

The Role of Key Competences in Adult Education: The Case of Lithuania

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Abstract

This article focuses on the analysis of the current state of the key competence development of adults in Lithuania. The following key competences are analysed: communication in native tongues and foreign languages, development of cultural awareness, entrepreneurship, application of information society technologies, and learning to learn. The research involved analysis of the definition and role of the key competences, discussing their typologies and revealing the preconditions, factors and approaches to the development of the key competences.

Results of the quantitative survey involving 6992 adult respondents in Lithuania showed that the key competences are important for the majority of the research sample in their social, work and personal life. Individualised ways of key competence development are applied more frequently than collective ways. Key competence development is mostly enhanced by personal needs (work, wish of development and self-realization) and support of the family. The most frequently mentioned obstacles to the development of key competences are lack of financial resources and expensive training services.

Keywords: key competences, knowledge, abilities, lifelong learning (LLL), Lithuania

Introduction

Lithuania has been participating in the global and European economic competition and undergoing different processes of the European integration for 25

years. Hence, Lithuania faces multiple and very complex challenges, starting from the declining population (especially of youth cohorts), high and not declining emigration rates and insufficiency of investments in the development and sustaining of human capital at the level of enterprises, sectors of economy and state. Despite the fact that statistic indicators evidence rather impressive educational achievement of young population comparing to other European countries, this competitive advantage fails to be exploited due to existing mismatches of skills, lack of communication between education and business and other reasons.

Acquisition of the key competences and their application in different activities are determined by the multiple factors influenced by political, economic, social and cultural changes. Adult population faces the necessity to acquire and develop the key competences through lifelong learning, thus opening new possibilities for participation in social life. Development of innovations in the economy and society also requires improvement of the application of knowledge and skills and increasing their effectiveness.

The aim of this article is to disclose the main characteristics that reveal the key competence development of adults in Lithuania. This aim is achieved by outlining the roles of the key competences in the fields of professional, social and personal development of citizens, revealing the core features of didactic approaches applied in the development of the key competences and identifying the factors that enhance and impede their development.

Research Methodology

Key competences: definition and role

Key competences are the research object of many disciplines, including education science, psychology, ergonomics, economics, and political economy.

According to human capital theory, the need for the key competences in the labour market is determined by the fact that the demand of skills in the labour market has not only its specific features, but also many common characteristics (O'Riain, 2011). Theories of political economy treat the key competences as individuals' capacities necessary for the economic activity, which are shaped in interactions between the social economic system and acting institutions (Brockmann et al., 2011; Busemeyer, Trampush, 2012).

Theory of the varieties of capitalism explains the demand for the key competences referring to the articulation between the regimes of social welfare and employment on the one hand, and protection of employment and wages ensured

by the industrial relations and social dialogue on the other hand. Estevez-Abe, Iversen and Soskice (2001) distinguished three types of skills that are applied in economic activities: enterprise specific skills, sector-specific skills and general skills (Estevez-Abe, Iversen, Soskice, 2001).

Streeck (2011) criticises such an approach and notices that the skills and their distribution in society are not factors, but the outcomes of historically developed nationally specific institutional constraints and opportunities for capital and labour, related to the policies of work organization and to the authority at the point of production.

The concepts of the key competences are defined by indicating their essential features and characteristics: 1) *universal character of contents* characterised by the application of the knowledge, skills and attitudes in different situations and contexts of professional, social and personal life; 2) *flexibility and changeability of contents* – the key competences are composed of different components (knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes) having no strict structuring of contents and subjected to dynamic change; 3) *importance of professional, social mobility and social cohesion* – development of the key competences (especially the learning to learn competence) creates important preconditions for human capital development and adjustment of its contents to the needs of the world of work. Typologies of the key competences originate from different goals and conditions.

Le Deist and Winterton distinguished (2005) four dimensions that help classify competences in the corresponding types (cf., Table 1).

