Higher education teacher competences in view of the changing social conditions

Abstract
Higher education in the European Union countries passes through the process of transformation, reflecting the global changes in economic, political and social spheres and the consequent shift in the understanding of the purpose of schooling. The role of school today is to equip students with such knowledge, skills and abilities that will enable them to achieve success in work and in life, abiding by moral and ethical values of society. A specific role of a higher education teacher consists in teaching adults who are physically mature, but still need guidance in their social and emotional development. A higher education teacher fulfils the roles of a pedagogue, a researcher, a team member, a member of society, which poses high requirements to his/her professional and personal competences. The paradigm of lifelong learning applies to all members of the knowledge society, especially to higher education teachers preparing future specialists who will once be responsible for further development of society.

Introduction

In 1996, the UNESCO’s International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first century published the report Learning: The Treasure Within, where Jacques Delors proposed a new construct of education based on four pillars, emphasising the importance of lifelong learning. Considering the challenges of the future development, the Commission declared that, “humankind sees in education an indispensable asset in its attempt to attain the ideals of peace, freedom and social justice” (Delors, 1996, p. 13). The four pillars of learning became fundamental principles for reshaping education: learning to live together, learning to know, learning to do, and learning to be. The Delors Report inspired rethinking education in the context of social changes and, with the aspirations of “educating the global village” it started transformation processes in education systems throughout the world.

The following UNESCO documents on education, the outcomes of the European educational policy and the results of the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) contributed to the shift in understanding of and attitudes to education. In 2000, the Lisbon European Council declared a new strategy for the following decade, “to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion” (European Parliament, 2000, Par. 5). Proclaiming that people are Europe’s main asset, the Council articulated the necessity of transforming education systems in order to adapt to the demands of the knowledge society and the requirements of the labour market. “Europe’s education and training systems will have to offer learning and training opportunities tailored to target groups at different stages of their lives. This new approach should have three main components: the development of local learning centres, the promotion of new basic skills, in particular in the information technologies, and increased transparency of qualifications” (ibidem, Par. 25, 26).

Defining competences
The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning suggested a common European Reference Framework on key competences “for policy makers, education and training providers, the social partners and learners... with the aim of achieving the agreed European reference levels” (European Parliament, 2006, p. 11). Competences are defined here as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the context. Key competences are those which all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment. The European Reference Framework set the following eight key competences: 1) communication in the mother tongue; 2) communication in foreign languages; 3) mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology; 4) digital competence; 5) learning to learn; 6) social and civic competences; 7) sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; 8) cultural awareness and expression.

The lifelong learning paradigm, proclaimed in the UNESCO documents and in the Lisbon strategy, emphasises the importance of transversal competences (digital, learning to learn, civic), in particular the meta-competence of learning to learn – adjusting to change, managing and selecting from huge information flows (European Commission, 2013, p. 8).

In its 2013 document Supporting teacher competence development for better learning outcomes, the European Commission encouraged governments and other institutions to define teacher competences at different stages of their career, naming some beneficial factors: 1) the results of research and of international comparisons such as PISA and TALIS (Teaching and Learning International Survey); 2) international commitments such as the Bologna process of higher education reform or the development of Qualifications Frameworks; 3) the desire to enhance the quality or effectiveness of education; 4) other system developments, such as moves towards expressing school curricula in terms of learning outcomes, or reforming the system of teacher education; 5) demand from parents or other stakeholders for greater accountability in education systems. According to the Commission, “such a framework can provide important support for teachers and facilitate a discussion about what society can expect from teachers and what teachers can expect from society, thereby providing teachers with a sense of security in their roles” (European Commission, 2013, p. 13).

Higher education teacher competences

The European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) describes quality teachers as equipped with the ability to integrate knowledge, handle complexity, and adapt to the needs of individual learners as well as groups. Teacher competences are built on “a concept of teaching as praxis in which theory, practice and the ability to reflect critically on one’s own and others’ practice illuminate each other, rather than on a concept of teaching as the acquisition of technical skills” (ETUCE, 2008, In: European Commission 2013, pp. 7–8). M. Sirotová defines a teacher as “a qualified professional whose task is to instruct and educate pupils or students so as to achieve the best possible development of their personalities, either by presenting (conveying) information, attitudes and abilities or by directing pupils’ and students’ activities during which they form their attitudes and abilities” (Sirotová, 2014, p. 5).

