

EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY ADVICE? THE GERMAN COUNCIL OF SCIENCE AND HUMANITIES.

Thomas Heinze and Arlette Jappe

DOI: 10.22163/fteval.2026.743

ABSTRACT

This article examines the evolving role of the German Council of Science and Humanities (Wissenschaftsrat, WR) and assesses whether it can be regarded as an evidence-based advisory body. Drawing on historical, sociological, and organizational analyses, the paper traces how the WR's mandate has shifted from post-war planning and federal coordination toward evaluation, accreditation, and support of national excellence policies. Despite these substantial changes, the WR's committee structures – deeply embedded in Germany's federal multilayered governance system – have remained largely unchanged. Three case studies illustrate the consequences of this institutional inertia: the 1968 recommendation to abolish professorial chairs, the 1988 proposal to expand structured doctoral training via graduate research schools, and the 2005/2012 selection decisions within the Excellence Initiative. The cases show that the WR's recommendations were shaped by political consensus-seeking among federal and state executives and major non-university research organizations, leading to diluted reform proposals and limited systemic impact. The Excellence Initiative case further highlights legitimacy concerns, including extreme selectivity, path-dependent funding outcomes, and the persistence of structural size-based inequalities between universities. The article concludes that the WR primarily functions as a coordination and consensus-building body rather than an independent source of evidence-based policy advice. It argues that this arrangement fosters an “illusion of excellence” – a narrative suggesting substantial improvements in international competitiveness without

commensurate structural or financial reforms. The article proposes establishing an independent expert council for higher education and science policy – potentially by expanding the mandate of the Expert Commission for Research and Innovation – to enable more rigorous, evidence-based policymaking for Germany’s university system.

Keywords: *German Council of Science and Humanities, Evidence-Based Policy, Multilevel Science and Higher Education Governance, Historical Institutionalism, German Excellence Initiative.*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the Council of Science and Humanities (Wissenschaftsrat, WR) in the context of Germany’s multilevel science and higher education governance. Drawing on the history of the WR we discuss the problem of its lack of institutional independence and the consequences that follow from this condition. The *first section* provides a brief history of the substantial transformation of the WR’s mission and interprets these changes using the perspective of Historical Institutionalism. We show how the WR initially formulated an ambitious policy agenda for structural university reform, but later became an agency for policy coordination, research evaluation, and excellence funding, while its committee and decision-making structures remained unchanged. The *second section* introduces the WR’s recommendations and activities selected for this paper, which serve to illuminate the problem of its lack of independence and the resulting consequences. The *third section* uses an early, reform-oriented recommendation by the WR – namely, its call to abolish the professorial chair system – to demonstrate that such a reform could not be implemented within Germany’s politically intertwined field of science and higher education policy. The *fourth section* draws on the WR’s recommendation to establish graduate research schools to illustrate how its decision-making structures operate. Representatives of the federal and state governments in the WR committees weakened the financial commitments needed to implement the recommendation, with the result that such graduate schools became structurally significant only

at a small number of mainly large universities. The *fifth section* discusses the WR's activities in the so-called "Excellence Initiative". Given the very small number of university subject fields that received funding and the high rate of reproduction between the first and second funding phases, the selection practices – developed jointly under the WR's responsibility – appear questionable. Another problematic aspect is that the WR actively contributed to creating the political illusion that the "Excellence Initiative" has effectively strengthened the international competitiveness of the German university system. In the *sixth section*, we call for a politically independent council of experts for higher education and science policy. Such a body could help develop evidence-based proposals for the institutional renewal of the German university and science system and communicate innovative ideas directly to political decision-makers.

2. BRIEF HISTORY OF THE GERMAN COUNCIL FOR SCIENCE AND HUMANITIES

This section provides a brief history, including the substantial transformation of the WR's mission, based on historical, sociological, and legal-administrative studies (Bartz, 2007; Braun, 1997; Heinze et al., 2019; Möller, 2017; Röhl, 1994; Schönstedt, 2024; Seckelmann, 2016; Stucke, 2006, 2011; Trute, 1994; Trute et al., 2007; Wolff, 2015). The WR was founded in 1957 to prepare planning for the expansion of universities. In accordance with the administrative agreement between the federal and state governments, its task was to develop an overall plan for the promotion of science and to coordinate the corresponding plans of both levels of government. Thus, it had not initially been established to provide as strategic policy advice. However, the mandate was sufficiently broad that strategic issues could indeed be understood as part of the overall planning remit. The WR's committee structure – comprising a plenary assembly, a scientific commission, an administrative commission, and an executive office, reflects a federal coordination of planning tasks. It is designed to coordinate the interests of the federal and state governments and to involve representatives of university and non-university research in this process. In this sense, the WR functions

primarily as a body of science-policy federalism in Germany. Against this background, it becomes necessary to examine how the tasks assigned to the WR have changed over nearly seventy years of its existence.

