

Massive education cuts in German state of Saxony

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Universities in Saxony are threatened with massive cuts, including the closure of entire departments. The reason is cost savings in the education sector, which are supported by all parties and legally required via the so-called debt break anchored in the state's constitution.

At the end of January, the state government of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Free Democratic Party (FDP) announced 1,042 permanent job cuts by 2020. This equates to annual savings at universities in Saxony of €52 million, even though the number of those studying has sharply increased, which had not initially been expected.

The situation is particularly critical at the University of Leipzig, the largest institution in the region after the Technical University in Dresden. More than one quarter of the cost-cutting measures will affect Germany's second oldest university.

In an interview with the weekly magazine *Die Zeit*, the rector of Leipzig University, Beate Schücking, said that entire departments would have to be closed by 2017. "I expect that the free state will demand a further three-figure cut in jobs between 2017 and 2020."

Even the closure of several institutions would not be enough to meet the targets, Schücking said. "Will we have to give up entire departments in the end? I fear yes. I don't think we will be able to keep all 14 of our departments."

The University of Leipzig already cut 48 jobs last year. An immediate consequence of this was the closure of the pharmacy department—the only one in the state.

The cutting of 24 jobs this year will also lead to the closure of entire institutes. This time the departments of classical archaeology and theatre studies are affected. There is nowhere else in eastern Germany where these courses are offered. A professor is also being cut from

the area of physical chemistry.

Other institutions in Saxony are affected by the targets for layoffs. The Technical University in Chemnitz has to cut 14 jobs both this year and next. The cuts will affect non-scientific areas only, as reported by the *Sächsische Zeitung*.

At the Technical University of Freiberg's mining college, 19 jobs will be eliminated by the end of 2015. According to a spokesman, the quality at the mining academy cannot be maintained if there are more cuts. "We can currently continue to maintain our profile with great difficulty," he said.

The Technical University of Dresden is, for the time being, the only university in Saxony excluded from the staff cuts. It is part of the nationwide "excellence initiative" and will receive special funding until 2017. It is unclear what the university will face thereafter. Art and music institutions in the state have also been exempt from the cuts until now, but their period of respite runs out at the end of 2015.

While the universities have had targets imposed upon them by the state government, they have implemented the cuts, in spite of limited opposition, without any political resistance. Responding to a question from *Die Zeit* on which universities she considered sustainable, rector Schücking from Leipzig University answered, "We are trying to expand our strengths, so only that which doesn't form part of the substance of our university is given up. What we absolutely don't want are cuts according to the lawn mower method, where a little is cut everywhere."

Those using such arguments can even portray the austerity measures as progressive under headings such as "focusing" or "profile building."

The major attacks on the education system are not limited to Saxony. In almost every state there are plans

for substantial cuts. States in eastern Germany are affected especially severely by this. In Thüringen, 300 jobs are to be eliminated at higher education institutions. Saxony-Anhalt plans to save €50 million in education spending by 2025.

The plans of all state governments to implement unprecedented cuts at universities are a direct consequence of the debt break adopted in 2009. According to this, it is explicitly forbidden for states to take on new debt after 2020. Often confronted with high debt levels, the state governments are attempting to slash all spending as far as possible.

Along with education, this has also affected the cultural sector. In Saxony-Anhalt, the budget for theatres and orchestras is to be cut by €7 million, which will likely result in the closure of many renowned institutions.

In this frontal attack on education and culture, all parties, from the CDU to the Left Party, are cooperating closely. Conflicts merely involve tactical differences, such as where exactly it would be best to make the cuts.

The Left Party is playing an important role in this. Early last year, when the debt break was also inserted into Saxony's constitution, the Left Party demonstratively gave its backing to the debt break, even though its passage was not dependent on their votes.

The ruling elite has no need to fear any resistance from the Left Party to the current cuts in higher education institutions in Saxony. On the contrary, the statements of Left Party deputy in the state parliament Gerhard Besier on the cuts at the University of Leipzig could not have been clearer.

The lion's share of the job cuts at the institution are still to come. "In the not too distant future we won't be talking about the closure of courses and institutes, but about the end of entire departments and even institutions," he said, and demanded of the state government, "Have the courage at least to say that!"

"If the state government takes the view that nothing more can be invested, then in that case there needs to be a Saxony-wide plan for urgently required dismantling," Besier declared.

Such statements make one thing clear: if the Left Party enters government in a state in eastern Germany this year, it will result in more, rather than fewer, cuts.



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