

German Universities Bursting at the Seams

Record enrollments prompt a rethinking of the nation's higher education policies; \$1.2-billion emergency fund approved

Bonn

RECORD ENROLLMENT levels at West German universities have propelled the country's education system into a major crisis. At a time when academic and government officials had expected a decline in enrollment, the nation's 242 universities and colleges must deal with 1.5 million students—almost double their current capacity of 800,000.

Severely short of space, facilities, and faculty members, the Technical University of Hamburg-Harburg recently moved several seminars to a nearby dance hall. In Cologne, students have used binoculars to follow lectures. At the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg, classes are held on Sunday, while at Munich's Ludwig-Maximilians University, classes have become so crowded that students are carrying their books around in aluminum suitcases—so they will always have something to sit on.

Ideally, Ludwig-Maximilians is supposed to accommodate 25,000 students. By 1975, however it had 34,500 and this fall the figure reached 65,000—a “dangerous development” that diminished educational quality, says Wolfgang Matschke, head of the university's student affairs division.

The enormous surge caught West German universities completely off guard. Ad-

ministrators had anticipated a halt to steady growth due to a continuing drop in the national birthrate. Now, after several years of state budgetary cuts, compounded by policies that discourage the replacement of retiring professors, the universities find themselves painfully ill-equipped to solve their problems.

Overcrowding has several explanations. The number of high school graduates who want to continue their studies has increased dramatically since 1968. At that time only 7% of the students took the examinations that qualified them for university. Now the figure is 28%. In addition, German students take longer to complete university studies than do students in other European countries, older students are reentering the university, and more soldiers are taking advantage of government study grants than ever before.

The state (länd) and federal governments have recently taken emergency measures to meet the crisis. A 7-year, \$1.2-billion fund has been set up with equal funding from both levels of government (universities in Germany are principally the responsibility of the individual länder) to enable universities to hire additional staff and improve their teaching and research facilities.

In addition, Federal Education Minister Jürgen Möllemann has called for measures to reduce the length of study. The minister has urged professors to stop adding new course requirements—a steady increase in the amount of knowledge that students are required to absorb has been one of the reasons for the length of their studies—and to have the courage to allow some “gaps” in their students' knowledge. According to Möllemann, West German students take an average of 14 semesters to complete their studies and enter the job market at an average age of 29, compared with 23 in Britain and France.

In one respect, West Germany is struggling with the results of a policy, adopted in the late 1960s, that shifted higher education from an elitist system to a more egalitarian one. The state even helps pay a student's living expenses if necessary.

The current glut and less favorable job

opportunities for graduates in some fields have made it necessary to rethink the system. Möllemann himself has called on the state governments to spend more money on higher education or risk a defeat of West Germany in international competition in science and research. He has criticized them for significantly reducing the amount of money spent per student in recent years.

Heinrich Seidel, president of the Standing Conference of University Rectors (WRK), says universities will soon have no other choice but to limit admission in oversubscribed fields. In business-related disciplines, for example, about 24,300 first-year students have signed up for what the universities originally said were 6,450 places.

While welcoming the extra money being provided by the state and federal governments, the WRK has also said that it does not go far enough, pointing out that the total currently being promised represents only 2% of the nation's overall budget for higher education.

A plenary session of the organization held last month passed a resolution saying that much more needs to be done, and demanding that the amount of additional funds being made available should be increased from \$170 million to \$280 million a year.

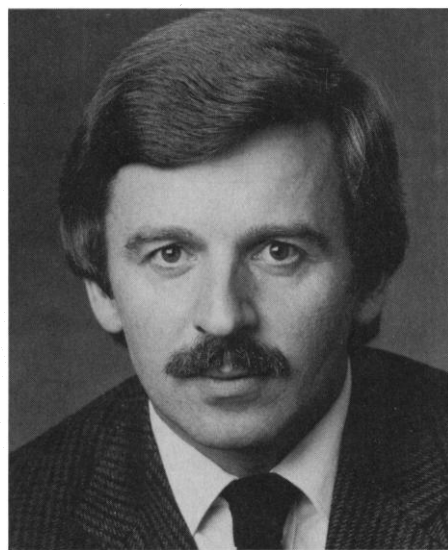
A working party of the opposition Social Democrat Party has gone even further, demanding that the extra funds be raised as high as \$450 million a year.

According to the German Science Council (DFG)—whose own budget, which is primarily spent on supporting university-based research, will be increased by 5% as part of the new financial package—public spending on universities has stagnated since 1975, while enrollments have nearly tripled. Neither facilities nor faculties have grown apace.

In the meantime, student protests about overcrowding have grown angry. Thousands of students have demonstrated in Berlin, Hamburg, Stuttgart, and Munich. In Münster Professor Helmut Wagner recommended his colleagues dedicate 10 minutes of their office hours each week to 12 of the 6000 economics students. “Then every student can see his professor once a year,” he calculated.

Last month, in a further attempt to persuade universities to change their approach as part of the solution to this crisis, Möllemann emphasized that the lowering of economic and social barriers between the 12 member states of the European community would make it necessary for German universities to bring their admissions and teaching procedures more in line with those of the other countries in Europe. ■ DON KIRK

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Jürgen Möllemann. The education minister urges shorter university studies.