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Foreign Students in Germany

by Dr Friedrich Mühlenberg, Hamburg

German universities* had been centres of powerful attraction to foreign students already before the First World War. In 1911/12 the share of foreigners in the student bodies of all German universities of the then Empire, at 10.7 per cent, was higher than it is now, when it amounts to about 8.4 per cent. However, the national composition of this foreign share in the student body was completely different from today: the lion's share of the pre-1914 students was claimed by the countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, where the use of the German language and knowledge of German civilisation were then very widespread, both among a numerous minority population of German origin, and among others.

Between the two world wars, both the share of foreign students in the total student population and their absolute number declined. After 1945, the new development, launched some time after the end of the Second Great War, showed a completely different trend, for which the following facts are typical:

□ Between the winter term (of German university terms, there are only two, so-called "semesters", in one academic year) of the university year of 1950/51 and the winter term of 1965/66, the number of foreign students expanded from 1,939 to 22,576, and their share in the total German student body from 1.7 to 9.4 per cent.

□ For a number of years now, this share has been growing more slowly than that of the total figure of German students, which means that, in percentage terms, its development shows a slowly declining trend.

□ The body of foreign students did not experience a process of simple growth but its composition changed fundamentally at the same time. In 1950/51, most of the foreign nationals who were then studying in the Federal Republic were making use of guest or exchange studentships, which meant that they did not intend to graduate or acquire a diploma in Germany. For the rest, there was a comparatively large number of refugees, expellees, and displaced persons from Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, who aimed

* In this context, the term "university" will be used, in order to simplify understanding for Anglo-American readers, to take in every institution which, in German parlance, counts as a Hochschule, or centre of higher learning, enabling its students to read for a recognised degree of university and comparable level. This will save the use of a literal translation ("high school") which could only mislead, but also that of seemingly endless enumerations, as: universities, technical "high schools" (i.e. technical universities), medical, agricultural, forestry, mining, veterinary, legal, art and music "colleges", "high schools", or "academies", which all have the right, not only to confer diplomas, but also the ubiquitous degree of "doctor", apart from which there is no other academic degree in Germany.

at their full integration with German professional life. The contrary is true of the current foreign student population: practically all of them intend to graduate in Germany, and virtually all the potential graduates need their diplomas and/or degrees for professional advancement in their native countries.

□ The change in the objective towards which foreign students are striving is closely related to the fact that many of them hail from "developing countries"¹—62 per cent of them in fact, and the share is growing. In some subjects of study, e.g. economics, the social sciences, and related syllabuses, this share is even rising to above 70 per cent.

The reasons and motivation for choosing Germany as the land where to study are so varied and diverse that, in this brief survey, it will only be possible to underline a few of them, which are highly conspicuous in their effect of increasing the number of foreign students in Germany. These main forces are:

□ Many countries have swiftly built up their system of secondary schools but have so far omitted to expand (or create) the centres of higher learning, whilst demand for highly skilled and educated labour has also not kept in step with the "production" of such skills.

□ Other industrialised countries have started to restrict admission to their universities much earlier than Germany.

□ Financial reasons combine with the attractiveness of this situation, but they may also act as a powerful independent pull of preference. German universities charge relatively cheap enrolment and lecture fees. In addition, without designing to be so, the structure of the German university timetable makes it much easier for poorer people to finance their studies than the time requirements of other academic systems: no lectures and no seminars are held in German universities for more than five months every year, which permits many students to use this time for earning their maintenance. Universities, furthermore, hardly exercise any control on the speed and efficiency of the student's process of learning anything: German academic freedom comprises also almost complete liberty of the student to learn slowly, or to learn fast—even to learn nothing at all. In other words, the student may sit for his intermediate and main examinations at his own sweet leisure. Even should

¹ In the context of our survey, developing countries are all the states of Africa, with the sole exception of South Africa, the Asian countries, except Japan and the Asian parts of the Soviet Union, the whole of Latin America, and among European countries, Greece, Spain, and Portugal.

he be determined to succeed in his efforts, he still can conclude a fair compromise between the need to make progress academically and the necessity to live within his means.

But this is only the "structural framework", which is modified and varied by a multitude of personal, individual, social, and political influences—e.g. training and reading for a number of subjects at a German university still carries with it a high academic and professional reputation; parents of students may have known Germany and advise their children to study there, or similar advice may be given by older students already in Germany; students' parents may have worked or may still work or visit professionally in the Federal Republic, and there are a multitude of political and other reasons that persuade students to move to Germany, especially from Eastern countries, where they could have studied.

