

Separate Slovakia's struggles

Bratislava & Nitra. Slovak universities have two big problems their Czech counterparts do not face. First, since Slovakia became independent of pre-existing Czechoslovakia in 1993, university staff have been leaving in droves. Second, the new law to modify the 1990 law of universities in federal Czechoslovakia, likely to be debated in parliament this month, will not make the radical changes expected in the Czech republic.

The 1990 act made faculty deans independent of their rectors, and so impeded attempts by universities to reorganize themselves along Western lines. Unlike their counterparts in the Czech Republic, Slovak rectors have failed to get these provisions changed.

Juraj Švec, rector of Bratislava's Comenius University, who, since 1990, has moonlighted as head of the Slovak Academy of Sciences Institute of Cancer Research, says that in 1990 it may have seemed sensible to spread power among the faculties. Academics were then worried by the risk of concentrating power in a single individual who, in an unstable political climate, could be subject to political influence, as in communist days.

In Švec's view, one unfortunate result has been to make university courses inflexible. Faculty deans may have been prepared to make changes to their curricula, but they were in general not prepared to coordinate their courses with those of other faculties. This has made it difficult for students to change courses, says Švec, and has also made universities expensive to run. When faculties duplicate courses, such as West European language courses and basic economics (now part of all study programmes), he says, "not only is it more expensive, but we do not have so much expertise in these areas, so that quality must be questioned."

In August last year, a group of 19 experts, selected by the ministry of education and headed by Švec, presented a proposal to put more decision-making powers in the hands of rectors to overcome this problem. But it was blocked by an outcry from the scientific community. The academic senate of Comenius University called for Švec's resignation, only withdrawing its demand when he promised that the proposal would be redrafted.

In the Czech Republic, the ministry of research was able to defuse a similar outcry. In Slovakia, academics were able to argue that their political situation continues to be unstable and that such a change could be dangerous.

Švec now diplomatically says that the academics' point is valid. But he points to other external factors which mean that universities must change if they are to serve the community.

Unemployment is a serious pressure, he says. In 1993, 0.5 per cent of the unemployed were graduates, but this proportion has now doubled. "This means that one-fifth of last year's 13,000 graduates did not get jobs", he says, arguing that this means universities, used as they are to being told by the Communist Party how many graduates to produce in each discipline, should now be flexible enough to adapt their courses to suit market needs.

In addition, the long-term desire of Slovakia to become a member of the European Union means that the country should adopt similar systems to those of Western Europe. "Universities are fundamental to European integration," says Švec.

But in Slovakia the changes are going to have to be achieved step by step. The new act does not go as far as many would like, but there are some improvements, such as the formal introduction of the PhD research degree, along Western European lines, and a formal 'habilitation' procedure. That is the German teaching and research qualification required of those wishing to be appointed to the 'Dozent', or assistant professor, level at a university. Habilitation was previously very much corrupted by politics: many so-called dozents, or 'telephone dozents', were appointed for political reasons.

But while arguments about the structure of universities now take centre stage in the academic community, a more serious problem is calling loudly from the wings: universities are losing their staff.

In the Czech Republic, despite low wages, negligible unemployment and



Rector, administrator and parliamentarian.

political pressure to cut staff on grounds of efficiency, there has been no reduction in staff numbers (see page 602).

In Slovakia, wages are not simply low, but improbably so. Academic salaries have lost 30 per cent of the value of Czech university wages since the countries split. Slovak academics are now almost the lowest-paid state-employed personell. At Comenius University, 1,400 staff, more than a quarter of the total, have left in the past 18 months. Of these, 880 were teaching staff. As a result of this extraordinary brain-drain, the average age of professors has risen to 62.5, and that of associate professors to 58.5. In a few years retirement will decimate the teaching staff.

Pressure for the formal evaluation of staff is also weaker. As in the Czech Republic, internal evaluation failed to satisfy critics from the Academy of Sciences and elsewhere (see page 601).

Ladislav Kabát, rector of Nitra's University of Agriculture, nevertheless argues that the critics have not given the universities credit for the particular problems they faced in the evaluation. As well as having to assess the competence of existing staff, for example, they were also required to reinstate all members of the academic staff who had been dismissed for political reasons in the previous 20 years, since the Prague spring. Kabát says that at his university, there were 100 people in this category, mostly over 60 and approaching retirement, whose competence had been lost in the intervening years.

Now, the urgent task is to improve pay. At the end of last month, rectors and trade unions produced a petition demanding an increase of salaries of 100 per cent for professors, 75 per cent for associate professors, 50 per cent for other qualified scientists and 20 per cent for all others.

The government has countered with an offer of a 10 per cent increase in salaries. "We will protest", says Švec. "We will stick to our request". Švec has more influence than most: he was became a member of parliament in the September elections.

Alison Abbott

Shrinking asset for funding

Bratislava. Science in the two republics of the former Czechoslovakia has suffered progressive reductions in funding since the revolution. Slovakia, economically the poorer partner, has inevitably fared the more poorly.

The Slovak Academy of Sciences has seen its budget more than halved, from SKr808 million in 1990 to SKr401 million in 1994. On top of this, the 1994 budget was recently been cut by a further 5 per cent as part of a general economy package. Over the same period, staff numbers

have been almost halved — from 6,220 to 3,340 — while cumulative inflation for the four years is some 100 per cent.

The unions of the academy have now, for the first time, begun a major lobbying campaign to restore government support. They are preparing a petition, already signed by the academy's presidium, to put their case to the government. A similar petition is being drawn up by the university unions.

Neither is likely to cut much ice. Like its counterpart in the Czech Republic, the