

Personal View

Renewal of Teaching Quality and its Evaluation by Students

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POLITICAL CONTEXT

ONLY a few years ago, academic teaching, its quality and yields, was not something that attracted any particular interest, but was rather taken for granted, especially in the way the higher education institutions perceived themselves. Here, we have seen fundamental changes. Meanwhile, in Germany, the 'quality of teaching' has become a prominent topic in the discussions on higher education, indeed, in the political debate.

November 1990 saw the introduction by the North Rhine–Westphalia Government of a draft action programme, 'Quality of Teaching', which, by July 1991 had been given concrete shape and a definite form by a number of task forces with higher education participation. Our action programme comprises 28 measures involving the universities and 22 measures involving the polytechnics. These measures are designed to give more prominence to teaching, to initiate structural reforms of basic higher education and to improve the organization of teaching. The programme provides ideas for quality assurance and enhancement, ideas that did not go unnoticed interstate, given that the Federal Government and some states have followed suit. A 'Model Programme to Improve Teaching' was launched in October 1991 by the Federal Ministry of Education and Science, while, in November of that year, the Bavarian Government introduced its 'Action Programme to Curtail the Length of University Courses'. There are now similar schemes in the states of Baden–Württemberg and Hessen. The latest initiative is a position paper on future higher education policy, which was drawn up jointly by the states' education and finance ministers, and which also addresses the issue of overlong courses of study, and demands a structural reform backed by statutory or administrative provisions.

In North Rhine–Westphalia, we can proudly claim that our action programme has given genuine impetus to the higher education reform in this

country. There is a good chance that the states will come to an agreement on joint action in this field; we must not turn our back on this opportunity and put the quality of our education system in jeopardy.

OUTLINES OF THE ACTION PROGRAMME 'QUALITY OF TEACHING'

North Rhine–Westphalia's action programme—a reaction to overlong academic courses and a high dropout rate—aims at removing excessive workload from university courses and streamlining their organization. It is designed to strengthen the didactic dimension of teaching and create incentives for more personal commitment to teaching as well as for implementing effective reforms.

The following principles apply:

- *It must be possible to complete the course of study in an appropriate period of time*—meaning that an average-talented and assiduous student must have the chance of obtaining a degree within the expected period. This requires removing excessive workload, making curricula more transparent and improving examination procedures. Streamlined degree courses must nevertheless remain an option rather than an obligation to students. Whoever wishes—for personal reasons—to undergo longer studies should be allowed to do just that.
- *Teaching must regain its original standing*—the reputation of science should be based not only on top research performance but equally on excellence in teaching. To this end, university teachers ought to alter their self-perception, and higher education facilities must single out teaching to afford it special promotion and support. This should not be confused with an institutional dual-track approach to research and teaching, which have to remain linked to each other. But, precisely because they are equally important tasks of higher education institutes, the teaching role must be enhanced to match research.

- *Increased quality of teaching requires more competition among higher education facilities and also among individual teachers.* This, in turn, firstly requires public debate and accountability for teaching performance and, secondly, a system of incentives for exceptional commitment.
- *Teaching can only be improved by the higher education institutions themselves*—with the government initiating the process, giving suggestions and encouragement and establishing a statutory framework. Neither side can do without cooperation.

We have divided the variety of measures into four sectors: *Sector I is basically a new facet of the higher education reform*, involving, among other things, less workload through despecialization, easy-to-cope-with course volumes and a radical shift away from the current practice of having a proficiency test or examination for every subject and branch of a course. To kick off the necessary reforms, the Ministry of Higher Education and Research plans to establish—in consultation with the institutions of higher education and by issuing a legislative decree—structural and quantitative guidelines governing the main features of academic courses.

Sector II contains steps to add more weight to teaching. A qualified researcher must equally qualify as an academic teacher. The teaching proficiency of academic staff needs therefore to be both promoted and scrutinized by a board of admission and review. There should also be awards for outstanding teaching performance.

Teaching is not a one-way street and students are more than just consumers of services, but are meant to participate actively in scientific learning processes, which is why Sector III deals with ways to involve students in the assessment of the didactic aspects of teaching, relying on an enthusiastic and responsible attitude on their part.

Finally, the action programme seeks to answer the crucial question of how to get the individual professor, the faculty and the institute as a whole to give particular attention to teaching. We envisage an incentive scheme to ensure that commitment to teaching is also materially rewarding.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAMME

This programme is not intended to prolong the altogether not too successful saga of education reform. Let me say though, that of the 12,000 copies of the first edition of the final report on the action programme, none is left. We have been active; our higher education facilities have been active. In 1991, the State Government provided special funds totalling DM 9.5 million for the implementation of the programme; in 1992, it will be DM 15.5 million. We hope to be able to considerably increase the funding in 1993.

To address all our measures—a total of 28—would go beyond the limits of this article. Let me therefore confine myself to the focal points:

COUNSELLING AND TUTORIAL PROGRAMME

With overlong familiarization periods during the first year and with the student lost amongst the masses, studies suffer a lot. Therefore, the 1991 summer term saw the start of our counselling and tutorial programme to offer help in such situations as getting accustomed to university operations, individual study problems and learning to work in small groups. We are also taking advice from students' representatives. Currently, we are funding a programme comprising 138 tutorials and totalling some DM 15 million between 1991 and 1994.

