

Slovakia

Networking: the key to success?

The transition to a market economy and a multiparty democracy, started by the economic transformation in 1991 and the creation of an independent state in 1993, has resulted in dramatic changes in Slovakia. However, changes in education may not be so evident. Some analysts, mainly right-wing economists, consider that educational reform has not even started. Others, predominantly from the education sector, consider that the reforms shifting responsibilities from the state to self-governing bodies and from the Ministry of Education to regional and local authorities have been too hasty. With the exception of power-sharing reforms, developments in other areas have been gradual and more subtle, for example the steady development in post-secondary education and curriculum design.

One major development that perhaps is difficult to quantify and therefore has received little recognition is the growth of networking and the increased spirit of openness since the 1990s. Crucial changes in education have stemmed from partnerships, e.g. within the Phare VET reform programme aimed at the establishment of pilot schools, in bilateral projects or in current community projects mainly within the Leonardo da Vinci and Comenius programmes. Changes such as these, which can be introduced by partnerships directly into school infrastructure and day to day working, are the most important and effective means of reform. Broad measures, for example increased autonomy in curriculum development (10 % of weekly hours and 30 % of content left for adjustment to regional and local needs) or the promotion of self-governance by creating school boards, cannot produce such significant change so easily.

The further promotion of openness, networking and school-to-school partnerships, successfully initiated in the 1990s, is crucial to continued educational reform in the 2000s.

No investment, no incentive

The availability of adequate finance is a vital factor in successfully coordinating the many policies in education and VET funding; as resources are limited, this is a major challenge facing the Slovakian education system. The present state budget based financing system encourages an insular approach and imbalance among stakeholders. These regional disparities cannot be overcome, nor more effective use made of resources, without devolving budgets and agreeing on the appropriate targeting of funds.

More efficient social partnerships cannot be formed without the finance for VET being drawn from diverse sources; employers cannot be effectively involved unless they contribute directly to VET and/or are attracted by financial incentives. Further, financial regulation is needed to ensure consistency in the proper allocation of resources between initial and continuing VET and training for the unemployed, and between formal, non-formal and informal LLL.

A tax reform, implemented on 1 January 2004, introduced a flat rate of 19 % income, corporate and value added tax and is expected to attract foreign investment and stimulate free enterprise at home. These developments should be accompanied by promoting the value of education and training and investment by the business world.

Businesses still suffering from lack of liquidity, a dead capital market and an inability to

obtain credit might not recognise the importance of investment in human resources. Equally, people struggling with rising living costs as a result of the increase in value added tax on everyday goods and services, and by the deregulation of the cost of energy, might also be deterred from investing in education and training. There is a resistance to funding VET by a levy over a 10 year period but the developing alternative funding measures encourage all those involved to adopt pro-educational strategies.

Before being able to implement the Lisbon strategy and accept calls for higher investment in LLL, the Slovak government must face two fundamental issues.

- the problems arising from the way that budgets are devolved and allocated as a result of the 2004 fiscal decentralisation (1);
- the way in which the tax reforms introduced in 2004 can assist in developing the quality of education and training and an improved method of funding VET and LLL (2).

(1) While responsibilities have been transferred to regional level and municipalities, the state still controls the funds.

(2) A robust financing scheme which enables entrepreneurs to invest in VET is needed, currently the state decides where the investment is made.

More information from:

Juraj Vantuch at sno@netax.sk .
Štátny inštitút odborného vzdelávania
(ŠIOV - State Institute of Vocational Education and Training)
Tel. (421 2) 54 77 67 74 - Fax (421 2) 54 77 67 74
Available from Internet: http://www.education.gov.sk/pro/siov_index.htm

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