



Improvement of Educational Competences in the Context of Lifelong Learning: Attitude of Higher Education Teachers

Vida Navickienė¹

Abstract

The article emphasises that the documents regulating higher education highlight the importance of teachers' educational competences. The extent to which higher education institutions themselves set goals to improve the quality of the study process encouraging teachers to improve own pedagogical competences is analysed. The results of the research with participation of the teachers from Lithuanian universities and colleges (n =140) are presented. The participants in the survey expressed their attitude towards establishment of necessary conditions for improvement of teachers' educational competences. Generalising, it can be stated that a large share of responsibility lies with the HE institution. A lot depends on the personality of the teacher, his/her attitude and willingness to engage in various activities improving own educational and other competences. Thus, a multiple system for improvement of educational competences of teachers has to be created in HE institutions. Referring to the necessity/need to improve their own competences, the HE teachers particularly emphasise the educational competence. Its significance is particularly highlighted in daily activities of the study process. Thus, the research revealed possibilities and problem areas in improvement of teachers' educational competences.

Keywords: higher education; teacher; educational competence;

1. Introduction

The change of paradigms towards providing quality education was promoted in the European Higher Education Area that could be ensured by a reconceptualised teaching/learning system in higher education and creation of the environment inspiring a person to work and learn. It is noteworthy that during the last meeting in Yerevan in 2015, the Ministers stressed and clearly defined what internal changes should be implemented and maintained in higher education. The most important ones were related to educational innovations, including employment of digital technologies, flexible learning as well as appropriate teaching/assessment methods. It should be emphasised that the Communiqué [5] highlighted the necessity for developing educational competences of teachers.

The National Progress Strategy "Lithuania 2030" [3] underlines implementation of assessment and self-assessment system of competences promoting creativity, quest and development. The National Education Strategy for 2013–2022 [4] highlights the necessity to achieve the level of pedagogical communities consisting of reflective, continuously developing and effectively working professional school teachers and teachers in higher education. The aforesaid documents commit teachers in higher education to act within the prevailing paradigm of lifelong learning and focus on the continuous development of educational competences. The increased competitiveness of higher education in Europe and all over the world forces universities to responsibly address not only scientific research activities conducted by university teachers but also their pedagogical activities, which are inseparable from knowledge and understanding of higher education didactics [2].

The aim of the article *is to analyse the need of higher education teachers to improve their educational competences in the lifelong learning context*. The following objectives are set: 1. To analyse theoretical aspects of competence improvement seeking to present the strategic attitude of HE institutions towards the need to improve their teachers' competences. 2. To analyse the attitude of HE teachers towards establishment of conditions for improvement of teachers' competences and the importance of the need to improve their educational competences lifelong.

Methodology. Due to a binary character of HE system in Lithuania, the survey was conducted in universities and colleges. The survey was done from September to November in 2015 included 140 respondents. The questions were answered by 56.5 % university and 43.5 % college teachers, who represented 6 scientific fields. The research instrument was designed by the article authors seeking to analyse HE teachers' attitude to and understanding about the competences necessary in the study process and importance of their improvement; several open-ended questions were included among closed-ended questions. The research methods included: analysis of scholarly literature, regulatory documents on education; analysis of strategic documents on higher education, qualitative content

¹ Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, Lithuania



analysis (qualitative information obtained from the responses to open-ended questions were analysed and systemised distinguishing categories, subcategories and presenting respective quotes).

