

## POLICY MAKING IN SLOVAKIA

### The application of challenge-based education and collaboration with external stakeholders

#### The transformation of the course since 2019

I started teaching the ‘Policy Making in Slovakia’ course at the Department of Political Science, Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava, in the summer semester of the 2018/2019 academic year. It follows a course entitled ‘Public Policy’, and before 2019 it had been taught in an old-fashioned way. Its content was descriptive rather than practical or challenge-based, and students used to receive an overview on who was involved in various public policies in Slovakia and in what way.

I understood that there was an opportunity to improve things. In 2019, I initiated an intensive collaboration between the faculty and the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Civil Society Development. These parties signed a memorandum on mutual collaboration,<sup>1</sup> stating in Art. 2, par. 2 that ‘[b]oth sides of the memorandum will participate in the preparation and implementation of courses, especially the course entitled “Policy Making in Slovakia”.’

This collaboration immediately bore fruit. In the following semesters, and in cooperation with the office, we organised several discussions for students on issues linked to policy making challenges, obstacles, and benefits, where representatives of various public authorities and NGOs took part. In addition, since I was the leader of a monitoring group responsible for the early assessment of several pilot projects that were co-funded by the office, we prepared a two-volume publication entitled ‘Participatory Processes in Practice: A Reader of Participatory Policy Making’.<sup>2</sup> This work contains valuable insights based on real experiences with policy making in Slovakia as well as an assessment section which helps students better understand the complex nature of policy making and which allows them to compare theoretical knowledge with practical experiences.

I consider this collaboration to be crucial for the further development of this course. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when social distance policies were applied, I could use the described and assessed pilot projects for an easier explanation of the various challenges, obstacles, and benefits of policy making, and students considered them to be very helpful. Even though student feedback was positive, I was not satisfied with the outcomes; my vision went beyond them. I felt that students were kept outside of real policy making and were just passive observers. This led me to another shift in approach. Instead of learning through observing the experiences of others, I transformed the course in a way which allowed students to be directly involved in real policy making. Thanks to this approach, students could gain new knowledge, experience, and skills; improve competences; and build their own capacities through personal engagement. For this purpose, I initiated additional collaboration with the Bratislava municipal authority and the Metropolitan Institute of Bratislava (MIB) in 2022.

The city and the MIB found the course interesting, and they liked the concept I introduced to them. At the same time, Martina Benzoni Baláž started to assist me as my new doctoral student. Her contributions have been highly valuable and enriching since the very beginning of our collaboration. In addition to discussions with policy makers,<sup>3</sup> decision makers,<sup>4</sup> and representatives of other stakeholders<sup>5</sup> (e.g. NGOs and the media), we agreed with the MIB that they would propose semester assignments for our students.

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<sup>1</sup>[https://www.minv.sk/swift\\_data/source/rozvoj\\_obcianskej\\_spolocnosti/participacia/2020/memorandum%20o%20spolu\\_praci%20\\_MINV%20SR%20\\_%20FiFUK.pdf](https://www.minv.sk/swift_data/source/rozvoj_obcianskej_spolocnosti/participacia/2020/memorandum%20o%20spolu_praci%20_MINV%20SR%20_%20FiFUK.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Klimovský, D. (ed.) 2000. Participatory Processes in Practice: A Reader of Participatory Policy Making. 1st ed. Bratislava. Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic. ISBN 978-80-89051-51-9. Online at:

[https://www.minv.sk/?ros\\_participacia\\_publicacie\\_participativne\\_procesy\\_v\\_praxi](https://www.minv.sk/?ros_participacia_publicacie_participativne_procesy_v_praxi)

Klimovský, D. (ed.) 2000. Participatory Processes in Practice: A Reader of Participatory Policy Making. 2nd ed. Bratislava. Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic. ISBN 978-80-89051-63-2. Online at:

