Eliciting the institutional myth: exploring the ethos of 'The University' in Germany and England.

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Abstract. This paper is situated in relation to a critical mass of largely censorious commentary around global policy trends purportedly undermining, or even realigning, universities' 'traditional' ethos, but where the student perspective on this appears to have been largely ignored. Drawing on interviews with German and English undergraduates, it applies the neo-institutional theory of organisational fields supported by regulative, cognitive, and normative pillars (Scott 1995). The latter pillar, representing a sector's values, methods, and goals, is of particular interest here, and it will be argued that this and an ethos may correspond. The findings show that a sense of the participants' understanding of a university ethos/normative pillar could be discerned, with significant convergence between the two groups. However at the same time there was also divergence both within and between them, and this raises a number of novel empirical and theoretical questions.

Introduction

> 'The University, in Europe and elsewhere, is currently involved in changes that
> have a potential for transforming its institutional identity and constitutive logics. At
> stake are the University's purpose, work processes, organisation, system of
> governance and financial basis, as well as its role in the political system, the
> economy, and society at large.' (Olsen 2007, 25)

A broad body of scholarship describes higher education, worldwide, as becoming

increasingly tethered to the appetites of what Jessop (2008) describes as the 'hegemonic

imaginary' of the neoliberal knowledge-based economy. That is, that university systems

and their constituent universities must compete with one another, trading in knowledge

production, export, and dissemination, to maximise revenues in their own organisational

and national interests. This includes transferring tuition costs to students (Lebeau et al.

2012), intensifying domestic and international competition between universities (Pusser

and Marginson 2013), knowledge exploitation/transfer becoming the principal driver of

academic activity (Maassen and Stensaker 2011), and an increasing managerial

influence over all aspects of university life (Enders, de Boer, and Weyer 2013). These

'marketising' policy moves have, it seems, created a period of flux for universities'

norms, roles, and practices (Olsen 2007); in other words, that the *ethos* of the university

is changing/under threat.

Within the discourse on this topic, there is a sizable literature *about* students.

This covers issues such as how their decisions are influenced by fees (Hübner 2012;

Wilkins, Shams, and Huisman 2013), whether those fees position them as customers,

consumers or something else (Tight 2013), or the socially exclusionary effects of a

vertical differentiation of universities (Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009). We can see

student responses on individual issues such as tuition fees (Marcucci and Johnstone

2007), free speech and 'no-platforming' (O'Neill 2016), or policy statements from

student guilds and unions, but the majority of students are not involved with national or local university politics (Klemenčič 2014). There is, then, little sense as to 'how students themselves construe the idea of the university' according to May et al (2016, 389), whose Australian findings reflect some of the tensions around access and utilitarianism in the literature. Their participants – first-generation, largely mature, students – described higher education as part ivory tower or 'foreign' country, part pragmatic 'degree factory', but also as a space for intellectual development provided the cultural barriers to entry could be overcome. Given the shortage of literature on this topic, it is difficult to support Jessop's (2008) assertion of the 'hegemonic imaginary' in the way that Gramsci formulated hegemony, where the view of the political society is accepted as 'common sense' by the civil society (Fontana 2008). We can certainly see that many academics view the precepts of the knowledge economy to be incongruous to the ethos of universities, but are largely ignorant of any real sense of the student view.

With this in mind, this paper seeks first to establish what an ethos is, what the ethos of higher education might be, and how it relates to the knowledge economy. It then enlists a theoretical perspective through which to consider this. The methodology subsequently outlines how and from whom data was collected and the theory operationalised to explore students' conceptualisation of higher education. The findings are then presented before a number of both substantive and theoretical questions are raised.

The Ethos of 'The University'?

McLaughlin (2005) sees the term ethos applied frequently in the educational literature at both the societal and organisational levels, but that it is rarely defined, often remaining nebulous and elusive. Merton (1973, 269) – of whom more later – describes an ethos as a 'complex of values and norms [as] prescriptions, proscriptions,

preferences and permissions'. This sense of in-/appropriate purposes, means, and roles (the latter of which is beyond the scope of this paper) corresponds with McLaughlin's (2005, 320) definition of an ethos as an 'articulated and defensible set of educational aims and values', although the latter omits means. In this way, an ethos represents a normative structure consisting of a combination of 'collective intentions' underpinned by 'tacit rules' that regulate a given group's behaviour (Turner 2010). This establishes values and aims as identifiable components of an ethos, providing a framing that allows us to consider it as an object of enquiry. It also offers a potential connection with the theory, as we will see in due course.

