

## **Education in the 21st Century**

doc. PhDr. Oľga Bočáková, PhD.

PhDr. Darina Kubíčková, PhD.

*The University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava*

*Faculty of Social Sciences*

*Department of Social Services and Counselling*

*Bučianska 4/A*

*917 01 Trnava*

*Slovakia*

*olga.bocakova@ucm.sk*

*darina.kubickova@ucm.sk*

### **Abstract**

*This paper deals with the issues of education in Slovakia in the 21st century. The focus has been oriented on the system of higher education and on its current problems. At the present time there prevails an opinion that the quality, standard and demands of the university education is decreasing. In our paper we have carried out an empiric research mapping the opinions of employers of university lecturers and individual students of universities with regard to various aspects connected with university education. We have taken into regard the development of system of education after 1989 and the changes connected with it. The aim of the paper is to identify the current problems of higher education in Slovakia. The research question reads: What problems does the university education have at the present time? From the point of view of used methods we have selected work with literature and its analysis and also the questionnaire method. Subsequently we have analysed and evaluated the results of our survey.*

### **1. Introduction**

What should education in the 21st century be like? The educational process is developing on continuous basis, just as the whole society changes, because the system of education is to prepare an individual for the current conditions on the labour market at the given time. It is generally possible to observe that the system of education does not anticipate the future development on the labour market, but it is exactly the opposite case, it reacts to this development with delay.

In our paper we research into the problems of higher education in Slovakia, with regard to the changes, which took place in connection with the transformation process after 1989. The transformation processes probably evoked changes in all sector policies in Slovakia and did not avoid the educational system. The principle change rests in quantitative increase in the number of universities and in the development of private education. The aim of our paper is to identify the problems of higher education. The research question reads: What problems does the system of higher education have at the present time?

### **2. The current trends in the educational policy**

In our conditions it has not been true for a long time that the human being worked in the course of his/her whole productive life in one and the same company or even also in the same position. The present time is becoming

faster and more flexible. It is not enough to graduate from a field of study at the secondary school or at the university to be able to earn one's living the whole life long, but it requires systematic learning. 21st century will be a century of learning. After having graduated from a 5-year study the required knowledge is not up-to-date any more and therefore the process of learning is becoming more and more significant. This can be seen in the conditions of the present labour market, in the form of the so-called education of retraining, which in its essence is a kind of a "crash course" in the duration of several months that cannot compete with learning programs of 4 or 5 years at the secondary specialised schools.

Highly specialised learning programs at the secondary schools or fields of study at the universities turn out not to be needed on the labour market, based on the reason that because of substantial flexibility the employees have to be capable to reorient themselves to new tasks and employment challenges. This gives rise to the significance of general education, which provides the biggest world horizon, however it brings with itself a certain amount of shallowness.

The present trends in the policy of education result in the situation, when the graduates are not prepared for the present conditions of the market and this again results in the situation, when the firms have to provide them additional training within their educational programs to get them into the shape, in which they need them.

We often come across a feature called degradation of education, which means that employees are doing jobs not corresponding to their qualification degree of education.

From the above mentioned it results that exclusivity of education is getting lost, because people from all walks of life are obtaining access to it. On the one hand it leads to increase of education of the population, on the other hand to the education becoming average. In the past a secondary school leaving certificate had a relatively great significance on the labour market, at the present time it is not the case any more, because the second level of university education is becoming quite a common case. Therefore the demand for the third level of education (PhD.), or as the case may be for other alternative forms of education such as MBA, LL.M., MPH etc. is increasing.

The university puts other demands on the university lecturer than it is in the case of a secondary or elementary school. The lecturer at the university is becoming to be more a partner and not a mentor [6]. A university lecturer should be above all a specialist in his/her field with qualifications for scientific and pedagogical work [9]. A university lecturer is a complex personality, who should have the required pedagogical-psychological, specialised scientific as well as a moral profile [7]. However regrettably not all people have inborn aptitude to be a teacher and this is even less expected from specialists, who are oriented into high spheres of theoretical thinking and research, but some techniques and methods can be learnt [5].

