

**Message
to the members of the academic community
and the public.**

Foreword

**WE ARE PROTECTING
THE VALUES OF NOVEMBER '89**

WE WANT TO BE A FREE UNIVERSITY

I take the privilege of clarifying the reasons why we at UPJŠ join those who openly reject the amendment to the Higher Education Law Act, why we join those who claim that the proposed reform is merely a cover-up of the State efforts to intervening in university management and administering its assets. This is not an easy time for me personally and for my team at the University and the Faculties management teams because we have repeatedly called for a reform of university funding and management. We have repeatedly called for saving the Slovak higher education and Slovak science especially within the Association of Research and Technology-Oriented Universities, the "V7 Association".

Upon assuming the Office of Rector in 2015, I adopted a call to establish UPJŠ indelibly in the European educational and research area and, subsequently, I have initiated the adoption of a number of internal reform measures over the past six years. So I dare say that we have a clear idea of what we would expect from the amendment if it had the ambition to launch a reform. Our disagreement with the amendment is not a manifestation of our inability to accept change, it is rather a consequence of our experience, which confirms us in that the proposed model of higher education is not a reform.

I consider it a legitimate attempt by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research, and Sports of the Slovak Republic to technically improve the currently existing legislation, but alongside with motions which, in our opinion, jeopardize the achievements of November 1989.

Where is the objective reality and where is instilling the half-truths about the quality of universities?

We want a **reform that will make our universities more attractive, introduce transparent funding based on the different performance and social role of universities, and prevent the brain drain abroad**. To meet these goals, we had taken reform measures at this University much earlier than the reform of higher education was announced through the amendment to Law Act No. 131/2002. **IN WHAT WAYS?**

- We are an active member of the **European University Association** (EUA).
- As signatories of the **Magna Carta Universitatum**, we adhere to its values, principles, and objectives.
- We purposefully **internationalise our milieu**, even with the support of both national and international grants, we belong to the universities with the highest number of international students and in which the total number of students has not been decreasing.
- We fully support and actively advocate the idea of **academic freedom and human rights** as represented by the **Scholars at Risk Association** of Academic Institutions.
- In 2021, UPJŠ received the **HR Excellence in Research** Award awarded by the European Commission to universities and research institutions as proof that they adhere to the 40 principles of the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers.

- Thanks to ESI Funds projects, this University has changed its **scientific infrastructure competitively with EU universities**, and participated in the building three university parks. Thanks to this, but especially thanks to the reforms in the field of personnel, it ranks among the institutions with the highest share of high-quality publications registered in respected databases, with our students appreciating the fact that teaching is based on the most current scientific results. We have our **own grant support for PhD and postdoctoral students from abroad**, we finance these positions from our own budget.
- This University has also joined the **global Race to Zero campaign** with the ambition of being a promoter in Slovakia in the area of reducing carbon footprints and building "green infrastructure" with the aim of significantly improving the environment.
- UPJŠ has been ranked at the forefront of Slovak universities in prestigious **international rankings** in recent years. With the financial background provided to us by the State we consider our ranking to be a remarkable achievement that deserves recognition, not dishonesty. This university, its workplaces and personalities have an important place in the social, economic, and cultural life of the city, the wider region or at the national level.
- We dynamically develop **career counselling** at UPJŠ, we closely monitor employability of our graduates and intensively discuss the profile of the graduate with employers and invite them to teach. In recent years, we have responded to labour market requirements by accrediting several new study programmes.
- Since In 2013, i.e. **5 years before the legal regulation mandatory in the Slovak Republic**, we have been implementing an **internal quality system** at the University pursuant to EU standards (European Quality Assurance Guidelines "ESG").
- **We are open to experts from abroad**, but the Slovak Republic does not create conditions for their arrival by financing its universities. We have never been filling positions at this University in just a formal way; rather, we supported the arrival of experts and our re-integrees.
- Since my inauguration as Rector, especially in my 2nd term in office, we have **supported the integration of universities** not through declarations but through specific steps. The project of the **Košice cluster of new industry**, initiated by the universities of Košice, is a living proof of this.

We have the ambition to continue this trend together with the Technical University in Košice and the University of Veterinary Medicine and Pharmacy in Košice.

