

# Development of Study Programmes as an Organisational Challenge – A Case Study at German Universities

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## Abstract

*The development of study programmes became a major challenge after the Bologna process started. Creative instruments are needed in order to coherently design study programmes without neglecting the independency of lecturers. Based on data from a case study, we argue that discursive structures are especially necessary in order to develop and manage study programmes.*

## 1 Introduction

In recent times, a strong discussion can be observed in the Higher Education discourse concerning the development of study programmes. Bologna depicts a starting point in this discussion. Bologna represents a comprehensive structure reform in the Higher Education system in Europe and includes – but is not limited to – the introduction of Bachelor's and Master's programmes, their modularization and an outcome-orientation. In this regard, Bologna presents a framework which opens a broad scope for the design of learning and teaching at universities as well as new alignments on the meso-level of universities and faculties are set: The structural requirements of the educational policy (macro-level) and the ideas of learning and teaching on the micro-level should be designed on the meso-level. Thus, a new discourse is taking place and can be described with the term 'development of study programmes': The main emphasis is on a coherent design of study programmes and a module development to adequately support the learning processes of students (Gerholz & Sloane, 2013; Euler, 2012;). To implement an educational design with these aims in mind, instructional clarification concerning the individual study programmes must be made and also be realized in the corresponding faculties (Gerholz, Euler & Sloane, 2014) as the development of study programmes is mostly anchored at the level of faculties as they are the main entities in a university.

In this context, the management and development of study programmes can be described as a complex process which two conflicting factors may affect: On the one hand, the requirements of Bologna and the corresponding criteria like competence and outcome-orientation must be satisfied in the design of study programmes (Gerholz & Sloane, 2013; Kromrey, 2003). On the other hand, the design of study programmes and its management should be fit to the organisational routines and the core values of the participants being involved in these programmes. The routines of persons at faculties are shaped by a long tradition of collegial and democratic self-administration. Faculty members experience independence and liberty as the main guiding norms (Gerholz, Sloane, Fuge, Kaiser & Schwabl, 2013; Musselin, 2007). In this context, the issue of the faculty's organisational concept is vital since the management and development of study programmes goes together with certain organisational ideas and assumptions that are subjectively accentuated in contrasting ways among the participants (Picot et al., 2012). Within the mentioned conditions, the challenge for faculties is to design coherent and adequate study programmes that fit to the organisational routines like norms, rules and values in the faculties. Thus, creative instruments are needed in order to mutually

organise study programmes and to involve academic staff members and lecturers who are responsible for the study programmes.

In this paper, we will first present a theoretical analysis of the organisational routines in faculties. Based on this, we present three case studies of the management of study programmes at German Business and Economic faculties and analyse these concepts how they fit to the organisational routines. In the discussion, based on the results of our survey, organisational design factors for the development of study programmes will be presented.

## 2 Theoretical analysis: Organisational routines in faculties

Focussing on the management and development of study programmes, we take an organisational perspective. Therefore, organisational concepts are necessary in order to describe the organisational routines in a faculty. Organisational concepts aim at describing the functionality and specificities of an organisation (Scherer, 1999). Various models have been developed that can help to understand the organisational mechanisms and routines in a given faculty (e.g. Engels, 2004; Gerholz, 2014; Musselin, 2007). In the following synopsis (table 1), much-cited models are presented. It also shows indications for how faculties work as well as implications for the study programme management.

