

INSTITUTIONAL TRANSLATION, ORGANISATIONAL IDENTITY AND AI IN GERMAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

As European universities intensify their internationalisation efforts, AI-assisted translation increasingly shapes institutional communication. Yet translating a university is not a neutral transfer of information but an act of institutional positioning. This qualitative case study investigates how neural machine translation (NMT) and large language models (LLMs) influence institutional self-representation in a German dual higher education institution. Comparing human and AI-mediated workflows across lexical, textual and institutional levels, the findings show that NMT narrows culturally specific terminology into dominant Anglophone categories, while LLMs produce greater fluency but default to statistically prevalent norms unless guided through informed prompting. In human-in-the-loop workflows, prompting emerges as a strategic competence through which translators shape institutional voice and mitigate convergence pressures. AI-assisted translation thus constitutes a strategic governance issue rather than a merely technical tool.

1 Introduction

1.1 Aim and scope

English has become the *lingua franca* of higher education, influencing research dissemination, international rankings, and cross-border academic collaboration (Ammon 2012; Vera-Baceta et al., 2019). Its role now extends beyond research and teaching to administration, marketing, and strategic communication, where English is used to signal international orientation, competitiveness and institutional legitimacy (Lawrence, 2007).

As universities intensify their internationalisation efforts, an increasing number of institutional texts – including legal statutes, programme descriptions, diploma supplements, and marketing materials – are being translated into English. These texts are not purely informational; they influence how institutions are categorised, compared, and valued by external audiences, and also shape internal perceptions of institutional purpose and identity.

Traditionally, such high-stakes translations were carried out by human translators, ideally with specialised knowledge of institutional contexts. However, universities are increasingly adopting artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted translation as a fast, cost-saving alternative. This paper argues that this efficiency-driven perspective overlooks the strategic consequences of different translation technologies and underestimates the role of human translators as mediators of institutional meaning.

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Drawing on research in institutional translation, organisational identity, and higher education internationalisation, this paper presents a qualitative case study of a German university operating within a dual higher education model. It examines how human and AI-mediated translation choices affect institutional self-representation at lexical, textual, and institutional levels. The study has three primary aims: (1) to conceptualise institutional translation as a strategic practice; (2) to analyse how AI-mediated translation alters translation outcomes across different levels of analysis; and (3) to assess the broader implications for universities in non-Anglophone contexts.

Adopting a constructivist perspective, this paper focuses on identity work rather than treating organisational identity as a fixed attribute. References to organisational identity are therefore used as shorthand for practices of institutional self-representation, enacted through language and translation.

The following section outlines the theoretical framework employed in this study. This framework integrates three key areas: institutional theory, organisational identity, and translation studies. Such an approach allows us to analyse the deeper consequences for how universities present themselves to international audiences, rather than simply describing terminological choices.

1.2 Challenges in translating institutional texts

Administrative, legal, promotional, and strategic institutional texts constitute the corpus of organisational self-representation, providing empirical evidence of identity claims and aspirations. For universities seeking to operate bilingually, translating this corpus can be viewed as a means of ‘cloning’ the institution in a second language. In this process, the institution’s structures, roles and values are rearticulated for international audiences embedded in different academic traditions and cultures (Ashford, 2019).

In such contexts, translation is rarely a neutral transfer of meaning. In highly institutionalised settings, such as universities, titles, roles and functions carry substantial symbolic and legal weight. German higher education terms such as *Kanzler*, *Rektor*, *Fakultät*, *Lehrstuhl*, *Präsidium*, *wissenschaftliche/r Mitarbeiter/in*, and *Duales Studium* are rooted in specific governance structures and academic traditions, and therefore lack direct equivalents in English.

Such terms are difficult to translate for two main reasons: systemic non-equivalence, where practices may only exist in German-speaking academic contexts (e.g., *Habilitation*, *Beamtenrecht*, *Berufungsleistungsbezüge*), and cultural-cognitive gaps where concepts are context-specific or tied to intellectual traditions that may be unfamiliar to international audiences (e.g., *Willkommenskultur*, *Humboldtsches Bildungsideal*).

Other challenges include false cognates (e.g., *Kanzler*-chancellor, *Promotion*-promotion) and the broad semantic scope of some German terms. The term *Hochschule*, for instance, is not only a false cognate with ‘high school’, but also encompasses a variety of tertiary education institutions regulated under German higher education law (Behmel & Neudorfer, 2016; Siepmann, 2016).

A similar example is *wissenschaftliche/r Mitarbeiter/in*, an umbrella term covering a wide range of academic roles. As shown in Table 1, selecting an appropriate English equivalent depends on institutional context, requiring detailed knowledge of both source and target systems, and of communicative intent.

