

DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL IN SLOVAKIA: EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract: This paper describes the context of global and development education in Slovakia through the implementation of a curriculum development project (titled 'Capacity-building of human resource for health in Slovakia for international development aid' (CABIS-IDA)), which was developed using innovative teaching and learning strategies. Participants in the training programme reported a high level of learning and provided important feedback on appropriate adult centred teaching methods. The project proved the necessity to include development and global education in formal education within the universities in Slovakia. The content of the programme was piloted and supported participatory teaching methods, which are new to the teaching culture of the country. The outcomes of the project show that the traditional paternalistic teaching philosophy and methods used in Slovak universities create serious obstacles to introducing global education into university teaching. Persisting cultures hamper the development of curricula that could more closely explore current global challenges to development and promote critical innovative thinking among students.

Key words: Development education; capacity building; curriculum development; training programme; teaching and learning philosophies; global education.

This article presents the results of a project titled 'Capacity-building of human resource for health in Slovakia for international development aid' (CABIS-IDA), which ran from 2010 to 2012 at Trnava University in Slovakia. The goal of the project was to create a curriculum for a training programme in development education at university level and pilot it within the project. This was envisioned as a stepping stone for the institutionalisation of a study programme in the future that would be integrated into the mainstream academic system, for example, in the areas of

research and teaching. The process of creating a curriculum was based on existing similar programmes at the Royal Tropical Institute in The Netherlands and Horizont 3000, Austria. The main achievement of the project was the successful pilot of a training programme for teachers that has become a resource for further work on a development education curriculum. Introducing development education topics such as a participative methodological approach into the university curriculum represented an attempt to change deeply rooted role patterns and understanding of learning, and was an important and innovative outcome of the process.

The need for capacity building in development education in Slovakia

The Slovak official development assistance (ODA) programme was established in 2003 with the assistance of the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Bratislava Regional Centre and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). During its short history it faced serious problems connected to a lack of professionalism among the development personnel in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). A lack of basic understanding of ODA principles as defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the misuse of ODA for political purposes, were also key challenges. In the decade 2003-13, very little was done to increase the professionalism of the system either on the side of the MFA as a donor or the Slovak Agency for International Development Cooperation (SAIDC). Very few of the staff making decisions on the distribution of resources, as well as the tracking and monitoring of project implementation, were systematically trained in international development cooperation. At the same time, several dozen non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and private organisations had started to implement development and humanitarian projects several years before the ODA system had been introduced in Slovakia. Their competences were gained mainly through practical experience and some NGOs had their workers and volunteers trained by international organisations (for example the International Red Cross) or by agencies from so-called traditional donor countries. However, with increasing requirements for quality in international

development interventions, more and more NGOs began looking for training opportunities to meet the standards of EU donors.

In 2012, the OECD stated that Slovakia's main problems in meeting international development standards included the lack of a systematic approach such as strategic documents, transparent procedures, a lack of professional management and capacities. The OECD's official recommendations stated that:

“The capacity and capability of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Slovak Agency for International Development Co-operation are central to achieving Slovakia's development objectives. To strengthen these, Slovakia needs to establish and recognise in the Ministry and the Agency a development co-operation career path; attract and retain a cadre of development professionals in the Ministry and the Agency; professionalise its approach to development co-operation; address the Ministry's frequent staff turnover; provide training for all Ministry staff in development issues; and ensure a proper set of career incentives are available” (2012: 3).

At the start of 2013, a Development Advisory Committee (DAC) delegation surveying the ODA system in Slovakia stated that not much has been changed since 2011. It admitted that capacity building of all relevant development actors (government, private sector, academics, NGOs) is an element that is substantially neglected within ODA in Slovakia (OECD, 2012). One of the main challenges of Slovak ODA is the ‘limited expert capacities, [which] would be on the side of MFA, SAIDC agency, or contractors themselves. No strategy exists on how to involve experts and increase their numbers in Slovakia’ (Fialová, 2012: 24).

Policy level of global and development education in Slovakia

In Slovakia, the terminology of global and development education has been changing and is still not settled. ‘Global education’ has been the term used to describe both formal and informal educational programmes focused on a

reflection of globally interconnected issues like inequality, climate change, human rights, and so on. On the other hand, ‘development education’ is understood as the education of development professionals at various levels. Sometimes ‘global development education’ is used to describe mixed approaches in education that have been appearing in theoretical discussion in Slovakia for the last few years. From the outset, activities connected to global and development education in Slovakia were mostly initiated by NGOs which have been drivers for change, not only in implementing global development education activities, but also in the process of policy making in this area. The Slovak NGDO Platform is frequently requested by the MFA to provide assistance such as background analytical papers. When the MFA and the Ministry of Education prepare documents related to global and development education, the Slovak NGDO Platform is usually involved in the process by commenting on and collecting feedback from grassroots institutions such as NGOs and schools.

