University Spots in Short Supply (December 12, 1974)

Abstract

Starting in 1973, admission to certain fields of study in the Federal Republic was regulated nationally by a central office. This process was supposed to reduce overcrowding and to promote equal opportunity in higher education, but it failed to solve the existing problems.

Source

Ulrike K. and the Chaos of Education Policy: Thousands of High School Graduates Will Never Have a Chance to Go to College

Ulrike K. passed her *Abitur*[1] this year with a 1.7 grade point average.[2] She narrowly missed her chance for a spot to study medicine by 0.1 points. She owes her bad luck to the pedagogical advice of her teachers. The seventeen-year-old skipped a grade twice.

In the Düsseldorf Ministry of Research and Education, the operators of the "university placement guillotine," the Central Office for University Admissions (ZVS) in Dortmund, were wondering whether Ulrike could be considered a "social hardship case." The well-meaning decisions of her teachers essentially robbed the unusually gifted schoolgirl of her chance to attain an even better grade point average two years later. But because the state treaty [*Staatsvertrag*] on university admission does not provide for cases like hers, the jurists did not accept this reasoning. Visibly moved and upset, undersecretary Herbert Schnoor (SPD) said, "This is how a country treats its highly gifted young people."

For Ulrike, admission to a university program in medicine is now beyond reach. The rush on the available spots is so great that the necessary grade point average is dropping ever lower: 1.5, 1.4 . . . 1.0. Those who are rejected wind up on the so-called wait list. The list is so long that anyone with a triple-digit place number next year could only get a spot in ten years' time. But the state treaty does not allow for ten-year waiting periods, because an applicant's *Abitur* certificate cannot be more than eight years old. "For economic, personal, and social reasons, there is no other possible way," says Schnoor.

The state treaty, which the ministers of education of the federal states quickly cobbled together in 1972 in order to show the federal government how easily such problems could be solved, is already running on empty. The more the ZVS in Dortmund centrally regulates admission to various fields of study at all universities, technical colleges, and polytechnics, the more it is becoming the "control center for the national education system" (Schnoor). Going there "is like going to the scaffold" (Minister of Research and Education Johannes Rau).

Growing numbers of young people who, after arduous years [of schooling], finally have a piece of paper in their hand that entitles them to be admitted to an institution of higher education, are disappointed when they realize that their *Abitur,* or an equivalent diploma, gives them an entitlement that they can never take advantage of. Neither the federal states nor the politicians responsible for educational matters are considering expanding or overcrowding the universities so that everyone can be admitted. All over the country, there are reductions, cutbacks, curtailments. And no matter what procedure is used to regulate university admission, the number of available spots will not increase in the coming years. Thousands of entitled high school graduates will never have a chance to enter the university system.

"The effects on schools, reaching deep into the families of individual youths, on society, and on the

employment system, are catastrophic," Schnoor warned insistently. Not only he, but also his colleagues from most other federal states and all other experts—clear across party lines—know what kind of disappointments and political quarrels are on the horizon if the transition from school to institutions of higher learning, and the relationship between schools and institutions of higher learning, are not settled as quickly as possible. But the ministers of education of almost every state (with the exception of Bavaria) know that a new version of the state treaty, which the majority of the eleven states would have to approve, "simply isn't feasible politically" (Johannes Rau).

The feat of strength from 1972 cannot be repeated. Back then, the ministers also had the July 18 decision of the Federal Constitutional Court hanging over their heads. The decision obliged the federal government, or else the states, to work out uniform regulations for university and college admissions "as quickly as possible." The highest German court set almost insurmountable obstacles for these regulations: judges associated the limited number of spots and the strict criteria for admissions to difficult conditions, including full capacity use and no government management of demand. Lower Saxony's undersecretary for higher education Günter Wichert responded that "we are not permitted to intervene until the universities and colleges have expanded to death." The judges also stipulated "a chance for every applicant who is technically qualified to enter an institution of higher learning." In practice that means: anyone who is eligible, according to the government, has a "right to participate."

In extensive decrees, agreements, and hefty tomes, the ministers of education based the entitlement to study on the *Abitur* certification. Equivalency degrees, specialized secondary schools, and evening schools are measured according to its standard. Social prestige, upward mobility, and admission to a career in the civil service are still tied to the *Abitur*. But the certificate is increasingly losing its value, and the ministers of education are feeling pressure because they will be held responsible for the consequences.

