berinfor

2018
Survey |
Managing higher education with greater agility

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1 Introduction

Digital transformation, globalisation and other major changes in society are creating an increasingly dynamic environment that, more than ever before, is calling for higher education institutions to adapt their structures and processes in order to react to changes. In this context, the word 'agility' means that higher education institutions as organisations are in a position to deal with emerging developments and new challenges more flexibly.

Agility as a concept and management method has become a widely discussed topic in recent years. This approach from the field of software development – and the corresponding mindset and tried-and-tested methods from that environment – is now applied in a wide variety of organisations, where its feasibility and impact are tested in different areas using an exploratory approach. The idea of 'doing and being agile' is also of interest in the area of higher education. Here, the fundamental question is to what extent and in which areas a higher education institution can or should be agile. Does it need to become more dynamic and more flexible as a whole in order to position itself successfully? How can agile principles and methods be integrated into the structure and culture of a higher education institution? What are the main challenges associated with making a higher education institution more agile? And on a more fundamental level: Why should a higher education institution even become more agile?

Agility as a possible concept for higher education institutions?

More specific questions relating to the topic of agility include:

- What is meant by the term 'agility' and how can the concept be applied in a higher education context?
- How agile are higher education institutions currently perceived as being?
- In which areas and to what extent can aspects of agility be seen in higher education institutions?
- What are the characteristics of an agile higher education institution?
- What and who encourages agility in a higher education context?
- What hampers agility in a higher education institution?
- Which challenges present themselves when attempting to make a higher education institution agile?
- Which methods and tactics can be used to make higher education institutions more agile?

In order to obtain insights and answers to these questions, we considered the context of 'higher education institutions' at various levels. The questions above formed the basis for the online survey conducted by Berinfor, in which 266 managers and employees from Swiss and German higher education institutions took part between April and June 2018. We would like to take this opportunity to thank the participants for completing the questionnaire and assisting the analysis with their answers and comments. We would also like to thank those who took part in the round table 'Managing higher education with greater agility'[1] that was held in July 2018.

Input from the online survey, round table and expert interviews

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1 Together with six managers from different types of higher education institution in Switzerland, Germany and Austria, we spent half a day discussing the different aspects of an agile higher education institution and the question of whether and how such institutions can be made more agile. The interesting and constructive dialogue between the participants highlighted both the diversity and the complexity of this topic. The results and findings from the round table are summarised in this report.

We also conducted interviews with experts, which gave us the opportunity to examine aspects of agility in greater detail within a higher education context. Literature research also provided insights into how the topic can be applied to higher education institutions.

OBJECTIVES OF THE 2018 SURVEY

The aim of this year's survey was to consider agility and its principles as a management approach in a higher education context. In light of the findings from the survey, the round table and individual interviews with experts, the idea of 'agility' could be seen as a kind of 'heart rate monitor' for higher education institutions. The aim was therefore to take a differentiated and discursive approach to the topic. The presented results enable initial conclusions to be drawn as to whether and to what extent an agile mindset and agile methods can be applied in higher education institutions.

STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

This report is divided into four chapters: following an introduction, the theoretical background on the topic and the concept of 'agility' are provided in the second chapter. The quantitative and qualitative results of the online survey and the round table are presented in chapter three. The fourth chapter contains a summation of the results.

We hope that you enjoy reading the Berinfor Report 2018. We look forward to discussing the topic with you in more detail and thereby helping to shape the discourse on Higher Education Management.

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2   Introduction to the topic

Digitalisation, globalisation and other major trends that are transforming society have made the markets increasingly volatile over the past decade. Today's situation can be aptly described by the term 'VUCA world'[2], which means that the world is becoming increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambivalent. Agility offers one potential answer to the question of how organisations can survive in these dynamic environment.

Agility as an answer to the 'VUCA world'

2.1   Agility as a concept

Various adjectives can be used to describe the basic idea of agility and how agile organisations operate, such as: adaptable, flexible, nimble and proactive. Since originating in the field of software development, the concept of agility has spread to numerous other areas of organisations, including product innovation, organisational development, leadership and further. Agile methods (e.g. Scrum, Kanban, Design Thinking) are adapted for use in development and innovation processes. At the same time, the aim is to acquire an agile mindset that helps to establish corporate values such as collaboration, delegation and customer orientation throughout the entire organisation. The latter calls for a new understanding of leadership focused primarily on achieving long-term objectives or a vision. This means that the organisation is no longer controlled top-down on the basis of a defined plan. Instead, the intention is embodied in a goal/vision that is implemented with the help of appropriate agile methods by collaborative teams that possess the required resources, expertise and decision-making powers.

Adaptable, flexible, nimble, proactive

CATEGORISING THE CONCEPT OF 'AGILITY'

Agility as a management approach represents on one side an agile mindset that is based on agile principles and can be categorised as an aspect of the organisational culture. On the other side agile methods can be used to make development processes iterative and more customer-oriented. Agility as a mindset and method has become increasingly important in recent years. Since originating in the field of software development[3], the application of the principles has become much more multifaceted. However, the concept, principles and the term itself are often used and interpreted ambiguously, confusingly or even incorrectly.[4] The objectives of agility as an overarching management approach are derived primarily from the confrontation with the 'VUCA world' and thus cannot always be compared with those of agile software development; instead, they show what should be included under the category of 'agility' and how the concept can be understood in one's own context.

Agility = mindset and method

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2   cf. Bennett N.G & Lemoine, J. (2014): What VUCA Really Means for You. Retrieved on 27/08/2018 from https://hbr.org/2014/01/what-vuca-really-means-for-you.

3   cf. Manifesto for Agile Software Development (2001). Retrieved on 28/08/2018 from http://agilemanifesto.org/.

4   cf. Preussig 2018: Agiles Projektmanagement – Agilität und Scrum im klassischen Projektumfeld. Haufe Lexware.

