

The White Book Launched: On the Prospects of Education in the Czech Republic

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This article wants to present the National Education Development Programme of the Czech Republic, also known as the White Book, to large international audience. The vision of Czech education is hereunder discussed within the framework of the development of the Czech educational policy in the 1990's, pointing out the Programme's essential ideas.

Why did the White Book originate?

The last decade has brought a series of changes to Czech schools and education, considerably affecting most areas and levels of the educational system. Especially, the first half of the 1990's witnessed a succession of changes which were created, adopted, and launched in a rather hasty manner. More than from a governmental concept, these changes were often resulting from individual or local initiatives. Evidently, the country was lacking in managerial experience and stimuli, not only financial ones. Like in any other field, a wide range of opinions could be noticed: from total resistance to any alterations, up to an outright yes to a revolutionary change.

The first and major part of the last decade can therefore be seen as ambiguous. On one hand, there were many good intentions and efforts, while on the other, we have experienced a lot of fumbling and a good deal of political calculations. There was vast disability to systematically review the past evolution, evaluate the present state, and define a concept of development, based on the comparison and trends of "industrialized countries". The spontaneity of the development led sometimes to chaotic situations and often to unexpected consequences.

The need for a unified and clear vision could be felt more and more strongly. There were numerous reformatory proposals as soon as in the early 1990's. However, their aims were varied, none of them having explicitly become a leading concept of a substantial reform. It was abroad where probably the first systematic review of the Czech educational system came from: the OECD specialists' analysis (Zprávy, 1996), stressing the main discrepancies of the development in the 1990's and defining eleven expert suggestions.

In 1998, there was another attempt, this time utterly interior, to analyse Czech education, compare it with some European standards, and propose further steps: the project called Czech Education and Europe (České, 1999). Since the middle of the decade, studies of partial and particular areas and subjects of education have been gaining their importance, too.

Nevertheless, it is only the National Education Development Programme of the Czech Republic, also called the White Book (published in autumn 2000), what constitutes a turning point in the efforts to conceptually delimit the evolution of the Czech educational system. It is widely considered the first truly thorough document of the previous decade, analysing profoundly the contemporary situation and formulating a clear vision of Czech education on a mid-term scale.

Its origin was boosted by both internal circumstances requiring a sophisticated reform, and external ones, introducing the European educational context. It was impossible to neglect any longer the challenges of the European educational policy, especially the European White Book of Education and Vocational Instruction (Vyuèování, 1997). Many a notion of the Czech White

Book has been taken over from the European edition, such as lifelong learning, education as open preparation for a change, equal opportunities of education, employability, etc.

The White Book is presented as a systemic project, meant to express the basic ideas, general conclusions, and action plans of the development of Czech education. As not only its authors declare, it is a document emerging from a very wide platform and expressing concisely a groundwork of consensus. This is proved by the number of contributors who have written the resource studies (29) or further resource documents (9) and by a lively public discussion upon the text. The team of editors was also numerous (8 members).

What does the White Book aim at?

The document observes the educational system as a whole and, subsequently, describes the details of particular education areas and school types. Based on the current situation, the White Book outlines important targets and gives recommendations to proceed and achieve them.

The introductory part presents the outsets and goals, in regard to European and Atlantic integration, to new legislative conditions, considering the projection of quantitative developments of the educational system and recent demographic and economic trends.

The anthropo-genetic and lifelong concept of education is emphasized, saying clearly that “intentional education or learning is a purpose itself, and cannot be partly or wholly inferred from other purposes” (p. 5). The White Book requires that a multilevel and extensive educational system be aimed at the development of the personality, interpretation of the society's historic culture, support of civic solidarity and democracy, and cultivation of partnership and cooperation within the global society. Increasing employability, competitiveness, and prosperity is also seen as crucial targets.

It is accentuated that, on one hand, variety is what deserves respect as an important quality, but on the other hand, differences in education contribute to social disparities. The general goal is lifelong learning, throughout the society. Consequently, school education must be understood in a new way, the main tasks being the creation of the necessary groundwork for lifelong learning, the introduction of a sophisticated relationship between learning and work, the updated delimitation of responsibilities at all levels of the educational system, and the encouragement for investments in human resources.

