



The Czech government scholarship programme for students from developing countries – Evaluation findings and policy reflections



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 February 2013

Received in revised form 28 November 2013

Accepted 11 December 2013

Keywords:

Scholarship programmes

Tertiary education

Developing countries

Programme evaluation

Shoestring evaluation

ABSTRACT

In Czech Republic there is a long tradition of providing tertiary scholarships to students from developing countries. The government scholarship programme started in the 1950s already as a part of the Czechoslovak technical assistance to countries in the South. Even though the programme left tens of thousands of graduates all over the world, the recent programme evaluation has revealed that it is characterised by a relatively poor performance. This article brings forward the main outcomes of the programme evaluation, highlights the policy recommendations and summarises policy reflections that occurred following the evaluation. The programme evaluation was done under unfavourable circumstances and could be accordingly defined as 'shoestring evaluation'. The restrictions and their influence on evaluation outcomes are discussed in article, too.

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1. Introduction

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimates that in 2011, nearly 4.3 million students were enrolled in tertiary education outside their country of citizenship (OECD, 2013, p. 304). Although Europe as a whole attracts majority of these students (48 per cent), the Czech Republic ranks still rather among the less popular destination countries. Nevertheless, the ratio of foreign students enrolled in Czech tertiary educational institutions expressed as a percentage of all tertiary students steadily increases year to year and in 2011 it reached 8.5 per cent (OECD, 2013, p. 317). Most of them come to study within different intergovernmental agreements, or international exchange programmes (e.g. Erasmus, Erasmus Mundus, Ceepus, etc.), but not a negligible share of them come to study on a commercial basis.

A unique group of these international students are students from developing countries who come to study within a special government scholarship programme which the government of Czech Republic implements and finances as a part of its development cooperation programme. The 'government scholarship programme for students from developing countries' started in

the 1950s already as part of the Soviet bloc's policy towards its allies in the Third World. Since then tens of thousands of students came to Czechoslovakia (and since 1993 to Czech Republic) to obtain their tertiary education under this scheme (i.e. for free). Currently, the programme hosts roughly 600 students every year and though it consumes about 5–6 million euro yearly, not much attention has yet been paid to its impacts, efficiency and/or effectiveness.

In 2011, the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) as an institution responsible for the Czech development cooperation programme commissioned an external evaluation of the scholarship programme. This paper presents its evaluation design and discusses its limits. Further it outlines its main outcomes and derived policy recommendations. The last part tracks policy changes which occurred after the evaluation has been accepted by its commissioner and in the end, it discusses the lessons learned.

The circumstances under which the evaluation was done were rather challenging than standard, mainly in terms of the allotted time, budget and available data. Therefore, the evaluation methodology was based on a non-experimental one group post-test design only. The data collection methods consisted of a literature review, analysis of official statistical records, online surveys and semi-structured consultations with stakeholders. The paper discusses reasons why no other and more robust design could have been chosen. In this regard, the evaluation could be defined as 'shoestring' but still it brought quite significant changes in policy.

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2. The Czech government scholarship programme for students from developing countries

The history of the Czechoslovak (until 1992¹), and later the Czech government scholarship programme for students from developing countries dates back to the 1950s. At that time, policies were at large influenced by the Marxist ideology determined by two main principles of 'political independence and economic liberation from imperialism', and a 'close relationship' with the Soviet Union. The notion of non-capitalist development was based on a vague statement made by Lenin during the Second Comintern that 'backward countries could bypass capitalism with the aid of the victorious proletariat' (Botha, 1992, p. 182). This approach lasted for more than three decades and obviously greatly shaped and influenced the form and content of the emerging scholarship programme.

Not surprisingly, scholarships were first of all provided to students from countries such as Vietnam, North Korea, Cuba or Mongolia. In 1961, because of the overwhelming interest, the Czechoslovak government decided to establish a unique university only for students from developing countries.² The university got called The University of 17th November (in honour of students assassinated by Nazis because of their resistance against the occupation in 1939). However, as Pick (1979, p. 10), the renowned Czechoslovak analyst, observed: 'This experiment was not too successful'. Rising number of racist attacks against students from developing countries gave evidence of the unpreparedness of Czechoslovak society to accept the otherness of students from the Third World. The overall resentful climate in society after the Prague Spring in 1968, rising costs of the programme and low return rate of its alumni resulted in transformation of the university into only a single department of the Charles University.³ In 1974 the University of 17th November was definitely closed (Holečková, 2010, p. 27).

