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Professionalisation of management on German universities: the research liaison officers

Paper presented to the

30th ANNUAL EAIR FORUM

**24 to 27 August 2008
Copenhagen, Denmark**

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Key words

Leadership, Management, Organisation structures, Staff appraisal

Abstract

Professionalisation of management on German universities: the research liaison officers

Occupations of higher education institutions such as public relations offices, research liaison offices etc. are increasing. A study related to research liaison officers was conducted in Germany to identify activity profiles and qualifications. Results show no standardised education or training, but only learning by doing. From the viewpoint of professionalisation theories a reasonable professionalisation can only be achieved through an organisation of the various occupations in the field of mid-level university management as a whole. Proposals for professionalisation were made, such as more systematic education and improved integration into the organisation of HEIs. Staff development is needed as well as more jobs.

Professionalisation of management on German universities: the research liaison officers

Introduction

With the change of governance models universities gain more autonomy. As a complex entity and an experts' organisation the university has to be lead with the help of the new science management. There is a discussion about the growing importance of these occupations. We only know that there is an increasing number of staff in this specific area but in order to be able to fulfil these tasks the professionalisation of the science management is required. However, science management does not exist as a homogenous field but consists of various activities and occupations. You can find some "old" professions such as public relations offices, research liaison offices, international office and transfer agencies and new ones such as higher education marketing, fund raising, alumni relations, accreditation of new courses of study, faculty assistants etc.

The high level of differentiation of tasks in this interface between science and administration which can be found nowadays is still relatively young and thus a still unfolding topic in higher education research. Yet, besides a probing survey at two German universities (Klumpp and Teichler 2006) there is hardly any empirical material on this topic, apart from the phenomena of the expansion of science management in general (see e.g. Gornitzka 2006). The survey at hand wants to contribute to this desideratum and has therefore dealt with the research liaison officers. This field of work is an excellent example of the new higher education professions.

Research liaison officers are one of the "old" occupations in this new field. You can find it at any German and many European universities. It is responsible for the support of university research (e.g. third party funding and promotion of junior scientists).

Despite the relatively clearly discernible tasks there is no clearly defined profession "research liaison officer" until now. However, without an accurate definition of tasks, qualification requirements and organisation needs an efficient promotion and professionalisation of this occupation is impossible.

Study and method

In order to achieve an extensive but nevertheless representative description of the activities of research liaison officers a research project funded by the German "Stifterverband" was developed. As main point of research activities a survey was employed in the project. A standardised web-based online survey with mainly closed questions was conducted about the following aspects:

- Employment and integration into structures of HEI
- Fields of activities
- Profiles of qualification
- Requirements for qualification
- Methods of selection for employment
- Membership/participation in job-related organisations
- Self-assessment of role, function and influence

- Career chances and satisfaction
- Demography and gender aspects

Additionally, guided interviews with experts were conducted. Two different groups of persons were interviewed: eight research liaison officers (RLO) and seven registrars in order to create a systematic relation between different perspectives. The interviews of the officers aimed at the deeper approach, the completion and validation of the questions already asked in the online questionnaire. The guided interviews of the registrars, on the other hand, exposed the university administration's perception of the activities and organisational positions of the research liaison officers.

The guided interviews opened the opportunity to explicitly address profession theoretical questions. For example, there were deepening questions about the trust relationship between the clients (the scientists) and the bearers of the profession (the research liaison officers). Additionally, this gave opportunity to ask about the modes of internal and external institutionalisation and the competition with other higher education managers.

Test Group

At the time the survey was made 85 universities and 164 colleges (so called "Fachhochschulen") were running in Germany. 92 persons filled in the questionnaire, 66 of them were working at universities, 22 at colleges, four at other institutions. The aim of a census could not be fully reached, but with regard to universities a representative sample was reached.

Results

The survey revealed that, despite a great width of variation there are typical activity profiles and qualification requirements.

