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The System of Higher Education in CSFR

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The System of Higher Education in CSFR

Botho von Kopp

Contents	Page
1. From the founding of Charles University to the modern higher education system	2
2. The higher education system 1948-1989	3
2.1 Basic data on higher education	3
2.2 Organizaton and structure of the courses of studies	4
2.3 Developments after 1989 and future trends	6

CS
1.1
S. 1

1. From the founding of Charles University to the modern higher education system

Charles University of Prague was founded in 1348 as the oldest in Middle Europe by Charles from the house of Luxemburg, king of Bohemia, later Charles IV, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. As usual at that time, students and teachers were grouped into "nationes" which of course had not exactly the same meaning like the modern word. There was a Bohemian "nation", which included Czechs, Germans and Hungarians, a Saxonian (including the students from Holland and England), a Bavarian and a Polish "nation".

At the end of the 14th century, the radical religious, social and "national" reform movement of Jan Hus spread over Bohemia. Hus, a graduate of and teacher at Charles University, was burnt in 1415 at the stake for his teachings. Hussite wars and international crusades against Bohemia (until 1437), affected also the university. After the wars up to 1618 Catholicism and "Utraquism" (a moderate Hussitism) coexisted in Bohemia. The university was in this period dominantly Utraquistic and an important center of science in the age of Humanism. Jesuits set up own academies.

In Slovakia the famous Hungarian king Matyas Korvin founded a first university (Academia Istropolitana) in Bratislava in 1467 which however ceased to exist after his dead. Intellectual and scientific contacts between the Bohemian lands and Slovakia were strong at that time, and also Slovaks could be found studying and teaching at Prague.

Religious coexistence was guaranteed in a "bill of tolerance". Its violation gave a signal to the Thirty-Years-War 1618–1648. Defeated Bohemia came under unconditioned Habsburg rule and was re-catholized. Thousands were forced to emigrate, among them Jan Amos Komensky/Comenius. The university, handed over to the Jesuits in 1622 and, officially conjoined in 1654 with the Jesuit's colleges, became the "University of Charles and Ferdinand".

The function of education in the "enlightened absolutist" state of Maria Theresia and her son Josef changed in favour of practical needs. In university Latin as a language of instruction was replaced by German. An elder school of ingeneering – founded as the first of its kind in Europe in 1706 – became part to the university and independent in 1806. It was the University of Prague.

Czech patriots began soon to advance Czech schooling on all levels against many obstacles, but were lastly very successful. Czech as language of instruction gained increasingly a dominant position and Technical University and university were divided into a Czech and a German one in 1869 and 1882 respectively. The other institutions (technical and art academies) usually offered courses in both languages under the same roof.

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S. 2

In Slovakia several times institutions of higher education had been founded, but they never lasted for long and never taught in Slovak language. Except for a short period, even Slovak secondary education was forbidden by the Hungarian authorities.

After founding the Czechoslovak Republic 1918, universities at Brno and Bratislava were set up. Higher educational enrolment grew quickly up to around 27.000 domestic students. The higher education system was of high quality, and even famous in some fields (for instance the "Prague school of linguistics").

Prague's German University (with an average of 3.500 students between 1918–1938) ended ingloriously as an instrument of Nazi occupation. But it had been, in better times, a place of reputed academic work. After all, no one less than Albert Einstein held for one year (1911/12) the chair of theoretical physics at Prague's German University.

Under German occupation all Czech universities were closed. On November the 17th of 1939, 9 students were executed, more than 1.000 taken to prison. In the fascist Slovak State 1939–1945, higher educational institutions continued to work, but neither politically nor academically there is reason for them to look with pride at this period.

