WENR
Summer 1993
Vol. 6 No. 3
Singapore
9
WORLD EDUCATION NEWS & REVIEWS
A publication of World Education Services

New & Old Eastern European Countries Redefining Educational Systems

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International Trends

While social scientists and experts in international affairs are attempting to explain the revolutions in the former eastern bloc countries–revolutions which they did not predict–the entire region is undergoing a transitional period of reform.

During 1989-1991, the unfolding events were revolutionary both in terms of their domestic and international impact and the speed with which changes took place. By 1992, revolution had been replaced by reform, with changes slowed further by the dire economic circumstances present in all the former socialist states.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, and the recent breakup of Czechoslovakia, the number of countries in the region has more than tripled practically overnight, if one considers time in an historic context, from eight to 27.

The collapse of highly centralized, state-controlled structures, may they be economic, social, or political, is the single most significant development in this region. While the number of countries increased, so did inflation and unemployment.

It is within this context that most nations/states, old and new, are attempting to define and redefine their economic and political structures and institutions.

Educational reforms are part of the on-going changes in recent Eastern European history. Since 1917 in the Soviet Union, and following World War II in the rest of the region, education has been strictly controlled by the state. It was based on a set of common principles believed to define socialist education, i.e., the eradication of illiteracy (primarily a goal of the Soviet Union), massification, inclusion of polytechnic education at the secondary level and a heavy emphasis on ideology.

While these were the organizing principles, Eastern European systems of education did not all share a common historical development, nor were they at the same stage of development at any given time.

As an example, Charles University in Prague and Jagellonian University in Cracow were established in 1348 and 1364, respectively, while the overwhelming majority of tertiary institutions in the Soviet Union came into existence only within the last 50 years. Consequently, education in certain countries will be eminently more reformable than in others, simply because a strong educational infrastructure that existed for centuries will support the current reform movement.

Czechoslovakia as a Case Study

Educational reform in the former Czechoslovakia illustrates the complexity of transition from a system of education based on and supported by a state economy, to one operating within a market economy and western-style democracy.

Structure and Characteristics

Like other eastern European systems of education, the Czechoslovakian system was characterized by its high degree of centralization. Institutions at all levels were directly administered by the Ministry of Education through an elaborate, inflexible schema of centralized bureaucracy and administration.

The absence of institutional autonomy in higher education was what analysts of the system pointed to first. Furthermore, the post-1948 system of higher education was characterized by an imbal-

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ance between technical studies and the humanities, to the detriment of the latter, and separation of teaching from research.

Prior to 1989, elementary/secondary education consisted of a 12-year cycle. During the last four years of secondary education, students had several alternatives. One was to continue studies at the *gymnasia*, which offered general academic education to prepare students for admission into institutions of higher learning–in particular, to universities. Another option was technical education, taught at secondary schools devoted to special fields such as business, technology, nursing and elementary education.

Upon completion of this cycle, regardless of the stream, students sat for the maturity examinations, success in which led to the award of the *maturitni zkousce/maturitnej skuske* (maturity certificate). The certificate and success in the university matriculation examinations were the criteria for admission into institutions of higher learning.

Access to higher education, as in all Eastern European systems, was selective and based on a strict *numerus clausus* in accordance with the government's manpower plans. The admission ratios were not more than 1:2 to 1:3, and sometimes even less.

Higher education was offered at universities and specialized higher schools of engineering, economics, education, agriculture, medicine, and fine arts. Programs of study varied from four to six years. Upon completion of the required coursework, students were awarded the qualification of *absolvent* or *promovany* (graduate).

Those who also passed a state examination and defended a diploma thesis/project were awarded a diploma (roughly the equivalent of a master's degree in the U.S. system of education), which, depending on the area of specialization, would be accompanied by the title of *inzenyr* in engineering, economics, etc. The graduate who sat for an additional examination in the area of specialization, *examen rigorosum*, was awarded the qualification of *doktor* in (specialization).

In terms of postgraduate education, the *kandidat ved* (candidate of science) was awarded upon completion of research, examination, dissertation (original work), and public defense. The degree of *doktor ved* (doctor of science), the highest qualification awarded in the Czechoslovakian system, was accessible to holders of the *kandidat ved* through research, extensive publications, and original contribution to knowledge.

