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# Coordination modes in higher education management: a qualitative–reconstructive typology from German higher education development projects

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## ABSTRACT

This study reconstructs a typology of coordination modes in the university third space, drawing on externally funded HE development projects at German universities. It asks how project coordinators enact steering and which ideal-typical coordination modes can be identified. Previous research on third-space roles and projectification describes the growing relevance of hybrid management positions in HEIs yet lacks an empirically grounded typology specifying steering orientations and forms of embeddedness. Conceptualising project coordination as a governance resource, the study proposes two analytical dimensions structuring a four-mode typology. Drawing on 20 qualitative guideline interviews and reconstructive ideal-type comparison, it derives four modes with distinct role self-understandings, instrument repertoires and decision pathways. The typology refines understanding of managerial roles in the third space and offers guidance for integrating such positions into HE governance, with implications for systems where projectification is salient.

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Project coordination; higher education management; governance; third space; projectification; typology

## 1. Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have undergone a phase of growing institutional autonomy and competitive governance. Reform initiatives associated with New Public Management sought to tighten coupling and reduce coordination problems through stronger strategic coherence (Hautala, Helander, and Korhonen 2018; Kanniainen, Pekkola, and Kivistö 2021; Kloke and Krücken 2012; Lange 2008). Classic higher education (HE) research, however, describes HEIs as loosely coupled organisations with high internal complexity (Muselin 2007; Weick 1976), and empirically, hybrid arrangements have emerged rather than fully tight coupling: new steering instruments are intertwined with the enduring logics of academia (Canhilar, Lepori, and Seeber 2016; Fumasoli, Barbato, and Turri 2020). Strategic change remains only partially controllable through hierarchy. Project formats therefore gain importance as instruments of steering across HEIs (Besio 2009; Dollinger 2020; Mrohs 2025; Wald, Ingason, and Fridgerisson 2025).

Within these hybrid arrangements, new professional roles have emerged that operate beyond traditional career paths, often referred to as higher education (HE) managers or third-space professionals (Hoelscher and Lauer 2024; Krempkow and Höhle 2021; Whitchurch 2018, 2024). Among them, project coordinators occupy a particular position: they steer projects with limited formal authority and on a temporary contract (Hanft et al. 2016; Lehmkuhl 2018). Yet despite the growing importance of such roles, systematic knowledge about the distinct modes through which coordination operates in the third space remains limited.

This article addresses this gap by reconstructing a typology of coordination modes from German university development projects. The guiding question is: how do project coordinators enact coordination in the university third space, and which ideal–typical coordination modes can be reconstructed from their accounts?

To answer this question, the article proceeds in four steps. First, it situates project coordination within HE management research and specifies the research gap. Second, it outlines the research design, which draws

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on content analysis for systematic coding and ideal-type reconstruction for pattern formation. Third, it presents four coordination modes illustrated with condensed case vignettes. Fourth, it discusses implications for research and practice, including institutional integration of project coordination roles.

## 2. Project coordination in the third space

Third-space professionals and HE managers have taken on tasks across a wide spectrum of HE activities, including quality management and teaching evaluation (Ansmann, Brase, and Seyfried 2014) to research coordination (Boud et al. 2014), continuing education (Hanft et al. 2016) and digital strategy implementation (von der Heyde and Gerl 2022). They act as boundary spanners between academia, administration and external partners (Kloke and Krücken 2010; O'Reilly et al. 2019; Whitchurch 2012, 2018, 2024).

Within this spectrum, project coordinators constitute a specific variant. They steer externally funded projects under two structural conditions that distinguish them from other third-space roles: an implicit leadership claim alongside limited formal authority and precarious temporary employment (Hanft et al. 2016; Lehmkuhl 2018; Mrohs 2026; O'Reilly et al. 2019). Despite their growing importance, project coordinators have received only limited research attention. Research on HE management primarily discusses organisational change in HEIs at a general level (Kehm, Merkator, and Schneijderberg 2010; Krempkow and Höhle 2021). At the same time, coordinative and management activities between research and administration are receiving increasing attention (Ansmann, Brase, and Seyfried 2014; Hanft et al. 2016). What is missing, however, is a specific focus on the coordination of externally funded HE development projects, which follow a particular steering logic. While projectification is increasingly documented as a cross-system phenomenon (Dollinger 2020; Jacobsson and Jałocha 2021), the coordinative practices through which such projects are actually steered remain under-researched.