Table 1. Typology of competences proposed by Le Deist and Winterton (2005)

	Professional dimension	Personal dimension
Conceptual dimension	Cognitive competence	Meta-competence
Operational dimension	Functional competence	Social competence

The key competences (such as meta-competence and social competence) in this typology have a more strongly expressed personal dimension. The meta-competence involves skills and abilities related to the conceptual dimension (e.g., learning skills, logical thinking skills, positive attitude to change and personal development, etc.), whereas the social competence involves more skills belonging to the operational dimension (transfer of information, cooperation and team working skills, etc.).

The European Parliament Recommendation on the Key Competences for Lifelong Learning discerns eight main key competences (2007): *communication in the*

mother tongue, communication in foreign languages, mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology, digital competences, learning to learn competence, civil and social competences, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, culture awareness and expression.

Acquisition of these key competences is expected to contribute to active participation of individuals in society, their successful work and adaptability in the constantly changing work conditions, providing added value for career designing, reducing the mismatches in supply and demand of skills and ensuring the well-being of aging population (Key competences for lifelong learning, European Reference Framework, 2007).

Critical views to the conceptual aspects and issues of key competences

Many critics of the concepts of learning outcomes and competence claim that knowledge provides a suitable and sufficient background for the education and development of key skills and competences. Provision and acquisition of knowledge, as well as the extent of acquired knowledge are essential conditions or the flexibility and adaptability of persons to the changes in the world of work and society, because ability to operate abstract knowledge allows for the development of a range of transferable skills and adaptation to new situations (Green, 1998).

According to Green (1998) and Hayward (2006), the concept of key skills in the UK was introduced as ineffective substitution of knowledge for the solution of knowledge provision gaps in general education, when the key skills were suggested as reduction of knowledge into underpinning skills applied for the execution of different tasks. Criticism of key skills and competences is also related to the fact that researchers and education policy makers attribute many functions to these skills and competences and raise a wide range of expectations by claiming that key skills and competences can help to learn, to develop skills, to adjust to the change of professional activities and social life, to create possibilities for the transferability of skills and qualifications between different contexts of work and learning, etc. However, there is a shortage of relevant empirical evidence that distinguishing key skills and competences as a separate category of learning outcomes and focus on these skills and competences in curricula can help to achieve these goals (Green 1998).

Streck (2011) discerns a wide range of contradictions in the criteria used for distinguishing the key skills from the specific skills. He claims that these contradictions originate from the very narrow understanding and treating of criteria that define key skills and competences, very often ignoring the origin of these

criteria. For example, whether the transferability of skills and their adaptability in the different fields of activities are defined by the qualities and features of these skills or by the existing regimes of labour market and employment relations.

One more challenge is the *fuzziness* and flexibility of the contents of the key competences making it possible to label as skills or competences different personal characteristics, attitudes, personality traits, cultural habits and attitudes (Grugulis, Warhurst, Keep, 2004; Grugulis, 2007). Such development creates a wide range of difficulties and problems in the assessment and accrediting of such key skills and competences due to the high subjectivity of the above-mentioned phenomena and absence of neutral criteria for their assessment and recognition (high risk of cultural bias).

Key competence development of adults in Lithuania: quantitative study

Research on the development of the key competences of adults in Lithuania is based on the quantitative survey approach by using fully structured questionnaires. The survey was conducted by sending the questionnaires in paper format for the respondents to fill in (4868 answered questionnaires of the main survey) and by using on-line survey format (1020 answered questionnaires). The survey sample was collected from the three categories of population having diverse needs related to the development of the key competences: job searchers, employees and self-employed persons and retired persons. The contacts of the respondents were collected by using the snow-ball technique and by asking for assistance from the institutions working with the above-mentioned population groups: the National Labour Exchange offices in the regions working with unemployed persons and municipalities. Part of the questionnaires (about 78%) was presented to the respondents in printed form and filled-in in written form. The remaining part of the questionnaires (22%) was presented and answered on-line or using e-mail communication. In both ways the anonymity of answering was ensured. The data were analysed by using SPSS software.