In terms of an ethos for higher education, Shore (2010, 18) describes a general consensus across the literature whereby 'core academic values are suborned' by the neoliberal influence on universities. But what are these values? Much of the scholarship focuses how aspects of marketization might conflict with individual or clustered principles associated with universities. For example, Codd (2005) describes how a commercial research orientation may lead away from socially valuable research and towards short-term, lucrative goals and a sequestration of knowledge from public view, and Masschelein and Simons (2009) extend this to excluding certain disciplines, universities, and separating research and teaching. This, they argue, undermines the principles of academic autonomy, of unified research and teaching, and the goal of generating publicly available, disinterested knowledge. The excessive detail and control inherent in New Public Management threatens individual and organisational independence (Shore and Wright 1999; Nokkala and Bacevic 2014). Others see tuition fees as encouraging students to be passive and primarily employment-focused (Naidoo and Jamieson 2005), rather than aspiring towards the intellectual development and critical thinking skills required for engaged citizenship (Masschelein and Simons 2009;

Shore 2010).

In order to draw the potential elements of a university ethos together, it is illustrative to refer to ideas attributed to the Enlightenment philosopher and statesman Wilhelm von Humboldt. A particular vision of higher education as a 'Republic of Science' (Olsen 2007) has been gleaned from his writings (See Paletschek 2002; Wulf 2003; Nybom 2003), summarised in Table 1.2 (below).

Table 1.1 - The Humboldtian Ethos

Value	Aim
Independent research;	Knowledge based on empiricism, not dogma;
Academic freedom over taught content;	Curriculum determined by intellectual relevance;
Unified research and teaching;	Curriculum based on rationality and empiricism;
Non-utilitarian science[1];	Bias inherent in commerce or industry avoided
Students choice in degree content;	Education not only imposed by academics;
Training in scientific scholarship ('Bildung')	Moral leadership and citizenship;
Education funded – but otherwise not influenced – by the state	Protection from commercial and political interests
Philosophy to unify all disciplines	Societal and natural knowledge considered in combination

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[1] Science here relates to the German term - '*Wissenschaft*' – encompassing all systematically-produced knowledge, rather than the more STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) sense more common in English.

This formulation, von Humboldt believed, enabled the university to serve a vital social – i.e. public – role in producing rigorous knowledge and ethically-minded, learned statesmen. We can readily identify the themes of non-utilitarianism, autonomy, and rational thought that feature heavily in critiques of policies associated with a neoliberalism that potentially privatise the roles and outcomes of higher education (Marginson 2007). It should be noted that we could have drawn on Merton's (1973), Ethos of Science, which outlines 'institutional imperatives' of universalism, disinterestedness, communism, and organised scepticism, and these do correspond with parts of the 'Humboldtian' model around knowledge production. Merton, though, appears to have focused more on the presence of/adherence to norms in science and their relationship with the broader political/social context (Ben-David and Sullivan 1975) rather than their reproduction/transmission to students through teaching; both teaching and research were considered crucial in this study. There is also an argument for considering John Henry Newman's (2008) 'Idea of the University' as a foundational ethos, particularly in the English case. Beyond the conceptual difficulties of simultaneously marrying the theoretical perspective with both Newman and Humboldt's work – a literature in itself (see Ker 1999) – the greater emphasis that, according to Ker, the latter placed on research was considered important here in relation to discussions around non-/utilitarian science.

It is important before continuing further to stress two points about the Humboldtian form. The first is that this should not be imagined as one side of a binary of opposing principles, with commercial avarice and micromanagement pitted against a 'pure', curiosity-driven science. Universities have long negotiated these tensions, but moves towards a greater privatisation of knowledge and increased oversight seem to be exacerbating the potential conflicts between them.

