06 / [illegible]
(Folien vorbereitet)

University Governance as Conflict Management

Professor Dr. Detlef Müller-Böling

CHE Center for Higher Education Development
Gütersloh, Germany

Paper submitted to the
11th International Meeting of University Administrators
Auckland, New Zealand
6-10 January 1998

- Section: Management of Higher Education -

3 introductory remarks

1. I will not read the paper, but I will present parts of the paper
because a) I'm not so familiar with the English language
to hold a free speech
b) I'm sure, you nereht able to read my paper during the last days

3 my ~~second~~ last introductory remark belongs to the general validity of the issues. This is not a paper about the German HE System but (Titel) is of worldwide validity

Abstract

Departing from some of the university's main characteristics (professional organization, organizational fragmentation, decentralization of decision-making) as well as their possible perversion (hyper-specialization, academic individualism, conservatism), the paper discusses university government as conflict management. It highlights some common forms of resistance against effective university management and finally points out the principles and instruments (management and coordination tools) of university governance from the point of view of organization theory.

2 After ~~been~~ such tremendous keynote adresses
I hope to reach the minimum Standard

University Governance as Conflict Management

Professor Dr. Detlef Müller-Böling

CHE Center for Higher Education Development
Gütersloh, Germany

Currently, we are witnessing a crisis of university governance. This in particular is the case in countries with a long-standing tradition of government control over institutions of higher education. Claims for an expansion of institutional autonomy bring about a paradigm shift in how we conceive of university governance and management, and it is not too much to say that we are as yet ill-prepared to meet the enormous challenges ahead of us.

And yet, the crisis of university governance is not simply a temporary phenomenon. Rather, it also seems to be inherent in the structure of the institutions themselves. It is in this sense, then - and this is the thesis I would like to discuss - that I am going to talk about university governance as conflict management - as the management of conflict within and beyond the institutional boundaries of our universities.

In order to illustrate my thesis, let me point out three essential features of the institution that we call university.[1]

1 Characteristics of the University and their Perversion

First of all, the university is a *professional organization*. Many of the issues in a university (e.g. research, teaching) can only be decided upon by academic experts. Based on the notion of academic freedom, the university as an institution just as its individual members claim a high degree of autonomy and self-regulation. This affects the university's external relations as well as its internal governance structures.

Secondly, the university is marked by *organizational fragmentation*. Teaching and research take place in almost autonomous organizational cells, which by and large follow the traditional notions of disciplines. The university in this sense is an organization with a great number of individual and highly specialized entities. It appears as a „loosely coupled system", as an assemblage of autonomous units.

[1] See also Frans A. van Vught, De nieuwe academische collegialiteit, Rectoraats overdracht, Universiteit Twente, 13. Januar 1997

This leads me to the third characteristic, namely the *decentralization of decision-making*, the dispersion of the power for decision-making over autonomous entities within a lose institutional framework. With regard to its organizational structure and the pace in which decisions are made, the university resembles a supra-national body such as the European Union rather than some of the latter's centralized nation states.

If one accepts these aspects as characteristic of the university - and I think they indeed capture something of what may be called, for lack of a better word, the university's „essence" - one may be tempted to characterize university governance as a „mission impossible". For not only is it very difficult to actually govern an institution that in its basic characteristics tends to resist formal and stringent governance; there is also evidence that the university is permanently threatened by the *perversion of the three characteristics* I just mentioned.

1.1 Professionalization: Hyper-Specialization

There is, for instance, the general tendency of *professionalization* turning into *hyper-specialization*, that is, the fragmentation of disciplines into a myriad of isolated sub-disciplines. In order to legitimize their existence, such sub-disciplines claim a specific scientific territory as their own. They put up „No trespassing" signs in order to keep any possible intruder from disturbing the inner circle of their self-centered scientific world. Communication no longer takes place within an institutional framework; rather, specialists communicate with other specialists around the world. They identify primarily with their discipline rather than with the institution they belong to. And yet, although the tendency toward hyper-specialization to a certain extent is in accordance with the logic of research and science and their move toward unknown territory, there is also the danger of science becoming incapable of tackling the holistic, interdisciplinary problems of mankind. In addition, hyper-specialized research no longer is able to legitimize and communicate to the tax payers its growing need for public funding. Hyper-specialization thus may severely damage the university's social reputation and acceptance. But it also affects teaching and the organization of our study programs, leading to ~~the well-known~~ deficits like uncoordinated courses and examination dates, overlaps in curriculum and content, to name but a few.

