

Report by the Office of the Presidium of the GDR Government on University and College Admissions for the 1957/58 Academic Year (December 21, 1957)

Abstract

In the 1950s, the GDR government, not least for economic reasons, sought to expand the university system, especially in the fields of science and technology. Nonetheless, the number of applicants still exceeded the number of available slots at university. Admission to university was limited and subject to strict state control. In addition to objective qualifications, the political-ideological reliability, or “firmness,” of the young applicants was crucial in student admission decisions. An additional qualifying element was the completion of a practical year in manufacturing. University education was especially promoted for the children of farmers and workers. The ideological orientation of the SED’s higher education policy contributed to the flight of East German academics to the West in the 1950s.

Source

Admissions for the 1957/58 academic year, and the preparations for and the results of matriculation were reviewed at all universities, at the Technical College of Dresden, and at the College of Transportation. A review of the preparations for and the implementation of matriculation was also carried out by the State Secretariat for Higher Education.

The total number of applicants was 21,000 for the 1957/58 admissions year. Of these 21,000 applicants, 14,100 could be admitted in keeping with the fixed quotas. Because of the regulation adopted in the spirit of Socialist education that all future students must complete a year of practical work in enterprises, 5,500 applicants were slotted for the 1958/59 academic year.

In terms of social composition, the newly admitted student body can be broken down as follows:

Workers and farmers 61%

Intelligentsia 14%

White-collar workers 17%

Other social strata 8%

The number of admitted female students is 31%. Fourteen percent of those admitted are graduates of the Workers’ and Farmers’ Institutes.

In some fields, particular difficulties resulted from the fact that the volume of applications was completely out of line with the fixed quotas. For example, the quota for chemistry is 375. The number of applicants, however, came in at 1,034. Of those, 450 were workers.

If only workers were admitted to this field of study, then 75 workers would still have to be left out of this particular field alone.

The situation is similar in other fields. Thus, geology has a quota of 40 and had 170 applicants, among them 73 workers and 27 members of the intelligentsia.

In pharmacology, the quota is 185, but the number of applicants was 900, among them 245 workers and 210 members of the intelligentsia.

In veterinary medicine, the quota is 130, but the number of applicants was 727, among them 306 workers and 147 members of the intelligentsia.

Large discrepancies between the quota and the number of applicants are also evident in other fields. For example,

Aeronautics had 9,

landscape architecture had 5, and

foreign trade had 4 applicants

for every university slot.

In a few fields, the number of applicants from the circles of the intelligentsia is especially high. The following figures, which show the percentage of applicants from the circles of the intelligentsia, make that clear:

In architecture, 23% of applicants

In pharmacology, 23% of applicants

In veterinary medicine, 21% of applicants

In physics, 20% of applicants

In medicine, 31% of applicants

The problem of meeting the applicants' wishes was especially serious this year, because, as a result of overcrowding, absolutely no quotas had been established for the fields of history, biology, art history, geography, or for all of the philological disciplines, and applicants in these fields could not be considered at all.

Complaints

Given the ratio of applicants to available slots, the number of complaints is relatively small. Compared to the previous year, the number of complaints has declined significantly. The majority of complaints come from the ranks of the intelligentsia and white-collar workers. The applicant numbers provided above make clear that not all applicants in those categories could be admitted. Another aggravating factor among applicants from the ranks of the intelligentsia is the large number of individual privilege holders^[1], who, as a result of the assurance they received in the individual privilege, insist that these promises be kept no matter what, and simply do not accept rejection.

The universities and the Technical College of Dresden had more than 700 applications from applicants whose fathers were holders of individual privileges. Of those, 300 were admitted, and more than 100 will be matriculated for the 1957/58 academic year after completing their year of practical work. More than 300 applicants in this category were rejected. These rejections were unavoidable, because admission in these cases would have meant a reduction in the proportion of children of workers and farmers, and also of the proportion of children of white-collar workers – in other words, a reduction in favor of applicants who were objectively and socially less qualified. Such a reduction would have been incompatible with the idea of seeing the universities and colleges as solidarity-driven educational institutions.

It is obvious that numerous inadequacies and deficiencies in the ideological firmness of students result not least from the admissions policy, which has been excessively concerned with keeping the assurances made in the individual contracts, even if the necessary objective and social preconditions did not exist.

Moreover, a reduction in the proportion of applicants from the ranks of white-collar workers in favor of the intelligentsia is not recommended. These applicants are for the most part recruited from the children of employees of government bodies and Socialist enterprises, mostly parents with a Socialist past and people who have also been outstanding participants in the build-up of Socialism. Apart from objective qualities, applicants from this category bring with them, by virtue of their upbringing, a proclivity and willingness for social commitment, and they constitute a good element at the universities.

Second to the intelligentsia, most complaints come from the circles of these applicants.