I. Turek states that, in professional preparation including the preparation for a teaching profession, the trend today is a competency-based education. He also insists that all higher education teachers should have pedagogical qualification, however, this requirement is not consistently observed in the Slovak higher education institutions (Turek, 2008, p. 4). I. Turek distinguishes the following types of the higher education teacher competences:

1) Subject-specific competences – deep knowledge of the content of the subjects taught;
2) Scientific competences – to carry out scientific research in the teacher’s scientific field;
3) Psycho-didactic competences: to create favourable conditions for learning; motivate the students to obtain knowledge, to learn; activate and develop their abilities, key competences: digital, learning, cognitive, communicative, interpersonal and personal; create a positive social, emotional and working climate; manage the students’ learning process – individualise it respecting the time, pace, depth, measure of help and learning styles of students; use optimum methods, forms of organisation and material means of the teaching-learning process, etc.
4) Communicative competences: a competence to effectively communicate with students, colleagues, superiors, parents, social partners, etc.
5) Diagnostic competences: validly, reliably, fairly and objectively evaluate the students’ learning outcomes; identify their attitudes to learning, school, life, and their problems;

6) Planning and organisational competences: to plan and project the learning-teaching process, create and maintain a certain order and system in the learning-teaching process, etc.

7) Advisory and consultative competences: to provide advice to students, dealing with their problems, also other than connected with their study, etc.

8) Self-reflexive competences (reflection of own work): to assess one’s own pedagogical work, aiming to improve one’s own future activity (Turek, 2008, pp. 5–6).

A. Hurajová underlines a pragmatic approach emphasising the gaining knowledge for practice: “Current demands for education put emphasis on success in practice and development of such competences, which allow us to act successfully not only in professional but also in personal life” (Hurajová, 2014, p. 16).

Multiple roles of a higher education teacher

Student’s guide instead of authority

Amongst the diverse flows of data, which are nowadays available to the ICT users at an instant, the school ceased to be the only source of information. The teacher is no more the only authority that is entitled to transmit the knowledge to his/her students. Instead, the teacher plays multiple roles in relation to students, being a facilitator, consultant, supervisor, partner in communication. As E. Poórová states, “today’s teacher can no more fulfil a single function of a mediator of knowledge and skills, because a student is no more willing to be merely a passive element in the teaching-learning process. Nowadays information is available in a complex form and the teacher should adapt to this reality. It also involves developing his/her technological skills, even though, in this process the teacher will always lag behind. On the other hand, a certain overview and experience can represent the teacher’s advantage in the form of a more critical assessment of the positives of innovative teaching methods, as well as foreseeing the negatives” (Poórová, 2010, p. 65).

Social dimension

Performing the role of a mediator of social values, a teacher fulfils a number of further roles arising from social demands, in particular: a manager of the work of a given group, a diagnostic of the students’ learning styles, a consultant in situations connected with learning problems, instructor, protector of moral and cultural values, facilitator of student learning, innovator of skilful modifications of curriculum (respecting the age), as a creative worker in the school team, as a reflexive professional (Petlák, 2004, In: Mandelíková, 2011, p. 4).

A. Hurajová mentions a wide range of activities related to the work of higher education teachers. “Working as a teacher in a higher education institution is not easy. Apart from pedagogical duties – teaching several subjects, often those in which he/she is not a specialist, a higher education teacher performs a number of other activities – searching for literature or familiarising with the didactic technique. We must not forget about the fact that most of the beginning teachers are also students of doctoral studies, which involves further obligations” (Hurajová, 2012, p. 50).

