

## ***“Czech Tertiary Education: Bologna Process Completed?”***

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## INTRODUCTION

The Czech Republic needs a compact conception of Czech tertiary education reform as never before. Our ambition is belong to the main European leaders in the field of tertiary education. Of course, it is required to reflect world trends towards the tertiary education. There have been made many positive changes during last 15 years that helped to the modernization and dynamics enhancement of education itself. Increasing number of university students in conjunction with increasing integration of the Czech Republic to the global world lead to higher and growing demands of the public interests (White Paper, 2009). Main impulsion to take the reform in a more complex way was done by the OECD which published the Review on tertiary education for OECD countries. It was the starting point of Czech Ministry of Education to think of more detailed conception of tertiary education reform.

What we must mention is that the whole change process of Czech tertiary education goes hand in hand with Bologna process. It defines the main objectives which each Bologna country should implement in its country conditions. Bologna process composes the core framework for all important changes concerning the Czech tertiary education. Without it the reform aspiration of education would not be complete and successful that is why we as reformers have to build on it.

Everything is of course not so easy as it may look like. The past two years we have been tackling the world economic crisis, which has an enormous effect on all activities such as education supported and financed by the state. We definitely have to mention how the crisis influences the education

Taking into consideration two mentioned moments – the initiative of OECD and Bologna process, the Czech Republic has been facing the essential changes in the tertiary education and has been responsible for creating effectual document. It should have mirrored the concrete recommendations proposed by OECD and Bologna process has given to the reformation an international context.

What happened after was that the Czech Ministry of Education prepared the pre-version of White paper on Tertiary Education and opened it for a wide debate. After all stimulation comments delivered by universities, ministers, employers, scientists, politicians and even students the ministry published The White Paper on Tertiary Education in 2009. There are mentioned key areas that the ministry should work on. It is full of challenging aspects how to create the successful and competitive Czech tertiary education.

The main part of the paper concentrates on short programs (part of the structural problems of the tertiary education). Short programs mean Bachelor degrees which are taken no shorter than 3 years. We will analyze their strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities. These programs were also evaluated by OECD, so there will be mentioned some recommendations concerning short programs.

## **BOLOGNA PROCESS**

What is Bologna process? We have to clarify it in order to understand the reform of short programs. Bologna process is connected with the Bologna Declaration which is a pledge of formerly 29, now 47 countries to reforms the structures of their educational systems in a convergent way, overall at European level. The fundamental principles of autonomy and diversity are respected. The declaration specially recognizes the fundamental values and the diversity of European higher education: independence and autonomy of universities as well as diversity of cultures, languages and educational systems (The Bologna Declaration, 2000).

European higher<sup>1</sup> educational systems are facing common internal and external challenges related to the growth and diversification of tertiary education, the employability of graduates, the shortage of skills in key areas, the expansion of private and transnational education, etc. That is why the Bologna set a clearly defined common goal. It wants to create a European space for higher education in order to enhance the employability and mobility of citizens and to increase the international competition of European higher education. The European space for higher education should be completed in 2010 – it is a deadline.

The most important part of Bologna declaration deals with a set of specific objectives (Expert Response OECD, 2009). All objectives are quite widely described so it is useful to mention only the most important moments connected with the reformation of the Czech tertiary education in recent years.

*The first objective* deals with the adoption of a common framework of readable and comparable degrees. Its function performs Diploma Supplement. Whether we evaluate the situation, Czech Diploma Supplements are quite well introduced at all universities but the value of it cannot be compared among the universities. For me, it is only an English version of past courses; it has nothing in common with the comparability either in the Czech Republic or in the Europe. *The second objective* speaks about ETCS compatible credit system

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<sup>1</sup> The Czech terminology uses the term „tertiary“ education and the Bologna speaks about the „higher“ education

also covering lifelong learning activities. This is quite well fulfilled in the Czech conditions. *The third objective* writes about a European dimension in quality assurance, with comparative criteria and methods. We can argue that it is not completed. Money on education goes mainly from the state, there are not enough people with university degrees and the educational system suffers from small diversity in the Czech Republic. *The fourth goal* deals with the elimination of remaining obstacles to the mobility of students and teachers. This issue has been improved quite substantially in recent years.