The questionnaire of the survey consists of five main topics presented in Table 2: 6992 respondents were surveyed: employees, job searchers and retired persons. Figure 1 presents the histogram of the respondents' age. It shows symmetrical distribution of the respondents: the majority of the participants are quite young – 24–30 years of age, whereas the number of the senior respondents is comparatively small.

Referring to the occupational status of the respondents (Figure 2), job searchers make the biggest share of the research sample. Employees and participants from small businesses also make an important share of the survey respondents – more

than 30%. The number of the retired senior persons involved in this survey is comparatively small for the reason that it is rather complicated to reach this group.

The majority of the sample are respondents with higher education (Figure 3), as the biggest share of the survey data was collected via on-line questionnaires, which makes surveying of lower skilled people very challenging.

Table 2. The topics of the questionnaire on key competences

Part	Number of questions
Importance of the application of the key competences in professional activity, solution of work tasks, career management, execution of social and civic duties, personal development.	4
Overall importance of the key competences	8
Application of different approaches to the development of the key competences (frequency)	10
Factors that enhance the development of the key competences (how important these factors are for the development of the key competences)	12
Obstacles to the development of the key competences (how often the obstacles are encountered)	12

Figure 1. Respondents' age distribution

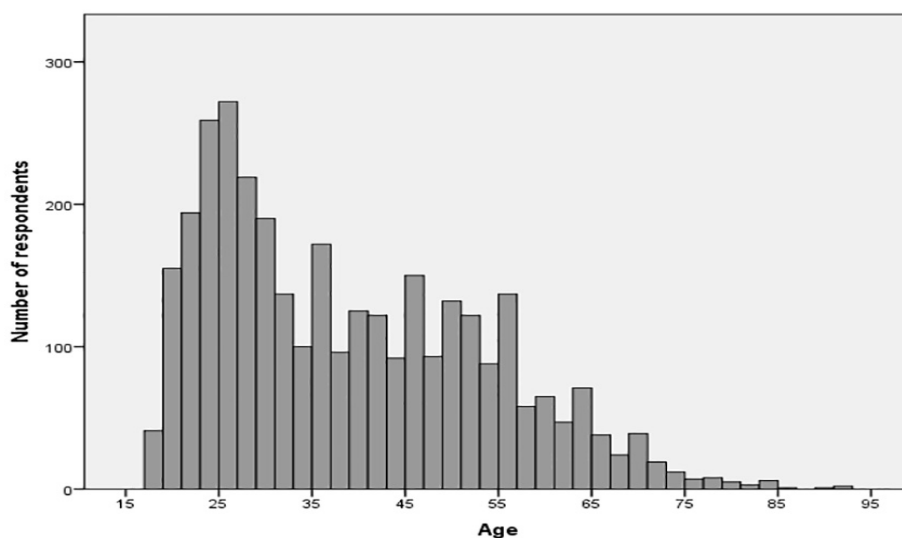


Figure 2. Occupational status of respondents

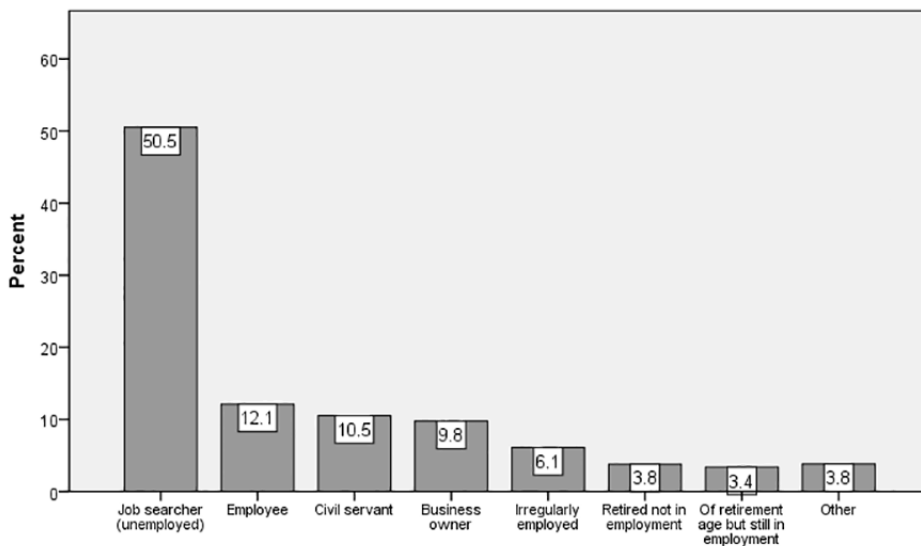
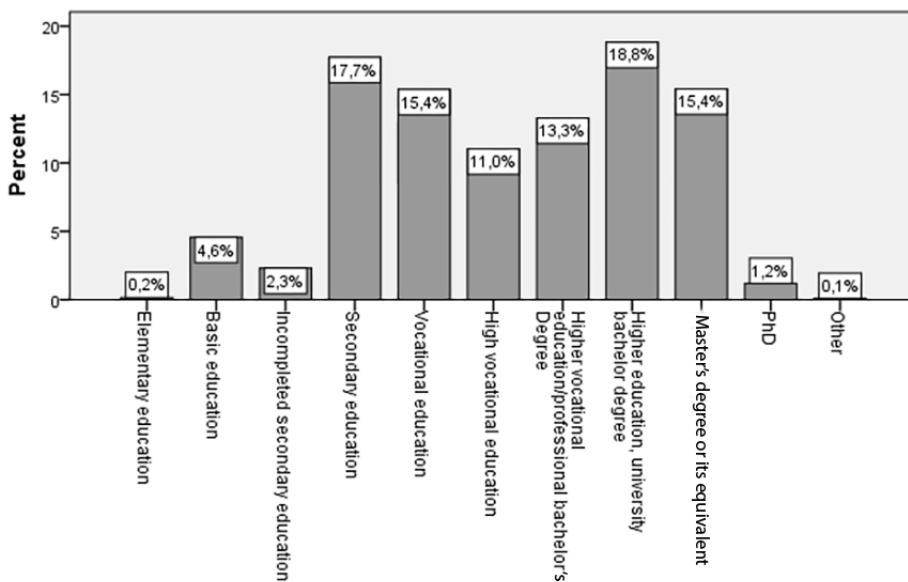


Figure 3. Education level of respondents



Research Results

Importance of key competences

The majority of the respondents (85%) recognize the importance of the key competences in the listed 4 fields of activities: professional activity, job search, personal development and social or civic activities.

The respondents also consider as important the application of the key competences in particular fields, such as solving work tasks, career issues or personal development (Table 3).

Table 3. Importance of application of key competences in the fields of activities

Field of application	Very important	Important	Not very important	Unimportant	The number of answers
Professional activity, solving of work tasks	47.4%	42.5%	6.8%	3.3%	3217
Career	40.7%	39.2%	13.8%	6.3%	3169
Execution of social and civic duties	28.3%	47.1%	18.5%	6.1%	3159
Personal development	59.8%	34.2%	4.3%	1.7%	3189

Personal development was considered as the most important field where the key competences should be applied. Hence, about 94% of the respondents indicated that this field was very important or important. A comparatively less important field of the application of the key competences is execution of social and civic duties. Yet, 75% of the respondents stated that it was also an important field of the application of the key competences.

