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EDUCATION FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND AGRIBUSINESS IN POST-SOCIALIST SLOVAKIA

Danka Moravčíková^{1*}, Izabela Adamičková² & Peter Bielik³

¹*Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra, Office for Lifelong Learning, Slovakia
e-mail: danka.moravcikova@uniag.sk*

²*Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra, Department of Economics, Slovakia
e-mail: izabela.adamickova@uniag.sk*

³*Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra, Department of Economics, Slovakia
e-mail: peter.bielik@uniag.sk*

** corresponding author*

Abstract: Agricultural education and training in the former Czechoslovakia has traditionally focused on fostering the position of cooperatives and state farms. The destruction of socialist agriculture and the reduction of commuting opportunities in the urban space during the transition have resulted in the handicapped socio-economic position of the Slovak countryside and its population. The role of education and training in fostering agribusiness growth and rural development could therefore become a crucial strategy. The aim of this article is to analyse the current state of education and training for agribusiness and for rural development in Slovakia using the methods of literature research and document analysis. The article interprets general trends in the development of adult education in Slovakia during the transition period. The main priorities and perspectives formulated in the national strategy for education in agriculture (for the period 2007-2013) are discussed in the mentioned context. With a focus on the leading role of the Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra, the paper assesses the current status of formal and further agricultural education and training offered in academic and other educational institutions. The paper concludes by discussing implications, recommendations and challenges for developing education and training initiatives for agribusiness and rural development.

Key words: adult education, agricultural education, post-socialist transformation

1. Introduction

The Slovak educational system has undergone radical changes during the past few decades. The transformation of the political system and introduction of the market economy in the 1990s influenced the development of adult education and training considerably. Qualitative changes have taken place in administration, management, curriculum and policy making. This has influenced the relationship between the adult education network and its societal context (Švec 1998). Presently, 36% of the Slovak adult population have completed secondary education (passing a leaving exam) and 9.9% have a university education. (European Commission 2011, p. 20) The content of further education in secondary schools and universities is relatively similar to the formal education what do you mean by formal? Do you mean pre-secondary? i.e. primary? Confusing...) but shorter courses are offered. In-company education usually reflects the needs of the employers and both private educational institutions and civic associations offer varied courses according to the interests of their “paying” participants. The negative figures for Slovakia are being presented in the sphere of lifelong learning – adult

participation in Slovakia was at 2.8% in 2010, while the EU average was 9.3% (National Lifelong Learning Institute 2012, p. 48). The most common barriers appear to be the cost of the education, time at which they are held, and the fact that further education learning outcomes do not guarantee a higher salary or better employability.

Agricultural education is an old area of study in Slovakia. After 1945, agricultural education developed a new face, because new ideology was implemented and the corresponding policies were introduced into specialised education. A new organisational structure was set up in 1952 and in 1972 another content-based transformation of the agricultural education took place. A special emphasis was put on the practical skills of students and graduates for the work in state farms and cooperatives. (Bielik *et al* 2012) After 1989, new and modern study forms were offered in the field of the agricultural education, too (e.g. specialised study, retraining study, distance study, further education courses for various population groups). As the only institution of higher education in Slovakia oriented to agriculture and rural development, the Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra (SUA) plays a crucial role within this process.

