

STEPS TOWARD REFORM

The Higher Education Development Plan (2006–2010) has been proposed by the Ministry of Science and Education. Realizing certain inefficiencies in the system, in March 2007 the ministry created a working group for the reform of higher education and research in Lithuania. The need for reforms was also instigated by the strong political demands of more right-wing parties to liberalize the higher education system. At the same time, left-wing parties called for ensuring that access to higher education does not change. As a result, different players were invited to share opinions, and a proposal was advanced to transform the traditionally closed higher education and research system in Lithuania. The major issues on the table included higher education quality, governance, financing, human resources, and infrastructure.

CONCLUSION

The latest discussions of reforms definitely have had a neoliberal feel, with a priority given to ideas of efficiency of the higher education system. There is a much greater focus on the agenda of higher education to raise the country's economic competitiveness—in line with the Lisbon goals of raising the competitiveness of the European economy. The Lisbon objectives have to some extent taken over the legitimization of the reforms with regard to the Bologna process of the 1990s. It is too early to draw conclusions about the success of the reforms, but the involvement of various stakeholders and the vision of broad reforms increase hopes for prospects of a more radical change of the Lithuanian higher education landscape. ■

Germany's “Excellence Initiative”

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Although many factors contributed to what most policy observers saw as underperformance of German universities in the late 20th century, lack of differentiation of mission among institutions seems paramount. All universities were treated essentially as peers in teaching and research, with roughly equivalent salary scales and working conditions. In 2008, 88 public universities in Germany are authorized to

award doctoral degrees. Each of these institutions can claim to be what the United States calls a research-intensive university. Relative to the size of its economy, the number at this level is untenably large but unsupportable at a high level of quality. In fact, no German university appears at the top among leading universities worldwide in commonly consulted international rankings.

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On January 27, 2004, the federal minister for higher education and research in the Social Democratic government of Gerhard Schroeder, Edelgard Buhlmahn, electrified the academic community by proposing that the government simply select and support six universities to be Germany's top institutions of higher learning. With startling swiftness, in less than 18 months, key stakeholders reached an agreement to undertake a process called the “Excellence Initiative,” to be financed by an appropriation of 1.9 billion euros, shared 75 percent by the federal government and 25 percent by the states. Meanwhile, the Social Democrats were replaced by a grand coalition led by Christian Democrat, Angela Merkel. The new minister for higher education and research—Christian Democrat, Annette Schavan—quickly endorsed continuation of the Excellence Initiative.

SHAPE OF THE COMPETITION

In the compromises necessary to achieve consensus, the emphasis turned from an exclusive focus on identifying a few elite institutions to a more broadly based program to strengthen research and reform doctoral education throughout the university sector. Three competitions were organized. The first was for new “graduate schools,” which are intended to develop modern paths toward award of the doctorate. Winners receive about 1 million euros per year for five years, and about 40 awards were expected. The second was for “excellence clusters,” encouraging combinations of the strongest academic programs at an institution in innovative ways to promote high-quality interdisciplinary research. Winners receive about 6.5 million euros per year for five years and about 30 awards were expected.

The final competition was for a “futures concept,” intended to reorganize the university radically to enable it to compete against the strongest international standards. To qualify for entry into this competition a university had independently to win support for at least one graduate school and one excellence cluster. Winners receive about 14 million euros per year for five years, and about 10 awards were expected. Since winners in the futures-concept competition also receive funds for their win-

ning entries in the graduate school and excellence-cluster competition, the actual funds received by these institutions were at least 21.5 million euros per year for five years. All universities were permitted to win more than one graduate school and more than one excellence cluster, and several did. Funds awarded through the Excellence Initiative are supplements, added over and above a university's normal budget.

PROCESS OF SELECTION

The language of the competitions was carefully worded to avoid use of words such as "elite" or "best," but the media and the general public quickly picked up these labels so that winners in the futures-concept competition were widely called Germany's elite universities. A rigorous competition was established by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Society) and the Wissenschaftsrat (Science Council). Commissions of internationally renowned scholars from nations around the world participated in evaluating all proposals—each of which was submitted in English, the language of deliberation in the international evaluation committees. I was privileged to serve on the 12-member "strategy committee," charged with evaluating the futures concepts and selecting these winning proposals. There was also a 14-member "expert commission," charged with evaluating and making final determinations of winners in the graduate school and excellence-cluster competitions. Discussions within the commissions were intense and unwaveringly focused on the single criterion of academic excellence.

Finalists for the futures-concept proposals also underwent a three-day site visit by a panel of distinguished international scholars, chaired by a member of the strategy committee.

Anyone in the United States who has participated in a review panel for the National Institutes of Health or the National Science Foundation or who has labored on promotion and tenure committees at a leading research institution will understand the kind of deliberation that took place. Each decision by the strategy commission had to be defended to the expert commission and vice versa before common agreement was reached on the final list of recommended awards. After the two commissions had completed their work, the ministers of education for each of the 16 states in the Federal Republic, plus the federal minister of education, participated in a final meeting at which the awards were approved. In no case was a political decision substituted for an academic one.

Finalists for the futures-concept proposals also underwent a three-day site visit by a panel of distinguished international scholars, chaired by a member of the strategy committee. For example, one site-visit panel I chaired consisted of an Arabist

from Yale, an American historian from Princeton, a mathematician from Oxford, a dean from Indiana University, a prize-winning young scientist from Göttingen, a former university chancellor from Switzerland, and two directors of independent research laboratories in Germany.