With regard to role perception among HE managers, prior work has mapped identities (Whitchurch 2012, 2018, 2024), communicative and coordinative competences (Muszyńska and Marx 2019; Rathke, Krempkow, and Janson 2023), social and organisational competences (Kehm, Merkator, and Schneijderberg 2010; Krempkow and Höhle 2021), positional heterogeneity (Schneijderberg and Merkator 2013), and self-perceptions of HE professionals (Hoelscher and Lauer 2024; Schneijderberg and Schneider 2013). These studies describe *who* coordinators are and *where* they sit, but not *how* coordination is concretely enacted in project settings.

Two research gaps follow from this. First, it is unclear how coordinative roles are concretely configured within the third space and how actors reflect on their steering practices. Second, empirically grounded coordination modes are missing that capture how third-space professionals enact organisational steering. Given the heterogeneity of these roles (Hoelscher and Lauer 2024; Whitchurch 2018, 2024), developing such modes appears both analytically useful and practically relevant. This study addresses both gaps by reconstructing coordination modes from externally funded HE development projects at German universities.

The following section outlines the methodological approach used to reconstruct such modes from interview data.

## 3. Methodological approach

For examining the coordination modes of project coordinators in the third space, externally funded research and development projects at German HEIs at the intersection of digitalisation and HE teaching are suitable cases. They make it possible to observe projects used as HEI governance instruments (Dollinger 2020; Jacobsson and Jałocha 2021) and, in particular, projects that address digitalisation as a structurally transformative phenomenon (Stalder 2018) intended to trigger institutional development. At the same time, project coordinators are described as central actors and conditions for project success in HE development (Kretschmer and Bischoff 2017; Wolff, Bartel, and Martens 2025).

*Sample.* This study is part of a qualitative interview project on the steering and organisation of externally funded research and development projects with a focus on digitalisation in HE teaching. In spring 2024, 109 single-partner projects from four funding lines at the interface of digitalisation and teaching were identified. Collaborative consortia were excluded because their steering logics differ fundamentally. A total of 20 project coordinators were interviewed, 11 of whom came from universities and 9 from universities of

applied sciences. Project leadership was located in HE management, professorships or third-space units. Most of the 20 coordinators were women and worked full-time on their project (for a detailed sample overview, see Appendix A).

*Data collection.* Based on this sampling, 20 interviews were conducted until empirical saturation was reached. Saturation was assessed during data collection. Interviewing continued until successive interviews no longer introduced new thematic aspects across the main topics of the guideline. From interview 16 onward, additional interviews confirmed existing accounts without generating new thematic dimensions.

The interviews were open, qualitative guideline interviews (Mayring 2022) with narrative openings (Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2021). Open questions were designed to access respondents' own priorities and steering practices. An initial open question on tasks and challenges in project coordination created a space for narration. Follow-up questions probed project structures, decision-making processes, collaboration, and perceptions of roles and project effects. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded, fully transcribed and anonymised. They lasted between 40 and 90 min and took place from March to May 2024.

*Analytical procedure.* The material was analysed using qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2022) supported by MAXQDA to develop a systematic category structure. This structure then served as the basis for ideal-type reconstruction. The analytical process followed an interpretive logic aimed at reconstructing coordination rationalities from actors' meaning structures rather than observable behaviour. The coding started deductively based on the thematic blocks of the interview guide to access respondents' explicit knowledge. These blocks concerned the role of project coordination, challenges in cooperation, formal and informal structures, and the perceived effects of the projects. This initial category system was then inductively differentiated as patterns emerged in the empirical material.

Building on this category system, the coordination modes were reconstructed as ideal types in a Weberian sense (Weber 1976). As heuristic constructs, they accentuate characteristic features of coordination practices rather than describing individual cases exhaustively. The underlying assumption was that project coordination in the third space is not uniform but shaped by varying configurations of role understandings, action patterns, and structural conditions.

