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Current issues in Slovak higher education
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Abstract

This paper considers the problem of universities as an important determinant of development of society. It is based on the mission of higher education in the context of the current needs of society. It accentuates the essential need for quality of higher education and also highlights some of the social problems associated with the application of university graduates in practice that results from economic and societal problems as well. This is particularly due to the absence of mechanisms to evaluate and present the responsibility of universities to society. Advancing trend of declining quality of educational process and research is noticeable in connection with the worsening climate for work at universities, increasing the number of university students etc. Part of the paper is a survey of student satisfaction with their university studies. Acquired research findings highlight some problems in university preparatory from the university students’ point of view. At the same time it also points to the possibility of improving higher education in the context of the needs of society.

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1. Introduction

Education and training of person living in the society at the beginning of the third millennium should provide a person with a holistic picture of the world, in all its aspects and developmental dimensions. This world must be in human cognitive system embedded within the natural world composed of mutually integrated system of cognitive representation of the natural properties both in terms of individual disciplines. Picture of the world should allow person to orientate in the surrounding reality in the context of individual human assumptions and provide it with a holistic view of its close environment. But it is necessary to stress out that the importance of detailed and specific facts is currently negligible, because the information of various kinds are readily available through sources of

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information (e.g. Uncle Google) and its amount is unnecessarily burdensome for memory.

2. Higher education problems

The increasing flow of information emphasizes the skill requirement of efficient search, sorting and processing. This task has to be one of the key tasks of each school. In contrast, higher education is already conceived targeted to specific professional perspective and should satisfy one of the highest human needs - self-realization and within this context it should be a tool for the application of the young person in social practice.

What is it therefore like in Slovakia? Has higher education in the Slovak Republic been focused on the relevance, i.e. high degree of consistency between expectations and what higher education provides to society? The fact proves that it is not so, despite the fact that we have a lot of enthusiastic people willing and able to develop higher education.

We have many universities, but what is missing is long-term concept and definition of the various universities, the lack of focus on the needs of society, but also students, reserves in imperfect legislation, insufficient diversification of curricula, expanding bureaucracy and downright painful financially starving. There is some evidence of such claims.

While in July 2000 there were 21 state universities and two non-state universities in Slovakia, in the academic year 2012/2013, 20 public universities, three state universities, as well as 13 private universities and two foreign universities based in the Czech Republic provided higher education.

Fig. 1. Number of Universities in Slovakia in 2013.

Fig 2. Comparison of universities in Slovakia in 2000 and 2012
Is it a lot of not? In order to compare we will list number of universities in two European countries that are almost the same in size as Slovakia: Denmark and Switzerland.

Table 1. Population and area of the selected states.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Area (km²)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>5.43 mil.</td>
<td>49 036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>5.5 mil.</td>
<td>43 094</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>7.4 mil.</td>
<td>41 285</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Slovakia there are 18 universities and 18 other higher educational institutions compared to 11 universities in Denmark (5 multi departmental and 6 specialized) and 12 universities in Switzerland (10 cantonal and 2 federal institutes of technology, 8 vocational higher schools).

Table 2. Number of university students in given European states.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>200 743</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>196 473</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>222 656</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fig. 4. Number of university students in given European states

From the comparison it is evident that comparing with those states we have many universities. Unfortunately, we also have a lot of graduates who are unable to enter the labour market.

Table 3. Unemployment of university graduates – year 2013.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>higher ed. 1st degree</td>
<td>456</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>higher ed. 2nd degree</td>
<td>2242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>higher ed. 3rd degree</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2748</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Documents relating to higher education in Slovakia say („Správa o priebehu reformy vysokého školstva na slovensku a jej dopadoch na študentov vysokých škol, Dpráva o plnení koncepcie ďalšieho rozvoja vysokého školstva na Slovensku pre 21. storočie“) that the main mission of higher education is to develop a harmonious personality, knowledge, wisdom, goodness and creativity in a person and contribute to sustainable development and the improvement of society as a whole. Interest in higher education evokes the idea that there are a lot of young people for whom education is really important goal of life - hence their desire to be wise, successful and necessary not only for loved ones, but also for the society in which they live. Since I work in a faculty that prepares future teachers, I will build on my own experience.

