5 Excursus: Isomorphism – The Case of Entrepreneurship Professorships

The analysis of the historical development of business schools has shown that the organization of academic business education seems to be partly isomorphic across countries. In many respects, this structural homogeneity is particularly widespread in the organizational field of higher education. For example, despite the peculiarities of an applied subject, the formal structure of business administration as academic subject certainly resembles the organization of other academic fields, such as the natural sciences, theology, or the humanities. Looked at in a comparative and historical perspective, business schools show a high degree of standardization and shared norms not only across disciplines but also across countries. There is probably a greater consistency among marketing professors worldwide than there is among the direct colleagues in the management faculty within a particular business school (see also Hardy et al. 1984).

The observation of an increasing structural similarity of organizations, even across different branches and organizational settings, is also the starting point of DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) argument. With their concept of isomorphism, they provide an explanation for their high degree of homogeneity between organizational forms and practices. Within organizational fields isomorphic processes take effect, leading organizations to become more similar. The notion of an organizational field has already been defined as “the existence of a community of organizations … whose participants interact more frequently and more fatefully with one another than with actors outside the field” (Scott 1995: 56).

Various attempts at imitating university systems can be found in the history of higher education. At the beginning of the 20th century, the German research university was an exemplar for numerous European and non-European higher education systems. The integration of research and education within the organizational framework of the research university has been copied from the German system into the American and the Swedish higher education systems. However, the German role model in the organization of higher education was later replaced by the American system (Engwall 1992, Krücken 2002, 2003).

Another indicator for isomorphic processes is the current debate about the transfer of academic degrees, such as the Bachelor and the Master’s degree, into many European university systems. This debate is certainly shaped by the organization of American research universities. The so-called Bologna Declaration from 1999 urges European universities to homogenize their higher education system by changing existing one-tier systems such as the
German and the Swedish one into two-tier systems with both Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees.\textsuperscript{56}

In Germany, the diffusion rate of Bachelor’s and Master’s programs seems to be remarkably high: in summer semester 2003, German universities and universities of applied science offered 749 bachelor and 803 master courses.\textsuperscript{57} One reason for this rapid adoption of consecutive study programs in Germany is the strong normative support expressed by various organizations within higher education, such as the Science Council (Wissenschaftsrat), the Center for Higher Education Development (CHE), the Foundation Association (Stifterverband), the Rector’s Conference (Hochschulrektorenkonferenz), and diverse German trade associations (see Krückken 2003). Since governmental organizations, consultancies, and organizations such as accrediting agencies collectively demand the introduction of M.A. and B.A. study programs, universities are more or less forced to accept and implement the new programs. From a neo-institutional perspective, the diffusion of Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees can thus be interpreted as normative isomorphism on the threshold of coercive isomorphism, which results from formal or informal pressures on business schools.

Research addressing the forms and causes of structural isomorphism within the field of business schools has to date been largely neglected. This study will draw attention to those features that can be observed across different countries and that can be utilized to observe and illustrate isomorphic processes. One starting point to investigate isomorphic pressures is the designation of academic chairs and professorships. By analyzing academic designations, changes in the internal dynamics of business schools can be identified. For researchers, the designations of academic chairs provides a good indicator of the cultural pressures that operate on the business school, because they offer valuable clues particularly for identifying the educational and research objectives that the business school faculty thinks should be pursued.

To illustrate how isomorphic processes occur within the organizational field of business schools, the discipline of entrepreneurship has been selected. This field is comparatively young, but the amount of academic research as well as the creation of professorships at business schools have increased vastly in recent years. The process of institutionalization of entrepreneurship as an academic subject is documented quite extensively. Furthermore, the field of entrepreneurship can be differentiated from other academic discourses in management studies fairly easy. In the following, the adoption patterns of entrepreneurship professorships

\textsuperscript{56} The increasing standardization of European higher education is intended to facilitate the comparability of curricula and degrees within Europe. It is planned to establish a two-tier system consisting of Bachelor’s and Master’s programs, to establish common standards, and to facilitate a Europe-wide acceptance of programs and degrees (see, for example, Krückken 2003).

\textsuperscript{57} See www.hrk.de/161htm, 2003-07-12