

## Explanations and developments in the sphere of concept of teaching competence. The specifics of university teaching competencies

Ecaterina Sarah Frăsineanu<sup>22</sup>

**Abstract:** The training of academic teachers is an important aspect in the international and European context because of how they are set firstly, then developed the competencies of academic teachers considerably influence outcomes in higher education. The competencies and professional standards are the core training, they being discussed nowadays in terms of ensuring the quality of higher education, centering it on the student, but also on the external or internal evaluation of teachers. With the help of these competencies, in higher education, the training and relations can keep pace with the changes taking place on the social level: the internationalization of education, inter-enlightenment, globalization, the mobility of students, use of communications and technologies.

From the most definitions results that a competence combines knowledge, skills and personality characteristic features – attitudes, skills in a particular context. Very interesting is the observation that, in identifying the key competencies is necessary to consider the psychosocial prerequisites of success and good living. Therefore, the key competencies are necessary to adapt to a world characterized by change, complexity and interdependence among people.

Cumulating a number of theoretical explanations on the concept of teaching competence, we intend to identify the core aspects of the manifestation of these skills for the teacher in higher education, by reference to feedback concretely achieved in the interactions with the participants in a university training program. We referred to academic teacher in general and we did not consider the levels of his evolution, but a desirable model of the teacher as a professional, from the perspective of the training subjects. The competencies of academic teachers include specific competencies, and of them the critical ones are of training and transversal competencies, the psychosocial, and the latter are those that help them adapt to the dynamics of academic environment. At the practical level, our study presents the results of an empirical research, conducted on the base of questionnaires and experiment for the participants in a program of psycho-pedagogical training.

The results confirmed the important role of competencies of teachers to ensure the quality of training programs, starting from the educational needs analysis. The latter refers to both the learning, training requirements and the expectations, desires, motivations, interests, goals of beneficiaries; the request to value the main competencies of teachers who educate them, being an indirect expression of educational needs and yet, unusual for students. Our prerequisite was that the quality education implies interdependence between the suppliers and beneficiaries involved in the educational supply and one of the ways to ensure it is the compatibility among the

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<sup>22</sup> Lecturer Ph. D., Pedagogy, Department for Teachers' Training, University of Craiova, Romania, sarah.frasineanu@yahoo.com

components of the professional development of teachers and the real focusing on student. As a result, the profile of the capitalized competencies after the empirical research conducted includes: the competencies to unfold training, by clear, attractive contents presentation, providing the learning an applied and interdisciplinary aspect, using interactive methods; optimization competencies of the use of educational resources; networking and mentoring competencies, learners support, based on a better knowledge, communications; curriculum building and implementation competencies, by organizing the contents; competencies to grant the feedback and of proper, objective assessment; learning and professional improvement competencies; competencies to participate in the development of the educational institution, to involve in the university-other social institutions partnership.

The competencies based approach has advantages and limitations. The main advantage is that a structured pattern favors monitoring the professional training, gives a sequential, progressive approach. At the individual level, it can get better motivation and personal development and at the organizational level, an inventory of competencies is an assessment tool of the personnel and quality management tool. But even a well-determined framework of competencies does not always guarantee the possibility to put it into practice and measure its direct usefulness in profession and society. The professional needs are reassessed continuously, they are modified, adapted or even changed in the course of practicing their profession throughout life, as a result of social demands (improvement, , retraining, reconversion), but also due to the intervention of self-organized learning approach within the framework of self-education and self-improvement. The success of a self-training project depends on practice, involvement in a sufficient number of activities and organizing the results into a coherent whole.

As a synthesis, among the characteristics of teaching competencies is the fact that they evolve gradually, involving a deployment which lies in a continuum, with a development from simple to complex; they affirm themselves in a real professional context, are dependent on context; are based on a set of resources (of skills and attitudes); are indivisible; they are heterogeneous by their components and homogeneous by goals; they are subject to change; involve opening, globality and interactivity; require learning and development processes well defined; they are a project influenced by many factors and, not least, they are interdependent.

**Keywords:** competence, university teacher, standard, professionalism

**1. Short History.** There is the concern in education for reporting to certain objectives, as a logical approach for identifying the desirable values and to translate them into descriptive elements, with a greater or lesser generality in order to provide a better orientation on the results. From focusing on knowledge, it has reached in the latter part of last century to focus on objectives, the behaviorism generating numerous taxonomic variants to operationalize the behavior.

