



# Gallic Villages in the Bologna Area - Reasons and Strategies for Resisting the “Bologna Reform” in Selected Fields of Study

Heinke Röbbken and Marcel Schütz\*

University of Oldenburg

Germany

**Abstract**

Since the implementation of the Bologna model in 1999, the vast majority of German higher education institutions introduced a two-tier system leading to a Bachelor's or Master's degree. Only a very small group of departments explicitly rejected reforming their study programs according to the new Bologna system and decided to maintain the old diploma programs. This article investigates in detail the departments resisting the reform. The purpose of this study is to explore the backgrounds, motivations and strategies in resisting a powerful rationalized myth in European higher education. Using a qualitative research design, this study draws on six case examples with departments that have avoided adopting the new study degrees. Results suggest that a variety of stakeholders within university departments and the higher education organizational environment influence decisions to resist the Bologna Reform project. In this paper we advertise for the analysis of locale decision making and reform effects within educational organization.

*Keywords:* Reform project, decision-making, institutional theory, micro-politics, resistance to change.

## Introduction

One of the biggest organizational reforms that has ever taken place in the European higher education system is the so-called Bologna Reform. The Bologna Reform project attempts to harmonize study programs within European higher education in order to stimulate international mobility within and beyond Europe. The name derives from a conference that took place in 1999 in Bologna where 29 European ministries of education

signed this programmatic declaration. Before 1999, most European countries had only a single higher education tier in which the university is entered directly after completion of secondary education. This system leads to a Master's or an equivalent degree as the basic degree (such as diplomas or state examinations).

The Bologna model propagated a two-tier system in Europe that is structured into an undergraduate level, leading to the Bachelor's degree, and the graduate level, usually leading to an advanced degree, such as a

*\*The authors' order is an alphabetical one. The authors contributed equally to the article.*

Master's degree (Clark, 1983). To be able to harmonize European study programs, the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) was established, which attempts to measure the student workload required to achieve the objective of a study program. For example, a full-time student must complete 60 ECTS per academic year, which represents 1,500 to 1,800 hours of study. It is important to note that these numbers are the result of political decision-making and not a scientifically tested system. Surely, when reforms are going to be implemented, numbers and reckoning are required. Without quantification there is no reform projects (Gruber, 2015).

Many countries, including Germany, substituted their so-called one-tier system leading to diplomas, state examinations and magister degrees with Bachelor's and the Master's degree. Over the last 15 years, the old structure has almost completely disappeared. The rapid adoption of the Bologna model in European higher education has been analyzed by a variety of authors (e.g., Schriewer, 2007; Krücken & Meier, 2005; Schriewer, 2009; Kühn, 2014; Lenzen, 2014). Although it seems that the Bologna model is nowadays an unquestionable fact, there are some case examples, where this "new European myth" (Schriewer, 2007, p. 31) has been resisted. A small group of departments explicitly rejected reforming their study programs according to the new Bologna system and decided to maintain the old diploma programs. One example is the University of Dresden, which kept the German "Diplom Ingenieur" that is widely considered a brand label in international academic engineering education (Odenbach & Krauthäuser, 2015). Engineering sciences in Germany in particular have a long tradition with the diploma (single-tier) degree. The "Diplom-Ingenieur" (= engineer) was regarded as an international trademark with a high reputation. There are local initiatives to return to the diploma degrees at technical universities (TU) and faculties of engineering. In October 2016, two diploma programs were reintroduced at Technical University Ilmenau. The university administration is now advertising the advantages of the new (old) degrees (Technical University Ilmenau, 2016). It can be assumed that these "resistance departments" face severe legitimation and adaptation pressures given the fact that politicians and many higher education actors have vigorously enforced the adoption of the Bologna system (Schütz & Rübken, 2016). Against this

background it is interesting to investigate the departments resisting the reform in more detail. The purpose of this study is to explore a number of distinctive backgrounds, motivations and strategies in resisting a powerful "rationalized myth" (Schriewer, 2007, p. 31) in European higher education.

This research will draw on (neo-)institutional theories of isomorphism and decoupling to show under which circumstances resistance to institutional pressures is possible. In addition, the micro-political model is presented to focus on the internal dynamics of organizational change induced by the Bologna Reform. Using a qualitative research design, this study uses six case examples with departments that have avoided adopting the new study degrees. This article is structured as follows: First, we outline some theoretical concepts from neo-institutional theory that help to structure our qualitative empirical analysis. Then we present some methodological considerations. Based on that, we summarize and analyze the results of our interviews. The article closes with some implications for dealing with institutionalized pressures in higher education practice and for the development of neo-institutional theory.

### **The Bologna Reform in light of selected organizational theories**

We briefly present two theoretical approaches to organizational change. First, we start with neo-institutional theory that emphasizes external pressures as triggers for change. Second, we use the micro-political model in order to illuminate internal power structures and processes underlying organizational change in higher education institutions. We define reform in this case as the planned structural modification of a (organizational) system. A reform is based on proposals for improvement (Luhmann, 1971). Consistent with Christensen et al., we mean active and deliberate attempts by political and administrative leaders to change structural or cultural features of organizations. The famous buzzword change expresses "what actually happens to such features" (Christensen, Lægveid, Roness & Røvik, 2007, p. 122) in organizational practices.