2.2 Individual levels of agility

Agility as a characteristic of an organisation's management can be demonstrated by various aspects. They describe the methodical basis and self-conception of agility as well as the prerequisites under which agility becomes applicable as an attitude and method.

IITERATIVE DEVELOPMENT AND CUSTOMER ORIENTATION

Iterative development based on customer feedback

Agile methods are characterised by the iterative development of project ideas, solutions or products by focusing on the end user respectively the needs and requirements of the customer. Needs are identified together with the customer, prototypes of the solution are developed, feedback is obtained from the customers and the product is then refined on this basis. Customer orientation and iterative development lie at the heart of the agile concept. Agile methods offer the advantage of launching solutions more quickly (faster time-to-market), developing solutions in accordance with the customer's requirements, and considering their perspective directly in the process.

COLLABORATION AND AGILE TEAMS

Skills-oriented and collaborative work in networks

An agile mindset is focused on the skills of employees and how they collaborate in order to develop efficient and successful solutions. This strong focus on collaboration helps to break down the barriers associated with a 'silo mentality'. Agile teams are composed on the basis of their skills, and they organise themselves appropriately for the task at hand. They are cross-functional and jointly decide on subsequent project steps to ensure its progress. Agile teams are composed of 'specialised generalists' who contribute to the success of a project with their skills and expertise. In this sense, it is important that agile teams regularly reflect upon their actions on the basis of feedback and adapt their working methods accordingly.

AGILE LEADERSHIP AND DELEGATION OF DECISION-MAKING POWERS

Create and communicate visions – delegate implementation

Agile leadership describes the management of an agile organization. The leaders set an objective or vision and delegate the tasks associated with achieving or realising it. This involves moving away from a plan-based approach with several stages, milestones and longer time-frames, towards an iterative approach in which the available resources are defined but there are no other frames set for finding the ideal solution (within the context of the vision). Agile teams should be able to act and make decisions within the defined scope, with the available skills and within the set budget. This increases the sense of responsibility at the development level.

LEARNING CULTURE

Testing hypotheses

Agile organisations are associated with a strong learning culture. This is characterised by short feedback loops in proximity to the end user, within which feedback on current development steps in the project is obtained regularly and at relatively short intervals. But increased collaboration also fosters mutual learning, as more experiences are shared. In order to encourage and stimulate interaction beyond the silos, suitable methods can be developed and their adequate application tested in practice. These support the flow of communication and aim to maintain a common level of knowledge. A further characteristic of a learning culture is that mistakes are permitted and actually contribute to a positive learning outcome. The idea behind allowing mistakes is that different hypotheses can be tested with the respective end users and customers.

2.3 Agility as a buzzword for higher education institutions?

'Agility' has become a management buzzword in recent times, one that is also becoming a focus of interest for higher education institutions. The extent to which an agile mindset or agile methods can find fertile ground in higher education institutions, as well as what added value or risks this may give rise to, has seldom been considered in the past.[5] This may come as a surprise, given the current situation of higher education institutions: universities, universities of applied sciences, and universities of teacher education have grown enormously as organisations over the past few years. At the same time, operational and strategic tasks have become more diverse and demanding, as have expectations in all core areas of higher education institutions. In addition, the planning, implementation and anchoring of digital transformation initiatives is posing new challenges for higher education institutions (cf. Berinfor Report 2017 on the digital future of higher education institutions).[6] Increased competition between higher education institutions was also mentioned as a catalyst for greater agility at the round table. This has led to higher education institutions being faced with new and sometimes contradictory expectations.

The higher volatility and growing complexity of the higher education landscape would therefore imply that structures as well as development and decision-making processes at higher education institutions need to become more flexible and dynamic. Legal requirements, rigid governance structures and cultural aspects can all make it more difficult to operate in an agile way, especially when it comes to the management and organisation of higher education institutions. Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider how suitable agility might be as an approach to making the development and organisation of a higher education institution more flexible, dynamic and responsive to rising expectations and demands.

On the basis of the results of the Berinfor Survey 2018 on 'Managing higher education with greater agility', it is possible to consider whether and to what extent agility could be useful as a mindset and method in a higher education context.

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5   cf. Baecker, D. (2017): Agilität in der Hochschule. In: die Hochschule 01/2017 'Einszweivierpunktnull. Digitalisierung von Hochschule als Organisationsproblem'. P. 19-29.

     cf. Twidale, M.B. & Nichols, D.M. (2013). Agile methods for agile universities. In T.A.C. Besley & M.A. Peters (Eds.), Re-imagining the Creative University for the 21st Century (pp.27-48). Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

6   cf. Balocco & Gautschi (2017): Die digitale Zukunft der Hochschule. Wie sieht sie aus und wie lässt sie sich gestalten? Retrieved on 15/06/2018 from https://www.berinfor.ch/assets/docs/befragung/2017-Report-Survey-Berinfor-Die-digitale-Zukunft-der-Hochschule.pdf.

3   Results

The results of the survey demonstrate both the complexity of the topic and the ambivalence towards it. Agility was found to be considered necessary or even unavoidable but, at the same time, is seen as an almost provocative idea and concept within the existing higher education structures and culture. In addition to the quantitative results, the qualitative results in particular allow many conclusions to be drawn on the subject of agile higher education institutions, and show how agility can be ingrained as a mindset in the context of higher education.

PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

The participants of the online survey provided information about the type of higher education institution they belong to, their work location (Switzerland or Germany), the language region (German- or French-speaking Switzerland) as well as their job role and affiliation with a centralised or decentralised organisational unit.

266 people completed the questionnaire. Traditional universities account for 41% of participants, universities of applied sciences for 48% and universities of teacher education for 9%. 2% of respondents are from other, non-university organisations. 78% of participants work for Swiss institutions of higher education, 22% for German higher education institutions.

