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'Tuition in disguise' upsets student groups

In an attempt to mend its budget gap, Charles University has been working to implement a registration fee of thousands of crowns that it plans to present to the Education Ministry in September as part of an extensive proposal to amend legislation on higher education.

Dubbed by critics as "tuition in disguise," the proposed 4,800 Kč (\$267) fee marks yet another drift of higher education toward a tuition-based system, something the state has been mulling for years.

The idea of a tuition-based university system has surfaced numerous times over the past several years to help bolster a flailing economy, but officials have always stated that it would take a minimum of three to four years to put such a model in place.

While Charles University's proposed annual fee would help cover directorial, service and administrative operating costs, boosting the university's resources 7 percent, the move has many student groups crying foul.

"The Student Chamber of the Council of Higher Education Institutions is convinced that the commercialization of education would not deliver the often-mentioned positive effects — increased income of higher-education institutions, the rise of quality of education and students' motivation," says Miroslav Jašurek, the chamber's spokesman. "The implementation of tuition is often accompanied by a drop in expenditure for higher education from the state budget."

Jašurek also points out that the risks of tuition loans, which build on the assumption that graduates earn more than those who haven't attended higher education and can therefore aptly pay back tuition costs after graduating.

"This assumption, however, became problematic once the Czech higher-education system changed from an elitist system to a universal one — more than 50 percent of the corresponding age group enters this system," he says.

Officials at Charles University point out that the annual budget is short 2 billion Kč. According to a study by the university's Centre for Education Politics, the country's average relative expenditure per student in 2008 stands a quarter lower than the EU average. The university estimates the budget gap is somewhere between 7 billion and 10 billion Kč.

The Education Ministry is not completely onboard with the university's plans, arguing that a better financial aid system should precede any form of financial contribution from the student body.

In its reform proposal concerning tertiary education that passed the government in January, the Education Ministry calls for a discussion of the possible forms of students' financial contributions and proposes state study loans to be repaid after graduation.

Motivation

Under the ministry's proposal, a system of loans would be launched beforehand, and the money would be paid back in installments from the graduate's wages. In addition, tuition would only apply to students who started their education after the law was introduced. Those who started their studies earlier wouldn't have to pay tuition, according to ministry officials. Right now, a public higher education degree does not cost students anything.

The plan has its advocates. "The implementation of tuition would increase the students' motivation to really work and to demand quality education in return for their money and, subsequently, indirectly influence the quality of higher education," says Václav Havlíček, the head of the Czech Technical University (ČVUT) and the deputy chair of the Czech Rectors' Conference.

Havlíček, however, empathizes with Charles University's attempt to replenish its budget with registration fees and points to ČVUT's tight yearly budget of 1.3 billion Kč for 24,000 students. The lack of funding essentially translates into few teaching spots and poor student housing, he points out.

Although Charles University seeks a substantial financial student involvement, it opposes stripping the role of the student down to an economic one. University officials also say they don't want to see their students' status diminish to that of clients, consumers and a future work force.

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