

Final Theses from Higher Education Pedagogy Course at Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra as Reflection of the Quality of the Education at the Level of its' Subjects

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Abstract

Final theses as the result of Higher education pedagogy courses are not only a means by which graduates present how they have acquired the necessary range of theoretical knowledge and the ability to apply them in solving problems. The topics of the final theses are listed in the context of the specific conditions of the activity of the university teacher who attends the course and the result is therefore an analysis of a particular selected problem. The study briefly describes the results of selected final theses originated within the Course of Higher education pedagogy at the Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra (SUA) in year 2019. Analyzed were the works which focused on research of the selected aspects connected with students and their personality at SUA in Nitra and the aim was to obtain indications concerning the quality of the educational process at the level of its' subjects. The study is based on the analysis of the selected final works and there are summarized and formulated framework recommendations and proposals for implementation of measures in selected areas that could improve the quality of higher education at SUA.

Keywords:

University Student
University Teacher
Higher Education Pedagogy Course
Final Thesis
Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra

1 Introduction

Nowadays, university teachers in Slovakia are responsible for their own professional development and there do not exist any methodology to strictly regulate it. Many teachers at universities do not have pedagogical education (mainly graduates of non-pedagogical faculties - engineers, doctors, lawyers, etc.) and nobody even requires such education from them (Turek, 2001). Their main goal is to get knowledge from them into the heads of their students. However, there remains the question how to achieve that goal. Some technical universities offer the possibility to obtain a certificate of pedagogical competence by completing a higher education pedagogy course. The course is voluntary and each university organizes it itself (Malach, Chmoua, 2017). According to the needs of each institution, higher education institutions organize pedagogical education as a pedagogical minimum; they also set it as an obligation in the form of internal regulations or as part of habilitation and inauguration criteria. Such courses are organized for a long time, for example, at Slovak university of agriculture in Nitra (SUA), at the University of Economics in Bratislava or at the Technical University of Košice.

Until 1990 there was a compulsory system of pedagogical education for university teachers. In the 1990s, however, pedagogical seminars were only rarely present at universities as an interest and voluntary. In

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1990, the system of preparation in the framework of higher education was discontinued. Until then, “the system of increasing the pedagogical qualification of university teachers” was defined by Decree no. 8/1983 as compulsory for all university teachers. The first stage of pedagogical education included general topics of higher education concerning university education, student personality, academic profession, forms of teaching, methodological innovations, etc., always taking into account psychological aspects. The second stage of pedagogical education was focused on the issue of teaching of scientific fields and in experimental verification it gave the basis for the constitution of higher education didactics. The system was terminated by Act 172/1990 Coll. on universities together with a network of higher education institutions, which were to carry out pedagogical-psychological preparation of their academic staff (In Šeben Začková, 2014).

In spite of the expiration of the legislative requirement for the pedagogical education of university teachers, the SUA in Nitra continued to carry out the pedagogical education of its staff as the only one higher education institution in the Slovakia.

2 Higher Education Pedagogy Course at Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra

The courses have been continuously organized at the SUA in Nitra since the establishment of the Department of Education in 1964 until today. In the past, the requirement for pedagogical education at SUA was also part of the minimum criteria for the habilitation procedure and the procedure for the appointment of professors at the SUA in Nitra (SPU v Nitre, 2008 – Minimálne kritériá, časť I., ods. f). After the changes in the habilitation criteria in 2014, from which pedagogical education was exempted, the future motivation of university staff to further education in the field of pedagogy and psychology was questionable. Despite the fact, that courses are not obligatory any more, our experience show the interest of young teachers of SUA in this form of further education and the courses are running.

As stated in the current course project (*Projekt kurzu vysokoškolskej pedagogiky. Realizačné obdobie 2018 – 2019*; Fakulta ekonomiky a manažmentu SPU v Nitre, 2018), the aim of the course is to “provide students with relevant and up-to-date information and knowledge in the field of engineering and higher education, psychology, social sciences - sociology, sociology of education and ethics, higher education didactics, the application of modern educational technologies and dissemination tools for educational (professional) content. The content and all activities of the course should be helpful in acquiring skills in the field of pedagogical communication in the educational process at the university and lead to the overall improvement of the quality of higher education”.

Currently, the course is accredited by the International Society for Engineering Pedagogy IGIP for the period 2016-2020 and its organization and study plan meet the IGIP criteria. The course is organized by the Center of Education and Psychological Counseling (CPPP FEM) of the Faculty of Economics and Management (formerly the Department of Education and Psychology) as an independent course in engineering education in two-year cycles with a duration of 3 semesters. It is an internal form of in-service training for university staff and leads to a certificate of completion of the course.

