CURRENT SITUATION AND FUTURE TRENDS IN GERMAN UNIVERSITIES

ENGLISH SUMMARY OF THE STIFTERVERBAND UNIVERSITY BAROMETER, 2011
The German higher education system has been undergoing major changes during the last years. German universities have increasingly gained institutional autonomy and use this autonomy to sharpen their individual profiles. But how exactly are the German universities changing? Where is the higher education system as a whole heading? The Stifterverband University Barometer answers these questions. It is based on a survey of all the presidents and rectors of German universities, Fachhochschulen (Universities of Applied Science), and other higher education institutions. They were asked to give their opinion on the current situation and their future expectations on a number of aspects. The data is representative for the German higher education system as a whole. Key aspects are condensed in the Stifterverband-Index. This indicator, based on the presidents’ and rectors’ personal opinions, contains information that ‘hard’ statistical indicators such as student numbers, publication counts, or funding measures cannot mirror. It can thus serve as a complementary indicator on the state of the German higher education system.

CURRENT SITUATION AND OUTLOOK

1. German universities mostly satisfied with the current situation
   The Stifterverband-Index, the key indicator within the Stifterverband University Barometer, shows that German universities are to a large extent satisfied with their current situation. For the year 2011, the Stifterverband-Index takes a value of 25 points—within a scale that ranges from −100 to +100. This can be seen as a moderately positive appraisal. As a composite indicator, the Stifterverband-Index consists of ratings in 17 categories such as funding situation, autonomy, and the current competitive position within the higher education system.

2. Universities see their current situation as mostly positive, but the future forecasts lack of funding and qualified scientific staff
   Germany’s universities see the current situation as much more positive than their future situation. This is shown by the ‘situation indicator’ which reaches a value of 32 points, whereas the ‘expectations indicator’ reaches only 19 points. The lower value for the ‘expectations indicator’ is primarily caused by concerns about future university funding as well as an anticipated shortage of qualified scientific staff.

3. Private universities more confident than public ones, large research universities specifically sceptical.
   Private universities rate their current situation and their future much more positively
than the public ones. The Stifterverband-Index for the subgroup of the private higher education institutions reaches 42 points, but only 19 points for the public universities. Smaller universities are more optimistic than larger ones. Fachhochschulen view their current situation slightly worse than do traditional universities, but are more confident for the future. Nevertheless, higher education institutions (HEIs) that focus on continuing education are optimistic. Research universities are, on the other hand, noticeably sceptical about their future. Negative expectations are especially predominant among those universities that benefitted from the German ‘Initiative of Excellence,’ a major policy initiative for Germany’s universities with an overall funding volume of €1.9 billion during the years 2006 to 2012. These elite universities apparently believe that the best years are already behind them.

4. Large differences in the Stifterverband-Index among the German federal states
Comparing the results for the different German federal states, Berlin and Hamburg come in first with around 35 points for the Stifterverband-Index. Both city states benefit from a high number of private universities as well as an attractive location, which helps to recruit new personnel. In the states of Thuringia, Bremen, and Schleswig-Holstein, HEIs are rather sceptical about their future.

THE CURRENT SITUATION IN DETAIL

5. HEIs request more institutional autonomy
Three out of four German HEIs report that their institutional autonomy has increased during the last 5 years. This is specifically true for academic and organizational autonomy, as well as for the freedom to select their students. However, even in those areas, higher autonomy is still needed. Especially in the area of financial autonomy, there seems to be a need for action: The rectors and presidents rate the importance of financial autonomy particularly high, but see their current autonomy severely restricted.

6. Complex strategy decisions show need for new governance instruments and qualified administrative staff
As a result of growing institutional autonomy, the presidents of German HEIs consider their management tasks much more complex than in the past. Only half of the rectors and presidents at public universities think that their governance instruments are adequate for fulfilling their responsibilities. There seems to be an important bottleneck when looking at administration personnel. Too few staff, and partly underqualified administrative staff at many German HEIs hampers efficient management.
Comment: Higher points correspond to a better appraisal of the current situation or better expectations for the next five years. The more a data point lies to the right, the better the appraisal for the current situation; the nearer to the top, the better the expectations for the next five years in the corresponding group.

