

Zippel, Kathrin S.; Ferree, Myra Marx; Zimmermann, Karin

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Gender equality in German universities: vernacularising the battle for the best brains

Kathrin Zippel*, **Myra Marx Ferree**** and **Karin Zimmermann*****

* Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Northeastern University, Boston, MA, USA;

** Sociology, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI, USA;

*** WZB Social Science Research Center, Berlin, Germany / Present address: Senior Researcher at the Freie Universität, Berlin, Germany

Contact: Kathrin Zippel k.zippel@neu.edu

Abstract

We examine how global pressures for competitiveness and gender equality have merged into a discourse of 'inclusive excellence' in the twenty-first century and shaped three recent German higher education programmes. After placing these programmes in the larger discourse about gender inequalities, we focus on how they adapt current global concerns about both being 'the best' and increasing 'gender equality' in locally specific ways, a process called vernacularisation. German equality advocates used 'meeting international standards' as leverage, drew on self-governance norms among universities, used formal gender plans as mechanisms to direct change, and set up competition to legitimate intervention. This specific incremental policy path for increasing women's status in German universities also mobilised the national funding agency and local gender equality officers as key actors, and placed particular emphasis on family friendliness as the expression of organisational commitment to gender equality.

Keywords

Gender equality policy; Germany; science; academia; gender mainstreaming; globalization

Academic inclusivity has long been a goal for advocates of gender equality, but despite substantial gains in enrolments and targeted interventions to advance women into professorships, gender equality remains elusive, especially for higher university levels and high status fields of science and technology (Caprile et al. 2012; European Commission 2012; Fox 2008). In this paper, we explore how the global norm of gender equality combined with contemporary transformations of academia shapes three specific recent programmes for gender equality in German academia in locally appropriate ways.

Vernacularisation is the term used for the translation of transnational concerns into forms that are meaningful and usable by local actors in national institutions (Levitt and Merry 2009). Because feminist challenges to the workings of academic institutions have always been simultaneously transnational and national, academia is a good site to study gender equality's vernacularisation. Such vernacularisation is historically specific and may particularly be seen in the incremental choices made by specific national policy actors.

We argue that the early twenty-first century is a moment in which German university-based gender equality advocates are using national engagement in the transnational

'battle for the best brains' to shift gender policy by vernacularising both gender equality and neoliberal academic reforms. As countries are urged to 'produce and attract top talent' to survive, an opening exists for women to be redefined as such essential talent.¹ Both the transnational norm of gender equality and the increasing value placed on economic competition and managerial authority in public institutions become adapted into vernacular forms by local actors. We examine the intersection of these norms in German academia, an active site of policy development for increasing both competition and gender inclusivity.

To better understand this historical moment, we distinguish three phases of policy discourse about women in academia. The first period (1980–1995) aimed to help individual women enter and advance in academic careers; the second (1996–2005) 'mainstreamed' gender into public institutions, including universities. The third, post-2005 period introduced a transnational narrative of 'inclusive excellence', which discursively uses competitive values to leverage gender equality policy. We consider this third period part of an international neo-liberal shift of academic norms and power, and show how Germany has vernacularised 'inclusive excellence' in three recent programmes. These programmes draw upon German policy culture to accentuate shame at not meeting international standards, to mobilise self-regulation as norm for academia, and to convey legitimacy through competitive success. We additionally identify the distributed power of research funding as an instrument being used to direct universities towards gender inclusivity, and see university gender equality officers as a locally specific managerial tool for institutional transformation. The emphasis on family friendliness as a strategy is a third aspect of the German vernacular for gender equality.

Melding discourses of gender equality and competition

Feminist demands for gender equality in academia are global, but so too is the 'creative destruction' of academic capitalism in the twenty-first century (Binner et al. 2013; Slaughter and Larry Leslie 1999). Also discussed critically as neo-liberalism, academic capitalism refers to a transformation process in universities in which economic values expressed in discourses of rankings, market competition, managerial authority, and efficient use of resources inform the meaning of the term 'excellence' (Teelken and Deem 2013). The academic capitalist reform agenda intersects with normative claims made for university systems to advance 'gender equality', as can be seen in the proliferation of rankings for countries on their proportion of women, especially in the science and technology fields that are deemed essential to economic growth (Berman 2012).

Universities thus face demands to be both 'excellent', as they compete globally for talent, and 'inclusive', by advancing gender equality among students and faculty. As world polity scholars such as Ramirez, Soysal, and Shanahan (1997) and Keck and Sikkink (1998) have pointed out, such norms spread unevenly, but over time produce a new political baseline for national policy-makers. We follow Williams, Berger, and McClendon (2005) in calling the new academic standard 'inclusive excellence', and argue that it guides how countries engage in the international 'battle for the best brains'.

But both excellence and gender equality are terms whose definitions are vague and contested, so national policies 'shrink, bend, stretch' their meanings to fit their own

concerns (Verloo 2006). Gender equality in particular has been repeatedly redefined as feminist critics and academic policy-makers have contested its framing. Gender equality as a goal can mean achieving equal numbers of women and men, transforming academic institutions towards more procedural transparency and explicit standards of fairness, as well as empowering feminist knowledge creators to produce better, less biased science (European Commission 2005; Schiebinger 2007).