Thus, the efforts of some SPD politicians in Bonn—and a few, hesitantly, in the CDU—to revise admission procedures for universities in the Framework Act on Higher Education found fertile ground. Klaus von Dohnanyi and his successor Helmut Rohde are betting on the revisions, not least, to finally put an end to the four-year ordeal over this law. But the text, which was debated by parliamentarians on Thursday and Friday in the second and third readings, betrays not only uninspired educational policymaking, but also an inability to think a problem through to the end.

Like the state treaty, the new provision is also based on three key elements: "social hardship cases," "achievement," and "wait lists." In the Ministry of Research and Education in Düsseldorf, the process whereby social hardship is determined is considered "totally absurd": universities assess petitions and decide whether an applicant should receive a bonus of 0.1 points or more due to illness or family circumstances. Then the candidate is entered into the computer system in Dortmund. Since only 15 percent of applicants with a "hardship bonus" are accepted, however, the young people's chances of admission depend on whether or not the computer gives them the luck of the draw. "It totally contradicts the point of helping an individual if we are forced to standardize hardship," said the undersecretary.

The Bonn experts thought they had found the philosophers' stone with wait lists. High school graduates with an *Abitur* were no longer supposed to wait around at university for the longed-for spot—they were supposed to work. The slogan "waiting on the job" met with public approval. It sounds very practical, popular, and voter friendly. The "total duration of employment or vocational training" is to be given special consideration in the application process for a university spot.

What does this mean, considering that there are roughly 20,000 professions and occupations? Here's Schnoor on the topic: "We have to create a ranking for the roughly 100 degree programs and decide whose wait list activity makes them most eligible." All imaginable occupations from "pavement painter

in Ticino" (the sarcastic response of vocational training experts in Bonn to this suggestion) to dental technician have to be stored in the computer. They say they would "manage" [with this system], but they don't think it makes sense. Applicants will adjust by selecting occupations that are ranked highly. The impact on the labor market will also be serious. Vocational training experts expect that wait-listed high school graduates will be sucked up by the market at the expense of foreign workers. Other experts fear that there will be even fewer apprenticeships and even fewer options for trainees for whom a university education is out of the question. None of these views can be proven at the present time.

The ZVS administrators see an alternative in "special admissions procedures," one of former education minister Klaus von Dohnanyi's favorite ideas. He, as well as the Free Democratic Party these days, wants to use these procedures only for medical degree programs. Instead of good grade-point averages, an applicant's abilities should be assessed through tests and interviews, so that—according to CDU minister of education Bernhard Vogel— "even those with 3.0 [B-/C+] averages will still have a chance."

The Düsseldorfers do not think that this is a good idea, because it focuses only on medical schools. Applicants who are not admitted to medicine-related courses of study, despite their good grades, will then, logically, flood other degree programs, causing the same chaos there. For this reason, Schnoor has said unequivocally that the *Abitur* should only be considered a certificate of graduation and not an entitlement to attend university or college. "We have to draw a line between secondary school and higher education in order to protect the secondary schools and to allow as many people as possible to advance as far as possible in school."

Schnoor decries the enormous pressure that the state treaty has placed on secondary schools. He and the other Social Democratic ministers of education don't want to see schools determine the number of university and college students, filter people out, and dole out opportunities for social advancement. "We also need master craftsmen with qualified diplomas. We have to offer more to all young people, and we cannot just focus on the 20 percent of college students whose placement [at institutions of higher learning] is causing us problems."

NOTES

[1] Abitur: college entrance qualification exam taken at the end of secondary school [*Gymnasium*]—trans.
[2] The German grading system ranges from 1 to 6, with 1 being the best grade and 6 being a failing grade—trans.

Source: Jutta Roitsch, "Ulrike K. und das Chaos in der Bildungspolitik. Tausende von Abiturienten werden nie eine Chance haben, ein Studium zu beginnen," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, December 12, 1974. Republished with permission.

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Recommended Citation: University Spots in Short Supply (December 12, 1974), published in: German History in Documents and Images,

<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-881> [November 18, 2026].