
INITIATIVE OF STUDENTS IN TEACHING AS A DETERMINANT OF THE QUALITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND ITS COMPETITIVENESS IN THE KNOWLEDGE MARKET

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Abstract: The European and national strategic directions of higher education recognize the initiative of students as one of the basic determinants of the quality of the teaching process. The diverse, complex and multidimensional roles of teachers in working with students and in their joint activities, from planning and organization to the evaluation of overall achievements, determine the effectiveness of educational activities, the quality and transparency of student knowledge. Numerous studies of the quality of university teaching which were conducted abroad, some of which are presented in this paper, confirm that the relationship between teachers and students implies mutual initiative, cooperation and partnership in learning and teaching. In such relationships, favourable conditions are created for effective student learning, exchange of experiences, creative expression, acquisition of applicable knowledge and development of the ability to transfer the acquired knowledge to new situations. It is precisely these outcomes of contemporary university education that point to the good preparation of students for their future profession, their competence and readiness concerning the theoretical understanding of pedagogical and methodical phenomena and processes, quality professional work, flexible and exploratory approach to pedagogical practice. The mentioned studies, which were conducted abroad, represent the starting point for examining the attitudes of the students of the Faculty of Education of the University of Kragujevac (Jagodina), on the quality of university education in our surroundings. This review will present the results of long-term research concerning teacher competencies, which determine the quality of university education in our country. This research was aimed at examining the initiative of students in the teaching process in the context of current strategic directions of the development of university education. The results of this research have confirmed that: 1) students recognize the determinants of the quality of contemporary university teaching and the quality of work of teachers; 2) their attitudes on the quality of university education largely correspond to theoretically determined and expected strategic outcomes in the system of higher education; 3) student expectations concerning the organization of teaching activities are directed towards mutual respect and openness, freedom and autonomy, interdependence in relationships between teachers and students; 4) consistency, objectivity, clarity and precision of teachers in their work are evident in teaching activities, which act as incentives for students, and that 5) the quality of teachers' work is determined by their multiple roles in the teaching process. We believe that the results presented in this paper can be a good starting point for the development of a system of measures for the improvement of the quality of higher education, in accordance with the mentioned strategic directions.

Keywords: quality of higher education, teacher competencies, initiative of students, partnership in learning and teaching, competitiveness.

1. INTRODUCTION

The quality of contemporary university education must be viewed in a developmental context. Constant social and educational changes and new goal orientations in planning, preparation, organization and evaluation of teaching activities are determined by the demands of the system of higher education for the acquisition of applicable knowledge and its transfer to new situations. The growing complexity of demands that are placed, on the one hand, before teachers who are teaching, and on the other, before students who are learning, is determined by strategically established outcomes of contemporary curricula. These outcomes imply such conditions in which the students will become able to acquire new thinking and cognitive experiences, successfully prepare for their future profession and the application of acquired knowledge and skills in pedagogical practice, and the teachers will be able to teach students how to think, reason and connect, explore and learn through activity (Kopas-Vukašinović and Ružica Petrović, 2014; McKimm, 2009; Mirkov, 2013). The encouragement of interest, initiative and cooperation of students in teaching activities determines the quality of higher education and the competence of teachers in their profession. The studies conducted abroad as well as national studies concerning the quality of higher education and

teacher competencies have clearly outlined the demands for the development of contemporary strategies of teaching and learning, for identifying, encouraging and directing the creative potential of students, for the development of their own knowledge management system. These are just some of the demands that represent the determinants of the system of higher education quality assurance (Kopas-Vukašinović, 2017; Kopas-Vukašinović, Golubović-Ilić and Cekić-Jovanović, 2017; Milovanović, Kopas-Vukašinović, 2014; *Standardi i smjernice za osiguranje...*, 2005; *Strategija razvoja obrazovanja...*, 2012).