What makes the work of a university lecturer difficult and devalues the university educational processes is a great number of universities and also a great number of university students as well as graduates. So the question that should be asked is, why there is an inadequate number of universities in the small Slovakia [1]. Mainly in the nineties there was a great interest in university education mainly among the adult population, one part of which could not study during the period of socialism [4]. The university students can be divided into two basic groups and these are the full time students and the students of other forms of studies [8].

Some universities have not risen evolutionarily in the cities, in which a long-term tradition was being created, but often as a consequence of an artificial political decision. The other side of the imaginable coin is an educational and intellectual potential of development with attractiveness of the given region, which the existence of a university brings with itself. These universities were formed as a result of local patriotism of a politician or a group of politicians, who wanted to do something for their city. The next reason was creation of parallel influence centres and such centres can be represented by the universities. This claims proves the personal interconnection between the universities and the political entities, and we cannot hold this against anybody, because everybody has a right to become involved in politics. Another cause why new faculties or fields of study or programs were formed was the vacuum of specialists social sciences after the changes in

1989. However this vacuum has already been filled in, even overfilled. One cannot forget the European integration processes, which have been for a long time determining the line of direction in various resort policies and which are also followed by the Slovak Republic. Harmonisation of Slovakia with the EU can also be seen in an artificial increase of population with university education [1].

The consequence of the present situation is the fact that the faculties literally fight for the students, therefore candidates with disastrous low knowledge get to the universities [2]. In this connection J. Keller and J. Tvrđý have stated that the whole system of education is functioning so that when a certain field of study ceases to be reserved for the privileged social groups a new prestigious form of studies is sooner or later created for them [3].

### 3. Empirical research

#### 3.1 The aim of the survey

The aim of our empirical survey is to identify the key problems of university education in Slovakia at the present time.

#### 3.2 The tasks of the survey

Our survey has the following tasks:

Task 1: What problems the university education has at the present time from the point of view of the students.

Task 2: What problems the university education has at the present time from the point of view of the teachers.

Task 3: What problems the university education has at the present time from the point of view of the employers.

#### 3.3 The methodology and characteristics of a sample

We have chosen a questionnaire as a method. We have sent out 193 sheets. 150 of them came back to us. On the basis of filtration question, which is analysed in table 4, we have filtered 3 groups of respondents, which we have needed from the point of view of set tasks.

**Table 1 Sample of respondents according to their sex**

Sex	%	number
male	54	81
female	46	69

**Table 2 Sample of respondents according to the region**

Region	%	number
Bratislava	16.67	25
Trnava	13.33	20
Nitra	10.67	16
Trenčín	12	18
Žilina	11.33	17
Banská Bystrica	10	15
Košice	13.33	21
Prešov	12	18

**Table 3 Sample of respondents according to the age categories**

Age categories	%	number
18 – 30	34	51
30 – 40	17.33	26
40 – 50	18	27
50 – 62	13.33	20
62 and more	17.33	26

**Table 4 Sample of respondents according to the social and professional status**

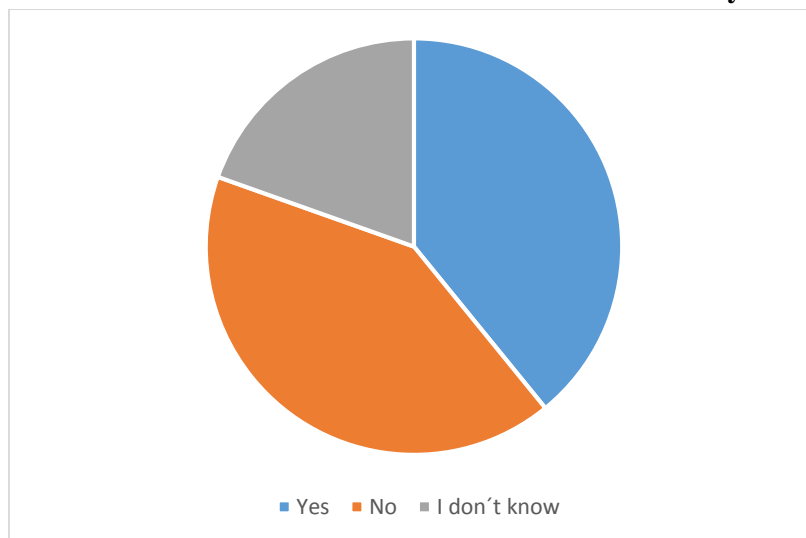
Social and professional status	%	number
university student	30.67	46
university teacher	16.67	25
employer	14	21
other	38.67	58

