Editorial

Research Concerning Quality Assurance as Research on the Consequences of Political Reforms

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The mini special issue on “Taking Account of 20 years of Quality Assurance in German Higher Education” provides insights into research on the consequences of political reforms (in German: *Reformfolgeforschung*). Why quality assurance is defined can be best explained for the case of accreditation: First, accreditation replaced the framework regulations for study programs (*Rahmenprüfungsordnungen*), which were introduced in the 1970s with the goal of a certain standardization of the organization of studies and teaching. Second, accreditation is a governance measure to control the establishment and the regular execution of other quality assurance activities, such as the evaluation of teaching and tracer studies. Third, with the introduction of accreditation, the higher education institutions (HEIs) gained more autonomy in deciding which study programs to offer and in how to design (innovative) study programs.

The political decision to accredit the study programs offered by HEIs in Germany was taken sometime in 1998. This decision was politically supported and justified with reference to the Bologna Process, in which the German minister responsible for higher education and science was among the founding fathers. The first accreditation criteria were presented in 1999 (AR, 1999). In the following years, the struggle for accreditation to gain political legitimacy and the parallel urge to improve and make accreditation procedures more effective has led to a sequence of follow-up reforms of the reform, such as the introduction of cluster and systems accreditation and the modification of criteria (formulations). The political struggle about accreditation as a governance regime has come to a temporary end with the verdict by the German constitutional court (Bundesverfassungsgericht, 2016) and the resulting change of the accreditation criteria and organization of the accreditation decision powers (KMK, 2017a, b). In 2019, it is the 20th anniversary

of the German higher education accreditation regime (HEAR). With the European dimension in the background, it can be expected that the accreditation reform will exceed the general life expectancy of a reform of a maximum of 30 years — looking at the short lifespans of higher education reforms in Germany presented by Turner (2018).

The four invited papers presented in this mini special issue address very different aspects of HEAR. The reflection of the empirical analysis in the four papers allows for the generation of two core characteristics of research on the consequences of political reforms. At the core, research on the consequences of political reforms is not about the explanation of a reform or theoretical discussion of possible consequences. Research on the consequences of political reforms is the study of actual, empirically detectable (missing) consequences — (missing) consequences in the forms of effects and mechanisms (Gerring, 2004, 2005, 2010; Stensaker and Leiber, 2016) — initiated by a specific policy paper, introduction of a governance instrument, etc. The empirically detectable consequences studied in the four papers are diverse: Schneiderberg and Steinhardt (<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-018-0111-y>) did a normative coding of the multiple versions of accreditation criteria to show how criteria for the standardization of the organization of studies and teaching, and HEI quality management are reduced under political pressures, such as the collective protest by the rectors' conference and student protests. Baumann and Krücken (<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-018-0120-x>) focus on events and present documented evidence about academic resistance, which challenges the internal and external legitimacy of HEAR. Lust, Huber, and Junne (<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-018-0116-6>) present an interview study about how professors use academic identity claims as a means to resist managerial changes pursued by HEAR and other quality assurance mechanisms. How quality managers deal with the resistance of academics is presented in the quantitative study by Reith and Seyfried (<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-018-0124-6>).

The second core element of research on the consequences of political reforms is the time component, i.e., the initial point of depart, for example a new law becomes effective, has to be several years back in the past. From research into organizational change, it is known that the point of depart of a reform should lie at least ten, better 20 years in the past (e.g., Armenakis and Bedeian, 1999; Jaffe *et al.*, 1994). Such an amount of time is needed for a reform addressing humans working in organizations to become effective. For such a period, it should also become visible if and how possible resistance to a reform — due to the perceived threat of an individual's self-interest — is overcome or not (e.g., Anderson, 2008). Like Lust, Junne, and Huber, Seyfried and Reith asked their respondents to take a look back in time. The empirical evidence of Seyfried and Reith presents how quality managers use the strategies of balancing, pacifying, and bargaining to advance quality assurance reforms. The time perspective is more structured in the articles by Schneiderberg and Steinhardt, and Baumann and Krücken. Baumann and Krücken

present several events, such as petitions against accreditation, students in the streets, and protest notes by the representative body of the German academic profession, as proof for the fragile external legitimacy of accreditation. With the normative coding of accreditation criteria, Schneiderberg and Steinhardt cover the evolution of criteria for the entire period from 1999 to 2017. Schneiderberg and Steinhardt argue that the year 2018 marks a break for HEAR with the formalization of the substantial modifications of the accreditation procedures and criteria, and the transfer of the decision power from the accreditation agencies to the accreditation council. However, the use of quality assurance as a means of governance in the German higher education system keeps evolving.

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