Secondly, there have been claims that the spirit of von Humboldt has permeated throughout higher education, particularly in Germany, since his founding in 1810 of University of Berlin (Teichler 1991), a university subsequently renamed the 'Humboldt University of Berlin' (after him and his brother Alexander, a naturalist and philosopher) in 1949. It seems that his ideas were unknown elsewhere in Germany at the time, only resurfacing in the early 20th Century (Paletschek 2002). However, what is important here is that his name and 'his' principles seem to have developed a considerable normative power (Krücken, Kosmütsky, and Torka 2007). They have been co-opted as a rallying point for and against change by groups across the political spectrum, even on issues such as egalitarian access which post-date the aristocrat von Humboldt by some margin (Ash 2006). Regardless of the questions around the provenance and diffusion of these ideas, we can see that they form a distinct - but flexible – ethos which has been moulded or marshalled by various interest groups, and adherence to it may underpin much of the opprobrium greeting the spread of neoliberalism in higher education.

Theorising the Ethos

A theoretical approach which appears to offer a useful framework for considering the question of an ethos issue lies in a form of neo-institutionalism, where Olsen (2009, 9) defines institutions as:

> 'A relatively enduring collection of rules and organised practices, embedded in structures of meaning and resources that are relatively invariant in the face of turnover and changing external circumstances.'

Institutions – or organisational sectors – form around 'highly rationalised myths' that, over time, take on a rule-like quality and develop their own justification, language and activities (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Actors (organisations and individuals) align

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themselves with an institution and internalise its logics through a combination of coercion, mimesis, and normative isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). In other words, they follow rules to gain rewards/avoid sanction and appear legitimate, imitate other (usually successful) actors, and/or adopt and reproduce forms of language and ways of acting around a distinct, professional group identity. Institutions have been described by Scott (1995) as resting on three complementary 'pillars': the regulative, cognitive, and normative. The regulative consists of the rules, roles, and rewards for success and penalties for transgression, while the cognitive involves actors' internalised understanding of scripted or routine activities. Of particular interest to this paper is the normative pillar, which represents the (broadly) shared values and cultural beliefs – the informal rules – underpinning an institution. Within this lie its objectives and the appropriate means for achieving them – which by implication also provides a sense of what is also inappropriate in that institutional sphere.

It appears that the normative pillar mostly corresponds with the ethos described by McLaughlin (2005) as an aligned configuration of values and aims, although the means alluded to by Scott (1995) and Merton (1973) do not feature in McLaughlin's definition; we will return to this later in the paper. The three pillars should, in principle, align with one another, with values reflected in both the regulations and people's understandings of what to do and how (Scott 1995). There is, though, among many neo-institutionalists an acknowledgement that individuals' understanding of norms is subjective and imperfect (March and Olsen 2006), but at the same time a degree of convergence must prevail for an institution to exist. Indeed, the definition of an institution relies on the presence of some shared understanding, but it is important to accept that it is unlikely to be uniform, entirely static, or uncontested (Schmidt, 2008).

There is a growing volume of neo-institutional literature on universities analysing developments in the sector (Krücken and Röbken 2009). Research in this vein has extended the neo-institutional observation that organisations in a sector tend towards isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) as universities, worldwide, appear more similar. The causes of this, though, range from a perhaps uncritically considered, benign diffusion of shared institutional practices (e.g. Ramirez and Christensen 2012) to the coercive influence of governance regimes (e.g. Krücken 2011). Earlier work by Krücken (2003) detected the presence of von Humboldt's blueprint for the university in resistance to knowledge transfer in German universities, and his name features prominently elsewhere in the literature (e.g. Readings 1995; Connell 2017). It is therefore posited here that the Humboldtian ethos may represent one of higher education's institutional myths (Newman's presenting another) and also, therefore, its normative pillar. As Olsen, (2007, 27) suggests, members of an institution act as the 'guardians of its constitutive purposes, principles, rules, and processes…to defend its institutional identity and integrity', and we can interpret the resistance of academics to neoliberalism, as institutional members, as forming part of this defence. This again connects with McLaughlin's (2005) notion of an ethos as defensible, and many academics seem keenly aware of the tensions here. However, we are largely in the dark as to how students – as either relative outsiders or perhaps temporary members – might consider its normative foundations and therefore, in turn, how in-/appropriate they consider knowledge economy formulations of universities to be.