Table 1. Translations of *Wissenschaftliche/r Mitarbeiter/in*

German term	Typical situation	Possible English translations
<i>Doctorand/in als Mitarbeiter/in</i>	PhD/doctoral student employed by university, doing research or teaching while writing dissertation/thesis	Doctoral Researcher, Research Assistant, PhD Candidate
<i>Postdoc (nach der Promotion, befristet angestellt)</i>	Conducting independent or team research, sometimes teaching	Postdoctoral Researcher, Research Fellow, Research Associate
<i>Akademischer Mittelbau allgemein</i>	Classic <i>Mittelbau</i> role, not tenure track	Academic staff member, Lecturer (UK), Teaching and research Associate

Table 1. Translations of Wissenschaftliche/r Mitarbeiter/in (continued)

German term	Typical situation	Possible English translations
<i>Lehrkraft für besondere Aufgaben</i>	Primarily teaching, often contract-based	Teaching Fellow, Lecturer (UK), Adjunct Instructor (US)
<i>Doctorand/in als Mitarbeiter/in</i>	PhD/doctoral student employed by university, doing research or teaching while writing dissertation/thesis	Doctoral Researcher, Research Assistant, PhD Candidate
<i>Postdoc (nach der Promotion, befristet angestellt)</i>	Conducting independent or team research, sometimes teaching	Postdoctoral Researcher, Research Fellow, Research Associate
<i>Akademischer Mittelbau allgemein</i>	Classic <i>Mittelbau</i> role, not tenure track	Academic staff member, Lecturer (UK), Teaching and research Associate
<i>Lehrkraft für besondere Aufgaben</i>	Primarily teaching, often contract-based	Teaching Fellow, Lecturer (UK), Adjunct Instructor (US)
<i>Wissenschaftliche/r Mitarbeiter/in mit Projektstelle</i>	Fixed-term contracts on grants	Research Associate, Project Researcher, Research Assistant
<i>Senior Mitarbeiter/in (langjährig, ohne Professur)</i>	Experienced, non-professorial academic with both teaching and research duties	Senior Research Fellow, Senior Lecturer (UK), Adjunct Faculty (US, if part-time teaching focus)

Author's own representation

Without an explicit language policy, such interpretive decisions are often based on individual preferences, which is likely to lead to inconsistencies in texts and disputes over meaning. Frequently contested terms can become “translation flashpoints” that reveal underlying power struggles, disputes over legitimacy, and identity conflicts (Ashford, 2021).

Universities operating within a dual higher education model face additional challenges when seeking to balance vocational and academic logics. This can affect linguistic choices in both the source texts and their translations, as shown in Table 2. Translation thus becomes a catalyst for renegotiating identity aspirations and competitive positioning.

Table 2. Competing logics in organisational culture and terminology choices

Logic	Professional orientation	Academic orientation
Identity focus	Pioneering, innovative, modern, cutting-edge	Conventional, rooted in tradition, ‘tried and tested’
Accessibility	Inclusive, accessible, open	Exclusive, selective, elite
Curriculum	Interdisciplinary, broad, focus on employability	Specialised fields, narrow scope, depth over breadth
Core mission	Teaching-oriented and vocationally competitive	Research-oriented and academically competitive
Structure	Flat organisation with lean management	Hierarchical structure (e.g., with <i>Mittelbau</i>)
Language policy	English as primary or secondary institutional language	German as the official language (<i>Amtssprache</i>)
Terminology (examples)	School of Engineering Steering/Executive Committee Head of Administration Head of Department Former students Exam supervisor Head of Internationalisation	Faculty of Engineering Presidency, <i>Präsidium</i> Provost, Registrar Dean <i>Alumni</i> Invigilator (BE), Proctor (AE) Vice-chancellor for Internationalisation

Table 2. Competing logics in organisational culture and terminology choices (continued)

<i>Logic</i>	<i>Professional orientation</i>	<i>Academic orientation</i>
Terminology (examples)	Class	Seminar

Author's own representation

Despite its strategic importance, institutional translation is often handled in fragmented and ad hoc ways. In the absence of translation governance, there is a risk of texts being translated by non-specialists or automated systems, often in combination, which can have significant consequences for consistency, credibility, and institutional distinctiveness.

1.3 Strategic use of translation

Organisations seeking legitimacy may engage in symbolic compliance with dominant norms when substantive change is constrained, a phenomenon described as “decoupling” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In higher education, translation can be used as camouflage to hide local realities and appear to meet global expectations, in effect acting as a form of linguistic window-dressing. For example, German institutions such as *Fachhochschulen*, *Hochschulen für angewandte Wissenschaften* and *Duale Hochschulen* are legally prohibited from using the term *Universität*, yet they often adopt the term “University” in their English branding (e.g., Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences and Hochschule Furtwangen University). Some older universities omit historical figures from their English names for international audiences, while retaining them for their German-speaking audiences (e.g., University of Heidelberg/Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg).

Similarly, degree programmes and courses taught in German are often given English titles to signal internationality or prestige (Ashford, 2019).

