Designers of competition at work: A neoliberal consensus-machine caught in the act

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abstract

This article examines how personnel entrusted with developing competitive tools deal with such tasks and how they reflect on them. What is their experience when competition is prescribed as the main solution to the problems confronting their organizations? The analysis of a subset of twelve interviews from a broader case study reveals that competition needs to be instituted in a bureaucratic manner. To begin with, the article provides a glimpse into how managers portray their work environment. After diagnosing an administratively staged bureaucratic competition, the article discusses how this occupational field of 'third-space-professionals' can be understood. On the one hand, the work of these (fictional) managers contributes towards smoothing the contradictions of neoliberalism; on the other hand, it questions the very credibility of such forms of rationalization.

A third species: Designers of competition

A warning from Josefa, a faculty manager, is only one example of the deep doubts of those whose job it is to install a more 'rational' distribution of budgets:

> We have to be very careful, that the history of communist regimes is not repeated in the current management. We simply tolerate a system too much although, quite frankly, nobody believes in it. (Josefa, interview clipping from a study presented below)

The daily work of these so called 'third space professionals' (Whitchurch, 2008; 2015) and how they manage their work is mostly overlooked – when the entrepreneurial university is propagated as well as is criticized. Managers have become a standard in universities' everyday life, whether they are quality-, research-, faculty- or controlling managers. Third space professionals (3SP) have to design, implement and re-design competitive tools in everyday organizational life. They are described as neither scientists nor administrators, but have to mix both: the world of process instructions with the world of creativity and thought.

Analysing these 3SP will offer interesting insights, as competition – understood as a process where somebody has to prove to be better than somebody else – has become a general template. In the working world of the 3SPs competition has the power to provide or cast doubt on evidence of people's performance. This article analyses the sensemaking of those who can be conceived as 'designers of competition'.[1] Analysing how they craft quantification and competition is also of great interest because while universities have to follow the general appeal of strategic market-driven management, they have to do this within traditional structures and rules set by political authorities (Bath and Smith, 2004; Eggins and MacDonald, 2003). Most research on this professional group highlights that knowledge about their occupational competence is rare (Kehm et al., 2010; Hasse and Krücken, 2013; Jenert and Brahm, 2010; Schwarz and Struhkamp, 2007), and that these blended roles need to be professionalized. In contrast to this perspective of permanent improvement, the article aims to understand how this occupational group handles and rationalizes to (prescribed) competition.

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1   The term 'designers of competition' is preferred because it does not label and reduce the 3SPs as 'only support staff' (as one of my reviewers called them). Furthermore, traditional hierarchic distinctions (like academic – non-academic or research – teaching) are avoided.

Critical management research has already provided a lot of encouragements for being sceptical of popular management theories and that active reflection is needed (Alvesson and Willmott, 2003; Berglund, 2008; Oldenhof et al., 2013). The contribution of this article is to highlight the remarkable repertoires that the designers of competition develop to deal with the tensions, contradictions and instabilities by performance measurement systems. After some background information about this type of managers and the study's methodology, the empirical section will show how their daily activity is dominated by justification work. The symptom of a hardly justifiable bureaucratic competition will be discussed by consulting selected literature. Maybe Josefa's worries about losing the will to resist (mentioned above) can be addressed by some reflections from a study that will be presented here. The conclusion will consider alternatives to the mutated form of competition described here.

The new governance of universities: In need of a third space?

Since the 1970s, questions of governance, self-control and uncontrollability have been dominant topics in university research. The 'entrepreneurial university' (Clark, 1998; Foss and Gibson, 2015) was announced at the end of the 1990s, but it has become questionable how far business instruments can properly meet universities' tasks (Bogumil et al., 2013). Most of the current research of the 'new governance of universities' (Grande et al., 2013) states that while competitive techniques in universities are not effective (or show very demanding preconditions), they are often portrayed as being necessary because of the corresponding need to shrink budgets.

Over the last decade competing for public goods has become a big issue in the university system. In Germany, most universities received 'financial autonomy' in the mid 1990's, leading to greater responsibility for (albeit decreased) resources. However, universities remained dependent on ministerial bureaucracy, politics and internal committees and lobbies.

Therefore, at present, universities face pressure from several processes of performance measurement: benefit-based funding, target agreements, different kinds of evaluations and (enforced) competition. For the purpose of

finding adequate new steering tools and staff, much effort has been financially supported by the state – including the research project that is partly presented here. However, it has revealed much more than only control requirements as the people involved started to unfold their experiences, thoughts and doubts regarding the competition for resources.

Methodology: Competition designers on the research agenda

The research project 'HidA'[2] was a qualitative case study about performance management and fights for recognition: It was carried out in seven German universities. Our task was to find out how performance management systems start to change people's view on how they feel recognized in their work (Schwarz, 2017). While conducting the project the team (of three researchers) carried out 40 intensive conversations with different members of these universities (different federal states, size and excellence labels). Besides document analysis and participative observation guided interviews were conducted with experts and narrative interviews with teachers, researchers as well as administrative personnel (most about 90 minutes long). The material was transcribed and interpreted mainly through content analysis (Krippendorf, 2004; Mayring, 2002; Mostyn, 1985).

Among those 40 interviewees were twelve persons of four types of designers of competition: quality managers, controllers, faculty managers and administration presidents from three universities (anonymised as Redland, Greenland and Blueland). The figure below gives an overview of the interviewees' affiliation to organizations, area of expertise and professional role.

