

GERMAN HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY by Roland Richter

For most time of the 20th century, the practice of teaching and learning in German higher education has lived off the fruits of its widely respected development during the 19th century. It operated upon the esteem of the German research university. Even after World War II, as higher education turned more and more into a mass phenomenon, nothing much changed. It has been only since the 1990s that the higher education institutions have become deeply involved in the shift from teaching to learning, from input to learning outcomes and in re-shaping the curricula. Thus, Germany is on its way to modernise the structures of study programmes and degrees according to the Bologna process aiming at a European higher education area enhancing the exchange, mobility, and employability of students and teachers in Europe.

1. GERMAN HIGHER EDUCATION IN TRANSITION

In today's Germany, as determined by the Constitution the responsibility for education and higher education lies with each of the 16 states (*Länder*). The German higher education framework law (*Hochschulrahmengesetz*) which was put into force in the mid-seventies by the West-German federal government defines nation-wide the scope of action for the federal minister and the 16 state ministers of education and science. Recently, against the competencies of the federal government, responsibilities have been very much enlarged for the states. Thus, each state is allowed to design the shape of its own higher education system concerning the number and level of institutions, their funding, and the over-all-structure of study programmes. However, the framework law is still in action giving higher education institutions the possibility to operate simultaneously two different schemes of study programmes; an old and a new one.

The traditional single-track scheme of German degree programmes may be offered, at the latest until 2010, at universities as four to six year programmes concluding in different equivalent qualifications (*Diplom-U*, *Magister*; *Staatsprüfung* in law and medicine) as well as at universities of applied sciences (*Fachhochschulen*) as three to four year programmes (*Diplom-FH*). The University programmes are organized by general national subject-specific framework regulations being established by the German Joint Commission for the Coordination of Study and Examination Regulations of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the States (KMK) and the German Conference of Rectors and Presidents of Universities and other Higher Education Institutions (HRK). They describe the quantitative

and qualitative requirements of degree courses like the standard time-period of study, the amount of teaching hours for compulsory and elective subjects, the number of certificates required for admission to examinations, and the length of time to complete the final dissertation.

Within this national framework, on institutional level faculties have the possibility of designing their own programmes depending on local conditions (staff, teaching and research activities). Moreover, each particular state regulates its own two-tier teacher training for all types of schools (primary, secondary, vocational, comprehensive schools). The relevant statutory provisions include study regulations for academic teacher training courses, examination regulations for the First State Examination (*Staatsprüfung*), training regulations for the preparatory service on the job and examination regulations for the Second State Examination. Law and Medicine is regulated in the same manner but by federal law.

Nowadays, under the umbrella of the *Bologna* process the traditional single-track model will be changed into the new two-track-structure of Bachelor's and Master's degree programmes. I will come back to that later.

Of course, since the early 1960s the higher education system in West-Germany has been under constant discussion in many ways:

- Until the mid 1980s, in West-Germany, politicians have been aiming at two main goals. The first was to modernise the curricular content by attempting to meet the changing societal needs. The second goal was to shorten the extremely long duration of studies by setting programmes in a tighter time frame. Several national advisory bodies put forth proposals that called for the reduction of the content and material offered in

first year programmes, shifting material that is more specialized to later phases of study.

In this context, the question arose: "What are the reasons that students take so long to complete their studies?" Of course, part of the answer was found in inadequate intellectual learning capacities of students, choices of study programmes not fitting very well to the student's pre-education, or social problems that prevent them from participating the classes. But, what was more important to higher education policy makers was the assumption that the long-lasting duration of studies might have been caused by the lack of quality, teachers, and teaching skills, not to mention the poor quality of management by faculties and departments.

That way, the debate began on teaching quality and quality assessment in West-Germany, albeit later than most other countries in Europe. As a result, institutions have had to evaluate their performance and to demonstrate that the amounts of money spent for these institutions had been spent for good reasons. Despite these changes in Germany, after the unification, it was only until the mid 1990s that the first agencies for evaluation of study programmes were set up. However, some people are still of the opinion that the introduction of regional or national schemes of quality assessment of teaching procedures is not necessary.

