Internationalisation of Higher Education in the Czech Republic — the impact of European Union Programmes

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Introduction

Higher education in the Czech Republic has a long tradition. Charles University, Prague, founded in 1348 by Czech King and Roman Emperor Charles IV, was the first university in Central Europe. In 1573, the second university was established in Olomouc. The development of higher technical education began with the foundation of the Engineering School in 1707, which developed into the Czech Technical University in Prague. The roots of the Academy of Fine Arts go back to 1799. The Czech-German Technical Institute, the basis of the Technical University in Brno, was established in 1849. The Higher Education Institute of Mining in Pribram and the Academy of Applied Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague were also founded in the 19th century and many higher education institutions (HEIs) were established in the 20th century.

The development of higher education in the 20th century was deeply influenced by the 40 years of the Communist regime. As from 1989, following the ‘velvet revolution’, the system changed rapidly with new legislation and internationalisation. The Czech Republic cooperates with many important international organisations and more especially the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). OECD carried out analyses of the educational system and submitted a number of recommendations concerning its development. Cooperation with UNESCO and the Council of Europe — especially in the project of Legislation Reform Programme — was also very fruitful.

Last but not least, there is the cooperation with the EU, especially until 1997 within the PHARE programme, where TEMPUS played a vital role. New relationships were established between Czech and West European higher education institutions. TEMPUS influenced the internal structures of universities, university management, the quality of tuition and the development of the cooperation of the Czech institutions, both at the international level and among themselves.

Later, the Community Programmes became an organic part of the integration process in the EU: since 1 October 1997, SOCRATES, LEONARDO DA VINCI and YOUTH FOR EUROPE III; since 1 January 2000, SOCRATES II, LEONARDO DA VINCI II and YOUTH. Thus, since the end of 1997 we gained, especially with SOCRATES and LEONARDO DA VINCI, a quite
complex instrument which could be used in the whole sphere of education. With
SOCRATES, platforms for exchange of information on the educational systems
and recognition issues in higher education were opened. For both the higher
education institutions and the Ministry of Education SOCRATES-ERASMUS
has become an important element in strategic planning. The sub-programme
ERASMUS is a complex instrument in higher education, not only at national but
also at international (European) level. This can be seen quite clearly in the recent
developments of higher education in Europe expressed in the 1999 Bologna
Declaration and the Prague Communiqué, which the ministers responsible for
higher education adopted on 19 May 2001 and in which they formulated priorities
for the creation of the European Higher Education Area ('Bologna' and since May
2001 the ‘Bologna-Prague Process').

Czech Higher Education and Legislative Developments 1990–2001

Over the last decade a lot has been done and in July 2001, there were 46 HEIs in
the Czech Republic. There are 24 public institutions, 4 state HEIs and 18 private
HEIs. It became possible to establish private HEIs in 1999. The institutions are
subject to a rather strict accreditation process to guarantee the quality expected
from an HEI. In addition, there are the higher professional schools which provide
three-year vocationally-oriented courses.

The HEIs offer bachelor, master’s and doctoral programmes. After the
bachelor degree, students can continue their studies in one- to three-year master’s
programmes, but they can also start a master’s programme at the age of 19 which
lasts on average five years. The doctoral programmes have a standard length of
three years. Admission is based on completion of studies in a master’s programme.

The first priority after the ‘velvet revolution’ in November 1989 was to
provide higher education with new legislation. The Act came into force on July 1,
1990. It included reducing the state influence and control of higher education to a
minimum, confirmation of academic freedom and academic rights, and
institutional self-government. The Act also included matters regarding study
and academic degrees, introduction of the bachelor degree as the first step to
diversification of higher education, student affairs, higher education teachers and
other employees. The other important issue was establishing a democratic
representative body of all HEIs — the Council of Higher Education Institutions.
The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports must discuss with it all important
matters regarding higher education.

The rapid development of higher education, changes in economic conditions
and overall changes in society, development of the international situation, and new
demands on harmonisation of higher education studies within Europe created the
need for a new higher education act — Act no.111/1998 Col. On Higher
Education Institutions. It made the best of the positive provisions of the previous
Act, while incorporating new and necessary changes to eliminate its shortcomings.
Its implementation could be considered the next reform step in the higher
education system in the Czech Republic. Broad diversification of HEIs and study
programmes was introduced.

In July 2001, a new Amendment of Act No.: 111/1998, prepared by the
Members of Parliament, came into force. It specified more strictly the structure of
study programmes towards the scheme introduced in the Sorbonne and Bologna
Declarations (two-tier model of master study programmes) and brought some amendments to the organisation of lifelong learning courses.

The Impact of TEMPUS

In 1990–91, the TEMPUS programme was launched in Central and Eastern Europe countries within the PHARE programme. Its aim was to contribute to the development of the system of higher education in these countries and support their cooperation with the European Community. In the Czech Republic, in the first round in October 1990, a total of 325 projects were submitted. But due to the financial means allocated, only 39 could be selected.