1.2 Specialization: Academic Individualism

Coupled with the tendency toward hyper-specialization is the second moment of perversion I would like to mention, namely the growing *academic individualism*, which undermines and subverts both the university's corporate autonomy as well as its institutional identity. The institution's organizational fragmentation thus turns into the isolation of single departments or even individual faculty members,

2.2 Questioning Governance on Scientific Grounds

Another form of resistance is more appropriate to academic professionals yet not less effective with regard to undermining leadership and university governance. It consists in *questioning governance on scientific grounds*. To give you an example from my own experience as a university president: During my presidency, I attempted to reshape the internal procedure for the allocation of funds in the basis of a new mathematical formula. When it became clear that the Department of Mathematics would have to accept a considerable cut-back in funding, the faculty members went through great pains in order to demonstrate that the formula we used was mathematically incorrect. Fortunately enough, the other department chairs were unwilling to follow their colleagues from the Math department on foreign scientific territory and thus rejected their reasoning. Although the department's initiative ultimately remained unsuccessful, it still was able to cause considerable disturbances within the university.

2.3 Putting Decisions on Hold

Still another commonly deployed strategy is that of *putting decisions on hold* by relocating the problem that needs to be solved on adjacent territory. Here is an example from my current work as the director of the Center for Development of Higher Education: Together with a humanities department of a large university we designed a common project intended to reshape and optimize departmental organization. However, when the proposal was submitted to the rector for approval, we were confronted with the question as to why we were cooperating with the humanities department instead of the Department of Law, although the law department never had shown any interest in engaging in such a project. This had the effect that, at least temporarily, we could not get down to work. The reason for this was not simply the lack of good will on the rector's part; it also had to do with deficiencies in the ways decision-makers are involved in internal information and communication processes.

2.4 Building of Strategic Political Alliances

One last form of resistance that I would like to mention here is the *building of strategic political alliances* within the university's various councils. This form is particularly „appropriate" to the German university, which unlike universities in other countries essentially is characterized by collegiate decision-making.[3] This

[3] See the comparative study by Harry de Boer, Leo Goedegebuure, Frans van Vught, Governance and Management of Higher Education Institutions. A Comparative Analysis, lecture presented at the Thirteenth General Conference of IMHE Member Institutions, „Setting New priorities for Higher Education Management", Sept. 2-4, 1996.

who all claim the right to pursue their own interests and who are generally allergic to any kind of interference from above or outside - to the detriment of academic collegiality.

1.3 Decentralization: Conservative Organization

In such a situation, the university becomes incapable of adapting to a changing societal context and to respond to the challenges of institutional self-recreation and modernization. The university turns into a profoundly *conservative organization*. The *decentralized system of decision-making*, which I have mentioned as the university's third characteristic, breaks down. The university and its members lose sight of the challenges they will have to face in the future. Instead, they become self-centered and self-obsessed. Strategic planning on the institutional level turns into strategic behavior of individual university members, into tactical moves of sporadic collective alliances mainly designed to resist the growing need for modernization and change - for „drastic and rapid" change, as Steven Muller recently put it.[2]

2 Types of Resistance toward University Management and Governance

I will come back to this point later on in my talk. For the moment, I would like to give you a few examples from daily academic life for what I have called the perversion of the university's characteristic features. They will also show some common forms of internal resistances toward university management and governance.

2.1 Ignoring Leadership and Governance

Everybody familiar with the university - and I venture to say: the university in almost any country - knows how inventive academics can be when it comes to circumvent or postpone decisions and initiatives or to boycott university governance altogether. One of the most common form of resistance is simply to *ignore leadership and governance* altogether. For instance, it is impossible to account for the number of memos and instructions sent by a university president to the department chairs or to individual faculty members and that allegedly have been „lost in the mail". In German universities, this is a very common excuse and a comfortable way of undermining internal communication and administration; and it is favored by the common lack of effective internal communication networks.

---

[2] Stephen Muller, The Management of the Modern University (unpublished lecture)

accounts for the power the various councils on the central and decentral levels hold within the institutional process of decision-making. Now, the shift in German universities toward participatory democracy, which took place in the 1970s, led to a very fragile balance of power between the various constituencies in the university councils. As a result, professors find themselves forced to build strategic alliances with their colleagues merely in order to defend their narrow majority against the other constituencies. The mediation of conflicting opinions and individual interests as well as the search for the smallest possible consensus thus become vital issues to the professors. Everybody familiar with universities and the idiosyncrasies of their members knows that this is a hard and very enduring undertaking.