2.1 Analysis of the Final Theses from the Higher Education Pedagogy Course at the Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra

The aim of the empirical part of the study is to identify potential factors affecting the quality of the educational process. This is based on the analysis of the final works from the last cycle of the higher education pedagogy course realized in 2018 - 2019. Final theses can provide important (and authentic) information about the real state of the learning environment in real time, serve as indicators and be helpful in identifying critical elements that ultimately affect not only the quality of education, but also recognize students' views and attitudes towards their study. The study summarizes selected findings and framework recommendations and suggestions for implementation of measures in selected areas that could improve the quality of higher education. The text briefly outlines the actual level of subjects of the educational process at the university.

The qualitative and quantitative methodology based on document analysis was used. Based on the analysis of documents (submitted and defended final theses) were identified weaknesses, and gaps related to the quality of the educational process. The study deals in more detail with the analysis of a group of final theses that were focused on the thematic area of university student personality.

The primary source of the analysis were 46 theses from the of Higher Education Pedagogy Course carried out in 2018 - 2019. The works originated under the auspices of Centre of Education and Psychological Counseling at Faculty of Economics and Management (FEM) SUA in Nitra. The authors of the works were university teachers and doctoral students from all faculties of the SUA. As shown in Table 1, the research sample is characterized by the prevalence of women. This fact is not surprising, as feminization generally prevails in education. The largest group of the course participants consisted of teachers and doctoral students from FEM.

Category	N	%
Female	29	63
Male	17	37
All	46	100
Faculty of Agrobiolgy and Food resources	12	26
Faculty of Biotechnology and Food Sciences	1	2
Faculty of Economics and Management	18	39
Faculty of European Studies and Regional Development	4	9
Faculty of Horticulture and Landscape Engineering	10	22
Faculty of Engineering	1	2
All	46	100

Table 1: Structure of the research sample

2.1.1 Final theses

The higher education pedagogy course at the SUA in Nitra traditionally ends with the defense of the final theses created by the participants. Successful graduates of the last cycle of the course in the framework of the final colloquium held on 13. - 14. 2. and 16. 5. 2019 demonstrated the ability to solve selected pedagogical problems in their educational practice. The colloquium raised many issues that require a solution at the SUA and made several remindful suggestions and recommendations for their solution. Examination committee consisted of vice-rector of the university, vice-deans of the particular faculties of the participants and heads of their departments together with the lecturers involved in the course.

The topics of final theses within the course are usually offered to participants so as not only to present their level of theoretical knowledge acquisition, but also to prove their ability to use the theoretical basis for solving practical questions / problems, associated with the teaching process. Based on this predicate, the defended theses could, among others, be thematically classified into units focused on: - Dynamics of motivation factors and adaptation factors of students after their arrival at university. - The level of competences of students coming to university. - Relation between effectiveness and innovations in higher education. - Quality of education at university. - Lifestyles of university students and others.

On the other hand, in terms of the components of the higher education system, the analyzed works can be categorized according to their content as follows: 1. Key and professional competences; 2. Specific objectives of education; 6. Means and tools of instruction (Content of instruction, Methods of instruction, Forms of instruction, Material tools of instruction). However, the division into thematic areas according to the components of the system of higher education did not cover all thematic areas of the processed works. There were also identified other topics that can be all included into the area of higher education management (Šeben Začková, 2019).

Specifically 10 theses were selected for document analysis. The issues concerning the subjects of the higher education teaching process were explicitly expressed in the selected works.

Thematic area: Student Personality

- *Learning styles in higher education (2x)*
- *Preferred learning styles of the selected students at Faculty of Horticulture and Landscape Engineering*
- Work with students with special needs in higher education
- *Factors influencing the students' motivation to study of the selected course*
- *Students adaptation to higher education*
- Cheating and plagiarism of students at SUA as an ethical problem (2x)
- Students' attitudes to products of organic plant production
- Influence of pedagogical communication on value orientation of university student

Table 2: List of theses identified within the thematic area - Student Personality.

3 Results and Discussion

Teachers' activities are teaching, that is a guided process of cognitive and practical activities of students, managing the formation of their attitudes to life, the world, etc. On the other side, the activity of the students is learning, that is a process in which they acquire knowledge, skills and habits, develop their abilities, shape their attitudes, relationship to the world, life, themselves, people, etc. A university student is the center of the educational process and it is therefore important to pay sufficient attention to them.

