



# Governance of university continuing education in Germany. A scoping review of research in a game-changing area

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**Abstract** The governance of academic continuing education is an area of research that has received little attention to date. On the one hand, this may be related to the fact that it plays a minor role as a “third mission” area at universities. On the other hand, governance mechanisms in higher education are necessarily closely linked to its political, financial, and contextual characteristics, which require differentiation from educational governance more broadly. Based on a scoping review, the existing research on the governance of university-based continuing education in the German higher education system has been systematically prepared using a multi-level model. This shows a comprehensive view across all levels, which makes use of broad theoretical references and is qualitatively oriented in terms of research methodology.

**Keywords** Educational governance · Continuing education · Germany · University · Academic

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## Governance der universitären Weiterbildung in Deutschland. Ein Überblick über die Forschung in einem zukunftsweisenden Bereich

**Zusammenfassung** Die Governance der wissenschaftlichen Weiterbildung ist ein Forschungsgebiet, das bisher wenig Beachtung gefunden hat. Einerseits könnte dies damit zusammenhängen, dass sie als dritter Aufgabenbereich an den Universitäten eine untergeordnete Rolle spielt. Andererseits sind Governance-Mechanismen im Bereich der Hochschulbildung notwendigerweise eng mit ihren politischen, finanziellen und kontextuellen Merkmalen verknüpft, die eine Abgrenzung gegenüber der Bildungs-Governance im weiteren Sinne erfordern. Auf der Grundlage eines Scoping Reviews wurden die vorliegenden Forschungsarbeiten zur Governance universitärer Weiterbildung im deutschen Hochschulsystem anhand eines Mehrebenenmodells systematisch aufbereitet. Dabei zeigt sich eine umfassende Betrachtung über alle Ebenen, welche sich breiter theoretischer Bezüge bedient und forschungsmethodisch qualitativ ausgerichtet ist.

**Schlüsselwörter** Governance · Wissenschaftliche Weiterbildung · Deutschland · Universität · Bildungssteuerung

### 1 Introduction

In recent years, following the Bologna reforms, in Germany as well as in the rest of Europe governance structures of universities have changed. During the extensive conversion of public institutions to New Public Management (Kuhlmann et al. 2008), universities have also started this process and thus initiated a cultural change (Mora 2001; Broucker and De Wit 2015). In the process of the Bologna Reform and an accompanying emphasis on lifelong learning, universities are increasingly called upon to create market-oriented offerings and to systematically develop business fields in continuing education (Wissenschaftsrat 2019, p. 65; Wolter 2017). The development of German universities in terms of New Public Management leads to a different self-image—from institutions to “specific organisations” (Musselin 2007) and the definition as participant in “quasi-markets” (Agasisti and Catalano 2006). Still, Germany's federal countries are responsible for educational policy (including universities), so the legal framework is not identical nationwide. The countries also provide the majority of the university's financial resources, quite different from a lot of other states. Thereby a dilemma arises between the logic of the publicly funded scientific institution and the logic of the continuing education market (Schulze 2020, p. 156; Zastrow 2013, p. 41). A new management culture is emerging, a managerial governance in universities as a whole and in university continuing higher education (UCE) in particular. In this context, higher education in Germany can be described as a “latecomer”, since the structures of a university that is self-organized in its subareas, with high levels of autonomy for professors and faculties (academic-self-governance), are still firmly entrenched here today. The position of UEC between the traditional freedom of academic teaching and demand-oriented continuing educa-

tion poses fundamental questions to internal management, in particular for university boards. New competencies over professors and deans—but also central administrative units—were given by new (federal) Higher Education Laws to presidents and vice-presidents of universities. These changed demands on the actors lead to role conflicts and to changes in university management practice (Krettek et al. 2013).

