



## **The education system faces many serious problems which the state has not tackled for a long time.**

MESA10, a not-for-profit organisation, launched the initiative *Learning Makes Sense* in 2016, with the aim of identifying causes of the current unfavourable state of the education system in Slovakia, and recommending appropriate changes. Education should provide learners with relevant knowledge and skills development, and should enable their holistic development. It should reduce inequalities, address various needs and develop the potential of all learners as much as possible. Moreover, higher education institutions should also develop culture and new knowledge. At the same time, education should prepare learners to succeed in their personal, civic, and professional life. However, the findings of the *Learning Makes Sense* initiative show that the current reality of the education system is different.

The initiative carried out an extensive qualitative and quantitative survey in 2017–2019, with more than 650 interviewed respondents and 15,000 survey respondents from among various educators and employers. “*This survey is unique in Slovakia in terms of the range of its respondents and the complex approach applied,*” explained Renáta Hall, the manager of the *Learning Makes Sense* initiative. This survey forms the basis for the *Analysis of Findings about the State of the Education System in Slovakia* that is presented at the conference today. Its aim is to describe the current situation and identify the major problems in the education system, together with their causes, relationships and impacts. The findings of the analysis are serious, in many cases alarming even, and they concern all levels, from pre-primary up to higher education.

One of the major problems is that ***not all individuals have access to education at all levels*** in Slovakia. Almost anyone can be admitted to a higher education institution today, but access to early childhood education and care programmes is limited. The education system ***is unable to eliminate sufficiently early the risk that students will fail in their education later on*** and it does not provide equal chances



for all. There are costly measures implemented in the education system, such as preparatory “zero” classes or courses to complete education at primary school, and these are introduced due to the failing preventative measures at preceding education levels. The analysis suggests that these measures are inefficient.

Currently, the education system *is unable to address the variety of learners’ needs and interests* at schools. Indeed, particular groups of children, such as the physically disabled or Roma from excluded localities, are being systematically excluded from education. The lack of the support at the right time even multiplies the initial difficulties these children face on their education path. Many of them end their education without completing a level that would enable them to take further studies, and without acquiring a qualification sufficient to succeeding on the labour market.

At primary schools, *almost one fifth of pupils* are special needs designated (SEN). The increasing proportion of these pupils can be attributed to the financing scheme, according to which, paradoxically, providing a higher financial contribution for pupils with physical disabilities or special talents can indirectly support their excessive diagnosing. At the same time, almost half of these pupils are educated *separately at special needs schools and classes*. Yet staff at both mainstream and special needs schools would appreciate more co-operation between their schools. Importantly, many teachers at mainstream schools are not prepared for the education of children with various needs, and there is practically no opportunity for them to acquire these skills on further education programmes.

*Also, teachers are not adequately trained to* master a wide variety of teaching methods, recognise learners’ needs and apply all of that to their teaching. *Teacher salaries are inadequate* and their social recognition does not reflect the difficult nature of their job. The *Learning Makes Sense* analysis also showed that teacher training programmes focus largely on students gaining theoretical knowledge (what to teach), instead of on their practical teaching skills. Moreover, obsolete teaching methods are prevalent on teacher training programmes. Further education courses do not develop their teaching skills either. It is alarming that according to the survey, *almost three quarters* of secondary school students claimed they had experienced that *a teacher humiliated a student in the presence of other classmates* (e.g. using nicknames, mocking, etc.) often, sometimes or at least once. *Almost 60% of higher education students* experienced humiliating too.

The content of education in Slovakia is not defined so as to *develop relevant competences*, besides providing essential knowledge. Teaching at schools does not currently support active exploration, nor



the development of critical thinking, ethical behaviour, creativity, co-operation or civic engagement. According to teachers, the dominant **teaching methods** are **conversation about a topic and lecturing**. However, these methods do not support learners in acquiring the various learning strategies they could use in real life; they do not motivate them to explore, search for context, and they do not develop their analytical and critical thinking. Yet these are precisely those skills employers expect from graduates. Teachers explained that the barriers hindering them from applying active teaching methods are not only related to time and material resources, but also to the lack of methodological guidance in implementing new methods in practice.

**Higher education institutions (HEIs) in Slovakia** tend to be **closed institutions**. Many students study at a single HEI throughout their studies, and remain there for the duration of their academic career, right up until retirement. As such, they miss out on various opportunities and knowledge in science, arts and teaching, as well as HEI management. Only some postgraduate students develop their skills in research and teaching. Teacher remuneration at HEIs is often not related to their teaching quality. **Weak teacher training and a lack of reward for quality teaching both contribute to the unfavourable picture HEI students form of their teachers**. At private HEIs, students' needs seem to be better addressed, and thus they evaluate their studies and teachers more highly than their peers at public HEIs do. At HEIs, **passive teaching methods prevail**. As much as one third of HEI students claimed that teachers simply read texts aloud at lectures. Emphasis is mainly placed upon specialised knowledge which is even considered to be obsolete by one third of students, focussing less on the skills needed for their personal life and professional career. **Plagiarism at HEIs seems to be a widespread practice**, especially because students do not know how to quote correctly, and also due to the absence of sanctions.

