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The Experience and Issues of Citizenship Education in the Higher Education in Latvia

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Abstract

This article analyses the experience of citizenship education in the Latvian institutions of higher learning, which is a topical issue in the present-day social and cultural development of Latvia. It attempts to analyze the content of the study programs of several Latvian institutions of higher education as well as the application of various study forms and methodologies in citizenship education. The practice of training future specialists in citizenship education, especially those studying social sciences, is also evaluated. On the basis of the empirical research, the analysis of the social competences of future specialists and the possibilities for the development of their social personality features, self-analysis and self-evaluation skills in the process of studies is presented.

Introduction

Citizenship education has an important part in the context of the economic and social development of Europe, and it is given significant attention in the discussions concerning the development of a knowledge-based society.

Citizenship education was also given an important role in the Bologna Process (2000), which set guidelines for higher education; it is an integral part of the European Strategy of Lifelong Learning and the European Youth Policy as well. It should be noted that the European Commission document *A new Impulse for the European Youth* (1991) highlighted new forms of European governance, based on youth autonomy and active civic participation, while the White Paper defined openness, participation, responsibility, effectiveness, and coordination as the principles of good democratic governance (The White Paper, 1998).

The actualisation of citizenship education is an important function of higher education, with a significant moral and political-legal capacity as it ensures the development of the citizenship identity and citizenship competence of the future specialists.

Teacher education, which undergoes constant development in Latvia, is a possible area in which to introduce changes. The potential of universities, the resources and the capacity allocated for the implementation of reforms in the system of education (UNESCO, 2005) promote the development of an institution aimed at sustainable development. The academic staff willing to introduce changes and to involve students in this process play a decisive role in it. Thus, reforms are promoted in a direct way, based on the experience of the participants, active operation, reflection, and the development of new systems of reference.

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The purpose of the article is to analyse the experience of citizenship education in the system of higher education in Latvia and to give a more detailed survey of the content of various courses, the implementation of the interdisciplinary link, and the application of various study forms and methodologies.

The Characteristics of Professional Study Programs for the Teachers of Social Sciences within the Context of Citizenship Education in Latvia

In Latvia, particular attention is devoted to the citizenship education of the teachers of social subjects, their training, and constructive participation both in the local and the European context. Citizenship characterises the desirable actions of a citizen regarding democracy and his/her civic virtues. It should be noted that the list of civic virtues is very long nowadays. Besides readiness to take active part in the social life and protect the democratic legal order of the state, it also includes readiness to question the actions of the authorities, to participate in the rational discussion concerning important issues, to listen to opponents' views, to substantiate one's attitudes, and to respect other people's rights (Kumlicka, 2002, P. 288).

From the pedagogic point of view, citizenship education is a task to develop an active personality capable of functioning in a free society.

At present, study programs such as 'A Teacher of Social Sciences', providing the second level professional higher education are developed in Latvia according to the provisions of the Education Law, the Law on Higher Education Establishment, the Constitutions of higher educational institutions and other normative acts, as well as the Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers No 347 'Regulations on the Requirements Concerning Teachers' Education and Professional Qualifications' and No 481 'Regulations on the National Standard of the Second Level Professional Higher Education' (www.likumi.lv), as well as the Direction of the Ministry of Education and Science No 405 'On the Professional Standard – A Teacher of Social Sciences' of 10.07.2002 (Professional Standard, 2002).

The purpose of the study programs is to create opportunities for the acquisition of professional higher education and raise the qualifications of the teachers of social sciences, to train teachers for practical work at schools, thus ensuring their competitiveness in the labour market. This can be implemented by offering theoretical courses in social sciences – economics, ethics, health education, and citizenship with a particular emphasis on the teaching methodology, as well as other topical courses promoting students' professional development and broadening their citizenship competence, developing critical thinking skills, and stimulating the understanding of diverse values necessary for life in a civic society with good democratic government. It is also necessary to provide an opportunity to apply the acquired theoretical knowledge, skills, and professional attitudes in the pedagogic practice, by involving students in tackling practical tasks (conducting lessons, participation in projects, research work, etc). Lately, there has been more emphasis on the necessity to motivate students engagement in life-long learning, so that teachers themselves could perfect their knowledge in the area of social sciences, evaluate the latest information according to the requirements of modern science and the needs of the educational process within the context of active European citizenship.