Expectations of modern universities also include the establishment of a *third mission*, which results from the guidelines of the Bologna Process and diverse social developments of the last thirty years (Berghaeuser and Hoelscher 2019). Third mission refers to activities of the university that do not belong to the areas of teaching and research. These include knowledge and technology transfer, university continuing education and social engagement. (ibid.). If German universities are to fulfil other functions for the economy and society in addition to teaching and research, new demands on their leadership level and a new self-image will have to result from this. The development of universities into institutions of lifelong learning is related to this idea:

“Faced with the challenge of an ageing population Europe can only succeed in this endeavour if it maximises the talents and capacities of all its citizens and fully engages in lifelong learning as well as in widening participation in higher education.” (Ministerial Conference Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve 2009, p. 1)

Compared to other countries, UCE is still relatively little established in Germany (Wissenschaftsrat 2019, p. 37). Although UCE has been one of university’s core tasks since an amendment to the Higher Education Act in 1998, this task is nevertheless interpreted very differently by universities in Germany (Franz and Feld 2015). At the same time, the demand for academic continuing education is also limited. In the 18–64 age group, the share of total continuing education is only 5% (Federal Ministry of Education and Research 2022, p. 65). Nevertheless, politicians see great potential in this area. Especially for a labor market that is becoming more and more academic, it can be assumed that the demand for UCE will increase. Therefore, comprehensive funding programs support the establishment and development of UCE at universities. For example, within the framework of the funding programme “Aufstieg durch Bildung: Offene Hochschule (Advancement through Education: Open Universities)” alone, almost a quarter of German higher education institutions received funding for the establishment and further development of UCE (Nickel and Thiele 2020, p. 59). Therefore, the development status, organizational forms, study formats as well as the understanding of the role and relevance of UCE vary greatly. While traditional universities tend to be more reserved here, federal or private universities of applied sciences in particular see this as an attractive market. This makes the situation very different from other countries, where renowned universities often have a very high proportion of postgraduate offerings (Reum 2020, p. 101).

The organisational relationship of the UCE institution to the parent university can either be arranged as a spin-off or remaining in the university and universities in Germany decide differently according to this question. If the latter is the case, three different models are essentially possible, which effects UCEs structural relation to the university board: directly subordinate to the presidium, as a department of the

university administration or as a scientific institution of the university. Depending on this relation to the university, there are different possibilities for the institutions self-understanding. It can see itself as a scientific institution, it can see its task primarily in the administration of continuing education offers, or it can have the self-conception to do both. Overall, many hybrid forms are in practice. Both the understanding of UCE and its embedding and organisation is anything but clear and depends on different factors such as the type of university, the federal state within Germany or the type of public funding (Maschwitz et al. 2020, p. 255). Spin-offs, e.g. in the form of associations or non-profit companies are the much rarer case in Germany (Hanft et al. 2016). Among those universities whose continuing education institutions are supported by a public funding programme, only about 20% have taken the path of a spin-off or operate a spin-off in parallel with another organisational form (Maschwitz et al. 2018, p. 10). However, spin-offs have advantages: They can work independently of political intervention and approval procedures. This means that they tend to be faster in developing offers depending on the market situation (Herm et al. 2003). But the organisational outsourcing of university continuing education also represents a steering challenge for the university board: Scientific and content-related cooperation with the university must be guaranteed and shaped, because this is characteristic for continuing education teaching (Smitten and Jaeger 2010, p. 23).

The advantages of an internal location of continuing education courses are that they are closely linked to these scientific developments, which they can directly use the infrastructure of the university and—this is partly possible—that they can be included in the teaching staff's budget. The management instruments of the university board can be especially effective in these models. As soon as the area of continuing education is organisationally outside of university, the possibility of influence is considerably limited. Authors in the German-speaking discourse therefore call for the legal framework to be developed that continuing education remains entrenched within the university (ibid.). They also stress that in order to make use of the quality assurance procedures available there (Gröger and Schumacher 2018, p. 24). Either way, both variants lead to governance challenges in the field of UCE.

If, on the one hand, a spin-off of UCE seems to bring it closer to the market, the question remains how the requirements of the academic institution can be met. If, on the other hand, continuing education is an integral part of university organization, the question of how to accommodate a demand-oriented market logic (Wilkesmann 2007) of continuing education becomes all the more urgent from a governance perspective. Continuing education at universities in Germany is subject to financial and legal conditions that make it highly dependent on the needs of the market. It must therefore orient itself more strongly to the market than other areas of university activity. At the same time, it is also subject to more direct management options at the university, which supports the promotion of NPM. Therefore, for governance, the development and increasing establishment of UCE at universities can be seen as a transfer challenge but also an opportunity to test and establish new governance practices at German higher education.

