

# University Counselling in Slovakia and Ethics

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**Abstract:** The contribution is focused on an analysis of the situation of university counselling in Slovakia in relation to ethics. It is based on the findings of several projects dedicated to the problems of counselling in the school system in Slovakia and on the postmodernity of academic life. The author anchors the terminology in dialogical personalism. The methodology consists of establishing the Gadamerian situation of dialogical understanding of interdisciplinary approaches, comparing the findings of projects with the author's practice as both an advisor and as an ethicist, and the heuristics of implementing ethics into university counselling activities. The fundamental conclusion of the research is the deduction that, just as freedom needs limits, so counselling inevitably needs ethics in order to be delivered wisely, humanely and effectively.

**Key words:** Slovak university counselling, postmodernity, ethics, responsibility

## Introduction

It cannot be denied that ethics as such is an important part of the obligatory minimum required for most fields of university study in order to foster the idea of improving good practice in academic studies, research, and preparing for inclusion in interdisciplinary working processes. This is why it should be, and is, a part of university counselling and should serve to define codes adequate to make academic life humane and dig-

nified. Therefore, the main aim of the paper is to confirm the need, value and importance of ethics in any type of university counselling.

The study of Ethics has again been included in the field of Philosophy in Slovakia.<sup>1</sup> There are only two academic institutes where this exists: the *Institute of Ethics and Bioethics at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Prešov* and the *Department of Ethics and Aesthetics at the Faculty of Arts of the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra*. There

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<sup>1</sup> See: MŠVVaS SR (2019) Decree 244/2019 on the system of university study fields in the SR.

are also other independent institutes and non-profit organizations providing research, courses and counselling in ethics and bioethics in Slovakia. The Institute of Medical Ethics and Bioethics in Bratislava is the oldest (since 1992) and the best known institution focused on the problems of medical ethics and bioethics at home and abroad.

In the article, the term *university counselling* is used in a larger sense, as is obvious – it means an interdisciplinary ethical dialogue on good practice in academic life. It may be seen as a dialogic encounter<sup>2</sup> (Vrána, 1996, 40–42; Vadíková, 2011, 87–91) of academics in a situation of dialogic comprehension<sup>3</sup> (Gadamer 2009). It serves to establish an ethical environment at university and in academic life. As such, university counselling in the field of ethics may be seen as a new challenge to think of a definition for such a new type of guidance. The topic deserves interdisciplinary academic attention and further research – the main aim of the paper is to draw its contours, so that it can be followed up in the future.

## Terminology and methodology

The notion of university counselling includes all types of professional counselling provided at Slovak universities, academies and colleges e.g., career guidance and educational, psychological, social, spiritual and environmental services. It follows on from school counselling and is supported by the Slovak national school system to serve as part of the counselling connected with the comprehensive educational preparation for the profession.<sup>4</sup> Its principles are specified by the law and ethics of academic life. University counselling may be understood as a broad spectrum of interdisciplinary guidance to enable a good academic life. It serves mainly intra-institutionally to make an inter-institutionally academic life possible in Slovakia, in Europe, and in the world. The counselling method of enduring prevention, of wise support and of responsible understanding of the entire variability of calls to vigilance in contemporary society, continuously innovated by each university counsellor, enables the academic establishment

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<sup>2</sup> The term *dialogic encounter* means deep inner comprehension in the relations of two dialogic persons, which may naturally become an understanding of each other without the need for many words. It belongs to the terminology of dialogical personalism. (See: Vrána, 1996, 39–43; Buber 1993)

<sup>3</sup> Gadamer's term *situation of dialogic comprehension* means the hermeneutic concentration of an interdisciplinary spectrum of views into the centre of knowledge of the phenomenon of common interest. (See more: Gadamer, 2009)

<sup>4</sup> See Act 245/2008 on Upbringing and Education (School act).

of Gadamer's *situation of dialogic comprehension* worldwide. In this sense, university counselling should never descend into a mechanical search for solutions. If it did, then this would be the first step in handing over responsibility to artificial intelligence – making it inhuman.