Andreas Stucke, who worked at WR for three decades, most recently as head of the evaluation department, offers an internal organizational perspective on this question (Stucke, 2006, 2011). Based on the predominant activities in each period, he distinguishes three phases: “reconstruction and growth” (1957-1975), “stagnation” (1975-1989), and “evaluation and reform” (after 1989). The last phase includes the evaluation of the former GDR academy institutes and the Blue List institutes (since 2001: Leibniz Association), the system evaluation of the Helmholtz Association, and the coordination of the selection process for the “Excellence Initiative” (2019: Excellence Strategy). The WR’s organizational structure and decision-making processes remained formally unchanged, even though its concrete responsibilities and the political and social environment evolved considerably.

Heinze et al. (2019) and Schönstädt (2024) provide an external historical-sociological perspective. According to Heinze et al. (2019), the WR briefly functioned in the 1960s as a political arena in which representatives from academia and politics negotiated higher education reforms in the Federal Republic. The two WR chairmen, Ludwig Raiser (1961–1965) and Hans Leussink (1965–1969), shaped the WR’s reform agenda and in this way expanded its mandate toward reform-oriented policy advice. During the 1960s, the WR published four statements explicitly addressing structural weaknesses in the German higher education system (WR, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968). This phase of higher education policy ended in 1969/1970 with the creation of competing federal coordination bodies, which called into question the WR’s planning authority and its institutional *raison d’être*. However, the WR was not dissolved; instead, its remit was refocused on administrative coordination and harmonization of science and higher education policy, as well as consensus-building across governance levels within the federal system.

Following a new administrative agreement, the WR was assigned responsibility beginning in the mid-1970s for evaluating institutions

jointly funded by the federal and state governments. Since the 1980s, the WR has focused on evaluation and accreditation, including the former academy institutes of eastern Germany (Schönstädt, 2024). With the reform of federalism in the mid-2000s, its mandate was expanded once again to include ensuring the international competitiveness of science in Germany. This includes working with the German Research Foundation (DFG) to perform a nationwide coordination function in the selection process for “excellence funding.” Despite these additional tasks, the WR continued to publish recommendations on structural issues in the German higher education and science system at irregular intervals. However, these do not aim at substantial reforms of institutional structures but rather mark the zone of consensus between the political executive (federal and state governments) and the major science organizations in the federal system.

From the perspective of *Historical Institutionalism* (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010, 2015; Streeck & Thelen, 2005; Thelen, 2003), the change in the WR’s tasks appears as a process of *layering* in which the original tasks of political coordination aimed at expanding higher education institutions were increasingly supplemented by tasks of reform recommendations, evaluation, and ultimately the promotion of scientific excellence. This raises the question of why the WR’s committees and decision-making structures have remained virtually unchanged despite the substantial transformation of its tasks. The political and scientific environment surrounding the WR has also changed significantly since its founding. In institutionalist terms, the persistence of the WR’s structures appears to reflect *drift – an increasing gap between formal structure and the context of action*. The social mechanism that creates this situation is referred to by the authors of *Historical Institutionalism* as *deliberate neglect*: key actors (in this case, the federal multilevel governance system, i.e., the political executives of the federal and state governments and state-funded non-university research organizations) have no interest in adapting the formal structures to changing societal conditions. This in turn raises the question of the long-term consequences of this development for the institutional renewal of the higher education and science system in Germany.

3. WR RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTIVITIES EXAMINED

We address this question in relation to the fundamental tension between, on the one hand, the WR's role in issuing recommendations on science and higher education policy and, on the other hand, the lack of institutional independence due to its committee and decision-making structures. This tension cannot be analyzed comprehensively here, i.e., in the sense of a retrospective evaluation of the WR's entire activities and the consequences for the federal science and higher education system in Germany but rather based on selected topics and issues. The examples were chosen because they arguably concern core issues of university system performance in Germany and cover different phases of the WR's activities. Specifically, the following WR recommendations and activities were examined:

- Recommendations on structure and administrative organization of universities (WR, 1968).
- Recommendations on the promotion of graduate research schools (WR, 1988).
- Selection decisions within the framework of the "Excellence Initiative" (DFG & WR, 2015).

The two recommendations were selected because they can be closely linked to the analysis of the German university system by Ben-David (1960, 1971). Around the same time as the first WR recommendation considered here (WR, 1968), Ben-David published a comparative analysis in which he examined, among other things, why Germany had ceded its global scientific leadership to the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. Ben-David identified the hierarchical structure of chairs and institutes and the lack of comprehensive, research-oriented graduate training as major causes of the performance deficits in the German university system. The lack of graduate training is addressed directly in the second recommendation considered (WR, 1988). More recent research by Hollingsworth (2006), Jappe and Heinze (2016) and Heinze

et al. (2020) on the conditions for research breakthroughs in the United States and Germany, as well as Münch (2007, 2014) on the German and global reform debate, builds explicitly on Ben-David's work.