**The proportion of HEI students heading for HEIs abroad is persistently above the OECD average**. The problem is that as much as **41% of these students do not intend to return, and another 18% do not know** if they would return to Slovakia. The main reason for studying at HEIs abroad seems to be the higher prestige of the HEIs abroad, as based on recommendations from other students currently studying in a given country or HEI. For more than three quarters of students at HEIs abroad, a sign of the lowering quality of Slovak HEIs was the withdrawal of entrance exams at most Slovak HEIs. The survey also indicated **that students at HEIs abroad developed more in those skills that employers appreciated**. More than half the professionals in HR stated that graduates from foreign HEIs were



better prepared and their English was superior, as was their autonomy at work and their motivation and willingness to learn and work.

The Slovak education system ***lacks quality governance at top level and an adequate and effective financing scheme***, from pre-primary up to higher education institutions. School principals usually lack proper training, and many of them do not receive adequate support from school founders, which are in most cases municipalities or regions. Maintaining school infrastructure, organising public tenders, managing economic and personal issues – all this constrains school principals and drains their capacity to focus on strategic development, improving teaching and managing employees at their schools.

In the case of higher education, ***governance is complicated, especially at public HEIs, and not all stakeholders have a say in it***. Only some employees and students at HEIs participate in the election to academic senates. It also seems that there are no effective mechanisms to systematically engage students in shaping and improving their own studies. Rectors and deans have management roles but have no decisive power, and can only submit their proposals. Data also suggest that several HEIs are internally fragmented, thus limiting the potential for co-operation between their faculties and institutes in teaching, arts and science, as well as in managing administrative and operational tasks. Scientific councils should stimulate the quality of pedagogic, scientific and artistic activities at HEIs. However, these are seldom dominated by scientists with above average results at international level, or within Slovakia in the case of certain specific social sciences and humanities.

Another problem is that the state does not have a vision for the development of the education system in the long term, and it does not systematically process related data ***or analyse the impacts of policies implemented***. This contributes to frequent changes in legal norms and financing schemes. At the same time, the state does not provide adequate support to employees in the education sector. All these factors contribute to the persistent decrease in the quality of education in Slovakia, indicated by international comparisons and the worsening performance of students in centralised tests.

*The full analysis is available in Slovak at the website: <https://analyza.todarozum.sk/>*



# The Analysis of Findings about the State of the Education System in Slovakia – selected facts and context

## Area 1: Education openness and permeability

### ***Almost anyone can be admitted to a higher education institution, but access to early childhood education and care programmes is limited***

Everyone should have access to early childhood education and care programmes, and these should help all children start on an equal footing when they later commence their schooling. Research findings confirm that if children participate in these programmes, it has a positive effect on their future learning. However, no attention is placed on programmes for children aged below 3 in Slovakia, and the state cannot guarantee access to pre-primary education even for those who are willing to participate in it. Many children are left in front of the kindergarten gates, as confirmed by the *Learning Makes Sense* questionnaire survey. Almost 50% of kindergarten principals surveyed stated that demand for places in their school outnumbered vacant capacity in the school year 2017/2018. Introducing compulsory pre-primary education for children aged 5 and above contributed to the pressure for capacity increase, although the risk of insufficient capacity remains.

While people have to “fight” for a place in a kindergarten, vacant places at secondary schools and HEIs significantly exceed the number of potential applicants. In 2018, vacant places at secondary schools exceeded the number of primary school graduates by 15,000. Vacant places for full-time and part-time studies at HEIs exceeded the number of secondary school graduates by 20%. An extremely high, and still increasing, number of secondary school graduates heading for universities abroad also contributes to vacant places at HEIs. The proportion of HEI students from Slovakia studying abroad is 17%, while the OECD average is 2%. [1]

### ***Selection of students is spreading at lower education stages, while it is non-existent where it would be legitimate***

Upon completing education at primary school, young people should have a wide choice of education paths. In most European countries young people are tracked into various education paths at the age of 14 to 16. In Slovakia however, tracking is present at the age of 11. Upon completing year 5 at primary



schools, some pupils leave for the 8-year grammar school. However, research findings show that early tracking of students does not lead to significant gains for those being tracked into premium education, and causes huge losses for those remaining in the non-premium tracks. The remaining pupils lose positive models and the motivation to work harder, because the school environment deteriorates after the best performing pupils have left.

