

A Letter from the President – or: How the German Universities Excellence Initiative Became a Driver of Gender Change in the German Science Policy Discourse

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Abstract

For several years, New Public Management and new forms of governance have dominated the agendas for reforms in research organisations and higher education institutions in many countries all over the world. Neoliberalism and the idea of the “entrepreneurial university” have produced a shift in how universities and “ideal researchers” are defined. One strategic focus of the latest state-run reform programmes has been to promote “excellence” in knowledge production and scientific organisation(s). Now every researcher and every research organisation has to be or become excellent. Another concern of reform is gender equality in the academic world. However, whether and how these developments match seems unclear. This article is focused on the latest university reforms in Germany, which have been influenced by the introduction of New Public Management into research and higher education. One main outcome of these reforms has been implementation of the “German Universities Excellence Initiative”, a nationwide programme which aims at improving the “excellence” of research in German universities and research institutions by strengthening competition among them. Considering the national-programmatic policy level of the “Excellence Initiative”, the article investigates if and how the concepts of “academic excellence” and “gender equality” intertwine in the German science policy discourse. Therefore, it discusses selected science political initiatives since the 2000s in Germany and examines the results of interviews with influential actors in German science and gender equality policy. It conducts critical analysis of current reform discourses and makes suggestions for improving gender equality policies in universities.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial university; New Public Management; Academic excellence; gender equality in academia & research.

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1 Introduction: Excellence and E/quality under Neoliberal Conditions

Amid a globalising capitalism, since the 1980s New Public Management (e.g. Ferlie et al., 2009) and new forms of governance (e.g. Lewis, 2013) have dominated the agendas for reforms in research organisations and higher education institutions in many countries all over the world. Managerial steering tools have now entered the science system. Consequently, the reform agendas have been mainly orientated to economic conditions and mechanisms influenced by neoliberal ideas and practices.

From the perspective of organisation studies, a central aim of the reform can be described, in accordance with Henry Mintzberg (1983 & 1989), as the restructuring of universities to become organisations with highly autonomous working professionals and experts and horizontal power relations de-centred to entrepreneurial organisations, which can be considered to form a type of organisation now based on the principles of economic rationality, centralised management, and vertical and horizontal power relations. The processes of “creating entrepreneurial universities”, as Burton R. Clark (1998) calls universities of this new type, dominated by economic standards and values, have changed the political and scientific landscape throughout the Western system of science and the humanities, higher education, and research. Neoliberalism and the idea of the “entrepreneurial university” have produced a shift in the way universities and “ideal researchers” are defined. Internationalisation, a clear profile with unique selling points, local and global competition, but also cooperation on behalf of science are elements of this new governance.

The changes accompanying this shift are of great importance for political interventions from outside the science system. They concern not only the management of research organisations but also the self-management of researchers as professionals and of their tasks. The main reform focus and strategic key concept of the latest state-run reform programmes with respect to research organisations, higher education, and academic work(ers) has been to promote *excellence*, sometimes also called *quality*, at the organisational as well as the individual level. Now every research organisation, every organisational unit, and every researcher has to be or become excellent in their work and their products, with their results being evaluated by mainly international peer reviews, and by so-called impact factors deriving from the natural sciences. This also applies to disciplines that do not yet have a system of impact factors, like the humanities.

Other ongoing reforms in the science system concern equal opportunities and gender equality. Under conditions that could be described as a “new governance regime”, gender equality policies and gender studies can no longer rely on a powerful state with strong parliaments intervening in the organisational development processes of academia. This new situation does not seem favourable to equal opportunities and gender equality in scientific organisations.

Whilst equality has been put on the organisational agenda, it has now become a subject of governance that must also fit with the structures formed by contractual agreements between the state and research organisations or within research organisations. The separate policy fields of affirmative action and equality policies established in the 1980s seem to have been replaced by gender mainstreaming or diversity policies, both of which are supposed to fit better with the emerging “lean” entrepreneurial organisation(s) of science and research, dominated by issues of quality (management) and excellence.¹

1. Here, I cannot discuss if these changes have *improved* the chances of gender equality in academia being enacted, or if these changes have *weakened* such chances, or if perhaps both outcomes are possible. Whatever the case, concepts, strategies, as well as the rhetoric accelerating gender equality have changed.

Of course, quality and equality can go hand in hand: at least at the semantical level, quality is part of equality. But is this also true in practice? Under which conditions and how can excellence and gender equality be linked? In this article I will discuss these questions with regard to science politics in Germany, or, to be more specific, with a focus on the German Universities Excellence Initiative and related science political projects in Germany, and on the role that gender equality politics have played in this development. Although Germany has a federal structure comprising the central government and sixteen federal states, and although science policy is the responsibility of the federal states, many of the science development policies which are implemented in the federal states are prepared at the government level, for which the main purpose is financial. The federal government has limited political influence on science politics in the federal states, but it has more money than the federal states and it is allowed to give this money to them to a certain extent and for selected issues.