[https://www.minv.sk/?ros\\_participacia\\_publicacie\\_participativne\\_procesy\\_v\\_praxi2](https://www.minv.sk/?ros_participacia_publicacie_participativne_procesy_v_praxi2)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/C3h1-oUqqTe/?igsh=aW9mZjNrd25rc3kw>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/CqDbWzwqSHD/?igsh=MXV3NDRwand3OXJsOQ==>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/C472id7Kh9M/?igsh=MWFxNnF2MmtlZXJ3ag==>

We started in the summer semester of the 2022/2023 academic year.<sup>6</sup> The students worked in small groups (with a maximum of three students) and delivered their contributions at the end of the semester.<sup>7</sup> Feedback from students and from the MIB was essential at this stage because it helped us to understand that there was still room to move further. Our intention was to achieve the highest learning impact possible and enhance the attractiveness of this course for students. In the 2023/2024 academic year, we included a short training session on presentation skills<sup>8</sup> and a field trip<sup>9</sup> in the semester programme. Thanks to the coaching provided by the ‘Innovative Teaching Methods’ course held at the faculty’s Department of Pedagogical Science, we implemented a new initiative. Martina developed a project to involve students more closely in course creation and to strengthen their role as a partner in both teaching and learning. Students actively participated in creating the evaluation process of the course. In cooperation with the MIB,<sup>10</sup> students developed a set of assessment criteria for their own outputs. This meant that they directly defined for themselves the criteria which would be taken into consideration in the final assessment. This was a challenging activity, but the experience ultimately helped students become far more familiar with the MIB’s requirements and expectations, and they behaved much more accountably regarding the overall quality of their outputs.

In order to achieve an even more realistic experience, we organised a public presentation forum in cooperation with the MIB where the students presented their policy papers (or parts of them) at the end of the semester.<sup>11</sup> During this event, they received feedback from the MIB as well as from others.<sup>12</sup> This was a great opportunity for students to see and learn how the requirements and expectations of policy makers differed from those of academics. In addition to the standard ECTS, participation in this course was acknowledged with certificates (Annex 1). We also started collaboration with Slovak MEPs to implement a reward system in order to motivate students, and the authors of the best papers received an invitation to visit the European Parliament in Brussels or Strasbourg.<sup>13</sup>

This innovative approach involves situations where students face real-world challenges that differ from the traditional classroom environment. By engaging students in intended or ongoing city-level projects, we aim to empower them in their learning and allow them to develop key competences through personal experience. The main deliverable for this course is a policy paper which is developed by each group throughout the semester. The assignments from the MIB require the application of a multi-disciplinary approach and creativity, and students can choose their assignments in compliance with their own preferences. Recent assignments have focused on issues such as sustainable local tourism, climate change, youth policy, the brain drain, and modern communication tools in local transport. Each assignment consists of a set of MIB requirements and expectations. Students have to apply common methods and are encouraged to go beyond them. They learn from each other. The teachers facilitate the whole process and support both individual and group initiatives taken by the students. Students have to develop their own arguments to defend the proposed measures, consider a set of counterarguments and possible risks, and convince the MIB representatives that their proposals are innovative and applicable for the city. The teachers encourage further collaboration between the MIB and students in order to improve the delivered policy papers and proposed strategies beyond the scope of the course. The MIB also uses this opportunity for the identification of future interns, which motivates students to do their best.

