

# Higher education act in Czech Republic: What are the implications for the role of students and their governance?

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## Abstract

Self-governments are a common part of higher education institutions in the Czech Republic and have a legal position due to the Czech Higher Education Act 111/1998 Coll. However, there are major changes due to the introduction of Amendment to the Higher Education Act. The system of higher education in the Czech Republic has been waiting for this essential reform for more than 10 years. And there will be some major changes, due to this reform. For example, establishment of the National Accreditation Authority, approved by resolution of the Government of the Czech Republic (17<sup>th</sup> October 2016). For the first time, there will be also one student representative in this National Accreditation Authority. Therefore, this contribution aims to present implications for the role of students and their governance.

**Keywords:** higher education, Czech Republic, Self-government, Higher Education Act.

## Introduction

The students' governance has been in existence as an integral part of higher education almost since the founding of the first college in colonial America (Preston, 2009). Since then, students' self-governments are an integral part of university environment, especially in terms of alerting priority issues, such as quality improvement, educational processes and adequate study environment. Self-governments are also a common part of higher education institutions in the Czech Republic and have a legal position due to the Czech Higher Education Act 111/1998 Coll.

Generally, current objectives and functions of the students' self-governments are mainly the following:

- to provide and to protect the rights and interests of students, in particular towards the organization of the educational process;
- to provide execution of students' obligations;
- to promote educational, scientific and creative activities of students;
- to assist creation of the proper conditions of living and rest of students;
- to assist the activities of the different types of students' associations;
- to organize cooperation with students of other universities and youth organizations;
- to assist the employment of graduates;
- to take part in the solving the questions of the international exchange of students;
- to take part in the realization of the State youth politics; and
- to involve students into amateur performances.

As is mentioning Bergan (2003), Higher education institutions are an important part of society and obviously play a key role. As well, as they are societies unto themselves, but still being part of the

larger society. But it is important to realize, that higher education institutions without some distance from society might be losing their capacity to take a long-term view detached from the immediate issues of the day and to identify sustainable solutions to the most serious and long-term challenges facing our society (Bergan, 2003).

## **Current situation in the Czech Republic**

While self-governance may seem loose and unstructured, it is just the opposite. Students learn how hard it is to operate openly, responsibly and accountably. Furthermore, by self-governing, they remove most of the conflict resolution burden from the professional staff, allowing them to focus on educational purposes (Dougharty, 2011). Currently, many are used to take student representation and student participation so much for granted that it is easy to forget that in the most of European countries, these representations in its current form are usually little more than a generation old (Bergan, 2003).

The stages of self-government are similar in many ways to the cyclical phases of management – "analysis of contradictions, forecasting, goal setting, planning, decision-making, criteria for evaluation, control, correction"; the essential difference consists in the transition from self-government (as needs in improvement) to self-regulation (behavior habit and actions)". In some countries, such as Russia (Khusainova et al., 2016), or Ukraine (Roubík et al., 2016) the problem of development of students' self-government at the university is providing a focus of the educational process to the factors of self-development: value orientations and motivational attitudes.

Astin and Astin (2000) as well as Dugan et al. (2008) and Casteem et al. (2007) believe that the development of leadership and leaders is the central aim for higher education. In the case of the Czech Republic, self-governments are a common part of higher education institutions and have a legal position due to the Czech Higher Education Act 111/1998 Coll. The changes in higher education and its governance in Czech Republic were perceived in terms of the "return to Europe" as is describing Pabian (2009) and it was based on the lessons from the west, however, as it was not substantiated by systematic policy transfer – the initial reform of the Czech higher education and its governance was not preceded by studies of Western models. Therefore, introduction of Amendment to the Higher Education Act was necessary. The system of higher education in the Czech Republic has been waiting for this essential reform for more than 10 years.

Currently, the most remarkable changes from the students' point of view in the Higher Education Act due to the of Amendment to the Higher Education Act in Czech Republic, approved by resolution of the Government of the Czech Republic (17<sup>th</sup> October 2016), are as follows:

- A new accreditation institution is established – **The National Accreditation Authority**, which will approve a wide field of education instead of a particular study discipline.
- For the first time, there will be one student representative in the National Accreditation Authority, so the student voice will be heard during the accreditation process. The **Student Chamber of Higher Education Institutions** (SK RVŠ) is responsible for choosing such a representative.

- Other novelties also involve the inclusion of the position of **adjunct professor**, who may be an expert from abroad or a prominent expert with 20 years of experience, and the right for the rector to take away an unlawfully gained title.
- There is a new regulation of foreign universities and their departments in the Czech Republic which should make sure that the quality of education is comparable with Czech institutions.
- **Social grant** for students in need increases from prior fixed amount 1,620 Czech Crowns/month (60€/month) to a quarter of the minimum wage – that is, at the moment, 2,480 Czech Crowns/month (92€/month).

