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More Students and Better Teaching?

Teaching at German Universities between Capacity and Quality

Abstract

There is a general political consensus for increasing the intake capacity of German universities to accommodate a growing number of students, and for enhancing the quality of teaching. Yet beyond the departmental level, the actual teaching personnel is unknown. Data on all courses taught in one semester at four universities shows that not only professors but also academic staff, lecturers, and adjuncts are indispensable for sustaining teaching capacity. Nevertheless, their contribution to teaching is ignored. This policy of neglect appears to be functional for accommodating growing student numbers. Both higher education policy and the universities have an interest in obscuring who actually teaches how much – the former on the grounds of efficiency gains in capacity, the latter because of the need to sustain structurally underfunded teaching. This policy of neglect undermines efforts to enhance the quality of teaching. The universities' daily business is dominated by securing teaching capacity, not quality.

Recently, teaching at German universities has become the focus of higher education policy. There is a general political consensus for increasing the intake capacity of universities to accommodate a growing number of students. In consequence, universities have received extra funding if they were able to accommodate more students than before. So far, the universities have been quite successful in doing so, as can be witnessed by the growing number of first-year students that has by now exceeded half a million. Yet no one knows exactly how the universities have managed to increase their teaching capacity – to receive extra funding, universities have to exceed a predefined number of students. Therefore, the number of students is documented, but not the personnel that has to teach these students. Beyond the departmental level, this personnel is unknown.

At same time, universities are expected to enhance the quality of teaching. The German Science Council has estimated that to achieve this goal the universities need two billion euro additional funding per year. These demands are legitimized by the Science Council's call for a "changed teaching culture" at university. The professors are seen as the actors of this change.

This presupposes that teaching at university is predominantly shaped by professors, being the only professional teachers at university who are entitled to teach autonomously. In contrast, scientific personnel below the professorship is regarded as junior staff, still being in the process of qualifying, and only assisting the professors in teaching (Kreckel 2008).

Nevertheless, the fact that professors make up only for ten percent of the scientific personnel at German universities casts some doubt on the scope of the professors' contribution to teaching. Yet the shares different groups have in teaching are generally unknown. Official statistics document all scientific personnel employed at universities, but do not specify whether they teach. The purpose of our comparative case study was to fill this gap. We collected data on all courses taught in one semester at four universities. This allowed us to determine who taught how much. In a second step, we linked these findings to staff data. This allowed us to determine the status, employment

conditions, gender, academic qualification and discipline of the persons involved in teaching. All in all, our dataset contains 5.219 persons who taught 15.298 courses.

The share of teaching done by professors varies strongly on the departmental level but amounts in most cases to less than 50 percent (mean: 39%). Three other groups are involved in teaching. First, academic staff, i.e. personnel below the professorship that is hired for both teaching and research, accounts in the mean for 35 percent of all teaching. Second, lecturers who are employed mainly to teach and whose use is subject-specific, may cover up to 34 percent of all teaching (mean: 7%). Finally, adjuncts who are hired per course provide in the mean 14 percent of all teaching.

If professional teaching means being taught by professors, then the majority of teaching at university is not done by professionals. However, for the students, the status may be less important than the continued presence of the faculty. At German universities, continuity or permanence of employment is a prerogative of professors. Because personnel below the professorship is regarded as junior staff it is employed only temporarily. Yet the results yield a higher teaching share of permanent faculty (mean: 58%) than of professors (mean: 39%). Therefore, the permanent faculty is not limited to professors: 15 percent of all teaching is covered by permanent academic staff and five percent by permanent lecturers.

The existence of permanent faculty beyond the professorship is generally neglected in the political discussion. Although almost a sixth of all teaching is covered by it, nobody proposes to accommodate growing student numbers with the use of non-professorial but permanently employed personnel. Furthermore, there is neither an acknowledged career pathway for such positions nor any research on the consequences for the quality of teaching.

In a similar fashion, the use of contingent faculty in teaching is neglected. Contingent faculty that is employed temporarily, either full or part-time, or paid per course, makes up for 40 percent of all teaching; contingent academic staff covers 19 percent and adjuncts 16 percent. It is an open question whether the use of contingent faculty jeopardizes the quality of teaching. Nevertheless, contingent faculty is absent in the political discourse on the quality of teaching. Contingent faculty, therefore, is likely to be used for other reasons, namely because of its flexibility (Cross/Goldenberg 2009). As long as the increase in student numbers is regarded as a temporary one, and additional funding is therefore limited, universities will not hire extra faculty on a permanent basis. Rather, next to the efficient use of existing capacity they resort to contingent faculty. Because of its flexible employment conditions as well as its flexible teaching load, contingent faculty is best suited for the short term compensation of teaching capacity. In consequence, faced with the need to secure teaching capacity, quality of teaching becomes a secondary concern for universities.

Therefore, current higher education policy in the realm of teaching can be described as a policy of neglect – a neglect that nonetheless appears to be functional for accommodating growing student numbers. Universities are prompted to expand their teaching capacity, but the ways to do so remain utterly unspecified. Facing financial constraints as well as other demands such as for excellent research, universities use contingent faculty, third-party funded research personnel, and paid as well as unpaid adjuncts to meet student numbers fixed by politics. For the systematic use of permanent faculty beyond the professorship universities have neither the resources nor the consent of the professors. Both higher education policy and the universities have an interest in obscuring who actually teaches how much – the former on the grounds of efficiency gains in capacity, the latter because of the need to sustain structurally underfunded teaching. Yet this policy of neglect

presumably undermines efforts to enhance the quality of teaching. The German universities' daily business is dominated by securing teaching capacity, not quality.

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