The importance of global and development education was underlined by the MFA in the Mid-Term Strategies and the National Programmes of Slovak ODA which identified development education as one of its main aims. The aims from the Slovak national strategy’s annual Action Plan for Global Education (2012-2016), proposes activities such as integrating global education aims and topics into mainstream primary, secondary and tertiary education and building the capacities of teachers to deliver these study programmes. Another aim included strengthening the development research agenda in universities and in all informal educational programmes, and the promotion of global issues to the general public, civil servants, politicians and the media. In reality, however, the Ministry of Education, which is responsible for integrating global education into primary and secondary education, has taken few practical or concrete steps to fulfil these aims. Despite pressure from educational institutions, NGOs, and, to a certain extent, the MFA, there have been no elements of global education introduced into the official education system at any tier of education. The MFA is responsible for integrating global and development education at

tertiary education, which is the main focus of development education practice.

Practical implementation of development education in Slovakia

Development education in Slovakia, which is understood as the capacity building of development professionals at various levels, is currently happening via three pathways:

- Through the preparation of development and humanitarian workers within development and humanitarian organisations;
- Elements of development and humanitarian education in current academic programmes; and
- Development and humanitarian education in non-formal programmes.

Slovak development and humanitarian organisations have practical experience in the implementation of development, humanitarian and educational projects. They have worked and are still working in more than thirty countries around the world. Some of them have been active for more than ten years (including eRko, the People in Peril Association, Trnava University and Pontis Foundation) as evidenced by two surveys (Jančovič, 2009; Pecháčová, 2009). Despite this long-term engagement in development work, there is no systematic preparation of development and humanitarian workers in Slovakia. Development education initiatives are mostly carried out by those organisations deploying workers overseas. The forms and methods vary from organisation to organisation but in most cases the preparation is focused on the people who will be deployed abroad, and is less interested in the education of people working in Slovakia (Jančovič, 2011).

At present, no Slovak university is providing an academic course in international development. There are several isolated subjects related to global education that are offered in various universities, though they are often marginal in the study programmes (optional/elective subjects). NGOs are

active in development education by offering non-formal training, focusing on specific aspects of development education, for example project management, peace work and conflict management. Each of these three pathways has its own specific nature, but the common element of them all is that initiative comes mainly from people who have practical experience with this kind of work. They see its enhancement in better education and preparation (Jančovič, 2011).

Developing a training programme

The main outcome of the CABIS-IDA project was a training programme for increasing the competencies of the experts in international development cooperation. The training programme was tailor-made and developed at Trnava University in cooperation with the expertise of the Royal Tropical Institute and Horizont 3000. A project outcome included the training of a team of teachers from Trnava University who would cascade their learning through the same training programme. The project aimed that the training be adopted by Trnava University and offered to registered students as well as to external trainees.

Needs assessment and target groups for the pilot training

In the initial phase of preparing the training programme, a needs assessment workshop was conducted. It was clearly stated at the beginning of the project that the training programme should target practitioners, i.e. individuals and organisations (universities, NGOs and the private sector) who are active in implementing development interventions in low and middle-income countries. The training programme was to be dedicated to development practitioners, rather than theorists or academics. Professionals currently working in this area can be divided into two separate groups: decision-makers, managers and coordinators of the projects or individuals involved in policymaking in Slovakia; and personnel who are deployed by development organisations to their target countries. It was desirable to have decision-makers with field experience from low- and middle-income countries and, on the other hand, field workers with desk experience involved in the training.

However the two types of work require slightly different knowledge and skills that would be adapted to their needs.

Representatives of various organisations and institutions involved in development work took part in a needs assessment workshop. Here, the crucial competencies of the development worker were defined and, on this basis and on that of reviewed documents focusing on the issue of education in the field of development cooperation and humanitarian assistance in Slovakia, the project team defined learning needs and identified learning gaps. An additional factor in the selection of development practitioners as a target group was that, since the training programme was considered to be a pilot, there was a need for in-depth quality assurance and critical feedback from participants. Thus, the field experience from low and middle-income countries was an official criterion during the selection of participants. This approach proved to be successful and the participants' experience enriched the content of the training programme.

