

Ranking of Universities in Germany: The Changing Scene

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I

Every year, some 250,000 fresh students in the Federal Republic of Germany face the same irksome question: Which university is the best for the subject chosen? Traditionally, the answer to that question has been a very lonely and subjective one. Very little, if any, information has been available so far on the differences in quality of the education offered by the various faculties from different German universities. While private and public research budgets have been subject to intense competition by German professors and scientific institutes for many years, students are perceived as troublesome clients that universities are reluctant to compete for. Consequently, there has been no noticeable ranking among German universities as yet.

This situation, however, may be changing soon. In March 1990, the German weekly "Der Spiegel" published a special report on "Studying today - which university is the best?" The Report, which has been equally well received by students, the Federal Government and the public at large, introduced the first comprehensive ranking list of German universities.

II

Unlike in the United States and in the United Kingdom, there are no particular admission tests for fresh students under the system of higher education in Germany. Some subjects, like law and economics, which is divided into business and national economics, may be studied without any admission restrictions at all. For other subjects such as medicine, biology and physics, the average mark achieved in the Arbitur (eg the German equivalent to A-

levels) is the decisive criteria for admission.

There are 51 universities in Germany (higher technical colleges and business schools excluded), all of which are state-run. They fall into four categories: the old and long established universities like Bonn, Heidelberg and Munich, to name only a few, the more modern universities founded since 1960 in smaller cities such as Bayreuth, Bielefeld and Bochum, the comprehensive universities established in the seventies and the technical universities, the most prominent of which is located in Berlin. Not all universities in Germany entertain faculties for all subjects. Law can be studied at 30 universities, economics is offered by 44 German universities.

Whereas American universities have been subject to ranking for the last three decades and British universities, since 1981, are evaluated by an official commission upon whose findings federal and state funds for individual universities are based, German higher education could so far only be compared on the basis of the amounts of public and private research grants secured by individual faculties, a standard that does not necessarily reflect educational excellence.

The most important reason for the absence of any substantive university ranking in Germany is that it has long been misunderstood as a challenge to the freedom of research and education, one of the cornerstones of Germany university tradition. Also, in light of many American universities being privately funded, ranking has long been perceived as a typical American expression of competition for money and students that, allegedly, could not be applied to the state-run German system of higher education. Another reason for the absence of any noticeable university

ranking in the past is that many German professors, in particular those who expect a rather low score in any objective test, do not like the idea of their scientific and educational skills being publically compared to those of their colleagues.

Nevertheless, in a time of increasing internationalisation and in light of Europe 1992 there is a growing demand for reliable data on the performance of different German universities. So far, large employers have had to make use of private ranking lists which consolidate the respective enterprises' experiences with graduates from various universities. Such lists are more or less subjective and often reflect only the personal director's own academic background.

Long established links to particular universities also play an important role in the hiring practice of German companies. Dresdner Bank, one of the big three German commercial financial institutions, is said to have good contacts with the universities in Bochum and Cologne as well as with the private business school in Koblenz.

The information provided by such private ranking lists has little coherence. Only few common findings can be drawn therefrom. One is to have a second look at applicants from allegedly leftish universities such as Bremen and Marburg, another is to consider old and prestigious universities like Munich and Tübingen as preferable addresses. The Spiegel Report gives little justification to such attitudes.

III

For the purpose of the Report, 6,000 students from all the German universities were questioned. The overall results may be summarized as follows: The winners are the comprehensive universities that scored best, closely followed by the newly founded universities. The losers are the long established, traditional universities that follow with considerable distance and the technical universities scoring worst. Out of the different faculties covered in the 146 page Report, only the findings for law and

economics shall be described.