Job Satisfaction

The most important result shall be presented first: research liaison officers are highly content with their work situation. This assessment can be seen in the results of the online questionnaire as well as in the interviews. Only 5,4% answered the opening question on general job satisfaction with "rather not satisfied" with their occupation. The mean value of the scale (ranging from 1="not satisfied" to 4="satisfied") was 3,5.

But what is the reason for this high satisfaction? Several factors can be named:

1. Research liaison officers are specialists at the interface between science and administration, whose work is highly valued by scientists as well as the administration.
2. They have a big scope of action when setting their work priorities.
3. In general, there is no competition for topics and resources between them and other people working in the science management of HEIs.
4. The work situation is quite multifaceted.
5. There are good work contacts to different levels of the HEIs.

This assessment is all the more interesting as it is in no way linked to career hopes as the survey and the interviews show. The participants assess their career chances as generally rather low (mean value of 2 on a scale of 1="low" to 4="high"). The assessment of career chances in other, also non higher education fields, slightly varies according to field (scale of 1="low" to 4="high"):

- rather low in economics (2,1),
- rather low in higher education (2,2),
- rather low to rather high in big research institutions (2,5),
- rather low to rather high in ministries (2,5).

From the point of professionalisation theory research liaison officers are rather "locals" than "cosmopolitans". The better they know their local HEI the better they can fulfil their tasks, Because of the high job satisfaction in the "local job" the opportunities of a further career are supposedly not considered at all or accordingly underrated. In the interviews with the registrars on the other hand there is word of good career chances in the field of RLOs at a HEI:

"[...] the employment perspective of all employees in science management is very positive. This will become a new work field. To my belief there will also be quantitative expansions, because whole fields in science management are insufficiently filled. Just think of the topic of alumni, where higher education institutions are so far only partially active. In my opinion this will open positive career chances for research liaison officers and other fields of science management, especially when, here I continue with what I said before, they have acquired further qualifications beyond their studies. [...]"

Organisational features

The typical research liaison officer is hired for an unlimited period with fulltime employment and is normally paid like a research assistant. The position is created from the employment plan and therefore belongs to the regular work tasks. Resources and personnel substructures are relatively small and testify to a sub-optimal work organisation. The integration into the structure of the HEI is very different. More than 50% are the only research liaison officer at their institution. They belong to a single office, a research department, planning department or are part of a central administration. They are engaged in the operational business of research funding.

Table 1: Integration into the structures of HEIs

	Frequency	Percent
separate office	23	25
research department	23	25
other	21	23
part of administration	18	20
planning staff	5	5
don't know	1	1

Tasks

Research liaison officers are service providers with the main tasks of research funding, promotion of junior scientists and EU funding. The core themes among those are information service, counselling and help with proposals.

Table 2: Fields of activities of RLO

	Tasks	percentage of cases
Research funding		96
	Information	92
	Counselling	86
	Help with applications	82
	Development of strategic concepts for research	62
	Evaluation of research at the own HEI	65
	Help with contracts	61
	Help with project management	50
Promoting of junior scientists		82
	Information	73
	Counselling	66
	Help with applications	59
Research reporting		77
EU funding		76
	Information	74
	Counselling	62
	Help with applications	61
Contribution to regional or supra-regional networks		66
Transfer activities		59

Qualifications

In the qualification profile the statements disperse much more. Common to all is only the holding of an academic degree (whereas the academic training is spread out over all fields of science).

95% of participants hold a higher education degree, 38% of those in the field of natural sciences. Almost half of the participants holding a higher education degree have graduated in humanities or social sciences. Nearly half of the respondents additionally hold doctoral degrees and declare to have research experience.