- In the mid-1990s, politicians and academics noticed that the number of foreign students from certain countries such as the US, UK, and other first-world countries had decreased substantially and saw the international competitiveness of Germany at risk.

Reports issued gave many recommendations to improve the situation. By means of public relations activities, the first attempts were aiming at convincing people outside Germany of the high quality of German higher education. However, in the light of international trends in higher education, it soon became clear that there was no way to address this issue except to take over and introduce an international model of study programmes most foreign students are familiar with, i.e., the Bachelor-Master structure.

Thus, the 16 states agreed tentatively upon the establishment of a new course structure, which for some time has been expected to co-exist alongside the traditional course system. According to the respective amendment of the framework law, passed in 1998 before the *Sorbonne* Declaration was signed, the new model is characterised by the

distinct division between undergraduate and graduate programmes, that is Bachelor's and Master's programmes.

- Moreover, experience in West-Germany has shown that the development of the framework regulations for the traditional degree programmes and the long-lasting negotiations between the states about them take too much time to meet the needs of scientific and societal change and international competitiveness.

Thus, in the late 1990s, federal legislation as well as KMK and HRK have reacted by accepting accreditation as a steering instrument within the governmental approval procedures of new Bachelor's and Master's programmes. Additionally, in 1999 KMK and HRK have appointed the Accreditation Council (*Akkreditierungsrat*) in Bonn that operates nation-wide.

As a conclusion, one can state, that at the end of the 1990s the united German higher education system, finally, is undergoing major transformations reflecting new approaches concerning the quality of learning and teaching, and the content as well as the structure of programmes and its recognition procedures.

2. BUILDING THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

In the 1960s and 1970s, all over Europe a profound social change took place; simultaneously, in all countries were growing the student population and the budgets for higher education.

In the 1980s, in the contrary, higher education institutions in Europe started feeling an increasing need to legitimate their existence. The mistrust by politicians, business and industry, and the society at large in the productivity and efficiency of universities and other higher education institutions being all together very expensive was grave, and measures had to be found to describe their quality and potentials.

Moreover, at the turn to the 1990s, many European governments realised that quality and standards in research and teaching could not sufficiently be guaranteed by the existing means of centralised governmental steering mechanisms under the conditions of simultaneous expansion of the system of higher education and financial funding remaining at the same level or even being reduced. Therefore, there has been a tendency to decrease the di-

rect influence of government on the internal control of universities and other higher education institutions and to introduce new problem-oriented local steering mechanisms. Of course, the new mechanisms did not affect the continuing and unquestionable responsibility of the state for the quality and effectiveness of the system of higher education at large.

However, the keyword for the 1990s and the first decade of the new century certainly is quality assurance under the umbrella of governmental deregulation and increased institutional self-control and responsibility.

At the end of the 1990s, the so-called *Bologna* process has been started by 29 European education ministers signing the *Bologna* Declaration in 1999 and putting the topics mentioned above on the agenda, not only of the single nation states but also of all states willing to form the European higher education area. That process addresses the enhancement of the cross-border collaboration to align the different European higher education systems to one another and to improve student mobility, employability, and international exchange up to the year 2010. According to the agenda of the declaration, four out of ten fields of action are most important. That is the adoption of a European-wide system of easily readable and comparable degrees, the adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles (undergraduate and graduate), the establishment of a system of credits -such as the ECTS-, and the promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance.

3. QUALITY ASSESSMENT, ACCREDITATION, AND RECOGNITION IN GERMANY

While for a long time, there has hardly been any discussion about quality assessment in teaching at West-German universities and universities of applied sciences, since the mid-1980s, a permanent discussion has been under way. This debate has effected some important changes concerning not only faculty management and teaching evaluation but also the mission of higher education institutions for the development of a modern society. The quality of teaching and its evaluation was no longer a taboo. Many proposals were laying emphasis on the fact that under the conditions of mass education at universi-

ties and universities of applied sciences good practice in teaching has to receive the same prestige as research activities doubtlessly have for a long time.

