

Editorial: Czech Higher Education at the Crossroads

This issue of the *Czech Sociological Review* is devoted primarily to higher education, its development, structural reforms, financing, accessibility, and inequality, with special emphasis on the Czech Republic and other transforming societies.

The decision to have sociologists, economists and policy-makers address some of these issues was not accidental. The accessibility of higher education has for decades been one of the central issues in modern sociology. Sociological research in most advanced countries has provided valuable results for policy-makers striving to design measures and policies aimed at reducing inequalities in access to higher education.

Though the research on social stratification evolved very rapidly once it was freed from ideological control, sociologists in post-communist countries still owe policy-makers relevant and unambiguous results concerning the development of educational inequality after the demise of socialist redistributive systems that controlled – though with varying degrees of success – the growth of and access to higher education through structural, financial and political measures. There is no doubt that a significant reduction of inequality in access to higher education is not possible without a true expansion of the tertiary education system.

In 'Western' countries, where inequality in access to higher education has diminished or at least has been kept stable, tertiary education had grown from an elite to a mass institution and enrolment rates have risen from the low teens to close to fifty percent of birth cohorts. In most of the former communist countries, such expansion, supported by organisational reforms has not taken place. Therefore, in order to meet equity goals and succeed in global economic competition, post-communist countries must expand their tertiary education systems and provide significantly more opportunities to meet the steadily increasing demand for higher education.

Owing to the still lower level of economic performance and available financial resources, the expansion of tertiary education in most of the post-communist countries is to be achieved under tough fiscal constraints. Since the development of human capital plays a crucial role in determining competitiveness and sustainable growth, and as the reduction of educational inequality will require a rapid growth of educational opportunities, post-communist countries are facing deep reforms of their tertiary educational systems, particularly their financing. If these reforms are to bring about sustainable growth in university budgets and greater efficiency, the policy-makers can hardly avoid implementing some forms of 'cost sharing', i.e. the financial participation of students and other private entities ultimately benefiting from the 'production' of the universities.

Available surveys and analyses show that such reforms will be quite difficult, not only because of the still strong 'socialist residues' in people's perceptions of ed-

education as part of their social entitlement, but also because post-communist countries show more and still growing socio-economic inequality in access to tertiary education than many advanced countries. There is a common notion that shifting some of the cost burdens of higher education from taxpayers to students, as the potential beneficiaries of education, will further increase socio-economic inequality in access to higher education. Is there any proof of this assumption from the countries where cost sharing has been implemented, along with a system of loans, student aid and subsidies?

There is no doubt that promoting equity in access to tertiary education and financing its growth are becoming intertwined issues, which bring together sociologists, economists and policy-makers. Clearly, the key question for policy-oriented sociological and economic research is whether there is a principal contradiction between equity and cost sharing. In order to promote research on these highly topical issues and raise arguments for policy and public debate, a group of scholars – sociologists, economists, and policy makers – decided to hold an international conference in Prague on *University Reform and Access to Higher Education*. This special issue, prepared with the collaboration of the organisers and the conference, aims to show where we are in addressing these issues and where the major gaps still remain.

Let us now briefly introduce the individual contributions.

The paper co-authored by Petr Matějů, Blanka Řeháková a Natalie Simonová (*Transition to University under Communism and after Its Demise: The Role of Socio-economic Background in the Transition between Secondary and Tertiary Education in the Czech Republic 1948–1998*) addresses the trend in inequality in access to tertiary education in the Czech Republic since 1989, when political control over the selection process was removed, redistributive policies were abandoned, and universities gained autonomy, but very soon fell into a deep financial crisis that hindered the further expansion of educational opportunities to meet the fast-growing educational aspirations. The authors conclude that class inequality in making the successful transition from secondary to tertiary education has increased significantly since 1989, particularly due to the widening gap between individuals from families of professionals on the one hand and semi-skilled and unskilled workers on the other.

