

SHORT COMMUNICATION

ORGANIZATION OF PhD STUDIES AT THE FACULTY OF PUBLIC HEALTH OF THE SLOVAK MEDICAL UNIVERSITY IN THE CONTEXT OF PRACTICE

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SUMMARY

Objectives: The Slovak Medical University (SMU) holds a unique position in the health education system in Slovakia. It has a direct connection to the health sector, allowing health education to reflect the actual needs in this field. Because of increasing importance of public health in the last decades, more attention must be given to disease prevention and the promotion of healthy lifestyles. We aim to highlight the main characteristics of health higher education at one of the specialized health universities in Slovakia, with a particular focus on public health and its practical impacts.

Methods: We analysed the available legal regulations for postgraduate studies in Slovakia and the officially valid documents of the Faculty of Public Health (FPH) and the Slovak Medical University in accordance with the accredited study programme in Public Health. Archived data from the Department of Science, Research, and Doctoral Studies of the Faculty over the past 10 years were used for the analysis of postgraduate studies (2013–2023).

Results: PhD studies in Slovakia are conducted in accordance with Act No. 131/2002 Coll. on Higher Education Institutions and on amendments to certain acts. There are two forms of PhD study in Slovakia: full-time and external. The evaluation of study results is based on the credit system. The doctoral study programme proceeds according to an individual study plan under the guidance of the advisor. The PhD study concludes with the defence of the dissertation, which serves as the final thesis. A total of 97 students have graduated at FPH SMU in Public Health in the last 10 years. The majority of graduates were females (68% vs. 32% males) and studied in the external form of study (80.4% vs. 19.6% in the full-time programme). The most frequent research topics at FPH SMU in the last 10 years included Epidemiology and Prevention of Non-communicable (21.7%) and Infectious Diseases (11.3%), Health Management and Policy (17.5%), Environmental Health (15.5%), as well as Occupational Health (13.4%).

Conclusion: High-quality and innovative postgraduate education in public health plays a crucial role in this field, preparing experts for the public health services. From a quality perspective, it is substantial to share experiences with various study programmes across the European region, as well as with other universities. Graduates of the Faculty of Public Health are highly sought-after professionals with diverse career opportunities not only in Slovakia but also within the European Union, other countries, and various important international institutions.

Key words: PhD studies, public health, postgraduate education, health promotion

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INTRODUCTION

Public health is defined as the science and art of preventing diseases, prolonging life, and promoting physical health and efficiency through organized community efforts (1). Its importance has increased significantly in recent decades due to the aging population, longer life expectancy, advancements and availability in health care, and rising healthcare costs. Consequently, more attention must be given to disease prevention and the promotion of healthy lifestyles.

The Slovak Medical University (SMU) is the only university in Slovakia that provides specialized education for healthcare professionals across all three degrees of higher education. Since 1953,

it has been the sole institution to offer comprehensive education for healthcare workers in Slovakia under various names. SMU is affiliated with the Ministry of Health of the Slovak Republic, unlike other Slovak Universities that fall under the Ministry of Education, Science, Research, and Sport of the Slovak Republic. This unique position within Slovakia's education system is crucial for health education. SMU's direct connection to the health sector allows it to respond to the sector's needs, ensuring that its health education programmes remain relevant and up to date.

Public health, which focuses on disease prevention and the promotion of physical health and efficiency through organized community efforts, has played a very important role in recent decades. The quality of higher education in health care is a sig-

nificant and current issue in the European region. Postdoctoral researchers are essential to the European higher education system, contributing substantially to research, education, and community outreach. During the postdoctoral period, a transitional career phase, they conduct cutting-edge research, take on various academic responsibilities, and often help achieve broader health, economic, and societal impacts of research. They present their findings to the public, teach and mentor junior researchers, and contribute to the academic community and the advancement of knowledge across various fields (2).

SMU is a member of the Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region (ASPHER), a key independent European organisation dedicated to improving and protecting the public health by strengthening the education and training of public health professionals for both practice and research. ASPHER promotes activities that foster exchange of information and best practices amongst its members to achieve high standards of public health education and training across Europe. The main functions of the Association are to support the professionalisation of the public health workforce in Europe, while respecting the diversity of national and regional contexts in which each school of public health operates. It aims to sustain, in theory and practice, member schools in achieving their missions of education, training, scientific research and service, and to develop models for public health education and training at all academic and professional levels. ASPHER also focuses on the interaction of education and training with population health, health systems and services. ASPHER promotes structured processes for sharing evidence-based public health models of innovation and good practice. It helps build coalitions with other programmes and public health organisations whose mission is to improve public health. Specifically, ASPHER strives to establish high standards in and strengthen public health education and training and to enhance the quality of the public health workforce in Europe and its global competitiveness (3).

