

The Humboldt Illusion

The German university, once considered the model for the world, has been stirred from years of slumber. But as long as it remains solely a creature of the state, it will not escape its middling status.

BY MITCHELL G. ASH

WHILE THE WAR IN IRAQ IS LAYING BARE THE LIMITATIONS of American power and political will in military and foreign affairs, in higher education and research, America's long-established supremacy remains unquestioned. Now, Europe is moving forcefully to compete with the U.S. university system.

Education ministers across the continent have promised to produce a "European higher education area" by 2010 in which a cohort of workers educated in compatible degree programs can carry their skills and knowledge across the continent's national boundaries as easily as Americans move from state to state. The European Union's budget for scientific research, though small, is growing. European governments appear finally to understand that higher education and research policy can no longer be left to local or even national governments alone, because knowledge—especially scientific know-how—is key to economic growth in the global economy.

At the same time, Europe cherishes its traditions, and next to the Catholic Church, the university is Europe's old-

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est cultural institution. Names such as Bologna, Paris, Oxford, Cambridge, Kraków, Vienna, and Heidelberg have stood for excellence in higher education for hundreds of years. When the modern university emerged in the late 18th and 19th centuries, Göttingen, Berlin, Leipzig, Munich, and other cities joined this exclusive group, increasing Germany's prominence, and attracting the attention of American educators.

As the story goes, the modern research university, with its laboratory instruction in the sciences and research seminar in the humanities, was imported from Germany to America in the late 19th century. American universities subsequently rose in prominence as their German counterparts declined because of dictatorship, war, and the country's division during the Cold War. Today, Germany is reunified and Europe is expanding peacefully. Is the homeland of the research university finally poised to return to the front rank at the head of Europe's transformation?

Positive change clearly is occurring, but it cannot be described as a reimportation of German grandeur from America. Nor is it likely to produce a new academic superpower capable of competing on equal terms with the American research establishment.

First, some history. The conventional view that the university was imported from Germany to America is prob-

lematic. German universities were already in deep crisis around 1900, just as they were being acclaimed abroad as the world standard. Contemporaries complained about over-crowded lecture halls, seminars, and laboratories. They warned against the danger of an “intellectual proletariat” of unemployable academics, and an “invasion” of foreigners (and Jews), and they worried about an “exodus of research from the university” to industrial laboratories and elsewhere. It was only then that the writings of Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), now celebrated as the founding spirit of the University of Berlin, were published, and that the ideals he expressed during 1809–10, most notably about freedom of teaching and learning and the unity of teaching and research, became the guiding myths of the German university. Even in 1900, the claim that the German research university was informed by Humboldt’s ideals was not entirely true. Americans and Germans embraced his ideas roughly simultaneously. His vision was a utopia in his own time, and it retains its power today primarily as a utopian counterpoint to the realities of mass higher education.

The claim that “the German university” was imported to the United States is also not quite accurate. American universities are too diverse to be described as products of a model imported from any single country. Higher education in America has never been oriented exclusively to science and scholarship, as it supposedly is in Germany. Instead, research-oriented graduate schools were added onto bachelor’s degree programs. Moreover, the original cliché focuses on elite private universities, while America’s public institutions have always tried to balance broadly accessible undergraduate education and a variety of practical professional training programs with basic and applied research. The roots of American higher education’s enormous vitality—institutional openness and diversity, the union of professional training and academic research in the same institution, and the combination of outstanding research at the upper levels with broad accessibility at the undergraduate level—are as much home-grown as imported from elsewhere.

In Germany today, 100 of the 351 higher education institutions are properly considered universities. The rest are specialized in more limited areas such as technical disciplines, the arts, social work, education, and theology. This compares with about 125 research universities and some 2,000 other four-year institutions of higher learning in the United States. The liberal arts and two-year community colleges so common in the United

States have no counterparts in Germany.

Nearly all German universities are public institutions supported primarily by state (*Länder*) governments. A few private institutions such as the International University in Bremen have attracted attention lately, but their size and their impact on the system as a whole are small. Total enrollment in higher education institutions currently stands at roughly 1.8 million. Just over 20 percent of Germans now have more than 12 years of schooling, a considerably smaller proportion than the comparable figure of nearly 50 percent in the United States.

Reform is on the agenda in Germany. Universities are altering their administrations, trying to coordinate their curricula, and moving gradually to open up new sources of revenue. But many Germans are ambivalent about these changes, charging that they amount to an “Americanization.” Part of their fear arises from perceptions, or misperceptions, of what is going on in the United States, and part stems from loyalty to what they take to be the Humboldt tradition.

Germans decry a loss of “autonomy,” but the real meaning of that word is what is in dispute. Until recently, autonomy in Germany meant that professors enjoyed academic freedom and could determine university policy through so-called self-administration. In fact, self-administration was limited because state governments pay almost all the freight and appoint the professors. Universities in Germany continue to be regarded as welfare-state institutions, because Germans, like other Europeans, view higher education as a public and not a private good.

Policymakers now recognize that German universities need more autonomy to advance as research entities, but by this they mean increased management flexibility. That is now permitted, and the forms it takes are drawn to some extent from American models. Higher education administration is being professionalized, supported in part by a private institute funded by the Bertelsmann Foundation. The corresponding shift in power within universities from professors toward administrators has potential to create widespread unease—for example, when the *Rektor* (president) and the *Kanzler* (provost), and not the faculty as a whole, decide on the distribution of funds or the appointment of professors.

