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## **Cultural Diversity in the Learning Society: Knowledge and Skills for Life**

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### **Abstract**

*Quality education is a precondition for successful development in contemporary society. The learning society has broadened the meaning of education, learning and knowledge. Currently many students choose to work abroad. In our rapidly changing situation, the main priority is New Man, who will live, work and be able to act productively, giving his contribution to a process of the development. Personal and professional competence is named as an important competence for every student and specialist not only now, but also in future. This article analyses the results of higher education, as reflected in the knowledge, skills, social skills and values of university graduates, looking at the extent to which these are in line with the demands of the labour market.*

### **Introduction**

The twenty-first century with its rapidly changing socio-economic and cultural situation has introduced the necessity for changes in higher education as well.

Language and education have to be viewed in close relationship. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is characterized by the necessity of multicultural paradigm in education. When different cultures meet, it becomes necessary to solve communication problems, to understand universal values, as well as various languages and cultures and ways of communication.

The Austrian philosopher Ludvig Wittgenstein considered that to know a language means to know a form of living. This world is my world and it means that the border of my language is also the border of my world. A new language brings a new understanding of the world. The learner of a foreign language uses his native language understanding. One's system of values comes through language. Latvian philosopher Maija Kūle points out the interrelationship of living forms and language that is essential for nations, for culture in general, and for each individual in particular (Kūle, 2006).

As a result of the diversity of living forms and pluralistic thinking the notion of intercultural learning has become topical. In the course of these changes there has been a discussion of cultural dialogue in education, communication, and cooperation. The development of our future society is not possible without solidarity – cooperation between individuals, organizations, and communities. Thus communication for all people in modern society becomes significant. The ability to participate in a dialogue and to communicate has to be consolidated through learning experience. (Koşe, 2001). One has to be aware that language is not only a means of communication but also a part of cultural heritage that embodies national identity. Language is a key to understanding one's values and it is by the means of language that we express our feelings and emotions.

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The changes in politics, economics, thinking and in language have influenced each individual and revealed more of the people and the world around us. Education changes according to the social processes; thus it becomes necessary to make changes in instructional objectives shifting the emphasis towards developing one's independence, initiative and receptiveness. (Koķe, 2001)

Demands which have emerged in the twenty-first century stimulate universities to educate students not only in the theoretical, but also in the practical aspects – not just in line with the demands of the present day, but also in compliance with the demands of tomorrow.

In characterizing the study environment at the University of Latvia, we see three major problems:

1. There is a discrepancy between the supply and the demand in the area education, and this discrepancy is not commensurate with the rapid increase in the number of students in the system, or with the available amount of funding for higher education;
2. This is the matter of attitudes which students develop while the area studying. A half of the students (50%) are employed, because they have to earn their living, and students come to realize that what they are being taught is not particularly relevant to what their employers expect of them.
3. The first year students (there were foreign students between them as well) find it difficult to adapt to the study environment at the University of Latvia. This is because of the motivations and skills, which young people possess, because of the fact that many students have to uproot, and because of the fact that students simply do not have enough money.

### **Problem**

The mechanism which has been set up to ensure that students can become integrated into the labour market quickly and effectively is basically on paper, and it does not work successfully. There are several symptoms in Latvia's society today which suggest that the national economy and the system of higher education are not in tandem with one another. Links between university graduates and the labour market are, in most instances, weak, while educational programs are only gradually being professionalized.

Student mobility increased in Latvia as early as the 1990s as a result of international cooperation through contacts in business and education. In 1995 the University of Latvia restored the faculty of Medicine where foreign students from Sri Lanka, Syria, Lebanon, India, Japan, Turkey, Iran and other countries now have a possibility to study medicine in English.

Learning Latvian as a foreign language has become a part of a complex process where the development of the student's personality, skills of professional communication and socialization take place. For many of these new specialists the knowledge of Latvian is professionally significant because it is not enough to know medicine and professional English well. In practice, for example in a hospital they have to apply language according to the requirements of the communicative situation and language environment.

