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# The Challenges of Building a World-Class University: Lessons from Slovenia

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Slovenia, a small country with a population of 2 million in the middle of central Europe, takes higher education seriously. It educates a respectable 67 percent of its age group in higher education. Its three universities enroll 81,617 students—two-thirds of them at the University of Ljubljana. Public expenditure on higher education is around 1.25 percent, not bad in the European Union context, and significantly ahead of its neighbors in the former Yugoslavia and the Balkans. Slovenian universities are arguably the best in the region. Slovenia's higher education context—and aspirations—has relevance not only for other countries with small populations but also for universities with a traditional continental European pattern of academic governance and administration.

## THE CONTEXT

Slovenia is committed to an egalitarian philosophy of higher education. All of the public universities have a research mission, and tuition is free for full-time undergraduate students. There is one small private university. At the end of secondary school, students who score well on the *matura* examination are, in most cases, automatically admitted to a university. Those who do not quite meet

the standards can often enroll in an evening or other part-time programs, where tuition is charged, and end up with the same degree as the regular students. The pattern of "dual track" study with variations in tuition and admissions standards—now common in some European countries, China, and elsewhere—distorts student admissions, teaching loads for professors, and creates other problems. Tuition is also charged for doctoral study.

In common with many universities in continental Europe, rectors are elected by the academic staff, with additional participation of students (who control 20% of the votes). They serve four-year terms and can be reelected. Similarly, deans are also elected, and a strong ethos of autonomy exists throughout the academic system. Campus interest groups—including autonomous and well-funded student unions and professor interest groups—are powerful.

A 2011 National Higher Program for Slovenia, recently approved by Parliament, lists a range of initiatives for reforms in higher education and research, by 2020. These factors are aimed at improving Slovenia's research infrastructure and output, as well as boosting the country's internationalization and to some extent diversifying the higher education system; although the list of innovations is long and the guidelines for specific implementation is limited. The devil is, of course, in the details, and implementing significant change in Slovenia's consensus-driven system will probably be a challenge, particularly since higher education attracts a good deal of public interest.

## WORLD-CLASS FOR SLOVENIA?

What might a world-class university look like in the Slovenian context? Certainly, no Slovenian university can aim to compete with Berkeley or Oxford. The country could not finance a Berkeley nor does it have the population base to support an Oxford. But at least one Slovenian institution, no doubt the University of Ljubljana, could become a globally competitive university in a number of academic fields and internationally visible as an institution. As a nation that depends on its human resources that sits in a strategic place in Europe, the 2011 National Higher Education Program makes sense, although it does not seem to go far enough in concentrating financial and human resources.

The strategy makes a sharp break with past thinking. At least it recognizes the need for Slovenia to work harder on higher education. The traditional view seemed to be general satisfaction with an academic environment that is good but not great. Assuming that Slovenia at some point will wish to play in the academic big leagues, what would be required to fulfill existing possibilities and secure a place in the European and global knowledge economy?

## THE PROSPECTS

Paths to academic excellence vary according to national and institutional circumstances, but it is easy to identify some of the Slovenian realities that create problems for improvement—challenges that are shared by many countries and institutions. While the possibilities for significant improvement may objectively be present, policy and governance issues pose daunting obstacles. The following factors will, at least in part, determine Slovenia's academic future.

*Governance.* In common with many European universities, top academic leaders in Slovenia are elected to four-year terms of office. They typically return to the faculty, following administrative service. Rectors, for example, are elected by the academic community—including academic staff and students, who have 20 percent of the votes. Rectors and deans, typically, govern by consensus and are seldom willing to exercise leadership that may create strong opposition in the academic community. This means that universities seldom, if ever, have strong internal leadership with the option to make decisions that may create dissent or controversy. Elected top management will be unable to implement the serious decisions that are inevitably required for building academic excellence.

*Funding.* Full-time undergraduate students pay no tuition in Slovenia—although fees are charged for part-time study and some graduate programs. Thus, universities are largely dependent on direct government funding. In mass higher education systems, public funding can never provide both access and excellence; the costs are simply too high. For Slovenia to achieve world-class excellence, it will need to find additional funds to support an expensive research university; and it is unrealistic to expect total state funding. There is probably no alternative to charging tuition to all students—of course, with appropriate scholarship assistance for students who may not be able to afford the costs. At the same time, the state will need to enhance funding and to ensure that required resources are available over the long term. Additional income can be obtained by enhanced cooperation with industry and other agencies. Excellent universities can prosper only with sustained funding.

*Academic differentiation*. Slovenia's three public universities are all research universities and are similarly funded. Even in a small country, it is necessary to

differentiate academic missions among the universities. Slovenia can afford one research-intensive university, the University of Ljubljana. The other institutions, which are newer and much smaller, must focus on teaching at the undergraduate level. Financial and human resources must be carefully concentrated. It will, of course, be quite controversial to strip or severely constrain existing universities from some of their current roles and to ensure that research and doctoral education is carefully limited in the future.

*"Steering."* Determining broad academic directions and policies cannot be left to the academic community alone. Broad "steering" of higher education policy for the nation can only be developed and implemented by the government. While consultation with stakeholders, especially the academics themselves, is necessary, difficult decisions will inevitably be made by outsiders. Further, continuing governmental supervision of university policy is required to keep the system "on track." This may be particularly difficult in Slovenia's consensus-driven society, where higher education is frequently a political concern.

*Selective excellence.* Few universities can afford to be world class in all specialties. For a small country, careful selections will be required as to what fields and disciplines can be truly world class and which should be "merely excellent." Based on national needs, economic realities, and current academic strengths and interests, a limited number of areas—including interdisciplinary and cutting-edge fields—can be selected for concentration. Targeted funds and other resources can be provided.

*Internationalization.* A fine line always stands between serving national obligations and playing in the international big leagues. If the University of

Ljubljana desires to achieve a world-class status, it must focus on further internationalization. This includes offering more academic programs in English; enhancing its exchange relationships; looking first to provide strong leadership to central and eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union; and, to some extent, engaging with North America and emerging Asia. Slovenia is an excellent site for research on central European themes, and the university can build its interdisciplinary strengths in understanding the challenges and possibilities of the former Yugoslavia and the region.

However, the balance between national needs and concerns and internationalization is not easy to achieve. Particularly for a small country, the universities are at the center of intellectual life and central institutions for maintaining and enhancing national language and culture. At the same time, the universities are among the most internationalized institutions in the country, and the pressures are great to increasingly engage with the rest of the world. In the Slovenian case, these forces are particularly complex, since they involve the Bologna agenda, working with the Balkans, and to some extent a broader international agenda.

## THE FUTURE

Slovenia, a small country with a favorable geographical position in the middle of Europe and with a good academic infrastructure, has the potential for excellence. It already includes perhaps the best university in the region. Reaching for world-class excellence is a challenge, but this standard is not impossible. For a country dependent on its human resources, university development is a logical step. If Singapore can become a knowledge hub, why not Slovenia?