For the German science system, as for other science systems, neither the search or struggle for excellence *per se* nor the question of a possible connection with equal opportunities and gender equality is new. However, the advent of New Public Management has involved an orientation to output and governance by numbers. Excellence and gender equality are now more economised than ever before, and they are measured at all levels of the science system. In the German science system, the neoliberal ideological and organisational movement suddenly generated discussion about the necessity to have elite universities in order to be able to compete on the global science market. This discussion started in the early 2000s and was primarily led in science politics, surprisingly fired by social democratic politicians and a red-green government at the federal level. The removal of the elite taboo in science politics was new for the German science system, which until then had been based on the idea of (institutional) equality. The main reason for this removal may have been financial limitations. At that time, it became very clear that there was not enough money to improve the quality of the overall science system but only of selected scientific organisations. Because of strong criticism, talk about *elite* universities was quickly changed to talk about *excellent* universities, which seemed to meet more consensus in science political discussions. Since then, the orientation to excellence has never again been seriously questioned in German science politics, neither at the government level nor at the level of the federal states.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a short overview on equal opportunity and gender equality policies in Germany, mainly in its western part, from the 1970s to the 1990s. In Section 3, the German Universities Excellence Initiative, a time-limited funding programme from 2005 to 2017, is introduced and characterised as an indicator of a system change in the state funding of universities. Section 4 presents the so-called Gender-Alliance, a political initiative started in 2006 by the leading organisations of the German science system, and the purpose of which was to improve gender equality in all scientific organisations. Section 5 considers whether, how, and by whom gender equality has been introduced in this debate as a contribution to achieving the excellence of science and the humanities, as well as of the overall science system. Section 6 deals with the achievements of the Gender-Alliance after five years on the basis of its evaluation report. Section 7 presents empirical findings from interviews with elites from science and gender equality politics on the connection between excellence and gender equality, conducted shortly before the end of the German Universities Excellence Initiative. Finally, in Section 8, some conclusions are drawn and discussed.

2 Gender Equality Policy in the German Science System from the 1970s to the 1990s

In Germany,² a main sociopolitical insight from the late 1960s and 1970s was that the implementation of equal opportunities and gender equality needs political support. This insight also concerns the science system. Research organisations and higher education institutions had been more or less resistant to including female academics, especially in top positions such as full professorships.

The history of the implementation of equal opportunities and of gender equality policy can be described as a long process, with successes and struggles between different actors like the women's movement, the federal government, the state governments, organisations of science policy, universities, affirmative action officers, and, of course, academic professionals of both genders. All these actors have in common that they have been struggling for gender equality in the German system of science since the 1980s, but in their struggles they have not always moved in the same direction and pursued the same goals. At least in the first two decades, i.e. the 1980s and the 1990s, mainly universities and research organisations did not give the achievement of gender equality high priority on their political agendas.

Supported by the pressure of women's movements aiming at democratizing scientific organisations and higher education, the state and its politics have endeavored to implement activities which enforce equal opportunities and gender equality at all levels of the academic career system and in all areas of the science system, including knowledge itself. Since the 1980s all federal states in Germany have established special gender equality laws for research organisations and higher education institutions, affirmative action plans, and equal opportunity units, as well as special equal opportunity officers in order to implement equal opportunities and gender equality policies in all areas and at all levels of academia. In 1990, the year of the reunification of the two German states, the *Bundeskonzferenz der Frauen- und Gleichstellungsbeauftragten (bukof)*³ was founded as a nationwide organisation whose members seek to shape the structure and culture of universities in a gender equal manner. Members of the *bukof* are the universities, represented by their equal opportunity officers, staff from gender equality units, and function owners from different areas of gender equality issues in universities. Moreover, in the 1990s some of the most important science political organisations in Germany, such as the German Rectors' Conference (in German: *Hochschulrektorenkonferenz [HRK]*)⁴ and the German Council of Science and Humanities (in German: *Wissenschaftsrat*),⁵ published recom-

2. The developments in the 1970s and 1980s described here primarily relate to the western part of Germany, where democratic structures were implemented after the second world war, whereas at the same time in the eastern part a socialist political regime established another way how to promote equal opportunities and gender equality. Because of limited space I cannot go into more detail on the eastern German way of promoting equal opportunities in the science system until the reunification in 1990.

3. There is no official English translation of the name of this organisation. My translation would be: Nationwide Conference of Women's and Gender Equality Officers at Universities. *bukof* is the German abbreviation for the main words of the organisation's name and cannot be translated into English.

4. The German Rectors' Conference is the voluntary association of public and state-approved universities in Germany. Not all but most of German universities are members of the German Rectors' Conference. Thus the German Rectors' Conference is the universities' voice vis-à-vis politics and the public and the central forum of common formation of opinion and decision-making in the science system.

5. The German Council of Science and Humanities advises the federal government and the state governments with regard to questions concerning contents and structural developments of universities, science and the humanities, and research.

mentations on how gender equality could be improved in research organisations and higher education. In 1990 the German Rectors' Conference discussed the promotion of female careers in academia and published the results (Westdeutsche Rektorenkonferenz, 1990). A few years later, in 1998, the German Council of Science and Humanities published a paper titled "Recommendations for Equal Opportunities of Female and Male Academics"⁶ (Wissenschaftsrat, 1998). This document attracted a lot of attention but its impact on organisational developments concerning gender equality seems to have been limited.

Although this brief overview of the implementation of equal opportunities and gender equality policies in German science and research organisations may seem to recount a success story, in the structures, cultures, and the daily lives of universities equal opportunities and gender equality were not given high priority, and the capacity of all these laws, rules, plans, units, officers, and political recommendations to increase gender equality in academia was low. In the structure and culture of scientific organisations and higher education institutions there was strong opposition to gender equality issues in the first decades. Of course, it had become clear to the universities that the state wanted them to improve equal opportunities and gender equality in research, teaching, and organisation, but in practice progress in these areas was sluggish.