The third case study concerns selection decisions made within the framework of a federal funding program in the design and implementation of which the WR played a key role. The selection process for the so-called "Excellence Initiative" (ExIn) illustrates the shift in the WR's tasks using a case highly significant for German science and higher education policy. At the same time, the ExIn's selection results raise serious questions about the legitimacy of the selection process, particularly in light of the personnel and financial resources involved, as well as questioning the rhetoric of excellence associated with the whole program, which contributed to an illusion that the initiative effectively strengthened the international competitiveness of the German university and science system. The third case therefore concerns the legitimacy, and cost-effectiveness of decisions for which the WR bore substantial responsibility.

4. STRUCTURE AND ADMINISTRATIVE ORGANIZATION OF UNIVERSITIES

The Recommendations on the Structure and Administrative Organization of Universities (WR, 1968) essentially call for abolishing the professorial chair system in favor of the introduction of departments modeled on the U.S. system. Administrative authority of the institutes and chairs was to be transferred to the departments. In addition, the WR advocated greater administrative autonomy for universities. This recommendation was selected as a case study here because it corresponds to a core argument by Ben-David (1960, 1971), who maintained that the chair system hinders German universities in establishing new areas of teaching and research. According to Ben-David, the organizational structure of German universities had already proven to be an obstacle to disciplinary specialization by the late nineteenth century, as the growing number of emerging research fields could no longer be adequately accommodated within the existing chair and institute structure. A decisive factor was that the small regional states in Germany were unable to bear the high costs associated with

elevating these new fields to the status of fully staffed and equipped chairs and institutes. As a result, many emerging fields of research and teaching remained confined in the less well-resourced associate chairs established outside the chairs and/or were represented by private lecturers.

Retrospectively, the abolition of professorial chairs and the introduction of departments in German universities remain yet to be implemented. Although the Higher Education Framework Act (HRG), which came into force in 1976, contained a passage stating that research assistants could be directly subordinate to the departments rather than to the professorships, no comprehensive tenure-track procedure was introduced at that time (or later), meaning that young academics remained personally dependent on the chair holders as reviewers of their habilitations and mentors for their careers. Two amendments to the HRG in 1985 and 1998 reversed the 1976 reforms. In 1985, responsibility for assistant and research assistant positions was reassigned to the professorships, and in 1998, departments were formally abolished as organizational units of universities. The political context in which these amendments occurred was shaped by concepts such as competitiveness and deregulation (Kühler, 2012). The WR did not issue statements or policy recommendations regarding these two amendments.

According to Heinze et al. (2019), the recommendation of the WR (1968) is an example of the reform-oriented phase of the WR, during which it functioned as a political arena. This phase ended in the mid-1970s at the latest. Thus, this recommendation is not typical of the WR's later activities and was not pursued further in substantive terms. According to current legal opinion, the professorship constitutes the fundamental scientific unit of higher education in Germany (Coelln, 2017). Moreover, the growing number of researchers without tenure (doctoral students, post-docs, research assistants) per unit of professorship indicates a quantitative strengthening of the chair principle: At the time of the WR recommendation to abolish chairs, the average ratio between professors and non-professorial research staff was approximately 1 to 4. After an interim phase in which this ratio fell to 1 to 3, it increased to roughly 1 to 7 by the early 2020s (Jappe & Heinze, 2025).

The conclusion on the first case study is as follows: The WR recommendation addressed fundamental structural problems within German universities, was not typical of the WR's subsequent recommendations, and was not implemented. The professorial chair system has, in fact, been strengthened in recent decades, both legally and in terms of staffing patterns.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE PROMOTION OF GRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOOLS

The WR recommendation on the promotion of graduate colleges (Graduiertenkollegs, GKs) is conceptually related to the recommendation published twenty years earlier calling for the abolition of professorial chairs. It proposed that doctoral students should not be trained solely within the framework of individual doctorates supervised by chairs, but that professorships should instead coordinate doctoral training collaboratively – analogous to departmental doctoral programs in the U.S. system. This reform idea is also highly consistent with the analysis by Ben-David (1960, 1971). The DFG was subsequently entrusted with the implementation and incorporated the GKs in its funding portfolio. From an organizational sociology perspective, the GKs can be understood as a compromise solution: on the one hand, they embody the principle of jointly organized, structured doctoral training – similar to departmental programs in which doctoral candidates are grouped into cohorts and attend supplementary coursework; on the other hand, the chair system remains structurally intact, as professors continue to serve simultaneously as supervisors, examiners, and mentors of individual doctoral candidates. The WR describes this organizational compromise solution with the term “research-oriented doctoral training”. From 2005 to 2017, graduate research schools were also part of the ExIn.