'Country of origin' of online survey participants

Participants	Switzerland	Germany	Total
Traditional universities	42 %	36 %	41 %
Universities of applied sciences	44 %	62 %	48 %
Universities of teacher education	12 %	0 %	9 %
Other organisations	2 %	2 %	2 %

Among the respondents from Switzerland, 16% of participants are from French-speaking Switzerland and 84% from German-speaking Switzerland. Of all respondents, 37% work in a decentralised unit and 63% in a centralised unit of a higher education institution. 93% of respondents from Germany indicated that they work in a centralised unit of a higher education institution.

The respondents can be divided into four different groups in terms of job role/position: 33% of respondents are members of the higher education council, 20% of respondents hold an academic leadership position (head of department, dean, head of institute, professor), 36% belong to the category 'head of staff, infrastructure area or service unit, manager at a faculty, institute or department' and 11% stated that they did not occupy a leadership position.

ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS – METHODOLOGY

The following provides a summary of the most important quantitative and qualitative results as well as more detailed quantitative comparisons with relevant or significant results.[7] The unstructured answers, as well as the discussions and findings of the round table, have been analysed in the sense of a summarised content analysis. The various sources of data and their detailed description and interpretation serve as the basis for the closing discussion in the fourth chapter, which takes a differentiated look at the topic and outlines potential ways to achieve agility in a higher education context.

3.1 The need for more agility in higher education

The online survey opens by asking the extent to which higher education institutions are regarded as agile, and whether agility is considered necessary as a mindset and thus as a method for higher education institutions. We wanted to know whether the respondents think their higher education institution needs to become more agile.

'How necessary do you think it is to increase agility in your higher education institution?'
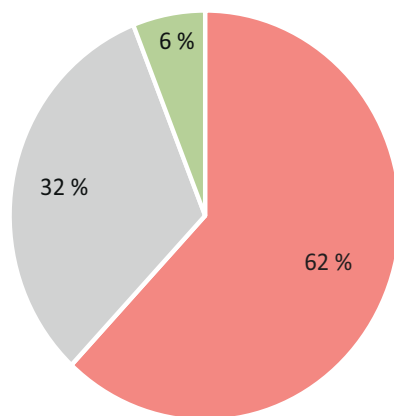
■ My higher education institution needs to become significantly more agile

■ My higher education institution is already agile enough

■ Higher education institutions do not need to become more agile

A large proportion of the respondents feel that higher education institutions need to become more agile. However, a clear minority believe that their own higher education institution is already agile enough or that agility is not generally relevant for higher education institutions.

■ 62% of the respondents stated that their higher education institution needs to become significantly more agile in order to remain able to act in its dynamic environment.

■ 32% of those surveyed said that their higher education institution is already agile enough to be able to act and respond sufficiently quickly to external changes.

■ A further 6% of the respondents believe that higher education institutions (generally) do not need to become more agile, as they are not affected by the dynamic development of their environment as much as companies engaged in the private sector.

This tendency is also reflected in the analysis of the subsequent questions. It becomes clear that there is a certain degree of ambivalence towards agility (be it as a mindset or as a method).

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7 Where it is possible to extrapolate the results calculated in the sample to the underlying totality (population), the result is deemed 'significant'. This means that the reported findings occurred by chance alone with a probability of no higher than α %. With a significance level of $\alpha = 5\%$, which is typical for social sciences, the reported findings therefore have a probability of error of 5% or lower.

3.2 Characteristics and aspects of agility in a higher education context

To obtain evidence of the status quo of agility in higher education institutions and also to identify the potential strengths and weaknesses of agility in a higher education context, we asked the respondents to rate different aspects of agility at their own institutions.

For 10 different statements, they were asked to assess the current situation of their higher education institution with regard to different agile characteristics and the extent to which the statements apply to their institution. The statements relate to the areas of strategy, structure, processes and culture at a higher education institution. The respondents were also asked to assess the current situation in terms of whether their institution 'requires significant improvement', 'is more than satisfactory' or lies somewhere in between.

The results can initially be summarised in four main points:

- The agile characteristics outlined in the statements were often assessed as 'partly' for the higher education institution, meaning that clear tendencies (weak or pronounced agile characteristic of a higher education institution) can only be identified in a small number of cases.

- At the same time, around a third of the respondents (sometimes more) specified that the statements were 'partly' applicable.

- As expected, the respondent's assessment of the current situation was congruent with whether they saw a need for improvement.

- In addition, large (mostly significant) differences were seen between the answers of the different groups of respondents.

The main findings obtained from a differentiated analysis of the data are summarised and discussed in the following. The 10 agile characteristics for which the respondents were asked to assess the current situation in the online survey are outlined.

THE FLEXIBLE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION? – OR DEALING WITH GREATER DYNAMISM

'As an organisation, my higher education institution reacts quickly and pre-emptively to its dynamic environment and changing conditions.'


- 15 %
- 47 %
- 38 %
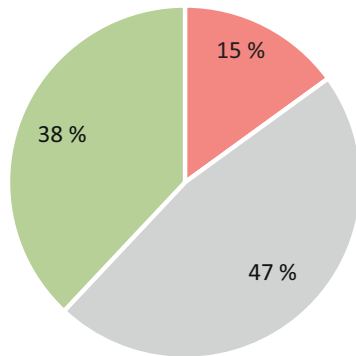
■ slightly to not at all   ■ partly

■ mostly to completely

Agility implies that an organisation can react in a flexible and pre-emptive way to external changes. Almost half of the respondents specified that their higher education institution is only partially able to react quickly and pre-emptively to its dynamic environment or changing conditions.

It is therefore hardly surprising that the majority of respondents (56%) currently assess their higher education institution's responsiveness as 'requires some improvement' to 'requires significant improvement'.

(AGILE) LEADERSHIP IN CHANGE PROCESSES – MANAGEMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS MUST LEAD BY EXAMPLE

'My higher education institution's management embodies the vision and goals set by change and transformation processes.'