Thus, since 1993 nearly all state governments have submitted more-or-less detailed programmes for taking action to improve the quality of teaching and, thereby, reduce the duration of studies. Therefore, they have amended their higher education bills to implement obligatory internal quality assessment procedures into the general quality management of the institutions. The explicit objective of the internal evaluation of teaching is to contribute to the dialogue between and among teaching staff and students. The external evaluation is meant, to help improving the quality of teaching in discussion with external experts. At the same time, accountability for the quality of teaching is publicly given. Thus, improvement of and accountability for the quality of teaching are the objectives of quality assessment. Now, there are about 10 state independent agencies and networks on state or national level offering quality assessment services for permanent or contractual evaluation of the teaching procedures.

Furthermore, with the implementation of new two-tier scheme, a new problem came up: "How recognition procedures should be organised?" It became clear very quickly that, for reasons of international competitiveness, the old model of designing and re-designing national subject-oriented framework syllabi by the 16 states, which usually took up to 8 years of inter-state negotiations, would have been of no help for a rapid, scientific and societal responsive implementation of the new programmes. As a solution, an accreditation model has been introduced in 1998/99, which reflects the federal structure of Germany.

One has to be aware that accreditation is not just one technique of recognition among many others as the explanatory text of the German framework law suggests. Instead, it marks a fundamental shift in the relationship between higher education institutions and the state: with the introduction of accreditation procedures, a substantial part of state competencies within the recognition procedures for the introduction of new degree programmes will be given up. This task has been taken over by third-party institutions, societies, or foundations that are as buffer-institutions, positioned between state and higher education institutions.

This new approach to quality assurance is operated by a national Accreditation Board, which recognises agencies that accredit particular degree programmes acting in the framework of fixed and widely accepted procedures, criteria, and standards set by the Accreditation Council.

Today, there are two accreditation agencies that concentrate on the accreditation of degree programmes from certain disciplines and three that check all degree programmes that apply for accreditation, regardless of the discipline. Of course, results from previous surveys and evaluations can be taken into consideration. The accrediting agencies have to take care that the submitted programmes are not old wine in new bottles because accreditation by one of the five existing agencies has become a prerequisite of state recognition of programmes. Up to now, the agencies accredited about 700 degree programmes out of 3000 new programmes.

For that reason, the German accreditation procedure is, by no means, comparable to the professional accreditation in the USA or the licensure by the professional bodies in the UK.

4. THE BACHELOR'S AND MASTER'S STRUCTURE

In Germany, since 1998 the federal framework law was amended, almost all universities, universities of applied sciences, and their faculties have been busy designing new Bachelor's and Master's degree programmes. In fact, both types of institutions are allowed to design Bachelor's and Master's programmes. It is assumed that universities of applied sciences will offer more praxis-oriented programmes and universities more research-oriented ones, even though universities of applied sciences will be allowed to offer more university-style courses and vice versa. Theoretically, in the end there might be a merging of universities of applied sciences and universities. Practically spoken, it will take a long time.

However, up to now, in addition to approximately 8,196 traditional German study programmes still being offered by the institutions, some 2,925 new Bachelor's and Master's programmes or 26,3 percent have gained recognition from the respective ministries of education in the states. But, the new programmes gather not more than about 3,5 percent of the total number of students enrolled.

Moreover, analyses of these programmes have made it obvious that there is still a long way to go, not only in promoting the new two-cycle system as such, but also in respect of the re-shaping of concept and content of the programmes themselves.

Thus, the introduction of the two-cycle system, credit points, and modules is not only a matter of formal adjustment of the system. It is also an issue of intense debate regarding the goals, content, and means necessary to bring about a framework for qualifications to be met by all graduates throughout Europe for Bachelor's and Master's degrees. Students and learning outcomes will become the centre of all activities instead of teachers and learning input. The fact that graduates will have to demonstrate at the point of examinations knowledge and qualifications in respect to academic and societal needs makes it necessary for teachers to think not only about their own research but also about the role their own subject plays in a given programme as well as about new teaching and assessment methods. Teacher-centred courses or multiple-choice examinations seem to be not really useful in the development and assessment of qualifications and competencies.

