

Conceptions in the Hungarian higher education

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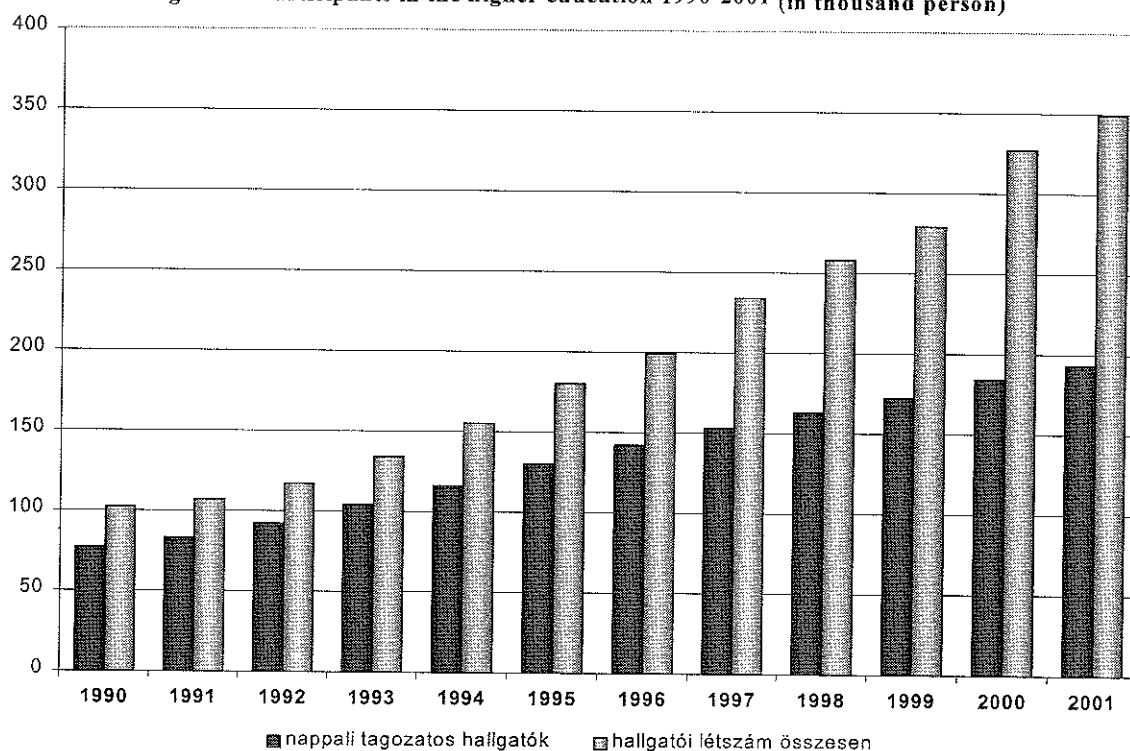
1. Dilemmas in the Hungarian higher education

Regarding the quantitative parameters, the higher education in Hungary is considered to be a “top sector”. In the early 90’s the Hungarian higher education formally fulfilled its tasks which had to be changed. Although not smoothly, but the institutional integration gained realization. However nowadays it turned out that not all these artificially created universities are viable in this form, besides, some of them, mostly where the structure was geographically too divided, deliberate over the thought of disintegration.

From September 2003 the credit system will take effect which will make mobility easier and would be considered as an entrant to the European credit system.

The enormous expansion in student number has already eventuated. This growth had been forced in 1998-2002 by the policy of higher education and the increasing demand for higher education. The universities and the colleges adapted to those claims, but in the mean time they were also to do so because of the unfavourable financial structure. Between 1990 and 2001 the number of students in higher education increased more than threefold (108 400 → 349 300¹) (Figure 1.).

Figure 1.: Participants in the higher education 1990-2001 (in thousand person)



Source: KSH, Magyar Statisztikai Évkönyv 2001. Budapest, 2002 (CD)

However this enormous expansion also involves quite a few concomitant phenomenons. The growth for example hasn't been followed by augmenting subsidies so far. Broken down infrastructure, obsolete buildings, old-fashioned and dangerous student hostels are all the consequences of a decade-long process. But the number of those student hostels still doesn't seem

to be sufficient. While in 1990 every second student could live in dormitory, nowadays this rate hardly reaches one third. Recently more than half of the 84 380² freshmen pays a tuition fee.

Already few years ago a number of experts drew the attention to the menaces of the over-qualification. The question read as follows: “knowledge-factory” or “paper-factory”? The debate runs that the institutions of higher education had changed into “education-factories” where the underpaid teachers are to fight with slightly motivated students. In these “education-factories” almost everyone will graduate, since getting rid of the “junk” is not in the institutions’ interest; in that way they would lose their “head quota”. The quickly multiplying new branches are often very under-qualified. Compared to the student numbers and to the rising requirement claims, the number of erudite teachers is still few.

Surveys for the job opportunities of the young people, starting out on a career show that the menace of over-qualification already exists. It is indeed a cautionary sign that more and more freshly graduated will only be able to find an employment in lower scope of duties, as a so-called “intellectual semiskilled worker”. Besides, the menace is growing that lots of freshly graduated young people become unemployed.