Today, some 17 years after the "Bologna declaration", Master's and Bachelor's degrees seem to be completely institutionalized in the German higher education system. That means society takes them for granted (Zucker, 1983; Scott, 1995), which forces or

ganizations to correspond to these norms. If organizations are willing to adopt institutionalized practices, they receive legitimacy from their wider societal context and resource givers (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Institutionalization leads to a process called “isomorphism” which causes organizations to become increasingly similar (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). We differentiate between three forms of isomorphism: coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphism. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) describe “coercive isomorphism” as coming from formal and informal pressures on organizations. These pressures are usually exerted by powerful organizations, such as the state. In this study, political actors played a central role in influencing the adoption of the new degrees. Twenty-nine ministers of education declared a common European higher education area with similar degree standards among all participating countries. Mimetic isomorphism refers to imitation of one organization by another (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). Mimetic processes mainly occur in situations in which uncertainty is high, goals are ambiguous, or technologies are poorly understood (March & Olsen, 1976). Higher education organizations are prime examples for poorly understood technologies, because they lack explicit goals, have changing preferences, highly autonomous staff, and a wide range of different outputs (Everett & Entekin, 1987). Rather than meeting “technical efficiency criteria” (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991, p. 41), universities are evaluated in terms of their conformity to institutionalized norms and the expectations of a variety of constituencies. The third form is called normative isomorphism, which stems from professionalization (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). Universities and professional associations are seen as important vehicles for driving normative isomorphism because they define normative rules of organizational and professional behavior, through which a common cognitive basis is created.

Another theoretical concept useful in the context of our study is the idea of decoupling. In institutionalized environments, the demands from important stakeholder groups do not necessarily coincide with what is required for effective organizational action and production. For example, the pressure to adopt the two-tier system with Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees can conflict with the needs and educational goals of particular academic fields, such as medicine, engineering, or teacher education. When the demands for an “efficient

academic education” in medicine are inconsistent with institutionalized expectations, the adoption of the two-tier system may cause considerable problems for the department or university. How do organizations in highly institutionalized environments cope with these contradictory demands? Neo-institutionalists argue that organizations that are exposed to inconsistent demands and norms develop two sets of structures and processes: one formal and one informal structure for each set of demands (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Luhmann, 1964). The formal front face, or organizational facade, does not always represent the actual work activities – or the organizational backstage (Kühl, 2013). For researchers of organization, decoupling is not the “pathologization” of formal structure, but rather the necessary pressure valve for balancing external expectations and internal capacities. Furthermore, decoupling is not just compensation for external requirements. It is also about overcoming contrastive logics of work and decision. This is particularly relevant for higher education organizations: On the one hand, universities have to carry out rigorous research. On the other hand, they have to be practically relevant. They have to do good teaching and at the same time publish the “right” papers in the “right” journals to reach high positions in the rankings. They have to conduct creative research and at the same time preserve established theories and methods. They tell non-academics that they are not too academic. And they tell academics that they are not too non-academic. Universities are full of conflicting goals.

Organizations with conflicting demands are likely to decouple their formal structure from their operating core (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Decoupling helps to buffer the organization from parts of its complex social and technical environments that impose various and divergent demands on the organization (Röbken, 2004). Anecdotal evidence supports the view that many old diploma programs have only been slightly adapted to meet the new Bologna requirements. Teichler (2008) and Kühl (2014) for example, talk about “bonsai programs” and “micro Master’s”, which are highly concentrated (diploma) programs packed into Bachelor’s or Master’s degrees.

We must mention a few notes on coupling, which are particularly important in the field of education. An indirectly related concept of decoupling is based on the known approach of loose coupling by Weick (1976). Weick, in his famous and widely quoted article, de-

scribes loose coupling as a central structural principle, especially in educational institutions. While the buffer concept of decoupling focuses on the conflict between internal and external demands, Weick's loose coupling addresses only internal organizational cohesion. Universities have generally loosely coupled organizational structures. This is explained by the distinction between different role concepts of the experts and the administrators. There are parallel logics of "good" decision-making. Peripheral and functional centers of decision-making coexist (academic departments, research centers, university administration). It is no coincidence that Cohen, March & Olsen (1972) developed their garbage can model using the example of the university. Reform decisions fit the garbage can model because they are also the additive result of timely opportunities and fortunate coincidence.

Weick's article was also used to describe organizations outside the education system. Reforms aimed at effecting structural innovations can be considered as a critical phase of the expert organization in which two problems of coupling occur: on the one hand, expert organizations confront the uniformity problem of decision-making. And on the other hand, they have to implement decisions in such a way as to adequately satisfy internal and external demands. As a consequence, it is difficult for universities to develop a uniform new logic of decision-making. The Bologna Reform can also be used as an opportunity not to reduce decoupling and loose coupling, but even to expand it. Reforms are productive as they provide a rich reservoir of problems and solutions. The problems produce solutions and the solutions produce new problems. As such, reforms are new and old at the same time (Brunsson, 1989; Esposito, 2005; Jung, 2008).