The main impact of TEMPUS could be summarised as follows:

- The first TEMPUS projects focused on the mobility of teachers.
- New relationships were established between Czech and West European universities. In many cases, they have lasted and became the basis for further international cooperation.
- Preparation of new curricula or innovation of the existing ones.
- Changes in internal structures of universities and better university management.
- Contacts between HEIs and industry and opening the institutions to the region.
- Possibility to purchase modern technical equipment and literature. Universities acquired technology and specialist literature worth at least 400 million CZK (about 11.5 million EURO).
- Quality of education through demands for mobility, organisation of the activities and development of the projects by the teachers, departments, faculties or university, and more explicitly by projects concerning the creation of evaluation systems at HEIs.
- Development of cooperation between the Czech universities because in most projects there was more than one Czech university cooperating.
- The establishment of the National TEMPUS Office created a long-term effect. There were specialists with experience in management, coordination and administration of European projects at national level, with competences to act and negotiate with the EU structures.
- Entry into SOCRATES and especially ERASMUS was smooth.

Teacher Mobility

The Czech institutions had been denied the natural freedom in the exchange of ideas and knowledge for almost 50 years. In spite of that, mobility of teachers was pejoratively designed as ‘academic tourism by uninformed people’. Especially in the first phase it had essential means for carrying out the reform of the higher education system. Useful contacts and cooperation with partner institutions in EU were established. It brought new ideas, knowledge of foreign higher education institutions and better teachers’ proficiency in foreign languages and other abilities, and enhanced self-confidence among Czech university teachers. When they returned, they started to compare higher education in the Czech Republic with that at universities in other European countries. They saw similar problems,
strong and weak points and found that the Czech HEIs were often not worse and sometimes better in their human potential than the Western ones. Teachers from EU countries coming to the Czech Republic gained similar experience.

The Shift of Priorities in the Programme 1990–1998

The TEMPUS programme, especially in its first phase, mainly targeted curricular development projects — either for the preparation of new curricula or innovation of the existing ones. Cooperation with EU countries was not only important because of the aim of transforming and reforming the Czech higher education, but it also laid bases for the development of joint curricula e.g. within ERASMUS or the ‘Bologna-Prague process’.

In the second phase, more projects dealing with internal structures of universities and strengthening university management were developed. New departments and units facilitating cooperation between HEIs and industry and/or local/regional authorities were established. Centres for continuing adult education were established at several institutions.

Contribution to Changes in the Internal Structures of the Institutions and Openness to Industry and the Region

In universities in North Moravia, centres for continuing adult education provide retraining and continuous education for professionals and local officials in fields that are relevant to the region, such as waste processing, recycling, and environmental matters.

An interesting example is the Centre of Lifelong Education at the Institute of Airspace Engineering of the Brno University of Technology. This project initiated a development of the Airspace School, which gained accreditation from the Authorities for Civic Aviation of the Czech Republic to train the candidates for the pilot licence and the accreditation of a bachelor study programme in Economy and Management of Airspace Operations. The project continues further to develop a professional modular training programme on the harmonisation of the technical requirements and the legal and administrative procedures in the sector of civil aviation with reference to joint European standards and EU regulations in this field. Brno University of Technology expects that the international accreditation of the courses will be obtained in October 2001. The results of the project are expected to be used in the whole Central European region.

TEMPUS also led to the foundation of Business Schools which offer MBA programmes. Different specialised centres were established, e.g. for information technology, artificial intelligence, civil engineering, and data processing.

The implementation of the TEMPUS projects created many contacts between various categories of people. It opened the HEIs to the region. The last phase of TEMPUS targeted to institutional building continued in this direction. It was a unique opportunity for the institutions to establish contacts and cooperate with local authorities and contribute to strengthening the cooperation in the region. The TEMPUS grant was an important contribution to the development of regional universities.
Strengthening Institutional Management

The impact on the management of Czech HEIs could be seen in the development of the University of West Bohemia in Plzen. The TEMPUS project was used to establish a department for international relations. This type of department does not exist in all Czech universities. The international departments exist at all our universities. The problem is that they do not have a real impact on the whole institution as they are decentralised to faculty or department levels.

There were two more projects where the experiences were further developed at nine other Bohemian and Moravian HEIs.

Influence on the Quality of Education

A good example is the project coordinated by the University of West Bohemia in Plzen which enabled the transfer of know-how in internal quality assurance and staff development from EU to another seven Czech partners. Recommendations were addressed to the Ministry of Education and the Accreditation Commission on linking the internal quality assurance developed under the project with the external quality evaluation carried by the Accreditation Commission.