	Faculty as a collegial consensus (e.g. Clark, 1971)	Faculty as a political arena (Baldrige, 1971)	Faculty as a loosely coupled system (Weick, 1976)	Faculty as a professional bureaucracy (Mintzberg, 1992)
Organisational structure of the faculty	Autonomous making of consensus among people in the faculty External interference is difficult, because core values exist within the faculty	Pluralistic structures with different and incompatible interests Participation depends on the interests of people in the faculty	Loose coupling between the units Teaching and research units orientate themselves towards the scientific community Autonomy Internal orientation is relatively small	Scientific staff is the important piece in the organisation Decision-making structure is democratic and self-governed
Norms and values	Faculty community shares the same norms and values Pronounced understanding of autonomy	Interest-oriented and group-specific Principles: negotiation, political influence	Decentralized Oriented towards prevailing scientific community	Relevant norms are the skills and abilities of the scientific staff Pronounced understanding of autonomy
Clues for the development of study programmes and study programme management	Targets of the study programme should be based on the core values in the faculty Study programme management should be integrated Committees as arenas to find a consensus	Development of study programmes represents rather a micro-political process Risk that powerful interest-groups decide objectives concerning the study programme on their own without the participation of other groups	Organisational mechanism are needed to connect the several participants in the management process of study programmes Risk that the objectives of the study programmes orientate on-sided towards the scientific community	People with expertise and skills can manage development processes of study programmes → steering becomes possible It is important to identify those experts Committees are important steering instruments to ensure a coherent design of study programmes

*Tab. 1: Models of the faculty as an organisation and clues for the development of study programmes (adaption of Gerholz 2014, p. 163)*

Clark introduced a model of ‘collegial consensus’ which is based on the assumption that the actions of people in a faculty follow the same values and norms. He speaks of the ‘organisational saga’ as a “collective understanding of unique accomplishments in a formally established group” (Clark, 1972, p. 178). Clark argues that consensual decision-making in the faculties is possible and differences can be overcome (1971). Focussing on the development of study programmes, this means that the targets of the study programme should be based on the core values of the faculty. Committees serve as arenas in which decision making processes take place in order to find a consensus. According to the approach of Baldrige (1971), faculties operate as ‘politicized institutions’ with pluralistic structures. These structures lead to incompatible interests among the different people and groups. Conflicts and decision-making cannot be overcome by collegial consensus because an underlying political nature of decision processes exists. Hence, the development of study programmes represents a rather micro-political process including the risk that powerful interest-groups make decisions about objectives concerning the study programme on their own without the participation of other groups.

A popular model in the literature is the model of ‘loosely coupled systems’ from Weick (1976). The teaching and research units are autonomous while being only loosely coupled to each other. The interests and norms of the units correspond more to the prevailing scientific community (Weick, 1976). Therefore, the social requirements of faculties would not be fully recognised. In order to diminish this risk, organisational mechanisms are needed to connect the several participants of the management process of study programmes.

Mintzberg (1992) developed the model of ‘professional bureaucracy’ in which the organisation faculty is rather formalized to provide autonomy to the academic staff (the professionals). The actions of the professionals are legitimized by their scientific expertise. Hierarchies are created through skills and experience of the scientific staff. There exists a democratic process of decision making by the committees (e.g. the council of a faculty) within the faculty. Management boards, like the deanery, play a subordinate role. Within the development of study programmes, this means that steering becomes possible based on expertise and skills. Therefore, experts have to be identified in order to enable development processes to take place. The people with expertise and skills can manage such processes. At the same time, committees are important steering instruments to ensure a coherent design of study programmes.

The concepts of faculty organisation represent images of the faculty that analyse the interplay of structures, processes and people in the faculty. Nevertheless, it is important that the organisational mechanisms in the study programme management correspond to the actual common practice. Problems emerge if on a formal structure a coherent study programme design is developed while on the activity structure the lecturers do their own ‘business as usual’ without any steering effect concerning the activity structure (e.g. Zucker, 1994). In the following, we will analyse this ratio in several case studies at German faculties.

### **3 Method**

The intention of our research was to describe the study programme management at three faculties and to analyse, how the mechanisms in the management correspond with the organisational routines in a faculty. Therefore, we conducted three empirical case studies (Yin, 2003) at German universities with a focus on the organisation of the study programme

management and its implementations on faculty level. The objects in the analysis were (1) the organisational structure and (2) the procedural organisation as well as (3) the daily life challenges in the common practice. The latter refers to the institutional idea of the organisation, that is, which norms and values in a given faculty have an influence on the daily life, while the former reflects the institutional idea of the organisation, that is to say how the organisational modelling of this research fields is carried out.