- 20 %
- 31 %
- 49 %
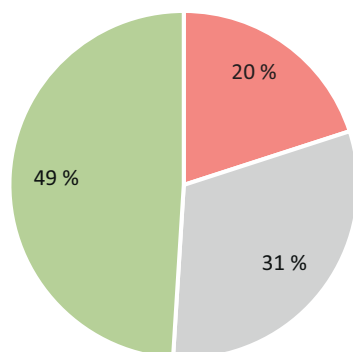
■ slightly to not at all   ■ partly

■ mostly to completely

For agility to be successful, it is essential that the management 'leads by example' to achieve the set objectives. We wanted to find out the extent to which the respondents believe that their higher education institution's management embodies the vision and goals set by change and transformation processes. Almost half of the respondents had a positive view of the current situation.

There were, however, some differences between the groups of people, with 59% of professors and 64% of the other respondents stating that this aspect was 'not at all relevant' or only 'slightly relevant'. The difference in comparison to how the people who are part of the higher education institution's management assess the situation is significant. 69% of respondents rated their 'role model function' as 'mostly' applicable to 'completely' applicable.

PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPMENT, INNOVATION AND CHANGE PROCESSES – A BALANCING ACT

'Employees are involved in development and innovation processes and can play an active role in shaping changes.'

1 %
14 %
46 %
39 %

■ slightly to not at all   ■ partly
■ mostly to completely   ■ cannot say
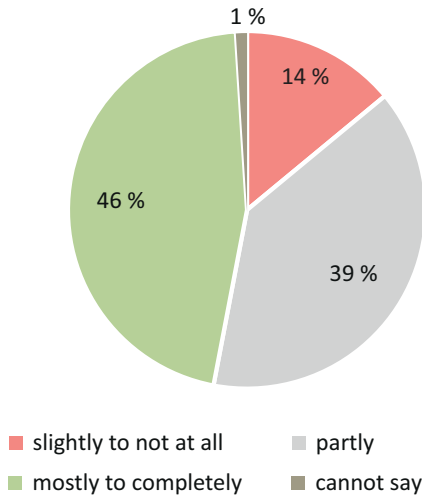
In an agile context, the degree to which employees are involved is high. The expertise of different actors is used for development, innovation and change processes, meaning that the respective process is a heavily bottom-up one.

With regard to the situation at higher education institutions, 53% of respondents said that the employees are involved only 'slightly' (39%) or 'not at all' (14%).

There are significant differences between the respondents depending on their position: 63% of members of the higher education institution's management assess the current situation as 'mostly' to 'completely' applicable, but also stated that it 'requires some improvement' (54%). About one-third of the other respondents (35% on average) assess the current situation equally.

INNOVATIONS ARE ENCOURAGED – HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS ARE 'ACTIVE'

'Innovations (such as the expansion of services, new teaching and learning formats and administrative innovations) are actively encouraged.'

1 %
11 %
61 %
27 %

■ slightly to not at all   ■ partly
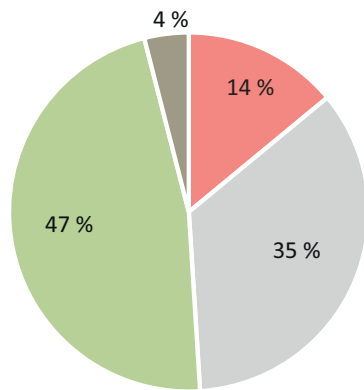■ mostly to completely   ■ cannot say
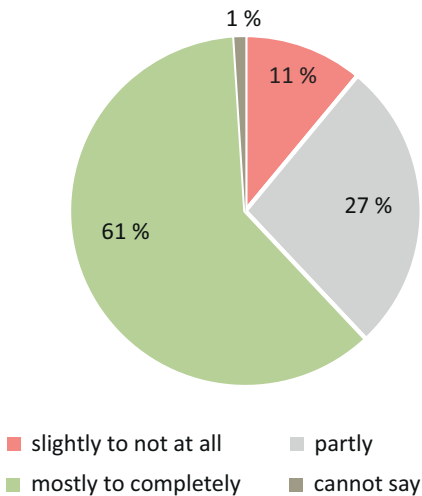
An agile environment is characterised by the fact that innovation is actively encouraged and ideas are implemented.

The participants of the survey confirm the statement that innovations are actively encouraged at the higher education institution (e.g. in teaching or administration): more than 60% of the respondents stated that this current condition is 'mostly' to 'completely' true.

From this, it can be deduced that higher education institutions as organisations are generally innovative and that they enable and encourage developments and innovations in many areas, which would imply agility in the sense of dynamism. The extent to which agile methods support innovation processes has not been clarified here.

A SCALABLE LEARNING CULTURE FOR THE INNOVATIVE DEVELOPMENT OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

'There is a learning culture at my higher education institution that enables innovative developments.'
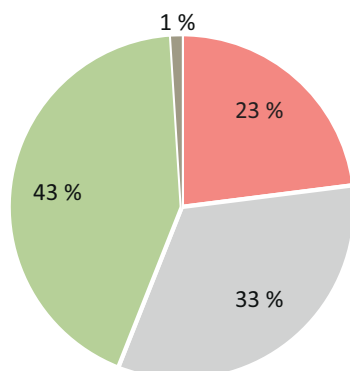

- slightly to not at all
- partly
- mostly to completely
- cannot say

Agility embraces a learning culture in which mistakes are also permitted if they are thought to harbour potential for improvements.

The respondents' answers were mixed: almost half (47%) believe that there is a learning culture at their higher education institution that enables innovative developments. 49% of the respondents assessed this condition as being only 'partly' (35%) present or only 'slightly' or 'not at all' (14%).

'THE RIGHT TO DECIDE' PRESUPPOSES TRUST – AN AMBIVALENT PICTURE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

'There is a culture of trust that gives employees extensive decision-making powers within the institution.'

- slightly to not at all
- partly
- mostly to completely
- cannot say

Agility thrives on employees or teams within an organisation having extensive decision-making powers for their area. This requires a high degree of trust in the employees and their abilities.