In practice, gender equality programmes in most European and North American countries address hiring and promotion policies and practices; provide career advice, mentoring and networking for women in particular; offer training on gender bias and stereotypes to decision-makers; and address 'work-life balance' as a barrier for women's advancement (Bilimoria and Liang 2012; Caprile et al. 2012). Such programmes have shifted over time, as the understanding of what is effective has changed. Over the past 40 years, the framing of gender equality policy internationally has moved from identifying the problem as being deficiencies in women themselves, to seeing gender as a structural inequality that demanded organisational intervention to encompass bias in standards of evaluation and disparate impacts of ostensibly gender-neutral norms, and to include a gender dimension in research content.

Family-friendly policies in academia have been part of all three of these approaches as they can include re-entry assistance to mothers who have left the workforce in the first model, adding childcare for all faculty parents in the second, and rethinking productivity measures in the third. Financial supports, childcare services, and paid leaves from jobs or fellowships for both men and women enable both to remain attached to the workforce even when caring for children, ill, disabled, or elderly family members, and have a disparate impact on women who as mothers are held responsible for such work. Relying on family support measures alone to bring gender equality is deeply problematic, since this policy assumes that all women face such barriers and only women are disadvantaged by carework, making such gendered role assignments seem universal and inevitable. When 'family friendliness' is equated with mother friendliness and presented as remedying gender inequality, it actually may increase women's disadvantages (Morgan and Zippel 2003). This has been a recurrent issue in German social policy, where support for caregiving has been closely tied to expecting women to be mothers and mothers to limit their commitment to paid work.

Vernacularising inclusive excellence in Germany

The concept of vernacularisation offers a theoretical tool for connecting broad normative regimes to practical feminist advocacy (Levitt and Merry 2009). It proposes that international reform does not just diffuse from global to local, but is actively translated to fit the needs of local actors and the specific systems they seek to change (see also Gal 2014). We look at how gender equality in the current age of academic capitalism is adopted, rethought, and made to fit into the German academic system and its social policy preferences. Bridging the gap between global shifts and local changes, we focus on how national policy frameworks (discourses embedded in powerful texts such as policies, laws, and court decisions) shape the particular phases of policy development by providing leverage for gender equality advocates and mechanisms of legitimation for changes.

We take German universities as our case because this system is actively developing policies joining gender equality with global competitiveness. Germany is considered a leader in research and science policy with outsized influence in EU economic policy-making (Freudenschuß and Jana 2012). It has been ambivalent about international calls for gender equality (Liebert and Sifft 2003) and hesitant to embrace EU demands for positive measures (or affirmative action), which the 2007 Lisbon Treaty intensified (Ferree 2012). German equality advocates have often used Keck and Sikkink's (1998) 'boomerang' method to push for conformity to EU standards, relying on the combination of German self-esteem and sensitivity to external criticism to change social policies. For obvious historical reasons, the technique of 'naming and shaming' countries or corporations for not meeting international standards of social justice is especially likely to provoke concern in Germany.

Although gender equality in Germany has historically been equated with support for non-employed mothers (Ferree 2012), its strongly institutionalised male breadwinner model has come to be framed as 'old-fashioned' and restricting economic development (Von Wahl 2008). Recent family policy changes introduced by the conservative government take up the EU emphasis on 'activating' women as paid workers, enhancing childcare and opportunities for dual-career couples, and providing a 'daddy month' of childcare leave (MacRae 2010). The desire to encourage more births, especially among educated women, undergirds family-friendly policies across the EU (Lewis et al. 2008). Although the discourse of modernisation challenges Germany's tendency to 'shrink' gender equality policy into support for mothers (Gottschall 2000), it often valorises family support instead of directly addressing gender bias. Germany is not alone; across the EU, policy measures in all areas have become increasingly focused on work–family balance (Daly 2011; Jenson 2009).

German university policy-makers thus enter the battle for the best brains aware that they are laggards in both infrastructure for childcare and women's standing in academia (Metz-Göckel, Möller, and Heusgen 2012), with fewer women faculty at all levels than the EU average (Lind 2012). They feel themselves at risk of losing ground in research excellence if more academics (male and female) now want 'modern' dual-career opportunities and find other countries more 'family-friendly' than Germany.

International competition broadly shapes academic policy towards research excellence. The German government has invested more than 2.4 billion euros in its Excellence Initiative, which singles out universities, researchers, and training fields for extra federal support, even though higher education is constitutionally a state-level concern. Germany has embraced 'Europeanising' and 'modernising' academic strategies such as EU efforts to standardise credits and degrees (the Bologna Process), foster student and researcher mobility among member states (e.g. the Erasmus and Marie Curie programmes), and encourage competitive funding to promote 'brain gain' by attracting talent from around the globe.

In sum, international policy concerns about gender equality and competitive success, articulated globally as a demand for inclusive excellence, meet a German academic system that is eager to show that it is modern in both regards. We step back now to sketch the broader frame for German gender policy development in academia, review our sources of data and methods about the three programmes introduced since 2005, and then turn to examine them as vernacularisation, where the tools available and concerns expressed in a local context shape what can be done with such a global discourse.