Table 3: Scientific education of research liaison officers

Humanities	n	Social sciences	n	Natural sciences	n	Engineering	n
American Studies	1	Information Management	1	Biology	14	Agronomics	2
English Studies	1	Law	4	Chemistry	6	Electronic Engineering	1
Education science	1	Politics	8	Geography	4	Electrical Engineering	1
Cultural Studies.	2	Sociology	1	Geology	2	Power Engineering	1
Eastern European Studies	1	Social Sciences	2	Geo-Ecology	1	Informatics	1
German Studies	3	Management Sciences.	3	Geo-Physics	1	Landscape Architecture	1
History	4	Economics	7	Mathematics	2	Mechanical Engineering	3
French Studies	1			Molecular Biology	1	Production Engineering.	1
Greek Studies	1			Physics	7	Environment Engineering	1
Psychology	3			Psychology	1		
Education Science	1						
Philosophy.	3						
Romance Studies	3						
Latin	1						
Scandinavian Studies	1						
Slavonic Studies	1						
Total	28	Total	26	Total	39	Total	12

The questionnaire asked for the current state and further needs for professional training for working in the research liaison office or further training on the job, respectively. Training elements in management sciences, law and economics were specifically addressed. Only 16% had professional training in administration or business. Even though further training in the fields of administration, law and economics are considered to be useful, only a quarter of the respondents took part in such.

Professional training as higher education manager obviously is not part of the requirement profile at the moment, as can be learned from the interviews with the RLOs:

“This specific knowledge about “How does higher education work? How does research in HEI or non higher education research institutions work?” [...], this knowledge you only get through “learning by doing”.”

The knowledge of further training offers seems to be incomplete. There are a lot of offers, but the officers don't recognise them. The low participation in further training offers is especially surprising looking at the multitude of required qualifications that research liaison officers and registrars give detailed information about in the interviews.

In the interviews there is a discrepancy between the required qualifications by the HEI management represented by the registrar and the willingness of the RLOs for further training. A registrar said:

“I have sent one of the employees to such an extra occupational training programme which runs to my knowledge six times for one week each. This was financed by the university. Occasionally, I notice that the demand from the employees themselves isn't that high and that I always have to push them and say: “Come on, do this!”.”

There were further differences in the understanding of science. Everybody regards it as necessary but there are different opinions about how far it should go. So-called “soft skills” for example were only explicitly mentioned by one participant as existing but three quarters of the participants think they are necessary.

In addition, more than a third of the respondents state "no time" as the reason for not participating in further education. The high specialisation of tasks and the incomplete integration into the science administration have a negative influence as well. In terms of profession it becomes clear that the officers act as "local agents", that nobody could stand in for and consider themselves invaluable. We call it the “indispensability syndrome“. If you are indispensable, you don't have to look for further education, because you know for sure that you cannot take part in it for time problems.