Decoupling is only one strategy to buffer organizations from institutionalized expectations. Oliver (1991) developed a set of hypotheses predicting under which circumstances and in which ways organizations respond to institutionalized demands. She argues that, depending on the institutional pressures exerted on organizations, strategic responses can vary from conforming to resistant, depending on certain organizational and environmental factors. According to Oliver, resisting institutional pressures is more likely to occur if, for example, the social legitimacy or the economic gain perceived to be attainable by adopting a new technique is low. We can assume that certain fields of

study are more likely to gain social legitimacy by adopting the new Bologna degrees than others. This may also apply to the dependence on external factors, which is likely to vary between different fields of study. According to Oliver, resistance to institutionalized pressure is more likely to occur if the organization is not so dependent on certain factors, if the legal obligation is low, and if uncertainty is low. Likewise, if the institutionalized requirements differ markedly from the internal goals and needs for efficiency, it is more likely that an organization will resist the adoption of an institutionalized technique.

Other models focus on the dynamics and structures within the organization, which can also stimulate change processes. One prominent model is the dialectical or the micro-political model of organizational change (Morgan, 1997). This approach is considered to have strong explanatory power, especially for understanding the way changes occur within higher education institutions (Kezar, 2001, p. 93). In his seminal article "Micropolitics: Mechanisms of Institutional Change", Burns (1961) emphasized the importance of interest groups and power within organizations as well as the significance of persuasion and influence strategies within change processes. In his view, decisions typically result from bargaining among influential members of the organization. Other key concepts of this model include persuasion and influence strategies, informal networks, persistence, and the role of mediation. In all organizational reform activities there are great sources of useful uncertainty – either pro or contra reform (Brunsson, 1989; Brunsson & Olsen, 1993; Jung, 2008). Micro-politics is present in a wide range of organizational areas, including human resource policies, personnel selection, budgeting or strategic decision making.

Universities have unique power structures and typically rely on expert power rather than legitimate power. Crozier and Friedberg (1993) argued that the higher the discretion of the organizational members, the more likely decisions will be imprinted by micro-political processes. Organizational members use the freedom they have and fill the scope creatively with their own interests and goals (Breisig, 2015). Since lecturers and researchers benefit from high professional autonomy, universities provide favorable conditions for political activities, bargaining, and negotiations in order to create change. A number of studies have ap-

plied the political model to organizational change in higher education institutions (e.g., Baldrige, 1971; Conrad, 1978; Clark, 1983; Gumpert & Pusser, 1999; Gioia & Thomas, 1996). Also in educational reform, micro-political aspects are often discussed. During the implementation of a new quality management concept in schools (Björk & Blase, 2009) and universities (Wendt, 1994), micro-political perspectives have been useful for understanding change. Finally, the systemic analysis of planning processes in universities (Marcus, 1999) or the backgrounds as well as consequences of structural changes in departments (Sullivan, 2000) provided excellent accounts of the micro-political model of change.

Based on these two theoretical approaches –the neo-institutional and the micro-political perspective – we will now turn to our method, then the empirical study in which we explore qualitative interview material in detail. In the final section we will discuss the fit of neo-institutional and micro-political theory and develop a more fine-grained picture of the organizational responses to the Bologna Reform.

### Method

In order to explore the reasons and action strategies for resisting the implementation of the new degrees, we conducted a qualitative study utilizing semi-structured interviews. According to Flick, Kardoff & Steinke (2004), a qualitative research design is particularly fruitful when the concepts of interest have not been fully identified, are poorly understood, or underdeveloped. Sofaer (1999) states that qualitative research is also very useful for studying individuals, groups or organizations that are otherwise rarely heard, such as patients or workers far down in the hierarchical chain of command. In the present study, organizational units that have resisted the Bologna Reform have remained almost invisible in the current debate. Hence, it may be fruitful to use qualitative research for clarifying the values, intentions, and meanings attributed to organizations and people who play different roles in the Bologna process. Qualitative methods have also been used to understand and compare the perspectives of different stakeholders which is regarded an important element in studies of policymaking and policy implementation (Sofaer, 1999). Since the reasons for resisting institutionalized practices have only been studied rudimentarily in the literature, the exploratory qualitative approach is appropriate because it allows us to elabo-

rate new concepts and theory grounded on a number of in-depth interviews. Additionally, the qualitative approach to collecting data enables the researcher to gather rich accounts of participant's interpretation of their environment which is an important element of institutionalization processes, respectively the resistance to institutionalization (Flick, 2014).

From the wide spectrum of qualitative research methods we chose case study research involving several cases. The case study approach provides the flexibility to examine complex processes of change and to explore unexpected consequences and challenges (Creswell, 1994). Tempel (2001) points out that interview-based case studies also have the advantage of being able to reveal issues that would have gone unnoticed, because the researcher could not have known them in advance. Using qualitative interviews allows the researcher to "go deep into complex matters, which are not wholly understood" (as cited in Stewart, Barsoux, Kieser, Ganter & Walgenbach 1994, p. 13). Especially semi-structured interviews can "lead in unanticipated directions... [and be] valuable in investigating issues that have not been addressed satisfactorily hitherto" (Tempel, 2001, p. 146).

The first step in the data collection process involved gaining access to interesting cases that have refused to implement the new degree structure. An Internet analysis revealed 61 diploma programs at German higher education institutions in the beginning of our project. We randomly contacted 25 departments via e-mail; out of these, 6 professors and deans were willing to take part in this study. The selected professors were asked to participate in personal, semi-structured interviews. An overview of discussion topics was sent to each interviewee prior to the interview. Each interview was informal with non-directive, open-ended questioning to stimulate the subject's thoughts. Interviews lasted an average of 80 minutes. While an initial semi-structured interview guide was composed, it evolved throughout the interviews to reflect the responses of the individual professors and to encompass issues raised by previous interviewees.