Then from the objectives measurable on the base of performance, achieved in a short term, by a report to a well-defined content, it has reached to a new reference system, the competence, achievable over a medium or long period of time, and this represented a fundamental change in the design and implementation of education. According

to the observation made by Ardelean and Mândruț, the competencies are interpreted as learning outcomes (outputs), as opposed to the educational goals (regarded as inputs) (2013, p.22).

An important role for the domain affirmation had the movement developed in the years 1960-1970 in the USA and expanded later to other countries (such as France), movement referring to the competencies-based teachers' training, which has led to some analysis and studies on the teachers' competencies. Among the representative authors are included: R.W. Houston and R.B. Howsam (1972), J. Cardinet (1982), L. D'Hainaut, V. De Landsheere (1988), B. Rey (1996, 2011), Ph. Perrenoud (1994, 1998, 2001), M. Altet (1996), X. Roegiers (2000), P. Jonnaert (2002), G. Le Boterf (1999, 2001, 2010).

After the 1980s, following the development of the cognitive psychology, then, the constructivism, it became more general the idea that the processing of information leads to the formation of certain competencies, results which works as a whole and are obtained in a medium and long term . In fact, the influences of the main social paradigms determined also in education a reversal of the priority objectives (from knowledge to skills and attitudes), which assumes acquirements that ensure the learning to learn and gaining the intellectual and spiritual autonomy of man. From a constructivist perspective, focusing on competencies is more necessary today, for pragmatic reasons (Joița, 2010).

**2. The essence of competencies.** In 2001, Perrenoud analyzed the competence as a cognitive resources mobilization that guides the action and decision. It is about : knowledge (declarative, procedural, conditional), capacities (aptitudes, schemes of perception, thinking, judgment and evaluation) and attitudes, values, norms, internalized rules, reference to a number of landmarks such as: what is known, what is done, to others, what it can be done. The National Education Law (2011) defines the competence as a multifunctional and transferable ensemble of knowledge, skills/abilities and aptitudes required in different situations.

The competence is the proven ability to select, combine and use, in an appropriate way, knowledge, skills and other acquisitions consisting of values and attitudes for successful resolution of a certain category of work or learning situations and professional or personal development in conditions of efficacy and efficiency. If these components of competence exist and manifest themselves separately, they do not ensure the successful implementation of the activity. Therefore, the competence is related to specific situations, concrete, usually in the professional plan.

The transversal competencies – represent values and attitudinal acquirements that transcend a certain area/study program and are expressed by the following descriptors: autonomy and responsibility, social interaction, personal and professional development. The transversal competencies are transferable (e.g. cooperation, communication, creativity), they belong to the socio-relational domain, so they can be used in many life situations, being the engine of other types of competencies. Referring to the trans-disciplinary nature of competencies (Rey, 1996, 2012), B. Rey explained the transferability by the repeatability of the efficient action.

The various analyses about competencies and European policy documents show that, they help to achieve the effectiveness (achievement of objectives) and efficiency (the best use of resources) in activity. Thus, the competencies allow teachers to respond to complex requests, by psychosocial mobilization of resources, in context,

in a consistent manner (Koster and Dengerink, 2008) and they can be demonstrated at a certain level of achievement, over a temporal continuum (González and Wagenaar, 2005 as cited European Commission 2013, p. 10).

**3. The competencies of university teachers.** To synthesize the main specific competencies at the level of university teachers, we considered the fact that a university teacher has many roles (Potolea, 2008): the role of expert; didactic; role of researcher; educational role; institutional and community role; role on his own training and personal development. By reporting to these roles (idem) are derived series of competencies in: the design of teaching and making curricular products, teaching-learning practice, in practice of assessment, in innovation of professionalization of students, in networking, knowledge and counseling students, in participation at personal development and the institution which the teacher belongs to.

In the study conducted by Struyven and De Meyst (2010) it is shown that the implementation of the professional competencies of teachers is differentiated, meaning the ones closely related to the role of teaching are clearly present in the policies and practices of institutions (e.g. the teacher as learning and development guide, the teacher as expert), while other competencies are manifested still weak (e.g., the teacher in relations with the external partners of institution or as a member of the educational community).

The Romanian authors such as Duță, Pânișoară and Pânișoară (2014) have studied the importance given even by the academic teachers to the sides that make up the profile of a good professor. These were, in order of importance: transversal competencies; teaching, scientific, relational competencies; vocation and dedication; experience in educational institutions; self-assessment and professional development; involvement in research.

