

# Rapid Changes in Three Countries

Change is in the air for Germany, Switzerland and Belgium as these three European federal countries adapt to new demands of higher education

## Germany Shifts Power to the *Länder*

BY RICHARD VAN LOON

**O**F THE POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION SYSTEMS IN federal countries around the world, Germany's may be changing the most rapidly. Roughly 2 million of Germany's 82 million people currently enrol in post-secondary education programs at either universities or *Fachhochschulen* (vocational and technical colleges). Two-thirds of these students enrol in 121 universities and equivalent institutions; 197 *Fachhochschulen* enrol the remaining one-third of students. Germany also has a highly regarded and extensive system of apprenticeship training. The German approach was often characterized as being highly conservative. The system is now undergoing a radical transformation in the face of globalization and other pressures.

Until very recently the German university system had been, by intention, highly homogeneous – so much so that graduates did not, and for the most part still do not, identify themselves as coming from a particular institution. All five-year degrees were assumed to be equivalent and all institutions were assumed to be essentially equal. Under the Basic Law – German's constitution after the Second World War – education was supposed to be under the jurisdiction of the *Länder*, the equivalent of states or provinces, but the inclination towards having a nationally homogeneous system was sufficiently strong that by 1948 a national council had been formed to coordinate post-secondary policies. Federal framework legislation under the Basic Law followed, setting standards and defining practices that the *Länder* would be responsible for implementing with some degree of flexibility. Even faculty salaries were uniform across Germany, established by the federal government.

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### The *Länder* Pay for Instruction

In Germany, funding of instruction is primarily a *Länder* responsibility, but most research is funded by the federal government. While individual research grants are carefully evaluated and controlled by scientific committees, the working assumption is that universities are largely equal in their research capacities.

The German system, which assumed that all universities were essentially equal, could not easily comply with the Bologna Declaration, which aims to greatly standardize degrees, course credits and quality assurance standards throughout Europe. Instead, the German tradition was to give every school or department a say regarding qualifications obtained at another institution. Germany was also out of step with the notion in many countries that some universities should be allowed or encouraged to develop as centres of recognized international excellence in research and graduate education. Nor did it particularly value competition among institutions. This has led to fears that Germany would be disadvantaged in the highly competitive global economic environment.

All of this changed in the fall of 2006 through major amendments to the Basic Law that fundamentally altered the relationship between the German federal and *Länder* governments with respect to post-second-

ary education. The driving force for these reforms was the desire to achieve a measure of constitutional disentanglement between the two orders of government. There was a trade-off that transferred significant policy authority to the *Länder*, in return for a reduction in their capacity to veto federal legislation. The *Länder* then took responsibility for policies and legislation with regard to post-secondary education, provided these were consistent with the Bologna Declaration. As a result, the traditional German five-year undergraduate degree will be replaced, by 2010, by a four-year undergraduate degree with a master's degree as the standard second level of achievement.

SPECIAL SECTION

Post-Secondary Education



## Germany Charges Tuition for the First Time

These changes will affect the financing of institutions in fundamental ways. To allow for greater variation, some institutions will be chosen as centres of excellence and thus be eligible for enhanced research funding, most of which will continue to be provided by the federal government. Another traditional equalizing force in German higher education – not charging tuition fees – will also likely disappear. Tuition fees have begun to be charged in some *Länder* (typically at the level of 500 Euros per term) and it seems that these are likely to rise to the 3,000 Euro level across Germany over the next decade.

All of this constitutes a revolution that is motivated by the forces of international competition and, presumably, also by a desire to decentralize and make the whole German federal system more flexible.

Students, who will be paying higher tuition fees, will certainly see a change and graduates will arrive on the market with qualifications different, at least on paper, from their predecessors. The poorer *Länder* will have more difficulty financing their institutions at the same level as the richer ones, and that could lead to greater regional differentiation in economic develop-



REUTERS/MIRO KUZMANOVIC

German President Horst Köhler greets students at the University of Tübingen in February 2007.

ment, perhaps in exchange for a higher level of national economic growth in the long run. Whether the system will be better or worse in a decade or more is unpredictable – and the outcome will depend partly on the relative importance placed on equity versus competition-driven excellence – but it will most certainly be different.

# Switzerland Spends More Per Student

BY RICHARD VAN LOON

**T**HE POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE SWISS federation is often characterized as highly decentralized. Historically, its pattern of managing higher education also fits this description. Recent constitutional changes have affected higher education and, although they were instigated by the Cantons, paradoxically they may have the potential to increase the influence of the federal (referred to as central) government in this area. What is clear is that these governmental changes will likely increase institutional autonomy and management responsibilities.

In 2004-2005 about 200,000 of Switzerland's 7.5 million inhabitants were enrolled in higher education, with about two-thirds of these in universities and the remaining one-third in higher vocational institutes. Ten universities are governed by cantonal legislation and supported financially by the cantons

and there are two federal institutes of technology supported by the central government. The central government is the primary funder of university-based research, but funds only about one-eighth of teaching costs. Mobility of students is encouraged by inter-cantonal transfers to reflect the cost differentials of students studying away from their home area.

