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Managing Professorial Appointment Procedures: Increasing Professionalism and New Specialists at German Universities

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Abstract: Following a recommendation by the German Council of Science and Humanities *(Wissenschaftsrat)* on the organisation of professorial appointment procedures (2005) and the subsequent revisions of the state higher education laws, more and more German universities now established officers for professorial appointment procedures. These new specialists are supposed to ensure the (procedural) quality assurance of the appointment procedures by taking responsibility for "the proper and smooth running of the procedure" (ibid., p. 5). In order to explore how concretely the task profiles and the organisational anchoring of these positions are shaped and to gain insights into the professional self-image of the position holders, I conducted a quantitative survey. On the basis of qualitative expert interviews and group discussions, I am further able to give an overview on extent to which the Covid 19 pandemic demanded new adjustments in the work processes regarding the running and quality assurance of professorial appointment procedures.

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The appointment of professors is of central importance for the internal governance of German universities. By international comparison, the position 'professor' in Germany is characterised by a particularly high degree of autonomy and prestige: Generally speaking, all full professors hold tenured, safeguarded lifetime employment and the compartmentalized structure of the German chair system, ensures every chair holder the authority over their own academic dominion (Hamann, 2019, p. 924).

This exemplifies the importance of choosing a particular candidate who will shape the university for decades to come. German universities have highly formalised procedures for appointing professors (Frey et al., 2015; Klawitter, 2017, pp. 36–43). As a rule, there is a public call for applications and the university management appoints an appointment committee for each procedure, which (depending on the concrete university regulations and state laws) is made up of professors from the university, but also, for example, of academic staff, students and an equal opportunities representative. This commission decides which candidates may present themselves in person. After hearing a scientific presentation and a teaching sample, a ranking of the best candidates is made. The right to make a call then lies either with the university management or with the responsible ministry at the state

level.

But appointment procedures are not only an instrument of quality assurance, they themselves must also be quality assured. Following a recommendation by the German Council of Science and Humanities *(Wissenschaftsrat)* on the organisation of professorial appointment procedures (2005) and the subsequent revisions of the state higher education laws, more and more German universities now established officers for professorial appointment procedures. These new specialists are supposed to ensure the (procedural) quality assurance of the appointment procedures by taking responsibility for "the proper and smooth running of the procedure" (ibid., p. 5).

While the Council of Science and Humanities recommended appointing experienced university professors as appointment officers, in practice we can increasingly observe the installation of professorial appointment officers who are not professors themselves. These persons fill positions that have been set up specifically for quality assurance and decision-making support for professorial appointments. A systematic study of this type of position had yet to be conducted. In order to explore the state of implementation of this type of position at German universities, I conducted an online survey designed as a complete survey.

The questionnaire was developed on the basis of a qualitative preliminary study conducted as a participant observation of a network meeting for professorial appointment management. Furthermore, the survey was preceded by a web research, which served to determine the target group of the survey. This procedure identified 157 persons. 60% of whom took part in the survey. The data set - which as of June 2020 is in the process of being cleaned - now allows insights into various thematic aspects: First, an overview can be gained of the form in which the positions are organised: Where are these organisationally anchored and what exactly is the task profile? A second thematic block is devoted to the respondents' professional self-image: what (orientation providing) criteria do they apply in their work and what do they consider to be the hallmarks of a successful professorial appointment procedure? With regard to the last question, strongly divergent views already emerged in the preliminary study: Is the aim to recruit the best, the most excellent applicant or the one who best fits the position? The third aspect examined touches on a particularly sensitive topic: how are the activities of appointments officers perceived by other agents? Here it became clear in the preliminary study that they are often met with mistrust - they are even called spies sometimes.

A free text field at the end of the questionnaire allowed respondents to state what they currently experience as a challenge in their work. Not surprisingly, the Covid 19 pandemic was mentioned here, as it demands a digitalised running of professorial appointment procedures. I will subsequently address this matter of quality assurance of appointment procedures under the conditions of the pandemic on the basis of data from qualitative expert interviews and group discussions that allow a deeper insight into the challenging situations which demanded new adjustments.

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