We conducted three case studies at faculties for business and economics at universities in the federal state North Rhine-Westphalia in Germany. The federal state North Rhine-Westphalia is the biggest study location in Germany, thus it was an adequate research field for the study. The data was retrieved methodically from partly structured expert interviews (Flick, 2006). The interviewees were those persons, who are involved in the study programme management, that is to say lecturers, Higher Education managers, or staff members. We conducted the interviews at three different medium-sized universities in December 2012 as well as March 2013. This includes (1) a Faculty of Management, Economics and Social Sciences (MESS), (2) a Faculty of Business Administration and Economics (BAE), and (3) a Faculty of Business and Economics (BE). The interview transcripts were analysed with a concept-driven method (Schreier, 2012), with the aim to describe the organisational structure of the study programme management in the three faculties and to reconstruct the benchmarks for an adequate study programme management. For the latter, we used the theoretical approaches that are presented in chapter two.

## 4 Findings

### Case study 1: Faculty of Management, Economics and Social Sciences (MESS)

**Structural organization** The MESS is, among others, divided into the teaching and research units (e.g. the three departments Business Administration, Economics, and Social Sciences) and the administrative units (e.g. the Dean's Office including the vice-deans and a supportive, administrative apparatus). Three units of the faculty are relevant for the study programme management: (1) the Programme Management (PM), (2) the Study Reform Commission (SRC) and (2) the Programme Directors (PD).

(1) The PM is assigned to the Dean's Office. It deals with the planning, administration, development, and quality assurance of study programmes at the MESS and is a central contact for questions concerning teaching and learning in the faculty. The PM is a rather operative unit, which prepares decision-making processes – which are going to be decided on in the SRC – on an operative level. Several important positions in the PM can be mentioned:

- The Management of the PM can be seen as a higher instance which keeps an eye on all processes converging in the PM. Its tasks are rather strategic and less operative. ‘Daily business’ shows that the authority over the staff of the PM belongs to the management.
- The staff in the PM consists of the so-called Programme Manager. They are responsible for the operational implementation of tasks. Each Programme Manager is responsible for at least one study programme of the faculty and in this respect – but also for general questions concerning teaching and learning – contact for the faculty. Thus, Programme Managers have an insight into all relevant structures and processes as well as the study programmes of the faculty.

(2) The Programme Directors are professors of the faculty who are responsible for a study programme. This is a function, which the professors inhabit next to their tasks as lecturers, researchers etc. Each Programme Director is supported by a Programme Manager on an operative level (e.g. regarding changes in the study regulations). The continuous exchange

between the same takes place in the context of the various commissions or decision-making bodies. The Programme Managers who are assigned to the respective PDs and who are responsible for the various study programmes on an operative level do preparatory work for the PDs.

(3) The SRC is a commission with equal representation. It is led by the Dean of Studies and deals with operational and strategic issues concerning learning and teaching at the MESS. In addition to the representatives of the academic staff and the students, the programme directors of the several study programmes are a part of the SRC, too. They shall defend the interests of the respective disciplines and pass on the proposals and decisions of the SRC to the same. Decisions which have been reached unanimously within the SRC are passed on to the faculty council as a recommendation for adoption. Thus, the SRC can be seen as the discursive element of the faculty.

**Process organization** Based on the results of the interview analysis, the tasks of the PM can be categorized in three categories: (a) daily tasks, (b) recurring tasks and (c) problem-induced tasks.

