

Private Universities and Their Position in Czech Higher Education



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Tertiary education in the Czech Republic has been a tradition for more than 600 years. In 1348, Charles University in Prague was founded as one of the oldest universities in Europe. Having an excellent reputation for centuries, the sector has been facing a significant drop in international university rankings. In general, Czech public universities have been losing their position compared to their competitors. Why? Is something rotting in the Czech educational system?



ENROLLMENT AT BOTH PUBLIC AND PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES HAS BEEN FALLING DUE TO DEMOGRAPHIC REASONS OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS

CZECH HIGHER EDUCATION

In the Czech Republic, public universities dominate tertiary education. Private universities and colleges account for only about 10 percent of university students. Enrollment at both public and private universities has been falling due to demographic reasons over the last few years. However, private universities have been more affected by this slump. Since 2010, private universities have lost al-

most 40 percent of their students, whereas public universities have lost *only* 14 percent. It should be noted that only public universities receive financial support from the government based mainly on the number of enrolled students, whereas private universities are fully dependent on tuition and other private finances. As such, both types of institutions have large financial incentives to have as many students as possible [See Graph 1].

Private universities tend to have a greater share of students in distance learning than their public counterparts. In private universities, students in distance learning form almost half of the student body, whereas the public university average is not higher than 20 percent. Enrollment in distance learning has fallen more than overall enrollment due to the fact that many students were employed in various government and public sector posts which require a university degree. Since those employees do not need a specific qualification, just a degree, they tended to flock to private universities¹. Private universities are considered to be more flexible, which was another reason for their preference in distance learning. Due to the temporary satisfaction of demand for distance learning, those sorts of students no longer enroll, which has resulted in a sharp drop of distance student numbers, especially at private universities² [See Graph 2].

Another interesting fact is the gender balance. Women constitute about 56 percent of the student body in both private and public universities in the Czech Republic. Location plays a certain role. Public universities are spread over the country and while the greatest number of students are in Prague, there are notable universities in other cities, especially Brno. This is not the case with private universities which are overwhelm-

¹ In general, most private universities are considered less demanding than public universities.

² This applies mostly to Czech and Slovak universities, with some exceptions.

Figure 1: Number of university students in the Czech Republic

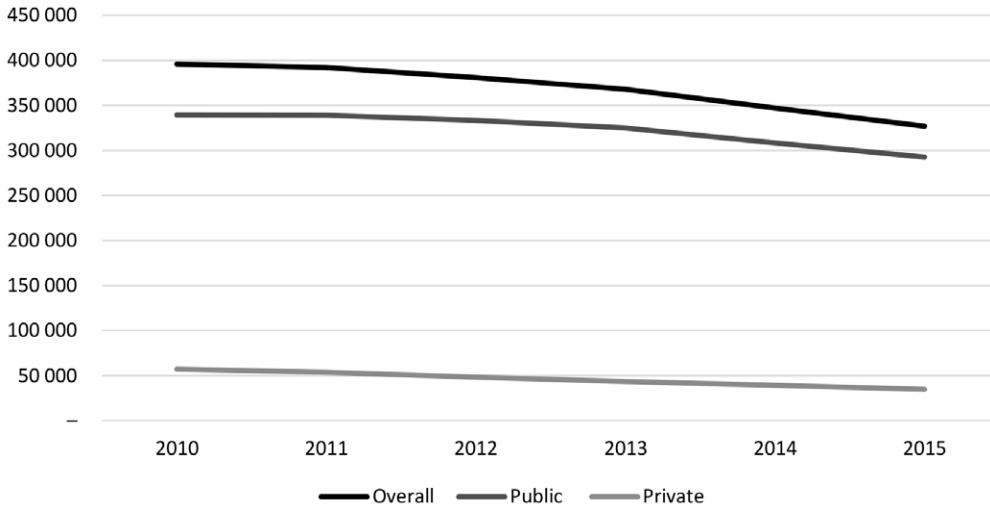
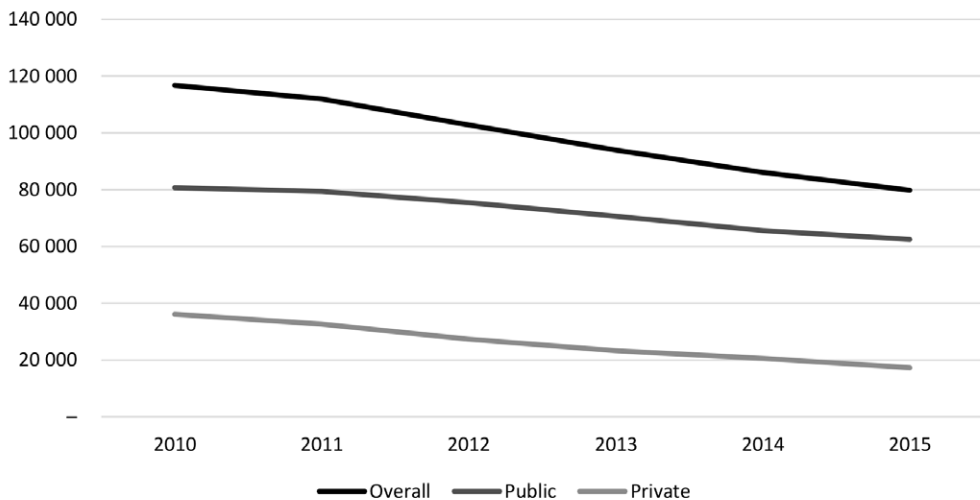