The Immediate Aftermath of the Revolution

Certain structural changes have occurred since 1990 at all levels of education. While the 1984 reduction of elementary education from nine to eight years was rescinded, compulsory schooling was reduced from ten to nine years.

Private schools now are permitted to function. Similarly, secondary foreign language schools are encouraged (there are already three French, three German, and one Spanish in operation).

What has changed drastically at this level, as a result of privatization, is vocational education. Initially, state-owned and run industries and businesses had been operating vocational schools in conjunction with the Ministry of Education. With privatization and the subsequent withdrawal of public funding, these companies began to abandon the vocational programs because they were too expensive to maintain. By February 1990, in Slovakia alone, about 60 former state enterprises were scheduled to close their vocational schools, affecting approximately 11,000 students. These planned closings forced the Ministry of Education to take over the schools completely, whereas previously the Ministry had been responsible only for the general education component.

Furthermore, as the process of privatization continues, the actual ownership of school buildings is being debated between the Ministries of Education (Czech and Slovak) and the enterprises to which the vocational schools were once attached. Developments of this nature best demonstrate the ongoing changes and constant search for new paradigms and solutions within a framework of limited, if not dire, economic resources.

The most sweeping changes, however, and the ones with farthest-reaching implications, occurred in higher education. On May 4, 1990, the Federal Assembly of the Czechoslovak Federal Republic passed Act No. 172/1990 on Higher Education. The basic principles of the Act can be summarized as follows: guarantee of academic rights and freedoms, such as the freedom of scientific research and of publishing its results; the right to elect self-governing bodies; immunity of university academic premises; a renewal of the universities' self-governing bodies (the academic senate, elected democratically by teachers, students and other university staff); and redefinition of the status and tasks of the scientific council of universities, and of academic officials (rector, prorector, dean, etc.). New bodies were established such as the University Council, a self-governing body of higher education institutions representing universities before the Ministry of Education, as well as accreditation commissions as advisory boards active in the area of evaluation of higher education.

The overall aim of the Act was to restructure higher education in terms of both administration and institutional autonomy as well as curricular reform. Accordingly, institutions of higher learning will have sole responsibility for all matters regarding their organization and programs of study.

Structurally, higher education has been reorganized. A short cycle of two to three and one-half years of study leads to the new degree of *bakalar* (bachelor); a longer cycle of five years of study and passing of the state examinations at universities/faculties of theology/academies of art leads to the degree of *magistr* (master), roughly equivalent to a master's degree in the U.S. system of education. Upon fulfillment of the same requirements, higher schools of engineering, agricultural academies and academies of art will award the degree of *inzenyr*.

Bakalar programs have been intro-

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Eastern Europe continued...

duced primarily at newly-established tertiary-level institutions. The aim of these programs is to provide students with specialized professional training in the areas of technology and business in order to meet the immediate needs of the economy and to fill the vacuum that existed between secondary and higher education. Similar needs in a number of Western European systems of education were met with the creation of third-level, non-university institutions in the late 1960s and '70s.

Although the introduction of the *bakalar* will address certain immediate needs of the labor market by training experts in the areas of business and technology within a shorter time than the five-year, highly theoretical academic degree programs, its creation was the result of a legislative process rather than a comprehensive study of the system of higher education, its current status and future objectives. While the law stipulates that there is articulation between the short and long programs, the specific conditions have not been formulated.

In the second postgraduate stage, the Higher Education Act introduced the degree of *doktor*, which will eventually supplant the *kandidat ved*. Postgraduate studies may be pursued by students who have completed the long cycle of education as well as by holders of the *magistr* or the *inzenyr*. The Act does not address the *doktor ved* degree and its fate is not clear. For practitioners in the field, it is important to emphasize the elimination of the degree of *doktor* (specialization).

Following the Soviet paradigm, teaching and research in Czechoslovakia were kept separate. Research was the responsibility of the Academy of Science, established in 1952. The Act of 1990 ended this separation and adopted the western principle of unity of teaching and research. As the role of the Academy has eroded, so has its size and budget.

By June of 1993, the Czech Academy had closed 21 of its 86 institutes, and 2,000 of the Academy's 8,800 scientists and other employees had lost their jobs (a staff estimated at 13,000 in 1989). As for its budget, the Czech government has reduced it to about a quarter of its 1992 level of $60 million.