The Czech University of Agriculture and Mendel University of Agriculture and Forestry launched another interesting project, which enabled the development of the system of internal evaluation of the institutions and the external evaluation of the performance at both universities carried out by the EU partners. A university strategy was formulated and an evaluation system for each faculty has been implemented.

The ‘Socratisation’ of the National TEMPUS Office and the First Step Towards the Implementation of SOCRATES/ERASMUS

When the countries of Central and Eastern Europe were invited to join SOCRATES and LEONARDO DA VINCI, the experience and results from TEMPUS helped the Czech Republic to make this step smoothly, especially in the case of SOCRATES-ERASMUS. The experience was on both sides — the National Agency and the institutions. The TEMPUS activities were slowly decreasing, the TEMPUS Office had staff trained in management of European projects at national level, in acting with formal EU structures, with practice in the formal mechanisms of the Brussels administration, with knowledge and experience in promoting the EU programme and an information campaign, being able to provide consultations to institutions and individuals, etc. The Ministry decided to split the agency into two units and entrust one of them with the implementation of the SOCRATES preparatory measures.

Everything the institutions learned during their participation in TEMPUS projects had to be implemented to launch ERASMUS. The development was not smooth and the coordination of ERASMUS did not function efficiently at all institutions, even now. But the situation is gradually improving. SOCRATES-ERASMUS gave the HEIs a clear task — to develop a certain central institutional strategy in international relations. The pressure became even greater with SOCRATES II, in which the policy statement should involve not only the SOCRATES activities but also the JEAN MONNET or LEONARDO DA VINCI ones, etc. We should remember that without the experience gained under
TEMPUS the access and participation of the Czech Republic in SOCRATES (ERASMUS) would have been much more difficult.

**SOCRATES: the coordination structure and its impact**

SOCRATES could be used in nursery, primary, secondary and tertiary, as well as in adult education. The sub-programmes EURYDICE and NARIC opened platforms for exchange of information on the educational systems and recognition issues. Realising this, the Czech Republic implemented from the very beginning the coordination structure of SOCRATES that established direct links between stakeholders. The programme was a useful tool of strategic planning and influence at national (ministerial) as well as institutional level. The Ministry of Education is represented by the national operational structure for the Community Programmes. It consists of the Coordination Committee for Community Programmes, National Committees for SOCRATES, LEONARDO DA VINCI and YOUTH that steer the implementation of particular programmes. Members of the National SOCRATES Committee are experts from the Ministry of Education, higher education institutions, schools, and regions. The head of the SOCRATES National Agency (NA) is the secretary of the National SOCRATES Committee. Proposals for decisions of the National SOCRATES Committee and the advisory work related to different SOCRATES sub-programmes are processed through Expert Committees (for COMENIUS & LINGUA, ERASMUS, GRUNDTVIG, ARION and MINERVA). The Expert Committees’ members are professionals from the Ministry of Education, higher education institutions, schools, regions, and local and regional authorities. The secretary of each Committee is the head of the sub-programme in the National Agency.

The Ministry of Education is responsible for policy-making regarding cooperation in all Community programmes, for national priorities and the implementation of the Community programmes in the Czech Republic. The National SOCRATES Committee is responsible for the strategy of SOCRATES in the Czech Republic, co-financing the programme from the national budget, lists of eligible institutions, approval of projects selected at national level, the appointment of members of the Experts Committees for the sub-programmes, and the implementation of the programme by the National Agency, e.g. planning, budget, activity report of the agency, etc. The National Agency, the National SOCRATES Committee and all Expert Committees must respect the rules of the European Commission (procedures, criteria, priorities, deadlines, standard forms). Any additional national criteria or priorities for each sub-programme are suggested by the respective Expert Committee and approved by the National SOCRATES Committee. The procedures for assessment and selection of proposals are provided by experts under the supervision of the respective Expert Committee and approved by the National SOCRATES Committee. The Ministry of Education also controls and audits the management of all financial aspects of the SOCRATES activities.

The National Agency is responsible for the administrative and technical implementation of SOCRATES in the Czech Republic and for the financial records of decentralised activities. It was established as a department of the Centre for Higher Education Studies — the organisation founded by the Ministry of Education as a contributory organisation (non-profit-making legal body). This means that the Ministry of Education has a direct relationship with the Agency.
The coordination structure with the HEIs functions quite well. The Ministry and the institutions cooperate via the Council of Higher Education Institutions and the Czech Rectors’ Conference in their everyday work and all the important decisions are discussed and negotiated together. This mechanism also works in ERASMUS.

The SOCRATES NA succeeded in bringing together people from all the HEIs responsible for the implementation of ERASMUS and international relations. Since 1997, coordinators and workers of the university international departments meet twice a year via regular ERASMUS meetings. In parallel, these meetings were also attended by people from the Ministry. It helped to establish good links between all the stakeholders and contributed to a better flow of information. An interactive discussion platform among the ERASMUS coordinators was established on the Web.

Problems occur in the cooperation with the other parts of the SOCRATES programme. The people having the guarantee at the Ministry are used to deal with these problems in a more bureaucratic and more centralised manner that does not always function well.

ERASMUS: experiences between 1997 and 2000

Higher education institutions in the Czech Republic quickly understood the advantages of the programme. Since 1997, 22 of the 23 civilian higher education institutions have entered the programme successfully. The last one joined the following year. Up to 1st November 2000 all public civilian higher education institutions and 3 private ones sent their Institutional Contracts to Brussels.

Monitoring at Selected HEIs

A group was established in 1999 (one member representing HEIs, one nominated by the Ministry and one from the NA) to monitor the implementation of ERASMUS at selected higher education institutions. First visits were carried out at the end of 1999 and some in 2000. In autumn 2001, site visits are planned to monitor the achievements of the academic year 2000–01. The first series of visits (1999–2000) was targeted to the institutions with a lower performance. The main objective was to identify weak points and to help these HEIs to improve their performance.

The monitoring visits were organised in such a way as to speak with the ERASMUS coordinator, students taking part in the ERASMUS exchanges and the university management. These interviews were organised per-partes with a final session with all those who were interviewed. The final report, which included recommendations of the monitoring group, was sent to the university.

One of the main problems was lack of coordination between the university and faculty level. In those institutions where the organisation was decentralised to faculty level, some faculties did not participate in the programme at all and ERASMUS was not used in the university strategy of international relations.

Teacher mobility can contribute to develop or at least start discussions on cooperation on joint curricular projects and/or improve the exchanges of students. However, it was not often the case. The work of the teachers within ERASMUS was usually not appreciated either at the faculty or university level. In most of these institutions the position of the ERASMUS coordinator was not strong. In some cases, there was no policy at institutional level.
At some universities, there was a lack of programmes taught in foreign languages and the foreign students were provided with a series of consultations. This was less difficult in the case of Ph.D. students. Some institutions had problems to find teachers who were willing and able to participate in teacher stays. The main problem was the language.

Problems were also identified in the recognition of Czech students’ study results abroad within the ERASMUS programme and vice-versa. Although recognition of the study period abroad is the necessary precondition for ERASMUS stays, in practice it did not work.

First Experiences of HEIs — Positive Achievements and Problems Identified Since 1997

The following experiences were identified from final reports of participants and HEIs, Internet sites of particular HEIs, and interviews with the people organising ERASMUS at HEIs.

Positive Achievements

• The teachers who participated in the stays at foreign universities tried to implement what they had learned abroad. Their stays led to innovation of curricula; they started to publish in foreign languages. They developed their self-confidence.

• The problems with recognition can have a positive impact. To deal with them means that partners should know more about each other and cooperate more closely. The teacher stays contribute to further harmonisation of the programmes. The intention is not unification but identification of the cornerstones of the subjects taught. Another logical consequence is a further development of credit systems that are compatible with ECTS. At the Charles University, 10 ECTS were implemented during the first year of ERASMUS (none was implemented outside the ERASMUS programme!).

• From the reports of students and from the interviews, one can see how enriching the study stays were for them. In addition to the professional knowledge they gained at a foreign institution, they appreciated cooperating with students from different European countries and getting experience in solving everyday problems in a foreign country. They also saw the differences in the organisation of studies at home and at the host institution. On their return, they incited the university management to more openness in teaching and user-friendly attitude of teachers to the students. They usually also demanded a more interdisciplinary approach to their subjects. These demands are also strongly supported by incoming students.

• New courses have been developed at some institutions (e.g. Charles University). Some are taught in foreign languages and designed not only for foreign or ERASMUS students, but also for the Czech ones. Lectures by foreign professors have become part of the study programme at some institutions. There were also courses which involved teaching in several foreign languages (e.g. at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Charles University). At the request of the students (both outgoing and incoming) and in correspondence with the overall development, study paths are now more...
individualised. Thus, ERASMUS contributes to a shift to more learner-centred education, which does not have a tradition at Czech universities.

- At most institutions, the number of applicants is higher than the study grants available. Most universities send abroad very good students who help to improve the image of their university and of the Czech Republic. This is very important, since the Czech Republic is a candidate country for accession to the EU. The foreign students coming to the Czech Republic play the same role in our country.

Problems

- In spite of the pre-condition of student exchanges which states that the period spent abroad within ERASMUS will be recognised, this recognition faces many prejudices. Recognition should be treated as stated in the Council of Europe/UNESCO Lisbon Recognition Convention which has been signed by 40 countries (25 of them are members of SOCRATES). 20 have ratified it (13 being SOCRATES countries). The main difference is that the study periods/completed studies should be assessed as a whole. The assessment should be based on students’ study load, expressed for example by the credits gained, and the quality of the respective institution, instead of comparing details and finding real equivalence. In ERASMUS it should work even more smoothly, since the exchange is organised on the basis of established contacts and contracts (Institutional Contract). Much remains to be done at many institutions and probably not only in the Czech Republic.