Attention to gender equality issues increased in the 2000s. Those were the years in which "excellence" was put on the agenda of science politics and research organisations and when the German Universities Excellence Initiative was established. Paradoxically, it was precisely the Initiative for Excellence of German Universities that seems to have acted as driving force for gender equality issues and contributed to making *bukof* an important voice and actor in German science policies from a gender equality perspective.

3 The German Universities Excellence Initiative as an Indicator of System Change in Science Politics

In the 2000s strong attempts to enhance the excellence of the German science system accompanied the implementation of New Public Management and the new governance of science. Their preliminary outcome resulted in the German Universities Excellence Initiative, a promotional programme adopted by the Federal Government and State Governments with an administrative agreement signed on 23 June 2005 after lengthy negotiations. The Excellence Initiative was the result of controversial political discussions about the pros and cons of establishing a special nationwide state-funded programme to support some public universities in becoming exclusive elite universities and strong academic players on the global science market. Its implementation marked a break with the long German science political tradition of treating all universities equally.

The Excellence Initiative programme was launched on 18 July 2005 and ended on 31 October 2017. It aimed:

- to promote cutting-edge research and to create outstanding conditions for the next generation of scholars at universities;
- to increase cooperation among disciplines and institutions;
- to strengthen international cooperation in research;

6. Here and in the following quotes all translations from German into English have been done by the author.

- to enhance the international appeal of so called “excellent” German universities.

The Excellence Initiative was administered by the German Research Foundation (in German: *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft [DFG]*) and the German Council of Science and Humanities. It comprised three funding lines:

- Graduate schools to promote young researchers: in total more than 40 graduate schools for the next generation of scientists and PhD candidates received funding.
- Clusters of excellence to promote top-level research: in total 30 clusters of excellence, which connected universities with leading German research institutes and business organisations, were funded.
- Institutional strategies to institutionally strengthen universities as a whole: a selection of 11 so-called “universities of excellence” were funded for their “future concepts” for a limited time, i.e., institutional strategies to promote top-level university research.

The German Council of Science and Humanities was in charge of the third funding line, while the German Research Foundation was responsible for the first and second ones. In total, € 4.6 bn of funding through all three funding lines was approved as additional money for the universities selected for funding — specifically, € 1.9 bn for the first programme phase (2006–2012), and € 2.7 bn for the second (2012–2017). 25% of the funding was given by the federal state in which that particular university was located, 75% was provided by the federal government.

Universities had to apply to receive funding from the Excellence Initiative. Although not all universities agreed with the guiding principle of this programme, many of them applied for this additional money, not all of them because of the wish to be or become more excellent than the others but because of chronic funding shortages and the desire to improve their financial situation at least for a certain time. Thus, the Excellence Initiative caused competition and cooperation among all German universities: competition because universities had to apply and be better than others; cooperation because some graduate schools and clusters of excellence could only be created together with other research organisations. Due to the funding conditions of the Excellence Initiative, which included two programme phases and several rounds of applications, all universities tried to meet the funding criteria. Almost needless to say, gender equality issues were not originally part of the criteria, which were exclusively scientific.

However, the suitability of measures to promote gender equality in science and the humanities had to be considered in the applications. This additional criterion was included in the list of criteria after the *bukof* and other science political lobby groups had applied pressure for gender equality. The funding conditions caused hectic reform attempts in nearly all universities for several years, not only in those which finally received money from the programme. Thus the Excellence Initiative stimulated reform activities within the whole German science system — although in the end only a few universities profited financially from the programme.

Of course, all applications were peer reviewed by international experts. Shortly after the start of the programme, on 3 February 2006, those universities that had applied received a letter from the president of the German Research Foundation, Professor Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker. He not only elaborated on the academic reasons for the first decisions in the Excellence Initiative but also hinted that efforts to put gender equality into action were often poor in the participating universities. According to Winnacker, all groups of international reviewers had complained that the aspect of gender equality had been entirely insufficiently treated in most

of the projects. The international experts had gained the impression that this topic had mainly received lip service and was not grounded in concrete measures, either ongoing or planned. Therefore Winnacker asked the universities to formulate concrete objectives and to take measures, that can bring “us” — i.e. the German science system — into the top international ranking with respect to gender equality.

Mechthild Koreuber (2008), representative of the *bukof*, argued that Winnacker’s appeal was neither without consequences nor disobeyed. His letter led to “astonishing activities at all participating universities”. According to Koreuber, the question of promoting academics was no longer a marginal matter but had become central for gender equality policies. She therefore differentiated between “the time before and after the Winnacker letter”, which seems to have marked a turning point in the handling of equal opportunity policy.

Of course, it was not the letter as such that moved the universities, but the fact that in international comparison Germany was ranked at the bottom in terms of gender equality in academia *and* that international reviewers criticized this position publicly within a context of excellence, *and* that the president of the German Research Foundation reacted to this criticism. Indeed, the *bukof*, gender scholars, and some gender-sensitive science politicians had pointed to that fact at least since the early 1990s but had not elicited any significant reaction from the universities and science policy, nor from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and comparable ministries in the federal states.

