



UNIVERSITY IN TRANSITION: THE CASE OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA

by

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INTRODUCTION

"What is the purpose and responsibilities of modern universities ?" (Kozma, 1992). The attempt to answer this - apparently uneasy - question in a comparative perspective could undoubtedly contribute to the explanation of the mission of higher education in our civilization. However, I am affraid that - having in mind the increasing complexity of the higher education institutions in all countries - the above mentioned question can be answered only partially. The first step can be made by identifying the impacts of new economic relations and recent political developments upon higher education. This is relavant especially for countries like Czechoslovakia where universities are challenged to new tasks stemming from the substantial transition of the whole social system.

In Czechoslovakia the questions about responsibilities and quality of higher education emerged soon after the breakdown of the totalitarian regime. One of the intensively discussed questions at present is how far the universities should become places of teaching and research, in regard to the fact that in the former^{regime} this traditional unity had been widely restricted in favour of concentrating research in extra-university institutions. Many experts in Czechoslovakia believe that through reaching this unity an improvement of universities will be reached. On the other hand the problem of broadening the admission to higher studies is a topic of hot debates.

My approach presented in this paper is that these profound issues can be understood only in the broader social and political context of the particular country. Therefore, I am dealing here with outlining social and political changes performed in Czecho-

slovakia in which higher education develops, together with its new legislation, and concluding with a discussion about possibilities of broadening the access to higher education.

A more detailed survey of major changes in education in Czechoslovakia can be found in the author's papers listed in References.

1. HIGHER EDUCATION IN A CHANGING SOCIAL CONTEXT

Czechoslovakia¹⁾ is a country with long cultural and educational traditions. For example, one of the oldest universities in Europe was founded in 1348 in Prague by Charles IV., King of Bohemia and Roman Emperor, for those "who hanker for the fruits of science", as the founding document states.

Unfortunately, in its recent history Czechoslovakia suffered enormously from the tragic period of the communist regime (1948-1989). Four decades of socialism have caused Czechoslovakia today to lag behind most developed countries of the world not only in economic parameters and technological development but also in some areas of education. An example can be presented concerning access to higher education which was heavily damaged under socialism (see Table 1).

1) "Czechoslovakia" is used here as a common expression to replace the official name of the state, i.e., Czech and Slovak Federal Republic (ČSFR). The population of the country is multi-national: Of the 15.6 millions inhabitants there are about 10 millions in the Czech republic (62.7% of population), 4.8 millions in the Slovak republic (31%), with several national and ethnic minorities of which Hungarian (about 600,000, i.e. 3.8% of population) is the greatest.

The data of international comparison show that in the 80's Czechoslovakia was much behind the highly developed countries in number of students in higher education proportionally to the whole population. At present, however, the enrollment in higher education in Czechoslovakia is higher due to recent arrangements in educational policy (see, in more detail, Prucha, 1991, a, b).

Fortunately, in November 1989 the "velvet revolution" has been realized which has finished a period of 41 years of totalitarian system. At present, all economy, political and social system,

Table 1

NUMBER OF STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION ACCORDING TO COUNTRIES
(1985-1987)

country	number of students per 100 000 inhabitants
1. USA	5 142
2. The Netherlands	2 794
3. Finland	2 723
4. Germany (West)	2 589
5. Belgium	2 558
6. Norway	2 502
.....	
17. Bulgaria	1 220
18. Portugal	1 119
19. Czechoslovakia	1 088

Source: Dohnalová, N., et al.: Naše školství v mezinárodním srovnání. VV nezávislá revue pro výchovu a vzdělání, 1990, No. 4, pp. 72-76.

science and culture, proceed through radical changes. The changes are influencing also the whole educational system and higher education institutions. Therefore, it is necessary briefly to characterize the wider social context in which the universities are developing nowadays. What are the main changes since November 1989 ?

- The most important change in Czechoslovakia concerns political pluralism. Instead of the one-party system lasting during 1948-1989, Czechoslovakia restored a parliamentary pluralistic system with different political parties, streams and movements. In June 1990 the first free elections were organized in Czechoslovakia in which the parties representing liberal and democratic forces won.

