

Czechs still lag in university attendance

Law, psych, languages remain popular areas

By VANESSA BULKACZ

FOR THE POST

The Czech Republic still lags far behind most of Europe in the population's enrollment and completion of higher education, despite an upward trend since the fall of communism.

Within the European Union, only Slovakia and Malta have gross enrollment ratios for higher education lower than the Czech Republic, according to UNESCO statistics.

For the 2001-02 academic year, the most recent figures available, UNESCO statistics put the Czech Republic's gross enrollment for higher education at 34 percent. UNESCO data show other EU countries with similar-size populations, such as Belgium, Greece and Hungary, with 48, 61 and 44 percent gross enrollments, respectively.

The International Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) uses more precise population data provided by each country rather than the UN-furnished data used by UNESCO. But even based on OECD estimates, in 2001 the Czech Republic had the lowest population percentage in the EU who had completed tertiary education, at 11 percent. Italy and Slovakia showed the next-lowest tertiary education attainment levels, with 12 percent each.

Legging to differ

Many in the Czech education system disagree with these figures, citing

problems with statistical methodology and definitions. "The low number [for the Czech Republic] is because these statistics include the entire population, even those who were college-aged during communism when there was great neglect of the tertiary sector," said Jan Sokol, dean of humanities at Charles University.

Jaroslav Mullner, the deputy head of the Education Ministry, echoes Sokol's sentiments.

"We... really have lower numbers, but they cannot be compared from one year to another because the older generations had a lower rate of university attendance," Mullner and Sokol insist that current enrollment rates for college-age Czechs are high.

But according to Allison Kennedy, an analyst at the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, older generations are not included in either UNESCO or OECD calculations. "In UNESCO tertiary education gross enrollment ratios, we use the total number of pupils enrolled for five years after completion of secondary education," Kennedy said. OECD estimates for tertiary education completion include only 25- to 34-year-olds.

Some blame low enrollment on high rejection rates at Czech universities. Sokol, who administers entrance exams every year at Charles University, dismisses that idea. "If's true, we only accept every third or fourth student that applies. But in my experience, those who were not accepted would not be able to complete the course anyway."

The next logical explanation for the low numbers might be a shortage of universities in the Czech Republic. Mullner doesn't believe that. "I think

the number of universities here is rather high. It is enough." In fact, the ratio of universities to population in the Czech Republic is roughly average for similarly sized EU countries. According to statistics provided by the UNESCO-affiliated International

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Structural issues

Most experts agree that the Czech tertiary education system's structure is flawed. "It is not a general disportion of students attending university. The problem is structural," Sokol said. "Schools have trouble filling spots in some study areas, while other areas that are more in vogue, such as

law, psychology and languages, have high rejection rates because of space limitations."

Petr Matějka, chairman of the Institute for Social and Economic Analysis in Prague, agrees that the problem is structural, but he cites different causes. "University students must stay in school for four or five years and achieve a master's degree, which is called a 'unitary' system, which some also call an 'elitist' system."

Despite having signed an EU agreement in 1999 to allow for binary systems — separate bachelor's and master's programs — in higher education, the Czech Republic has been slow to adapt. Matějka cites the financial interests of public institutions for the delay. "The public education system is terribly underfinanced, but by law, public universities are not allowed to charge tuition," Matějka said, making public institutions resist the binary system. "Why would they want students to have the opportunity to move after two years when the Education Ministry provides a subsidy for each enrolled student?"

Because of this problem, Matějka says the number of new students has actually been dropping as the ministry's financial woes and debt have grown. Matějka says, however, that the number of bachelor's degree programs grew significantly this year. "These [recent] statistics have scared the Czech Republic into taking a much stronger position. They know we must now keep pace with other EU countries."

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