Heinze et al. (2019) examine the process of developing WR recommendations, as coordinated by the WR office, by comparing various draft versions with the final published version. In addition to the WR recommendation discussed here (WR, 1988), the authors also consider other WR recommendations, all of which concern the personnel structure of universities (Heinze et al., 2019, Appendix A). The 1988

recommendation touched on the personnel structure insofar as it raised the question of additional professorships. Specifically, a proposal was discussed whereby professors involved in GKs would have two semester hours per week credited to their individual teaching load. The proposal initially included a provision that the federal states should compensate for the reduced teaching capacity by creating additional professorships. To this end, the 1988 recommendation produced a model calculation of the estimated costs that would be incurred by the federal government for the establishment of 80 GKs, putting the figure at DM 40 million per year. Although the document did not specify the corresponding costs for the states, the authors calculated these at DM 27 million per year (Heinze et al., 2019, Appendix D). The federal government agreed to the WR's 1988 recommendation in the committee meetings only on the condition that no binding financial commitments were attached to it. This greatly weakened the substance of the recommendation and can be interpreted as an expectable consequence of the WR's lack of political independence in the deliberation of higher education policy reform.

This interpretation is also supported by the supplementary analysis of the WR recommendation (WR, 2008), in which the creation of additional professorships was once again the subject of discussion. Although the recommendation referenced guidelines in place in Switzerland at the time regarding maximum student-faculty ratios, these ratios were ultimately not used as the basis for the model calculation. Heinze et al. (2019, Appendix D) calculated that applying the Swiss guidelines at the time of the 2008 recommendation would have justified the creation of nearly 18,000 additional professorships – representing an increase of around 90 percent over the actual number of professors at that time. However, the adopted WR recommendation only contained a significantly weaker demand for a 33 percent increase – or, alternatively, 10 percent – with neither option further substantiated by argument. Even then, the recommendation was included in the final version only on the condition that no binding financial commitments by the federal government would accompany it. The authors therefore conclude that the WR, in terms of its internal working structure, is deemed to function as a conservative advisory body in which any reform proposals are reduced to the lowest

common denominator in science policy during negotiations between the federal and state governments (Heinze et al., 2019, p. 284).

Heinze et al. (2019) examine how many GKs were created over time. The number of GKs rose from 56 in 1990 to 330 in 1998, before declining significantly and stabilizing at around 250 from the mid-2010s onwards (DFG, 2024, p. 227). It is noteworthy that in its first assessment of GKs as a funding instrument, the WR recommended a target of 600 GKs (WR, 1995). In its second assessment, it no longer specified a target figure, but recommended GK-based doctoral training not as a standard model, but explicitly as a model of “scientific excellence” (WR, 2002).

To assess the structural impact of GK funding on doctoral training in Germany, Heinze et al. (2019) examined the distribution of GKs across the German university landscape. In the period from 1990 to 2015, about one-third of GK years were concentrated at 10 universities and more than half of GK years at 20 universities. Only the top 10 universities offered research training groups across a broad spectrum of disciplines during this period. The authors conclude that GK funding had a long-term structuring effect only at a small number of universities. Since the 1990s, a pattern of federal funding for “top universities” has emerged – one that later became an explicit funding principle in the ExIn.

Our conclusion for the second case study is as follows: With the GKs, the WR designed a funding instrument that, despite the responsibility of the constituent states for university funding, allows federal funds to be used for doctoral training within the framework of joint funding for science and research. While initially designed for the entire university landscape, the program evolved into a scheme that concentrates funding at certain universities. The investigation into how recommendations are made also reveals that the WR’s draft recommendations were already toned down during the formulation process, particularly regarding the financial commitments for the federal and state governments.

6. SELECTION DECISIONS WITHIN THE “EXCELLENCE INITIATIVE”

The selection decisions for the so-called “excellence funding” are closely related to the funding of graduate research schools (GKs). In the report by the joint commission of WR and DFG (2015), the ExIn is described as a “joint effort” by the federal and State governments, which also includes the “Higher Education Pact” and the “Pact for Research and Innovation” (DFG & WR, 2015, p. 6). In its first two phases (2007 to 2015), the Higher Education Pact amounted to roughly €14.7 billion, the Pact for Research and Innovation (2006 to 2015) to just under €3.0 billion, and the ExIn (2006-2017) to €4.6 billion.