Appeals from white-collar workers and tradesmen were directed mostly against the rejection. In part, these complaints pointed to the fact that the children of workers and farmers, or the children of the members of the intelligentsia with poorer qualifications were admitted [ahead of their children]. A few comrades were also among these complainants. The review process revealed that the admission committees were inadequately informed as a result of a lack of documentation. In most cases, it was possible to reverse the decision.

Appeals from the circles of the intelligentsia were directed either against the rejection or against placement in the practical work-year program. In many cases, the demand was for a profession-related work experience (medicine – hospital). These demands cannot be considered, lest they endanger the success of the practical year.

There were few complaints from workers and farmers. In some cases, other fields could be recommended. In general, the decisions of the admission committees proved correct.

The observations made during the review process indicate that the ideological aspect was also given adequate consideration in admissions. The high proportion of workers' and farmers' children alone points to that. Even more so the careful selection in a few fields, in which extreme instability has been evidenced in the past with respect to ideological firmness, consciousness, and a clear Socialist perspective. For example, in veterinary medicine, only applicants who could demonstrate practical work were admitted. The ideological element was given special consideration through the introduction of the practical year.

The practical year presupposes that the members of the intelligentsia can fulfill their tasks in the build-up of Socialism only in close alliance with the working class and the working farmers. That is why the academic youth must first go through the school of production, perform a practical year in Socialist production enterprises, before they can begin their studies at universities and colleges.

During this year's admission, the universities and colleges for the first time selected the applicants slated for the practical year and reserved slots for them for the 1958/59 academic year. The 3,500 preselected applicants will begin their studies at universities and colleges in the coming year, provided they have demonstrated during their practical year – through good work discipline and a social attitude – that they deserve to begin their studies in our workers' and farmers' state.

This measure, which connects the future student more strongly to the working class and is intended to educate him to a higher sense of responsibility toward the workers' and farmers' state, also establishes closer ties between the universities and the Socialist enterprises. [...]

The work of the protectorates for university affairs and of the State Secretariat for Higher Education

A review of the work of the protectorates revealed that the admissions work by the protectorates was carried out thoroughly, deliberately, and with political understanding. The proposals were first discussed with the appropriate party and FDJ [Free German Youth] leadership. The party leadership on higher education everywhere was engaged in preparation for the admissions work.

Above all, the collaboration of the protectorates for university affairs with the secondary schools has improved significantly. The participation of representatives of the secondary schools and the democratic public in the meetings of the admission committees has increased substantially. The example of Karl Marx University in Leipzig, in particular, has contributed to this improved collaboration with the secondary schools. There, liaison teachers were appointed at every secondary school, and they were instructed by the university to support the university guidance at secondary schools, discuss in parents' meetings the proposals of the secondary schools for the decisions of the admission committees, and participate in explaining the practical year.

The responsibly-minded work of the protectorates has succeeded in

1. selecting the best applicants according to the overall evaluation, all of whom belong to the FDJ or held offices in it or the GST [Society for Sport and Technology],
2. admitting applicants with good and very good knowledge who meet the requirements of their fields,
3. ensuring a very high proportion of workers' and farmers' children in the admissions.

One drawback was the small proportion of SED members and candidates among those admitted. This is due to the fact that most *Abitur* graduates are coming directly from the secondary schools and are still very young. Among the students coming from enterprises, too, very few are members of the party.

What continues to make the work of the protectorates and the selection of applicants by the admission committees difficult is the fact that the evaluation by the secondary schools is for the most part very formal. It generally includes a list of functions and a series of minor points that are already apparent in the questionnaire. However, it almost always lacks

1. an evaluation of the political influence of the home and its role in the social life,
2. an evaluation of the political conduct of the applicant himself,
3. an evaluation of ties to West Germany: parents who have fled the Republic, siblings in West Germany, and so on,
4. indications of religious ties, possibly active participation in the Young Congregation [*Junge Gemeinde*],
5. information for the university about those applicants who could, with further political work, become SED candidates within a short period.

The same goes for the evaluations that come from the enterprises as well, but most especially from scientific institutes or institutions within the health care system. In the latter cases, there is for the most part merely an evaluation of the professional aptitude of the applicant by the teacher, which may also be signed by the cadre leader and BGL chairperson [chair of the enterprise trade union]. [...]

Pätsch

NOTES

[1] Privileges [*Einzelverträge*] for university admission were given to some individuals and their

families if the GDR government considered them particularly important – trans.

Source: BArch, DR 2/5650; reprinted in Dierk Hoffmann and Michael Schwartz, eds., *Geschichte der Sozialpolitik in Deutschland seit 1945*. Bd. 8: 1949–1961: *Deutsche Demokratische Republik. Im Zeichen des Aufbaus des Sozialismus*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2004, no. 8/176.

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