In this regard, one is reminded of that very cogent characterization of the academics once given by Nietzsche, who wrote: „Whoever associates with scholars knows that one occasionally wounds them to the marrow with some harmless word; (...) one can drive them beside themselves merely because one has been too coarse to realize with whom one was really dealing - with *sufferers* who refuse to admit to themselves what they are, with drugged and heedless men who fear only one thing: *regaining consciousness.*“[4] However, if there is one thing the university and its members are forced to acknowledge, it is precisely this need to regain consciousness - consciousness, one might add, of the urgent call for institutional reforms.

3 University Governance between Scylla and Charybdis: Conflict Management

And yet, as soon as one regains consciousness, one realizes the unresolvable dilemma and a fundamental conflict in which university governance is caught. It is constantly forced to oscillate, as it were, between Scylla and Charybdis - between, for instance, the temptation to either simply ignore the pressing need for change, or to hectically and rather intuitively react to any fad that might appear on the academic, social, or political scene. None of these attitudes is adequate with regard to the real and dramatic changes ahead. Just think of the enormous challenges the university faces in the age of telecommunication and tele-teaching. It is simply impossible to predict how the virtualization of the classroom will affect both the traditional forms of research and teaching as well as the university's institutional self-understanding. Furthermore, there is the need to adapt the university and the study programs it offers to the changing societal

[4] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, III, 23 („Man verwundet sie - jeder erfährt es, der mit Gelehrten umgeht - mitunter durch ein harmloses Wort bis auf die Knochen, man erbittert seine gelehrten Freunde gegen sich, im Augenblick , wo man sie zu ehren meint, man bringt sie außer Rand und Band, bloß weil man zu grob war, um zu erraten, mit wem man es eigentlich zu tun hat, mit *Leidenden*, die es sich selbst nicht eingestehen wollen, was sie sind, mit Betäubten und Besinnungslosen, die nur eins fürchten: *zum Bewußtsein zu kommen ...*“. *Zur Genealogie der Moral* III, 23).

context. For instance will it become necessary to respond to the growing demand for life-long learning. Higher education in many countries has been rather reluctant to acknowledge the need to expand its traditional course offerings and to adapt them to a very heterogeneous clientele. And finally, the university also needs to recognize the changes in society's attitude toward research and results it produces, society ~~[and German society in particular]~~ becoming increasingly suspicious of the possible effects of technological advances or new findings ~~[for instance, in the bio-medical field]~~

~~Although we might recognize and accept these challenges as a threat to the~~ university's self-understanding ~~and its institutional integrity, we at the same time are forced to admit that as yet~~ we „have no clear idea of what the university is in the process of becoming" (Muller). The only thing we know for sure is that the traditional representations of the university no longer are at hand. This is the fundamental dilemma in which we are caught. For the university of the future can no longer be governed according to the ideal of an independent „republic of scholars"; ~~nor~~ neither can it be treated, ~~as this is sometimes the case in Germany~~ as a subordinate government agency without any real institutional autonomy, ~~And~~ nor ~~neither~~ is the idea of the university as a mere service organization appropriate to its scientific aspirations and academic mission. ~~Nor is the 70s model of the German university as an institution organized according to the principles of participatory democracy a viable concept to master the changes ahead~~. All these concepts are still alive in the public debate about the university. But none of them is adequate with regard to providing the organizational principles and the governance structures our universities actually need.

In a way, the situation is similar when we turn to the internal organizational structure our universities need in the future. Here again, Scylla and Charybdis loom on the horizon. For neither the temptation to strengthen university leadership by means of centralized and hierarchical structures of decision-making nor the respect for the university's traditional characteristics ultimately offer viable solutions to the university's internal management problems. Whereas the former promises effectiveness and efficiency, it at the same time tends to disregard some of the essential features of academic culture, i.e. creativity, individuality, and unprohibited scientific curiosity. And whereas the latter tries to respect the university's fundamental characteristics, namely professionality, organizational fragmentation, and the decentralization of decision-making, it constantly finds itself on the verge of fostering organizational anarchy, academic individualism, and institutional disintegration.

Hence, there is no lasting solution to the fundamental conflict of university governance. ~~In the absence of an all encompassing and unifying idea of the university, it becomes impossible to reach a state of harmony in which the fundamental conflict that inhabits the university and its governance is suspended~~.

It is in this sense, then, that university governance will have to turn into *conflict management*, that is, into the management of the university's inherent conflict and tension in the absence of any viable and lasting solution.

3.1 Principles of Conflict Management

Now, what are the principles that university governance as conflict management will have follow?