Since the selection procedures are applied early, they are not applied later when they would be legitimate. The analyst Katarína Vančíková noted: *“The transition of pupils after year 9 at primary schools to secondary schools more closely resembles recruitment than selection.”* Softening admission criteria is even more apparent in the transition to tertiary education. While in 2005 less than one third of applications was accepted without entrance exams, in 2018 this proportion rose to 61%. The absence of entrance exams probably deters the more ambitious applicants. In the questionnaire survey, more than 80% of students from Slovakia studying at HEIs abroad claimed that the decision to abolish entrance exams is lowering the quality of HEIs in Slovakia. Teachers point also to a lowering in the quality of HEIs, yet in addition they attribute this reduction to the insufficient abilities of students. In the questionnaire survey, almost 70% of teachers ranked the low quality of students among the five factors that worsen the quality of education. However, qualitative data point to a lack of systemic communication between secondary schools and HEIs in preparing students for their university studies. The criticism directed at the abilities of university applicants is related to teachers’ expectations. *“With the new millennium, university studies in Slovakia opened up to a broader group of students, but this process did not involve the diversification of HEIs this necessitated. Most HEIs continued to offer mostly academically-oriented study programmes.”* explained the analyst Renáta Hall.

### ***There are groups of people with no access to higher education stages***

The state should guarantee equal access to quality education, and the education path of each individual should be determined solely by their abilities and interests. However, not everyone has access to higher education, and learners with disabilities and social disadvantages face the most difficulties. Compared to other countries, significantly fewer people go through higher education than their parents. [2]

To a large extent, this relates to people living in social exclusion. Calculations by the Education Policy Institute and Value for Money Unit show that more than a third of pupils from excluded Roma localities finished their compulsory education without attaining a full basic education, and fewer than half



continued on further studies in the school year 2017/18. [3] In secondary education, these students attend mostly practical schools and special vocational schools for students with mental disabilities, or they attend mainstream vocational schools. However, they often attend 2-year study programmes offering no professional qualifications, and this significantly decreases their chances of finding a job. The proportion of students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (SDB) at HEIs is even lower than at secondary schools. In the school year 2017/18, only 8% of young people aged 19–23 years receiving material benefits attended HEIs. This proportion is 4 times lower than their total proportion of the population. [3] Less than 1% of Roma have a university degree. Support for students coming from excluded Roma localities is reduced to needs-based scholarships serving to partially eliminate the financial barriers. However, the analyst Katarína Vančíková warns that *“they do not receive support in other areas, and their families and relatives can only help them to a limited degree, as they themselves lack experience with university studies.”*

Similarly, the education paths of people with disabilities differ from the majority population. While children with disabilities comprise 11% of all primary school pupils, at secondary schools their proportion drops below 7%. This indicates that a significant proportion of children with disabilities do not continue their studies at secondary schools. This is mainly the case for children with a diagnosed mental disability. The *Learning Makes Sense* survey findings indicate that transition to secondary school can also pose problems for children diagnosed with autism, multiple disabilities or sensory disabilities. Transition to secondary schools is further complicated by the limited access to career advice. A quarter of special primary schools do not provide it at all. *“Secondary school choice is thus driven mostly by the openness and accessibility of particular schools to the education of students with disabilities, rather than by their own abilities and interests,”* remarked the analyst Miroslava Hapalová. Physical barriers in school buildings pose a particular problem, along with the lack of teaching assistants and personal assistants for learners with disabilities, and the inadequate competences of teachers in working with these learners, a shortcoming which is not compensated for by methodological support for teachers. It is alarming that a significant proportion of children with disabilities attend programmes without a school-leaving exam (28%), and similarly to Roma children, this lowers their chances of entering the labour market.

Only a small proportion of students with disabilities continue their studies at a HEI. In 2018, some 7,000 students with disabilities attended programmes with a school-leaving exam at secondary schools, while only a thousand such students studied at HEIs. The *Learning Makes Sense* survey findings indicate



that despite partial positive measures at many HEIs, there are still physical barriers present which limit access to higher education for people with disabilities. Students with sensory disabilities or arm disabilities also face barriers related to IT systems, and have limited access to academic literature and other materials.

Low state support hinders the process of eliminating barriers, because public HEIs receive only half of the subsidies requested for students with special education needs (SEN). Also, specific support measures for individual groups of students with SEN are not defined. Having such a definition is particularly important, since people serving as SEN support co-ordinators at HEIs have various backgrounds, do not attend training in this field, and often perform this task beyond the scope of their regular duties and for low financial compensation. Yet their role is extremely important in providing guidance to teachers. There are also shortcomings in training and support for university teachers in teaching SEN designated students.

***The education system introduces compensatory measures instead of placing emphasis on prevention***

The education system should help equalise opportunities and compensate for disadvantages as early as possible, thus eliminating or significantly reducing the risk of future failure. Currently, it addresses the needs of people at risk too late, and applies compensatory rather than preventative measures. According to the analyst Katarína Vančíková, *“the system contains various costly and not always effective measures, which have been introduced due to inadequate prevention at preceding education stages.”*

An example is the introduction of preparatory classes (“zero classes”) aiming to help children with little or no access to early childhood education and care programmes. While the intention to compensate for disadvantages can be appreciated, available data suggest that learners from the preparatory classes still experience failure later at school. Moreover, the year spent in a preparatory class is included in the period of compulsory education, and students who repeated a year at primary school frequently finish their studies before they complete year 9 at school. Consequently, state education policies address this by offering courses to complete education at primary school, and these are provided mostly by secondary vocational schools offering 2-year programmes. In the end, these students often finish their education path without achieving any work qualification at all. However,



their chances of entering higher education would have been higher if the schools they attended had addressed their learning needs more effectively using a wide range of support measures.