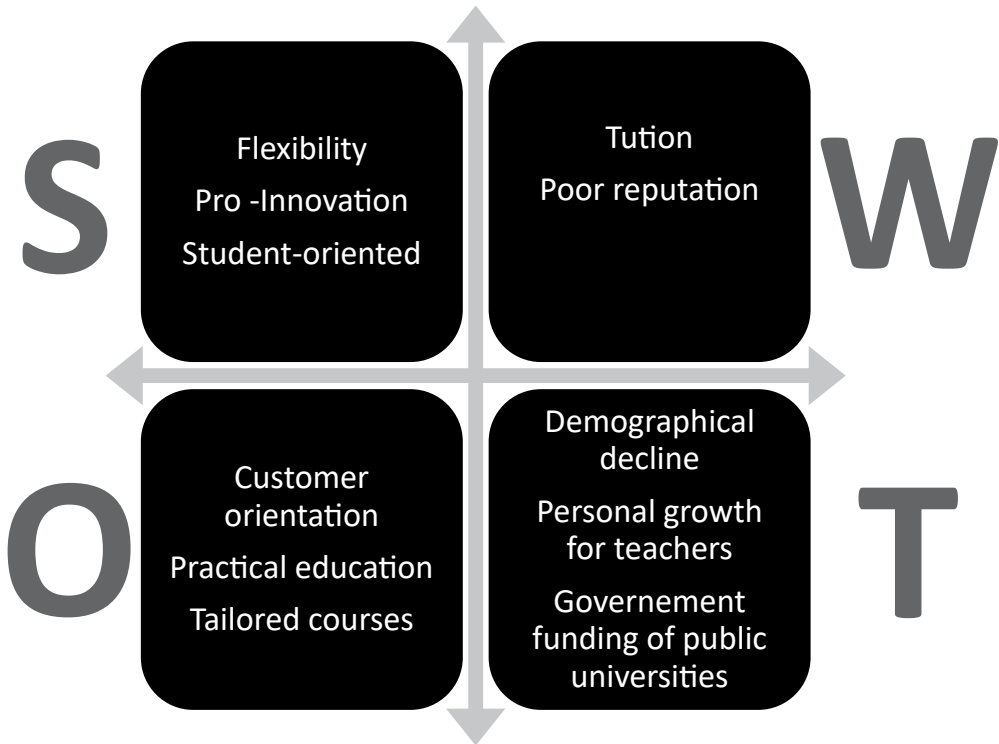
Figure 2: Number of distance students in the Czech Republic



ingly situated in the capital – 72 percent of private university and college students study in Prague. In comparison, there are only 32 percent of public university students in the capital city. As a final note, 12.6 percent of students in public universities in 2015 were foreigners, compared with 18.2 percent in private universities.

PROBLEMS WITH PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

Almost all public universities are divided into faculties, which have a great deal of autonomy that is guaranteed by law and cannot be limited by the academic senate of the university. This was supposed to change in the latest proposal of the bill of



public universities, but there was such an outcry by academia that the change was dropped. At present, a provost, the head of the university, is a figurehead.

