



from the February 01, 2005 edition - <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0201/p07s01-woeu.html>

To halt brain drain, Germany adopts 'competition' mantra

A German court last week lifted a ban on tuition. 'Elite' is in; 'egalitarian' is out.

By Isabelle de Pommereau | Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

FRANKFURT - Like many of Germany's top-notch scientists, Dirk Krueger left his homeland for the United States, attracted by higher salaries and better research opportunities. But this past fall, the economist gave up a plum assistant professorship at Stanford University and returned home to become a full professor at Frankfurt University.

By offering him swift advancement, the university broke tradition in a system where scholars face a bureaucratic, rung-by-rung climb up.

Krueger's homecoming represents a success story for German higher education, which is trying to reverse decades of brain drain by attracting global talent, including its own academic expatriates. Recruitment drives may get more muscle after a German court ruling last week paved the way for new tuition fees.

In the postwar decades, Germany's academic talent left in droves for the US. In fact, 1 in 7 students who complete a doctorate in Germany moves to the US, and 30 percent of them stay there.

The 20,000 German scholars in the US enhance America's leadership in the global education marketplace at the expense of German taxpayers who subsidized their training. With unemployment soaring and jobs leaving for Eastern Europe, a move is under way to treat higher education as a production factor and win back Germany's best minds.

"Germany and the whole of continental Europe are now aware that higher education is a main source for success," says Thomas Straubhaar, head of the Institute of International Economics in Hamburg. "We need competition between ideas."

Mr. Straubhaar, along with other leading German scientists and scholars, launched a "brain drain, brain gain" campaign featuring a brain packed in plastic accompanied by the words: "Origin: Germany. Our most expensive article."

A year ago, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder pledged to inject \$250 million into five "elite" universities that would attract world talent. While they welcome the focus on the word "elite," saying it breaks taboos in a country that emphasizes egalitarianism, experts here say that greater autonomy, not government intervention, would make Germany's universities more globally competitive.

Government regulations, they say, are stifling growth. Schools cannot select their own students; a central agency dispatches students to universities. Nor can schools set salaries or tuition fees.

But that's beginning to change. Germany's highest court last week ruled that a law banning states from charging tuition fees was illegal. It is a major shift for Germans, who are used to college being essentially free.

The decision, which was condemned by many students' groups, will force universities to compete with one another, says Straubhaar.

"What's going to happen more and more is that most universities will continue offering good, basic education to the masses and some elite universities will be able to play first league, if not champion league," Krueger says.

What pulled Krueger to Frankfurt was its newly created PhD economics department - for him a stamp of quality for research. Increasingly, institutions are using American methods to attract top researchers, including expatriate scholars, beckoning them with fast tracks to top positions, building a specialty profile, and going out to job markets to recruit lecturers instead of hiring from within.

But Walter Trockel, head of the University of Bielefeld's mathematical economics department, sees the University of Frankfurt as an isolated case. The school is able to burnish its reputation as a top-notch financial center because of its proximity to the European Central Bank. He argues that massive increased government funding is needed to make German universities attractive worldwide.

"But the new trend I see is on the other side of the Atlantic," says Mr. Trockel, noting that, for historical reasons, Germans traditionally shun patriotic behavior. "Ten years ago German scholars vanished in the American environment, they weren't interested in keeping their identity.... Now there is an increasing tendency for them to want to spend time in [Germany]."

To capitalize on this potential, Trockel organized a networking economic conference in Bielefeld in December to help expatriate researchers reestablish contact with German academia. "That would have been impossible 10 years ago," says Trockel.

Michele Tertilt, a German-born assistant professor at Stanford, responded to Trockel's effort. "A lot of us are considering going back," says Ms. Tertilt. Although she deplores how German bureaucracy deprives her of research time, she is warming to the prospect of returning home. "It's important to improve ties with Germany," she says.

Even as more German scholars consider returning, it has become more cumbersome to work as a foreign-born scholar in the US, due to tightened visa restrictions after Sept. 11, 2001. The German Academic Exchange Service, a nonprofit organization promoting German education abroad, reports that the number of international students enrolled at German universities has soared since then.

Krueger likes being home, but says his research will be more limited. "Everything is a trade off," he says. The birth of his son eased the decision. "I started thinking: 'Now is the time to consider coming back.' "

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