Type formation followed Kluge's (2000) procedure for empirically grounded typology construction. Individual cases were analytically compressed through interpretive comparison and integrated into overarching patterns of coordination. The development was iterative, proceeding as a heuristic approximation in the interplay between the category system, case material and theoretical guiding ideas. An interpretation group provided external scrutiny and discussed interim versions of the typology and associated anchor examples (Reichertz 2013). Following Kränke et al. (2025), ChatGPT (GPT-4) was used as an additional reflection tool during type formation. Preliminary mode descriptions and contrasting case summaries were submitted as prompts; the model's responses served as external impulses to challenge categorical boundaries and surface potential blind spots. All interpretive decisions remained with the researcher: ChatGPT output was treated as a heuristic stimulus, not as analytical authority. This use complements, rather than replaces, the collaborative interpretation group.

From the resulting category system, five features emerged that showed high discriminatory power across cases and aligned with existing theorisation of loosely coupled HEIs and third-space roles: communication practices (Rathke, Krempkow, and Janson 2023; Whitchurch 2012), decision-making processes (Krempkow and Höhle 2021; Mrohs 2026; Stratmann 2014), and the handling of hierarchies (Krempkow and Höhle 2021; Whitchurch 2012) and organisational guidelines (Ansmann, Brase, and Seyfried 2014; Pohlenz 2010; von der Heyde and Gerl 2022), as well as role self-understanding in HE management contexts (Hoelscher and Lauer 2024; Schneijderberg and Schneider 2013; Whitchurch 2024). Systematic comparison across cases along these five features revealed two overarching contrasts that structure the typology as analytical dimensions:

1. *Coordination practice:* The coordination practice differed between *administrative* and *developmental* approaches: Administrative coordination primarily binds through safeguarding and implementing organisational processes, compliance and reporting, whereas developmental coordination enables progress by remaining close to substantive work and mobilising leeway to maintain momentum. This contrast emerged consistently in case comparisons and provides the first axis for the typology.
2. *Form of embeddedness:* The coordination role and its involvement within projects are perceived in different ways, showing contrasting forms of embeddedness. Integrative embeddedness co-produces

decisions through inclusion and facilitation; driving embeddedness frames choices and advances progress by preparing decisions for formal leaders. This contrast furnishes the second axis.

These two dimensions capture the most salient contrasts in how coordinators structured decision-making and positioned themselves within organisational environments, thereby rendering the diversity of coordination practices empirically visible and providing the analytical scaffolding for the typology. Throughout the coding process, assignments to modes were iteratively checked, refined and linked to anchor examples (Mayring 2022). This yielded four ideal–typical modes of project coordination, each defined by a distinct combination of coordination practice and form of embeddedness:

- Project coordination in the mode of collective action (mode 1),
- Project coordination in the mode of pragmatic–strategic task execution (mode 2),
- Project coordination in the mode of cooperative integration of perspectives (mode 3),
- Project coordination in the mode of participatory facilitation (mode 4).

#### 4. Findings: the four modes of project coordination

Following the analytical grid outlined above, the four coordination modes are presented in turn (Table 1). The first two modes of coordination practices display *administrative* orientations, whereas the latter two are characterised by *developmental* orientations. At the same time, the modes differ in how coordinators perceive their role regarding their form of embeddedness, ranging from *driving* to *integrative*.

##### 4.1. Project coordination in the mode of collective action

As an administrative mode with integrative embeddedness, coordination here centres on collective action. It is driven by a strong need for shared responsibility, appreciative communication, and intensive relationship and networking activities.