## **A reflection on learning and teaching**

Feedback is a fundamental element of the learning process, and we employ a few monitoring and ex-post assessment methods. Thanks to monitoring, we can be assured that students have understood assignments and the importance of every individual step that leads to the delivery of final outputs. Within monitoring, students also evaluate and reflect on their own and others’ actions alongside the teaching methods. This means that we

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/Co7dNJYKlRk/?igsh=b3lldGRyNWhjbXNp>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/CrdIBXKkD2/?igsh=bmt6NTA4MzM3NDZ2>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/C5x4qUULKGT/?igsh=dHQ0NjE2bmt3ejd6>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/C3kSjHxq2FE/?igsh=NzF2aXZ0dmJvZTRI>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/C30V6wILZa7/?igsh=dWlwNW9tZGFudDc3>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/C66KX5mKKRk/?igsh=NzI5czBhYjJ6Z2Zy>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C66FPvFKERW/?igsh=MXF5eTRreG1rNW9uZg==>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cw5lZBsrnHC/?igsh=MWNsb3MwbXEzN2ndA==> & <https://www.instagram.com/p/CxPi4gIKlxR/?igsh=eXV3M2lIbW16MDdz>

always make feedback a two-way approach to encourage a reflection on the learning and teaching outcomes. As for the method, we apply the GROW (Goals–Reality–Options–Wrap Up) model, which helps the teacher and the students in following the set goals. From the students' point of view, it is essential to gradually recognise their progress from the perspective of their own goals, identify volatile options within various stages of their work, improve their capability to draw significant conclusions, and make the right decisions.

Ex-ante assessment consists of a few activities. At the end of the semester, we facilitate an open roundtable feedback session where everyone gets a voice. Similarly, an open feedback forum is facilitated immediately after the public presentations of students' final papers. All three parties (students, teachers, and the MIB) are actively involved in this process. This means that teachers and representatives of the MIB evaluate the students' presentations while students also share their feedback as equal partners. In addition to these open forms, feedback is collected through a regular anonymous student survey which is organised at the end of each semester. The students' comments which were collected at the end of the summer semesters in the 2023/2024 and 2022/2023 academic years are given in Annex 2. This year we also used a Google Questionnaire tool to collect feedback from students who had participated in our course previously. Our main intention was to see whether this course had some positive long-term impacts on their competences. Their feedback can be found in Annex 3.

Throughout the semester, three classes were dedicated to presenting partial results and receiving peer feedback, which provides valuable learning through diverse perspectives and constructive criticism. This format brings value in the form of receiving feedback and gives students sufficient tools to self-evaluate their own work. The final students' papers are evaluated by the MIB's representatives based on assessment criteria created by the students themselves. By giving students the possibility to create their own assessment criteria, based on which the external stakeholder then evaluates their work, the students become a part of the process, co-creators of the course, and key partners.

Finally, the learning process and the applied teaching methods are openly discussed and evaluated with partners (e.g. the MIB, the Bratislava municipal authority, and selected NGOs). This is an important element in building long-term partnerships based on mutual trust, and it shows a degree of respect for their needs and expectations (Annexes 4–7).

Significant improvements have been observed in scores across all the student outputs. The rise in average scores – from 17.17 (out of 28) points in the 2022/2023 year, assessed ex-post using the same assessment criteria, to 18.83 points mid-semester and 24.67 points at the end of the 2023/2024 academic year – highlights the positive impact of the challenged-based education strategies implemented throughout the course. This improvement aligns with feedback from the MIB, which commended two out of five groups for their outstanding results, stating, 'In both cases, we appreciate the professional execution' and indicating that 'we will be happy to share these outputs with colleagues and the city's leadership.'

### **Developing ENLIGHT competences**

Students who participate in this course develop and improve several generic competences. Thanks to their active involvement in policy making and challenge-based education, they develop critical thinking and a problem-solving approach while creating and discussing their own policy papers, created on the basis of a research challenge provided by an external stakeholder. Their papers ought to meet high standards in terms of understanding assignments.

A great emphasis is placed on innovativeness. Both teachers and representatives of the MIB encourage students to go beyond traditional solutions and come up with novel ideas. The assignments are original in terms of the relevant policy fields and the stages of the policy cycle. Students cannot use a 'copy-paste' approach. Instead of this, they must show creativity; various unconventional and alternative proposals are welcomed. In addition, a set of assessment criteria includes innovativeness and creativity as highly appreciated elements of students' work. In this context, we especially appreciate the active involvement of the MIB in the final evaluation of students' papers. This involvement has essentially enriched the evaluation process, and students received academic feedback from academics as well as from policy makers which focused on innovativeness, creativeness, and the applicability of students' proposals.

