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Slovakia

Fees in higher education: yes or no?

For the first time, tuition fees have been introduced for higher education in Slovakia. Starting in 2008/2009, universities will be allowed to charge part-time students for their studies. This was made possible by a controversial amendment to the Higher Education Act, passed by Parliament in July 2007.

Remarkably, it was a left-wing coalition government that argued in favour of introducing the fees and indeed of bringing market forces into higher education. The right-wing opposition parties, which had unsuccessfully attempted to introduce fees for all students, protested that this amendment violated the Constitution. It is worth trying to decipher this apparently counterintuitive political alignment.

Though students currently cannot be charged for their studies, many part-time students have been asked to make donations through university-affiliated third parties who organise the studies and subsequently award a diploma. This bypassing of the law had been a convenient solution for both schools and students. Three ministers of education had unsuccessfully tried to stop this practice; a textbook case of market forces coming to the aid of students facing a dearth of university places.

Under to the new law, the Ministry of Education will offer tuition-free studies to part-time students, but within financial limits that reflect labour market needs and the quality of the university. It is left to the university to decide how many part-time students it will accept and which study programmes it will offer for free. If a university attracts fewer students than foreseen, the money will go back to the Ministry. But if it is able to accommodate more students, it will be allowed to charge the extra students for tuition.

Results so far show that the best performers are the Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava, with a 2.2 % unemployment rate, and Comenius University (6.1 %). The least successful are the Technical University in Košice (15.1 %) and the University of Prešov (21.9 %), which both lost -0,7 percentage point from their share. (One percentage point represents SKK 2 million.)

Some universities are now saying that they will accept the best students for free in all study programmes, while those who do less well will be charged for their studies. This would lead to three distinct student categories: full-time students studying for free, lucky part-time students also studying for free, and fee-paying part-time students. To some, this approach is fair, but others think it is both conducive to bribery and in violation of the constitutional principle of equal treatment. Comenius University, the country's largest, has declared that it

intends to solve this problem by collecting fees from all part-time students in attractive study programmes and no fees from part-time students in programmes that attract less attention.

Time will tell whether this form of 'regulated market forces' will work. Private universities are not satisfied with the rule stipulating that part-time students can be up to 50% of all new students. Universities from regions with high unemployment (Prešov and Košice) object to the way in which graduate unemployment is calculated. It is true that graduate unemployment rates correspond to the total unemployment rates in these regions; the criticism that the graduate unemployment rates do not reflect the quality of education would thus appear to be valid. Moreover, this measure might cause an even greater brain drain in these regions. The results of the new policy are expected to become clear in the May 2009 data for graduate unemployment.

Ironically, since 2006 the total number of places in higher education has exceeded the annual number of secondary school graduates who are eligible for higher education. Competition for full-time students is thus expected to become ever stronger.

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