Gender equality policy development in German academia

German universities are predominantly public, that is, state funded and supervised, albeit with a constitutional guarantee of academic autonomy. States must adhere to federal laws, including the legal guarantee of sex equality, which also applies to universities. Gender equality law is governed by the equal rights clause, Art. 3, in West Germany's 1949 constitution, which explicitly addresses sex equality; it was amended in 1994 to affirm this as a positive goal for the state and an individual right against sex discrimination.² Litigation, which German legal culture frames as individualised and apolitical, has not been a preferred strategy (Baer, personal communication). Instead, gender advocates have used discursive and material resources to institutionalise their roles in state administrations, pass enabling legislation, and offer incentives for change through public funding. This strategy has moved through distinct stages in German universities to reach the current moment.

Phase one: discover inequality and help women (1980–1995)

Stirred by transnational movements in the 1970s, feminist engagement expanded federal, state, and local mandates for gender equality (Ferree 2012; Lenz 2008). In the 1980s, laws requiring 'women's equality' offices at the local, state, and national level proliferated in all state institutions. University gender equality officers were appointed (or elected by women university members), and like their counterparts in city and state governments, they developed official plans for women's advancement (*Frauenförderpläne*). These first programmes aimed at helping individual women, targeted entry stages, and offered accommodations for childbearing, such as extensions beyond customary age limits for fellowships and junior research positions. State and federal governments also funded fellowship programmes for women Ph.D. students and postdoctoral researchers (*Habilitationsstipendien*) (Matthies and Zimmermann 2010).

Comparative data on gender in the academy were initially lacking. In the 1980s, feminist scholars volunteered time to help equality officers collect and analyse statistical data, revealing the paucity of women at all levels. Given the state's obligation to gender equality, these data were framed as scandalous, and provoked university action. State-mandated data collection on the status of academic women began in 1991 and has occurred biannually since 1996. These official reports helped institutionalise Germany's gender equality policy system by the mid-1990s. Today, federal and state regulations governing universities affirm gender equality as a goal, include affirmative action clauses, mandate equality officers, and establish implementation procedures. The institutionalisation of gender equality officers is an important resource for gender equality advocates, giving them insider status and legal leverage.

Phase two: introduce gender mainstreaming to academia (1996–2005)

The second phase of reform began in the late 1990s with a national and international shift towards more structural equality measures. The governing question of transnational discourse became 'why so slow?' (Valian 1998), and EU equality strategies shifted towards the gender mainstreaming approach encouraged by the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (Schmidt 2005). Mainstreaming, that is, incorporating attention

to gender into regular organisational practice, was adopted by the EU in the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1996 and arrived in Germany via EU funding requirements in 1999–2000. It offered gender equality advocates in universities and education ministries new tools for change backed by the money and moral authority of the EU.

Although the EU has no direct authority over higher education, the European Commission Directorate General (DG) for Research and Innovation became ‘a pioneer in implementing mainstreaming’ (Pollack and Hafner-Burton 2000). The DG installed quotas for review boards and goals for research funding, and commissioned reports on gender equality in research. By 2000, regular, comparative EU data provided a resource for local mainstreaming efforts (e.g. European Commission 2012). The German Federal Ministry of Education and Research embraced this data-driven EU strategy and in 2000 funded the Center of Excellence for Women and Science (CEWS), a think tank designed for this. In 2001, federal law mandated gender equality in public employment, including federal research institutions and state agencies responsible for science, culture, and education. These discursive tools (statistics and law) and material resources (institutionalised gender equality officers and plans) created leverage for new policies.

Another new tool was the distributed power of EU research funding. Already in 2000 ‘inclusive excellence’ discourse runs through EU-funded initiatives for supporting research, reflecting its Lisbon Strategy for becoming the ‘most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world’ (European Council 2000). It appropriated funds for research competitions run by the European Research Council, and set priorities through its Framework Programmes for Research (FPR). Because research grants employ researchers, feminists were able to use EU equality laws to influence funding decisions. In the fifth FPR (1998–2002), women were under-represented (Danowitz 2008; Schneider 2007); the next FPR (2002–2006) specifically mandated gender mainstreaming (Zimmermann and Metz-Göckel 2007; Zimmermann 2010; Abels 2012). Applicants for Integrated Projects and Networks of Excellence awards were required to submit *gender action plans* to ‘promote gender equality in all forms within your project’. These EU guidelines broadly defined ‘good’ gender action plans as including attention to gendered aspects of research practices, and including gender in research content (Abels 2012; European Commission 2005, 9).³

Phase three: implement the narrative of inclusive excellence (2005–today)

Transnational gender mainstreaming gave feminist activists the opportunity to increase pressure for gender equality in research, collaborating in a ‘velvet triangle’ among state feminists in ministries, equality officers in universities, and feminist academics (Woodward 2004). National and international reports on women in science produced since 2005 define gender equity as a global problem for science policy, and science policy as key to competing in the global knowledge economy.⁴ EU influence made both neo-liberal competition and gender equality more significant policy goals for its member states. Germany responded by passing EU-mandated laws against discrimination, including the General Equal Treatment Act (2006), which applies to all employers, including universities (Baer and Obermeyer 2010). The competitive focus on employment and human capital development was articulated in reports expressing concern about shrinkage in the engineering

workforce and framing women as untapped human capital, especially in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields (Wetterer 2002).