In order to ensure credibility and trustworthiness of our findings, we employed a number of techniques (see also Shenton, 2004, pp. 64-67):

- We tried to establish a trustworthy and familiar relationship with the selected university departments before the interview took place. Documents

about the study programs were analyzed and phone calls about our project with the respondents prior to the interview were conducted. This helped us to get an adequate understanding of the department and to establish a relationship of trust between the interviewer and the respondent.

- The selected cases are the result of a random sampling process among departments that retained diploma degrees. We should therefore be confident that the departments are typical of members of the group of resistant university departments.
- We triangulated our fully transcribed interview data with our notes from our observations and also with written documents about the selected departments and study programs (e.g., program descriptions, department homepage, marketing material etc.). This helped us enrich our interview data and generate a more full-fledged picture of the selected cases. We also triangulated our data by comparing our six case organizations to reduce the effect on the study of particular local factors peculiar to one department.
- Finally, our respondents also had the opportunity to refuse to participate in the project. Respondents were encouraged to be open and frank to the outset of the interview. We also told our participants that there are no right answers to our questions, and we emphasized our independent status as researcher.

The researchers fully transcribed all interview discussions, which enabled unnoticed information to be detected at a later stage. The interview material was analyzed using an inductive approach to data analysis. The interviews were read in full, and memos were written. The two authors read the interviews independently. On a subset of interviews, we performed line-by-line coding, and the emerging codes were compared, discussed and revised. After that, we derived a number of key analytic constructs, including (1) reactions to the reform, (2) relevant actors (ministries, university leadership, recruiters, students), (3) micro-politics, and (4) decoupling. Using this broad category system, the researchers coded all transcripts using MaxQDA. After all data was coded, we utilized several techniques to ensure that our categorization was trustworthy. First, the two researchers coded all interviews independently based on our coding scheme. Over 95% of the coding was identical between the two researchers. To assure inter-coder reliability, a fellow research-

er checked the categorization and coded approximately 10% of the transcripts; we achieved a 93% agreement on the four major themes. To increase the credibility of our interpretations, we solicited feedback from four colleagues who were familiar with the Bologna topic as well as from one person who had not dealt with research on this phenomenon. We presented the original citations and discussed the meanings from different point of views. This helped us acquire a fuller and more revealing picture of what was going on in the selected cases. However, we must notice some methodical challenges of translation (Bogner, Littig & Menz, 2014). For the translation of the citations into English a native speaker has assisted.

As with any empirical study, the results presented have some limitations. First, this study was limited to only six cases. It may be that more cases as well as cases from other academic disciplines would have produced a different picture. Although it is not possible to generalize our results to all departments resisting the new degrees, they provide a first empirical foundation for generating hypotheses and further developing neo-institutional theory. Second, this study mainly used interview data with academics who were responsible for the study program. It would have been interesting to compare their viewpoints with perspectives from recruiters, university leadership, students or politicians. However, due to lack of data, it was not possible to take their views into consideration. Future research on these issues are necessary.

## Results

In this section, we present our research findings, first as a brief description of the selected cases and secondly in terms of the reactions to the Bologna Reform as well as relevant actors in the environment of the reform resistant department. In addition, we describe several micro-political processes that emerged as influencing the decision to keep the old degree structure. Finally, we consider some arguments on the observed decoupling strategies.

### The selected cases

The backgrounds and reasons for resisting the new degree structure are manifold. After carefully reading the interview material, different actors and processes were identified that influenced the decision not to fully adopt the Bologna system. Among the most important actors mentioned by the interviewees are local recruit-

ers, the ministries, students, as well as university leadership.

## Recruiters

In the three engineering programs, the interviewees pointed mainly to the technical needs resulting from the job requirements of an engineer. The recurring argument in all three interviews was that a successful engineer could not be qualified within a six-semester course of study leading to a bachelor degree. This perspective has been attributed to the expectations from industry and potential recruiters. Local recruiters in particular believe that the Bologna system is not compatible with the required competences of a well-grounded “Diplom-Ingenieur”:

*Well, I believe a six-semester course of study in engineering with shorter practical experience does not really qualify students for the job as engineer. Employability was one major aim of the Bologna Reform. But I doubt that bachelor degrees in engineering will lead to employable graduates. This is particularly problematic in engineering. In today's highly competitive industries, we need highly competent and qualified engineers. That cannot be achieved within six semesters.*

The interviews also reveal that industry or recruiter needs in the field of engineering have not been sufficiently accommodated when developing the new study structure:

*The industry and recruiters never asked for this reform. Our industry already knows what can be expected from a student graduating at a particular university.*

## The Ministry

Key actors in the transformation process are the ministries in the individual federal states. The interviewees felt that the states exerted pressure to adopt the new degrees within a short period of time. One interviewee felt particularly strong “pressure from the top”:

*Yes, there was clearly pressure from the ministry. In our department, we always said that we should not hurry ahead in anticipatory obedience, and only adapt our degrees when we are forced to do so. And so up to now we have not changed our structure. In my opinion, there were only very few colleagues from other universities who acted out of conviction.*

