

# Elective courses at The University of Economics in Bratislava: Initiating Cooperation with the Private Sector

Bratislava, Slovakia





# General Information

<b>Title</b>	Elective courses at The University of Economics in Bratislava	
<b>Pitch</b>	Initiating Cooperation with the Private Sector	
<b>Organisation</b>	The University of Economics in Bratislava	
<b>Country</b>	Slovakia	
<b>Author</b>	Dr. Samo Pavlin (University of Ljubljana)	
<b>Nature of interaction</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Collaboration in R&D	<input type="checkbox"/> Lifelong learning
	<input type="checkbox"/> Commercialisation of R&D results	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Joint curriculum design and delivery
	<input type="checkbox"/> Mobility of staff	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Mobility of students
	<input type="checkbox"/> Academic entrepreneurship	<input type="checkbox"/> Student entrepreneurship
	<input type="checkbox"/> Governance	<input type="checkbox"/> Shared resources
<b>Supporting mechanism</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Strategic	
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Structural	
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Operational	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Policy	
<b>Summary</b>	<p>Slovak University of Economics in Bratislava runs about 20 accredited elective courses per year in cooperation with several well-known companies, such as Dell, IBM, Adient, Lenovo, PriceWaterhouseCoopers, with the coordination of the American Chamber of Commerce. The course duration is between 6 - 12 weeks, which in some cases can be extended by internships, and comprises promotion of the course among students, assignment of credits, defining active learning methods, and quality evaluation. These elective courses, which are offered in English, provide students with generic competencies which are not usually part of the regular curriculum and are inevitably important for graduates' transition to labour market and professional success. The most prominent feature of the courses is that they are to a large extent initiated and delivered by companies.</p>	



# Introduction & Overview

## 1. BACKGROUND

The University of Economics in Bratislava (UEBA) is a public higher education institution with seven faculties in the fields of economics, business and management. The UEBA comprises more than 12,000 students who are provided with higher education programmes at the bachelors, masters and doctoral levels. The university is the country's oldest university in economic sciences and provides a good background and basis for university-business cooperation (UBC) with its reputation and tradition<sup>1</sup>.

The university mostly cooperates with multinational companies, but also smaller companies and companies based in Eastern Central Europe that are motivated to work together with the university.

For this reason, the university has faculties in both Bratislava and Košice, the second largest city in Slovakia. Thus, they can focus on the two main business centres for developing possible cooperation.

Due to competition from renowned international universities that also attract Slovak students, the university decided to extend its basis for UBC and provide more attractive study programmes. In addition to theoretical foundations and practical seminars, the university tries to include in the study process practitioners or experts from the business world, who are also well accepted by the students. The university management is increasingly aware that the university should not be isolated from the outer world, thus, it is very important to involve students and give them a chance to work with experts from companies on joint projects via elective courses. On the other hand, practical orientation of study programmes are desired by other stakeholders as well, especially by companies that need graduates with specific skills.

Both the university management and involved companies believe that generic competencies are very important for professional success in the business world, yet, they are highly underestimated in the existing national education system. One of the most relevant mode of UBC which is also a subject of this case study is accredited elective courses that are coordinated by the university and implemented by experts from private sector companies. The UEBA is also well connected with more than 80,000 alumni who also provide good connections with business.

## 2. OBJECTIVES AND MOTIVATIONS

During the past few years the UEBA changed the isolated path of Slovak universities and started to open its doors to the big international companies that settled in Bratislava in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Since they are the main employers of UEBA graduates, especially those from the field of economics, it was natural to move closer together and start developing a

mutual educational process. The university management has become aware that it is essential to provide students not only with the theory but also practical knowledge what comprises real-life experiences from the business world. UEBA has ensured this by including experts from practice at different stages of its teaching activities.

In this context, the main aim of the elective courses is to provide students with skills required by the business world. The existing Slovak education system does not provide support for the acquisition of these skills at a sufficient level. Despite the professional knowledge and experience the students gain through their education, they lack the soft skills needed to function successfully in the world of work. Moreover, they lack the most up-to-date knowledge about the requirements of the labour market, such as the high demand for employees in business shared services sector in Slovakia.

From the industry perspective, the main motivation to cooperate with the university is fulfilling the requirements of corporate social responsibility and establishing a long-term strategy of physical presence on the university campus to promote their brand among students and graduates. Moreover, a vast number of current employees in these companies are graduates of UEBA, who maintain strong feelings towards their university ready to give back. Another important motivation factor for UBC for the companies is the possible recruitment of new employees.

The practice of combining theory with practice is a motivational factor for students who are willing to engage in the elective courses along with the brand and good reputation of the co-operating companies.