In terms of communication, the mode is participation-oriented and integrative. Exchange takes place regularly through ‘lots of jour fixes’ (Interview 8, Pos. 12) and ‘in the chat’ (Interview 8, Pos. 86). Decisions are prepared jointly, with topics discussed ‘until we have developed a shared understanding of the points and find a consensus’ (Interview 8, Pos. 75). When dealing with hierarchies, collegial cooperation on an equal footing dominates, while formal structures are activated primarily in conflict situations: ‘if there is trouble [...], then the line of communication to project leadership is very quickly established in order to resolve the issues’ (Interview 11, Pos. 14). Organisational requirements are largely accepted and followed, for example by taking care ‘not to change the timeline’ (Interview 6, Pos. 75), even when they are perceived as constraining. The coordinators interpret their role in the HE system as service-oriented and community-related. Project coordination is understood as community building and as a contribution to the university community in which ‘networking [...] is a core aspect’ (Interview 18, Pos. 66).

##### 4.2. Project coordination in the mode of pragmatic–strategic task execution

As an administrative mode with driving embeddedness, coordination here centres on pragmatic–strategic task execution. The primary aim is to safeguard the project process efficiently through a solution-oriented and strategic–pragmatic stance.

**Table 1.** The four modes of project coordination.

		Coordination practice	
		Administrative	Developmental
Role perception: form of embeddedness	Integrative	<i>Mode 1</i> Project coordination in the mode of collective action	<i>Mode 3</i> Project coordination in the mode of cooperative integration of perspectives
	Driving	<i>Mode 2</i> Project coordination in the mode of pragmatic–strategic task execution	<i>Mode 4</i> Project coordination in the mode of participatory facilitation

Communication is goal-oriented and 'needs-based' (Interview 2, Pos. 53), which means that 'things can be coordinated very quickly' (Interview 2, Pos. 53). Decision-making is situation-dependent, especially when there is pressure to act or urgency: 'Either I decide independently or I submit a decision proposal' (Interview 18, Pos. 26). In dealing with hierarchies, an ambivalent position becomes visible: the project coordinator is 'perceived as quasi leadership' (Interview 4, Pos. 127) by staff, while interaction with 'the professorial colleagues' (Interview 4, Pos. 127) is more collegial. Organisational requirements are interpreted flexibly: Room for manoeuvre is used deliberately and deviations are justified in creative ways, for example when there was 'no reasonable project reference' (Interview 7, Pos. 12) for project expenditures. This ensures that formal requirements impede the project as little as possible. The role is understood as strategically networked and action-oriented: the coordinator perceives the position as the 'backbone of the project, trying to ensure as smooth a course as possible' (Interview 6, Pos. 4).

### **4.3. Project coordination in the mode of cooperative integration of perspectives**

As a developmental mode with integrative embeddedness, coordination here centres on the cooperative integration of perspectives. Its central characteristic is close linkage to substantive work and the capacity to connect different perspectives within the project.

Communication is cooperative and close to project themes, where 'content monitoring' (Interview 1, Pos. 4) is intended to identify needs at an early stage so that the coordinator can offer timely input, and 'different perspectives' can be brought together (Interview 1, Pos. 22). Decision-making is configured in different ways: the coordinator decides 'what happens at the operative level' (Interview 8, Pos. 77), while decisions that 'have a political dimension within the university' (Interview 8, Pos. 77) are prepared and taken together with project leadership. The hierarchies are perceived as relatively flat and are shaped more by content than by formal position. At the same time, classic approval processes exist in individual areas, where 'you do notice a bit of a hierarchy' (Interview 8, Pos. 38). Organisational requirements are perceived as restrictions, but pragmatic solutions can be developed when milestones cannot be achieved in order to clarify what is needed 'so that they can achieve them and so that we can argue our case to [the third-party funding provider]' (Interview 9, Pos. 32). The role is understood as 'mediating perspectives' (Interview 10, Pos. 62) to connect organisational and substantive viewpoints and thus advance development processes.

### **4.4. Project coordination in the mode of participatory facilitation**

As a developmental mode with driving embeddedness, coordination here centres on participatory facilitation. It is characterised by flexible involvement of project participants, with the coordinator acting in a supportive and framing role.

