



### Call for Articles

## Authoritarian Dynamics and the Resilience of German Higher Education Institutions: Structures, Risks and Strategies

Journal *die hochschule*, special issue 1/2027

Freedom of research and teaching at higher education institutions (HEIs) in the USA has been under massive pressure since the beginning of Donald Trump's second administration – universities are being politically regulated and censored through executive orders and an increasingly dense 'web of control' of legislative measures (Reid et al., 2026). For many democracies around the world, similar elements of *democratic backsliding* (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Lewandowsky et al., 2025) or authoritarian developments (Boese et al., 2021) can also be observed, with sometimes drastic restrictions on freedoms, including in the higher education sector (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). This also applies to member states of the European Union (e.g. Maassen et al., 2025).

Until recently, similar dynamics were largely ruled out for the German higher education system, primarily with reference to the protection of academic freedom guaranteed in the Basic Law. Yet, potential and current restrictions are already being explored and debated (e.g. Blümel, 2024; Gärditz, 2022; Schäfer, 2024; Schimank et al., 2024).

However, little research has been done so far on the extent to which German HEIs, which are obliged by the Higher Education Framework Act to support a 'liberal, democratic and social constitutional state' (§2 (1) sentence 1), use their freedoms and autonomy to implement this (e.g. Behm, Kohler & Pasternack, 2025). It also remains to be seen to what extent HEIs prove resilient to authoritarian interventions and incidents. Against this backdrop, the guest editors are dedicating issue 1/2027 of the journal *die hochschule* to research on the topic of **authoritarian dynamics and the resilience of universities**.

**We are interested, on the one hand**, in illuminating, concretising and examining the (self-)understanding of HEIs as democratic and democratising institutions. Until now, German universities have tended to be perceived as democratic spaces per se (e.g. Behm, 2025). However, recent studies suggest that reactions from and at universities to anti-democratic efforts tend to be characterised by tabooisation, helplessness and indecision (e.g. Haker & Otterspeer, 2025). Closely related to this, we are **also interested** in describing and analysing (structural) weaknesses and threats to which both HEI members and universities as organisations are already exposed or could be exposed by authoritarian developments. In this context, it is important to identify potentials for resistance as well as concrete countermeasures that have been or are currently being tested in Germany and internationally. In doing so, we take an integrative view of the actions of and at HEIs, i.e. in their interconnection with social and political actors. Accordingly, we also focus on alliances and allies that are mobilised to defend against attacks.

For the special issue, we are seeking contributions on the following **key topics and questions**:

#### **Inventories of HEIs as democratic institutions**

- Which legal and structural conditions promote/hinder the development of HEIs as democratic institutions and the implementation of their democratic educational mandate? Where are the structural weaknesses at the level of the higher education system and HEIs that could undermine academic freedom and/or institutional autonomy, for example in the case of right-wing extremist parties participating in government at the state or federal level?
- In what specific ways do German HEIs prove to be democratic institutions, but could also become more aware of this? Where are they vulnerable to misanthropic attitudes or targeted attacks in their quotidian interactions? In which situations and cases have HEIs so far proved to be overwhelmed?
- What tensions are inherent in HEIs and their members' actions with regard to democratic governance? For example, between the (self-)perception as politically neutral spaces ("principle

of neutrality”) and the coupling of teaching with the German constitution. How can these tensions be addressed?

- Where have HEIs as democratic institutions fallen short of their potential so far, and for what reasons? This concerns, for example, social imbalances, e.g. in access to higher education, student participation and shared decision-making.

#### Potentials for resilience

- What strategies and measures to prevent or counteract the risks of authoritarian political developments are being tested at HEIs already? Of particular interest are initiatives at the organisational level (e.g. Researcher Support Consortium, 2024), support for individual scientists (e.g. SciComm Support, 2023, National Institute for Science Communication, 2025) as well as integrated measures.
- What initiatives are HEIs and their members testing outside of Germany? Which were the critical points to start these initiatives? We are interested in comparative (including historically informed) studies as well as case studies, particularly of regions that have received little research attention to date.
- Against the backdrop of the mentioned questions, what insights into the relationship between HEIs and democracy do studies of German history offer? Of particular interest are phases of political system change and transitions, e.g. from the German Empire to the Weimar Republic, from Weimar to the Nazi regime, from the Nazi regime to the post-war situation in West and East Germany, or to the period of transformation after 1989/90.

The journal **die hochschule. journal für wissenschaft und bildung** is as a forum for in-depth articles and debates on higher education and educational research as well as science studies. The special issue 1/2027 is expressly open to different disciplinary, theoretical and methodological approaches.

Abstracts (**maximum 4.000 characters**) are requested by **6 April 2026**. In addition to a brief description of the topic and the theoretical and methodological approach, the author's affiliation and contact email address should be included. The selection decision will be made by mid-May 2026. Given the urgency of our topic, we will request the **full texts** of the selected contributions by the **end of September 2026**. The **publication** of the special issue is scheduled for the **first quarter of 2027**.

Dr Andreas Beer · PD Dr Britta Behm

Please send abstracts and any queries to:

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#### Literature

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