

International Trends

Europe's Overcrowded Universities: Mass Higher Education Has Its Price

■ Axel Markert

A couple of years ago, someone strolling from the medieval center of Tübingen to the University's main building through the small park formerly known as the Botanical Garden of Eberhard-Karls-Universität, would have made an unusual discovery. Students had erected a huge tent in the middle of the park as a protest against the housing situation. They slept in the tent and tried to alert passersby to the untenable housing situation in this small town with a big university.

When frosty nights forced the tent dwellers to decamp a few weeks later, another group of more radical students then occupied a medical school building. The building, scheduled for renovation, had been left empty for just one night. After lengthy negotiations with university and police officials, the protesters departed—leaving behind many aggressive graffiti on the walls.

These are examples of a phenomenon which has its parallels in French, Italian and Spanish university towns: overcrowding in higher education on the Continent.

Of course, the housing situation is only the most visible aspect of this unfortunate development, which has also created unsatisfactory student-staff ratios and inadequate finances. It is certainly also the aspect which is felt most acutely by foreign students who, if housing has not been reserved for them ahead of time, have more difficulty in finding reasonably-priced rooms than the natives.

The enormous growth in student mobility stimulated by recent programs

such as ERASMUS has European students venturing into other European Community (EC) countries and has led, in turn, to worries among the well-established (and not-so-well-established) American study abroad programs, who already see their charges being flushed out of dorms by the European flood.

Of course, the problem is not all that new on our Continent. "Big" universities, comparatively speaking, already existed in the Middle Ages. Paris had over 5,000 students in the 13th century, and Bologna had more than 10,000, but these were the exceptions. Until the end of the 19th century, the bulk of European universities had but a few hundred students, or a few thousand at most.

The decisive expansion or, rather, explosion of higher education came in the decades after the Second World War.

Schools for the elite developed into mass universities and the idyllic calm of the classical centers of higher education gave way to boisterous activity by the mid-1960s, much to the regret of many who had enjoyed the privileges of the "old" system.

Growth rates in European higher education were indeed spectacular between the mid-1950s and the mid-1980s. Student enrollment rose

- from 150,000 to 1,300,000 in France;
- from 140,000 to 1,150,000 in Italy;
- from 175,000 to 1,550,000 in Germany, which means a

growth factor of eight to nine times, similar to those found in Finland, Switzerland or the United Kingdom—where it was somewhat lower—and to Austria and Sweden, where the rate was a bit higher. In Spain, however, student numbers grew from 65,000 to 950,000, or nearly fifteenfold!

During this period, the enrollment of the age cohort from 20-24 rose in Germany from 4 percent to over 25 percent.

In all these countries, which have predominantly state-supported higher educational systems, financial contributions could not, as a rule, keep pace with this rapid expansion.

Also, because these national systems had always assumed they would be dealing with mature, self-sufficient students;

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the in "loco parentis" principle was notably absent. This assumption worked well with four percent of the age cohort, but it could not work with 25 percent.

As early as the 1960s, students started to have serious problems in finding suitable housing and new ways had to be found to feed the masses through organizations which started out as student self-help associations.

The need to feed and build dormitories for a sizeable proportion of the student population was accepted and undertaken, with mixed success. Someone who has never stood in line for a half hour outside a French "Restau U" or a German "Mensa," who has never talked in vain to two dozen unyielding landlords or ladies within a week, and who has never stood through a one-and-a-half hour lecture will never know what the term *Massen-universität* really means!

It looks as though these problems will be with us for quite a while. After the tremendous efforts of the 1970s, as Burton Bollag pointed out in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Nov. 7, 1990), "European governments began to scale back their spending on higher education in the early 1980s, partly in anticipation of an end to enrollment growth in the middle of the decade."

A Faulty Prediction

Planners had predicted that, for demographic reasons, student numbers would drop. German universities learned a new word, *Überlast*. This "overload" was supposed to be a temporary phenomenon which the universities would have to tolerate for a limited time, until the demographers' predictions were redeemed. It is not only the Germany universities which are still waiting for this moment to come around.

Several factors intervened to influence student behavior differently from what had been expected. Among these were high unemployment rates which

make a longer sojourn at tuition-free schools an attractive alternative, and a renewed tendency of high school graduates, after a few years of slack, to enter into higher education.

The Spaniards call this *masificación*, and have not found a pat solution to the problems created. They are, it seems, in good company. To help remedy the situation, the Spanish government has approved the setting up of private universities, thus hoping to alleviate the pressure on State schools. Spain does have a special problem in that an unreasonably high percentage of its students study in its two largest cities. Almost half of the Spanish student population of over one million is enrolled in either Madrid or Barcelona. Overcrowding is worst in what is also the biggest school, Madrid's Complutense with 130,000 students! But even in a smaller school like Salamanca, it is estimated that only half a square meter of space is available per student.