The data on the importance of the application of eight types of the key competences in the above-mentioned fields is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Importance of application of different types of key competences

	Very important	Important	Not very important	Unimportant	The number of answers
Communication in native tongue	63.9%	30.7%	4.3%	1.0%	3246
Communication in foreign languages	24.7%	46.0%	22.8%	6.5%	3212

	Very important	Important	Not very important	Unimportant	The number of answers
Elementary mathematical skills	23.2%	54.0%	19.4%	3.4%	3202
Digital literacy and ability to use IT	47.4%	41.2%	8.3%	3.1%	3215
Learning skills	35.0%	46.7%	13.9%	4.5%	3188
Social and civic skills	26.7%	53.5%	16.9%	2.9%	3198
Initiative and entrepreneurship	31.1%	45.8%	18.1%	5.0%	3178
Cultural awareness	30.4%	48.0%	17.3%	4.3%	3170

Communication in the native tongue is considered as very important and important by the biggest share of the respondents (94.6%). It is followed by the digital literacy and IT skills (88.6%), ability to learn (81.7%) and social and civic skills (80.2%).

Development of key competences: influencing factors, approaches and obstacles

The survey also included questions concerning different ways of key competence development and frequency of their use (Table 5), as well as questions concerning motivation and the enhancement of competence development (Table 6), and obstacles to key competence development (Table 7).

Table 5. Ways and approaches in the development of key competences: frequency of usage

Ways of key competence development	Often	Sometimes	Very seldom	Never	Number of answers
Participation in seminars and group learning activities	17.9%	41.5%	25.0%	15.6%	3221
Lectures	14.3%	33.8%	28.2%	23.8%	3192
Independent learning	33.4%	40.1%	16.9%	9.6%	3204
Learning with the use of distance education tools	8.1%	18.1%	22.7%	51.1%	3160
Learning with the use of ICT	34.4%	36.8%	16.9%	11.9%	3193

Ways of key competence development	Often	Sometimes	Very seldom	Never	Number of answers
Learning with use of TV and radio	16.7%	31.6%	29.3%	22.5%	3180
Studying literature	23.7%	35.5%	22.0%	18.7%	3179
Everyday practice	47.4%	34.9%	12.9%	4.9%	3170
Other	21.1%	28.6%	10.2%	40.1%	332

The most common ways of key competence development is everyday practicing, learning with the use of ICT and independent learning, as the majority of respondents can devote most of their time to such types of activities and they do not require any additional costs. Seminars, lectures and distance education are less accessible ways.

The results of the survey on the factors that enhance and motivate people to foster their key competences are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Importance of the factors enhancing key competence development

Enhancing factor	Very important	Important	Not very important	Unimportant	Number of answers
Everyday work needs	40.4%	51.0%	6.1%	2.5%	3181
New job search	32.1%	42.1%	14.8%	11.0%	3140
Career planning	37.3%	37.9%	16.4%	8.4%	3156
Wish of self-development	50.5%	41.3%	6.0%	2.1%	3200
Pursuit of self-realisation	48.1%	42.1%	7.6%	2.1%	3183
Support of society and friends	30.3%	50.7%	16.0%	3.1%	3164
Wish to be useful for the family	48.4%	43.2%	6.5%	1.9%	3177
Wish to be useful for others	31.5%	51.5%	14.0%	3.0%	3168
Support of family members	50.8%	39.4%	7.8%	2.0%	3162
Hobbies	27.1%	51.1%	18.4%	3.4%	3123
Other	29.4%	44.2%	19.8%	6.6%	197

The most important factors that enhance the development of the key competences are everyday work needs, wish of self-development and self-realisation, as well as the wish to be useful for the family and support of family members. These factors are considered to be important by 90% of the respondents. Interestingly,

such a factor as new job search is considered as less important for competence development.

