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Sustainable Project Work at Universities in Central-, South Eastern-, and Eastern European Countries

For years, the Eastern Europe Centre of Hohenheim University has been making successful efforts to establish more intensive cooperation with research institutions and universities in central-, south eastern-, and eastern European countries (CSEC). For financing, the centre must rely on the acquisition of national and EU-financed project funds. The choice of the projects coordinated in Hohenheim is particularly based on sustainability.



Fig. 1: Professor Köller in a conversation with Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Karlheinz Köller, from whom he took over the direction of the Eastern Europe Centre in autumn 2002.

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At the end of April, the message that the European Court of Auditors had harshly criticized the criteria for the allocation of the billions of euros of subsidies for Russia, which the European Union had paid as part of the TACIS programme since 1991 and which amounted to € 200 million per year, caused a stir. Given the shocking result which showed that only five of 29 projects were classified as sustainable, the European Court of Auditors rightfully recommends that “a realistic evaluation of the sustainability potential in the planning phase” of the projects to be financed should be carried out as part of the subsidizing policy for the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Hohenheim University and its Eastern Europe Centre

Given these considerations, it must be permitted to ask whether we in Germany at both the federal and the state level even have the instruments which are required to draw up balances and to examine the sustainable effect of the government subsidy programmes for the countries of central, south eastern, and eastern Europe (CSEC) as well as the various programmes of universities, foundations, companies, and associations in the past 15 years.

The project work of the Eastern Europe Centre of Hohenheim University, of which Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Karlheinz Köller has been in charge since September 2002, must also undergo such an examination. Here, only some of these projects can be described.

Hohenheim University is the smallest of a total of nine universities in Baden-Württemberg. Its origin traces back to queen Katharina, a daughter of a Russian czar. Catharina Pawlowna, the sister of czar Alexander the first, founded the first agricultural education- and research institute after two years of extreme famine in Württemberg (1815/16) in November 1818. As the oldest and largest German faculty of agronomy, it competes with a total of nine German faculties of agro-

nomy in the search for students out of a total pool of 5,000 to 6,000 and (hard to believe) approximately 1,300 beginners, whose number cannot be increased.

With regard to harsher competition at the national and European level, Hohenheim University began early on to face this competition in an offensive manner and to orient its courses of study in the area of agronomy and nutritional science accordingly. Not least for this reason, the faculty of agronomy in Hohenheim was the first faculty of agronomy in all of Germany which introduced bachelor- and master degrees, which replaced the five-year “diplom” studies as early as in 1999. In addition to the reform of the structures and contents of the courses of study, the international profile of the university is a significant factor in competition. Hohenheim University not only has a Centre for Agriculture in the Tropics and Subtropics, which was founded in the middle of the 80s, but it also initiated a scientific Eastern Europe Centre in 1995. This centre was assigned the task of developing a network of contacts with the large universities of agronomy in the countries of central, south eastern, and eastern Europe. Up until today, the centre has only had its own small resources as well as a managing director and one part-time secretary, whose work is financed by the university, in order to cope with this task.

Therefore, it was the only solution for the centre to apply for project funds from national and European subsidy programmes in order to be able to initiate cooperation with partners in the above-mentioned countries and to realize collaborative scientific education- and research projects. Thus, the Eastern Europe Centre together with the agronomists in Hohenheim very successfully developed a niche strategy for the agricultural and nutritional sector in the CSEC. According to the statistics of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), it is therefore the most successful German university with regard to the application for university reform projects financed by the EU.

TEMPUS-TACIS Projects in the Russian Federation

Two examples will be used to provide an overview of these projects. On the occasion of its 175th anniversary, Hohenheim University was able to re-establish contacts with the Agricultural Timirjasev Academy in Moscow at a scientific convention on Russia in the year 1993. Contacts with this academy had already existed in the 19th century. With regard to competition among the currently 58 agricultural colleges in Russia, this largest education institute in the agricultural sector of the Russian Federation adopted the new name of Russian State University named after Timirjasev in order to be better able to document its claim to be the leading university in this field. From discussions with our Russian partners at the regional and federal level, we know that the Russian government will reduce the number of its agricultural universities to 15 to 30 "regional competence centres". Therefore, the establishment of sustainable cooperation with the Russian Federation depends on the answer to the question of which agricultural college will not only compete successfully in the struggle for its own survival, but will also be available as a scientific cooperation partner at an over-average level. With the answer to this question in mind, the TEMPUS-TACIS projects acquired by the Eastern Europe Centre must be considered, for whose implementation we were able to gain a total volume of € 4.5 million in the past 10 years.