2   The project was financed by the German Federal Ministry of Education (funding line 'Leistungsbewertung in der Wissenschaft').
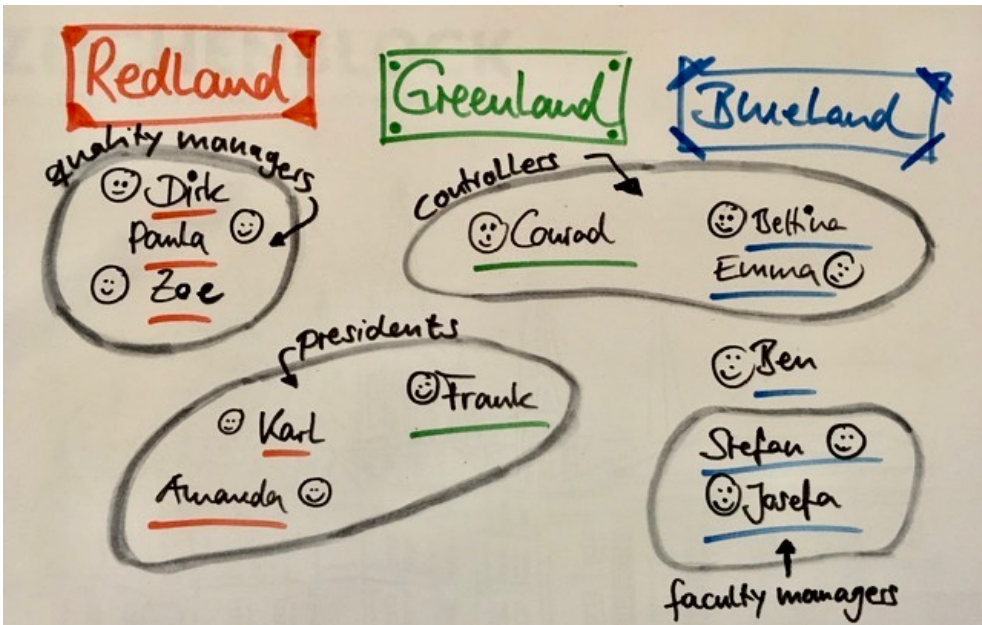
Figure 1: The 12 interviewees and their organizational and occupational affiliations

The interviews presented here show only a part of our empirical sampling, with a focus less on the recipients of competition (like professors, researchers and teachers) and more on the designers of competition. In this subset, three presidents/chancellors are included as they also held a special duty of care for the design of competition. The twelve designers of competition differ in some aspects, i.e. the conditions of their universities, their individual power positions, their professional backgrounds and why they have chosen more managerial rather than scientific tasks. The focus for analysing this subgroup was how they make sense of implementing competitive tools that are very disputed. Admittedly, this subset study is just a thin ice to portray the entirety of the competition designers. But this little piece of empirical research can illustrate that competition in practice is under heavy pressure.

The working world of competition designers

For the content analysis, five questions were chosen to map the self-descriptions of the competition designers:

- What do competition designers do in practice?
- How do the competition designers describe their professional role?
- What do they perceive as success or failure?
- Which skills do they view as essential for their job?
- How do they frame 'competition' and its purpose?

What competition designers do in practice? Transforming professors into dots

The competitive technologies of the different universities and their departments differ a lot. In Germany, universities have to present performance management data for their target agreement discussions with the ministry (approx. every 4 years). But the exact method of data collection and communication of data lies in the hands of the university board and at times several of their faculty managements. How performance is measured differs from university to university: a) the selection of indicators and their weightage, b) how much the performance measurement of a department has to be comparable to the others, and c) the amount of the bonus and where the bonus is taken from.

The most well-established performance indicators are: publication and citation indexes, amount and levels of third-party-funds for research ranking, amount of students and graduates as well as PhDs for the ranking of teaching.

'Every professor has become a little dot', faculty manager Stefan said with a smile, as he proudly presented the following chart in an interview. It illustrates one technique of publishing performance measurement and rewarding performance and is comparable to others used.
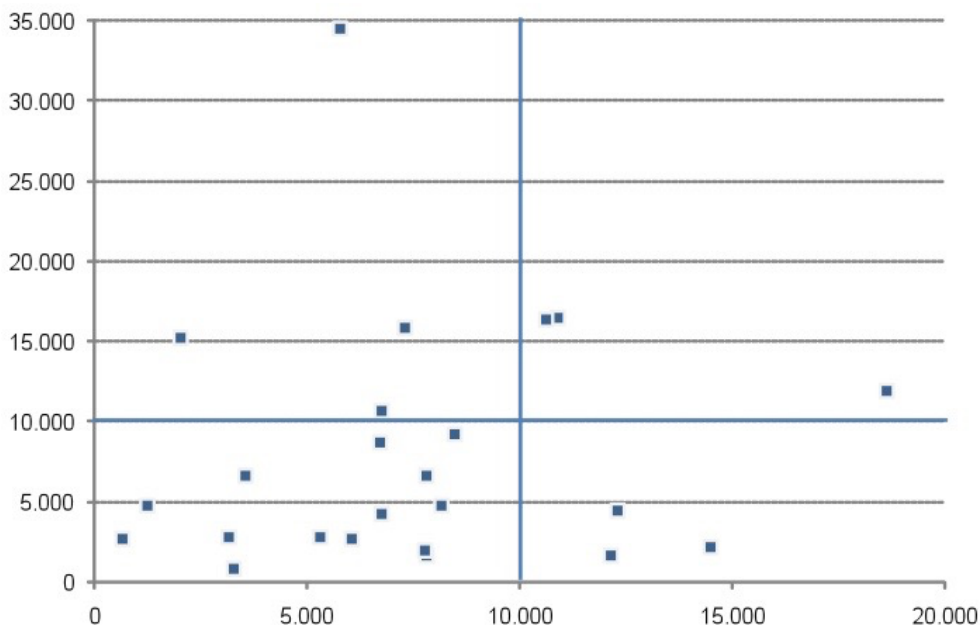
Figure 2: Rewards for research (max. € 35.000 per year) and for teaching (max. € 19.000)

This example of performance management reporting shows the annual results of the bonus payment each professor will receive concerning his or her measured activities in research (horizontal LOM-F) and teaching (vertical LOM-L).[3] Stefan pulled out this chart to illustrate how important he finds it in terms of making results 'transparent'. For him, it is essential that the affected winners and losers grapple with 'the problem' of finding an acceptable mode of distribution.