Studying at public universities in the Czech Republic is free of charge for all those who study in Czech language. Only those who study more than four years at bachelor level or more than three years in master level must pay fees (usually around 300-400€). If a student drops out, the time of all studies will sum up. According to the previous legislation, the failed study time counted twice (in bachelor and master level) and students had to pay the fees twice. Now, due to the new Amendment to the Higher Education Act in the Czech Republic, once students successfully finish their bachelor studies, they have a clean shield and can enjoy free master studies for up to three years.

Nowadays, one can notice a high dropout in the first years of higher education and higher professional studies. This could be caused reasons such as relatively easy admission procedure or low interest of students in the field of study. The specific situation is at technical institutions, where the dropout rate is also high in the second and third years, which could be caused by high study demands. If a student fails, he/she leaves an institution without the period of his/her studies being recognized by another institution. The situation is the same when he/she wants to study in the future. He/she is supposed to start again from the very beginning (Beneš & Šťastná, 2010).

There is no uniform admission procedure at higher education institutions in the Czech Republic, either for Czech students or for foreign students. Methods of examining and selection are fully in the competency of the faculty or of the higher education institution, when it is not divided into faculties. The academic senate of the higher education institution or faculty approves the conditions of acceptance before the admission procedure comes. In practice, there is usually a written test, an interview, or both. For art schools, faculties of architecture, faculties of education, sports studies and dentistry, one part of the examination is a test of talent or practical skills (Beneš & Šťastná, 2010).

Currently, due to the new Amendment to the Higher Education Act in the Czech Republic, there are created Internal Evaluation Boards at each university, where there is always present student as a member. Same for Ethical Committees, where there is always present student as a member. This should also increase position of students in the decision-making processes.

## **Some examples of European documents focusing the Role of Students**

The Communiqué issued by education ministers, meeting in Prague in 2001, stressed the importance of student involvement:

*“... Ministers affirmed that students should participate in and influence the organization and content of education at universities and other higher education institutions. Ministers also*

*reaffirmed the need, recalled by students, to take account of the social dimension in the Bologna process...”*

The ministers' communiqué issued in 2003 in Berlin speaks of:

*” ... the constructive participation of student organizations in the Bologna Process and ... the necessity to include the students continuously and at an early stage in further activities...”*

Furthermore: *“... Students are full partners in higher education governance. Ministers note that national legal measures for ensuring student participation are largely in place throughout the European Higher Education Area. They also call on institutions and student organizations to identify ways of increasing actual student involvement in higher education governance...”*

In the next communiqué, issued in 2005 in Bergen, the ministers announced the following:

*” ... We underline the central role of higher education institutions, their staff and students as partners in the Bologna Process. Their role in the implementation of the Process becomes all the more important now that the necessary legislative reforms are largely in place, and we encourage them to continue and intensify their efforts to establish the EHEA...”*

In the most recent communiqué, issued in 2015 in Yerevan, the ministers announced the following:

*”... Thanks to the Bologna reforms, progress has been made in enabling students and graduates to move within the EHEA with recognition of their qualifications and periods of study; study programmes provide graduates with the knowledge, skills and competences either to continue their studies or to enter the European labour market; institutions are becoming increasingly active in an international context; and academics cooperate in joint teaching and research programmes. The EHEA has opened a dialogue with other regions of the world and is considered a model of structured cooperation.”*

Furthermore: *“... We will support and protect students and staff in exercising their right to academic freedom and ensure their representation as full partners in the governance of autonomous higher education institutions. We will support higher education institutions in enhancing their efforts to promote intercultural understanding, critical thinking, political and religious tolerance, gender equality, and democratic and civic values, in order to strengthen European and global citizenship and lay the foundations for inclusive societies. We will also strengthen the links between the EHEA and the European Research Area.*

*... Moreover, we will actively involve students, as full members of the academic community, as well as other stakeholders, in curriculum design and in quality assurance.”*

## **Lessons learned and Conclusion**

The current changes in the Czech higher education legislation are seen as a step towards higher autonomy of the institutions and their respective students' self-governments as well. The students' self-government shall be recognized as a competent body having an equal voice in the decision-making process at the university management level. This, of course, gives the great opportunity for the student to create the university environment they want to be in. On the other hand, it challenges them in terms of responsibility for the results and at the same time the capacity building of their own. The students' self-government, an organization representing the entire student community, shall be playing a key role in the

creating proper study environment (including involvement in university management and decisions making processes, student and academic life and appropriate feedback for academic community as well as drive engine for continuous improvement). However, we must not overlook other organizations, such as scientific, artistic, tourist, sports and other associations created by students at the various higher education institutions. The effectiveness of efforts of students' organizations will be much enhanced if they are properly planned and consistent, if they work together with the rector and deans on institutional level, and with the conference of rectors on the national level.

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## Remark

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