First of all, university governance will have to transgress borderlines; it will have to take into account the zones of conflict, the demarcation lines between central and decentral academic units as well as between the university and its surrounding social and political context. The guiding principle for university governance as conflict management thus can be formulated as follows: *Decentralized responsibility with a centralized concept and organized coordination*. Decentralized responsibility means that the individual academic units (chair, department) must be in charge of performance and results. However, these have to be integrated into the superior concepts in each case (i.e. individual professors into the department, the various departments into the university). The determination of goals and the evaluation of results then must take place within an organized, coordinated effort.

It is clear that this principle applies to a genuinely autonomous university. However, autonomy in this sense no longer can be understood as the academics' right to unlimited scientific freedom without collective responsibility. On the contrary, the question of autonomy henceforth has to be seen as touching upon the internal relationship in a university on the one hand, and on the relationship between state and university on the other. Again, in both cases university governance turns into management on the borderlines, maintaining and affirming lines of separation while at the same time constantly transgressing them. University governance has to restore a balance between individual and corporate autonomy, and between its internal structure and society's legitimate interests and demands. With regard to the concept of autonomy his means that the freedom of research and teaching, which is often misunderstood as the freedom of the individual, should be interpreted more emphatically as the freedom of the university or the department vis-à-vis the state to define its own profile. The freedom of research and teaching thus clearly needs to be focused on common objectives.

3.2 Management and Coordination Tools

If ~~one is willing~~ we to accept ~~these principles~~ this ~~– and I believe that they lay the ground for an effective restructuring of university governance – one also has to look for the appropriate management tools for university governance~~.

Organization theory ~~knows~~ offers a variety of management and coordination tools, which are, however, of unequal value to university governance. ~~Internal conflicts and conflicting interests can be coordinated~~ in the sense of conflictual management. Organizations can be coordinated

(10)

- by means of a *management by directives*
- by *formal rules and regulations*
- via the *standardization of tasks, roles, and functions*
- through *internal markets*
- within a commonly shared *institutional culture* and *corporate identity*
- by means of processes of *self-regulation*
- by means of a *management by objectives*.

3.2.1 Directives, Rules, and Standardization

(11)

The first three forms of coordination, i.e. *management by directives*, by *formal rules and regulations*, and/or by means of *standardized roles and functions*, are only of limited value to university governance. They presuppose strictly hierarchical structures of decision-making or strong external control and thus ignore the university's institutional and organizational particularities. I addition, they tend to avoid, or rather suppress conflict in that they emphasize irremovable and clear-cut lines of separation.

3.2.2 Internal Markets

(12)

The case is somewhat different with *internal markets*. They may represent an effective means of internal coordination, yet only to the extent that commonly accepted performance indicators are at hand in order to measure the performance of individual departments against each other. This, however, is not (yet) the case. But all over the World we are working at that problem ~~indicators~~ to find valid indicators for internal and external marketing coordinations

3.2.3 Organizational Culture

(13)

By contrast, an *organizational culture* based on commonly shared values to some extent seems to be an appropriate means of coordination and internal organization. In many aspects the university of the last century is ruled by organizational culture.

3.2.4 Self-regulation

It also appears as the basis for academic *self-regulation*, which functions at its best in socially and culturally homogeneous groups. And yet, the critical issue with self-regulation on the basis of an organizational culture is that academic units are generally unable - or unwilling - to implement and accept effective means of *self-control*. Again, there is the tendency in this model to avoid conflict, to maintain the idea of *internal* harmony without any disturbances that come from „outside".

Although self-regulation on the basis of a commonly shared organizational culture has a long-standing tradition in our universities, it appears questionable whether it is still appropriate as the sole basis for effective university governance. In addition, it is all but clear whether in the current situation of mass-education universities can still rely on this - essentially non-conflictual - means of internal coordination. For neither the students nor their teachers still can be expected to share a common set of values and to pursue identical interests. This was still the case only some decades ago when access to higher education was restricted to about 5% of the population. With the enormous growth of the higher education sector over the last thirty years, however, academic life has become as diverse as the rest of the society, and the traditional *ethos* that supported the idea of the university in earlier times has by and large evaporated.

This, however, should not be a reason for mourning and for regrets. To be sure, nostalgia for the good old days is very widespread in academic circles. And yet, the issue is not whether we should reverse the process in order to return to the ideal of an esoteric „republic of scholars". For the decision to open our universities for broader segments of the population was both necessary and correct and thus is an irreversible fact with which we have to deal. Hence, the real and indeed very difficult issue is whether and how it is possible to recreate something like an academic culture under the circumstances of the modern university with its fundamentally agonistic nature.

