QUALITY ASPECTS OF LATVIAN HIGHER EDUCATION:COMPETENCE AND COOPERATION

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Abstract

This paper reviews current problems in Latvian higher education. It outlines the challenges that economic and social change presents to the pedagogical process of higher education by focusing on the topicality and significance of univeristy teachers' pedagogical competence and professional responsibility in sustaining a meaningful and productive intellectual dialogue with students.

Findings from theoretical and empirical research inform the tensions of pedagogical interaction and cooperation that are identified in the study process and described in the present paper. Insights from relevant research are used to devise a system of characteristics and features of university teachers' pedagogical competence to sustain effective pedagogical interaction during the study process. Opportunities are inferred and pinpointed for improving pedagogical cooperation with a view to sustaining a more solid scientific, intellectual and professional dialogue in higher education, which is seen as amenable to infusions of insights from relevant research. Potential problematic issues are apprehended in the sphere of higher education pedagogy, which are pertinent to improving the effectiveness of pedagogical interaction and enabling universities to function more efficiently.

Keywords: Cooperation, pedagogical competence, professional responsibility, students

Introduction

The 21st century has brought an unprecedented information boom and rapid technological transformations that affect learning and processing of information. These changes warrant a fundamental re-examination of traditional conceptions of knowledge procurement along with expectations for pedagogical competence. During the decade before 2020, European higher education is poised to significantly contribute to the creation of an accomplished – creative and innovative – Europe (*Europe of Knowledge*). Nowadays, education is a key area of social development, because the majority of the public is either directly or indirectly involved in school or university studies, continuous vocational education or lifelong education.

The present study was undertaken with an aim to explore the topicality and significance of university teachers' pedagogical competence and professional responsibility in the context of improving the quality of studies, intellectual interaction and the shaping of prospective specialists' professional competence in Latvia.

"...nowadays, the world's greatest power is mutual understanding, ability to cooperate on the grounds of shared assumptions and universal values. These grounds are shaped by education, especially what we refer to as higher education" (Zaķis, 2007, 65).

Undoubtedly, the intellectual resources that are concentrated in higher education are the decisive force that drives development in Latvia. Enhancing the competitiveness of prospective and current professionals by focusing on learning outcomes and competences that

are prized in the labour market is one of the most complex pedagogical problems of higher education not only in Latvia but also in Europe and beyond.

The 1990s brought the constructivist paradigm to Latvian higher education. It was eagerly embraced both by academics and the general public. Social expectations boosted the potential value of higher education. The public now imagines that graduates from higher education institutions will enter the labour market and encounter a wealth of open doors. Increased demand for higher education has rapidly transformed the latter from an elite value that is attained through hard work and application into a generally-available and trending opportunity for the masses. "Higher education is no longer the privilege of the social elite but a mass commodity"(Koķe, 2000, 155). Rapid expansion of the domain of higher education presents a number of tensions and challenges that affect the provision of the study process, compromise its quality and reshape students' attitudes to learning.

In her appraisal of higher education institutions, Professor Zanda Rubene outlines several pertinent problems: mass emergence of universities, crisis in academic education, tensions between traditionally academic and contemporary democratic conceptions of university, and demands for freedom and responsibility among university students and faculty (Rubene, 2006, 10).

Inta Brikše has researched public information about higher education reform. Qualitative analysis of relevant texts enabled her to conclude that the situation is fraught with danger, because many opinions and facts that are paramount to making an objectively evaluation of current challenges and changing tendencies fail to reach the public attention altogether. "Thus, agendas and limitations of the media and individuals in the higher education domain fail to challenge the society and evoke a public resonance in terms of active involvement in discussing relevant problems and proposing innovative solutions; instead, issues of the past continue to be ruminated, interpretative discourse about the present situation keeps growing, but no motivation is offered to join the discussion that seeks original solutions for the future"(Brikše, 2011, 226).