Competencies of the training programme's graduates

Writing general competencies for the training programme's graduate was the next step in the process. The envisioned graduate of the training programme should have acquired the following competencies by the completion of the training:

- To be an advisor and/or when needed a leader, contributing to the management of a project;
- To contribute to local capacity development and knowledge transfer (in this context 'local' means in the country or region targeted by a development intervention);
- To work sensibly in a development and humanitarian context with a main focus on social and health related issues;
- To work as a professional and communicate effectively in an intercultural context;

- To be conflict sensitive in his/her work and respect human rights; and
- To maintain a secure and healthy working and living environment and be able to take appropriate action when needed.

These gained competencies of graduates of the training programme outlined the main direction and focus of the training programme.

Design of the training programme

Within the Faculty of Health Sciences and Social Work, which implemented the project at Trnava University, the Department of Development Studies and Tropical Health led the activities. The Department provided most of the stewardship, knowledge and competencies concerning general topics on development cooperation and humanitarian assistance, as well as issues related to culture and conflict in the development context. Other departments involved included the Departments of Public Health, Management and Social Work. The structure of the curriculum was divided into the compulsory core modules and specialised optional modules. The general compulsory part of the training provided the in-depth background in international development cooperation and humanitarian assistance. The course was structured as follows:

- Trends in development cooperation and humanitarian assistance (40 in-class hours);
- Cultural sensitivity in development work (48 in-class hours);
- Community development (24 in-class hours); and
- Project management (24 in-class hours).

Specialised optional subjects were designed according to the specific expertise within the university, taking into account the special needs of the beneficiaries. They focused on specific professions or themes in

development work. Each participant had to complete at least one of the following options:

- Particularities of work with vulnerable groups (24 in-class hours);
- Community health care (24 in-class hours); and
- Public health with focus on environmental health issues (24 in-class hours).

Cross-cutting issues in the training course

During the process of creating the curricula, the project team identified four issues, which were mainstreamed within all the modules. They included the topics of *communication, intercultural competencies, human rights, and gender*, all of which were recognised as crucial for a competent development worker and as related to all modules. The cross-cutting issues were elaborated in all syllabi and topic sheets. Apart from the four cross-cutting issues, one more concept was mainstreamed into the core part of the training programme – the concept of development effectiveness. This was also reflected in the title of the training: *Training in Effective Development Cooperation*. Unfortunately, the concept of development effectiveness was not integrated into all module topics of the pilot training programme.

Integration of teaching and learning philosophies into CABIS-IDA

A number of pedagogical underpinnings were selected and used in the delivery of the training programme. Given that the participants in the programme were all adult learners who had a certain level of work experience in the field of international development cooperation, the principles of adult learning were adopted during the process of devising the curriculum. This approach to teaching and learning was deemed most appropriate, with the inclusion of experiential and participatory pedagogical approaches. Indeed, the principles of adult learning were the conceptually grounded ‘signposts’ that directed the development of the programme. In particular, the principles of adult learning were adhered to during the

development of the programme (Jančovič, 2012: 6-7). Principles of adult learning essentially advocate a pedagogical understanding that assumes the adult learners come to the classroom with life experience and a pragmatic mindset, more so than mainstream traditional higher education students who normally come to the university setting directly from secondary school (Russell, 2006). It was integral to the success of the piloting of the programme that the teaching approaches were appropriately tailored for the participant group, who were expecting a greater practical application of concepts to real world issues and problems.

From the outset, the development of the curriculum was framed by the theoretical works of Benjamin Bloom and Howard Gardner. Bloom's *Taxonomy of Learning Domains* (including six major categories of learning: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation) created in 1956 promotes higher forms of thinking in education, such as analysing and synthesising, as opposed to the sole focus on simply remembering and regurgitating facts (Bloom, 1956). Topic sheets for each module in the training programme were guided by Bloom's taxonomy, which meant that all of the activities, and the development of each part of each module, was planned explicitly with a lesson plan. For instance, in the module 'Community Development', there were five parts to the module, and so, five topic sheets were used with participants. In the first part of the module, 'Sustainable Communities', the objectives sought that the students would 'understand', 'describe and discuss', and 'apply the approaches' of sustainable community development. These learning objectives emulate the different levels of learning. The five topic sheets all contained between them the full chain of Bloom's Taxonomy of learning behaviours. This was the case for all seven modules which were outlined in fifty-two topic sheets.

