

The Slovak Agricultural University in Nitra: Successes and Failures in a Period of Transition

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With the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia on February 25, 1948, the country lost its historically developed democratic character and was forced to join the block of countries under the full political and ideological control of the former Soviet Union. The end of the country's political sovereignty was also the end of the whole system of democratic and historic achievements gained during the democratic past. The new Communist regime took strong measures to avoid any resistance or disobedience toward its organs and its ideology. The educational system as a whole became one of the first targets of the party's attention. Hundreds of highly qualified university professors and researchers, particularly those in the humanities, lost their jobs; many of them were sent to jail or labor camps. Shortly after 1948, the Czechoslovak University system was broken and forced to adopt the new scheme and to follow the Soviet pattern. The country's educational system began to lose its historical and democratic identity. This process of deterioration went on almost two decades until 1968, the year in which the Prague Spring brought new hopes for a politically more tolerant environment.

What Has Happened

Since 1948?

There are several key moments and key issues in the history of the Czechoslovak educational system, which should be particularly mentioned. Shortly after 1948, the university system became one of the most important targets of the new Communist regime. Under the direct guidance of Soviet "experts," the "restructuring" of the Czechoslovak higher education system began. The main goals of these offensive and disruptive changes were to weaken the public role and the social prestige of the universities and to minimize their expected resistance against the new government. In line with the Soviet

model, the university activities were split into two parts: university education and science and research. The latter—science and research—was withdrawn from the university system and moved under the umbrella of the newly created Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. With this move, university education lost not only important funding but also its most important academic driving force—the large number of graduate students. University education without an adequate research component and without support began to lose its quality and international competitiveness.

Following the political changes in February 1948, our university system lost its academic and organizational independence. The traditionally elected university and faculty representatives (rectors and deans) were selected and appointed officially by the government. The negative interference with university responsibilities was felt also in the new admissions policy. The government decided not only on the total number of students for different academic fields but also on their social structure. There was strong favoritism shown for applicants from the working class and party members' families. The personnel policy, as well as the hiring and promotion of university staff were also under the control of the government.

The university curricula, mainly in the humanities (philosophy, sociology, ethics, esthetics, history, and languages) were the focus of government "attention." Strongly reduced and one-direction-oriented Russian language training isolated our younger generation from the rest of the democratic western world after several years. Classical economic education and economic theory were completely removed from the university programs and were replaced by the pseudoscientific utopia of the centrally planned economy. By the mid 1960's, the Czechoslovak university system was almost completely reshaped according to the government and party directions.

A Period of New Hopes and Disappointments—the Prague Spring

The mid 1960's, however, meant not only the proclaimed “successful” final stage of building the socialist society in Czechoslovakia but also the mobilization of the internal political quasi-opposition forces. The political movement for “socialism with a human face” led by Alexander Dubcek gained broad support throughout the country. This movement was particularly welcomed and supported by our universities and other academic institutions. The period 1965-1968 could be considered as one of the most promising historical periods in the postwar history of Czechoslovakia. There was partially improved freedom of speech, increased possibility for travel abroad, and chances for academic cooperation with foreign institutions—all this was a new phenomenon in our country. Significant changes took place in the position of the church. The Czechoslovak society was looking ahead with high expectations.

However, the well-known Prague Spring ended very soon. The Soviet military force, with some local support, turned this great development back. The political protagonists of the Prague Spring were removed from the public scene. Similar to the political development in 1948, the universities again became the party targets in the so-called “normalization process.” Between 1968 and 1970, hundreds of university professors, scientists, researchers, as well as writers, artists, and many other professionals, lost their standing and even their jobs.

And the historical repetition did not stop there. The political and economic development between 1969 and 1989 was very similar to that which the country had undergone twenty years before. The period of normalization brought to our universities additional strong cuts into their democratic rights: strong control over the freedom of speech, control over personnel policies and permanent interference with education and research programs. Our universities operated under this environment for almost two decades, until 1989. The international working contacts and cooperation programs with academic institutions in western countries were strongly limited and, in the case of humanities and economics, practically liquidated.

The “Velvet Revolution of 1989” and the Reform Process

New hopes for our society and also for our academic institutions appeared again in 1985-1986 with Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of “perestrojka and glasnost”. The society, including its academic institutions, was full of expectations and hopes for further political alleviation. The collapse of the totalitarian governments in Central and Eastern Europe became the generally expected event. It was apparent that not only the communist regimes with their ideology, but also the centrally planned economies, failed to compete with the rapid technological and economic development in democratic western countries. The arguments justifying the centrally planned economy were rejected by the vast majority of people in these countries. The desire to change the political system in our countries was extremely strong and was broadly supported.