1.4 Translation as a driver of institutional isomorphism

In institutional theory, isomorphism refers to the process whereby organisations in the same field begin to look and act like one another in response to legitimacy pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). For a German university, this may involve emulating prestigious institutions in the Anglophone world to appear more international and competitive. Translation practices have the potential to reinforce this process. For example, professional networks of university translators, shared style guides, and standardised terminology promote a generic English register that smooths over national and organisational specificity (Ashford, 2019).

While experienced university translators may seek to preserve the markers and nuances of national, organisational and cultural distinctiveness, efficiency pressures frequently override such efforts. Translation therefore not only reflects institutional isomorphism but also contributes to it.

1.5 GenAI as a new actor in translation

The rise of generative AI (GenAI) has intensified these dynamics. Translation technologies now encompass neural machine translation (NMT) systems such as DeepL and Google Translate, and large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT, Gemini and Copilot, which users can prompt to generate translations across registers and styles. Although these tools offer greater speed and fluency, research highlights risks relating to reliability, bias, data protection, accountability (do Carmo, 2025a; Nunes Vieira, 2024; Ottmann & Canfora, 2021). Unlike human translators, or indeed the institutions they work for, providers of AI-tools bear no professional liability for errors in legal or administrative documents.

Studies in higher education contexts (Gimpel et al., 2023; Büttner, 2025; Crain, 2025; Cuniffe, 2025; Fleisig et al., 2024) further show that GenAI systems tend to favour American English, default to statistically dominant equivalents, exhibit prestige-bias, and sometimes translate too freely or even ‘hallucinate’, thereby risking institutional misrepresentation. Recognising these limitations, professional university translators emphasise the need for post-editing (human refinement of the

machine-translated text) to achieve professional-level quality (LKS, 2025). As Crain (2025) points out, “Humans use language creatively – so they can bridge gaps, read words that are not there, and skip words that are not needed”.

Against this backdrop, this study investigates how GenAI shapes institutional translation practices in a concrete higher education setting.

1.6 Research questions

The emergence of GenAI as a new actor in institutional translation raises questions about quality, standardisation, identity, and the balance between global visibility and local authenticity. This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does GenAI-mediated translation affect institutional branding and positioning?
2. What benefits, limitations, and risks emerge when GenAI is compared with human translation?
3. To what extent does GenAI reinforce isomorphic tendencies in institutional self-representation?
4. To what extent can the findings be transferred to other universities in non-Anglophone contexts?

2 Methodology

2.1 Research design

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study design to investigate how different AI-assisted translation workflows shape institutional self-representation. A case study approach is appropriate because the research questions focus on meaning-making, identity construction, and institutional positioning, rather than on frequency effects or large-scale linguistic patterns.

The Duale Hochschule Baden-Württemberg (DHBW) was selected as the case institution due to its legally distinctive hybrid organisational structure, strong regional embeddedness, and evolving internationalisation strategy. As Germany’s first public university specialising in vocationally-integrated degree programmes, it combines academic education with paid, employer-based workplace training, which builds on the German apprenticeship tradition. With several campuses across the federal state of Baden-Württemberg, the DHBW operates under a unified central governance structure, while its campuses maintain close cooperation with regional employers and exercise a degree of local autonomy. This decentralised configuration creates potential tensions between local flexibility and the need for consistent, university-wide coordination.

Higher education governance in Germany falls under the authority of the federal states (*Länder*). In November 2024, an amendment to the state higher education law (*Landeshochschulgesetz*) introduced wide-ranging structural reforms at the DHBW, including the formal establishment of faculties. These reforms place the institution in an ambiguous and analytically revealing position between academic and vocational education.

At the same time, the DHBW is pursuing an internationalisation strategy that includes expanding its English-language programmes to attract degree-seeking students from abroad, and promoting its model as internationally transferable. This generates substantial translation challenges as core elements of DHBW’s organisational identity do not align neatly with dominant higher education categories in English-speaking contexts.

Identity construction at the DHBW involves navigating three dualities: (1) academic versus vocational orientation, (2) local autonomy versus central governance, and (3) regional embeddedness versus international positioning. These characteristics make the institution particularly suitable for examining the strategic consequences of AI-mediated translation.

The Baden-Württemberg context is also analytically significant. The state hosts a well-established network of professional university translators. The *State Coordination Office for Translations Relating to Higher Education in Baden-Württemberg* (LKS), based at the University of Mannheim, provides translation services, training, and support for universities with the language

aspects of their internationalisation strategy, and maintains a network of university translators extending across the DACH region (Germany, Austria, Switzerland). Comparable centres in Bavaria (*BaySev*) and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (*Zentrale Übersetzerstelle*) reflect a broader trend towards the institutionalisation and standardisation of English translation in German higher education.