2. Development of the adult education system in post-socialist Slovakia

2.1 General outline and changing orientation

The Slovak Republic has quite a long tradition of adult education, especially vocational education and training (VET). During the period of centrally planned economy, all interested adults could undertake educational activities at state institutions or within various “cultural centres”. These activities were usually provided in exchange for a symbolic payment. The socialist period was also characterised by a well-established system of enterprise-affiliated VET. The majority of state enterprises had their own training centres for employees. (Kočanová 2007) After 1989, educational centres closed down and traditional adult education providers started to operate as any other private body. The number of private and non-governmental VET providers has increased significantly. It is estimated that at present there are around 2500 providers of continuing education and training in the Slovak Republic. The terms ‘continuing education’ (CE) and ‘lifelong education’ (LLE) came into use only after 1990. Many small and medium companies emerged, providing non-degree and CE courses. Universities started establishing Centres for CE, LLE or other forms of further education, and professional organisations started providing non-degree or post diploma studies. Though sometimes through loopholes in the legislation, distance education and CE courses gave HEIs a possibility to make “real money” and to become market-oriented. Recent tendencies and issues related to the development of adult learning can be identified through different strategic documents. In 2007, the *Lifelong Learning and Lifelong Guidance Strategy* was approved with a perspective to its fulfilment in 2015. One of the outcomes of this strategy is the *Act No. 568/2009 on Lifelong Learning* adopted in December 2009, which established several important institutes for the further development of lifelong learning, such as accreditation of qualification standards, recognition of learning outcomes, and monitoring and predicting educational needs. These tools have not yet been put into practice, mainly due to the non-implementation of a system project to promote further education, within which these tools should have been developed (National Lifelong Learning Institute 2012, p. 48). Likewise, concentrated and coordinated action of all stakeholders has not yet been achieved in adequate measure.

2.2 Agricultural education

Agricultural education in contemporary Slovakia attempts to meet the requirements of a new shape of this economic sector with respect to the inadequate educational level of rural and agricultural population¹. This situation has been caused by

¹ According to *Labour Force Sample Survey 2011*, within agriculture a total of 51,600 workers was employed. On an annual basis, the number of people working in agriculture has decreased by 4,700 persons (8.3%) in the period 2011–2012. The decrease in employment was recorded only for the group of

the transformation process after 1989, which affected not only agriculture, but also strongly influenced further development in rural areas (Moravíková and Klimentová 2011). Farmland has been redistributed as private property and rural incomes have dropped in comparison to the national average. Many of the new owners had no intention to farm and rented out their land. Even the members of cooperatives without ownership of the land became owners, their property shares being derived from their work participation. In general, employment in agriculture has drastically declined² and rural workers have left for jobs elsewhere, especially to the service sector (Buchta 2011; Hrabá *et al* 1999; Námerová 1997).

The agricultural sector in Slovakia has been primarily been employing people with basic or vocational education in recent years.

Table 1. Educational structure of employees in the Slovak agriculture.

Educational level	Year / Share of total (%)		
	2001	2005	2012
Basic	16.0	14.8	8.6
Vocational	56.7	50.5	53.6
Secondary	22.9	27.7	30.7
University	4.4	7.0	7.1

Source: Statistical Office of the SR (Labour Force Sample Survey)

Although there are around 100 secondary vocational schools oriented towards agriculture, the food industry, rural development, forestry and veterinary sciences in Slovakia, the number of students and graduates has rapidly decreased (Ministry of Agriculture of the SR 2007, p. 39). The critical situation in the agriculture sector and the alarming situation within agricultural education is characterised also by the highest unemployment rate in the group of secondary graduates.

Table 2. Unemployment rate of secondary vocational school graduates.

Study specialisation	Unemployment rate (%)					
	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Agriculture, forestry and rural development	16.2	16.1	16.0	28.1	26.3	26.5
Veterinary sciences	10.5	8.9	7.9	16.5	17.5	16.5
Total (specialisation group)	15.9	15.6	15.4	27.1	25.2	24.8

Source: Institute of Information and Prognoses of Education

employees, while the group of entrepreneurs has been increasing in the long run. According to the *Statistical Report on Basic Development Tendencies in the Economy of the SR* in 2011 there were 80 thousand people working in agriculture, which means an annual increase of 2.3% (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the SR 2012, p. 36).

²The number of these persons reached 351.2 thousand in 1989 and dropped to 65.3 thousand in 2009. In the period 2000–2008, employment within the agricultural sector declined by one third but the number of persons working on the basis of an agreement for the performance of work increased to 2.5 times the previous figure. A significantly progressive increase in the share of persons working out of the official labour relation was characteristic for all forms of legal entities within agriculture.

This group of specialisation took an 18% share of the total number of unemployed graduates from secondary vocational schools in 2010 (National Lifelong Learning Institute 2012, p. 48). There is also a growing tendency in agriculture to employ many people aged 50–54 (over 20%). In comparison with the situation in 1989, this is a more than double increase in this category within the age structure of the agricultural population. At the same time, the share of employees aged 20–24 has decreased by half (Ministry of Agriculture of the SR 2007, p. 39).

