
Education changing to suit the times

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| 9.2.2009, rubrika: The List, strana: 44, autor: JAISHREE KALIA

The economic downturn has resulted in many people seeking out further education, hoping to increase their employment options and recognition within the workplace.

Five years after joining the European Union, the Czech Education system has experienced a wave of changes. With many people revisiting education in anticipation of healthier job prospects, the colleges and universities of the Czech Republic and the international schools of Prague are feeling the tides.

Many admission deadlines have not passed yet. "We expect the [economic] downturn to increase the number of applications," said Libor Dušek, the deputy director for public relations at CERGE-EI, a joint think tank run by Charles University. CERGE-EI offers a doctoral program in economics. As of September 2009, it will also offer a "terminal" master's degree for people who do not wish to continue to a Ph. D.

Other school directors expressed similar ideas. "As it stands I have more applicants now than this time last year," said Thomas Mershon, the director of the Prague campus of University of Pittsburgh. In Prague, the university runs an Executive Masters in Business Administration (EMBA) program through its Joseph M. Katz Graduate School of Business. Dušek said he believes that although the EU has not had any direct impact on the curriculum, it has formed a correlation with the number of foreign students arriving. "There has been a continuing increasing trend in the number of countries from which our students and faculty come. Today, it is 35 countries and the trend is to have one or two students or professors from more distant countries like China, Japan or Ethiopia," Dušek told CBW. This could be from the increased access of language courses now available in the Czech Republic. CERGE-EI also finds increased competition coming from EU membership. "The major challenge for our school has been an increasing competition from the Ph. D. programs in Western Europe, where the governments have started much more generous funding for research and Ph. D. students in recent years. Those programs have also become more open to students from Central and Eastern Europe as the Czech Republic and other post-communist countries entered the EU," Dušek proclaims. Keeping pace Many experts claim that the education system is no longer keeping pace. Ján Figel, the European commissioner for education, culture and youth, declared that the EU must pay more attention to modernizing the education system so that it reflects the current status of businesses and companies, according to the Czech News Agency (ČTK). "Education must also reflect the need of the present era from the economic point of view. At present, schools often produce young new unemployed people, as the content of studies does not correspond to what companies and practice need," Figel stated after a conference on creativity and innovation in Europe, held in the European Parliament two weeks ago. "Europe must simply intensify its efforts in this respect. In Europe, there is the tradition of an isolated or fragmented space with academia on one side and companies on the other," he added. This means that education will continue to revolutionize in accordance to the economic condition of that particular time.

With this in mind, Mershon told CBW of some changes they had made to their study program. "We have added more strategy courses to our curriculum. We are also working with executive search companies more and helping connect our students to others looking for business contacts," Mershon said. This was not the only change. In 2008, the University of Pittsburgh had to close down some of its MBA programs. "We are hoping that the Ministry of Education will follow EU trends and laws, and eventually fully recognize the MBA degree," Mershon told CBW.

Getting ready While older students are hoping to improve their job skills, younger students are preparing themselves to study further in a multilingual environment. Peter de Voil, the principal of the English College in Prague - Anglické gymnázium, said he feels that the EU has a significant influence on students wanting to study the International

Baccalaureate Diploma Program. The college is for students between 13 and 19 years old. "For us, membership in the EU has increased the number of applicants to the college who want to have an education in English and who want to study the International Baccalaureate, as this gives them access to universities worldwide. Since 2004, applications to universities in the UK have multiplied, as Czech students are no longer liable to pay the high fees demanded of overseas students," Voil said.

With the weight of paying substantially high fees for courses outside of the Czech Republic being lifted, it is obvious that the need for an English education has amplified.

"In 2008, 18 students out of a class of 53 accepted places at universities in the UK," Voil added. However, it is also evident that there is an increased number of foreign students arriving for study.

According to the English College in Prague, a great deal of their syllabus has altered in obligation to new requirements.

"Challenges have come from the Ministry of Education and the need to adapt our curriculum to fit the requirements of the new Czech Educational Framework, which are extremely detailed and prescriptive," Voil said. *

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