Editorial

Globalization, the development of technology, mobility, the labour market, the diversity of learners, educational reforms and the like have already directly and indirectly affected higher education and faced higher education institutions and lecturers with new challenges.

Higher education has already been discussed in two previous issues of CEPS, in 2012/2 and 2014/2 but from the point of view of educational policies. This issue is focused on higher education didactics, i.e. on the processes of teaching and learning at the higher education level and on the importance of the development of higher education institutions as professional learning institutions that have contextual influence on the quality of the higher education learning process. The development of learning communities and the professional development of each individual that is understood as "a process of significant and lifelong empirical learning in which teachers develop their own comprehensions, and are changing their teaching practice; it is the process that includes teachers' individual, professional and social dimension, and it is also teachers' progressing towards the direction of critical, independent, responsible decision-making and acting" (Valenčič Zuljan, 2001, p. 131) are interdependent. The professional development of individuals contributes significantly to the development of communities and, in return, the learning community is an important foundation for the development and learning of each of its members.

Hord (1997) identifies basic characteristics of professional learning communities in education: shared values and vision, collective responsibility, reflective professional inquiry, collaboration and promoting of individual as well as group learning. Stoll, Bolam, Mc Mahon, Wallace, and Thomas (2006) confirm these characteristics at universities and emphasize the mutual trust, respect and support among staff members, inclusive school-wide membership, and openness, networks and partnerships that look beyond the school for sources of learning. Professional community building is not just about creating or defining collaborative work for teachers as Talbert (2010) stresses, but it means "[…] shifting a focus on teaching toward student learning", and "changing the way schools and the school system operate and how professionals at all system levels work to foster success for all students" (p. 568). All these accents encourage consideration of how to achieve quality in higher education and the role of higher education teaching.

The Focus section comprises seven articles. All articles are the result of teamwork of several authors, often of diverse levels of expertise. Thus, twenty researchers from four countries were included into the thematic part. Some

articles are comparisons over different countries while others are the results of cooperation of researchers from the same institutions. All contributions are empirical with qualitative or quantitative research approaches.

Faculties as learning communities emphasize the learning process of each lecturer. The analysis of competencies stimulates such development and can appear in the form of the self-evaluation of a lecturer, the research of direct measurement of competencies, the research of opinions and experiences of students and lecturers, etc. The competencies are the topic of four articles; two are focused on competencies of higher education lecturers while the others are on the achievement of student's competencies over the study.

The first article "Towards Competence-Based Practices in Vocational Education – What Will the Process Require from Teacher Education and Teacher Identities?" is authored by four Finnish researchers from the Oulu University of Applied Sciences, School of Vocational Teacher Education, *Nissilä Säde-Pirkko, Karjalainen Asko, Koukkari Marja and Kepanen Pirkko*. In the first part of the article, the development of competence approach is reviewed, including its advantages and limits, with an emphasis on vocational education. The authors contemplated vocational education upon collegial cooperation that often seems to be problematic in schools and universities and wondered if there are certain social structures or behavioural patterns that influence the cooperative culture in teacher communities. The article answers four research questions: What are vocational teachers' conceptions of cooperation in their work contexts?; What obstacles and promoters of cooperation do the teachers find in their work contexts?; What are teachers' experiences of mutual relationships in their work communities?; and What attitudes and intentions seem to guide teachers' cooperation at work?

The research was carried on 39 newly qualified and experienced vocational teachers at all levels. The findings show that the prevailing model in teacher communities is individualistic, discipline-divided and course-based, especially among older teachers. The obstacles are teachers' self-image and a deeply rooted fear of criticism or revelation of incompetence. The promoters of cooperation were connected to the changing practices and the desire to share with colleagues.