We now have a sense of what an ethos is and what that of higher education might look like, and what appears to be a suitable conceptual frame for this. The framing, though, must first be operationalized in order to explore this question empirically, and it is towards this conundrum that we now turn.

Methodology

Research Design

Thirteen undergraduates (see Table 1.2) from a research-intensive university in Germany and in England were interviewed individually, in their own languages, about their experiences and understanding of higher education. It should be stressed that this is an exploratory, convenience sample and no broader claims of substantive generalisation are being claimed here. The findings raise a number of pertinent questions but the prime motivation here is to utilise the conceptual framework with a view to potential 'theoretical generalisation' (Höijer 2008).

Table 1.2: Participant Sample

Feuerbach Universität			Mill University		
Name	**Age**	**Major Subject**	**Name**	**Age**	**Subject**
Ahmed	25	Politics	Chili	23	Civil Engineering
Anna	22	Electronic Engineering	Elizabeth	19	Civil Engineering
Lisa	22	Sociology	Gemima	19	Sociology
Maxi	25	Sociology	Jack	19	Civil Engineering
Michael	25	Sociology	Jo	19	Psychology
Thomas	25	Sport	Marie	21	Physics
			Zachary	19	Mathematics

Germany and England were selected because their higher education sectors have engaged to somewhat contrasting degrees with neoliberal policies (Pritchard 2011). England is more 'advanced' in this regard, with more pronounced university hierarchies, a greater proportion of non-state funding for research (Economic Insight 2015; OECD 2015), and rising tuition fees, the latter of which Germany introduced and

then abolished. Furthermore, almost all German universities – Universitäten – are owned and governed by the Bundesländer (federal states, rather than the central government), while those in England are more legislatively and financially autonomous. This is not to say that the German system has remained unchanged – it has not – but its marketization has been slower/less pervasive there (Kosmütsky 2012).

The universities from which the students were recruited, 'Feuerbach Universität' in Germany and 'Mill University' in England, were comparable in age (founded in the 1960s/70s), size (15-20,000 students), subject orientation (comprehensive but somewhat STEM focused), and geographic location (regional towns). They were, though, different in the sense that Mill operates a selective admissions system and is highly-ranked, while Feuerbach does not and is not; they are perhaps typical of their 'type' in this regard.

Operationalising the Theory

Schmidt (2008, 308), writing of the position of individuals within institutions, states that 'it is often the case that "everyone knows" what the basic philosophy or worldview is, even if they may not be able to define it precisely'. This, then, presents a challenge as we seek to elicit this 'worldview' from students. In order to achieve this, a number of different strategies were employed within the interviews.

One approach was to ask participants to describe the character or spirit of the university or what universities and/or academics 'believed in', framed with a comparative statement about the legal system being based on fairness and due process. A second was to seek comparative responses around how/if universities might differ from other knowledge-based institutions where teaching (e.g. schools) or research (e.g. pharmaceutical R&D) were conducted, and whether any distinctions that emerged were important. A third included the use of 'vignettes' as a prompt around which discussions could be framed (Jenkins et al. 2010). One was an extract taken from a student protest

magazine decrying the encroachment of universities for profit, while the other described an archetypal, passive student as customer. A fourth approach included a discussion around model students or academics, seeking to uncover the participants' sense of the activities that those groups engaged in, and how they thought they potentially did/should behave. Underlying these more direct strategies, attention was paid in the analysis to expressions of sectoral values, methods, and aims elsewhere in the participants' accounts. As discussions covered issues such as tuition fees, rankings, higher education's social and economic contributions, it was hoped that a variety of opportunities to identify normative references would present themselves. This hope was realised, although no claims are made here of providing a complete picture of the participants' understanding of higher education. The interviews were verbatim transcribed and analysed according to a coding framework that sought to identify references to institutional 'preferences' and 'purposes', i.e. values and aims, in the students' accounts.

Findings

Overall, similar views of a higher education ethos were articulated across both groups, often with unanimity within groups, but there was also variation between and within them. Table 1.3, below, provides an overview of the findings.