For higher education institutions, the picture is again ambivalent: almost a quarter of the respondents stated that a culture of trust exists only 'slightly' or 'not at all' and 33% of the respondents specified that one exists only 'partially' at their higher education institution at present.

Significant differences can be seen between the groups of respondents: 52% of respondents from the higher education institution's management and 49% of professors believe that a culture of trust exists 'mostly' or 'completely': only 38% of respondents in management roles and 18% of non-managers thought the same of the current situation.

SILO CULTURE VERSUS NETWORK CULTURE IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS?

'Work is increasingly organised within collaborative networks that transcend hierarchies and departments, in which the necessary skills of the employees are flexibly engaged.'

1 %
27 %
33 %
39 %

- ■ slightly to not at all
- ■ partly
- ■ mostly to completely
- ■ cannot say
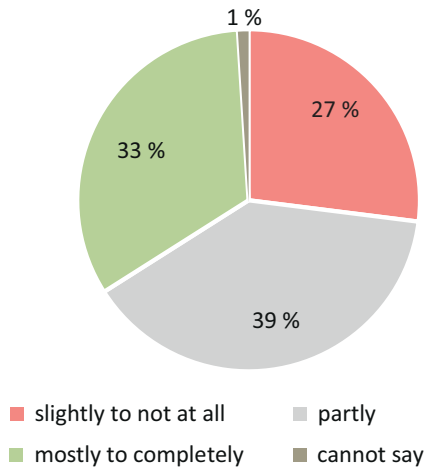
Work in agile teams is characterised by employees being put together across hierarchies and divisions according to their skills in order to work successfully on a project/a solution.

In higher education institutions, this approach appears to be rare: while one-third of the respondents stated that work is organised within collaborative networks, the remaining respondents' view of the current condition was more sceptical.

Again, there were significant differences between the groups of respondents. Approximately half of the respondents from the higher education institution's management stated that work is organised within collaborative networks, but only slightly more than a quarter of the remaining respondents have the same view of the current situation. 60% of all respondents are of the opinion that the current situation 'requires significant improvement' or 'requires some improvement'.

ITERATIVE DEVELOPMENT AND CUSTOMER ORIENTATION – LESS COMMON IN THE CONTEXT OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

'Projects aimed at the further development of the higher education institution are implemented using short feedback loops that involve the end user and are focused on their needs.'

5 %
21 %
36 %
38 %

- ■ slightly to not at all
- ■ partly
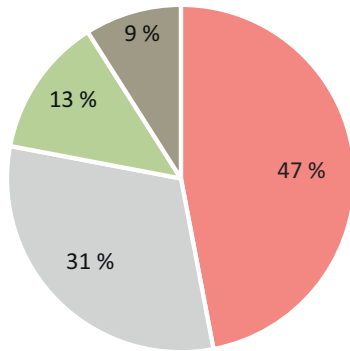- ■ mostly to completely
- ■ cannot say
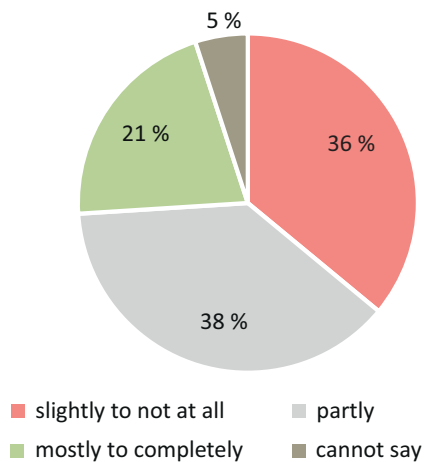
It can be assumed that development projects of all kinds are being conducted or planned at all higher education institutions. In an agile sense, these would be implemented iteratively using short feedback loops that involve the end user and are focused on their needs.

The respondents believe that the basic idea of agile project work is only implemented to a limited extent. More than a third of the respondents stated that iterative and customer-oriented approaches are used only 'slightly' or 'not at all'. Accordingly, 69% of the respondents believed that the current situation 'requires some improvement' or 'requires significant improvement'.

AGILE METHODS – NOT WELL KNOWN AND RARELY USED IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

'My higher education institution uses agile methods (such as Scrum or design thinking) in innovation processes and product and organisational development.'
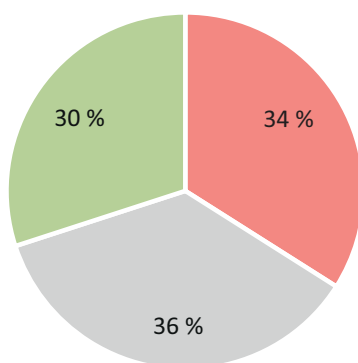

- slightly to not at all
- partly
- mostly to completely
- cannot say

Agile methods differ from traditional management methods and require appropriate knowledge of how to apply them correctly.

Agile methods are still a relatively unknown concept in higher education institutions and the corresponding methods are therefore applied only rarely. 47% of the respondents stated that agile methods are used 'slightly' or 'not at all'; at 13%, the proportion of people confirming that agile methods are used is very small. More than two-thirds of the respondents believe that (significant) improvement is needed in this field.

COMMUNICATION AS A 'CORNERSTONE' FOR MORE AGILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

'Internal communication regarding change and development projects is transparent and interactive.'

- slightly to not at all
- partly
- mostly to completely

Continuous and transparent communication is an essential prerequisite for agility, especially on change and development projects.

The results of the online survey show some ambivalence with regard to how communication is organised at higher education institutions. More than two-thirds of respondents assessed internal communication negatively.

There were significant differences between the groups of respondents. Almost half of the surveyed members from the higher education institution's management and less than half of the remaining respondents believed it is 'mostly' or 'completely' the case that internal communication regarding change and development projects is transparent and interactive. With regard to the need for improvement, the picture is similarly heterogeneous, whereby the higher education institution's management tends to find the current condition adequate but the other respondents see a greater need for action.