How relevant these numbers are for the distribution of finances varies in different universities. In our sample of three organizations, the percentage of performance related budget was between 1 and 15%. In addition to this internal competition, there is also the external competition between the universities within a federal state. It is not unusual that the two kinds of

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3   LOM = German acronym for performance-based funding allocation („leistungsorientierte Mittelvergabe'). In this chart example the winner in research receives € 35.000 per year and € 8.000 for teaching and the winner in teaching receives € 19.000 and € 12.000 for researching.

competition cancel each other out. This calls steering effects into question, as we shall see later.

How do competition designers describe their role?

The following analysis was made by selecting and interpreting interview sections, in which competition designers express their roles or role conflicts. Without exception, all define their occupational role as finding a responsible way of handling the discrepancies between so-called 'financial autonomy' and coping with demands from ministerial administration. Five occupational roles have been qualified as in the following.

Controlling as the neutral delivery of data: The three controllers Conrad, Bettina und Emma initially present themselves as *neutral deliverers* of data: 'I define myself as an interface to decision makers' (Emma). They underline that they only intervene when severe misunderstandings of data and its interpretation arise, e.g. when 'certain ideas' (Bettina), which get anchored in the minds of people, turn out to be wrong when you interpret the data more thoroughly. They regard themselves as important decision-making aids and almost completely deny responsibility for the quality of decisions by arguing with divided responsibility: the more powerful leading managers sometimes make decisions that are based on the data that they have collected and prepared. However, all three feel bad when they are forced to interpret difficult or incomplete data (e.g. quantifying the weightage of how competitive third-party funds have been received or when data clearly suggests to shut down a whole discipline). They see their mission in 'making statistics more satisfying' (Conrad), e.g. when they are too fine-grained or de-contextualized for interpretation. When the measurement system is pushed to the limits, for example in the comparability of the approximately 300 disciplines, they try to compensate for the disadvantages through preventive communication with the people affected and act as mediators between conflicting stakeholders. Despite their claimed neutrality, they hold themselves as advocates for potential victims of quantification, for example when the effects of competition become inacceptable or when data is misused. When this occurs, they are proud to serve as socio-technical professionals who intervene in the name of better knowledge or as a kind of data moralists.

Quality managers as icebreaking consultants: Another variant of a competition designer are the three quality managers Paula, Zoe and their boss Dirk. They consistently formulate the credo of a consultant, whose aim is to support all performers by finding data that could be beneficial. In this partly missionary self-understanding as *consultant (or coach)*, they use their organizational knowledge for intermediating. Despite competition, they lobby for a culture of working together for a huge body of reliable data:

> If you support this data collection system out of your own motivation and personnel budget for this whole year, you will definitely have a much stronger set of cards in the next funding round! (Dirk)

Like the controllers, they protest when data is used only as a facade rolling down presentation screens, or when data is hastily requested from the top management without proving its reliability or relevance. They try to convince their 'customers' (Paula) about the side-advantages of participating in competitions and quality controls as a kind of 'sub-currency' (Zoe). The boss of the quality management department, Dirk, illustrates his occupational role as an 'icebreaker' in his organization. He has to face resistance against performance management and untangle difficult situations, but also deal with the consequences of that situation in the immediate future. All the three quality managers describe their jobs as a Sisyphean task, where the most important skill is not to expect any respect or thanks for this contribution, although you are an important part of this huge machine of funding aid acquisition.

Faculty managers as defenders: The faculty managers, Josefa from the humanities and Stefan from a business school, could not be more diverse in their way of thinking about and acting with performance measurement and competition. However, what unites them is their strong fighting spirit to *protect their faculties* in the struggle for an appropriate measurement system. They describe their efforts to adapt the university-wide system to the needs of their academic disciplines as being like advocates of a collective faculty identity who have developed a concept of mapping assertions of identity by academic individuals. Josefa's strategy is to show solidarity with groups that suffer from illegitimate penalties of competition. She has organized a university-wide survey about the performance management system and

gathered a majority for obtaining exception rules for minorities. She seems to be well networked, internally and externally, and steadfastly advocates for the educational mission against negative or incomprehensible effects of competition. Her warnings against accepting a mad system of competition culminate in comparing it with Former East Germany: 'Everybody knew we all did not want the system anymore but we tolerated it too long' (Josefa).

In contrast, Stefan defends his faculty by perfecting the system and, at the same time, by highlighting his faculty as excellent. We will learn later what he means by 'healthy competition', but for now we can say that Stefan argues almost stereotypically for competition, whereas Josefa pleas for solidarity. Another contrast is that Stefan claims to have a 'strong service mentality' for his faculty, while Josefa emphasises that she 'is burning for the disciplines in my faculty, otherwise I could not protect them so well'. By the way, although they have very different attitudes they very much enjoy working together as respected colleagues.

Presidents as communicative connectors: Combining data with strategy. As members of university leaderships, Karl, Amanda and Frank present themselves as communicative connectors. 'To lead with data' is a metaphor that all three chose to illustrate how they realize their tasks. However, they agree this strategy only works if you have your 'own strategic goals' (Amanda, Karl) and a 'strong will for a strategic leadership that you want to reach for your organization' (Amanda). Gradually, a kind of cultural change or educational process can then take place (see below Amanda's metaphor of horse breeding). The masterpiece of leading universities seems to be educating professors 'smoothly and step by step' (Amanda) to perceive themselves as top performers in a global scientific system for the sake of the universities' survival in competition with others. The delicate issue here is that these strategic leaders have to accept that scientists mostly do not think of themselves as members of an organization and that many of them take advantage of the freedom of science. Because they often 'buck' when you address them as a member, you need 'an awful lot of tact and sensibility. You have to learn and perfect this ability so that you find your own way of feeling good with it' (Frank) and when you have it, you will step back from your electoral office and resume your professorship.

