“There is no other university, where graduate students arrive from so many places”

Translation of interview with John Shattuck, President and Rector, CEU
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By Andras Schweitzer

“Democracy is always a work in progress.”

HVG:
Central European University (CEU), which is 20 years old this year, is preparing for a celebration. In Europe and in the US the most prestigious universities are hundreds of years old, such as Harvard, where you were once a Vice-President. What does 20 years mean in the life of a university?

JOHN SHATTUCK:
At CEU the past 20 years essentially meant the period of growing up: our university became a dynamic young adult. I believe this is also reflected in the level of excellence.

HVG:
Essentially there are only post-graduate studies at CEU. Or is it an indication of expansion that in Nador Street both building number 13 and 15 were purchased in the past years?

JOHN SHATTUCK:
When we arrived in the region, there were good universities here for first degree studies but post-graduate studies of high-level of excellence in the social sciences were virtually missing—we made a decision based on that. In reality, with the new buildings we are not expanding but consolidating. Our Business School is in Frankel Leo Street, the Cognitive Sciences Department is in Hattyuhaz. We are bringing all of these together and we are also creating a new School of Public Policy and International Relations, which will begin in the fall. The number of students will grow by 200-300, thus we will have altogether 2000 students. By renovating the buildings we are creating more student meeting places, and greater classroom space, and a larger auditorium.

HVG:
Several Hungarian institutions can be envious of that. It is well-known that the University was founded by businessman George Soros. What part of the operational costs is arriving from him now?

JOHN SHATTUCK:
Our operations—just as an American private university’s—are based on an endowment, in which there is a substantial amount, 840 million dollars, which we primarily received from George Soros. The income of this covers 70% of our operational costs. But we are also trying to include additional funding. We are targeting research funds for example, from the European Research Council and similar institutions. Alumni and other donors also support the university.

HVG:
In January 2009, upon announcing your upcoming rectorship, you said: “CEU has all the tools to be an exceptional institution, an intellectual magnet.” Where is CEU’s place today in the international competitive field?

JOHN SHATTUCK:
According to several indicators, CEU is already the magnet I mentioned in 2009. In recent years we had a substantial increase in applicants: two years ago by 30%, this year by a further 5-6%. We now admit only one of 10 applicants, so the students who are here –of which 18% are Hungarian– are really the most outstanding. Last year our Political Science Department was ranked by Die Zeit as a “five star department,” which means that it is one of the best in the European field. Our Legal Studies Department was ranked first in Central Europe in a listing by the Czech newspaper Lidove Noviny. Also one of the faculty members of the Economics Department won the prestigious award of the American Finance Association with a paper. Our Philosophy Department won a Marie Curie Grant from the European Commission to establish a regional training center for philosophy. So there are several indicators by which CEU is the best, or among the best in Europe.

HVG: These results are obviously worth noting, however, can you imagine that one day the University would be referred to as a Harvard or a Yale?

JOHN SHATTUCK: CEU will always be CEU, we are proud of who we are. Harvard is also an international institution, but there 70% of the students are American. I believe the main value of CEU is that – although I haven’t done scientific research– there is no other university, where graduate students arrive from so many places. Today our students come from more than 100 countries. The Central European region, Russia and Central Asia today only represent 50% of our students. And in addition to Western Europe more and more students are arriving from North America, Asia and even from Africa.

HVG: Is there any kind of quota that limits the number of Hungarian students? There were some rumors about that in the past.

JOHN SHATTUCK: I do not think this has ever been the case. We admit students on the basis of merit, and we are very happy that Hungarian students form the largest community at CEU.

HVG: How much does the application process support applications based on merit? The international English language exam, the TOEFL, is undoubtedly an objective measure. After that however, personal interviews follow in which each student is examined by only one person. How can the faculty compare their impressions about the applicants? It seems as if in America there would be greater emphasis on transparency and measurability.

JOHN SHATTUCK: We do not always do personal interviews since we receive more than 5000 applications from all over the world and thus there is no capacity to do this. Depending on the program requirements, besides the tests, applicants are required to submit other materials, essays, and additionally, we also offer the possibility of an interview. It can happen that one of our alumni in the region interviews the applicant, and sometimes the interview is through Skype. This system by the way is also characteristic of American universities.