Being a European teacher

M. Schratz highlights the dimension of a ‘European teacher’ who educates not only future citizens of his or her country, but also supports them in becoming future generations of European citizens. The impact of social changes should reflect in new learning outcomes and contribute to citizenship education of students or trainees, such as: living in a multicultural, inclusive and tolerant society; living according to sustainable lifestyles regarding environmental issues; dealing with gender equality issues in family, work and social life; living as a European citizen; managing his/her own career development; etc. (Schratz, 2010, p. 98).

What makes a teacher competent or even excellent?
Pedagogical theorists and practitioners agree that the teacher is the most important factor in the whole process of instruction and education. The teacher plays an irreplaceable role in the development of student’s personality, be it a conscious or unconscious expression of his/her professional and personal attributes, opinions, living style, ways of dressing, conduct, communication, etc. I. Turek states that “teaching adults, which the majority of higher education students are, differs from teaching children and the youth, primarily in the measure of preceding learning, experience, motivation, and activity” (Turek, 2008, p. 3). M. Sirotová marks that higher education students are generally aged between 18 to 23 years. Most of them enter university as physically mature individuals and attain their psychical and sociological maturity during the studies. “It follows that, for educational process there opens space for both educational and instructional activities in sense of forming the personality and value orientation of a higher education student (Sirotová, 2014, p. 113).

M. Sirotová specifies the tasks and responsibilities of a higher education teacher in preparing students for a knowledge-based society. “The role of a higher education teacher is not just to present ready-made information and promptly convey new findings from his/her own scientific research, but also to create conditions in which the students will acquire more lasting values rather than large amounts of data that will soon be forgotten and, moreover, become obsolete over time. Such lasting values include the development of cognitive abilities of students, their motivational, emotional and value spheres, their socialisation, development of creative abilities, ability to learn rationally, and flexibly adapt to the rapidly changing conditions of social life” (Sirotová, 2010, p. 5). According to M. Sirotová, it is necessary to support students in their self-study and activate the student’s personality by using two-way communication rather than one-way communication methods. “The most suitable methods seem to be activation methods, which transform a monologous lecture into an activation lecture, a traditional seminar into an activation seminar” (Sirotová, 2014, p. 6).

**Competences of an ESP (English for Specific Purposes) teacher**

In addition to the English language knowledge, an ESP teacher must possess certain knowledge about the discipline he or she teaches, develop needs analysis and syllabus design, write or adapt materials, make course evaluation, etc. (Venkatraman, Prema, 2007).

In a foreword to their textbook Angličtina pro studenty MFF UK (English for students of the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics of Charles University), A. Křepinská, M. Bubeníková and M. Mikuláš outline the language competences which the students should acquire during the course, but an ESP teacher is supposed to have them in his/her repertoire prior to teaching. “In a subject-specific discourse, it is important not only to express oneself intelligibly, with adequate fluency, just as the students used to express themselves at the previous stages of education. In a higher education institution, we set ourselves higher goals. Specialists have to be careful about accuracy and adequacy of expression. Accuracy, clarity, unambiguity, and relative comprehensiveness are the constituting functions of a technical style… It also means that they will often have to suppress some of their language habits (informal way of expression) or emotionality of the message” (Křepinská, Bubeníková, Mikuláš, 2013, p. 3).

A competent teacher should also build up the instructional materials consequently, in a logical order, employing the knowledge of Bloom’s taxonomy of pedagogical objectives and learning outcomes. Knowing the levels cognitive domain, he/she presents the content of instructional units respecting the processes of lower-level thinking (remembering, understanding, application) and higher-level thinking (analysis, evaluation, creation) (Anderson, Krathwohl et al., 2001).

**Language culture: language competences and learning outcomes in practice**

Higher education teachers in Slovakia deliver their knowledge to students mostly using the Slovak language, however, many of them do not master their mother tongue proficiently, as expected from the representatives of the highest educational institutions, which universities and other higher institutions undoubtedly are. The responsibility of higher education teachers for the language culture is far-reaching, since they prepare the future elite of society – teachers, journalists, radio- and TV reporters, moderators, managers, engineers, politicians, etc., who will once communicate with their students, listeners, viewers, business partners, clients, citizens, etc., in the form of language they have
been taught to. It is mainly the school and the media where excellent language culture should be naturally manifested, because the speech patterns of professional language users are often emulated by listeners or viewers, especially among young generation.

