

A 6 IMPROVING EDUCATION IN GERMANY

Growth, Education, Solidarity: The educational policy priorities of the new German government

The new coalition attaches importance to education and research. Section 2 of the coalition agreement entitled “Growth, Education, Solidarity” is dedicated to the “Education Republic of Germany”. The envisaged increase in Federal expenditure of EUR 12 billion until 2013 is intended in particular to benefit research, namely the High-Tech Strategy, the Pact for Research and Innovation,²⁰ the Higher Education Pact²¹ and the Excellence Initiative. The Expert Commission welcomes these proposals. Other measures in the coalition agreement have the potential to improve the German education system so that more people can receive good education and vocational training. This includes state contributions to so-called Future Accounts²², language tests and lessons for four-year olds, support for highly talented school-children, a grant system for talented students, and an increase in student enrolments, in particular for applicants from vocational training courses. For this purpose, so-called step-up grants are to be expanded (Box 07), which is necessary in view of the limited numbers currently available (about 1000 grants a year). In addition, the coalition agreement favours increased continuous learning, although it remains vague on this point. In view of the increasing importance of further training throughout life, the Expert Commission urges the Federal Government, Laender, local authorities and companies to work together in order to allow people to acquire

BOX 07

Step-up grants

Since December 2008, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research has been providing so-called “step-up scholarships” for men and women with vocational experience who wish to go on to higher education. The programme is aimed at “highly-talented” applicants, who are selected in a three-stage process. Anybody can apply who has completed their vocational training very successfully and has at least two years experience in their occupation. So far, some 1500 scholarships have been awarded.

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further qualifications while they are working or in phases of unemployment.

Equality of access and full use of all potential

Many of such educational policies benefit primarily those who have already received considerable support in the course of their education. It is well-known that more than 70 percent of grants for the highly talented go to students whose parents have university degrees and more than 40 percent of recipients are only given flat-rate book grants.²³ The Future Accounts for each new-borne child, into which the government pays EUR 150 with a premium to be paid if regular payments are made through until adulthood, will also tend to better higher-income families. Those with less money will have less to save for their children’s education. The Expert Commission recommends making greater efforts to achieve more social equality for access to education. Targeted preferential support should go to those who have potential, but who do not receive enough backing from institutions and their family. In this context, the planned introduction of payments to parents who do not send their children to public pre-school care institutions will not contribute to the objectives in hand. In particular, children from educationally disadvantaged strata benefit from early support. The government is wasting the opportunity to counter the educational deficits of these children before they start school. Furthermore, such payments for child care represent a disincentive for women to enter the labour market. For these reasons, the Expert Commission is against the introduction of child-care payments and in favour of an entitlement to a free kindergarten place for all children from the age of three, and also for an obligatory pre-school year for five-year olds.

Removing the ban on cooperation between the Federal Government and Laender

The goal of an “Education Republic of Germany” can only be achieved by a joint approach of the Federal Government, Laender and local authorities. Many of the points included in the coalition agreement are currently the responsibility of the Laender and local authorities. Even though the Growth Acceleration Act has passed through the Bundesrat, it

remains to be seen to what extent the Laender and local authorities will implement the specified measures. This is all the more the case because the decline in tax revenues as a result of the financial crisis, in combination with public budget limits and proposed tax cuts, give grounds to fear that it will not be possible to pursue many of the research and educational targets. Where public budget cuts have to be made, then it is areas of discretionary spending which usually suffer, such as education.²⁴ The ban on cooperation means that with few exceptions it is also not possible for the Federal Government to make special funding allocations. For this reason, the Expert Commission favours lifting the ban on cooperation and reconsidering federal responsibilities for education. Germany cannot afford the tight framework conditions which result from federalism in this sector.

Boosting research at German universities

An important impulse for research is provided by the Excellence Initiative (Box 08). It has had a marked impact on the German science landscape in recent years. Recent investigations of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences (BBAW)²⁵ show clearly

that a “special class” of research funding has resulted which has created a new level of academic reputation. In particular the Excellence clusters are regarded as an outstanding new category of third-party programmes. The BBAW working group draws attention to the importance of the third line of funding to support the universities themselves – apart from the support for individual excellence clusters or graduate schools. This is the only way to develop the best internationally competitive universities.

The effects of the excellence initiatives are varied and extend beyond the individual faculties and universities which receive support. In some cases, universities which made unsuccessful entries for the Excellence Initiative could still benefit. The proposals could be realised with funding from other sources, usually organised at the federal state level. However, in other cases, rejection casts an unfavourable light on the application; unsuccessful applicants and their faculties report significant damage to their reputation. The Expert Commission recommends for the next stage of the Excellence Initiative that applications which are excluded after the second round of assessment should be awarded a sum in the order of EUR 100 000 so that the projects can be further developed and alternative funding acquired.

BOX 08

Excellence Initiative

The Excellence Initiative promotes cutting-edge research at German universities. It includes three lines of funding:

1. Graduate schools for young scientists,
2. Excellence clusters which link universities with leading research institutes and businesses
3. “Future concepts” to raise institutional research profiles.

In two rounds of application in 2006 and 2007, a total of EUR 1.9 billion was made available to the universities and their partner institutions for research and the support of young scientists through until 2012. On 4 June 2009, the Federal Government and Laender decided to extend the excellence initiative for the period 2012 to 2017 with a total funding volume of EUR 2.7 billion. The programme will retain its current structure with three lines of funding. The next round of applications is planned for 2010, and the decisions on funding will be taken in 2012.

Promoting excellence in university teaching

Although the Expert Commission welcomes the Excellence Initiative, the University Pact and the Pact for research and innovation, it very much misses proposals aimed explicitly at promoting university teaching, which is not covered by the funding provided by the Excellence Initiative. The call to submit innovative teaching concepts in the next round of the Excellence Initiative is not enough in order to provide support for the Bologna Process and the associated targets. The “Excellence Initiative in Teaching” of the Stifterverband for German Science is an important step,²⁶ but by itself it will not be sufficient in order to ensure the implementation of the urgent recommendations made by the German Science Council to improve the quality of university teaching and course²⁷.