Efficiency of Studying

The alleged inefficiency of the German university establishment is at present the object of keen criticism. Complaints are raised against over-long periods of completing a full syllabus, against the almost total lack of control and supervision of students' making progress, against a high quota of "drop-outs" before graduation in a number of disciplines, and similar shortcomings are quoted as widespread symptoms of an insufficient adjustment of the German universities to the requirements of the economy and of society that ought to be met by a modern educational and research system. As was to be expected, an enquiry into the results of foreign nationals studying in Germany from their enrolment in 1957/58, after eight years, has shown that their success, or lack of success, has been even more unsatisfactory[‡].

Subject of Studies	Of one hundred undergraduate "freshmen"	
	This number dropped out without diploma and/or degree	This number passed their final examinations successfully
Medicine	40.9	40.2
Science	49.8	32.7
Engineering	41.6	31.0
Economics, Social Sciences	63.9	20.7
Agriculture	33.2	57.4

The distribution of successes and failures suggests that only among the students of farming, there was a majority of successful graduates. In all the other subjects, the failures fluctuated between a share of one third and almost two thirds of the total number. The relative shares, naturally, cannot be absolutely exact, since not all undergraduates may have intended to take a degree in Germany—some of them might have come to Germany wanting to pass there only a limited number of terms. However, this factor which

[‡] C. Oehler and H. Pabel, "Das Studium der Ausländer an den wissenschaftlichen Hochschulen in der Bundesrepublik" (Foreign University Students in the Federal Republic of Germany), Bonn 1967.

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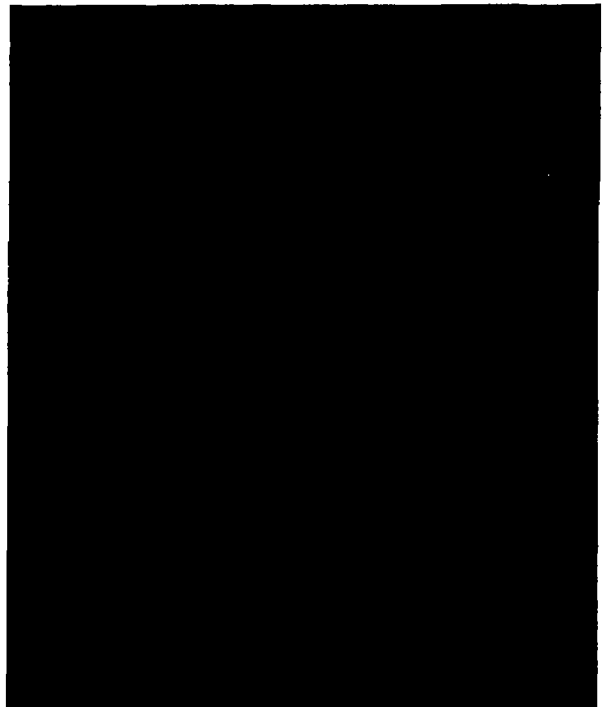
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can never be fully eliminated in a count of this type almost certainly had no deep influence on the order of magnitude fixing the proportion between success and failure.

The balance between 100 and the sum of successes and failures among the students was represented by those who still remained on the university rolls eight years after first enrolment, without having passed their finals. Further successful completions of their studies are to be expected only from some students of the sciences and of engineering, but the magnitude of the success quota will not be substantially improved by such late "passes".

The directions in which both success and drop-out quotas fluctuate from one discipline to another are the same among both German and foreign students, only the width of the variations is different. A separate survey has indicated that the share of "passes" in the final examinations taken by German students, which was not always satisfactory, fluctuated between 91 per cent in agriculture, 80 per cent among medical students, and 68 per cent among budding economists and social scientists.

If we wish to use the share of "passed finals" in the total number of originally enrolled students as the only yardstick of educational efficiency—an attitude far from being adopted by everybody in Germany—we would have to conclude from the recorded percentages that foreign students in Germany cut a highly unsatisfactory figure. And this again raises the additional question as to what are the particular difficulties to which foreign nationals are exposed in our universities.

Learning Difficulties of Foreign Students

The situation that confronts students enrolling in German universities, especially those intending to read for an arts, economics, or social science degree and/or diploma, is seemingly chaotic and almost incomprehensible to anyone not familiar with the German university establishment and its structure:

□ Formally, there is academic freedom which, for the student, means the freedom to choose what to learn and what not to learn. Within the framework of the examination schedule—a distant aim—he may pick and reject, according to his academic progress and following his personal inclinations, from among many forms of instruction on offer (lectures, "exercises"—a form of tutorials, and seminars). There are no "classes" or "years" uniting students of the same, or similar, formal knowledge. In many lectures, the youngest "freshmen" and hoary candidates for the final examinations rub shoulders constantly.