2. INITIATIVE OF STUDENTS AS A DETERMINANT OF THE QUALITY OF UNIVERSITY TEACHING

The quality of the relationship between those who teach and those who learn was addressed by an American clinical psychologist Thomas Gordon. This author has developed a model of their effective relationship, which is largely determined by the achievements of students. This model implies mutual *openness* and honesty, caring and respect, interdependence, but at the same time autonomy and freedom of the individual (Gordon, 2008). Also, theoretical knowledge and research have confirmed that interests, possibilities, attention, cooperation and creativity of the participants in the teaching process determine their achievements (Dryden and Vos, 2004; Kadum, Lepičnik-Vodopivec and Hmelak, 2017; Mathew, Mathew and Peechattu, 2017; Skopljak, Zečević and Drobac, 2016). In order to establish such relationships in educational activities, it is necessary to continually improve the work of teachers, in the direction of the development of their competencies for teaching and learning. According to the national *Standards of Competencies for the Profession of Teachers and Their Professional Development*, the mentioned model of effective relationships between teachers and students can be recognized in the following situations: 1) during the realization of educational activities, the teacher implements various forms of work and activity, in accordance with the knowledge and experience of students, their individual characteristics and needs, as well as the set goals, outcomes, contents and characteristics of the context in which teachers are working; 2) the teacher encourages and supports different styles and strategies of learning; 3) continuously encourages the development and application of different cognitive skills (problem identification, problem solving, decision making) and forms of thinking (critical, analytical and divergent); 4) supports students in freely expressing their ideas, asking questions, discussing and commenting on the teaching topic; 5) the teacher offers clear instructions, creates conditions for the transfer of acquired knowledge (*Standardi kompetencija za profesiju...*, 2011).

Starting from these theoretical assumptions, we have examined *the attitudes of students about the competencies that, in their opinion, teachers must possess and that contribute to student initiative in educational activities*. We then linked these attitudes to the theoretical assumptions about the quality of teaching activities. Two basic research tasks were identified: 1) Determine which competencies students value in teachers; 2) Determine the extent to which these competencies contribute to the development of initiative and cooperation of students and teachers in the educational process. The research was conducted during the academic year 2013/2014, by applying the descriptive method and the procedure of guided discussions (within focus groups), with students of the second and third years of study, of the Faculty of Education of the University of Kragujevac (N=120). The research results have confirmed that students value numerous and diverse competencies in teachers. These can be classified into the following four categories, in accordance with the mentioned standards of competencies: 1) competencies regarding the organization of teaching activities; 2) competencies concerning the attitude of teachers towards students; 3) competencies regarding the evaluation of student effort and achievements and 4) competencies regarding the attitude of teachers towards their own work. For a quality organization of teaching activities and the encouragement of student initiative, it is significant that the teacher is able and ready to: a) involve students in the planning and realization of activities; b) encourage them to interact (interdependence) and c) enable them to express their opinion (openness). By doing so, teachers create conditions for a good interaction of students in the teaching process, both with teachers and with other students in the group (team) (Kopas-Vukašinović, 2014).

3. THE QUALITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND ITS COMPETITIVENESS IN THE KNOWLEDGE MARKET

The following research, which was conducted in an identical manner, in the academic year 2014/2015, with the students of the second year of study of the Faculty of Education of the University of Kragujevac (N=67 students), we intended to determine *what brings students to recognize the quality of work of teachers, in the context of preparation for their future profession and whether student attitudes about the quality of university education correspond to current standards (expected outcomes) in the system of higher education*. Students had the task of determining the preconditions of quality university teaching which contributes to a quality preparation for their

future profession. They concretized *the determinants of quality university teaching* in two directions, in relation to those who are teaching (teachers) and in relation to those who are learning (students). They emphasized that they recognize the quality of work of teachers in situations in which teachers are systematic, precise and clear in their presentations, in which they encourage the development of the ability of students to discover the possibilities of applying the acquired knowledge in practice and in which they are consistent and flexible. In relation to students, they recognize the determinants of quality teaching in situations in which they understand the meaning of the material that they are learning, in which they are interested in preparing for the following lesson with the teacher's instructions, in which they are motivated to work during classes and interested to expand their knowledge outside the classroom as well, in situations in which students have an opportunity to cooperate with each other and with the teacher in solving a given problem, in situations in which teachers support the originality of students in their search for possible solutions to the problem.