*The last and the most important* objective for this paper familiarize us with the introduction of undergraduate and postgraduate levels in all countries, with first **short degrees** not shorter than 3 years and relevant to the labour market. Some issues are still not clear. There are institutions which offer specialized 2 years – long programs but are not involved in the structure of tertiary educational system and 3 years-long programs that do not correspond with the labour market. The main stress is further laid on these short degrees (Bologna Leaflet, 2010). Before we leave come to the SWOT analysis of these short programs we have to discuss how it applies to the White Paper on Tertiary Education. To summarize, the main aim of Bologna is to increase the international competitiveness of the European system of higher education.

## **ECONOMIC CRISIS**

The economic crisis had and still has an influence on education. It caused problems and difficulties to the higher education, too. Universities have to meet the widespread budget costs. The money amount is limited and universities face less money on public universities, also public research does not get enough money to continue with current explorations. Private sponsors are not from now on able to invest so huge amounts; they limit their generous funding, too. Some universities are forced to carry out credit restrictions. It is not positive evaluation of education conditions (Impact of the Economic Crisis on Education, 2009).

It all has an impact on institutions as well as on university staff and students. Institutions suffer from decrease in innovation due to concentration of resources in the traditional roles of universities. Institutions are urged to make “voluntary” reductions by them in their expenses. The most important impact of crisis is connected with a reduction in the number of departments and faculties. Staff is affected with salary cuts but on the other hand with the increasing number of students there are insufficient professors. And what does it

mean for students? It means increased demand and enrolments in public universities, decreased enrolments to private schools. Students usually make more market-oriented choices and crises increases student fees and student support is reduced.

Some measures are being undertaken by educational institutions to respond to the crisis. Among the most interesting ones belongs that universities are looking for *structural change*. It is also case of this paper. As we see in the next part, structural change is one of the crucial challenges of tertiary education. Universities are also considering a return to a single campus strategy, they are forced to reduce the number of PhD students. The research is being reduced as well as some programs costs. There are new emerging trends coming together with the crisis. We can talk about possible increase in demand for vocational courses, increase in e-learning and on-line courses and more demand for additional lifelong learning for those in the labour market (Impact of the Economic Crisis on Education, 2009).

To summarize it, the key issues raised from the crises are following: growing demand on education, increase in public involvement for economic recovery, preparing for future economy in the terms of unemployment and need for innovation and growth, targeted budget costs, hidden impact on service delivery (on teachers) and finally negative effect on private involvement. As we can understand from the situation, the reform of the Czech tertiary education is dealing with these obstacles and probably some issues will be postponed to “better” times.

## **BURNING ISSUES OF CZECH TERTIARY EDUCATION**

As it was written in the introduction, the Czech ministry of education has been dealing with the reform step by step for many years. The more detailed emphasis has started since 2006 after the OECD published the Review on Czech Tertiary Education. The ministry started concentrating on creating any conception. It came with the White Paper on Tertiary Education that at length analyses burning issues of tertiary education. The paper identifies 6 key areas which need crucial changes. The planned changes are supposed to be fulfilled by 2020; it means that it is a long-term plan. In case that the Bologna wanted to be completed since 2010, the Czech reform is on the half way to get it. Some burning issues of tertiary education are closely associated with the Bologna objectives. It is not the conclusion of the paper, but we can say that Bologna process is still not completed.

We only briefly mention these proposed burning issues and drop in on one more closely (White Paper, 2009).

**Research and Development.** It is positive because much work was done. It is positively evaluated by the OECD but there is still some space for improvement. It is asked to interconnect companies' research with university research.

**Governance and Self-Administration.** Universities should be governed by university deputies and students. It has been successfully started since the fall of communism when the universities were governed by the central state.

**Funding.** It will affect students firstly. This issue expects the change of financing. The ministry wants to make students responsible for their choices. Student will be understood as those who know what they want. The ministry is inspired by the western way of financing with deferred funding.

**Equity.** All students should have equal studying opportunities. Even students from lower classes should have a chance to enter the university system and be able to win a degree.

**Cooperation with the business sector.** After students leave the university system they are immediately connected with the labour market. Business sector interests especially graduates because of course they would like to fulfill the employers' needs. In the Czech Republic there is missing the appropriate tool how to recognize employers' needs and how to make it visible and accessible to students. University system is not dynamic enough to predict needs and adapt to it.