In view of the above-mentioned facts, the necessity for people with secondary and higher education in rural areas and agriculture seems to be a very strategic issue for the intersection of different policies (educational, agricultural and rural development policy, youth policy). It is important to create appropriate conditions for the employment of young graduates in this sector and to motivate them to become entrepreneurs or to work in agriculture.

3. The current state of education for agribusiness and rural development

3.1 Formal and further education at the SUA in Nitra

The Slovak University of Agriculture (SUA) in Nitra is the leading educational and scientific institution for the agricultural sector. Its main aim is to support the development of rural areas in Slovakia through the provision of education, research and advisory services to agriculture and its related industries. In 2010, the SUA was the first university in Slovakia to be awarded a prestigious ECTS Label for the correct implementation of ECTS. The SUA comprises six faculties – the Faculty of Agrobiology and Food Sources (FAFS), the Faculty of Economics and Management (FEM), the Faculty of Engineering (FE), the Faculty of Horticulture and Landscape Engineering (FHLE), the Faculty of Biotechnology and Food Sciences (FBFS) and the Faculty of European Studies and Regional Development (FESRD). These faculties offer 88 study programmes at all levels of study, which correspond to the mission and role of the university in the Slovak society, as well as to the needs of contemporary agribusiness and rural development in Slovakia. In recent years, the number of student has stabilised at a level of about 10,000 students (including both full-time and part-time).

The SUA in Nitra actively participates in European research, education partnerships and in organising international events. It is connected internationally with 45 partner institutions in 21 countries at the present time. The Department of Economics (former Department of Agricultural Economics) has contributed markedly to the development of international cooperation with universities in West Europe and the USA, particularly in terms of following and implementing new trends in agribusiness education (Bielik and Dragan 2007; Gurčík 2011). New trends were recorded in creating the joint study programmes with foreign universities. The FEM offers the *V4 Business Economics* and the MBA programme

Agribusiness and Commerce within the AGRIMBA network and there are also joint study programmes at the FESRD (*EU-US Double Degree in Rural Development and Agricultural Economics, International Master of Science in Rural Development, Canada-EU Programme for Cooperation in Higher Education, Training and Youth*) and at the FBFS (*Animal Welfare*) taught at the doctoral level of study.

Educational activities for students, graduates and public (certified further education programmes, career centre, education for seniors etc.) are coordinated by the Office for Lifelong Learning at the SUA, which cooperates with other universities within the Slovak Academic Association for Lifelong Learning (SAALL). This is an area in which SUA wishes to develop capacity and thus strengthen its contribution to agriculture and rural development at the local and regional levels. The SUA currently offers adult education at different levels including:

- (i) courses of specialised training in economics, agribusiness, rural development and agriculture (certified by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the SR)³
- (ii) language courses (international certificate *UniCert®*)
- (iii) IT courses (international certificate *ECDL*)
- (iv) education for senior citizens (*University of the Third Age*)⁴
- (v) complementary pedagogical study for teachers at agricultural vocational schools (part-time study) and for full-time students. The graduates of this additional form of study receive the *Teacher Certificate* which enables them to teach agricultural subjects and subjects related to their study programmes at vocational schools.

Table 3. Number of participants in further education at the SUA.

Academic year	Specialized courses (i), (ii), (iii)	University of the Third Age (iv)	Complementary pedagogical study (v)	Total
2006/2007	398	498	301	1,197
2007/2008	379	569	219	1,167
2008/2009	174	670	228	1,072
2009/2010	496	761	76	1,333
2010/2011	496	573	240	1,309
2011/2012	602	485	113	1,200
Total	2,545	3,556	1,177	7,278

Source: Reports on the Education at the SUA

³For example: Non-traditional plants in rural development and the agri-food sector; course for pig keepers; water risks in food production; malting and beer-making; sensory evaluation of food and drinks; managerial skills; economy and management in the European dimension; LEADER approach in strategic rural development; etc.

⁴For example: foodstuffs, nutrients and health; horticulture; garden architecture; ecological family farming; informatics; basic accountancy; English language; public management, etc.