Therefore, I plan to analyze the university counselling practice as a dialogic gift of humanity to the academic world. The terminology of *dialogical personalism* (Vrána 1996; Vadíková 2011) will be used to correctly capture the main problems relating to its good practice. Gadamer's hermeneutics (2009) will be heuristically used to recall all interdisciplinary approaches obviously used in academic life, and the research will be focused on the dialogical relation between a tutor and a student at any university.

To use ethics within university counselling demands the minimal requirement of respecting the human dignity of any student and any academic at any university. Ethical codes are signals to pay attention to questions of moral decision making more than just formally. Ethics serves as an instrument, as a summary of recommendations on how to remain a human being in the academic world and become a moral authority in dialo-

gue with others. Defined as a practical philosophy<sup>5</sup> – ethics is a human theory (science) of what is good, based on a personal interpretation of moral law, though based carefully on good practice and a dialogic comprehension of the call for morality from the depths of one's individual conscience<sup>6</sup>. In the end, it is upon the actors of the dialogue to understand the requirements of their consciences and to act morally. It is a call to personal responsibility<sup>7</sup>.

The partial aim of the article is to confirm the value of the implementation of ethics into the system of counselling. It traces the results of more than one project to enable Gadamer's hermeneutics: 1) the Slovak multidisciplinary project KEGA 008TTU-4<sup>8</sup> on *Transfer of personal responsibility as a modern type of evasion and its postmodern solution* (thesis: the Slovak academic world becomes postmodern, which means there is a need to take personal responsibility to fight for a revitalization of the humanization and ethicalization of the school system in Slovakia); 2) Polish research on the consequences of the so-called *Homo Sovieticus mentality in post-Soviet countries* (Kobylynski 2020) and its analysis in the Slovak context within a comparison with

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<sup>5</sup> See the Kantian definition of ethics as a practical philosophy (KANT, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> See more on moral decision-making processes explained by Guardini (1999).

<sup>7</sup> See more on Guardini's (2001) heuristics of the relation between freedom and responsibility.

<sup>8</sup> See the main publications of the project: Vadíková, 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2020d; Krištof, Sámellová & Vadíková, 2021.

the mentality of “The Man of the Velvet Revolution” with regard to taking on personal responsibility (Vadíková 2022a); 3) the MESA 10 project: *It makes sense. Education is the future.* – a piece of interdisciplinary research on the school system in Slovakia (Hall, Drál, Fridrichová, Hapalová, Luknáč, Miškolci & Vančíková, 2019); 4) the Euroguidance.eu project – specially dedicated to the topics of counselling within a comparative analysis of European school systems. (Beková, Grajcar, Lepeňová, Uhríková, & Zvaríková, 2014, 3–41); 5) the Eurydice project; 6) the results of my previous research on the topic, which were presented at the conference *University Counselling – Actual Challenges and Trends*, organized by the Faculty of Pedagogy at the Charles University in Prague (CR) and have already been published in its conference proceedings (Vadíková, 2022b).

## Postmodernity and University Counselling in Slovakia

University counselling in Slovakia is regulated by Act 131/2002 on universities (the University Act) according to which universities are providers of university counselling. Details of the provision is implemented in Act 245/2008 on up-bringing and education (the School Act).

§2, par. 14 of Act 131/2002 requires that: “Each university provides applicants, students and other individuals with information and counselling services related to their studies and the possibility of applying knowledge gained from the study programs in practice.”

University counselling is classified as a student right (§70/1J of the School Act). It is provided free of charge. Special attention is dedicated to students with special needs. This type of school and university counselling is also financially supported by the state. The support is included in the university’s budget as scholarships and is valid for an academic year. That means that each university has a different budget and there is no lump sum to support students with specific needs, which may become unfair.<sup>9</sup> The university counselling in Slovakia for students with so-called specific needs is detailed within §100 of the School Act. It is also restated within Decree 24/2022 of MESR&S SR on Counselling and Prevention Facilities.