Referee and arbitrator: An individual case in our sample is Ben, Professor of Law and Economy and head of the Performance-Management-Board for six years. This commission monitored the performance management system, reacted to errors or critiques and was the authority that decided if system changes (e.g. in weighting factors or rules on exception) should be made. Ben reflected with honesty 'what we do here in university is actually not real competition, not like international arenas anyway'. Nonetheless he enjoys a good reputation as a careful and fair referee and arbitrator and is committed to peacekeeping, even more than the presidents described above. Meeting the designers of competition shows that a range of diverse competences is addressed: As socio-technologists they objectify, consult, motivate, mediate, educate and also fight for own convictions. In doing so, it is enlightening to see how the designers of competition assume, reject and reclaim responsibility for the quantified performances.

In the following steps, these self-descriptions are flanked by the stories of success and failure narrated in the interviews. Unlike earlier, the actors are not differentiated by their occupational position but by the kinds of experiences with the limits of 'the system'.

What do competition designers perceive as success and failure?

The designers of competition were not asked directly what they perceive as success and failure, but as the interviews were conducted as narratives, they provided a lot of every-day-experiences, exposing the ups and downs of working with the system and its recipients.

Building up and obtaining organizational knowledge: 'Keeping the data-body up-to-date' (Emma) is the most common success for all interviewees, because most of them are convinced that without this data-body it would be unmanageable to plan or do anything today. Data has become the 'hard disk memory that we have to build in the faculties like hammered pegs', Stefan explains, so that 'old and feudal prerequisites are unthinkable today', as resource decisions need to be substantiated by data. Even Josefa, the heavy critic of competition, points out that she profits a lot from using this 'data

body' for the increased reporting duties and that she can gain time for 'more important work'.

Making differences visible: Although all interviewees were persuaded that 'money is no incentive for intrinsically motivated scientists' (Stefan), most of them argue that the system is suited to make difference visible – for whatever purpose. Regardless of how these quantified differences are published (via e-mail-newsletter or in a slide-show), 'you can feel that a lot happens with people, even if you cannot see it' (Karl). The fact that 'everybody wants to be sitting pretty' is something Stefan frequently experiences weeks after he publishes his ranking list (see chart 1 above). 'Very often the phone rings and sometimes I have to come up with a method of consolation', as a result, Stefan makes fun out of the painful situations of comparison. Controller Conrad freely admits that 'provoking people with bad data sometimes is healing', for example when a faculty manager realises that they have to lay off their young researchers before Christmas, just because they did not look up or even collect their data.

However, a refusal to be compared is not restricted to so-called 'low performers', as ex-president Karl emphasizes. He received a phone call from a young and internationally successful professor, requesting: 'Please stop this perverse joke of a reward! For that poor 12,000 Euro bonus I wouldn't do any research!' Even if making differences visible sometimes proves to be a painful act, most of the interviewees think it is productive, not least because it increases the responsiveness between the organization and its members.

The limits of comparability: The limits of comparability were a permanent topic in every interview. The greatest failure was seen in using indicators to compare the quality of teaching. Even the contest-affine Stefan pictured how he 'jumped into the lifeboat' after trying this:

> After all, we said collectively, let's forget this quality factor in teaching. We cannot measure it anyhow and it causes only dispute! So, I admit we really shirked responsibility. Now we measure and reward only the number of students, although we know that this does not mean too much. (Stefan)

Hence, while a sophisticated system has been created for research, for teaching only the simple amount of students and graduates are measured. The measurability or 'rankability' of publications is another contentious point. Efforts to make the incomparable commensurable ended in a time-consuming splitting of the distinctions of disciplines. After a while, it was not justifiable, at least economically, and resulted in a series of disputes about the proposed quality scale for articles. Some faculties returned to ranking by length of articles, which all parties felt was a defeat but was held as not an arbitrary decision.

Concerning the benchmarks for measuring third-party funds, Josefa has a meticulous catalogue of arguments against them. Here, we can only show a couple of the most tortuous aspects for her: the general prioritisation of external funds according to how competitive or rare they are, is held to be illegitimate, because the density of external funders varies in the different disciplines (e.g. more competitive in more common subjects); furthermore, only funds granted and spent are measured and not how much effort was necessary to get these grants or what was done with them.

Growing discontent with the ways of comparing 'performance' was articulated in the interviews. But for now it can be stated that the more the differences in performances are made transparent and public, the more the opposing views on which differences are more relevant get into public discourse as well. This might even increase the responsiveness of the organization, even though this feels as a burden for all concerned.

Unintended and absent effects of competition: Without exception, all interviewees questioned if the system really achieved its (assumed) goals: to provide a rationale for budget distribution and to promote performance incentives. Good data reports are mostly used for a contract negotiation situation of professors. Stefan in particular describes his reaction on that topic as very lively. When he notices how 'astronomical sums are bargained with the data in backrooms' he often feels ill because he is the one who has to negotiate with professors who continually bargain for more money. In Stefan's words: 'assholes that would walk over dead bodies and would not even try to conceal this'. The system can be misused for deadweight effects,

because the university leadership expects 'high volume projects from those very-good-data-kings'. The catalogue of intended and unintended 'misuses' could be continued. Misuse of competitive data does not seem to be a rule, but it is also no exception.

