



Students say that higher education institutions coped with the pandemic, but graduates do not feel ready for the real life.

Bratislava, 29 June 2021 – **Almost 20,000 students** took part in the “**Academic Quarter of an Hour**”, a survey by the **Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (SAAHE)** run for the first time. This anonymous survey, so far the largest survey about how students in Slovakia perceive the quality of higher education institutions, is planned to be repeated every year. The agency will further monitor how do higher education institutions improve based on the student feedback and this will be taken into account in their accreditation procedure.

Key findings:

- As much as 70% of students say they study in their study field because it interests them and 82% would recommend their study programme to their friends. Thus, the data did not confirm a commonly held perception that students study merely to obtain a degree.
 - These days, thousands of graduates finish their higher education, yet their schools assisted only a fraction of them in transition to the job market. As many as 39% of graduates feel they are not ready for life after their higher education studies.
 - Many graduates had no traineeship (including the period before the pandemic) – as many as 49% of graduates in the Bachelor study and 29% of graduates in the Master study. Among students who had a traineeship, 36% perceived its duration as insufficient.
 - Students develop their transferable skills only to a limited extent, although these are vital for employers across all industries. For example, professional communication in English or other world language is one of the most demanded skills, however, higher education institutions (HEIs) pay little attention to it.
 - HEIs successfully tackled managing education during the pandemic. However, they should concentrate their efforts to cope with its negative impacts – many students have not acquired knowledge comparable to the in-class learning (39%), and 71% of students had only a limited share of traineeships and practice lessons supplemented and due to isolation, they could not develop relations important both for their personal life and career.
 - These are just the initial findings at the national level published by SAAHE less than a month after the data collection was completed. The agency is now further processing data and will present its results to higher education institutions and the public in autumn.
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“We have good news for Slovakia: young people care about the quality of their education. There were 20 thousand higher education students taking part in the survey, accounting nearly for 16% of all students in Slovakia. I think this is by far the largest survey of this kind in Slovakia. At the



same time, it sends a clear signal that the quality of education matters to young people”, explains Robert Redhammer, the Chairman of the Executive Board at SAAHE.

“In a systemic way, the survey collected student opinions across higher education institutions in Slovakia. Today, one month after the data collection was completed, we only present selected findings at the national level. Following further data processing, we will provide detailed information to each higher education institution. Later, during the accreditation procedure, we will ask the schools how they made use of such information, if they improved their strengths or eliminated their weaknesses”, adds Redhammer. “Without really knowing the current situation, it is impossible to effectively improve. Knowing the students’ opinion is the first step in improving the quality of education”, concludes Redhammer.

Higher education institutions coped well with managing education during the pandemic, however, distance learning also had detrimental effects on students.

The organisation of studies during the pandemic was evaluated rather positively by 79% of students.

“We were curious, whether students had timely information about changes related to instruction, if they had access to study materials and if schools gradually learned to cope with the pandemic challenges and improved their approach. We can say that schools coped well with managing education during the pandemic, yet survey responses point out several shortcomings”, says Bálint Lovász, the member of the Executive Board at the agency and one of the survey initiators.

“One of the main problems is that as much as 40% of students perceive that during the pandemic, they have not acquired knowledge comparable to the in-class learning. This could be due to a lack of direct contact with teachers who mainly sent out study materials and assignments as 38% of students claimed,” adds Lovász.

The pandemic also had a negative impact on interpersonal relations and their development, thus affecting future perspectives of students. As many as a third of respondents do not feel they are part of the community of students and teachers at their HEIs and only 56% of them spent time with their classmates outside classes.

“Insufficient involvement of students in the school life adversely impacts their personal lives and careers, because students establish less contacts beneficial for their careers, and may lack interpersonal skills and new personal relations”, explains Peter Maňo, an analyst at SAAHE.

Mainly part-time students are in favour of maintaining elements of distance learning.

Slightly more than half of the respondents (57%) want their study programme to keep using distance learning elements introduced during the pandemic. This idea is significantly more attractive to part-time students (71%) than full-time students (55%).

“The reason might be that distance learning eliminated the practice of part-time studies with learning sessions concentrated to weekends. So, the part-time students could better distribute their study workload. Also, they saved time intended for travelling to school for learning sessions,” explains Maño.

Notably, unlike full-time students, part-time students were more likely to claim they acquired knowledge comparable to in-class learning.

Students in Bachelor studies not tempted to join the labour market; they often lack traineeships

Only 50% of graduates from the Bachelor studies had a traineeship. Graduates from the Master studies are slightly better off, with 71% having had a traineeship. To participate in a traineeship is one of the basic requirements set by employers as indicated by [data of the Profesia.sk portal](#) for more than 10 years.

“One of the difficulties Slovakia faces is that only a small share of graduates from Bachelor studies move to the job market. We have lagged behind the world in this aspect for a long time. As a result, our graduates are to some extent overqualified compared to their peers abroad, and the education system is using its resources less efficiently,” explains Renáta Hall, a coordinator of the analytical team at SAAHE.

“It might be because only half of the students in Bachelor studies participated in a traineeship. Some respondents are afraid that they will not find a job with only a bachelor’s degree. In certain professions (e.g., teachers), a bachelor’s degree is insufficient to get a job position. In the central government and public administration, having such a degree limits one’s career progression. Respondents often stated that they continued at the Master level to have a better job, which can mean both a higher wage or higher job position (Figure 8). To increase the share of graduates with bachelor’s degrees on the labour market would require adopting structural changes by both schools and employers,” adds Hall.