As results of the project MESA 10: *It makes sense. Education is the future.* (Hall et al., 2019) demonstrate, there is still much to do in the field of good practice in university counselling in Slovakia on both sides – students and academics. Its results point to unethical approaches (irresponsible, manipulative, discrimi-

<sup>9</sup> See: *Guidelines for creating study conditions for students with specific needs.* (MŠVVaS SR 2018); *Educational support and guidance: Guidance and counselling in higher education.* (EURYDICE 2022).

natory, bullying, etc.) both among the students of the study group and towards students with specific needs, as well as towards counsellors. As for the findings of the project, the emphasis is more on revitalizing the good practice of university counselling in the sense of improving manners and humanizing the academic world, or fostering politeness towards and comprehension of otherness, rather than on ethics and the transformation of thinking and values.

The situation in the academic world in Slovakia is related to a postmodern change of mentality. Based on an analysis of Slovak postmodern thinking about responsibility (KEGA 008TTU-4), the derivation of the ethical consequences of the postmodern mentality of Slovaks (Vadíková, 2022a) and an analysis of the situation in university counselling in Slovakia (Vadíková, 2022b), there is a massive trend in evading personal responsibility (the *Homo Sovieticus mentality*) and a tendency to rely on institutional guidance on the part of both students and academics. These tendencies to rely on others instead of taking responsibility for one's own life may also be seen when examining the issue of counselling. The camouflage of reality, the hyperbolization of the obvious instead of the rare, the destructuralization, the devaluation of

time, the unjust or discriminatory tolerance, the obfuscation of truth, the liquidity of formerly stable university structures, hierarchy, principles, etc. – these postmodern characteristics of the destabilization of human relations<sup>10</sup> make the situation in counselling unclear and very hard to manage. Therefore, this article can be seen as an expression of gratitude to all Slovak university counsellors for their heroic dedication, forbearance, endurance and professionalism.

The consequences of postmodern thinking are also currently visible in the academic world, which make the situation of any university counselling nebulous. The notion of university counselling is defined by law, but in practice all kinds of popular “new trends” are syncritically (Piaček, 2014) implemented in it, which causes chaos and disharmony in defining what university counselling might be and what it is or is not in reality.

As an example, I have in mind a case of providing counselling that inappropriately mixes coaching and mentoring methods within consultancy and training, which means that the counsellor works without distinguishing between them, between the way of interpreting individual results, and the handling of obligations and responsibilities or positions in relationships. All this creates

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<sup>10</sup> See more in Bauman's description of so-called “liquidity mechanisms”, which are destroying human relations and through them the whole of contemporary society, and are changing them into postmodern ones (Bauman 2004, 2013, 2020).

a nebulous obligation and allows the avoidance of personal responsibility. In my opinion, the recipient of the service deserves to know what to expect. Otherwise, it may be everything, but not university counselling<sup>11</sup>.

Another interesting phenomenon of postmodern thinking in university counselling in Slovakia is the role of merging and isolation. Nowadays, the obligations, responsibilities, duties, and priorities of any university counsellor are hidden in a nebulous accumulation of roles: a university counsellor is pushed to be, for example, teacher, tutor, counsellor, scientist, manager, psychologist, and lawyer at the same time. This makes the function of the counsellor unclear, causes confusion and destroys the relationship between the counsellor and the recipient of his or her service. Mastering all the roles requires a heroic effort to find an appropriate schedule, location, and the resources to deliver services consistently, responsibly, eruditely, interdisciplinarily, and with an open mind. This is another consequence of postmodern thinking on responsibility in academic life in Slovakia. Once somebody has been delegated as a university counsellor, the complete

management of this role is left to him or her; there is a lack of intra-institutional or collegial cooperation, and instead of understanding and cooperation there are excuses. In most cases, the advisor remains alone and is suspected of ulterior motives or incompetence if he or she requests the cooperation of colleagues or other institutional units (study, financial or administrative departments).

