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HAVE DIPLOMA, WILL TRAVEL?

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Dear Peter and friends:

Czechoslovakia's university students were the heroes of the 1989 revolution. They went on strike. They banged out news bulletins around the clock and drove all around the country to distribute them. Their bravery and decisiveness moved their parents and grandparents to join them in the streets and demand the end of Communism.

They felt powerful. Special. But that was then. Today, they have no more illusions of grandeur -- most of them, anyway. Most have faded from public life. They are studying or working, which would be fine, if so many of them weren't feeling so depressed and downtrodden. They seem to be fulfilling the prediction of those who say the typical behavioral pattern for Czechs is bravery and action during times of crisis, followed by failure to see things through. They, like their parents and grandparents, have a short memory. When they were bringing down the Communist government, they declared that they knew real change would take years, decades. Two years later, such patience is in short supply.

It's of course natural to stop acting like Super Students. Czech experts who analyze these things tell me students are just not prepared for all the options they have now. But besides "options," they may be overwhelmed by the reality of life, which can be harsh. The higher education system hasn't changed much; there's uncertainty waiting for them in the job market; and all around is the turmoil that accompanies large-scale political and economic transformation. Many young people seem tired again, beaten down by "the system," still dragged down by the past.

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Dagmar Obereigner is an Institute fellow studying political and social change in Czechoslovakia.

I ran into one of my former students, an upbeat, energetic woman of Czech origin from Croatia (Even before the war, she was emphatic about saying she's not from Yugoslavia), the other day. She asked what I was up to. When I gave her a list of things I was working on, she seemed pleased. "So something is going on, right? I'm glad **someone** is doing **something**. Everyone I know says 'oh, nothing,' when I ask them."

Students at the Charles University Faculty of Social Sciences, where I still teach English, complain about the lousy quality of their education but don't do anything about it. They complain that they can't find work, yet they don't really look for it. They can't seem to tell me why they chose their fields of study, nor what they want to do when they graduate.

Their school is suffering from a lack of good instructors, outdated teaching methods and political maneuvering left over from the old regime. Several former Communist yes men and women still work there, holding on to their jobs tooth and nail and practicing Draconian politics. They travel around the world -- milking the "We're a new democracy and want to learn from you so help us" theme -- but don't seem to bring back much information for the school and the students to actually use and benefit from. So yes, changing these things is tough. But students are going to have to get in there and fight for what they want.

The dean told me recently he thinks the faculty will be good in five years. He said it's hard to find new teachers to implement changes. He does see a change for the better in the quality of freshmen coming in, he said.

Higher education still is free here, and the value of a diploma questionable. I don't think there's as much anti-intellectual sentiment as there was under Communism, and people do see the value of education. But they know their education system isn't what it should be. What seems to matter more than a diploma in a society that's in the early stages of what is starting to resemble a market economy is willingness to risk, to be assertive, to learn new skills, to be adaptable. That is not what university students have been taught in school. Passivity, memorization rather than independent, analytical thinking, and a certain comfort level is what they're used to.

One 19-year-old journalism student, who's attractive, articulate and speaks English well (a big asset), told me she wants to work in television but doesn't know how to go about it. She says it's tough for young people to break into that field. Yes it is, but one has to start trying. I suggested she at least try to volunteer at the state television offices. She has good credentials and language skills, I stressed. She didn't seem convinced.

Many students have no idea what they want to do. A group of sociology students told me they had no idea why they picked that field and doubted they'd work in it. And these are freshmen, so

their choice of what to study didn't have to be limited by political considerations.

They showed me that things still haven't changed that much from last spring, when a survey was done on a group of spring 1990 graduates (the first post-revolution graduating class). They started their university studies when options were limited. They often wound up majoring in fields in which they had little or no interest, picking almost anything just so they could get into college. (Certain faculties were harder to get into than others - either big demand or the requirement that one have the "right" political background.)

Marie Čermáková, a sociologist at the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, with the help of her sociologist husband, Vladimír Čermák, surveyed 5,360 young people who graduated in spring 1990 from institutions of higher learning in the Czech Republic. That was a 43 percent response rate to an anonymous questionnaire mailed to all 12,479 graduates.

