



PREPARATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS FOR THE ENTRY OF SLOVAKIA INTO THE EUROPEAN UNION

Interview with Prof. Ing. Vojtech Kollár, CSc.,
Rector of the University of Economics in Bratislava

The University of Economics in Bratislava has a more than 60-year long tradition of providing university education and training economists for the needs of economic research, practice, and state administration. Since establishment, the University has educated more than 53 thousand graduates, who now work in various sectors of the national economy in all levels of economic management, and many of them represent the country in important positions abroad.

At the present time, there are more than 14 thousand students at the University of Economics following courses in various branches of study at the five faculties

The University of Economics has undergone numerous changes in recent years. Could you give a brief description of the most important ones?

The first, principal stage of transformation took place after 1989. The legal framework for the reform was based on the law on universities (No. 172/1990 Zb.). The law restored the academic rights and liberties of universities, the autonomy of individual faculties by granting them legal personality, and created conditions for free academic research and education. The first reform in higher education brought a number of new subjects and branches of study, arising from the needs of a market economy. While maintaining our achievements from the past, we have attempted to adjust the University to the external environment, mainly the European Union and the countries of our major partners.

The second stage of the reform is connected with the concept of development of universities for the 21st century, drawn up by the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic. According to the new law on universities (No. 131/2002 Z. z.), the reform applies to several basic levels. The first is transformation from a state-run institution to an independent university, which is connected with the transfer of property from state ownership to the ownership of the university. The second level concerns legal and employment relations. The role and position of a professor, associate professor, senior lecturer, lecturer, and language teacher have been redefined. At the third level, the positions of teachers and students were defined in relation to study



programmes, which are part of the education market within the new system of study branches in Slovakia. The last, but no less important level is funding. The University has adopted multi-source funding, which means that state subsidy is now only one of the sources (though still the major part) of budget revenue of the University.

What does this mean as far as education is concerned?

The second stage is, as far as education is concerned, of key importance in the preparation of study programmes, which are to comply with the requirement of compatibility within the internal as well as external environment, particularly with regard to study programmes in the European Union.

In the past, the branches of study at Slovak universities were fragmented and their number was very large in comparison with EU countries. The reform reduced the number of branches in line with the international standards (ISCET) applied in EU and OECD countries. Our university took an active part in the preparation of new branches of study related to economics, management, services, and informatics. The task was to prepare study programmes that are in line with the practical needs, the education and labour markets, programmes for the preparation of professionals with skills recognised in the European economic area.

The transformation of universities in Slovakia is not an isolated process, but part of the country's preparation for



integration into European structures. The course of transformation is in line with the processes taking place in the European Union. A significant milestone in this area was the meeting of ministers of education in Bologna, which resulted in the so-called Bologna Appeal. This laid down the basic requirement that universities in the European Union should be oriented to the creation of a unified system of education and academic research with the aim of strengthening their compatibility with American universities. The Bologna Appeal was followed by the Lisbon Agreement, the Prague Summit, and further activities, declaring the concept of future development of universities in the growing education market of the European Union.

What changes do you expect in connection with the entry of Slovakia into the European Union?

To sum up, we have three basic tasks in connection with the integration of Slovakia into the European Union. The first is to improve the quality of education and educational systems, and to strengthen the role of science in education, which is a top priority in advanced countries. The second task is to facilitate access to education. In this connection, the basic requirement is to have a three-stage system of higher education – studies leading to the degree of Bachelor, Engineer/Master, and PhD – and to ensure its transparency. The third task is to ensure that the study programmes are in line with the needs of the education and labour markets in EU countries, and the needs of the Slovak economy. The programmes should be compatible within the system of courses of study, in order to enable the mobility of students as well as teachers.

The harmonisation of Slovak higher education with European standards is undoubtedly a big challenge. What steps are to be taken by the University in this area?

As I have mentioned above, the educational process comprises three stages, in accordance with the Bologna Appeal. For Slovakia, it is important to comply with European standards of education, which mean the same system of education with the same degrees, ensuring the free movement of our graduates in the European labour market.

The University of Economics has adopted a fully compatible and open three-stage system of education. Its functioning is supported by a credit system of study, which, however, requires deep reform to become compatible with the European system of credit transfers.

The University played an active role in the transformation of courses and was charged with the task of co-ordinating activities within the group of economic and managerial studies in the SR. We even attempted to modify the

structure of courses so that every branch of study leading to a bachelor's, engineer's, or master's degree had a common basis, a so-called core of study. All universities offering study programmes in the field of economics and management, must comply with the above requirement. It is an essential prerequisite for the mobility of students within universities and compatibility with the external environment, mainly universities in advanced countries.

We are now faced with the task of appointing candidates for the posts of professors and associate professors, capable of guaranteeing the required quality of the courses. This task is very demanding and must be met by every university. Naturally, it is also very important to have enough senior lecturers, lecturers, and language teachers, capable of becoming the associate professors and professors of the future. In preparing such activities, we also communicate with the representatives of students within the academic community. The experience of students in studying abroad and their opinions on education at our University are very stimulating.