One of the principal issues related to public universities in the Czech Republic is too much democracy, since the most “sacred cow” of education is the independence of public universities. The principle in itself is admirable. The practical application in Czech university education, however, is not.

The end result is stiffness, rigidity, and inertia. While deans of faculties have considerable power, they are elected by faculty senates which tend not to favor individuals interested in disturbing the *status quo*. At least one-third of senate members are students, who are mostly under the strong influence of their professors or other senate mem-

bers who support the status quo. Deans are mostly long-term members of faculties. Thus, most universities tend to exist as they had in the past with minimal innovation.

SWOT ANALYSIS

- **Potential Strengths of Private Universities**

Private universities are less bound by institutional and personal traditions. That could allow them to offer more up-to-date education and make it easier to replace poor educators. Since students pay for their education, there is an expectation of better services rendered to them.

- **Institutional and Personnel Flexibility**

Since private universities in the Czech Republic are at most less than 30 years old, they suffer much less from institutional in-



THE FIRST PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES WERE FOUNDED AFTER THE VELVET REVOLUTION IN 1989

ertia. Most public university departments are ancient, having existed for decades at least. That results in many things being done inefficiently because “that is the way things have always been done”.

In most public universities, individual departments are generally staffed by people who studied an undergraduate program in that department, then studied graduate and postgraduate programs, and will likely continue working in the department until they retire.

Private universities, on the other hand, are much more flexible in recruiting lecturers. Usually, they combine employment of local teachers coming from public universities and colleges together with professors hired from abroad or lecturers from a business background. Removing bad teachers is also considerably easier to do since there is no “old boys network” preventing it.

• **Up-to-Date Curriculum**

In public universities, many programs have not had their curricula updated for ages. In contrast, private schools should be able to react quickly to changing demands on the job market and provide attractive study

programs as tuition is one of their major financial sources and the market is very competitive.

• **Student-Oriented Environment and Lower Teacher-to-Student Ratio**

Private universities have to try much harder to gain and keep students than their public counterparts. In general, they have fewer students per teacher than public universities. That allows them to offer an individual approach as well as individual study plans. Those ensure to students a possibility to combine part-time work with their studies, which enables them to build up their professional career during their studies.

• **Potential Weaknesses of Private Universities**

Several areas pose potential threats to private universities in the Czech Republic. The two most apparent include tuition for the study programs and the reputation of a respective institution.

• **Tuition**

In the Czech Republic, students do not pay any tuition at public universities. Therefore, public universities will always be the first choice for many, if not most, students. People prefer education free of charge and very often choose a private university when they are not admitted to a public one.

This means that private universities have to offer other advantages to students. These can be as completely different as almost effortless degrees on the one hand to higher-quality education or better services for students on the other.

• **Reputation**

Private universities do not have as good a reputation as public universities, partially because they do not have a very long

tradition. During the communist era, only state-owned universities existed. The first private universities were founded after the Velvet revolution in 1989. Still, they are generally considered to be institutions offering an easy way to get a degree, not an education. In general, public universities can afford to be demanding because of the constant interest of students due to no tuition. On the other hand, private universities are forced to offer an easier path to gain a university degree when competing for students.

There is also a deeply rooted mistrust toward the motivations of private university owners. However, not all non-public universities and colleges are profit-seeking. About 40 percent of them have the legal status of an NGO and are run in a non-profit manner. The first non-state university established in Prague 1990, Anglo-American University, which is also the first university in the Czech Republic with American accreditation, was non-profit.

- **Opportunities**

There is untapped potential in the form of students of private secondary schools. Moreover, as already mentioned, since private universities are much less bound by tradition, they can offer a more practical education than their public counterparts. There is also the possibility of direct cooperation with companies to prepare their future workforce.

- **Quality Education and Student Services**

Students coming from secondary schools are used to a certain level of student services which are not provided by public institutions. However, there is a distinct difference as some of the private secondary schools are considered to be listed among

the best secondary schools in the country, which is certainly not the case for all private universities at present.

Nonetheless, for the high-quality ones (offering innovative programs, qualified teachers, and demanding efforts from their students), a combination of strong marketing based on flexibility and good student service coupled with quality teaching seems a promising way to go.

