SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES OF TEACHER EDUCATION: THE CASE OF LITHUANIA

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Abstract

In recent years, teacher education model in Lithuania has been a topic of debates among governmental authorities, the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports, teacher professional unions, students and teaching education professionals.

Responding to emerging need for young, motivated and professional teachers, Lithuania took steps towards shifting from specialized pedagogical education to comprehensive development of teaching skills. The paper presents the case of implementation of the new teacher education model that combines consecutive and parallel teacher education and concentration of pedagogy studies in country’s leading higher education institutions.

In this paper, we overview the main principles of the new teaching education model in Lithuania and present the practical steps of its implementation through teaching training centers. We discuss interim results of the new model by the example of Teacher Training Center at Vilnius University, Lithuania’s largest and highest-ranked higher education institution.

1 INTRODUCTION

The premises of major changes in teacher education in Lithuania are closely related to ongoing education system and higher education system reforms. Firstly, growing attention to STEAM education in Lithuania and the experience of STEAM education in the EU, revealed the need for the development of innovative, cross-discipline, research-focused teaching methods and in-class practices. Secondly, the optimization of Lithuanian higher education system, aiming at strengthening national universities towards the effectiveness, quality and global competitiveness, has been implemented through university mergers. As a part of the optimization process, the only specialized pedagogical higher education institution: Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences, was merged with larger and more comprehensive institution. The changes in general education and higher education systems in Lithuania were rather rapid in terms of existing teacher education paradigm. Therefore, the need for shift in the principles of teacher education has become evident.

Furthermore, in 2012, the Parliament of Lithuania has approved country’s long-term progress strategy “Lithuania 2030”, setting a vision for development of a country towards smart society, aiming at gearing the general education system to creativity, citizenship and leadership skills [1]. This strategical initiative set an emphasis on developing innovative educational process, led by highly motivated and qualified teachers. However, the preparation of action plans for the initiative also revealed major issues related to teaching staff and teacher education. International experts have concluded that decreasing schoolchildren population of the country may lead to redundancy of teaching staff in upcoming decade [2]. However, country is facing a growing issue of ageing teaching personnel: in 2018, more than a half (55.4%) of Lithuania’s general education teachers were aged 50 years or above. Thus, the numbers of retiring teachers are expected to surpass the decrease of schoolchildren population and potentially create a high demand of teachers. The European Commission recommendations emphasized the need of reforms in teacher education, training and careers, by attracting new talent into the teaching profession, developing comprehensive competences that allow shifting from teaching to expertise in the selected field, and vice versa [3].

As a result of educational reforms, strategic initiatives and rather concerning perspectives of existing teacher education system, in 2018, Lithuania has begun the development of the new teacher education model, aiming at preparing teachers of the modern era.

The aim of the study: to review the main principles of the new teaching education model in Lithuania and practical steps of its implementation by the example of Teacher Training Center at Vilnius University.

Method: case study analysis of the new teacher education model in Lithuania by the example of Teacher Training Center at Vilnius University.
2 THE EMERGENCE OF THE NEW TEACHER EDUCATION MODEL IN LITHUANIA

Country’s long-term goal towards the new era of teachers, as well as international experts’ conclusions on the trends in Lithuanian education market, raised the need to review and initiate changes in existing teacher education system. For recent decades, Lithuanian teacher education model focused on specialized pedagogical education, implemented by Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences, as well as a number of specialization pedagogy study programmes in other Lithuanian higher education institutions (in total, more than 100 pedagogy programmes were available at 20 Lithuania’s higher education institutions). In addition, teacher education was implemented as minor degree module alongside the major degree in the selected field. Moreover, teacher qualification could be obtained through non-degree pedagogy study programme in addition to existing bachelor’s degree [5].

Although the model included both, parallel and consecutive teacher education approaches, but a number of educational experts [6] [7] have named a parallel approach as more relevant in the context of Lithuanian education system. However, the analysis of pedagogy study programmes, conducted in 2016, revealed rapid decrease in the popularity of pedagogy study programmes, and surprisingly low pedagogy graduate employability rates [8]. This situation illustrated the gap between the existed perception on teacher education and market conditions. Thus, in the development on the new teacher education model, the need for expansion of consecutive teacher education approach has been emphasized. The new model provides wider possibilities of consecutive approach by establishing the recognition of informal education, as well as pedagogical work experience, towards obtaining teacher qualification [9].

Although the new teacher education model retains parallel approach, however, it aims at the consolidation of pedagogy studies: from rather extensive supply of rather weak pedagogy study programmes, the new model institutionalizes the emergence of national teacher training centers [9] in three major Lithuanian cities: Vilnius, Kaunas and Šiauliai, led by country’s strongest universities: Vilnius University, Vytautas Magnus University and Šiauliai University. Similarly to the centers of excellence, Lithuanian teacher training centers evoke the potential of country’s leading higher education institutions for the development of modern, competitive, and creative teaching professionals. Teacher training centers implement pedagogy study programmes, organize pedagogical internships; provide recognition of informal pedagogy education and pedagogy practice; conduct teacher training and career programmes; develop new methods of teaching and training, and more [9]. As an important step towards the quality of pedagogy studies, national teacher training centers use three main principles of student selection: individual traits, moral attitudes and scientific potential. Moreover, Heads of general education institutions are involved into the process of student selection as potential employers of the candidates. In addition, teacher education programmes now include compulsory pedagogy internship at one of country’s general education institutions. Interns are being supported by mentors who help adapt to real-life school environment and solve practical issues in pedagogical work.

