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“WE ARE LOOKING FOR GRADUATES WITH PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE“: FORUM STUDENTS–ENTERPRISES 2018 OFFERS A SOLUTION TO THE SLOVAK PARADOX

Mária Paľová – Mariana Zeleňáková*

Since 2012, every March or April, the French-Slovak University Institute (SFUI/IUFS), in close collaboration with the French Institute in Slovakia, with the support of the French-Slovak Chamber of Commerce and under the auspices of the Embassy of the French Republic in Slovakia, has been organising an event called the Forum Students-Enterprises. This Forum is an important venue for French-speaking students, for enterprises offering internship and employment opportunities and for universities training French-speaking students within various study programmes.

In Slovakia, France is the second most important foreign investor (disregarding the banking sector) with 390 enterprises and 35,000 employees. Nevertheless, French-speaking students with a French-Slovak profile, i.e. potential future employees speaking both French and Slovak, are not only in demand from French companies. They are also recruited by Slovak companies with French equity and by Slovak companies trading with France. By cooperating with the SFUI/IUFS, participating employers have access to a database of students and graduates who are looking for employment opportunities or are interested in professional internships in a French company in Slovakia or abroad. French companies cooperate with universities offering study programmes in the French language in order to support innovations in academia including double-degree study programmes aimed at finding

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synergies between educational content and the changing needs of the labour market. Universities associated with the SFUI/IUFS currently offer three double-degree undergraduate study programmes and nine double-degree graduate study programmes in relevant fields of study such as economics, trade, politics, communication, European studies and translation and interpretation studies. They also offer PhD. double-degree study programmes which create the preconditions for continuity in a common Slovak-French academic preparation framework (for further information, please visit <http://www.iufs.sk/sk/podniky>).

The development of this event, its content and the changing focus of each year's agenda reflect wider societal changes in Slovakia: business changes, changes in the labour market and changes in academia as well as changes in the field of science and research. These changes in the event's focus also correspond to the trends in the internationalisation of tertiary education. *"Higher education institutions are a part of the globalisation process. Therefore, tertiary education cannot be perceived in a purely national context. Universities represent the innovation potential of every single country. In consequence, we should endeavour to react to societal changes or even to anticipate them."* (Rošteková, 2018, p. 204)

In 2012 and 2013, the Forum targeted employment prospects for French-speaking students and the promotion of contacts between academia and French companies with a view to simplify the process of finding employees with a specific profile for a specific company. This also served the purpose of helping students understand that French language skills are one of the ways to increase their prospective employment opportunities. In its first two years, the Forum opened as a platform for communication between students and employers in both professional and informal settings.

In 2014 and 2015, the Forum focused on networking between study programmes designed for French-speaking students in Slovakia and the need to satisfy the highly selective profiles of graduates required by French enterprises present in Slovakia. It was seeking a method of academic preparation of French-speaking students, within the capability of the Slovak study programmes, in order to make them sufficiently competitive on the labour market. The cooperation with The Faculty of Management of the Comenius University and with the Faculty of Informatics and Information Technologies of the Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava during the process of organisation of the event attracted around one hundred students from all over the Slovak Republic. Additionally, the Forum was attended by twenty significant

employers searching for young French-speaking specialists to assist in their expansion and to help strengthen their position internationally. The participants in Forum 2015 were able to visit the brand-new premises of the very first Fablab in Slovakia.

In 2016 and 2017, the Forum added a new dimension to its initial scope – looking beyond representatives of enterprises and Slovak universities it targeted many more potential participants. Among them were the representatives of French universities, members of student associations, students of secondary grammar schools, students of French-oriented study programmes, fresh graduates and successful graduates of common French-Slovak study programmes already employed by enterprises using French as one of their communication languages. The underlying theme of Forum 2016 was the Energy policy in the EU. In 2017, the theme was the position of the French language in business in Slovakia and worldwide. The Forum continues to play a major role as a platform for interaction between enterprises, which are given an opportunity to find French-speaking graduates able to fill roles requiring active command of the French language, and students who are seeking jobs or internships. Using a combination of presentations and thematic workshops, it offers possibilities for development for all participants (for further information, please visit <https://www.institutfrancais.sk/fr/actualites/480/etudiants-entreprises-universites2017/> and <http://www.iufs.sk/fr/iufs/evenements/item/507-forum-etudiants-entreprises-2016>).

The enterprises are given an opportunity to show the types of activities and professions they offer, to attract interns having the required qualifications and to inform academics about future internship needs. The students are involved in debates with professionals and they are provided an overview of job offers and ideas on how to improve their chances of employment. Secondary school pupils are guided in the best way to choose their higher education institution and students of higher education institutions are given assistance in choosing a study profile within the credit system that corresponds to their future career. The students can also discover the types of study programmes and diplomas that are available at both the Slovak universities and at the French partner universities and also the possibilities for studying in France via scholarship programmes. The universities are given space for the presentation of their study programmes where they can meet potential candidates, coordinate their study programmes with the expectations of enterprises and enhance partnerships with both academia and business. This allows them to develop common study

programmes, double degrees, to involve students in business projects related to the solution of professional problems and to contact supervisors and writers of theses to develop informal connections.

For all participants, the last two years of the Forum were marked by a switch from reactivity to proactivity and by the anticipation of future needs in the field of both education and practice. *“The policies of internationalisation of tertiary education have gradually diversified. While at the very beginning, most of the attention was focused on student mobility, today we are witnessing new forms of internationalisation of academia, e.g. study programmes. [...] The internationalisation of the profiles of candidates is increasingly becoming a key competence on the labour market.”* (Rošteková, 2018, p. 205) If we manage to enhance and promote common Slovak-French study programmes and the possibilities of lifelong learning and professional development on an international scale, our efforts shall unquestionably have a positive impact on the economic growth and competitiveness of enterprises. Further innovations in the field of education and practice will mainly focus on technical, scientific and economic study programmes covering reliable and efficient communication using human and artificial intelligence.