- **Practical Education**

Private universities are mostly offering commercially- and business-biased study programs, such as business economics, marketing, commercial communication, and private law, with the focus on practice. They are often cooperating with external lecturers from business who share personal experience with students and offer practical insight. Such curricula (less theoretical and more practical) attract students with well-defined interests and a clear idea about their future job.

- **Threats**

The most obvious threat is the declining number of students graduating from high schools. There is also the ever-present problem of competition from public universities which receive funding from the government. Last but not least, another issue hampering private universities is their dependence on the public education system to educate their future teachers.

- **Demographic Decline**

The number of students has been dropping for the last few years. Trends for the near future, too, are not encouraging. The number of students in high schools has been dropping for the last 10 years from 576,585



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students to 427,107 students³. A possible solution to this issue is to attract students from abroad – either degree-seeking or study abroad students coming for a semester or two.

As such, the only way for some private universities facing survival difficulties might be to merge with another institution. It looks like the higher education market will solve the unsustainable state of too many low-profile private universities by pressure toward reducing the number of private universities, the better-quality ones surviving.

• **Universities Funded by the Government**

In 2016, the Czech government spent about 21 billion Czech crowns (app. EUR 777 million) on tertiary education. Despite the fact that this sum is considerably high,

³ <https://www.czso.cz/documents/10180/34193311/2300421623.pdf/6083b745-1628-4009-a809-ddfaab4c878a?version=1.3>

the universities' representation is constantly asking for higher funding levels (by about 20 percent). The sum was allocated almost completely to public and government universities, and apparently there are no proposals to change the legislation in favor of supporting private universities.

• **Career Growth for Academic Lecturers**

Czech university study programs are mostly structured in accordance with the Bologna treaty process. Almost all universities⁴ follow the same 3+2+3 years structure (3 years of undergraduate studies, 2 years of graduate studies, 3 of years doctoral studies). There is, however, a difference between Czech and Western European academic career advancement, where teachers can aspire to a title of docent or professor. Those titles are awarded by universities after a formal process which usually requires a teaching practice as well as a number of published articles and books. These titles are transferable among universities (i.e., if a professor changes one university for another, his/her title remains and is fully valid), are highly prestigious, and gaining them is the goal of most university teaching staff.

However, the titles are not mere vanity because the government requires a certain number of docents or professors before it allows a university to run any study program beyond a bachelor's degree.

At the moment, no private universities in the Czech Republic offer post-doctoral advancement. And few offer doctoral study programs. The reason is simple – as they are not financially supported by the government and struggle with a declining number of students, they are mostly not able

⁴ With few exceptions, such as faculties of medicine which offer a single 6-year program for medical doctors.



to invest in their own research. This means that private universities are dependent on public universities in educating their future lecturers and providing them with career advancement.

As a result, lecturers often work for several universities at the same time, both private and public. This also poses a danger for private universities since there are repeated efforts by some lawmakers to curb this phenomenon. For example, a law was proposed that would condition work on more than one university on the agreement of a professor's home university. The home university would have little reason to grant this request. Another legal danger was a proposal to condition employment on a minimal number of hours spent teaching, which would probably lead to the closure of some programs.

Overcoming this weakness by private universities establishing their own post-doctoral advancement would be far too costly in terms of money and personnel. However, it is a real challenge for private universities in the Czech Republic (and similarly, in Slovakia).

CONCLUSIONS

There is undoubtedly a niche in the private tertiary education market in the Czech Republic. It is clear that, at the moment, private universities cannot challenge public universities in research. They should instead leverage their strength and offer practical tertiary education with an individual approach for students. That seems to be the right way to differentiate themselves from public universities and justify their tuition.

Moreover, private universities need to keep offering greater flexibility to their students and generally be more "user-friendly" places than public universities by giving advan-

tages such as individual study plans, strong student and alumni communities, and interactive courses.

Yet another option is to resign themselves to being just a "diploma factory". After all, it is likely that there will continue to be a large number of people willing to pay to get their degree with as little effort as possible. Doing this is quite depressing, and so let us hope that the Czech higher education market and its institutions will create a parametrical environment where incentives for real quality to prevail. ●



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