Against this background, the question arises, what is known about the governance of UCE in Germany. As Schmid and Wilkesmann (2020, p. 216) note, this topic is only marginally addressed in the context of higher education research. To get

a systematic overview, a literature review of the current state of research on the governance of UCE in Germany was conducted. This is intended to give an overview of the state of research and provides insight into the specific situation in Germany. At the same time, due to the predominantly German-language literature in this field, the connectivity for the international scientific discourse will be established.

## 2 Method

The methodology is characterized by a scoping literature review. Scoping reviews attempt to provide a clear indication of the scope of available literature and studies and a broad or detailed overview of their focus (Munn et al. 2018). Arksey and O'Malley describe it "as a technique to 'map' relevant literature in the field of interest" (Arksey and O'Malley 2005, p. 20). It serves to "examine the extent, range and nature of research activity (...) determine the value of undertaking a full systematic review (...) summarize and disseminate research findings (...) identify research gaps in the existing literature" (Arksey and O'Malley 2005, p. 21). The identification of relevant research publications is done on the basis of selected literature databases, which are relevant for the research area. These databases are then searched with selected search terms to find relevant publications. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the research topic, three databases with different disciplinary focus were selected:

- FIS (Fachinformationdienst Bildung<sup>1</sup>), a literature database on all areas of *education* with almost one million data records, mainly from Germany, Austria and Switzerland;
- Sociohub (Fachinformationsdienst Soziologie<sup>2</sup>) is a central contact point for literature search, information and communication in *sociology*, which provides a metasearch engine for databases and library catalogues with around 850,000 monographs and 6000 journal titles; and,
- Pollux (Fachinformationsdienst Politik<sup>3</sup>) provides direct access to more than 1000 journals and 500,000 monographs from the field of *political science*

In addition to these databases, which cover the German-language publications, Scopus<sup>4</sup> was chosen as a third database in order to also cover possible English-language literature on research of management of UCE in Germany. The research was conducted between October 20 and 22, 2021 for the period starting from 1998, since UCE was introduced in this year as a legal core task of higher education institutions in Germany alongside research, teaching and study. The search was conducted using the keywords "steering" or "governance" in combination with "university" and "higher education" as well as "continuing education" or in the German-language databases via the corresponding German terms.

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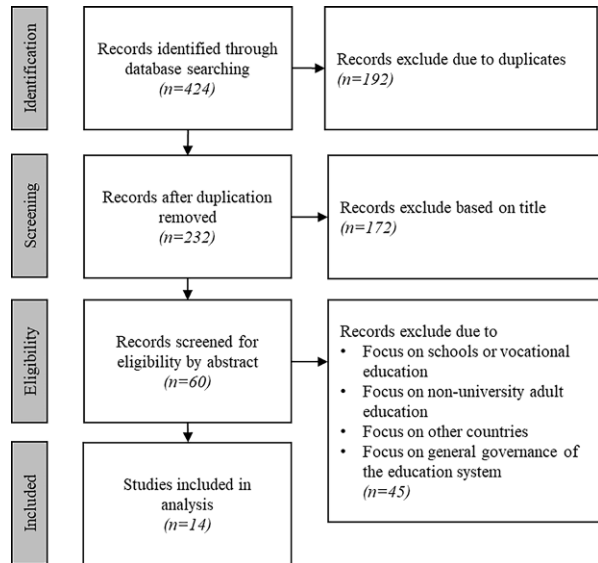
<sup>1</sup> <https://www.fachportal-paedagogik.de/en/literatur/index.html>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://sociohub-fid.de/>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.pollux-fid.de>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.scopus.com>.