- There is also misunderstanding concerning the credit points. The credits awarded at different universities are not always considered to be compatible. The problems usually appear if the exchange is organised between a ‘research’ and a ‘teaching’ university. There is in most cases a difference in the demands put on the students at both types of institutions and consequently in the workload expressed by the credits. Credits are not necessarily recognised in the same range after students return. Most probably this is not clarified in the bilateral agreement. It can even happen that the incoming students do not meet the demands of the host institution.

- Some of our institutions had difficulties in finding enough students to be sent abroad (especially at smaller, regional HEIs). Students were afraid to participate in a stay abroad. In these cases almost all the applicants were awarded ERASMUS grants. The first signals appeared also at some larger technological universities where the take-up rate of the planned figures is slightly above 70%.

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<tr>
<th>Table I. Gap Between Incoming and Outgoing Students</th>
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<td>Outgoing students</td>
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<td>Incoming students</td>
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The data were provided by the SOCRATES NA
The gap between incoming and outgoing students led some universities to think more about the promotion of their programmes. This promotion was partly done via ECTS and brochures for foreign students. Most of them pay more attention to developing and updating regularly their web sites in English. Every two years *Higher Education in the Czech Republic – Guide for Foreign Students* is prepared in cooperation with the Centre for Higher Education Studies and the Ministry. (The publication is available on the web site [http://www.csvs.cz](http://www.csvs.cz).)

There are still language problems. Not all institutions are able to deliver courses in a foreign language. Only a limited number of teachers are able to give lessons in English. There are prejudices on the side of the EU students. The Central and Eastern European countries do not belong to the most popular ERASMUS study places. The situation is better in Prague. That of regional HEIs is more difficult.

- Many problems identified by HEIs concerned organisational matters. There were visa problems both for incoming students and for Czech students going to EU countries. Strict bureaucratic regulations are found in awarding visas to Spain or Italy, and obtaining visas for the Netherlands takes 3 months. Germany requires the students (including Ph.D. ones) to present a photocopy of the ‘matura certificate’ (certification of completion of full secondary education). The foreign students coming to the Czech Republic have problems in providing the Czech authorities with the extract of their criminal record translated into Czech.

- The first two years of the Czech participation in the programmes showed clearly that the study grants for students and teachers awarded by ERASMUS were too low to enable the planned number of students and academic staff to go abroad. The grants are low in general in all SOCRATES countries. However, Central and Eastern European countries also face the difference between living costs in their countries and the living costs in EU and EEA countries. This difference, of course, makes the grants awarded to Central and Eastern European students even lower. In the Czech Republic neither the universities nor the State had a system of grants or loans to overcome this obstacle. The budget of our HEIs is quite tight and they are not able to carry new financial demands. Hence, there were three options:
  - send only those students who are able to co-finance their stay. This would lead to discrimination;
  - send only approximately 1/3 of the students planned and award higher grants;
  - establish a system of co-financing at national level.

From the outset, we tried to establish a system of co-funding. In this phase of the programme the end-user support from PHARE was introduced. It was only for students and faced many bureaucratic obstacles.

- NA, as well as the institutions, faced delays from the beginning — the official procedures to participate in programme, call for funds, signing contracts and consequent delay of payment. Student mobility was difficult. It usually starts in August. Taking into account the fact that, in 1998–99, the NA received the ERASMUS budget in October and in 1999–2000 at the end of September, the launch of the programme was not very smooth. Some
HEIs managed to pre-finance the students; the others had to postpone the mobility to the second semester. It influenced the successful rate of the mobility, it decreased the use of funds and it influenced the relationship between the partners.

**Co-financing Policy**

As described above, the situation in student mobility was rather complex. Teacher mobility was more difficult, as in the first phase of SOCRATES only student mobility was co-financed. The lack of money meant that stays were not organised at all or the period was shortened.

The Ministry learned from the experience of the first years. Since 2000–01 the new co-financing system of Ministry of Education has been prepared in order to overlap the financial gap at the beginning of contractual period of ERASMUS activities and at the same time complement the student and teacher grants. The average grant a student is provided with from the ERASMUS EU and end-user support budget is 450 EURO per month. A teacher gets from the ERASMUS EU and end-user support budget an average grant of 500 EURO a week.