Table 1.3: Values and Goals by Group

University	Value	Purpose
Both	Independence in research;	Social progress
	Systematic, evidence-based thought	
	Personal independence	Personal development

	Public knowledge	Employment
	Broad discipline base	
	Equality and meritocracy	
	Social tolerance	
	Non-profit orientation in research	Supports other values and purposes
Mill Only	Private provision and profit generation around tuition fees	Reinvestment in internal services
	Degrees as Prestigious	Labour market advantage
	Unified research and teaching;	Currency of course content;
Feuerbach Only	State provision of Tuition Fees	Equality

Values

Independence in Research: All participants considered higher education to be based on a principle of academic freedom around the direction of enquiry. This emerged in a variety of ways, such as the sense that research should be undertaken (and funded) without clear outcomes in mind, driven by interest and curiosity rather than profit, underpinned by a commitment to 'expanding the pool of knowledge' (Zachary Mathematics, Mill).

Systematic Thought: There was unanimous agreement across both groups that a fundamental principle – as well as a method and outcome – of studying and academic work was about being 'very analytical, objective, structured …with a solid [evidence-based] foundation.' (Anna, Engineering, Feuerbach). This was often related to a

professionalism, criticality and citizenship, fostering a 'sound judgement…holistic, in all disciplines…[being] involved in the community' (Chili, Engineering, Mill).

Personal Independence: All of the Germans and all but one of the English participants cited developing personal independence in terms of managing one's own studies and learning as a core value and purpose of degrees. There was a sense from the English interviews that while you had to work hard, the university was a more active partner in the degree than for the German students, who felt that tuition fees would undermine the balance of responsibility, and 'something of the character of the university would be lost' (Thomas, Sport, Feuerbach). A second sense of independence persisted across all of the English interviews – but was absent in the German ones – of university as a time of personal maturation: 'it's kind of…a transition from being a child at home to being an adult in the big wide world' (Marie, Physics, Mill)

Public Knowledge: Five members of each group considered it essential that academic research findings were publicly available. The distinction was often drawn between academic and commercial research, with the latter 'not shared in public because the competition would get it…[at universities] you essentially research something for the collective' (Lisa, Sociology, Feuerbach).

Broad Range of Subjects: Another nigh-on unanimous (all German, all but one English) view was that higher education (but not necessarily individual universities) should contain a comprehensive range of subjects. Participants in both groups referred to universities as a culture of ideas and expressed a requirement for having and/or combining different disciplinary perspectives. A loss of Humanities subjects, for example, was seen to diminish cultural richness, with a spectrum of subjects as essential

for fostering a 'diversity of discourse in knowledge production' (Michael, Sociology, Feuerbach).

Equality and Meritocracy: Both groups were united in their view that higher education should provide fair access across the social spectrum, and that that tuition fees had a negative effect on access, selecting 'based on whether or not they could afford it, not on whether or not they could complete the programme' (Anna, Engineering, Feuerbach). While structural inequalities were acknowledged across the English group, the common view was 'it should very much be anyone who is capable and interested [to] have the same chances to go to university' (Marie, Physics, Mill).

Social Tolerance: Four English and five German participants considered broad-mindedness as a key value and outcome fostered in universities. This was sometimes seen in the development of systematic thinking and the ability to 'relativise [and] understand the context in which something is said' (Maxi, Sociology, Feuerbach), but more often through being part of a geographically and ethnically diverse student body. It was widely seen that international students provided 'fresh air…like interdisciplinarity', Thomas (Sport, Feuerbach) enabling students to 'learn from others…as to how they see things'. This in turn, it was commonly viewed, would prepare graduates to better negotiate a multicultural world and/or workplace.

Non-Profit Orientation in Research: There was unanimity across both groups that research should not be driven by profit: 'universities should operate at a distance from business' (Maxi, Sociology, Feuerbach). This was universally seen to support other values and outcomes such as research independence, unbiased, public knowledge, and a broad disciplinary base. Some of the English students thought that while some

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academics might be driven by personal or financial gain, '*true* academics wouldn't mind not getting paid much provided they were still learning, still discovering things' (Zachary, Mill, Mathematics – my emphasis).