It was in this social and political environment that the November, 1989 “velvet revolution” occurred, and Czechoslovakia was thrust onto the international scene again after twenty years. Within several weeks the whole political system, based on the dominant role of the Communist party, collapsed. Our society was politically and ideologically free. After twenty years Czechoslovak universities and their academic communities got the chance to take over responsibility for their institutions. This was a great challenge, but also an immense responsibility. The expectations of our people were very high. The market economy was viewed almost as a conjuring tool for the rapid improvement of our life. Our people expected not only freedom of speech and freedom to travel abroad, but also better social and health care, better housing, and higher salaries. Our universities did not lag behind; they expected better financing of their educational and research programs, new laboratory equipment, new modern libraries, better living and working conditions for their students, higher salaries for the staff, and greater recognition for their work. Too much? Too much!

General Agreement on University Reform

Late 1989 was a period of excited public political meetings, discussions, and polemics on how to cope with this new political and social situation. There was no experience to suggest what the sequence of political and legal steps could or should be. One of the first problems for our universities was to abolish the old, politically inclined management and to elect new university leadership. There was a strong determination across the country to build up a new, democratic university system. The goal was defined rather clearly, the expectations of the academic society were very high, and the determination of students and university staff to support revolutionary changes was high as well. Under this environment, I was elected to the highest academic position of my university.

Shortly after the new university leadership assumed their managerial positions, we identified the main goals for our work as the following: (1) to support the democratic changes in society and to reestablish the role of the university as an independent educational and research institution and a center of excellence; (2) to evaluate critically and redefine all the educational and research programs and develop their new structure and new content; and (3) to reestablish the links with foreign universities in democratic countries and to bring our university back into the world academic community.

These key goals were publicly presented and discussed with our university community and with our colleagues from individual departments and colleges. There was quite broad support and almost general consensus on what to do. However, we did not have the experience or clear ideas on how to implement these goals. The old communist legislation which was still in place, made the intended goals almost impossible to achieve.

The New Higher Education Act

Widespread discussions were held, devoted to the preparation of new higher education legislation. The main goal was to replace the old Higher Education Act of 1980. In the period from February to April 1990, several drafts of the new Higher Education Act were considered. The Federal Assembly officially adopted the act on May 4, 1990, and it entered into effect on June 1 of that year.

The new act codified the basic academic rights and freedoms of universities. Unlike the previous acts, this one enabled universities to decide on their internal structure, the content and organization of academic programs, the staffing of faculty positions, and the number of students. According to the act the newly constituted bodies competent to decide these issues were the elected academic senates of individual universities and faculties. The other important bodies functioning at the higher education institutions were Scientific Councils, whose members were appointed by the rectors or deans, subject to approval by the institution's academic senate. The role of the Ministry of Education was reduced to the creation of the conditions necessary for the development of higher education institutions. The Accreditation Board and the Council of Higher Education Institutions were also established at this time.

The Higher Education Act gives academic senates extensive power to make decisions on the internal affairs of the institution. Under the law, the rector is elected by the Academic Senate and is a representative of the university. He is accountable to the Academic senate of the institution and in some limited aspects to the Ministry of Education. However, the provision of the act that gives rectors and deans only an advisory role in the Academic Senate is problematic. This platform weakens the rector's position in the administrative hierarchy of the institution.

At first sight, the Higher Education Act is fully democratic and offers our institutions full self-management responsibilities. However, the practical aspects of managing the university under this legislative scheme are extremely complicated and inefficient. To be able to provide real university leadership is questionable. The problem is linked to the definition of a legal entity and, consequently, to the authority to decide on the internal matters of the university and/or faculty. According to the University Law, both the university and individual colleges are defined as legal entities. In practice, this means that their representatives—rector and dean—are entrusted with full authority to act on behalf of their respective legal entities—university and the faculty. There is no clear definition of “internal matters,” which opens the broad and subjective interpretation of this concept. Based on our experience, however, it is clear that interests of these two entities do not necessarily coincide, and may even differ significantly. Shortly after this legislation came into effect, problems linked to further development and restructuring of the University system became extremely complicated. University leadership has no decision-making authority to coordinate development activities of the individual colleges.

All matters regarding personnel, number of students, academic programs, research and extension activities international cooperation, and so forth—all these activities—are carried out in a more or less isolated manner by individual colleges. Despite the fact that the new Higher Education Act clearly has a democratic spirit, its long-run impact on the development of our higher education system is negative. For the time being we have missed the chance to create real university institutions and, consequently, the real university environment.

Academic Programs: Our Priority

Despite the problems with the legislative framework, the main attention of the university leadership, from the very first days, was concentrated on the university education and research activities. There was no doubt that this area represented an immense complex of problems. The inherited, old university structure and educational programs had to be changed significantly according to the needs of the struggling democratic society.