2. Basic issues in higher education according to joining to the EU

According to the conditions of the European dimension, higher education on the one hand is regarded as an institutionalized representation of science, but on the other hand is considered as a significant measure of qualitative parameters of the internal labour market.

The effectiveness and the operability of the internal market (European Single Market), established by the Treaty of Rome and the Treaty of Maastricht, also depend on whether there will be an adequately qualified labour force, capable of crossing visible and invisible boundaries either from an intellectual or from a professional point of view. The free movement and the competition controlled with regulations require the mutual recognition of degrees and suppose harmonization in the field of education and qualification.

Maintaining the multicoloured culture of Europe, however, is impossible without saving the cultural, national and identity-forming function of education. The European Union is to solve this duality with such educational programs which – having respect for equality of nations, cultures and people - are supposed to transpose the national and traditional function of education into the conditions of the European dimension.

The new entrants, of course, will be up against race conditions in the field of education too, which require a very good preparedness from them. Besides of the state subsidies, additional funds are available under market conditions in the EU.

The role of applications, the co-operation with the consumers and the rate of self-financed training are becoming more and more important.

Gaining competitiveness in this field means a long and expensive process. The very first steps must be promptly taken if we aim to benefit from, and not just to suffer the drawbacks of the accession to the EU. The preparedness of Hungary is not evident; numerous positives as well as negatives can be found.

It is our common interest to meet the EU's financial requirements which are favourable to those countries that have already given definition to their strategy in certain priority groups, built up their market oriented organisations and to those possessing sufficient know-how, necessary routine and a financial strategy as well.

2.1. National standards and structures in higher education

In line with the diversification of institutional structures of higher education, the diversification of degrees and qualifications available in different institutions has also been started out.

The traditional differences are becoming levelled between the "continental European" structure (one levelled) offering a longer and more integrated study and the rather modular structured "British-American" system (two levelled) providing shorter studies and several post-gradual trainings.

In the system of universities a trend is observed towards the introduction of shorter and medium termed qualifications.

This diversity concerning to the provision of qualifications can be found in non-university segments as well. In order to satisfy the needs of the labour market in certain fields, new undergraduate programs are coming to light and at the same time, as part of the regular programs, different post-gradual trainings are appearing. This process may lead off the introduction of the national or joint and the double degrees. Those institutions of higher education with non-university status that are not able to provide magisterial programs on their own initiative, have the chance to co-operate with those foreign institutions that possess such possibilities. In this way they can offer their students the opportunity of an international magisterial program.

Both in national and international respects the enhanced diversity is considered as a value of the higher education. However, as a result of this intensifying diversity, sometimes the transparency is absent in the qualification structure. Because of the several various levels and the rising differences in content, there are also difficulties in the recognition of degrees. So it is important to have such other instruments that can facilitate the flow of information and the transparency in the "tangled web" of qualifications. ECTS and other credit systems, for instance, could be those instruments and the Diploma Supplement as well, which is supposed to systematize the different degrees and skills.

Nevertheless it must be acknowledged that neither the length of study nor the nature of the institution says much about the level of skills or the schoolwork and the content of studies. The titles assigned to degrees are also very diverse, they don't point to the traits of the achieved skill. In this wise, to get to know a certain degrees' characters and content, we are to situate it in the frame of the national standards. The comparability of degrees is not supposed to be based on the study term, but on the outcome, the agreed academic standards and the achieved knowledge.

2.2. Quality assurance and accreditation processes

It seems to be a general European trend that the institutions of higher education gain more and more autonomy concerning to the study organizations or the syllabus of the programs.

While the state's control function formerly tended towards the input factors, nowadays the various quality assurance processes and the output control are coming to the front. In several countries the financing is not geared to the number of enrolled students, but to the number of graduated ones. Elsewhere, the results of the quality control play an even more important role in the distribution of the subsidies (see also e.g. the practice in the United Kingdom).

At the same time, together with the enhanced diversity of institutions and qualifications and the intensifying international competition in the higher education necessitate that the institutions themselves also should take care of the quality factors of the institution and its qualifications. Their information and documentation system concerning the institutional standards should also be supervised by the institutions. That is also the requirement of the various stakeholders, such as the employers, the governments and the public opinion, as well as the students studying or working abroad, who are to decide in which study program they should take part. At last but not least the evolving international competition also calls for such reforms.

As a consequence of the above mentioned tendencies various types of external quality assurance processes and solutions came into existence. Besides the ongoing mechanisms of the quality assurance operating in institutional levels, several countries decide to establish external quality assurance bodies and agencies.

2.3. International systems of credit transfer and recognition

The ECTS significantly facilitate the international credit transfer, therefore further internationalization is expected. However, many issues remained unresolved, such as the question of surmounting the gap between the modular structured system, the integrated studies and the system based on obligatory subjects with a constant improvement.

The Diploma Supplement is considered as another tool to achieve the transparency and the recognition of degrees world-wide. This supplement is supposed to serve sufficient unattached information for the international transparency and a reasonable recognition of degrees. The Diploma Supplement, lying emphasis on the scholastic records, includes information on the type, on the level and on the content of the study and on the legal title of the institution. This document beyond the scholastic records does not contain any evaluation or equivalence-declaration, but the represented information is objective enough so that the recipient can make its own decision.

