

Ups and Downs across Central and Eastern Europe

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Studies of private higher education in the countries of the European Union (EU) have identified sizable differences in private provision between central and eastern European countries and their western counterparts. Larger private higher education sectors are much more common across central and eastern Europe, while private sectors in western European countries have remained mostly marginal. Ten central and eastern European countries joined the EU in 2004 and 2007 and aligned the reform agendas of their higher education systems with the wider processes of Europeanization and harmonization. They include Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

After the fall of the communist regimes in 1989, private institutions of higher education multiplied to varying degrees in all countries of central and eastern Europe. The establishment of private institutions in postcommunist Europe took place rather quickly. While most cited examples come from Latvia, Poland, and Romania—where more than one-third of all students are currently enrolled in private institutions—the majority of central and eastern European countries maintain private enrollment patterns ranging between 7 and 21 percent.

Over the last decade, private enrollments across central and eastern Europe reveal different dynamics in national arrangements of private and public sectors, based on a conscious attempt on the part of national governments to optimize the provision of higher education in their countries. Most recent trends reveal slow private growth in most of these 10 countries. Yet, examples of temporary decline, within all or some forms of private provision, have also been noted throughout the decade. Alongside the cases and trends in the other articles of this special section, the declines in central and eastern Europe are mostly small in scope and persistence, underscoring that this aspect of private higher education does not need to be viewed as dramatic or permanent.

Private University Enrollments

At least one period of temporary decline in private provision can be identified in most central and eastern European EU countries between 1999 and 2009. Enrollments in the private-university sector went down as a result of legal changes in Bulgaria, between 1999 and 2000; in Estonia, between 2002 and 2003; in Hungary, in 2003; and in Romania, between 2001 and 2003. Drastic, but still temporary, reduction of private provision occurred in Slovenia, where private university enrollments plummeted by almost 100 percent in 2003. In most of those cases, private university enrollments picked up subsequently, while rarely surpassing the predecline levels—as in Bulgaria and in only two of the countries, Latvia and Hungary—private-university enrollments have maintained the downward trend. Thus, for the most part, private declines in university enrollment have been limited in duration.

Private Nonuniversity Enrollments

The private provision in the nonuniversity sector needs to be examined as well. Again, growth (often extensive) is more common than decline in these lower professionally oriented qualifications and institutions—often known as professional colleges, offering short-cycle degrees and qualifications. In most countries, many of these colleges were created early on after the political changes. The nonuniversity institutions tend to be smaller, focus mostly on teaching, and have a relatively narrow programmatic scope of occupation-oriented programs—concentrating on management, marketing, economics, agricultural studies, insurance and finances, tourism, computer sciences, and theater. They are primarily student oriented, often closely connected with the labor market and regionally engaged. Private-nonuniversity enrollments have shown more resilience in several countries in the region. Examples come from Bulgaria, Lithuania, and Latvia. For the period 2004/05–2008/09, private-college enrollments in Bulgaria and Lithuania rose by 208 percent and by 74 percent in Latvia. The number of short-cycle colleges increased most pronouncedly in Latvia—where they doubled—while a slight increase of 3 percent in the numbers of colleges is also noted in the Czech Republic.

In several central and eastern European countries, growth in the private-nonuniversity, short-cycle higher education subsectors probably formed an emerging future trend within the overall region and beyond. The intense factors of this trend might include the necessity for creating a wide variety of lifelong-learning opportunities, the growing need for retraining and further education from increasing numbers of adult learners, the declining ability of state budgets

to support large-scale educational provision for more people, and the necessity to relate higher education provision to the world of work.

However, growth of this sector has not formed a widespread phenomenon throughout the region. A decline in nonuniversity private enrollments has also been noted. The private-nonuniversity enrollments grew by 63 percent in Estonia in 2002 and then declined, only to pick up slowly after 2005. Similar examples come from Latvia and Slovenia, while private-nonuniversity enrollments in Poland, Romania, and Slovakia have been decreasing over the last several years. Of course, private-nonuniversity enrollments across the region are much smaller in general, and rates of decline or growth rarely have a strong impact on the overall higher education sector.

The Resilience of Private Institutions

The variety of private higher education development among central and eastern European countries reflects each country's ongoing search of optimal approaches to balance high demand with limited resources and shifting demographic trends. Across the region, private higher education institutions are relatively new but have played an important role in increasing educational opportunity and satisfying demand. Declines in private provision of higher education have been limited in range and time, yet have occurred in both the university and nonuniversity private sectors—and sometimes in total private enrollments. However, a consideration of the university and nonuniversity sectors separately indicates that private provision in the region has remained resilient, especially in the nonuniversity sector.