



INTERVIEW

ARE YOU SERIOUS ABOUT PSYCHOLOGY? STUDY IT IN ENGLISH

According to the data of the Slovak Centre of Scientific and Technical Information the study of psychology attracted more than 2,500 new applicants in 2019 alone, half of whom were admitted. Interest in the study of the "science of the soul" began to grow about ten years ago. At that time psychology at Comenius University could only be studied in Slovak. Today, however, the situation is different. The recently established study programme of Social and occupational psychology at the Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences of CU (FSES CU) is celebrating its first birthday. It is taught entirely in English and aims to prepare its graduates for work in any area of psychology not just in our own country, but abroad. In this interview, the programme's advisor Dr. Katarína Greškovičová speaks about the course which is unique in more ways than just the world language in which it is taught.

What makes this new English-based study programme, 'Social and Work Psychology' distinctive – apart from the fact that it is taught in a world language?

The programme is unique because of the subjects it includes and because the teachers are all experienced practitioners and researchers who studied or taught abroad – in the U.S.,

in China, Germany, Ireland or Australia. Another distinguishing feature is the fact that an entire semester of the final year is set aside for a 13-week internship, which allows the students to become more completely involved in the secrets of practical psychology at an institution of their choice, acting as more than a mere "visitor". The style of teaching, likewise, is exceptional. Because this English-based programme has fewer students, those of us who teach it (and myself as the mentor) can devote more focussed and individual attention to the students. We have more room for communication, discussion and targeted feedback. All of that means our students can progress faster and acquire more knowledge and skills.

Who is the primary intended audience for the program? Does it accept applicants from abroad?

Yes, foreign applicants are welcome just like young people from Slovakia who want to continue studying or working abroad after graduating from university. These are our two main target groups. In general, however, the program is designed for anyone who is interested in psychology and wants to study it in English. To be honest, if one's really serious about psychology it is impossible to avoid English later anyway – it is basically the language of communication among psychologists. Without English, one would find it very difficult to navigate the field of psychology or keep up with the latest trends.

What are the conditions of admission?

An application needs to be sent in by 31 August, 2021, accompanied by a language certificate (FCE, TOEFL, etc.). As an alternative one can elect to

do an English SCIO test. The admission procedure fee needs to be paid and a proof of graduation of a secondary school is also required. If the applicant studied at a secondary school outside the Slovak Republic, they need to have the certificate of graduation recognized by the Slovak Ministry of Education.

What if I'm interested in psychology but I'm not sure my English is sufficient? What advice will you give me?

At the moment English proficiency of our students is diverse. In our case, the language is not the goal but a tool of communication. Similarly to the course in Slovak, students in the English programme receive assignments and need to elaborate reflection papers, seminar papers and give presentations in English. Consequently they need to master English at a certain level (B1 or higher) from the start in order to communicate their ideas and acquire knowledge, both in writing and orally. However, our teachers are patient and imperfect English should not discourage anyone from studying with us. You can be sure that your communication skills will improve immensely every week from the very first seminar. At the beginning your study may seem difficult but with every completed task you will be able to express yourself in the foreign language with greater ease and communication will gradually become second nature to you. Improved command of English will be a beneficial side-effect of your studies.

How many students are currently studying in this program?

We only opened the programme in this academic year, and all our students are in the first year of their bachelor studies. The fact that we obtained

accreditation fairly recently and then the pandemic struck means we there are now 11 students including one foreign student. This year, however, we expect an increased number of applications from abroad and one of our goals is to end up with a balanced group in which foreign students might even be a majority. Yet another unique aspect of the English program is the student diversity. It helps introduce new insights and experiences into the teaching process, allowing the students to share in the growth together.

What makes the study of psychology in English in Slovakia attractive to foreign applicants?