4 The Gender-Alliance: An Initiative to Put Gender Equality in Science and Research into Action

Also in 2006, the year when funding by the Excellence Initiative began, specifically on 28 and 29 November, the German Council of Science and Humanities organised a conference on “Excellence in Science and Research. New Ways in Equality Politics” (Wissenschaftsrat, 2007c). The conference addressed different management levels of universities and research organisations, i.e. exactly the levels authorised to undertake change under the conditions of the new governance of science. Numerous affirmative action officers as well as gender scholars working in the field of science and the humanities also participated in the conference.

In the opening speech, the president of the German Council of Science and Humanities, Professor Peter Strohschneider, claimed that a shift in equal opportunity policy had taken place since the late 1990s: Science politics designed to improve equal opportunities was no longer understood as affirmative action by women but as attempt to use the “creative potential of qualified academics of both genders equally” (Strohschneider, 2007, p. 5). In Strohschneider’s view, the “insufficient representation of women — particularly in top positions — belongs among the serious deficits of research organisations in Germany” (*Ibidem*, p. 6). Like Winnacker in his letter to the universities participating in the first round of the Excellence Initiative, Strohschneider pointed out that this deficit of the German science system was also underlined by the international groups of reviewers of the Excellence Initiative, who had given Germany a bad testimonial in this regard (cf. *Ibidem*, p. 6).

First, the conference discussed the chances of putting gender equality into action during the so-called and ongoing “alternation of generations” in science and research in Germany, which was supposed to terminate in 2014. Second, the conference wanted to give a distinct signal to the media that the problem of gender equality in science and research had not yet been solved, though there had been much discussion of this problem for many years (cf. Strohschneider,

2007, p. 6). Third, — and this is of particular interest for my purposes in this article — the conference sought to foster new developments in universities and research organisations with respect to gender equality. At the end of the conference, on 29 November 2006, the seven leading organisations in the German science system presented a common resolution called “Offensive for Equal Opportunities of Female and Male Scientists” (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft et al., 2006, p. 151), initiated by the German Council of Science and Humanities. Their initiative was also called “Gender-Alliance.”⁷

(Mainly male) elites in science politics seemed to have understood that they had to act to promote e/quality and excellence in the German science system. The document was signed by seven powerful leaders — six men and one woman — in science politics, namely the presidents of the German Research Foundation, the Helmholtz Association of German Research Centres, the Fraunhofer Society for the Advancement of Applied Research, the German Rectors’ Conference, the Leibniz Science Association, the Max-Planck-Society for the Advancement of Science, and the German Council of Science and Humanities. In the document these seven leading organisations of the German science system agreed to increase the participation of women in top positions in science and universities and to improve gender equality during the following five years. In order to achieve this aim, they emphasised four distinct approaches in their document:

- *Organisational development*: Each organisation will increase the amount of female scientists in decision-making and leadership positions, as well as their amount in committees and groups of experts. Qualified female scientists will be recruited even more actively, especially for decision-making and leadership positions.
- *Reconciliation of family and work life*: The reconciliation of family and work for men and women working in our organisations will be improved by concrete measures. For example, through the further definition of family-friendly working hours and working conditions, as well as through the development of programmes to support dual work participation.
- *Transparency*: Each organisation will inform the public about the participation of female scientists in their structures and processes.
- *Evaluation*: In five years’ time, we will evaluate the success achieved in implementing gender equality in our organisations.
(Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft et al., 2006, pp. 151–152, emphases in the original).

In the appendix to the common resolution by the seven organisations, each of them gave a detailed description of the institutional conditions, as well as the measures and instruments that each member would use to achieve the common aim. A closer look at the appendix shows that the organisational conditions, as well as the measures and instruments mentioned, are quite different in each Gender-Alliance organisation. They reflect different political strategies to achieve gender equality — affirmative action programmes for women, gender mainstreaming, or a combination of both strategies — as well as different levels at which reflection takes place with regard to resolving the problem of gender inequality within scientific organisations and research.

7. As far as I know, this expression was first used by Ernst Theodor Rietschel, the president of the Leibniz Science Association, in a discussion during a conference held in 2007 (Rietschel, in Dalhoff & Kreuzer 2008, p. 38).

Although the conference had put the term “excellence” in its title, links to the ongoing international discussion on improving the excellence of science and the humanities, research, and its organisations mostly remained implicit. However, the message in the opening speech by Strohschneider, the president of the German Council of Science and Humanities, that all talents of all genders are needed for the German system of science and the humanities, and that also female “knowledges, qualifications, and perspectives” (Strohschneider, 2007, p. 6) should be included, was strong.

This rationale was not primarily based on a normative argument emphasising the need to achieve equality and gender justice, but on an economic argument emphasising the need to harness the full potential of human resources to cope with the increasing competition in the global scientific market.

Moreover, this perspective also seems to have instructed the document by the Gender-Alliance. In its introduction, the representatives of the leading science political organisations present stated that equal opportunities in science and the humanities is a “strategic task” (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft et al., 2006, p. 151).

They argued in the same way as Strohschneider had done in his opening speech, which is not surprising because the German Council of Science and Humanities had initiated the Gender-Alliance. Female academics, female professors, and female science managers would have to become more important in the German science system “because they are an important but underused resource for our productivity in the future” (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft et al., 2006, p. 151). The message is clear: female human resources are needed for the future of the German science system and of Germany as such. In critical research, this economic perspective embedded in neoliberal thinking is also called “the business case for gender equality” (e.g. Cullen & Murphy, 2018, p. 110).

