THE SOCIALIZATION OF GERMAN UNIVERSITY TEACHERS: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON ROLE ACQUISITION IN AN ACADEMIC CONTEXT AND THE CONSEQUENT INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTS*

BRIGITTE ECKSTEIN
Technische Hochschule, Aachen, Federal Republic of Germany

ABSTRACT

Recent trends in universities in the German Federal Republic are reviewed with special reference to the norms, values and attitudes of university teachers. Despite democratizing influences the head of department is still a powerful figure. Recruits to the university teaching profession tend to conform to traditional values and ideas about the university. This has implications for the importance given to teaching. It is suggested that change may be brought about by helping academic staff to understand more fully the practical implications of the maintenance of traditional positions and also by exploiting opportunities which appear in the course of organizing workshops devoted to the improvement of teaching in higher education.

Introduction

During the last decade, the German university has become increasingly dysfunctional, and this view is based less on a consideration of the content of the curriculum than on an analysis of the attitudes and values which are being communicated to the students. The professoriate plays an important part in the transmission of those values and attitudes; the socialization of members of the professoriate into their role of university teachers is therefore an important area of research. The researcher entering this area faces certain difficulties, however. It seems that to a considerable extent this is a forbidden area and there could even be a "blind spot" which prevents university teachers from seeing what outsiders can observe. Kuhn (1970) has observed that even in pure science there is a tendency to confirm the currently accepted line of thought rather than to challenge it. Findings which do not fit in with accepted beliefs and practices tend to be ignored; the work of Flitner (1966) on student assessment as confirmed by the author (1971a) has not prevented the examination system from continuing as before. (See also Prahl, 1976).

* This is an abbreviated version prepared by the Coordinating Editor, of a longer article, available from the author, dealing with the topic at greater length. We are grateful for permission to include this study in the special issue on academics — Coordinating Editor.
This paper is based upon some thirty years of experience in academic institutions, feedback obtained in the course of student counselling, close observation of the professoriate in various settings, university teachers training courses run in Britain and Germany and on an analysis of the content of a German university teachers' journal. (Eckstein 1971b).

German University Teachers

Like every national professional group the German university teachers have their distinctive patterns of behaviour, but they may be taken as not untypical of the professoriate in Western countries, a point the author especially emphasises. Research is given high prestige but turns out to be less rewarding; as Hofman (1968) wrote "Die Desintegration von Wissenschaft in einen imposanten Schotterhaufen unkorrelierten Detailwissens..." As knowledge has expanded so has the required body of basic knowledge increased and the teaching of facts therefore predominates "teaching how to learn" as advocated by Postman and Weingartner (1971) dealing with school education and by Abercombie (1974) and Rogers (1969) in the context of higher education. Such a change would require the teacher to change from being a didactic instructor (a parent–child relationship) to being the confederate of an autonomous learner (an adult–adult relationship). Those German university teachers who have attempted to change roles in this way have suffered mistrust, even hostility, and some have reverted to directive teaching. Even those who have not attempted to adapt to the new requirements realise that in due course the change must come and they feel insecure and menaced on that account.

Other factors all contribute to the growing uncertainty within the German professoriate. Despite the large number of candidates anxious to enter its ranks, the professoriate is today seen as a less rewarding career. Research funds are increasingly difficult to acquire. Increasing control by government and university administration has reduced the teacher's autonomy and the rise in student numbers forces the professors to spend more time on activities they dislike — teaching and administration. The growth in student numbers represents an attack on another cherished ideal — the university as an elite institution. Today teachers in all kinds of institutions of post-secondary education have the title "professor" and the "real" professors find their status devalued.

The Socialization of German University Teachers

It could be argued that what is described here as socialization could be regarded as selection and training. This does not affect the main proposition: