

In at least one aspect, the Polish academic profession does not seem to differ from that in most other countries—namely, in the uncertainty of its future. Polish academics still do not know where they are heading as a professional group as no major reform of Polish higher education has been completed. The future of both the public and the private sector is indeterminate in both financial and legal terms. Working conditions and salaries in the public sector have worsened considerably, resulting in frustration and discontent among academics, but at the same time new opportunities have appeared for some in the booming private sector. Academics have certainly not benefited from the economic transformation and reforms to the same degree as other professionals have, especially in the private sector and in administrative positions.

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The probable future developments in Polish higher education include ongoing declining state support for public higher education and far-reaching changes in the structure of academic staff, leading to greater accountability and managerialism, perhaps to partial privatization; and far fewer full-time appointments in favor of part-time contracts, much higher workloads, and a greater emphasis on teaching activities. At the same time, with the increasing role of teaching at the expense of research as the “mission” of the academic profession, a growing division between core full-time academic faculty and peripheral segments of poorly paid, part-time teaching staff is expected. The university career no longer presents an attractive prospect for graduates and recent Ph.D.s. Career opportunities are poor in terms of promotions and, especially, remuneration, which makes it increasingly difficult to get talented young people to enter academia. Current provisions equivalent to tenure for senior scholars will in all probability not be maintained in any new law on higher education and will be replaced with renewable five-year contracts. The strengthening of the private sector and an increasing movement of academics between the public and the private sectors are also expected. Finally, to indicate at least one brighter perspective for the future: Poland is about to enter the European Union (hopefully by 2004) and there will certainly be new possibilities for higher education resulting from closer cooperation with the Western European academic community. In this context, likely Polish membership in the European Union represents a great opportunity for Polish higher education in the coming decade. ■

Higher Education in Croatia: Unfinished Reform

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The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 triggered not only political changes in the communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, including Croatia (then one of the Yugoslav republics), but the new pluralist atmosphere also opened the way for the long-awaited reform of the higher education system. Expectations were high, but the road was not to be straight: it soon became clear that, as in other sectors of the society, the damage caused by totalitarian undemocratic rule was much greater than imagined, not only in the visible material destruction but also, and especially, in the mental sphere. This phenomenon was new and unexpected, with no precedents that could provide help and guidance.

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The Situation in 1990

At the moment of the first democratic elections in spring 1990, Croatia had one large university (the University of Zagreb, founded in 1669 and reorganized in 1874, with around 50,000 students) and four smaller new universities (the Universities of Split, Rijeka, and Osijek, founded in the 1970s, with between 6,000 and 10,000 students). Their structure and organization (as in the other Yugoslav republics, but also with similarities to those in the Soviet bloc countries), so different from those of a “normal” university, was a result of almost half a century of Communist Party rule.

The main characteristics of this “model” were: fragmentation of the university, separation of research and teaching, and the bureaucratization of higher education, with no trace of university autonomy or academic freedom.

The university was a loose association of faculties, “independent” research institutes, and other “constituent parts” (e.g., student dormitories, libraries), linked by an agreement transferring certain, mostly formal and ceremonial, functions to the University Assembly, the Academic Council, and the rector. The real power lay in various

paragovernmental bodies that controlled financing and curricula. It was understood that students studied and professors taught in the faculties, not at the university, and there was no mobility. The opening of a new field of teaching or research required establishing a new faculty. Thus, in 1990, the University of Zagreb had 48 constituent parts—including 28 faculties, 3 arts academies, and 11 institutes. Independent research institutes were supposed to organize scientific and applied research (and development) and faculties, the teaching. In spite of differences in size, quality, and so on, all universities and all faculties were nominally equal, their degrees equivalent, with rigid curricula prescribed by law.

Academic promotion and research funding were based on numerical criteria, not on quality evaluation. This led, among other things, to the aging of the university, formalized and often outdated teaching, and poor-quality or no research. In 1990, there were 888 full professors (335 above 60 years of age), 458 associate professors, and 715 docents—versus only 1,186 research assistants—at the University of Zagreb. In spite of this, “pockets of excellence” still existed at this university—brilliant scientists of world renown who could provide its regeneration.

The 1993 Law on Higher Education

The first democratic elections, in April 1990, created enormous energy and enthusiasm to embark on the long-awaited process of reform at the university as in the rest of the society. In September 1990, a small working group was formed by the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Science and Technology to define the principles of the new legislation.

The legislation was designed to reintegrate existing universities into efficient institutions, with sufficient autonomy in academic matters (curricula and personnel policy) and internal organization and management. Relations between the founder/owner (Republic of Croatia, for the public universities) and the university were to be redefined through the establishing of a newly introduced Board of Governors. The National Council for Higher Education, National Council for Scientific Research, Higher Education Funding Council, as well as the Rector’s Conference were created to provide policymaking bodies and the forum for consultation between the academic community and the ministries.

To differentiate the university from vocational education, a number of appropriate institutions (colleges, polytechnics, etc.) were created. In order to promote postgraduate teaching and research, a system of departments was introduced at the university to replace or complement the existing division into faculties. In addition, the independent research institutes were fully reintegrated into the universities.