OUTCOME

To manage cash flow, roughly half of the awards were made in October 2006 and the remainder one year later, in October 2007. In the competition for graduate schools, there were 253 proposals, 83 finalists, and 39 awards. In the competition for excellence clusters, there were 280 proposals, 81 finalists, and 37 awards. In the competition for futures concepts, 47 individual universities entered the competition, 18 were selected as finalists, and 9 won awards. The winning universities in the futures-concept competition were Technical University of Aachen, Free University of Berlin, University of Freiburg, University of Göttingen, University of Karlsruhe, University of Konstanz, University of Heidelberg, University of Munich, and the Technical University of Munich.

Razor-sharp analytical thinking about the needs of the present and the future shaped the extraordinary adventure of the Excellence Initiative. All proposals in all competitions were encouraged to include local partners (especially in business and industry), to stress interdisciplinary research and teaching, to focus on creating a positive impact on academic fields in the future, and to include plans for turning research results into practical applications. In addition to participation by established excellent scholars and scientists, proposals were required to provide career development opportunities for junior faculty, create new ways of preparing junior faculty to do research, and encourage the participation of women. Finally, unconventional ideas were given priority, and designs for effective leadership and efficient management were required.

ONGOING CHALLENGES

The Excellence Initiative has been invaluable in breaking taboos—for example, about the equivalence of universities, in opening a broadly based discussion about the role of postsecondary education in national life, and in putting university matters conspicuously on the public's agenda. It has also exposed structural challenges that make movement toward genuine excellence for any university problematic. German universities are underfinanced by international standards, receiving significantly less proportion of GNP than other advanced economies invest. There are debilitating divisions in the nature of their financing, with the states claiming authority for teaching (but not research) and the federal government providing substantial funding for research (but not teaching). Teaching loads are shockingly high, with virtually all universities requiring that professors teach four courses per semester, with student/faculty ratios that generally hover between 50 and 100. For many cultural and historical reasons, it is difficult for Germans to agree that certain institutions be treated as quali-

tatively superior to others. The United Kingdom maintains that it supports at most three institutions in the top tier (Cambridge, London, and Oxford), and Switzerland only one (Zurich). It is unlikely that Germany could support as many as six, and yet the internal national pressures will be to widen rather than narrow the circle of truly excellent universities.

LOOKING FORWARD

The stakeholders in the Excellence Initiative are committed to continuing it in some form when the current funding is exhausted. Future plans are not yet settled, but it is unlikely that the “next round” will be a replica of what has just been completed. Scholars and politicians are working to determine how best to build on what has begun. One outcome, however, is now certain. German universities no longer constitute what they were in 2005. An entirely new course has been set, built upon differentiation of mission evolved from rigorously high academic standards. One surprising message surfaced with clarity in the minds of the many outstanding international scholars who participated in evaluation panels. It is not that German universities are weak. It is that, despite formidable obstacles, they are astonishingly strong. ■

Universities and Social Cohesion in the European Union

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It has become conventional wisdom in recent years that Europe faces a daunting challenge of social cohesion in the face of increasingly hostile and radical Islamic immigrants residing in European cities. In the year 2006 alone, there were four major books addressing how the “growing threat” of “radical Islam” is “destroying the West from within.” The murder of two prominent public figures in the Netherlands, Theo van Gogh and Pim Fortuyn, has been particularly highlighted as examples of how Islamic fundamentalism has run amok in Europe.

Major questions have been raised on the ability of European states to create institutionalized mechanisms to improve the integration of Muslim immigrants and especially their children, who often feel as if they are caught between two quite disparate cultures. It has thus become a goal in the European Union to increase social cohesion using state programs and resources, universities among them. But what is the likelihood that European universities will see these social cohesion goals as legitimate, and work to implement them?

SOCIAL COHESION IN THE UNIVERSITY

To investigate the possibilities for implementing the EU's social cohesion goals in continental universities, I conducted a small study among faculty in Dutch universities. We discussed whether universities should have special access policies for Muslim students, if the curriculum should incorporate topics related to the Muslim integration, and if a university should directly engage Muslim communities through recruitment, speaking opportunities, or visits to schools.

The faculty identified complicated issues of equity and policy regarding immigrant students, but saw no role for higher education.

With few exceptions, the faculty expressed indifference and even open hostility toward all these ideas. They laughed off the idea that universities would take any unified action toward addressing these goals. “You don't understand,” one faculty member said to me, shaking her head. “The administration doesn't do anything around here.”

To many, just asking the question characterized me as an impossibly naïve American with no understanding of how universities operate in continental Europe. Often I was given a brief lecture about how academic power is decentralized in the faculties, which is not different from American research universities. “This is how it is done in America, no?” one staff member asked. My informants simply did not see the university as a unitary actor with the potential for significant action.

The faculty identified complicated issues of equity and policy regarding immigrant students, but saw no role for higher education. They denied that any access issues existed due to open enrollment policies, even as they acknowledged that immigrant students were far less likely to have the qualifications or financial resources to succeed. “This is a problem for the schools to fix, or maybe the government—I'm not sure,” one faculty member said. Another directly opposed any scholarship funds to encourage Muslim student enrollment. “I came from a poor family, and I had to find a way to make it through graduate school,” he said. “I don't see what makes this student any different.”

Despite my preconception of Muslim integration as largely a social problem amenable to interventions by universities and educators, the faculty again and again recast integration as a political problem. This is problematic, as there are deeply held beliefs that the university faculties should “stay out of politics,” although in practice many individual faculty members are highly involved in national and local politics. For the university to act on a political problem was seen as totally illegitimate.

One of my informants brought up an incident at an American disciplinary conference that he attended. He wandered into a heated discussion about whether the association should take a stand in favor of same-sex marriage, due to a recent law preventing federal recognition of same-sex mar-