- Another substantial change concerns economy. At present, a centrally-planned economy based strictly on state ownership is replaced by free-market economy (through privatization of state-run enterprises, introducing free competition, joint-ventures, and foreign capital investments).

- Contemporaneously with this political and economic shift some important changes were realized in education. They concern curricula, instruction, textbooks, access to secondary and higher education, and other spheres of educational practice. First of all, teaching of the marxist doctrine (which was an obligatory subject for all students in all universities before November 1989) has been replaced by new subjects including social sciences, philosophy, history of religions and culture, etc. Also, a radical change has been made in teaching foreign languages. Russian (which was the first and for all students obligatory foreign language in all types of schools) is no longer obligatory. Instead, students can freely choose among English, German, French and some other languages. Today, most students prefer English or German whereas Russian is very unpopular.

- There are profound changes also in educational policy. Under the totalitarian regime all schools in Czechoslovakia were only state-run. No alternative schools were allowed. At present,

a pluralistic arrangement in the school system is introduced, i.e., alternative schools (private schools and schools run by churches) are recognized as legal counterparts to state schools. The other change in the school policy concerns decentralization of the school system. During the totalitarian regime all educational management was strictly centralized. According to the recent school law (1990) the school-based management has been introduced so that more independence is given to particular schools, and local authorities (municipal school boards). A new educational policy concerns also higher education as described below (in part 3).

2. BRIEF SURVEY OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

At present, there are in Czechoslovakia thirty-seven (37) institutions of higher education (not including the military academies) with together 132 faculties. Among the institutions

- five (5) are traditional universities
- four (4) are new regional universities
- ten (10) are technical universities or institutes
- two (2) are schools of veterinary medicine
- four (4) are higher institutions of agriculture
- two (2) are schools of economics and business
- six (6) are academies for fine or applied arts
- others are independent faculties of education.

Among classical universities the Charles University (Prague), Masaryk University (Brno), Palacký University (Olomouc), Comenius University (Bratislava) and Šafárik University (Košice) offer programs in the humanities, the social and natural sciences,

medicine, law, and theology. The biggest university in Czechoslovakia, Charles University in Prague, has 16 faculties with 19,596 students and 3,259 teachers. In addition, international unstitutions have been established in Czechoslovakia, especially Central European University, and the Katz School of Business of the University in Pittsburgh, both in Prague.

During the 1990-91 academic year 181,978 students were enrolled in institutions of higher education in Czechoslovakia. The students enrolled represent only about 16% of the 20-24 year age group. This is still less than in highly developed countries but the capacity of institutions as well as limited financial resources do not allow a higher enrollment. Table 2 presents some comprehensive data about institutions of higher education.

Table 2

DATA ON HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Higher Education Institutions	37
Faculties	132
Professors and Associate Professors	6,814
Other Pedagogical Staff	12,536
Total Students	181,978
Female Students	82,055
Foreign Students	4,803
Graduating	28,127

Source: Statistika školství 1990-91, Ústav pro informace ve vzdělávání, Praha, 1991.

3. NEW LEGISLATION ON HIGHER EDUCATION

During the totalitarian regime all the institutions of higher education in Czechoslovakia were under heavy pressure from the organs of the communist party. Universities had no rights for academic freedom in a real sense. Since November 1989, considerable attention has been paid to developing new legal foundations of higher education. In May 1990 The Federal Parliament approved The Act on Higher Education.

This Act establishes universities and all university-level institutions as autonomous, self-governing legal entities. The management of universities is ensured through academic authorities and also through academic senates. The senate is elected by its responsive community (university staff, and students). Deans of the faculties and rectors of the universities are not nominated on political grounds as was the case in the former regime but are elected democratically. Also, access to higher education is not governed by political criteria but is based on student abilities and achievements.

An important innovation of the Act is the establishment of scientific councils of the universities and faculties. The Act also creates a University Council which is made of delegates from the university senates and faculties in the respective republics. It functions as a part of the self-governance structure of universities and represents them in relation to the ministry.

As a whole, the Act has substantially decentralized the administration of higher education in Czechoslovakia. Though almost all of the expenses for higher education are paid from state sources and distributed through the ministries of education in Czech and in Slovak republic the universities are becoming

more and more independent of the governance of the ministries.