- The economic and academic results of this University are an example of how, even in the current legislative framework, we can **bring to society what it expects of us** and we will accept suggestions for further improvement. We agree that the statutory principles of the university self-government could be simplified by strengthening the competence of the Rector. On the other hand, UPJŠ is currently **not a confederation of faculties** and even in the current legislative milieu it appropriately combines managerial control with the inspection capacity of academic bodies.
- The University manages the funds allocated and obtained in order to guaranteeing the quality of education while **constantly improving its infrastructure and the technical condition of historic buildings**. Unfortunately, only a minor part of this is possible from the allocated State subsidy - we therefore solve this issue from projects and revenues from our main scope of performance and from business activities. These amounts have amounted to millions of euros over the last 6 years. However, even this is far from enough for us to erase the long-term investment debt of Slovak higher education and to be able to compare ourselves openly with developed Europe.

Does this give a good enough reason to think about the above and about the questions below?

In the previous block, I have given just a few examples that could inspire a sense of confidence in you as our readers that we are not the ones who are just waiting for the State to take care of them, that we act proactively and try to keep pace with the developed world. I also believe that we could arouse curiosity that if this University is far from happy and is protesting out loud, then where in fact lies the problem?

1) I keep asking myself and our personalities at several forums on our campus whether generalising criticism is justified. I have always tried to face it by looking for inspiration in it and confronting what is happening at this University with what is happening in developed countries and at universities of a similar nature. It has always been confirmed that those institutions are struggling with completely different problems, they are dedicated to their development, they cultivate academic values. They can afford it because their economic situation, historical tradition and setting of their milieu are just incomparable with ours. We, the rectors and deans in the Slovak Republic, are only in the role of crisis managers.

2). **Why does the Ministry of Education not officially declare that higher education institutions have launched education reform by applying Law Act No. 269/2018 Coll. on quality assurance and creation of an independent Slovak Accreditation Agency (SAAVŠ)?** We, the staff at this University, reject the claims that we are not interested in what and who we have in the output. Implementation of the internal quality system is also a required reform step by the OECD and really interferes significantly with the management of the University and has a positive effect on the quality of education in what employers call for.

3) **Why can't the courage be found on the part of the Ministry of Education and also on the part of public university representatives to rely on the potential and reputation of four universities: Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovak Technical University in Bratislava, Technical University in Košice, and Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice, which have for long been outperforming other public universities in the field of science and in international rankings? Why can't we be proud of their performance and, following the model of other countries, give them more prominence and support?** I believe that together with the SAS and with other specialised universities (those of veterinary medicine, agriculture, transport, forestry, arts fields, etc.) invited we would be able to define and also enforce the necessary reform measures. **In addition, we would be able to protect the legitimacy of other entities in the higher education sector, which will become part of a functioning ecosystem of categorised Slovak universities and colleges.** I am sorry that the current situation is a breeding ground for mutual indifference and envy in the academic milieu. I strongly believe that their basic essence is that we are all in a single basket, most universities have to report activities that they do not have the prerequisites for instead of focusing on e.g. training of professional bachelors employable in practice, qualified medical staff, or teachers for lower levels of regional education. Under the guise of the assumption that they cannot possibly disestablish all of us, I witness the search for pretended unity, which then draws us **all** down into the average. **I offer my experience and potential**, as well as the potential of the personalities of this Alma Mater, for attaining the desired objective by changing the approach. I wish Slovakia a genuine reform of higher education institutions.

Conclusion: So why are we protesting?

At the debate on the reform of education between the Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic and UPJŠ students on 3 November 2021, we pointed out that any reform, as soon as it contains elements and efforts to intervene in the autonomy of universities, will naturally provoke resistance and rejection of even positive proposals.

The proposed rector's election mechanism, the competency disharmony between the academic senate and the university board of trustees require further dialogue and are a legitimate reason for such intense protest. **Academic self-government, autonomy, and academic freedom are our highest values of November 1989, and therefore our protest is accompanied by the motto, "We protect the values of November 1989, we want to be a free university."**

Pavol Sovák
UPJŠ Rector

Express your support for the protest - [download the background to MS Teams](#).