Public/Private provision of Tuition Fees: In contrast to their assertion that research should be primarily curiosity driven, there was a perception across the whole English group that levying tuition fees was appropriate, and all but one considered the generation of a budget surplus from them was, too. Common among these views was that universities should be financially autonomous: 'you can't just be running a negative system. It has to be at least breaking even' (Jack, Engineering, Mill). Profit was qualified, though, with a distinction drawn between reinvestment in a university's own provision and facilities rather than as a return for shareholder dividends or executive salaries. The German group, on the other hand, were universally opposed to the imposition of fees for a number of reasons, chiefly in that they were seen as a barrier to egalitarian entry.

Degrees as Prestigious: Another distinct feature in four of the seven English and none of the German accounts was the suggestion that a university education should hold elevated status on the labour market. This was often tied to a perception that rising student numbers had diminished their relative prestige 'it used to be the best of the best and now everyone goes' (Jack, Engineering, Mill), leading to greater competition for graduate jobs. There were no such suggestions in the German group beyond the notion that graduates had access to more kinds of – rather than financially or socially better – jobs than non-graduates.

Unified Research and Teaching: Only two of the participants – both English – expressed that the combination of teaching and research was an essential principle in higher education. In both cases this was associated with course content being outdated, in which case 'the stuff you'd learnt would be a bit redundant' (Elizabeth, Engineering).

Purposes

The purposes of higher education were less separable in terms of particular outcomes being associated with singular values than in the scholarship on Humboldtian principles. Other than the goals of profit for reinvestment, prestigious degrees, and unified teaching and research, these could be divided into three broad intended outcomes: social progress, work, and personal development.

Social Progress: This was by far the most commonly cited aim of higher education, and participants made concrete connections between it and eight of the values. As already highlighted, it was seen that systematic thought contributed to the development of evidence-based positioning, reason and critical citizenship, while research freedom enabled academics to address social or other problems that they, as experts, saw as important. Publicly available knowledge was seen as essential to allow research findings to both be externally validated and developed upon, and the presence of a wide subject spectrum contributed to broader social discourse and interdisciplinary advances. An absence of equality and meritocracy was seen as socially regressive. A non-profit research orientation enabled other values to prevail as a commercial bent mitigated against publication, subject breadth, and balanced criticality. Also widely referenced was the sense that academics, as 'leaders in the field…should be trusted to know what good things to [research] are' (Marie, Physics, Mill), in addressing social issues or hot topics within or across disciplines.

University as Personal Development: All of the English participants described the time at university as a period of coming of age as well as one of intellectual and employability development. Among the English students, much of going to university was about 'developing yourself as an individual' (Jo, Psychology), often in conjunction the university's extensive portfolio of extra-curricular activities. The Germans, on the other hand, did not talk of personal maturation, rather the development of intellectual skills, habits, and the enhancement of job prospects.

Employment: References to the labour market beyond higher education were ubiquitous in the participants' accounts around their own university-related rationales, and also in terms of the role that higher education played socially. Employment/employability did not, though, eclipse social progress or personal development. Systematic thought and applied subject knowledge was seen as *de rigueur* to operating in the professions to which a degree gave access: 'our job here is to learn so that you know what to do in the real world…[professionalism] is about doing things properly' (Jack, Engineering, Mill). Similarly, the independence engendered in – and required to complete – a university degree provided a basis on which autonomy in the workplace could be developed. As Anna (Engineering, Feuerbach) explained, this independence was 'an essential property [of higher education]…that you figure out how to solve problems at work…you can pester your boss, but it's better when you manage it yourself'.

Discussion

It seems that the elicitation of the sectoral ethos/ normative pillar was partially successful, and particularly striking was the near unanimity within and between groups. This section will first consider the nature of the ethos itself before theoretical perspectives are addressed.

A Post-Humboldtian Ethos?

Overall, the sets of values and aims expressed by both the German and English groups were similar but with a number of subtle and perhaps crucial distinctions. In the main we can discern a presence of the Humboldtian vision, but it has also taken on a different shape in places, at least as expressed by the students in this study.