The respondents' average age was 24.6. Fifty-three percent were men, 52.4 percent were single, 76.6 percent childless. Ninety-one percent of the respondents were Czechs, 2.4 percent Slovaks, 1.2 percent other, and 5.4 percent did not indicate.

A total of 47 percent said they would have studied a completely different area if they had it to do over again; 57 percent weren't satisfied with the education they got.

The questionnaire was done in late March-early April 1991, when the graduates had been out of school about three-quarters of a year. It found that about 10 percent of them were unemployed. (That figure doesn't count women on maternity leave or men in compulsory military service.) A total of 53.8 percent had found work right away; another 21.1 percent within three months. Most of the employed graduates succeeded in landing a job after making one to five job contacts.

These graduates were educated under totalitarianism but entered a job market that employed new rules. There was still no real "market," the survey says, "and most graduates believe that if there was, they would have a much better chance at success. The graduating class of 1990 maneuvered and still is maneuvering in transient conditions that so far compensate for a market economy."

Čermák and Čermáková say the graduates have to help "build a market and with their own activity and self-assertion influence relationships and conditions to their benefit. If they are to be competitive, they have to for example first try to create an environment that is competitive. Most of them don't know how."

The sociologists note that about 4,600 more students should have graduated in 1990 but held off, some because they had opportunities to study abroad, others because they saw their job

prospects as dim. They were in fields such as technology, agriculture and construction.

More men than women found work right away -- 56 percent to 45.4 percent. Women also had a harder time finding work in the field they studied. The sociologists say women's employment is undervalued, and job preference is given to men. Many women drop out of the job market and have children. More of them are married than the men -- 57 percent to 36.6 percent.

Many of the graduates already have a family:

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Number of children	Graduates	%
1	1,093	20.39
2	134	2.5
3	22	0.41
4	3	0.06
5	1	0.02
childless	4,107	76.62

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The graduates placed a great deal of importance on finding meaningful work. Of average importance were factors such as using one's educational background, possibility to develop personally, possibility to realize expectations and job security. Less important were high wages and having enough free time.

In terms of what it took to find a job, they said the most important factors were:

- the market
- knowing the right people
- luck
- the employer

Of average importance:

- personal talent
- the ability to compete

Not important:

- the political situation
- prestige of their school
- how well they did in school

"It's characteristic that they give such great importance to outside factors," the study authors note. "It always was that way in this country." The group "underestimates its personal talent and doesn't have much faith in its ability to compete."

One finding that shocks Čermák, who works at Charles University, is the graduates' political profile. It's safe to say that these are students who were active in the 1989 revolution. Most of them say they are interested in politics, but few -- 2.6 percent --

belong to a political party:

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Politics don't interest/interest a party member (%)  
(By field of study)

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General university	14.0	83.6	2.4
Technical	17.3	80.1	2.7
Economic	12.5	86.6	0.8
Agricultural	17.7	78.6	3.8
Artistic	17.4	82.6	0.0

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(Note that the artsy types in this group are staying away from politics. I guess they see no need to follow in the footsteps of all the singers, actors and writers who are in government already. ...)

Čermák has some pretty strong words for the folks not rushing to join political parties. He says that after all, they in many cases were "children from loyal families," accepted to school during a time of "strict selection." ... "These are children who were raised to be directed and manipulated."

The graduates had varying opinions about unemployment, which technically did not exist before 1989. Young people didn't really have to hunt for work. They didn't have to send out a flurry of resumes. State firms usually had a number of openings set aside for new graduates. However, they were not required to give them work matching what they studied.

Such "qualification unemployment" continues. Forty-five percent of survey respondents who got jobs said they were not using their degree.

- 17.2 percent said they have a job that requires similar academic orientation
- 2.9 percent have a job requiring completely different orientation
- 16.6 percent have a job requiring only a high school degree
- 8.2 percent have a job that doesn't require even a high school degree

The bulk of these people's studies were designed for a labor model featuring "centrally directed economy and society," the survey says, but by spring 1990 there were some market mechanisms in place that were based on supply and demand.