#### **Structure of the system.**

It is closely connected with one Bologna objective. The tertiary education is composed of 3 years-long programs - if you successfully complete it, you get a Bachelor degree, and of 5 years-long programs when you become a Master. There are of course PhD programs. Out of this system there exists 2 years-long study programs but these are not involved in the tertiary system which causes problems not only to students but only to the institutions. I would like to write more broadly about Bachelor degrees. One request concerning short programs from Bologna is following: short programs should be diverse and should reflect needs of employers. It is totally not true in the Czech Republic. Short program has its own specific problems. Here we can ask the question *whether the short programs are fully implemented in the Czech tertiary education and whether they reflect the situation of the labour market.* We can quite sure answer that the first part of the question is true. At all universities the system of Bachelors degree is workable. Short programs were introduced in the system quite well. But it is not so clear with the other part of the research

question. We definitely cannot say that the short programs cover the employers demand. A supply and demand is not balanced and there is still strong deficit in the number of professionals.

Here at this place it is vital to mention its SWOT analysis (Bílá kniha – pracovní verze; 2008, White Paper, 2009), what the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of these Bachelor degrees are. For better lucidity I will choose the system of bulletin list.

## ***SWOT ANALYSIS***

### **Strengths**

Even the situation with the short programs is not so positive we can still find some places where the Czech tertiary education is quite strong.

- Students, universities, and people in general believe in great importance attached to higher education for success in life. They all understand that the system should be changed in order to make the tertiary education more competitive and comparative within Europe.
- The awareness of change in the system. With the crisis the tertiary education is becoming more vulnerable so the population is able to admit mostly that the system of financing should be changed.
- Standardized accreditation process. Most of the universities have a universal order how to apply for accreditations. The accreditation committee sets up quite high requirements for getting an accreditation.
- High economic returns on investment into higher education.
- Overall equal coverage of study programs in the Czech Republic. Our republic is quite small in its size and big cities are equally distributed. We recognize university cities like Prague, Brno, Ostrava, Olomouc, Plzeň, České Budějovice, Hradec Králové and Pardubice and Liberec. The level of university education is almost equal in each district.
- Increasing interests of employers in qualified students and graduates. There is strengthening interest of the private sector especially companies in students. It is true mainly in the field of technology, biology, IT, medicine but it is not so big issue in social sciences. It has to be changed.
- Big potential of Czech students and universities. There are many clever students who would like to enter the educational system but there are still not enough places for them. Universities should use the chance for improvement especially from the



European funds and inspire themselves from our neighbors. There is still space for increased number of university students.

- Increasing number of student who trusts in the tertiary educational system.
- International mobility. There are many and many opportunities how to get abroad. The EU has prepared many bilateral contracts between universities and invests money into students and academic staff as well. It is accompanied by improvement in language skills and social skill as well. The international mobility will still have an increasing tendency.

### **Weaknesses**

There are more weaknesses than positives sides of short programs. But it is also important for us to know about it in order to overcome it or improve it.

- The low ratio of graduates of short cycle study programs entering the labour market. It is the main problem which has more dimensions described below.
- Incongruence between applicants' choice of study and labour market demands of graduates. It happens often that students vote for programs that sound interestingly for them but the content of the program is old-fashioned and not updated with the current society needs.
- No evidence of employers' needs. What kinds of students are required by the business sector? What knowledge should they have? Students and graduates usually find it out when it is late – at an interview. We should more anticipate companies' needs.
- Weak cooperation with the private and business sector. Universities do not use the advantages of the private investment.
- Little cohesion between universities and potential employers.
- Not enough diverse system of short programs. Short programs are too general, it does not teach students what they should know compared to the external world. The study is too theoretical.
- Short programs are not enough recognized by the population. Those were introduced approximately 7 years ago. The population and especially the deputies of private sector thinks that 3 year are not enough to get the proper knowledge in some field of study. You are still recognized as a half-made graduate.
- Students vote for longer programs. The reason why is closely connected with the previous one. They want to have an added value not only half of it.

- Old way of teaching (Humbold system). It is based mainly on theories, on work with difficult paradigms and sometimes it has nothing in common with the good practice.
- Little working experience related to studies. There are not enough opportunities to have a practical experience within the special field of study. Where it is possible student should have a chance to take some voluntary work experience and in some cases even an obligatory one.
- Students are not prepared enough for the entrance to the labour market. It is the result of the university system.

From all these weaknesses we can take an advantage. We can work on everything to find possible chances. If we know that the business sector wants to cooperate why not to give a chance to it? There are many and many questions of this type, everyone from the university system knows it but no measures have been taken yet.

### **Threats**

Now it is the best place where to speak about threats. These are not many but thus more important.