□ Many faculties publish "Studienordnungen"—some sort of a syllabus—but they are no better than more or less vague recommendations. Students are compelled to produce some evidence of achievement only when they register for an examination. In most cases it is left to the discretion of the student during which

term he should acquire such evidence. Only a very short time ago, university authorities have begun to set certain time limits for preparations to examinations, and to introduce a kind of preliminary examination similar to those that have been traditional for many years for medical students, aspiring scientists, and engineers. No German university, however, knows the system of annual exams or tests. Many subjects are still being read and examined so that after four, five, or six years of the student steeping himself in the required knowledge has to sit an examination of inordinate length and scope during which the examiners may (theoretically) demand that he parade his full mastery of the entire field of his supposed studies.

□ In the case of many subjects, university expansion and the extension of teaching has lagged far behind the inflation of the student body. The effect is that lectures held before 1,000 or even 2,000 students, and seminars with between 200 and 500 people attending, are far from rare today in many fields of study. It is self-understood that the traditional form of German academic education has been so much undermined by this development as to have become patently absurd.

There are, of course, additional influences contributing to the high frequency of foreign students' academic failure. There are personal, social, and educational reasons for this. In many cases it may be found that the scholastic level of the foreign student's secondary schooling is insufficient for German requirements. This places the foreign national into an inferior starting position, which again may be made even more difficult by the different civilisation and school administration of his home country, where attitudes towards learning and studying are perhaps fostered that flatly preclude sufficient independence of mind for true scientific enquiries. Some overseas countries have tried to merge European models and forms of education with their own traditional civilisation, and the results have not been altogether felicitous. Aided by the efforts of governments to induce forced growth in the numbers of secondary school pupils and examinees, in spite of the prevailing scarcity of skilled teachers, the paucity of schools, and of supplementary facilities, the traditional inclination to learn things by rote is strengthened. The lack of mental independence, the inability to process contradictory pieces of information, the blindness in face of the differences between uniting and diversifying characteristics of things, a weak capacity for abstract thinking, for making deductions and for linking related thoughts and facts, poor mathematical abilities—these are the effects of insufficient preparation and selection through the secondary schools of the student's home country. It means that the university has to do what was left undone at school, but such a belated selection process is a detour which is useless and expensive for all interested parties.

On the other hand, it will not do, in this context to forget about the forces acting as a brake on the

foreign students created by insufficient human contacts and lack of integration with their academic and social surroundings. Insufficient integration in the student's personal surroundings will give rise to many misunderstandings, thus depressing the educational value of foreign studies both for the intended future profession of the student and for establishing a social position for himself.

The crucial task which the foreign national must tackle before he can even think of approaching all the indicated obstacles is the mastery of the language problem. If a student lacks sufficient knowledge of the language of instruction, this produces a series of chain reactions: the difficulties will mount up, as gaps in the scholastic preparation of the student cannot be bridged, he himself having insufficient understanding of the textbooks needed for the purpose. His personal isolation cannot be successfully broken, as he is prevented from making satisfactory human contacts. This again will cause him to understand but little of the lectures and seminars he attends, and therefore German students will not be very interested in seeking the company of the "semi-deaf, semi-mute" stranger. To improve the level of spoken and written German used by the foreign students was one of the crucial efforts, and with full justice, in a general programme for improving the chances of foreign students of achieving future successes.

Steps to Aid Successful Studies

The German universities and the Länder ministers of education were surprised by the big expansion in the numbers of foreigners studying in Germany. But when the problems connected with this change became more and more pressing, a network of new measures, some of them far-reaching, was gradually built up. The more important ones of these steps are listed here:

- "DAAD" (German Academic Exchange Service), a state-sponsored agency responsible for all university exchanges, was entrusted with disseminating preliminary information and with giving advice abroad on German conditions for studying.
- Conditions for university admission were heavily weighted against unsuitable entrants. In the Federal

Republic of Germany, foreign secondary school-leaving certificates are classified by three levels, some of which give only limited access to university.³ Holders of Class I certificates may proceed immediately to university enrolment. Class II entrants must pass a special examination before admission, but Class III applicants must first enter a special course, lasting one year, during which they attend a "Study College". At the end of that year, they have to pass a test "to assess their maturity for university". Without this "matriculation", Class III students cannot enter university.

The knowledge of the German language demanded of foreign students now is of a much higher quality than in former years. Most universities are operating compulsory German language classes for foreigners.

German universities have expanded existing, and created new, "Auslandsämter" (foreign relations departments). On their advice, full-time study counsellors were appointed, to act as liaison officers between the students and the administrative agencies of the universities, and also the academic and the social surroundings in which the foreign students live and work. Even some faculties in a number of universities now employ academic advisers for foreign students. Among their tasks is the staging of classes teaching the foreign students the basic requirements of studying and a number of special expressions and technical terms relating to their chosen course of studies.