But the single most important factor that determines the reach of change—or, more precisely, its limits—in higher



The University of Berlin, often called the progenitor of the modern university, grew out of the vision of diplomat-philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt.

education in Europe is state funding. Real autonomy can only come when universities are able to raise money from multiple sources, and that is not happening. Only in Britain does private revenue account for significant proportions of university budgets. One major and increasing source of funding outside state budgets in Germany is research money from the federal government, the EU, and other public or private sources, but three-fourths or more of university budgets still comes from the states. Tuition is finally being introduced in Germany, but the amount charged is generally the equivalent of \$600 per semester. At that rate, it will be a long time before student fees provide as much of university budgets as they do in the United States, and the higher education community worries that opening up new revenue streams will lead to corresponding reductions in state money.

Germans are torn between the goals of uniformity and competition. German professors are civil servants and in theory must be treated alike (for example, paid according to seniority). As state institutions, universities have to be financed and administered according to similar rules, and places must be provided to all qualified students who seek them. The result, according to available measures, is that

many German universities rank at a pretty good middle level internationally, but none is anywhere near the top, though their strengths in certain fields, such as history and engineering, are undeniable. Uniformity has its advantages: Degrees have the same value, and real differences in quality need not be discussed openly.

One reason for the success of American universities, by contrast, is their willingness to compete with one another for resources. And for many reasons—not only to buy prestige or get tax deductions—Americans have been extraordinarily willing to give money to their institutions. The availability of both government and private resources in America fuels continuous competition among institutions and leads to huge salary differences across disciplines, and among professors in similar fields. Could this happen in Germany? Maybe. German universities have introduced “achievement based salaries” for professors, but base salaries remain subject to civil service rules, and “achievement” supplements are often not included in the determination of pension benefits. Significant new state funding is not available for any of this; existing money is only being redistributed.

Any serious challenge to American predominance is not conceivable on the cheap. So where's the money? Seen

in this light, the current “excellence initiative,” a joint project of the German federal and state governments, provides another example of ambivalence about change. The project is being trumpeted as a new beginning because it requires universities, for the first time, to compete against one another for support on the basis of specific plans for graduate programs or research-oriented “excellence clusters,” evaluated by peer review. But the total amount involved is the equivalent of \$2.4 billion, to be spent by 2011, which is less than the budget of one top American research university for one year! Serious German commentators recognize that as long as dependence on state financing continues, talk of a German Harvard, Stanford, Berkeley, or Michigan is whistling in the dark.

Higher education also has a second purpose—teaching, or the production of qualified participants in the knowledge society. The Bologna Declaration of 1999, which established the goal of the European Higher Education Area, is not a project of the EU alone, but of the European Cultural Convention, with more than 50 signatories. Yet Germans are of two minds about change in this area, too. Opponents of Bologna warn of a “farewell to Humboldt,” by which they mean a standardization of curricula that would undermine freedom of teaching and learning, and a separation of undergraduate teaching from research. Yet, in the first five years after the Bologna Declaration, 1,900 new bachelor degree programs were approved in Germany, and their content varies widely across institutions. Thus, the process appears to be producing not standardization, but variety.

Germans also worry about the unity of teaching and research, but that has been in doubt in Germany since 1900. Though many still wish they could make “Humboldt” available to all, the division of existing German four-to-five-year *Diplom* or *Magister* programs into two degree cycles, a bachelor for foundational studies and a master for the first steps toward research, satisfies a long-standing demand from within the German system. It also accords with the wishes of many students who have little desire to do academic research.

The degree names “bachelor” and “master” provoke cries of “Americanization.” But the hope that the new three-year European bachelor degrees will be compatible with the four-year American B.A. or even four- or five-year

B.S. degrees is illusory. As American accreditation bodies and university officials have noted, the structural and content differences are too great for that. In fact, the new bachelor degrees are mainly shortened versions of the specialized one- or two-subject programs offered in the past, lacking any general education component. Germans think that students receive a broad liberal education in high school and do not need more of it in college, but that is no longer true. Specialized elective university-preparatory courses much like American advanced placement courses now dominate the last two years of high school. The new degrees have “Anglo-Saxon” names but will be European in form and content, and may not be easily transferable outside the continent. Despite this limitation, the “Bologna process” could, in time, produce a huge European talent pool of highly mobile, internationally experienced graduates ready to take the step up to research-based training.

The final element of ambivalence about change can be summed up in two words: “elite” versus “access.” These buzzwords polarize the politics of higher education in Germany in ways that would be familiar to Americans. Germans take pride in their Nobel Prize winners, but the primary focus of German higher education remains on training masses of students, and funding per student has long been insufficient to achieve that goal. Since 1945, several of the best publicly supported higher education systems in the United States have managed to balance relatively open access at the undergraduate level with high-quality research at flagship institutions. In Germany, many politicians and academics still regard these two goals as antithetical and refuse to invest what it takes to achieve both.

Departments and programs in some German universities are achieving international standing at the graduate and postdoctoral levels, at the cost of widening separation from their home institutions. The dynamism of such programs could increase the centrifugal forces pulling high-level research away from mass higher education in Germany.

The best outcome of today’s reforms would be serious increases in merit-based research and infrastructure funding, along with changes in university governance that would allow increasingly autonomous universities to compete for research funds and top students more effectively. It will be a challenge to make the benefits of such policies effective for whole institutions. But even if reform succeeds, the results will hardly be enough to make top American institutions fear German competition anytime soon. ■