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Higher Education in the Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs)

1) THE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF CHANGES

The years 1989 to 1995 represent for all of CEECs a period of radical educational changes surrounded by radical political and economic transformations. All these changes occurred within a very short period. These changes could be classified as

- * a certain restoration of past (pre-communist) educational patterns and/or
- * adaptations and assimilation of external (mostly Western European) trends.

1.1 The Main Characteristics of Educational Change:

- * the depolitisation of Education (end of the rigid ideological control, compulsory Marxism - Leninism, prohibition of certain subjects,...)
- * the breaking down of the State monopoly in education (private schools)
- * the recognition of the right of the students to choose an educational part according to abilities and interests
- * decentralisation in the management and administration

These implied an immediate correction of the most visible characteristics of communist education. This 'catching-up' policy was rapid in certain areas (modern equipment), in other areas (curriculum, teaching method reform) much more slower.

Some authors are writing about a real paradigm shift, meaning deeper reform and organisational changes reshaping of finalities and relations of education to fit the social system ... the redefinition of the role of the state ... quality control through evaluation and public accountability. Systematic reforms have not been

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completed in CEECs. In some cases they have barely begun or were only partly approached through modernisation and structural reforms.

1.2 The Diversity of CEECs

The countries of Central and Eastern Europe do not form a homogenous block - neither historically, culturally nor geo - politically. Greater differences often exist between them than those within Western Europe. We could divide - based on a simplified tipology - these countries into four groups:

- 1) The Visegrád Group - Hungary, Poland, Czech and Slovak Republics - to which Slovenia and probably Croatia should be added. Historically, they are of Roman Christian culture and were part of the Austro - Hungarian Empire. The industrial and economic development began in these countries in the 19th century, literacy levels were often relatively high well before the First World War and their education system and legislation were greatly influenced by the Austrian, and more generally, German system.
- 2) The countries of South_Eastern Europe (Romania, Bulgaria, Albania and the former Yugoslav republics other than Slovenia and Croatia) are primarily part of the Orthodox Christian tradition, with some Islamic influences. Economically and educationally they developed relatively late, mainly after the Second World War, and followed the Soviet influence. A relatively small number of highly educated elite existed before.
- 3) The three Baltic Republics are of similar size and constitute a relatively homogenous group having a historical past greatly influenced by German and Russian - or Soviet - domination. Since their new independence, acquired in the early 1990s, close contacts have been established with Scandinavian countries so that their education systems presently combine Nordic and Central European characteristics.
- 4) The countries of the former Soviet Union (the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova) have probably had to face the most difficult problems of transformation. On the one hand, they lived for almost 75 years under the communist regime, with all its distortions, but which allowed them to overcome their prior economic and, in many respects, educational backwardness. The political, social and economic crisis which followed the collapse of the Soviet empire cannot stop but complicate the educational reform processes of the new republics.

The decentralisation and the breaking down of the state monopoly processes are more advanced in the Visegrád group. We have seen that major differences exist even within the groups. Certain trends, however, are common to all CEECs:

- * the emergence and development of private schools
- * the historical traditions and geo-political conditions will have an important impact on the outcomes of the different educational reforms adopted in CEECs.
- * Each is elaborating its own synthesis of past traditions, its reaction to the communist period, as well as of the new trend of internationalisation.

Looking at the Visegrád group countries we could derive the following analysis:

- The relation between the development of GDP and total public expenditure on education

The share of GDP devoted to education has substantially increased over the past years and now represents between 5% and 6%, it is comparable with the average of advanced Western countries. Looking beyond the surface, we have to realize since GDP in real terms has dropped - especially between 1989 and 1992 - by as much as 15%, this unfortunately does not mean that education receives a new abundance of resources, in fact it is the contrary. But it reflects the importance of the education in these countries.

- The growth of student / pupil numbers

This indicator leads to a similar conclusion as the previous one. In the Visegrád countries, these numbers increased by an average 31% between 1989/1990 and 1993/1994 with regard to all levels of education other than vocational training, which has declined by 10% or more. These societies value not just education in general but more advanced levels of education.