HVG:
What is the percentage of Hungarians among the faculty? From official university magazines it can be seen that more than a decade ago there was serious discussion about the “Hungarization” of the faculty.

JOHN SHATTUCK:
The percentage of Hungarian faculty members is high, around 40%. Many have taught abroad and then have returned home, for example, Albert-Laszlo Barabasi, Network Science Researcher, who will teach at CEU in addition to also teaching at Harvard in the semester starting in the fall. We are very happy that we could attract many faculty to CEU: the increase of the level of excellence in the past years has gone together with the growth in the number of Hungarian faculty.

HVG:
You surely have heard the news –which according to later newscasts is most probably false- that Corvinus is planned to be closed down and incorporated into other universities. As a member of the Hungarian Rector’s Conference, what are your views about the planned mergers and the higher education reform?

JOHN SHATTUCK:
I heard the news and I also heard that these are probably untrue. I am not a specialist with knowledge of the Hungarian university system. The government obviously does not want the country to have diploma mills which have no value, but this is not characteristic of Hungarian universities. There are several excellent universities functioning in Hungary, with a strong research base, such as ELTE and Corvinus. Consolidation makes sense where there is a certain evident weakness, but strong institutions should be maintained. And privatization could be a way. I know that the Hungarian government has also thought these possibilities through.

HVG:
What is your opinion about tuition fees? In the Anglo-Saxon world it is an accepted trend, while on the other hand CEU offers generous scholarships to most of its students.

JOHN SHATTUCK:
Outstanding students receive scholarships in the US too, if they need them because of the financial situation of their families. We have the same approach. We would like to enroll the best students, including those also who do not have the possibility to pay a tuition fee.

HVG:
You are not only a scholar and leader of a university, but a human rights activist as well. How do you see the present Hungarian condition? In the past two decades democracy developed, market economy emerged, European integration was realized. Still, many feel a certain decline today. Freedom House almost dropped Hungary back to a semi-liberal country status recently with regard to the media law.

JOHN SHATTUCK:
Democracy is always a work in progress. CEU has hosted several lecturers with differing points of view on Hungarian or US politics. We are proud to be both a Hungarian and an American university, and to be a center where debates about the issues of democracy and open society are always given a forum.

HVG:
Does it not surprise you that the values of open society or those of liberalism are being discredited? To many even the name “Soros” is a swear word. How do you feel when armed militia enter villages populated by Roma in order to threaten people, while most of the social discourse is about whether the evacuation is embarrassing or not for Hungary?

JOHN SHATTUCK:
It is the duty of society to provide protection against discrimination to its members—especially to those who are in a minority. This is also a topic that CEU actively deals with. Such challenges exist not only in Hungary, but also in the US or France. Immigration policies also raise certain concerns.

HVG:
Does it not seem that the battle is about to be lost?

JOHN SHATTUCK:
It would be lost if we would not stand up against discrimination. When I was a child, African-American people in America could not use the same rest rooms, could not live in the same districts as whites. Now we have an African-American president. Therefore, I could not say that in the long term things are going in the wrong direction. But it is a constant fight. Discrimination against the Roma in this region, and here in Hungary, must be addressed. And I know that there are members of the Hungarian government who are addressing it.

John Shattuck, President and Rector, Central European University

The 68-year-old international legal scholar who received his degree from Yale Law School, besides being a human rights activist has built up an intertwined academic and a diplomatic career. In the beginning he led the Washington office of the human rights organization, the American Civil Liberties Union, and then from 1984 for nine years he was responsible, among other things, for foreign relations as Vice President of Harvard University. In the middle of the nineties as Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor he was part of the government of President Clinton. He played a key role in the establishment by the United Nations of the International Criminal Tribunals for Rwanda and former Yugoslavia, for the investigation of war crimes. He also participated with Richard Holbrooke in negotiating the Dayton Peace Agreement to end the war in Bosnia. From 1998 to 2000, during the time of the NATO accession of the Czech Republic, he served as US Ambassador in Prague. Prior to his appointment as the fourth President and Rector of CEU in 2009, he had served as Chief Executive Officer of the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation, and Senior Fellow at nearby Tufts University.