

Higher education reform - from need to must

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Much has been written about the quality of universities in Slovakia, the volume of funds in the state budget for tertiary education, scientific, research or innovation. The truth is that Slovakia's performance in research output and its investment into the 'knowledge economy' is behind most of the EU/OECD countries.

For some, it might be surprising to read that the 'knowledge gap' between Slovakia and the rest of the EU countries is not closing, but quite the contrary – opening, due to the low expenditure in R&D. Employers are desperate to find domestically qualified employees, especially those with technical skills and their eyes are gradually looking more outside of Slovakia than inside.

Status quo of Slovak tertiary education

Almost 20 years after the 'Velvet Revolution', the higher education sector is still waiting for reform. Let's take a look at some of the reasons why Slovakia is lagging behind:

1. Expenditure in educational institutions as a percentage of GDP in Slovakia is 0.9, while the EU 19¹ average is 1.3 (source: OECD, Education at a Glance 2008).
2. Annual expenditure on educational institutions per student for all services in Slovakia is 5,783 USD, while the EU 19 average is 10,474 USD (source: OECD, Education at a Glance 2008).
3. As a result of a rapid increase in intake of new students exceeding 214,000 (in 2007), the urgent need for improvements in quality has arisen. The institutional quality in Slovakia is measured by multiple quantifiable criteria set by the Accreditation Commission. However, the personnel criteria in terms of guarantors of academic programs and

courses dominate the accreditation processes.

4. Although a process of diversification or stratification of higher educational institutions (HEI) has officially started by adopting new legislation, there are certain concerns about the transparency of the institutional accreditation process, due to the constantly changing criteria and the various interpretations of those criteria.
5. The student numbers at private higher educational institutions grew annually by 55.4% (between 2006 and 2007), while the public HEIs grew at 2.1%. Due to this increase of competition, there are signs of discriminatory behavior against private HEIs from government agencies and public tertiary institutions. For example:
 - The use of EU Structural Funds: as a unique window of opportunity for development of schools infrastructure, it appears to be open only to public and state HEIs and not to private ones (while the University Act No. 131/2002 clearly sets equal responsibilities for all HEIs regardless of their founder);
 - The zero funding of private HEIs from the state budget - the strict quantifiable requirements of research funding of private HEIs prevents the utilization of the intellectual potential concentrated at private HEIs to its full capacity, es-

pecially in the area of basic research.

What can be done to improve the situation in tertiary education?

1. The bureaucratic processes ruling the structural and other EU grant schemes are demotivating potential applicants. There is an urgent need for making these processes as smooth and as straightforward as possible. This will enable the allocated sums to be used to their full extent and therefore, will bring the expected results.
2. As part of the Bologna reforms and for the benefit of its own overall improvement, Slovak higher education should immediately introduce a more systematic, responsible and trust-based approach to its quality assurance of higher education institutions. It should move, away from methodologies of external control of minimal standards and towards internal improvement-oriented processes of quality enhancement.
3. In the area of institutional autonomy and governance, the Slovak higher education system should benefit from being granted higher degrees of autonomy and responsibility. Especially the internal organization and governance structures of the higher education institutions. The university law goes into far too much detail in respect to the decision-making processes

and internal bodies. This is preventing universities from developing structures that fit their purposes, which would allow them to respond flexibly to their needs. One such body is the Academic Senate, which is granted too much power without any legal responsibility, especially in case of private HEIs.

4. In the area of R&D, Slovakia should identify priorities in research funding. This should be concentrated on its research and scientific potential. A small country with a fragmented research approach cannot effectively compete in the global research arena.
5. The implementation of practical solutions in motivating academic careers will be crucial in order to attract young researchers and university teachers to the academic sector. Such career paths should be clearly stated, and enhanced by sufficient funding schemes.

As has been indicated above, universities do not just need a 'facelift', but require real reform. However, such systematic changes cannot be achieved without a paradigm shift in the approach of the policy makers and legislators. Without their realization and participation, Slovakia will remain at 'the tail end' of nearly every measure available that indicates the development of strong foundations, upon which to build a knowledge driven economy.



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¹ EU 19 = Member countries of both EU and OECD