

## West German universities

# Shortening of courses urged

*Hamburg*

A DRASTIC shortening of university courses has been advocated by the Wissenschaftsrat, the standing committee of scientists and delegates from the federal and regional governments which functions as West Germany's senior science advisory board. In a 130-page document published earlier this month, Heinz Heckhausen, the chairman who is also the director of the Max Planck Institute for psychology at Munich, says that the average length of university studies in West Germany is much greater than in comparable countries. His report advocates a basic four-year course with only a few exceptions.

A century ago, most university students studied for only three years, but since then their courses have been lengthening steadily. The Heckhausen report says that the average length of study in social science and economics amounts to 11 half-year semesters. In mathematics, natural science and medicine, students spend an average of 12.8 semesters at university. Chemistry students, who usually finish up with a doctorate, spend no fewer than an average of 19 semesters at their universities, which means that they are usually 31 years old by the time they leave.

Under the new proposals, the content of university courses would be chosen to give students "a high degree of professional mobility" and would be complementary to professional practice. Courses would ordinarily last for four years, but there would be an extra three months of study for certain courses with exceptional needs.

The proposals fit in well with the recent discussions of the proposed new university law Hochschulrahmengesetz (see *Nature* **316**, 96; 1985 and **317**, 717; 1985). Significantly, however, they are addressed not to students but to academic boards, to universities and to professors. This may be the first time in the long discussion of this problem that responsibility has been shifted from students to officials.

The underlying difficulty is that the threefold increase of student entrants to West German universities, from 65,000 in 1950–61 to 155,000 in 1984–85, has not been accompanied by reorganization of university courses. As long ago as 1966, the then minister of education in the federal government, Hans Leussink, advocated that action should be taken, but almost the only tangible result was that

## Correction

In last week's *Nature* (**320**, 101; 1986), the name of John McTague, the acting director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, was misspelt. □

discussions of the problem were made more prominent.

The Keckhausen report is critical of proposals that have emerged from the Studienreform Kommission in the past few years, which has suggested ways of reducing the length of 10 university courses (excluding the time occupied by final examinations) to 10 semesters, a further four courses to nine semesters, but with courses in architecture remaining 12 semesters long. According to the new report, these are inappropriate recipes.

The Wissenschaftsrat's own proposals rely crucially on the assumption that a small proportion of the students completing first "four-plus" courses at universities would go on to graduate studies. The Heckhausen report, however, contains no specific proposals as to how the existing university courses would be shortened, and there are many who argue that shifting the problem to the universities is no solution.

Thus Theodor Berchem, the president of the Westdeutsche Rektorenkonferenz (the standing committee of university heads), has warned that too much should not be expected from the Wissenschaftsrat's proposals, which have been realized "only on paper". He points out that students whose employment prospects are not bright or who seek the high grades required for entry to the civil service will be tempted to prolong their studies to improve their grades by changing "the places after the decimal point".

According to WRK, there will be a change only if industrial companies are prepared to relax their demands of leaving students for high qualifications. Others point out that the universities have not yet been able to demonstrate that they can reduce the length or specialization of their courses, while the Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft calls the proposals "hollow" and "cobbled together", saying that the necessary conditions for their implementation must be a sufficiently generous payment to students and better professional prospects.

On the other hand, the federal minister for education, Dorothee Wilms, has praised the recommendations, emphasizing that the central and regional governments are in agreement on the issues raised by the report. She says that the federal government has already offered the regional governments assistance with the preparation of new graduate courses, but that it will be for the universities themselves to carry through the bulk of the reform. She hopes that the growing competition among universities for students will be a powerful incentive for change.

Jürgen Neffe

## French elections

# Chevènement's last hurrah?

M. JEAN-PIERRE Chevènement, the architect of the French socialists' expansionary science policy, startled French voters on the eve of last Sunday's general election with the proposal that the *grandes écoles* should be doubled in size. Much of the interest of this proposal lies in its source. Chevènement is the leader of Ceres, the most substantial left-wing grouping within the Socialist Party, and as such might just as well have proposed that the *grandes écoles*, the training grounds of the French élite, should be abolished.

Since the beginning of his two-year spell as French minister of research and industry five years ago, Chevènement has been an ideas man. Now that the voters have proved the opinion polls right, and have robbed the socialists of their hold on the executive branch of the government, there will be no chance to tell whether the proposal was seriously intended or merely an election ploy. But this is not the first time that Chevènement has departed from the ideology of the left: as minister of education during the past two years, he has been responsible for a number of innovations — such as the singing of the Marseillaise every morning in the *lycées* — which are more popular with the right than the left.

This may not be as inconsistent as it sounds. Chevènement now calls himself a "republican élitist"; what he did last week was merely to endorse a report he had commissioned from Mme Josianne Serre, director of the École Normale Supérieure de Sèvres, whom he had asked to find ways of doubling the annual entry to the *grandes écoles*, now a meagre one per cent of the annual entry into higher education. What Serre (and Chevènement) now propose is that entry should not depend exclusively on success in the "baccalauréat C", with its emphasis on mathematics and physics, but on the results of a broader school-leaving examination.

The Serre report also advocated that the proposed doubling of the population of the *grandes écoles* should be brought about not only by increasing the size of existing institutions but by creating more of them, concentrating on technical fields other than the branches of conventional engineering to which most *grandes écoles* are at present dedicated. This coincides with the present inclinations of the *grandes écoles* themselves, for which reason there is a chance that these influential institutions could make the changes happen even if the new government declines Chevènement's offer to serve even in a right-wing government under suitable conditions. Robert Walgate