In this regard, it may be useful to reconsider, for instance, the prohibition of in-house promotions of scholars at the end of their academic training. Under the current practice in German universities, graduate and post-graduate training spreads over a period of about ten years, which is long enough for an academic to identify with the university in which he or she is trained. However, after the completion of their training, academics are forced to leave the institution because in-house tenure tracks are generally not available. There are good reasons for this practice to exist. And yet, there is little doubt that it also may keep specific organizational cultures from emerging within our universities.

The last but not least tool of coordination is

3.2.5 Management by Objectives Contract management

~~Having said as much about ethics, academic self-regulation, and the creation of an organizational culture, I would now like to turn to the other management tools I have mentioned. I am convinced that, in order to be effective, university government will have to turn into a *management by objectives* that~~ It seems to be appropriate in this regard *deals with* the fundamental conflict of university governance~~, and thus turns into *conflict management* in the above-mentioned sense~~. Only on the basis of negotiations about the mission and the goals of a university as well as its individual academic units is it possible to arrive at forms of academic self-government and self-regulation that move beyond a sheer selfish pursuit of individual interests to the detriment of the larger academic community. On this basis, then, is it also possible to promote and strengthen the sense of belonging to an institution without suppressing conflict and without negating the productive game of internal and external differences.

One of the prerequisites for a successful management by objectives in this sense is that individual goals - i.e. goals that individual university members pursue - become integrated into corporate goals, that is, goals shared by a larger community within the university or by the university as a whole. In order for this management tool to function effectively, it is essential that goals are developed and agreed upon within a bottom-up process of communication and negotiation. The search for goals thus starts on the department level and leads to agreements between the department chair on the one hand and the department members on the other. In a next step, goals of individual departments are coordinated and integrated into agreements with the dean who in turn negotiates with the president or other decision-makers on the central level. In order to assure as much transparency as possible, negotiations on the lower levels of the institution have to take place in the presence of the person in charge of university governance on the upper level. In this way, it is possible not only to better communicate the reasons and motivations that stand behind a given set of actions and decisions; the process of goal negotiation also strengthens the responsibility decision-makers have to assume vis-à-vis their own unit as well as vis-à-vis the central university government.

3.3 Twofold Legitimation of Decision-makers

All this, however, cannot be achieved without provoking conflict and without an effective management of conflict. Hence, one of the prerequisites for this process to work is that we modify the selection processes for university administrators on every institutional level. It is a mistake to believe that collegiate bodies or academic councils always select the person that is best qualified and energetic enough to do the job. On the contrary, collegiate bodies oftentimes tend to vote for those of their members by whom they expect to be bothered the least. And if

by accident they call into office a „strong" chair or a „strong" dean, they can be certain that they won't have to endure this person for more than a year or two. This situation, I believe, is neither satisfying nor is it appropriate to the governance of a university or an individual academic unit. Hence, what we have to get to is a greater independence of the central and decentral administrators toward the institution or the unit they are supposed to lead. Administrators are in need of a „*twofold legitimation*" of their position and of the power that comes with it. Only then are they able to persist in a situation of conflict, and only then are they strong enough to sustain a conflict management in the sense it is understood here.

Ultimately, this means that key administrators should not be elected by their colleagues alone. Rather, they should be appointed in cooperation with and with the approval of the person in charge with the administration of the upper-level unit. A department chair, for instance, thus will be elected by the members of his department. This is in line with current practice. However, he will come into office only when appointed by the dean, just as the dean will be able to assume his functions only when his election is supplemented by an appointment of the university's president or rector. With regard to the latter, I suggest that they are appointed by a „board of regents", which represents society at large and is concerned with the university's strategic planning. In this way, we can assure that decision-makers on every institutional level receive the political backing they need in order to survive, or rather *manage* the conflicts that arise on organizational borderlines.

4 Concluding remarks: „Beyond Good and Evil"

Conflict management, thus, needs to affirm organizational lines of separation while at the same time transgressing them. It needs to affirm conflict within the university and between the university and the broader social and political context in which it moves. I am convinced that if we succeed in implementing such an organizational structure, our universities will be able to manage both the changes and conflicts they will have to face in the future. Hence, we have to respond to the growing need for moving *beyond* existing lines of separation - lines that separate the university from the rest of society, and lines that may lead to the disintegration of the university's organizational unity. Ultimately, university governance as conflict management is a form of *transgression* - in the Nietzschean sense of constantly trying to move „Beyond Good and Evil", beyond a fundamental conflict and an unresolvable tension, however, without ever leaving them behind.