

20 February 2008**HRK Senate debates academic reforms in Germany:
Politics must no longer leave the Bologna Reforms by the wayside -
Universities are making their adjustments**

The 107th meeting of the Senate of the German Rectors' Conference (Hochschulrektorenkonferenz – HRK) held in Bonn on 19 February centred on the future of academic studies in Germany.

The participants discussed the current state of development of the Bologna reforms as well as how the universities assessed these two years before the completion date for the final transition to Bachelor's and Master's degrees. We are now in the process of making the final adjustments to ensure that the reforms can indeed succeed," said HRK President Margret Wintermantel. "This applies to how recognition is carried out in the higher education institutions, to how exams are designed and organised, and to the qualification framework for curricula or part-time degree programmes. The HRK Bologna Centre of Excellence acts as the hub in this respect. This is where the experience that has meanwhile been gained is collected, analysed and passed on to the universities. The debate in the HRK Senate discussed the consequences that need to be drawn from this.

This showed that the universities are still very aware of the tasks that yet need to be done and that they have to continue investing enormously in this reform process. That the state, i.e. the federal states, has largely left the higher education institutions to their own resources as far as the question of financing the work and effort put into converting and intensifying the range of courses offered remains an incredible burden. The HRK Senate stated unequivocally that the promised new Higher Education Pact for the post-2010 years must not once again leave this demand out.

A key lever for changing the situation in the field of teaching and studies is provided by a reform of the capacity guidelines. These are rigid, are not demand-oriented, and are completely in need of revision. The HRK Senate once again reiterated its proposal for the training capacities of each higher education institution to be set by subject group or faculty in the target agreements reached between the federal state and the university. This must result in a budget that provides core funding to ensure that the necessary minimum quality standards are met. With such an approach, we hope to agree on a need-orientated level of funding that can then be topped-up by the universities through tuition fees or other external funding.

The universities carefully and thoroughly analyse the information that can meanwhile be drawn from the experience gained with the new degree programmes. This also includes the information recently collected by a HIS-GmbH survey, which concludes that the number of student drop-outs has increased at some universities. It is clear that great differences exist

between universities and universities of applied sciences (Fachhochschulen) as well as between subjects in the number of student drop-outs that are registered. In the social sciences, agricultural, forest and food sciences, the drop-out rate has fallen steeply. Hence, the generally hoped for paradigm shift indeed occurred. While in the engineering, economics and business administration programmes offered at universities of applied sciences, the situation shows that more students have actually given up. This indicates that the curriculum planners will have to pay more attention in the future to the actual studyability of the new degree programmes. Students are not helped when the course content of Diplom courses is stuffed into the shorter Bachelor's programmes. Better teacher-student ratios and better student advice services must also be addressed here. We want real academic reforms in which the students represent the key factor when designing the curriculum.

The question of whether the Bologna reforms actually achieve their target, namely promoting national and international student mobility, must be examined and tested. This may, among other aspects, lead to the one or the other question as to whether the concentration on a six-semester Bachelor's programme in Germany is actually appropriate in all cases. Some thought certainly needs to be given to deciding where a seven or eight-semester Bachelor's programme would make more sense, for example by integrating practical elements or semesters abroad, or to reorganising and fine-tuning the curricula. The goal of a shorter, competence-orientated first degree level would not be jeopardised by this."