Two important factors determine the significance and topicality of these study programs for Latvia: on the one hand, according to Direction No 766 of the Ministry of Education and Science of the 1st December 2004 (www.isec.gov.lv), there was introduced a new integrated subject, Social Sciences in Latvian schools from the 1st September 2005; on the other hand, there is a shortage of teachers with appropriate qualifications working in schools at present.

The authors of the research have used various 2nd level professional study programs concerning the training of the teachers of social sciences developed at the University of Latvia (UL), Liepaja Academy of Pedagogy (LAP), Rezekne Higher Education Institution (RHEI), and Daugavpils University (DU). In order to analyse particular courses, there have also been used course descriptions from the accreditation documents available at the Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre (HEQEC), as well as the reports of the accreditation commissions and self-evaluations (www.aiknc.lv).

The Comparison of Study Programs in Latvian Institutions of Higher Education

When comparing the study programs in training the teachers of social sciences offered by Latvian Institutions of Higher Education, it should be noted that the admission requirements in a professional study program are a bit different. In general, applicants are required to have higher a professional education in pedagogy, while the University of Latvia also requires a minimum of one years working experience in an institution of general education.

The scope of the offered programs differs slightly as well. The RHEI program is designed for three semesters (60 credit points), the one offered by LAP lasts for four semesters (80 credit points), while the program offered by UL is intended for four semesters of full-time studies or five semesters of part-time studies (80 credit points). Finally, the study program offered by DU is designed for three semesters (40 credit points).

As regards citizenship education, the courses offered in various study programs are different and unique. It appears that there is no one optimum way how to integrate the content of citizenship education into the study programs as it is shown in table 1.

Courses in pedagogy and psychology are widely represented in the programs of RHEI and LAP, while in the programs developed by DU and UL they are not offered at all as the students have already acquired them during the previous study programs of professional higher education. Differences can also be observed concerning the methodology in the acquisition of social sciences, which develop students' understanding of the role social sciences play in the school curriculum (standards), as well as consolidate theoretical knowledge in economics, political science, philosophy, ethics, etc, thus helping students to relate their understanding of democracy with a democratic approach to the organisation of the learning process. DU allocates three credit points to courses in methodology (The Methodology of Teaching Social Sciences – 2KP, Teaching Methods and Styles – 1 KP), while RHEI – 4 KP, but LAP – 6 KP. The

UL programs allocate the most credit points (12 KP) to teaching methodology, which is due to a longer study period – five semesters compared to three semesters in DU.

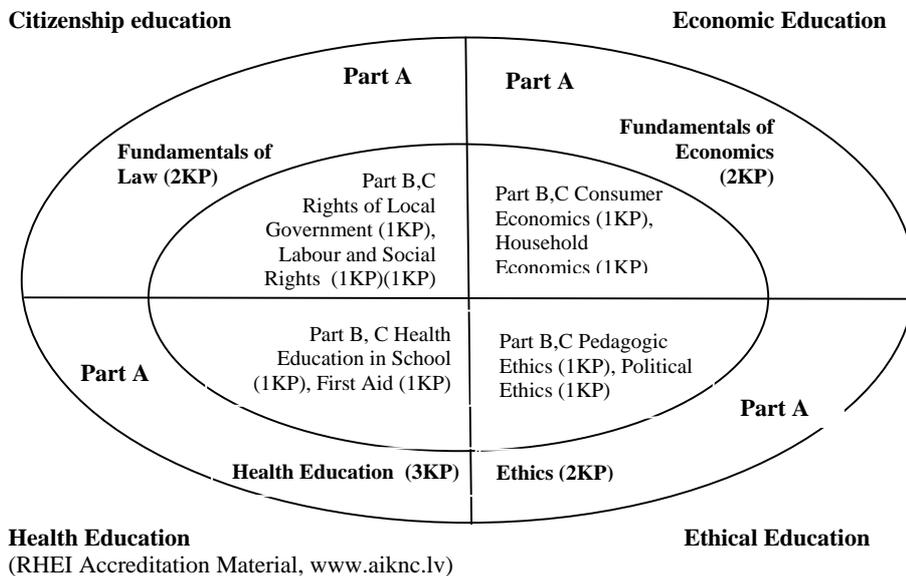
In RHEI programs, the theoretical basis of professional education is formed by four blocks of core courses: citizenship education, economic education, ethical education, and health education.