In this research, we have also obtained data on the attitudes of students regarding *the effects of the quality work of teachers*, which are recognized in the greater interest of students regarding teaching activities, various possibilities of preparing and organizing independent research papers and student activities. In well-organized teaching, the students are the initiators of activity in the classroom and outside of it. It implies a meaningful and detailed preparation of teachers for working with students. Thus, teachers become good role-models for students, who learn how to work and master professional competencies from them. Through the quality work of teachers, students are offered better and more diverse opportunities for a quality preparation for their examinations. Also, in the quality work of teachers, they recognize the teacher's professional competencies that they especially value (when a teacher is able to analyse his/her own work and the work of students, knows how to transfer his/her knowledge to students). In teaching organized in this manner, the teachers and students are both satisfied with the results. After identifying the determinants and effects of quality university teaching, the students concretized the following possible *outcomes of quality university education*: good preparation of students for their future profession; developed professional autonomy of students and their confidence in their work; successfully passed examinations; acquired knowledge that is not forgotten and that is applied in practice; students are enabled to connect the acquired knowledge, discover the cause-and-effect relationships in the teaching contents; they are satisfied with their achievements; they possess developed professional competencies (they know how and what they need to do); they are ready for the challenges of contemporary science and technology in education, further education and professional improvement (Kopas-Vukašinić, 2015).

One of the tasks of the research that was conducted in 2017 was to determine the manner in which *the roles of teachers in contemporary teaching were concretized, in relation to the strategic directions* of development and improvement of university education, which determine the possibilities of the teaching process innovation in the system of university education. The descriptive method and the procedure of content analysis of primary (*Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, Strategy for the Development of Education in Serbia until 2020*) and secondary sources (scientific articles in which authors consider the problem of the quality of university education, the quality of the work of teachers in the process of teaching children and youth) were used in this research. By inspecting the documentation it has been established that the strategic directions of the development of education have determined the roles of teachers as assumptions for the innovation of the teaching process and determinants for quality assurance, from the provision of resources for quality education, through the adoption, linking and application of the acquired knowledge in new situations, to the effective communication of those who are teaching and those who are learning. Teachers are expected to continually harmonize their teaching practice with current innovative approaches to education and with the demands of contemporary education, when it comes to their scientific and professional fields (Kopas-Vukašinić, 2017).

Based on the presented results, it can be concluded that the strategically determined guidelines and assumptions of the quality of higher education were recognized by students in their attitudes about quality teaching and the work of teachers. Such research results confirm that student attitudes about the quality of university teaching and the quality of the work of teachers correspond to European and national standards for the quality assurance of higher education, which ensure the development of global competencies of students and their readiness to learn in an international context. This creates the conditions for their competitiveness in the knowledge market, which is becoming ever more broadened and demanding (Kopas-Vukašinić, 2017).

4. CONCLUSION

The initiative of students in teaching is a current issue in contemporary theoretical determinations of the problem of the quality of university teaching, as well as the quality of the work of teachers in pedagogical practice. The review of the research results in this paper was aimed at examining student initiative in the teaching process in the context of current strategic directions of the development of university education and attitudes of students about the competencies of teachers that contribute to the development of their initiative in educational activities. It has been confirmed that students recognize the competencies of teachers necessary for quality teaching, which correspond to current standards in the system of higher education and imply the readiness of teachers to implement different forms of work and activities during the realization of educational activities, in accordance with the knowledge, experience, potentials and capabilities of students, to encourage and support different styles and strategies of learning, to contribute to the development and application of different cognitive skills and forms of thinking in students, to support them in freely expressing their ideas, asking questions, discussing and commenting on the topic of teaching, to provide clear instructions and create conditions for the transfer of acquired knowledge to new educational and practical situations. When it comes to competencies which, in their opinion, teachers must possess and which contribute to student initiative in educational activities, they emphasize the ability and readiness of teachers to involve students in the planning and realization of activities, to encourage them to interact (interdependence) and enable them to express their opinions (openness). We may presume that this type of work with students in the system of university education contributes to their professional development, competence and professional training for a quality pedagogical work in preschool institutions and schools. Also, the quality of work of university teachers determines the transparency of knowledge, skills and acquired competencies of students, thus making them more competitive in a broad and demanding knowledge market. If we know that teachers of pedagogical faculties represent role-models for their students, that they need to be examples of good practice that the students will carry on in their future professional pedagogical engagement, the quality of work of university teachers gains a special dimension, because their students represent a “mirror” of their work, ready for new challenges of contemporary society and education. In this context, it is our belief that the evaluation of work of university teachers by graduates and students employed in preschool institutions and schools should be the subject of further research of the issue of the quality of university education.

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