The national information centres (such as NARIC and ENIC networks) set under the aegis of the EU and the UNESCO are regarded the third implements for the mobility. These centres are supposed to provide official information about the systems of higher education, the legal title of the institutions and about the studies and the processes of the recognition of degrees. Some of these centres are to engage in the evaluation or the recognition of certain degrees achieved abroad.

3. Hungarian tasks issue from the integration process

In Hungary, following the set forth of the EU negotiations, an increasing co-operation and accession to the EU-programs have commenced. A clear indication of these is the several EU-programs based on its application system.

Nevertheless the governmental strategy of higher education is still missing. Even though on the grounds of this strategy could be the country's national interest better represented and further reconciliations could be laid down concerning the higher education aims and priorities of the EU.

The lack of this national strategy will hinder the country's successful accession to the EU's higher education. In order to be able to create an own strategy, the actors of the higher education should possess sufficient information about the operation of consultative institutions such as the Committees of Education, the Permanent Conference of College Issues and the Permanent Conference of European Ministers of Education. Without this knowledge we will lag behind the education market with the sole mission, that is to minimise the losses Is that what we want?

Of course, a successful accession is not solely the matter of strategy. It would be rather important to strengthen the relationship between companies, corporations and the domestic higher education. In addition the promoting of a more interactive co-operation among these institutions and their more enhanced participation in the educational investments would be also favourable.

In line with the economical needs, such educational programs are to be developed that are able to prepare students for the application and the development of the modern information technologies (especially in technical-economical field).

However, such knowledge-level measuring instruments and methods are absent that would be supposed to qualify our students' preparedness according to the European norms.

Regarding the lexical knowledge of our students, they are able to compete to students coming from the EU universities, however they are lacking the skills and the experience of communication, argumentation, disputes, and self-management. The communication and co-operative skills of the Hungarian students are to be improved. In order to overcome these undoubtedly disadvantageous characteristics, further structural reforms and attitude changes are necessary to be taken.

The leaders of the higher education policy ought to promote further analyses and researches so that the supply of higher education and the demand of social needs would be better balanced (which is not today). The currently noticeable discrepancy deteriorates the social effectiveness of the higher education and the competitiveness of the country, moreover after our accession it may cause the same problems on the EU as well (e.g. we train too many agricultural engineer who may not find a job neither in the EU nor at home. The situation is the same with such economists who do not specialize in any sectors. At the mean time, we have already trained computer-experts to the EU).

Beyond keeping our national cultural heritage and reinforcing our national identity, the Hungarian higher education ought to play an important role in acquainting the European cultural heritage and introducing the issues of the European identity as well. In case Hungary pictures

its future as a member of the EU, these above stated questions should be represented in the aims of the intellectuals' training and we are to find a convenient form how to transmit these thoughts in the education.

Until our accession, it is needed to stimulate and support further the institutions to join the already open programs provided by the EU. It is important that the institutions should gain competence in making "winner" applications so that the acquirement of the methods and technologies (according to the content and the form of the application) should be fostered. That is the only way to be able to benefit from the increasing number of opportunities.

In the EU the issue of language-knowledge is treated with a great priority. Our unfavourable position could be significantly improved by raising the level in the field of higher education at least. By the end of the higher education studies two intermediate professional language examinations (both written and oral) could be expected in two foreign languages spoken in the EU. From 2005 the introduction of the final exam bounded on language examination could be a good base to achieve it. The higher education could considerably distribute to the improvement of the foreign language-knowledge by widening the scale of the courses provided to students from abroad and by using technical books in a foreign language as course books. After our accession it would facilitate the rising participation in the student mobility. Our students ought to learn experiences how to behave and move in a multicultural environment. In addition the student mobility should be particularly stimulated by the higher education institutions themselves.