The aim of this case study is thus to shed light on how AI-translation mediates institutional self-representation in non-Anglophone higher education systems, particularly those characterised by hybrid organisational models.

2.2 Data selection and corpus

The analysis draws on a corpus of institutional documents that include one complete diploma supplement (Bachelor's degree in Business Administration), webpages from the university's central website, and webpages from nine satellite campuses. All source texts were originally drafted in German. The translated versions of the webpages were publicly accessible between January and December 2025. For the purposes of comparison, selected extracts were retranslated under controlled conditions using neural machine translation (NMT) and large language model (LLM) systems.

Texts were selected according to three criteria:

1. Strategic relevance for external stakeholders: The document had to function as an interface with external stakeholders such as accreditation bodies, international students, or partner institutions.
2. Identity-critical terminology: The text needed to contain terms central to institutional self-definition (e.g., *Duale Hochschule*, *wissenschaftlich*, *Dualer Partner*).
3. Availability of source and target texts: Both the German original and an existing English translation had to be accessible for comparison.

The focus on diploma supplements and institutional webpages reflects their dual legal and promotional function. These genres combine regulatory precision with branding, making them particularly sensitive sites to translation choices that influence institutional positioning.

In addition, the online translation tool Linguee was used to research how the university name is rendered in English. Linguee provides examples of terms in actual translated texts, including official documents, thus offering contextualised usage and translation memory data.

2.3 Comparative translation framework

The study compares four translation approaches applied to German source texts in order to evaluate the effects of different forms of human and AI-mediated translation:

1. Neural Machine Translation (NMT): Unprompted output generated by standard NMT tools, representing an instrumental view of AI as a fast, low-cost substitute for human translation.
2. Human post-editing: A version revised by a professional translator with specialised knowledge of higher education systems and institutional conventions.
3. Baseline LLM translation: Output generated with minimal prompting to assess default equivalence, semantic narrowing, and prestige bias.
4. Human-guided LLM translation: A context-sensitive workflow in which the translator acts as a strategic prompter, supplying institutional knowledge, terminological preferences, register specifications, and communicative intent.

This framework enables comparison not only between translation systems, but also between degrees of human mediation, allowing analysis of how translator agency shapes translation outcomes.

2.4 AI use in manuscript

For this study, NMT and LLM tools were used to produce comparative translations of selected German source texts. During the preparation of the manuscript, AI tools were used sparingly and transparently to improve clarity and assist with structural revision. They were not used for data generation, analysis, or interpretation. The author remains responsible for all analytical decisions and final formulations.

References to “AI” in this paper (“AI-mediated”, “AI-assisted”, etc.) refer to both NMT and LLM systems. However, it is important to note that generative AI (GenAI) translations are only a feature of the latter. Although this paper uses British English spelling, NMT and LLM outputs reproduced in the tables reflect those systems’ default settings, which typically favour American English.

2.5 Analytical procedure

The analysis proceeded in three stages:

1. Comparative alignment: German source passages were aligned with NMT output, baseline LLM translations, human post-edited versions, and human-guided LLM outputs using a structured comparison matrix.
2. Identification of translation shifts: Instances of semantic narrowing, register shift, terminological substitution, prestige alignment, and voice inconsistency were identified through close reading. Analytical categories were deduced from the theoretical framework (institutional translation, isomorphism, identity work) and refined inductively during analysis.
3. Institutional interpretation: Linguistic shifts were interpreted in light of institutional theory, particularly isomorphism and identity work.

Coding was conducted manually by the author. Throughout the analysis, particular attention is paid to the ‘human variable’: instances where professional translators modify, override or strategically guide AI-generated output based on linguistic expertise and awareness of institutional context, thereby mitigating homogenising effects or improving the translation in other ways.

3 Results and discussion

This section presents the findings from the comparative analysis and interprets how AI-assisted translation influences institutional self-representation. Rather than separating results from discussion, the analysis integrates empirical comparison with theoretical interpretation. Effects emerge at three interconnected levels: lexical, textual, and institutional.

3.1 Lexical-level effects: Semantic narrowing and default equivalence

At the lexical level, the most consistent pattern is semantic narrowing, which appears more pronounced in NMT output than in LLM systems. The contrast is not simply between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ translation, but between fixed statistical equivalence and interactive contextual mediation.

A clear example of this can be seen in the translation of *wissenschaftlich* in the diploma supplement. In German higher education discourse, *wissenschaftlich* refers broadly to research-based academic work rather than to a specific disciplinary field (e.g., the natural sciences, political science). As shown in Table 3, NMT translates *wissenschaftlich* as “scientific”, thereby narrowing its meaning and implicitly situating the degree qualification within a more restricted epistemic domain. This shift may affect how the qualification is viewed in terms of employability, accreditation, and international recognition.