Other restrictions of the performance system are indicated by the unwanted consequences. This frequently leads to injustices and quarrels, mostly when journals and articles are ranked incomprehensibly. This happens regularly when comparing different sub-communities. Another negative effect is that all joint 'performances' (like social engagement or committee work) have no influence in data reports but are essential for the every-day practice of the organization. The most general (unintended) effect emphasized by many is the loss of significance of many 'non-countable activities' (Frank, Josefa, Emma). Ben worries 'that the uncountable gets lost' when meeting the new generation of professors: 'our young puppies definitely orientate themselves on performance data' (Ben). While Stefan welcomes this development, Ben has reservations about these junior staff. A fourth unintended effect is that through this orientation on excellence – at least in his discipline of law and economy – knowledge is gradually removed from its relevance for everyday-life

> …of what avail is it, when the highest article in the ranking is read seriously by only three people worldwide? These other-directed personalities have to score more and more highly in niche-subjects to have any career prospects. This is very bad for the image of our academia in society and economy! (Ben)

No one else put this as sharply as Ben, but many others commented ironically on high-scorers in subjects they find obscure. In addition to these unintended effects and the absence of the main goal of providing incentives, there is also an example of the active avoidance of the intended effects of competition. Controller Conrad describes as an 'ideal of controlling' that incentives from the top of an organization should be passed on to its basic levels. But Conrad reasons that tough competition like that would, in reality, be unthinkable within the educational and academic sector:

> We would never close a discipline because of its performance results, because our mission is to provide a wide range of disciplines. In addition, this internal

> policy of protecting our wide spectrum makes us competitive to others. (Conrad)

We can see here that there are several competitions competing with one another! For example, there is one marginal study program that would normally have been closed as a consequence of internal competition due to fewer students, but it is sustained to maintain external competition with other universities. In addition it is promoted by a huge business lobby, so 'we feed and pamper it' (Conrad) although it has had bad data for decades. Similar cases have been described by Frank and Karl.

Beside these efforts to manipulate competition (for the sake of the continuance of the organization), we can also spot what happens when the effects of competition are neither explicable nor communicable. The following dilemma was presented by Conrad, who had to explain to faculty authorities that they were going to lose half a million Euros in the next year, although their performance data was much better than last year:

> You ask me how I remember this meeting? It is impossible to expect that somebody will amputate his own leg because the controlling department claims to have a more rational model! (Conrad)

This scenario acts as a precursor to the obviously increasing communication requirements outlined in the next section. All this leads us to conclude that the system that is held to be indispensable does not achieve its goal. Instead, it makes work life more complicated, especially because the designers of competition actively promote countermeasures in their own work within the system.

The costs of transparency: Questions of resources get tricky when a system claims to provide a more rational distribution of property. The most common resource aspects of the performance management system can be illustrated as follows.

The main resource problem of the distributing system is the staff budget needed, not only to establish and support the system but also to change it regularly because of the frequent 'readjustments induced by injustices of the system' (Emma). In addition, these changes are accompanied by lots of

committee work and communication loops. Half of the interviewees think this would be a 'necessary investment' (Amanda). To the other half, however, this represents a new mentality of consumption. In the name of a more rational handling of public goods, taxpayer's money is squandered. The following quote is only one example of this out of many:

> Without batting an eye, only third party funds spent earn points! Can it really count as a *performance* to spent as much money as you can? No enterprise would act like! (Josefa)

Josefa is embarrassed that a university that tries to become more entrepreneurial behaves partly like a planned economy and partly like a compulsive gambler. All (except Stefan) observe an enormous slowdown of the organization by an 'expanding bureaucracy of quality' (Karl and in similar words Frank) that develops its own dynamic. This way of handling the contradictions of prescribed competition describes an interesting relation of managing competition and bureaucracy. Stefan wants to defend the system as transparent, and even if there might be critique of that, requests for changes or further explanations can be submitted. At the same time, the possibility of influencing the system already indicates risks for its neutrality, because if everybody can submit an application form, particularly annoying submitters can try to influence the system in their favour. Or, they can get themselves voted into the commission to shape the system in their interest. The character of this performance management system is a hybrid one, because making the system more transparent reveals dangers of it being held as a completely negotiable thing.

Which skills do competition designers view as essential?

A number of competences about what makes competition designers capable of doing their job can be collected from the interviewee's statements, where they describe being jammed between competition initiators and their target groups, the professors and other academic staff.

Communication skills and organizational knowledge: Equally important as the 'affinity with data' (Amanda) or the 'gift of being a friend of data' (Karl), is the ability to act with 'clever communication' (Frank). 'To work with

communication is important!', says Karl. There are many reasons for this, but mostly it is necessary to avoid quarrels and to recognise that critique of the competition system is possible to refine its practice.

Organizational knowledge seems to be another essential skill:

> You have to be extremely experienced in the landscape of your university! You have to know every name and all kinds of sensitivities. You need to know not only with whom you need to talk, but also in which chronological order, in which choice of words and whom you tell with whom you already have talked – nothing else than this is needed most! (Josefa)

Quantification skills: Being 'friends of data' was often mentioned as an important skill of a designer of competition. However, the significance of this competence has a subsurface that is seldom made as explicit as in the following citations:

> You have to recognize the limits of quantification immediately! We cannot progress in all competitive aspects like in every single pore. (Bettina)

> A good controller's duty is to provide his knowledge about the relations and limits of quantifications too to avoid greater harm to the whole organization! (Conrad)

> The dataflow that influences the decisions of the university leader and committees sometimes transforms during its flow into something that is not manageable anymore. It has nothing to do with reality anymore nor is it feasible. This is what you have to keep at the back of your mind as a good friend of data! (Karl)

The significant point seems to be that quantification skills include the competence to foresee the possible misuse of numbers! Frank puts this skill in words that highlight the relevant product that has to be produced collectively here: *legitimacy.*

> At the end of this process chain, we sometimes have something that is supposed to be a legitimate system. But this does not necessarily mean that this system works!