The seventh meeting of the Forum revolved around these themes. For the very first time in its history, it took place in Košice, not in the capital city of Slovakia. On April 12, 2018, the Forum confirmed its role as a platform for synchronisation between supply and demand among enterprises, students and universities. The event drew attention to the theme of profession-oriented study programmes and more specifically, to employment-linked undergraduate and graduate study programmes. In a panel discussion, French experts explained the form of these programmes in France, the way in which they enabled a better reaction to the needs of enterprises by more targeted preparation of students for their future profession, and how fresh graduates then enhanced their employability on the labour market.

For those students who wish to find employment immediately after obtaining their graduate degree, the French universities and higher education institutions prepared some of their study programmes in an employment-linked form. This a major benefit as the students can acquire a significant amount of experience in the field even before graduation. This type of education is intended to interconnect a study specialisation with employment in companies, enterprises and institutions that have business activities in the field of specialisation so that the students acquire the competence and experience valued by employers. On

one hand, undergraduate and graduate profession-oriented study programmes promote the integration of students into the working environment. They put an emphasis on strengthening the real value of a graduate's profile on the day of obtaining his or her diploma. On the other hand, enterprises appreciate employees with specialisations and employment ambitions related to very specific working roles and with the ability to adapt to the work culture of an employer.

The complaints of students, substantiated or not, concern the fact that graduate education is too theoretical. Employers frequently claim that students graduate without being sufficiently prepared. Employment-linked study, especially in the second year of graduate studies, is an excellent solution for both parties. It enables a student to directly take up a job requiring specialised and management skills. Universities react to this type of impetus in order to keep pace with higher education institutions offering economic, business and technical education especially in the fields of management, logistics, financial services, audit, information technology, communication networks, energy and communication. New employment-linked study programmes have the flexibility to react to economic changes. By implementing this strategy, universities comply with the directives of the French government in the field of education reforms. (Arthuis, 2018)

An employment-linked study programme delivers targeted support to the development of relations between students, universities and employers. Students obtain a diploma of the same quality as diplomas in traditional study programmes, and, at the same time, study in excellent conditions: in small groups, being paid particular attention by teachers, by an assigned expert-practitioner from the field and by a thesis supervisor, working on a project corresponding to his or her personal profile related to future professional development – work which is also remunerated financially for the time spent in an enterprise or in an institution. Looking at the typical timetable pattern for these programmes, students spend two weeks working in an enterprise or in an institution followed by one week acquiring theoretical knowledge (the total number of hours is 500 – 600 over 16 weeks). This model requires exceptional coordination between the involved parties and places significant requirements with regard to the preparedness of teachers to follow the latest developments in the field of specialisation, as well as with regard to the theoretical preparedness of expert-practitioners. Students undertaking employment-linked education are aware of changes and innovations much earlier than students of traditional study programmes are. They conclude a fixed-term contract with an enterprise

or an institution. Its duration stretches from three months before entering employment-linked study to three months after its completion (trial period included). Once the contract has finished, the student is eligible for unemployment benefits and the term of the contract is eligible for pension insurance. The workload and duties of every student must be approved by thesis directors. In return, enterprises and institutions are entitled to financial compensation by the state and/or local government (for further information, please visit <http://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/pid25331/master.html>).

According to the survey by APEC (Agence Pour l'Emploi des Cadres), in 2015, 40% of employment-linked study programme graduates received a job offer from an enterprise or an institution where he or she “studied” as compared to 29% of students who worked there as interns during compulsory training only. By eight months after graduation, 83% of employment-linked study programme graduates were employed (out of which 58% had a contract of employment for an indefinite period, with a yearly income of € 28,800), compared to 76% of students of traditional study programmes (out of which 48% had a contract of employment for an indefinite period, with a yearly income of € 24,000) (according to the data provided by the Baromètre APEC Jeunes diplômé 2017, 2017, pp. 2, 4). These figures show that from the viewpoint of employability, professional preparation and study conditions, opting for employment-linked study programmes is a successful strategy.

The interest of the participants in the Forum and of the enterprises and universities associated in the SFUI/IUFS was intensified when hearing that employment-linked study programmes were taking root locally. The Faculty of Economics of the Technical University in Košice defined the first stage of such cooperation with the ISEM (Institut Supérieur d'Économie et Management) of the University of Nice Sophia Antipolis. The Slovak universities are trying to respond to the emerging needs of employers. The Technical University in Košice and the Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice offered their students an opportunity to participate in their research and innovative projects, presented at a common workshop titled ‘Technologies and Communication’ during the Forum, by concluding a work agreement. The form of research and innovative programmes fills an important gap, a loophole that profession-oriented study programmes would be able to close.

We believe firmly that the presentation of enterprises, their displays and the displays of universities during the Forum provided sufficient incentives and

possible partnerships for the development of employment-linked study programmes. The French-Slovak University Institute and all co-organisers of the event made a significant contribution to the discussion on a topic slowly gaining ground at the national level. New forms of education, production and consumption are the only way to successfully tackle global challenges. The Agenda 2030 objective for sustainable development (number 4) “*aims at equitable access to education and training in the periods following basic education, for young and adults, by means of equitable access to relevant education opportunities. Another new element of this objective is the notion of relevance of education in relation to the labour market and to the needs of civil society in today’s mutually interdependent and globalised world.*” (Ako rozumieť Cieľu udržateľného rozvoja 4. Vzdelávanie 2030, 2018, p. 8)

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