**Fig. 1** Flow diagram for inclusion of journal articles in the review



The concept of “steering” was therefore considered in account for conceptual vagueness in potential contributions. The aim was to search as broadly as possible in the databases: Therefore, in Scopus the search was carried out via Article title, Abstract and Keywords, in FIS and Sociohub as a free-text search, and in Pollux via the abstracts. The search in Scopus resulted in six records, in FIS 162, in Sociohub 210 and in Pollux 46, so that a total of 424 records could be identified. The contributions were exported from the databases to Endnote™ to identify and then remove duplicates. The 232 articles found were then examined in more detail. For this purpose, a rough selection was first made based on the titles. In this pre-selection, 172 articles were excluded as thematically not suitable. The remaining 60 articles were evaluated based on the abstracts or, if not clearly assignable, by cross reading the texts. The exclusion criterion was the close thematic fit to the topic, e.g. articles that considered general aspects, such as the governance of universities or the governance of the education system, were not considered. In addition, all articles that did not refer to Germany were removed. As a result, 14 articles could be identified, which were narrowly focused on the governance of continuing education in Germany (cf. Fig. 1; Table 1).

The qualitative analysis of the articles shows that only two articles were published before 2010, e.g. research on the governance of UCE in Germany is still a relatively young research field in Germany. Traceably, all but one of the articles were published in German. The majority of the articles were published in journals (10), the other were research reports (2) and book contributions (2). Most of the articles can be assigned to a theoretical discussion (7). The research approaches of the remaining contributions are to be classified as qualitative research (7), predominantly case studies. It can therefore be concluded that it is hardly possible to derive generalizations based on the results available. For the more in-depth qualitative analysis, the articles were analyzed with the help of the software MAXQDA (Woolf and Silver

2017). For this purpose, all full articles were imported into the program in PDF format and evaluated in terms of content analysis (Mayring 2015). Based on the questions, relevant text passages in the documents were coded inductively. In several circular steps, the codes were adapted and completed. Finally, the codes were summarized and structured. Five categories were formed in the process: (1) *Steering*, (2) *Stakeholders*, (3) *Contextual legal and financial conditions*, (4) *Strategy*, (5) *Structures*.

These coding categories were used for a first analytical structuring of the evaluation results. But, for a meta-analysis on the actual state of research of UCE governance, two aspects emerge: First, an underlying sociological or economical theorization of UCE governance seems to be low, measured by the evaluated articles. This is not surprising, considering that UCE governance represents a relatively young field of research, for which a clarification of the contextual conditions of UCE in the “system of German universities” is a necessary first step. All selected papers provide a theoretical discussion and some an additional qualitative analysis of the contextual or constitutive conditions of UCE. Secondly, shown by their inductive content analysis, all elected papers are very heterogeneous in terms of the addressed level of UCE, distinguished by macro-, meso- or micro-level. To systematize the existing research activities along the primary findings of this review, the coded categories and segments were sorted along these contextual levels. Further theoretical considerations for the research field of UCE governance were thereby initiated. In summary, the following (extended) methodological approach was followed: 1. scoping review (as previously described), 2. qualitative content analysis of the elected papers, and 3. meta-discussion of the results.

### 3 Results

As mentioned above, it is hardly possible to derive generalizations based on the present results. The number of relevant studies and scientific contributions in governance research concerning the field of UCE is too small for this purpose. Nevertheless, by sorting the present results (cf. Table 2), a kind of meta-structure of the current state of research in the field of UCE governance can be mapped. UCE governance literature as presented by this review is partly tied back to theoretical discussions in the related field of educational governance, which leads to a brief classification of the results of this scoping review in general terms of educational governance. This helps to sort the results of the scoping review.

Educational Governance does not represent a theory in the narrow sense but subsumes different theoretical approaches through a common perspective (Herbrechter and Schemmann 2019, p. 182; Benz 2004, p. 27). On the one hand, governance issues are raised in the multi-level system of continuing education, mostly related to the different contexts and influences of continuing education like state, market or organizational units. A functional classification of governance issues according to macro, meso and micro level seems to be helpful especially because it can support a structuring of the emerging governance requirements by areas of origin. At the macro level, education policy actors at the national or supranational level affect

continuing education from outside (Schrader 2011, p. 103, 2008). At the meso level, the actions of organizations can therefore be explained as a function of societal environmental expectations (Schemmann 2017, p. 9). The micro level, in turn, is about individual and interactive actors, which include UCE planners as well as lecturers and participants (Schrader 2011, p. 95–97). In their efforts, the macro, meso, and micro levels always influence each other. On the one hand, the societal environmental expectations placed on the organization at the meso level are due to influences exerted by macro level actors. At the same time, the organization serves as an action space for individuals on the micro level. In this sense, the three levels (macro, meso, micro) form a collaborative system that, from a systems theory perspective, places problems in the context of interrelated subsystems (Koskinen 2013, p. 13).