There exist different typologies of students based on various classification criteria. Classifications can relate e.g. to the criterion of degree of students' motivation to study, to personality characteristics, to preferred learning styles, or to the form of study, etc.

Our aim is not to provide a comprehensive classification of students, but in this context to point out that a university teacher works with heterogeneous groups of students and that makes their educational work more difficult. If the improvement of the educational process is also in the interest of the university teachers themselves, it is essential that they pay attention to their own development in the area of pedagogical-psychological education. The teacher is one of the most important factors influencing the development of the student's personality (Siroťová, 2012).

The above mentioned requirements are also recognized by the university teachers themselves, as several theses originated as the result of higher education pedagogy course focused on topics concerned with student personality characteristics such as students' approach to study, learning styles, student motivation, adaptation process to higher education, ethical aspects of students' personality connected with academic dishonesty, value orientation of students and attitudes of students to selected products.

The results of the final thesis analysis can be briefly summarized as follows:

a) When examining the factors influencing the adaptation process of students to higher education, it can be concluded following: The degree of 1st year students' information about SUA prior to their enrollment depends on the type of attended secondary school (secondary vocational school or gymnázium). Most respondents chose the university and the field of their study by their own choice. They did not consider the influence of parents or peers the most crucial. The adaptation process was assessed by the majority of students as good; there is no statistically significant relationship between adaptation and the type of secondary school they attended. Most of the students who work part-time during their studies reported that they do not feel any negative impact of their jobs on their studies. On the issue of study funding, a statistically significant relationship between the type of family (complete / incomplete) and the way of funding the study was confirmed. In coping with the new changed conditions of higher education provide students with the greatest support and assistance

their parents and friends. If students had the opportunity, 73% of students would again choose to study at their current faculty. Most students (56%) reported that they succeed the study at university as well as at their secondary school.

b) The way in which students learn, their learning strategies, learning approaches and learning styles may also have an impact on their study. The results confirm that a surface learning prevails among the students. According to VARK classification of learning styles (visual / aural(auditory) / read-write / kinesthetic) was identified the fact that among students predominate bimodal, trimodal or multimodal learning styles; it has not been confirmed that learning style affects the study results. There was also no relation between learning styles and faculty, field of study or degree of study. The most dominant learning styles among the research sample were auditory and kinesthetic.

c) In terms of ethical aspects of the study, the results indicate weaknesses, but also potential, both on the part of students and teachers. The results in this area may also be associated with the findings that surface learning prevails among students, which may also result in occasional unethical manifestations of student behavior.

The majority of students admitted that they have already committed cheating or plagiarism (69% students from Faculty of Economics and Management, 61% from Faculty of Agrobiology and Food resources). Unethical behavior is committed more by men than women. The most common unethical behavior is copying, 40% of students used a cheat sheet and a quarter of students was copying from classmates. Electronic cheating (using various electronic display units) is reported by only 5% of respondents, and the same percentage uses other, less widespread cheating methods. Most students reported that they only elaborate cheat sheets when they are unable to remember the definitions and classifications, and the cheat sheet is only a small note. 53% respondents stated that they elaborate cheat sheets only for the content what they think is not necessary for the future. In most cases, students do not associate using cheat sheets with specific teachers, even the majority say that they have good relationships with the teachers they cheat on. Students feel ashamed when revealed, but this motivates them not to be caught while cheating at the next opportunity. Students do not consider reprimanding in front of the rest of the group as a sufficient punishment. They would rather recommend for cheaters to elaborate extra assignment or seminar work or attend consultations on selected topics. Handwriting predominated in elaborating the cheating sheets. Writing own cheat sheets on exams prevails at the bachelor study level, whispering and group collaboration prevails at the masters' study level.

Plagiarism is the least widespread form of academic dishonesty. Men among the most common forms of plagiarism do not mention the source. The most common form of plagiarism for women is obtaining material and handing it as their own, or just using some part of the paper of another author. The motivation factors for cheating are mainly time pressure, followed by simplifying their studies, achieving better results, pressure from the family, feeling incompetent, lack of rules.

d) The survey on students' motivation showed that the organization of seminars and the personality of the teacher are highly motivating. Students are most motivated to study by a good relationship between student and teacher and the overall atmosphere during the course. They consider the usefulness of the course for their future profession to be an important factor, but the assessment of the particular course in which this survey was conducted was considered to be of little use. The factors that are the most demotivating for students are: the elaboration of seminar papers and their presentation; the number of students over 30 in the seminar groups, and competing with classmates. It was confirmed that there is a relation between final grade and the students' satisfaction with: the quality and availability of study literature, the organization of the exam, the rules of assessment, the extent of the course, the difficulty of the course, the personality of the lecturer and objectiveness of the overall evaluation. In the future, it is desirable to use this knowledge to make teaching more efficient and thus to improve students' performance, which can improve their overall results.