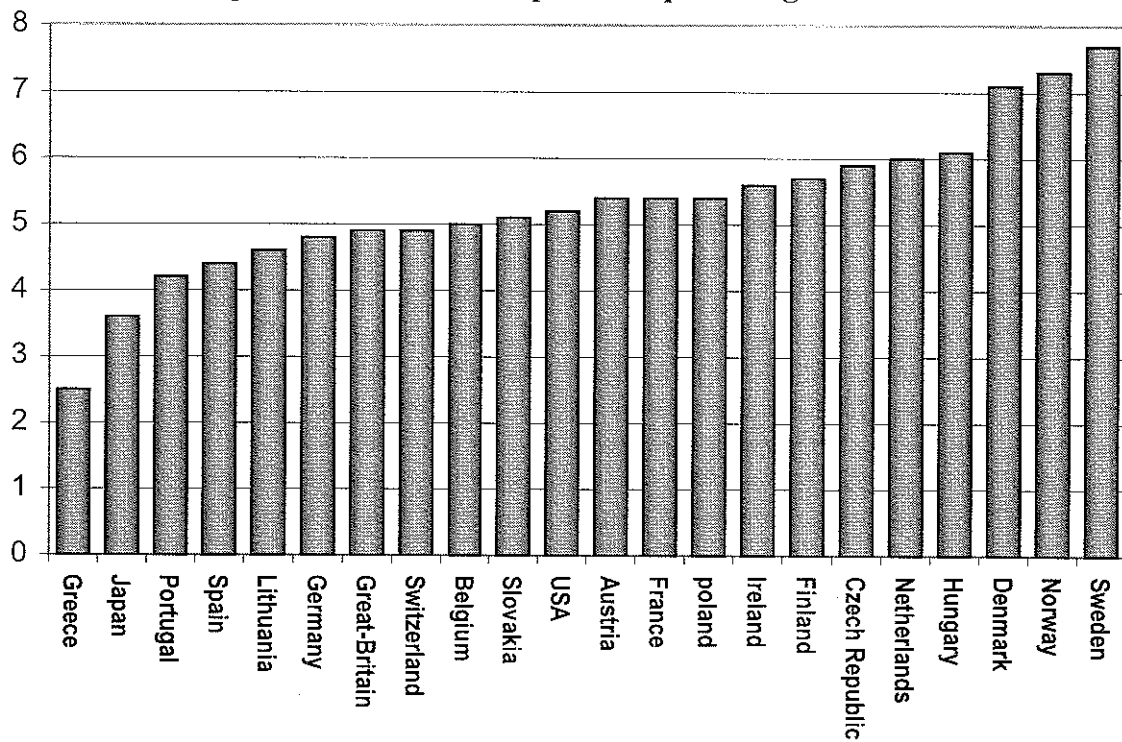
Most part of the Hungarian universities are obsolete, they are still built upon the ancient German model with their strong departmental structure. The modernization of this old-fashioned structure could be seen as one of the favourable factors of our accession.

In the management of the higher education institutions there are further steps to be taken towards a professional and a more effective operation. The awarding of the role of the universities' leadership, the rectors, the deans and the students is still based on the ideas of the ancient Humboldt-model (even in Germany has already passed away), though meanwhile both the environmental conditions and the complexity of the higher education organizations had changed. The institutions governed according to these principles are unable to comply with the requirements of the effectiveness.

From the point of view of joining to the EU one of our most vulnerable points is the weakness, or rather the lack of the information system. Reliable information is not available for very important decisions such as the consideration of the development recommendations, the statement of the applicants' number, the normative financing. On the grounds of the British model the establishment of such organization is recommended which is only supposed to develop the institution's information system and work off the information needed by the management. The data about the institutions are to be collected, filtered, improved and systemized, then the organization makes them available to the decision makers and distribute encompassing statistical issues.

In order to be able to close up is necessary to change on the rates of the financing of the higher education (it is also expected from the EU members). Our expenditures compared to the GNI closes to the average of the developed countries, however, our GNI per capita is only one third of it. In this context, because of the low rate of the GNI we need to expand relatively more on higher education than developed countries.

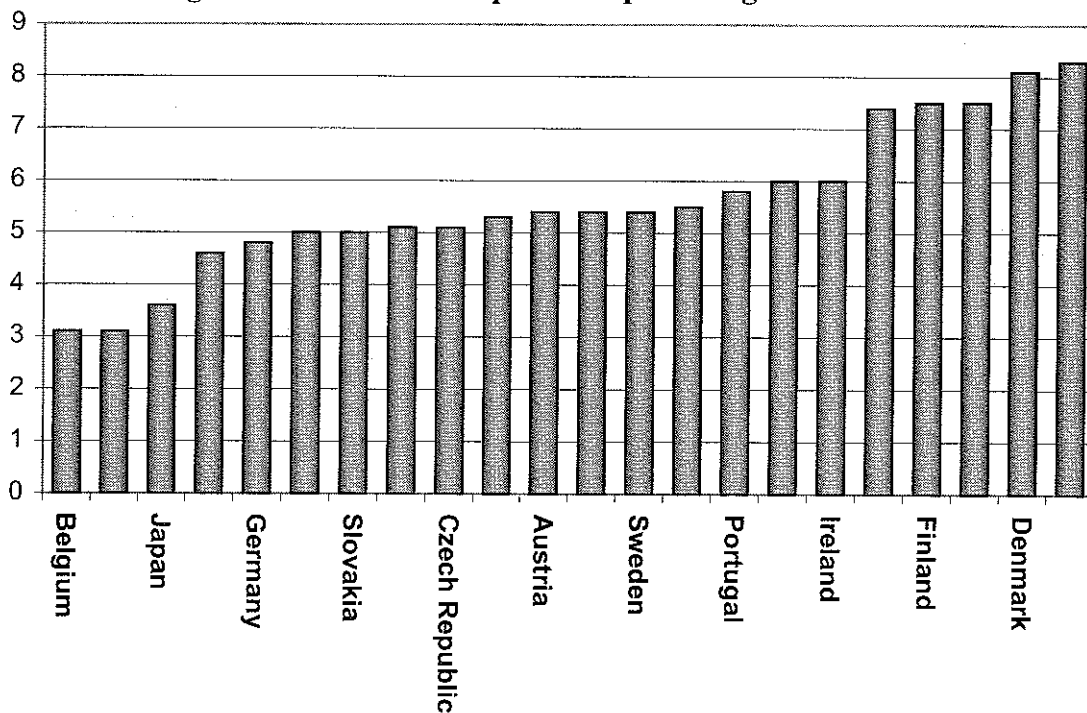
Figure 2. Educational expenses in percentage GNI in 1990.