As we will show below, inclusive excellence is a concept of this moment, with its practical meaning in Germany shaped by the specific concerns, discursive opportunities, and mechanisms for academic reform resulting from this history. Even within the present period, change is made incrementally, with each of the three programmes we discuss below building on each other.

Methodology

Our analysis identifies the main agents, opportunities, and discursive strategies that vernacularised post-2005 gender equality reforms in Germany. Gender equality advocates systematically exploited 'inclusive excellence' discourse to produce policies that funded broad university programmes, additional professorships, and specific research projects. We focus on gender equality offices in universities and on national funding agencies, which previous developments and present discourse especially empowered as change agents in Germany.

The three major German academic programmes introduced since 2005 are the Excellence Initiative, the German Research Foundation's Research-oriented Standards on Gender Equality, and the Program for Women Professors (PWP). All three move beyond 'support for women' and 'gender mainstreaming' approaches, but use legal and organisational resources produced in those phases to engage inclusive excellence. The Excellence Initiative was not understood as a gender equality programme, and many feminists see its aims as simply neo-liberal (Binner et al. 2013), but we focus on how it reconciled gender equality norms with its competition-enhancing mandate, just as we look at how the PWP used competition discursively to legitimise its gender equality interventions.

In analysing the three programmes, we look to their aims, frames, and potential opportunities, rather than the degree to which they have realised their goals in the short time since they were adopted. We unpack the particularities of each programme to explore vernacularisation as an incremental process and to reveal the leverage exercised by national funders and gender equality advocates in universities.

Our data are drawn from public policy documents, secondary literature, and off-the-record background interviews with science policy experts who worked on designing, implementing, and monitoring programmes in state ministries, research institutions, and universities. The stated goals of the policies and their designers are crucial, so the language of the policies themselves matters. The extensive German literature provides additional self-reported accounts of participants. Personal accounts about the chronology of actions and strategic goals were cross-checked with published reports whenever possible to form a consensual narrative. Points where interpretations varied are noted.

Zimmermann (2012) also conducted an extensive evaluation study of the PWP, including an online survey of 145 universities, a written survey of 16 state ministry employees, and 15 interviews with university administrators and gender equality officers at 3 universities and academic gender equality experts with responsibility for evaluating the plans. The evaluation study focused on whether the programme met the needs of policy-makers (ministries, university administrations, and institution's gender equality officers) rather than on its impact on actual representation of women faculty, although hiring data were also collected.

We use these data sources to create a narrative that details the discursive frameworks and implementation strategies of the 3 programmes, the outcomes they sought to produce, and the roles of the major actors.

Connecting excellence and equity in Germany

Inserting 'gender' into the excellence initiative

The Excellence Initiative, begun in 2005, is Germany's most prominent and controversial funding programme. It was a response to the shock that only one of the more than 100 German universities ranked in the top 50 universities in the world, according to the first such international ranking (Shanghai 2003). Its stated goal was to rebuild the reputation and international competitiveness of German universities by differentiating the university landscape: changing largely equal, severely underfunded institutions into a system where selectively increased state funding would create elite universities as international 'beacons' of excellence. Insider gender advocates were able to place a *pro forma* commitment to gender equality in calls for proposals, which, with the international peer review process, opened an unexpected window of opportunity for legitimating further gender equality measures.

The Excellence Initiative is administered by the German Research Foundation (*Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*, DFG) and the German Council of Science and Humanities (*Wissenschaftsrat*, Council). The DFG, supported by public monies, is simultaneously an association of German universities and Germany's most important research funding agency. The prestigious Council, staffed by federal and state politicians, university administrators, and elite professors, advises federal and state governments on higher education and research matters. International peer reviewers evaluated Excellence Initiative proposals, and DFG and the Council jointly selected universities to receive five-year funding with a possible one-time extension for another five years. More than 2.4 billion euros were awarded to universities for 2006–2017.

For the first round of Excellence Initiative proposals in 2006, the committee for gender equality and gender research formed by the German National Network of Equality Officers (BuKoF) succeeded in having gender equality included as a formal criterion for evaluation. These insiders (equality officers in state ministries, universities, and scientific organisations) – mainstreamed gender as one criterion of excellence in the list outside evaluators received. These prominent international reviewers were asked to consider 'what impact the measures would have for the promotion of gender equality of men and women in academia' (Beaufaÿs 2012; Engels et al. 2015). However, this formal mandate failed to have its desired effect. In the 2006 round, only 13% of the funded Principal Investigators (PIs) were women, although women made up 17% of German academics at that level (Engels et al. 2015, 54). Ironically, under-representation was highest in the humanities and social sciences, where women made up 26% of all professors, but were only 20% of PIs (Beaufaÿs 2012).