Klara Skubic Ermenc from Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana**,** *Nataša Živković Vujisić and Vera Spasenović* both from Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade (Serbia) in their article "Theory, Practice and Competences in the Study of Pedagogy – Views of Ljubljana and Belgrade University Teachers", examine the issue of competence-based approaches in the context of the Bologna process. In the theoretical framework, a short history of the

development of pedagogy is presented, as well as its identity and status as a science and the gap between pedagogical theory and practice. The empirical research attempts to illuminate the relationship between the theoretical and practical education of pedagogues at the university level. Eleven university professors from the departments of pedagogy and andragogy at the universities of Ljubljana and Belgrade were interviewed. The semi-structured interviews focused on two main research questions regarding how they understand the relationship between pedagogical theory and practice, and the identity of pedagogy as a science in that context, in addition to their opinion about the competence-based approach in the context of the study of pedagogy. The findings show that the majority of the interviewed university teachers hold the opinion that pedagogy is primarily a theoretical science and, accordingly, that mastery of the theory is crucial for the development of pedagogues' competences. Furthermore, most of them are rather reserved and critical towards the competence approach as well as practical skills development. Although there are some differences in opinions between professors from Ljubljana and Belgrade, the study shows that similar discourses prevail. The gap between pedagogical theory and practice is one of the major issues that have become current in pedagogical science in recent decades. The findings of this research indicate that there is dissatisfaction with the relationship between modern pedagogical theory and practice; therefore, authors emphasize the need for its reconceptualization.

The article "Didactic Strategies and Competencies of Gifted Students in the Digital Era" is by *Grozdanka Gojkov, Aleksandar Stojanović, and Aleksandra Gojkov-Rajić*, all from Teacher Education Faculty, University of Belgrade and Preschool Teacher Training College "M.Palov" Vršac (Serbia). The paper presents findings of an explorative research undertaken on an intentional sample consisting of 112 master students of pedagogy in Serbia, assumed to be potentially gifted and to have manifested academic giftedness. The intention was to examine the influence of didactic strategies and methods on the competencies of gifted students, thus verifying the hypothesis of the positive effect of certain didactic strategies and methods in faculty classes on the encouragement of intellectual autonomy of learning in the case of the gifted. The method of systematic non-experimental observation was used as well as an assessment scale used by students to estimate the level of presence of the enlisted strategies, methods or procedures during studies and to what an extent learning and teaching strategies used in lectures, exercises, seminars, consultations addressed their needs and contributed to competencies development. The basic finding refers to the following: the achieved competencies with higher average values were, predominantly, those that are important for intellectual functioning, but which

were not directly connected to what explains critical thinking (but not completely) and intellectual autonomy, and they referred to the knowledge of basic concepts, the understanding of facts, and giving explanations of events.

In recent decades, several researchers have been engaged in studying the quality of university education; they have researched different aspects of teaching and learning and contemplated the improvement of the study process. Varieties of these studies have shown that good teaching in higher education is a concept with no universally accepted definition (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010).Different studies determined that higher education teachers are the pillars of HE quality. Higher education teachers should be successful as researchers and educators. How we esteem both areas is shown by studies that enlighten both competences of lecturers and their relations. In the article "Fostering the Quality of Teaching and Learning by Developing the 'Neglected Half' of University Teachers' Competencies", *Barica Marentič Požarnik and Andreja Lavrič* from the University of Ljubljana emphasized that the quality of teaching and learning in universities has been undervalued too long in comparison to research. Current social, economic, ecological and other challenges require that more attention be given to measures to improve the situation. Academic staff must receive incentives, policy support, and high-quality pedagogical training to develop key competencies for excellence in teaching. The case study from the University of Ljubljana is based on experiences gathered from four groups of participants during a course on Improving University Teaching in 2013 and 2014. They gave their opinions on the relative importance of different competencies in teaching, to what extent have they developed them during the course and, finally, which of the activities and methods used have contributed the most to their development. The significant contribution of authors is some measures to foster excellence in teaching at the level of policy and exposed some areas for further research.

One of the most important goals of universities is to enhance students' learning and learning achievements and to outline their professional identity and professional development as well as vocational progress. To reach this goal, it is essential to create learning environments in which a metacognitive approach is stressed, and students are actively included in the planning, implementation as well as evaluation of teaching process. The formation of a supportive learning environment is the topic of two articles; the first is directed to ICT and the second to the relations between students' motivation, and perceptions of the learning environment.