Interpretation: HEIs in Berlin assess the current situation similar to the average of all HEIs (30 points). However, the expectations in Berlin are more positive (expectations indicator is at 41 points), whereas the German average is only 19 points.

Source: Stifterverband University Barometer 2011
7. Allocation of higher education funding within the public budget too low
German public universities complain about the lack of attention that research and teaching receive in public budget decisions. Two out of three presidents claim that there is a preference given to other public responsibilities—such as public infrastructure or financing the social system—instead of supporting the higher education system. Even compared with other institutions in the educational system, HEIs complain about being at a disadvantage: they consider themselves less privileged compared to the funding of research outside the universities (e.g., in institutions like Fraunhofer or Max Planck society) and in light of public support for private research and development.

8. Large differences among federal states regarding cooperation between public authorities and HEIs
The university rectors and presidents rate the cooperation with state authorities positive overall—in particular the public universities. However, there are distinct differences between the federal states. HEIs in Rhineland-Palatinate, Bavaria, and Saxony-Anhalt assess the cooperation with government representatives as very good. In Saxonia and Hesse this cooperation seems to be more difficult.

9. Universities work best with local partners from industry and politics
The German universities rate cooperation with local business and politics very well. Concerning the quality of cooperation with academic research institutions outside universities the HEIs have quite different opinions. Universities with a focus on engineering and natural sciences work well with academic partners from Fraunhofer Society, Max-Planck Society, or similar institutions. For the Universities of Applied Sciences this cooperation seems to be more difficult.

10. Universities see themselves as highly competitive
The German HEIs assess themselves to be quite competitive. In particular, in the area of teaching excellence, almost 80% of HEIs see their position quite favourably. For research activities, this share goes down to 50%. The international competitiveness of German universities is also assessed optimistically. More than half of the respondents think that German universities are positioned well compared to other industrialized countries with strong science systems.
FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

11. Differentiation within the higher education system increasing: Fachhochschulen, not traditional universities, make the difference
The differentiation within the German higher education landscape is gaining momentum. Responsible for this development is the strategic reorientation of many Fachhochschulen. They show a wide range of institutional profiles, going from institutions with a specific focus on applied research (35%), to institutions with an emphasis on teaching at bachelor or master levels (24% and 28%), to organizations with a focus on continuing education (12%). The strategies of the traditional universities seem rather homogenous: they all show a clear focus on research. Other alternative strategies among universities are underdeveloped.

12. Research is gaining importance at all types of German HEIs
A strong research base is becoming more important for all types of German HEIs, also at the Fachhochschulen and at private universities, which were traditionally more fo-
13. Teaching at the Bachelor level loses importance, while teaching at the Master level gains importance

With regard to teaching, advanced courses at the Master level as well as continuing education (part-time studies, executive education) seem to have gained importance. The importance of teaching at the Bachelor level has witnessed the least growth, in spite of the current rise in student numbers.

14. The profile formation along different fields of science conforms to societal needs

Among science fields, STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), as well as medical and health science, have gained importance. This means that two broad fields, have gained momentum, in which the future demand for skilled personnel will be particularly high. The humanities, on the other hand, seem to be, on average, of lesser future importance for the HEIs in Germany.

15. Most important challenge: Finding qualified scientific staff

Even though student numbers have been increasing lately, German HEIs worry about a shortage of future scientists, specifically at the doctoral level. But also at the postdoctoral level, the university presidents state that staff numbers are too low—specifically among universities with a focus on engineering and natural sciences. The respondents do not expect an improvement of this situation.

CONCLUSION

Are the best years for German universities behind us?

The majority of presidents and rectors of Germany’s higher education institutions are rather satisfied with their current situation, even though the current financial situation leaves a lot for to be desired. However, in their opinion, the current positive developments within the higher education system will not continue with the same momentum. The Stifterverband will continue its University Barometer with annual surveys to analyze changes in the ‘climate’ for the German higher education institutions. Future issues of the University Barometer will monitor whether the projected developments will turn into real trends for the higher education system.