**4. Standards of teaching profession.** In Romania, the concept of pedagogical competence is closely connected with the professional standards (minimal) that should reach a person while practicing the main tasks of teaching profession. The standards indicate formulated expectations in order to ensure the quality in education and are used from the evaluative perspective. With special reference to the teaching profession, Emil Păun (2009) showed that the professional standard should be regarded as a living, dynamic ensemble of competencies, which is always improving. Also, D. Potolea and S. Toma (2013) explained that the standard can be understood either as a set of competencies (the competencies are circumscribed to a standard) or the standards define or make sense to the evolutionary steps of one and the same competence.

For the academic education, in our days, an important role in the analysis of professional activity had the appearance of *The minimal standards required and mandatory for conferring the didactic titles in the academic education and the professional degrees of research-development* (O. M. 6560 from December the 27<sup>th</sup>, 2012, as amended and completions of July the 18<sup>th</sup>, 2013). Closely related to the European educational policy guidelines the evaluation system of the university staff (coordinator Potolea, 2008), which is in a constant change and improvement, provides a structure of the key areas of university teacher training in teaching activity, the activity with students, scientific activity, institutional services.

Among these areas, it is shown that for the core domain – the teaching one – is required to rethink the teaching, starting from the curriculum design, training conduction, evaluation of students` training and performances up to the professional improvement.

From the perspective of focusing on student (Iucu, 2011) – the standards of the teaching profession depend on a number of factors: axiological ones, philosophical, political, particularities of the curricular cycles, the nature of study disciplines, stages of professional development, explanatory paradigms of the professional efficacy and efficiency, transition to modern education and, not least, the development of the Science of Education.

Some criticisms of this issue notes that the variety, creativity and autonomy of the practices of teachers could be reduced by the use of the standards for the evaluation and professional incentives (Menter and others, 2010), they do not guarantee the quality of the education and can be in their turn subject to interpretation.

### **5. Identification of the specific of competencies of academic teachers. Empirical results**

Aiming to shape a profile of competencies needed for academic staff, we asked a number of 135 respondents, students of the training programs at the Department of Teachers` Training, University of Craiova, 2015, to value and propose the competencies that a teacher must possess generally in training students and relating with them. We focused on the teaching skills, as they represent the core of the main activity of university teachers holding the positions of assistant lecturer, associate professor, professor. The hypothesis pursued by us was the consideration of the training needs of beneficiaries by asking to value the teaching competencies useful in their training helps to ensure the quality of the training programs in academia. The research methodology chosen was the survey based on questionnaire and the experiment/study panel. We watched through the questionnaire to know the profile of competence required by learners and the experimental intervention consisted in the close monitoring the implementation of components indicated at the beginning of the training program. The results of the items of questionnaire applied were summarized in Table 1.

From the table below, it can be seen the most valued competencies (on the assessment scale: Very much). These made references, in order of preferences, to the following skills and abilities of teacher: clear, attractive presentation clarifying theoretical concepts, practical character, interdisciplinary links, interactive methods (94,4 % of responses); the innovative manifestation by optimizing the activity in academic education (90,2 %); good knowledge, communication, counseling, guidance, support, and orientation of young and adults (87,5 %). The most competencies got close scores, they being appreciated, mostly at the level Very Much and Much. Assessed at Average or Less and Very Little level and therefore less important are the competencies related to: the use of new multimedia technologies (11,8 % of responses); participation in the promotion and development of the educational institution (5,4 %).

Table1. The importance given by the students to the necessary competencies for academic teachers

Competencies	Components	Very much	Much	Average	Less	At all
<b>1. In designing the curriculum and teaching activity</b>	proposing clear goals	82%	11%	7%		
	using innovative contents, well-structured, accessible, ensuring lecturing material	84,8%	9,7%	5,5%		
<b>2. In teaching</b>	announcing and respecting the criteria/deadlines	83,3%	11%	5,5%		
	establishing the way of work depending on the needs of students	80,6%	9,7%	2,7%		
	clear and attractive presentation, applied character, inter-disciplinary links, interactive methods	<b>94,4%</b>	5,5%			
	ensuring guiding, organizing, good communication, motivation	83,3%	9,7%	7%		
	use of new multimedia technologies	54%	34,7%	9,7%	1,38 %	
	creation of a good climate	86,11%	12,5%	1,38 %		
<b>3. In the practice of assessment</b>	granting stimulating feed-back	83,3%	7%	2,7%		
	adopting adequate methods of assessment	83,3%	16,6%			
	fair and correct assessment	84,7%	13,8%	1,38 %		
<b>4. In the field of innovation</b>	optimization of activity in academic education	<b>90,2%</b>	8,33%	1,38 %		
<b>5. In relation</b>	good knowledge, communication, counseling, guidance, support, orientation of youth and adults	<b>87,5%</b>	11,1%	1,38 %		
<b>6. In own development</b>	learning and professional improvement	81,9%	15,2%	2,7%		
<b>7. In participating at the institutional development</b>	implementing viable development projects and setting partnerships with social environment	77,7%	16,66%	2,7%	2,7%	