3.3 Opportunities and obstacles for agility in the higher education institution

The participants of the online survey were asked an open-ended question regarding

- What opportunities they see to make their higher education institution more agile as an organisation and
- Which obstacles they believe are hampering the development of an agile or more agile higher education institution.

We have provided a summary of the answers to both questions. This shows the aspects that the survey respondents and the round table guests consider important for creating an agile higher education institution.

AGILITY AS A MANAGEMENT TASK – DESIRE, CAPABILITY, PERMISSION, NEED

Agility begins at the management level of a higher education institution

A large number of the respondents associate agility with the topic of 'leadership'. Accordingly, developing and implementing agility are seen as management tasks. It therefore stands to reason that the respondents believe the management should first develop an understanding of agility that they can then implement within the higher education institution. This calls for the management to redefine its management role with agility in mind and to delegate more decision-making powers. At the same time, it became clear that higher education managers are expected to create a framework for agility in which the different groups of actors can work.

During the round table, it was also established that the management's task consists of striking a balance between making agility possible and demanding agility. Alongside the requirement that different actors of the higher education institution should want to be agile and be capable of being agile, it also seems important that they are allowed to be, or even 'need' to be, agile. This would mean creating agile spaces (whether infrastructural or intellectual) within the institution would become a management task in order to establish a permanent agile mindset.

MAKING HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES MORE AGILE

Higher education governance determines the degree of agility

The unstructured answers to the survey showed that the topic of agility is closely related to the governance of a higher education institution. A large number of the respondents believe that the existing governance structures determine the agile scope for action, both of the institution as an organisation and of its actors. The hierarchical structures and decision-making powers that make the difference between agile or non-agile are reflected in these governance structures.

The unstructured answers lead to the obvious conclusion that agility as a 'new' approach to work and the concept of organisation calls for higher education governance structures to be considered and reshaped. Participation processes, along with the extent to which people are given a say in matters, were mentioned as key characteristics of higher education structures. Once again, this gives rise to the perpetual question of the advantages and disadvantages of centralised and decentralised higher education structures. Agility tends to follow the decentralised philosophy as smaller organisational units appear more capable of acting. At the same time, decision-making powers lie more at the bottom-up level rather than the top-down one. In theory, a decentralised higher education structure should therefore favor agility. However, the respondents believe that the governance structures of a higher education institution, which are often very hierarchical, represent a contrast to agile principles in many cases and are therefore often regarded as an obstacle to agility.

AGILE AREAS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS – A MIXED PICTURE

If a differentiated view were taken of agility in different areas of higher education institutions, the outcome would likely be the same in most cases. It stands to reason that the degree of agility varies between different areas of an institution and that departments or organisational units with different degrees of agility or 'agile potential' can be found in all higher education institutions. At the round table, it was pointed out that the management's task is to identify existing agile areas or ones with potential within higher education institutions.

Identification and promotion of agile areas within a higher education institution

From the qualitative results, it was also possible to deduce which areas of the institution are perceived as agile and which areas would be suitable for applying agile principles and methods. In addition to the key academic areas of teaching (especially curriculum development), research and training, the round table participants believe the administration and, above all, the IT departments are already agile to some extent and are thought to have agile potential. Knowledge transfer and spin-offs were mentioned as further aspects, along with the organisational/operational running of the higher education institution in general and higher education development as a strategic area of the institution.

THE ROAD TO MORE AGILITY REQUIRES HUMAN AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES

Developing agile structures and an agile approach to working and thinking within a higher education institution requires human and financial resources. The existing line structures are not enough for implementing projects or development processes in a more agile way. Employees lack the capacity to implement further development projects alongside ongoing operations.

Those who want to manage their higher education institution with greater agility will have to invest in the development of more agility

This well-known conflict is particularly relevant when it comes to making a higher education institution more agile and the 'change' that this entails. It makes it more difficult to implement the ideas and innovations that foster agility in the sense of organisational development and that might also establish agility as a culture, mindset and method. At the round table, it was found that human and financial resources are also needed to support the development of employee skills, recruit competent new staff and, furthermore, develop agile processes and integrate them into the organisation. An initial investment in 'greater agility' is therefore unavoidable, although it can be assumed that this investment will pay off in the long run.

STRUCTURAL AND ORGANISATIONAL INFLUENCES (FOR OR AGAINST AGILITY)

Agility can be facilitated or hampered in equal measure by the general structural conditions or organisational structures that exist within a higher education institution. It stands to reason that the agility of a higher education institution will be influenced by internal and external factors. In the unstructured answers to the survey, factors relating to higher education policy were often cited as the reason for a higher education institution not being able to become much more agile as the external rules are too inflexible and allow little room for manoeuvre. Following on from the governance aspects mentioned above, internal organisational structures such as processes and operational structures might also make agile work (collaborative, skills-oriented, etc.) more difficult.

External framework conditions as an obstacle to agility

SILO MENTALITY MAKES IT MORE DIFFICULT TO BE AGILE

Promoting the network perspective and breaking down hierarchies

The terms 'blinkered thinking' and 'silo mentality' that came up noticeably often in the open answers imply a culture that is diametrically opposed to agile principles in higher education institutions. If people only think in terms of their own department, it becomes more difficult to develop an agile mindset and establish an agile organisation. The respondents were of the opinion that hierarchical thinking in rigid structures and processes, as well as the associated mentality, represent a major obstacle to the higher education institution becoming more agile. At the round table, it was determined that breaking down this mentality is part of an agile transformation process that is associated with both cultural and structural changes.

GREATER AGILITY REQUIRES THE NECESSARY SKILLS

Both in the online survey and at the round table, it was pointed out that little to nothing is known about agility as a management approach in many cases (whether as a mindset or a method) and it is thus not very widespread in higher education institutions. In the past, agile project management has been considered and applied mainly by the institutions' IT departments.