The objective of ExIn in the context of these three measures is described as a “strategic reorientation towards significant quality improvement”, an objective not addressed by the other two programs (DFG & WR, 2015, p. 6). As is often the case in Germany’s federal multilevel governance of science and higher education, its legal basis is an administrative agreement between the federal and state governments. “Its stated goal is to strengthen Germany as a center of science in the long term, improve its international competitiveness, and make peaks of excellence in the university and science sector more visible” (DFG & WR, 2015, p. 7). Of the €4.6 billion in funding, 75 percent was provided by the federal government and 25 percent by the state of the respective university.

To administer the ExIn, committees and decision-making structures were established that are typical of the multilevel governance of German science and higher education. In accordance with the administrative agreement, the DFG and the WR appointed a “Joint Commission” consisting of an “Expert Commission” appointed by the DFG and a “Strategy Commission” appointed by the WR. An “Approval Committee” was established as the decision-making body (DFG & WR, 2015, p. 8), in which the members of the “Joint Commission” held the majority of votes, but which also included the ministers responsible for research in the states and at the federal level. The task of the Strategy Commission was to lead the review and evaluation of the “Institutional Strategies” (IS) at the university level and to prepare the

selection decisions. In contrast, the Expert Commission was responsible for reviewing and evaluating the two funding lines “Graduate Research School” (GRS) and “Excellence Cluster” (EC). In a two-stage process, applications in these two funding lines were first approved for submission by the Joint Commission based on a pre-selection process. In a second step, they were evaluated through a complex procedure, culminating in a funding recommendation. The DFG was thus integrated into a federal advisory and evaluation structure alongside the WR.

The empirical literature on national excellence initiatives – including the ExIn (for an overview: Yudkevich et al., 2023) – typically focuses on the university level, examining so-called “top” or “elite” universities (e.g., Buenstorf & Koenig, 2020; Mergele & Winkelmayer, 2021). In contrast, Heinze et al. (2025) analyze the selection decision for ExIn funding at the level of subject fields for the two funding lines GRS and EC, which together accounted for €3.3 billion (71%) of all ExIn funds. A first finding of their study is the extreme selectivity of the two funding lines: in the first ExIn phase (2006-2011), they covered only about 5 percent of all existing university subjects that were in principle eligible to apply. A second finding concerns the following funding phase (2012-2017), which was similarly selective – covering only about 6 percent of all university subjects eligible to apply – and in which funding decisions followed almost deterministically from decisions in the first phase. Most subjects not funded in the first ExIn phase did not receive funding in the second phase either, while those funded once could be reasonably certain of being funded again.

A third finding by Heinze et al. (2025) concerns the university level. ExIn reveals a stable stratification of the German university system on the dimension of organizational size. Universities with no ExIn funding represent, on average, the smallest entities. Universities with at least one funding line (GRS or EC) were bigger and had greater scientific visibility: their professoriate was 20 percent above, and their total grant funding was 30 percent above the average of all German public universities. In contrast, universities with all three lines of funding (GRS, EC, IS) were the largest entities: their professoriate was 40 percent and their total grant

funding 80 percent above the mean. Remarkably, this size-based order existed long before the ExIn started (1995-2005) and remained stable throughout the entire funding period (2006-2017).

Our conclusion regarding the third case study is that the ExIn raises questions about the legitimacy and costs of the selection process and the effectiveness of its stated objectives. Complex review and evaluation procedures are regularly justified on the grounds that qualitative features – indispensably requiring the judgement of renowned disciplinary experts – must form the basis for selection. However, given the high reproduction rate of funded and non-funded GRS and EC applications, the legitimacy of the procedure becomes questionable: Why conduct a costly and time-consuming second round selection procedure the results of which are largely redundant with the first round? Moreover, neither the WR nor the DFG documented the number of expert years invested in the preparation of grant applications, coordination among university staff, peer review, pre-selection, or final selection decisions, making estimates of application costs and administrative overhead speculative.

Furthermore, it seems questionable whether the ExIn ever possessed the potential to achieve the intended structural effects on the German university system, as claimed by the WR and the DFG (DFG, 2013; DFG & WR, 2015). Contrary to the policy narrative asserting that the ExIn was an effective means of scaling internationally competitive research capacities in German universities, one may reasonably ask: How could it be reasonably assumed that such a goal was achievable by funding only 5 to 6 percent of all eligible university subject fields? To reach global competitiveness, one could argue that significantly more subject fields would require substantial financial support.

7. DISCUSSION

An analysis of the selected WR recommendations and activities allows three conclusions to be drawn. *First*, an important function of the WR has been to design funding instruments enabling the deployment of federal funds in support of universities within the framework of joint funding

for science and research – despite the fact that higher education is a state responsibility. This applies both to the GKs and the ExIn (GRS, EC) discussed in the article. Accordingly, the WR functions as a coordinating body in surmounting constitutionally mandated funding constraints for higher education. *Second*, the WR is a conservative consensus-building body that, in addition to its numerous tasks in policy coordination and evaluation, repeatedly issues recommendations on structural issues concerning the German higher education and science system. As a rule, these recommendations do not aim at substantial institutional reforms but instead delineate the minimum consensus between the political executive (federal and state governments) and major science organizations within the federal system. In practice, such consensus generally means that little to nothing will change.