Room for improvement in arranging traineeships.

In addition to many students having no traineeship at all, among students who participated in it, 36% perceived its duration was insufficient (Figure 3). Schools could also improve in arranging traineeships. Only 39% of respondents stated schools arranged their traineeship, and 59% said their school professionally prepared them for the traineeship prior to its start (Figure 4).



“Nearly a third of students did not test their skills during a traineeship, and this could be caused by the fact that they search for a traineeship with no assistance from their school. The good news is that before the start of traineeship, as many as 74% of students had sufficient information about its course and organisation, and 83% experienced a quality leadership on the place of traineeship”, says Matej Bilik, an analyst at SAAHE.

Students at private schools work a lot during their studies. They feel better prepared for life after studies.

Students at private HEIs feel better prepared for life and jobs in the future (Figure 9). This could be attributed to the fact that their full-time students work 30 hours per week on average, and more than half of them work in nearly full-time job positions while being in full-time studies. Compared to private HEIs, the average hours worked per week at the state HEIs (10 hours) and public HEIs (11 hours) is almost three times less, and some 7% of their full-time students work in nearly full-time jobs.

At the same time, private schools are more likely to assist their students with writing a CV and preparing for job interviews, and more of their students are satisfied with the duration of traineeships. According to students, teachers at private schools reflect more on what is required in practice and more often engage professionals from the practice as mentors for final theses.

“Feeling as not prepared for life after studies was perceived by 41% of students at public HEIs and 37% at state HEIs, yet only 15% at private HEIs. The reason that private school students felt better prepared for the labour market might be that education at these schools better reflects what is required in the practice and that private school students work more intensely during their studies”, explains Hall.

Only a portion of students advance their foreign language skills and transferable skills.

Command of foreign languages is key requirement employers have on HEI graduates, as confirmed by the analysis of the Profesia.sk portal stating that the most frequent requirement is the command of the English language. In this context, it is alarming that more than half of SAAHE survey respondents (52%) stated they do not learn to communicate in English or another world language in their field of study, and a third of respondents (33%) develop their language skills only in a few courses (Figure 6).

Employers also often require job applicants to have transferable skills, such as teamwork, presentation skills, critical thinking, ability to solve problems or discuss. However, these skills are rather being developed in social sciences and humanities (Figure 7).

“Most of these skills are perceived as a domain of social sciences. On the other hand, the ability to understand numeric data, tables and charts is almost exclusively associated with fields of study based on mathematics. Students’ responses confirm this view. However, all these skills are vital



across all industries. Even artists may need to prepare a budget for their projects, doctors should know how to communicate a serious diagnosis to a person and engineers should be able to work in a team”, explains Bílik.

As much as 70% of students study their study field because it interests them. Only a fifth of students studies just to earn a degree.

The anonymous survey by SAAHE did not confirm a commonly held perception that young people study mainly to earn a degree.

As much as 70% of first-year students in Bachelor studies were enrolled because they were interested in that study programme. An interest in a particular study programme was also the main reason why students continued their studies at the Master level (68% of first-year students at Master level and 70% of graduates at Bachelor level).

“For only a fifth of students, one of the reasons for enrolling at an HEI was to earn a degree, and there is no difference between various types of schools nor forms of study. Data is in contrast with a commonly held perception that young people enrol in private HEIs or in part-time studies mainly to earn a degree”, says Hall.

A very strong indicator is that as many as 82% of students would recommend their study programme to their friends. *“It shows that students have a positive relation to their field of study. This is a signal for higher education institutions that there is a basis to build on”, adds Hall.*

Many full-time students work during their studies.

As many as 59% of full-time students perform a paid work during the semester, and 20% even work for more than 20 hours per week, exceeding the limit set on student jobs.

“To some extent, the good news is that students working for more than 30 hours per week during their studies are slightly more likely to work in their field of study and can better develop professionally. However, the majority of students work outside their field of study. Such work can also be beneficial if students develop their general working habits and skills. At the same time, too much work of any kind during full-time studies can endanger the quality of learning, because students have little time for studying left”, warns Bílik.

Detailed data will first be provided to schools. The Accreditation Agency will explore what measures schools adopt based on the feedback received.

So far, SAAHE presented initial findings at the national level. Currently, detailed data for particular HEIs, faculties and fields of study is being processed by the agency. In autumn, it will first present its results to HEIs and then to the public.



Data collection ran between 30 April and 31 May 2021. There were 20,056 questionnaires completed, with 19,983 valid responses. The survey covered students in both Bachelor and Master levels, full-time and part-time studies. The sample sufficiently reflects all fields of study at the national level.

The questionnaire was available in four languages (Slovak, English, Hungarian, Ukrainian) and in a version accessible for students with a visual disability. More than 1,000 students with special needs participated in the survey, along with more than 1,400 students with other than Slovak citizenship and international students.

“Many people were involved in disseminating information about the survey – student societies, HEI teachers, managements at HEIs and faculties, and I would like to thank all of them on behalf of the agency. Without their assistance, we would not be able to collect so many responses”, closes Robert Redhammer.

About SAAHE

The Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (SAAHE) is an independent public body assessing the quality of education and effectiveness of its provision by higher education institutions. It awards accreditations for providing education to higher education institutions, and it contributes to the development of quality education.

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