## **Area 2: Customised support for learners**

### ***The current education system is unable to address the variety of children's needs***

Education should be a public service enabling all people to acquire relevant knowledge and skills, preparing them for life in a diverse society, regardless of their health or social conditions. Such an objective can be fulfilled only in the case that the school can address the individual learning needs children have and provide them with quality and customised support. Similar to other countries, learners in Slovakia are entitled to receive support in education based on the special educational needs concept (SEN). Despite almost a fifth of primary school pupils (18%) being SEN designated, not all children actually needing the additional support are eligible for it in practice. More than half of the teachers and professionals in education (56%) confirmed in the questionnaire survey that such children attended their school. These children can be, for example, those whose mother tongue differs from the language of instruction at their school, children in institutional care (orphanages), or children facing crises in their families. However, they are not currently entitled to support in education.

### ***The increasing proportion of these pupils can be related to the financing scheme***

The proportion of SEN designated pupils at primary schools in Slovakia is the fourth highest in Europe, and it has increased by more than a third over the past decade. Survey findings indicate that it can be related to a more precise diagnostic process, the demands placed on children, and the entitlement to support being conditional upon the diagnosing of SEN. *“Paradoxically, providing a higher financial contribution for pupils with physical disabilities or talents can indirectly support excessive diagnosing for those groups of children for whom schools receive inadequate or even no funds to carry out support measures,”* warned the analyst Miroslava Hapalová. Such examples include children from socially excluded Roma localities, where one in five children are diagnosed with a mental disability. [3] However, there are several indications that the diagnosis of mild mental disability, i.e. serious and irreversible damage to cognitive abilities, is also granted to children failing in education due to other reasons, in circumstances where late and inadequate support measures are a common feature. *“Since receiving support is conditional upon granting a diagnosis, preventive measures at schools are rather*



*limited. Yet such prevention could reduce the likelihood that the potential impairment to the child's development might lead to disadvantage or even defect,"* explained the analyst Miroslava Hapalová.

### ***The number of children in special needs education remains stable in the long term***

Aside from the high number of SEN designated children, another problem is that only half of them attend mainstream classrooms with their peers. Yet findings from relevant international research show that such a practice has negative effects on learning outcomes and social skills, both for children with disabilities and other children. Slovakia occupies a discouraging first place among European states in terms of the proportion of primary school pupils educated separately in special needs classrooms and special needs schools. [4] The number of children in special education remained almost stable over the past decade, pointing to a relative stability of capacity in special education. A particular problem is that there is “no passage” between the mainstream and special schools. Special needs schools and classrooms are not used to providing temporary support for a child, and instead constitute a permanently separated education path, with most children being tracked into it as they start their schooling. The separation of both education paths is reflected in the limited co-operation between the mainstream and special schools. However, the *Learning Makes Sense* survey findings show that staff at both types of school would appreciate more co-operation.

### ***Many problems schools are facing prevent them from being ready to educate children with diverse needs***

An important survey finding is that despite the prevailing trend for SEN designated children being educated separately, most survey respondents from the mainstream schools tend to agree that the majority of SEN designated groups should be educated in mainstream schools (in their special or regular classes). However, many mainstream schools do not have conditions adequate in terms of organisation, funding, staff and space to educate these children. There is a lack of teaching assistants, and moreover their duties are sometimes not effectively delegated, leading to an increased demand for assistants in the system. Many schools lack professional staff (SEN teachers, school psychologists etc.) and the health and personal assistance services for children with physical disabilities remain almost fully uncovered. Apart from the lack of staff, there are no precisely defined standards for their work, including a model for co-operation with teachers and their work at schools.



### ***Teachers at mainstream schools are not prepared for the education of children with various needs***

One quarter of survey respondents perceived a problem stemming from the insufficient ability of teachers at mainstream schools to educate children with various needs. At *Learning Makes Sense* group interviews, students on teaching programmes pointed out the lack of attention placed on this issue in their pre-service training, and no remedy is provided during in-service teacher training. As much as 71% of teachers at mainstream schools participating in the survey did not attend any further training on supporting children with diverse needs in education. Despite 66% of teachers expressing a need to attend such training, it is not actually available. According to the international survey TALIS 2018 [5], it is in this field that the highest proportion of current teachers (27%) feel they need to develop professionally.

### ***Schools lack quality external support for educating children with various needs***

At the same time, the *Learning Makes Sense* findings indicate that even at special needs schools, conditions for educating children with various needs are not optimal. Respondents from special needs schools claim there is a significant lack of funds and staff in this education segment (teaching assistants, professional staff, other support service staff). At the same time, many mainstream and special needs schools lack adequate support from advisory and prevention centres. “Across Slovakia, respondents express widely varying experiences with the form and quality of support provided by advisory and prevention centres. While the centres are currently understaffed and underfunded, this situation can also be explained by the lack of quality standards for services provided by centres, and the inadequate methodological advice received by the centres themselves.” summarised the analyst Miroslava Hapalová.

