

Germany: New university tuition fees threaten students with poverty

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As a new term approaches, tens of thousands of German university students face new tuition fees of as much as €500 for each semester. The new fees threaten many students with poverty and will inevitably force a considerable number to end their studies. At a time when the current German government—a “grand coalition” of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Social Democratic Party (SPD)—is encouraging the development of so-called elite universities, the German higher education system is increasingly developing into a two-tier, class-based system.

Following a federal constitutional court decision in 2005, state governments are now responsible for the implementation of the new tuition fees. The seven states with governments led by the CDU—Hamburg, Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia, Saarland, Hesse, Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg—have taken the lead in implementing the fees either in the coming summer or winter semesters.

The imposition of tuition fees is being enforced despite years of student demonstrations and thousands of student lawsuits, including a pending trial as to whether the tuition fees violate German constitutional law. The SPD and the Green Party opposition in the state of Hesse initiated the lawsuit in an effort to restore their political credentials and declining social base. Fearing an explosion of nationwide student demonstrations, which could well escalate into a broader social protest, those states governed by a SPD majority are currently delaying the imposition of fees.

Thousands of students facing increasing financial problems have requested waivers for their payments. University authorities, however, have announced that exceptions will be made only to the physically impaired, representatives of the university students council (AStA), scholarship students and those facing private insolvency—albeit after a strict bureaucratic procedure. Thus, the bulk of the applicants have little chance of obtaining a waiver.

Because students are not entitled to the minimal Hartz IV social security benefits of €342 per month, they can only

apply for a student grant up to €580—hardly sufficient to cover the monthly average expenditure of an individual student. According to the Hans-Böckler Foundation, only 345,000, or 25 percent of German students, receive the student grant. All applicants are required to meet strict requirements including proof of academic advancement in a set timeframe.

Huge numbers of students must work part-time and find it increasingly impossible to finish their intermediate examinations by the fourth semester, the chief condition for entitlement for a student grant. The Hans-Böckler Foundation further revealed that the implementation of tuition fees means that students will have to work even longer hours, causing them to extend studies by at least four semesters. This will further reduce the number of potential applicants for grants.

Foreign students, who have chosen to study in Germany and constitute a significant portion of the country's university students, are hardest hit. As “foreign nationals,” they are denied any access to state assistance programmes. Only after an increasing number of complaints have university authorities agreed to grant a waiver for foreign students for a limited number of semesters—again based on a very strict selection procedure.

According to a recent report published by the AStA of the University of Essen-Duisburg, a staggering number of foreign students and the physically impaired have had their applications refused applications, including students who approached the authorities in wheelchairs. According to officials, only a student who is “50 percent impaired” is entitled to a complete waiver.

When a WSWs reporter visited the university last week, there were long queues of students applying for waivers cramped into two small offices. Most were foreign students, predominately from eastern Europe, Africa and east Asia, who had been waiting for up to three hours.

A Vietnamese student about to enroll for her last semester said she had been in the queue for four days and recognised many other students who were in the same predicament. She

showed a list of documents she had been asked to hand in, including her visa approval, housing documents, tax papers and bank records for the entire last year. She said she had been treated in a very unfriendly manner. A Turkish student remarked ironically that “this queue is the right place for tears and to put one in a bad mood.” A number of students, who were already registered for their final exams, expressed anger over the fees because they were not planning to take any further courses.

Just a few feet away from the queue of exhausted and worried students stood a freshly printed poster for the NRW Bank, depicting a happily contented student applying for an “easily available” student loan—to be paid back in instalments within two years of the completion of studies.

According to a recent opinion poll by Friedrich-Schiller University in Jena, 80 percent of students were opposed to the implementation of tuition fees, including 50.7 percent “vehemently opposed.” Those polled said tuition fees would “strongly affect the social position” of students and increasingly restrict higher education for those from poorer financial background. Close to 17 percent of students confirmed they would either drop their studies or opt to attend universities where a tuition fee is not yet implemented. An increase of fees to €1,000 would lead to 53.5 percent quitting their studies.

The opinion poll confirmed that only a small minority of students regard student credit as a viable option. The new results clearly contradict earlier findings of a Forsa opinion poll in 2003, which alleged to have found broad support for the implementation of fees.

Students also objected to the undemocratic way the fees were imposed without any consultation with the students themselves. The poll also rejected the widely propagated argument from representatives of the political establishment that the implementation of the tuition fee is justified on the basis that other European countries already have much higher education fees.

Confirming these findings, the *Stuttgarter Zeitung Online* wrote last week that only 300 students—i.e., a mere 3 percent of the 10,000 students at the University of Mannheim in the state of Baden-Württemberg—have applied for student credit. The authorities said they initially expected as many as 40 percent of students would apply for loans. Another consequence of the new fees is a dramatic increase in the number of students applying for a “holiday semester”—i.e., taking a semester off. This jumped from an average of 400 to 1,300 for the coming semester.

The Centre for Higher Education in Germany (CHE) confirmed last month that tuition fees would only fill in existing budget gaps at universities, which have resulted from inadequate state funding. This point was underlined by

an extensive study submitted by the Institute for Higher Education Research of the University of Halle-Wittenberg, which predicted a significant drop in student numbers as a consequence of tuition fees. The report suggested fees will contribute €1.7 billion for state coffers while at least 10 percent of Germany’s 1.9 million students will be forced to give up their studies.

According to current estimates, the under-funding of local universities ranges from €3 billion to €4 billion a year. The report prominently highlighted that, according to OECD standards, the German government spends far below the average for higher education. When compared to current OECD higher education outputs, the German deficit increases up to €10 billion a year. Thus, the amount expected to be extracted from working student youth in the form of tuition fees amounts to less than half of the current budget deficit, clearly indicating that far from improving the poor quality of education as politicians have promised, the new source of revenue is still completely inadequate to cover the elementary expenses of educational institutions. Additional increases are no doubt being prepared.

As a part of the austerity programme of Germany’s former SPD-Green government, dramatic cuts in subsidies for educational and cultural institutions were made, resulting in the downsizing of the education sector. Some universities were forced to merge with a subsequent and significant reduction in university staff—including the loss of at least 1,500 professorial posts.

The current “grand coalition” government of the Christian Democratic Union and Social Democratic Party, which came to power following a constitutional manoeuvre in November 2005, has vigorously continued the pro-business policies of its predecessor by justifying the implementation of tuition fees on the basis of necessary “savings in public education.” The government now spends a miserly 1 percent of its GNP on higher education as a whole.



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