Universities - Elitist but Nevertheless Fair?

The Excellence Initiative pursued by Germany’s federal government has acted as a catalyst in stimulating and accelerating the process of differentiation in the German university landscape. Critics fear increasing polarization between “elite” and “mass-market” institutions. Marius R. Busemeyer, however, sees opportunities arising from this development — and explains why and under what conditions the process of differentiation may, in the long term, improve the efficiency, as well as the fairness of the German education and employment system.
and toward an excellence-oriented stratification of the higher education landscape, with the “elite” universities coming out on top. This has been praised for the Excellence Initiative from both scientific and political circles, notably from individual deans of potential elite universities, among them former Heidelberg dean Peter Hommelhoff, and from the head of the German Research Council, now Secretary General of the European Research Council, Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker. However, there has also been much criticism. As anyone familiar with the university system in the US will be aware, just under two billion euros shared between multiple universities over a period of several years is little more than the proverbial drop in the bucket – it is hardly enough to create a German Harvard.

Critics have also pointed out that, contrary to its aspirational intention, rather than promoting effective and transparent competition, the Excellence Initiative really essentially consolidates existing structures and power blocs (Richard Münch). The polarization of the higher education landscape between elite and mass-market universities ultimately favors elitist access to education and subsequent employment – and it still remains to be seen whether the quality of education at elite universities is genuinely better (Michael Hartmann).

**Differentiation leads to fairness**

**Underlying these comments is the accusation that differentiation between universities actually hastens the process of limiting access to education and employment to an elite few. In the following, I would like to set out a counter-argument to this hypothesis. Specifically, I intend to postulate the theory that differentiation in higher education will, in the long term, improve the fairness and efficiency of the German education and employment system. This, in turn, has the potential to promote greater social justice, given that access to employment will then be achieved primarily on the basis of performance rather than through secondary criteria such as private networks or a convenient disposition.**

**Before setting out the core of my argument in greater detail, I would like to highlight some of the blind spots in the current debate on the Excellence Initiative. It is particularly striking that the interfaces between the university system and adjacent fields, that is to say, primary and secondary education on the one hand, and the qualification and recruitment strategies of business enterprises on the other, have thus far received little consideration. Yet a comprehensive assessment of the consequences of differentiation between universities must necessarily include these institutional cross-connections.**

**In matters of primary and secondary education, the PISA debate has, at the very least, put education reform back on the agenda. Once again, the German education system has been shown to exhibit a particularly marked degree of social stratification relative to other OECD countries. Rather than doing away with class differences, the distribution of education resources in Germany reinforces the class divide – no wonder, then, that the average standard of educational achievement is mediocre.**

**It might be argued that vocational training offers young people in Germany a third route into the education system. Systems of qualifications provide another example of a university alternative to university – and indeed, one that is much admired abroad for its considerable potential for the social integration of its target candidates into qualified learning and employment. But here, too, there are clear signs of erosion: the rising number of unemployed applicants and young people “put on hold,” as well as the decline in job security for both skilled and unskilled workers, shows that vocational training can no longer compensate for the weaknesses of the education system in general.**

**Higher education reform must therefore always be viewed in the context of the education system as a whole. Not that one should draw the false conclusion that the same principles for reform should be applied in all education sectors. Abolition of the structured school system is long overdue. The unequal standards of achievement in secondary education must be replaced by the new paradigm of equality and transmissibility. Thus far, however, little consideration has been given to the link between the discussion of the Excellence Initiative and the reform of other education sectors.**

**This brings me now to the core hypothesis, which considers the subject of differentiation in the university landscape from the perspective of the “customer” – that is to say, of businesses seeking qualified staff. Research into the labor market and education has shown that, when appointing specialist staff, businesses tend to rely on signals provided by the education system. Systems of education and qualification in various countries differ in terms of the nature and intensity of these signals.**

**Consider, for example, the US higher education system. This strongly differentiated system offers an effective and highly transparent signaling mechanism founded on an unambiguous university hierarchy or ranking. As a result, the subject in which a candidate has gained his or her bachelor’s degree is less important – at least when it comes to post-graduate appointments – than the prestige of the university he or she attended. Companies will usually initially undertake a period of internal qualification.**

