

**How well do reforms travel?
U.S. and European higher education and the international traffic of reform
ideas**

Introductory Paper for a Symposium at the 2003 Meetings of the Comparative
and International Education Society, New Orleans, LA, March 13, 2003

Hans N. Weiler
Stanford University

The flow of reform ideas: One-way or two-way?

Reforms in education have a history of transcending national boundaries. New math, achievement testing, program evaluation, teacher accountability, decentralization – the list of changes that have journeyed, for better or worse, throughout the contemporary world is long and varied. We know relatively little about the nature, speed, and direction of this traffic, and about the kinds of mutations that educational ideas and practices undergo as they travel around the world. One thing we know is that certain international organizations, notably the World Bank, OECD, and Unesco serve as major facilitators of this kind of traffic, but we also tend to underestimate the cross-national imagery of reform that tends to play a major role in the making and justifying of reform policies at the national level.

Higher education is a case in point. The reform discourse that has emerged over the past decade or so, all over Europe as well as in many Asian, African, and Latin American countries, has been strongly influenced by pervasive references to higher education in the United States. Privatizing higher education, achieving more differentiated systems, creating entrepreneurial universities, fostering competition both within and between institutions – all of these and others have served as maxims for the reform discourse in many countries, with an implicit or often explicit reference to the model nature of American higher education.

This development has some paradoxical elements. First, as national systems of higher education go, the U.S. “system” is probably the most idiosyncratic and least “comparable” system in today’s world; few other systems have an even remotely similar degree of differentiation and selectivity, and the existence of a prestigious private sector in higher education is virtually unique in the world. Second, and the constant invocation of American models for higher education reform elsewhere notwithstanding, the U.S. system stands out internationally as being remarkably devoid of any significant system-wide reform in recent times, especially when compared to the rather sweeping winds of change that have transformed, or are in the process of transforming, higher education in such countries as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Austria, or Germany.

Partly as a result of these paradoxes, and partly as a reflection of a more diffuse distrust of American precepts, the invocation of U.S. models in the higher education reform discourse outside of the U.S. has typically engendered a considerable, and mounting, degree of controversy. Even in its more moderate forms, the debate has increasingly focused on the question of why the international traffic of reform ideas in higher education should have such a distinctly and exclusively one-way quality, and whether the reform discourse in higher education would not benefit from a broader and more diversified pattern of international traffic in reform ideas and practices.

The symposium joins this debate at a particular juncture in history and with regard to a comparative set that highlights some of the problems and issues discussed so far in the abstract: Few countries outside the U.S. have been more massively subjected to the invocation of the U.S. model of higher education than Germany which, as a result, has experienced with a vengeance the attendant controversies over the utility or futility of the U.S. model. At the same time, few countries have in recent years undergone a process of reform that is both as sweeping and as instructive from a comparative perspective as what can be observed in Germany, making higher education reform in Germany a prime potential source for enriching and diversifying the international flow of traffic in reform ideas. Similar claims can be made, albeit in different ways, about other European countries, notably the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and, most recently, Austria.

The central thesis around which the symposium is organized is thus that, in a number of different respects, the higher education reform experience in Germany and other European countries over the past ten years generates an unusually instructive agenda for comparative reflection and research on the dynamics of change in higher education more generally, and could thus contribute to an international discourse on higher education reform that is richer and more diversified than the current U.S.-centric kind of discourse would seem to permit.

This is not at all to disavow the extraordinary heuristic and, indeed, political utility that the U.S.-centric discourse on higher education reform has had in a number of countries in Europe. Demonstrating, as the case of American higher education does, that radical alternatives to the prevailing statist systems of European higher education are not only conceivable in the abstract, but do exist and function rather well in reality, has in many countries proved to be an extraordinarily stimulating factor in overcoming anti-reform inertia in the first place and in getting a serious reform movement under way. Nonetheless, it seems appropriate at this point to broaden the perspective and to enrich the international agenda of reform issues in higher education by drawing on the experience of other countries as well.