Postmodern thinking<sup>12</sup> isolates. It makes people uncertain in their thinking, speaking and doing - in making decisions. It paralyses them. It empties terminology. People talk, but to no one. More than ever, both students and counsellors need each other as academic partners - they need dialogue (feedback) instead of communication (information flow), mutual understanding and dignified support. Just as university counsellors are not receptacles for trauma dumping, so their clients are not guinea pigs - they are partners in solving the dilemmas of academic life.

In this context, it is necessary to emphasize the value of sociability as an academic virtue<sup>13</sup>, the need to support *dialogic interpersonal comprehension*<sup>14</sup> (Vadíková, 2011, 123-125) in order to

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<sup>11</sup> On the consequences of the deprecation of properly distinguishing between coaching, mentoring, training and counselling see more in: Vadíková 2021.

<sup>12</sup> On postmodern thinking see more in the philosophical explanations by Lipovetsky (1998; 1999) and Bauman (2004; 2013; 2020).

<sup>13</sup> On the definition of sociability as a virtue see more: Vadíková (2014).

<sup>14</sup> The term *interpersonal dialogic comprehension* means understanding deep inside the life-stories of two dialogic persons. It is a dialogic encounter that requires no communication (words), however;

avoid the tendency to communicate mechanically – in the manner of artificial intelligence.

The results of the MESA 10 project *It makes sense. Education is the future* Hall et al, (2019) confirm the need to improve academic dialogue, which means establishing Gadamer's situation of dialogic comprehension. It is the human network of dialogic relations (Guardini 2005, 28; 32; 111-116) - dialogic behaviour, sociability, and comprehension which may clear the fog, identify problems and demolish dilemmas. (Vadíková, 2019, 31-32.)

It must be stressed - there are still heroes – those university counsellors who do understand the needs, obligations, and responsibilities of their position at Slovak universities. In such postmodern conditions as are mentioned above, they keep fighting for the rights of students, academics and their institutions, not only at home, but also abroad. At most Slovak universities, there are various programmes dedicated to university counselling (Vadíková, 2022b). Non-profit organizations have also been invited to be deeply involved in the revitalization of university counselling in Slovakia<sup>15</sup>.

## **Counselling Ethics at Slovak universities: the current situation and challenges**

It may be concluded that university counselling at Slovak universities is defined and regulated by the law, organizationally supported by non-profit organizations, provided by universities and delivered by academics in Slovakia. There is currently no special ethical code for university counsellors, and, since the new accreditation of university studies, there is also no special study programme on counselling ethics at any Slovak university.<sup>16</sup> However, ethics is partially implemented into various study programmes as a requirement of the so-called need for good practice in university counselling. Ethics may be understood as a helping profession (Vadíková, 2018) in the sense that ethicists are professionals who are prepared to help others to make personal decisions and to understand all the possible consequences of their decisions, to show them the mechanisms of the decision-making process, to make them establish a bond with the moral law and human dignity so as to be able

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it is a dialogue of consciences. The term follows up on Gadamer's (2009) term 'situation of dialogic comprehension' and Buber's (1993) description of dialogical silence.

<sup>15</sup> See the website of the institution ZIPCEM v SR, which records all the institutions engaged in youth-problem-solving.

<sup>16</sup> For example, the M.A. study programme Applied Ethics - Ethical Expertise and Ethical Counselling (Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra) and the BC. study programme Counselling Ethics (Matej Bell University, Banská Bystrica). (See: Fobel, Palovičová, Oravcová & Čierna 2012).

to decide on what is good and to take responsibility as a dialogical person in any situation<sup>17</sup>.

Each Slovak university has its own institutional code of ethics, which is derived from all the professional ethics codes of all university faculties (study fields). Each university counsellor should be aware of all the requirements of the university's code of ethics, should follow them, revise their application or request their revision at the university's ethics commission. In this way, it is possible to say that the counsellor may be seen as a university's manager of ethics.