Still, including gender in the proposal process produced additional opportunities to press for gender equality. Participants in the first-round evaluations included 457 peer reviewers, 80% scholars at non-German institutions. They expressed surprise at the paucity of women researchers, especially PIs, in the proposals. The BuKoF as a whole

amplified this observation (Koreuber 2008, 1) and later their critique was taken up by DFG-president Professor Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker, in a letter to all presidents of the more than 100 DFG member universities, chastising them for the 2 obstacles to excellence in German academia identified by the international reviewers: 'the lack of internationality and the problems with gender equality' (2006, 8).

Evidently, German universities lacked the demographic profile international peers expected. Winnacker's letter addressed this norm violation by advocating 'support within universities to formulate concrete goals and to take positive measures that would raise our level of gender equality into the internationally top group'.⁵ This official homage to the credibility of 'international peers' and very public scolding discursively validated the links among research excellence, gender equality, and Germany's competitive position.

Since the Excellence Initiative was intended to improve the international image of German universities, incurring international discredit was a powerful motivator. Rumours about university presidents and PIs being named and shamed for not including women spread, and true or not, they increased concern about demonstrating commitment to gender equality. Being depicted as a laggard in science matters is a particularly powerful rebuke in Germany, which has struggled to regain the stature its universities enjoyed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the wake of the Second World War, German concern for securing a positive international reputation makes public institutions especially vulnerable to being shamed. Gender equality went from being a rhetorical inclusion in the first round to a real funding criterion in the second (Riegraf and Weber 2013; Simon 2013). BuKoF identified Winnacker's letter as the turning point: 'For gender equality politics in universities, we can talk about before and after the Winnacker Letter' (Koreuber 2008, 2). Now, gender equality was discursively linked to research excellence through the reputational effects of not meeting international standards. At this point, the DFG took political responsibility to meet these international standards.

As an incremental discursive gain, placing gender equality in the 'international standards' that Germany would need to meet could now work through the DFG to shape rules for future funding. The DFG, as both the primary national funder and a self-regulating body of academic leaders, took on the role of giving gender equality greater priority, which opened further opportunities.

Research-oriented Standards on Gender Equality (2008)

In its Research-oriented Standards on Gender Equality (*Forschungsorientierte Gleichstellungsstandards*), the DFG expanded gender equality as a selection criterion for grants and thus further embedded gender equality in (research) excellence. It also offered university decision-makers financial incentives to surpass peers by asking them to design equality measures as part of their institutional grant proposals (Koreuber 2008; Riegraf and Weber 2013; Simon 2011, 2013). Once made part of the peer review process, gender equality appeared less as an external, 'politically' imposed criterion and more a matter of meeting standards that were now legitimated as a sign of quality and regulated nationally by the DFG, the peak organisation of self-governance among universities. Competition among PIs and universities for funding then encouraged attention to these criteria.

Since 2008, the Standards have been used to formally assess efforts to promote gender equality at the more than 100 DFG member universities when they apply for larger research grants (Simon 2013). This crucial policy initiative emerged from experiences with the Excellence Initiative and the broader 2006 Campaign for Equal Opportunity in Academia (*Offensive für Chancengleichheit*). The Campaign was a self-regulating response to the 2001–2005 EU initiatives for gender equality in research, which the German government had endorsed. Initiated by the Council, it included the DFG, representatives of the Association of University Presidents (*Hochschulrektorenkonferenz*), and leaders of the governing organisations of Germany's four major publicly funded research institutes.⁶

The Council report, 'Excellence in Academia and Research: New Paths for Equality Policies', concluded that gender equality measures in member organisations were still insufficient (Matthies and Zimmermann 2010, 204; Matthies et al. 2003). The report announced the steps each would take by 2013 to advance gender equality (Wissenschaftsrat 2007, 151–165). The DFG claimed its Standards would promote equality-oriented organisational development in the research community through self-commitment to a plan similar to the Excellence Initiative and asked universities to submit 15-page implementation reports, which most did in 2009–2010.⁷ This emphasis on formal plans and self-commitments deployed the managerialism and constant self-monitoring characteristic of academic capitalist reforms but in a specifically German form. The DFG, as both funder and institution of collective self-governance, had particular authority.

A DFG committee of university presidents and gender experts was established to provide support and advice to member universities on implementing specific elements such as statistical data collection, concrete numerical targets, and institutional strategies for advancing equality. The DFG also asked CEWS to create an online toolkit of 'best practices' for university gender equality programmes, which included personnel development, work–family balance, gender in research, gender mainstreaming, gender awareness, organisational development, quality control, and academic culture. Most suggested practices focused, however, on individual support rather than organisational development, and approximately half the specific examples addressed mitigating work–family conflict.

Advancing research about gender appeared only once, in the Standard's preamble:

Gender equality enhances research quality because it enlarges the talent pool, promotes a diversity of research perspectives, and eliminates blind spots regarding the significance of gender in research contents and methods. Thus the inclusion of relevant gender and diversity aspects is a key ingredient of high-quality research.⁸ (DFG 2008)

Yet no plans actually addressed equality in the substance and evaluation of research, such as assuring that samples in medical research include both men and women and balancing the composition of review panels. University presidents on the DFG committee were reported to perceive gender studies as too radical or biased, and their view apparently determined which tools made it into the kit. Despite some broader language, in practice the Standards narrowed equality policy to family-friendly measures, reframed in competitive terms as necessary to attract international talent (including both parents) to Germany.