An important condition of compatibility of education within the European Union is a knowledge of languages. What has the University to offer in this area?

Due to good contacts abroad established through international co-operation, we were successful in adopting a module system for the teaching of foreign languages and the teaching of professional subjects in foreign languages. We have very good experience with training courses conducted in French. In German studies, we have achieved compatibility with Martin Luther University in Halle (Germany) and obtained, as the only university in Slovakia, permission to grant a twin degree – engineer economist / chartered kaufmann. Within the engineering line of study, we have introduced, in collaboration with Erasmus University in Rotterdam, a joint European programme called 'Certificate of European Law and Economics' (CELE), with selected subjects being taught in English. These projects represent a point of entry of participation in excellent programmes, such as PIM (Programme in International Management) or CEMS (Community of European Management Schools), programmes focusing on the international aspects of economics and management.

A significant activity of the University is participation in EDAMBA (European Doctoral Programmes Association in Management and Business Administration). We are the only university in Slovakia involved in this programme.

It seems that the University is well prepared for the changes expected in connection with the integration of Slovakia into European structures ...

The management of the University focused, in colla-



boration with the individual faculties, on strengthening the position of the University within the network of European universities, mainly in the countries of our major partners. The second task was to strengthen the position of the University within the network of universities in Slovakia. The third task concerned preparation for the aforementioned legislative changes in the second stage of the reform and the implementation of specific measures. During my previous term of office (2000 – 2003), we prepared a document called 'Further Orientation and Development of the University of Economics in Bratislava for the Years 2000 – 2003', which was in fact a programme declaration of the University management. We carried out an in-depth analysis of the educational and research opportunities, as well as the personnel potential and position of the University within the network of domestic universities. From this analysis, we drew up a series of tasks to be carried out in preparation for the changes expected in connection with the entry of Slovakia into the EU, and changes concerning the education market in line with the Bologna Appeal and the Lisbon Agreement.

However, we not only relied on an internal analysis, but joined the evaluation programme of the International Association of Universities as well. After all, it is difficult to find the right treatment if the diagnosis is incorrect. Our goal was to find our weak points, rather than strengths, in order to identify and eliminate any weak points that might prevent the University of Economics from becoming one of the leading universities in Europe.

In 2000 – 2002, all faculties of the University received accreditation from the Accreditation Commission of the Slovak Government, which significantly strengthened the domestic position of the University and was a sign of preparedness for reform. At the present time, all branches of study leading to a bachelor's, engineer's and doctor's degree have accreditation and we are also authorised to conduct habilitation and inauguration proceedings in all branches and lines of study.

You said that one of the priorities in advanced countries is to strengthen the role of science in education. Does it apply to Slovakia as well?

Science and research must become a dominant factor in the process of modernisation and improvement in education. The new law has laid down the principle of diversification of universities. This means that the status of a research university, representing a special position within the network of universities, may only be granted to a university engaged in scientific activity and research (and not only within the scope of doctoral studies). This naturally has a profound effect on funding, which stems from the capacity of such a university to participate in various research projects funded by grant agencies (VEGA, KEGA) or the State, and/or international or deve-

lopment programmes, announced by the Ministry of Education or other ministries, or by the European Union.

For the educational process to be successful, it is necessary to have some feedback from practice, i.e. to involve prominent practising professionals in the educational process and thus ensure that the results of their work, research, and practical experience are transferred directly into the teaching process.

The second area is the creation of excellent teaching and research facilities, which are being built in co-operation with the profession. Here I should emphasise the importance of computerisation and the further development of information and communication technologies. These activities must be financed from extra-budgetary resources. We have achieved very good results in terms of the number of classrooms, teachers' rooms, and research facilities equipped with computers and access to the Internet. Special attention is paid to the software support of education, which is essential for the modelling of processes, activities, and solutions to practical problems. I mean the various systems applied in the area of banking, trade, and management.

Co-operation between the University and the profession enhances the educational process and is therefore mutually beneficial. The more projects we participate in, the better the position of the University will be, as well as its access to multi-source financing, which will enable a further improvement in the quality of work and an increase in the remuneration of employees.

My final question is how the changes you were talking about will be reflected in the profile of a graduate of the University of Economics?

In the document concerning the further orientation and development of the University, we undertook the task of training a generation of 'Euro-graduates', i.e. graduates equipped with the knowledge and skills to enable them to enter the European labour market and to compete with university graduates from advanced countries. However, professional knowledge should be combined with language skills, which are essential for success on the labour market, both in Slovakia and abroad.

Apart from professional qualifications, we lay great emphasis on the moral and ethical traits of students, which are sometimes neglected in training and education. In this connection, I should like to quote Prof. Karvaš, one of the first professors and co-founder of the first University of Economics, who said that the value of an individual should be measured not only in terms of his personal success, but also in terms of his contribution to the welfare of society as a whole.

**Thank you for the interview.
Alica Polóniová**