As a further approach, (neo-)institutionalist references serve as a theoretical framework, focusing on the institutional assumptions or rules of educational governance, that follow an ongoing alignment process between the organization and its institutional environment (Houben 2019, p. 165; Schemmann 2017, p. 3; Koch and Schemmann 2009). Beyond that, governance and steering issues in a multi-level system are interpreted as a problem of coordination between actors in different constellations (Altrichter and Maag Merki 2010, p. 22; Kussau and Brüsemeister 2007). Micro-analyses of coordination between actors are relatively rare in the Ed-

**Table 1** Included studies

No.	Authors (Year)	Title
[01]	Brüsemeister and Schemmann (2013)	Re-Organisation der wissenschaftlichen Weiterbildung als Regression
[02]	Cendon et al. (2020)	Steuerung der hochschulischen Kernaufgabe Weiterbildung
[03]	Feld and Franz (2016)	Wissenschaftliche Weiterbildung als Gestaltungsfeld universitären Bildungsmanagements
[04]	Franz and Feld (2014)	Steuerungsproblematiken im Prozess der Implementierung wissenschaftlicher Weiterbildung an Universitäten
[05]	Hanft et al. (2016)	Organisation und Management von Weiterbildung und Lebenslangem Lernen an Hochschulen
[06]	Heinbach and Rohs (2020)	Governance wissenschaftlicher Weiterbildung
[07]	Heinbach and Rohs (2019)	Vizepräsidenten als Akteur in der hierarchischen Selbststeuerung wissenschaftlicher Weiterbildung
[08]	Heufers and El-Mafaalani (2011)	Praxis- oder Wissenschaftsorientierung? Zur Steuerung der Wissensvermittlung in der universitären Weiterbildung
[09]	Jütte and Lobe (2019)	Stichwort: Steuerung in der wissenschaftlichen Weiterbildung
[10]	Klumpff (2010)	Risk-Return-Steuerung in der wissenschaftlichen Weiterbildung an Hochschulen
[11]	Kretschmer and Stöter (2014)	Weiterbildung und Lebenslanges Lernen (LLL) in Anreiz- und Steuerungssystemen
[12]	Schemmann (2014)	Analysis of the Governance of University Continuing Education in the United Kingdom and Germany
[13]	Schmid and Wilkesmann (2020)	Eine praxistheoretische Fundierung der Governance wissenschaftlicher Weiterbildung
[14]	Wilkesmann (2010)	Die vier Dilemmata der wissenschaftlichen Weiterbildung

educational Governance context (Peetz and Sowada 2019, p. 250; Graß 2015, p. 66). Theoretical approaches in the German-language educational governance literature can be found, for example, in the form of practice theory (Bourdieu) considerations in the sense of Bourdieu's sociology (Schmid and Wilkesmann 2020), the latter furthermore focused on UCE governance, or the sociology of conventions (Graß and Alke 2019; Leemann 2019; Peetz and Sowada 2019). Thus, the question arises: Where does UCE governance research stand in relation to these considerations of its parent field?

As a result of this scoping literature review (cf. Table 1), fourteen contributions towards educational governance research in the context of UCE could be identified. An analysis of these contributions shows clear differences in terms of the following points:

1. Even though all papers deal with educational governance as a context in principle, different levels in the multi-level system of university continuing education are addressed in each case. Implicitly, a macro-, meso- or micro-perspective is followed when analyzing organizations or institutions. From a theoretical point of view an isolated scope on one of each level might not be useful, because there's a contextual linkage between each of these levels (Schmid and Wilkesmann 2020, pp. 223–229). A sorting according to these levels, in the following referred to as governance scope, leads to the following categorization: Papers which address the political, societal, or historical context of UCE governance on the macro-level [2, 6, 11]. Papers that focus on the meso level [04, 07, 08, 10] in terms of organizational and institutional governance mechanisms. Papers that address a linkage between macro- and meso-level [01, 03, 05, 09, 12, 14]. And finally, one approach [13] of a meso-micro-level view, which understands UCE governance on the level of actors and their (problem-solving) interaction relations.
2. There are both generic overviews, which examine the context of UCE and the resulting governance problems, as well as at least one initial approach [13] to theorizing the cornerstones of UCE governance.
3. The share of empirical studies is 50% and corresponds to the approach of qualitative content analyses.