**3.4 Processing and analysis of survey results**

**Table 5 Reasons of selection of the field of study in %**

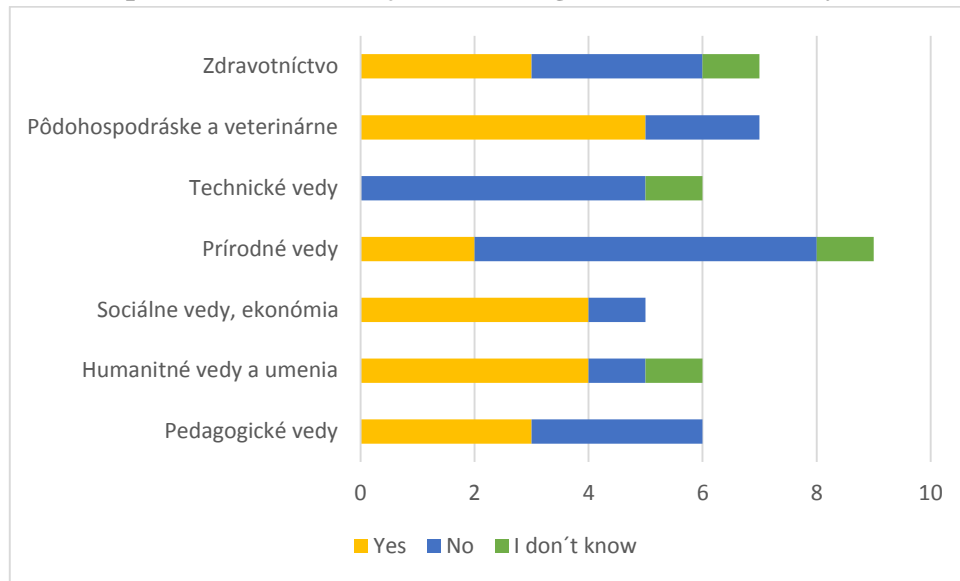
reasons	%	number
Interest in the field of study	15.22	7
Recommendation of the parents	4.35	2
Finding a job in the labour market	13.04	6
I was not admitted anywhere else	21.74	10
Salaries of the graduates	19.57	9
Easy to study field	26.09	12

**Graph 1 Satisfaction and dissatisfaction in % with the field of study at the university**



As it results from graph 1, so the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of the students with their study is approximately the same.

**Graph 2 Fears to find a job according to the fields of study in %**



Graph 2 indicates that the students of technical fields have fewer concerns with regard to finding a job in comparison with the students of humanities.

Graph 2:

Health care

Agricultural and veterinary fields

Technical sciences

Natural science

Social science, economy

Humanities and arts

Pedagogical sciences

**Table 6 Problems of university education from the point of view of the students in %**

	%	number
<b>Unprofessional approach of the teachers</b>	8.7	4
<b>Insufficiently furnished library</b>	15.22	7
<b>Lack of practice, too much useless theory</b>	19.57	9
<b>Fixtures and fittings of the hostels</b>	13.04	6
<b>High fees connected with the study</b>	17.39	8
<b>A great number of students at the universities</b>	13.04	6
<b>Unfair marking</b>	10.87	5
<b>Level of difficulty of the study program</b>	2.17	1

If we analyse individual replies so we can state that individual teachers do not consider their occupation to be a mission, but mainly to be a source of certain income notwithstanding what performance they provide in the lectures, seminars, etc. The students often point out the fact that the university teachers even do not come to the classes without an excuse. From the above mentioned it results that some teachers approach their occupation

to a certain degree with complete indifference and they are not afraid of any recourse on the part of management of the department, faculty or the university. Unprofessionalism of university lecturers can also be seen in cases, when a certain lecturer has several teaching loads at the universities or jobs in other organisations and as a consequence of this it happens that in several cases s/he is more or less a number at the school without real contribution for the students. On the other hand they are often the young graduates of masters' studies, who start in the position of university lecturers and their publication and research and scientific activity is almost zero. How can such a lecturer have any demands on the quality of students, if he s/has almost no demands on himself/herself...?