In the human post-edited version, the passage is reformulated to emphasise research competence and the application of theory. Baseline LLM output offers alternatives such as “academic work” and “evidence-based methods”. When prompted, it can adjust the tone and emphasis (e. g. “Formal & Academic”, “Professional & Concise”), as well as providing alternative translations tailored to a specific discipline.

Table 3. Translating ‘wissenschaftlich’

Source text	NMT	Post-edited (human)	LLM
Die Absolventinnen und Absolventen sind befähigt, selbstständig wissenschaftlich zu arbeiten und wissenschaftliche Ergebnisse in der betrieblichen Praxis zur Anwendung zu bringen bzw. auf der Basis wissenschaftlicher Erkenntnisse und Methoden auch komplexe Probleme ...	Graduates are able to work independently in science and to apply scientific results in business practice or to solve complex problems in business practice on the basis of scientific knowledge and methods.	Graduates are also able to conduct research independently and apply the theories, concepts and methods acquired during their studies to the task of solving complex problems in the workplace.	Graduates are qualified to conduct independent academic work and to apply research findings in professional practice, as well as to solve complex problems using evidence-based methods and insights...

Author's own representation

Notably, the LLM provides unsolicited meta-linguistic commentary, offering context-sensitive translations of “*wissenschaftliche Erkenntnisse*” such as “scientific findings”, “academic insights” and “evidence-based knowledge”, and explaining that “scientific” may conjure up images of laboratory-based research for English-speaking audiences. It also provides vocabulary breakdowns of key terms such as *Absolventinnen* und *Absolventen*, and offers advice on language usage, such as recommending “professional practice” for *betrieblichen Praxis*.

These patterns support the broader finding that LLMs offer greater fluency and stylistic polish than earlier NMT systems. They also demonstrate the interactive potential of LLMs, which can function as language tutors when guided through informed prompts.

Overall, the findings confirm that lexical choices act as positioning devices in institutional texts. When statistically dominant equivalents replace context-rich terminology, institutional meaning becomes compressed into globally recognisable, yet potentially misleading categories. LLM systems mitigate these effects by enabling variation, but only when human translators intervene strategically.

In summary, AI-mediated translation at the lexical level shapes how academic work is conceptualised and valued across systems. NMT tends towards semantic narrowing, whereas LLM systems allow contextual differentiation. The preservation of institutional meaning relies on human interpretive guidance.

3.2 Lexical-level effects: Semantic narrowing and default equivalence

At the textual level, AI-assisted translation can affect coherence, register, and ultimately institutional voice. In one diploma supplement extract (Table 4) the German pronoun *sie* is translated inconsistently as both *you* and *they*, despite there being a clear referent in the source text. Switching between impersonal description and direct address disrupts coherence and is likely to confuse readers. While this can be easily corrected through human post-editing, such instability illustrates how institutional voice can fragment in AI-assisted workflows.

LLM output does not exhibit this confusion of pronouns. As Reager (2024) observes, LLMs are less susceptible to such errors than NMT tools because they process larger textual units rather than isolated sentences, thereby retaining a more extensive translation memory.

Table 4. LLMs less likely to confuse personal pronouns (example)

Source text	NMT	Post-edited (human)	LLM
Sie können zielgerichtet und erfolgreich in Teams agieren und diese leiten. Auch schwierige Kommunikationsaufgaben im Unternehmen und mit der Unternehmensumwelt können selbstständig durchgeführt werden.	You will be able to act purposefully and successfully in teams and lead them. They can also perform difficult communication tasks within the company and with the corporate environment independently.	They are able to collaborate in and lead teams effectively, which allows them to navigate complex communication challenges both within the organisation and in external interactions.	They are able to work purposefully and successfully in teams and to lead them. Even challenging communication tasks within the organization and with its external environment can be carried out independently.

Author's own representation

However, both NMT and LLM systems reproduce errors, redundancies and stylistic weaknesses present in the source text, illustrating the 'garbage in, garbage out' effect. In the example shown in Table 5, the machine output mirrors a tautological formulation of the original German text. The human post-edited version resolves the issue only after clarification with the author, who acknowledges the tautology and explains that the intended meaning concerns subject knowledge complemented by practical work experience.

Table 5. Flawed input = flawed output (example)

Source text	NMT	Post-edited (human)	LLM
Die Absolventinnen und Absolventen zeichnen sich dadurch aus, dass sie über ein solides und breites betriebswirtschaftliches Basiswissen und über eine gute wirtschaftsbezogene Allgemeinbildung verfügen	Graduates stand out because they have a solid and broad basic knowledge of business administration and a good business-related general education.	Graduates with this degree not only have a firm understanding of the fundamentals of business administration, but also knowledge and skills acquired through experience of working in the field.	Graduates possess a solid and comprehensive foundation in business administration, complemented by a broad general education in economics.

Author's own representation

This example shows how a human translator can intervene to produce a text that conveys the intended meaning, in this case by clarifying an ambiguity with the author of the source text. It reinforces the point made in Section 3.1 that, when institutional meaning is at stake, AI output remains dependent on the interpretative and editorial work of human translators.

