



Weekly Briefing

**Slovakia social briefing:
Academic writing and ethics
Kristina Baculáková**



Academic writing and ethics

After the outburst of civic activism due to several impactful events in 2018 including the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée January 2019 has brought another reason for dissatisfaction. The turn of January and February was marked by public discussion on unethical practices in academic writing.

Slovak Parliamentary Chairman Andrej Danko faced appeal for plagiarism of his doctoral thesis already in November 2018. And though he defended his position, the debate on unethical practices in academic writing and university education is now culminating in the society. The story behind the situations seems simple.

In October 2018, Andrej Danko was accused by the opposition parties of plagiarism of his rigorous thesis (rigorous procedure is the acquisition of complementary education in some fields, where it is required for practice, such as law. It is not the equivalent of PhD study). The opposition demanded his withdrawal. The whole situation dramatized even more when Danko suspended the public access of his thesis. Not only the opposition, but the society, students and universities started to invoke Danko to make the text of his thesis public. The tension resolved in the establishment of a special committee at Matej Bel University to review and take opinion on the thesis. Danko tagged the case as ad hominem on his personality and after the long – term graduating political pressure, he decided to make the thesis again accessible for the public.

In November, the committee published an evaluation report and made the final statement. The thesis was very similar to another student's text. According to the chairman of the committee, the both theses were processed and defended in accordance with applicable regulations. The evaluation report as well as the statement did not use the term plagiarism and the parliamentary Chairman considered the report to be the proof of his correct acquisition of the academic title Doctor of Law (*Juris Doctor is a result of the rigorous procedure, which is one-year follow-up study after completing master studies in some fields. This academic degree is required for example in legal practice. It is not the PhD study as known internationally*). But the actual meaning of the evaluation is somehow different. In the case of both doctoral papers, the extent of the use of resources exceeded the scope justified by the purpose of the quotation. The committee stated that both authors took over the entire paragraphs or even chapters without using the correct quote or paraphrasing it. *“Both papers did not only use a short part of the*

source in the form of quotation, and these are not made correctly “noted the committee. Up to 63 pages of the thesis were written in this way.

The report did not use the term plagiarism or compilation simply because the Slovak legal system does not know these terms. The Academic Senate of Matej Bel University has received the final report of the committee and evaluated the misconduct of individuals, which cannot be considered as common practice in higher education in Slovak Republic. The reaction of Slovak universities did not come very long after the scandal.

Last days, some of the most considerable universities started to express their opinion on the situation. First announcement was made by the management of the Faculty of Philosophy of Comenius University in Bratislava. The Faculty stated that Danko had taken over most of the text from another author. It does not also matter, whether it is called plagiarism or compilation, it is the violation of elementary ethical principles in academia. And by doing so, Danko harmed the status of all university teachers and researchers. The University also strictly refused any intentions to interfere with the political situation in Slovakia. Comenius University was not the only one to publicly convict the unethical writing practices at universities. It was joined by the University of Pavol Jozef Šafárik in Košice, Trnava University and the University of Economics in Bratislava.

The message of the universities for the society is clear. Final theses represent acquired knowledge, skills and competences of the students, the ultimate finalization of their university studies. Therefore, any downsizing of this process, in addition by the important political figure, is unacceptable in the developed democratic society. Slovak Academy of Sciences supported the attitude of the universities. It does not matter, whether there are different rules of quotation at the time when the thesis was written, or if there was no software for originality check, plagiarism is always a fraud.

Surprisingly, the Minister of Education, Lubyová, questioned the committee’s work. She considers the disclosure of information during the investigation to be the proof of unreliability of the special committee.

Danko’s thesis scandal opened the discussion about the need for adoption of a new bill, which would penalize an unauthorised acquisition of the academic titles. The bill is inspired by the Czech legislation and will allow taking of the titles. This is, however, a highly debatable step, since the reason for doing this must be either the violation of law or the thesis must be written by somebody else. According to Lubyová, only those should be afraid, who are convicted of an offence or copyright infringement. However, a number of questions arise from

the bill – first, what is the period, to which the theses will be re-evaluated? Second, what process steps will be taken, if there is only a suspicion on the copyright infringement? Third, what will be the reason for even starting the process of re-evaluation? The withdrawal of the academic degrees will be eligible only by the institution, which has granted them. The withdrawal of the degree essentially eliminates also the university education of the affected person.

The political scandal of Danko's doctoral thesis points to a more serious academic problem. The education system in Slovakia is only slowly adopting to the innovation processes. Some of the key reforms were already adopted (as the Bologna process in the past). However, some of the practices from the past still persist today and clash with the endeavour to change. Let us go back to the time before the Bologna process was adopted. Practically, bachelor study as well as ECTS credit system did not exist. There was something called a complete university education. This lasted up to four, five or six years depending on the study field. Students were obliged to finish their studies with the final thesis and state exam. Obviously, the student wrote only one thesis when studying to become a master. Continuing to doctoral studies, of course, meant working on and defending doctoral thesis. Introduction of bachelor study meant that students should write two final theses during the five-year studies at the university. Therefore, the time spent on writing and the depth of each of these theses – bachelor and master – started to decline. Although nowadays all thesis undergoes the originality software check, the real research quality is somehow missing.

The need to financially secure their study, the desire to work and gain experience that is currently required after the end of studies, that all create great pressure on students. Theses are often written at last minute just to be able to pass through defense. Students do not have time to do the research, and the extent of bachelor thesis does not even really allow it. It is said that by writing the bachelor thesis, students are better prepared to work on the master thesis. Is it really so?

A common practice that most students still count on is that each and every one will defend their final work. But it seems that political case with one single thesis will affect the future of many other, not only those that arise, but also those that have been already written.

It is not a secret anymore that in recent times business with the theses is blooming. Number of companies that provide writing of so-called *study materials* is rising. Their business is legally treated by signing a contract with the customer. The customer commits himself not to publish the material and only use it for his personal needs. From the committee's point of view, it is virtually impossible to determine whether a student has written the work himself. The

supervisor of the work may be suspicious, especially if the work does not correspond to the activity of the student during the academic year, but if the thesis contains all the prescribed requirements, he has essentially no competence. A new law should also sanction such proceedings.

The question of academic ethics is not just a matter of adapting to new social and economic conditions and trends, but it is first of all about changing of attitude of society. Higher education has become synonymous of better employment, better earnings, better life. Therefore, the interest in higher university education is growing. The number of bachelors who do not continue to be educated also grows. Although they should be prepared for job, they often represent unwanted employees – they lack certificate of apprenticeship and practical experience and often have studied sciences where it is difficult to find a job.

Writing of the final thesis became a compulsory part of the university studies which only needs to be done. However, the current debate opens the 13th chamber and can mean a lasting shift in thinking and understanding the meaning of academic work in the society. Because university education is the basis of the development of every progressive democratic society in the world.