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Importance of the lifelong learning for professional development of university teachers - needs and practical implications

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Abstract

Education is perhaps one of the most important social activity in the life of human beings, for by this man has a number of personal attributes, academic and cultural setting it apart from other individuals. The aim of this study is has shows the importance of the lifelong learning for professional development of university teaching staff as perceived by them, concerning the field by teaching skills, aided in the implementation of a multiple choice question taken from the questionnaire administrated to teachers from various universities in Romania and Spain. Found the same opinions regarding the importance of lifelong learning.

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1. Introduction

The speed of change and the explosion of knowledge are requiring people to learn afresh at many intervals throughout their lives. This has important implications for the role of the school, which is no longer providing a package of knowledge and skills to serve a person for life.

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2. Theoretical approaches

2.1. *What is lifelong learning?*

Lifelong learning may be broadly defined as learning that is pursued throughout life: learning that is flexible, diverse and available at different times and in different places. Lifelong learning crosses sectors, promoting learning beyond traditional schooling and throughout adult life (ie post-compulsory education). This definition is based on Delors' (1996) four 'pillars' of education for the future.

- **Learning to know** - mastering learning tools rather than acquisition of structured knowledge.
- **Learning to do** – equipping people for the types of work needed now and in the future including innovation and adaptation of learning to future work environments.
- **Learning to live together, and with others** – peacefully resolving conflict, discovering other people and their cultures, fostering community capability, individual competence and capacity, economic resilience, and social inclusion.
- **Learning to be** – education contributing to a person's complete development: mind and body, intelligence, sensitivity, aesthetic appreciation and spirituality.

This is underpinned by "Learning to Learn". Lifelong learning can instill creativity, initiative and responsiveness in people thereby enabling them to show adaptability in post-industrial society through enhancing skills to:

- manage uncertainty,
- communicate across and within cultures, sub-cultures, families and communities,
- negotiate conflicts.

The emphasis is on learning to learn and the ability to keep learning for a lifetime. Universities have a particularly strong part to play in acting to promote lifelong learning. The importance of universities as key bodies in laying sound foundations for lifelong learning highlights the consequent need for appropriate levels of government funding for their roles. The European Commission (2001) found that lifelong learning has "Four broad and mutually supporting objectives: personal fulfillment, active citizenship, social inclusion and employability/adaptability". In this regard, lifelong learning has life wide dimensions that transcend narrow economic and vocational aspects.

The European Lifelong Learning Initiative defines lifelong learning as "...a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills and understanding they will require throughout their lifetimes and to apply them with confidence, creativity and enjoyment, in all roles circumstances, and environments" (Watson, 2003).

The topic of Lifelong Learning has assumed immense importance in the policies and practices of a number of international agencies, national governments and institutions of learning in recent years. An increasing number of governments, policy makers and decision-makers has concluded that a lifelong approach to learning should be instituted and deployed as one of the main lines of attack on some of the major economic and social problems needing to be addressed as we approach the twenty-first century.

2.2. *Professional development of university teachers*

The professional development of teachers is studied and presented in the relevant literature in many different ways. But always at the core of such endeavors is the understanding that professional development is about teachers learning, learning how to learn, and transforming their knowledge into practice for the benefit of their students' growth (Avalos, 2011). In principle, one can say that the primary goal of university education is, broadly speaking, the attainment of optimal preparation of future professionals. In recent years interest has grown and training to improve the quality of education and, consequently, pedagogical training of university teachers. In a previous paper (Duță, 2012) we have presented the current literature review of the development professional. In this respect, professional development of the university teacher is one of the recent issues in the current context of certain proposals and educational policies. Regarding the issue, over time, have raised reflections on various aspects involved in training involving academic commitments to institutions and teacher working in higher education. This work helped us understand the meaning of the term change and provide professional development of strategies to facilitate the transfer of initial training to training throughout life. One way to define the meaning of a term like this

can be analyzed at least some of the definitions that have been made to derive from them those characteristics that specified. As can be seen from literature, professional development is considered a critical review process that allows training practice, contract reviews, learn which problems faced by teachers, seek solutions and build knowledge about the learning process. Over time, there have been numerous studies trying to defining features of professional development of teachers. How does professional development play a role in lifelong learning? Of the many ways to engage in lifelong learning (classes, associations, informal networking, field trips, lunch bunches, and travel), professional development can play a significant role.