In this article, we aim to highlight the main characteristics, strengths, and potential weaknesses of health higher education at one of the specialized health universities in Slovakia, with a particular focus on public health and its practical impacts.

Structure of Slovak Medical University

The Slovak Medical University consists of four faculties: Faculty of Public Health (FPH), Medical Faculty, Faculty of Nursing and Professional Health Studies, and Faculty of Health. The Faculty of Public Health is dedicated to educating the students in disease prevention, health support, and health management. It comprises various departments and institution that emphasize the key pillars of public health, including:

- Department of Epidemiology;
- Department of Health Management and Economics;
- Department of Preventive and Clinical Medicine;
- Institute of Health Protection which includes two sections:
 - Department of Environmental Medicine
 - Institute of Occupational Health Service;
- Department of Radiation Hygiene;
- Department of Toxicology;
- Institute of Biophysics, Informatics, and Biostatistics;
- University Electron Accelerator Centre (UCEA) (4).

PhD Studies in Slovakia

PhD Studies in Slovakia are conducted in accordance with Act No. 131/2002 Coll. act on Higher Education Institutions and on amendments to certain acts. The doctoral study programme is a third-level study programme focused on acquiring knowledge based on the current state of scientific and artistic understanding, in particularly through the student's own contributions. It emphasizes scientific research and independent creative activity in science or technology, or independent theoretical and creative activity in art. Graduates of the doctoral study programme receive a university education of the third degree. The dissertation work must demonstrate the student's ability and readiness for independent scientific and creative activities in research or development. Upon completion, graduates are awarded the academic title "philosophiae doctor", abbreviated as "PhD" (5).

There are two forms of PhD study in Slovakia: full-time and external. The full-time doctoral study programme lasts 3 or 4 academic years. The required number of credits for completion is 180 credits for a 3-year programme and 240 credits for 4-year programme. The external form of study can be completed in 4 or 5 academic years, requiring the same number of credits: 180 credits for a 4-year programme and 240 credits for a 5-year programme. The study period can be extended by up to 1 year. Student may apply for an interruption of study for up to 2 years. Student who cares for at least one child may apply for the interruption of study for up to 3 years.

In Slovakia, the evaluation of study results is based on a credit system where each credit represents the workload of a doctoral student. The standard workload of a doctoral student over an academic year is equivalent to activities totalling 60 credits. During the study phase of postgraduate education, PhD students can earn credits through various activities such as:

- Participation in specialized doctoral lectures and seminars;
- Completion of a foreign study stays;
- Taking additional subjects from the faculty's study programmes of the faculty if not completed during previous stages of study.

The study phase culminates with the completion of the dissertation examination. Additionally, students can accumulate credits through:

- Independent creative scientific activities;
- Teaching activities at the faculty;
- Engagement in scientific publication activity;
- Delivering lectures;
- Participating in therapeutic-preventive or other professional activities in public health;
- Elaboration of the dissertation work.

If PhD students complete part of their studies in another workplace, they can earn credits from that workplace under certain conditions. Specifically, credits obtained at the other workplace are considered valid if the students were assigned there to fulfil their study programme and the credit systems of both the sending (home) and receiving (other) workplaces must be compatible for credits to be transferred successfully (credit transfer). This practice allows PhD students to integrate study activities across different institutions while ensuring that their academic progress aligns with the standards and requirements of their home institution's doctoral programme.

PhD students in Slovakia can apply for the dissertation examination in daily (full-time) form of study up to 18 months, in

external (part-time) form of study up to 3 years and only if they have earned at least 70 credits and at the earliest after 12 months from their admission to the doctoral studies. Upon successfully completed the dissertation examination, PhD students receive 20 credits. Once they have accumulated 150 credits and their doctoral thesis has been recommended for defence, they may apply for permission to defend their thesis. If the dissertation is accepted for the defence, the doctoral student receives an additional 30 credits. Successful graduates of doctoral studies, whether in full-time or part-time form, must accumulate at least 180 credits during their studies, which includes a credit assessment of their dissertation. This comprehensive credit system ensures that students meet rigorous academic standards and requirements throughout their doctoral programme.