As regards citizenship education, this program stands out among the others in terms of the diversity of the courses offered: Work with Sources in Social Sciences (1KP), European Integration Processes (1KP), the History of Latgale Region (1KP), The Culture of Dispute (1KP), Social Policy (1KP), etc.

Table 1: Courses offered by Latvian institutions of higher education in the program ‘A Teacher of Social Sciences’ within the context of citizenship education:

Courses of Studies			
University of Latvia (UL)	Daugavpils University (DU)	Liepaja Academy of Pedagogy (LAP)	Rezekne Higher Education Institution (RHEI)
The Social and Political Structure of Society (2KP)	Political Science (2KP)	Philosophy and Logic (2KP)	Philosophy (2KP)
Civil Society in Latvia (2KP)	Basics of Demographics (1KP)	The History of Cultures and Religions (3KP)	The Fundamentals of Law (2KP)
Introduction into Law (4KP)	The Political System in Latvia (1KP)	Political Science (3KP)	Research Methodologies and Techniques in Social Sciences (2KP)
Public Relations (2KP)	The Fundamentals of Democracy (1KP)	Civil Sciences (2KP)	Reading and Writing for the Development of Critical Thinking (2KP)
	The State and the Society (1KP)	The Fundamentals of Law (1KP)	The Rights of Local Governments (1KP)
	Sociology (1KP)	Modern Information Technologies in the Studies of Social Sciences (2KP)	Information Technologies in Social Sciences (1KP)
			Political Science (2KP)
			The Development of Philosophical Thinking for Children (2KP)
			Globalization (1KP)
			The History of Religions (2KP)

Interrelationships in the content of core theoretical courses offered in the 2nd level professional education program ‘A Teacher of Social Sciences’ can be seen in the following chart:



Examination is the basic form of assessment in the analysed programs, but there are also some differences in this respect. The students of UL and LAP have to present their diploma thesis, while in RHEI they also have a final examination. In DU, there is a specific qualification examination in social sciences, and students are required to present a qualification paper in the methodology of teaching social sciences.

The programs are similar in the number of credit points allocated for qualification practice: DU – 8KP, RHEI – 10KP, UL – 26KP (students get 14 credit points for their pedagogic practice during their studies; six credit points are considered equal to one year’s working experience in a primary school, and six credit points are incorporated in the study course ‘The Methodology of Teaching Social Sciences’).

The UL study program places a particular emphasis on the development of general and specific professional skills. Within the course ‘The Methodology of Teaching Social Sciences’ students have to deal with a range of practical tasks in an educational institution concerning the development of integrated learning models, the development of tests and assessment of learning, assessment methods, approaches to work and interactive techniques.

The Description of Methodologies Used in the Study Process. Assessment Criteria Concerning the Acquisition of the Study Programs

The accreditation materials available to the authors show that both traditional methodologies of instruction are used in the study process: lectures, seminars, practical classes, and the methodologies and approaches which promote students’ participation: project work, discussions, case studies, the analysis of documents, and research. Students are encouraged to make public presentations concerning the results of their work, do self-evaluation, reflect on their own identity, express a critical attitude, and explain

concepts. Various courses include seminars aimed at the development of the skills of democratic cooperation, accepting or clarifying different points of view. For instance, the main forms of seminars practiced in RHEI are:

- Discussions (questions – answers, debates, dispute),
- Discussion of reports (oral or written as the writing of reviews about the reports submitted),
- A theoretical conference, a press conference (in a group or among different groups),
- Seminars - excursions (visits to the local government, judicial institutions, objects of cultural and historical value, etc.),

Many of the techniques described above reflect the humanistic tradition in higher education with an emphasis on individuals' development regarding citizenship education and broader understanding of the content of citizenship.