2. Educational competences of HE teachers in the strategic documents of HE institutions

The analysis revealed that the strategic documents of different Lithuanian universities attribute uneven value to teacher competences. Having compared the strategies of state and private universities, it appeared that teacher competences are mentioned in the strategies of almost all state universities (12 out of 13), whereas they are outlined in the documents of 2 private universities out of 10. The research also focused on the content of educational competences outlined in the strategic documents of Lithuanian universities. The greatest attention is directed towards teacher mobility and sharing good practice with foreign teachers. Besides, most strategies draw a considerable attention to continuous development of teacher competences. Almost a half of the strategies emphasise the system of teacher motivation, since the aspiration for development and activeness are largely dependent on the personality him/herself. Only several documents highlight the significance of collaboration, sense of community, innovations, application of methods developing creativity and innovativeness in the study process, as well as improvement of foreign language skills. The obtained data confirm that the educational competence of teachers receives greater attention in the strategic documents of Lithuanian state universities than of private ones. Hence, it is assumed that all universities should focus on teacher competences and their development, which necessitates for the creation of a descriptor of educational competences of HE teacher.

Three tendencies can be distinguished when analysing the objectives of colleges regarding the improvement of teacher qualifications:

Firstly, no data regarding qualification development was found in the documents open to public. Secondly, some colleges follow paradigm changes, i.e. develop learner-centred system of education, set great challenges to promote internationalisation, develop distance studies, apply innovative teaching/learning strategies and ensure flexible and diverse studies; however, the promotion of teacher competences is defined in a very abstract way: to promote teacher professionalism, to ensure qualification improvement of human resources and to implement the process of human resources management and development that would ensure continuous and purposeful development of competences and qualifications of college teachers. Otherwise, no information regarding qualification improvement is provided. Thirdly, the competences to be developed are clearly defined in some documents that include not only research, educational and subject-specific competences but also some other competences (for example application of problem-based learning, general abilities, learning technologies, etc.). Scholars emphasise that students' active participation in the pedagogical process is a result of teacher's activity; therefore, enhancement of students' creative activity is possible upon their systematic integration into various types of educational and extra-curricular activities. Competence approach is oriented towards organizing educational and cognitive activity by modelling various situations in different areas of person's life activity [1].

The strategic documents of colleges emphasise general abilities such as communicative competence, foreign language skills in various forms, attention is allotted to development of both creativity and entrepreneurship and even specific methods to be applied by teachers in their daily work are indicated. Generalising, a big number of colleges also set themselves the objective of continuous professional development of their academic staff.

3. The attitude of teachers towards establishment of conditions for improvement of teachers' educational competences and towards significance of their improvement in the context of lifelong learning

Conducting the opinion survey, the HE teachers were requested to answer an open-ended question about the conditions for obtaining highest educational competences. Having grouped the data into categories and sub-categories, it can be stated that three main conditions/factors, which have direct influence on improvement of HE teachers' educational competences: institutional attitudes and actions, those of teachers themselves and those of organisers of training courses (see: Table 1).



Table 1. Conditions for improvement of HE teachers' educational competences

Condition / factor	Category					
	Attitudes and actions of HE schools	Financial resources	Reduction of workload	The position of authorities on HE teachers	Internal actions of HE schools	Institutional motivation of HE teachers
Attitudes and actions of HE teachers	Teacher's personality					
Attitudes and actions of organisers of training courses	Possibilities of career development courses and their promotion					

The survey conducted on HE teachers' opinion about improvement of their educational competences confirmed that HE establishments should provide their teachers with conditions for professional development. The biggest number of informants claimed that HE teachers should be paid higher salaries creating conditions for working in one educational institution. Moreover, additional financial resources should be allocated to specialists seeking professional development and, later differentiation of remuneration depending on professional development should be introduced. The second most important condition for teachers is reduction of their workload. According to the informants, it would also mean "more free time because of reduced contact hours creating favourable conditions for visits to foreign universities". The decisions about professional development are also significantly influenced by the position of authorities in HE institutions. The informants stated that firstly respect should be shown for HE teachers and their work: "teachers should be approached not as slaves but as free conscious personalities". Referring to internal factors of HE institutions, the participants distinguished teacher cooperation, favourable working environment and atmosphere as well as qualification requirements. Several informants also emphasised the students' influence on improvement of HE teachers' educational competence. However, the opinions regarding this question differed: one informant indicated that "more motivated students" would encourage their professional development, whereas the other participant mentioned that teachers are already forced to engage in professional development because of "demanding students". The informants also attracted attention that both financial incentives and other motivational measures, such as "awards of the teacher of the year", are of high significance. It should be noted that professional development opportunities indicated by the informants exceeded the national level. The role of authorities of HE institutions is significant establishing conditions for professional development abroad.