A systematization of these contributions is done analogously to the addressed level in the system of UCE (macro, meso, micro level), their primary theoretical framework (cf. Table 2) listed by keywords and their empirical contribution.

As mentioned above, current research in Educational Governance focuses on the macro and meso perspective. Empirical analyses on the micro level with a focus on the actors and their interactive relationships, on the other hand, have a smaller share (Graß 2015, p. 66; Peetz and Sowada 2019, p. 250). For the knowledge field related to UCE, this scoping review comes to comparable conclusions. Of the fourteen articles selected, the majority is scoping on the macro and/or meso perspective. Three papers (Cendon et al. 2020; Heinbach and Rohs 2020; Kretschmer and Stöter 2014) focus on the external framework and influencing factors from a political, societal or historical development perspective. The content of ten contributions (cf. Table 2) ranges between the external co-contextual conditions of UCE and the

**Table 2** Included studies—key contents and character

[No.] Authors (Year)	Scope	Key Words	Research Method
[01] Brüsemeister and Schemmann (2013)	Macro, Meso level	Internal power balance and control between actors (principal agent theory); internal and external steering mechanisms of UCE governance	Qualitative, single case study
[02] Cendon et al. (2020)	Macro level	UCE as Third Mission; areas of responsibility, fields of action and goals; development and understanding of UCE in Germany	Theoretical Analysis
[03] Feld and Franz (2016)	Macro, Meso level	Situation of UCE in a macro-level context, educational management; strategic and operational implementation of UCE design and management	Qualitative, case-studies, interview
[04] Franz and Feld (2014)	Meso level	Internal organizational steering issues (universities as loosely coupled systems)	Qualitative, case-studies, interview
[05] Hanft et al. (2016)	Macro, Meso level	New Public Management, Governance structures within the organization; UCE in context of market and its internal/external stakeholders	Qualitative, case-studies
[06] Heimbach and Rohs (2020)	Macro level	Higher Education policy post-Bologna and its steering issues; New Public Management; tensions between public educational mandate and economic activities of UCE	Theoretical Analysis
[07] Heimbach and Rohs (2019)	Meso level	The role of university management in the network of hierarchical self-control Central control versus academic independence (UCE as a hybrid)	Qualitative, interview-study
[08] Heufers and El-Mafaalani (2011)	Meso level	UCE and its conflict between market and academic organization	Qualitative, interview-study
[09] Jütte and Lobe (2019)	Macro, Meso level	Political steering impulses. Organizational structures and management action in the context of UCE steering	Theoretical Analysis
[10] Klumpp (2010)	Meso level	UCE governance as risk-management; risk-return steering as conceptual model	Theoretical Analysis
[11] Kretschmer and Stöter (2014)	Macro level	Cross-university regulatory framework for UCE, mapping of UCE in cross-university financial steering systems	Longitudinal study, document analyses
[12] Schemmann (2014)	Macro, Meso level	UCE from a historical, political and international perspective; coordinating actors in a multilevel system	Theoretical Analysis
[13] Schmid and Wilkesmann (2020)	Meso, Micro Level	Practice theory (Bourdieu); actor configurations in a multi-level model; linkage between macro-, meso-, micro-level in UCE governance research	Theoretical Analysis
[14] Wilkesmann (2010)	Macro, Meso level	Organizational theory approach; managerial governance versus UCE as public good; scientific orientation versus market and practical-vocational orientation	Theoretical Analysis

steering requirements within the organization, which are partly derived from them. One contribution is devoted to the sociological, practice-theoretical foundation of a meso-micro view of structures, strategies, and actor configurations (Schmid and Wilkesmann 2020).

