



## 7th ASEF Rectors' Conference and Students' Forum (ARC7)

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Higher Education Taking Action Towards the Sustainable Development Goals:  
Perspectives from Asia and Europe



### Interview | Conducted by Martin Hammerbauer Equal Opportunities in Higher Education



#### Mr. Lukáš Hulínský

Interview with Mr. Lukáš Hulínský, member of the Board of the Council of Higher Education Institutions focusing on legislation and policy from the students' perspective. Mr. Hulínský is also a Vice-president of the national representation of Czech students.

#### Martin Hammerbauer

Good morning, and thank you for accepting my request for an interview on the topic “Equal opportunities in higher education”. In the 21st century, higher education is not only a valuable investment, but also a financial commitment for several years as students have limited possibilities to work. What is the situation in the Czech Republic regarding equal access to higher education?

#### Mr. Lukáš Hulínský

It is no secret that the time of university studies is a financial burden. Firstly, universities are located in large cities, where the price level is higher than in the rest of the country. Especially in Prague, which has one of the highest relative cost rates in Europe. Moving to the university city is therefore demanding for people from smaller cities and the countryside even if they do not fall under the low-income category in their original region. Even most of the middle-class students depend on assistance from their families or have to work from the early stage of their studies to pay for accommodation. There is also a growing group of people who choose to travel to school for one or several hours to avoid the costs of living closer to their university.

#### Martin Hammerbauer

Do schools help their students in this matter? If yes, what do they do, and is their approach effective?

**Mr. Lukáš Hulínský**

Yes, most universities offer assistance such as housing allowance or financial assistance for low-income students. However, as I mentioned, only a small group classifies as low-income students, while the problem extends far beyond this definition into the middle-income group as well. What's more, the assistance merely puts the low-income group on more equal terms with the middle-income group, who still have to work to keep up with the university life. For example, if you live in the most basic shared bedroom dormitory in Prague, housing allowance covers around a quarter of the rent, not to mention other essential costs.

**Martin Hammerbauer**

What is the impact of this state on inequality in society?

**Mr. Lukáš Hulínský**

Even if talented students with weaker background manage to get into a university, they are forced to juggle between work and studying, whether they like it or not. Technically, they surely have the same options as well-off students, but in a broader context they face one obstacle after another. This inevitably affects their study performance. Not only do they not learn as much as they could, it is not uncommon to drop out due to lack of time left to actually studying.

The root of the problem is the availability of accommodation. There are not nearly enough places at dormitories, and thousands of unsuccessful applicants have to look for private apartments each semester. In Prague, accommodation prices are rising for eight years in a row. People can hardly focus on their studies when their primary concern is being able to pay for rent.

**Martin Hammerbauer**

What can be done to diminish the disparities and make university studies more accessible for everyone?

**Mr. Lukáš Hulínský**

I believe that the answer is in systematic investments into student dormitories. The original idea behind dormitories was to provide students with cheap accommodation during their studies, and I am afraid we departed from that a little. Prices are getting closer to those of private apartments, however, the equipment and facilities did not change for several decades. At the moment, dormitories are under the management of respective universities, which seldom have enough left in their budget for significant investments into accommodation. This way, the issue is slowly getting more urgent every year.

**Martin Hammerbauer**

Where should the investments come from? Would you prefer private investors, public funds or savings in the university budget?

**Mr. Lukáš Hulínský**

I believe we need to put this issue forward to politicians and negotiate for governmental funding. I am of course not saying that the state should take over the responsibilities of the universities, but a cooperation between the state and universities could diminish the price of accommodation or create more places. Even a single round of investments could at least improve the conditions at dormitories so that they match the 21st century.

There is a clear intersection with the state interests as well. First, affordable accommodation would contribute to the equality of opportunities of students from various social backgrounds. Secondly, focused students achieve better results overall, thus contributing to the society in the long run.