Another department also decided not to conform to the Bologna initiative, although the ministry raised expectations several times to adopt the bachelor and master degrees. One interviewee mentioned that their federal state would have much more urgent problems to solve than introducing new academic degrees:

*For a while, we were called to the ministry once a year to discuss this and related issues. We always had very good arguments and, as I said, our state faced so many other challenges in the school system. We were confident that it would be much more important for the ministry to focus on ensuring that the school system functioned properly and that pupils earn a school leaving certificate... We were sure we would be able to persuade the ministry to address more important issues in education than struggling with bachelor and master degrees.*

In the next case, the Bologna initiative lost favor after a change of minister. While the former minister clearly supported the new Bologna system, the pressure to change the degrees faded away noticeably:

*The ministry ... changed sides. Our new minister of education effectively said: 'I don't care. Do what you think is appropriate.' And that is the reason why we were no longer forced to adopt the new degrees ... and kept our diploma.*

At another department, the faculty came to an agreement that it would be better for the field of study “to stick to the diploma”. Although there were individual colleagues who tried to convince the department to adopt the new degrees, the majority of the faculty was able to enforce the old diploma structure:

*And what followed were two rounds of agreed objectives between the university and the ministry. The first clearly formulated that our department would have to switch to the new degrees. However, after long discussions with the ministry, this agreement was formulated more vaguely and less categorically: something like the university will endeavor to convert the remaining old degrees into master and bachelor degrees...*

Expecting a strong backlash from the ministry, the department prepared a short-term plan for implementing the new degrees. But surprisingly, the backlash never came:

*We in our department ... as objectors, were increasingly amazed that the ministry showed no sign of*

*exerting any pressure on us. Not once have we had to justify ourselves for the fact that we still offer our students a diploma degree.*

## Students

Another important stakeholder group in the Bologna process are the students. At some universities in the sample, students support the retention of the diploma degrees. Surveys among first semester students revealed that

*Among the diploma students, 76% chose this university because it still offers a diploma degree.*

In addition, the perceived strong competition for student numbers among universities have caused departments to develop clear profiles with so-called "USPs" (unique selling points) that help position the academic programs in an increasingly competitive and non-transparent market for Bachelor's and Master's degrees:

*In our region, there is fierce competition for students ... for a while we waited to see how other universities acted and how we could distinguish ourselves from them.*

Another reason for keeping the diploma degree resulted from the need to recruit young academics from the students, who were able to participate in research projects and qualify for an academic career. In sparsely populated regions of Germany, in particular, it can be difficult to retain the ablest students at the department after they complete their bachelor's degree:

*We want to keep the diploma for as long as possible, because it is reality for us. We want to offer our students a four-year academic education in order to commit them to stay with us for a doctoral program. ...Where else can we recruit our own research assistants for the future?*

## University Leadership

Another key actor in the decision to adopt or resist the Bologna initiative is university leadership. The direction of university leadership determines the context in which study programs are designed. According to several interviewees, study programs had to be transformed because university leadership demanded the new degrees:

*Because it was dictated by university leadership. We had no option. For a while we discussed it with the university governing bodies, but when they tell*

*you, "No, we will adopt the new degrees anyway", then you don't have any other option.*

In one case, the university rector reluctantly accepted the wish not to imitate prevailing practice, and was even sympathetic to the resistance to adopting the new degree. The interviewee also mentioned a partner university (not included in this sample) where the rector exerted pressure on all departments to implement the new degrees:

*The colleagues at our partner university still regret that they buckled so quickly under the pressure of university leadership. That was due to the former rector, who pressured them into it. Our rector was more considered: while he said that we should adopt the new degrees, he also ultimately signaled that he was sympathetic to our position. And that, of course, makes a huge difference.*

The non-imitation even gave rise to jealousy among competing universities that had quickly adopted the new degree structure. Some of them appeared to favor imitation of the non-imitation:

*Some colleagues at other universities were quite envious ... we really are pretty exotic with our program, but we jointly agreed with the university leadership to take this direction.*

In another case example from the field of engineering, the key role played by university leadership in the decision to keep the diploma degree was also emphasized:

*I cannot complain at all. In the past few years, we have had presidents at our university who have held considered opinions on the Bologna Reform and who supported us. They did not exert extraordinary pressure on departments to adopt the new degrees as soon as possible, in order to portray themselves outwardly, especially to the ministry.*

One of the case study universities is a small size institution, with non-bureaucratic communication structures between the departments and the university leadership. This too influenced the decision to resist the Bologna initiative.