Source: KSH. Nemzetközi Statisztikai Évkönyv, 2001, Budapest

Figure 2. shows that while in 1990 Hungary stood in the fourth place with its higher education expenditures in the order of the examined countries, in 1999 it fell back in the 19th place (see Figure 3.).

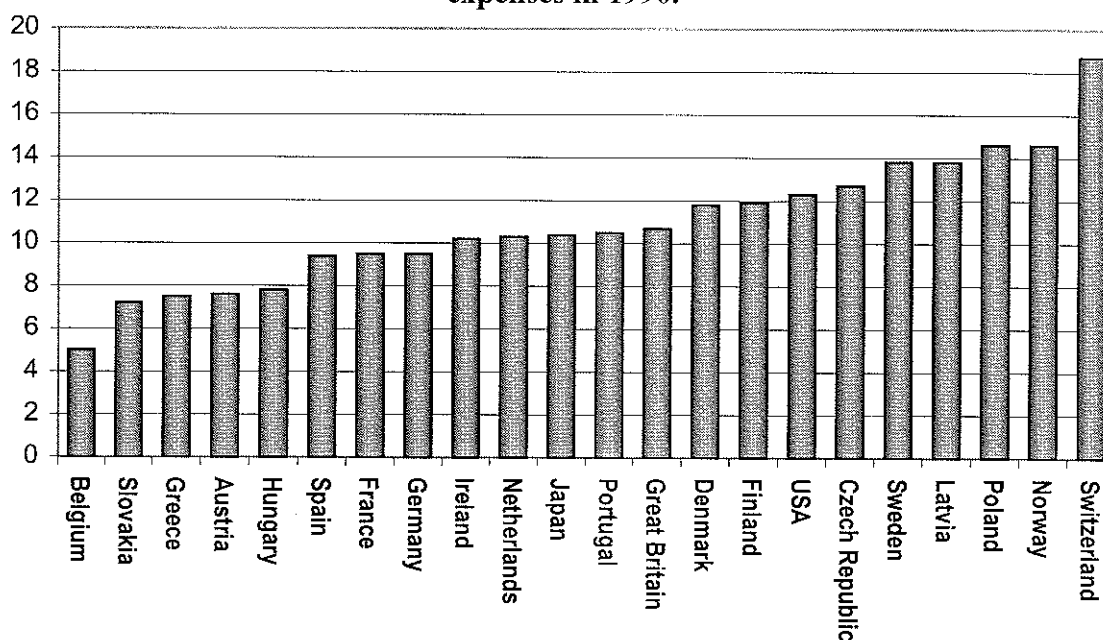
Figure 3. Educational expenses in percentage GNI in 1999.



Source: KSH. Nemzetközi Statisztikai Évkönyv, 2001, Budapest

In connection with the higher education expenditures of the government Hungary stands in the 18th place in 1990 (see Figure 4.).

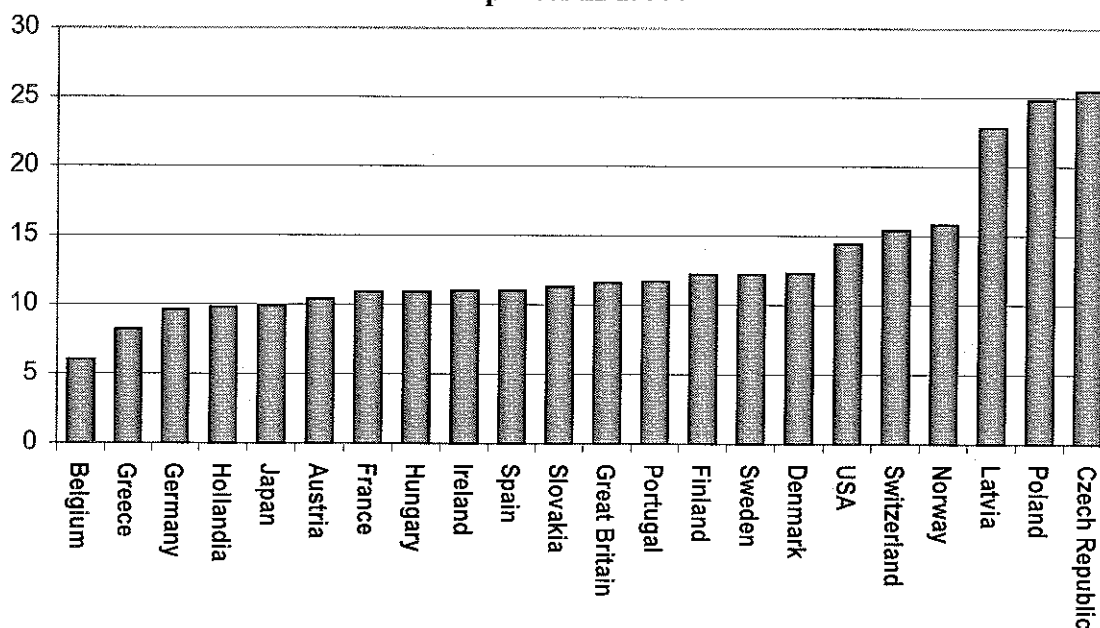
Figure 4. Educational expenses in percentage of governmental expenses in 1990.