How do they frame 'competition' and its purpose?

The last step of this empirical analysis shows the connotation of the term 'competition' in the interviews. Even if people do not always use this exact term, it can be analysed to see how they frame and sometimes assess competitive features.

Shaping and controlling organization through competition (Presidents): Using competitive tools to shape and control the university is the most important goal for the three presidents, but for all of them this has a two-fold nature. For Karl competition is explicitly only a means to shaping 'where an organization strategically wants to go'. But in contrast to the organizational visions that are mostly painted 'to lead with numbers' Karl believes that this involves a lot of risks and uncertainties, because numbers can only represent a small part of reality.

> Scientific performance always remains partially hidden and we have to accept that. You can try to reduce this uncertainty just a little bit by checking the interpretation and relevance of the data. (Karl)

This is exactly what Karl claims to be doing in his job as a good leader: 'I decide on the basis of data but also on the basis of remaining uncertainties'. Frank states that, as a former professor in the industrial sector, competition is 'normal business'. After 25 years in university, he is still concerned about the lack of fiscal control and that money is

> …still spent like in the medieval age. Just because somebody negotiated well 20 years ago, he continues to get twice as much as the performer next to him. (Frank)

The double-edged character of competition for Frank is that it is necessary to 'fasten the screws of competition' without producing too many losers, because this does not fit with the universities' mission to provide education and scientific knowledge. Furthermore, the organization obviously needs non-excellent members: 'In some stages of my career I benefitted a lot from magnificent ideas of so-called minor scientists' (Frank). He adds that to run a huge organization like a university you need to have a lot of non-high-performers.

Amanda wants to control by using competitive features but is caught between chairs. She illustrates a number of situations where she had to acquire the 'artistry' of managing academics. One very impressive image is that of 'horse breeding', which she chose to illustrate her fight to convince a range of deans to come to a decision regarding the selection of performance data for the system accreditation: 'The little horses were wildly hopping through the meadow and still didn't want to go into the stall!' The problem for her was not only showing them that a decision was urgently needed but also that they had to decide as a group, the representative body for the continuance of the 'their' organization. To make them realize this responsibility was 'a tremendous cultural shock for all those present'.

The three presidents all agree that somebody has to do the job to keep the university together as one organization but 'you should not expect that anybody would thank you for that'. The relevance of data extracted from the competition system would prove to work almost like a magic wand, since 'nothing convinces a heterogeneous quarrelling group as quickly as numbers' (Amanda).

Competition reward as (inflationary) currency (Faculty Managers): As already shown, the two faculty managers Josefa and Stefan have very opposite views on the sense that competition makes for their university. Both, however, use the metaphor of a new 'currency' that performance data has gained in the last ten years. For Josefa, the system is complete nonsense and we have explored her criticisms already (contradicting plurality of competitions, diversity of disciplines and irresponsible mode of consumerism). Her alternative suggestion of a 'holistic currency of measurement' that would include soft factors like solidarity inputs does not even convince herself. She does not have a plan or vision for improvement, so she concentrates instead on doing her job as attentively as possible.

Stefan is convinced that, 'when competition is outside, we have to bring it in'. However, as we have already seen, even he denies that the system reaches its goal, which is to promote an incentive for higher performance, because other 'screws' are more important. Because of this dilemma, it would be necessary to restrict competitive features in a clever way. Stefan compares this 'healthy

competition' in referring to a bestselling book on child education (Chua, 2011).

> We shouldn't exhaust the competition slogan down to the last, like these excessive parents who stand on the sidelines in sports arenas music classes and threaten to burn their kid's cuddly toy! No, we want healthy competition in keeping the steam on the boiler just a bit, but all of time. (Stefan)

By looking at the performance data every month, he can tell participants where they can locate themselves. But Stefan also admits, resting in the metaphor of currency, that this 'stimulating effect has only limited reach in the long run because it is subject to creeping inflation'; because almost everybody tries to increase publications, every point for publication gets less value.

Both Faculty Managers have serious reservations (albeit to different degrees) about competition, but both fail to find alternatives despite keeping an eye on this risky tool.

Plural competitions as decision mixers (Quality Managers): The metaphor of 'data pots and pans' is often used to document the use of the competition system for the organization: 'Which strengths and weaknesses can a discipline indicate with each of the different repositories?' Dirk explains how you can make profit from bad evaluation results (like too many student dropouts) by using the data in a competition for external funds for teaching quality initiatives. For the quality team, 'bad data' is always a good and simple chance to interact with academics facing future improvements.

Rationality versus weather (Controllers): 'Putting budgeting on more rational footing' (Emma) is seen as the mission of the competition system and also for controlling. This is not a job made by data, but enables a permanent reality check to prevent wrong and destructive conclusions that would, for example, close down indispensable disciplines. Particularly striking for the controllers is that the density of data queries often changes. 'This might depend upon how heavily the actual leader or manager of an institute uses data for their decisions' (Emma). 'Two years ago I had to do statistical analysis for so many things and now the use of numbers decline very much in decisions' (Bettina).

They both agree that, like the weather, data queries are subject to fluctuations.

> Like the seasons you know when there is a new round of competition. But how the season will be this year concerning the use of data is always a surprise! (Bettina)

It would be interesting to analyse which factors determine whether data is requested or 'used' for decisions. It can be noted that a performance data system only *potentially* serves as support for decisions and also can complicate decision finding.

