

Higher education in Hungary

by Thomas von Ahn

During the 1980s, the call for reforms in the Hungarian scientific world was increasing constantly and even led to some first reform initiatives. Nevertheless, the persons in charge – as in many other domains of society – were not prepared for the collapse of the socialist system.

Neither scientists nor politicians had any elaborated plans for the future organisation of either the structure or the institutions of university, science, research and technology. Therefore, the first task of post-socialist university and science politics was to find a system which would match with the new democratic system and social market economy, and which would allow for national specifics as well as international standards. 'The return to Europe' was the guiding theme of the reforms; they aimed at reintegration into the European academic tradition as well as catching up with scientific and technical developments.

Return to Europe

This held true for the scientific world in general as well as for higher education in particular: according to a speech that József Antall, Prime Minister of the first freely elected government, gave in May 1990, the Hungarian government was striving to raise the level of universities and colleges to European standards. This meant that the autonomy of university institutions was to be restored and the freedom of research and teaching secured.

However, apart from the increasing support of research at the universities, the new Higher Education Act which came into force in 1993 did not constitute a radical break with the former system.

This system had already included several elements of reform and therefore differed considerably from the ideological rigidity of those in other socialist countries. Still, the Act of 1993 did not yet complete the reforms: even today you can see changes in Hungarian higher education if you follow a series of reforms which culminated in a new Act on higher education this year. As a two-cycle degree system is supposed to be introduced everywhere by 1 September 2006, this second post-socialist Act clearly bears the mark of the Bologna process. On the other hand, the Hungarian President refused to sign the new Act in May 2005, doubting whether it was compatible with the constitution. Although the constitutional judge's complaints won't possibly call the whole Act into question, the 'return to Europe' appears to be accompanied by turbulences caused not least by the enormous changes which the whole European scientific world is undergoing at present.

Dual system

At the moment, Hungary still has a dual university system distinguishing between universities and colleges – although there are universities with college faculties and university courses at colleges. In addition to these two classic courses of studies, higher vocational education came into being in 1998/99. While it had been left to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences to award doctorates for a long time during the socialist era, accredited PhD schools at universities now take care of most of the doctoral candidates. Today, two of the most important institutions 'behind the scenes' are the Higher Education and Research Council, which works for the Minister of Education, and the Hungarian Accreditation Committee.

The latter was founded in 1997 and has since not only evaluated every university and college faculty, but also plays an important role in the appropriation of government grants, which are distributed at least partly according to work performed. The most important bodies representing higher education institutions are the Hungarian Rectors' Conference and the College Directors' Conference, while the National Union of Students in Hungary and the National Association of PhD Students are the ultimate bodies that attend to students' interests.

Apart from the new Act on higher education that passed this year, an amendment of the law in 1999 initiated the most extensive university reforms so far, predominantly changing the structure of the institutions of higher education. This so-called integration of higher education aimed at expanding and flexibilising educational opportunities and improving the quality of teaching. Furthermore, the greater numbers of students had to be offered adequate access to education, and emerging synergetic effects were to

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improve research and development at university institutions. Last but not least the legislator wanted to meet social and economic needs by founding regional centres of education, which were also to counter the extremely fragmented scientific world. The new associations of colleges and universities (principle of Universitas) already hinted at the following reform: not only the institutions were to be united, but it was also planned to abolish their curricular splitting of studies in favour of the two-cycle degree structure. The following numbers might give some idea of the effects of this reform: in 1993 there were 25 universities and 24 colleges registered, in 2000 the

number went down to 13 universities and 12 colleges. Today, national higher education comprises 18 universities and 13 colleges. In addition, there are two private and five church universities as well as 12 private and 22 church colleges.

Student numbers

Since 1990, the number of students has almost quadrupled. In the academic year 2004/05 more than 420 000 students were registered, 58% of which were women. However, the number of lecturers did not rise accordingly: in 1990, about 16 300 lecturers were employed in higher education, in 2000 it was 21 200. So the student per lecturer ratio deteriorated from 6.2 to 13.1. Today, there are 18 students for every single lecturer on average, although this does correspond to similar figures for the EU. But it shows us that the rising number of students was not followed by proportionally enlarged capacities of the universities: although the government grants, for example, have increased greatly in recent years – from 158 million euro in 1993 to 854 million in 2004 – it has never exceeded 1.12% (in 2003) of the GDP. On the subject of state financing, we must also point out that the universities already had to economise to such a degree in the late 1990s that irreversible damage in essential parts and structures of the institutions was inevitable. Research at universities in particular suffered from grants fluctuating between 0.85% and 0.97% of the GDP from 1995 to 2000. Moreover, the method of financing is regarded as inflexible, since grants are mainly based on the size of the institution and less on quality parameters. But the new Act on higher education is supposed to grant the institutions the right to employ grants more freely.

Other reforms

Other important reforms in recent years were the introduction of a student loan programme in 2001 and the ECTS system in 2003, as well as abolishing entrance examinations at universities this year. The student loan amounts to EUR 62–125 a month, bears an 11.25% rate of interest and is granted for up to 10 semesters. So far, 200 000 students have applied for a loan. When they start working, they also



The Parliament building, Budapest

begin to pay back the loan with 6% of their monthly income. The ECTS system is already obligatory for everyone; the EU has praised its realisation as exemplary. Abolishing of entrance examinations proved to be more difficult. A mistake the Ministry of Education made in the rules of procedure even led to a complaint to the constitutional court. Nevertheless, access to higher education is still determined by good results at secondary school.

The Hungarian minorities in neighbouring countries have also received more and more support: every year Hungary allocates university places free of charge for applicants from neighbouring states, in order to foster Hungarian-speaking elites in these countries in the long term. At the same time, 17% of the 51 million euro available for the education of Hungarian minorities was spent on Hungarian higher education in neighbouring countries in 2003.

Two-cycle system

However, most of the energy is being used in the change to a two-cycle degree system. Nobody knows how many Bachelor or Master programmes will replace the 413 traditional courses of studies. At the moment there are 102 Bachelor programmes to be accredited, whereas the Master programmes still have to be developed. Simultaneously, the traditional courses of studies are sup-

posed to be discontinued. To make the introduction of the new programmes possible the parliament recently had to pass an amendment to the Higher Education Act from 1993 – as the new Act still lies at the constitutional court.

All-European question

The past 15 years have shown that the Hungarian system of higher education has energetically been catching up the relevance it lost for historical reasons and at the same time been keeping up with the process of integration of the European Higher Education Area. We cannot say today whether the process is going to be completed successfully by 2010, as was planned. The one thing that is for certain is that success does not depend on the politicians in Budapest alone, but has become an all-European question. Nevertheless, aside from general positive progress, Hungarian higher education still has to face substantial problems owing to the small national budget – resulting from a bad economic situation rather than a lack of enthusiasm. In 2005 the institutions again had to economise on parts of their budget because the Hungarian state has serious problems meeting the commitments of the Maastricht Treaty. ■

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