Curricula and Other Changes Throughout the Region

Uniformity characterized education in all the former eastern bloc countries, from the type of institutions and philosophy to the curricula taught. Post-1989 reforms are changing this inflexible model by introducing new philosophies, teachers and teaching methodologies, as well as curricula. The new philosophy emphasizes pluralism and freedom of expression, decentralization and breaking of the state monopoly on education.

At the secondary level, the Polish, Czech, and Slovak systems, for example, have introduced separation of vocational and general education programs. *Lyceums* and *gymnasia* will focus, once again, on preparation of students for university matriculation, returning to the traditional continental European model.

Curricular changes are most profound in language, history, literature and social sciences. Pupils are exposed to world literature, while the volume of Russian literature has decreased significantly. Emphasis is on languages other than Russian. In the Czech and Slovak Republics, foreign language instruction starts in the fifth grade (three weekly hours of instruction), and a second foreign language is introduced in grade seven or eight. The teaching of ideology through civic education has been abolished and religion has been introduced as an elective in the Czech and Slovak Republics. In Poland, obligatory literature during the first year of the lyceum now includes the Bible, Old and New Testaments, and the Apocalypse of St. John, among others.

At tertiary level, curricular reform is expressed through the abolition of courses such as the History of the Communist Party, Marxist-Leninist Philosophy, etc. Institutes teaching Marxism-Leninism also have been abolished. Charles University has revived its departments of theology, political science, and economics (separating economics and politics in the western academic tradition).

The Central European University, with campuses in Prague and Budapest, was established in 1991 as a postgraduate studies center aimed at preparing the new intellectual elite, future academicians and civil servants. Funding for the school of social sciences and humanities came from the New York-based Soros Foundation.

Since 1989, hundreds of teachers in the region have been dismissed for ideological reasons. Charles University alone dismissed 500 of its 3,500 instructors.

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Implications for the Future

On January 1, 1993, the Federal Republic of Czechoslovakia officially ceased to exist as a nation state, ending a 75-year union of convenience. The 1918 unification was, in part, an attempt to offset the power of Austria and Hungary by forming a Slavic alliance; during the late period of the Hapsburg Empire, Slovakia was administered by Hungary and the Czech territories by Austria.

Slovakia, with a population of five million, has a very strong Hungarian minority of 600,000, or 11 percent of its total population, and may be headed towards serious problems with Hungary–the same ones it sought to avert with unification in 1918.

The Czech Republic, on the other hand, with a population of 10 million, will increasingly be in the German sphere of influence if one considers that 90 percent of foreign investment in unified Czechoslovakia was on Czech land, and the majority was of German origin.

While the country no longer exists, what we know as the Czechoslovakian system of education will remain intact for the near future because separate Czech and Slovak ministries of education always were maintained, even when the country was united. Neither republic has announced any changes.

Educational reform in Eastern Europe in the years to come will be driven by the vagaries of economics. The newly-established Central European University, for example, recently announced plans to close its Prague campus after the Czech government withdrew from an agreement to provide facilities, classrooms and offices for the institution.

Meanwhile, the size of the systems of higher education in all the countries of the region has increased drastically during this period of persistent negative growth and even hyperinflation; in Poland, for example, the number has risen from 61,334 in 1990 to more than 74,000.

Financially overburdened institutions are now introducing fees. In Poland, institutions of higher education were authorized to charge tuition for evening classes. In Hungary, tuition will be introduced from next year for students who do not maintain consistent high marks. It is expected that free tuition will be awarded only to students maintaining a 4.5 average out of a possible 5 points.

Yet another means of dealing with the financial crisis in higher education is either through the reduction of the length of programs of study for first university degrees from five to four years, as in Hungary, or with the introduction of the short *bakalar* degree in the Czech and Slovak Republics. Furthermore, in Poland the five-year *magistra* will be restricted to faculties with eight or more professors in a given subject at a rank equivalent to associate or full professor. The newly-introduced three-year degree called *licencjat* can be awarded only by faculties that have five professors of similar rank.

It would be wrong to predict the future on the basis of changes made during this highly transitional, interim period. Reports from the region say that institutional autonomy is becoming a reality, even as universities fight to overcome economic hardship and brain drain. One wonders, however, whether true autonomy is attainable within a framework of economic dependency. ■

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