STUDENT EVALUATION OF TEACHING PERFORMANCE

Since October 1991, the evaluation by students of their lecturers' performance is being tested in North Rhine-Westphalia in a bid to optimize teaching performance. Academic teaching staff are free to choose their methods. It is my view, however, that not only should they face critical analysis of their performance by their colleagues—following academic tradition—but also by the students who are, after all, as consumers, either beneficiaries or sufferers. Freedom of teaching is not a matter of individual disposition. Initial scepticism and distrust have given way to the conviction that this instrument of evaluation—a novelty in German higher education—is not a means of administrative control but rather a feedback from the students towards the proper address. This requires willingness to accept criticism, rather than a precise questionnaire. Still, we suggested to the higher education facilities a model questionnaire which, in turn, was freely criticized. Meanwhile, the institutes have developed their own questionnaires and are practising various forms of critical assessment and evaluation. Assessment by students is now common in many academic subjects and faculties. At the amalgamated university in Paderborn, 32 academic programmes are evaluated in this way. It is becoming clear that a standardized questionnaire—albeit adapted to the individual subject—is the most suitable instrument of evaluation.

THE REFORM OF THE MASTER'S DEGREE COURSE

Dropout rates of up to 80 per cent in individual subjects indicate grave structural faults in the Master degree programme. This has prompted the

NRW Government to support reform schemes with the aim of making the Master's programme more efficient, in both organization and contents, as well as linking it with career realities. Our 'Study Reform Commission' has also recommended separation of the basic and advanced courses with the option of graduating as a Bachelor of Arts after three years. I assume that Bochum will soon be the first university in this State to test such a concept.

THE REFORM OF TEACHER AND LAWYER TRAINING

These are being embarked upon. Law school reforms will not be confined to North Rhine-Westphalia, but will be implemented nationwide. All state justice ministers are demanding the removal of excess workload from lectures and examinations, and the introduction of a 'dry run', enabling law students to sit their finals within the envisaged duration of the course without running the risk of having to pack it in after failing. As for teacher training, we are currently scrutinizing methods to improve the structuring of curricula and to simplify exam procedures.

STATUTORY FRAMEWORK

It has become abundantly clear that it is no longer possible to complete the majority of academic courses within the envisaged duration. There are many reasons for this, including those brought about by the higher education facilities themselves, e.g. overspecialization, too many units for which attendance is mandatory, excessive exam workload, faulty course and exam management and flaws in the exam procedure—the consequences of developments that started dozens of years ago.

'Quality of Teaching', therefore, calls for another reform of higher education as a crucial step. The quality of education also depends on the objective ability of students to cope with their studies.

Until now, statutory instruments of reform have fallen short of removing excessive workload from and improving the structuring of academic programmes. Therefore, the government needs to establish a structural and quantitative framework, i.e. 'upper stress limits' and minimum requirements for a transparent exam system. This cannot be done without intensive consultation with the institutes of higher education. We are talking about guidelines governing important features of a study programme, such as the envisaged duration and the volume of a course, exam elements, course structuring and exam deadlines and procedures. These guidelines must be designed to boost and facilitate the reform work undertaken by the universities.

Moreover, such guidelines permit the task of approval of exam regulations to be conferred on the rector or principal, away from the Ministry. The

strengthening of their decision-making responsibilities makes the institutions of higher education more autonomous in establishing the contents of academic courses. The institutions are given a special instrument of reform to compete with each other in offering attractive study programmes as regards contents and duration.

The Ministry of Higher Education and Research has made a number of suggestions to the higher education facilities, which are now being discussed. We are striving for an agreement on guidelines that take into account the individual characteristics of courses and subjects. Consultations to that effect have begun between state ministers for schools and cultural affairs, and a positive outcome is expected. In initial reactions, North Rhine-Westphalia's plans were greeted with enthusiasm.

INCENTIVE SCHEME AND EVALUATION OF TEACHING PERFORMANCE

This includes the following:

- the introduction of a periodical *teaching report* written by the dean and designed to make teaching more transparent—an essential requirement for quality. Teaching reports will primarily be instruments of self-assessment for faculties but, in my view, higher education facilities must answer publicly for their teaching performance, as in research. Initial efforts are being made at some higher education institutions in North Rhine-Westphalia to work out a thematic structure for such reports (Aachen Polytechnic, the University of Bielefeld 'Vice Principals' Conference on Teaching').
- In the future, we will again consider criteria for the allocation of public funds to institutions of higher education as rewards for excellence in teaching.
- Rewards to researchers particularly devoted to teaching.
 - The State Conference of Principals and Rectors has proposed a range of 'awards for outstanding teaching performance'. It is intended to confer the first such awards before the end of this year.
 - Preferential treatment with regard to sabbaticals and funding.
- Some measures of the action programme, including the legal obligation to prepare teaching reports, will be implemented by amending North Rhine-Westphalia's higher education laws.

CONCLUSION

We are on the right track, but have not yet reached our goal. Until the upward trend in time needed for completion of studies is reversed, and as long as there is a significant number of dropouts



and students complain of lack of perspective and excessive workload, both government and higher education must continue to pay attention to teaching.

The author is a graduate in economics and social sciences from the universities of Hamburg, Paris and Köln. Her professional career began in 1966 as a research assistant at the computer center of the University of Cologne. As an active member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) since 1967 she became Senator for Youth, Family Affairs and Sports in Berlin in 1981. She is currently the Minister for Higher Education and Research of North Rhine-Westphalia—the most populous of the German federal states with over 18 million inhabitants and encompassing the conurbations in the Rhine-Ruhr region of Köln-Bonn, Düsseldorf and Essen-Duisburg. Ms Brunn is a vigorous advocate of reform in the German higher education system.