In law, the newly established University of Bayreuth, a small city in the north of Bavaria, scored first, followed by two other modern universities, Würzburg and Bielefeld, whereas the old and prestigious University of Munich finished only about average and Heidelberg, another long established faculty, scored place 23 out of 30. In addition, the average studying time in Bayreuth is more than half a semester shorter (11 semesters) than the federal average. In this context it must be understood that German law students have to decide for themselves, after how many semesters they feel fit for the First State Examination. The minimum studying time is seven semesters. However, since the failure rate of about one out of three is rather high, many students tend to put off their examination date again and again, which ultimately leads to the rather long average studying time of 11.6 semesters. On top of law school, the German educational system requires a period of two and a half years of practical training, before a young lawyer is eventually qualified at the age of 30 or so.

One reason for the better results of the modern law faculties is that they generally offer their students more favourable studying conditions. Thus, the number of students per professor in Bayreuth is 33.3, whereas it amounts to 57.3 in Munich. For many students this ratio is more important than the knowledge that a professor, who is personally out of reach for them anyhow, has conducted some remarkable research.

Also, professors are generally given better marks at smaller and more modern universities than at old and more prestigious faculties, which tend to be more overcrowded. Quite understandably, it is more motivating to participate in a class of 30 or 40 students, than to sit in a lecture which is transmitted by video to hundreds of students in various lecture theatres at the same time.

Moreover, the broader studying conditions appear to be in favour of smaller and more

modern law faculties as well. Students face less expensive leases in smaller cities like Bayreuth and Bielefeld. In Frankfurt and Munich, on the other hand, leases of DM 20 per square metre are not unusual. Such prices can hardly be paid out of a monthly budget of DM 800,- or so. An additional disadvantage is that many of the very large universities, such as Frankfurt, tend to be split throughout the city.

One phenomenon that all German law faculties have to face equally is that their facilities are hopelessly overcrowded, for example, in Munich there are three times as many law students as the facilities of the faculty are designed to host. Bayreuth has still more than two times as many students as its buildings could reasonably accommodate. The reason for such overcrowding is that contrary to most other subjects there are, as indicated above, no admission restrictions in law. Many students that did not qualify for subjects like medicine and the sciences therefore eventually discover their interest for law. Many of those will later drop the subject again. In the meantime, however, their decision which is respected primarily for political reasons (ie the concept of equal access to higher education) nevertheless leads to a total overcrowding of studying facilities at German law faculties. In that context it is submitted that it would be far better for all interests involved to have a strict admission test, instead of finding out after five to six years that the subject chosen has not been the right one.

In economics, the Spiegel Report also puts the modern, newly created universities ahead of the old established institutions. The University of Bochum finished first, followed by the universities of Trier and Würzburg, whereas old prestigious faculties like Munich and Frankfurt received places 34 and 40 out of 44. This picture, again, corresponds to the broader studying conditions and the marks given by students to their professors. The better ranked faculties also appear to qualify their students faster. Whereas the average studying time in Würzburg is one semester below the

federal average of 11 semesters, the average student in Munich needs an additional semester until being qualified.

Moreover, it appears to be easier for students at newly created economics faculties to gain access to their professors than for their colleagues at the old established institutions. In addition, some smaller faculties have lately started to offer combined economics and foreign language training. Thus, the University of Passau has been quite successful in promoting its foreign language courses covering, inter alia, Chinese, Japanese and Russian.

Overall, the Report indicates that German law as well as economics students value objective studying conditions, such as educational capacities and studying facilities as more important than the academic distinctions of their professors.

IV

The Spiegel Report on "Studying today - which university is the best?" has received rather controversial comments and remarks, not only from the universities concerned. Also, it must be emphasized that the Report focuses exclusively on student attitudes. Such attitudes do not necessarily reflect the objective academic quality of the faculties compared. Thus, the criticism of the Report by the Conference of German University Chancellors can claim some justification. One should not, therefore, overestimate the findings of the Report.

Still, the Report should be welcomed as a starting point to develop some objective university ranking regime in Germany. The Federal Minister for Education, Herr Jürgen Mollemann, has publically declared his support for the Report and indicated that he intends to continue the research started. It is thus hoped that the ranking of universities will no longer be a taboo in Germany, but will develop to provide some valuable guidance for students as well as potential employers.