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EDUCATION: Universities limit student numbers

In a number of European Community countries universities have imposed restrictions on access to certain subjects like medicine, dentistry and pharmacy. A student can no longer just register for the course of study he or she is interested in. The restrictions which were imposed because of the overflow of applications from would-be students hit foreign students particularly hard. Having a certificate or diploma and a good knowledge of the language of the course of instruction is no longer sufficient to guarantee a foreign student's entry to a university.

The situation in Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark and Greece means that formal limits to entry in certain specific disciplines have been imposed. But the way these countries apply their so-called "numerus clausus" restrictions varies from one to the other. In Germany, for instance, the legal restrictions introduced in 1972 depended largely on a student's final high school exam results. These requirements have been slightly modified since then, but even today, top results are needed to enroll in the medical, dentistry and pharmacy schools. In addition, in Germany the number of foreign students must not exceed a quota of 6 percent of all available vacancies. In the Netherlands, on the other hand, universities subscribe to a weighted random selection system.

In Belgium and France, it is special entrance examinations for major universities that are used to limit access. In Ireland and the United Kingdom, admission criteria tend to be determined individually according to standards set by each university or college. Normally these are based again on secondary school exam results. In France, a student can easily enroll in the school of his choice, but he must do extremely well in his first-year exams as that can be when the real selection process takes place. Admission procedures to European universities are extremely varied and complex. At first glance, the Italian system seems the most open. As a result, Italian universities attract a large number of foreign students who have not been able to overcome the obstacles posed by "numerus clausus" practices in their own countries.

SCIENCE: New Joint Research Centre chief

The European Joint Research Centre has a new chief. Mr. Jean-Albert Dinkespiler, a Frenchman, took over his new job as head of some 2000 scientists and technicians on April 1, 1982, replacing Prof. Stelio Villani, an Italian.

Mr. Dinkespiler who has spent most of his career specialising in aerospace research, is now head of an institution which includes four establishments situated at Ispra (Italy), Geel (Belgium), Karlsruhe (West Germany) and Petten (the Netherlands). The Centre's budget for 1980-83 is about fSt285 million (see Eurofocus 15/81).

The range of work done at the Joint Research Centre is immense. One of their recent projects deals with the classification of "transuranium" elements. Until recently, there was some doubt about how the exotic heavy metals at the far end of the "periodic table" should be classified (these are metals whose atomic number is higher than 89). For the first time, the JRC has now been able to set up a system allowing for the exact classification of these metals, which include uranium and plutonium.

Such information has more than just theoretical importance. It is valuable for understanding the basic chemical properties and safe handling of materials in advanced nuclear fuels for fast breeder reactors and radioactive waste management.

The Centre has also recently published a handbook containing a short history of neutron radiography which describes the industrial applications of the technique (1).

Neutron radiography allows us to see the inside of objects. But not like X-rays which only register the metal parts of, e.g. a cigarette lighter. A neutron radiograph will indicate the position of the wick, the petrol in the cotton wool and the fibre washer on the stopper. Although neutron radiographs are not suitable for humans, they have a wide range of other uses. They can be used, for instance, to examine the integrity of welded or soldered joints. Or to detect the presence of solidified oil and grease in aircraft engine parts, the inspection of alloy in racing car wheels and even the detection of voids in printed circuits for electronics components. Very elementary, my dear Einstein!

(1) Neutron Radiography Handbook: P. von der Hardt und H. Röttger, Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht (Netherlands) - London

HEALTH: Anti-smoking moves grow

When you're coughing out your lungs on the first cigarette of the morning, you may come to the conclusion that, Red Indian peace pipes apart, smoking never did anybody much good. In fact, it is generally accepted that it does unspeakable things to your liver, blood and respiratory system and may well hasten your end by giving you heart disease or lung cancer.

But the tobacco industry is big business and profits to firms and tax revenues to governments mean that smokers' health has never been very high on anyone's list of priorities. However, according to a report on anti-smoking legislation recently published by the European Commission, attitudes in Europe may be changing despite the huge sums of money involved.

As far as the smoker is concerned, it is probably the slogan on almost every pack of cigarettes he buys in Europe that will make him most aware of the risk he is running by lighting another. Legends like "Smokers die younger", "Smoking damages your health", and "Smoking may cost you more than money" are required in most EEC member states. In West Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, the amount of tar and nicotine in each cigarette also has to be given.

Bans on TV and radio advertising and prohibition of smoking in numerous public places and professions have also hit hard at the tobacco trade in recent years and more and more health education campaigns have been introduced to inform people about the dangers.

The British Health Council recently scored a major success with "Never say yes to a cigarette", a cartoon campaign aimed at schoolchildren featuring the evil Nick O'Teen being thwarted by Superman. Young people in Ireland are soon to get badges with the slogan "Smoking is choking - Don't flash the ash", which will be distributed in schools. And in Luxembourg a children's magazine entitled "Groggi" deals with all aspects of health education, with apparently considerable success.

But how successful has the anti-smoking movement been in concrete terms? The answer is not very successful at all. Consumption of cigarettes per head of population in Europe rose by an average of 23.2 percent between 1970 and 1980. In the United Kingdom the increase was as much as 49 percent and the Greeks, the heaviest smokers in the Community, registered a 40 percent increase. Even the Danes, who smoke less than anybody else in the EEC, increased their consumption by 9.4 percent, almost catching up with the Irish, who registered the smallest increase at 3.1 percent.