As a result it has become necessary to give the students of medicine a possibility to learn Latvian as a foreign language.

Latvia's educational policies do not compensate for the shortcomings of the market, which regulates those people in society who are active, but which does nothing for those who are passive. Latvia's human resources are too scant to leave this process unattended.

### **Knowledge Society and Didactics in the context of educational reform**

Postmodernism is a period of transition to the knowledge society aimed at an increase of well-being and harmonization of society. Quality education is a precondition for the successful development of contemporary society. The development of learning society has broadened the meaning of education, learning, knowledge and quality.

Since the twenty century German /Didaktik/, Latvian /Didaktika/, Russian /Didaktika/ developed the definition of this branch of science towards constant unity of inner and outer processes in learning, while American approach separates them. The two approaches stem from two philosophical schools, permeate and underline the nation traditions and systems of education.

During the last decade changing education experiences influence of two main traditions: European Didactics (mainly German Didactic) and the American Research on teaching.

The subject of Didactics as a branch of science is the mutual relations on the components of education (student – educator – subject matter), their relations of mutual dependence and necessity, which result in their unity in this process, due to which a teacher can facilitate pupils' learning, their development and self-development, as well as their socialization (Žogla, 2001). One can hardly design changes in this process without defining what its components are and how they might or should change.

The ideas of progressive education since Dewey are well known in Europe. The American influence on the current reform urged to move the accent from the content to pupils' learning. In Latvia due to the common and accepted Russian theory of action American pragmatism was and still is not the most popular approach, though fractions of it are widely scattered both in higher educational establishments and schools. In this respect researchers of Didactics in Latvia hold similar views with those of the Scandinavian countries, where pragmatism has never succeeded (Kansanen, 1999; Žogla, 2002).

### **Knowledge and skills for life**

Learning Latvian as a foreign language has become a part of a complex process where the development of the student's personality, skills of professional communication and socialization take place. For many of these new specialists the knowledge of Latvian is professionally significant because it is not enough to know medicine and professional English well. In practice, for example in a hospital they have to apply language according to the requirements of the communicative situation and language environment. As a result it has become necessary to give the students of medicine a possibility to learn Latvian as a foreign language.

The necessity to achieve good quality of learning and teaching has set new tasks for the students and teachers. Language skills have become an important requirement that gives a possibility to work in the chosen sphere.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment – CEF is the response to the social and political changes in Europe. In the context of this framework the language competence should be differentiated in separate components. The differentiated and classified competences in each unique personality work in a complex way because as a social being each individual builds relationships with more and more social groups which in their turn influence the identity of the learner.

The intercultural approach envisages the development of learner's personality as the main objective through contacts with other languages and cultures. Language learning and application include such activities where students as individual and social creatures develop various competences – general and communicative language competences in particular.

The general competences of a language learner or user are the following:

- his/her knowledge about the surrounding world (empirical and theoretical) that has been acquired during one's lifetime;
- sociocultural knowledge (especially concerning European society) may refer to daily activities (meals, working time, working traditions, leisure activities), living conditions (living standards, class and ethnic differences), interpersonal relationships (between genders, races, communities, religious groups), values and beliefs (traditions, ethnic, religious minorities, humour), body language, generally accepted social norms (precision, presents, conversational conventions, taboo), rituals; intercultural insight (the common and the different, stereotypes);
- practical skills and knowledge include social skills, surviving skills, as well as professional and intercultural skills and knowledge (the ability to connect one's native and foreign culture, act in the circumstances of intercultural misunderstanding or conflict);
- "existential" competence (the personal features, character and relationships of a personality that may change as a result of acculturation) includes willingness to acquire new experience, receptiveness, flexibility to adapt one's views about the system of cultural values, critical attitude towards stereotypes, motivation (external and internal), language as a means of communication, language as a part of one's identity, the necessity to communicate inherent to a human being, values, cognition, personal peculiarities;
- the ability to study is being developed in the course of learning experience based on one's understanding of language and communication, phonetic skills, learning skills etc.
- Communicative competence consists of the following components:
  - linguistic (lexical, grammatical, semantic, and phonological competence);
  - sociolinguistic (linguistic characteristics of social relationships, norms of behaviour, sayings, proverbs, idioms, popular quotations, language styles, dialect, accent etc);

- pragmatic (discourse competence, functional competence).