The authors of the White Book explicitly profess some basic principles of the educational policy, such as equitable access to education opportunities and the concern for the development of each individual's potential. The main strategic lines of the Czech education policy are defined by the White Book as follows:

- from centralized control to the responsibility of joint decision-making
- lifelong learning for everybody
- adaptability of the contents of learning to the society's educational needs
- exploration and evaluation of educational quality and efficiency
- support to internal transformation and openness of schools
- increase of the quality and professional prospects of teachers

The White Book assumes changes in virtually all fields, including the management and financing of the educational system. According to the new delimitation, central bodies should especially

formulate strategic aims and basic principles, define the guidelines, care for appropriate conditions, instigate techniques of indirect management, check the progress, and install a comprehensive system of evaluation.

Close attention is paid to the development of interpersonal relations at all levels of the educational process. Generally, it is crucial for the schools that “such preconditions, provisions and techniques of external support be established, that schools themselves can, and wish to, be reorganized“ (p. 16).

The White Book explicitly relies on relatively rich funds to buoy up some innovation and development programmes. The intention is to cherish the autonomy and stimulate the activities of the schools which join the governmental programmes and specify their own innovation plans. At the same time, the White Book urges much more efforts to be put in soliciting money from the European Union's structural funds. It is also indicated that schools should become an important chapter of regional budgets. The description of financial priorities in education results in some interesting recommendations, such as “to implore the increase of education outlays up to 6 % of the gross national product” or “to make teachers' salaries 30 % higher than the national average” (p. 18). It is therefore supposed that in 2007 teachers will be earning 137 % of the average national income. This corresponds with the goals of the current administration, but it is doubtful whether it does with those of future governments.

Within all this context, the authors of the White Book stress rigidly the importance of international cooperation for the development of Czech education. The EU, the OECD, the Council of Europe, the UN, the UNESCO, regional cooperation, bilateral relations — this all should be perceived as helpful elements for practical procedures.

What exactly does the White Book recommend?

The suggestions of the White Book are divided into three main sections: regional, tertiary, and adult education. For all three, the White Book gives the main strategic lines of the Czech educational policy and recommends various tools of its materialization.

Concerning **regional education**, which includes pre-school, basic, and secondary education, the analysis is obviously the deepest and the recommendations the most numerous. First Changes are mainly urged in the curricular policy, within all stages of education. The need for a State Programme of Education is mentioned. There should be some new or strengthened features of the curriculum. Tools of transformation of the encyclopedic approach to teaching are called for. The suitability of some active forms of teaching is underlined, as well as the interdisciplinary integration, and the integration of in-class and out-class activities. New areas of the curriculum should keep in view the European dimension and consider questions of multicultural education, environmental education, democratic citizenship, business and economy, support of professional orientation, information and communication technologies, healthy lifestyle, etc. Also, the curriculum should comprise two foreign languages, one starting from the 3rd grade, another from the beginning of the upper basic school stage (mostly at the age of 11).

As for the evaluation of regional education, the objective is to update the monitoring system in such a manner that all levels (the school, the region, the educational system) are encompassed and various stages and types of schools can be evaluated. Also, such a system should be able to provide all participants in education (pupils, parents, employers, schools, state administration) with the necessary information for their decision making.

It seems that one of the strongest characteristics of the White Book is the matter of autonomy and internal transformation of schools. The authors stress the need for a compact system of tools to enable such procedures, such as adequate training programmes for headteachers and the staff. As a novelty, the White Book comes up with the idea of the School Development Programme, based on innovative financing, the experience of prosperous schools, and fixed rules of differentiated approach to schools, considering their efforts and intentions.

Naturally, those who work in schools will experience the profound changes before anyone else. The White Book accentuates the improvement of the social status of teachers. Their salaries should be increasing in accordance with their different jobs and performances, their status should be defined through a fundamental document, and various forms of their professional associations should be supported. Other recommendations of the White Book aim at more efficient preparatory teacher education.

Subsequently, the authors of the White Book more precisely suggest some specific procedures. Those utterly new, or even controversial, are listed below. Various forms of education are taken into consideration, such as leisure time organizations, guidance to gifted children, education for the handicapped, or precaution of pathological incidents.