Daily tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• answering inquiries from the faculty and external persons/institutions</li> <li>• coordination of coordination processes among the members of the faculty and also between Programme Managers and Programme Directors</li> </ul>
Recurring tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• information sessions of the student counselling centres,</li> <li>• course and room management</li> <li>• implementation of the master authorization processes</li> </ul>
problem-induced tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• operational revision of examination regulations</li> <li>• (further) development of study programmes,</li> <li>• preparation and supervision of (re-) accreditation processes,</li> <li>• establishing IT support concepts</li> </ul>

*Tab. 2: Tasks of the Programme Management*

The staff members do not consider those tasks as being routine processes. Instead, the task structure is characterized by constant processes of development and improvement as well as problem- induced. Overall, the PM has an important interface in the faculty. It has an operational coordination and filter function for decision making processes in the faculty and it bundles communication strands of different faculty actors: e.g. the exchange between the Programme Manager and Programme Director. In addition, it is an interface for faculty members.

**Theoretical classification** Teaching and research units at the MESS are anchored rather loosely in the faculty which reflects the historically grown understanding of their autonomy (Weick 1976). From the perspective of the study programme management, however, they are integrated in organizational and decision-making processes through PM, PD and SRC. In this respect, a key element has been created – the PM – which takes a structuring and coordinating function of the loosely coupled system. At the same time, it is associated formally and de facto with the Dean or Associate Dean. The SRC can be seen as a collegial exchange arena in which coherence problems in a study programme or fitting problems between formal and activity structure can be collected. Moreover, decisions are made in the SRC, which have been previously discussed and prepared by the PM on an operative level. In this context, the function of the Dean of Studies plays a pivotal role. As head of the SRC, he is power and

process promoter at the same time (within the meaning of the Political Arena, see Baldrige, 1971) and can defuse conflicts by seeking the dialogue with the faculty members. Mintzberg argues that power in professional bureaucracies may also be based on expertise (see section 2). The management of the PM as well as the Programme Managers themselves can be identified as specialist and process promoters. They know the formal as well as informal processes within the MESS faculty which allows them to control innovations indirectly.

## **Case Study 2: Faculty of Business Administration and Economics (BAE)**

**Structural organization** Structure-wise, the Dean of Studies is responsible for the study programme management within the BAE. The Dean's Office Advisor supports him in operational and strategic matters. The duties of the Dean of Studies comprise all activities related to the implementation and ensuring of a study programme, e.g. (re-) accreditation, coordination of cross-faculty and faculty-internal elements concerning study programmes, recognition of academic performance, and so on. The Dean's Office Advisor supports the Dean of Studies with the student counselling, the coordination with study and examination regulations, public relations, etc. Being the contact within the faculty, he has a coordinating function.

There are staff members for each study programme who are responsible for the modules and the feasibility of the same. Permanent Faculty Committees are in charge of recurring processes, e.g. the Commission of Master's Authorization.

**Process organization** The study programme management is designed by the Dean of Studies, which is supported by the Dean's Office Advisor. The Master's Admission Commission as well as the Bachelor's and Master's Commissions provide information and by this prepare decisions.

The tasks concerning the study programme management can be categorized in daily tasks, recurring tasks, and problem-induced tasks (see table 2). The executing agents are shown in parentheses.

Daily tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Answering and coordination of ad hoc requests arising in the area of teaching and learning (Dean's Office Advisor)</li> <li>• Answering requests concerning studies or from abroad (Dean's Office Advisor)</li> <li>• Requests from teachers and students regarding changes Module Manual (Dean's Office Advisor)</li> </ul>
Recurring tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Module planning and coordination (Dean of Studies, Dean's Office Advisor)</li> <li>• Preparation and review of Master's Admission Commission (Dean's Office Advisor)</li> <li>• Master approval process (Master Admissions Committee)</li> <li>• Coordination processes regarding university wide academic recognitions (cross-faculty meeting of Deans of Studies)</li> <li>• Admission to modules (semi-automated, Dean's Office Advisor)</li> </ul>
Problem-induced tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• operative revision and control of examination regulations (Dean's Office Advisor)</li> <li>• Development of study programmes (persons responsible for the modules, Dean of Studies)</li> <li>• (Re-)accreditation processes (Dean of Studies)</li> <li>• Need for change in the degree (Bachelor-Master Commission)</li> </ul>