The study gives a number of other reasons for weakness in higher education, including political "cleansing" universities of teachers in 1948-52 and 1969-71. They were replaced by young people, "new socialist intelligentsia," Čermák says, noting that

these are many of today's senior lecturers and department heads.

Of the unemployed people in the survey, 90.8 percent would accept work that didn't match their educational qualifications; 75.7 percent would take a job that didn't call for a university degree at all; and 27.9 percent would take work that didn't even require a high school education.

Even though firms no longer save spots for young workers, the government is lending a hand to help cushion the blow. For a limited time, firms that hire new graduates get subsidies for their salaries. But how much commitment firms will have to these young people when the subsidies run out is uncertain. Young people have to deal with the reality of "old structure" management -- people who were in place before November 1989.

One young man, a graduate of the agronomics faculty in Prague who was born in 1968, said the main reason he can't find work is because companies are being reorganized and permanent workers let go. Also, "I feel a marked discrimination against young people in favor of [working] retired people and former [party members], who know one another and throw one another positions because, as opposed to us, they have "work experience." I, along with my parents and friends, consider it a sad paradox that as a student who was on strike in Prague after Nov. 17 [1989], I beg in vain for work those who were backers of the totalitarian regime. I'm convinced that it makes them feel good to see what's happened to us students -- what we got for striking."

Some students think their unemployment is scandalous and think the state should intervene. Others take it as a normal part of a market economy. They argue that those who want to work will find work if they're at all qualified. But, the study authors say, there is a group that truly needs outside help: not only the traditionally weak such as invalids, single mothers, but those living in areas hit hard by joblessness and at the same time having low mobility. Housing, as I've mentioned before, is a big problem. One third of the graduates called their present housing situation unsatisfactory. And because housing is so scarce, finding a job in another community is only half the battle. It doesn't necessarily mean you'll find a place to live as well.

Čermák and Čermáková found the graduates had a number of attitudes that gave them advantages in the marketplace over other social groups. They included willingness to move, orientation toward performance and willingness to change.

But there were several strikes against them. They included low self-confidence, low ability to compete, "catastrophical" foreign language ability, inadequate professional adaptability due to an outmoded, inflexible education system, and the phasing out of professions they studied.

More about this willingness to relocate: It's not universal. But factors that stop people may include lack of knowledge about job

opportunities in other communities and low confidence that housing would be available:

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25.9 percent would not be willing to move because of work.  
 23.3 percent would move within the Czech Republic.  
 4.46 percent would move within Czechoslovakia.  
 44.44 percent would be willing to move abroad.

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Most of those willing to go abroad were in the "artistic" category -- 7 out of 10 of them would relocate. The least willing were those in the general university grouping and those in the economics area.

If the would-be travelers have their way, Czechoslovakia might be in for a brain drain. Here's how the graduates answered this question:

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Are you planning to go abroad to work in coming years?

No, or not considering it \_\_\_\_\_ 3,368, or 63.15 percent  
 Thinking about it \_\_\_\_\_ 1,676, or 31.43 percent  
 Yes, definitely \_\_\_\_\_ 289, 5.43 percent

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✓ Čermák and Čermáková predict that at best, qualitative change will come at the end of this decade.

"Entrepreneurship, creativity, positively motivated ambition and other desirable qualities of a market economy cannot be effectively generated by education based on the collective spirit, on lack of interest in broadening talent, on authoritarianism without performance orientation."

The survey does point out that it won't always be possible to blame problems with education on the legacy of the past.

"With every new [incoming] class rises the responsibility of current higher education decision-making, and falls the possibility of blaming lack of success on the former regime."

But, Peter and friends, since this is the holiday season, I don't want to seem like a total Grinch. For those of you who say my newsletters have been depressing lately, I will add that of course there are bright spots, individuals who buck the system and inertia around them, who see the big picture, who say things will be rotten for a long time but then will get better.

There are students who work hard, and some even get rewarded for it. They have more contact with Western students, Western teachers, new ideas. They are beginning to be able to tell what a good education really is. I'm happy when I see them thinking and

acting free. I do get frustrated with them sometimes. Other times, I feel sorry for them. Sorry their education isn't what it should be. Maybe life will help make up for that.

Meanwhile, I'm going to show them how to write a resume.

All the best,



Dagmar