**The higher education system in the US certifies the potential of new employees for success in Germany. Elements such as the often crippling tuition fees and the perpetuation of genuinely elitist recruiting mechanisms on the part of the truly elite universities ought not to be adopted (Karl-Ulrich Mayer). On the other hand, studies show that the education, and above all, higher education systems in the US represent hugely important factors in social advancement.**

**The German system of education and training provides another example. Here it is generally the case that the actual content conveyed through training and study is more important than the reputation of the educational institution. Companies expect to be able to employ the young people who graduate from this system immediately after they have completed their training as prime and productive workers. In contrast to the university sector, however, in the case of vocational training, the two dimensions overlap. In other words, it matters both what one learns (for instance, mechatronics or hairdressing) and where one learns it (for instance, with Mercedes or the salon around the corner).**

**Thus, here, too, there exists a clear hierarchy that sends clear signals to employers: access to employment will be oriented toward these signals. Those who make it to an elite university are likely to enjoy the best employment opportunities. Is that a problem, or progress? It should be regarded as progress provided that three conditions are met:**

**First, a reform of the higher education system must be accompanied by reform of the secondary school system. If higher education is to become a central mechanism of social advancement, access to universities must be broadened. Specific mechanisms to be implemented in the medium term might include abolishing the Hauptrufschule (roughly, junior high school or secondary modern) as has just been initiated in the Rhineland-Palatinate, and improving the transmissibility between vocational training and university education.**

**Second, the core of the higher education system must remain in the public sector and accessible to all. Even if the universities are given full autonomy in their selection of students and proceed to charge moderate tuition fees, “American” conditions are not to be expected in either the short or medium term. The chronic lack of finance from which public-sector universities are suffer-
Studying abroad is becoming more attractive

It must be kept in mind that the German university system is in competition with others. In the research field, brain drain has long been a topic of conversation. Anecdotal evidence, well documented by journalists, as well as individual systematic studies (such as that conducted in 2002 by the Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft) show that this phenomenon is all too real, and that a return to Germany is generally prompted by private and practical reasons rather than career considerations.

The competition between university systems revolves not only around scientists, but also around students. The improved recognition of school-leaving qualifications within the EU and the greater willingness of younger generations to embrace mobility combine to make an entire course of study at a foreign university more attractive, rather than just individual semesters – albeit in certain countries only (Great Britain, the US, Switzerland) and only for those who can afford it.

And precisely here lies the danger: those who are wealthy enough to pay the high tuition fees and cost of living in Oxford, Cambridge, St. Gallen, Zurich or Boston would prefer to send their children there rather than to a German mass-market university. Attendance at these genuinely elite universities in turn sends a strong signal to future employers. An undifferentiated higher education system may comply with the model of equality among universities, but that is of little benefit if they all appear equally lacking in value, and if the attractive jobs remain reserved for those who have graduated from leading universities abroad.

The creation of high-value, internationally competitive universities in Germany – which, in a public-sector education system, will always require political intervention – could reduce the pressure to migrate. At the same time, we would also have the chance to avoid the dark sides of genuinely elitist university systems. Decisions regarding access to employment would become more transparent, with a greater attendant need for legitimacy. It would no longer be origin and private networks that matter, but achievement. This would also apply to the distribution of research funding, even if, as critics of the Excellence Initiative note – with some justification – the present procedure favors particularly those universities that were already well endowed with third-party funding.

Finally, differentiation in the higher education system will also have a beneficial effect on the education decisions young people make for themselves. The information advantage that children from the upper strata of society have over others currently serves as an essential mechanism by which social stratification is mirrored in higher education. A differentiated system accompanied by greater transparency will also allow children from educationally deprived strata to make informed and balanced choices.

All in all, I must conclude that, despite the somewhat justified criticism of the Excellence Initiative and the differentiation it heralds in the German university landscape, the advantages predominate. Linking access to employment and elite positions to performance criteria rather than disposition or networks would strengthen the universities as a central pillar of social advancement. And that would be a substantial step forward for German education, business and research.

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