Proving (international) relevance: Becoming a civilization disease?. Ben, head of commission and referee, clearly states that competition for him is meant to show

> …whether what I do in research is internationally relevant or not. Relevance can only be partially measured by numbers but needs also to prove that your research is at the trouble spots of economy, society or politics. And this remains vital! (Ben)

However, as Ben has a good insight into the 'hot spot' of the competition system and its changes, he says he is astonished and worried about, how quickly and strongly the significance of quantification has increased:

> Our work is too diverse to let it be represented by dots! On no account can we translate this into signs! (Ben)

In his experience almost everybody suffers from this reduction to numbers. This would have the most fatal effects on the young researchers of the next generation, because for them 'it doesn't make sense to do something without earning credit points.' Ben advised me to stroll around the corridors of his institutes to watch 'the aliens' of young professors working there, which he described as highly ambitious, but soulless and without interest for anything except their success.

Summary: Competition designer's justification work

By summarizing the self-descriptions of the competition designers, a diverse picture of their workplaces emerged. The study has given a rough impression

of a how these professionals create meaning within the contradicting aims of designing competition. The classifications above were based on their subjective view and provide a range of recurring dilemmas for the interviewees. The staff obviously has to cope with doing justification work as well as compensating or minimizing the drawbacks of bureaucratic competition.

The responsibility dilemma: The role descriptions have shown a range of role conflicts. The designers' dilemma is that they obviously have to struggle to take responsibility for how they measure academic performances on the one hand while, on the other, they feel dependent on the ministry's stipulations. We have seen gradual processes between refusing to be seen as responsible (regarding yourself just as an 'interface') and acting like a passionate referee or defender.

The representation dilemma: Even if the German example might be a weak form of performance management compared to other nations, the implementation of 'LOM' has already caused quite a lot of argument over what could be the best quantified representation for educational and scientific performances. In particular, the two 'lifeboat'-experiences of Stefan showed that sometimes competition designers stop fighting for a good indicator and go back to the poorer indicator because the efforts to find a more precise indicator are held to be uneconomic. The dilemma is then to judge when to search for a better indicator and when it is not even worth the effort to search for one.

The skill dilemma: Crafting competition seems to be a strongly sought after but also multi-faceted competence. The three dominant skills (communication and quantification skills as well as organizational knowledge) of the competition designers illustrate a necessity: to compensate tensions and contradictions of performance management practice. Their dilemma is that they need to reduce conflicts in acting as intermediators but, at the same time, need to function as a kind of non-emphatic scientific institution or court.

The sense-making dilemma: Concerning the sense-making of competition the perceptions have shimmered between (1) 'we simply and without alternative

have to manage this system!' and (2) 'the system is endlessly questionable and sinister for the future generations too!' So, the dilemma for the designers of competition is whether to take their profession seriously or not.

Finally, the complex justification efforts recognized in the empirical section can be addressed in the following discussion with selected literature from critical management research.

Justifying bureaucratic competition: What kind of management is this?

The study has shown that for the competition designers the challenge is not – as assumed in the beginning – that they have to provide competitive tools in a very bureaucratic way. This obviously seems to be manageable. The *key challenge* in the view of the competition designers is that they permanently have to justify things and procedures that are under heavy criticism – even from themselves.

The co-existence of economization and bureaucracy

In German Higher Education Policy, the giants of bureaucracy and economization have long been handled as natural enemies: Competition is primarily introduced as a remedy against too much bureaucracy or ineffectiveness. In almost every public sector area, internal or external competition is pushed as a cleaning instrument for many undesired forms of organizational or individual routines (Olsen, 2008; du Gay, 2000). An overall impression in our workplace visits was that bureaucracy and competition have fallen into dubious company; both giants might as well compete and sustain each other. This has been alleged as a specific kind of late capitalism, where bureaucracy and competition amalgamate. Ethnologist David Graeber has portrayed the congruence and co-existence of both: any form of competition and market-driven reforms would effect an increase in rules and regulations.

> The iron law of liberalism states that any market reform, any government initiative to reduce red tape and promote market forces will have the ultimate effect of increasing total number of regulations. (Graeber, 2015: 9)

The bureaucratic competition described here is *not fictional* but takes place in a twilight setting of people bargaining. Among the growing scientific approaches that criticize new governances of neo-liberalism, the post-cold-war diagnosis of the 'Audit Society' (Power, 1994; Miller and Power, 2013; see also Crouch, 2004; 2015) is often referred to. The empirical results presented here illustrate that quantification and competitive tools do not prove to be a controlled apparatus of power, although the budgets redistributed have not been small. Several uncertainties have been explored, especially the permanent struggles of being/not being responsible or representative, underlining a constant ambiguity and moving in a permanent crisis of legitimation. The crux of matter is that this kind of distribution bears an extreme non-binding character, while demonstrating that the new performance management is meant to enable more transparency and objectivity. It is not a cold and logical control apparatus of capitalism like in the visions of Crouch, Power and Graeber. Having learned a lot from these dystopias, it is time to finally explore what lies beyond competition as a general stencil for distribution.

So, what kind of management is this? Can this be qualified as only a fictional management technique, because people only pretend in public to develop the best tools for steering universities? I think that would be too easy and belittling.

Several situations of justification work have been described here, even some processes of self-persuasion and micro-resistance (Schwarz, 2017). A wide repertoire of literature is concerned with capitalism and its automatisms of justifying itself as being natural or necessary (e.g. Adorno and Horkheimer, 1947; Foucault, 1977; Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999, 2006; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2004; Chiapello and Bourguignon, 2005; Sennett, 2006). To reflect these aspects of managing and justifying dilemmas, some additional insights from (critical) management studies would be helpful. In the concluding section, some contemporary ideas are selected to grasp how this kind of management can be characterized. So, at last, what can we learn from the described experiences and reasoning? It might be useful to examine impacts for individuals as well as for perspectives on social action.

