

Executive summary

Performance of the Slovak Republic's higher education system

The Slovak higher education system experienced rapid enrolment growth between 1990 and 2009, and by 2019 about 39% of Slovaks aged 25-34 had obtained a higher education qualification, which was more than double that of 2009. Since 2009, the country has seen a steady decline in student enrolment. While this is due, in part, to falling school-age cohorts, there are serious concerns that the quality of Slovak higher education, in both teaching and research, is insufficient to attract young Slovaks.

Despite a rise in international student enrolment, close to one out of five Slovak learners chooses to undertake higher education abroad, a share second only to Luxembourg in the OECD. While higher education graduates have higher employment rates and wages than individuals who have completed upper secondary education or less, these employment and earnings premia are lower in the Slovak Republic than on average among OECD countries. Labour market mismatches, especially over-qualification, are common, in part due to the inability of the Slovak higher education system to adapt to changing economic and labour market needs.

The Slovak Republic has a good basis of skills on which to build as Slovak higher education graduates perform higher than average on the literacy and numeracy assessments of the OECD Survey of Adult Skills. However, its higher education graduates perform below average in problem solving in a technologically rich environment. This is a particular problem because the expansion of digital technologies is expected to affect the Slovak economy more than that of other countries: the Slovak Republic is the OECD country with the highest share of jobs at risk of automation due to the large size of its manufacturing sector. The higher education system will therefore need to equip graduates with skills for a labour market in which newly created jobs will more often demand digital skills than those they replace. In addition, transversal skills, those applicable in a wide range of settings, including socio-emotional skills, will be important – for young people and workers who will need to change jobs or careers.

The research activity of the Slovak Republic's higher education institutions (HEIs) is modest, comparatively speaking. Recent policy changes have given academics greater incentives to focus on the quality of their research, as well as its quantity. However, there are impediments to the improvement of Slovak research, ranging from ineffective funding application and allocation processes to limited collaboration between academic researchers and the private sector. While the Slovak Republic's accession to the European Union (EU) created new funding opportunities for research and development, the country has a poor record of making use of those opportunities.

Reforming the Slovak Republic's higher education system

Higher education system reform is a complex undertaking that requires strong collaboration between national policy makers and autonomous HEIs to be successful. In the Slovak Republic, higher education stakeholders have not reached broad agreement about the problems they face and their causes. They have found it difficult to formulate a shared vision that can be translated into concrete policy and institutional

actions, shape the financing of the system, and result in a model of higher education institutional governance and management that effectively balances autonomy and responsiveness.

Nonetheless, successive Slovak governments have articulated ambitious reform goals, and they have implemented some reforms. These include amending the Higher Education Act to create different institutional types by mission and introducing performance-related components in the institutional funding formula. However, the impact of these reforms on the system's performance in teaching and research has been limited to date. A major reform of quality assurance, passed in 2018 and to be implemented by the end of 2022, requires HEIs to put internal structures and processes in place to assure and improve educational quality. The reform of quality assurance holds significant promise for driving a greater focus on quality in HEIs. However, it will take time to realise its full effects and its impact will depend upon complementary improvements to the system's financing and governance.

From a financial perspective, the combination of low levels of government investment and fast enrolment growth between 1990-2009 led to substantial under-funding compared to other OECD countries. In the past decade, per-student funding has risen due to falling student numbers but remains at a level insufficient to spur reform and improvement. While the European Union is a growing source of funds, EU investments have centred on infrastructure but not on human resources, which are vital to improving the quality of teaching and research. In addition, efforts to hold publicly funded institutions accountable for the outcomes they achieve with public spending are relatively recent and have not focused on assessing and improving the quality of teaching.

Institutional governance and management arrangements that enable institutions to exercise their autonomy to be effective and responsive to societal needs while protecting academic freedom are widely agreed principles. However, it is not easy to translate these principles into appropriate structures and processes, and higher education governance and management are the most contested reform areas discussed in this report.