*The former rector was a colleague from my department [...] he actually supported us in our hesitant attitude towards the Bologna initiative and in considering whether the diploma would still be a more appropriate degree for us. So, we had quite some support and backing from the university leader-*



*ship. This allowed unpolitical requirements, the department will buckle and say: Okay, so be it! Then we'll just do it and adapt our degrees.*

In contrast to the other case studies mentioned so far, one diploma program in the sample had to make stronger efforts to attract students and obtain legitimacy from university leadership. Some statements show that the diploma program's legitimacy weakens in the eyes of university leadership or other stakeholder groups, when demand decreases:

*There is, of course, the risk that the program will be shut down sooner or later, even when the program doesn't require any additional capacities to resist the new programs considerably beyond the deadline. But otherwise, it is clear that if university leadership does exert ongoing pressure to fulfill. The program is, in my view, not very expensive for our university, because it causes no additional work. We do not offer additional seminars for the diploma program, we only offer courses for all students, and therefore it makes no difference in financial terms.*

## Micro-politics

The decision to implement or resist the new degree structure also seems to be a product of micro-politics within the university; that means the decision is potentially the result of a specific, unpredictable momentum between individual actors with the higher education institution (Burns, 1961). In one case, the implementation of the reform is attributed mainly to a single actor who climbed the career ladder into university leadership as part of the reform process:

*There was at least one actor, who rose in rank and who was also the driving force behind implementing the reform – and also supported the reform's intentions. He did that – and this is my opinion – not for individual career reasons, although maybe that played a role too, but because he was absolutely convinced of the goals of the Bologna initiative, particularly the modularization and the corresponding school-like regimentation of academic programs. He was always an opponent of freedom, an opponent of individual discretion in academic studies in subjects like the arts and humanities, i.e. where you are able to choose quite freely what you study and what you don't study, so*

*that you can circumvent certain departments – beyond the required subjects in the foundation courses. That was way back. I did that too – you avoid certain persons, and thus certain departments. This particular person never approved of that practice and was particularly keen on establishing a prescribed structure for the students.*

In another context the interviewee continued:

*You see the same pattern at other institutes too. I think, these people came to the fore because someone has to do it. Most colleagues kept quiet because they absolutely did not agree with the reforms, and that left space open for those who identify with the goals of Bologna. [...] and, at our university at least, that can be a pretty good career path into university leadership.*

Whether Bologna degrees are adopted or not is – according to one interviewee – also dependent on the particular micro-political situation at the department:

*In my view, each university or department has some colleagues who observe from the sidelines and go with the flow, and others who are more active and want to develop something new. The latter are typically the younger colleagues, and if they are also rhetorically competent and communicate their concepts in the relevant committees, I think they can achieve their goals with little resistance.*

Initially, one department decided to offer old and new degrees simultaneously. During the reform process, however, so much resistance emerged that the whole department became incapacitated. Eventually, the dispute escalated:

*The resistance became so strong – also the personal resistance of the individual professors – and the lack of support for the process of change so fundamental that we ultimately only changed the least common denominator. In the end, we changed our old diploma program only slightly by introducing modules. The whole process was incredibly difficult and there was even personal affront between colleagues.*

As a consequence, the study modules were the result of adding smaller subjects to a larger unit, although they did not fit together very in terms of content. It is well known from the literature that micro-political processes can have a number of functional as

well as dysfunctional effects (Neuberger, 2002). During the reform process, power is redistributed; some colleagues could clearly strengthen their position and climb up the career ladder. Others could not accomplish their goals, which in turn can be demotivating and cause inner resignation:

*Well, I believe that maintaining the diploma was an attempt to undermine or to torpedo the reform. That was perhaps connected with our hope that the bachelor program would be less accepted than our diploma program...)* Apart from that there is a predominantly reserved attitude towards these new structures – even to the point of inner resignation, I would say. That means, we adopted the structural requirements as a necessary evil – we changed our study regulations and implemented a master’s program – but our teaching courses, for example, our classes, did not change much or not at all.

### Decoupling and Parallel Structure

Neo-institutional theory emphasizes that institutionalization processes often result in organizational decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), where the formal organizational structure is only loosely linked or not linked at all to the actual work activities (Luhmann, 1971; Kühl, 2013). This helps organizations to correspond to institutionalized expectations, while at the same time securing organizational efficiency and goal achievement. This phenomenon can be observed in almost all case examples in this study:

*The professors who participated in the Bologna process did not change anything in their seminars, whether in the composition of the courses or in the introductory classes. The same goes for all the other faculty. From my point of view, they just did not respond to the new demands.*

Although many colleagues considered the reform to be counterproductive, they tried to deal with the requirements and to come to an arrangement. One professor raised the fear that the current unsatisfactory situation could perpetuate so that the half-hearted implemented reform could persist without being called into question. He voiced the concern

*...that it will be left at that – a botch job. [...] if we continue in this way, we will completely fail our educational target, because we merge all students from all programs together in one seminar and don’t distinguish between diploma, master and*

*bachelor. It becomes apparent that this leads, well, to inner resignation, and in the end nothing comes of it except a compromised botch job.*

One interviewee pointed to the fact that the Bologna initiative never prohibited the retention of diploma degrees. It was possible to implement Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees while at the same time maintaining the old diplomas. Some professors were quite aware of this option, so that this particular department decided to develop a parallel structure of old and new degrees. The retention of the diploma is justified with technical reasons:

*So we met the requirements and introduced a bachelor program and also a master degree, but we also kept our diploma program. We were worried – and I believe rightly so – that the professional education in the bachelor program would lag clearly behind the level of our diploma degree. We wanted to offer our students, our potential students, the possibility to obtain a high-quality education with our diploma program [...] without suffering exam stress all the time and writing extensive interim exams, as in the bachelor program. The diploma meant we could offer students more relaxed study conditions with more room for self-study, as it was in the past.*

