

OECD Education Study 'Embarrassing' for Germany

Germany's education minister is under fire as a new OECD study reveals that the country's higher education system is lagging behind when compared with other developed countries. Media commentators warn that Germany needs to make sure it has enough smart kids if it wants to maintain its title of export world champion.

Crippled by a lack of public spending, Germany's education system compares poorly to those of the other 30 countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), a new OECD study has revealed.

At 4.8 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), Germany's modest education expenditure is drastically smaller than that of other countries, such as the US, Denmark and Korea, where up to 7 percent of GDP is pumped into education. The study shows that Germany is ahead of only Turkey, Belgium and Mexico.

The Paris-based OECD has warned that Germany is producing too few graduates if it wants to recover fully from the current crisis. "If Germany wants to emerge strengthened from this financial crisis, now would be the time to invest in higher education and training," the head of OECD's Education Directorate, Barbara Ischinger, said at a news conference on Tuesday.

But German Education Minister Annette Schavan, of Chancellor Merkel's conservative Christian Democratic Party (CDU), defended the country's education system, claiming that the study does not take into account the fact that apprenticeships are a very popular

alternative to university in Germany, and that these can be just as valuable as academic degrees. "Nothing has failed," she told national broadcaster ARD.

Writing in the Wednesday edition of Germany's newspapers, media commentators argued for a more nuanced view of the education system rather than a rigid focus on hard data.

The center-left *Süddeutsche Zeitung* writes:

"OECD education experts have gained the reputation of being killjoys and always giving Germany bad marks. In reality, we should be grateful that they keep bringing up the issue of education. Although leading politicians seem to talk about wanting to do more for education in every second sentence of their campaign speeches (during the current election campaign), they never actually give any specific details."

"It starts with money. The OECD has once again accused Germany of not spending enough money on education. Although the numbers are not completely up-to-date, they do refer to a problem that continues to be acute. ... The (center-left) Social Democratic Party and the Greens are now demanding a supplementary income tax to fund education. This is more honest than always promising tax cuts. However, if people have to pay extra taxes for education, they need to be able to have confidence that their money is really improving schools and kindergartens."

"Many projects have already been started in the education sector, but only very few have been completed in a satisfactory way. ... The education of very young children was supposed

to be improved, but in reality there are still not enough kindergarten places available for young children ... One of the weaknesses of Germany's educational policy -- which it does, however, share with the OECD -- is its quantitative focus and its obsession with facts and figures. It only makes sense to have more kindergartens, more graduates and more students if the quality is right."

The left-leaning Die Tageszeitung writes:

"It is downright embarrassing to be confronted with the OECD numbers on German education year after year. While we Germans constantly blow our own trumpets when it comes to our levels of education, our report card from Paris always looks very different. The number of Germans going to university is plummeting and the amount we spend on education is shrinking too."

"The OECD is not some big bully who likes picking on Germany. The statisticians in Paris simply have the hard facts. Every standard-of-living study shows that a higher standard of education directly affects income levels, health, life expectancy -- even happiness."

"We should not paint the picture of the whole country falling into a collective depression. But we should not forget what will happen if the export world champion doesn't produce enough

smart kids."

The center-right Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung writes:

"Believing that short is sweet, Germans like to rely on five-line newspaper articles and 20-second newsflashes to learn about what's going on in the world. Now they know that the OECD is once again not happy with Germany, partly because we only spend 4.8 percent of our GDP on education, whereas other countries spend up to 7.4 percent."

"But 4.8 percent in a rich country may well work out to be equivalent to more than 8 percent in poorer or less productive countries in terms of how much money an individual citizen actually receives. For an accurate comparison, we need to look at the number of children and young people who are educated with this sum of money. We also need to take into account the number of teachers and professors whose salaries are being paid out of this 4.8 percent."

"High study fees -- like in the US -- considerably increases the percent of GDP spent on education, but this does not necessarily mean that the level of education is better. Part of being well-educated is not being satisfied just with the simplest numbers."

-- Josie Cox

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