Independence in research and non-utilitarian science featured very strongly throughout both group's accounts and, connected with the publication of knowledge, provide the basis for the solid empirical foundation that von Humboldt espoused. *Bildung*, too, is clearly evident through the acquisition and application of personal independence and systematic, rational ways of thinking. The central place of philosophy has perhaps been shifted to becoming a range of subjects, interdisciplinarity, and a holistic body of knowledge. That these values were so clearly connected in the participants' minds with social progress as a perhaps meta-outcome for higher education may well have pleased von Humboldt. The association of these values with work could also be a more current and pragmatic form of the notion that universities produce statesmen, particularly with the far greater numbers of graduates (and graduate jobs) than von Humboldt might ever have envisaged. Social tolerance, meritocracy, and equality, coupled with a broader sense of social progress than perhaps von Humboldt articulated, also post-date him, being traced to the emergence of the post-war social contract (Williams and Cochrane 2010). The presence in the English - and absence in the German – accounts of university as a period of maturation and character development could be due to the fact that the German participants were older and all but two had worked for at least a year before going to university. This may, though, also point to more of a presence in England of John Henry Newman's ideas around the acquisition of 'gentlemanly' dispositions in higher education (Issler 2008).

There were also signs that some of the cornerstones of the Humboldtian ethos might be absent, perhaps more so in the English group. Any sense of student choice in curriculum being fundamental was not detected, although all of the German students did talk about the practical difficulty of having to negotiate an enormous catalogue of courses. It is also notable that while the students understood the principles of research, only one student – at Mill – reported coming into contact with it as part of his degree. This seems to contravene the unity of teaching and research, and there is some literature on this in the UK (Deem and Lucas 2006). Freedom in teaching did appear in four of the six German student (and none of the English) accounts, but invariably in an unexpected manner – as a bastion of poor teaching practice. The overall view of the teaching was good, but complaints of unintelligible, inaccessible, or unappealing delivery, even when voiced through student representatives, could fall on deaf ears because 'the lecturers can do what they like…that's how it is' (Lisa, Sociology, Feuerbach).

The most striking distinction between the German and English participants was their position on tuition fees. The groups were not entirely uniform on this issue, but the English students all accepted the fact that they, and not the state, should pay for tuition fees, and mostly believed that the university should generate a surplus from those fees. Their largely uncritical position perhaps reflects that the sample here is small, and a larger study might uncover more varied views. The Germans were more in tune with the Humboldtian view of state funding on principle, and to some extent this reflects the presence/absence of fees in each country. The English students' sense that their degrees should retain some exclusivity on the labour market related to a perception of intense national competition for graduate jobs (see also Tomlinson 2008). This might connect with the fact that 42 percent of 25-64 year-olds in the UK have completed some form of tertiary education, while in Germany it stands at 27 percent (OECD 2015).

It should be noted here that detecting views of managerialism proved somewhat elusive. Academic freedom was seen as essential, but this related to the objects and means of enquiry rather than the in-/appropriateness of micromanagement. Both groups of students were sceptical of university rankings, but the German group were far more so, and there was little to no recognition that rankings engendered rivalrous behaviour. It could be argued that the English students, at a high status university, were better-informed around university hierarchies, but some of the German students had considered or attended – and then rejected – higher status universities and saw rankings as mostly irrelevant. Research has shown that university status in the UK is a strong predictor of graduate outcomes while in Germany it is less so, at least up the late 1990s (Leuze 2011), although this pre-dates the emergence of research funding policies such as the 'Excellence Initiative' which may be leading to a stronger vertical differentiation there (Peter 2013).

Ethos and the Normative Pillar

If, as is suggested here, an ethos may correspond with – or even represent – an institution's normative pillar, then the findings raise a number of theoretical questions. These relate the extent to which the normative pillar and an ethos equate, to the differences between the groups, to potential tensions within the pillar itself and also, potentially, between pillars.

The distinction McLaughlin (2005) makes within an ethos of values and purposes was useful but also limiting. It became apparent that some principles could count as more than one – personal independence, public knowledge, equality, and tolerance were values as well as aims of research and/or studying. Scott (1995) also considers the normative pillar to represent values, aims *and* methods appropriate to an institution, and this worked better on an empirical level; means are, though, present in

Merton's ethos. The debate around ontological and epistemological paradigms across/within disciplines aside, it could be argued that systematic, rational thinking represents a value underpinning research, the means of achieving research goals, as well as one of the aims of studying. We might therefore find it useful to extend all three aspects of the normative pillar to the notion of an ethos while also bearing in mind that they can overlap.