### ***The education system addresses the needs and interests of “regular” pupils to only a limited degree***

Also “regular” pupils not designated as SEN have their individual needs and interests addressed by the education system to only a limited degree. Survey findings indicate that in the case of gifted and talented pupils, support is provided mainly in premium schools or classes. Mainstream schools provide their support with various subject-based contests, extracurricular activities or by teachers assigning additional tasks to pupils. Yet it is alarming that more than one third of teachers presumed that no



gifted or talented pupils attended their school at all. The most common strategy in the case of the worse performing pupils is that teachers inform their parents. Options to shape one's own learning through optional school subjects are reduced to a forced choice between Ethical and Religious education, and a choice of foreign language, later supplemented by optional subjects related to the school leaving exam at secondary schools. Only 22% of schools surveyed also offered other optional subjects. There is almost no opportunity to choose the difficulty level for school subjects at primary schools, while at secondary schools, this is available only for foreign languages, as confirmed by one third of survey respondents.

However, the limited choice of school subjects continues in higher education as well. Only 37% of students surveyed at HEIs indicated that they could choose enough attractive subjects during their study. Among Slovak students studying at HEIs abroad, twice as many students (72%) reported this in the survey. In general, respondents from HEIs abroad could also choose subjects offered by another faculty/school/department, choose specific topics or from various lecture times. Three out of ten students studying in Slovakia reported in the survey that they could not choose anything at all. Such a negative perception was reported by less than 10% of students at HEIs abroad.

### **Area 3: Training and development of teachers and professional staff**

#### ***Teachers in Slovakia have low social recognition***

Teachers should be motivated, qualified and adequately rewarded professionals. Unfortunately, this is often not the case in Slovakia. Out of the 48 countries participating in the international survey OECD TALIS 2018 [5] Slovakia ranked last regarding the social recognition of teachers among teachers in lower secondary education (i.e. second stage at Slovak primary schools). Only 5% of teachers in Slovakia perceive that teachers are appreciated by society, while the average for all 48 countries surveyed was 37%. According to the analyst Jozef Miškolci, *“low social recognition of teachers coupled with low teacher salaries can influence the total number of students applying for teacher training programmes.”*

#### ***Teacher training programmes focus largely on students gaining theoretical knowledge instead of their practical teaching skills***



Teachers should master a wide variety of techniques and be able to choose the optimal learning method for every learner based on their needs. However, focus groups with students on teacher training programmes indicate that HEIs focus largely on students mastering what to teach instead of on their practical teaching skills. Students perceive they are relatively well prepared for the teaching profession in terms of theoretical knowledge, but feel they are weak in terms of their teaching skills and use of a variety of teaching techniques and methods.

### ***Prospective teachers are mostly being trained using outdated teaching methods***

Actually, HEI students on teacher training programmes participating in the *Learning Makes Sense* survey were the ones who most frequently reported that lecturing was one of the most common teaching methods they experienced during their study (as much as 88% of respondents). According to the analyst Jozef Miškolci: *“Unless students on teacher training programmes themselves experience what quality teaching should look like, then it is hard to expect these students to actually become high quality teachers themselves.”*

### ***The current set-up of the professional development system for teachers rewards for mere participation in development activities, not for acquisition of new skills***

Concerning the professional development system, as much as 44% of teachers in pre-primary to secondary education reported in the *Learning Makes Sense* questionnaire survey that the salary increase was one of their three main incentives. Unfortunately, the current set-up of the professional development system is such that, with salary bonuses, it motivates merely the “completion” of education programmes. It does not reward at all if participants gain any particular competence, or if they actually use the knowledge and skills gained in practice.

### ***Students consider their teachers to be experts in specific areas rather than being professionals with character***

Secondary school students perceive their teachers mostly as professionals in their field. In the questionnaire survey, as much as 71% of students reported that all/the majority of teachers at their school are professionals in their particular fields. Conversely, only 41% of students stated that all/the majority of teachers at their school can admit their own mistakes, or that they do not know something. It is alarming that, according to the survey, 74% of respondents claimed they had experienced often,



sometimes or at least once that a teacher humiliated a student in the presence of other classmates (e.g. using nicknames, mocking, etc.).

### ***Teaching plays second fiddle at HEIs***

Quantitative data in the *Learning Makes Sense* survey indicate that doctoral students applying for PhD study as prospective teachers at HEIs are attracted by future scientific or artistic work, rather than by teaching. Doctoral students spend a lot of time teaching, but in the questionnaire survey, as much as 59% of them stated they are not really trained for it. Teaching is also the core activity for academic staff already employed by HEIs. 83% of academic staff at HEIs reported that teaching was their core activity at work. However, it seems that the quality of teaching does not get support from HEI managements. 28% from among academic staff at HEIs reported the lack of interest from school management in the quality of teaching as a factor with the most negative impact on their quality of teaching.