- to give to all children the legal right of pre-school education, providing them with realistic chances to execute it
- to work out a synopsis of the pre-school education programme and formulate newly its objectives, contents, and expected results (child competence)
- to require university education of pre-school teachers (bachelor degree), so that they are satisfactorily acquainted with a wide scope of professional and social contexts
- to generally transform the life of the school and match the schooling to pupils' needs
- to thoroughly alter the selective upper basic school stage (11 to 15 years) into an integrated system (internally differentiated, though), both supporting gifted pupils and integrating difficult ones, so that specialized schools and classes become superfluous
- to increase the proportion of those who pass a secondary school-leaving examination (*maturita*) up to annually 75 % of the population
- to deepen the differentiation of the curriculum of secondary grammar schools (*gymnázium*) so that such education is not merely academic but rather comprehensive, making way to varied carriers
- to create a two-level secondary school-leaving examination, partly optioned by the pupil; to incorporate a final thesis and its defense in the profile part of such examination
- to optimize the network of schools in favour of multifunctional schools, offering both general and specialist programmes at various stages of education

As for **tertiary education**, the objective is a diversified tertiary sector, transitive and flexible, so that changes or continuation of the study are possible at any age. By the year 2005, half of the population of 19-year-olds should have the opportunity to start some form of higher education, bachelor, master, or any other form of study. The authors of the White Book, however, do not impel radical changes, but rather a re-shaping of the potential of tertiary education and a clarification of goals.

Especially the transitivity — the modular construction of the study — is stressed, mainly in its vertical direction (from lower stages to higher ones, but also vice versa) but also in its horizontal direction (transitions among study programmes). The system of modules and credits is

a way to succeed, such modules being understood as compact sub-parts of a programme, available to variedly build up higher education schemes. Such a system enables the students to aptly create or modify the process of their tertiary education, supporting their mobility and corresponding with the concept of lifelong learning.

Significant alterations are expected as regards the forms of study. Above all, distance studies and combined forms of study should substantially increase their importance. The offer of study programmes would therefore be more diversified. Students would get more chances, without much growth of the demand for teachers and space. The contents, form, and timing of the study would be perceived in a more flexible manner, the development of distance study centres would be stimulated, and opportunities to study at foreign universities would amplify.

Nonetheless, as the authors of the White Book claim, all this requires more finance, a new type of tutor education, and a well organized cooperation among all higher education institutions. Further, much closer attention should be paid to the development of contacts to employers.

To mention some numbers, here is what the White Book assumes as tertiary education objectives, to be fulfilled by 2005:

- 50 % of the population of 19-year-olds should be involved
- tertiary education must also be accessible to older applicants, making another 30 %
- the proportion of bachelor : master : postgraduate students at Czech higher education institutions should change from today's 15 : 80 : 5 in favour of the bachelors, their share reaching 50 %
- increased transitivity will decrease the number of university students who do not finish their studies, which adds some five thousand to the total number of students
- the total of tertiary education students of approx. 223 thousand (180,000 prospective bachelors or masters, 13,000 postgraduates, 30,000 students of higher vocational colleges, and a negligible number of students at private universities) should evolve into 250 thousand (195,000 bachelors or masters, 15,000 postgraduates, 30,000 higher vocational college students, and 10,000 private university students)

Not only the numbers of students are important, though. It is inevitable to explicitly describe the higher education institution as a place of studies, research, development, and lifelong learning too.

The White Book believes that the extensive evolution of universities has after ten years been finished, and nowadays it is the quality what must be focused on. Contrary to that, the development of non-university education institutions should continue with more private institutions being founded.

It is presumable that higher education institutions are *de facto* going to be divided into three groups:

- those in which top scientific research will constitute a significant part of most study programmes (for master and postgraduate degrees) and the tuition will mainly be aimed at scientific work
- those in which scientific research and work will constitute a part of a few study programmes, the rest prevailingly being practical and professional
- those solely aimed at practical and professional study programmes (especially for the bachelor degree), exerting creativity (i. e. non-university institutions)

Nevertheless, such a division should certainly not mean „better“ or „worse“ institutions, but rather different in their characteristics. As the White Book declares, not even the division between „researching“ and „teaching“ universities is a crucial point.

Of course, all this implies extra workload of the academic staff. Those involved in bachelor programmes should predominantly be practitioners. Consequently, general discussions about varied qualification of bachelor programme teachers will be heard, as well as about the potentials of various ways of quality evaluation. Quality is understood by the White Book — in the context of evaluation of higher education institutions — as a multidimensional term. It is not recommended to make comparisons between different types of institutions and present their rankings, nor even link the results of evaluation directly to financing.

As for what is called lifelong learning, the courses offered at higher education institutions should not be copying what is offered to regular students. On the other hand, those who pass a lifelong learning programme should get their chances if they later want to start a bachelor study or any other regular programme.

