

In dire need of systemic changes

Higher education in Slovakia is currently characterized by a decline in the quality of students admitted to universities, the generally low level of educators, and a high level of corruption. There is also a lack of cooperation with the private sector in training graduates profiled for the labor market needs and jointly conducting scientific research. Steps to change this situation must be fundamental and have to be come quickly.

Higher education is part of public life and it is determined by specific values. At the end of last year the European Public Policy Partnership (EPPP) think tank, carried out a study "Higher Education in Slovakia – the Reality, the Problem and Possible Solutions". The EPPP identified those values in the university system that make it work. Specifically named were the principles of freedom, self-regulation, independent governance and being a privately funded entity.

Thus defined, these principles are fundamental to the effective running of any institution or organization. However, when discussing the topic of higher education among experts, what rarely arises is the view that education is thought of as precious and that its acquisition requires an investment from individuals, who in return hope to acquire an education that gives them a particular advantage in the labor market.

The principle of *freedom* of education is a crucial one. It should be understood that universities need to operate as private institutions, offering specific types of education determined by their own assessment of educational needs. The idea of *self-regulation* is based on the concept that a private foundation is better able to control and adapt itself than a similar publicly funded organization. This is supported by the *independent governance* requirement, that universi-

ties should be separate entities with their own management and real responsibility. *Being a privately funded entity* means that while they should be exempt from following a particular state ideology, they should also be allowed to create the conditions and environment in which the free competition of ideas can prosper.

The post-1989 university boom

A vivid picture of the conditions and development of higher education in Slovakia can be easily obtained from basic statistical indicators. According to these, the number of university students and graduates from the year 1990 increased more than threefold. Since 2001, the president has appointed every year an average of 115 university professors. Also of interest is the creation, development and operation of new individual universities.

Between 1993 - 1997 there arose in Slovakia seven new universities and in the years 1998 - 2006 up to 12 more universities were created. Given the fact that in Slovakia there are currently 33 colleges and universities in operation, you will acknowledge the relative "youth" of our universities, particularly as two thirds of them emerged during the current independence of Slovakia.

There are a number of reasons for this quantitative increase in higher education. The positive demo-

graphic trends at the turn of the seventies and eighties (the baby boom) and an effort of a new state to build their own system of higher education and financing system, which provides a subsidy to universities according to number of students. The question and a potential problem, is how to maintain current capacity under the same system conditions.

How will universities cope with this situation, considering the negative demographic trends and the fact that young Slovaks have the opportunity to study abroad and that our own educational institutions are not seen as an attractive haven for masses of foreign students?

Price for education – big unknown

When considering the basic functional operations of the universities, we cannot avoid the question of their pricing and costs. Universities in 2008 had a budget of SKK 12 billion, which is nominally higher than in previous years. The Ministry of Education, academic officials and university staff may think that the amount is insufficient, but equally they, or anyone else, may think that 12 billion Slovak crowns are enough. Who is right? Subjective truth can have both sides. Each will defend its own interest, or point of view. This dispute, however, would say nothing about who has an objective answer to the question.

We cannot not know the price of Slovak higher education, because the above-mentioned 12 billion SKK is not a price, but a subsidy. Real value can be determined only through the supply and demand for education and the competition of universities, which have to rely upon only their income and not government grants.

More courage and autonomy

Slovak higher education has more or less happily existed in its own world for a long time. It acts, in principle, on guaranteed indisputability, knowing that society needs it, that politicians cannot ignore it and that according to the requirements of employers, both young and older people need a university diploma. It would accept more social prestige and money. It focuses in particular on the present, is sentimental for the past, and is hardly capable of a healthy optimistic perspective. Such higher education, however, does not make Slovakia a successful country.

Forgetting the automatic supply of state funds, 'flirting' with the private sector, learning ways of management and self-reflection from them, would definitely help higher education to improve. Banks that offer money for consumption could also consider offering more money for education. A state should recognize that in order to be successful, universities should be given the opportunity of a separate existence and that the schools should not be under the control of the Ministry of Education and the Accreditation Commission.



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