

VET during the Covid-19 crisis

A moderate experience of the Covid-19 pandemic in Slovakia is attributed to rapid and drastic measures aimed at social distancing.

The first case was detected on 6 March 2020, in Malacky an area outside Bratislava. The next day, public primary schools and school facilities in Malacky closed. The Bratislava self-governing region promptly decided to close all secondary schools, while the largest universities in Bratislava also decided the preliminary closure of universities and dormitories on 9 March. Following the declaration of the extraordinary situation and the state of emergency, all schools and school facilities were closed, and quarantine and social distancing rules were applied nationwide on 16 March. In a fast-track legislative procedure, amendments to education legislation were adopted with the consent of all political parties. Measures concerning labour relations, content and forms of education, and graduation procedure were the most urgent. On 25 March, the education ministry launched, in cooperation with third sector initiatives, a [‘crisis’ website](#), the aim of which was to disseminate information, recommendations and guidelines related to distance learning, and to provide digital education content to all learners. Later, this portal was redesigned and currently is managed by the National Institute for Education.

Labour relations

Wages for VET school teachers and trainers were not reduced. Distance learning was organised instead of face-to-face education. In the case of employees who were not teachers, such as cleaners and in-company trainers (nationally referred to as instructors), salaries could be reduced but no more than 60%. Training companies, which had to suspend training activities in dual learning on 16 March, could apply, through a [web portal](#), for employment support assistance to pay salaries of in-company trainers to a maximum 80% of average employee earnings.

Graduation procedure

The school year for the final grades in secondary schools, including VET, ended on 7 May. An administrative act of the examination commission suspended all types of school-leaving exams. Learner final grades were derived from an arithmetic average of the end-year marks from all grades and the half-yearly marks from the last two years in obligatory subjects and other relevant subjects for each respective programme. The suggested algorithm satisfied grammar schools more than VET, where the practical component of a school-leaving examination is substantial. The State Institute of Vocational Education suggested educational standards for [ISCED 353](#), [ISCED 354](#), [454](#) and [ISCED 554](#) programmes that had to be taken into account by schools when deciding on subjects relevant for calculating final marks for both theoretical and practical components of school-leaving examinations. Demonstration of practical skills was cancelled except for health school programmes. Learners had the right to ask for a face-to-face examination. Less than 1% of graduates from grammar schools and ISCED 354 VET programmes made use of this possibility.

Admission procedure to secondary schools

Entrance examinations for secondary schools were replaced by an administrative decision based on a formula calculating each learner’s total score; this was derived from marks in obligatory, specific and supplementary subjects, and some additional criteria set by individual schools. Schools could exceed ceilings prescribed by self-governing regions by a maximum of three new entrants. Learners who will fail to get into a secondary school based on their score will be administratively transferred to a school with free capacity by a decision

of the regional state authority until 28 August 2020. Although this decision should result from discussion with parents and school directors, this may lead to dissatisfaction and later efforts to change the school during the school year.

Content and forms of education

Teachers spontaneously started to offer distance learning by a variety of means. There are no exact data available, but video-communication platforms, such as Zoom or MS Teams, dominated over learning management systems (LMSs) such as Moodle. A high share of teachers started with a simple allocation of tasks via mail or regular teacher/parent communication instruments. Although digital education contents were offered within the above-mentioned one-stop-shop website, teachers often preferred their own digital contents. 6% to 14% of practical lessons could not be delivered.

Lessons learned from the closure of schools

- access to digital infrastructure is insufficient and varies substantially among schools, teachers and learners;
- although teaching materials were available, many of them were developed without sufficient testing in school practice;
- existing repositories need to be restructured to allow for more user-friendly access and filtering;
- access to online education varies; poor and large families are deprived of equal access to learning in terms of quality connectivity, equipment and the cost of using large volumes of data.

The Association of Secondary VET Schools suggested use of leasing instruments to secure equal opportunities for online and offline distance learning. An operating lease should allow for the provision of hardware and software, access to data and related services adjusted to each education programme without advance payment and for reasonable monthly fees. The labour ministry should offer a specific digital contribution (up to 75% of a monthly leasing fee) in addition to regular child allowance, and the education ministry should offer a specific digital contribution to pedagogues equal to 100% of a monthly leasing fee. This operating lease is expected to contribute to improving school-family cooperation and to guarantee up-to-date services through renewing the lease after a four-year period.

Juraj Vantuch, vantuch2011@gmail.com; Dagmar Jelinkova, dagmar.jelinkova@siov.sk