Anticipatory thinking is another essential competence that has been developed in this course because students focus their proposals on the (sometimes volatile) urban environment. In addition, they have to become

familiar with all recent societal trends (e.g. demographic trends – especially ageing, the brain drain, the labour market, and the rapid digitalisation of public service delivery). Their proposals have to reflect these areas since a set of assessment criteria includes the practical applicability of the proposed solutions.

Individual assignments vary a lot. The teachers support intercultural competences and diversity awareness among students, who are expected to avoid undesired cultural prejudices or social stereotypes. On this matter, both teachers and MIB representatives are ready to discuss these topics with students in the case of any doubt and advise them on improving competences. Active involvement in real policy making helps a lot because students have a sense of responsibility; in some cases, they have to recognise and critically reflect on their own values, and they have to understand and respect the high ethical standards of policy making at the municipal level of Slovakia's capital city. It is important to stress that in each assignment, students need to draw on international experiences. They often have to search for suitable international cases where they can find a certain inspiration. A correct understanding of these cases and the identification of similarities and differences in comparison with Bratislava has implicitly improved their intercultural competence.

Students organise their work in small groups because our aim is to use group dynamics to improve other students' competences. They have to collaborate within their own groups as well as with the MIB and other external stakeholders. This collaboration requires a broad use of diverse communication because communication with various external stakeholders requires a different approach to communication within working groups, which can be rather informal. Students understand the importance of the comprehensibility of communication. Our approach also challenges students' leadership competences. Since they are fully responsible for the division of tasks within their own groups and for the timely delivery of the required outputs, they have to act proactively for the sufficient quality of these outputs (particularly the final papers), adhere to the principles of time management, and show a capability to make decisions at the right time and coordinate their activities. The development of leadership competences is driven by a competitive environment because the best working group is rewarded with attractive incentives (e.g. an invitation to the European Parliament). The competitive nature of the environment is enhanced because the representatives of collaborating partners, including the MIB, offer various internships for the students. As a result, there is an extra motivation to do one's best.

### **Replicability in the ENLIGHT community**

In this course, we directly apply elements of challenged-based education and encourage students to act independently and responsibly, employ their creativity, and invent innovative and unconventional solutions. We consider our students the future agents of change, and through this course we would like to improve their readiness to tackle the challenges of today and tomorrow. With an aim to achieve the improvement of relevant student competences, we apply a learning-by-doing method, whereby students are actively involved in local policy making at the Bratislava municipal authority. At the end of the course, students are able to identify problems, analyse them, develop innovative solutions, and prepare policy papers.

Partnerships between ENLIGHT universities and cities as well as regional partners are vital for the ENLIGHT community. The main community's emphasis is on the development of innovative courses and R&I synergies around real-life challenges emerging in local contexts. From this perspective, this course as well as its main elements is replicable within the whole ENLIGHT community as well as in various study fields (e.g. public policy, economics, management, public administration, political science, social work, urban/spatial planning, and environmental studies). The ENLIGHT universities are located in cities where various innovative solutions are adopted, and the empowerment and active engagement of young people in policy making through such courses is a way to support student growth, develop new and innovative solutions to public problems, enhance city communities, and ultimately improve the quality of life.

In our roadmap for the following years, there is an intention to make this course international and invite international students to take part and share their knowledge, experiences, and visions with Slovak students while also developing their own skills and key competences. If this course is replicated at other ENLIGHT universities, it will create a unique opportunity to interconnect these courses and help city and regional partners use the great potential of university students and develop common innovative solutions. In this context, it will undoubtedly strengthen various multi-sectoral partnerships within the whole ENLIGHT community.