Prior to the 1989 political changes, the Slovak higher education system was especially designed to serve the country’s political and economic systems. In line with the basic dogmas of the political economy of socialism, there was a permanent emphasis on technical education. The humanities, including language training and sciences, represented a relatively small part of the university programs. Economic education was also a relatively minor part of the curriculum. Education about production agriculture was relatively more important in the curriculum. Basic information on the Slovak higher education system in 1988 is shown in *Table 1*. The structure of the higher education system was fully defined and controlled by the Ministry of Education. Also under its authority were quotas for the number of students at individual university institutions and in individual academic fields. University funds were distributed according to those quotas.

Following the 1989 political changes, however, it was clear that that we had to change not only the structure of the university system, but also its content. There was an urgent need for fundamental changes in our curricula. The educational programs designed in the past were heavily infiltrated by old-fashioned and ideologically strongly biased subjects. For example, subjects in the humanities—such as socialistic philosophy, marxist economy, scientific communism, atheism and atheistic philosophy, and some others—were still an organic part of the academic programs. In a very short period, all of these subjects have been completely excluded from the academic curricula by rector’s decision.

Table 1
Structure of the Higher Education System in Slovakia in 1988

Group	Number	Humanities	Technical	Economic	Agriculture	Art
Universities	13	3	5	1	2	2
Colleges	43	13	17	5	5	3
Students	48,543	15,413	22,952	5,211	4,501	466
Students %	100	31.75	47.28	10.73	9.27	0.96

With the abolition of these subjects, which represented approximately 15-20 percent of the entire teaching load we immediately opened space for introducing a new and much needed university education in modern market-oriented economics. The first university course in macroeconomic theory in Slovakia was offered in Nitra at the beginning of 1990. Thanks to our active contacts with the special section of the Peace Corps operating in Czechoslovakia, we managed to bring to Nitra several young graduate students (in economics) from U.S. universities. With generous support of the United States Information Agency (USIA), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the U.S. Embassy in Prague we also got some textbooks, and the first window to the world academic community was opened.

The problem of the language barrier needed to be solved. After a very short time we understood that the language barrier is the strongest obstacle to going farther and faster with our university reform. The absence of direct communication between our faculty members and visiting western academicians, as well as between our students and their English-speaking visiting professors, made it clear that we needed to put a strong emphasis on language, particularly English training at the top of our priority list. We mobilized not only our internal financial resources, but also big support from many western universities, mostly in the United States, that offered their professors and the possibilities for our students to study at their institutions. Since 1990 we have hosted hundreds of visiting students and professors through formal and informal exchange programs; all of them have assisted with our efforts to improve the English proficiency of our students and faculty. The English language has become more and more prevalent in our classrooms and dormitories. Many of our students have started to use English language textbooks for their courses

in economics, language training, and other subjects. In 1991, we offered the first economics courses in English for a limited number of students. However, we understand that the language problem can not be solved in a period of only several months.

International Assistance with the Reform Process

Our international contacts and assistance from abroad were significantly expanded with our first Project on Economic Education and Management Training implemented jointly with Iowa State University (ISU). This project was targeted to include all three agricultural universities in the former Czechoslovakia: Prague, Brno, and Nitra. The project was funded by USAID and generously supported and implemented by ISU. The main goal was to assist our institutions to deliver a basic knowledge of economics in a systematic way to a very broad audience including faculty members, graduate students, and managers. The special bilingual textbooks developed under this project were extremely useful, not only for all the participants, but also for our faculty working on new economics textbooks and instructional materials.

The project had several components: (1) the direct economic education of the involved and interested Czech and Slovak colleagues; (2) managerial training for newly emerged managers of private companies and farms; (3) study tours for the Czech and Slovak participants at U.S. governmental and professional institutions; (4) student and faculty exchanges and assistance with instructional materials, (ISU-Prague-Brno-Nitra); (5) working seminars; and (6) assistance with curricula evaluation.

Thanks to this large-scale and well-organized project, approximately 50 faculty members from Nitra visited the United States and spent time with ISU, USDA, and particularly with USDA's Economic Research Service. Some of our private farmers got their first chance to become familiar with U.S. family farming and farm operations. Approximately 40 students from Nitra spent some time at ISU and approximately 20 ISU students spent one semester at Nitra University. Several ISU faculty members spent their sabbatical in Nitra and participated actively in reshaping our curricula.