Specifications of PhD Studies at FPH SMU

The admission procedure to doctoral study at Faculty of Public Health begins with the publication of dissertation topics available for application at the faculty. Each topic is supervised by an adviser or supervisor. Prospective doctoral students must choose one of the listed topics to apply for. Eligibility for doctoral studies at FPH is restricted to graduates holding a second-level degree in public health. The admission exam is conducted by a committee composed of faculty members appointed by the Dean of the faculty.

Doctoral studies in each field are monitored and evaluated by a departmental commission established in accordance with the internal regulations of the university or faculty administering the respective study programme.

The role of advisor within a specific field of study may be fulfilled by faculty members of the higher education institution hosting the doctoral programme, as well as by other experts, subject to approval by the faculty's scientific board. The supervisor of a doctoral student at the Faculty of Public Health must be a recognized expert in the field of public health who currently meets the strict criteria for the positions of professor or docent, as defined in the internal regulations of the faculty. These criteria must be up-to-date and not more than 5 years old (5, 6). Alternatively, supervisors can also include individuals holding a Doctor of Science (DrSc.) degree, scientific workers with a PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) or CSc. (Candidate of Sciences) degree, who have achieved qualification levels I and II. The dean of the faculty may request supervisors to submit scientific and research profiles to the institution. Each supervisor can oversee a maximum of 5 doctoral students. Their responsibilities include guiding the professional and scientific development of the doctoral student, designing and overseeing the student's study and research programme, directing the focus of the dissertation project, and submitting annual evaluations of the doctoral student to the institution's administration. Supervisors are invited to participate in dissertation exams, propose the exclusion of doctoral students from the programme, provide input on requests for study interruptions, recommend study visits for doctoral students to other research institutions in Slovakia and abroad, evaluate written work for dissertation exams, and offer consultations with other specialists (7, 8).

The doctoral study programme follows an individualized study plan supervised by an advisor. It consists of two main parts: the study component, which includes lectures, seminars, and individual study of scientific literature relevant to the disserta-

tion topic; and the scientific component, involving individual or collaborative research directly related to dissertation topic, under the professional guidance of the advisor. Additionally, full-time doctoral students are required to engage in pedagogical activities at the faculty, averaging no more than 4 hours per week. Lectures and seminars in the PhD programme at Faculty of Public Health provide students with theoretical knowledge of key public health topics and essential practical skills in research. Topics covered include Current Issues in Public Health, Pedagogical Activities, Theory and Methodology of Scientific Research, Scientific English Language, Management of Research Project, Communication in Public Health, Research in Public Health, and Statistics in Research Projects.

A condition for the proper completion of doctoral studies is the successful performance of a dissertation examination in the first half of the study programme, which is classified as a state examination. Before being allowed to take the dissertation exam, the student must pass a scientific language exam at the appropriate level. The PhD study concludes with the defence of the dissertation, which serves as the final thesis. The dissertation must demonstrate the student's ability and readiness for independent scientific and creative work in research or development. Graduates of doctoral studies are awarded the academic title PhD.

The chairman of the departmental committee evaluates whether the submitted dissertation meets the required criteria. If it does, the chairman proposes three opponents and members of the examination committee to the dean. The dissertation is reviewed by three opponents, who are then appointed by the dean of the faculty. An opponent of the doctoral dissertation must be a recognized expert in the field of public health, holding a title such as professor (Prof.), associate professor, DrSc., or PhD (CSc.) as an independent researcher. They are required to prepare their opponent reports within the set deadline. At least one of the opponents must hold the title of Prof. or DrSc. (7).

The chairman of the departmental committee, after receiving all the opinions from the opponents and obtaining approval from the departmental committee, will promptly propose to the dean of the faculty the chairman of the examination committee for the dissertation defence. Additionally, the chairman will propose at least three other members of the examination committee, along with the date and place of the dissertation defence. The Dissertation Defence Commission must have at least four members, including at least one expert from a foreign university. The members also include the supervisor and the three opponents. The defence committee and its chairman are appointed by the dean of the faculty from among the members of the committee for doctoral studies, who are regularly approved and updated by the scientific council of the faculty (8). Only university teachers holding positions as professors and docents, and other experts approved by the scientific council of the university or the relevant faculty body, have the right to participate in the state exam (5).