e) Students with special educational needs look at the university courses and their teachers differentially according to the study demands and requirements. Students decide accordingly when to notify the teacher and whether to reveal their disability at all. In many cases, students are afraid to speak openly about their specific need. In this area, the work of a coordinator for students with specific needs in higher education is important. Coordinators' role is important not only in work with students but also in work with particular teachers. It is important to widely inform students about the role of coordinator and their functions. University teachers are not systematically prepared to work with such students; lecturers would need methodological guides and support; some teachers even have shortcomings in the basics of providing first aid.

f) In the area of students' attitudes and relation towards selected products and the possibilities of influencing them, can be summarized the findings resulting from the implementation of specific practical projects in higher education. The attitudes of students are largely influenced by the media. For example, in relation to

organic crop products, most students do not understand the nature of this production, and a third of all students buy eco or bio food primarily under the influence of the media. 60% of students stated that the prize even does not discourage them from buying these foods. Also in this context, it is important to influence students' attitudes, opinions through deepening their knowledge in the particular higher education courses, to make adjustments to the course syllabus in accordance with the current requirements, but also on the basis of ongoing surveys among students. A suitable means is also to use activating methods specifically the project teaching in higher education because it affects the student's personality comprehensively. For example, the results of a questionnaire survey among students after completing an activating semester project in a selected higher education course point to the potential to increase students' interest in the practical implementation of such projects. The result of the project implementation besides the knowledge development was also in deepening the respect to plants, the deepening of the relation to the studied field, and the willingness of students to invest their own financial and material resources into the project they perceive as meaningful and interesting. Under the active work on the project, students have also proactively demonstrated their enthusiasm for plant care, interest in continual gardening. Students expressed the project's value in gaining their new skill to navigate and guide people around them on cultivation and plant care issues, that will be a main job description of their future professional life. They also showed the pride on being able to making the more attractive interior, where the plants were grown (boarding rooms). Students were also able to pass on their enthusiasm to other visitors to these areas. This project was evaluated by 92% of students as interesting, original and beneficial for their further study and practice in the field. Students as the most important benefits stated: I learned to grow indoor plants (58%), I got a closer relationship to plants (67%), I deepened my relationship to the study field (50%), I influenced my neighborhood by my attitude to plants (33%). According to the mentioned, it can be concluded that the more interesting and activating the project is for the student, the more aspects of their personality are engaged and developed.

3.1 Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the analysis of the theses, we summarize the following recommendations:

It is important to pay regular attention to the students' problems during their studies and to solve them. Study counsellors play an important role in addressing study problems, but their function is in reality often only formal. It is essential to develop personal relationships, informal communication with students, and an open, empathetic approach to them. It is also important to increase the mental health care of students e.g. through more flexible forms of education (distance learning, part-time study, individual study plan, etc.), creation of rest zones in the interiors and exteriors of university, greater promotion by faculty and university management about the existence of a psychological counseling center operating at the university, developing study manuals, offering the university course - Introduction to study, etc.

Already in the recruitment process of secondary school students, it is important to inform them about the real requirements and demands of future studies, so that students do not have an inaccurate vision of the system of higher education. Among various marketing tools suitable for study promotion, it is appropriate to continue in activities (as is currently the case) such as Doors Open Days, both present form and online; faculty presentations at secondary schools and educational fairs.

Important recommendation for getting to know better the students is to diagnose students' learning styles and, based on this knowledge, to change teaching methods in the lessons. Knowing the students can help their natural development through optimal methods. Adapting to learning styles and adapting to the needs of students can increase students' interest in studying the course and, last but not least, increase the attractiveness of the study overall. Teachers should be informed about the different types of learning styles; we propose that the issue of learning styles be included more often in further education courses intended for university teachers. On the other hand, it is advisable to provide students with information about the possibility of diagnosing their own learning style and about the importance of this diagnosis; to explain them the optimal learning techniques connected to particular learning styles (for example within the course Introduction to Study); to provide students with self-diagnostic questionnaires and thus making the learning process and one's own adaptation to study more effective.