In times of crisis, changing economic and social processes fundamentally reshape public attitudes towards education as a social and intellectual value. Crisis of social values transforms the higher education paradigm and highlights the pressing need to restructure and improve the supply of existing study programmes, especially in terms of content, abandon old mechanisms of planning and organization in favor of a modules approach as well as tap into the developmental potential of interactive studies by upgrading higher education pedagogy with meaningful innovations for higher quality, greater efficiency and increased competitiveness.

Improving the quality of higher education is a challenge that presents itself to every single professional working in the field. At the same time, it is also their professional responsibility. The author of the present paper is positive that most productive initiators of all change are students and their critically evaluative demand for better quality studies. Transformations in higher education are effected by university administration and faculty, who create intellectual values and develop human capital.

Educator Tatjana Koķe has analyzed the potential for boosting the productivity of higher education study programmes. She concludes that "the greatest asset of a knowledge society is individuals with their skills and competences"(Koķe, 2005, 88). Crucially, the resources of higher education carry a unique capacity to open unlimited opportunities for human self-development and professional growth. The tensions that accompany higher education reform illuminate the central problem of the preset paper: the importance of university teachers' pedagogical competence and professional responsibility to sustain an educational dialogue and interaction that shape students' professional identity during the course of their studies.

Thus, the focus of the study reported on in this paper is analysis of university teachers' pedagogical competence and academic cooperation in the context of increasing the competitiveness of prospective specialists and raising the quality of higher education studies.

The importance of university teachers' pedagogical competence and the efficiency of pedagogical interaction during the study process are explored through the following research questions:

- what features of actions that characterize university teachers' pedagogical competence attest to their professional performance which aligns with current tendencies of higher education reform;
- how can the quality of higher education be improved with focus on studies that are underpinned by science and research and acknowledgement of the importance of university teachers' pedagogical competence and academic cooperation during the study process.

Research methods

The author has performed a qualitative action research study that relied on theoretical research methods and comparative approach to analyzing relevant scientific literature and other sources on university teachers' pedagogical competence and professional responsibility in the field of higher education in Latvia and abroad. The paper was written by taking a qualitative approach to educational research, which determined the research question and informed the analysis of qualitative empirical data (Barlett & Burton, 2007; Merriam, 2009).

The interpretative phenomenological method of data analysis was used when examining relevant theoretical insights with a view to illuminating the quality aspects of university teachers' competence and the theoretical aspects of prospective teachers' (current university students') emerging pedagogical experience. Empirical data were drawn from the opinions of faculty at Liepaja University on university teachers' pedagogical competence in the context of professional challenges in higher education. Experiences of some faculty were analyzed in greater detail by using the approach of informal description, which enabled experts to express their subjective opinion. The inferred opinions were structured into systematic groups that describe the research participants' views on university teachers' pedagogical and professional competences to provide an effective higher education. Students' attitudes and opinions were appraised through survey and interview. The sample included 87 students of the programme "Teacher". The survey was focused on eliciting students' understanding and argumentation regarding opportunities for self-education during university studies in the context of their emerging pedagogical experience. Meanwhile, during the interview, students give qualitative evaluations of a set of statements, which allowed for eliciting qualitative self-evaluations of their emerging pedagogical competence.

Improvement of higher education

The international and technological domain of goods and services demands new skills. In the sphere of learning, these are *self-organization and self-responsibility*. At all stages of human development, learning is a source of emerging individualized experience in both formal and informal education. The individual quality of new experience is contingent on the learner's motivation, action, attitude, degree of personal involvement and application (Giese, 2010, 74). Consequently, human experience is the very foundation of learning as much as a pedagogical tool, a method and an outcome. In pedagogy, especially in adult learning, it is important to interpret the dialectics of experience as a structural correlation with one's own self or, in other words, to make sense of one's self-experience (Brigmane, 2012, 15).