It is important to pay attention that a considerable number of informants stated that striving for improvement of educational competences also depends on the teacher's personality, i.e. on intrinsic motivation for doing this ("If she or he is personally eager to strive for professional development and is not indifferent to his/her work, then professional heights can be achieved") and on motivation to become a HE teacher ("Only motivated individuals with appropriate personal features, who are respected by society, should become educators").

The informants find actions of organisers of training courses as well. Firstly, they should improve access to such courses, diversify topics, analyse their demand and provide more information. The supply of such trainings should be systemic and consistent and available not only at the national level but also within HE schools. Thus, the informants emphasised the importance of improvement of educational competences in the context of lifelong learning (i.e. in the strategic documents of HE schools). The informants stressed that it is particularly important for a teacher to continuously learn, to be interested in innovations and to serve as an example for others. The competence of lifelong learning is understood not only as an interest in innovations or lifelong learning ("continuous improvement in own field") but also as ability to encourage others to do the same employing own example: "Willing to learn lifelong and able to encourage others to learn."



Conclusions

The analysis of documents outlining the education in Europe highlighted HE teachers' activities under the prevailing paradigm of lifelong learning, which concentrates on continuous development of educational competences. The research revealed the documents adopted in the Republic of Lithuania focus on acquisition of teachers' educational competences and their improvement but insufficient attention is directed towards educational competences of HE teachers. The analysis of the long-term strategic plans of HE institutions (universities, colleges) reveals insufficient attention to improvement of teacher competences. The research and subject-specific competences obviously attract more attention compared to educational ones. Development of teachers' competences is more emphasised in state HE institutions than in private establishments.

The distinguished conditions for improvement of educational competences depend on three factors, i.e. on heads of HE establishments, teachers themselves and organisers of events for improvement of educational competences. The research revealed that authorities of HE establishments have the largest share of responsibility for establishment of conditions for improvement of educational competences. According to the informants, their salary should be higher, the workload should be revised and motivation system should be created. Though participants in higher education perceive the significance of lifelong learning, they think that it also partially depends on the teacher's personality and on continuity of proposed seminars.

References

- [1] Abykanova, B., Tashkeyeva, G., Idrissov, S., Bilyalova, Z., Sadirbekova, D. Professional Competence of a Teacher in Higher Educational Institution. *International Journal of Environmental And Science Education*, Vol. 11(8), 2016, 2197-2206.
- [2] Jatkauskienė, B., Le Boterf, G. Universiteto dėstytojų profesionalizacijos eskizas (A Sketch of the University Lecturers' Professionalization). *Andragogika*, Vol. 1(3). Klaipėda: Klaipėda University, 2012, pp. 48-66. (in Lithuanian)
- [3] Lietuvos pažangos strategija "Lietuva 2030" (*The National Progress Strategy "Lithuania 2030"*). Approved by the Resolution of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania No. XI-2015 of 15 May 2012. [online] [05.09.2016]. Available at <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.425517> (in Lithuanian)
- [4] Valstybinė švietimo 2013–2022 metų strategijos (*The National Education Strategy for 2013–2022*). Approved by the Resolution of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania No. XII-745 of 23 December 2013). [online] [05.09.2016]. Available at <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/legalAct.html?documentId=b1fb6cc089d911e397b5c02d3197f382> (in Lithuanian)
- [5] Yerevan Communiqué. (2015). Bologna Process. Yerevan: European Higher Education Area [online] [15.09.2016]. Available at http://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/Papildomas%20menui2/Bolonijos_procesas/Communique.pdf.