

Chapter 13

Governance Within Diverse University Structures: The Case of Charles University

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on university governance, which reflects the structure of an institution, whether it is centralized or decentralized, but most importantly democratic and autonomous. The case is illustrated using the example of Charles University, which is a large and highly decentralized organization that has been affected by developments in the Czech Republic after 1989 and their consequences for higher education in the country. In this regard, different governance models and recent challenges for higher education institutions are explained. The structure, main bodies, and management of Charles University are described and put into context within the national regulatory framework. The chapter further explores the division of powers and control mechanisms. A special focus is placed on the role of the Academic Senate, which underlines the democratic principles of the institution. The final remarks highlight the importance of a democratic, autonomous environment for both research and education.

INTRODUCTION

European universities have always played an important role, and borne significant responsibility, in society. However, the mission of institutions of higher education is changing in the modern world. Nowadays they are also expected to contribute to the resolution of economic, social and environmental problems. They must also respond to new technological and demographic developments. In order to meet these aspirations, especially in research and education, governance must be strong and, at the same time, democratic and transparent in order to provide academics and researchers with a high degree of independence.

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Governance issues are of relevance to all states and mainly concern issues such as the relationship between institutional self-governance and process of steering by the central authority (in European countries this is often the Ministries of Education), the participation of external representatives, student participation, and the relationship between the university and its constituent parts/faculties. These issues and others, such as funding, have a profound impact on institutional autonomy. At the same time, higher education governance as defined in Europe today is hardly conceivable without autonomy.

The article shows how the changes in the public sector in recent decades have affected governance in higher education – be it the governance of the higher education system, i.e. the relationship between the state and higher education institutions, or the internal governance of institutions themselves. It is neither possible for, nor is it the aim of, this article to convey a full picture of the European landscape; it is rather to outline developments in Europe and their impact on the Czech Republic and Charles University.

The Czech system of higher education has undergone dramatic changes since 1989, and is still in the process of being reformed. In order to better understand those changes, this paper identifies three distinct periods of higher education reform. In fact it has copied, in an accelerated way, the processes undergone by universities in the western part of Europe from the 1960s onwards. The reason for this is that, in the period between the Second World War and the year 1989, the Czech Republic was a communist country, in which all aspects of society were controlled by the state and higher education, in line with the Soviet model, was organized entirely by the state. Higher education institutions were directly managed by the Ministry of Education and served as only teaching entities, while research was performed at the Academy of Sciences. After the fall of the so called “Iron Curtain” in 1989, the Czech Republic underwent rapid development. Changes in the legal environment, the internationalization of higher education (namely the European Union educational and research programs and the Bologna Process) and the expansion (and later universalization) of higher education were the most important drivers of change that shaped the higher education system in three main waves.

Each of the waves of reform can be characterized by different relationship between higher education institutions and the state, and consequently by different policy. The first phase (1990-1998) could be regarded as the return of Czech higher education institutions to the Humboldtian ideals of unity in research and education, critical thinking and academic freedom, and into the community of free European universities. The second phase (1999-2006) was a period of a relative stability for the Czech higher education system, accompanied by quantitative expansion (in terms of both the numbers of institutions and students), a process which rapidly accelerated between 2006 and 2010. The governments of the third period (after 2006) have introduced the New Public Management (NPM) reforms into the public sector and tackled the impact of the global economic crisis by introducing budget cuts. Together with the quantitative increase in the number of students, this led to the substantial underfunding of Czech higher education.

National developments are furthermore projected on Charles University as an institution that must deal with the new policies. Its faculties and other constituent parts are very diverse. On one hand, the University is based on the principle that the procedures and tools for the development of educational and scientific activities and related activities must be applied first within its constituent parts, and therefore endeavors to preserve and develop their internal cultures and traditions. On the other hand, external factors have been slowly changing its internal governance due to the requirements placed on it by the state authorities.

Therefore, Charles University can be used as a case study to demonstrate the model of Humboldt higher education governance into which the elements of NPM have been incorporated, and can serve as

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