

**The Quality Discourse  
in American and German Higher Education  
-Introductory Statement-  
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Since the early 90s, quality has moved to the center of the discourse on Germany's higher education system. Although in the meantime it seems natural to us to discuss quality and its management in higher education, there is – in a historical perspective and to some of the people involved – something unsettling and disturbing about this “quality debate”.

Traditionally, institutions of higher education, institutions of academic learning – universities as well as polytechnics – closely are associated with the idea of quality. Quality, in a way, seems to be inherent in these institutions. Quality cannot be dissociated from academia. Academic culture, higher education, research and science are notions, so it seems, that simply do not exist outside of and independent from a certain notion of quality.

So, with regard to quality management in higher education one is tempted to ask the rather heretic question: What is there in higher education that needs to be managed? What is meant by “quality management” with regard to higher education and to the institutions in which it takes place? What is quality, anyway? And how to define it, in the last analysis, the quality of higher education?

Instead of further pursuing these rather philosophical questions, I would like to point out some of the driving forces in this recent turn toward quality as the *leitmotiv* of higher education development.

1. First of all, there is the issue of **institutional autonomy** – an issue of great importance with regard to Germany's HE system, which traditionally is characterized by strong governmental control. The turn, in recent years, toward stressing institutional autonomy on the contrary implies that the state refrains from detailed steering processes ex ante via rules and regulations. Instead, setting the political priorities, securing academic freedom, and **steering the HE sector “ex post”** and based on results, on achievement, and merit will be the government's role and its function in the future.

With this turn toward steering the HE sector ex post, quality falls within the institutional responsibility of any university. Quality no longer is the results of closely following governmental rules and regulations; rather, it needs to be taken care of, and as such it becomes of decisive importance with regard to assessing a university's *institutional performance*.

2. Second, and in return: Within a system of steering HE institutions ex post, universities need to be able to plan their own course of action, to determine their profile, their goals, and their institutional mission. There is a need for **strategic planning** on the institutional as well as department level – in order to direct an institution’s various activities toward commonly shared and accepted goals. In a system traditionally oriented toward assuring a high degree of homogeneity among its various institutions and which, in the past, has been very reluctant to accept the idea of universities competing among each other this is quite unfamiliar an idea.

Quality in higher education – quality understood as the result of a university’s institutional performance – thus also relates to the broader issue of redesigning our universities’ **governance structures** so that they will be able to set priorities and posteriorities and determine their own course of action. In short: quality touches upon the issue of allowing for an effective and efficient university management to emerge – a university management, that is, clearly devoted to reach its institutional goals and to achieve academic scholarship, research and teaching on the highest possible level of excellence.

3. And finally, quality is related to an institution’s **accountability** both toward the government, which provides for the necessary funds, as well as toward society at large. In the first instance, quality primarily is an issue of generating value in exchange for money, and it is central to output- or performance-oriented funding models, which currently are being discussed in German HE policy. In the second instance, quality also relates to society’s growing interest in the results of university research – or rather: to society’s increasing suspicion leveled against research and science and the results they bring forth.

In the last analysis, the public’s heightened awareness of what universities are doing clearly demonstrates: Quality – i.e. the quality of teaching and research, of the higher education an institution provides – no longer can be understood as simply being inherent in an institution, or as being intimately related to its status or its name. Rather,

- one will have to take care of it – in order to produce it and to bring it forth;
- Furthermore, quality needs to be referred to certain “stakeholder preferences” and “stakeholder interests;”
- And finally – and this is the result of a shift, in research and science, toward what is being called the “Mode II” of knowledge production and knowledge transmission – quality no longer can be understood as being independent from specific contexts of application and defined on the basis of scientific standards and disciplinary conventions alone.

To sum up these brief introductory remarks: The turn, in recent years, toward quality in German higher education has to do with fundamental

changes in our traditional ways of steering our HE system and the ways of governing our universities. The key issues involved are the following:

- an increased degree of institutional autonomy, which ultimately makes universities responsible for the quality of their research and teaching activities;
- the move toward steering the HE system ex post, which requires a closer look at achievements and results and which asks for adequate funding models;
- and finally a keen awareness on the side of universities for both their social accountability and the relevant stakeholder interests.