2. The higher educational system 1948 –1989

After the war, universities were re-opened in 1945. When the Communist party came to power in February 1948, immediately substantial structural and contentual changes took place. "Sovietization" reached a peak around 1953. In the Stalinist era the Soviet model was paramount: the Academy of Science became the highest academic authority and university a place of teaching in the first line; a strong specialization was introduced: the figure of institutions boosted from 11 in 1945 to 40 in 1954 then 50 in 1960 and declined to 38 in 1965 (36 in 1974); Corresponding the policy of favouring heavy industry, technical studies expanded: Since 1953 nearly 50 % of all students study in those fields. The Communist party stressed ideological and social emancipatory issues like opening consequently the university for worker's and peasant's children. To a degree these programs were successful: The share of worker's children among the students grew considerably. Party's ideological and administrative control over the academic world changed several times. The extremes are marked by Stalinism in the early 1950ies, and the Prague Spring of 1968 with practical academic autonomy. Control increased again with the so called "normalization" after 1968.

2.1 Basic data on higher education

In 1968 a law on the federal structure of the state passed. Since then universities in each republic are supervised by the respective Ministry of Education. The single institutions are subdivided into faculties and chairs.

Total student enrolment grew steadily from 50.000 in 1950 to 200.000 in the year 1981. It decreased again to 170.000 in 1988. In 1981 there were 150.000 Full time students (about 14 % of the 20–24 years old) and in 1988 135.000 (12,5 %). Language of instruction is Czech or Slovak.

Higher education is grouped into following types of institutions (figures 1987/88, including foreigners, full and part-time students):

- 5 universities with all together 60.453 students: Prague (13.980 students), Bratislava (9.214), Brno (7.243), Olomouc (6.014), Kosice (3.864). Some of the faculties were moved out to smaller cities. In addition two Universities of Veterinary Medicine (Brno and Kosice) and 8 independent faculties of education in several cities are counted into the number of universities.
- 2 schools of economics with all together 17.436 students: Prague (10.068 students) and Bratislava (7.368).
- 10 technical universities (institutes of technology) with all together 74.770 students. Some of them are very complex, (Prague, Brno and Bratislava), others specialized to various degrees. (Institutes of: transport and communication, of mechanical and electrical engineering, of mechanical and textile engineering, of chemical technology, of mining and metallurgy).
- 4 agricultural institutes with all together 15.031 students (including faculties of operation and economics, agronomy, forestry mechanization wood-working technology).
- 6 arts academies with all together 2.094 students and the following specializations: music and dramatic arts, fine arts, applied arts and industrial design, music and dramatic arts).

Apart from this "regular" higher educational system there existed:

- 6 colleges for the training of priests in the different denominations with all together 766 students, and several communist's party, police and military academies.

2.2 Organization and structure of the courses of studies.

Precondition for admission to higher education is having obtained the "matura" and being successful in the admission procedure. School time for obtaining the "matura" was several times changed from 13 to 12 years and back. Three types of schools provide the "matura" which is obtained from about 40–45 % of the 18–year old population: higher vocational, technical and general (gymnasia) secondary schools. The criteria for admission (school records, written and oral testing) were prescribed and controlled by the ministry. The figures of admission were centrally planed and equally prescribed into detail. It was however not exceptional that the admission figures were exceeded or (in some technical fields) not fulfilled. Competition for admission in most fields is strong.

The academic school year (begin: September 1) is organized into two terms extending over 15 weeks of teaching each and followed by special periods for testing. The courses of study, the number of lectures, seminars, practical trai-

ning, and the number of tests to be taken in order to proceed to the next year of study were prescribed in detailed syllabi. Generally the study of Marxism-Leninism, a foreign language and participating in sports to certain amounts of hours was compulsory, so was a part of the military service for male students. The regular time for completing a course of study was usually 4 or 5, in some cases 6 years for day-time studies (one year more for evening or distance studies). The drop-out rate was in the last two decades about 30 % for day time studies and about 40 % for part-time studies in the average, but showed great variations in the single fields of studies. Since tests, respectively school years could not be repeated more than once or twice, the absolute majority of all (full-time) students so far graduate before the age of 25.