As it was proved the prevalence of multimodal learning styles among students, it is needed to use different teaching methods. This increases the chance of attracting a large audience. It is important to encourage students to change the surface approach to an in-depth approach to learning. To deepen students' interest in studying, it is advisable to help students in the bachelor study level understand the importance of general courses, emphasize the application of the learning content in their practice, discuss with students on professional topics

and support them in independent thinking. The teacher should lead the teaching process so that all students understand the issues explained; the emphasis should be on the student's opinions, individual work and especially on understanding the links between the particular courses and their use in practice. Last but not least, to learn what preferences of learning styles students have can encourage teachers to self-reflect, to assess their own teaching methods.

The above recommendations are also related to the statement that the teacher must be able to motivate the learner to look forward to their teaching. It is important to stimulate students so they can see the sense of the study and its contribution to their own formation in the professional field. Teacher therefore should not stereotypically stagnate and teach each semester without variation. Nowadays, when the position of teacher in society has changed a lot, it is appropriate to work even more on the teacher - student relationships. It is important to motivate students appropriately and keep their initial enthusiasm throughout the whole semester or study, to keep their attention throughout the whole lecture or seminar.

If the student is motivated and uses a deep approach to study this can also lead to elimination of academic dishonesty. Numerous sources indicate that cheating on college campuses is an issue of some significance. Additionally, there is some concern that rates of cheating may not be static, that cheating behaviors may be on the rise. Overcoming this negative phenomenon in the higher education it is needed that teachers apply a unified approach to addressing the unethical behavior of students. Teachers have to strictly adhere to the Directive on Ethics of Publishing and Plagiarism and the Study Regulations valid at the SUA. Teachers should take precautionary measures - to establish and follow the rules at the beginning of their course and to build a relationship with the student based on natural respect and authority. From the didactic point of view, it is necessary to pay particular attention to the content required for the exams, to concentrate on the comprehensibility of the content, to constantly motivate students to study and to develop their awareness. In this area, we would like to draw attention to the consistent observance of the basic pedagogical principles of morality and tolerance and awareness and activity in education.

In the context of all the above conclusions and recommendations, the need for higher education pedagogy courses continues to be essential and, in particular, the introduction of further update and innovation of education, which is currently left to self-study only. As we have outlined at the beginning of the paper, pedagogical and psychological education of university teachers is not a prerequisite in Slovakia and therefore the real quality of the teaching process at universities is also questionable.

4 Conclusion

Indirectly, through this study it was possible to identify potential weaknesses / deficiencies in the quality of the teaching process at SUA. The text contained not only the reflection of the students through the final theses, but also reflection of the teachers' work. In addition to suggested recommendations for the future, several issues were identified that require more attention to paid not only at the level of Centre of Education and Psychological Counselling as it is a specialized department at the SUA in Nitra that can influence the pedagogical knowledge and teacher competences of young teachers through the Higher education pedagogy courses. But on the other hand there is a need to pay more attention to solve the following questions also by the university management (or management of faculties):

How is the adaptation of students to higher education monitored? How is the level of motivation measured during the study? What is the real readiness of university teachers to work with the diverse needs of students? How is the implementation of innovative forms and methods of education monitored with regard to the comprehensive development of the student's personality? Do teachers have sufficient knowledge of pedagogy and psychology and sufficient skills to apply that knowledge? What are the educational needs of university teachers in the field of pedagogy and psychology? What are the needs and requirements of students? What are the students' opinions, what are their attitudes to study, to the field of their study? What is the real relationship of students to their alma mater?

Successful graduates of the course have demonstrated the ability to solve selected pedagogical problems in their educational practice and they have raised many questions that require a solution not only in the conditions of SUA. As outcomes of the final theses were originated also many inspiring suggestions and recommendations. The participants of the course as well as the conceived topics of final theses ultimately point out the need for pedagogical respectively branch - didactical components in the preparation and training of higher education teachers and the need to develop their pedagogical competence. The final theses have a common denominator, which is to pedagogize the higher education.

In our opinion, this text is an incentive for further study of the raised issues and especially for the improvement of the quality of the higher education environment. The analysis of selected final theses provided a brief overview of some areas of higher education in the conditions of the SUA in Nitra, obviously in terms of the limited scope of the study, it is only a very narrow view. Our predominantly positive experience with the courses at SUA in Nitra support the belief that this type of education has in addition to long tradition at the university also practical reasons for which higher education pedagogy in Slovakia should be developed more intensively. As the title of the paper indicates, the author tried to look at the final theses as reflections and indicators of quality of the subject of education in the specific context / conditions of one university.

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