- Earnings in relation to levels of education attained and unemployment ratios in relation to levels of education attained

The situation has changed fundamentally comparing to the communist period. There is a much closer relation between the level education and earnings, also the unemployment levels are lowest for people with higher levels of education. Today the expectation of higher earnings and of avoiding unemployment has become a powerful factor of educational expansion in CEECs.

The role of private schools, totally absent during the communist period, is also very important. They are catalysers of innovations which can spread throughout

the system of which they usually represent only a small fraction. In some instances, however, private schools have merely followed fashion or even just commercial interests of their founders, without becoming a true factor of reform.

Finally, foreign experts or agencies and international organisations had a key influence in the reform process of CEECs. Their recommendations were often ignored or shelved and a certain resistance towards them has developed over the years. The present education scene and the changes in these countries cannot be separated from programmes such as the EU's TEMPUS and PHARE, from the flow of information and exchanges originating in meetings, seminars and publications by numerous Western governments, by private foundations as well as Western universities and consortia.

2) ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN HUNGARY

Higher education in CEECs became a professional fashion after the political transition of 1989/90. Only a few studies realised that the state of higher education in the post-communist countries are neither unique nor equivalent with the rest of the continent. It cannot be presented like an alternative model of higher education development nor can it fully be described in present international terminology. Rather, it is based on traditional institutions and values characteristic to other European regions during and after World War II.

Such a system, however never existed in other parts of Europe. Higher education in eastern Europe was formed out by totalitarian systems that survived the war. They created, for an additional fifty years, an unprecedented order of planned economy, society and culture in the art of the 30's. According to the leading ideas of the 1930's those totalitarian systems favoured vocational training at elementary and secondary level and developed labour force education. Higher education therefore were kept back in its initial phase where it still served only the few. While on the one hand higher education were saved from mass movements, on the other hand it was under strict control of the national labour planning. It is a system of higher education that faces today the rapid change of East-Central Europe. It also suffers the efforts of harmonisation with the rest of Europe.

2.1 Dual System of Higher Education

Hungary, like most of the other CEECs has a dual system of higher education. Colleges („főiskola”) offer professional education and training while universities are mostly for academic education.

- Colleges are characterised by the diplomas they offer and the years of studies they require for them. There are therefore differences among two-year, three-year and four-year colleges of various arts (from teacher training to agriculture and from business to medical service and health service).
- Universities differ from each other according to the professions they are preparing for and the structures they developed (or saved). „Professional universities” are existing in the fields of agriculture, industry, economics and business and most of all in the field of medical science. University of Chemistry (Veszprém) or heavy industry and mining (Miskolc) until recently were no extremities under Hungarian circumstances.

It is a typical two-track system where tracks (colleges and universities) are not combined. The system of studies is „unilevel”, there are no graduations before the end of the required studies neither are differences between undergraduate and graduate studies. College graduates faces problems to join the university programs; they have to sit for special additional exams before getting in to the universities.

An unilevel education also means that there are no academic grades separate from the diplomas guaranteed by the state. College and university leavers receive diplomas rather than graduations. The two system evaluations have been unified back to the history of higher education of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. As a reward, institutions themselves assign state diplomas without an independent board of examiners from any of the state administration.

The institutions are not autonomous in the original sense of the word, they are maintained by government organs, various ministries like the Ministry of Social Welfare (medical universities and colleges), Ministry of Agriculture (agricultural higher education), Ministry of Finance (higher institutions of accounting), Ministry of Industry (colleges of trades and tourism), Ministry of Internal Affairs (military higher education including a military university) and Ministry of Education (the rest, including technical universities and business higher education).

These institutions are basically financed by central state budget:

- some institutions receive supports from industry (Budapest Technical University),
- county governments
- part-time students are charged
- full time students have to pay a minimum fee (about 20\$)

In the private sector the fees are ten or twenty times higher.

The Hungarian higher education could be characterised as a special case of survived elitism in education:

- There is an administratively controlled selection at the entrance. It is connected with the final examination of the secondary education (Abitur).
- Institutional programs have clear academic profiles, no crossroads.
- No ways of collecting credits, colleges and universities are separated and do not create dual levels of the same program.
- The graduations are closely connected with diplomas. The diplomas are connected to labour needs as they are fixed by administrative forecasts.

