

Europe's hopes for university reform

More flexibility, diversity, mobility and tighter ties with business are on the EC's wish list

The European Commission (EC) is calling for a wide reform of European universities and higher education institutions suggesting that they "have failed to unleash their full potential so as to stimulate economic growth, social cohesion and improvement in the quality and quantity of jobs". More flexibility and a more sympathetic ear for the needs of the labour market; greater diversity in the programmes they offer; more mobility for both students and teachers; flexible admission policies; and improved human resources policies at the universities: all these items are on the EC's wish-list. But the commission is not alone in wanting them: business representatives and human resources professionals share its vision of a root-and-branch reform of universities in Europe, not least in Slovakia.

Observers of the Slovak labour market argue that the country's education sector is in urgent need of restructuring, in order to achieve the reform and revival that that other sectors of society have undergone, if it wants to attract the best students, retain the best minds in academia and become internationally competitive.

Slovak universities say they are already internationally competitive and have the potential to produce students who meet international requirements and can perform well as postgraduates at any university abroad. However, university rectors also warn that they have to make do with as little as a quarter of the funds available to leading European universities.

What both university leaders and human resources experts can agree on is that the Slovak

education system faces serious challenges which need to be systematically addressed without delay. First, the education sector must effectively respond to changes in the Slovak labour market.

Today, many talented young Slovaks get their university education abroad but then seek jobs at home in Slovakia, demonstrating that the labour market is in fact one step ahead of the education sector, says Martin Krekáč, a co-founder of the Jenewein Group global consultancy firm and the president of the Business Alliance of Slovakia.

"The education sector must become, through what it offers and the environment it provides, attractive to the young generation," Krekáč told The Slovak Spectator.

QUANTITY AND RAPID DEVELOPMENT VERSUS QUALITY

Slovakia's university system is suffering from a drop in the quality of the candidates who apply to study in its programmes, generally low quality of teachers, a high level of corruption, an inability to meet the requirements of the labour market and insufficient cooperation with the private sector, according to a study published in 2008 by the European Public Policy Partnership (EPPP), a think-tank which is part of the Jenewein Group.

The number of university students tripled between 1990 and 2007, reaching more than 200,000, the study – entitled System of Universities in Slovakia: Reality, Problems and Possible Solutions – reported. Since 2001 the president has appointed 115 professors per year on average, and there are now 1,500 professors at Slovak universities. Two thirds of Slovakia's total of 33 universities were founded in the last 15 years and are therefore still relatively new, the EPPP noted.

"Among the reasons for the quantitative increase in university education is the positive demographic development in the 1970s-1980s - the so-called baby boom - the efforts of the new state to build its own university system and the system of financing which allocates money to schools according to their number of students," said Miroslav Řádek, the author of the EPPP study.



Photo: TASR

Universities face tough challenges all around the European Union.

While the Slovak university education system may be applauded for its enormous effort to increase higher education participation, and universities for their efforts to expand their portfolio and boost research potential, the quality of educational and research activities has at the same time suffered from the speed and insufficient financial coverage of that expansion, found another report, by the European University Association (EUA), released in January 2008. The report, entitled Institutional evaluation of the Slovak higher education system and its research capacity, had been widely anticipated by the academic community in Slovakia.

"The time has come to address the quality of educational provision and to allow for sufficient internal differentiation to cater for the wide range of diverse needs and student profiles," the report said.

Economically active population by education in 2Q/2008*

| | Slovakia | Bratislava Region | Trnava Region | Trenčín Region | Nitra Region | Žilina Region | B. Bystrica Region | Prešov Region | Košice Region |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Economically active population | 2,675,600 (100%) | 344,100 (100%) | 292,600 (100%) | 297,100 (100%) | 363,200 (100%) | 334,900 (100%) | 326,900 (100%) | 370,100 (100%) | 346,700 (100%) |
| Elementary and without education | 188,500 (7.0%) | 20,300 (5.9%) | 16,600 (5.7%) | 13,400 (4.5%) | 25,400 (7.0%) | 22,200 (6.6%) | 35,700 (10.9%) | 30,300 (8.2%) | 24,600 (7.1%) |
| Secondary without A grade | 920,200 (34.4%) | 72,400 (21.0%) | 99,300 (33.9%) | 119,100 (40.1%) | 148,500 (40.9%) | 128,900 (38.5%) | 97,700 (29.9%) | 132,300 (35.7%) | 122,000 (35.2%) |
| High school with A grade | 1,174,200 (43.9%) | 156,500 (45.5%) | 144,500 (49.4%) | 121,000 (40.7%) | 149,300 (41.1%) | 141,000 (42.1%) | 146,400 (44.8%) | 158,700 (42.9%) | 156,900 (45.3%) |
| University | 392,700 (14.7%) | 94,900 (27.6%) | 32,100 (11.0%) | 43,700 (14.7%) | 40,100 (11.0%) | 43,000 (12.8%) | 47,000 (14.4%) | 48,800 (13.2%) | 43,100 (12.4%) |

* - data for 2Q/2008 are based on a labour force sample survey (LFS)

Source: The Statistics Office of the Slovak Republic