Competition design is no bullshit job but…

Graeber (2018) describes five types of 'bullshit jobs'. These jobs are so meaningless that they become psychologically destructive, especially when work ethics have become interrelated with self-worth in capitalism. The twelve competition managers not only seem to be confident and influential but their skills apparently also develop through the work of going through systemic contradictions as a collective. Graeber's (in my view) despicable diagnosis underestimates the staff a bit hastily. Deskilling perspectives misjudge that while dealing with such contradictory workplace requirements people also widen their skills including their reflection capability. Justification work has shown to be a demanding process of managing contradictions. In shifting the focus from the deskilling- to development-processes, questions of creative perseverance of the staff arise.

The discrepancy between the ideal and the reality of management generally is striking. Other empirical studies on middle managers as well looked behind the formal and official descriptions of these workplaces. They described these workplaces as 'empty labour' (Paulsen, 1914), 'myths of management' (Fleming, 2016) or 'managerial lives' in an 'imperfect world' (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2016). How can we respond to this picture of people wasting their time in pretending 'to manage'?

Alvesson and Sveningsson (2016) describe this superficiality and highlight dilemmas that are similar to those found here, in order to contrast popular management ideals with reality. They analyse 'managerial lives' from an identity approach to get insights from managers' 'inner world experiences'. Research on managers failing to shape a coherent self-image seems to be in vogue. The permanent trial of creating stable and reliable conditions of social order might be exhaustive and time consuming. However, the crucial point is that (young) professionals often take over distorted pictures of managerial life from popular management literature as a worthwhile future or role model. This can have dangerous consequences for them as well for the educational system: 'It is frustrating when you cannot work seriously with what you believe expresses part of who you are as a manager' (*ibid*.: 331). What is needed is a serious reflection about how people can find a more critical

learning mind-set in dealing with managerial work in contrast to unreliable ideals.

What is to be done: Perspectives and paradoxes

After having explored the disputed bureaucracy-competition-nexus, let us conclude by returning to the beginning. Josefa reminded us to not tolerate something that is considered wrong for too long and in too great an extent, as it was in the case of the GDR before 1989, where she was brought up. So, how are the conditions for action and resistance now? The analogy between neoliberal management and the end of the GDR-regime might not stand on all counts, but it is refreshingly thought-provoking. For it does strike a chord, when denying the contradictions within the system turns out an unbearable test of endurance – like a pain in the neck and in various bodily parts. The collective urge to peacefully break away seems inevitable, but how?

…by researching: Social research has become difficult as the density of contradictions grows in the course of attempts to make societies more rational. This perspective on the 'dialectic of enlightenment' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1947) is nothing new. But observing management – and if it is only for a period of time – as an anarchic form of control may not be strong enough to effect a new social movement, but it is an issue that should be considered by future management and organizational research, practice and teaching. Even recent organizational research has recommended to 'fill a crucial intellectual gap' (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020: 19) by conceiving competition no longer as naturally given but as an ideological construction.

…by protesting: Concerning the current state of universities, plenty of protest movements around the globe try to protect and transform the public university with campaigns like: 'Voices of researchers' (EU), 'British Council for Defence of Academic Freedom', 'Really Open University', 'Education not for sale' (UK), 'The Academic Manifesto' (Netherlands), 'Slow Science Manifesto', 'Hochschulwatch' (Germany). Meanwhile, entire academic associations have disembarked from university rankings.

...by thinking of alternatives to competition: To reflect upon what *political implications* bureaucratic competition has, it is fruitful to take into consideration what has been beautifully described as 'the limits of neoliberalism' (Davies, 2014; see also Davies and Dunne, 2015). Competition has become an unbeaten 'rhetorical and evaluative device' (Davies and Dunne, 2015: 156). Having understood where the tremendous legitimating force lies, it is possible to conceive of alternatives – although they remain abstract as of now.

It might be concluded that the principle of competition, although permeated by disagreement, obviously still works as a makeshift consensus-machine. Increasingly, however, it reveals itself as obsolete, fragile and extremely dubious. Competition seems to be necessary as a moral and widely unquestioned principle, even if it proves absurd every day – yet it seems indispensable in the face of a public sector that poses as economically oriented and more capitalist than the keenest of neoliberals. So, this might be one reason why this kind of management consumes an awful lot of justification workers. The claims of competition themselves have changed historically from freedom and plurality to equality and justice into benefit, effectiveness and inequality. Davies and Dunne describe competition as a 'mode of justification' (*ibid.*: 156) that has mutated from a justification of 'markets to a justification for business' (Davies, 2014: 47). This mode of justification is powerful because it has 'certain paradoxical qualities' (*ibid.*: 199) like: the state can choose to be active or passive and 'a paradoxical combination of equality and inequality' (*ibid.*) is secure. The success of competitive dynamics lies in its capacity for 'neoliberal rejoinders' between visions of the collective and visions of the individual:

> For instance, if a different vision of collective organization is proposed, the neoliberal rejoinder is that this must involve abandoning individual 'choice' or freedom. Or if a different vision of the individual is proposed, the neoliberal rejoinder is that this is unrealistic given the competitive global context. (Davies, 2014: 201)

Because of these neoliberal rejoinders, the permanent imperative for competition has become commonplace: on the one hand, competition seems not appealable but, on the other, it has this non-binding quality as seen in the

case studies. On this basis, it has become clear that it is necessary to 'invent new visions of individual agency...and collective organization, at the same time' (Davies, 2014: 201).

Therefore, the predicament is obvious. Whether people will develop a vision of a collective (being responsible for the individual) and individuals (being responsible for the collective) will remain an open issue for a while. Resistance to this kind of competition can be made visible in the search for different ways of practicing and looking at managerial work. This struggle from people within the system should not be overlooked – neither in practice nor in management research. In fact, competition has become uneconomic and out-of-date, a mere simulation of societal consensus. Its agency should yield to alternatives beyond playing off individualism and collectivity.

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