#### 4 Discussion: Scoping UCE governance from a multi-level-perspective

In state universities, the responsible ministries of the German federal countries play a major role in the steering of UCE and its institutions. The *German Federal States* establish the legal framework, and in this framework continuing education is now established throughout Germany as part of the catalogue of tasks of universities (Pellert 2013, p. 27). In order to implement this general requirement in concrete practice, so-called university pacts are concluded between a state and the presidents of all universities in this state. In addition, the state ministries also negotiate target agreements with the individual universities. Continuing education has become customary as part of the university portfolio, especially in these target agreements. However, the formulated goals are vary in concreteness (Kretschmer and Stöter 2014, p. 29). For this reason, it is not possible to make a statement on the scope or accuracy of external control specifications for UCE for Germany as a whole, as far as it concerns its external financial and political steering process. In principle, a need for research exists regarding to university steering mechanisms from this macro perspective. Neither the process nor the effectiveness of target agreements between ministry and university have been systematically investigated. Their influence on UCE can therefore not be described in more detail (Kretschmer and Stöter 2014, p. 31).

The politically desired development towards more autonomy for universities also has an influence on possible actions for boards. They have gained new decision-making powers through the increasing autonomy of their organizations—and are therefore in a process of reorienting their self-image. If this is to be successful, it must be possible to communicate openly about it (Scherm 2015). A particular challenge of this process is described as reconciling the independence of research and teaching with the needs of managing a modern university (Spoun and Weiner 2017). Academic participation in decision-making and the self-image of professors as independent scientists in contrast to political objectives, strategy processes and adaptation to a scientific world shaped by financial indicators. Universities must position themselves in this world, also in competition with each other. At the same time, they must cultivate and maintain the fundamental values of academic independence. Harmonizing both is to say at least difficult (Böckelmann 2017, p. 225).

The New Control Model for universities is assessed rather critically among professors, but this judgement gets more and more positive with increasing hierarchical levels (Schmid and Wilkesmann 2015, p. 65). This is where the macro and meso level are dependent: Those who provide the services of the universities by implementing teaching and research—that is the professors and scientific staff—are difficult to reach through hierarchical action (Böckelmann 2017, p. 221). For this reason a structural contradiction arises in the claim for leadership by university boards. To

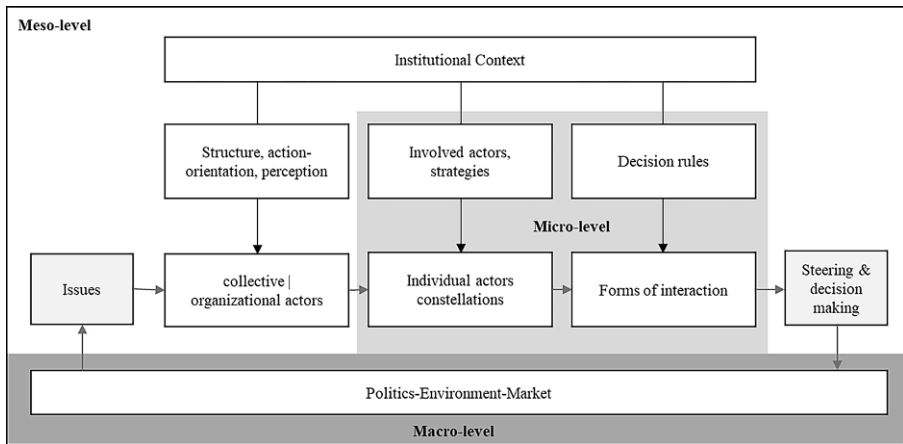
circumvent this contradiction, and to meet the legal framework, conditions as well as public discourse for the development towards a managed organisation, hybrid models are emerging in practice (Kehm 2014, p. 23). In these models, the traditional administrative structures exist parallel to the new instruments of steering and management (Lange 2008, p. 238).

The term hybrid models has been used often and might now be considered a common description of the steering model in German universities these days. UCE is described as one of a few fields in German universities where development and steering is directly related to the university board. Direct means that there is no decentralized intermediate level, such as a dean's office. Continuing education programs are always linked to the faculties in terms of content and staff, but in terms of organization they normally are separate units under the supervision of the vice-presidents who are responsible for studying and teaching (Heinbach and Rohs 2019).