### 3. STAKEHOLDERS

The described UBC involves two main groups of stakeholders:

- ▶ Slovak students of all levels and study fields, and foreign students (mainly of 1<sup>st</sup>-cycle degree bachelor's programmes);
- ▶ International and national companies, with a special role played by the American Chamber of Commerce and its Business Service Centre Forum, with its members

The American Chamber of Commerce in Slovakia (AmCham)<sup>ii</sup> includes over 330 international and Slovak companies, including many of the largest and most important firms in Slovakia. Of this number, approximately 23 percent are American companies, 42 percent are Slovak companies and 35 percent have other nationalities. The described courses are offered in partnership with corporate leaders, including Dell, IBM, Adient (formerly known as Johnson Controls), Lenovo, PriceWaterhouseCoopers, O2, Hewlett Packard, Amazon, Uber and Siemens, together with smaller Slovakia-based companies like Sesame, TPA, etc.



# Implementation

## 4. INPUTS

Stakeholders that provide human and financial input can be best described on two levels:

- ▶ *at the university level:* the Centre for North American Studies (CNAS) as part of the Vice-rectorate for International Relations; and the Faculty of Business Management, and the Faculty of Economic Informatics that also offer accredited courses in cooperation with companies
- ▶ *at the private sector level:* the international and national companies, the American Chamber of Commerce and its Business Service Centre Forum, with its members.

The elective courses engage academics only occasionally since their main purpose is to provide students with a practical perspective. The academic quality of an elective course is assured by an executive director of the CNAS. The university management is informed about the content of courses, the students' feedback and the feedback from the company representatives who enables the context and conditions for implementation of these activities at the administrative level.

The companies' participation is voluntary – the companies and their employees are not paid for delivering the courses. Companies are responsible for delivering sessions that need common planning of the course objectives, learning activities and assessment tasks and are coordinated by a university representative. Companies also have an important role in considering feedback from students and session leaders along with redesigning and upgrading future courses. The experts from companies who give lectures have varied profiles and positions— for example, the human resources course is typically lectured by the HR manager of an HR partner, an arrangement that depends on the availability of employees within the involved companies.

The courses are delivered on the university's premises, and occasionally on company premises due to students demand to have the opportunity to visit the companies.

To present an example, the course called "Management of Global Business" is delivered by Dell company and run by Dell's experts from various units (together with a coordinator from UEBA) who create the content, provide the syllabi and communicate with the university representatives. Inside the company, there is a group of talent pool employees who voluntarily signed up to teach the course at the university. Thus, students can meet 10 to 12 different Dell employees during the whole semester, not only one lecturer.

## 5. ACTIVITIES

The provision of elective courses started with the IBM company, with one employee instructing the whole semester. Today the UEBA coordinates 20 elective courses with a range of employees with different profiles and positions within the company. The identification of generic competencies required by the employers is mainly done by the companies, and with the coordination of the AmCham. These competencies include team work, ability to work under stress, presentation skills, writing effective emails, preparing case studies, consulting for the business world, etc.

Confirmation and operationalisation of the initiated elective courses is followed by discussions on the learning objectives of the possible course at the university. The university in cooperation with companies also formalise the learning activities, the course duration, promotion of the course among students, assignment of credits, identification of active learning modes, and assessment methods. The course length is 6 or 12 weeks depending on the company preferences, and for any course to be worth of 3 ECTS credit points, the course must meet 18 hours per semester. This process, from the initial idea to the development of the whole course, usually lasts one year.

The main generator of elective courses is CNAS. It offers 10 courses per academic year (individual faculties offer about six of such courses), each taken by an average of 20 students. Courses offered through CNAS are for the students of all faculties and eight from these courses are directly taught by business representatives. Other courses are included directly in the curricula of bachelor's or master's programmes of individual faculties. Examples of the most important elective courses are the following

### *American Business Culture and Ethics*

This course offers students an opportunity to learn about particularities of the corporate business culture and the influence of ethics on business. It combines theoretical approaches with practical case study methods. The key topics include managing stakeholder and governmental relations, PR and communication, business ethics, managing human resources and corporate social responsibility.

### *HR in American Practice*

This course offers an in-depth look at the key roles HR plays in large companies. Based on real-life systems and processes used in top international companies associated within the American Chamber of Commerce in Bratislava, this course introduces participants to key HR aspects via case studies presented by HR professionals. It also develops participants' critical thinking on possible difficulties and pitfalls that await HR professionals and managers and increases participants' preparedness for working at managerial and HR positions.