In spite of a failure of a separate-university concept, the government scholarship programme for students from developing countries claimed rising interest throughout the 1980s again. The number of students annually accepted for scholarship-funded education reached an inconceivable 850 placements for new students in the late 1980s (Jelínek, Dessieová, & Náprstek, 2004, p. 14).

The fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 brought vast socio-economic changes (not only) to Czechoslovakia, and the very demanded scholarship programme for students from developing countries was severely affected, too. Above all because the urgently needed socio-economic changes required a reallocation of available (and very scarce) financial resources. This resulted in restrictions in the programme in early 1990s.⁴ Nevertheless, the accession of Czech Republic into the OECD in 1995 triggered the revitalisation of the Czech development cooperation programme with developing countries and the scholarship programme became an integral part of its bilateral form. As a result, the number of new students enrolled in the programme progressed again. In 1996, the Czech government approved to raise the number of new positions to 200 every year (Czech Government, 1996, p. 1); and in 2001, the number was increased up to 250 (Czech Government, 2001, p. 1). Compared to 1980s, the number was significantly lower but on the

other hand, the scale of eligible developing countries has widened considerably (e.g. in 2003 the programme covered 92 developing countries in total).

In 2007, mainly because of vast budget constraints the Czech government decreased significantly the number of new positions every year to 130 only, with effect from the academic year of 2008/2009 (Czech Government, 2007, p. 1). As a consequence, the total number of students (scholarship holders) registered at Czech universities under this programme has been slightly decreasing since then, i.e. from 660 students in 2008/2009 to 600 students in the academic year of 2012/2013 (MFA, 2013, p. 44). On the contrary, the range of study programmes has broadened, and nowadays it includes programmes in agriculture, economics, international trade, chemical engineering, medicine etc. However, the scope of eligible developing countries has remained wide which in combination with the limited number of new positions raises questions about the effectiveness of such a modality of cooperation, mainly considering the on-going efforts to limit bilateral development cooperation to a few priority countries only.

One can ask what could be the motives behind such a programme and which goals it aims to achieve. The authors assume that this instrument used to play its role in strengthening political and security relations with particular countries within the socialist block (research on this would go beyond the scope of the evaluation). Nowadays, based on official documents, it presents an instrument of the Czech development cooperation programme which 'contributes to sound socio-economic development of developing countries', in regards to the scholarship programme via the 'enhancement of their human capacities' (MFA, 2010, p. 24). But in fact, exact goals of the scholarship programme have never been explicitly defined. It was only in 2012 (following this evaluation) when the Czech MFA approved a key document⁵ (the first of its kind) setting out goals of the programme this way: (i) to provide tertiary education to those students in developing countries for whom (due to any reasons) such education would not be accessible in their home countries and via this to contribute to human capacities enhancement in particular countries, or their socio-economic development respectively and (ii) to strengthen the (mainly economic) relationships of the Czech Republic with developing countries via alumni of this programme (MFA, 2012, p. 2). The second goal indicates that there could have been hidden objectives of the programme even before (e.g. economic, or political) even though they have never been officially defined.

3. Evaluation design and its limits

Based on Terms of Reference, the evaluation was supposed to assess the process of scholarship provision, and attempt to quantify (based on existing data) the impacts of the programme. The evaluation was requested to be done in four months. Had sufficient data and budget been available, the allotted time could have been tight but adequate to apply a more robust evaluation design. However, the evaluators faced severe problems mainly in: (i) data availability and accuracy and (ii) budget restrictions. What made the evaluation even more difficult was the fact that the evaluators were not familiar with these restrictions from the early moment. The budget was cut off (to almost half) from the limit officially announced in tender (to 4000€ only) which significantly influenced the pre-planned evaluation design. Official statistical data proposed by evaluators to be obtained with the help of the evaluation commissioner (i.e. data which are not made public but can be provided on request only to another state authority) were indeed promised to be delivered but the reality was a bit different.

¹ As of 1st January 1993 Czechoslovakia split into two countries (Czech Republic and Slovak Republic).

² After The Peoples' Friendship University in Moscow (founded in 1960 and later renamed after Patrice Lumumba) and Herder Institute at the Karl Marx University in Leipzig, it became the third university in the Soviet bloc established with special emphasis on "technical assistance" to former colonial countries, allies of the Soviet Union.

³ The oldest and world-known university in Czech Republic established in 1348.

⁴ However, the scholarship programme was the only form of development assistance that was not fully abolished during this period.

⁵ Strategy on the provision of government scholarships to students from developing countries accepted for the period of 2008–2013.

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