Each counselling process is based on a decision-making process. Therefore, each counsellor should be aware of the fact that ethics does not work without verification by the personal conscience that connects it with morality. And, since there is only one moral law for all members of humanity, and it is given to the dialogic person within the framework of the only moral law of humanity in his or her conscience – it could be concluded that it is possible to recognize the truth about good in dialogue with others (Guardini, 1999). Ethics without morality and dialogue is an inhuman, mechanical theory, which in practice can only become something like an ideology or a utopia (Glasová 2008). Dialogically based ethics can serve as an instrument

for stabilizing, supporting and saving the human dignity of every person who seeks the good. Ethics is not a patent for a moral life; it is a recommendation on how to remain a moral person. All types of ethics have an author – someone who offers an interpretation of morality and recommends a way to recognize the truth about what is good. At the same time, in the depths of the inner world of each person who is deciding on the good, there can be heard the advice of his or her personal conscience – an instance of morality. If it is a just conscience (Skoblík, 1997, 91), its call is morally binding; but it is the individual, as such, who makes decisions.

According to this, every university counsellor should be aware of the ethical minimum in order to be able to provide university counselling in an ethical way. Since the counsellor is institutionally delegated, his or her status, competences and authority should be clearly known and respected, at least institutionally. Becoming a university counsellor should be an honour and should be supported within the university.

The research of Beková, Grajcar, Lepeňová, Uhríková & Zvaríková (2014, 3–41), was conducted as a follow-up to the project Euroguidance.eu – a map of guidance systems in Europe, including Slovakia. The findings of the project

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<sup>17</sup> For more information on this idea and on the critical analysis of the decision making of a dialogical person in life situations, see Vadíková (2019).



show that the first-ever quality standard for career guidance and counselling services in Slovakia was developed by the Association for Career Guidance and Career Development in 2019. In 2020, all career guidance providers (both institutions and individuals) had the opportunity to go through the certification and mentoring process in the new quality standard to become certified career guidance providers. As the authors stressed – ethics was a normative part of the certification process.

It can be concluded that the ethics of university counselling in Slovakia has already been institutionally ensured by Managerial and Professional Ethics – by so-called Code Ethics. Every university counsellor has to be aware of all the codes and able to apply their principles. There is no specific training in counselling ethics organized for university counsellors. It is assumed they know the Codes. Each university in Slovakia has its own code of ethics, just as, most of the professions which the students are preparing for in various study programmes have specific codes of ethics. There is no separate code for the profession of a university counsellor as it is assumed that several professions are combined in one person, and therefore he or she is bound by the good practice implemented in these professions. Students of most of

the humanities study the subject philosophy and ethics as a part of their curriculum, so it can be assumed that they are also taught the basics of counselling ethics.<sup>18</sup>

In my opinion, it would be helpful to prepare a specification of the code of ethics dedicated separately to university counselling, covering all types of counselling. Counselling ethics have already been defined within Slovak circumstances and researched by Fobels (2012) and staff at Matej Bell University. The research needs to be followed up and applied to the new postmodern way of thinking in Slovakia. Taking into account the reality of postmodern thinking about responsibility (KEGA 008TTU-4) and the crisis in the school system in Slovakia as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, Slovak university counselling needs revitalization, humanization and ethicization, needs dialogue, dignity, evaluation – a deep ethical audit, interdisciplinary research, and intra- and international cooperation between academics, students, and counsellors.

University Counselling ethics can serve as an interesting preventive service – the ethicist can become a real designer of solutions to problems, and in the next stage of care can serve as a mentor. The adjective *university* specifies the range of problems in the specific university

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<sup>18</sup> See Vadíková 2022b, the projects *Eurydice* and Euroguidance.eu: EURYDICE (2022) Educational support and guidance: Guidance and counselling in higher education: Slovakia.

location (intra) and its international cooperation service (open inter-institutionally); identifies its clients: academics, students (Slovak, foreign), media, non-profit organizations, etc.; determines the types, methods, and ethics of counselling. The notion of university counselling implies an institution that deserves its body (Ethics Committee), law (Code of Ethics), and ethics manager to serve academics and students.

