EPC-TKS 2013

Training the competences in Higher Education – a comparative study on the development of relational competencies of university teachers

Nicoleta Duta\textsuperscript{a}\textsuperscript{*}, Elena Rafaila\textsuperscript{a}

\textsuperscript{*}University of Bucharest, Panduri street, 061071, Bucharest, Romania

Abstract

In this study we have proposed to present some considerations on the importance of the development of teaching competences, starting from analyzing the training needs of the academic staff. The results of the study were obtained by applying a written questionnaire to subjects who work in different universities from Romania and Spain, in total 485 teachers. For analysis and interpretation of data we used SPSS 17.0 program. The study analyzes the perception regarding the importance of the teaching activity and the level of competences for the activities with students of teachers from various universities. Finally, we propose a set of recommendations centred on the professional training and development system aimed at university academics and development the areas with significant differences between average grades.

© 2014 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd.
Selection and peer-review under responsibility of Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiești, Education Sciences Department.

Keywords: Training of teachers, competence, university teachers, training needs, higher education.

1. Introduction

The study analyzes the perception regarding the importance of the teaching activity and the level of competences for the activities with students of teachers from various universities in Romania and Spain. It should be noted that the publications that have occurred in recent times indicate that faculty, like other professionals, need for improvement and support of fellow teachers and specific advice from colleagues with more experience and didactic training given. In this sense, teacher training programs contribute to improving teaching quality, and therefore, education in the universities, thus helping teachers to play, as in other professions, professional role.

* Lector dr. Nicoleta Duta, Tel.: +040724961682
E-mail address: nicoleta.duta@g.unibuc.ro
2. Theoretical framework

Fullan (1993) considered teacher training is having the honor of being simultaneously the worst problem and the best solution in education.

Teacher training in the University has been a forgotten issue during the historic, indicating that the pedagogical training of professionals has not been as in other educational levels. The University has highly qualified professionals in different subject areas, but has pedagogical difficulties. The training given to teachers presents difficulties, particularly in learning to teach, learning group formation and integration of students into groups, organization of discipline and care planning tutorial students (Duță, 2011). Universities need to identify an adapted approach for the new challenges they are facing today. While preserving their fundamental missions, they should start operating, to some extent, as any other service provider. The peculiarity of their status derives from the specific features of the products they are offering: competences and knowledge.

In a previous paper (Duță, 2012) we have presented the current literature review of the development professional (Iucu, 2007; Benedito, 2007; Potolea & Toma, 2008) elaborated some of the starting points of our communication with regard the training and professional development of the university teacher.

In general, we know what the terms “competence”, “competencies”, “competent behavior” or “competent person” mean, without being able to precisely define or clearly differentiate them. The same can be said for terms such as “ability”, “qualification”, “skill” or “effectiveness”. The use of these terms as synonyms is reflected in dictionary entries, as well. For example, “competence” is defined in Webster’s dictionary as “fitness or ability”. Words given as synonyms or related terms are “capability”, “capacity”, “efficiency”, “proficiency” and “skill' (Weinert, 1999, p. 4).

Competence belongs to a family of concepts that rapidly enforces itself within a field necessitating a profound analysis. In the field of sciences of education, the notion causes lexical uncertainties and controversies.

By “competence” (Zaharia et al., 2008) is named the capacity to select, combine and use adequately, as an integrated and dynamic unit, the knowledge, skills (cognitive, actional, relational) and other attainments (values and attitudes), in order to solve successfully, effectively and efficiently, a certain category of problem situations, in various contexts (Zaharia et al., 2010). This definition can be expressed by the following formula:

\[
\text{Competence} = (\text{capacities + knowledge + other resources}) + \text{situations}
\]

A competence is defined in its three dimensions:

- the cognitive dimension- knowledge;
- the functional-actional dimension – skills;
- the attitudes-values dimension which is related to the individual autonomy and responsibility in exerting the professional competences.

In the authors’ views, competence represents an integrated and dynamic set of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes, all combining in a strategy for solving problems, anticipating, estimating the probabilities of some events to happen, for diagnosing a situation starting from a set of prior clues. Competence grants efficiency, precision, confidence – and allows solving difficult situation in the practice they were developed.

As considered Iucu (2004), training means "all activities aimed at updating regularly the initial training, to adapt it to new demands of conducting educational processes, and to assimilate knowledge and skills".

Currently, the training of university teachers is a subject widely debated upon and studied in the field of professional development. If we take one moment to reflect upon the academic profession in the past, we can firmly state that nowadays, more than in any other age, the profession of university teacher is facing more challenges, and one of these is represented by the initial and continuous training of academics (Duță, 2012).

3. Research methodology

The research conducted falls within the educational realm, opting for an integrated strategy, which correlates quantitative research with the qualitative one. The research took place in the November 2008 – July 2009, in four
higher education institutions from Spain, institutions rated as representative for the country. Additionally, for the purpose of conducting a comparative study we resumed the investigation in our country, as well, between September 2009 and July 2010, comprising a series of four Romanian higher education institutions.