Researcher Miķelis Grīviņš has analyzed texts such as OECD, relevant documents by the European Union and the World Bank, and recommendations of international organizations on ways to adapt national systems of higher education to demands of the global education market. He concludes that changes should be effected in areas such as academic staff, the study process and the supply of educational programmes: "Universities should educate and support researchers capable of developing quality education (perform as teachers), produce topical research (perform as researchers) and find a market for their research outcomes. ...Students' involvement in the research process should be much more profound and extensive. It would give them access to practical knowledge and at the same time strengthen their ability to autonomously obtain relevant knowledge in the future"(Grīviņš, 2011, 173).

British professor Peter McCaffery has studied the management of higher education and compared the challenges and changes inherent in traditional and new higher education. He sums up the changes that ought to be effected, which include pedagogical growth of academic staff (Table 1).

Table 1, Traditional higher education and the new HE

Traditional HE	***New HE***
Competition: other universities	Competition: everywhere
Student as apprentice scholar	Learner as customer (and producer)
Delivery in the classroom	Delivery everywhere
Technology as an expense	Technology as market differentatiation
Institutional-centric	Market-centric
18-25-year-old audience	Lifetime learner
Terminal degree	Lifelong learner
Mode 1 knowledge	Mode 2 knowledge
Take what is offered	Courses on demand
Academic calendar	Year-round campus
Course as 3-4 year revenue	Courses as business plan
Teacher as director of learning	Teacher as facilitator of learning
Academic as "jack of all trades"	Academic as specialist
Multicultural	Global
Diversity as problem	Diversity as strength
Process-compliant	Outcomes-driven
Public subsidy	Portfolio management
Peer review	Quality "kite marks"
Producer of knowledge	Agent of learning
Organized by subjects	Organized for solutions

Source: McCaffery, P. (2010). *The higher education manager's handbook: Effective leadership & management in universities & colleges*. New York and London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. p. 31

In Latvia, public discussion is unfolding about a number of issues: disproportion of academic staff and students, calculated by means of comparative framing; what differentiates Latvia from other countries with more successful systems of education; declining rates of state budget funding; inability of the Ministry of Education and Science and the Council of Higher Education to manage reform. Meanwhile, other pertinent issues are ignored, such as how exactly should Latvian higher education be improved (Brikše, 2011, 218-219).

Lately, the concept of creativity education has become a buzz word in Latvia. It denotes the skills and abilities that youth should possess and suggests that the system of education should develop learners' ability to think autonomously, critically and creatively as well as cooperate and adapt. Creativity education should be focused on interdisciplinary cooperation, proficiency, individual growth, imagination, out-of-the-box thinking and nurturing of talent. It means a shift is required from teacher-driven studies that make use of

study plans, programmes and didactic methods to a student-oriented self-education process, which develops skills of self-directed and autonomous learning and research.

Aspects of pedagogical competence

The quality of the study process in university setting is contingent on different factors: content of studies, organization of studies, students' achievements and learning outcomes. Meanwhile, scientific and methodological literature and documents relevant to higher education put forward university teachers' professional pedagogical activity as a key indicator for assessing the quality of studies.

On the one hand, the task of higher education is to prepare young specialists (students) for life in a democratic society and develop their employability in the labour market. However, on the other hand, teachers' pedagogical preparedness and ability to adequately perform these tasks deserves special attention. University teachers' performance affects the development of all disciplines of higher education and, consequently, drives the training of specialists in all areas of national economy. For university teachers to be effective, it is not enough to be professionals in their scientific discipline. Interdisciplinary competences are also required. At the turn of the 21st century, pedagogical competence has become a primary asset, absolutely essential for anyone involved in teaching in university setting.

Training creative and competitive specialists is a serious challenge in a traditional, academically-oriented learning environment. It requires reorientation of a number of factors in the study process. The author's extensive pedagogical and administrative experience suggests that optimum pedagogical solutions are also warranted to help students set individual goals for professional growth as well as balance breadth of professional information and knowledge with depth of understanding, insight and capacity to apply the latter on the level of competences. On the level of organization of studies, in cases when small groups of students are merged into bigger formations, university teachers must keep reflecting on appropriate degrees of individualization. The latter is, regrettably, declining dramatically due to objective (internal) and institutional (external) factors.