The content of the counselling in the field of ethics presents a range of problems. It can be seen as a part of any type of university counselling, since the main aim is to find not only the best, but above all the good solution to a problem. Distinguishing between ethical and moral dilemmas is the first step in such counselling. Ethical dilemmas may be broken down into subproblems using philosophical methods (Vadíková, 2018). If a problem is identified – the dilemma diminishes. The counsellor-ethicist is able to offer a spectrum of insights, and a review of possible descriptions of the situation to help to create a distance that opens up the space necessary for tackling the problem. He or she explains the different possible consequences, but it is the service user who decides on the insights and solutions. If the counsellor only communicates his or her findings (without feedback or explanation), it causes uncertainty in the service user, no stability in the decision-making process, no clarity, no solid base from which to

make good decisions. The service user can become paralyzed in terms of making decisions, which leads to procrastination, an uncertain conscience, and an inability to accept personal responsibility. Very few people are aware of how subtle and responsible the work of an ethicist is...

Any professional counsellor-ethicist could provide the widest range of counselling, but it requires cooperation with other counsellor-advisors, oversight, flexibility, preparation and interdisciplinary knowledge. The main distinction between an ethicist and a counsellor is the range of possible solutions that the ethicist offers to the recipient as material for their dialogic encounter, including the consequences. The ethicist tries to avoid a situation in which his or her opinion, advice or solution could be understood as a service to be consumed without discussion. The ethicist comes into the recipient's problem in dialogue, engaging with but never deciding for him or her.

As both a university counsellor and an ethicist, I can confirm the differences mentioned above. Students also refer to the value of implementing ethics in university counselling and the need for professional help in solving ethical problems and are interested in dialogue with an ethicist in order to feel more secure and comfortable in their decision making. The frequency of interactions (dialogues and requests for dialogue) was more

intensive during the COVID-19 pandemic. The prevalence of a postmodern mindset was identified and revealed gaps in the university counselling service.

I can confirm that a counsellor-ethicist is asked for help as a moral authority by students, as a respected professional by colleagues and as an institutional representative of the code of ethics (a manager of ethics) by representatives of collaborating institutions at home and abroad. Some problems require the ability to move between these positions, depending on whether finding a solution needs a more formal or personal approach. The counsellor should recognize the appropriate method, approach, way of thinking and also the full range of institutional tools to be able to provide a complex service. He or she should also have a good sense of humour and be very well organized.

## Conclusions

University counselling in Slovakia is regulated by law, provided by universities and delivered by university counsellors. It is a right of every university student. It can also be seen as a tool for preventing complications arising from misunderstandings and misinformation caused by the postmodern transformation of thinking. It is a matter of prestige for a university to be known at home and abroad as a student-friendly institution governed by law and ethics.

Ethicists can serve as professionals in all types of counselling. The expertise of ethicists may be helpful in the decision-making process in academic life. It can help to break down dilemmas into problems, prevent procrastination and any type of decision-making paralysis and offer a range of options for learning how to make free and wise decisions. Counsellors deserve codes of ethics to make their service simple and undemanding. University counsellors already use ethics intuitively in their daily practice, but this is not institutionalized. University counselling without a code of ethics is, like making decisions without the feedback of one's own conscience, a very difficult, lonely and uncertain way of recognizing what is good. That is why contemporary academic life also needs to engage ethicists as university counsellors, for just as freedom needs limits, so academic life needs ethics. Ethicists can be helpful not only to students in solving ethical problems, but also to academics or counsellors.

All university counsellors are invited to recognize the demands of ethics and responsibility and to be aware of their status as moral authorities. Since they are representatives of the university, they deserve honour and gratitude, kindness and cooperation, recognition and appreciation.

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