

Statement from OECD Review Team, Prague, 16 October 2009

In November 2006 the OECD Education Directorate published a report on the Czech Tertiary Education System. Much has happened since then, and the Czech Ministry of Education has requested that we return and review its January 2009 White Paper on Tertiary Education.

We have spent the past two days listening to experts from government and representatives of tertiary institutions discuss – and sometimes criticize – this document. In November the OECD will deliver its written comments on the White Paper. Today we will share with you some of our impressions of the White Paper and its analysis of Czech tertiary education.

We welcome the White Paper, and see in it some perceptive analysis and valuable proposals. Later today we'll talk about these ideas in greater detail, focusing our remarks on three key areas: the financing the tertiary education system; the structure of the system and its need for clearer differentiation among institutions; and the tertiary system's arrangements for system-level steering and institutional governance.

Funding

We fully support the White Paper's proposal to create a system of basic study grants, grants for education, and means-tested scholarships. A comprehensive system of student support is essential to providing equitable opportunities for study.

We have repeatedly been told those with whom we met that the funding of Czech tertiary education is insufficient. Yet, one must acknowledge that there are many legitimate claims on

public spending, and that demands for discipline in public spending are strong. This White Paper wisely recognizes that the public purse cannot easily meet all demands for spending, and proposes that added revenues be introduced through a deferred tuition fee – a fee paid by graduates that is contingent upon their earnings. Since 2006 OECD has consistently recommended that private contributions towards the cost of study in public higher education be introduced in the Czech Republic. This White Paper takes forward this recommendation, and does so in a way that appears likely to add revenue while safeguarding equitable access.

Differentiation

The Czech tertiary education system has expanded dramatically, providing many more secondary school graduates with an opportunity to continue their studies than in decades past. It has done this principally by expanding enrolments in its public universities, and tied funding to increased student numbers. Funding universities on the number of students they enrol rather than what they accomplish has not encouraged universities to pay enough attention to enhancing quality or relevance of teaching and learning.

Equally important, this way of expanding tertiary education has resulted in a system that is very weakly differentiated. Many things are expected of 21st century higher education institutions: they are asked to offer education oriented toward working life, world calibre research – which, where possible, is joined to innovation -- and regional engagement. Many institutions can do one or two of these things well. It is the rare institution that excels at all. The White Paper recognizes reforms to the accreditation process would permit institutions to differentiate their offerings, and that reforms to the financing system would reward them for doing so.

These changes would encourage the creation of more professionally-oriented programmes in some institutions and faculties while permitting others to focus more on theoretically-based education and high-quality research.

The Czech education system is doing remarkably well in providing secondary education to practically all young people. We are concerned however about the prospects for the tertiary professional schools which meet a significant need. We support the White Paper recommendation “to fully incorporate short-cycle programmes pursued by post-secondary professional schools into a single system of tertiary education, both from the legislative point of view and from the lens accreditation and financing”. The tertiary professional institutions should formally become an integral part of the tertiary education system. However to enhance quality and broaden choice for students, we strongly urge institutions to join forces through mergers, strategic alliances and other forms of cooperation.

System Steering and Institutional Management

Governance, leadership and management are among the most difficult areas for any system of higher education. It should not be surprising that it is contentious in a country which has seen dramatic political change and where the higher education system has grown so quickly. Getting the balance right between autonomy and accountability relies on the interplay of a number of elements.

Fundamentally, good governance is a matter of establishing trust and confidence so that the checks and balances in the system can work in an open and transparent way. The proposed reforms of higher education that we have been asked to review are set in the context of a polarised political landscape which inevitably subjects any proposal to more than usually thorough scrutiny.

It is important to distinguish two dimensions of governance: one is the relationship between

society, as represented by the State, and the institutions. The second is the intra-institutional dimension: the relationship between the institution and its constituent parts.

The White Paper deals with both. In the former the proposal to have a Council of Tertiary Education whose purpose is to ‘ensure a balanced strategic influence on the development of all parts of the tertiary education sector’ seems entirely appropriate. We believe that its fundamental role should be to build confidence through dialogue at system level, thus creating a forum for providing advice to Government in making the decisions that are properly in its realm of competence. For that to happen all the actors need to have a part to play. It is clear from our meetings that the proposals as formulated for the composition of the Council need further thought and consultation.

So far as institutional governance is concerned international experience suggests that external membership of boards of trustees can be of great value in securing broader public support and in the strategic management of institutions. It is not our experience that external members endanger academic freedom, as academics in some Czech institutions have suggested.

Good governance also requires the alignment of power and responsibility, so that those who are responsible for decisions are also those who making them. For example, rectors should be able to make the decisions for which they are held accountable.

Transparency and openness are the parents of trust. Good progress has been made with the evaluation of research; and we commend the White Paper’s aspiration to evaluate the quality of teaching and learning.

OECD Review Team:

Anita Lehtikoinen, Director, Division for Higher Education and Science in the Ministry of Education,
Finland

Thomas Weko, Associate Commissioner, Postsecondary Studies, National Center for Education Statistics,
Institute of Education Sciences, USA

Gregory Wurzburg, Senior Analyst, Education and Training Policy Division, Directorate for Education,
OECD in Paris

Richard Yelland, Head of Division, Education Management and Infrastructure Division, Directorate for
Education, OECD in Paris