The data concerning the obstacles to key competence development are shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Obstacles to key competence development

Obstacles to key competence development	Often	Sometimes	Very seldom	Never	Number of answers
Lack of resources	53.0%	36.7%	7.4%	2.9%	3246
Lack of time	36.2%	47.7%	12.6%	3.5%	3231
Expensive training services	56.5%	30.5%	8.9%	4.1%	3213
Lack of employers' support	29.9%	34.2%	17.6%	18.3%	3160
Lack of family support	9.9%	31.7%	28.6%	29.8%	3184
Nowhere to learn	11.1%	26.9%	30.2%	31.7%	3151
Lack of knowledge and information about learning opportunities	11.9%	25.0%	27.7%	35.5%	3131
Absence of wish to learn	12.8%	29.9%	27.0%	30.3%	3143
Absence of sense to learn	11.4%	24.7%	22.8%	41.1%	3128
Personal features (laziness, lack of self-organisation)	10.0%	31.5%	28.4%	30.2%	3120
Other reasons	22.4%	20.1%	15.0%	42.5%	254

The most important obstacles hindering the development of the key competences are a lack of resources and highly priced training and learning services – more than half of the respondents indicated these obstacles as the most frequently faced. Among others, many respondents also indicated a lack of time and support from their employers as common obstacles in the process of attaining the key competences.

Factor analysis of key competence survey

The strongest correlations were identified between the factors of the same part of the questionnaire. More frequent application of the individualised ways of key competence development also means more frequent application of collective ways of its development (-0.70). Increasing importance of the social factors of key competence development increases the importance of personal factors that enhance the development of the key competences (0.66). The importance of the key competences in professional activities positively correlates with the importance

of enhancing factors and here the stronger correlation is with the personal (0.62) and social factors (0.43). Correlations of personal obstacles to the development of the key competences show that the increasing importance of key competence development tends to decrease the encountered obstacles, or these obstacles are considered of lower importance (-0.30).

To identify and explore the relations of factors with the demographic variables (age, sex, education, residence location), a regression analysis was conducted. All the identified regressions are statistically important, $p < 0.001$. The results of this analysis show that the importance of key competences, individualized ways of key competence development and personal factors that enhance key competence development are more strongly related to demographic variables. The most important demographic variable is age, especially as related to the importance of key competences for professional activity (with an increase in age, the importance of the key competences in this area decreases) and to the importance of personal factors enhancing the development of the key competences (this importance also decreases with an increase in age). Another important variable is education, especially for the importance of certain competences and individualised ways of training. The importance of key competences increases along with a higher level of attained education as well as individualised and collective training methods are more frequently applied in the competence development process.

The survey findings show that the development of key competences and the factors of their development are more important for women. Moreover, women also apply more frequently different ways of key competence development and face fewer obstacles.

Discussion and conclusions

Key competences and their development play an increasingly important role in different agendas of the socio-economic development of society starting from the education and skills development policies and moving towards human resource management and development in enterprises. These trends can be traced in the education and lifelong learning policies and strategies implemented in the EU and its member states, including Lithuania. Despite these EU and national policy priorities, everyday practices of adult key competence development often encounter various problems and challenges.

The research found that key competences are important for the majority of the surveyed people. This finding implies awareness of the importance and role of key

competence development among the adult population. However, this understanding is shaped and defined not so much by the policy discourses, but by specific demands and requirements of practical life related to employment, work, career, social and personal life.

Individualised ways of competence development are applied more frequently than collective ways. This finding shows that key competences are mostly considered as an element of the individual human capital by adults. Such an approach can also be explained by the fact that both the state and employers consider the development of key competences in the lifelong learning perspective as a primary responsibility of individuals making individual choices in the market of adult education services conforming to the neoliberal approach to adult education and skills development.

Moreover, it can also explain the findings related to the enhancing factors and obstacles to key competence development. Competence development is mostly enhanced by personal needs (work, wish of development and self-realisation) and support of the family. The most frequently mentioned obstacles to the development of key competences are the lack of financial resources and highly priced training services.

Some findings of the research conform to the ideas of human capital theory. With the increase in age, the importance of key competences and their development tends to decrease. Furthermore, adults with a higher level of education attach higher importance to the key competences and their development.

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