We already mentioned some unique traits of this programme which strives to reflect the needs of society and focuses on building a connection among theory, practice and research, but Comenius University could be an attraction in its own right. After all, we are a modern European institution which usually makes top 2% of world universities in international rankings. In addition, although FSES CU was only formed in 2002, it has already managed to establish itself as the best faculty in the field of 'other social sciences' in Slovakia, while also enjoying a good reputation abroad. We may be one of the smaller faculties in terms of student numbers but that simultaneously leads to a friendly and open atmosphere in which students are more than just anonymous statistics. Their creative activities have made our faculty particularly dynamic. Last but not least, the location of our university in the heart of Europe might be attractive to foreign applicants who will have many opportunities for discovery.

What about the content of the study programme – which areas of psychology (apart from social and work psychology) will the students encounter during their studies? Which subjects are the most popular?

Students will study general psychology, developmental psychology, neurophysiology, cognitive psychology, organizational psychology, educational and school psychology, clinical psychology, counselling psychology and research in psychology. Our first year students complete five compulsory subjects in the first semester. Their feedback tells us that they were most interested in neurophysiology which studies the functions of the central nervous system. Interesting subjects are planned for

this semester, including, among others, social and psychology skills training, which is one of the gold standards in the study plan. I would also like to mention the psychology of health, psychology of language, psychology of drug use, psychology of creativity or a career club to name a few.

How would you describe the system of the study? What can students expect – apart from the five compulsory subjects, give or take, per semester?

Every week, students have classes where they receive various assignments. They are expected to turn them in on time. We place a great emphasis on discussion and feedback because we know that this is how their abilities and skills improve. They often solve real-world problems and need to handle controversial topics, honing their scientific and critical thinking. Both assessment and knowledge acquisition in the subjects are continuous. In some subjects, however, students will not be able to avoid end of term exams during which we'll verify the level and quality of their knowledge. In the second year, they choose the topic of their thesis. At the end of their studies in the third year, they defend the thesis and take state exams in three subjects: general, social and work psychology.

Do students select a specialization during their studies?

No, they do not specialize in this programme. The subject curriculum is standard and allows the graduates to further specialize in any area of psychology, i.e. occupational, clinical, counselling, forensic, transport, psychotherapy, school psychology, etc.

At the beginning of the interview you mentioned that the students complete a 13-week internship in the final year. What is the internship like and where can it be performed?

We are very open and flexible about the students' internships. Students can go virtually anywhere their hearts take them as much as the situation permits. Of course, they can also stay in Slovakia. The internship can be in Slovak, English or any other language. Students also have the opportunity to choose an internship through the Erasmus+ programme. The country of their internship is less important than what they want to learn in practice, what their goal is and whether the chosen institution can deliver it. Therefore, the first important step is to carefully

plan the entire internship and be aware of the expected outcomes early on. This planning takes place in the winter semester of the second year. Students choose the area of psychology in which they would like to serve as an intern and subsequently we communicate with the chosen institution and resolve all documentary formalities.

I read that the program focuses on practical experience, critical thinking and research. How has the current pandemic affected teaching and how can practical experience be acquired online?

Online teaching is a challenge for us who teach the English programme but it is challenging for education in general. We are fortunate to have the maximum support of our institution and various other organizations. This applies to distance tuition training which is available to us, teachers. That is a very important element. The dynamics and flow of online tuition are different and exercises need to be converted or reinvented, but we can manage just fine. In our case, we can focus on practical experience even online because psychology is not so much about physically travelling and being present somewhere else. The concept of practice involves the solution of real-world issues, analysis of specific situations, teaching through case studies and such. Apart from that, our current world operates largely online anyway, so online is actually a great space for practice, right? As for research, that can also be designed and implemented online. Whether it is possible and appropriate to carry out research online depends, of course, on the type and goal of that research.

Since we mentioned research – please give us an example of what you or your colleagues are currently researching in collaboration with the students.

There is an ongoing research into the confidence of Slovaks in COVID-19 measures, but also into how citizens perceive the threat of the coronavirus and how are they coping with the pandemic from a psychological point of view. There is also a project studying how secondary school students discern credible news, a project examining intercultural aspects of compassion, self-compassion and self-criticism, a project which studies the relationships and organizational behaviour in the workplace or a study into women's experience of maternity care. As you can see, the topics we

cover are really diverse.

