

Duisburg-Essen University

Germany: Students protest implementation of tuition fees

Parwini Zora
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An “open discussion over the implementation of tuition fees,” announced on short notice, between Duisburg-Essen University students and the university rector was prematurely cut short on April 6, as angered students queued up one after the other to voice their protest.

Although the venue of the discussion was a medium-sized auditorium built to hold a maximum of 300 students, approximately 1,000 turned out to demand a halt to the North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) federal government’s plans to further privatise higher education.

The universities in the Ruhr district, famously known as former “coal workers districts,” built during the 1970s as part of the then social democratic program of social concessions, have been subjected to gradual privatization, especially during the last few years at the hands of the “reform”—or deregulation—of public spending. Following a cost-cutting merger, the universities of Essen and Duisburg in the Ruhr were fused in 2003 followed by a downsizing of university staff and services.

Having been widely discredited among its popular base in these northwestern districts, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) government was ousted during the last federal elections by a protest vote for a Christian Democratic-led government, which has since insisted on intensifying the same program. The liberal NRW minister for innovation, science, research and technology, Andreas Pinkwart (FDP—Free Democrats), is therefore pressing for the quick implementation of tuition fees, by the summer semester next year, starting off with €500 per semester.

Following a Federal Constitutional Court decision in

January 2005, the federal government is deprived of the authority and decision making involving the nominal tuition fee that is to be implemented. The court’s legal sanction, therefore, has dismissed all legal obstacles that may have blocked or postponed the implementation of fees at universities across Germany. Therefore, according to Minister Pinkwart’s optimistic calculations, approximately 470,000 registered students are to pour in a total of some €320 million per semester to the federal state budget, which has been systematically drained of public funds.

Foreign students, mostly of South American, African, east European and Asian origin, who have favoured Germany as a heretofore affordable destination for higher education, are to pay additional tuition fees for their “Studienkolleg” attendance. The Studienkolleg’s are pre-university colleges, which are to be attended for a period of two semesters, where compulsory German proficiency is to be obtained for further studies.

Already burdened with the rising cost of living, monthly rent and legal provisions limiting the students’ ability to work, the additional cost of tuition fees makes university education more and more unaffordable—or a luxury—for thousands of students.

At the “open discussion” last month, Duisburg-Essen University Rector Zechlin’s comments in favour of the implementation of tuition fees were constantly cut short by angry students voicing their concerns over privatising higher education in a federal state where youth poverty and unemployment are already rampant.

The federal government has proposed “refuge” via an “affordable” student loan scheme to those who can’t afford the additional expense to be funded, with interest costs, by the NRW.Bank. This means a student could

accumulate debts amounting to several thousand euros before attaining a basic degree or even before beginning a qualified job—if one is lucky to attain one. This is in addition to the personal debts stemming from the official student grant scheme, “Bafög,” which are to be repaid on the appointment of one’s first paid job or two years after completing studies.

The government’s plan to implement tuition fees has been met with growing disapproval by students faced with deteriorating learning conditions in the universities. The lack of basic services—such as out-of-date libraries, overcrowded seminars, the replacement of traditional student courses by Bachelors and Masters degree schemes—have made student life difficult and stressful.

In the Duisburg-Essen University alone, most of the seminars usually limited to 30 persons are held in the form of lectures, with 50-70 students in some courses as the general norm. If the number of students exceeds 100 per course, the number of course days per semester are cut in half as lecturers are forced to repeat the class in two groups. Due to lack of staff, the few lecturers available are forced to consult an average of 300-400 students a semester, having to offer inadequate consultant time per student and longer office hours.

The recent implementation of an online registration program for English courses for the current semester was known to have crashed repeatedly as hundreds of students rushed to register for the courses to secure a place. Exclusion from a compulsory course could mean a prolonged degree period, and now the threat of bearing the brunt of tuition fees. For this reason students are forced to take part in class even in the event of an emergency or illness, as dozens on the waiting list are eager to get into the course on another’s absence.

This unfriendly climate and the watered-down quality of education are combined with a neglected infrastructure and the sale of essential university services, such as the canteens, to private firms. During a recent fire drill at Duisburg-Essen University the outmoded emergency regulations and the absence of adequate fire exits became the focus of few commentaries in the local press.

Under these appalling learning conditions, the government’s drive to implement tuition fees has met with widespread protest among the students, which has

been repeatedly manifested in demonstrations organised since last year by the student unions affiliated with other universities in the region and countrywide. The unions continue to rally students behind the protest slogan “Education is no commodity,” hoping that the federal government will yield to the “pressure” of student protests and revise its privatization plans.



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