Communication is situational and enables timely clarification of issues. Smaller questions are handled informally 'with a chat program' (Interview 10, Pos. 76), while more complex coordination is 'prepared well' (Interview 10, Pos. 24). Decision-making processes are structured and prepared so that the project leader can make informed decisions. Hierarchies 'are accepted' (Interview 2, Pos. 55) despite the collegial atmosphere, particularly in decision-making: it is 'absolutely clear that the project manager has to make the decision and not me' (Interview 2, Pos. 55). Organisational requirements are followed in a rule-conforming way and are also used to legitimise decisions. At the same time, room for manoeuvre is used pragmatically to enable project progress, even where formal requirements limit flexibility: 'I can justify why things are the way they are, for example in communication with [the funder]' (Interview 10, Pos. 46). The role is understood as an 'enabler' (Interview 15, Pos. 27) of development processes.

### **4.5. Synthesis**

Taken together, the modes display a polarisation along the first axis: Modes 1 and 2 predominantly bind coordination through administrative procedures, whereas Modes 3 and 4 enable progress through substantive, content-proximate work. The second axis clarifies how decisions are reached: integrative

**Table 2.** Key characteristics of coordination modes across five analytical dimensions.

	Mode 1 Collective action	Mode 2 Pragmatic–strategic task execution	Mode 3 Cooperative integration of perspectives	Mode 4 Participatory facilitation
<i>Communication practice</i>	Participation-oriented with frequent jour fixes	Solution-oriented, goal & needs-based	Content monitoring, connecting actors	Situational: informal for minor, prepared for complex issues
<i>Decision-making processes</i>	Consensus-based; escalation when friction arises	Unilateral on operational matters; prepared proposals for higher-impact	Operative by coordinator; political with leadership	Decision rights with project leader; coordinator curates options
<i>Handling of hierarchies</i>	Backstop for escalation only; day-to-day collegial	'Quasi leadership' with staff; collegial with professors	Flat in daily practice; classic approvals in specific areas	Accepted as anchor for final decisions; disciplined use
<i>Handling of organisational guidelines</i>	Timelines & milestones respected	Pragmatically interpreted; deviations justified ex ante	Pragmatic solutions negotiated; progress defended to funder	Rules legitimise & small gaps exploited pragmatically
<i>Role self-understanding</i>	Service & community-oriented	Project 'backbone'; strategically networked	Mediating perspectives; aligning requirements with ambitions	'Enabler' of development; structured decision framing

embeddedness co-produces decisions through inclusion and facilitation; driving embeddedness either takes operational decisions independently or advances progress by structuring choices for formal leaders.

While Modes 1 and 3 share an integrative form of embeddedness, they differ in their steering logic. Mode 1 integrates through procedural routines, consensus-seeking, and community building. Mode 3 integrates through content monitoring and the active mediation of substantive perspectives. Likewise, Modes 2 and 4 share a driving form of embeddedness but diverge on the first axis. Mode 2 drives progress within administrative coordination by safeguarding procedures and justifying exceptions within given rules. Mode 4 drives progress within developmental coordination by curating options for formal decision-makers and framing processes rather than safeguarding compliance. Table 2 summarises the key characteristics across the five analytical dimensions.

Empirically, individual coordinators may shift between modes depending on project phases or situational demands; the modes capture recurrent patterns, not fixed attributes. The polarisation along the first axis thus proved particularly salient, with the second axis appearing more fluid, as some coordinators adapted their embeddedness depending on decision complexity or time pressure.

## 5. Discussion

This study has reconstructed the steering practices of project coordinators in the third space along four ideal-typical coordination modes.

The typology builds on and complements existing frameworks that address third-space professionals from different angles. Whitchurch's (2012) typology distinguishes four professional dispositions (bounded, cross-boundary, unbounded and blended), capturing how identities form in hybrid roles. O'Reilly et al.'s (2019) contingency model catalogues coordinator roles and effectiveness factors in research and technology transfer projects. The present study extends these accounts by reconstructing how coordinators enact steering in HE development contexts, shifting the focus from identities and role catalogues to patterned coordination practices. More specifically, the results show that project coordination in HEIs is shaped in distinctive ways by the logic of loosely coupled systems (Weick 1976). Despite the coupling intentions associated with projects (Dollinger 2020; Jacobsson and Jałocha 2021), decisions cannot be implemented in a linear top-down manner with clear authority. They arise through negotiation processes that depend strongly on communicative patterns, relationship work, and the situational interpretation of rules. Steering is realised primarily through horizontal coordination and intermediary roles (Hoelscher and Lauer 2024; Krempkow and Höhle 2021; Whitchurch 2018, 2024). Project coordinators do not orient their action solely toward formal requirements; they rely to a high degree on relationship work, negotiated alignment and flexible readings of institutional rules. The modes can be read as practical responses to loose coupling and third-space constellations at the interface of administration and