Since the DFG is a membership organisation, each university is in charge of the implementation of the Standards. They are not laws but tools for self-regulation offering universities a chance to demonstrate their commitment to gender equality. The DFG

committee evaluated the final reports of 68 universities who chose to participate between 2009 and 2013, and classified the plans in four stages, from 'first steps taken' (5 universities) to 'successfully established concepts and added innovative approaches' (22 universities). By listing the resulting scores on its website, the DFG employed the neo-liberal discursive strategy of using public rankings to promote competition, in this case among universities over gender equality measures.⁹ The enhanced concern with competition among universities that the selective funding of the Excellence Initiative encouraged was now being actively directed by the DFG to make universities care about their relative standing on the gender equity assessment, implicitly suggesting that these ranks would matter for future funding decisions.

By 2014, the DFG demanded that research proposals specify how many women researchers are included and each university provide a yearly statistical report on gender equality. Such steps have a signalling effect even beyond DFG member universities, as they are invoked in many other German funding procedures and research policy discussions. Rumours and signals supplement formal statements to discursively transform gender equality measures into signs of overall university quality. Institutional reputation-building work, which now included achieving a good gender equality score, placed responsibility for equality measures on academic leadership.

In the German vernacular, the DFG represented self-regulation, and so affirmed traditional norms of peer review and academic freedom. The most significant actors behind the Standards were research leaders, for whom regaining a competitive international advantage for German institutions of higher education was the primary goal. Success in increasing women's representation was now framed as essential to that goal. The DFG has since extended to 2017 its self-mandated duty to monitor and report on member universities' progress in this regard.

The DFG Standards also raised concerns about how slowly universities would be able to make measurable progress in increasing the numbers of women professors. This added urgency to the problem of funding that would increase the international standing of German universities.

Programme for Women Professors

The PWP (*Professorinnenprogramm*) added a layer of direct incentives to the DFG Standards' emphasis on administrative plans for gender equality. Jointly financed by the Federal Ministry of Science and Research and the states, the PWP allocated substantial funds (150 million euros for its 2008–2012 first phase and another 150 million for 2013–2017) to award professorships for individual women faculty to universities that submit acceptable gender equality plans to an expert committee appointed by the Ministry.

Rather than imposing gender equality, the Ministry used a competition for new positions to provide financial incentives to the university leadership. Creating a choice for universities to enter into a competition and with an economic logic that shows gender equality can 'pay off' affirmed gender equality as an outcome of good management practices.

This programme especially aimed to broaden the legitimacy of gender equality measures. Unlike the Excellence Initiative, designed to selectively support only elite research universities, policy-makers wanted the PWP to encourage hiring women in as

many universities as possible, including non-DFG member Fachhochschulen, and do it as quickly as possible. As the Excellence Initiative and DFG Standards had highlighted, Germany's low representation of women researchers was an embarrassment for the university leadership, which lent perceived urgency among them for addressing this problem.

The PWP designers chose a 'first come-first served' procedure for appointments, making speed in hiring critical for competitive success. In 2008–2012, there were two rounds of position announcements; 70% of overall funding was allocated in 2008, and 30% held to 2009. Priority for funding each position was determined by the date the woman accepted the university's offer. This procedure encouraged universities to hire women already identified in searches that were finished or well underway, while still legitimating the process as 'competitive'.

To enter this somewhat artificial competition, universities had to provide a 15-page gender equality proposal (*Gleichstellungskonzept*), including a status report, institutional gender analysis, and plan for change. If the plan was approved by the Ministry's committee of experts, a university could apply for five years of funding for up to three individual professorships. After five years, the university committed to take over the funding. Almost three-quarters of public universities applied, over 80% of applicants were approved, and 260 professorships were funded. The official evaluation revealed that policy-makers and most universities considered the programme a great success.¹⁰

Further supporting the goal of gender equality as self-commitment and self-regulation, the call for proposals said the head of the university needed to sign the proposal, all relevant university committees needed to be involved, and the administration needed to endorse the effort. In practice, many universities simply had their gender equality officers or other staff with gender expertise draw up a proposal, and did not engage faculty senates or other administrators in the planning process. Most of the approved plans said they would transform their institutions to be more 'family-friendly' and only a few mentioned institutionalisation of gender in research content.

As with the Excellence Initiative, DFG Standards, and other neo-liberal uses of ratings to advance equality politics, the signalling effect was a key aspect of the PWP. If universities believed the award would increase their reputation for 'excellence', advocates believed the administrators would invest in hiring women. The PWP stamp of approval thus resembles the Total E-Quality Award, presented each year to German universities, research institutions, and companies for exemplary equal opportunity human resource activities, and the *family friendliness audit* passed by 134 Germany universities.