Péter Róbert, one of the leading Hungarian sociologists of social stratification, focuses in his paper (*Self-selection and Selection: Transition from Secondary to Tertiary Education in Hungary*) on the main factors explaining persisting inequality in attaining university education in Hungary, specifically the role of social background in the self-selection process in the transition from secondary to tertiary education. His analysis of extensive data, drawn from a survey of all Hungarian secondary school graduates in 1998 that were eligible to apply for university, confirms that self-selection is more strongly affected by social origin than passing the entrance exams is. This conclusion supports the assumption of the above-mentioned article that children coming from lower social strata and less advantaged family environments decide not to engage in the tough competition with their more socially advantaged peers for a very limited number of educational spots at universities.

The article by Bruce Johnstone (*Cost Sharing in Higher Education: Tuition, Financial Assistance, and Accessibility in a Comparative Perspective*) addresses the central issues of the conference from an economic perspective. It outlines the main theoretical and practical rationales for shifting some of the higher education costs from governments and taxpayers to students and families. These rationales range from the sheer need for other-than-government revenue in a time of worldwide fiscal austerity, to the ideas that those who benefit should share the cost, to the neoliberal economic notion that tuition encourages greater institutional efficiency and responsiveness. The article also reviews the main arguments against cost sharing, which include socio-political ideologies that hold higher education to be a social entitlement, and the related view that society is the major beneficiary of higher education. The article goes on to document the actual implementation of cost-sharing policies (and especially tuition policies) in several countries and the student financial assistance policies that are designed to protect or encourage access among low-income students. The article concludes by looking at the relationship between cost sharing and enrolment behaviour in terms of the decision to apply to, and matriculate in, any higher educational institution, the decision to apply to a particular form of post-secondary education, the likelihood of degree completion, and the likelihood of going on to more advanced levels of higher education.

Bill Weldon's paper (*Considerations for Higher Education Systems in Post-Communist Societies: A Current Look at Czech Higher Education*) is an interesting attempt to look at Czech higher education from the perspective of the key stakeholders, experts and policy-makers. The paper, based on in-depth interviews with twenty experts, sends a clear warning to all those who are responsible for the future development of tertiary education in the Czech Republic: *"Czech higher education needs a champion. Within it there exists an apparent ambiguity of leadership. Leadership by committee, like a Rectors Conference, or leadership by influence, like some individual educators, is muddled in a confusion based on a lack of clearly defined leadership principles."* Paradoxically, the author's analysis of the interviews shows that there is a lack of consensus, not only with regard to the evaluation of the current situation, but also as far as the necessity of the reforms, their goals, policies and instruments are concerned. This is quite an alarming finding, particularly in view of the fact that the examples of the most recent successful educational reforms (e.g. Ireland or Finland) show that such reforms would not have been possible without a strong consensus among all key actors.

There are two contributions to the section of State-of-the-Art Reports, both focusing on the Czech educational system. With respect to the system of tertiary education there is a report by Petr Matějů and Natalie Simonová (*Czech Higher Education Still at the Crossroads*), which addresses the development of higher education in the Czech Republic, its legislative aspects, adopted and rejected structural and institutional reforms, developments in financing, enrolment and efficiency indicators. This report uses statistical data and other objective information to generally support the picture drawn by Bill Weldon: Czech higher education suffers from a lack of dy-

namism and seems to be in the trap of a stalemate typical for many transforming societies.

The leading Czech specialist on measurement in education and the former national co-ordinator of international student assessment projects, Jana Straková, provides a report with a brief overview of the large-scale studies of educational achievement that took place in the Czech Republic during the past decade. The report offers information on the data collected in these studies and provides a summary of the findings. Brief information about national activities in the field of student assessment is also included. We have chosen to include this report because we believe that some of the problems in higher education in the Czech Republic have their roots in the lower levels of the school system.

The editors of this issue realise that the changes in higher education and its accessibility deserve more space, with a wider spectrum of questions being addressed and more opinions being expressed. As usual, the major limiting factor was the availability of space. Both the organisers of the conference and the editors of this issue of the *Czech Sociological Review* believe that their effort will increase awareness in higher education and interest in its interdisciplinary research, addressing the growth, financing and accessibility of higher education. The *Czech Sociological Review* will be open to publishing papers and reports resulting from the continuing debate on these highly topical issues.

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