Table 4: Qualification needs named in interviews

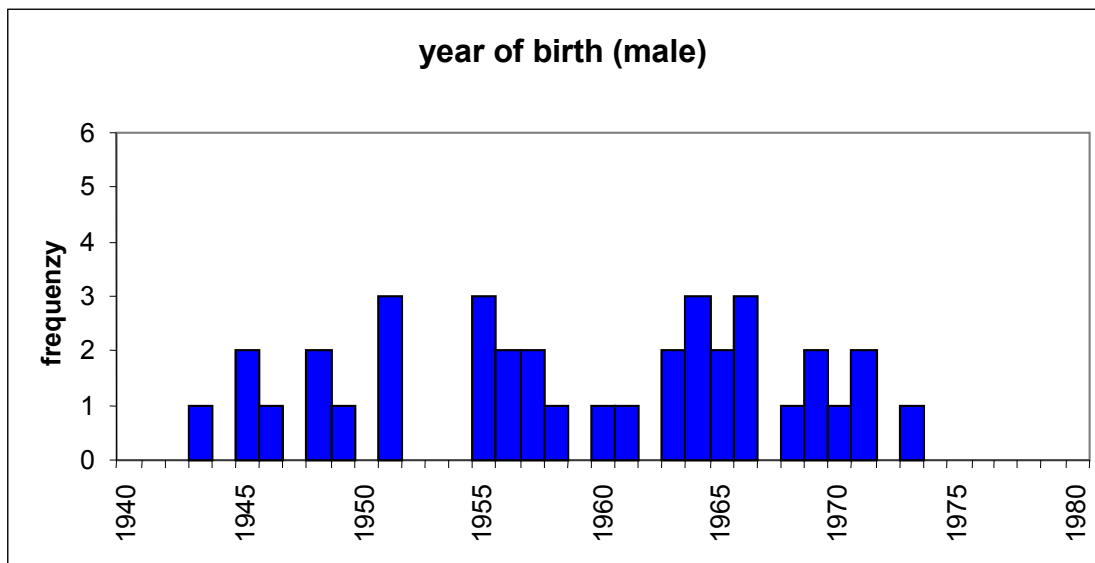
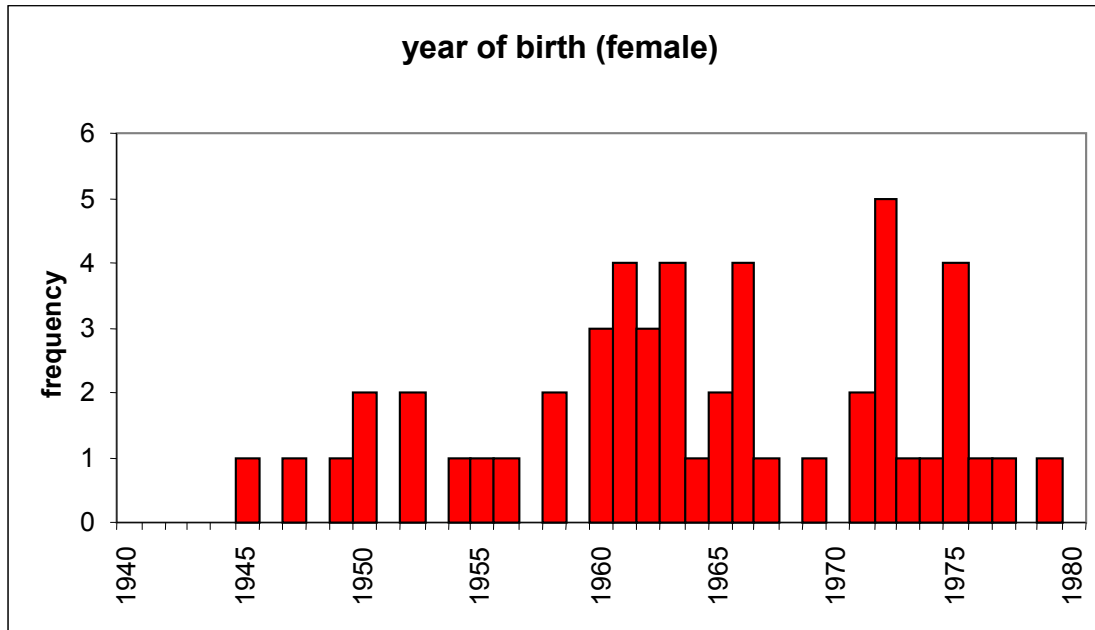
Required Qualifications		Percent of		
		Total	RLO	Registrars
		73%	75%	71%
Scientific training required	Professional studies required	40%	50%	29%
	Degree in natural sciences required	13%	13%	14%
	Studies according to field	40%	25%	57%
Doctorate required		40%	38%	43%
	No doctorate required	7%	13%	0%
Scientific understanding required		100%	100%	100%
	Broad expert knowledge required	47%	38%	57%
	Own research/understanding of research required	93%	100%	86%
Administration/Management required		80%	100%	57%
	Administration/Management knowledge	53%	75%	29%
	Law knowledge	60%	63%	57%
	Economic knowledge	40%	38%	43%
Knowledge of foreign countries required		47%	38%	57%
	Knowledge of the EU	33%	25%	43%
	Stays abroad	7%	0%	14%
Social competencies/personality required		100%	100%	100%
	Empathy	20%	25%	14%
	Manners	53%	63%	43%
	Ability to deal with conflicts	33%	38%	29%
	Frustration tolerance/patience	13%	13%	14%
	Ambition	13%	13%	14%
	Openness	33%	50%	14%
	Sociability	27%	38%	14%
	Communication skills	87%	88%	86%
	Ability to work in a team	13%	25%	0%
	Motivation skills	13%	13%	14%
Soft skills required		73%	63%	86%
	Management qualities	47%	50%	43%
	Presentation skills	7%	13%	0%
	Language proficiency	27%	25%	29%
	Independence	7%	13%	0%