Slovak HEIs have a complex governance structure established in law and applicable to all, despite significant heterogeneity in size and focus among institutions. Slovak law establishes a balance of power in HEIs in which academic governing bodies are responsible for performing key managerial responsibilities – such as choosing and potentially dismissing the rector or approving the institutional budget – while university rectors have limited managerial tools at their disposal. Higher education institutions continue to be weakly engaged with their wider environment, notwithstanding the creation of boards of trustees. This creates problems of transparency, accountability and low responsiveness to the needs of Slovak citizens.

An action plan to improve higher education in the Slovak Republic

The objective of this project is to assist Slovak authorities in developing and implementing higher education governance and funding reforms to help improve the performance of the nation's higher education system. The action plan provided in this report includes ten actions to be taken between 2021 and 2024. It builds on analysis and advice provided by recent national and international projects, input provided by Slovak stakeholders throughout the project, and a rich body of policy experience across OECD countries.

The following table lists the policy actions, suggested timeframes, and organisations that might take responsibility for implementing the actions. It also assigns a broad cost estimate to each action: “low”, “medium” or “high”. These indications should be interpreted as follows:

Low: Actions that focus on policy processes and can be undertaken by existing bodies or bodies funded through other actions.

Medium: Actions that focus on policy processes or the provision of financial incentives requiring investment of a limited scale.

High: Actions that require substantial new investments.

The table aims to provide a starting point for the implementation of the ten policy actions, based upon the OECD's assessment of implementation considerations in the Slovak Republic. Timeframes, responsibilities and costs will need to be discussed and refined by the Slovak authorities in close collaboration with higher education stakeholders.

Policy action	Potential timing	Potential lead organisation	Potential cost
Developing and implementing a co-ordinated higher education strategy			
1. Establish a small multi-stakeholder Higher Education Task Force responsible for co-ordinating the development and implementation of higher education reforms	Q4 2021	Established by and accountable to the Prime Minister's Office Membership identified by Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport (MoE) in collaboration with key agencies and stakeholder organisations	Medium
2. Develop a mid-term higher education vision and strategy articulating linkages between goals, actions and monitoring results	Q1-Q2 2022: Stakeholder engagement Q3 2022: Strategy presentation and adoption	Higher Education Task Force, reporting to the Prime Minister's Office	Low
3. Develop indicators of quality teaching and research, and strengthen data collection	Q1 2022	Expert Group, reporting to the Higher Education Task Force	Low
Using funding to support and reward higher education performance			
4. Map out investments required to implement a mid-term higher education strategy, new funding sources and options for enhancing higher education funding levels (the funding envelope)	Q2 2022	MoE, supported by the Ministry of Finance and the Higher Education Task Force	Low
5. Establish an approach and process for the development of institutional contracts and possible performance parameters	Q1-Q2 2022	Higher Education Task Force, reporting to the MoE	Medium to High
6. Use the institutional contracts to allocate targeted funding to enhance teaching and research quality	Q2-Q3 2022	Expert Group, reporting to Higher Education Task Force MoE implementing revisions recommended by Higher Education Task Force	High
7. Consider revisions to the funding formula for higher education and research allocation mechanisms	Q1 2022: Recommendations Q4 2022: Implementation of revisions to funding formula and research allocation mechanisms	Expert Group, reporting to Higher Education Task Force MoE implementing revisions recommended by the Higher Education Task Force	Medium
Enabling responsive institutional governance and management			
8. Reduce the level of prescription of the legislation and introduce a small number of key requirements supporting HEI effectiveness and openness	Q1-Q3 2022: Stakeholder engagement Q4 2022: Legislation passed Q2 2024: New governance arrangements in place	Higher Education Task Force for stakeholder engagement MoE for legislation drafting	Low
9. Create incentives for public HEIs to adopt a new governance structure on an accelerated, pilot basis	Q2 2022: Incentives designed Q1 2023: New governance adopted by pilot HEIs	MoE	Medium
10. Establish appropriate supports to foster best practice in HEI governing bodies	Q3 2022: Guidance on institutional governance	Higher Education Task Force, MoE	Medium



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