Source: KSH. Nemzetközi Statisztikai Évkönyv, 2001, Budapest

In 1999 a slight improvement can be seen (15th place). Nevertheless it must be acknowledged that some of the accession countries such as Lithuania, Poland and the Czech Republic are all take precedence over us according to their expenditures (with a rate of 2-2,5 times higher). This way they gain a significant competitive edge by the time of the accession, in 2004.

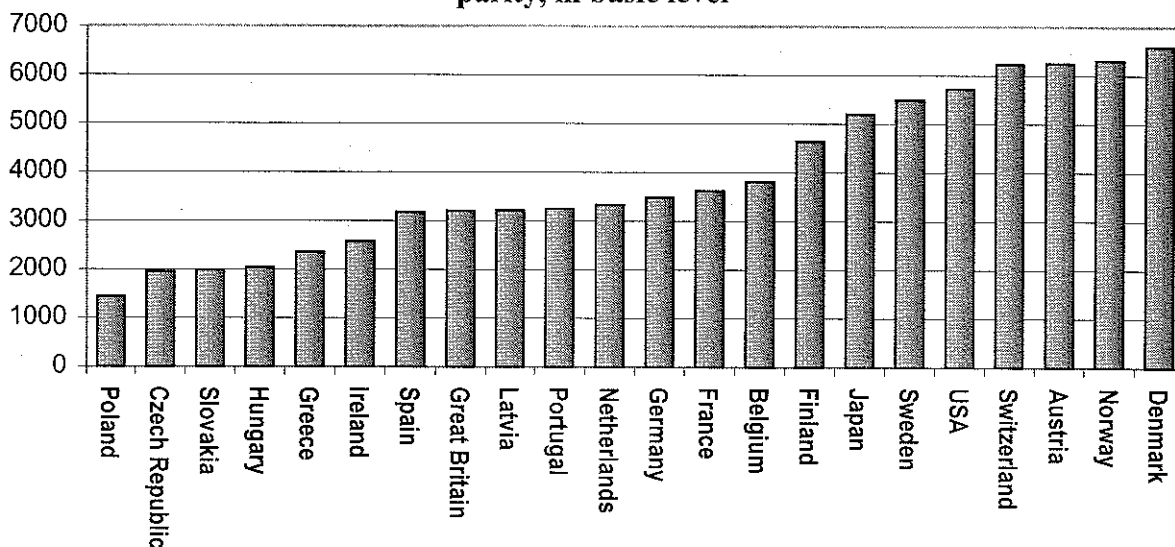
Figure 5. Educational expenses in percentage of governal expenses in 1999.



Source: KSH. Nemzetközi Statisztikai Évkönyv, 2001, Budapest

From the above stated turn out that Hungary does not possess a definite conception, since the expenditures per student do not say anything about the aims of the education policy, neither in the field of public education, nor of higher education. We do not follow the northern welfare countries that turn the most part of their educational expenditures to the development of the basic and the secondary education, so they ensure the future of a homogeneous knowledge-based society.

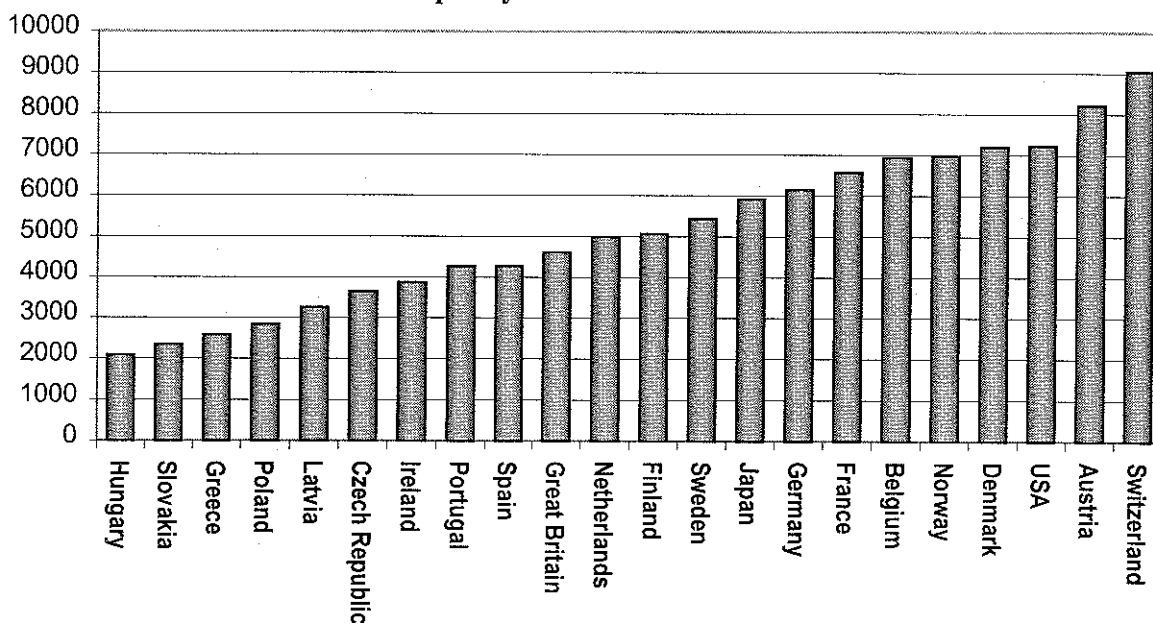
Figure 6. Educational expenses (USD) per head in purchasing power parity, in basic level