TEMPUS-TACIS Projects in the Balkans Region

After the Balkans war, the German universities got the chance to establish scientific cooperation with partners in the Balkans region as part of the European Solidarity Pact for South-East Europe. With the aid of the German Academic Exchange Service, German universities were intended to successively lead their partners up to the European standards in education and research. The Eastern Europe Centre of Hohenheim University also participated in this academic reconstruction programme and received a total of € 150,000 in subsidies from the German Academic Exchange Service for the years 2002 and 2003 in order to inform the agricultural universities in Zagreb, Osijek, Belgrad, Novi Sad, Sarajevo, Tirana, Pristina, and Skopje about the goals of the Bologna declaration and to make them aware of these objectives. Once again, we were successful here in the past years and able to integrate the above-mentioned universities into a TEMPUS-CARDS project such that the introduction of stepped degrees and the modulariza-

tion of the contents in combination with the European Transfer Credit System are recognized as indispensable structural and quality criteria of the European education area for the agricultural universities on the Balkans on their way to Europe.

The Question of Sustainability

For the problem to be discussed here, the question of whether the projects in the Russian Federation, the Caucasian and Asian CIS states, or on the Balkans which are coordinated in Hohenheim are sustainable is more important than the description of the contents of the individual projects. From the perspective of Hohenheim University, the answer is an unrestricted yes. The cooperation network which has been developed in Hohenheim in the past 10 years using the EU-financed TEMPUS-PHARE, -TACIS, and -CARDS projects has doubtlessly helped this small, though fine profile university to choose and identify cooperation partners who will be able to cooperate in scientific research at this level in the future.

The selfless commitment of the agronomists and nutritional scientists in Hohenheim to the reform of the educational structures and contents at the CSEC partner universities will result in long-term and, hence, sustainable research cooperation, which will also enhance the international profile of Hohenheim University and its partners. The evaluation of the sustainability of the outlined project work in Hohenheim as part of networks would require an "Eastern Europe competence centre" at the level of the federal states, which would document and analyze the commitment of Baden-Württemberg in its main areas, i.e. politics, economy, science, and culture in the individual countries of central and eastern Europe, for example. Neither Baden-Württemberg nor any other federal state alone is in a position to be present on the entire eastern European market or even on the markets of individual countries. The Russian Federation with its 82 oblasts alone exceeds the possibilities of any kind of commitment at the level of the federal states. If, given its historical bonds, Baden-Württemberg is primarily present in Russia and the countries along the Danube, this commitment must focus on selected oblasts or regions of the mentioned countries.

To our knowledge, east-west competence centres have been founded in Lower Saxony, North-Rhine Westphalia, Hesse, and Bavaria. They draw up a strategic balance of the commitment of the individual federal states in eastern Europe in individual areas of politics or in all of them such that they provide synergies, new development impulses, and perhaps also political recommendations.



Fig. 2: Professor Köller receives an honorary doctorate from the director of the State Academy of Agriculture in Poltava/Ukraine at the beginning of October 2002.

At the federal level, the former government under chancellor Schröder initiated the foundation of a central/eastern Europe competence centre in Leipzig, which, however, is still waiting for the allocation of the first funds in order to be able to make initial plans for its future orientation.

Meanwhile, all these initiatives are borne by the awareness of the fact that uncoordinated competition of states as well as their universities and companies on the new markets in central and eastern Europe and for the scientific and technological potential of these countries, which takes place at the regional, national, and European level, will not have any sustainable effects in the long run. Successful and, hence, sustainable networking which includes all areas of politics requires knowledge and the ability to draw up a country-related balance of a wide variety of individual initiatives such that it provides additional value for the network partners or at least a recommendation for the future orientation of their measures.

Therefore, our wish for the very diverse commitment of the federation and the states as well as their universities, companies, foundations, and associations in the agricultural and nutritional sector of the so-called transformation countries, which still provides jobs for one third of the working population in countries such as Russia, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine, would be improved coordination of the political, economic, scientific, and cultural interests beyond the level of the individual institutions so that the proverbial wheel does not have to be invented all over again like so often in the past years.