In this way the academic world is separated from the socio-economic realities. The secret of this survival is its capability to adapt.

2.2 Opening the door

The growing social demand toward higher education means a political tension under which policy makers tend to open up higher education. Like in the case of consumer goods the first phase of changing demands is always controlled by the shortages of supply. According to the theory of the connecting S-curve once the rapid increase of demands for elementary education comes close to its end, the increasing phase may start in the lower secondary education. Once the higher secondary education is close to be universal in a given society the increase of demands for tertiary education would start.

Educational demands in the CEECs are close to the second phase when higher secondary education faces massification and tertiary education is right before the increasing phase. Comparative data of tertiary education in Europe suggests the following:

- Tertiary education involved nearly the same per cent of population (around 5% of the respective age group). Tertiary education has always been a sign of the European culture.
- The boom of tertiary education started around the mid of sixties. CEECs recovering from Stalinist era and after the shock of the Hungarian revolution and Czechoslovak movement for liberty and independence.
- Tertiary education underwent its greatest increase during the seventies in Western Europe, in other part of Europe a stagnating period started.
- In the 90's the tertiary education in the Western part of Europe is on the way of democratisation and universalization. While in the Eastern part it is still in its elitist phase.

Hungary with its elitist system of higher education fits well to the general picture. Let us mention that university graduates or secondary students from countries like Hungary or Romania may get the best results at international intellectual competitions. It is the typical results of the selective and elitist systems which may produce the best few though not necessarily the reliable average students.

A new boom of higher education started after the political transition.

- The massification of upper secondary education started in the mid 1970's in Hungary. The rate of upper secondary students in the age group jumped from 38% to 49%, nowadays is around 55%.
- Apprentice education (vocational training at the upper secondary level) was gradually decreasing and technical education was increasing in the 1980s.
- The process of massification in upper secondary education reaches its peak.
- The political - administrative control abolished. An ideology of the European harmonisation took place.
- A demographic wave hit the system in the early 1990s. Harmonisation + political tension to get into the system caused a rapid increase of full time places at the universities and colleges. The institutions run for more students because of the per capita finance and the competition in this market.

2.3 Post-Secondary Education: The Solution

The main policy alternatives to the Hungarian system:

- **Policy A: to slow down the process under the present economic constraints**

The CEECs national governments have to restructure the central budget, cut off welfare expenditures including higher education. The boom will be postponed to the next decade. The higher education could survive in its present elitist form.

- **Policy B: to increase the system quantitatively while keeping its present organisation and rationale**

The aim of this policy is twofold: to stabilise the traditional higher education and turn it into a democratic and universal system. To expand the influence of the universities on colleges and research institutions.

The idea of *universitas* was born from this. It means a consortium of universities, colleges and research institutes in one location with a governing body and an administrative unit. Positive outcome of this system: better use of laboratories, libraries, computing centres, creating intellectual centres in various regions of the country with better student/teacher ratios.

The academicians can save the traditional organisations while modernise the teaching, learning and research activities behind the doors.

- **Policy C: to increase the system qualitatively, that is to build up new ways for mass tertiary education.**

- * There is a growing demand for further rather than higher education. The college and university programs are far from everyday realities. They want professional training.
- * This system needs secondary rather than elementary school education. The dynamic sectors of economy need more general education and practice oriented vocational training.
- * The post-secondary education can be organised with secondary schools, colleges and university centres. It is flexible and can be close to the student's location.

- * Post-secondary education is sensitive to market incentives. It can easily be marketized and even privatised.

POST SECONDARY EDUCATION SEEMS TO BE A BRIDGE OVER THE GAP BETWEEN ECONOMY AND (HIGHER) EDUCATION.

There is a large and growing market for post-secondary education in Hungary. It is expanding under economic constraints, central budgetary deficits and financial limitations. It has a positive response to youth unemployment and privatisation.

Negative effect: the market incentives are not strong enough to screen out unreliable post-secondary programs. There is a need for accreditation procedure and for organising a network of institutions throughout the country hosting post-secondary educational and training programs. These incentives have been accepted by the authorities responsible for education and these steps are under elaboration.