Source (6-7. figure): KSH. Nemzetközi Statisztikai Évkönyv, 2001, Budapest

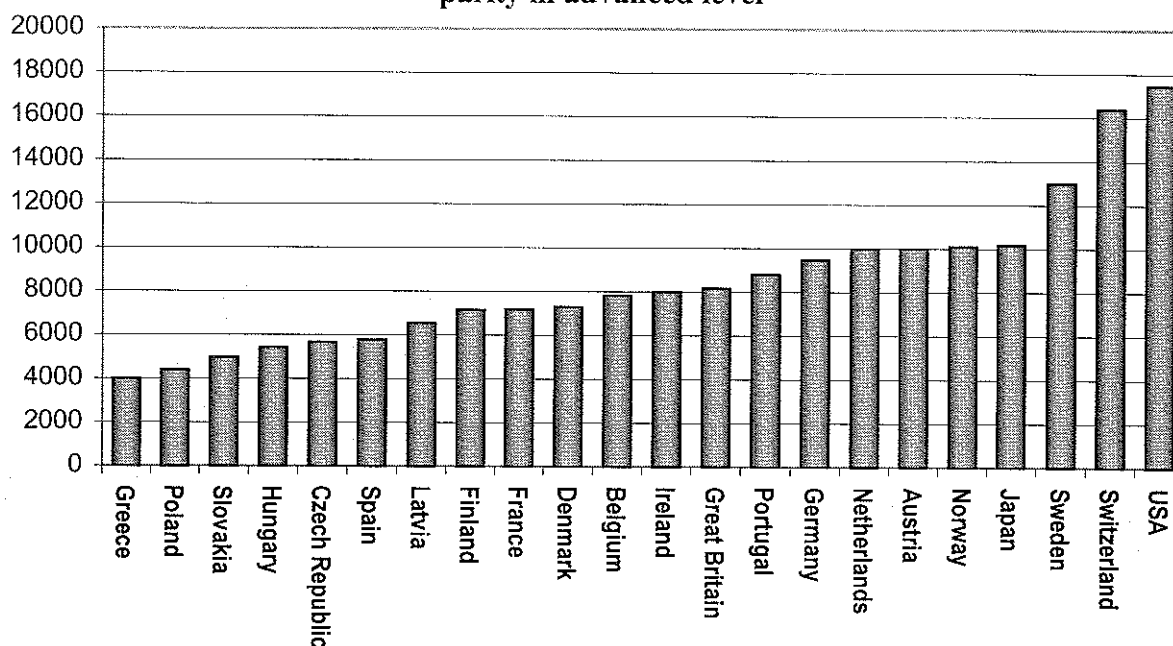
Hungary does not belong either to the countries that follow the Austrian, Swiss, German model focused on the secondary education framing a good base on the small and medium enterprises.

Figure 7. Educational expenses (USD) per head in purchasing power parity on medium level



Concerning the expenditures per student on higher education, Hungary is situated rather at the rear.

Figure 8. Educational expenses (USD) per head in purchasing power parity in advanced level



Source: KSH. Nemzetközi Statisztikai Évkönyv, 2001, Budapest

As long as Hungary does not start creating its own knowledge-society, it will fill a peripheral part in the EU and it will be surpassed in any field by the other applicant countries.

Enlarging the sources does not mean an automatic development; we must learn how to use them efficiently, which requires however a more professional management in the higher education.

4. Alternatives and challenges

Thinking of the duties should be done in connection with our system of higher education while preparing for the accession to the EU, we are not just to recognise where the EU stands right now, but we are to see where the EU is heading to. We have to give a simultaneous answer for the challenges of the accession to the EU and for the challenges of the EU itself.

The EU is also facing with diverse and large-scale changes of the society, having three core aspects, naturally effecting the education. The last IT boom, besides its life-transforming effects, has also had a unifying effect on terms of studying and working and on the role of the taught and the teacher as well. The “globalisation-shock” creates the global labour market with the help of the free flow of labour and with the help of the gradual levelling of wages and structure of consumption, resulting in identity conflicts and the lag behind of those, left out of the EU. The “civilisation-shock”, moreover, results in the state of uncertainties and poses ethical challenges due to inadequate knowledge, and in the meantime it appreciates qualification and creativity. All these significant twists and turns test the system of education which, in order to comply with the aforementioned challenges, should undertake at least five major duties;