Training existing employees and recruiting new ones under the agile philosophy

Many of the respondents in different areas of the higher education institutions believe that knowledge of agile management methods and the agile mindset is often vague and is also associated with certain preconceptions. In order to gain a better understanding of agility and to recognise and work out the advantages and benefits for one's own organisation, employee development measures such as training courses or application-oriented workshops on agility would appear to be useful for developing a fundamental understanding of agile management and the associated methods. These would teach the necessary skills while also providing an opportunity to consider the benefits of agile management for the higher education institution.

In this respect, it was also pointed out at the round table that new employees could be recruited 'under the agile philosophy'. Recruit people who know and use agile working methods and because an agile environment can be an attractive place to work, especially for junior staff.

AGILE CULTURE – AREN'T HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AGILE BY DEFINITION?

Higher education institutions are highly agile in certain areas – but they often lack an agile mindset

The above explanations of the quantitative survey results show that the situation with regard to agility in higher education institutions is somewhat ambivalent. The question of whether and to what extent an agile culture exists within higher education institutions is therefore answered in similarly ambivalent terms. It can be assumed that higher education institutions are highly agile organisations in certain areas. For example, institutions with a strong focus on research or a strong teaching profile are perceived as agile. They demonstrate their 'latent agility' in the sense that some of them have been capable of evolving continuously and sometimes rapidly in their core areas and as an organisation for centuries. At the same time, as already mentioned, many of the respondents believe that the often hierarchical structures and processes of a higher education institution stand in direct contrast to the agile mindset.

The discussions at the round table also highlighted the fact that an institution's development towards an agile culture is a long-term process that can be shaped and developed on various levels. From the respondents' point of view, the development of agility requires higher education institutions to think about their own structures and processes.

It was also mentioned that ideas and projects emerging bottom-up within the institution (in a wide variety of areas) in particular generate positive dynamics that can benefit the development of an agile higher education institution.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST AN 'AGILE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION'

Some of the open answers from the online survey also highlighted what might be described as 'suspicion' towards agility as a mindset and method. At the same time, individual feedback from the survey and the discussions with the round table guests suggested that managers and employees at higher education institutions often see agility as a trend that is currently 'en vogue'.
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Agility = short-lived trend or even just a fad?

This reveals fear of the changes that might result from developing an agile culture. For example, there are concerns that agility will result in higher education institutions no longer being seen as 'intellectual spaces' guaranteeing time and space. At the same time, the point was raised that more agility could lead to 'rash decisions' that have not been thought through and have far-reaching consequences. Another argument against was that 'administrative hyperactivity' already exists and could destroy 'tried-and-tested processes' if there is too much agility. Furthermore, a fundamental task of higher education institutions is to preserve knowledge that requires a firmer construct than a fleeting, agile organisation.

Does agility contradict higher education culture?

USING AGILE METHODS TO SHAPE COLLABORATION AT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

The open answers showed that the desire for more efficiency in day-to-day collaboration within higher education institutions could be met through greater agility and purposeful use of specific agile methods (e.g. Design Thinking, Scrum, Kanban). Agile methods would serve as 'tools' that can be used to support collaboration, interdisciplinary work as well as meetings and strategic development processes in everyday line operations. As mentioned above, the necessary methodical knowledge is often lacking. The specified training measures could help to fill this gap.

Shaping higher education development processes with agile methods

MANAGING TRANSFORMATION WITH GREATER AGILITY? WAYS TO BECOME MORE AGILE

The question as to how higher education institutions can be managed with greater agility now arises again. The round table participants worked out that agility itself as a mindset, as well as the purposeful application of agile methods, can lead to cultural and structural change within a higher education institution. Agile structures and agile work could help to make changes such as digital transformation more extensive and sustainable. Both entail a change process that has to be shaped step by step. It is essential that the employees of the higher education institution are sufficiently involved and are able to support and contribute to the change process.

Taking the road to greater agility means embracing change

Create structural conditions for greater agility

The round table also offered the opportunity to come up with ideas and potential ways to become more agile. Structural and cultural aspects were identified that both encourage and demand agility as a mindset and a method. On the structural side, the following ideas were conceived at the round table or mentioned in the discussions with experts:

- Along with providing an infrastructure (e.g. workspaces, digital collaboration platforms, innovation hubs) that supports agility in a structural sense, the application of agile project management and the digitalisation of processes were named as important structural measures.

- At the same time, it is important to create incentives to encourage agility and highlight the value of it (e.g. supporting agile pilot projects).

- 'Decentralised autonomy' of individual organisational units also appeared to be important as it increases their ability to act and strengthens their governance.

- Agility could also be increased through stricter separation of strategic and operational projects, which in turn would lead to processes and planning being more efficient.

- Teams that develop and implement projects could increasingly be composed on a skills basis. Feedback loops would ensure that other stakeholders are involved and have a say without needing to be involved in the actual operational process.

- With regard to the aforementioned aspect of teams, it was also noted that skills profiles should be sharpened as early as the employee recruitment stage so that teams on agile projects can be composed in an interdisciplinary and goal-oriented way.

Create cultural conditions for greater agility

On the cultural side, the following measures could help pave the road towards greater agility:

- The staff of higher education institutions need sufficient time to deal with the topic of agility, to acquire the necessary skills and – as mentioned – to be permitted and willing to be 'agile'. This calls for a certain degree of freedom to 'experiment' and the option of trying out agile working.

- It was mentioned that one of the main duties of the institution's management (or of the management of individual organisational units) is to open itself up to specific strategic topics that need agility in order to be implemented.

- Another idea was to promote interdisciplinary project-based learning, work and research from the Master's level onwards so that the basic principle of agility becomes a matter of course.

4 Summation

The presented results can be summarised in six key points:

- It is regarded as necessary that higher education institutions become more agile. At the same time, higher education institutions are already perceived as agile in many areas. Nevertheless, there appears to be a lot of potential for higher education institutions to become more agile overall.

- There is clear ambivalence with regard to agile characteristics of higher education institutions, which is reflected in frequent 'partly' answers. Among other things and as explained in the previous paragraph, this ambivalence is due to the complexity of higher education institutions.