The other problem mentioned in the above mentioned table is insufficiently equipped library. Among the basic preconditions for formation of new fields of study should be:

1. Personnel cover,
2. Material means,

Under personnel cover we understand the guarantors, who would be able to guarantee the given programs of study as well as other personnel, i.e. professors, associate professors and university lecturers with a PhD. degree. Under material means we understand mainly the library and technical support.

**Table 7 Problems of university education from the point of view of the teachers in %**

	<b>%</b>	<b>number</b>
<b>Financing for a head</b>	32	8
<b>Low salaries</b>	20	5
<b>Many students</b>	36	9
<b>Little time for scientific and research activities</b>	12	3

The problem of relatively high number of universities in Slovakia is connected with several circumstances and according to table 7 a great number of students can be considered to be a key problem.

**Table 8 Assessment of university graduates from the point of view of employers in %**

	<b>%</b>	<b>number</b>
<b>Absence of experience</b>	23.81	5
<b>Much theoretical knowledge</b>	14.29	3
<b>Expectations of unrealistic salaries</b>	14.29	3
<b>Absence of social competence</b>	4.76	1
<b>Absence of knowledge of foreign languages</b>	9.52	2
<b>Absence of foreign experience</b>	4.76	1
<b>Absence of work habits</b>	4.76	1
<b>Insufficiently developed will qualities (responsibility...)</b>	4.76	1
<b>Absence of graduates of the technical fields</b>	19.05	4

The absent experience is probably the key problem of the university graduates, because university education in Slovakia has mostly technical character, in particular in the case of theoretically tuned fields of study. From the above mentioned it results that the so called verbal learning causes increase of the so called education in the

academic sense of the word, but on the other hand it leads to useless and inappropriate overloading by useless and often unusable knowledge, which will be forgotten by the graduates in the end. In this context it is necessary to ask a question how to solve this problem. At the secondary specialised schools we are coming back to the so called dual education, which enables better connection of theoretical teaching of specialised subjects at secondary specialised schools with practice in the firms and the firms can train their future employees in this way. This model has already been successful in the period of socialism, but as a consequence of casting away everything what was connected with the previous regime this model was cancelled and only with the benefit of hindsight we are coming back to some positive elements of the previous social-economic formation.

If we move from the secondary specialised schools to the universities, so we can see here several possibilities how to achieve the required experience:

1. Temporary employment, partial employment already in the course of the studies at the university,
2. Educational stay.

Implementation of the study visits for the university students requires certain umbrella institutional coverage on the part of the university or faculty and the corresponding signing of the contracts between the firm and the learning institution. This process is taking place already at the present time in the sense that the students of technical fields of the universities carry out practical part of their final works (bachelor, diploma or dissertation) directly during their practice in the firm. From the point of view of the firm this makes it possible to select the best trainees as future employees.

As we have already indicated on another place, in most cases the school provides a relatively large amount of knowledge, on the basis of which the graduates acquire an overview corresponding to that and its corresponding width and depth.

The project teaching represents a principle change from the present manner of Slovak education, which goes more or less into the width, which results in a broad overview, however this kind of teaching is superficial. Contrary to that project teaching is focussed on one problem only, which is being researched from various aspects.

In some western countries the education takes place in the form of essays, enabling the training in the following academic skills:

- academic writing,
- creative thinking,
- critical thinking,
- Analysis of information.

Also one should not forget the financial literacy. Financial literacy results in knowing financial operations, knowing the products not only of the banks and saving institutions but also of insurance companies and other financial institutions that are active in the financial market. Knowing the advantages and disadvantages of financial products results in making a correct decision when choosing among them and enables not to succumb to financial agents. In the U.S.A. financial literacy has substantially higher standard than in the Slovak Republic, which is given by financial education from the lowest levels of the educational system, which lags behind in the conditions of the Slovak Republic. This requires preparation of the concept of the development of financial literacy on the basis of appropriate age. In addition to this the next challenge the Slovak system of education is in for is the development of medial literacy.

Another problem from the point of view of the employers is unrealistic financial remuneration for the provided work.