Gender aspects

The survey gives some interesting clues on gender specific aspects that have to be further addressed in surveys to come. 58% of participants are female. This shows a tendency of finding more women than men in this work field. Further proof for the growing percentage of women is given by the analyses on the gender specific age structure and on the entrance date as employee in the research liaison office. Female RLOs are significantly younger (43 years old on average) than male RLOs (46 years old on average). Additionally, the distribution of age-groups is positively skewed for women, that means a higher proportion of younger age-

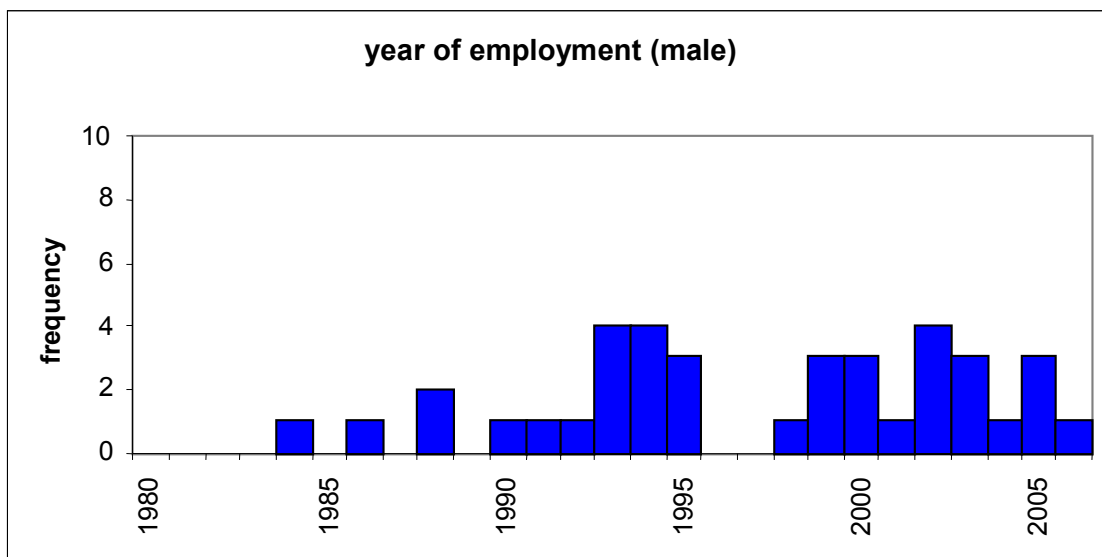
groups.

Figures 1 – 2: Difference between male and female RLOs (Age)



Women are on the job for a significantly shorter time (average entrance date ca. 2003) than men (average entrance date ca. 1998). Their distribution of entrance dates is also clearly more positively skewed compared to the men, whose distribution is relatively even over the years. Obviously, women have been especially employed since the new millennium.

Figures 3-4: Differences of male and female RLOs (start of employment)



The analysis of gender aspects showed that younger women increasingly exercise the activity as research liaison officer. One theory is that women and service "come together" like in other areas and that women are more probable to have the required communication skills. But this has to be proven by further studies.

However, the compatibility of work and child rearing is seen as problematic as shown in the online survey. It is remarkable that there is no gender difference in this question. But a closer look is interesting: 20 of the women and 28 of the men have children. But 41 women and 31 men were answering.