Moreover, PWP provided internal signals of status, especially legitimating the gender equality offices and giving feminist advocates a stronger insider role. Gaining needed funds for professorships for their universities conferred status and influence on gender equality officers, signalled their importance, and increased their feeling of empowerment. Indeed, two-thirds of the successful universities reported that PWP participation increased the prestige and influence of their gender equality officers and the momentum of existing efforts.

In sum, the PWP linked self-generated gender equality plans with the material incentive of authorisation and funding to hire individual women professors, a move which increased the legitimacy of gender equality measures and improved the bargaining position of gender equality officers. The veneer of competition applied to this programme was essential in legitimising the Federal Ministry's intervention as legal, the university's participation

as a free choice, and the gender equality offices as important contributors to the status of the university.

Discussion and conclusion

After 2005, German policy-makers adopted the new international narrative of inclusive excellence, as endorsed in the EU, but through programmes with specifically national characteristics (Zimmermann 2016). Transnational discourses of neo-liberalism – competition as a sign of excellence and women as an essential resource for competition among knowledge economies – were strategically used to advance gender equality in these three German programmes. These programmes created discursive links between gender equality and success for modern universities that are battling for the best brains and talents internationally and nationally (Ferree and Zippel 2015). Germany is not alone in connecting gender equality with entrepreneurial and managerial discourses, as case studies of the USA, UK, Austria, and Scandinavian countries show (Aulenbacher and Riegraf 2010; Garforth and Kerr 2009; Kreissl et al. 2015; Nielsen 2014; Teelken and Deem 2013). But the specific strategies adopted reflect the previous policy history of Germany: its constitutional commitment to gender equality, its institutionalisation of gender equality officers throughout the public sector, its legal embrace of mainstreaming measures, and its preference for supporting mothers as a means of addressing gender inequalities. Moreover, the sensitivity of German institutions to international rebuke, the national concern for regaining reputation as a leader in science and technology, the growing influence of EU norms, and the perceived need to modernise family policy to support dual-career couples opened doors to policy pressure in Germany that remain closed in other countries.

These interventions also exemplify vernacularisation rather than mere diffusion as they were developed in a very German way by a ‘velvet triangle’ of gender experts (largely feminist scholars), insider advocates (BuKoF, university gender equality officers), and semi-autonomous and government funding agencies (DFG, Council for Sciences and Humanities, Ministry for Science and Research). Feminist advocates intentionally took advantage of opportunities aimed at enhancing academic reputation to push for gender equality. These diverse actors adapted international demands for ‘inclusive excellence’ with particular recourse to the neo-liberal tools of international competition, quantitative measures of outcomes, and heightened authority for academic administrators.

The German path of incremental policy change operates by building a normative consensus that gender equality is a form of excellence, without using litigation over gender discrimination or applying explicit negative sanctions to enforce policy. This norm-building process worked from the top-down to negotiate consent; for example, all three programmes chose to prioritise official approval of a formal gender equality plan and to present successful competition, national excellence, and gender equality as mutually necessary. Gender equality advocates also created synergies across programmes, allowing them to build momentum by presenting each step as a necessary and increasingly urgent response to what was successfully being defined as a social problem. While the resistance of university leadership to measures that they saw as ‘radical’, such as bringing gender considerations into research design and evaluation, shows how shallow this consensus was, gender equality advocates used self-regulation mechanisms specific to German

academia to present each new programme as a legitimate way to meet its perceived need for 'inclusive excellence' to compete in the global knowledge economy.

The Excellence Initiative was a first step, as the president of the DFG used his position to express shame and chastise member universities for falling short in meeting international standards of inclusivity. The DFG then took positive steps to self-regulate its community of universities, not only by adding gender inclusion to its Standards, but also by making known that it was watching and evaluating what its member universities did. When the federal government then stepped in to offer a partial remedy to what was now defined as an urgent problem, it used its Program for Women to build legitimacy for action through a speed-based competitive award process. Since the total number of women professors hired is but a drop in the bucket, the larger purpose of the programme can be seen as defining the absence of women as a problem that urgently needs a solution. As these programmes increasingly legitimised gender equality as an essential part of 'becoming excellent', the commitment to this latter goal now implies taking steps towards addressing the persistent under-representation of women in the system and carries an increasingly explicit commitment of resources to support it.

However, normative acceptance of gender equality as a means of being excellent depoliticises gender equality, moving it away from a social justice frame and toward a 'business case' model of justification (Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita 2001). Moreover, the competitive case for gender inclusivity that is being constructed in Germany carries forward the country's policy preference for treating women's status as a 'family' issue. Unlike the EU, where gender equality was located administratively in the Directorate for Employment and now is in Justice, Germany places gender equality in its ministry for family, youth, and senior citizens.

A particularly effective strategy for prioritising gender equality measures in Germany was using the neo-liberal proliferation of international comparisons to shame its academic leadership at the very moment that politicians had been made anxious about Germany's position as a world leader in science. With internal differentiation of universities between 'beacons of excellence' and all the rest through the Excellence Initiative's large institutional grants, concern about academic reputation was not just felt at the national level. Each university's reputation mattered intensely and the DFG and PWP strategies focused on emphasising competition among them to be recognised and potentially secure more resources. With positive and negative reputation at stake, rumours and signals reinforced the messages that the Winnacker letter, the DFG Standards, and the PWP were sending more officially. Responsibility for gender equality measures was placed on academic leadership as a matter of good management.