**TABLE II. Co-financing Student and Teacher Mobility**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Plan</td>
<td>Reality</td>
<td>Take-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>rate %</td>
<td>rate %</td>
<td>rate %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outgoing students</td>
<td>1,131</td>
<td>879</td>
<td>77.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Months</td>
<td>5,406</td>
<td>4,130</td>
<td>76.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>free movers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Months</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>86</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL outgoing</td>
<td>879</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL months</td>
<td>4,130</td>
<td>5,975</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outgoing teachers</td>
<td>620</td>
<td>366</td>
<td>59.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weeks</td>
<td>1,333</td>
<td>531</td>
<td>39.8</td>
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</tbody>
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* estimated figures according to the Interim Report 2000/01
The data were provided by the SOCRATES NA

Moreover, the Ministry pre-finances the activities to overlap the financial gap at the beginning of the contractual period. In the year 2000, the situation was especially complicated due to procedures to adapt the Decision on SOCRATES II for associated countries.

From Table III, one can see that, in the year 2000–01, the Czech Republic supports the student mobility additionally with 180% of the sum of the EU budget, in case of teachers this sum is 256%. The figures indicate quite clearly that in both cases the increase of mobility is dependent on funding.

**ERASMUS: an instrument of higher education development**

The internationalisation and strategic development of higher education and the whole tertiary sphere are based on the:

1) Sorbonne Declaration
As we have seen in the previous section, the amount of money invested in ERASMUS by the Czech government is quite substantial. For both the HEIs and the Ministry of Education, SOCRATES has become an important element in the strategic planning — concretely expressed in the long-term strategy plan of particular HEI and the long-term strategy of the Ministry and their annual updating.

It is also a part of the National Programme of Education in the Czech Republic (White Paper) issued by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic and the Strategic Development of the Tertiary Education.

Since 1999, higher education institutions must work out a long-term strategy plan which must be available to the public. A similar task, i.e. to work out long-term strategy of development of the higher education system, is required of the State, represented by the Ministry of Education. Long term-strategy plans of both HEIs and the State (Ministry of Education) must be updated annually. Very great autonomy and self-governance of HEIs are balanced by the state authority’s possibility to indirectly manage HEIs by means of budget allocations. The allocation of the state budget should not be dependent only on the number of students and ‘the cost of study’ (as it has been the case for several years so far) — i.e. ‘formula financing’. An important change is expected with respect to the strategy plan of both the Ministry of Education and institutions. The funds should be allocated via ‘programmes of development’. The call for proposals will be updated annually, together with the updating of the long-term strategy of the Ministry.

The experience is recent. But the HEIs and the Ministry elaborated these documents with care. The Ministry of Education has become more concerned about the future development of higher education institutions and it seems that strategic plans of higher education institutions could contribute to more transparency and accountability of the education provided. Part of these documents is devoted to international cooperation and internationalisation of higher education and particular institutions.
Long-term Strategy of the Ministry of Education

In the field of international and especially European cooperation, the Ministry of Education will actively support the participation of Czech HEIs in SOCRATES (with emphasis on ERASMUS), with the main focus not only on student and teacher mobility, but also on the other instruments offered by ERASMUS and SOCRATES — harmonisation of curricula at all levels (bachelor, master and doctor), development of ECTS or ECTS compatible credit system, etc. As the ERASMUS grants only partly cover the expenses connected with the study stays, the Ministry will co-finance end users.

The LEONARDO programme could be also used to extend student mobility by using practical placements, as well as further developing contacts and cooperation of HEIs with enterprises and regional and local authorities. Participation in the programmes should be complemented with projects on higher education developed under the Higher Education and Research Committee of the Council of Europe.

Our next priority is cooperation, exchange of experiences and learning from the best practices in the processes of accreditation, evaluation and recognition.

Academic mobility in both directions (incoming and outgoing) will be supported by using all the possibilities of ERASMUS, LEONARDO, CEEPUS (Central European Exchange Programme for University Studies) and other possibilities within bilateral programmes and intercultural governmental agreements. In 2001, the Ministry offered a Programme of Development which extends the possibilities of the above-mentioned mobility by allocating funding to support outgoing students with the cooperation of HEIs. A negotiation to establish an academic exchange programme with Canada is under way.

Long term Strategic Plans of HEIs

The same objectives and priorities can be found in the long-term strategic plans of HEIs. Most institutions are beginning to envisage a centralised strategy in international relations.

Participation in ERASMUS — in mobility, as well as in curricular development programmes, organisation of intensive courses and implementation of ECTS — is mentioned in most strategic plans. In addition, other SOCRATES sub-programmes (e.g. MINERVA, COMENIUS and LINGUA) and LEONARDO DA VINCI and JEAN MONNET are also priorities. The 5th Framework Programme and other programmes of scientific cooperation are also mentioned several times. Some institutions pay more attention to better professional and administrative organisation of international relations, as well as to language skill development. Special attention is paid to the improvement of teachers’ language competences. The objective is to have enough academic staff who are able to deliver lectures in English and other foreign languages. All public HEIs offer study programmes or at least courses in foreign languages, mostly in English. However, the situation must be improved. Preparation of courses and accreditation of a study programme in English (or another foreign language) are also mentioned in the strategic plans of both large and smaller HEIs.
Concerning student mobility, some institutions suppose that all doctoral students and 10% of students of master programmes will spend a study period abroad. The most important instrument to meet the planned goals is ERASMUS; some institutions also plan practical placements within LEONARDO DA VINCI.