Weak teacher training and lack of reward for quality teaching can both contribute to the unfavourable picture HEI students in Slovakia form of their teachers. 11% of HEI students in Slovakia, compared to 26% of HEI students abroad, reported in the survey that all their teachers customise their teaching methods to students. In Slovakia, respondents from private HEIs tended to view their teachers more positively than at public HEIs regarding education content, teaching methods and their approach to students. *“As much as 70% of respondents at private HEIs, compared to 40% at public HEIs, have never experienced that a teacher humiliated a student in the presence of other classmates,”* says the analyst Renáta Hall.

### ***There is room for improvement in preparing academic staff at HEIs for work in research***

Apart from teaching, academic staff at HEIs perform scientific or artistic activities. These activities develop particular fields of study, provide a basis for their teaching at a HEI, and opportunities for students to engage in them. Here also, doctoral studies have room for improvement, because 40% of doctoral students reported in the survey that they do not learn basic research skills, such as design and implementation of research, presentation of creative activities, or research methods. At the same time less than half of doctoral students (49%) stated that they develop their skills in publishing their outputs in prestigious publishing houses.



### ***The closed nature of Slovak HEIs poses a problem***

Another problem is the closed nature of HEIs in Slovakia. This means that academic staff spend their whole professional career at a single HEI. As much as 74% of doctoral students surveyed continued their studies at the HEI where they earned their Master's degrees, and 28% had no interest in international mobility. Hence, our academic staff miss out on various opportunities, knowledge and contacts in science, arts and teaching, as well as establishing scientific co-operation or facilitating mobility for their students. Presumably this was the reason why as much as 66% of Slovak academic staff working abroad perceived that continuing their career at the same HEI where one earned their PhD has a negative impact on one's own professional development.

### ***Our HEIs are endangered by ageing***

A key challenge for human resources at HEIs is that only some doctoral students (53%) intend to pursue employment at these HEIs, according to the *Learning Makes Sense* survey findings. They argue that initial salaries at HEIs are low (65%) and there are employees limiting further development for other progressive people (40%). A lack of interest in working at HEIs, coupled with their closed nature and a significant decrease in PhD student numbers over the past decade (by 68%) mean that HEIs will be ageing faster, and will lose the dynamic energy typical of young people.

## **Area 4: Education content and methods**

### ***Education content mostly focuses on acquiring a set of knowledge in subjects or study fields***

Education content should provide learners with relevant knowledge and skills development, and should also cultivate their personalities. Yet in practice this happens to only a limited degree. As the *Learning Makes Sense* questionnaire survey indicated, school principals at all levels of education at both mainstream and special needs schools consider acquiring subject-based knowledge and reading comprehension to be their priorities in education. Principals at both primary and secondary schools reported that they also focused on financial literacy in education, which is a topic also focused on in the state curricular policy.

On the other hand, little emphasis is placed on developing other skills that are important in personal and working life, as well as in further study. Areas that school principals at all education levels selected



the least among their education priorities were the following: ability to organise time for study and relaxing, coping with stress, entrepreneurship, ability to learn in context, civic engagement and critical thinking. However, several positive trends were identified in the analyses of the education system. The analyst Petra Fridrichová explained: *“We have analysed topics highly emphasised by schools in their education, and we have found that at both mainstream and special needs kindergartens and primary schools, the school principals surveyed try to create conditions for the holistic development of their pupils and their personalities. Areas which school principals marked as being key for the development of their pupils were relatively balanced – they covered subject-based knowledge, reading literacy, and quite often also on ethical behaviour, critical thinking and communication.”*

***Knowledge and skills students possess do not meet the expectations of teachers at further education levels or employers***

Despite the fact that school principals at all education levels reported they place the highest emphasis on developing subject-based knowledge and reading literacy, neither teachers nor employers were satisfied with the level of knowledge and skills possessed by students from the preceding education stages. Teachers mostly pointed out reading comprehension as being the key problem. 68% of secondary school teachers criticised the level of reading comprehension of admitted students. The qualitative data indicated that teachers are also not satisfied with the following issues: ability to select important information from a text, analyse it and assess its correctness. Higher education teachers meanwhile, criticised shortcomings in secondary education. More than 60% of higher education teachers negatively assessed the written expression of their freshmen students, and half of the teachers criticised their ability to learn in context (56%) and discuss (52%). Ability to learn, work in a team, and to be motivated to learn and to work are those skills that employers also expect and consider to be important. Only one quarter of secondary school students reported in the survey that their school developed these skills. Employers confirm this. According to them, almost 37% of applicants for low-skilled and middle-skilled job positions were not motivated, 65% were not able to learn and 79% were not ready to work in a team.

***At higher education institutions also, emphasis is mostly placed on knowledge in a specific field rather than on skills necessary to life and work***



Both qualitative and quantitative data in the *Learning Makes Sense* survey indicated that higher education also focuses mostly on acquiring knowledge in a specific field. As students surveyed reported, more than half of HEIs developed their knowledge during studies. However, as much as one third of students perceived such knowledge to be outdated, which is alarming. In contrast, students studying abroad indicated that their studies also developed them in other areas, along with providing them knowledge. The main differences between these two student groups were in the following skills, which were developed more abroad than at Slovak HEIs: ability to solve problems, critical thinking, teamwork, and ability to learn in context and across disciplines. Students at HEIs abroad are being developed more in skills appreciated by employers. More than half of HR professionals surveyed (53.7%) considered graduates from HEIs abroad to be better prepared. Businessmen appreciated specifically that their English was better, as was their autonomy at work, and their motivation and willingness to learn and work.

