In mature democratic states, institutions have developed over generations, even centuries. But the Czech Republic, which was established in 1993 in the aftermath of the Cold War, has had to confront the challenges of modern society in a far shorter timeframe.

Over the last 22 years, tertiary education in the Czech Republic has changed beyond recognition. The number of institutions and students has increased rapidly; R&D activities have shifted to universities; university management has become more autonomous; institutions have forged links with international partners; and private institutions have opened.

However, around the world, societies are being transformed by knowledge and economies driven by innovation. Globalization means that competition is intense. So education systems are subject to pressure – from citizens who demand the right knowledge to succeed in tomorrow’s job market, from governments looking to boost the productivity of their economies and from businesses that have to hire people with the right skills. So, although the Czech Republic can look back with pride on the progress of its tertiary education sector, reform and expansion must continue.

Rapid expansion has posed some serious challenges for the Czech Republic’s tertiary education system. In an interview with EY’s Petr Knap, former education deputy minister Petr Mlsna outlines the policy response.
Growing pains

Until June 2015, Petr Mlsna was Deputy Minister of Education in the Czech Government. In one of his last interviews before he left the education ministry to become Deputy Minister of Interior, he spoke to Citizen Today about the Czech Republic’s tertiary education challenges.

“The challenges we face at present are, paradoxically, a side effect of successful policy,” says Mlsna. “The sector expanded very rapidly. It wouldn’t be too much of an exaggeration to claim that the system – which in many respects had been designed to serve the educational needs of a small elite – is in a kind of post-traumatic shock brought on by its own expansion.”

Mlsna says that, in general, Czech tertiary institutions offer a high level of education to a relatively diverse group of students. However, the proportion of university-educated people in Czech society is still far lower than in many advanced countries, while the demand for highly qualified workers is rising all the time.

According to the deputy minister, ensuring that the tertiary system serves Czech society is a key principle. The recent expansion in student numbers has not eliminated the link between educational attainment and socio-economic background. “Despite efforts to reduce barriers to entry, achieving a university education in the Czech Republic still largely depends on family status,” he says. This must change.

Public expenditure is rising more slowly than student numbers. Money from European funding sources helps to reduce this spending gap, but there is still a shortfall. So, will students have to fund themselves? “Unlike its predecessors, the current Czech Government has made clear that it has no intention of introducing tuition fees,” says the deputy minister. “The main reason is to ensure that the already pronounced inequalities are not exacerbated.”

The deputy minister has studied the experience of countries that have introduced university fees over the last decade. He notes that Germany, with good reason, is moving away from the tuition fees approach.

Access and excellence

Mlsna says that the Government’s aim is a “top quality public higher education system that is open to all social classes and offers everyone a chance to develop their educational potential to the maximum.” The Government’s Education Policy Strategy to 2020 supports these goals, prioritizing a reduction in educational inequality, support for quality tuition and improved governance.

But serving society is only part of the challenge. The Government also wants the Czech tertiary sector to play a bigger role in the European and global production of knowledge. Balancing these interests is no simple matter. “The experience of many foreign education systems shows that the two initiatives can complement each other as long as the wide-ranging role of higher education is not lost,” says Mlsna. “For instance, theoretically I could imagine the Czech Republic making greater endeavors to push one or two of its universities into the top league of global research. However, under present circumstances, this would mean higher education not being made more accessible to a wider spectrum of Czech students.”

Mlsna is not starting a revolution on Czech campuses. Policy in the sector is evolving. “Many years of discussion have revealed pretty clearly that there is no space for the radical redesign of tertiary education in the Czech Republic,” he says. The Government has decided to respect the principles of the 1998 Higher Education Act, the cornerstone of recent policy in the sector, and to modify only those parts of the Act that it deems outdated.

“Despite the rapid developments of recent years, we have to ensure that there is continuity,” says the deputy minister. “In any case, it is clear from other parts of the education system that attempts at some kind of shock therapy rarely pay off in practice.”
Driving up standards

The main tool for improving standards is reform of quality assurance. Until now, this has been based on the accreditation of individual study programs by the state. “However, in a situation in which you have several thousand such programs, it seems only logical to transfer a greater share of the responsibility for their preparation, approval and implementation directly to the institutions themselves,” says Mlsna.

This is not simply about reducing the administrative burden on the state. “The main aim is to create space for higher education institutions to improve the quality of their activities.” The new quality assurance system will also bring stakeholders such as employers into the accreditation process.

In many countries, employers are becoming more vocal about what they would like to see students learn at university. What measures are being taken in the Czech Republic to match graduates’ skills to employers’ demands?

“‘The Czech government has no intention of introducing tuition fees,’”

“There is a certain disconnect between what students choose to study and the demand from employers,” says the deputy minister. “Nobody can reliably predict the long-term needs of the jobs market, which, to a considerable extent, is simply a natural phenomenon.”

Mlsna is not convinced that the problem is as serious in the Czech Republic as it is sometimes made out to be. Graduate unemployment is low, and graduates can expect to be paid much better than their less-educated peers. “Data on the ability of graduates to find work has not revealed any alarming findings. It doesn’t even support the often-repeated cliché about unemployed humanities and social sciences graduates filling up the labor offices.”

The Government acknowledges that future employment prospects and earning potential are not students’ only considerations when selecting their courses. Mlsna is keen to encourage diversity. “Higher education has many different purposes and therefore many legitimate forms,” he says. The Government is taking account of this diversity by drawing a deeper distinction between the syllabuses of universities and colleges, and boosting the profile of vocational courses.

From the past to the future

“The link between research and education has been regarded as the definitive sign of the modern university since the 19th century,” says Mlsna. Many academics and policymakers in the Czech Republic still regard this alliance as a crucial guarantee of higher education quality.

However, recent studies indicate that pressure on universities to produce research brings a range of unintended consequences. “While research activities undoubtedly remain the primary source of academic prestige, teaching activities often fail to keep pace,” says the deputy minister. “Tuition becomes routine, and students are encouraged to regurgitate facts rather than develop innovative ideas of their own.”

“We cannot sit back complacently and assume that the existence of research and educational activities under one roof will lead naturally to innovative thinking on the part of students,” says Mlsna. A priority now is to create space for institutions to think through how they can best align teaching and research. “I believe that the newly introduced quality assurance system will create the right conditions.”

The Czech tertiary education system has come a long way in a short time. There is further to travel, but the Czech Government is keen to get there step by step.

In conversation | Petr Mlsna

Petr Mlsna was talking to Petr Knap, Government & Public Sector Leader, EY Czech Republic.