

# Berlin's Humboldt University plans massive job cuts

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Humboldt University in Berlin (HU) plans comprehensive cost-cutting measures in research and teaching. So far, however, the drastic austerity measures developed by the university management, currently causing unrest in all faculties, have been discussed exclusively behind closed doors.

Student sources have declared that HU President Sabine Kunst sent a letter requesting all faculties to submit savings proposals of 8 percent by the middle of January 2017. The cuts are aimed at offsetting the university's current budget deficit.

The latest developments at HU are linked to the drastic austerity policy of the Berlin Senate in the education sector. In its 10-year term of office from 2001 to 2011 a coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Left Party imposed a succession of cuts on the universities of Berlin. This political legacy is expected to be carried forward by the city's recently sworn in SPD-Left Party-Green Party state government.

At regular intervals the universities are obliged to submit to the Berlin Senate "structural plans documenting their planned focus and profile formation as well as other services," according to the Senate's Science Council in 2000. The plans are examined by commissions and checked by the Senate.

Up until now HU was subject to the structural plan issued in 2004. At that time, the SPD-Left Party Senate imposed a rigorous savings program of €75 million on all Berlin universities. At the same time, annual cost increases, e.g., for energy supply, personnel and pensions, have not been offset by the state administration for the past 10 years. As a result, the universities accumulated new deficits from year to year, to be offset by cuts in pay and jobs.

In 2004, HU reduced its staff by about 20 percent. Seventy-eight professors and 500 employees lost their posts. The city's Free University (FU) had to cut 86 professorial posts, although it had already slashed 306 of the university's original total of 730 professorships between 1992 and 2002. Many study subjects have been discontinued in Berlin in

recent years, including Indian Studies. The student body at the Institute of Asian and African Studies at HU fears that courses devoted to Central Asia and Islamism could also be axed.

After the collapse of the Stalinist countries in 1989-90, the Technical University (TU) also carried out austerity measures. In 2004, it wound up 59 of its total of 335 professorships. In May last year, TU adopted its current structural plan, which includes the curtailment of a further eight professorships. At the same time, so-called "innovation professorships" are being set up, which according to TU President Christian Thomsen aim to increase "competition within the university."

While the management of Humboldt University is determined to push through the new savings plans at a rapid pace, resistance is growing among students and employees. Several student members of the Faculty of Cultural, Social and Educational Sciences sent an open letter to the president on December 5, in which they unanimously rejected the upcoming structural plan.

In the open letter, the student members of the faculty declare that the savings to be made "are not only of great concern to the teaching of all institutes." They would also "significantly adversely affect" study conditions. They warn of "cuts to urgently needed posts in teaching." It is already the case that the provision of courses and the supervision of examinations and dissertations are suffering due to staff reductions. Many students are unable to finish their studies within the regular study period. The cuts would "increase this already very tense situation to an intolerable level," they said. The abolition of student help centres also has an impact on the future of students.

The structural planning leads to "a distancing from students" and threatens "to drive a wedge between the different faculties and institutes," which demand "an end to all cuts in posts and resources in teaching."

The students also criticize the opaque approach of the presidency. They were only informed of the plans "at short notice and incompletely." It appears the cuts have been

“decided over the heads of both teachers and students.”

In fact, there has been as yet no public statement by the university management on the structural planning, although the faculties are expected to respond by the middle or end of January. So far, the press office of HU has not announced any official figures or facts, as requested by the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The next meeting of the Academic Senate of HU to discuss the structural plans is due to take place on Tuesday. On Facebook, the Physics Initiative at HU calls for “participation in the meeting and making clear to the Senate, and in particular the Presidium, that meaningful structure planning is only possible with university participation, including all affected groups.”

The new HU president, who has only been in office since May of this year, is taking an uncompromising attitude towards students and staff. Her hard-line stance is not unexpected. The qualified engineer and political scientist Sabine Kunst (since 2014 a member of the SPD) has many years experience in the implementation of austerity measures. From 2011 to March 2016 she was minister for science, research and culture in the state of Brandenburg, which has been governed by a coalition of the SPD and Left Party since 2009.

In its twin budgets for 2013 and 2014, the state government decided to cut €12 million at the universities.

Kunst imposed the cuts in the face of broad popular resistance. The proposal to merge two universities in the state met with particular criticism. In 2013, Brandenburg Technical University of Cottbus was merged with Lausitz University of Applied Sciences in Senftenberg. Kunst described the fusion as a “new-type of college,” at the same time as scientific experts, students and professors protested against the threatened job cuts.

Subsequent increases in the budgets of the universities in Brandenburg remained far below their actual needs and could not compensate for the earlier cuts.

In 2014, a number of universities, especially in the east German states, were hit by massive cuts, and this policy is being continued. In Baden-Württemberg, the minister of science, Theresia Bauer (Greens), recently proposed that non-EU citizens pay €1,500 per semester. Students seeking a further degree are also required to pay €650 per semester. Bauer plans cuts amounting to €47 million in the coming year.

The cuts are part of a European-wide austerity policy in the sphere of education. In mid-October, the *Tagesspiegel* cited a new study by the European University Association (EUA), which analysed the situation of European universities since the beginning of the financial crisis. In Greece alone, more than 60 percent of university funding

has been cut since 2008. This year, the pseudo-left Syriza government slashed a further 16 percent.

Government grants were also reduced in other EU countries: in the Czech Republic by 5 percent, in Slovenia by 9 percent, and in Ireland and the UK by over 2 percent. In Ireland and Britain the cutback mainly affected apprenticeships, which have decreased by 70 percent since 2008. The lack of funding is offset in many countries by increased study fees—in Britain by £9,000 per year—and by the acquisition of third-party funding from companies and associations.

The investigative online portal hochschulwatch.de reports that €1.4 billion flows from the private sector to German universities every year. In Berlin, the percentage of commercial enterprises in third-party funding is particularly high, at 15 percent. At the Free University the figure is 5 percent, and for HU it is 3 percent. In 2013, third-party funding at HU rose to around €96.9 million (from around €88.5 million in 2012). Of this, about €3 million came from commercial sources. The renewed austerity measures could lead to professors being compelled to raise more funds through third-party sources.

According to a report by the German Interior Ministry, an average of every fourth euro of university funds in Germany comes from third-party funding. Often the exact contracts are unknown. The growing influence of business, politics and, increasingly, the military is encroaching on the independent status of research and teaching.

At Humboldt University, this development is already well advanced. The chairs of Prof. Jörg Baberowski (History of Eastern Europe) and Prof. Herfried Münkler (Political Science), who play a central role in the elaboration and ideological justification of the new German war policy, are financed largely from third-party funds. The “Berlin Correspondence” series, currently taking place in the Gorki Theatre in Berlin, is based on a deal struck between the SPD-led Foreign Ministry and Humboldt University.



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