But the figures show that over the past five years overall consumption has stagnated and in some cases even dropped, either as a result of anti-smoking legislation, or simply as a response to the recession and people economising in hard times.

It is also clear that different social groups are now smoking, although there are few consistent trends that transcend national boundaries. As a rule, young men seem to be smoking rather less and young women seem to be smoking more. Smokers everywhere also seem to be becoming more conscious of tar and nicotine levels in the cigarettes they buy and opting for milder brands.

EMPLOYMENT: EEC supports cooperatives

Despite the abundance of time, thought and talk aimed at resolving the current unemployment crisis in Europe, there are relatively few new ideas about concrete ways to help solve the problem. More often than not the discussions revolve around the merits or disadvantages of a particular economic and political approach. There are the Keynesians and the monetarists, the people who want more public spending or more private investment, the people who blame inflation, the people who blame production costs.

One new trend, however, has turned up an old idea. Cooperatives have been around for a long time, in agriculture, in credit or other social institutions and sometimes in transport and industry. But now many more local communities or groups of employers and employees are forming cooperatives to face up to the economic challenges of the recession. Sometimes the motive for pooling interests is a defensive one. It might be to save jobs being lost in the private sector, or to fill social, educational or similar services where existing facilities are being reduced. But they are also sometimes offensive in nature and are formed to exploit a potential market.

While these ventures have to be economically viable, they sometimes face special obstacles because of laws relating to collectives. For instance, they may have greater difficulty than a regular business in raising capital to finance their operations. Recently the European Community Commission in Brussels examined the employment potential of producer cooperatives under a study-action programme undertaken with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in Paris, aimed at local employment initiatives. In a recent communication to the EEC Permanent Committee on Employment, which comprises representatives of government, industry and labour, the EEC Commissioner for Employment and Social Affairs, Ivor Richard, said that although the total employment impact of cooperatives is likely to remain relatively small, such initiatives are growing rapidly in number and may have

a special contribution to make in encouraging enterprise, building morale and encouraging cooperation. He said governments should seek to assist them through information by supporting education and training efforts and by helping to assure them access to appropriate finance.

COMPETITION: Belgium beats the bootleggers

Most European countries have legislation on alcohol, designed to fight alcoholism and to protect primarily young people from the negative effects of alcohol consumption. In Belgium, the "Vandervelde legislation", dealing with alcoholism, dates back to 29 August 1919. Under this law, restaurant owners must purchase a special license to authorise them to serve spirits whose alcohol content is higher than 22°. People who do not are liable to heavy fines.

But in this field, as in so many areas, there are always some "wise guys" who believe they can get away with not respecting the law. A Belgian restaurant owner who was recently caught selling alcohol without the required license succeeded in bringing his case before his national Supreme Court of Appeal and succeeded in throwing this august institution into some confusion.

The accused claimed that the law of 1919 was contrary to Article 30 of the Treaty of Rome, which forbids quantitative restrictions on imports from one EEC country to another or "any equivalent measures".

Being in some doubt, the Court of Appeal turned to the European Court of Justice whose job it is to interpret Community legislation. The question was simple: did the measures banning the consumption of spirits whose alcohol content is higher than 22° constitute the "equivalent measures" banned by the EEC Treaty? In other words, could these rules pose an obstacle to imports into Belgium of alcohol from other EEC countries, by giving preference to national beverages over and above those imported from other European states?

The European Court of Justice decided against the restaurant owner, pointing out that such measures had nothing to do with imports of products and as such did not form a barrier to trade between EEC countries. All the same, hats off to the man who tried - even if he still has to pay the fine!

CONSUMPTION: What price your car?

Thinking of buying a new car? Perhaps you are planning to visit the next automobile show or ask your local agent to provide you with brochures and information on the prices of different models and makes of cars? But, would you ever think of going abroad to buy the car of your dreams? If not, you

could be missing out on a real bargain.

The prices of new cars vary considerably from one EEC country to another. In October 1981, for instance, a Talbot Horizon cost about £St 2,200 in France (excluding tax), but only £St 1,800 in Luxembourg.

British consumers are the worst off. Some cars (particularly Fiat, Volkswagen, Peugeot and Rover) sell at sometimes twice the price in the United Kingdom compared with countries like Belgium or Denmark.

These differences in prices were highlighted some months ago by a Belgian magazine on consumer affairs. The conclusions of the magazine prompted a European Parliamentarian, Victor Michel (Christian Democrat) to question the European Commission about its pricing policy. Can the British consumer, asked Mr. Michel with heavy irony, continue to believe in the benefits of "the free forces of market economy", and the effectiveness of the EEC's competition policy?

The variations in prices have been a headache for the Commission for several years now. But it believes that the situation is improving and that over the years, price differences have narrowed between the six founding members of the EEC. On the other hand, variations continue to exist - and have even grown worse - between the Six and the countries that joined the EEC in 1973 and 1981.

The Commission recognises that prices are abnormally high in the United Kingdom and particularly low in Denmark and Greece. But it cannot intervene unless they are due to restrictive measures taken by either the manufacturers or the importers and sellers of the cars. The variations are generally due to other factors, such as labour costs, or taxation. The Commission says that British consumers are penalised twice over: not only are cars sold in Britain more expensive than anywhere else in the EEC, but attempts to buy foreign cars with right-hand drive can lead to enormous difficulties (delivery delays, restrictions in guarantees, etc.) EEC officials are currently investigating whether import barriers are compatible with the competition rules of the Treaty of Rome.