Swiss financial support of universities is the highest per student among OECD countries, now amounting to about US\$25,000 per year. Almost all of this spending is paid for from public sources – 1.6 percent of GDP, with the result that Switzerland has one of the highest public commitments to post-secondary education in the world. This is the result of the relatively small size of the system and low tuition fees, meaning that more funds must come from public sources to pay the freight.

## Bologna Declaration Transforms Europe

Occasional attempts by the federal government to exercise greater influence over higher education have been impeded by divided responsibilities within the federal government, with two departments having a role in supporting higher education and research. There has been some debate about whether the divided jurisdiction within the federal government created more complications than were caused by having 26 cantons dealing with higher education in a small country.

Switzerland is a signatory to the Bologna Declaration, which aims to greatly standardize degrees, course credits and quality assurance standards throughout Europe and has had a transformative effect on post-secondary education in Europe. It appears that the ongoing process of bringing the Swiss system into compliance with the Bologna stipulations and the dictates of the increasing globalization of higher education have led the Swiss cantonal governments toward increased levels of co-operation and integration of their university systems. To encourage



REUTERS/ANDREAS MEIER

Students arrive on campus at the University of Zurich, where a record 24,000 students were enrolled in October 2006.

greater levels of co-operation at all levels of education, the cantons proposed a constitutional amendment that was passed in May 2006 which is likely to have a significant impact on the way Swiss governments approach higher education.

The new constitution recognizes a “Swiss Learning Area” and enjoins the central government and the cantons to “co-ordinate their efforts and ensure their co-operation through joint administrative bodies and other measures” at all levels of education. And although residual powers in Switzerland belong to the cantons, Article 63a declares the cantons and the central government “jointly responsible for the co-ordination and guarantee of quality in the Swiss university education.” It further obliges the cantons and the central government to enter into agreements and to delegate “certain powers” to joint administrative bodies. Finally, it provides that if the central government and the cantons fail to reach their common goals by means of co-ordination, the central government “shall issue regulations on levels of studies and the transition from one level to another,

on postgraduate education and on the recognition of institutions and qualifications...”

Since the constitutional amendment is recent, there is no agreement yet on which powers should be delegated to the joint bodies and, while there is a long history of inter-cantonal co-operation in Switzerland, this clause potentially gives the federal government a more powerful hand in regulating the system. It is interesting to see the highly decentralized Swiss system and the highly centralized German system both potentially mutating toward each other, driven by strong external forces. It is equally interesting to note that both countries have been able to use constitutional amendments to bring about the changes. As all who toil in the various fields of federal government know, constitutional amendments require a high degree of co-operation between the two orders of government and Germany and Switzerland have considered higher education sufficiently important that they have been able to muster this degree of co-operation.

## Belgium's Communities Make Changes

BY ADRIE DASSEN

**I**N THE PAST, BELGIAN SOCIETY WAS CHARACTERIZED BY three cleavages. On the socio-economic front, labour and capital faced each other. The Dutch-speaking Flemish and the French-speaking Walloons fought a bitter linguistic conflict. Ideologically, Roman Catholics on the one side and liberals and socialists on the other, disagreed strongly. These cleavages also divided the political landscape in Belgium.

In the 1950s a major ideological conflict threatened the functioning of the Belgian political system. Catholics on the one hand and liberals and socialists on the other hand fought bitterly over the financing of Catholic education and the control over state education. Between 1950 and 1954, the Christian democratic government outlined a financial system that was very favourable for Catholic schools and universities. Moreover, the Christian democrats tried to get a grip on the ideological neutral education organized by the state. However, in 1954 socialists and liberals won the national elections and formed a coalition government that reversed the decisions of its predecessor. After a stalemate in the 1958 parliamentary elections, Catholic, socialist and liberal politicians decided to make a compromise, the so-called “School Pact.” This pact became a law that guaranteed state financing of Catholic education and the ideologically neutral position of state education.

### Three National Divides Fuse into One

The three oppositions that fragmented Belgian social and political life converged gradually into two opposite poles: Flanders and Wallonia. This convergence of the three cleavages made it possible to solve the problems by means of regionalization and federalization. This reform process, which started in the 1960s,

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Belgian researcher Walter Fiers poses in his laboratory at the University of Ghent. Fiers led a team that designed a one-time universal vaccine against human influenza, potentially eliminating annual flu shots.

jerked along over a period of more than 20 years. Finally, in 1988-1989 a constitutional reform changed Belgium from a unitary to a federal country that is composed of three communities: Wallonia, Flanders and Brussels. Communities – the language-based constituent units – have authority in so-called “person-related” affairs, such as culture, education, national and international cooperation and of course linguistic affairs. Regions – the geographic constituent units – have authority in so-called “soil-related” affairs, such as physical planning and environmental affairs. The communities were given power over education.