No impressive success has attended the introduction of these reforms. Admittedly, students who have been admitted to German universities during recent years will probably make a somewhat better showing than those enrolled in 1957/58. However, the drop-out rates are still much too high, which indicates that the improvements, if any, have been in degree only, not implying structural changes.

All the measures adopted in the past have been mere reactions, with little or no coordination, to the impact of stark evils. There has never been in the past,

³ To illustrate how this works, the following are sample countries from the three categories: France's secondary schools rank as Group I, those of Indonesia belong to Group II, those of Egypt to III.



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and there is not yet, any overall conception of what foreigners studying in Germany should do and achieve,⁴ which might commit both the Federal authorities and the Länder ministers, as it is they who regulate education in present-day West Germany, independently of the central government, or bind the universities with their high degree of autonomy.

In order to reform the present state of affairs efficiently and fundamentally, the entire concept of educational aid policies will have to be reshaped, integrating it with an overall view of the Federal Republic's development aid programme. Before we can think over this complex of questions, however, we must be able to obtain much more precise records of success or failure of educational aid, more detailed, at any rate, than the mere scrutiny of examination successes and failures. There must be additional information made available on the portion of the regrettably small group of successful passers of examinations who, for varied reasons, fail to obtain employment at home suitable to their training, or fall victims to unemployment there, or even do not try to return home. About those who do secure employment based on their academic achievements we must find out with what degree of efficiency they work, and how they can hold their own against competitors trained in other Western, in Eastern, or in "Third World" countries.

Suggested Reforms

But even without waiting for such far-reaching measures that are difficult of application, some immediate suggestions clearly offer themselves for improving the success rate achieved by foreign students in obtaining diplomas and/or degrees:

□ It is obvious that the methods used for university admission have to be improved. The report on the success rates achieved by foreign students, which was discussed above, makes it abundantly clear that the tests used in the past for such admissions have not been selective enough. Paradoxically, a number of students who ought not to have been admitted under the guiding principles now in force are among those with the highest examination success rates, whilst other students whose school leaving certificates place them in Class II are among the worst failures. It would be desirable to have a single central authority administering admissions, and a method of selection based on a combined test of fitness and actual achievements, so that not only present knowledge but also certain psychological qualities indispensable for a successful student may be spotted. Selection tests, if possible, should be taken before the candidates' departure from their home countries.

□ It is also necessary to change the principle and methods of the "study colleges". In order to form sufficiently large classes of an approximately even

level of academic and linguistic achievements, no more than two or, at most, three such colleges should be sufficient. For certain groups of college students, the programme of studies ought to be extended over two years, which might enable the colleges to accept students whose training in the chosen subject of studies is sufficiently high but whose lack of linguistic achievements excludes them from the one-year language course. By such changes it might become possible to mobilise "reserves of talents", which cannot evolve fully in the student's home country for a number of special and economic reasons, especially when the students hail from the lower and middle layers of society in a great number of developing countries. But this would require a complete overhaul in the conditions for admission to the study colleges—the abandonment of formal and legal qualifications in favour of new selection principles slanted to serve special development purposes. The same principles must inspire the filling of another requirement—offering alternatives to the "drop-outs" from colleges and universities, who must be re-directed to training in severely practical vocational schools, or under apprenticeship schemes.

□ Universities, too, should keep as many foreign students together in specially designed lecture courses and seminars as possible, at least for the first four terms (i.e. two years). The university reforms which are just being initiated should also provide for the creation of special facilities and tuition aids suitable for serving the foreign students' interests. Such measures, coupled with improved efficiency of the study colleges, can only be adopted on condition that selection practice and admission methods are decisively improved.

□ In order to raise the quality of foreign diploma holders and graduates, they ought to be better prepared for the tasks awaiting them in their home countries. For this purpose it would be very useful to make them pass through a practical trainee year following the preliminary examination to be taken in their homelands. Special lecture courses dealing with the special problems of these home countries ought to be held for foreign graduates before they return home, etc. The form and subject matter of such lectures ought to be adapted to the different home countries and to the discipline the graduate reads before his graduation.

Putting such proposals into practice is unbelievably difficult in the Federal Republic. To overcome such difficulties depends—as does the entire reform of the German universities and of German academic studies—on a multitude of influences and opposed vested interest. Yet the growing importance of international relations and the increased significance of contacts between differing civilisations have become such strong social realities that no country in the world dare overlook them in hammering out its objectives, concepts, and policies in the field of research and education.

⁴ cf. in relation to these questions the ideas and proposals put forward by H.-D. Ortlieb, *Ausbildungshilfe wohin?* (Whither Education Aid?), Publications Series of the Academy of Economics and Politics, Hamburg, Hamburg and Tübingen, 1963.