Since there were no institutions with less than 4-year courses, all graduation certificates were formally on an equal level of "completed university education". The names for the different graduation certificates varied and were changed several times. The final examination usually consists of a written (diploma) thesis (projects or constructs), its oral defense and additional oral examinations (with a maximum of 3 subjects). The graduates of the technical, economical and agricultural higher educational institutions are given the title "engineer", the graduates of medical schools are "Doctors of Medicine" (MUDr.) respectively "Doctors of Veterinary Medicine" (MVDr.), the graduates of the art schools "Academic" Artists ("Academic Painter" etc.). The university graduates had no special title, however, could, after an additional examination receive the title "Doctor of ..." ("Doctor of Philosophy": PhDr., "Doctor of Natural Sciences": RNDr., "Doctor of Law": JUDr. etc.). Very good students received this title automatically. It is important to stress, that these "doctoral" titles gained during the last decades, are not equivalent with the German "Dr." or the Anglosaxon "PhD", which in Czechoslovakia is "Candidate of Science" (Csc.); the second doctorate ("habilitation") is the "Doctor of Sciences" (Dr.Sc.).

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1.1
S. 5

There was no tuition fee. The figure for students receiving some scholarship was approximately one third during the last years. The main forms of financial aids were: social scholarships, regional and company scholarships and scholarships for excellency. About 70 % of all students lived in students dormitories.

Further education is organized in different forms (day-evening-, extra-mural studies) and mainly for those who combine occupation and studies in order to gain some university qualification. The respective figures varied between a low of 21.000 (1972), and a high of 50.000 (1965) which was nearly the half of the figure for the full-time in this year. In 1988 there were 29.000 such students (17 % of all students). Apart from those a growing number of students (over 9.000) are enrolled in courses in order to upgrade or to renew their qualification. Regular further educational courses are compulsory for physicians and were planned to be compulsory for teachers.

2.3 Developments after 1989 and future trends

After the overthrow of the communist government, substantial changes of contents and forms of higher education are taking place respectively can be expected. The most important are:

- Higher education has gained a high level of formal autonomy, especially in the field of contents of research and teaching. The students are now strongly represented in the elected academic senates (with nearly the half of all votes in some cases).
- Some new institutions are set up respectively planned to be set up. Among them are: the "Silesian University", going back to private initiative, functioning so far in two fields (economy and Czech philology) and apparently aiming at becoming an elite institution: for the first academic year (1990/91) only one fourth of all applicants were admitted who practically all had excellent school-marks. Partly former pedagogical faculties or specialized technical colleges try to become now universities (Plzen, Usti n.Labem, Ceske Budejovice). But also new faculties (as branches of existing universities) in smaller cities are planned.
- The criteria and figures for admission of students is now in the competence of the single institutions. This however does not mean so far free admission. Since interest in university studies grew in the last year, rather more applicants than before had to be refused; in the philosophical and law faculties for instance only one third of all applicants could enroll, in civic engineering half of all applicants were admitted. Like in former years written and partially also oral tests were used for screening.
- The syllabi are not any longer prescribed by the ministry and the school-like system of year-to-year advancement is being replaced by a system of freer choice for the student.
- The former uniform system of studies is divided into two levels: Short-time studies (2–3 years) which are finished with the "master" degree. The old "doctor"-titles can be still used but from now on the title "doctor" (without specifying the faculty) will be granted only after having completed a doctor's course and a "dissertation". The other titles (MuDr, MVDr, engineer) remain unchanged.
- Theological studies are being re-integrated into the universities.
- Marxism-Leninism as a compulsory subject was given up immediately in 1989/90.
- A (symbolic) rehabilitation was applied to all students and professors who were expelled from university under the former regime for political reasons.
- The universities and colleges were "purged", that is, in most cases the faculty was collectively dismissed with the possibility to compete again for employment. Practically all leading functions have been exchanged, but so far there are no figures how many professors were dismissed in the whole.
- It can be expected that the proportions between the students in technical fields and those in social and human sciences will change considerably.
- Expansion of higher education (which decreased since 1980) is proclaimed to be a main goal of educational policy.