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German Court Upholds Right to Charge Tuition to 'Eternal' Students

By BURTON BOLLAG

Germany's "eternal students" will no longer all be allowed to study indefinitely at taxpayers' expense, according to a ruling by a German court.

The decision was the result of a lawsuit brought by four students who charged that the state of Baden-Württemberg was unjust in its policy of charging tuition to students who extend their studies past a certain point.

But the Federal Administrative Court, in Berlin, said the state had the right to impose the measure to reduce the tax burden.

Baden-Württemberg is the only one of Germany's 16 states to have adopted such a policy. Under it, students are charged \$450 for each semester beyond the official study time for the given academic program, plus two years. Studies are otherwise free in Germany's predominantly state-run higher-education system.

Study programs for the basic undergraduate degree last officially between eight and 10 semesters, with most liberal-arts programs nine semesters long. Yet few students manage to complete their studies during that period. In 1999, the average time students took was just over six years. Some students, derided as "eternal students," take considerably longer.

Germany's education minister, Edelgard Bulmahn, has been a strong opponent of calls to introduce tuition across the board. Yet she told German television that she approved of Baden-Württemberg's policy. "Students should have the responsibility of finishing studies in a certain time," she said.

Other German states are considering similar measures.