An important quality aspect of university teachers' pedagogical work is their pedagogical reflection, self-evaluation and ongoing testing of their professionalism and performance with a view to appraising gains and losses, pinpointing problematic issues to be addressed, identifying challenges and recognizing opportunities.

Findings from an international project "Quality assurance in higher education" in *Phare* programme framework suggest that higher education can be evaluated according to four principles. Two of them are especially relevant to assessing university teachers' pedagogical competence:

- objectivity of evaluation, autonomy and responsibility;
- self-evaluation as a key component in a quality assurance system (European Training Foundation, 1998; Dzelme, 2002).

An essential aspect in evaluating the quality of university performance is the need for self-evaluation by all stakeholders. Since self-evaluation is practicable on different levels (such as student, university, study programme, study course, specialty, individual faculty member, academic subject), self-evaluation is a most effective tool for raising university teachers' pedagogical competence. It helps supervise ongoing improvement of professional performance and predict desired innovations (Samusevič̆a, 2002).

Table 2 sums up answers to questions from a survey administered to 55 teachers from Liepaja University. These findings confirm the respondents' pedagogical competence and awareness of "pressing problems" as well as their determination to grow professionally and assume greater responsibility for the organization of the study process in university setting.

The limited number of respondents, however, precludes the possibility of making generalizations and extrapolating the findings to all specialists employed in the academic environment. At best, the study allows for identifying emerging trends as regards university teachers' professional responsibility and development of their pedagogical competence.

Table 2, Pedagogical competences of efficient university teachers: Expert evaluation

Rank	Key competences of an efficient university teacher (N= 55 teachers)
1.	High professional competence in one's subject, wisdom, knowledge and experience in one's area of expertise
2.	Personality competence: motivation to teach, integrity and objectivity towards oneself and students, willingness to pursue study goals, being professionally engaging according to students
3.	Cooperative competence: orientation towards students and interaction, democratic style of teaching, openness to exchanging social and academic values, availability to students physically, emotionally and virtually, supportive and encouraging approach and methods
4.	Professional responsibility, ability to change and grow professionally
5.	Orientation towards science as a research process and pedagogical work as organization and management of the study process, creative thinking

Opportunities for quality improvement of the study process

Kārlis Dobelis, a lecturer from Liepaja University, proposes a list of quality parameters and their descriptive criteria for evaluating the study process. The first quality assurance factor is university teachers' quality with the following parametrical features:

- university teachers' scientific potential;
- outcomes of research and teaching;
- awareness and application of new teaching methods (Dobelis, 2000, 97).

Philosopher and pedagogue Ivans Vedins also affirms the influential capacity of university teachers by arguing that development of students' thinking greatly depends on the teacher's culture of thinking, his or her quality and creative drive. The teacher's way of thinking is believed to have an important educative influence. According to Vedins (2011, 73), a person's creative energy is their energy to act.

A university teacher's interaction with students is positive if the latter: discover themselves, identifying their "strong and weak" points; are self-critical in their self-evaluation; make autonomous decisions; are self-affirming; rejoice in their achievements. Meanwhile, university teachers maintain a favorable psychological climate in the group of students; give adequate assessment, enhance positive attitude, are respectful to students; furnish opportunities for each student to express opinions and develop skills while working in a team (Škoļņikova, 2000).

If the teacher establishes a dialogue with students, it helps the latter construct their knowledge and perceive the mind as a state of active existence. This way, new experience emerges. The process becomes just as important as the outcome. Critical constructivist pedagogy can endow students with capacity for conscious self-determination, which liberates individuals from external determinants and enables making autonomous decisions. In modern-day higher education, the paradigm of pedagogical interaction reaffirms the positions of action subjects, the importance of the process and outcome of the learning process and the value of high professional competence, while making demands for orienting the process of studies towards autonomous learning and self-education, where criticality, creativity and constructivism are both tools for developing the students' cognitive and emotional attitudes and outcomes in their own right – the very foundation of professional self-growth.