- Loss of competitiveness in tertiary education, which has an impact on the competitiveness of the economy. The university system has to prepare professionals who are able to get important and reputable jobs. Without it the system does not have a sense. The university is a starting point for graduates' careers.
- Loss of money on short programs. If the program is not diverse, too general and not connected with the labour market, it is natural that this system is losing its support, even financial. It should be supported by the private sector because if you teach students what the private sector really wants, they are able to appreciate it by money amount. Where to find better professionals else than at universities?
- Loss of attractiveness of short programs. Students vote for longer programs because as it seems it prepares student better than the short ones. But it is the basic fault. Short program should itself be attractive, attract more people than the long programs and of course offer diverse fields of study with a clear idea where student will work afterwards.
- Short programs do not correspond with the labour market.

- Increasing demands on students from the private sphere. These demands cannot be satisfied by the universities that is why it needs a more complex change of the whole system of tertiary education.

## **Opportunities**

The biggest importance attends to possibilities and opportunities.

- Significant increase in the number of graduates of professionally oriented study programs. If student see the added value of these programs, it could increase the number of graduates and even prospective students.
- Connect the system of vocational education to the tertiary education. In the Czech Republic there is the system of 2 years-long programs, which are not part of the tertiary education. But they are quite well connected with the business sector so the tertiary education could use it in its´ own benefit and join with them.
- Cooperation with the private sector. It could bring more money into education and into the research.
- Evidence of potential employers needs. If we have an evidence of whatever needs we can work on it. It is the same as in a company. If you know the needs of your employees you can develop them and reach company goals easier. It is mainly about strategies.
- Obligatory study travel abroad. If there is still enough money from the EU and universities want to share knowledge and cooperate why not take an exchange as an obligatory part of study? Now there are many exchanges from one week to three years, so it should be available for everyone.
- Obligatory working experience. It is supposed that the short programs are going to be very practical, connected with some special and narrow field of study, it is more than purposeful to attend some obligatory practices.
- Teachers from the private sector. Some managers and workers are quite willing to give some lectures at universities. It is sometimes their hobby. We should use more these people and win practical knowledge from the business world.
- Deputies of private sector as a part of university authorities. These people may be involved in decision processes.
- Cooperation of students and companies on various projects. It is sometimes common with technical fields of study but not so common with social sciences or humanities. If it is possible companies welcome interest of students, especially those international

ones. They allow students to write even their final thesis about company processes. It is the easy and cheap way how to find out needed knowledge.

- Professional Students 'unions concentrated on special subjects and supported by universities. It can easily connect taught theories with the practical experience and it brings the added value to students and later to employers.

## ***RECOMMENDATIONS***

There were made many recommendations concerning short study programs (White Paper, 2009; OECD Review, 2006). OECD sees as really important to create a strong and flexible system of tertiary education. It should expand the academic choices available in tertiary education so that opportunities better reflect the needs of the labour market and the challenges of global society. It should also support bachelor's programs that produce graduates with strong professional profiles. And finally to create stronger linkages between lower types of tertiary education and practice (mainly two-year programs and bachelor's programs).

The diversification of the objectives of bachelor's programs has to be accompanied by a clarification of the position of graduates of bachelor's programs on the labour market (mainly by the state as an employer) by including practice-oriented courses that taken into account their subsequent diverse practical applications in broader fields of study; by involving students into research, development and innovation and by including courses with the involvement of major regional and local employers (industrial companies, state administration and local government, professional associations, etc.).

## **SUMMARY**

From the SWOT analysis and also from what was said by OECD it is more than obvious that Bologna process is still not completed, that the deadline was for some countries too optimistic. We definitely have to take into account that each country has its own current circumstances and what is quite successful in one country it doesn't have to be successful in other one.

If we look at the Czech Republic we are starting intensively rebuilding the tertiary education but we have to count with more difficulties. We have to think of any changes that are happening. Firstly, we have to clean our house and after compare ourselves with other educational systems. Secondly, the crisis does not help us much; it is holding back the reform. Everyone is unsure, hoping for better times and there is no time for brave reforms. Finally,

the reform has to start in the right time and with right strategy because there is no space for failings.

I would recommend concentrating on issues that are the hottest ones. There is the time of crisis and everyone including the business sector is talking about talents, about human capital. Only people can have the right knowledge, they produce money so all resources should concentrate on them. I see the parallel between it and universities. Universities should bring up professionals, people who are really good and smart and then enable them to start their careers on the labour market successfully. If we enable them to take short degrees it definitely has to be helpful for universities as well as for the market. But to fulfill it the structure of tertiary education has to be changed and recognized differently than it is now. The reform probably will be completed step by step, starting with financial issues, continuing with structural changes and finishing with quality and evaluation. It is the plan of the Czech tertiary education till 2020.

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