Third, this article has shown that the WR is not an independent political advisory body that formulates evidence-based recommendations. Kielmannsegg (1990, p. 211) aptly observed: “In the Science Council (...) those seeking advice sit at the table and participate in formulating the advice they are given. (...) Advice without risk, to put it succinctly.” The organizational structure of the WR was never intended to provide independent scientific policy advice. We argue that the WR’s committee and decision-making structures are fundamentally ill-suited for the tasks later assigned to it – in particular the evaluation of universities and non-university research institutions and the support of Germany’s international scientific competitiveness – tasks for which independent and evidence-based expertise appear indispensable. As demonstrated in this article, all recommendations on higher education and science policy must pass through the narrow eye of political consensus-building. Along this path, reform proposals are either abandoned or substantially diluted. This is particularly evident in the case of “excellence funding,” to which we now return.

To reiterate the first conclusion: The WR plays a central role in designing and coordinating funding instruments that channel federal funds to public universities. This is precisely how the WR’s activities in the ExIn should be understood. Moreover, the WR’s involvement in administering

the ExIn may also have facilitated acceptance of its funding decisions, especially because the distribution of ExIn funding among the states was predictably uneven. However, it is problematic that the WR has supported an illusion propagated by the political executives (federal level and states) and the major scientific organizations associated with ExIn. This illusion concerns the scale of investment necessary to elevate German universities and their subject fields to the frontiers of international competition in science.

Compared with the world's leading universities in the United States and the United Kingdom, even the largest German universities – such as LMU Munich, TU Munich, and Heidelberg – are rather small and therefore unable to maintain the disciplinary breadth and research capacities necessary to be internationally competitive across a broad spectrum of academic disciplines (Lepori et al., 2019). The small size of German universities is closely tied to the establishment and expansion of the publicly funded extra-university research sector. This sector was established in the early twentieth century through the founding of the Kaiser Wilhelm Society and today comprises several hundred institutes in four major research organizations (Max Planck Society, Fraunhofer Society, Leibniz Association, Helmholtz Association), jointly funded by the federal and state governments. A substantial share of the resources directed to this sector – currently around €12 billion per year – would arguably be required to raise universities to a significantly higher level of financial support. Ben-David (1971) historically linked the establishment of this research sector to internal structural deficiencies in German universities that hindered the development of new and emerging fields of research. Since then, science policy at both the federal and state levels has reinforced this institutional trajectory by directing funding for numerous innovative research areas to the extra-university public research sector rather than to universities.

Yet it is not in the interest of the functional elites of the state-funded, non-university research sector represented in the WR, nor of the ministerial bureaucracies at both the federal and State levels, to engage in discussions about substantial resource transfers to universities and – including the legal and constitutional changes such transfers would

require. Instead, the functional elites represented in the WR have chosen a far less costly and politically more feasible path: they have contributed to constructing and disseminating the illusion that Germany has already substantially improved the international performance of its universities through the implementation of the ExIn (since 2019: Excellence Strategy). However, this illusion prevents serious debate about the organizational and resource reforms required. The illusion created by the ExIn ultimately obstructs an evidence-based discussion about effective measures in higher education and science policy.

Such a discussion would be possible, however, if there were a politically independent council of experts for higher education and science policy. Such an expert council could help develop evidence-based proposals for the institutional renewal of the German university and science system and communicate innovative ideas directly to political decision-makers, including federal and State parliaments. The Expert Commission for Research and Innovation (EFI) has served as an advisory council on innovation and technology policy to the federal government for several years. It would therefore be a comparatively straightforward option to extend EFI's mandate to the broader domain of higher education, science, and innovation policy. Such an extension in EFI's mandate would allow the WR to refocus on its core task of policy coordination. In this scenario, policy statements and recommendations by the WR would no longer be necessary.

Main conclusions:

- We argue that there is an acute mismatch between the WR's important advisory role in institutional evaluation and German science policy, and its historically rooted, consensus-oriented structure and lack of political independence.
- We presuppose that Ben-David's (1960, 1971) comparative diagnosis of the German university system's fundamental structural weaknesses is even more pertinent today. From this perspective, the three WR cases discussed in this paper underscore a longstanding political failure to address these weaknesses effectively.

- WR instruments such as ExIn are likely to foster self-deception within German science policy circles about the level of investment required to enhance the international competitiveness of German research universities.