The White Book sees good reasons for the reorganization of higher vocational colleges, urges the reintroduction of follow-up studies at secondary schools, and advocates support to new non-university institutions of higher education. For all tertiary forms, the modular construction of studies is promoted and credit systems are preferred. The transitivity of the whole system of tertiary education should consequently be secured.

As for the **adult education**, the White Book takes into consideration all three major parts thereof: programmes aimed at gaining a certain degree of education, further professional education, and adult education courses. The authors warn that the development of adult education is slower in the Czech Republic than anywhere else. The actual key problems are uncertain competence, lack of motivation, and the absence of a systematic approach to adult education.

Some specific problems are typical for adult studies. Higher education institutions call for larger numbers of adult students, demanding easier access to adult studies (e. g. through recognition of shorter programmes), wider implementation of distance programmes, higher financial allowance on adult students, or the reimbursement for study leave from their jobs.

Efficient incentives for the employees should play an important role in further professional education, too. The care of human resources, this is to say, is neglected in businesses and widely ignored by regional authorities.

The White Book furthermore suggests to increase the numbers of participants in re-qualification courses, to launch new re-qualification programmes for specialist applicants, to more intensely motivate the unemployed to take part in re-qualifications, and to update related information and counseling.

Even for hobby courses and civic education, the authors of the White Book propose that the expenses on individual adult education be tax deductible.

Thus, the recommendations in general call for a legislation framework of adult education, for a system of financial and non-financial stimuli, and for new mechanisms of systemic development of adult education.

What are the expectations of the White Book?

The White Book undoubtedly comes up with a series of suggestions and recommendations which are new and helpful in the context of Czech education. Schools should be gradually transformed into institutions prompting people to abilities, willingness and concern for lifelong learning — and the White Book should be understood as a good tool of such transformation.

In many respects the White Book takes into account the situation in advanced countries. This can be seen, for instance, in the efforts to deflect from the double-tracked system (to eliminate the 8-year [and 7- or 6-year] secondary grammar schools [*gymnázium*] and strengthen the obligatory part of the system, i. e. basic schools), to increase the importance of evaluation at basic schools and thus weaken the sometimes fatal weight of secondary school entrance examinations (finishing the basic school with an overall diagnosis), to internally integrate and externally differentiate the system of isolated secondary schools (lines of general, technical, and vocational education), to establish school administration bodies in order to balance powers at the local level of the educational system (school councils), to reinforce the programmes of general education (at grammar schools and technical colleges) and increase the percentage of those who finish such programmes (mainly at grammar schools), to widen and diversify the offer of tertiary education (parallel programmes at higher education institutions), and to strengthen the programmes of adult education (formal and informal education courses).

Some of these suggestions have long been expected and will probably meet grateful reactions. Others may be perceived by various parts of the Czech audience as problematic, if not unfeasible, although one can hardly doubt their usefulness. Many people and a good deal of mass media are strongly opposed to changes, partly because of traditions, partly due to lacking information, ignorance, limited views, or political calculations. The materialization of what is formulated by the White Book will therefore be an interesting test of how difficult it is to negotiate and make compromises — throughout the system, from central bodies to single schools.

The main query, however, will be the ability of the centre to materialize such a universal change. It is not only a challenge to the educational sphere but even more so for politicians and economists, as their priorities will be the decisive factor of this change. In this regard, the authors of the White Book seem to be courageous, or even audacious, if they rely on a support of 6 % of the GNP and a considerable increase of teacher salaries. Still, do the current Czech politicians and economists like it or not, the priorities of EU countries are like this.

The document has originated as an assignment of the current Ministry of Education. It took a considerable time to be elaborated, the most important work having been done during the last twelve months or so. It does not seem favourable for the White Book to be published as late as at the end of the legislation period of the assigning government. Namely, the objectives of this document cannot be achieved sooner than within some five or ten years, the evolution depending on the governments coming to power.

Nonetheless, there is a more general purpose of the White Book: it reflects amply the needs of Czech education and, at the same time, presents the basic tendencies of education in advanced democracies. From this viewpoint, hopefully, the White Book will not become a hostage of political rivalry but rather a stimulating vision of practical steps. This is the only way for it to be successful and get gradually materialized.

However, the White Book is hardly more but a vision. One cannot think that having defined its conclusions, no matter how pregnant they are, the main task is over. It will only be the materialization of such vision what shall decide whether the White Book is really purposeful. It is going to be a long and complex managerial task, having impact on anything and anyone

involved. In the Czech Republic, the results of recent complex changes are often far from excellent. Let us hope, then, that the White Book is going to avail.

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