Student's communicative competence is practiced in different ways with the help of perception, production, interrelationship (interactive activities), and in many spheres of activity (social, personal, professional and educational). Application of language changes according to the requirements that are set for the speaker. Each speech act takes place in a specific situation in a particular sphere of social life or language environment (sphere of activity or interests):

- personal sphere where the speaker is in the centre as an individual (place: student hostel, rented apartment; people: relatives, friends, acquaintances);
- social sphere where the person acts (social places, institutions, authorities; people: officials, clerks etc);
- sphere of education where the person studies (university lecture-rooms, laboratories; people: teachers, group mates, secretaries, office-cleaners etc);
- professional sphere where the person works or practises, place: hospital, laboratory; people: medical staff; doctors, nurses, trainees).

Many situations may simultaneously be connected to many spheres. In the process of communication between a language learner, user and his/her partner in a conversation there may arise difficulties and misunderstandings because of different external circumstances. These may be as follows:

1. physical circumstances,
2. social circumstances,
3. limits of time,
4. other limits (financial, stress etc).

The progress of a language learner is characterized by his ability to take part in communicative activities and use communicative strategies:

- productive activities and strategies (speaking: monologue, argumentation, public announcements, public speaking; writing: reports, articles);
- receptive activities and strategies (audio perception – listening: understanding of a native speaker, listening in a lecture-room in presence, listening to announcements and directions, listening to broadcasts and recorded speech; visual perception – reading; audio-visual perception – watching TV and films);
- interactive activities and strategies (dialogic speech, conversation, informal discussion, official discussion, target oriented cooperation, interview; written communication etc); non-verbal communication.

Since it is important to organize efficient good quality studies of Latvian as a second foreign language, we can draw on the experience of foreign specialists and use their second and third foreign language acquisition models. (B. Hufeizena, G. Neuners)

This research gives the analysis of the experience, evaluation of the weak spots in language teaching through contacts with representatives of different cultures, religions and educational systems that will determine the choice of our approach and its scientific argumentation.

The existing difficulties for students in a strange language and sociocultural environment at the moment must be viewed critically. The present situation is characterized by the

application of unreasonable principles and inadequate methods, lack of considered language means and materials, shortage of effective tasks and exercises, disregard of the individual peculiarities of students' personalities, their previous learning experience and communicative needs.

The investigation of language acquisition will help to work out and adapt the most appropriate linguo-didactic model. Thus, to take part in the study process where the new specialists are developing, we have to be able to cooperate and communicate in a common sociocultural environment. It is obvious that the sociopedagogical category (defined by Vigotski) – sociocultural competence becomes topical. In modern times in the context of the global processes the development of Latvian has to be viewed broader to enter gradually the sphere of language investigation and application along with other European languages.

The significance of the research is determined by the situation that in the multicultural paradigm the acquisition of Latvian as a foreign language is a new field with much investigation needed. Besides that acquisition of this foreign language is professionally oriented. The professional communication in Latvian may include more than the time when students are in practice; it may be extended because of internship if the student chooses to stay in Latvia.

This paper analyses the conditions of building Latvian language competences as a foreign language with the purpose of creating the contents and the procedure of the new language acquisition model. The research applies systemic integrative approach that includes the theory of cultural and intercultural communication and the analysis of personal activity and linguistic theories.

Latvian as a foreign language competence for the students of medicine from abroad means a good level of language skills that can be effectively used for communication and for professional purposes. Speaking skills become especially important when the students are on practice in hospital and enter the actual language environment with particular communicative situations.