5 Gender Equality as a Contribution to Excellence?

The members of the Gender-Alliance explicitly used neither the notion of excellence nor the notion of quality in their common resolution, but they both are present in the discussion which accompanied the document. The notion of excellence had a prominent position in the title of the conference where the Gender-Alliance was presented in November 2006 (cf. Wissenschaftsrat, 2007c). And the notion of quality was first introduced into this debate by Susanne Baer, a gender studies scholar of law and later member of the Federal Constitutional Court of Germany, who at another science political conference held on 18 and 19 April 2007 within the framework of the German EU Council Presidency⁸ called the “Offensive for Equal Opportunities for Female and Male Scientists” an “offensive for quality” (Baer, 2008, p. 28):

Equality is a contribution to innovation and excellence. An offensive for equality is a reaction to challenges for justice or economically necessary, but in science and the humanities it is — and must be to have success — an offensive for quality, too. (Baer, 2008, p. 35).

Although in the document by the Gender-Alliance the relationship between excellence and gender equality was not explicitly clarified, according to Baer the two concepts are reconcilable. Moreover, in her argumentation, it seems as if the equal participation of women and family

8. The conference was titled “Gender in Research. Innovation by Equal Opportunities”.

justice makes excellence possible.⁹ Baer explicitly connected the science political discussion on equality with the discussion about excellence. (Gender) equality, she argued, contributes to innovation and excellence. She emphasised that the “Offensive for Equal Opportunities of Female and Male Scientists” was a reaction to challenges for justice from a normative perspective or was economically necessary, but it was also an offensive for quality. She did not deepen this discussion further; nor did she criticise the advent of neoliberal thinking in science politics. However, she seemed to be aware of it. According to Baer, the problematic gender bias in German academia could only be abolished systematically “by motivation of our own, not because of coming from outside, not because the staff is lacking, but because we are orientated to knowledge and want quality there” (Baer, 2008, p. 35). Hence, according to Baer, the quest for quality and excellence must go hand in hand with the quest for equality.

Whilst Baer argued that gender equality in scientific organisations is best achieved by “motivation of our own” in combination with the idea that a different composition of the scientific community would improve the quality of knowledge and thus have additional value, Rietschel, the president of the Leibniz Science Association, in a discussion during the above-mentioned conference in 2007 was sceptical and stated that science on its own would not solve the problem of gender inequality:

Science works with other criteria, with competition, with excellence. Science is content with the system as it exists. Whether 7% or 22% of top positions are occupied by women is not important for science. This is a political question.” (Rietschel, in Dalhoff & Kreuzer, 2008, p. 38).

According to Rietschel, this political question must be resolved by the Gender-Alliance with clear objectives and with soft measures like recommendations or with hard ones like quotas.

The German Council of Science and Humanities took up the idea of e/equality without explicitly adopting the notion of excellence. When on 16 July 2007 the Council presented its “Recommendations towards Equal Opportunities for Female and Male Scientists” (Wissenschaftsrat, 2007b), a revised version of that of 1998 (cf. Wissenschaftsrat, 1998), the press release bore the title “Equal Opportunities are a Question of Quality” (Wissenschaftsrat, 2007a). Both documents from 2007 presented the implementation of equal opportunities in research organisations primarily in terms of increasing the proportion of women and promoting family justice, as well as appropriate controls. Furthermore, it is remarkable that the consideration of the gender dimension in research and teaching is only mentioned in the “Recommendations” of 1998 but not in those of 2007. From the first version of the document of 1998 to the second version of 2007, the third level of gendered innovations in science and the humanities, namely gender in knowledge, seems to have lost its importance for equal opportunities for women and therefore also for the excellence of science and research as such. Hence, the gender dimension as perspective and content of research and teaching is not given any importance for the excellence of science and the humanities, differently to the European level (cf. European Commission,

9. This perspective was also taken up by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and the state governments which in 2008 jointly established a funding programme for the appointment of female professors (cf. Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, 2013). In 2012, Cornelia Quennet-Thielen, undersecretary of state in the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, declared in a speech: “We should not let anyone tell us that there is a contradiction between excellence and equal opportunities. The one is the precondition for the other!” (Quennet-Thielen, 2012, in Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung 2013, p. 3)

2015). Surprisingly the loss of this dimension in the science political recommendations was not criticised in the discussions following the document issued by the German Council for Science and Humanities.

It becomes apparent that there was consensus on the necessity of equal opportunities in the German science system, at least among the *elites* quoted up to now. However, the idea that gender equality contributes to excellence was questioned.

6 Achievements by the Gender-Alliance after Five Years: More Attention to Gender Equality, but Little Increase in Numbers

As announced in the document by the Gender-Alliance (cf. Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft et al. 2006, p. 152), in 2012 the gender equality achievements of the seven leading organisations in the German science system had to be and were evaluated by the German Council of Science and Humanities (cf. Wissenschaftsrat, 2012). In its report, the German Council of Science and Humanities (Wissenschaftsrat, 2012, p. 20) concluded that the “Offensive for Equal Opportunities for Female and Male Scientists” had emitted a visible political signal that effort should be made to achieve equal opportunities for female and male scientists in the German science system.