- Agile methods, an open feedback culture and more agile forms of collaboration are considered the main areas in which higher education institutions need to take action.

- Developing and encouraging agility within higher education institutions are key management tasks that must be planned and carried out.

- Agility requires the necessary structural and cultural framework conditions to be in place.

- 'Managing higher education with greater agility' also means developing the skills of employees and involving them in change processes.

As a whole, it can be said that agility as a mindset and method offers one way of shaping the further development of a higher education institution. Agility has the potential to pave the way for new forms of collaboration within higher education institutions. The concept of agility creates an attitude and a belief of how collaboration can be shaped and how new 'products' can be developed in the form of ideas, solutions and offers. To this end, it is necessary to create the appropriate framework conditions so that agility can be used as a management approach or a mindset. As a further summation, we would like to share the following thoughts:

4.1 Making higher education institutions fit for the future with agility

'Higher education institutions must prepare themselves for the future. We don't know what the educational landscape will look like in ten years' time.' (Quote from the round table). Today's higher education institutions appear to be well positioned for the most part. They have shown an ability to deal successfully with a multitude of changes in recent years, such as growing student numbers, developments in the Bologna Process, structural expansion and growth.

Agility is one option

A look towards the future, however, shows that some major challenges await that will require them to be more agile. Last but not least, institutions must anticipate the changes that a dynamic digital transformation process will bring. Agility (as a management approach and attitude) can increase a higher education institution's ability to react more flexibly to external dynamics as an organisation. Agility can thus be seen as an opportunity for a higher education institution to deal with different development scenarios that affect it and to survive in the 'VUCA world' in the long term.

AGILITY IS FIRST AND FOREMOST A MINDSET

Agility: desire – capability – permission, plus need

In order for a higher education institution to be agile, it is essential that the various actors have an agile mindset. To develop an agile mindset, higher education institutions must fundamentally consider the issue of agility at different levels of the institution (e.g. at management level, for individual departments/organisational units).

Thinking and acting in agile terms come more into focus when the managers at higher education institutions embody basic agile values, create leeway for agility and delegate more decision-making powers. The three-pronged principle of 'desire – capability – permission' is important here, along with the aspect of 'need'. The management's task is therefore to enable and encourage agility, but also to demand it.

USING AGILE METHODS IN THE RIGHT MEASURE

Context-sensitive application of agility

Developing agility does not simply mean applying agile methods to most of a higher education institution's activities. It is about identifying which areas could be improved with agile methods. Answering this question calls for an initial assessment of agile methods, their principles and their objectives.

The use of agile methods can be tested iteratively in individual areas of a higher education institution. Development and innovation areas tend to be more suitable for agile approaches, whereas processes with strict requirements due to specific standards (e.g. accountancy, ISO standards) usually offer little scope for agility.

4.2 Becoming agile means changing

Becoming more agile also means distancing oneself from old habits

Developing greater agility is a far-reaching process that affects the structure and culture of a higher education institution and is associated with changes. Becoming more agile also means rethinking things, distancing oneself from old habits and permitting new things.

The shift towards greater agility can be seen as a comprehensive transformation process. The cultural level is supplemented with agile corporate values that trickle down to the day-to-day work. At process level, agile methods for individual areas are developed, adapted and implemented step by step. At methodological level, it is also necessary to develop the employees' skills and create agile spaces (digital and physical). These form the basis for open collaboration and communication, both of which are essential characteristics of agile methods.

At the same time, the path towards a more agile organisation can be shaped through a bottom-up process in which existing agile teams within the higher education institution are identified and activated as 'germ cells' that disseminate their approaches throughout the organisation. If no potential germ cells yet exist, experimentation with agile methods and approaches could be carried out in individual, newly launched areas or projects.

There is no confirmed one-size-fits-all blueprint for becoming more agile. Simply forcing agile methods and values upon the existing processes and organisation will only have a very limited effect in most cases. The values and methods are much more likely to be effective if they are translated to suit the unique attributes of one's own organisational structure and stakeholders, taking into account the specific context. In various real-world examples, the shift towards more agility also shows that the greater sense of responsibility (through delegation of powers) and the increased collaboration through feedback loops can make the transformation process very strenuous for employees. Furthermore, it is often said that this new way of working does not necessarily fit with the ideals of all type of employees.

No enforcement of agile methods but, instead, translation to suit own context

BECOMING AGILE MEANS CHANGE – BUT BEING AGILE MAKES CHANGE EASIER

The Berinfor Survey 2017 on the digital future of higher education institutions highlighted the difficulty of implementing and integrating new approaches and concepts in organisations against the backdrop of digital transformation. In this sense, agility could offer a solution for the sustainable implementation. Changes can be rooted more firmly in the organisation through a customer and user orientation, an increased sense of responsibility, delegation of decision-making powers and iterative development processes.

4.3 Where to start?

In summary, it can be said: in order to manage higher education institutions with greater agility, it appears to make sense to initially address the topic of agility in depth at the management level of the institution.

Possible measures and approaches for achieving greater agility include,...

- Considering the extent to which agility (as an attitude and method) could be used as a tool to assist the further development of the higher education institution.

- Identifying areas within the higher education institution that have agile potential.

- Identifying stakeholders with whom collaboration could be made more agile.

- Creating a comprehensive programme for developing agility (vision, values, planning and structure for programme development, competence development, etc.) or, alternatively,

- applying agile methods in individual areas or projects by testing and experimenting in the sense of the aforementioned 'germ cell' metaphor, following a bottom-up approach.

- Encouraging the discussion of agility-related questions or possibilities within the higher education institution (e.g. peer exchange/coaching in the context of relevant events) and thereby putting the basic idea of agility (communication) at the center.

- Deriving a positive learning outcome for other areas of the higher education institution from successful examples so that more agility can be implemented continuously as a mindset and method in different contexts.

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