

Editorial

Can adjustments to educational demands be made on the fast lane?

NEWS items from the USA, Germany and Australia in this issue reveal that politicians and governments are seeking a redirection of funding support towards vocational education and away from higher education. In a communication by **Wiebe** and the editor in this issue the intake of first-year students in mechanical engineering is reported to be showing a steep decline. This decline is now alarming, to the extent that practically only one applicant per professor has registered interest in studying mechanical engineering in the summer semester of 1994 at the Fachhochschule Hamburg. Similar news is coming from other engineering disciplines. The reaction is indicative of almost concurrent response by the aspiring student population to market conditions. No jobs in an area means no students for the subject. The current intake of students in building and construction engineering greatly exceeds capacity; after many lean years, this area is reacting to the current building boom. Moreover, the increasing rate of unemployment among academics worldwide brings calls for the training of more non-academic professionals. In Germany, which traditionally has a lower proportion of service employees, opinions are being raised that emphasis should now be on academic training of professionals for the service industries such as health care, social and other services. Whether such contortions in the education sector are wise is an open question. It is not at all evident that these trends are permanent, although the size of the unemployment figures and the fact that less manpower is needed for all production processes is probably a permanent feature. It is hardly feasible that whole economies can be changed at short notice. Even attitudes will have a hard time influencing a change from manufacturing, automobile production and electrical engineering to other sectors in an industrialized country such as Germany. With a lack of flexibility in higher education the reaction to reduced student numbers will be slow, and the most appropriate policy will be to await developments and then change. As for vocational education, there is a need for improvements in almost all countries which lack central European standards. The fact that even in a recession highly trained professionals are unavailable in certain sectors may be partly due to the move of a high proportion of the population to opt for higher education. It remains to be seen whether a more flexible, highly educated population cannot better solve economic problems than an overwhelmingly vocationally trained population.

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