This approach is essential, as the students need not only to be actively involved in their studies, but also to acquire the methodologies they will have to use when teaching social sciences in schools. The future teachers have to adapt and develop new approaches, both as citizens and as educators, which will enable them to get involved reflectively and critically in the fundamental social transformations. Therefore, pedagogic practice takes place after the acquisition of basic courses in the methodology of teaching social sciences and the content of social sciences. During the practice, the students can:

- Consolidate their skills in planning, organising, and assessing the integration between the educational content in social sciences and the process of upbringing, to learn the experience of a particular school and teacher, to analyse actual problems,
- Gain a deeper insight into the schools of various types, problems encountered by the teachers of social sciences and their solutions,
- Consolidate skills necessary for integrated learning of social sciences and working in a teachers' team; to gain understanding on the necessary areas of self-development and the possibilities to implement it.

In general, it can be concluded that the acquisition of citizenship education in Latvian schools takes place concurrently with the formation of the motivational attitude of students. Various assessment methods are used: completing practical tasks, class observation, oral examinations, essay-type tasks and examinations, as well as writing of the diploma thesis, where students can use the research carried out during their pedagogic practice, obtained experience, and conclusions. For instance, all UL students carry out research work according to the program requirements. The forms of students' research work are: reports, and research on topical social issues related to the content of the study courses.

While studying the courses offered in the programs students acquire theoretical knowledge and practical skills, as well as realise their self-determination in accordance with the professional qualification of a teacher of social sciences.

The analysis of the accreditation reports concerning the study programs makes it possible to identify the following positive features:

- Generally, the content of the programs is well structured and organised; it is logical and carefully considered;
- The programs are open to further development and perfection;
- Generally, the programs are linked with the basic guidelines of European education.

On the other hand, the drawbacks and shortcomings pointed out by the accreditation commissions are as follows:

- It is necessary to pay more attention to the students' areas of specialisation;
- It is necessary to limit the diversity of minor courses and to combine them together in more meaningful blocks giving more credit points;
- It is necessary to reach a higher degree of integration in the acquisition of social sciences, to emphasise the program unity and systemic character.

It is pointed out in the reports that program participants tend to acquire and use modern methods of instruction, but inappropriate technical resources hinder this process. This does not allow the academic staff and the students to fully use the possibilities of computer technologies, multimedia, and the Internet, which would enhance the acquisition of the content of studies and its quality.

Conclusions

In Latvia, the topicality of the issue of teachers' qualification is determined by the state normative acts referring to education. In order to train teachers of social sciences, the 2nd level professional study programs are offered to those applicants who have previously obtained higher education.

Citizenship education can be acquired in Latvia as an interdisciplinary system. This process is implemented in the context of changes and development, i.e. in a constructive context.

The study programs for the teachers of social sciences comprise the acquisition of theoretical knowledge and practical methodological techniques, which enable the graduates to carry out effective theoretical instruction and citizenship education.

The analysis of the program content offered by various institutions of higher education in Latvia shows that these institutions provide most directly the development of the citizenship identity of future specialists, teachers of social sciences, the acquisition of the fundamental principles of a democratic society and the key values of the Latvian state, as well as the upbringing of competent young citizens.

The Latvian experience shows that the goals and objectives of citizenship education are focused on training young specialists possessing broad professional knowledge, developed critical thinking, ability to organise and manage professional work in a

modern way, understanding of the civic and patriotic values, and ability to engage in various social activities.

The content of the study programs also demonstrates the qualitative and quantitative transformations taking place in the society; it develops the social competences of future specialists and promotes the development of social qualities of personality, as well as provides optimum conditions for future specialists for the development of self-analysis and self-evaluation skills in the process of studies.

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