Furthermore, speaking about the enhancement of the mobility of students the modularisation of the content of studies and the development of a common credit point system are regarded as proper means supporting mutual recognition of student's records and degrees Europe-wide.

In this framework, the dispute is cooking on whether the content of the Bachelor's programmes and the achievements required should be limited in such a way that most students will be able to obtain their first degree within the time specified in the programmes (three or four years). Of course, that would be much quicker than it would be in a traditionally structured programme. Students who would like to go into research more deeply should do that in a Master's programme (one or two years) which then, after not more than five years in total, might lead to a doctorate programme. However, according to the plans of the state ministries, certainly not all graduates from Bachelor's programmes will be allowed to enter Master's programmes.

Many academics, especially engineers, argue that it is not possible to design three years curricula that fit as academic preparation for an adequate employment in the la-

bour market; the new degree programmes will not enhance the attractiveness of the German higher education system for foreign students as well as for German graduates in foreign countries. Thus, nine leading German Universities of Engineering, forming the Consortium of German Institutes of Technology (TU9), are promoting the Master's degree as entrance degree to the labour market.

What really matters are the decisions being taken, in 2002, by the Conference of Ministers for Interior Affairs responsible for personnel and salary issues within the civil service at large. According to these decisions, Bachelor's degrees of universities of applied sciences and universities equally will lead to positions within the middle management of the civil service comparable with the status of former graduates from universities of applied sciences. At the same time, university Master's degrees will automatically lead to positions within the upper salary groups. Finally, accreditation agencies have to investigate if Master's programmes of universities of applied sciences really meet the requirements of university Master's programmes. If not, graduates from the Master's programme of the universities of applied sciences will be treated like graduates from ordinary Bachelor's programmes.

Again, it is very demanding for German academics because German professors in the Humboldtian tradition usually think of themselves as individual researchers, who now will be forced to engage in teamwork and cooperation to bring about a coherent and well-organised curriculum and the appropriate distribution of related credit points.

5. OUTLOOK

As an outline into the future, it can be concluded that under the umbrella of the Bologna process, it is certain that all national systems of higher education, including the German system will not undergo a transition into a single European model. Instead, the renewed national systems will take both the historically rooted specifics of the individual higher education systems and the need of

common ideas of a European higher education area into account for supporting further exchange, mobility, and employability of students and teachers. In 1998, the European ministers of education decided that the implementation of the new system was supposed to take place within 10 years time (2010). Thus, more and more regional politicians and academics realise that they have to take part in the game and that it will change the culture of higher education in all European countries tremendously. Furthermore, the transformation of the different traditional European degree systems into the new structure is not only a problem for the higher education systems but also one for the related societies and the European Union at large. All stakeholders involved, institutions, politicians, and industry/commerce should deal with the concerns of students and others who fear that there will raise problems concerning the acceptance of the new degrees in the national labour markets. All together, the situation seems a bit paradoxical because the industry at first was asking for a new, competitive structure, and now they seem to be afraid to hire graduates with new degrees because it is not quiet clear to them what these graduates are able to do. Thus, all stakeholders in- and outside the higher education institutions have to work together to make the new model competitive and supportive of the targets the Bologna process is aiming at: Mobility and employability of graduates within the single European market.

For that reason, in Germany a culture of consistent quality assessment and accreditation has to be developed assuring high quality in higher education. In theory, on the one hand, most of the state governments are aware of the fact that they have to step back from direct ruling and give more autonomy to the institutions. The institutions, on the other hand, know that it is their responsibility to guarantee degree programmes of high quality. In practice, the collaboration needs to be improved. All stakeholders (faculty staff, students, institutions, and governments, agencies on national and regional level) have to work together in a strong network.



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