In several cases, we observed that the departments prepared an “emergency plan” where they might need to present a Bologna-program with bachelor’s and master’s degree at short notice. To be on the safe side, several departments developed a “Plan B”, to be used when the faculty could no longer resist institutionalization pressures:

*When we modularized our diploma programs in 2006 according to the Bologna requirements, we simultaneously developed a plan for a potential bachelor program that we would be able to install with relatively little effort in 2009.*

Some interview passages revealed that such a rapidly introduced new program would probably lead to rather superficial structural changes and not alter the teaching culture fundamentally:

*At least internally we modularized our diploma program – I would say “modularized” in quotation marks – we did that, of course, somewhat superficially as did probably many of the other universities that adopted the new degrees very quickly.*

*This approach – essentially remodeling our semester periods per week (SWS) into credit points – meant that we effectively attempted to heave as much diploma structure as possible into the new system.*

Obviously, the study program was modularized during the Bologna process without giving up the classical diploma structure with an introductory and an advanced study period. Also, not every module finishes with an exam. The department still offers so-called preparatory assessments (*Prüfungs-vorleistungen*). However, the modules are self-contained so that they are exchangeable among the departments. With these transformations the department can then quickly switch to the new Bologna system:

*Basically, we could simply solve the problem by renaming the program and making some smaller changes in the study and examination regulations.*

One respondent raised concern about the legitimization of the diploma in the long run after all universities and programs have adopted the Bologna system:

*On the other hand, I see the danger that if we continue to lean back and say: “Well, our diploma is still in great demand and we don’t have to think about other possibilities”, there will be a point in time when the general status quo has shifted and the job market is adjusted to the bachelor graduates, and the first bachelor graduates enter recruiter positions. They will then ask: “What? A diploma? Isn’t that from the last century? We no longer need people with such qualifications.”*

## Discussion

In a first step, we use selected concepts from neo-institutional theory to discuss our empirical findings. Several interviewee responses tend to support Oliver’s (1991) conceptual framework on strategic responses on institutionalized pressures. In the three engineering cases, we can support Oliver’s hypotheses on strategic responses to institutional pressures (Oliver, 1991, p. 170). Engineering is a field of study with low technical uncertainty (Whitley, 1984) and strong stakeholder support from industry. The selected departments were very aware of the demands of important stakeholder groups. In the case of engineering, one interviewee pointed to the lack of pressure to introduce the new degrees from recruiters and industry. The “Diplom-Ingenieur” has a strong reputation in industry, and

many constituencies in the engineering field supported maintaining the Diploma degree. The engineering departments were on the one hand strong enough to resist political pressures to adopt the new degrees. However, on the other hand one could argue the departments were being influenced by engineering employers to keep the old diploma structure and thus their legitimacy.

Although we are aware that our results are derived from only six cases from selected fields of study, the available data may also enrich Oliver’s framework. First, our study shows that organizations in organizational fields (in that case higher education) do not necessarily react diametrically. Institutionalized expectations are not either unambiguously rejected or accepted. It is also possible that an organization partly adopts some useful elements from the reform, without completely adhering to the expectations of external constituencies (for the example of personnel department: Röbbken & Schütz, 2016). The interview results show that on the one hand the selected departments are actually willing to modify their structures if it is in line with their own “technical” needs. The selected case departments searched for ways to legitimize their (limited) resistance by implementing own change activities (Hasse & Krücken, 2005; Walgenbach & Meyer, 2007). Only defending the old diploma degrees and resisting the reform did not seem to be an opportune strategy. Instead, some elements of the Bologna initiative were adopted and incorporated into a hybrid reform strategy. In other words, the departments neither simply rejected nor simply followed the Bologna model. Instead, they used the reform project to develop an own “unique” model of change. It is a local interpretation of global political reform. To avoid sanctions, the departments displayed a behavior that can be paraphrased as “preventive reforming”, i.e. allowing the expert organization to retain its professional autonomy (Brunsson, 1989; Brunsson & Olsen, 1993; Luhmann, 1971, p. 203-256; Kaube, 2015).

The selected cases seem to be well prepared to respond to the Bologna Reform. They present preventive solutions, so-called emergency solutions that can quickly be put into practice if the department should be forced to correspond to the rules. The responsible persons consciously made preparations for a possible escalation that might require a fast reaction. However, the respondents also emphasized that such a solution

would certainly remain superficial. That means, the prepared solutions would not necessarily be implemented on the level of action. It is this separation of talk and action that is so central in dynamic change processes, where a high level of flexibility in “talk” and “action” is required (Brunsson, 1989; Kühn, 2013). Meanwhile, the outward “non-imitation” attracted the attention of other higher education institutions, who in turn sometimes regretted having had to implement the new degrees so quickly and saw the reform resistant departments as role models. Indeed, a new large survey (n=1149) of German professors and lecturers present considerable dissatisfaction with the conditions of academic teaching in the Bologna system (Petersen, 2017).

Another beneficial factor for refusing the new degrees is a general climate of non-permanent attention among political actors, such as the ministry. If the particular federal state has more urgent political issues to address that require more attention, e.g., school policies, the chances of being left alone for a while are quite good. Furthermore, if a department has a good reputation in industry or the cultural sector, that may help them to risk more than colleagues of other disciplines. It seems that there are differences in the strength of legitimation in different disciplines and their particular local embeddedness. For example, the field of engineering has strong stakeholders outside the academic world, and powerful spokespeople for this discipline are often located in the world of industry and lobby groups. The ministries of the individual federal states or university leadership may not be powerful enough to enforce study structures, which are not supported by these groups.