The financing of both universities and vocational institutions is also a matter for the communities. Predominantly lump-sum financing occurs in both the Flemish and the Wallonia communities, but this is about to change. The Flemish government has proposed a new law on funding which will consist of four elements: a fixed basic level of funding, incentive funds for specific policy priorities, a teaching-related variable part and a research-related variable part. The teaching-related variable part is based on four criteria: number of new entrants (bachelor's degree level), number of new entrants (master's

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established according to private law, were typically set up by federal higher-education institutions.

While the state universities vary greatly, most of their courses are taught in the evening. Few teachers have high qualifications and most teach part-time. The state institutions of higher education receive various forms of government financing, which is typically not sufficient.

### Private Sector Has Fastest Growth

Private institutions are the fastest growing post-secondary sector in Brazil, with enrolments that have increased by nearly two million students since 1990 – that is one-half of total current enrolment. The main sources of funds for private institutions are tuition and fees paid by undergraduate students. Tuition fees at many private institutions are falling as competitive pressures have led to price cutting. In this environment, little is invested in graduate studies and research. Most private institutions are organized as colleges or university centres, which basically provide good undergraduate courses.

In the area of research, several national development agencies provide funding for various types of research and scholarships for students in master's and doctoral courses. Research programs and proposals are typically subject to peer review processes. There is a widely-used federal program to evaluate undergraduate courses, but this has not yet been incorporated at the graduate level.

The challenges of curbing inequality in Brazil are addressed primarily through mechanisms used to fund students' studies. In the public sector, education is free at all federal, state, and municipal institutions. As a result, federal institutions attract a much greater proportion of applicants because of their higher quality, and they are free. Consequently, the better-educated (and higher-income) students typically enrol in the public sector, while the rest gravitate to the private institutions. This exacerbates the inequities inherent in Brazilian society.

Despite efforts such as new scholarship programs for poor students, equity remains a high priority. At the graduate level, for example, 70 per cent of master's and doctoral students are from families in the highest 10 per cent income bracket.

To ensure quality in post-secondary education, the National Education Council deals with issues relating to federal and private institutions of higher education, establishing rules and providing supervision, especially in the accreditation of universities and university centres. All 26 Brazilian states and the Federal District have a State Education Council with the principal responsibility of maintaining and improving quality at state institutions. The state education councils, in addition to their regulatory activities, provide accreditation of courses.

The state councils must follow the Federal Constitution in their areas of operation and these councils are not obliged to participate in the national evaluation system. Cooperation between the federal and state systems, however, often is resisted by the state councils.

There are still many challenges facing higher education in Brazil. The benefits to students attending the elite and well-financed federal universities far exceed those to the 90 per cent of students enrolled in other institutions. Quality is also a major concern, particularly outside of the federal university system. Whether these challenges can be redressed by the federal system of government remains a key unanswered question. 

### BELGIUM [FROM PAGE 18]

degree level), credits achieved, and the number of degrees awarded. Thirty-five per cent of the funding for universities goes to research and 65 per cent goes to teaching. The total budget is open-ended for universities and fixed for *Hogescholen* (the vocational, professional and technical colleges). This new law should be fully implemented by January 2008. No proposals to change the law on funding have yet been put forward for the Community of Wallonia.

### Communities Give Grants to Students

In Belgium, public sector financial support for students also is arranged at the community level. Both in Flanders and Wallonia, tuition fees are modest and additional support for students is available. The grant system for students is an important means of promoting access to higher education.

In Flanders, increasing attention is paid to the role of rankings and accreditation in students' choice for universities and *Hogescholen*. In 2006, a few programs received accreditation and the Flemish government aims to have all programs reviewed by the accreditation committee as soon as possible. Additionally, the Flemish Ministry is participating in a pilot project in which a multi-dimensional ranking system of bachelor's and master's degree programs is developed. In this project, in which Dutch higher education institutions are participating as well, the methodology of the German system ranking is used.

The Wallonia government in 2002 created an agency that is responsible for the evaluation of quality in higher education. However, until 2004, there was no official procedure to evaluate the quality of higher education in the French community. Until then, Universities and *Hautes Ecoles* (the vocational, professional and technical colleges) had their own internal quality assessment procedures. With the decree that is operational since 2004, the newly created agency is fully responsible for both quality assurance and accreditation.

The follow-up of the Bologna Declaration, which aims to greatly standardize degrees, course credits and quality assurance standards throughout Europe, has led in Flanders to a new two-cycle system, replacing the traditional system. The old one-cycle studies of the *Hogescholen* changed into a professional bachelor's degree and the two-cycle studies were transformed into academic bachelor's and master's degree programs. University studies were also transformed into academic bachelors and masters. No professional master's degrees are foreseen at *Hogescholen*. For Wallonia, developments were similar. The new system has been fully implemented, and since 2004, bachelor's degrees have been awarded at both universities and *Hautes Ecoles* for three-year programs. Master's degrees are awarded at most institutions by now as well, and the Wallonia Government aims to finish the full implementation of the two-cycle studies by the academic year 2007-2008.

### Policies Converge in the Three Countries

The Bologna Declaration, the scarcity of public tax dollars and the demands for more control are pulling Germany, Switzerland and Belgium in the same direction. The changes in each of these countries are likely to result in more similar approaches to post-secondary education. 