The main goal of the SUA in the field of further education is to enlarge the number of certified training courses and educational programmes that are on offer, to realise new forms of further education (virtual education, distance learning, e-learning) and to strengthen cooperation with the Office for Labour, Social Affairs and Family (further education for unemployed people).

3.2 Further education in agriculture (other institutions and activities))

Competitiveness and sustainable development of agriculture, food industry, forestry and veterinary sciences in the rural space guarantee the development of the whole sector. Furthermore, they also guarantee rural development, utilisation of the human potential as well as stable conditions for entrepreneurship with respect for environmental principles. The investment in human capital seems to be one of the main priorities.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the SR offers further education through its own contributory organisations. *Agro-Institute Nitra* is the educational institution involved in the development of continuing education strategies and concepts in the agriculture sector, particularly related to food production. It has its own centre of continuing education mainly focused on the agricultural sector and is one of the most important adult learning institutions focusing its training policy particularly on agricultural and rural development. The *Rural Development Agency* promotes particularly the Rural Development Programme of the SR 2007–2013 and its main aim is to disseminate information, to communicate feedback to the Ministry and other responsible state and public bodies, and to provide counselling. The *National Forest Centre* plays the leading role in the development and promotion of sustainable forest management and its implementation in practice. The educational activities are realised through the *Institute for Forest Consulting and Education* in Zvolen, which offers advisory services, pedagogical trainings, education and training for forestry professionals, etc. The *Institute of Postgraduate Education of Veterinary Surgeons* in Košice specialises in educating the employees of the state veterinary and food administration of the SR and the state veterinary and food institutes in all spheres of the veterinary care, food and foodstuff hygiene as well as food control, food safety and quality.

The current state and the recent situation in the field of further education in agriculture and related areas can be characterised as a system “suffering” from a lack of internal resources, but also from a lack of external support. The low social status of agriculture and the agricultural population in contemporary Slovakia has resulted in an insufficient supply of education and training courses for the agriculture sector as well as in a low level of participation in these activities.

The changing situation is influenced mainly by the number of the ongoing educational projects within the Rural Development Programme of the SR 2007–2013 (*Axis 1:*

Improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector; Measure 1.6 Vocational training and information actions; and Axis 3: Quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy; Measure 3.3. Training and information). In this context, it is significant that external funding for further education in agriculture and related fields is one of the crucial factors.

Table 4. Educational programmes (EP) and participants in further education oriented to agriculture, forestry and veterinary sciences*

Year	Number of EP	Share of total (%)	Number of participants	Share of total (%)
2006	276	8.36	15,911	4.60
2007	225	6.34	11,482	2.38
2008	258	7.32	20,471	5.28
2009	444	9.77	26,409	8.25
2010	202	2.96	11,639	3.11
2011	415	1.89	12,936	4.32

Source: Institute of Information and Prognoses of Education, Information System of Further Education

*share of all fields of further education and all participants in further education in Slovakia

4. Conclusion

The current situation in adult education in Slovakia, particularly in further education, is strongly influenced by societal transformation from 1989 onwards. A general look at the state of funding of further education shows that in comparison with the financing of formal education, further education is significantly neglected. Within the group of low-skilled and unskilled people (often working in the agriculture sector), the price of the education programme seems to be the largest obstacle to their accessing further education. The financial factor is key in the motivation of individuals to invest in qualification and personal development. For this reason, it is essential to create opportunities for further education funding that would encourage people to take part in lifelong learning.

Although agriculture and agricultural education represent a traditional area of work and study from a historical viewpoint, their general position in contemporary Slovak society has dramatically declined. The socio-demographic structure of the agricultural and rural population in Slovakia reflects neither the requirements of the modern development of rural areas, nor the needs of the targeted support of the agriculture, food and forestry sectors. Thus, it is necessary to create activities which will facilitate the further development of rural areas, training and skills of the rural population and will contribute to the retention of the population in rural areas. It is essential to increase the absorption capacity through the vocational training of rural entities by organising training programmes aimed at reducing the deficit in expert, professional and management skills in the agriculture sector and rural development.

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