

powers managed to persuade uncertain student voters to take a stand on their side.

Conclusion

Progressing toward a professional university management system involves some dangers: weakened autonomy and

academic freedom and excessive influence from government and business. I believe, given the present changing conditions, Hungarian higher education will only be able to fulfill social needs, improve the effectiveness of its operations, and meet new demands through the process of modernizing university management. ■

A Review of Higher Education Reform in Bulgaria

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Over the last decade higher education has been one of the most rapidly developing sectors in Bulgaria. Reforms initiated in the economic, agricultural, and social fields have faced great difficulties. Changes introduced at other levels of the educational system—preschool and primary and secondary education—have been minimal as well. In contrast, Bulgarian society has resolved that, in a time of economic and social crisis, higher education is one of the most reliable financial and intellectual investments.

Reform Phases

Even though 11 years is a relatively short span of time, higher education reform in Bulgaria has undergone several phases. Two acts affecting Bulgarian higher education were adopted in the 1990s: the Higher Education Act, passed in December 1995, and the Amendment to the Higher Education Act, passed in June 1999. The period from the initiation of political, economic, and social change in 1989 to the adoption of the 1995 Higher Education Act demarcates the first phase. From 1989 to 1990, ideological subjects and course content were abolished; study programs, curricula, and syllabi were reconceptualized (the “first wave” of curriculum reform); and communist/socialist higher education policy was subjected to widespread criticism. The following two years saw the closing of many research institutes, increasing unemployment among researchers and their transfer to other fields of activity, and the influx of new academic staff into the higher education system. New faculties and specialties were created, public universities were expanded and permitted to introduce tuition fees, and private universities and colleges were established. The system stabilized from 1993 to 1995, with the gradually ebbing of political pressure. Numerous institutes were transformed into universities, assisted by an influx of foreign assistance programs.

The second phase covers the period from the adoption of the 1995 Higher Education Act to its amendment

in 1999. The act aimed to legalize the previous efforts made by Bulgarian postsecondary schools. A new system of academic degrees was introduced, and an agency for quality assessment and accreditation of postsecondary school activities was created. Efforts were made to harmonize the educational process with that of Western Europe, which involved major restrictions on educational institution finances and the development and adoption of new curricula, especially in the social sciences.

In mid-1999, the system of higher education entered a new phase, characterized by the abolition of free education and the introduction of tuition at all public universities, increased competition in admissions, and efforts to bring standards into line with the European context.

Current Goals

The goal of higher education in Bulgaria has been described as “the training of highly qualified specialists and the promotion of scientific and cultural progress.” The practical aspects of this effort are (1) to provide fair and equal opportunities to all who are able and willing to pursue higher education; (2) to create admissions systems and a learning environment in postsecondary schools, corresponding to contemporary requirements; (3) to maintain and raise the quality of higher education through the establishment of criteria that will improve access for all individuals and groups of society and promote excellence in teaching and research; (4) to ensure that graduates from postsecondary schools are able to apply scientific knowledge in various spheres of human activity; and (5) to upgrade the qualifications of specialists.

Current Problems

Numerous problems with the system of higher education in Bulgaria have been identified. First, universities have much greater prestige than do colleges. A university’s reputation is the result of higher standards in the quality of education offered, competitive admissions requirements, and employment prospects after graduation. Furthermore, although there are various forms of interaction between universities and colleges, the functional “bridges” between them are not well constructed. The structure of the university system ensures strict vertical and horizontal inflexibility. Vertical inflexibility is prevalent in application and

admissions procedures, examinations, and graduation requirements. The many obstacles to transferring between schools, faculties, and specializations exemplify horizontal inflexibility. The structure does not respond well to student needs and requirements or to the needs of the labor market; nor does it provide a smooth transition from the secondary level. There is no postsecondary education sector consisting of vocational schools or preuniversity institutions. A serious step toward the establishment of such a sector was taken with the July 1999 adoption of the Law on Vocational Education and Training, but it is too early to predict the outcome of this initiative. Finally, a credit system has not yet been introduced encompassing all public higher education institutions, with a few exceptions. Private universities are more advanced in this respect, but they enroll a comparatively small number of students.

Future Challenges

The Bulgarian government's recent reform efforts have focused on the following objectives: reducing the number of faculties of universities and consolidating postsecondary schools, decreasing enrollments at postsecondary schools, making use of policy and financial instruments, adapting specializations to reflect the needs of society, restricting revenues to postsecondary schools and encouraging reliance on governmental financial decisions, and centralizing higher education policy.

With regard to its place in the international realm of education, Bulgaria must prove that an Eastern European country can, despite financial and other challenges, achieve the standards of quality of Western European higher education. This task is particularly important for the country's efforts to gain admission into the European Union. In March 2000 practical negotiations with the EU were initiated by Bulgaria and five other countries, focusing on six topics, the first two of which were "education and training" and "science and research."

Domestically, student needs and services demand attention. This includes professional guidance, counseling and career services for students prior to higher education, during their studies, and before their entry into the labor market. Methodologies for measuring student profiles, entry qualifications, matriculation, and drop out and transfer rates must be created or improved to help universities respond to the public expectations of preparing students to find their place in society. The system needs to develop a deeper and coordinated understanding that higher education is the provider of tomorrow's leaders and politicians and, therefore, plays a pivotal part in developing a well-functioning society.

Predictions

While many aspects of the system of higher education in

Bulgaria are still difficult to predict, a number of prognoses can be made for the coming decade. An ongoing contraction of the system is likely to occur. The number of students will decrease by 2 to 5 percent annually as a result of higher education policy and demographic, financial, and societal factors. State funding of higher education will decline, while state financial control will increase. The role and prestige of private postsecondary schools will improve. Because the national accreditation process applies the same standards universally, the private sector will gain greater legitimacy. The current difference between the sectors lies in the perception of student quality, since many private school students were once denied admission to state universities. However, this image of private higher education will gradually change.

Heated controversies between the government and the Ministry of Education and Science on one hand and postsecondary schools and the University Rectors' Council on the other hand are inevitable, due to the government's efforts to centralize policy and financing. The system will increasingly move toward a one-track structure. The university sector will assume the function of preparing specialists, while the college sector will have a significant role in postsecondary education.

A number of trends can be cited in support of this prognosis of the system. First, in 1999–2000, 232,000 students were enrolled at universities and only 18,000 at colleges. Second, in 1998–1999, university staff comprised 97.5 percent of the total number of instructors and college staff, just 2.5 percent. Almost all colleges depend upon visiting university lecturers. Third, college graduates tend to continue their education in part-time university programs. Finally, colleges have failed to develop specific programs that are not available at universities. Thus, it is likely that colleges in Bulgaria will slowly disappear from the system or be incorporated into universities. Demand will increase for master's degree programs. Currently, more than two-thirds of all bachelor's degree holders continue their studies at the master's level.

Bulgaria will work to establish a more flexible structure for its higher education system. Flexibility is not only one feature of Western higher education systems that Bulgaria aspires to emulate, but it is also a present-day academic requirement and an essential way to meet the challenges of the future. ■

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