

Tracing Processes of Gradual Institutional Change in Higher Education Systems

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This paper elaborates theoretical concepts of institutional change in higher education systems. Building on historical institutionalism, it explores both the traditional model of path dependence, which allows for institutional change only in the case of exogenous shocks and critical junctures (see, e.g., North, 1990), as well as more recent concepts of gradual institutional change (Streeck and Thelen, 2005; Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). The latter concepts refer to modes of *gradual* institutional change, which, however, can still add up to transformative changes over time. These modes are especially helpful to grasp how higher education systems, which are often said to be highly path dependent given their embeddedness in the respective national political, socio-economic, and cultural context (e.g., Graf, 2009), can still display surprising transformations (cf. Thelen, 2004 on vocational training). Such a perspective facilitates a better understanding of the endogenous and exogenous factors that drive change processes – or, conversely, lead to institutional stasis despite changing environmental conditions. In addition, the paper presents *systematic process tracing* as a method that fits the application of the theory of gradual institutional change (see, e.g., Hall, 2008). To illustrate this approach, the paper analyzes the case of a significant recent change in the relationship between higher education and vocational training in Germany. While the dual apprenticeship training system and its corporatist governance remain the key instance of strategic coordination in Germany's coordinated market economy, high-end dual programs are now also increasingly being offered within the German higher education system (Graf, 2013). In dual study programs, which are rapidly expanding, firms are key actors in negotiating, for instance, the curricula and rules of accession. This has significant consequences, for example, in terms of the specificity of skills acquired but also the governance of higher education more generally. The analysis identifies how modes of gradual institutional change, such as *layering*, *conversion*, and *drift*, are linked to firms' attempt to achieve a more firm-specific and less academically standardized skills provision in higher education.

References

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