The case of Germany

In focusing for this introductory paper on Germany, we have a particularly extensive and variegated array of reform experiences at our disposal: changes in legal arrangements, in structures of governance, in programs of study, in university financing, in internal decision-making, in the recruitment, promotion and remuneration of personnel – to mention but the most dramatic ones. The following provides an overview of some of the issues and themes on which an attempt to make the German experience comparatively more transparent could focus:

a) The relative effect of bottom-up vs. top-down approaches to change

Both have been tried in Germany, with a significant emphasis on the latter. Reforms have typically been brought about by initiatives at the level of state governments, assisted by the stick and carrot of federal legislation and subsidies and by a limited cohort of reform-minded university presidents, who in many cases had to battle considerable opposition to change among faculty and students.

b) The role of different actors in deregulating higher education

The focus here is on the relative role of the state, business, and the universities themselves. While the state and business have had little difficulty advocating and facilitating greater institutional autonomy for the universities, there has been considerable resistance within universities to trade dependence on a state bureaucracy against dependence on a relatively powerful and autonomous leadership structure. The struggle, as it were, between the individual autonomy of the professor and the institutional autonomy of the university is one of the key tensions in the German reform experience.

c) The advantages or disadvantages of a federal system in a time of reform

Does a decentralized policy process help or hinder change? Are certain kinds of reform (structural, legal, financial) more easily accomplished at a central level, while others (curricular, programmatic) are more conducive to decentralized decision-making? The evidence from a decade of university reform in Germany is highly instructive, both with regard to the relative role of the federal government as a catalyst of reform and to the natural experiment that has emerged as individual states pursue instructively different strategies of reform within their jurisdiction.

d) Finance and governance arrangements as a necessary or sufficient condition for bringing about reform

In the sequence of reform initiatives in German higher education, changes in financing and governance arrangements have taken precedence, based on the expectation that these changes would in turn bring about other changes, notably in substantive and curricular matters. The evidence on whether this expectation is warranted is as yet not conclusive, but it would be interesting to check this experience against the evidence from other countries.

e) The politics of the professoriate

Professors have played a significant role as both advocates and opponents of reform in German higher education, although their role has been heavily skewed towards opposition. In this, they and their organized representation have been significantly more active than their U.S. peers – a fact greatly facilitated not only by the tradition of professorial autonomy in Germany, but also by the continuing structures of university governance, in which professors traditionally hold the power of blocking or at least significantly delaying decisions by the university leadership. The ongoing change in these governance structures in the direction of more effective decision-making arrangements is rapidly eroding the basis for this opposition; in the long run, however, the important challenge will be how the professoriate can be brought to buy into the reform process.

f) Assessing and rewarding quality

A major effort has gone into designing and applying more adequate measures of quality in the performance of universities, faculty, and students, and into incentive schemes intended to enhance quality. This ranges from the widespread introduction and consideration of rather sophisticated forms of institutional rankings (cf. the contribution of Detlef Müller-Böling to this symposium) all the way to performance-based forms of resource allocation and faculty remuneration. It is too early to gauge any tangible effects of these measures, but it should be seen, especially in comparison with parallel measures in the U.S. of much longer standing, as a massive and highly instructive ongoing experiment.

g) The possibilities and limitations of privatizing higher education

Even though a number of private institutions of higher education have emerged, and continue to emerge, in Germany, notably in the form of private business schools, the dynamic of reform is clearly centered within the public system of higher education, one of the reform thrusts being the introduction of private (entrepreneurial, competitive, income-generating) elements into the overall fabric of public institutions. This has resulted in a significant increase in institutional flexibility and autonomy, without (as yet) seriously jeopardizing the basic fiscal responsibility of the state for sustaining the full cost of higher education. In this regard, the German system, while reaping some of the benefits of a more entrepreneurial stance, has thus far escaped the deleterious consequences of

the commercialization of higher education in the U.S. – from undue interference of outside commercial interests all the way to institutional bankruptcy.

h) Internationalizing higher education

A major effort in German higher education has been directed in recent years to enhancing both the number of German students studying abroad and the number of foreign students enrolled at German universities – the latter being seen as a potential long-term supplement to the high-skill sector of the German labor market. Indeed, the most significant curricular reform in German higher education – the introduction of consecutive degree programs of the BA/MA variety – has been explicitly argued for on the grounds that it would facilitate this two-way internationalization of German higher education. The strategy, especially with regard to attracting foreign students in engineering and the natural sciences, has its parallels in an earlier phase of U.S. higher education, but seems to be in serious jeopardy in the wake of 9/11 and “homeland security” concerns.

As a first approximation, these issues are seen as particularly suitable both to assess the impact of American models of higher education in the German reform process and to identify a different set of reform ideas that emerge from the German experience, and that represent a contribution to the international reform discourse in their own right.