2.3. Analyze of the training needs - important issues for professional development

Carrying out a thorough analysis of the training needs is a matter of importance should be carried out before any development training program within the framework of the organization. In the opinion of Potolea (1989) *"any pedagogical innovation, no matter how important it might be, remains only potentially valuable as long as it is not integrated into the design and behavioral teaching of the instructor"* (Potolea, 1989, p. 125). Wondering *what is the human need?* and studying literature I have observed a vast range of studies which include the need and apparent simplicity and clarity of the examined period, at both national and international level. The phrase *"the need for ..."* shows a situation of tension, a feeling of frustration and, therefore, a desire, it is a result of an imbalance. In the opinion authors Farla, Ciolan and Iucu (2007) training needs represent the learning needs of the members of an organization which may be satisfied by the training and professional development. So, the authors propose us a definition of this concept, frequently encountered in everyday life, but also in the professional life: *"The need is the discrepancy or the difference (distance) between the current state of development of a group or of a situation and the wanted stage (possible to reach). The need reflects an existent problem which requires a problem that should be treated"*. As Witkin et al. stresses (1995, in Farla, Ciolan, Iucu, 2007, p. 7) the analysis of needs is trying to identify such goals, to examine their features and questions and to establish future priorities for action.

3. Method

This article focuses on the preliminary phase including a written administration of a questionnaire to a sample 485 teachers. Hypothesis: if shall draw up a support system, type modular with certain particularities, then there is a higher degree of probability that educational expertise gained to be greater, more effective as compared to normal practice. 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 procedure for data collection has consisted in the application written questionnaire sent by post and email. For the analysis and interpretation of data, we used SPSS 17.0.

4. Results research

Professional development of university teachers constitutes a continuous process that is based on the life-long learning concept. A significant contribution to the evolution in the teaching career devolves upon the continuous training, especially by means of the results that it determines in the educational process, in sense of the increase of the efficiency hereof. Within the conducted study, item 3 of the questionnaire aimed at identifying how important the psycho-pedagogical training is for the exercise of the didactic activity in the opinion of the academic staff. The results obtained by the data analysis indicate the fact that, upon the evaluation of the importance of the psycho-pedagogical training, both the teaching staff in our country and in Spain had opinions that coincided. A first ascertainment envisages the very high proportion of the subjects in our country (68.98% - approximately 70%) and in Spain (80%) who consider the psycho-pedagogical training very important and important. Wishing to find out whether significant difference in terms of statistics occur between the two groups of subjects (Romania - Spain) regarding the *necessity of the training programs and the participation thereof in training programs over the last years*, we calculated the t tests for independent specimens and have obtained the following statistic data (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. The indicators of the importance of pedagogical training of belonging to the country

	Country	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Necessity of pedagogical training	Romania	245	3,86	1,191	,07614
	Spain	240	4,17	1,065	,06877

Tabelul 2. The results of Independent Sample test regarding the necessity of pedagogical training

t-test for Equality of Means							
	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
Necessity of pedagogical training	-3,059	479,028	,002	-,31386	,10260	-,51546	-,11226

Concerning the data comprised in Table 2, a statistically significant difference of average between the subjects belonging to the two countries is noted, differences in favor of the group of subjects from Spain. Thus, in terms of the *necessity /importance of the psycho-pedagogical training*, the t test (479,028) = -3,059 for p=0.002, which implies that the respondents from Spain consider the psycho-pedagogical training important /necessary to a greater extent than the respondents from Romania. Both the practitioners in the education field and the decision-makers become aware of the teaching staff training necessity for the appropriate management of the tasks that devolve upon them. More and more frequently, the providers of continuous training programs focus their attention on the analysis of the necessities in the educational environment, for the purpose of the development of programs that are as appropriately as possible for the beneficiaries thereof.