*Tab. 3: Tasks within the course management*

A special feature at the BAE is the organizational structure with respect to the study programme management. This can be seen in episodes from practice which have been described in the expert interviews: The respondents assess a great need for coordination concerning the study programme management with the central University Administration, which is attributed to the university-wide study programme model<sup>1</sup>. The interdepartmental regulation of the study programmes – which is necessary due to the uniform study model – leads to high control of the study programme management by central requirements of the University Administration (e.g. the cross-faculty consulting staff is involved in processes of (re-)accreditation of the BAE faculty and has a restrictive effect on the process). In contrast to this, the exchange within the faculty is informal and only little regulated. The position of the Dean's Office Advisor is central, because he is an important coordination center or focal point within the faculty. Besides the usually rather informal structures and processes in the faculty, a permanent coordination body has been created with this position.

**Theoretical classification** The study programme management at the BAE has only a low regulation and can be categorised more as an informal structure. Nevertheless, concerning the study programme management at the BAE, the data analysis shows ambivalent effects: coordination processes on the level of management of the university are bureaucratic and follow hierarchical principles. The Dean of Studies acts as an intermediary between university's counselling team and the respective members of the faculty staff, while coordination processes at faculty level run relatively non-bureaucratic and informal. The bond to the university as a central level is strong, whereas the couplings within the Faculty of BAE are, for the most part, loose and show flexible structures (see Weick's approach). However, a

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<sup>1</sup> The students have the option of combining various modules during their Bachelor studies due to the university-wide model of study programmes. University-wide regulations and cooperation processes exist to make this possible, e.g. concerning credit points or changes within modules.

coordinating and structuring position was created by the Dean's Office Advisor, which opposed the loose couplings and the information loss due to the high turnover of staff on faculty level. However, the Dean's Office Advisor has a rather operative function and is subordinate to the Dean of Studies.

Study development processes within the faculty depend on the support of specialist promoters (e.g. persons who produce and advance the specialist concept) on the one hand and power promoters (e.g. management positions at university administration level) on the other hand. It became clear in the expert hearings that the work in the study programme management is dominated by negotiations with various stakeholders. The cooperation with the same depends on the cooperation of the faculty members involved in teaching and research. Control mechanisms, however, do not exist. This refers to the strong desire for autonomy in teaching and research, which can also be found in Mintzberg's idea of the professional bureaucracy: Personal instruction is taken as a strong interference in the understanding of autonomy; at best, there are 'soft coordination mechanisms'. This becomes particularly clear on the level of professional staff: they can be compared to a collection of individuals who get together for the purpose of sharing resources and support services, but who want to be left alone otherwise (Mintzberg, 1992, p. 278). However, little monitoring and control mechanisms can be opposed to a lack of cooperation.

### **Case study 3: Faculty of Business and Economics (BE)**

**Structural organization** Various bodies are involved in the study programme management at the BE. The Dean of Studies is connected to the Dean's Office on faculty level. The Dean of Studies has two staff members, which form the Study Management. Beyond that, every study programme has her own Study Programme Commission (SPC), which consist of the Study Programme Commissioner and his/her deputy.

The Dean of studies moderates the Faculty Committee, the Bachelor's Quality Management Group (QMG), the Master's Quality Management Group, and the Study Programme Commissions (SPC). The Faculty Committee consists of the Study Management and the Study Programme Commissioners. The Bachelor's and Master's QMGs each consist of the Study Management, the Study Programme Commissioners, the Chairman of the Audit Committee, and Student Representatives. Thus, they form the interface between students, professors, and the Student Affairs Office respectively. The QMGs are based on the currently existing meeting between the Dean of Studies, the Student Affairs Office, and the Representatives of the Student Council. However, since the representatives represent only some of the study programmes, the number of students is being increased at the moment in order to obtain a comprehensive picture of the study conditions. The SPC is the interface between the study programme level and the module level. The SPC meets once a semester in order to clarify questions concerning the design of modules, module evaluation and – if necessary – criticism and/or problems. If important issues cannot be resolved in this SPC at programme level, they can be discussed again in the Faculty Committee at faculty level. This is especially true for aspects concerning more than one study programme.