The usage of ICT in higher education teaching and learning has been the subject of numerous discussions and studies. *Maja Lebeničnik* from the

Faculty of Education, University of Primorska and Faculty of Civil and Geodetical Engineering, University of Ljubljana (Slovenia), *Ian Pitt* from Department of Computer Science, University College Cork (Ireland) *and Andreja Isteni*č *Star*čič from Faculty of Education, University of Primorska (Slovenia) authored the article "Use of Online Learning Resources in the Development of Learning Environments at the Intersection of Formal and Informal Learning: The Student as Autonomous Designer". The authors categorize different online learning activities into principles of Universal Design for Learning. The survey was conducted on 138 Slovenian university students, comparing student teachers with students in other study programs. The aims of the research were to investigate the incidence of certain ICT-supported learning activities among Slovenian university students, following by the comparison between student teachers and students in other study programs and by an appraisal of the diversity of ICT-supported learning activities among student teachers and students in other study programs. The findings indicate that among all students, activities with lower demands for engagement are most common. Some differences were observed between student teachers and students from other programs. Student teachers were more likely than their peers to perform certain activities aimed at meeting diverse learner needs, but the percentage of students performing more advanced activities was higher for students in other study programs than for student teachers. The categorization of activities revealed that student teachers are less likely to undertake activities that involve interaction with others. The authors conclude that student teachers should be encouraged to perform more advanced activities, especially activities involving interaction with others, collaborative learning and use of ICT to plan and organize their own learning processes.

University teachers often face dilemmas regarding how to create a stimulating learning environment in large and more diversified/heterogeneous university classes along with motivating students to undertake work tasks and to study more intensively, as well as how to support them in achieving academic standards.

Marko Radovan and Danijela Makovec, both from University of Ljubljana, in their article "Relations between Students' Motivation, and Perceptions of the Learning Environment", examined the characteristics of university students' motivation and its connection with perceptions of learning environment. The authors attempted to determine which characteristics of the learning environment best predict the motivational orientation of students and their course satisfaction. The survey included 120 postgraduate students of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Ljubljana. For measurement motivation, the authors

used several scales of the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire and for evaluation of the learning environment further to the creation of a new questionnaire for the purpose of this research. The main research questions of the study were how the perceptions of the learning environment are connected to students' motivation and which aspects of the learning environment and motivation predicts students' course satisfaction. The results revealed a high correlation between the intrinsic goal orientation, self-efficacy, and control beliefs. The most important factors of the learning environment that are connected with the formation of intrinsic goal orientation and enjoyment of education are the perception of the usefulness of the studied topics, a feeling of autonomy, and teacher support. The authors conclude that the research findings support the student-centred model of teaching and learning to a certain extent.

In contrast to the traditional practice of teacher training grounded in a transmission paradigm, modern models of teacher training presuppose educating teachers to conduct reflective practice and thus transforming teachers into reflective practitioners. *Lidija Vujičić, Željko Boneta, and Željka Ivković*, all from the University of Rijeka, Faculty of Teacher Education (Croatia) present an example of a research-based, reflective approach to practice grounded in action research and the co-construction of knowledge with students as an example of quality practice at their faculty. Such a form of practice creates knowledge through action itself and through deliberation upon one's own actions and the actions of others, all with the purpose of strengthening the practical competencies of future teachers. Their conclusion is that mutual learning, as propounded by the social constructivist approach to education, within the context of the mutual discussions between students and teachers that they organized, directly contributed to the development of (self-)reflection competencies among future teachers. Moreover, all participants immersed in an environment conducive to deliberation and the (re)definition of oneself and one's own pedagogical work.

The Varia section comprises two articles. The first article, "L1 Use in EFL Classes with English-only Policy: Insights from Triangulated Data", is authored by Iranian researchers *Seyyed Hatam Tamimi Saʾd and Zohre Qadermazi* from Urmia University (Iran) and discusses the use of L1 (the students' mother tongue) in English as a Foreign Language Classes and on the base of theoretical and empirical study presents the advantages and disadvantages of its use.

The article "The Social Acceptance of Secondary School Students with Learning Disabilities" by three Slovenian authors. *Teja Lorger* from the Third Gymnasium Maribor, *Majda Schmidt* from Faculty of Education, University of Maribor and *Karin Bakračevič Vukman* from Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor imparts an important challenge to the social exclusion of pupils with

learning difficulties. Based on the research findings, the authors emphasize the teacher's role within appropriately developed strategies for strengthening students' social skills, as well as positive attitudes and sufficient knowledge about the special needs of students that has a significant influence on social inclusion and acceptance of special needs students into class community.

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