Before being presented to the politicians, these ideas were explored, clarified, and reinforced in discussions, both with distinguished expatriate Croatian academics, col-

leagues from Central and Eastern Europe with similar experiences, and international experts (e.g., the Tempus Project of the EU, the Legislative Reform Project of the Council of Europe, etc.).

Resistance to Change and Compromises

The higher education law proposal was ready in autumn 1991, but it took two more years before passage by the Croatian Parliament. In the meantime, opposition to these reforms grew, so that the final form the law included several modifications. The crucial one was that both the university and the faculties (and other constituent parts) could remain legal entities. This nullified almost all the positive provisions of the law and indicated a lack of political will (especially among the powerful lobby of academics-turned-politicians) to fully reintegrate the universities into the European higher education system.

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In spite of this, some important advances in university restructuring were made—as contained, for example, in the first statute of the University of Zagreb (in 1994)—due to the vision and determination of its leadership. But tensions were rising. The Ministry of Science and Technology, citing the “unfinished reform,” could and did micromanage each faculty separately, approving each salary, purchase, or investment. Therefore, the university had no ultimate control over its budget, personnel policy, investment policy—in short, no possibility of defining and carrying out its own strategy.

Several groups of experts visited Croatia and strongly recommended changes, notably strengthening the university structure (having the ministry deal directly with the rector, introducing lump-sum budget allocation, etc.), but were ignored. Instead, legislative changes in 1996 further weakened the powers of the university management. Uncontrolled proliferation of lucrative study courses offered by some faculties (only with the approval of the ministry) continued. The first vocational colleges appeared (often with no permanent staff or facilities) and also without the approval of the National Council for Higher Education. The power of the ministry increased further after the Board of Governors was eliminated.

Stalemate

It became obvious that this unfinished reform was paralyzing Croatian universities, which found themselves in the

bureaucratic grip of the ministry and various political, financial, and individual interests. To continue the integration into the European higher education system, the academic community enhanced its contacts with international advisory bodies (Salzburg Seminar Universities Project, CRE Institutional Evaluation Program, Academia Europaea), whose experts visited Croatia in 2000. It was again recommended that university autonomy and management be strengthened.

Still, one cannot detect any political will in the government for such reforms. In fact, one notices some opposite tendencies. The draft of the new law envisions the possibility for the faculties to “leave” public universities; become “independent” faculties; by association, form new universities; or join other newly established (perhaps, even private) universities. This could lead to the privatization of

large segments of the existing public higher education system. Coupled with the introduction of an unregulated free market in higher education (no quality control, no restrictions on enrollments, tuition fees, etc.) this could deprive most Croatian students of the opportunity to study, and ultimately even destroy the existing public higher education system.

In view of the crucial role that higher education plays in the development of a democratic and prosperous society, it becomes essential to study the origins and mechanisms of the resistance to the necessary reforms, from both the academic and political circles. Above all, this resistance needs to be eliminated, in Croatia as well as in other “transition” states of Central and Eastern Europe, before further irreparable damage is inflicted. ■

Higher Education Reform in Kyrgyzstan

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Kyrgyzstan is a very mountainous, land-locked central Asian country with a population (4.8 million) and land area comparable to a medium-size U.S. state like Minnesota. It is a former republic of the Soviet Union that gained its independence in 1991. Since independence, Kyrgyzstan's GDP and per capita income have declined by more than 50 percent, and more than 60 percent of the population lives in poverty, including over 20 percent in severe poverty.

Problems in Higher Education

National poverty, the introduction of market capitalism, and the legacy of Soviet centralization have produced four severe problems in Kyrgyz higher education: corruption, a lack of connection between higher education and industry and student needs, redundancy in the higher education system, and low quality. First, corruption—it takes the form of either selling or providing, by the well-connected, of admission places, grades, and academic degrees as well as the theft of valuable resources, falsification of academic credentials, and the awarding of contracts in return for kickbacks. This corruption wastes scarce higher education resources and undermines the legitimacy of higher education. In this corrupt system the core academic value of recognizing and rewarding intellectual merit and achievement is ignored.

Second, higher education is not well linked to either the labor market or student demand. The system produces excess supplies of often poorly trained medical doctors and lawyers, while producing an insufficient number of much-

needed accountants, financial managers, and teachers of computer science.

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Third, because of the explosive growth in the number of institutions and levels of student enrollments, the higher education system suffers from extensive overlap and duplication. The number of higher education institutions has tripled from 33 to 114, and the overall enrollment has grown from 65,000 to 159,000 students in the last five years. These levels are unsustainable given the country's expanding needs and insufficient resources.

Fourth, academic quality has significantly deteriorated as a result of the cumulative effects of corruption, low faculty salaries, an insufficient supply of appropriately trained faculty, shortages of textbooks and library and technology resources, and inadequate facilities. The proliferation of new and weak higher education institutions has exacerbated this problem.

Reform Initiatives

The new minister of education and culture, Camilla Sharshkeeva, who took office in early 2001, is launching a