Many institutions mentioned their inter-university agreements. These are a very important component of internationalisation. But the ERASMUS programme is much more comprehensive. At most institutions, the major part of student mobility lies within ERASMUS, which becomes the main engine of European cooperation for the HEIs. An exception seems to be the Charles University. This oldest and largest Czech university has been working on its international relation strategy for longer than most institutions. There is a special funding for students going abroad from the institutional budget. The ERASMUS exchanges cover about 38% of the outgoing students. They are gaining in importance. Their take-up rate is 90% and the absolute numbers in student mobility are by far the highest in the Czech Republic, both for outgoing and incoming students. Their organisation is available on the Internet site of the International Relation Office (http://www.cuni.cz/erasmus/welcome.html.en).

The European Higher Education Area

On June 19, 1999, the Ministers of Education signed the Bologna Declaration on the creation of a common space for European higher education. It was a follow-up to the Sorbonne Declaration which was signed on the occasion of the celebration of the anniversary of the Sorbonne University a year before. In 2001, there was the Summit of ministers in charge of higher education in Prague. In its final document (the ‘Prague Communiqué’), it assesses the progress achieved and sets priorities to meet the main goal of the Bologna Declaration, the creation of a European Higher Education Area.

It is a response to the fact that higher education in most European countries has undergone a transition from an elite model to a modern model based on the participation of a broad segment of the population in a diversified tertiary system. The statistics show that, since the 1970s, the number of higher education students in EU countries doubled or tripled (in Portugal it quadrupled) and that, since 1990, the trend is the same in the Czech Republic.

The development in last few decades in Europe was not homogeneous. Some European students think that higher education systems do not meet their demands and expectations concerning the labour market. They do not find the European systems flexible. In many countries, 5 years (or more) are required to obtain the first degree. If there are institutions providing professionally-oriented higher education, including shorter programmes (Fachhochschulen, polytechnics, etc.), the transfer between them and universities is low, and in some countries it is not recognised at the same ‘output’ level as comparable higher education in traditional universities. This situation is beginning to change, and the process of creating a European Higher Education Area plays a very positive role here.

All the problems multiply when students seek mobility and consequent recognition — academic and/or professional. There is no doubt that many European students leave for the U.S. and maybe Canada and Australia, and that there are fewer students coming to study in Europe from other areas of the world.
(e.g. Asia, Latin America). The overseas students that come to Europe are looking not only for good education, but also for a transparent and user-friendly system.

The ‘Bologna-Prague’ process seeks to address the issues which are common to all the European systems: increasing numbers of students, employability of graduates and diversification of higher education as a response to maintaining the quality of higher education. Only in this way can a more compatible/harmonised system be built which will increase the competitiveness of European higher education with American higher education. The main objectives of the European Higher Education Area are:

- Introducing a system of transparent and comparable levels within higher education through the use of the ‘Diploma Supplement’ and seeking a common framework of qualifications/levels of education;
- The adoption of a system based on two major cycles. The shorter one, leading to a first higher education degree (bachelor), lasts at least three years. The qualification gained after the first cycle should be relevant to the labour market. The second cycle leads to the master and/or doctor’s degree. In practice, this means continuing the transformation of higher education in the common framework of three levels — bachelor, master and doctor — which will help the different systems to project their higher education ‘outputs’ into the common framework. It will continue the implementation of short bachelor cycle programmes, which are broadly diversified to meet the demands for further studies, as well for entrance in the labour market and the 1–3-year master programmes;
- The development of a system of credits as an appropriate means of promoting student mobility. The credits could also be acquired in the non-university sector and lifelong learning. The general use of credit systems like ECTS or ECTS compatible including both an accumulative and transfer function is the important task for all European countries.
- The system should be characterised by the increase of student and academic staff mobility — the aim is to remove obstacles limiting mobility whether caused by problems related to the recognition of education or social and political problems.
- Maintaining the quality of higher education. It is the basic pre-condition for confidence and mutual trust between European countries.
- Promoting European cooperation concerning the content of education, particularly with regard to curricula development, integrated programmes of study, training and research, inter-institutional cooperation, etc. In Prague, quality assurance and accreditation, recognition of diplomas, international cooperation in discipline-oriented joint programmes and degrees, removing obstacles to mobility, especially with regard to social issues, were topics suggested for further ‘European’ discussion in 2001–2003.

The Czech Higher Education System Seen Through the Prism of the European Higher Education Area

The Czech higher education system is described in Fig. 1.
Problems and Tools in the Implementation of the European Higher Education Area

Weak points

It is clearly seen that there is a framework enabling to build a diversified tertiary sector. The system identifies three higher education levels — bachelor, master, doctor. In practice, the reality is more complicated. Although the number of bachelor and master programmes is similar, most graduates are graduates of master degree programmes, only some 18% finish with bachelor degree and do not continue in a master programme.