In summary, LLMs outperform NMT in terms of contextual coherence, yet neither compensates for ambiguities or weaknesses in the source text. Institutional voice remains vulnerable in AI-assisted workflows and requires human mediation to ensure consistency, clarity and credibility are maintained.

3.3 Institutional-level effects: naming, categorisation, and prestige bias

The most significant effects of translation appear at the institutional level, particularly with regard to naming and categorisation.

Analysis of publicly available translations of *Duale Hochschule* reveals considerable variation ranging from "Cooperative State University" to "dual university", "vocational college" and "technical college". Examples collected from Linguee (Figure 1) are listed here in alphabetical order.

Baden-Wuerttemberg Cooperative State University – Baden-Württemberg Cooperative State University – Baden-Württemberg University – berufsakademie – Cooperative State University Baden-Württemberg – corporate state university – dual academy – dual university – Dual University Baden-Württemberg – duale hochschule baden württemberg – occupational training school – technical college – university of cooperative education –vocational college

Figure 1. Translations of “Duale Hochschule” in English (Linguee 2025)

This variety suggests not only terminological instability but also uncertainty regarding international categorisation. For many years, the university’s English webpages referred to the institution as “Baden-Württemberg Cooperative State University (DHBW)” and also used variations such as “University of Cooperative Education”. Since 2025, the English name seems to have disappeared from the university’s central website, where the abbreviation DHBW is used instead. No official public statement has been given for this change, and the English name continues to be used in websites of the satellite campuses.

Comparative LLM translations of the mission statement (Table 6) demonstrate consistency in the use of the official name, but variation in translating *Berufsakademie*, the institution’s legal predecessor. One system retains the German term, thereby avoiding miscategorisation, while others render it as “Cooperative Education institution” or “Vocational Academy”. This may evoke associations with lower-status institutions in English-speaking contexts despite the pioneering role of the *Berufsakademie* in delivering degree-level professional education.

Table 6. Comparing LLM translations of the institution’s name

German original	ChatGPT	Gemini	Co-pilot
Die Duale Hochschule Baden-Württemberg (DHBW) geht aus der Berufsakademie Baden-Württemberg hervor und führt das seit mehreren Jahrzehnten bewährte Erfolgsmodell des Theorie und Praxis integrierenden dualen Studiums in der Hochschullandschaft fort.	The Baden-Württemberg Cooperative State University (DHBW) emerged from the Baden-Württemberg Cooperative Education institution and continues the successful model of dual study programs that integrate theory and practice, a model that has proven its value over several decades, within the higher education landscape.	The Baden-Württemberg Cooperative State University (DHBW) evolved from the Berufsakademie Baden-Württemberg and continues the proven, decades-long success model of dual education—which integrates theory and practice—within the higher education landscape.	The Baden-Württemberg Cooperative State University (DHBW) emerged from the Baden-Württemberg Vocational Academy and continues the successful model—proven over several decades—of dual study programs that integrate theory and practice within the higher education landscape.

Author’s own representation

As expected, the LLM outputs reflect the system’s default settings, which typically favour American English (“program” instead of “programme”) and the typographic convention of closed em dashes rather than spaced en dashes.

Across AI tools, *Hochschule* is consistently translated using variants containing “university”, reflecting both semantic narrowing and prestige bias. These choices align the institution with dominant Anglo-American templates, thereby reinforcing isomorphism.

An analysis of course offers confirms the practice of marketing German-taught degree programmes under English labels, many of which include ‘management’ (e.g., Supply Chain Management, Industrial Management, Digital Business Management, Technical Management, and Risk and Insurance Management). This reflects the perception of programme heads that German equivalents such as *Leitung* and *Verwaltung* are “too narrow” or “unappealing” (Ashford 2019).

Further variation appears across satellite campuses in the translation of identity-critical terms such as *Dualer Partner*, *Duales Studium*, and *Studiengang* (Table 7).

Table 7. Variation in translation choices across satellite campuses

<i>German</i>	<i>English translations</i>
<i>(Studiengang) Industrie</i>	Industrial Management, Management in Industry
<i>Assistenz Rektorat</i>	secretary to the president
<i>Dekan/Dekanin</i>	Dean, vice president
<i>Duale Hochschule</i>	DHBW, Cooperative State University, University of Applied Sciences
<i>Dualer Partner</i>	cooperative partner, training company, partner company, corporate partner, dual partner, corporate partner company, cooperative partner, workplace training provider
<i>Duales Studium</i>	cooperative education, dual education, dual course of study, career-integrated degree course, career-integrated study, dual study system, job-integrated learning (JIL)
<i>Fakultät Wirtschaft</i>	School of Business, Business Faculty, Faculty of Business
<i>Lehrbeauftragte</i>	guest lecturer, presentation speaker, external lecturer, associate lecturer, highly qualified specialists from partner companies and social institutions
<i>Präsidium</i>	President's Office, Präsidium, DHBW headquarters, main seat
<i>Rektorat</i>	Presidents Office, President's office, rectorate, Rektorat, rector's office
<i>Standort</i>	location, campus, branch campus, satellite site
<i>Studiengang</i>	study programme, study program, degree program, degree course, course of studies
<i>Studiengangsleiter/ Studiengangsleiterin</i>	Head of Department, programme director, program director

