

Slovakia

The chicken and egg in the development of vocational training

Financing education in Slovakia is from 2004 strictly based on per capita contributions. In a country facing a dramatic decline in live births from over 80 000 in 1989 to slightly over 50 000 in 2003, per capita financing causes fundamental changes in the network of schools. Municipalities are forced to merge and close schools and kindergartens. In the school year 2004/2005 over 200 institutions have been closed and over 450 merged with others. The ebbing tide will dramatically affect secondary schools very soon. Already, the self-governing regions maintaining secondary schools are having to close and merge schools lacking students, as the following examples show.

The Associated Secondary School has recently appeared in Dolný Kubín as a result of merging one secondary specialised school and two secondary vocational schools. It offers various programmes in different areas of study, e.g. food-processing (baker), textile and clothing (dressmaker), metal processing (painter), economics and organisation, retail and services (shop assistant - horticulture products), agriculture and forestry (farmer).

A newly established Church Associated Secondary School in Trebišov offers programmes covering areas of study, such as economics and organisation, retail and services (shop assistant, hairdresser), metal processing (passenger car mechanic), textile and clothing (dressmaker), food-processing (baker-pâtissier), electrotechnics (auto/car electrician).

No doubt, it is correct and saves money to offer theoretical education and training within one school and to use capacities efficiently. Nevertheless, problems may occur in the provision of practical training and in ensuring the quality of education and training in a new heterogeneous environment. The fiscal pressure on public education authorities to undertake all necessary cost saving activities is hard. Nationwide over 3 000 teachers lost their jobs in 2004 due to the declining numbers of students.

The most interesting point however is how the regions deal with the restructuring of VET schools. There are two contrasting views here. 'Economists', criticising soft fiscal constraints and the gradual increase in the indebtedness of schools consider the current fiscal pressure inevitable for the sake of efficient allocation of means. 'Educationalists' speak about the underestimation of the long-term impact on the future labour force, about debts caused by permanent undercapitalisation, and about the educational needs of regions and the real quality of VET schools. Indeed, what they say sounds plausible. The restructuring of the network of schools and programmes should not be blindly driven by fiscal limits; it should follow a clear vision of regional development, labour market needs, and of the quality assurance in VET schools. It is however also plausible to argue that these initiatives would not exist without fiscal pressure and that it is impossible to wait for visions and policy papers, which are permanently in the process of finalisation.

So, what should come first, a regional vision followed by subsequent and subordinated economic action, or an economic action-creating environment for subsequent regional development? Which is the chicken? Which is the egg?

How to solve the chicken and egg dilemma in VET and the regional development is not as simple as it is in biology, but the question is correct. Perhaps it is best to bypass the dichotomy and avoid, by developing balanced and cohesive policies, both the reluctance of hardcore educationalists to change and the rigidity and tendency to economise the whole of life of hardcore 'economists'.

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