We consider that the responses of subjects who were part of the sample (teachers participating at continuing training classes, young and adults) are relevant and they have, in our opinion, internal consistency, meaning that they do not contradict themselves and point the same time, the components whose content should be developed

further at university level. The common note of these proposals is given by the requirement for a real focus of teacher on student.

At the open question *what aspects you appreciate most about the demonstration of knowledge from academic teacher?* - the answers were: the teaching skill, clear, concise, attractive presentation; exact knowledge and mastery of specialized language; diversity and complexity of knowledge; facilitation, accessibility of contents, adapting to students (young, adults); structural, organized character of teaching; correlation of data from several fields; broad perspective for approaching the discipline of study.

At the question *what aspects you appreciate most about the demonstration of capacities, abilities, skills of academic teachers?*, the subjects provided the following guidelines: the mastery of certain presentation techniques; varied communication skills, open, flexible rhetoric; synthesis capability, capability to capture the important elements; ability to develop applications; ability to argue; the skills to provide instructive feedback.

Regarding the aspects most appreciated about the demonstration of attitudes, values, behaviors of the academic teachers, the students indicated: the availability of teachers for guidance, their involvement; their patience and responsiveness to requests; pleasant relationship during training; tolerance in accepting the differences in opinions; attitudes that command respect, stimulate motivation, commitment and provide behavioral models; professional ethics; objectivity in assessment; optimism.

As shown above, from experimental-improving reasons, we intended to find out whether there is a correlation between the assessment of competencies required by learners (at the beginning of training) and their satisfaction after attending the training stage (at the end of training). Knowing the profile of the most valued competencies by students, we implemented them in the training course, designed specifically for them. At the end of activities subjects were questioned to assess the program quality. The resulting values were statistically processed and showed a strong correlation, which confirmed us the interdependence of the two variables. Thus, using SPSS Program, we determined statistic a significant correlation coefficient of 0.43 ( $r = 0.43$ , positive relationship) at a materiality threshold ( $p = 0$ ) smaller than 0.01, for the 135 subjects ( $N = 135$ ), the parameter date requiring the setting of the Pearson correlation.

## **6. Discussion of results and conclusions**

The qualitative and quantitative interpretation of the above results shows that the subjects appreciated favorably such an approach of the teacher, to take into account the requests, preferences, needs expressed by students since the beginning of training, but also during it. The participants indicated the importance of manifestation of certain transversal competencies; surprising proved to be the tendency of the whole group not to validate the need for mastering the competencies to use the multimedia technologies, which indicates a certain degree of conservatism to the use of modern training tools.

Our pleading for establishing some axes of the competencies of university teachers is based on the main advantage of focus on competence: the fact that promotes the professional training, as by gaining experience to reach at motivation and success. Focusing on competence directs the attention on the effectiveness, efficiency,

efficacy and personal responsibility, on a clear identification of the results, both at individual and organizational levels. Such a list is indicative for the teacher, but considering the perspective of acquiring expertise in this area, it must be filled continuously with the completion of stages of the career development. It is true that, from the perspective of students, of the three areas, teaching and professional activity; the research activity; recognition and impact / institutional services, can be appreciated best the domain teaching and professional activity. By the way of sampling (using a natural sample, not a representative sample) and the modality to collect the data (mini questionnaire applied to students, the type of ameliorative intervention and the researcher`s involvement, specific for the panel study) we are aware that the empirical approach presented has a limited validity, however, beyond the theoretical documentation, identifying some of the educational needs of the students is an essential starting point in developing tools (matrices) to propose an inventory of the main required competencies. From a critical perspective, we consider that the main limits for proposing certain desirable profiles for teachers are determined by the fact that such identified competencies would have a predetermined restrictive character, representing external requests and the formulations, prescriptions in theory do not always correlate with the possibilities to put into practice, to transform them into practices at the level of education.

Combined solutions such as using the feedback obtained from learners, the self-monitoring of demonstration of professional competencies, the use of external evaluations, internal evaluation and, especially, the exchange of experiences can contribute to quality management of the training programs, to develop the academic career, personal development, to increase the responsibility and pro-activity.

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