### *Interpersonal Managerial Skills: Lenovo Case Studies*

The aim of this course is for the students to practice the interpersonal skills that lie at the core of working at a large multinational company. This course is based on a series of highly-practical trainings Lenovo offers its managers and top talents. The course introduces students to personal branding, time management, effective communication and career planning. Students will have an opportunity to experience the influence the often-overlooked interpersonal skills cast on people's achievement and job satisfaction.

### *Negotiations*

This course provides students with essential knowledge related to negotiations in the framework of business, politics and third sector. During the course, a number of questions are addressed, i.e. "How can we define a (un)successful negotiation?" "What are the main challenges associated with negotiating in business and in politics?" "Can we summarise a set of principles and strategies for effective negotiation?". Using case studies and practical exercises, the course leads students to compare and contrast negotiation practices in diverse contexts.

### *Managing Global Business: Dell Case Studies*

The aim of this course is to introduce students the functioning of a global company and its success story, specifics of its operations on the global market. Students will gain an overall understanding of the market and industry the company operates on. Certain strategic areas will be discussed in more detail (direct model, brand, remote management, M&As) so that students understand these aspects and how they are important for global companies compared to the ones operating on a local market. Competitors are addressed in specific topics to show the differentiation of DELL.

The course coordinator is responsible for the courses on a weekly basis. Each company representative that acts as the session leader prepares a draft for a session (at the beginning of a semester) as the course usually involves different companies. A typical session plan includes learning outcomes/objectives, activities, the suggested topic for the final paper (for some courses) and assigned literature and other material for pre-course reading, and questions for homework – students are required to submit homework in written form 24 hours before each class. The homework is not graded but is intended to prepare students for the course.

In the case of AmCham, the university representative also takes part in regular meetings of the committee on cooperation between business and academia (every two months), and in quarterly meetings with the committee bringing together the representatives of universities and business-shared-services centres in Slovakia. The meetings are aimed to discuss what has been done in the previous months and how to advance further cooperation – whether to focus on improving the quality, redesigning a course, or introducing a new initiative.

The courses are not delivered in 'lecture' style but as workshops or seminars, and the communication is always two-way. The intention is to bring students 'out of their comfort zone' and encourage them to actively participate in the course where they also have to express themselves, i.e. through presentation, simulation or group discussions. The role of the business representative is being a facilitator and not a lecturer.

The courses are usually based on practical cases. For example, in the Lenovo class on soft skills, students are given a pool of training methods for how to develop certain soft skills. Later on, the students are given a task. They have to mutually prepare a solution for that task and present it to the class. The feedback provided by the business representative focuses on the performance rather than the content itself.

All courses are provided in English as they are attended by Slovak and international students. Some of these courses are delivered by the international experts from the companies. At the end of the course period, the students are evaluated and assigned grades. The final grade usually consists of three different elements: course attendance and active participation in class, completion of the course homework and a final project, which can be in the form of, for example, a team or individual presentation or essay. The grades are especially important for foreign students and Erasmus students because their learning contract obliges them to have to transfer credits and grades back home.

#### *Other activities related to practical learning*

Implementation of the elective courses is not the only UBC activity implemented by the UEBA. Other activities include summer school with university partners from the USA and Mexico with a duration of three to four weeks and focus on doing business in Central Europe. Summer schools are based on solving practical cases, including serving as consultants to companies and offering solutions to real problems companies assign to students.

Another UBC activity is run in cooperation with the University of Technology in Lappeenranta in Finland. Alumni created a start-up called “Solved” – an online platform for solving projects. A company gives the task of searching for a solution to a problem, all communication runs through an online system and the result is a product proposal for the company.

The Faculty of Business Management also recently launched a project whose aim is to map Slovak start-ups and monitor the development of their business models.

Also, students are invited to attend various one-off skills development workshops, i.e. how to prepare a CV, how to undergo a job interview, that are offered by companies and organized by CNAS. Moreover, CNAS circulates calls for internships for a number of companies and facilitates student participation in international student business competitions and conferences.

## **6. OUTPUTS**

According to students, one of the biggest benefits of the courses are meeting experts from business, practising English and developing generic skills needed for transition from education to the labour market and early career. Examples of these competencies are teamwork, time management, conflict resolution, and presentation skills.

The courses are also accredited and credit points are assigned according to the university policy, thus the elective courses typically offer three ECTS, which is the practice for all courses run in cooperation with the business sphere.



Through these elective courses, the university is able to portray itself as a leading university in the country and in the smaller region of Central Europe due to its good connections with the business sphere.

## 7. IMPACTS

The elective courses bring an impact and advantage for all stakeholders. The biggest impact for students is the experiences they can get from the business world. What is more, providing graduates a competitive advantage in the labour market through the development of soft skills leads to a considerable increase in graduate employability. In addition, students also develop an awareness of the importance of knowledge, and skills currently demanded by companies for their newly hired staff. An important asset for the students is creating a professional network of contacts that include managers (including the leading HR managers) and talents from a number of companies.