Gardner's theory (1995) also informed the theoretical framework of the pedagogical approaches used to inform the development of the training programme. In Gardner's seminal work *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (1983), he provided extensive research to support his contention that human intelligence is multifaceted rather than singular. The

project design acknowledged and thus integrated into the design process the premise as promoted by Gardner's theory, which sets forth the proposition that different people learn at different rates, and in different ways. Each of the trainers, in their module topic sheet, needed to explicitly plan teaching methodologies in a way that was varied enough to be appropriate for all learners, from those who learned best by listening to lectures to those who learned better when engaged in the problem-based learning (PBL) activities. Within these guiding principles, pedagogical approaches that were used and guided the development of the training curriculum included the use of problem-based learning. Kiley (2000, cited in Buckley, 2010: 8) sets forth a number of features of PBL, all of which align with the principles of adult learning:

- It encourages students to self-direct their learning;
- To be both independent and interdependent in their learning;
- It creates an environment for peer teaching;
- It encourages reflection; and
- It leads to a research-oriented curriculum.

An example of how PBL was used in the programme design was in the module 'Cultural Sensitivity in Development Work'. In two days dedicated to conflict analysis and management, the participants had to work on cases to analyse a development conflict and propose a way how to deal with it. The work was difficult not only because various skills were needed, but also because of the substantial emotional burden these kinds of cases were bringing (the cases dealt with domestic violence, community violence, culturally different behaviour and norms). This variety of approaches, all of which acknowledge different forms of learning and teaching, were knitted together within the design of the programme, as seamlessly as possible, to ensure the pedagogical style was holistic and tailored for the target group.

The following section outlines feedback from the participants in the programme and how the approaches to teaching worked for them.

Evaluation of the training programme

For the evaluation of the training programme, a quality assurance system was set up and tools for monitoring and evaluation were agreed by its authors. As outlined in Box 1, these tools included ways that feedback was gathered from the participants in the programme, and from the trainers. A variety of ways of collecting this information were planned (i.e. daily reflections, evaluation workshop, and so on).

Box 1. Tools for quality assurance of the pilot training

Tools for collecting feedback from participants of the training:

1. Collecting expectations – at the beginning of the training.
2. Daily reflections – at the end of a day – real time evaluation (feedback on a level of reaction & learning).
3. Module evaluation - at the end of the module – same format for all modules in written form, evaluating content, methods, trainers, logistics.
4. Core part evaluation – at the end of core part (reaction & learning level) – carried out by an external expert.
5. Specialised module evaluation – at the end of specialised module -
 - Same format as module evaluation in core part of the training.
6. Quality assurance meeting with participants – carried out by external expert

Tools for collecting feedback from trainers from the training:

1. Trainers reflection – after each session
 - Written form which was easily filled within a few minutes.
2. Assessment and report of module – document which analyzed & concluded from:
 - Daily reflection (participants)
 - Trainers' reflections after sessions (trainers)
 - Module evaluation (participants)
3. Evaluation workshop – after the training
 - Summary of the training
 - Lessons learned
 - General rating of the training, recommendations for the future

How did the pedagogical approaches work for the participants in the programme?

Participants in the programme stated that the training programme was of a high learning level compared to other courses taken before (in Slovakia and abroad). The participants were all practitioners and appreciated the inclusion of theoretical reflection in the training programme.

Box 2. Feedback on the modules from the participants

- ✓ “The course was pretty good for Slovakia” (this remark is from a student who claims to have already had a lot of training).
- ✓ “There are no specific studies like this in Slovakia”.
- ✓ “It is good to reflect on your work”.
- ✓ “I was inspired”.

Participants expected the training programme to provide them with concrete tools to be applicable in their work. That is why they positively evaluated when trainers were able to link the theory with practice. If the trainers did not, participants pointed it out.

Box 3. Feedback on trainers and lecturers of the training programme

- ✓ “Some facilitators were too passive, introducing theory, not allowing participation”.
- ✓ “Facilitators without working experience in developing countries were not so good, not able to give examples from the field”.
- ✓ “Some facilitators not able to incorporate input from group”.

At the same time, they expected that their experience would have been used more during the training programme. They rejected the traditional passive role of a student. Most of them preferred the participatory methods.