REFERENCES

- Bartz, O. (2007). Der Wissenschaftsrat. *Entwicklungslinien der Wissenschaftspolitik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1957-2007*. Franz Steiner.
- Ben-David, J. (1960). Scientific Productivity and Academic Organization in Nineteenth Century Medicine. *American Sociological Review*, 25(6) (pp. 828-843).
- Ben-David, J. (1971). The Scientist's Role in Society. *A Comparative Study*. Prentice-Hall.
- Braun, D. (1997). Die politische Steuerung der Wissenschaft. *Ein Beitrag zum „kooperativen Staat“*. Campus.
- Buenstorf, G., & Koenig, J. (2020). Interrelated funding streams in a multi-funder university system: Evidence from the German Exzellenzinitiative. *Research Policy*, 49, 103924.
- Coelln, C. v. (2017). Das Binnenrecht der Hochschule. In M. Hartmer & H. Detmer (Eds.), *Hochschulrecht: ein Handbuch für die Praxis* (pp. 349-413). C.F. Müller.
- DFG, WR & BMBF (2013). Exzellenzinitiative auf einen Blick: Der Wettbewerb des Bundes und der Länder zur Stärkung der universitären Spitzenforschung *In: Wissenschaftsmanagement Online*, 9, 108 S.
- DFG. (2024). *Jahresbericht 2024*. Aufgaben und Ergebnisse. Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft.
- DFG & WR (2015). *Bericht der Gemeinsamen Kommission zur Exzellenzinitiative an die Gemeinsame Wissenschaftskonferenz*.

- Heinze, T., Fehsel, I., & Jappe, A. (2019). Reformimpulse durch hochschulpolitische Beratung? Eine empirische Analyse der Funktion und Wirkung des Wissenschaftsrates für das deutsche Universitätssystem. *Soziale Welt*, 70 (pp. 268–303).
- Heinze, T., Habicht, I., Tunger, D., & Eberhardt, P. (2025). Field size as a predictor of “excellence.” The selection of subject fields in Germany’s Excellence Initiative. *PLoS ONE*, 20(3), e0300828.
- Heinze, T., Heyden, M. v. d., & Pithan, D. (2020). Institutional environments and breakthroughs in science. Comparison of France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States. *PLoS ONE*, 15(9), e0239805.
- Hollingsworth, J. R. (2006). A Path-Dependent Perspective on Institutional and Organizational Factors Shaping Major Scientific Discoveries. In J. T. Hage & M. Meeus (Eds.), *Innovation, Science, and Institutional Change* (pp. 423–442). Oxford University Press.
- Jappe, A., & Heinze, T. (2016). Institutional Context and Growth of New Research Fields. Comparison between State Universities in Germany and the United States. In T. Heinze & R. Münch (Eds.), *Innovation in Science and Organizational Renewal. Sociological and Historical Perspectives* (pp. 142–187). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jappe, A., & Heinze, T. (2025). Forschungsförderung und Universitätsprofessuren. In P. Pasternack, G. Reinmann, & C. Schneijderberg (Eds.), *Hochschulforschung. Forschung über Hochschule und Wissenschaft* (pp. 465–475). Nomos.
- Kielmannsegg, P. G. (1990). Notizen zum Thema Wissenschaftsrat. In U. Kleiner (Ed.), *Verwalten ist Gestalten: Festschrift für Armin Danco zum Ausscheiden aus dem aktiven Dienst* (pp. 211–219). Triltsch.
- Kühler, L. (2012). *Hochschulreform in Deutschland nach amerikanischem Vorbild. Chancen, Möglichkeiten und Grenzen*. Akademikerverlag.

- Lepori, B., Geuna, A., & Mira, A. (2019). Scientific output scales with resources. A comparison of US and European universities. *PLoS ONE*, 14(10), e0223415.
- Mahoney, J., & Thelen, K. (2010). A Theory of Gradual Institutional Change. In J. Mahoney & K. Thelen (Eds.), *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power* (pp. 1-37). Cambridge University Press.
- Mahoney, J., & Thelen, K. (Eds.). (2015). *Advances in Comparative-Historical Analysis*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mergele, L., & Winkelmayer, F. (2021). The Relevance of the German Excellence Initiative for Inequality in University Funding. *Higher Education Policy*, 35.
- Möller, G. (2017). Hochschulfinanzierung und -steuerung. In M. Hartmer & H. Detmer (Eds.), *Hochschulrecht: ein Handbuch für die Praxis* (pp. 873-902). C.F. Müller.
- Münch, R. (2007). *Die akademische Elite. Zur sozialen Konstruktion wissenschaftlicher Exzellenz*. Suhrkamp.
- Münch, R. (2014). *Academic capitalism. Universities in the global struggle for excellence*. Routledge.
- Röhl, H. C. (1994). *Der Wissenschaftsrat. Kooperation zwischen Wissenschaft, Bund und Ländern und ihre rechtlichen Determinanten*. Nomos.
- Schönstedt, M.-C. (2024). Wissenschaft evaluieren. *Der Wissenschaftsrat und das ostdeutsche Wissenschaftssystem während der Wende (1989/90)*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner.
- Seckelmann, M. (2016). Rechtliche Rahmenbedingungen der Wissenschaftspolitik. In D. Simon, A. Knie, & S. Hornbostel (Eds.), *Handbuch Wissenschaftspolitik* (pp. 99-117). VS Verlag.