### ***Teachers are active, while students listen and write down notes***

Teachers should create a learning environment at schools where purposeful learning and research takes place across various disciplines. Active teaching methods, along with experimental and exploratory activities carried out by pupils, including practical work or drama, are only being used by some 20% of teachers surveyed. The most preferred teaching methods were discussion about a topic (82%) and lecture (56%).

Secondary school students reported a similar picture of their classrooms. Students surveyed stated that the most frequent teaching method applied at their school is lecturing (93%) and dictating notes (75%). However, only 20% of secondary school students reported applying experiments at their school. Students' responses complement those of teachers, confirming that passive teaching methods prevail at secondary schools – lecture or discussion about a topic. However, these methods do not support learners in acquiring the various learning strategies they could use in real life, and they do not motivate them to explore, search for context, nor do they develop their analytical and critical thinking. Lecturing, dictating notes and a teacher-led conversation about a topic using closed questions and simple answers all provide transfer of information, but this is not stored in long-term memory, so they serve little purpose. The analyst Petra Fridrichová explains that *“these teaching methods, where students are mostly passive recipients of information, can be one of the causes behind the paradox that subject-based knowledge is focused on at all education levels, yet secondary school teachers (54%) and higher*



*education teachers (40%) are not satisfied with the said knowledge as possessed by the students admitted.”*

Qualitative data partially address the question of why teachers at all education levels do not use teaching methods that could support active exploration, involving experimenting and problem solving by students themselves. Teachers explained that barriers hindering them from applying active teaching methods, along with classroom work in teams or pairs, are not only related to time and material resources, but also to the lack of methodological guidance in implementing new methods in practice, and a lack of teaching assistants for students who need them for successful learning.

### ***Passive teaching methods are more prevalent at Slovak HEIs than abroad***

The varying learning outcomes of graduates from Slovak HEIs compared to HEIs abroad can also be caused by differences in the teaching methods they apply. Findings from the questionnaire survey among HEI students in Slovakia and abroad indicate this. Students reported that in Slovakia, lecturing is the most frequent teaching method, while one third of students stated that teachers read aloud from textbooks in classes. The analyst Stanislav Lukáč explains that *“lecture using well-structured presentation can provide a broad range of information in a short time and concurrently develop analytical and critical thinking. However, if lecturing is only meant to pass on information, students cannot continuously explore the issue and develop a deeper knowledge of a specific field.”*

In contrast, Slovak students at HEIs abroad more frequently reported in the questionnaire survey that they experience active teaching methods, motivating students to actively acquire knowledge. Methods reported include; discussion (57% abroad vs 49% in Slovakia), problem solving by students (44% abroad vs 28% in Slovakia), or work in small groups (47% abroad vs 29% in Slovakia). When comparing various types of HEIs in Slovakia, active teaching methods were more frequently reported at private HEIs, by both their students and teachers.

### ***Absence of sanctions and students not knowing how to cite correctly both contribute to plagiarism at HEIs***

One can hardly speak of quality education if students are assessed or earn their degree on the back of fraud. The survey findings suggest that plagiarism seems to be a frequent fraudulent activity. Only 16% of higher education students reported in the questionnaire survey that their classmates had never



submitted plagiarised work. One of the reasons behind plagiarism is that students do not actually know what plagiarised work is. *“Half of the respondents stated that the reason behind plagiarism is that students are not sufficiently professional to write an original paper. However, plagiarism can be avoided merely by the correct referencing of resources,”* explained the analyst Stanislav Lukáč. Other responses suggest that the absence of sanctions can also contribute to plagiarism. Students think that their classmates also submit plagiarised work, because nobody checks for plagiarism in assignments submitted (37%), or teachers do not read their assignments at all (25%).

## **Area 5: Governance, management and financing in education**

### ***Low quality governance of the education system and its inadequate and inefficient funding***

The education system should be governed effectively, thanks to a set of simple and comprehensible rules, transparent decision-making, and professional management by people with leadership abilities. A system with such governance is the prerequisite for quality work by teachers and academic staff. However, the *Learning Makes Sense* survey findings indicate that the education system in Slovakia lacks quality governance, along with adequate and efficient funding. The state does not have a vision for the development of the education system in the long term, and it does not systematically process related data or analyse the impacts of policies implemented. This contributes to frequent changes in legal norms and financing schemes. At the same time, the state does not provide adequate support to employees in the education sector.