However, the German Council of Science and Humanities made clear that the improvements made significantly lagged behind the expectations. An evident increase in the proportion of female academics in top positions, the central aim of the Gender-Alliance, had not been reached within the first five years of its existence. Thus, further efforts were necessary. After elaborating on some fields of action, together with recommendations for measures, the German Council of Science and Humanities ended its report by urging the Gender-Alliance’s members to continue working forcefully to achieve the objectives of the “Offensive for Equal Opportunities for Female and Male Scientists”. While doing so, the aims of their equal opportunity policy should be formulated more concretely than in the document of 2006 (cf. Wissenschaftsrat 2012, p. 39). In fact, only the German Council of Science and Humanities had proposed a precise quota of women, namely 25%, which should be reached in its committees and working groups by 2011.

The final conclusions of this evaluation are more than contradictory. On the one hand, the German Council of Science and Humanities is right in its statement that the aims of the Gender-Alliance need(ed) more concrete wording, more structure, and incentives. On the other hand, any binding character is lacking in the German Council of Science and the Humanities’ evaluation itself. For example, one outcome of the evaluation could have been the issue of another common document with more concrete aims signed by all the members of the Gender-Alliance, as well as an agreement with them that another evaluation of the new aims would be conducted five years later, namely in 2016, shortly before the Excellence Initiative ended on 31 October 2017.

It is rather surprising that it had not been noticed before the evaluation in 2012 that the Gender-Alliance’s aims should have been expressed more concretely and connected with clear indicators which could be evaluated. All members of the Gender-Alliance should and did know the German science system and its indolence with respect to inconvenient changes. So why did they not implement a more binding provision when introducing their initiative, or at least when it was evaluated five years later? Did they primarily want to attract symbolic attention to the issue and test the reactions to their initiative? Or did they believe in the long-term effect

of the business argument that they made with respect to the need for gender equality in the German science system? Or were they merely being naïve and overestimated the influence their initiative could exert?

These questions cannot be answered here because there was no common public reaction by the Gender-Alliance with respect to the evaluation report. However, it is obvious that the “Offensive for Equal Opportunities for Female and Male Scientists” of 2006 was not mentioned again in science politics after this document. This does not mean that no further measures and instruments were adopted by the Gender-Alliance’s members in order to attain gender equality. Rather, all of them continued their attempts to achieve this aim and informed the public about the outcomes.

7 A Long-term Change of Mentality in Science Politics with respect to Gender Equality Elicited by the German Universities Excellence Initiative

The following remarks are based on results from eight semi-structured interviews with nine key-informants (*elites*) from science and gender equality policies. They deal with the relation between excellence and gender equality as presented by the interviewees.¹⁰ All of the interviews took place in 2016, shortly before the end of the Excellence Initiative on 31 October 2017, but in the same year as the independent evaluation report of this funding programme by the International Expert Commission for the Evaluation of the Excellence Initiative was presented on 29 January 2016 to the public (cf. Internationale Expertenkommission zur Evaluation der Exzellenzinitiative, 2016). The focus of the interviews was on the ideas and practices of reforms in the German science system related to excellence and gender equality, and the possible connections between these reform concepts. Three interviews were conducted with members of the Gender-Alliance, namely *elites* from the German Council of Science and Humanities, the German Research Foundation and the German Rectors’ Conference, and five interviews with other important science and gender equality policy *elites*, among them representatives from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and the *bukof*. Because the interviews focused on reforms related to the universities, no key-informants (*elites*) from non-academic research organisations, such as the Leibniz Science Association and the Max-Planck-Society for the Advancement of Science, were interviewed.

Eight interviewees agreed that excellence and equal opportunities belong together. Equal opportunities were primarily seen as a *structural* precondition for excellence in the science system. Achieving excellence in science meant that “the best” are needed, and these also includes “the best” female scientists. This illustrates what “structural” means: excellent science needs “the best” researchers, and if women are not among “the best” researchers, this is considered a loss of quality. Hence, the interviewees considered the promotion of gender equality to be the promotion of quality. Consequently, equal opportunities were a precondition for better quality in science, for “the best”, i.e. excellent, research; or, as one interviewee said, they are an “integrated element of excellence”:

10. Most of the qualitative interviews were conducted by me, only two of them by a research associate. They were digitally recorded, transcribed, made anonymous, and prepared for interpretation by qualitative content analysis. One interview was held with two interviewees because the respective organisation had opted for that arrangement. Of course, the interviews included more information on the topic on which than is presented here because of limited space, e.g. (different) understandings of the terms “excellence” and “gender equality”. These results will be presented and discussed elsewhere.

I would say that equal opportunities are an integral element of excellence. I would find it very bad if the numbers produced the impression that excellence is gendered. And I believe that nobody thinks like this [...] And it is our task now to play this out in numbers.

Therefore, affirmative action programmes for women had to be included in programmes to promote excellence. When asked about the reason for the (slow) “change in mentality” in the German science system, as this interviewee described the greater sensitivity to the problem of and with gender inequality, he traced this “change in mentality” back to the criticism of the insufficient status of gender equality made by all groups of international reviewers at the beginning of the Excellence Initiative. It seems as if this had opened the eyes of many science politicians and managers in the German science system.