The likelihood of deviation from the Bologna Reform project is further reinforced by the federal structure of Germany. The education system consists of 16 ministries (and also 16 ministers of science). The “Gallic Villages” remain; they are simply ignored because their meaning is insignificant. We can assume that local state government is not interested in a small number of German “hinterland” universities. The deviation is tolerated as long as it does not become a larger programmatic counter-reform. The subtle message to deans and professors is: “Do what you want as long as you keep it to yourself”. The deviation of a few local departments will not destabilize the whole global Bologna Reform.

Besides external factors for change, we also observed some micro-political processes that effectively influenced the decision to keep the old diploma structure. A central player in this arena is university leadership. Leadership behavior determines the corridor of options in which the Bologna system may be refused. In other words, the department has “to be able to afford” the resistance against an initiative which is adopted by all others. If pressure from leadership does not appear, the chances for resistance are quite good and alternative models of change can be implemented. Also, personal contacts to university leadership may be helpful in finding a solution more informally. It is obviously the strength of non-formal relationships that they can contribute decisively to the resistance. Formally, a university president cannot agree to resist the Bologna model. But internally, the president can find ways to be lenient. And perhaps, first the president can watch the ministry which, in turn, observes the university. Then, he can still decide which decision seems appropriate.

Besides passively tolerating resistant behavior, university leadership can also take a more active role in this process. It can also discreetly show its solidarity with the resisting actors by absorbing potential pressure from the ministries and cooperating with the resistant departments. In such cases, university leadership holds a protecting hand over the department that has to be buffered from external pressures for change. Occasionally, the leadership is even perceived as a sympathizer of the reform resistant departments. Persistence seems to be another fruitful strategy for avoiding changes. Departments who are willing to stick to their decision, who are willing to defend their arguments over and over again, and who are willing to meet with ministry leaders and discuss their arguments can achieve great effectiveness. This supports the micro-political argument that individuals, groups, or coalitions that continually bring up an idea and offer ways to implement it were very most likely to succeed and effect change (Kezar, 2001; Hearn, 1996).

In another case, correspondence to the Bologna model enabled a faculty manager to quickly climb up the hierarchical ladder to receive a job in university leadership. This new manager could more easily exert pressure on the resisting department to correspond to the Bologna regulations in a way that would probably not have been possible from his former position. In that respect, the ability to resist or adopt reforms is bound

to certain roles and hence, to informally defined micro-political power spheres in the higher education institution.

The resistant actors are also aware of the fact that their strategy to keep diploma degrees may dissolve in the course of time. Increasing pressure to correspond to the Bologna system may gradually lead to complete institutionalization. How long resistance may be kept up is, according to the interviewees, “written in the stars”. One interviewee also pointed out that non-imitation could transition from an initial advantage to a disadvantage. Bologna-skepticism may over time give way to Bologna-acceptance, rendering the preservation of the diploma impossible.

For future studies, a couple of analytical potentials can be extracted from the present investigation. On the one hand, the aspect of the facade structure of reform activities should be investigated more thoroughly. It seems fruitful to shed more light on the relationship between, talk and action, referring to Brunsson’s classic concept in organization theory, or to use other words for the same point, between “facade” and “backstage” (Kühl, 2013). Furthermore, our results pointed to the micro-political potential in higher education reform processes. So far, the relevance of micro-political practices not only in the Bologna Reform, but micro-reforms in universities in general has only been marginally discussed.

In addition, the role of leadership in expert organizations has largely been neglected in institutionalized environments. It is possible that an expert organization corresponds only partly to external pressures. In our study, the majority of departments adopted the new degrees, while only some actors refused to (completely) adopt the new study degrees. This is, of course, easier to achieve in expert organizations like universities, where the single parts are only loosely connected (Weick, 1976). However, university leadership seems to play an important role in supporting the divergent departments – a factor that has so far not been addressed when discussing strategies in institutionalization processes.

One important contribution of our study is that universities are not as passive as is often described in organization theory. A great intransigence of local actors can have appreciable effects in universities. It seems paradoxical that university members are active because they remain passive. There is however one re-

striction. The resisting departments may also be ignored because they are simply so few in number. In other words: They can be strong only because the attention by others is weak.

However, there are many shades of gray between the potential of local deviation and the narrative of the passivity of universities. This invites further research into current reforms in higher education. Isomorphic approximation is an important move. It could be fruitful to observe how decisions on the reform in universities are not only executed, but also prepared – and precisely by counter-decisions – reformatted. The weakness of academic decisions (non-decisions) can also be seen as a strength. This is when obstinacy results in own solutions.

Finally, we argue that reform projects in education should be seen more with the eyes of the organizational theorist than with the eyes of organizational members. It could be useful to focus on the volatility of all organization reforms, especially in higher education. Administrative processes are often seen as more linear and consistent than they are (Jung, 2008; Seidel, 2016). This seems to apply also to the reform discourse in higher education. The results of the present study are therefore especially relevant for kinds of universities that are faced with ever-increasing expectations and reform project ideas.

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