

Preface

Sometimes it is the small events which prompt someone to write a book. In the midst of the reform of Bachelor's degree programmes at my university, two compulsory modules accidentally contained the same component on the topic of 'Practical Experience of Social Scientists'. Due to the fact that the components found themselves in two separate modules, one in a practical module and the other in an academic one, initially neither the faculty administration nor the teaching commission at the university noticed the mistake. My pointing out of the error could no longer be taken into account, because the degree had already been handed on to the faculty conference and the teaching commission of the university, and no one was willing to dismantle the degree package just before the course was scheduled to begin. I was, however, reassured that degree programme 'modification' had been a constant necessity since the introduction of the Bologna reforms, and that the duplicated module components would simply be cancelled in the next semester.

But everyone was exhausted from the effort of creating the new degree programme, so the identified problem was quickly forgotten. It was only when students were first forced to simultaneously complete both module components in one semester that the problem returned to the fore. For understandable reasons, students protested about having to learn exactly the same thing twice. In response to the revolting masses, the faculty was forced to construct elaborate detours around the problem, and only then did they use the noisy protests as an opportunity to finally make the necessary amendments to the degree programme.

I soon discovered that it was not possible to simply delete one of the module components due to the sophisticated arithmetic of the ECTS credit system, and this ultimately forced my hand to writing this book. In my capacity as a course coordinator, I was able to reach a quick agreement with my colleagues on what seemed the most viable pedagogical solution for a course with practical relevance. Rather naively, we believed that the curriculum would just have to be amended accordingly. But once the duplicate component was deleted, we were suddenly faced the problem that two credits in the Sociology degree programme had also been wiped out. All of a sudden, the course comprised only 178 credit points instead of the required 180.

My subsequent suggestion to simply ascribe the remaining module with four rather than two credit points did not work because the Political and Social Sciences degrees also contained the remaining component. The modules were designed

uniformly with the intention of counting towards all degree programmes, and therefore if the change were to be made, the other courses would suddenly acquire two surplus credits and have a total of 182 instead of 180. Over the course of many months, various course planners proceeded to move credit points to and fro between all possible module components within the three degree programmes. They tried to shorten the length of the internship in an attempt to lose or gain credit points and looked at whether it was possible to hide credit points amongst the other modules.

There had to be a way to delete the surplus credits and simultaneously ensure all three degree programmes were left with the appropriate 180 ECTS points; or so everyone involved hoped, with increasing desperation. Several parties put in over 100 h of work, pressure began to increase due to ongoing student protests and resulting conflicts became increasingly personalised. Finally, the idea to create uniform modules and course descriptions for all three degree programmes was abandoned. Instead, individual solutions were developed for each degree programme, but they were so complex that neither the module coordinator nor the degree coordinator could explain them. Somehow, it finally seemed to work out mathematically.

My frustration at the hours lost over something that could have originally been resolved rather easily had an unintended side effect; it aroused my curiosity to the extent that I finally found myself wanting to scrutinise the university system more closely. What creates these Kafkaesque situations in higher education? How is it that since the implementation of the degree structure reforms, the task of creating a coherent and effective sequence of module components finds itself increasingly overshadowed by the mathematical logic of credit points? Why is it that, since the reforms initiated by the Bologna Declaration, degree programmes exist whose accreditation systems any faculty member is able to explain? Why are the faculties and departments stuck in a kind of permanent reform rut for their courses? This book is my answer to these questions.

My goal is to offer explanations for the effects of the Bologna reforms, inspired and supported by organisational research. My book is not one of today's usual studies, often financed through national education ministries or the European Union, discussing the implementation of study reforms in the individual countries or the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of the affected staff. Rather, my book follows a longstanding essay tradition, common among academics discussing developments in higher education and educational politics during the past few decades. One need only think of Konrad Paul Liessmann's contributions on the 'errors of the knowledge society' (2008) or those of Benjamin Ginsberg, concerning 'the fall of the faculty' (2011). These essays, which are a long-standing tradition in the literature of Higher Education, are characterised by the fact that although the professors utilise their social science tools when analysing universities, they then refuse to hide behind the façade of an academically neutral description.

In researching for this book, it has not been my intention to impress readers with a systematic ethnological analysis of universities, as is the case with Becker, Geer und Hughes (1995), Moffat (1989) or Nathan (aka Cathy Small 2006),

who have carried out research on the study culture at universities. Instead, through this collection of theses based on observations in different universities, I aim to stimulate further analysis into the special nature of the ECTS points system from new perspectives of social science; the emerging ‘Sudoku effect’ at universities; the increase in the ‘spoon-fed’ teaching method as an unwanted side effect; the informal bypass strategies, the resulting vicious circles of bureaucracy; the almost magically appearing resolutions of responsibility for reforms and the formation of interlocking phenomena.

This book intends to further inspire research that goes beyond just scanning the surface structures of universities with quantitative data, as is the case in the majority of leading studies into the university system today, and instead captures the deep-rooted structures of the implementation of the reforms through qualitatively oriented investigations. Three areas of research in particular may prove especially fruitful.

First, it would be worth examining how and to what extent the Sudoku effect has developed differently in the individual European countries. In the debate over the Bologna reforms, there is definitely a tendency to rashly put problems down to the way specific countries have implemented the changes. My hypothesis is that the Bologna reforms are producing similar effects all over Europe with the introduction of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System. However, it might still be interesting to examine in more detail why the Sudoku effect in Estonia or Spain, for example, has in part developed differently than in France or Austria.

Second, it would be interesting to study in depth the reasons why the Sudoku effect has only developed within the specific variations of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). As illustrated in this book, the credit points system was used long before the Bologna reforms were introduced, especially in the USA, but also in a multitude of other Asian and African states, without producing the same effects experienced in the European Higher Education Area. In my book, I provide initial explanations for this phenomenon, but it might also be helpful to compare the different systems used in the States, Australia, and the European Union, for example.

Third, the Bologna reforms must be correlated more systematically with other ongoing higher education reforms. There are various reasons for this process of bureaucratisation apparent within universities. The Bologna reforms represent just one—albeit an important one. Additional insights could be gained by linking the effects of the Bologna reforms even more systematically with the centralisation measures in universities, or with the new forms of governance, based upon performance indicators.

With this book I raise the claim to describe the situation at universities as it really is. In the debate that I wish to lead, it is of primary concern to determine whether the ‘reality’ of European universities rendered in this book are of adequate complexity. In the quest to scientifically scrutinise those reforms that find themselves under the label of ‘Bologna’, it may become apparent in the text that I am not only a distanced scientific observer but also a member of a university. As

members of an organisation, we may not always succeed as sociologists in immediately grasping the functionality of these observed oddities, perceived irrationalities or supposedly insane decisions of the organisations in question. It may therefore be the case that an evident irritation is reflected in the descriptions within this book, and that some readers find my accounts too sarcastic; but the conditions at the universities are as described.



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Bureaucracy

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