- Streeck, W., & Thelen, K. (2005). Introduction: Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies. In W. Streeck & K. Thelen (Eds.), *Beyond Continuity. Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies* (pp. 1-39). Oxford University Press.
- Stucke, A. (2006). Der Wissenschaftsrat. In S. Falk, D. Rehfeld, A. Römmele, & M. Thunert (Eds.), *Handbuch Politikberatung* (pp. 248-254). VS Sozialwissenschaften.
- Stucke, A. (2011). Quality assurance through procedures - policy advice by the German Science Council. In J. Lentsch & P. Weingart (Eds.), *The Politics of Scientific Advice: Institutional Design for Quality Assurance* (pp. 157-173). Cambridge University Press.
- Thelen, K. (2003). How Institutions Evolve. Insights from Comparative Historical Analysis. In J. Mahoney & D. Rueschemeyer (Eds.), *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences* (pp. 208-240). Cambridge University Press.
- Trute, H.-H. (1994). *Die Forschung zwischen grundrechtlicher Freiheit und staatlicher Institutionalisierung. Das Wissenschaftsrecht als Recht kooperativer Verwaltungsvorgänge*. Mohr.
- Trute, H.-H., Denkhaus, W., Bastian, B., & Hoffmann, K. (2007). Governance Modes in University Reform in Germany - From the Perspective of Law. In D. Jansen (Ed.), *New Forms of Governance in Research Organizations. Disciplinary Approaches, Interfaces and Integration* (pp. 155-174). Springer.
- Wolff, J. (2015). Der neue Artikel 91 b GG - Erweiterte Kooperation im Wissenschaftsföderalismus. *Die Öffentliche Verwaltung*, 71(18) (pp. 771-780).
- WR. (1965). *Empfehlungen des Wissenschaftsrates zur Neugliederung des Lehrkörpers an den wissenschaftlichen Hochschulen*. J.C.B. Mohr.
- WR. (1966). *Empfehlungen zur Neuordnung des Studiums an den wissenschaftlichen Hochschulen*. Wissenschaftsrat.

- WR. (1967). *Empfehlungen des Wissenschaftsrates zum Ausbau der wissenschaftlichen Hochschulen bis 1970*. Wissenschaftsrat.
- WR. (1968). *Empfehlungen zur Struktur und Verwaltungsorganisation der Universitäten*. J.C.B. Mohr.
- WR. (1988). *Empfehlungen zur Förderung von Graduiertenkollegs*. Wissenschaftsrat.
- WR. (1995). *Empfehlungen zur Neustrukturierung der Doktorandenausbildung und -förderung*. Wissenschaftsrat.
- WR. (2002). *Empfehlungen zur Doktorandenausbildung*. Wissenschaftsrat.
- WR. (2008). *Empfehlungen zur Qualitätsverbesserung von Lehre und Studium*. Wissenschaftsrat.
- Yudkevich, M., Altbach, P. G., & Salmi, J. (2023). *Academic Star Wars: Excellence Initiatives in Global Perspective*. MIT Press.

AUTHORS

Thomas Heinze

Bergische Universität Wuppertal
 Gaußstraße 20, 42119 Wuppertal, Germany
 Email: theinze@uni-wuppertal.de
 ORCID: 0000-0003-4611-4591

Arlette Jappe

Bergische Universität Wuppertal
 Gaußstraße 20, 42119 Wuppertal, Germany
 Email: jappe@uni-wuppertal.de
 ORCID: 0000-0003-3313-4729

Biographies

Thomas Heinze

Thomas Heinze is Professor of Sociology at the University of Wuppertal. His research focuses primarily on the sociology of science and organizational sociology, while also engaging with broader sociological questions and theoretical approaches. He has published in journals, such as *Research Policy*, *Science & Public Policy*, *Scientometrics*, *PLoS One*, *Quantitative Studies of Science*, or *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*. He received his doctorate from the University of Speyer and completed his cumulative habilitation at the University of Bamberg.

Arlette Jappe

Senior researcher at the Interdisciplinary Centre for Science and Technology Studies IZWT, Wuppertal University. Her research focuses on science of science and higher education studies, including comparative perspectives on university reform, the study of scientific change with bibliometric metadata, and bibliometric research evaluation. She received a Diploma in Psychology from Free University Berlin and a PhD in Sociology from University of Bielefeld, Germany.