The defence takes place as a public event at the place and time determined by the commission for doctoral studies. The defence cannot proceed if two opponents are absent. After the defence, the chairman of the commission will continue with a closed session, attended only by the commission members, the supervisor, and the opponents. During the closed session, the commission members express their approval or disapproval of awarding the academic title through a secret vote according to the established procedure.

Topics and Characteristics of Defended and Currently Ongoing Dissertations at FPH SMU

Public Health encompasses a wide range of activities. Among the defended PhD theses at the Faculty of Public Health SMU in the last 10 years (2013–2023), various topics can be found, such as:

- Managerial knowledge and skills in the practice of healthcare professionals;
- Innovative approaches in management and their impact on the success of healthcare organizations;
- Risk factors for IgE-mediated food allergy in childhood;
- Analysis of toxicological methods used in the prevention of human health and biosecurity of genetically modified food;
- Obesity in children as a significant risk factor for health;
- Analysis of young people's relationship to alcohol consumption and regulatory measures;
- Evaluation of the effectiveness of intervention in the prevention of chronic non-communicable diseases in clients in health advisories.

Some of the currently ongoing PhD theses include:

- Potential impact of ionizing radiation on workers at a nuclear station;
- Evaluation of selected indicators of health risk of SARS-COV-2 infection in health and social workers on the frontline in the Slovak Republic;
- Assessment of exposure of children and their mothers to polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons in the living environment using the human biomonitoring method;
- Occurrence and management of allergic diseases in Slovakia;
- Impact of professional exposure to welding smoke on employees' health;
- Design of preventive standard diagnostic and therapeutic procedures for colorectal cancer screening in the Slovak Republic;
- Economic aspects of healthcare-related infections;
- Impact of epidemiological measures on the course of the COVID-19 pandemic in Slovakia.

Table 1 lists the numbers of defended theses, the form of study, and differences by gender over the last 10 years at FPH SMU. A total of 97 students have graduated in Public Health. The major-

ity of graduates were females (68% vs. 32% males) and studied in the external form of study (80.4% vs. 19.6% in the full-time programme). This reflects the well-known higher interest of females in health professions and the financial possibilities of the faculty, as costs for the full-time programme are covered by the faculty, while students in the external programme share the costs.

Table 2 illustrates the thematic characteristics of defended theses at FPH SMU over the last 10 years, reflecting the diverse range of public health issues (9). The most frequent research topics at FPH SMU in last 10 years included Epidemiology and Prevention of Non-communicable (21.7%) and Infectious Diseases (11.3%), Health Management and Policy (17.5%), Environmental Health (15.5%), as well as Occupational Health (13.4%).

Graduates of Faculty of Public Health in Practice

The graduates of the Faculty of Public Health are highly sought-after professionals with diverse career opportunities not only in Slovakia but also within the European Union, other countries, and various important international institutions. They can take up various professional positions in Public Health Authorities. In educational institutions, FPH graduates contribute as university teachers and researchers, driving advancements in public health. Within hospitals and other healthcare facilities, they work as public health officers, hospital hygienists or epidemiologists. In research institutions, they focus on chronic diseases, environmental health, infectious diseases, occupational environment and health, etc. In health advisory and counselling, they promote and educate on healthy lifestyles.

Other potential work fields include Institutes of Labour Safety, state institutions with health and environmental departments, public organizations focused on managing of health protection and promotion and initiating and implementing preventive programmes. In occupational health services, PhD graduates can work as public health officers. They also serve in local government as officers in healthcare departments and contribute to designing and implementing health and social insurance programmes. Further applications include Institutes for Social Care, where they

Table 1. Number of defended theses and differences by gender and forms of PhD studies in 2013–2023 at FPH SMU

Year	Total defended theses	Males	Females	Daily form	External form
		n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
2013	13	7 (53.8)	6 (46.2)	3 (23.1)	10 (76.9)
2014	12	3 (25.0)	9 (75.0)	5 (41.7)	7 (58.3)
2015	7	1 (14.3)	6 (85.7)	2 (28.6)	5 (71.4)
2016	9	2 (22.2)	7 (77.8)	2 (22.2)	7 (77.8)
2017	12	3 (25.0)	9 (75.0)	3 (25.0)	9 (75.0)
2018	4	2 (50.0)	2 (50.0)	0 (0.0)	4 (100.0)
2019	5	2 (40.0)	3 (60.0)	0 (0.0)	5 (100.0)
2020	5	0 (0.0)	5 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	5 (100.0)
2021	16	7 (43.8)	9 (56.2)	2 (12.5)	14 (87.5)
2022	11	3 (27.3)	8 (72.7)	0 (0.0)	11 (100.0)
2023	3	1 (33.3)	2 (66.7)	2 (66.7)	1 (33.3)
Total	97 (100)	31 (32.0)	66 (68.0)	19 (19.6)	78 (80.4)