The legislative framework offers good preconditions for transferability and openness within the system, namely

1) among educational institutions of various kinds at national and/or international levels (higher education institutions, higher professional schools, and other educational institutions);
2) among accredited study programmes of higher education institutions, educational programmes of higher professional schools, short courses, and programmes of lifelong learning guaranteed by the relevant institution;
3) within the relevant institution — a higher education institution (programmes, courses which may be recognised as parts of higher education studies), a higher professional school (programmes and courses which may be recognised as part of tertiary education).
The national and international mobility of students is low. About 3% of Czech students study for at least a period/semester abroad and foreign students (including the Slovaks) represent about 2% of the student body in Czech universities. (If we want to implement the Sorbonne and Bologna Declarations and enable each student to spend at least one semester abroad, the rate of outgoing students should be about 12–13% instead of 3%).

There is practically no mobility of academic staff at national level; international mobility is only beginning to develop.

Tools

To improve the situation, the Ministry uses its long-term strategy and its correspondence with the long-term strategic plans of HEIs as described in the previous chapter. The additional financial support of the State, the help of ERASMUS, LEONARDO, and other possibilities within regional and bilateral programmes should help to improve the weak points. Where the objectives are not met by these programmes, the Ministry allocates funding through the Programmes of Development, namely to support further restructuralisation of study programmes, cooperation between different types of institutions and mobility of students within the direct cooperation of HEIs since 2001.

Our strategy concerning recognition is based on the implementation of the Council of Europe/UNESCO Lisbon Recognition Convention. The Czech Republic ratified the Convention in February 2000. Since then, seminars and workshops have been organised with HEIs representatives to implement the basic principle — the study periods/completed studies should be assessed as a whole. The assessment should be based on students’ study load, expressed by the credits gained and the quality of the respective institution. And again the ERASMUS programme with its ECTS, curriculum development projects as well as the NARIC Network is an excellent tool. The Diploma Supplement is issued at the students’ request.

The Accreditation Commission

An important issue of the Higher Education Area is maintaining the quality of higher education through quality assurance mechanisms. The mechanism of evaluation of study programmes provided by Czech HEIs, which is comparable with those used in developed countries, has been established. The Higher Education Act of 1998 determines that any higher education institution has to regularly provide its internal quality assessment and specify details of the process in its internal regulations.

Any higher education study programme has to be accredited. The Ministry of Education awards accreditation only if the expert opinion of the Accreditation Commission is positive. The Accreditation Commission is an independent body composed of 21 academic and professional experts appointed by the Czech government. There are also foreign members. Positive expert opinion of the Accreditation Commission is necessary in the case of the state licence enabling the establishment of private higher education institutions.

The Accreditation Commission is also concerned with the overall quality of higher education. Since 1992, it has conducted a peer review and a comparative
evaluation of faculties in related fields of study and it is expected that it will continue this activity.

The Accreditation Commission is a member of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher education (INQAAHE) and cooperates with similar bodies at regional level — through the regional sub-network of INQAAHE for Central and Eastern European countries. In 2001, it applied for membership in the European Quality Assurance Network (ENQA) established under the umbrella of European Commission. The associated countries (to which the Czech Republic belongs) were accepted members of ENQA at the second General Assembly meeting in Brussels in May 2001. The importance of this international network was stressed during the Salamanca Convention in March 2001. It was further developed in Prague during the Summit in May. It was suggested that ENQA should be encouraged to facilitate open floor (a platform) for participation of various organisations and agencies on quality assurance to give them the opportunity to share and disseminate good practice and to advise each other on appropriate steps to be taken.

Back to the European Scale

From the Czech example we can see that to implement the objectives of the European Higher Education Area some of the instruments and platforms for sharing experiences and examples of good practice are already there, e.g. the European Community programmes, TEMPUS, SOCRATES LEONARDO DA VINCI, 5th FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME, and also regional schemes, Network of Information and Recognition Centres (ENIC/NARIC Network), the 1997 Council of Europe/UNESCO Lisbon Recognition Convention, the European Network of Quality Assurance (ENQA), etc. What is of utmost importance is to coordinate all possibilities nationally and on a European scale and make the most effective use of them. It is clearly seen that the objectives and results achieved via the EU Programmes, especially ERASMUS, are the same as those which were identified in building the European Higher Education Area and expressed in the Sorbonne and Bologna Declarations and the Prague Communiqué (2001). ERASMUS and SOCRATES, together with the EURYDICE, NARIC, supporting projects such as the Diploma Supplement implementation or cooperation with ENQA contribute to the process at the European level and bring their impact to participating higher education institutions.

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