Author's own representation

While many translations are linguistically sound, the wide range of options suggests an absence of coordinated terminology governance. Some choices risk misinterpretation. For instance, “training company” implies a business organisation that specialises in training rather than an employer, whereas “workplace training provider” could suggest an organisation that provides unpaid placements, despite the fact that DHBW students receive a salary. Inconsistencies between British and American English (e.g., centre/centre, internationalisation/internationalization, program/programme, labor/labour) even occur within individual webpages, which could indicate decentralised authorship, individual preferences, or an absence of an explicit language policy.

The English-language webpages are not usually direct translations of the German originals, but rather are versions that have been tailored for an international audience. Compared with the main website, satellite campus pages exhibit more frequent errors in spelling, grammar, word choice, and orthography, indicating that many were produced or translated by non-specialists.

Some errors reflect native speaker tendencies (e.g., “accomodaton” instead of “accommodation”), while others reflect transfer from the writer’s first language (L1). One example is the overuse of exclamation marks, such as “Our classes have a maximum of 35 students!”, “You will have close contact with the teaching staff!”, “After your arrival we provide academic and non-academic support!”, and “Travel insurance is not sufficient for studying in Germany!”. These carry different degree of emphasis in English and can undermine credibility in formal contexts.

Overall, it seems that webpages are produced locally rather than being coordinated centrally. The variation across campuses reflects the absence of institution-wide language governance and decentralised translation practice.

In summary, translation choices at the institutional level influence categorisation, prestige alignment, and perceived equivalence within global higher education. Variation in translation tools and practices across campuses reveals decentralised governance and highlights translation as a mechanism through which pressures for institutional convergence or divergence are enacted rather than merely reflected.

3.4 Translation, institutional isomorphism, and organisational flux

The findings suggest that machine translation acts as an active driver of institutional isomorphism. NMT systems tend to produce fluent, yet bland and generic, English texts. LLM systems enable more contextual differentiation but still rely on historically dominant patterns unless guided by informed prompting.

However, universities are not static entities. They are complex, hybrid organisations that combine academic, bureaucratic, professional and market logics, and they undergo frequent reform (de Boer et al, 2007; Hüther & Krücken, 2010; Kleimann, 2019). In such conditions, institutional terminology evolves. Translating a university is therefore an ongoing process that requires continual renegotiation as practices, hierarchies, and identities shift. AI systems trained on past usage patterns are poorly equipped to reflect such shifts without human oversight.

Emerging European AI regulation further highlights the importance of human oversight in institutional translation, particularly to mitigate risks such as hallucinations and cultural or semantic distortion.

The changing role of professional translators is also relevant. As universities expand their presence in English, the demand for translation continues to grow, but at the same time the nature of translators' work is shifting. They are increasingly asked to post-edit AI-generated output, which requires critical evaluation, terminological judgement, and institutional knowledge (Do Carmo & Moorkens, 2020; Crain, 2025). However, this shift is often accompanied by declining remuneration, reduced professional recognition, limited scope for interpretive agency, ultimately resulting in reduced work satisfaction. As Do Carmo (2025b) argues, post-editing is frequently framed as a menial, corrective "mopping up" task, despite involving linguistic expertise.

Paradoxically, although AI offers the promise of efficiency, the uncritical adoption of AI could accelerate the homogenisation of institutions at a time when they are seeking to establish their own unique identities in an increasingly competitive higher education landscape.

4 Conclusions

The study examined how AI-assisted translation influences the way a German dual higher education institution represents itself. By comparing neural machine translation (NMT), large language models (LLMs), and human-mediated workflows, the analysis revealed that AI systems play a more active role than simply accelerating translation processes. They also contribute to the construction, stabilisation and, in some cases, distortion of institutional meaning. At lexical, textual and institutional levels, translation emerges as a strategic practice embedded in governance, identity work, and institutional positioning.

4.1 Lexical choices, semantic narrowing and conceptual clarity (RQ1)

At the lexical level, AI-mediated translation affects institutional positioning through semantic narrowing and default equivalence. NMT systems in particular tend to select the statistically dominant English equivalents for culturally embedded German terms. While this could enhance international recognition, it compresses context-rich concepts into globally standardised categories, which can obscure institutional specificity.