Source: Archived data from the Department of Science, Research, and Doctoral Studies of FPH SMU

Table 2. Categorization of thematic issues of dissertation theses at FPH SMU in 2013–2023

Thematic categories of PhD theses	Number of defended theses n (%)
Epidemiology and prevention of non-communicable diseases	21 (21.7)
Epidemiology and prevention of infection diseases	11 (11.3)
Environmental health	15 (15.5)
Occupational health	13 (13.4)
Food safety	1 (1.0)
Health economics and financing	5 (5.2)
Health management and policy	17 (17.5)
Health protection and promotion	8 (8.2)
Experimental research in public health	6 (6.2)
Total	97 (100.0)

Source: Archived data from the Department of Science, Research, and Doctoral Studies of FPH SMU

assist handicapped and elderly individuals, and positions in the third sector such as project assistants and managers. Additionally, opportunities exist within pharmaceutical companies.

Public health services are highly organized in Slovakia. The main Public Health Office is located in the capital, Bratislava, overseeing 38 Regional Public Health Offices that provide comprehensive public health services across all 79 districts of the country. Many of PhD graduates assume leadership roles within these key institutions. They also contribute their expertise to various health statistics institutions, such as the National Centre of Health Information, State Statistical Institution or Health Registers. These specialists in public health hold positions in different ministries including the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family. They are also involved in Educational School Departments, further advancing public health initiatives and policies across Slovakia.

Some graduates of the Faculty of Public Health participate in important international projects. One recently realized project was the “Doctoral Programmes in Public Health and Social Sciences (DPPHSS)”, where FPH acted as a co-director. This project was co-financed by EU funds and ran until 2021. The goal of the project was to enhance the scientific expertise of doctoral programme participants, specifically students at the third level of university education in public health and social sciences, focusing on the Caucasus region.

One of the methodologically significant tool for enhancing the quality of education at the doctoral level is the exchange programme under ERASMUS+, which facilitates exchanges for both teachers and students. Mutual consultations, seminars, and conferences within the research consortium on selected aspects of PhD programmes also contribute significantly to improving educational quality (10).

CONCLUSIONS

With the aging of population, longer life expectancy, and advancements in health care leading to more innovative and accessible treatments, healthcare costs are rising. The only feasible path to financial sustainability amidst this trend is to prioritize diseases prevention and promote healthy lifestyles. High-quality

and innovative education in public health plays a pivotal role in this endeavour. From a quality standpoint, it is essential to share experiences with various study programmes across the European region, and other universities. This sharing of knowledge enhances the effectiveness of public health education, ensuring that best practices and innovative approaches are adopted and adapted to address current and future healthcare challenges.

The Faculty of Public Health at SMU is one of the 107 full members of ASPHER community, which includes institutions from 43 different European countries. This community strives to improve the quality of public health education across Europe and collaborates with more than 10 other associate and networking countries outside Europe (3).

There should be more discussion about the importance of the quality of PhD studies at both national and international levels, and a comparison of different approaches. Well-developed countries should share their experiences of good teaching practices in postgraduate studies with those with lower incomes and fewer opportunities. This can be achieved through various international conferences, projects, or exchange programmes for university teachers and students, such as the Erasmus+ programme.

More than any time before, the idea expressed by Charles Everett Koop, an American paediatric surgeon and public health administrator known for his work on tobacco use, AIDS and abortion, as well as his support of the rights of children with disabilities, holds true: “Health care matters to all of us some of the time, public health matters to all of us all of the time”. This statement encapsulates the unique and essential role that the public health profession holds among other health professions and underscores its distinct focus and importance compared to other health careers (11).

Higher public health education develops the specialists in various fields, including disease investigation, environmental sciences, health administration, data analysis, health policy, and health education. Graduates work as health researchers, epidemiologists, environmental health and safety managers, health project and programme managers, health scientists, data analysts or biostatisticians, health economists, health educators, or district public health officers.

Conflicts of Interest

None declared

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