In practice, German university leaders have translated gender equality norms into an understanding that they should transform their institution into a family-friendly university (*familiengerechte Hochschule*). While gender equality advocates may have had more ambitious goals, the consensus-building method of the plans promoted a narrowing down of gender equality to a work-family balance agenda. Although an improvement over mother-only measures that once typified German social policy, this emphasis on family friendliness in the gender equality plans underestimates the importance of such matters as biased evaluations and exclusionary networks for reproducing inequality. This is especially unfortunate, since work-family balance as a discursive synonym for gender inclusivity and a policy substitute for gender equality increasingly appears in EU discourse as well (Daly 2011; Jenson 2009). New in the German context is how university

presidents proudly present their new childcare centres as a sign of a modern, world class university, demonstrating that family issues are now considered part of the university's competition for top talent internationally.

With the focus on competition in the knowledge economy, university resources are directed disproportionately at fields of science and technology, and Germany is not an exception in this. The Excellence Initiative funded no gender research clusters or graduate schools for gender research, though it did create a few professorships for gender research. Similarly, the PWP has not prioritised funding gender researchers, only women. Just a handful of respondents in the evaluation of this programme even identified institutionalisation of gender studies in teaching and research as a relevant structural change. Although the DFG Standards affirm the legitimacy of gender sensitivity as a criterion for evaluating research content, reviewers and administrators have not yet applied them in this way. In avoiding controversy and building normative consensus about 'the problem' as merely women's under-representation and the solution as more 'family friendliness', this incremental German approach overlooks feminist critiques of science itself, gender in research content, and the devaluation of women and fields associated with women.

The gender equality officers Germany institutionalised in the earlier period of reform played a crucial role in legitimating inclusion as part of excellence, and the gender equality plans required by both the DFG Standards and the PWP further improved these officers' institutional standing. Other countries may lack similar insider networks, or institutionalise them in other ways, for example, in the governance structures of disciplinary associations and their journals. Universities as distinctive national institutions pursue their goals in locally specific ways; in Germany, they were especially influenced both by their status as state institutions (with legal commitments and equality officers as a matter of course) and by their heightened concern with reputation and relative status both in the international academic order and among themselves in competitions for funds.

The three programmes also reflect Germany's increased willingness to follow a path laid down by the EU (Lipinsky 2014). Across Europe, higher education systems are being urged to advance gender equality by framing it as essential to competitive economic success. The EU 'Horizon 2020' programme (2014–2020) promises to include 40% women among decision-makers (expert groups, panels, and committees) and integrate a gender dimension in funding decisions; it has already recommended guidelines to all member states on institutional change to promote gender equality in universities and research institutions.¹¹ The devil will be in the details of the policies gender equality advocates pursue in vernacularising these ideals.

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Notes

1. http://www.worldcrunch.com/brain-drain-talent-magnets-and-global-battle-best-and-brightest/culture-society/brain-drain-talent-magnets-and-the-global-battle-for-the-best-and-brightest/c3s4776/#.VC1x6_nMSAg downloaded 29 August 2014.
2. http://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_gg/englisch_gg.html, downloaded 1 July 2013.
3. http://ec.europa.eu/research/science-society/pdf/gap_compendium_en.pdf, 2013.
4. The Helsinki Group on Women and Science, composed of national representatives and working since 1999, and the European Commission have generated multiple reports on gender and science.
5. Letter. 2 February 2006 translation by authors.
6. The German research system includes both publicly funded research universities and four publicly funded research organisations: Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft, Helmholtz-Gemeinschaft, Leibniz-Gemeinschaft, and Max-Planck-Gesellschaft.
7. Plans were to be assessed by the gender competence of those in leadership positions, echoing gender mainstreaming approaches; transparency evidenced in statistical information on gender differences; concrete goals; expected statistical outcomes; detailed descriptions of change measures and how they would be sustained. Statistics were to show women and men by discipline and level along the full career path to professors, professors with leadership responsibilities, and university leadership.
8. http://www.dfg.de/download/pdf/foerderung/grundlagen_dfg_foerderung/chancengleichheit/forschungsorientierte_gleichstellungsstandards.pdf, translation by the authors.
9. The list of ranked universities is at: http://www.dfg.de/foerderung/grundlagen_rahmenbedingungen/chancengleichheit/forschungsorientierte_standards/abschlussberichte/index.html. For more information, facts and figures on gender equality in research promotion by the DFG see: http://www.dfg.de/foerderung/grundlagen_dfg_foerderung/chancengleichheit/forschungsorientierte_standards/.
10. The assessment study of the programme was carried out on behalf of the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research and provides the data we use here (Author 2012).
11. See http://ec.europa.eu/research/era/gender-equality-and-gender-mainstreaming_en.htm. <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/pressroom/content/20130624IPR14338/html/EU-research-funding-after-2013-MEPs-and-Council-agree-legal-package>.

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