Understanding UCE as a hybrid, the question arises which theoretical approaches appear to be compatible from a research perspective. Hierarchical self-control in university organizations is influenced by the political and social context. In addition, control mechanisms exist in organizations that follow institutional rules and norms. At this point, a distinction seems to make sense: organization and institution are different constructs in terms of their conceptual character. Many formal organizational structures emerge as "reflections of rationalized institutional rules" (Meyer and Rowan 1977, p. 340), in other words, as formalized translation into structures judged to be appropriate by actors. In turn, the development of institutional rules is based on a constant exchange with the organizational environment, in the sense of the classical neo-institutionalist notion of environmental isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

Returning to the theoretical foundation of research in the field of UCE governance, a theorization of the institutional embeddedness of UCE and the governance mechanisms derived, seems to be a helpful approach in a hermeneutical sense. As noted by Dollhausen and Lattke (2020, p. 102), the research context of UCE lacks a basic understanding of institutional reference systems and their coordinating effects on the actors involved. Institutional theory research thus potentially serves an analytical view of the connection between a macro and meso perspective in the multi-level system of UCE. Moreover, actor-centered institutional theories can also be a useful approach at the interface of the meso and microlevels.

Nevertheless, research and academic contributions on the governance of UCE in the German-speaking context mostly deal with the macro or meso level, as the results of this scoping review demonstrate. Actor-based analyses of governance and decision-making processes at the micro level appear less researched so far. One possible explanation could be that the "problem of the organization as a multi-level feedback system" makes actor-centered research approaches difficult (Schäffter 2013, p. 230). So, what conclusion can be drawn for UCE governance research if, from a theoretical perspective, institutional and actor-centered considerations should ideally be incorporated into the UCE multilevel system? Returning once again to Educational Governance as a kind of supraordinate discipline for UCE Governance, Nöpfl (2019, p. 130) presents a model of actor-centered institutionalism that could



**Fig. 2** Actor-centered institutionalism in UCE Governance following Näpfl (2019), Treib (2015)

fit the discussed multi-level problem with some extensions and therefore seems applicable in the field of UCE Governance as well (Fig. 2).

This model focuses on an actor-centered approach to educational governance research while including the institution as a framework for action. Following Treib (2015) and Scharpf (2006), Näpfl (2019) presents an analytical concept that allows a description of governance processes both at different levels and considering different actor constellations. As a specific extension, the elements from this model (Näpfl 2019, p. 130) are now mapped along their logical assignability to the contextual levels (macro, meso, micro) of UCE. At the macro level, environmental expectations from outside the institutional context affect UCE and its governance processes. Viewed as a trigger, the macro level provides issues that are brought to UCE from the education policy or market environment. At the same time, the institution provides structures, collective orientations, and important basic institutional perceptions that also influence the organization as a collective actor. This in turn has an impact on the actor constellations and forms of interaction at the micro level as well. Decision rules and action strategies of the actors involved at the micro level are thus balanced between the demands of the institution at the meso level and the macro influences from the political environment and the market. From a research perspective, the changed steering requirements in the sense of the New Public Management, as described at the beginning, can hereby be pictured in a more holistic context.

## 5 Conclusion and study limitations

The argument for research on UCE governance that is both institutionally and actor-centered is based on the content analysis of the selected papers in this scoping review and was not part of the primary search strategy. Nevertheless, even if institutional and actor-centered keywords were considered, the output of strongly related studies

in context of UCE governance would be expected to be equally low. With fourteen clearly contextualized contributions, the field of research in UCE governance can be therefore classified as wide open.

A common feature of all contributions is that UCE governance is a multidimensional and complex challenge in an increasingly dynamic environment. The change of governance processes in universities is much more than “just” a change in practical action. It reflects major developments in higher education policy. Accordingly, the expansion and structuring of academic and development of UCE, with all the subsequent demands on leadership in university management are directly related to the university-wide governance processes (Heinbach and Rohs 2020, p. 295).

Even though all elected papers in this review are connected to educational governance as a context in principle, either explicitly or not, there is hardly any hermeneutical recourse to educational governance theories. Subsequently, an institutional or actor-centered approach is concluded as a research need to arrive at holistic explanations in the multi-level system of UCE. Based on this, empirical statements on governance processes and leadership requirements would be possible.

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