academia. Where central steering is only partly effective, project coordinators fill these gaps situationally and thus enhance organisational agency in HE development.

Accordingly, the typology offers differentiated empirical grounding for debates on HE managers in the third space (Whitchurch 2018, 2024). The modes show that project coordinators can assume service functions while simultaneously being involved in strategic negotiations and, in part, taking independent decisions. In addition to well-known issues such as limited formal recognition and legitimacy (Whitchurch 2025), this contributes to an ambivalent role self-understanding among HE managers. At the same time, the ideal–typical differentiation shows that project coordination is not a uniform function but is enacted in different modes depending on context, resources and individual interpretation. This suggests that coordination operates as a governance resource that produces organisational effects beyond its formal mandate.

Although the study draws on German HE development projects, the two analytical dimensions capture tensions inherent in third-space work more broadly: whether coordination binds through procedures or enables through substantive engagement, and whether embeddedness co-produces decisions or advances them. These tensions are not specific to the project format but characterise hybrid steering wherever third-space professionals operate under limited formal authority (Fumasoli, Barbato, and Turri 2020; Whitchurch 2012). The typology is thus expected to travel beyond the German case, particularly to settings in which projectification, negotiated rule-work, and lateral coordination are salient features. Comparative work could examine how system-level features, such as funding regimes and the degree of academic autonomy, shape the prevalence or expression of different modes.

For UK higher education, comparable dynamics are well documented. Whitchurch (2025) demonstrates that third-space professionals in British HEIs face persistent challenges of limited formal recognition and legitimacy, with institutional structures slow to accommodate roles that fall between academic and professional domains. The typology developed here can inform this debate in three ways. First, the two axes offer a diagnostic lens for HEIs designing project governance: they make visible whether coordination is configured to bind through procedures or to enable developmental work, and whether the coordinator's embeddedness matches institutional expectations. Second, the distinction between administrative and developmental coordination draws attention to how reporting requirements and milestone structures set by funding bodies may channel coordination toward procedural compliance even where developmental steering would better serve project goals. Third, misalignment between a coordinator's enacted mode and the institutional setting carries identifiable risks, such as procedural overload when developmental work is forced into administrative frames or legitimacy deficits when developmental steering lacks formal backing (Whitchurch 2025). For practitioners, recognising one's dominant mode can serve as a reflective tool to inform deliberate adjustments in communication, decision preparation and the use of hierarchies.

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## Ethical approval and consent

This study did not require ethical approval under the Bamberg University research ethics guidelines because it involved interviews with adult professionals on non-sensitive topics and posed minimal risk. All participants provided informed consent; interviews were anonymised and securely stored.

## Data availability statement

Due to confidentiality and participant consent, interview transcripts are not publicly available; de-identified excerpts are available on reasonable request from the corresponding author.

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## Appendix A

**Table A1.** Sample overview.

		University	University of applied sciences	
<b>Projects</b>	Type of HEIs	<b>11</b>	<b>9</b>	
	Average number of project participants	33.9 <sup>a</sup>	11.1	
	Location Project leadership	University management	5	5
		Professorship	4	2
		Third-space service centre	2	0
<b>Project coordinators</b>	Gender	Scientific staff	0	2
		Female	10	7
	University degree	Male	1	2
		PhD	3	4
		M.Sc./M.A.	7	4
		Diploma	1	1
	Full-time/Part-time	Full-time	9	5
		Part-time	2	3
		<i>No information available</i>	0	1

<sup>a</sup>Three university projects without information on the number of project participants (here, the mean value is  $M = 8$ ).