The translation of *wissenschaftlich* as "scientific" illustrates this effect. The broader German notion of research-based academic work is narrowed to a disciplinary domain associated primarily with the natural sciences, with implications for how qualifications and institutional profiles are understood internationally.

LLMs offer greater flexibility, generating alternatives such as "academic work" or "evidence-based methods" when prompted. Yet this sensitivity is not automatic. Contextual differentiation only emerges when institutional knowledge is actively supplied through prompting.

Thus, where translation is treated as a technical service, AI systems reinforce dominant linguistic norms and contribute to conceptual convergence. However, with human expertise, lexical choices can be calibrated to strike a balance between accessibility and institutional distinctiveness.

4.2 Textual coherence, institutional voice, and the human-in-the-loop (RQ2)

At the textual level, differences between systems are more apparent in terms of coherence, register, and institutional voice. LLMs tend to produce more fluent and contextually coherent texts than NMT systems. However, neither technology can maintain a consistent institutional voice without explicit linguistic governance. AI systems tend to reproduce and even introduce inconsistencies, rather than resolve them.

A central contribution of this study is to show how LLM-based translation reconfigures the role of the human translator. Unlike NMT systems, which produce relatively fixed outputs, LLMs facilitate iterative, context-sensitive interaction via prompting. In this way, the human-in-the-loop model is not merely corrective but strategic. Prompting is thus a core professional competence through which translators shape institutional self-representation.

Strategic prompting involves integrating institutional context that is not made explicit in the source text, overriding statistically probable but conceptually weak equivalents, and calibrating tone and framing for different stakeholder audiences. In this way, institutional voice is co-constructed through the interaction between probabilistic systems and human expertise. When skilled translators remain actively involved in translation workflows, LLMs can enhance coherence while preserving institutional specificity.

4.3 Institutional positioning, isomorphism, European transferability (RQ3, RQ4)

At the institutional level, AI-assisted translation is part of the broader dynamics of isomorphic convergence in European higher education. The consistent rendering of *Hochschule* as “university” and the adoption of Anglophone naming conventions align institutions with globally dominant templates. While this may improve international visibility, it obscures the distinctive features of hybrid organisational forms such as the German dual higher education model.

Variation across decentralised campuses further illustrates how uncoordinated translation practices intensify these dynamics. Without shared terminology governance, AI systems favour statistically dominant equivalents and reinforce prestige bias. Translation thus becomes a mechanism through which convergence pressures are enacted.

However, convergence is not technologically predetermined. These findings challenge deterministic accounts of AI-driven isomorphism. Outcomes depend on governance structures and degrees of human mediation. When translation is embedded in a human-in-the-loop framework, AI tools can articulate hybrid identities rather than homogenise them. In this sense, skilled prompting functions as a counter-isomorphic instrument. For this to happen, translation need to be recognised and governed as a strategic institutional function.

Although these findings are based on a German case, they are transferable to other non-Anglophone universities that face similar tensions between international alignment and institutional distinctiveness.

4.4 Policy recommendations (European higher education context)

The findings confirm that AI-assisted translation should be treated as a governance issue rather than a purely technical service. Three areas require particular attention:

1. Institutionalise translation governance: AI systems should operate within structured human-in-the-loop workflows for strategically relevant texts. Post-editing should follow ISO 185.87 standards, and there should be transparent documentation of AI use and compliance with emerging EU AI regulation. Translation should be recognised as a governance function with reputational and strategic implications.
2. Develop institutional language infrastructure: Universities should establish explicit language and translation policies that define preferred English varieties and regulate identity-critical terminology. Binding terminology databases, institutional glossaries, and comprehensive style guides can help ensure consistency across decentralised campuses and departments, and can be integrated into AI-supported workflows.

3. Invest in professional expertise: Technological transformation does not eliminate the need for expertise; it redistributes it. In AI-supported environments, professional competence encompasses skillful prompt design, critical evaluation of probabilistic output, and strategic awareness of institutional positioning. Therefore, it is incumbent on universities to invest in skilled translators with knowledge of higher education systems, and to support professional networks that promote shared standards and reflective practice across the European Higher Education Area.

By integrating AI within robust governance frameworks, strengthening language policies and investing in professional expertise, universities can benefit from technological innovation while safeguarding their institutional distinctiveness.

4.5 Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research

The findings are based on a qualitative case study of a single German higher education institution, and are therefore analytically rather than statistically generalisable. Focusing on selected institutional texts prioritises close textual analysis over large-scale corpus methods or empirical research on audience reception.

Future research could build on these findings by conducting comparative and longitudinal studies across different national systems, institutional types, and stages of organisational change. Reception-oriented research would be particularly valuable in examining how translated institutional identities are interpreted by international stakeholders. Further work could also explore the role of professional university translator networks and discourse communities in institutional isomorphism, investigating whether shared norms and practices primarily reinforce convergence or also enable the preservation of institutional distinctiveness.

Ethical declarations

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