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What do PhD students think about the quality of higher education? First results of a nationwide survey.

Doctoral students belong to conscientious students. They are interested in opportunities for improvement in education. Almost all of them can publish the results of their scientific work. However, only a quarter visit foreign partner institutions. However, they would like more attention from their supervisors and better organisation of doctoral education.

The Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (SAAHE) has published a thematic report on initial findings from a survey of the opinions of students and recent graduates of doctoral studies on the quality of education +document+ (saavs.sk).

The survey was conducted online between October and November 2023. All PhD students registered in the Slovak Republic were invited to participate in the survey, 1,525 respondents actively participated. The return rate of questionnaires exceeded 21 %.

The survey aimed to **determine the perception** of the quality of education by PhD students in the Slovak Republic. Following the principles of ensuring quality assurance in Europe, the aim was not only to find out **their opinions on the fulfillment of the learning objectives** but also the **experience of students and graduates with doctoral education**.

The thematic report provides the first results on the perception of the learning quality provision from the students' perspective, it focuses on the evaluation of the responses to closed-ended questions, in some cases also in the secondary grade. After full processing of all responses, we will publish a summary report with further grading and a compilation of the responses to open questions, i.e. with freely formulated answers.

The implementation of the project was carried out by Ing. Jana Stovíčková and her colleagues. The Student Council for Higher Education helped with the preparation of the questionnaire, as well as several PhD students in testing the questionnaire. The survey was supported by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic.

"From my point of view, a positive finding is the high interest of doctoral students to participate in the survey (1,525 which is more than 21 % of all registered students in the Slovak Republic), furthermore the overall positive attitude towards studies (2/3 of students are satisfied) and publishing their own scientific of the students' results towards the completion of their studies," said Robert Redhammer, chair of the Executive Board.

"I consider the negative findings to be the fact that only a quarter of the respondents graduated study abroad and also the high percentage (15 %) of doctoral students declaring very low frequency of professional guidance from the supervisor. This is striking."

We consider it important to demonstrate a link between infrequent expert guidance by supervisors (less than once a month or not at all) and negative perceptions of learning quality

including many aspects of the work. This also guides universities on how they can improve the perceived quality of learning relatively quickly," explains Redhammer.

"We hypothesize that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is also (negatively) reflected in the survey," he adds.

We also gained an insight into doctoral students' expectations of where provision should improve.

The agency will pay increased attention to doctoral studies.

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Key findings and recommendations

From the evaluation of the survey so far, we consider the following to be the most significant findings:

1. A relatively high percentage of PhD students participated in the survey. A total of 1,525 completed questionnaires represents a return rate of more than 21 %.
2. Overall satisfaction with doctoral studies prevails in the responses - up to 70 % of respondents are overall satisfied with the study provided and 13 % are dissatisfied. Approximately one sixth of the respondents expressed a neutral attitude.
3. The survey showed a direct correlation between perceptions of professional leadership of the doctoral student's supervisor and overall satisfaction with the doctoral studies. It showed a direct relationship between the frequency with which students perceived their supervisors they are professionally supervised and the perception of the quality of education from the doctoral student's point of view.
4. Infrequent professional contact between the supervisor and the doctoral student - less frequently than once a month - concerns one in seven respondents, which is a relatively high proportion.
5. Overall satisfaction is lower among students after the dissertation examination. As these are the doctoral students who have been most affected by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, we conclude that this phenomenon may also be related to their isolation from the physical presence of the higher institution or the supervisor.
6. The survey also monitored the fulfilment of the learning objectives in the structure of requirements according to the EHEA Qualifications Framework. The proportion of positive responses was approximately 70 %, which can be interpreted as partial fulfilment of the individual requirements of the Qualifications Framework. Skills acquisition in the area of project management (only 30 %). A significantly more critical perception of the fulfilment of the objectives of respondents who are rarely professionally involved with the supervisor (less often than once a month).
7. We consider it positive that more than 80 % of respondents - recent graduates reported that they had already published some of their research results, mostly in scientific journals indexed in databases (WoS, Scopus). Indirectly, this also means that most training institutes accept the requirements of the qualification framework: the third cycle of higher education is to be based on intensive, and part of the results of the doctoral thesis are to be published.
8. The frequent absence of foreign internships can be perceived negatively: almost three quarters (74 %) of respondents reported that they had not participated in a research placement abroad. This is an alarmingly high percentage. Gaining valuable experience from other renowned centres of excellence with the same or similar focus is an enrichment for the student himself, but also for the sending workplace.
9. In the social field, the fact that the scholarship - for the majority of those who receive it - largely covers their running costs.

10. Respondents were allowed to indicate the areas in which they see a need for improvement. The most frequently indicated need for increased funding for research, training of new PhD students and a change in the organisation of doctoral studies. If the first thesis is deeply rooted in public opinion, others point to the need for better organization and provision of doctoral studies at universities.
11. Respondents who are supervised less than once a month, most often cited the need to improve the supervisor's approach and the organisation of doctoral studies, training of new doctoral students, and improve the scientific level of the department.
12. Doctoral students in the external form of study perceive a stronger need to improve access to foreign literature and databases.

From the above findings, the Agency recommends that universities pay increased attention to attention to

1. systemic provision of trainers' work; already from the initial results of the survey, this area appears to be key to improving education in the third level of higher education;
2. support for international placements of doctoral students, both short-term and medium-term, and
3. support for external doctoral students in accessing foreign professional and scientific literature and databases.

The Agency has consistently paid increased attention to doctoral studies; it will therefore also proceed to a targeted discussion on its improvement.

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