Obviously, for the women the compatibility of work and family is a much more pressing matter than for the men. With regard to the apparently increasing number of female RLOs it has to be asked whether the existing offers for combining work and family are sufficient. By

the way, in none of the tenders the term "family-friendly HEI" appeared, which can be acquired as a certificate in Germany by now.

Profession theory

The term of professionalisation can be broken down to the following aspects in the given context:

- Making the training more scientific and thus the profession more academic,
- Fixation of the job description and the training in a clear profile,
- Exclusive occupational association, whose members are highly renowned by society,
- Binding the occupational group to a codified job ethos,
- Acceptance of a wide-reaching self-control of the occupational group through its occupational association, especially with regard to qualification, entrance and quality control through public organs,
- Monopoly of the work field of the profession through its members by law. Competing occupational groups are excluded, limited or put under the control of the profession,
- High autonomy of the profession's members.

Some of these criteria can be found to a limited extent within the "profession" of the research liaison officers. Regarding the terms of profession the analysis of the characteristics of the activities of research liaison officers shows the following picture:

- Usage of abstract and specialised knowledge, in order to solve problems for clients
- Service in terms of providing problem-solving advice without guarantee for success and with participation of clients
- Asymmetric relation between client and research liaison officer in the field of research funding
- Only minor topic and resource competition in the main activities
- Apart from minimal routine controls research liaison officers elude performance monitoring (no evaluation)
- The work of officers is important for the organisation "University" but not for society in general
- Despite high qualification requirements no unified academic training
- Without a unified education certificate there is no rigid access regulation possible
- Despite invaluableness there is no complete autonomy
- No professional association
- No special work ethos

Although a lot is said about the "new higher education professions" essential power-theoretical characteristics of profession are not fulfilled with respect to research liaison officers.

When one of the occupations in science management cannot be called a profession the questions remain, whether science management as a whole can be called a profession.

Research liaison officers, like the other activities of science management, are stuck in the third phase of professionalisation. Due to the small sample there cannot be professional associations for each and every field of activities to strengthen the professional autonomy and

the position of power. The simultaneous creation of a unified study course "science management" with several core topics (e.g. with a specialisation in research funding) would be another possibility. This would allow a professionalisation of the various fields of activities through homogenisation with simultaneous specialisation.

Consequences

This study shows that despite a specific profile of activities there is no unified profile of qualifications for research liaison officers as of yet. As a hypothesis it can be stated that these officers are an example for other occupations in science management.

What should be done?

Two main recommendation are arising from the survey:

1. Integration into the organisation of HEI should overcome unique selling point, that only a research liaison officer is able to do special things (the "indispensability syndrome").
2. A career model has to be developed, which crosses the border of only one HEI. New higher education professions should become "cosmopolitans" instead of "locals".

Further recommendations:

- Integration into the organisation of HEI, which allows better substitution through other persons
- Better integration of operational and strategic business in the research field of HEI. The know-how of research liaison officers should be used for the strategic business too.
- Looking to qualification needs contracts should be made for further education starting the job at a HEI
- Internships at research funding organisations or ministries should be offered vice versa for persons of new higher education professions
- Family planning and child rearing should be discussed starting the job at a HEI
- Persons of new professions in science management should look for representation of their interests

Already when doing a survey on one occupational group (the RLOs) a tremendous need for action could be shown. Further survey on the new science management at HEIs should follow, especially with regard to a professionalisation and possible standardisation of their training. A view at the organisation of the tasks of the new science management in Europe could give interesting stimuli and in the sense of internationalisation improve the cooperation of HEIs.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft for funding the project, we are presenting some of the results at EAIR-Forum Copenhagen 2008. Special thanks are for Ellen Krause (University of Bern, Switzerland) and Robert Debusmann (University of Bayreuth, Germany) for hard and fruitful discussions and work as co-authors and friends.

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