Formation of students' professional experience

Some of the richest sources for students' professional experience in university setting are purposeful studies and autonomous learning, supervised by the teacher in keeping with the normative demands of the study programme and the study course. Latest discussions

about the importance of autonomous learning in the process of training prospective professionals have been scarce, because practically all educators are unanimously aware of its pedagogical value and developmental potential. According to survey findings, the majority of students consider their own responsibility and motivation to be the primary guarantee of quality in autonomous studies. Experience plays a major role in the organization of autonomous studies. This experience is acquired from student-teacher cooperation while moving towards shared goals. For this reason, teaching and learning methods and a well-appointed learning environment are equally important in the shared process of intellectual inquiry. Somewhat less significant, according to the surveyed students, are such factors as pedagogical management and supply of learning materials. Giving feedback on evaluation of autonomous learning can be considered a problematic issue that warrants closer investigation, because only 7 out of 87 respondents call for systematic evaluation. These findings invite reflection about quality aspects of autonomous studies.

Table 3, Preconditions for high-quality autonomous studies: Students' perspective

Choice ranking	Preconditions	Number of choices
1	Students' personal responsibility and motivation	61
2	Usage of advanced teaching and learning methods	34
3	Appropriate learning environment	33
4	Pedagogical management	25
5	Learning materials	21

Each student's individual learning style determines the opportunities and sources of their emerging experience. For this reason, in one of the open questions of the survey respondents were invited to list three most important elements that characterize their culture of studies. Analysis of these elements allowed eliciting data about their process of learning and extracting the main sources of their individual emerging experience. The majority of answers corroborate the crucial role of *self-organization* and *self-responsibility* in the study process. Meanwhile, reported negative learning habits confirm students' awareness of the importance of autonomous learning in shaping professional knowledge and experience.

Other findings from the survey are summarized in Table 4. They suggest that students still consider elements of pedagogical management to be equally important factors when they mention cooperation, communication, mutual understanding and sympathy, respect and interaction. These elements corroborate the viability of using the model of social integration in pedagogical practice in university setting. This tendency is significant in the context of facilitating the emergence of a constructive pedagogical experience.

Table 4, Aids and barriers to the culture of studies: Students' perspective

Aids	Barriers
Active participation and involvement Personal initiative and responsibility Self-education skills Constant drive to inquire Making connections with teaching practice at school Inquisitiveness, willingness to replenish one's stock of knowledge Learning from university staff's experience Putting one's ideas into practice	Poor concentration Poor initiative and laziness Poor time management Failure to follow the standard of assessment Postponing completion of learning tasks Poor theoretical knowledge Last-gasp learning at the eleventh hour Failure to implement one's ideas
Cooperation with staff and peers Conversation, communication and sharing of insights Respecting one's own and other's work Respecting the teacher, mutual understanding Opportunities to express one's attitude	Reluctance to cooperate Poor interaction with peers when addressing learning tasks Lack of own opinion Timidity, fear of rejection and misinterpretation

Students were interviewed to ascertain what they believe to be conductive to development of professional identity in university setting. Analysis of the elicited criteria exposes the respondents' awareness of different sources of pedagogical experience, such as personal imitative, inquisitive attitude, university teachers' creativity, different forms of learning, cooperation with academic staff, development of research skills, pedagogical practice at school, assessment and analysis of challenges and achievements, facilitation of critical thinking, etc. Clearly, all the above-mentioned sources of learning or professional self-development involve individualized experience of the subject's action, which emerges from active inquiry and initiative and results in self-responsible performance, which, in its turn, necessarily includes self-reflection. Broadening students' capacity to evaluate their learning skills and reflect on their practical responsibilities in the context of emerging pedagogical experience enables students to constructively compare theoretical knowledge and practice, critically evaluate the formation of their self-experience and test essential knowledge in the teaching profession. For this reason, students' suggestions for improving the process of studies in teacher education setting (Table 3) ought to be appreciated and accepted.

