



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia social briefing:
Education Challenges in the Time of Pandemic
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Education Challenges in the Time of Pandemic

Already several months have passed since the outbreak of COVID-19. In Slovakia, the prevention measures were fortunately taken in the early stages of the pandemic. Meanwhile, almost 800 people have been cured (as of May 5), several kinds of stores and services re-opened, face masks have become a part of everyone's wardrobe and a fashion item. The life is, however, still far from being back in normal. The pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges impacting all areas of human existence not only in Slovakia, but on the global level. Economies, businesses, self-employed people, health care systems, and most importantly people themselves, they all are suffering extremely from the virus and its consequences. Most people had to change their daily routines and adapt a sort of virtual mode of operation, trying to keep in touch with others as much as possible.

One of the areas facing this unexpected and brand-new situation is education, which is traditionally conducted in person (unless we consider part-time university studies attended usually by people who are at the same time fully employed). Obviously, all stages of education are impacted, ranging from primary education, through secondary education to higher education and training. Teachers and lecturers need to find solutions to appropriately address the content to be taught, whereby many of them have never used the available online platforms before, and neither have pupils and students. Obviously, full-time university studies often require a certain amount of self-studying even under normal circumstances, but there are study programmes which are based on practical training of skills, such as medicine or engineering programmes.

Since pupils as well as students of secondary schools and universities are currently learning from home, families had to adapt to these circumstances. A complicated situation can emerge in lower-income families, that may not have the means necessary to acquire, for instance, a laptop for their children to enable them to complete all their school assignments in the home environment. Moreover, parents frequently need to manage their time in very detail in case they are working from home. Indeed, a combination of a full-time job, children of school age and taking care of the household must be almost a mission impossible.

Perhaps the most complicated thing is to facilitate smooth learning of the pupils at elementary schools, mainly of the first grades (children aged 6/7 - 9/10 years). The Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic (hereinafter "Ministry of Education") has specified two categories of distance learning areas, namely a) main learning

areas (Language and communication; Mathematics and information handling; People and society; People and nature), and b) complementary learning areas (People and values; People and the world of work; Arts and culture; Health and physical education). The content of the complementary learning areas may be incorporated into the main learning areas or used as additional activities. Besides, elementary schools tend to offer a variety of elective classes, too. Some of them are designated to deepen the knowledge related to the principal learning units (e.g. extra Maths classes); other may cover topics which are otherwise not reflected in the main courses. Elective classes do not need to be included into the distance learning activities, or it depends on their character. For instance, in case of a second foreign language, this can be inserted into the distance learning process provided the school decides to do so.

It does not need to be reminded that even though teachers are doing their best, focusing on certain learning areas and their selected aspects may result in difficulties or failures to comprehend the learning stuff planned for the next school year, as certain topics may overlap or relate to each other (even though these should be focused on during the distance learning), or to understand broader contexts. Moreover, staying at home and not being in direct contact with one's classmates may, in our opinion, lead to psychological distress. It can also influence communication and social skills of the pupils in a negative way. Last but not least, physical education is disregarded, it is now up to the parents to ensure their children are having enough exercise at home. Generally, not taking the importance of exercise and balanced diet into account can cause children's obesity and bad eating habits, which can be even intensified by the current situation, as physical education classes are often the only exercise children have. The above stated equally applies to secondary school students who are still developing their personalities, with the institutional factor and the presence of their peers playing a significant role.

The pandemic has been influencing not only the educational process as such, but also the ways how evaluation, school leaving exams and state exams are carried out. Pupils finalising their elementary learning (9th grade) are normally required to write a final test from Slovak and Mathematics, the results of which are often considered when applying for secondary schools. This whole-Slovakia knowledge testing has been cancelled this year, hence admission requirements for secondary schools need to be modified. At the time of elaboration of this text, principals of secondary schools are publishing information relating to numbers of first grade students to be accepted or study requirements. The original deadline was April 28.

Leaving exams from secondary schools, which traditionally consist of a written and an oral part, have also been cancelled due to the pandemic. Similarly, some universities take the

applicants' results of the so called "*maturita*" leaving exam into consideration. Instead of the usual leaving exam, an average from the previous certificates will be calculated. We can expect, also universities will have to amend their usual ways of accepting first-grade students.

As far as state exams at universities are concerned, these have not been cancelled so far, what has resulted in dissatisfaction of the future graduates. They have published a petition, arguing it is not right and fair to cancel leaving exams of secondary schools' students and not do the same for university students. In the petition it is stated, that although the semester and the deadline for final thesis submissions have been extended, libraries have remained closed, which significantly complicates research linked to the process of final thesis elaboration. Moreover, it should not be expected that every university student has the appropriate conditions for an online thesis defence and online state examination. At the time of writing this briefing, more than 10,500 individuals have signed the document.

Recently, information emerged in the Slovak media concerning a possibility to prolong the ongoing school year with the aim to catch up the learning stuff. What would that mean for pupils in the praxis? Learning instead of the summer break. For elementary schools and secondary schools, the school year normally begins in September and ends in June; July and August are the months of summer vacation. According to the Prime Minister Igor Matovič, one more month of learning would be in favour of the children. However, the final decision will be made by experts and not politicians (source: Hospodárske noviny online with reference to a TV discussion of the Slovak Radio and Television).

In Slovakia as a country where mastering a foreign language is a must, many languages schools or private language teachers operate. Apart from regular compulsory education, many of them have as well switched to online courses in order to survive the crisis.

Quality education is essential for a prosperous, democratic society, with individuals possessing critical thinking skills, open-mindedness and respecting cultural values and diversity. On the other hand, despite the pandemic being overall a negative phenomenon, there is a chance that temporary switching to online learning will help develop and/or improve digital skills of both the pupils and the teachers, what will be tested soon within the 9th year of the IT Fitness Test. According to the information available on the website of the Ministry of Education, there have already been long-lasting attempts to modernise the education process and the content taught. Now may be the right time to do so.

There is no doubt that ramifications of the corona virus will be global and that all areas of human existence will be affected. We believe, education is one of those spheres that cannot be left unattended either in these difficult and challenging times.