The media expert I. Jenča states that, concerning the language culture, the Slovak Radio maintains the highest position among the other Slovak radio stations, including commercial radio stations. At the same time, he concedes a certain decline in the language culture. “If we assessed the Slovak Radio broadcasting with regard to the language culture as a whole, then the Slovak Radio will far overreach the other radio stations. However, if we assessed the Slovak Radio broadcasting in the historical context, then we must state that its contemporary broadcasting does not attain, with regard to the language purity, culture – the preceding level” (Jenča, 2009, p. 105). In his view, one aspect of the problem is that the phonetic side of the language is the most vulnerable. Another aspect of the problem is connected with the language teaching in schools. For example, applicants for the positions of radio moderators and journalism applicants displayed the greatest insufficiencies in the phonetic area of language. “It is also the result of the way of language teaching, in our elementary and secondary schools there is more writing than speaking and listening” (ibidem, p. 106).

A higher education teacher: rhetorician, manager, entrepreneur

In the light of the problems described, it is necessary to enhance the language competences of professional users of language, including higher education teachers. One of the possibilities is the introduction or reinforcement of rhetoric and the Slovak language as subjects at all faculties, whether focused on humanities, natural sciences or technologies. J. Danek stresses the importance of rhetoric skills in pedagogical communication, saying that “the teacher should also be a good rhetorician whose task is to gain the student’s interest in learning, wisdom and independent thinking. Therefore, teacher’s rhetoric preparation should include credibility, emotiveness and logical argumentation, which in teacher’s case involves a high degree of professional expertise, pedagogical and psychological preparation, and the power of personality” (Danek, 2009, p. 26).

Higher education institutions often cooperate with organisations from other sectors of national economy – industrial corporations, business companies, social and cultural institutions, etc. Working on joint projects, teachers as scientists and researchers can widely apply their managerial, entrepreneurial and negotiating competences. More and more business companies today try to invest in local development projects in order to attract potential employees. Gažicová points out that “the question of business is how to ensure that the results and the production of the firm should be of some benefit to a wider circle of people. This question is old like the humankind itself. It is the subject of socially responsible business” (Gažicová, 2012, p. 406).

At the European level, the European Commission launched the research and innovation programme Horizon 2020, planned to run from 2014 to 2020, aimed at securing Europe’s global competitiveness. Horizon 2020 opens wide possibilities for universities to exploit their scientific and research potential via the programme’s initiatives, institutes and partnerships, such as the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT), the Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs), etc. (European Commission, 2011).

Conclusions

Global changes occurring in the last decades of the twentieth century gave the impetus for rethinking the quality of school systems in the developed countries which did not manage to offer young people adequate qualifications required by the labour market. Neither did they take into account the needs of the employed and unemployed adults who could not keep pace with the rapid development of digital technologies and new knowledge without further training or requalification. To ensure efficiency and effectiveness of education systems worldwide and improve employability for sustainable development of society, organisations responsible for education and economic growth, such as UNESCO, OECD and other relevant institutions launched a series of initiatives and projects designed to implement vast school reforms on a common theoretical basis. National governments adopted legal measures compatible with the EU legislative to enable pertaining subjects to prepare and
implement education reforms, to promote student and teacher mobilities and recognise qualifications obtained in other countries.

A long lasting and still open discourse on the concept of competence led to elaboration of the framework of competences as a tool to define, measure and assess human performance in different kinds of activities against given standards. School curricula have undergone profound changes due to the shift in the comprehension of educational objectives, methods of teaching, approaches to the learner’s personality, didactic techniques and the ways of assessing the quality of learning outcomes. The call for transparency in evaluation of teachers’ work induced the introduction of performance measurement systems, which enabled to determine more clearly the criteria teachers are expected to meet. Lifelong learning, research activity, enhancing qualification, interactive communication with students, motivation for academic excellence, search for innovative ideas and practices, passion for teaching profession – these are the preconditions that make a teacher competent or even excellent.

Bibliography