The focus group comprised university academics taking part in the questionnaire-based survey, amounting to a total of 240 persons from 4 Spanish universities (The University of Barcelona; The Polytechnic University of Catalunya; The Polytechnic University of Madrid; The Polytechnic University of Valencia), and, on the other hand, 245 subjects from 4 Romanian higher education institutions (The University of Bucharest; The University of Pitești; The Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj and Transylvania University of Brașov), chosen at random.

The selection variables of university academics were: the country of origin (Romania, Spain); the higher education institution he or she teaches at; the faculty he or she belongs to; the gender (male/female); length of service in higher education (1 to 5 years, 5 to 10 years, 10 to 15 years, 15 to 20 years, more than 20 years); the professional category (instructor, assistant professor, lecturer, reader, professor, associate professor, consultant).

The questionnaire in its final version was elaborated starting from the results of the pilot study, comprising 14 items. The data gathering procedure was the implementation of the questionnaire, in writing. In the process of analysing and interpreting the data obtained, we used the SPSS 17.0 statistical software (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

4. Results

In order to find out the level of importance and competence university academics assign to the various aspects of the activity with students, and thus detect possible training needs, we formulated item 7 from the Questionnaire concerning the analysis of the psycho-pedagogical training of university academics.

The analysis of the data concerning the university teachers’ training needs in relation to the activity with students allowed us to notice that the two countries are experiencing the need to provide training and development in certain major areas of professional activity with students, differences, but also similarities arising, as reflected in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ROMANIA                                                                 ACTIVITY WITH STUDENTS</th>
<th>Degree of Importance (DI)</th>
<th>Degree of Competence (DC)</th>
<th>Difference between average grades (DI-DC)</th>
<th>Recommendations for the improvement of professional development areas with significant differences between average grades</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Development of communication at interpersonal relationships and group.</td>
<td>4,57</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>2,23</td>
<td>V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge and differentiated counseling the students:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Identification and orientation of students with special needs;</td>
<td>4,64</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>1,98</td>
<td>VIII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Identification and orientation of students with high scientific potential.</td>
<td>4,71</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>4,15</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management of the works of undergraduate and master.</td>
<td>4,57</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>2,92</td>
<td>III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support and participation in the activities of the student community.</td>
<td>3,98</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>3,35</td>
<td>II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling the students in the development of research projects</td>
<td>4,64</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>2,19</td>
<td>VII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The mentoring activities: sessions with students about learning topics, counseling.</td>
<td>4,25</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td>2,60</td>
<td>IV</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From the above table illustrating the results obtained by the Spanish and the Romanian academic personnel in the field of didactic competence, we may ascertain that the major areas where discrepancies occur between the degree of importance and the actual knowledge mastery lie at the level of criteria:

- from the results obtained in the sample of Romania observed discrepancies that are produced in all indicators of educational relationships (see Table 1 the areas marked with gray color), with the exception of only two indicators that show no weaknesses, but are indicators with improved coverage of the subjects, intended to be strengthened in the future: identification and orientation of students with high scientific potential and support, participation in the activities of the student community.

- It was found that high mean differences between IG and CG in the sample of Spain were registered in various indicators (see Table 1, the areas marked with gray representing indicators you need to have into account for the construction of possible programs formation). Regarding the development of communication at interpersonal relationships and group, support and participation in the activities of the student community, the mentoring activities: sessions with students about learning topics, counseling, social work etc., in the sample of Spain did not record high mean differences, which claim to represent us better covered areas, areas that could be good practices for university teachers in Romania.

These results constitute the prerequisites needed in the future to improve the work with the students, as it has a special importance in the evaluation of university teaching staff. The similarities of practice may reflect the European spirit by the two samples of investigated subjects (Romania-Spain).
5. Conclusions

The results obtained may constitute reflection points and valuable premises for the management staff within higher education institutions in view of addressing the training and development needs by means of building programs designed to innovate in the field of educational activity and lead to the increase of the education quality level and the students’ preparation level.

Based on the theoretical substantiations present in this paper and the investigated subjects’ opinions, we have synthesized a set of recommendations centred on the professional training and development system aimed at university academics and development the areas with significant differences between average grades:

- training of teachers for the development of counseling and facilitation skills to identify and guide students with special needs (opportunity to participate in training courses in educational psychology domain oriented in the relational skills development), the establishment of schedules for weekly tutorial activities with students, for all university professors (will be displayed on the notice board or on the website of the Faculty);
- creation of a research center national and international in which the university teachers together with students in research projects and will be supervised by a specialist.
- develop and implement counseling plans for students with high scientific potential, for upgrading to students with an intermediate level of training and counseling for students with special needs to ensure equality of opportunity.

As suggestions that we need some key to the success of teacher education: creating training programs, dynamic reflective target, transparent ethics, modernizing experiential, empathic psychosocial climate. Also establish educational systems technical support and evaluation for teaching performance, based on a holistic, systemic, thoughtful, critical and continuous professional development.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the EPC-TKS 2013 Conference Organisation Committee.

References