These remarks may sound as if the relation between excellence and equal opportunities was not questioned in the interviews. However, this is not the case. Improving equal opportunities alone was not seen as leading the science system to excellence, but nor does the lack of gender equality. Moreover, one male interviewee made clear that the gender perspective alone was too narrow and stated that the whole spectrum of diversity should be taken into account. A female interviewee described the relation between the two concepts as “very burdened”. She explained where this burden comes from by referring to research results showing that excellence is identified by seeing it. If it is true that excellence is identified by seeing she says, then the logical consequence of this idea is that excellent women assert themselves; and if they are unable to do so, they cannot be excellent. However, according to her, a lot of research has shown that female scientists are not always able to assert themselves. She also made clear that, in the Federal Ministry of Education and Research’s internal debates about the Excellence Initiative, always controversial had been the extent to which equal opportunities can be considered an “excellence marker” of a university, and whether this can be anchored in funding conditions. Nevertheless, she resumes, in the end doing so has always worked.

Besides the structural perspective on the relation between excellence and equal opportunities, two female interviewees representing gender equality politics also pointed out a dimension of excellence *in terms of content*. Both of them emphasised that the idea of excellence in science has to include interdisciplinarity and different styles of thinking in research, and that excellent research should “care” for society by treating questions and topics which are very important for society’s future. One of the interviewees rendered this more precisely as the inclusion of gender studies in the idea of excellent science.

To complete the results from the interviews, it is also important to point out that one male respondent did not share the idea that excellence and equal opportunities belong together, and that one of them is the precondition for the other. Significantly he was a male *elite* representing the German Rectors’ Conference, which is a member organisation of the Gender-Alliance and acts for the universities, being maybe the site where the connection between excellence and equal opportunities should be first put into practice. When asked what a connection between excellence and equal opportunities looks like, he answered: “I don’t see a connection.” He repeated this statement several times without any explanation. Asked by me whether these are two completely different areas, he said that they were so:

These are two completely different areas. If one thinks that one could, so to speak, connect the promotion of excellence with the promotion of gender equality, then one does something wrong, I believe. [...] To draw, so to speak, a real link between these two things I consider very dangerous. [...] If one opts for excellence, one

should prove that it really is excellence. However, at the same time the rectorate should always be able to determine whether the affirmative action plan is not violated by this decision.

This interviewee made clear that he agreed with the idea that excellence means hiring “the best”, regardless of gender, and that he also opted for taking care of equal opportunities as such. The fact that the result of starting from the idea of gender-neutral or gender-free excellence is reflected by unequal shares of male and female researchers in top positions is stated by him as without any contradiction.

When the number of scientists is not distributed equally between the genders, then also the number of the best is not distributed equally.

According to him, universities cannot change these proportions: “Only society can achieve this”, starting with socialisation within families. No wonder that this interviewee also considered science political attempts to connect excellence and equal opportunities in funding programmes as “nonsense, political nonsense”.

His idea of “proving” — or “seeing” — the excellence of a scientist seemed to reflect the conception of meritocracy as independent from all social factors and social embeddedness. This idea has been widely criticised by feminist scholars (and other scholars with sensitivity to inequalities). Adopting the idea of meritocracy in practice mostly means adopting the construct of an “ideal researcher” who is implicitly male, flexible, and without any personal relationships.

8 Conclusions: Excellence and Equality as a Contested Connection

Finally, I draw some conclusions with respect to the question addressed by this article: under what conditions and how can excellence and gender equality be linked in the German science system. I have argued that the German Universities Excellence Initiative served as a push to put equal opportunities and gender equality on the agenda of science politics. However, this is only half of the truth. The real push came from outside the German science system. It was driven by the international reviewers who had given Germany a bad testimonial in regard to accomplishing gender equality. It was not the so-called “Winnacker letter”, written by the former president of the German Research Foundation, which was responsible for this push. Rather, it was the fact that colleagues in the international scientific community pointed out a deficit in the German scientific system that had not been foreseen by the leading “architects”, politicians and managers who had planned the Excellence Initiative as the best means to improve Germany’s competitiveness on the global science market.

It came as a great surprise to many leading architects that in the eyes of international reviewers the (bad) status of gender equality counted negatively.

A large amount of internal criticism concerning the German science system had been expressed before the Excellence Initiative was designed, but the backlog according to gender equality had not been mentioned in this context by the reformers responsible. And those who had pointed out this deficit long before the Excellence Initiative was created had not been taken seriously.

The push for gender equality worked primarily at the symbolic level. Issues of equal opportunities and gender equality were given more attention, and there took place a change in the “mentality” of science politicians and managers in regard to this topic. This was perhaps

the main achievement by the international reviewers and the Winnacker letter following their criticism. However, besides the symbolic level, also political activities, e.g. discussions about quotas, recommendations, as well as more concrete measures, instruments, and monitoring, were initiated and established within the German science system, although many of them have not been presented and described here because of limited space. While concrete achievements in gender equality are still limited, sensitivity to this topic has remained up to now relevant. And it directs the attention of science politicians and managers to the fact that progress is still sluggish.

To give only one but important example: on 15 November 2022 the meeting of the members of the German Rectors' Conference adopted a resolution concerning the situation of women on career paths in German universities (cf. HRK, 2022). It stated:

With great concern, the German Rectors' Conference takes note that progress with respect to adequate consideration of women at higher career stages is much too slow, despite numerous measures. [...] Resolute actions by all stakeholders in science and politics at all levels is absolutely essential in order to achieve clearer progress. [...] In the medium and long term every other professorship will have to be occupied by a woman if an adequate representation of the genders is to be achieved. That will only be put into effect by a decided strategy which is supported by all. This strategy will have to combine different measures (policy mix) and rely on a sustainable cultural change driven by a structural change. The universities are ready to take the necessary steps (HRK 2022).