Together with the legal right for autonomy and self-management the universities in Czechoslovakia should assume the responsibility for the quality of their work. There is some doubt, however, whether higher education institutions will be able to take such responsibility in new social conditions of renewed democracy. Therefore, there must be a control mechanism which should guarantee this responsibility. This control will involve both state control (by means of the Accreditation Commissions established in each of the republics of Czechoslovakia) and by international control (through special OECD commission which evaluates, in 1991-92, the quality of higher education institutions in Czechoslovakia according to international standards). It is, however, symptomatic that in the recent investigation concerning the self-evaluation of the quality of higher education institutions in the Czech republic only 15.2% of them have replied to a questionnaire asking for evaluation of quality of the respective university or faculty (Report by Centre for Studies on Higher Education, Prague, June 1991).

4. QUALITY VS BROADER ADMISSION TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Universities in Czechoslovakia, at present, have to solve the following controversy: On the one hand, there is a need for opening the access to higher education for more people who are able to enter higher learning and, thus, to eliminate the restrictions which discriminated some groups of population as for university studies during the former regime. On the other hand, however, there is tendency for improving the quality of

higher education by applying, among others, procedures of selection for higher and advanced studies.

It seems that this is a reflection of two opposite approaches to admission for higher education:

- An approach, based on moral principles of democratization of education, which tries to give chance to all people for higher learning irrespectively of the economic and other actual conditions.

- An opposite approach trying to select only the best individuals for higher studies ensuring, thus, the educational quality of the nation.

If one analyses the situation in countries with highly developed educational systems several general tendencies related to the above mentioned controversy can be identified (they are described, in more detail, in the study by Klusák, Walterová, Prucha, 1992):

1) The countries with highly developed higher education (as, e.g., Germany, France, Japan, and others) devote a great attention to procedures of selection and admission to higher education. This is a consequence of the relevance assigned to quality of higher education as it is emphasized not only by the school policy-makers of the particular countries but also by economic institutions, including also international institutions as, e.g., OECD or The World Bank.

The World Bank has published a special Technical Paper on University Examinations and Standardized Testing (Heyneman and Fägerlind, 1988) where it is stated:

"The mechanism of selection will affect the quality of universities and therefore a nation's future. Since universities

are expected to increase levels of self-financing and to be competitive internationally, then universities should be given the responsibility of selecting their own students" (pp. xii-xiii, underlined by J.P.).

2) The procedures of selection and admission to higher education are based, in many countries, on educational evaluation research and practices. They have developed a variety of educational testing and created special institutions for measuring educational achievements and quality in education. Such institutions are, e.g., CITO (National Institute for Educational Measurement), in The Netherlands, or ETS (Educational Testing Service) and NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress), in the USA.

Unfortunately, in Czechoslovakia educational evaluation research is underdeveloped (due to ideological restriction of the former regime) and, consequently, also procedures of selection and admission to higher education are to be elaborated accordingly to the world standards.

3) The third general tendency is reflected in interrelationship of the quality of secondary education and higher education. Though the higher education has reached a large autonomy in national systems of education its relation to secondary schools is intensive. It can be evidenced that, e.g., the quality of achievements of students in secondary schools is one of the relevant criteria of their selection for higher studies. In some countries there are National Achievement Tests which are considered to show how well students have learned what they have been taught and, thus, reflecting their preparedness for higher studies (National Tests, 1991).

How to solve the problem of admission to higher education in Czechoslovakia ? In the study (Klusák, Walterová, Prucha, 1992) there are several recommendations for it. The substance of them is to combine, as far as possible, both of the above mentioned approaches:

- It means, on the one hand, to develop an exact system of selection procedures for admission to higher education ensuring thus the quality of universities in the country (as postulated, e.g., in the material of The World Bank).

- On the other hand, however, it is recommended to broaden the access to higher education through offering opportunities for those people who do not fulfil official requirements of admission, i.e., who have not certificates of leaving examinations from secondary academic schools but have working experiences, skills, etc. It is supposed that providing people with this "second chance" can contribute to implementation of the principles of continuing education.

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