Furthermore, the establishment of teacher education centers has changed previously existed excessive and non-competitive supply of pedagogy degree programmes towards demand-based study programmes’ planning. All three national teacher training centers work in close collaboration with regional general education institutions to identify the need of relevant skills and pedagogical specializations. Moreover, the ministry of Education, Science and Sports of Lithuania has developed a teacher demand forecasting model, that allows teacher training centers to respond to current demand in the market [10]. These measures help overcoming oversupply of pedagogy study programmes, as well as solving high unemployment rates of newly prepared teachers, previously occurred due to oversupply of teachers of irrelevant specializations.

3 THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NEW TEACHER EDUCATION MODEL: CASE OF VILNIUS UNIVERSITY TEACHER TRAINING CENTER

Since the early editions of the new teacher education model appeared, discussing the establishment of national teacher training centers at Lithuania’s leading higher education institutions, Vilnius University took a proactive approach towards the development of excellence center for teacher education. A new center was established on the basis of Pedagogy center, Department of Educational Sciences and Education Policy Center of the Faculty of Philosophy. In addition to existed minor pedagogy degree studies, non-degree studies and research in the field of educational sciences, Vilnius University
developed pedagogy degree study programmes, professional pedagogy study programme, teacher training modules and teacher competence modules [11].

**Pedagogy degree studies:** Vilnius University focused on 2 areas of bachelor degree pedagogy studies: natural sciences pedagogy and childhood pedagogy. A study on the teaching workforce in Lithuania revealed that Lithuania lacks of teachers in the field of natural sciences and primary education [10]. Therefore, Vilnius University aims at filling this gap, as well as supporting strengthening of STEAM disciplines, as well as enriching primary teacher education with modern education anthropology, psychology, sociology and other cross-discipline research on childhood education.

**Professional pedagogy studies:** study programme “School pedagogy” is one-year master level programme aimed at preparing professionals in the fields of mathematics, informatics, linguistics, natural sciences, physical sciences and economics to teach these subjects at schools. The main idea behind this programme is to bring together strong scientific background in the above-mentioned fields of science and modern skills required for successful teaching job. In addition to this programme, Vilnius University promotes the project “Continue (Tęsk)” that encourages professionals and precisionists of various fields to share their knowledge by teaching at general education institutions.

**Modules for teachers.** Non-degree modules, designed for teachers to obtain relevant skills in pedagogical psychology, modern learning methods, latest research-based study methods in STEAM fields, and others. Modules for teachers also include trainings for competence development according to the latest trends in active learning, blended learning, pedagogy, sociology and other relevant fields.

Both, parallel and consecutive teacher education programmes at Vilnius University’s Teacher Training Center are conducted in cooperation with researchers and academic staff from faculties of Chemistry and Geosciences, Economics and Business Administration, Physics, Natural Sciences, History, Mathematics and Informatics, as well as Institute of Asian and Trans-cultural studies. Such cooperation allows bring the scientific knowledge to teachers, and further to schools. In addition to this, Vilnius University is currently developing STEAM center that aims at providing schoolchildren of 5th-12th grade a possibility to conduct research in modern laboratories, together with university scientists, pedagogy students and experienced teachers. STEAM center will focus on strengthening schoolchildren skills in life sciences, chemistry, physics and astrophysics, engineering, visual programming, mobile technologies, robotics, light technologies and digital manufacturing.

Moreover, Teacher Training Center is authorized for the recognition of informal education, as well as teaching experience towards teacher qualification. This helps shifting from the pedagogy education-based teacher qualifications to experience and professional skills-based teaching. In addition, the qualification recognition system helps attracting highly motivated practitioners to schools and ensuring growing quality of teaching staff.

Furthermore, as a part of the implementation of the new teacher education model, Teacher Training Center at Vilnius University has developed an advanced teaching internship model, where students and trainees receive comprehensive experience of teaching in real-life conditions. Interns are guided by two supervisors: an experienced teacher from general education institution where internship takes place, who helps adapt to institution’s culture, work practices and teaching environment; and university researcher, who helps applying scientific knowledge in the selected field and align it to the requirements of general education programmes.

### 4 CONCLUSIONS

Changes of teacher education model in Lithuania take place during rather difficult times of both, general education, and higher education reforms. However, this allowed rethinking the process of teacher education and training and creating more flexible, relevant, research-based pedagogy studies and teacher qualification programmes.

The new teacher education model has brought major changes in strengthening both, parallel and consecutive teacher education, by expanding the possibilities to receive teacher qualification, as well as fundamental reorganization of pedagogy study programmes, by consolidating pedagogy degree studies, together with minor and informal pedagogy studies and teacher training at centers of excellence in Lithuania’s leading higher education institutions.

Newly established national teacher training centers helped manage the issue of pedagogy programme and graduate oversupply by adjusting study programmes according to teacher demand forecasting model and the needs of the main general education stakeholders.
Teacher Training Center at Vilnius University illustrates the main strengths of the new Lithuanian teacher education model. Center provides refined selection of pedagogy degree studies in the response to most relevant demand of general education labor force. In addition, center contributes to the expansion of STEAM education in Lithuania, by emphasizing the integration of research from the leading scientists in STEAM fields into degree and non-degree teacher education, as well as by developing STEAM center that focuses on strengthening schoolchildren scientific skills.

A wide range of consecutive teacher education possibilities at Vilnius University’s Teacher Training Center allow prospective teachers focusing on the research in the selected field and further receiving needed pedagogy skills. Moreover, extensive pedagogy internship helps prospective teachers test their skills and personality traits in real-life environment with help from teaching professionals and university scientists.

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