- It must make people well prepared for understanding future changes. It has to help improving the skills and the level of creativity and also the capability of delivering reliable decisions.
- It should minimise the number of lag behind, the tragedy of those being undereducated or over-specialised. (For instance, language knowledge will be a basic requirement, built on the foundations of the common basic education, just like a firm knowledge of computer skills. We should not forget to mention the requirement for social intelligence and for the skill of adaptation capabilities, as equally important basic requirements.)
- The education system, as a rather important building, should be erected on solid ground. We must ensure the widest and broadest input options for its smooth running, while we also have to aim for obtaining a colourful output, as a result of the educational process. Between the “entrance” and the “exit”, we must also guarantee a coherent and continuous system, comprising of several knowledge-elements, obtained in different places and times. (Meaning that everybody should possess an internationally common, personal “competent card”, bearing all the relevant information in connection with one’s previous educational background.)
- We must correspond to the urgency of the need, first of all, by providing answers and solutions for the quality of education, for the training methodologies and for the forms of financial support etc.
- We have to harmonise our regulations, concerning the education, to the EU regulations, and we have to announce the results before accession is well under way, so to say, before the 31st of December, 2003.

The quality of education is a rather interesting one out of the five above mentioned duties. First of all, because it relates to almost every other relevant questions, and furthermore, because the quality-assurance, deriving from the just about re-defined quality concept, is expected to be newly established.

It is palpable that besides the honourable results for our higher education from the EU’s point of view, some other capabilities of ours are also put to the test. Saying that those shaky capabilities are well developed, would be a slight over exaggeration.

5. Measuring the value of the Hungarian higher education

The Agenda 2000 was prepared to gauge all relevant fields of the national economy, from the EU accession point of view. Hardly any of the fields of our national economy received such good critics as the education (including higher education). Although having received these good feedbacks, Hungary cannot lean back, waiting for the victorious march. There are still things to be done.

The short but substantial valuation is not just about achievements, but about challenges and problems as well. The deduction does not come to a conclusion that the final connection to the EU will lack any problems, but it says that no major problems are expected to turn up. Which can be interpreted that comparing the problems of the higher education with that of the agriculture and the environmental protection, for instance, can be less significant. The education policy plays a key role in the improvement of the human capital, which is the main element of the strategy and which may facilitate the successful handling of the XXI century’s economical, social and cultural challenges for Hungary.

- It seems to be a great challenge to prove whether, concerning our participation in communal programs, effective financial and institutional conditions have been well established so far or not.
- It also seems to be a great challenge to prove whether our participation in EU programs is adequate enough or not.
- Listing the great challenges, we have to note the difficulty to carry out a structural and qualitative reform in terms of education. The “Country Notifications, 2002” paints a slightly idealistic picture about this field. Not to mention the deceiving sentence which says that Hungary has closed the concerning accession chapter without applying for transitional provisions, and will meet its obligations. (This is rather laudable regarding Hungary’s abroad reputation, but in reality we have to turn to look that this chapter has not been opened up at all. Those standing on the pulpit should realise that serious work must commence from now on.)
- We must answer questions concerning whether what sort of institutional reforms and what sort of teaching methodological improvements and overviews would be necessary. It is my belief that we approach our results, that could be measured and criticised by European standards, in a way of an Eastern – European thinking (institutional culture, professional governing, strategic approach, operation, the lack of monitoring, marketing and decision-making mechanisms). Our syllabuses are very far away from allowing us to become a member of the knowledge-society (flexibility, credit-systems, feedback from graduated students and from those employing them).
- We have to reflect on the introduction of new programs, on the initiation of new subjects (in connection with these the approved number of participating students), on how easy it is to get multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary programmes accredited. Because if something can be regarded as a nightmare that is the installation of a new program. There is just one, even more dreadful attempt which is to bring a running program to a full stop (it is almost impossible).
- We have to figure out how to give a successful set off for the installation of modern education technologies, and a powerful boost for the plantation of updated quality-assurance systems. We can cite information technology for the sake of an example. In the case of a successful set off in connection with the latter mentioned topics, we would be able to turn for computer or multimedia assistance during classes in every field of the educated sciences. Furthermore, we should set the assessment of our teachers, carried out by students on a regular basis in order to obtain a reliable quality-assurance system.
- How shall we prepare for the communal framework – which is nevertheless an equally important question needed to be answered.
- Finally, what can and what shall we do to overcome the deficit of the necessary financial funds? These questions are seeking urgent answers.

6. Conclusions

Having skipped through some of the questions and problems arising in connection with our accession to the EU, we cannot avoid to arrive at conclusions, like

- the number of challenges in case of being solved, offer enormous help. Otherwise they may embody a serious menace.
- the difficulty of hitting a target in motion. Meaning that the European education system is also in a transition period, thus the inertia (as a margin of acting-capability of the higher education) of the current system is fairly considerable. Therefore each and every step of the reform should be turned into reality with careful and supervising guidance and respon-

sibility on the behalf of all the participants who are concerned in this reform process (thus governments, institutional characters etc.).

- the acknowledgement of the urgent need for well-founded professional strategies. A change in the government/governing parties cannot mean a sudden twist in the existing strategies. If a well-founded strategy fulfils its mission, we are likely to have a higher education system at the time of the accession which may meet all the probable needs. Especially the needs of our own, traditionally famous and world-wide known scientific achievements of higher education.

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