Table 5, Students' suggestions for improving the process of studies in university setting

• *Higher demands for applicants to boost the prestige of the profession.*
• *Longer practice placement and better theory-practice connection.*
• *Students' involvement in shaping the contents of the study programme.*
• *Professional workshops to share experience and perform demonstrations.*
• *More concrete educational aims, strategies and perspectives, which are open to discussion.*
• *Support to prospective professionals' willingness to become more fully and practically involved in their work.*
• *Greater flexibility of study programmes.*
• *More extensive usage of innovative methods and greater creativity during lectures.*
• *Re-planning for more intensive studies – shorter in duration but with more emphasis on autonomous learning.*
• *More profound presentation of topics and more discussions about them.*
• *Better availability of learning materials throughout the entire duration of studies.*
• *More guest lecturers.*
• *Interdisciplinary seminars for students of different levels.*
• *Analysis of pedagogical problems at school and seeking adequate solutions.*
• *Cooperation with schoolchildren not only during practice placement but throughout the entire duration of studies.*
• *More extensive cooperation and experience exchange with other higher education institutions.*
• *Students' involvement in genuine research to expand their professional experience.*
• *Monitoring the content and quality of study courses.*

University studies are a crucial time in the shaping of prospective specialists' learning culture and professional identity. Formation of prospective specialists' experience of autonomous learning is, to a great extent, contingent on the quality of pedagogical interaction and lessons learnt during the course of studies.

Opportunities for improving the quality of higher education and relevant intellectual resources are diverse: increasing university teachers' authority and maintaining a constructive pedagogical interaction; innovative transformations of elements of the study process by focusing on needs and demands of the labour market; optimum balancing of theory and practice; self-education and analysis of progress reports; evaluation of individual and group reflections; acknowledging such activities of individual growth that contribute new knowledge, drive and initiative for self-growth, shape a critically evaluative personal attitude, foster active participation and co-responsibility, and facilitate meaningful, conscious and creative learning at the dawn of prospective specialists' professional career.

Conclusion

A holistic perspective on and analysis of the problems of higher education confirms that university teachers' pedagogical competence and professional responsibility as well as the breadth and depth of their knowledge are vital preconditions for a sound pedagogical process, which is focused on seeking new action dimensions and informative insights into the quality of studies in higher education setting.

Improving pedagogical interaction between university teachers and students, nurturing intellectual capacities, providing a wealth of opportunities in terms of choosing appropriate methods, harmonizing individual learning and thinking styles of students and faculty, and joining inner forces of different individuals can motivate growth and help withstand challenges as well as sustain favorable conditions for professional maturation in higher education setting while fostering a labour market-oriented professional identity among students.

The above-mentioned professional challenges of higher education highlight the need for improving university teachers' and students' teaching and learning styles and for researching the latter with a view to contributing to quality assurance in higher education. Addressing the problems of higher education can be improved with focused research into pedagogical, cognitive and creativity psychology in higher education setting as well as with investigations into the viability of constructivist paradigm in relevant theoretical and practical dimensions of pedagogical work:

- How to develop and ensure personal responsibility of all students for their emerging professional identity?
- How to increase capacity for diversity of methods and pedagogical forms in a critically analytical study process?
- How to transform the power of university teachers' personal example into synergetic intellectual cooperation with students?

Organization of pedagogical process in university setting should make use of positive experiences discovered in relevant research in order to seek innovative solutions and establish a closer and more focused inter-university and interdisciplinary cooperation between faculty members, infusing the process of university studies with insights from relevant research.

The shaping of individualized learning experience during the course of university studies is a conscious, motivated and meaningful learning that is rooted in free will, autonomy and responsibility, critical evaluation of experience and ongoing reflection while moving towards the goal of professional growth.

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