Despite challenging times and inadequate financial remuneration of teachers there are still applicants interested in the teaching profession. Statistics show that there are many universities that train future teachers, paradoxically, even those that do not have a teaching degree programs, but their study also includes training requirements for teaching qualifications through supplementary pedagogical study.

Table 4. Number of teacher-training universities in Slovakia.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Teacher-training study programmes</th>
<th>Supplementary pedagogical study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public schools</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State schools</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private schools</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This enormous interest in the profession of a teacher has several explanations.

The first one could be that this is a profession that significantly affects the life of individual, families and society, and even now it is seen more as a mission. At the same time there is no profession that would have so many admirers and critics at the same time. It can be caused by the fact that each of us have had or have experience with this profession. Certainly there are a lot of young people who realize the mission of the teaching profession and are willing to do everything possible to be ready for this challenging, responsible, interesting and beautiful work.

The second possible explanation is that many young people choose the path of university education, only to somehow bridge the period of unemployment after graduating from secondary school. They are usually candidates with lesser aspirations for higher education.

Our experience shows that among students there are also those who have chosen studying teaching because of failing to be accepted to other university what they are interested in and they think they can handle it without major problems and they do not find teacher’s training very difficult.

We therefore have relatively many students but paradoxically not all of them will be future intellectual elite of our society that will affect our social development and even be its driver. It is likely that even successful students will not all become teachers. There are certainly many reasons, but the principal one is that many educated young people (mostly very diligent ones) are more eager to live and work beyond boarders of Slovakia, they are confident that their work elsewhere will be rewarded better and allow them to have better economic and social status.

Goal of universities is to prepare knowledgeable, highly trained individuals, minded, creative, and hardworking with the skill to constantly work on them. At the same time the individual with attributes of ethical, freedom, i.e. one that knows his/her limits, freedom, wisdom as well as knowledge of necessity. Independent expression of the ethical, cultural and social problems, and analysis of emerging social, economic, cultural problems should be absent on the academic ground. It would be tragic if the academic land did not serve for fostering universal values of humanity such as truth, mutual respect and esteem. It is also undeniable that higher education enables one to self-fulfilment, creating a more exclusive stratification in society, a higher degree of independence, decision-making and accountability not only individually but also socially. These expectations are feasible only if we are able to create conditions for the development of such personality at our universities. Necessary condition in this respect is to remove the massification of higher education. Receiving a large number of students brings not only organisational but also qualitative complication. Only the most skilful ones should study at universities, these who will represent and develop their field of study so it can obtain better quality. Averagely prepared individuals are unable to develop their field to the extraordinary one neither state will not benefit from average individuals. Higher number of accepted students means the need for more teachers who are able to implement higher education. However, we cannot produce them in a moment, so doctoral students are needed to help in teaching and they are not always at a level that is necessary for university.

Number of accepted indicates that tendency to reduce demands on the study has expanded (as a consequence of accepting less-trained and talented candidates) and we have many students in groups. And we do not discuss with them enough, we do not try to find out their opinions, we convince them about certain rules. Starting point could be a legitimate requirement to reduce the number of accepted ones. To place greater emphasis on selection and quality when selecting students (Řádek et al.). But the problem is, that for the vast majority of study programs are so far accepted candidates in line with the trends evident in Slovakia without entrance exams, based on results from secondary schools. Based on our experience we know that the quality of secondary school is diverse. Achieved grade average does not always reflect the real level of education and preparation for university study. Direct contact with students is reduced. The right higher education should be based on a self-study. But to orientate, excite and discuss are the vital needs for successful learning in universities. Problematic is the fact that the content of education in various fields does not always reflect societal needs. Painful is that we stopped to prepare and develop the field that are necessarily needed in our society. Social practice does not only need doctors, managers, lawyers, and teachers. At universities, there is still a problem which is, unfortunately, a problem of moral principle. Boundless individualism presented by absolute individual freedom, extreme materialisation of society, commercialization of culture, preferring hedonistic pleasures, presented contradictory values causes mainly young people to lose their orientation in what is good and right (Kučerová, 2013). Volatility of values of society requires greater accentuation
of moral competence. Here, at university students should learn, especially from our teachers, which means accepting, arguing, concluding, factual and constructive criticism, deliberate decision to compromise, be responsible and tolerant.