As far as the absent social competencies are concerned, neither they are a focal point of educational system. In this context the key social competencies can be considered to be mainly:

1. **Project management** – management of the project, of the so called certain work task, which represents a certain process consisting of several steps, and in which several participants take part,

2. **Team management** – represents management of a team, i.e. a collective of colleagues, who cooperate within a certain (permanent or temporary) organisational unit; in addition to other things it requires also knowledge of several areas, such as e.g. group dynamic processes or personal typology,
3. **Presentation abilities** – include positive presentation of a certain product,
4. **Verbal communication** – includes handling of words up to the degree required by the audience,
5. **Non-verbal communication** – includes body contacts, facial expressions, posturology, gestures,
6. **Discussions, negotiations and conclusion of compromises** – are necessary conditions of coexistence with other people not only in the private relations but also in the working environment.

If we look at the knowledge of foreign languages, so we can see here several dimensions of this issue.

First of all this competence is to a certain extent determined by the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic, which decides about the facts, when, how much and how many hours a week the pupils of elementary and secondary schools will be learning foreign languages. The results of this decision can be observed only in the course of several years, e.g. during the transition from the elementary school to the secondary school, when it is possible to state that a certain age group, which is strong or weak in foreign languages is taking up studies. It was mainly after 1989 when relatively significant acceleration of the development in language teaching at elementary schools took place, however at the present time there is certain decline in this area. Because of this reason it is possible to assume that in the future it will be necessary for the school graduates to take additional independent studies either in the form of courses for the public or in the company courses.

Another dimension of language teaching is the question of degree of generality of the language or as the case may be of the language for special purposes or of the specialised professional language. A command of general language can be considered to be a certain broader basis, which makes it possible to learn basic principles, by which a certain language is governed and to acquire grammatical structure and vocabulary and subsequently on this basis it is possible to go deeper in specialised language. In connection with the needs of the employers in the area of the specialised language it is mainly the technical and business terminology that is required. Its acquisition should be one part of the curriculum at the secondary specialised schools or of the curriculum at the universities in such a degree, so that the graduates were prepared to communicate in the foreign language not only on the general level, but also on the level of specialised language.

If we move to the next item, which is insufficient foreign experience of the graduates, so in this context it is necessary to look for the reasons of this situation:

1. **Fear of unknown and alien environment** – this fear may result from the life style or as the case may be from the manner of upbringing and it can evoke the conditions of anxiety when leaving the nearest family,
2. **Language barrier** – a study or exchange stay requires certain knowledge of a foreign language, without which the student is not capable to include himself/herself into normal functioning in the course of his/her foreign studies,
3. **Finances** – travelling and a study in a foreign country can be connected with substantial financial demands in the case that the scholarship and the expenses associated with it do not cover the whole amount of the stay,
4. **Usual lack of interest without an apparent reason** – results from indifferent attitude to the study, when the student studies only for one reason, i.e. to acquire the required qualifications without deeper interest in the field of study.

Also one cannot forget the absent work habits, or insufficiently developed will qualities. The mentioned shortcomings have certainly connection to the fact that the demands on the university students are getting lower and lower and because of this reason they spend less time for their study duties and more time for the free time and recreational activities. The result of this is that they are not used to systematic work, which they are in for in their employment and they miss the qualities, such as:



- ambitiousness,
- industriousness,
- accuracy at work,
- efficiency,
- patience,
- persistence.

### 3.5 Summary of the conclusions of our survey

Within our survey have arrived at several facts:

1. The students are satisfied or not satisfied with their studies approximately in the same extent.
2. The students of technical fields have the smallest concerns concerning their jobs.
3. They consider the biggest problem within their studies to be insufficient practice.
4. The biggest problem from the point of view of university teachers is a great number of students.
5. The biggest problem from the point of view of employers is few graduates of technical fields.

## Conclusion

At the end we can state that approximately in the course of the last quarter of the century the Slovak university education went through the principle changes as a result of transformation processes, which had been launched in 1989. The result of these changes is Slovak mass higher education, i.e. mass admittance of candidates to university studies, decrease of their standards and degradation of higher education connected with it. The key problems of the present situation in the university education can be considered to be absence of practice, a great number of university students and few graduates in technical fields.

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