As the highly positive result of this useful cooperation I could mention the primary changes introduced not only into the form but also the content of our economic education. The old, rigid educational system, under which there was no way for students to participate in designing their curricula, was replaced by a more flexible credit system. The assistance from ISU in this process was very effective. As a final product we developed the system by which students could participate in designing their curricula and become an active part of the educational process. Our teaching goal was to shift our programs from the passive formula "a student has to be taught" into an active one, "a student should learn." Students, like other consumers, got the right to decide on the selected subjects. The introduction of the credit system with the active participation by students in designing their curricula represents one of the most important achievements in the last reform process at our university. There are still many problems that should be addressed, but the spirit and understanding of flexibility in university education was successfully infiltrated into our academic environment.

The second, large Project on Economic Education was prepared and successfully completed in cooperation with Cornell University. The main goal of the project was to offer the economic (MS-level) education to a larger number of students from Slovakia and neighboring Central European countries. This project was funded by the Andrew Mellon Foundation, the Soros Foundation, and partially by the Slovak Ministry of Education; significant contributions also came from Cornell University. Through this project we expected to educate our new faculty by assisting them to prepare for Ph.D. programs. (This goal, however, was never reached.

Immediately after their graduation, the graduates of this program disappeared into the newly emerged Slovak and foreign private companies.) The importance of this project was also in the follow-up activities, oriented toward faculty development. For Nitra's faculty we created sufficient opportunities for study visits and for development of working contacts with their counterparts at Cornell University.

Other U.S. partners that played an important role in the reform process of our university were West Virginia University, the University of Delaware, Texas A&M University, and Chapman University. All these institutions contributed significantly to the development of our university in different ways. But the unifying sign of their contributions was, and still is, better understanding of international cooperation in higher education.

Throughout the transitional period of the Czechoslovak and Slovak universities, the TEMPUS program (funded by the European Union) and many other programs aimed at the reform of university institutions played a special role. TEMPUS and its students and faculty exchange components contributed significantly to the expansion of international contacts among academics in Eastern and Western Europe. In addition, through this program our universities received significant support for improving their technical facilities, particularly their computing facilities, which aided them in joining the international information family.

Recent Developments in the Czechoslovak and Slovak Higher Education System

Shortly after the New Act on Higher Education came into effect, Czech and Slovak universities utilized their rights to decide on their internal matters. Significant structural changes took place within the higher education system. We observed the explosion in creating new departments, faculties, and even new universities. The "upgrading" of departments to the college level and colleges to the university level was obvious.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) expert panel that reviewed our university system in 1992 had to conclude that there was no real and comprehensive university system in Czechoslovakia. Rather the higher education system was represented by some two hundred mutually isolated, academically narrowly oriented colleges. Many of them, supported by the existing legislation, started independently to reshape their educational programs, to create and to offer the new, frequently redundant, or internationally incompatible academic programs. The reform goal for restructuring the higher education system was misunderstood and operated primarily as a mechanical way to increase the number of students. Data for the Slovak higher education system in 1998 are shown in *Table 2*.

A comparison of *Table 1* and *Table 2* shows that since 1990, the total number of university students in Slovakia has increased approximately 80 percent. During the same period, the number of faculty has increased only about 13 percent. The total funding for Slovak universities in 1998 was about the same level as in 1990. Despite this serious budget restriction, individual colleges, using the weaknesses of the current legislation, systematically increase the total numbers of their full-time and part-time students.

This irrational growth of total enrollment can not be stopped without the coordinating role of the university (in the case of universities) or the Ministry of Education (in the case of Slovakia as a whole). For this, the modification of the existing Higher Education Act is urgently needed. The Slovak higher education system is currently in the trap of its democratic, but naïve and

unqualified, basic legislation. The current organization of university education is economically ineffective and is causing many problems in reshaping the academic side of the Slovak higher education system into a system comparable with the higher education systems in western countries.

Conclusion

Despite all the problems I have indicated, there is no doubt that Czech and Slovak higher education institutions have made significant progress since 1989. I would summarize the highlights as the following: democratization and self-management of the higher education institutions; significant progress in the curricula reform; introduction of the Ph.D. programs; progress in continuing education; some progress in organization of the scientific and research work; and successful internationalization of the higher education system.

The primary aim of this presentation was not to draw up a conclusion on the status of the Slovak higher education system. I do hope that its current status and structure is not the final one. To achieve the compatibility and comparability with higher education systems on the international level, we have a long way to go. To be successful in this process we would need to open the discussion on the legislative framework under which our university system operates. The existing tension between university leadership and leadership of individual faculties, however, makes such discussion very difficult. It is my strong belief that international cooperation and technical expertise are urgently needed to solve the problem.

Group	Number	Humanities	Technical	Economic	Agriculture	Art
Universities	18					
Colleges	83	38	18	13	7	7
Students	86,804	33,795	26,410	17,297	8,001	1,301
Students %	100	38.93	30.42	19.93	9.22	1.5