### ***At pre-primary to secondary schools, school principals are the key actors, yet they often lack adequate training and support in managing schools.***

In accordance with current legislation and international comparisons [6], school principals in Slovakia have a relatively wide range of powers at their disposal, but face many barriers in their actual application. First of all, their agenda is very broad – they manage school facilities and learning resources, along with personal and financial issues, as well as co-operation with their school founder and parents. According to the analyst Peter Drál, *“with the wide range of their agenda and the frequently changing legislation, school principals lack capacity to focus on strategic development, improving teaching and managing employees at their schools, which should be their priority.”* In the questionnaire survey, a majority of school principals stated that a quality team of teachers (77%), their school founder (67%) and shared management with their deputies (56%) helps them manage their



school. Primary school teachers reported that their contribution to school management is in designing the school curricula (81%) and school rules and regulations (66%). However, only one third of primary school teachers reported they can influence subjects they are going to teach, or their content. Secondary school teachers reported a higher degree of decision making in these areas.

### ***School managers lack quality training and support from school founders***

In the *Learning Makes Sense* survey, only 20% of school principals stated that the leadership training which they had to attend after starting in a managing position had actually been useful for them in practice. The minority of school principals who considered it useful stated it was beneficial mainly because they could share experiences with other school principals (66%) and find their feet in the respective law (59%). In certain management areas, school principals cannot rely on support from their school founders, which mostly consist of local and regional self-governments (89%). According to school principals, school founders mostly perform those tasks as explicitly stated in the law: they appoint and dismiss the school principal at the school board's initiative, they provide funding for regular operation and salaries, and check the financial management of schools. Less than two thirds of school principals reported that school founders take care of school facilities, only one third of principals reported that school founders help them with public procurement tenders and only one out of six principals reported that school founders help them manage the economic affairs of their schools. Thus in many cases, school founders do not share the burden of day-to-day school operation with school principals. Also, less than half of school principals stated that school founders deal with the school curriculum (45%), or school strategic plan and vision (33%). At private and church-affiliated schools, school founders discuss and approve the school strategic plan and vision more often (63% and 47% respectively), than at state-run schools (37%) or schools with municipal or regional school founders (28%).

### ***School management is substantially influenced by the education financing scheme and school network regulation***

Problems with funding experienced by pre-primary to secondary schools are not rooted in a single cause as concerns the low volume of funding, compared with other OECD or Visegrad 4 countries. [7] Schools might also lack funds if they have a low number of students, because funding is allocated on a per-student basis. However, primary schools with less than 250 pupils receive higher per-student



subsidies compared to larger schools. Also, the smaller the school, the higher the per-student subsidy. The problem is that smaller schools with less than 250 pupils make up two thirds of all primary schools, yet they educate only one third of pupils.

On the other hand, larger schools educate two thirds of pupils. As the analyst Peter Drál' explained, *"in such a setting, it is better to be a very small school or a very large school, but not a school with a number of pupils around the threshold level."* This fact compels reflection on school network optimisation, focusing on both expenditure and the maintaining of access to school and education quality. These criteria should have different weightings for kindergartens, primary and secondary schools. In the case of kindergartens and the first stage/level of primary schools, access and quality are more important than higher expenditures. For the second stage/level of primary schools and secondary schools, it seems that the current financing scheme leads to inefficient spending along with a worsening education quality.

***Governance is complicated, especially at public HEIs, and not all stakeholders have a say in it***

Although rectors are statutory representatives of their HEI, they can influence life at individual faculties only indirectly, by drafting the internal rules of the HEI and its budget. They have a direct influence on the dean's salary, yet the salary does not seem to be linked to performance criteria. Neither rectors nor deans have decisive power, because their proposals, including personal nominations, are approved by academic senates, and in certain cases also by scientific councils and management boards.

Co-operation with the academic senate, a self-governing academic body, can further improve and legitimise certain proposals. However, in crisis circumstances, such as the loss of accreditation or a financial source, this can increase the length of procedures. Senates, which contain members lobbying mostly for the interests of their own workplace, can impede proposals which are necessary for the institution as a whole but unpopular with some academic staff; for example, merging workplaces with a similar focus, introducing interdisciplinary education, research and arts, or centralising and increasing the efficiency of administration and operation. Integrating universities further with their faculties is not supported by some senate members, nor by several deans and heads of departments/institutes, who prefer the autonomous management of their own units. The composition of academic senates indicates that employees with less work experience both vote and stand as candidates less frequently. *"We were surprised that one of the most frequently stated barriers to participation in HEI governance*



*for early-career staff and full-time doctoral students was the fear of revenge from school management in case they criticised something,”* explained the analyst Renáta Hall, adding that respondents from both these groups perceived HEI to be a hierarchical organisation. Students participate in the election to academic senates less frequently than employees. However, students have at least a third of votes in senates, and thus they can influence many issues shaping their school many years ahead. However, survey findings indicate that students perceive these issues as being too abstract. Still, at the level of departments/institutes, where issues related to school subjects or teachers arise, there seems to be no systemic method of engaging students, according to the survey.

Scientific/artistic councils at faculties and HEIs should stimulate the quality of their pedagogic, scientific and artistic activities. However, data suggest that only some scientific councils have a majority of scientists with above-average performance at international level, or at Slovak level in the case of specific social sciences and humanities.

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