**Process organization** Within the Faculty Committee, the Study Management is divided into an operational and a strategic level. The Student Affairs Office carries out the operational tasks. One or two research assistants, in turn, carry out the strategic tasks. In addition, they are responsible for information distribution into the other bodies on the one hand and to relieve the Student Affairs Office by the adoption of various operational activities on the other hand. The Faculty Committee meets once a semester with the Dean of Studies; they exchange views



on the various operational and strategic issues and objectives at faculty level. This includes, for example, issues concerning further development and quality assurance of study programmes, accreditation issues, etc. The scientific staff of the Study Management ensures that topics within the Bachelor's and Master's QMGs are also brought into account. This is possible due to the staff's function as an interface and information carrier.

Operational tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organisation of the modules (classification of new modules in the module catalogue) (SPC)</li> <li>• Entrance requirements for master courses (Study Programme Commissioners)</li> <li>• Accreditation of study programmes (Faculty Council)</li> <li>• Interaction with students (Bachelor's and Master's QM Groups)</li> <li>• Recognition of credits and modules (Study Programme Commissioners)</li> </ul>
Strategic tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Further development of study programmes</li> <li>• Implementation of strategic objectives and evaluation of indicators of the QM report (e. g. Ensuring quality of studies, Promotion of profession-oriented careers in scientific and non-scientific fields of work, Recruiting of high achievers)</li> </ul>

Tab. 4: Tasks within the study programme management

**Theoretical classification** On the one hand, the study programme management at the BE is highly regulated and has a complex structure that is reflected in the several bodies. These bodies enable a structuring of the loosely coupled system at a faculty (see Weick 1976). On the other hand, the several bodies mirror the faculty level as well as the study programme level, which make a collegial communication and decision-making process possible. The Faculty Committee represents the faculty level and opens a voice opportunity for the several staff members. Thus, collegial decision-making concerning the whole study programmes is enabled (see Clark 1971). On the study programme level, two bodies exist: The QMG and the SPC. The former guarantee a systematic and sustainable further development of the given study programmes (e.g. the quality assurance). The latter assure a connection and exchange between the study programme and their several module managers. The Dean of Studies can be seen as a process and power promoter as he is embedded in all of the bodies. At the same time, he is supported by the Study Management, which is divided into an operative as well as strategic part. Nevertheless, no indications could be found in the data analysis that show how the complex structures work in practice.

## 5 Discussion and practical implications

The three case studies show different organisational solutions of a study programme management. Based on this studies, however, first organisational design factors for the study programme management can be described. The MESS has with the Programme Management a force entity for the operational tasks and with the Study Reform Commission an element that ensures collegial decision-making processes. A similar structure shows the BE, with the difference that the collegial decision-making process is divided into the faculty level with the Faculty Committee and the study programme level with the Quality Management Groups. Here, too, the Dean of Studies is supported by an operative entity, the Study Management. These two case studies illustrate that discursive elements such as the mentioned committees are important in order to foster the exchange between the Dean of Studies, the person responsible for the study programmes and the several lectures in the study programmes. In

contrast, the BAE can be characterised with a strong informal structure. Used in a positive way, at the BAE a collegial structure without organisational steering elements is ensured. There is, however, also the risk that in problematic situations a consensus – especially in appearance of political interests – cannot be founded. Beyond that, the support structure for the Dean of Studies at the BAE is limited. In addition to the other two case studies, it can be shown that a study programme management should consist of both, a sustainable operative structure that comprehensively organises the programme work in daily life, and a leading persons (e. g. Dean of Studies, persons in charge of the study programme) who are able to act as mediators for making a consensus between several persons in the faculty.

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