3. Opinion survey on university study

Experience that young people gain in their often counterproductive personal development is not clearly positive in the academic environment. The survey conducted in the fall semester of the academic year 2012/2013 supports it as well. Its aim was to investigate students' opinions on satisfaction and quality of study at our university. Although the sample of respondents (172) does not allow broader application of identified research data, it provides much food for thought. I will mention only the most interesting data. In the introduction of the survey we investigated whether respondents had clear idea of what they want to study prior to entering our university. Response of 44.1\% of them was positive. The responses, however, opinion differed in terms of gender (66\% male students, 39\% female students). Only one third of the examined sample (27.9\%) said that they study exactly what they are interested in. The greater part of surveyed (62.8\%) stated that study only partly. To clarify, it should be noted that teacher training in Slovakia is a combination of two subjects.

In the next section, we were interested in student satisfaction with university studies. About a quarter of respondents (25.6\%) expressed clear satisfaction. Most respondents, 65.1\% said they have little reservations in this regard, but they are satisfied. From the aspect of gender there were differences within the responses again. Male students are happier - up to 83.3\%. Only 8.11\% of female respondents expressed total satisfaction and 18.9\% are not satisfied with their study.

We were also interested in the field of university studies which have the most complaints. Responses were as follows: course content 32.5\%, 23.2\% system of study, 16.3\% approach of teachers, the educational process conditions 7\%.

In terms of gender the biggest differences of opinion were on the course content. Female students are less satisfied - up 62.2\% compared with 33\% of male respondents. Male students (33\%) are often more satisfied with the approach of teachers than female students (18.9\%).

Another area of our interest was to find out how they evaluate their decision to study at our university. Only 11.62\% of respondents expressed total satisfaction, 69.7\% are partially satisfied, 13.9\% are dissatisfied and 2.3\% regret their study at our university.
Having said this, we wonder if they would again choose the possibility to study at our university. Positive response was stated by approximately one-third (30.2%) of the examined sample and 20.9% of respondents would prefer to have attended another university. Answer ‘I do not know’ voted 32.6% and unambiguous 'no' for university studies at PU expressed 11.6% of our students.

Two questions in the survey were open. One of them concerned the possibility to send a message to teacher who they admire the most and the second one, to send a message to the teacher to whom they have the greatest reservations. Obtained responses were very interesting.

Positive references stated that students appreciate the relationship of the teacher to students, the atmosphere in class, professionalism, friendliness, willingness to pay more attention than necessary, precision in expressing and formulating requirements, creating a space for debate and respect for the opinions.

The most frequent negative references were as follows: excessive rigorist, not interesting lessons, excessive theorizing, incomprehensible explaining, chaotic tasks, misconstruction of subject of the study, too much complexity of the evaluation.

There were also reservations such as high professionalism and inability to explain, bias in evaluation,
unwillingness to help, not enough space for discussions, approach to students from a position of "superior - subordinate" and so on.

Of course, we cannot generalize the findings on the basis of this sample, nevertheless, they suggest us what we have in order to enhance the quality of higher education focus on.

Especially at universities we need university teachers of high quality who are not only professionally, but also professionally - methodically prepared for work with students. In fact, they present study and in particular through the work of teachers, students perceive the quality of a particular university. We necessarily need to improve the content of education and the educational process conditions. Finally, we need obtain feedback, so that we create the conditions for streamlining the educational process of university education.

Conclusion

Despite all the complexity of today we must do all we can in order to prepare highly qualified professionals, people who will know and will want to prove more in their field. Average student will give an average performance in practice. If higher education should provide a path to professionalism in a particular field, then we shall insist on that. It is in the hands of us, teachers. We are the ones who must guard the level of our field. Unprofessionalism, indifference, superficiality, sometimes inability or lack of preparation to provide students with an adequate form of what they need, unfortunately, shall return to us and certainly none of us wishes so.

References