As a result of the analysis of data from research to application through question 6, we find some ways that faculty consider important to the effectiveness of lifelong learning. Within item 6 (*please specify those aspects of your professional preparation related to the field of activity in which you feel like you refine*), subjects have been given the opportunity to express their views freely on matters within the scope of activity considered to be necessary and important to develop. Due to the fact that the data obtained from the investigated samples (Romania and Spain) were similar, we opted for the grouping of answers of subjects, such as:

- In life sciences (*biosciences*) the multidisciplinary approach and the approach which takes it imperative not only at the level of the applicative or fundamental research, but also at the level of implementation by the educational

act; this aspect of implementation would be desirable to be perfected for the sake of the efficiency of transfer by students.

- Half of the subjects considered to be useful those aspects that you are already specialist in, because the need for training increases in the domain of the knowledge acquisition;
- Aspects of communication, conflict management, motivating students;
- Inter- and trans-disciplinary approaches, techniques validated with certain categories of children with disabilities, linguistic competences;
- The increase of the international mobility of the teachers and researchers of the universities: *"As long as there are several exchanges of experience the more the level of professional development is pronounced. The participant teacher in different exchanges or partnerships with foreign universities discover if what they say and the way in which it sends the signal back students from foreign universities is of interest or not. Also in these partnerships new ideas are uncovered, new ways of teaching, new styles of assessment etc. "*
- Training in using IT support - Information and Communication Technology (ICT): *"Extending a more accessible ICT, offers a whole series of new sizes - portability, transferability, social media, etc. - with a significant impact on education. On the one hand there is a possibility of direct support of the activity with educational multimedia resources extremely valuable and with a significant impact"*
- Lifelong oriented educational career (training related to teaching, learning, assessment, design curricula plus, centering on skills, etc.) that will provide opportunities for the development and expansion of the psycho-pedagogical capacity/competence by institutional contributions: *"Description of the clear frame roles of the university teachers, the identification/description of the optimal ratio between teaching and research; formation of a mentality to ensure an activity of quality, training a culture of quality. "*
- Training for the improvement of the field research for the acquisition of skills specialized in specific industry: *"for the professional promotion a great emphasis is laid on research (ISI articles, publications, communications presented at congresses, seminars, etc.) and very little will be taken into account regarding the educational activity, I suggest that anything would be done in this direction, possibly by training courses";*
- The evaluation methodology alluded by inserting an assessment on the way of the weighted consistency for the final mark, *"the value on the way is not a partial examination, but also an applicative disciplinary activity on those themes"*.
- The relationship educational activity – research activity: *"there is an emphasis in evaluating teachers and in the promotion on their research activity; although research is essential in the professional development of any of us, in the evaluation universities and, by default, in the classification and their financing, I think you ought to be quantified in direct relationship with the domain discipline taught by the teaching staff in question so that it supports the scientific procedure that each of us develops and in the teaching activity"*.
- *"The use of strategies for teaching and learning, such as learning based on practical training, experimental learning, work-based learning etc.)"*.

Because the answers have been varied, we examine the results of each country, which confirms our hypothesis. 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.

5. Conclusions

It is necessary to stimulate individual and collective reflection process in solving problematic situations in teaching practice; to create and maintain an environment of collaboration and social interaction; to develop collaborative projects and to relate the training through action research strategies. Continuing training is both a challenge and a necessity for teachers, with a view to increase their professionalism, update and deepen their knowledge through the development of the profession. We consider that the professional improvement and development are sources of a professional continuum and lifelong learning in the knowledge society.

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