The courses also support internships in companies what includes recruiting students without practical experiences. The UBC is also important for the university's recognition and relevance in the business world. Due to regular cooperation with companies on a daily basis, the university is already considered a partner by business. A long-term impact for the university involves an improvement of the brand, which result in more efficient marketing activities for attracting potential new students and staff.

Regarding a broader impact, the courses serve as a model for other universities and the Ministry of Education. Within this context, one of the goals of AmCham is to use these examples and good practices for decision-makers at the government level to stimulate UBC.





# Support & Influencing factors

## 8. SUPPORTING MECHANISMS

UBC is supported by the university's strategy. In Bratislava, there is an increasing number of new business centres which need to employ new people and the university of economics is 'a natural source' for both interns and full-time employees.

The CNAS, which is the key generator of elective courses, was established using grants provided by the US Embassy in Bratislava and supported by grants awarded on a yearly base for funding the courses, lecturers, the equipment, and technical devices. At the moment, the Centre is only funded by the university itself. In the future, the Centre also plans to apply for external EC grants to broaden its activities.

## 9. BARRIERS AND DRIVERS

Since there are no systematic motivation and initiatives from the Ministry of Education to implement practical learning, universities and companies carry out practical learning and other forms of UBC on their own initiative. In this context, significant barriers are the formalities of the accreditation process and the funding of the coordination of elective courses. The rectorate provides salary for one person, therefore there are no capacities for new initiatives if companies propose larger extent of UBC. Accreditation is valid for four years and some faculties are bound to introduce new courses if they do not have a free slot for this in the approved accreditation.

While lack of governmental initiatives stand out as a barrier to UBC activities, the main driver for the implementation of the elective courses emerges as the personal engagement of UEBA employees who are aware of the importance of developing cooperation with business.

Regarding the companies, they are aware that the availability of qualified workers is the key driving force for ensuring competitive advantage. Companies see this form of cooperation with the universities through the longer development of own human resources.

## 10. FUTURE CHALLENGES

The main challenge on the side of the university, companies and AmCham is to continue creating new practically relevant courses and offer the existing courses also to other faculties and universities in order to reach a larger number of students. This will in longer term contribute to the practical relevance of higher education in the area of business and economics.

There is also a big potential in commercialisation of various higher education products and services but this would require larger number of employees who would facilitate cooperation

on the side of university. There is also the pending idea for establishing a head-hunting coordination unit which would conduct a preliminary screening of talents at the university. This would allow companies to search for students and graduates directly at the university, which has the best overview of their students.

There is also a potential for quality development in advancing the courses to provide students with even better generic competencies what would require, the 'pedagogical' development of the professionals from the companies.

## 11. CONTEXT

Bratislava is home to the headquarters of many international and transnational companies. Economics and managerial universities in Slovakia are traditionally independent and without concrete ties with the private sector.

## 12. KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

The main success factor in the implementation of the courses is the motivation from both the university and the companies to bring together the worlds of business and academia, which are far apart from each other. There is also a mutual awareness that both actors have to cooperate with each other in order to provide a qualified workforce possessing the required skills.

In some cases, students may be offered a job based on their knowledge, performance and potential they exhibited during the elective courses.





# Further Information

## **13. MONITORING AND EVALUATION**

The coordinators of elective courses regularly obtain feedback from the students and also from the lecturers. The CNAS director attend many of the course sessions, makes written observations in order to help develop future courses. The courses are being constantly updated and redesigned based on the feedback provided. As mentioned, there are regular meetings with all course providers aimed at discussing past activities and advancing future cooperation.

## **14. SUSTAINABILITY MEASURES**

Sustainability always runs two ways, and, according to the motivation of the company and university, sustainability depends on the willingness and ability of the university management to fund the Centre (this involves providing salary to its director) and of the companies need to continue providing their experts.

## **15. TRANSFERABILITY**

The courses which enhance soft skills can also be applied to other fields of study and other universities. EUBA is therefore considering extending them to other universities.

## **16. PUBLICATIONS AND ARTICLES**

Faces of CNAS, Center for North American Studies

## **17. LINKS**

Centrum severoamerických štúdií - <http://cnas.euba.sk/>

## 18. CONTACT PERSON



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## 19. REFERENCES

- <sup>i</sup> University of Economics in Bratislava: <https://www.euba.sk/about-university>
- <sup>ii</sup> American Chamber of Commerce in Slovakia: <http://www.amcham.sk/about-amcham>