What are my chances in the real world after I graduate from this programme? Will my degree from Comenius University be valid in other countries of the world?

By completing the bachelor level the student acquires theoretical knowledge of basic and applied psychological disciplines and basic methodological procedures in psychological sciences. The content and form of the curriculum lead the students to acquire knowledge and skills which they can later apply both in the practical world and in continued study towards a Master degree. The graduate can choose to continue studying for a Master of psychology or related fields, specializing in any area of psychology. If you want to study abroad you need to know the study recognition criteria of your chosen country. However, the feedback from our graduates confirms that they encounter little problems with that. Our graduates also find work in both the public and private sectors. They are qualified for the area of human resources and can consequently participate in the development of staff policies and procedures, contributing to the stabilization and development of employees in various jobs. They can manage and develop the social and organizational aspects which then affect the quality of life of individuals, teams and organizations.

Can a graduate of this programme continue with doctoral studies at the faculty?

Yes, the continuation is seamless. We are working on an accreditation for a Master programme in English and the

accreditation of an English doctoral programme is advancing as well. This will give our bachelors a chance to continue their studies easily.

Let's say I am an undecided secondary school student who considers going for psychology. What do you think I should consider before applying to avoid studying just for the sake of studying?

In the first place, give yourself an honest answer to the question whether you enjoy working with people, or have had any experience where you could see if you're cut out for a helping profession. At the same time be aware of the fact that a psychologist uses himself or herself as a tool and faces the prospect of continuous self improvement. This process begins at school and continues after graduation. A psychologist should be open to new options and should creatively seek solutions. At the same time they should approach ideas, thoughts, theories and experiences critically. They should have a strong moral bearing in life.

I expect you need to explain the difference between a psychologist, a psychotherapist and a psychiatrist quite often. Do you remember any other such misunderstandings or myths that the lay public associates with psychology?

A frequent myth is that a psychologist sees inside the peoples' heads and can evaluate them instantly while automatically forming a professional opinion about them and diagnosing them. This prejudice can make people feel vulnerable, threatened and distrustful. Or quite the opposite – they will tell you everything about

themselves right away, because they expect advice and immediate help. That is another typical expectation of clients – they want to hear advice, get a quick and simple solution and they expect the psychologist to produce a miracle pill which solves all their issues. But the truth is, we have neither pills nor X-ray vision, nor laser eyes.

How did you get attracted to psychology? Will you tell us how the study of psychology changed you?

When I was in the third grade of secondary school I selected psychology as a subject of the IB Diploma Programme (*which is a two-year educational program in a foreign language for students aged 16 to 19, culminating in an internationally recognized qualification for university studies – editor's note*) at the Juraj Hronec Gymnasium in Bratislava. During that course we studied many great psychologists. It definitely caught my interest and since I gravitated towards the helping professions anyway, I thought the choice was fairly logical. During my study I gradually moved away from the clinical specialisation (which is probably the first choice for many students) and focused on working with the general population instead. The study definitely changed me because by definition it makes one get to know oneself and develop one's own personality. Apart from learning a lot and developing myself I had the chance to meet many great people who enriched me immensely be it my teachers or classmates. And last but not least, the university gave me a great husband, with whom we have been walking the path of life together since our final exams.



Mgr. Katarína Greškovičová, PhD.

In 2004 she graduated in psychology at the Faculty of Arts of Comenius University. In 2016, she successfully defended her PhD in pedagogical, counselling and school psychology at the Pan-European University. She has worked at the Institute of Applied Psychology of the FSES. Her specialization is social psychology and in her research she studies topics like the importance of relationship attachment in adulthood, in partner relations and in the workplace, or the importance of postpartum bonding between parents and children. Since 2015 she has been the national coordinator of the "Babies Born Better" project, which aims to map women's experiences of childbirth.