Secondly, the fact that the two groups expressed largely similar but also subtly divergent views of a higher education ethos suggests that we might consider the notion of national higher education institutions. Scott (1995) theorises that the normative pillar is shared by institutional actors; by and large this was the case, although the individual differences predicted by Schmidt (2008) were also evident. The sample here is too small to suggest generalisation by itself, but there is extensive literature attesting to the observation that, within global trends, national diversity in higher education prevails (Krücken, Kosmütsky, and Torka 2007). This corresponds with the recent suggestion by Hüther and Krücken (2016) of nested – global, regional, national and sub-national - organisational fields to explain university heterogeneity. With this in mind, it seems reasonable to expect that there may be some broader, shared senses of what a university is and does, but that this is likely to differ between (and within) countries.

Thirdly, we can see, particularly within the English accounts, a number of values that could contradict one another, while the Germans expressed a more cohesive view. For example, all seven English participants considered equality and meritocracy to be fundamental to higher education, but four also believed that access to the club of graduates should be somehow exclusive, with only one being aware of any potential tension here. Also, all of the English participants were of the view that it was appropriate for universities to generate profits from tuition fees, but at the same time

only two considered the levying of fees to act as a deterrent to participation (see e.g. Callendar and Jackson 2005; Callender and Mason 2017). This indicates some unresolved tensions within individual accounts, raising questions about the internal cohesiveness of the normative pillar itself. Would these tensions be resolved, for example, in the minds of members of the institution, i.e. academics?

The data also raises a theoretical question around the alignment of the pillars. Schmidt (2008) identifies the potential in actors for a cognitive dissonance between norms and reality, and there was some evidence of this. If the ethos does indeed form an institutional myth, we might expect some of that mythology to be false. The acceptance that university research should be public was widespread but only one participant identified that scholarly literature was potentially exclusive. Three participants knew of industrial research sponsorship within their own university; of these, one considered it unproblematic but later argued for non-utilitarian research. Also, the tolerance engendered through having a diverse student body was mentioned by most participants, but they also reported little interaction (personally or in general) with international students. While it extends beyond the remit of this paper, the extensive literature detailing the inappropriateness of neoliberal policies to higher education would suggest that the regulative pillar is indeed out of line with the normative and cognitive pillars, at least from many academics' perspective. Neo-institutionalists of higher education appear not to have considered this analysis to date, and work in this vein by Caronna (2004) on the US health care sector indicates that it might be a fruitful avenue for consideration.

Conclusion

This paper set out to explore how contemporary students might construe an ethos of universities and, in turn, consider its relation to neoliberalism. What emerged is a

perhaps post-Humboldtian vision of higher education, being oriented around several 'older' and 'newer' values and towards social progress, personal development, and work. There was, by and large, unanimity within and across the English and German groups but also some subtle differences between them, largely around tuition fees and graduates' labour market positioning. This convergence raises questions as to the source of their understanding, particularly given that some had only been at university for a short time at the time of the interviews. Schmidt (2008) points to the influence of institutional discourse, and scholars in other theoretical paradigms also offer alternative explanations for this (Archer and Elder-Vass 2012).

Theoretically, it is suggested that a sector's normative pillar/institutional myth could – with a little adjustment – be considered to represent its ethos by incorporating values, aims and methods, or at least that further thinking about ethos could advance our understanding of the normative pillar. It also appears useful to consider the notion of distinct but overlapping – or 'nested' (Hüther and Krücken 2016) – national higher institutions, and the extent to which an institution's pillars are both internally cohesive and aligned. Both the data here and broader literature on higher education would suggest that they may not be.

Finally, this paper sought to explore whether Jessop's (2008) hegemonic imaginary of the knowledge economy is indeed accepted as common sense by students. For the German students, it seems not, and for the English participants, only partially. While both groups rejected a financial orientation in research and considered universities as geared in the main towards social progress, the English group had also internalised that degrees were personal investments and that universities should generate profit from fees. The lack of historical research in this area does not allow us to see this as evidence of a change in how students perceive higher education, although we

can surely assume that students past would have had somewhat different perspectives as the university landscapes of both countries have changed significantly in recent times.

Conclusion

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