However, it is also important to be critical about the science political rhetoric and its implications concerning changes in the structure and the culture of universities, as well as organisational practices with respect to gender equality in these neoliberal times influenced by the ongoing race for excellence. Londa Schiebinger (2008) posited three levels of analysis to identify gendered innovations in science: first, the participation of women in science; second, gender in the cultures of science; and third, gender in the results of science or gender in knowledge.

In light of this very useful analytical frame, it becomes obvious that the above-discussed resolution by the Gender-Alliance of 2006, as well as subsequent recommendations and resolution, have mainly paid attention to the first level: they focus particularly on the participation of women in top positions within the science system. All of the instruments and measures originally proposed by the Gender-Alliance's members concerned women: for example, mentoring programmes for female researchers and special positions for women as full professors, but not men. So the message is that the term "gender" refers to women and that the lack of equality only concerns women. Furthermore, gender means sex, it means women from a biological point of view, giving the impression that women do not have equal opportunities because they can become or have become mothers.

But this is exactly the problem addressed by additional measures which can be considered as relating to the second analytical level introduced by Schiebinger (2008): the reconciliation between family and (scientific) work. The examples given in the context of reconciliation are mostly described with gender-neutral language. There are only very few sentences dealing with gender changes and concerning particularly the dual careers and men-as-active-fathers phenomenon. There still seems to be less sensitivity to the scientific understanding of gender as a social construction and to the empirical fact that gender relations and intentions concerning how to deal with the division of labour in private lives, especially in dual-career family model, have started to change. That organisational structures and processes will have to be changed in

order to increase the number of female scientists especially in top positions and change the universities into family-friendly or family-just workplaces has for a long time been ignored. However, this insight is slowly seeping into the perceptions and strategies of science politicians and especially university managers, as the recent resolution by the German Rectors' Conference shows.

It should also have become obvious from my analysis that the third and last level of analysis to identify gendered innovations in science devised by Schiebinger (2008) is still neglected. Moreover, most science political actors and managers do not include measures and instruments which promote gender knowledge in their equal opportunities and gender equality activities. The end of the line has not yet been reached.

Last but not least, science political discussions and strategies still do not reflect the discussion ongoing in gender studies and politics of affirmative action in regard to intersectionality and diversity — they lack sensitivity to inequality in its various forms. One could argue that diversity is mentioned in some respect — as the question of gender and of lifestyle concerning the “problem” of reconciling family and scientific work — but there is no reflection on different social or ethnic or sexual backgrounds or on the fact that not all children grow up in two-parent-families. The concept of “woman” underlying the discussions and documents is that of a white, German, middle-class, young and heterosexual “woman” aiming to become or being a mother in a heterosexual partnership while following her academic career. Thus, the notion of equal opportunities used in science politics is still constricted.

Maybe another push from outside the German science system is needed in order to foster sensitivity especially with respect to the two last issues criticised above.

And what about excellence and its possible connection with gender equality? As said above, the German Universities Excellence Initiative as such was examined twice shortly before its end on 31 October 2017. The report by the German Research Foundation and the German Council for Science and Humanities of June 2015 concluded:

A perceptible growth of institutional sensitivity to questions of equal opportunities for women and men in science is observed as a direct consequence of the German Universities Excellence Initiative (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft and Wissenschaftsrat, 2015, p. 2).

The International Expert Commission for the Evaluation of the Excellence Initiative presented its independent evaluation report of this funding programme on 29 January 2016 to the public. It included a clear call for the targeted funding of top-level research at universities in clusters of excellence and for the selection of top-level research projects to be based “solely on their scientific excellence” (Strohschneider, in Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, 2016). The topic of equal opportunities and gender equality found only “little echo in the evaluation” (Beaufäys et al., 2016, p. 4). Moreover, this International Expert Commission indirectly recommended that a follow-up of the Excellence Initiative “must not weaken its effectiveness by an intermixture with other aims, even if they are legitimate and urgent” (Internationale Expertenkommission zur Evaluation der Exzellenzinitiative, 2016, p. 3). Thus equal opportunities and gender equality are identified as “other aims” and again decoupled from achieving excellence. Sandra Beaufäys, Jutta Dalhoff and Andrea Löther (2016, p. 8), all experts of the CEWS Center of Excellence Women and Science,¹¹ criticised the position of these international experts because it “drops behind the science political consensus of recent years”. And

11. CEWS, Center of Excellence Women and Science is the national hub for the achievement of gender equality in science and research in Germany.

the *bukof* (2016, p. 1) demanded maintenance of “the promotion of equal opportunities as a programmatic aim in the coming round of the Excellence Initiative”.

The two different evaluation reports of the Excellence Initiative make clear that the connection between excellence and gender equality is still controversial. At present, within science and the humanities this connection is contested, but in German science policies it seems to be accepted. Although the German Universities Excellence Initiative ended in October 2017, it was continued with the open-ended so-called Excellence Strategy with two funding lines: clusters of excellence and universities of excellence. Equal opportunities have been an undisputed part of the funding criteria from the very beginning.

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