Box 4. Feedback on the pedagogical approach used in various modules

- ✓ “It was intensive. Sometimes I had a feeling we are thrown into water to learn how to swim (...). Anyway, I use to learn this way in my life, so I like it really very much.”
- ✓ “This module seems very important to me, however since we all have practical experience, the potential of the group was not perfectly exhausted”.
- ✓ “I was satisfied with content of the module, I suggest to take into account the level of knowledge and skills of most of the participants”.

It was obvious that even those participants who preferred the more structured facts or theoretical information presented during the particular modules, still expected the trainers to be able to link theory with practice. In some cases lecturers or trainers were not able to adjust the level of information and the methods to the level of expectations and experience of the participants. This explains why the live and ongoing feedback from participants was so important. There were cases, when, due to constructive feedback from participants, the agenda for the following day was altered to take account of the feedback. This was also a new situation for many lecturers and trainers from the university who are not used to direct and honest feedback from their students, as the style of learning and teaching is based on a more patriarchal system of education.

Discussion

Many lecturers at the universities in Slovakia lack the necessary expertise in working with participatory teaching methods. For this group of professionals, these methods are novel and without precedent in the teaching culture of the country. Lecturing staff are familiar with transferring knowledge, rather than developing skills and facilitating participation in groups. Most of the lecturers (trainers) who took part in this pilot programme were unfamiliar with these methods despite receiving training in them, and they had low levels of trust in their usability. Often they were uncomfortable in using these methods. This was also reflected in the feedback from participants. This challenge of participatory teaching methods (considered by some as simply ‘fun and games’ but without any true pedagogical value) mirrors the situation throughout Slovakia, not only at

Trnava University. Evidence of difficulties in the facilitation of participatory methods during the sessions was illustrated when there was not enough time allocated to debrief the activities and allow for discussion, which was sometimes the most illuminating and important part of the whole session. This was often missing due to lack of time or inability of lecturers to conduct these debriefing activities. Connected to this issue was the fact that there is also very little expertise and understanding of adult learning principles. The lecturers were unfamiliar with the methods used for adult learning. The traditional form of teaching ('I teach, you listen') is grounded very much in a paternalistic approach towards student learning. It is widespread across all educational institutions in the country as an ingrained part of the pedagogical culture. On the other hand, people who are working in an international environment (e.g. Slovak development workers) have experienced the different teaching cultures of international trainers and expect this level to be also achieved in Slovakia.

Many lecturers were not prepared to be the subject of quality assurance (QA) and the evaluation sessions created a lot of tension. The reason for this may be because this kind of QA and evaluation is not mainstreamed in the university system. Lecturers found it difficult to accept feedback, especially the constructive and well formulated feedback, and the results of the QA resulted in tension amongst some of the lecturers. In relation to the design of the programme, there was difficulty in meeting the objectives as they were often too ambitious and not deliverable. The aim of the programme was to attain a teaching standard to cover knowledge, skills and attitudes, all of which were covered at least to some extent. However the desired level of competency was not satisfied, meaning that all three areas were not fully covered and this impacted on the resulting competences achieved.

The mainstreaming of cross-cutting topics (communication, intercultural competences, human rights, and gender) was not sufficient and during some modules was completely missing. Also, module coordinators did not consult with one another so there were contradictions and overlaps

between modules. Linkages and cohesion of topics between the modules was regularly missing, resulting in the overall content not being presented to participants in a fluid and seamless way. However, the expectations of the participants in the programme were mostly met and overall they were largely satisfied. As one participant said: ‘The course overcame (sic) my expectations in quality and atmosphere. Thank you. It’s just a pity that it is not compulsory to all development workers (I think it should be). We would prevent many mistakes happening in Slovak development projects’.

Conclusion

The training programme illustrated the necessity of including development education in formal education within Slovak universities, based on the feedback from participants in the pilot. In Slovakia, a system of formal preparation for people working in development is missing. Neither systematic research nor theoretical reflection of Slovak development initiatives exist in the country at present. Knowledge of global issues and development is needed not only for development workers, but perhaps even more so for the decision makers, public officers and teachers in all levels of education from primary to tertiary level. At the time of writing the programme in its entirety has not been adopted into mainstream education. However elements of it have been and continue to be used. The programme’s content informed a cross-departmental subject in Trnava University and also informed subjects taught in Saint Elizabeth University, Bratislava. The programme’s results are currently being integrated into work being currently carried out in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Slovakia.

Based on the experience of the CABIS-IDA project, development education brings a very different approach to teaching methods than is the norm in Slovak universities. That is why not only its content, but also the methodology, can bring new light and innovation into the Slovak system of education and the culture of learning.

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