

PhD Studies at the Faculty of Natural Sciences of Comenius University in Bratislava

One of the priorities of the faculty's leadership is to bring the quality of the PhD student to a higher degree, mold them into a comprehensive personality, yet remains a student from a legal standpoint (by proving their activities in their educational field), works on their scientific growth towards the PhD title (through publication activities), and last but not least, passes on their knowledge and intellect to students in the early bachelor's years (pedagogical activities). From each of these three areas, the PhD student can build his/her own individual study programme and adapt its dimensions based on the specific requirements of the study programme itself (students of didactics towards pedagogical activities, PhD students from SAV through a high volume of publishing output) through their own abilities, the nature of their work (field work, laboratory, didactical) and the type of study (full-time or as an external student). Naturally, always with the help of one's supervisor, programme assistant or head of department.

The Faculty of Natural Sciences of Comenius University in Bratislava is one of the most prestigious faculties of one of the most prestigious universities in Slovakia, so it is quite logical that studying at it (especially PhD) may not be easy, and is not intended for everyone (as well as undergraduates) as many in recent years have believed. Without any further philosophy and details of its tightly enacted credit system, which are within the scope of the Scientific Council and have been discussed among guarantors (who have certainly discussed further levels with their supervisors), it is necessary to highlight the practical aspects. If a PhD student does not outline a quality individual study plan in which he/she has an individualised PhD study activity, he or she risks several problems at the end of the academic year (during which he/she should earn an average of 60 and a minimum of 40 credits) or, at the end of the study programme itself (240 credits). While each year is specific and 41 credits are earned in the first year (mainly from study activities), many get through it and outpace themselves in their publishing activities in the following years of the programme.

The following chart shows three of the many examples of the credit load spread over four years. The differences are mainly in publishing. For example (red column): an ideal doctoral student shall obtain credits for his/her study activities during the first three semesters, ie for an examination in English (5), passing 2 compulsory subjects (10) and 3 electives (9), as well as the compulsory subject of their Dissertation (3x5). In the second year of their study, he/she will take a dissertation exam (15). The student shall actively engage in the workplace, oversee at least one bachelor thesis (6) and each year after shall challenge another (4x2). He/she shall also participate in conducting exercises over 4 semesters (24). The PhD student shall also gain new inspiration and experience during an internship abroad (minimum 2 weeks) (7). For a good project proposal, the student can receive a grant from Comenius University (12). The student will also compare his progress with other PhD students through active participation in the student scientific conference within the first three years (18). He/she shall also publish their results of their scientific activity in one prestigious journal (28) and two domestic scientific journals (2x10). The PhD student shall also represent their workplace every year at one additional scientific conference (14 credits for abstracts). Credits are also awarded for the compulsory course, Doctoral Thesis (4x5) and upon successful defense of the dissertation (30), the PhD student shall receive 241 credits.

One advantage of this system is its plasticity. A PhD student with two works in the CC periodical is almost completely balanced from further publishing. On the other hand, one alternative for not having any article in the CC periodical is by presenting a lot of extensive work in publishing in less valuable sources (for example, 2 articles in domestic magazines and 2 in foreign periodicals). There are many alternatives, many categories of activities (quotes, presenting work at Student Conferences, etc.) which are not mentioned here. But it is always true that deviating from quality publishing leads to endless and low-value quantity publishing.

Finally, a few tips for PhD students:

1. Do not be afraid of attending the ŠVK (Student Scientific Conference) immediately in the first year, even if you have not yet figured out the topic of your dissertation yet. You have a lot of data from previous years (eg. from your diploma thesis) and in spite of this, a somewhat different focus on ŠVK may not only be about the topic, but also about the improvement of rhetoric, scientific expression, social ethics and professional communication. Mutual comparisons between performances can provide a lot of motivation, even when the results may not yet reach the level of work in the CC periodical.
2. A scientific internship at another university motivates, inspires and in some cases, increases self-confidence. Each PhD student should gain experience from a similar workplace during their studies, and this needn't be far away overseas. The Faculty of Natural Sciences offers a full spectrum of internships (often unused). Check with your supervisor whether he/she has declared any funding opportunities in their grant award scheme if they are not willing to cover the cost of your stay, even if it is close to our sister university, Masaryk University in Brno.
3. Try to unburden your supervisor from time-consuming bachelor thesis administration; your own experience will allow you to preside over a potential bachelor's student (naturally under the supervision of your supervisor), notwithstanding the challenging of their concluding work. Such practice (on a healthy level) strengthens your training abilities, as well as provides experience with the review process.
4. Do not yield to the claim that there is no possibility of publishing your work in periodicals in your field. Usually the opposite is true. Try to overcome this barrier (especially in the final years) and contribute to a better reputation of your workplace. In the rest of the programmes, you will be respected by older colleagues.
5. I admit that obtaining the 60 credits needed for the dissertation is somewhat more difficult for some students. However, when you receive 15 credits for the subject of Doctoral Thesis (3x5), 19 credits for passing 2 compulsory courses and 3 elective courses, 5 credits for the examination in English, 6 credits for participation in the Student Scientific Conference in the first year, 3 further credits for an abstract at a domestic scientific conference sometime in the third semester, and finally 12 credits for conducting exercises, you needn't force yourself to register for an absurd number of elective subjects. There are many alternatives, your supervisor and programme assistant are available to you.