Italy Tries to Catch Up

In Italy, too, the capital has the most populous institution: La Sapienza boasts an enrollment of 180,000, which should make it the mega-university of Europe. Only about one quarter of the students enrolled in Sapienza attend the university outside of examinations, which helps explain why only one-third of those "attending" earn a degree.

Italian higher education has some catching up to do in comparison with, say, France and Germany. Where these two countries spend 2.2 and 2.5 percent of their gross national product, respectively, for higher education, Italy offers a meager 0.5 percent. A new law approved in August 1990 provides funding (1,900,000 million lire through 1995) for the development of universities, while stipulating that the underdeveloped South, the *Mezzogiorno*, will receive at least 40 percent of the funds available in an attempt to re-



Axel Markert is Director, Office of International Relations, University of Tübingen. He is a past president of the European Association for International Education, and a member of the Board of Directors of NAESA: Assoc. of International Educators.

duce the imbalance with the North.

Centralism is the issue in France, where the government's recent "decentralization" plans aim to alleviate pressure on Paris. However, four of seven new planned universities will be built in Paris by 1995.

A series of professionally-oriented *Instituts Universitaires de Technologie (IUT)* also will be created or expanded in the neglected regions of the Southeast, the Southwest, the Picardie and the Centre. The shorter courses offered by these IUT have attracted a growing number of French students in the past few years.

The French Ministry proposes to create nearly 2,200 new faculty positions in the universities to help remedy a situation which is seen as having deteriorated during the past 15 years. Of course, the total cost for this expansion, 16 billion francs through 1995, can be raised only if the local authorities chip in. Regions, Departments and towns will be asked to carry a part of the load—another drastic departure from France's traditional centralism, which regarded university construction and expansion as the exclusive domain of the national government.

In contrast, Germany has always had a decentralized system in which the States have the overall responsibility for education, including higher educa-

tion, and the federal government, as a rule, subsidizes research and university construction only.

Complications of East German "Unravelling"

Germany's situation has been complicated by reunification. Statistics show more than 1.7 million students in over 300 higher educational institutions for 1990/91.

Institutions in the former GDR had been much more (politically) selective, a fact which is best shown by the following statistics: only 7.9 percent of the 19-26-year-old cohort were enrolled in East German institutions of higher education in 1990 compared to 23.4 percent in West Germany.

Recent prognoses are that in 2010, there will be between 1.7 and 2 million students in Germany, and it is clear that massive investments will have to be made in order to ensure a competitive system in the European context.

Once the *Abwicklung*, (or "unravelling," as the restructuring of Eastern institutions is quaintly called) has had the expected results, universities in the former GDR will certainly carry a more equitable proportion of the national load, and play a role in the German concert which will come closer to the situation before World War II.

The Federal government has helped to relieve the states' burden through a seven-year financial aid plan started in 1989. About \$100 million will be contributed annually for the expansion of facilities and the creation of new teach-

ing positions, but many rectors and presidents consider this, as the German saying goes, "only a drop on a hot stone."

Present overcrowding may further raise the average graduating age at some German universities, which is already close to a record 28 years!

In most of the States, dormitory construction programs are underway, in some cases curiously accelerated by improved East-West relations and the resulting troop reductions: in Tübingen a sizeable portion of the barracks left behind by French troops, who started to leave town this past summer after 45 years, will be used for student housing.

It is hoped that in all European countries, the much celebrated increase in student mobility will eventually lead to an improvement in the student accommodation sector. The EC has commissioned a study on the "Accommodation of ERASMUS Students in the Member States of the European Community." The study concludes that "the European community should exert a stronger political influence which emphasizes the significance of providing student accommodation in the EC Member States," and recommends, among other things, that:

- in addition to mobility programs, the European Community should give extra financial aid to improve the infrastructure for the accommodation of exchange students;
- central and regional governments in those Member states which do not yet sufficiently finance student

housing...need to show more involvement in this sector and...regard it as a political and social duty;

● once student accommodation has been accepted as a public task, governments...devise means, instruments and incentives to motivate public and private initiatives to engage in providing accommodation; and

● *Europahauser*/Europe houses/*Maisons d'ERASMUS* be built in university towns with a high proportion of foreign students and...provide accommodation for ERASMUS students.

Let us hope that the Member States will follow these recommendations and will manage to provide the necessary resources. Whatever is done to improve intra-European mobility will also help American students coming to Europe.

Maybe the expected partial departure of American troops from Europe will provide a concrete means of stimulating the trans-Atlantic student flow, if those in responsible positions choose to grasp this opportunity. The author hopes, at any rate, that a tent for American exchange students will never be erected in the Tübingen Botanical Garden. □

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