Acquisition of Latvian is divided into the following competences: language competence, communicative competence, and sociocultural competence. The standard of foreign languages include language and communicative competence together and sociocultural competence. Reaching the aim depends on the contribution of each member of society to the development of new knowledge. However, as the discrepancy between people is often quite considerable, it may result in a division of society into knowledge rich and knowledge poor layers. In order to secure its aims in the natural course of uneven development, the knowledge society is to ensure a good education for each citizen.

The pedagogical process should facilitate the development of new scientific paradigms instead of the experience of previous generations to the new generation.

Nowadays a lot of students choose to work abroad. In our rapidly changing socio-economic and cultural situation, the main priority is New Man, who will live, work and be able to act productively, giving his contribution to a process of the development.

Competence of responsibility action be singled from all personal and professional competence considered as important for each present student and specialist. That is the most actual and useful personal competence. Responsibility as a feature of a person's character should be treated as one of the basic qualities of personality. The development of personality's responsibility, i.e. equipping a person for life, activities, behaving in accordance with accepted standards, choosing one or another solution with freedom, is becoming increasingly topical.

Personal and professional competence is named as an important competence for every student and specialist not only now, but also in future. It also focuses on the necessity to develop cooperation and dialogue in practical classes to improve analytical abilities for thinking, discussing and critical assessing their language competence to achieve educational goals. Self – realization opportunities, critical and supportive reflection, implementation of one's own experience and development of study skills within education process grant increase of the quality of life for the individual and the society.

Principle of independence and responsibility requires that students are guaranteed to be able in the process of critical reflection to make their own decisions other studies as well as to take responsibility for these studies (Ennis 1996, Rubene 2004).

This principle is very important in the view of securing the possibilities of emancipation which allows lessening the inclination to conventionalism and authoritarianism in person's opinions. The implementation of these principles allows the students to take autonomous decisions in intentional activity.

Optimal possibilities provide, but do not guarantee students chose to be autonomous instead of heteronomy, as well as student's active cooperation in the study process does not provide responsibility attitude – it ought to be connected with possibilities of individual personal evolution.

### **Interaction between universities and the labour market**

Over the last 15 years, there have been increasing amount of studies which evaluate the extent to which the "output" of higher education systems conforms to labour market requirement. P. Brown & R. Scose (1994) have emphasized that a change in managerial and organizational paradigms soused by technological innovation demand for more highly educated labour.

Partnership between universities and employers is a prerequisite for producing a new kind of graduate, and Coldstream (1997) affirms that the university system and employers share responsibility to educate for change and growth. Alongside with educators and employers, the government and professional agencies should also take an active part in the partnerships. Thus, the partnerships can contribute to the strategic and operational level of higher education.



### **Empirical research**

The University of Latvia has 32 bachelor's degree and 25 professional study programs in five thematic fields – the Liberal arts; Pedagogy and educational theory; Social studies, business and law; Natural sciences and mathematics; and Health, health care and social care. Of 1,275 surveyed students at the University of Latvia 91% were satisfied with the fact that they were attending the University of Latvia. However, dissatisfaction with the offered study programs increases during the study process.

1. Students are compelled to find more to earn their tuition fee, as well as money for everyday needs.
2. Many students report that once they enter the labour market, they find that the things they have been taught at the university are not in compliance with the demands of the labour market; the body of knowledge which is taught is simply too academic. The fourth year students at the University of Latvia were found to be the most critical about this issue, as were students in the natural sciences, and students whose tuition was being paid by the state and who did not have to work were more satisfied with their studies. An initial understanding of this situation can be developed by considering the study “The Study Environment at the University of Latvia – Supply, Demand and the Quality of Studies” (Tora, Jaunzeme 2000).

The survey also found that half of respondents were holding jobs. Higher percentages of employed students were found in the field of social sciences. On half of the employed students reported having a job that was related to their field of specialization. This was more common among students in the natural sciences. Students who are taking courses in those fields, which are in the highest demand in the nation economy – financial management, communications, law, accounting, computer science and psychology – were likely to be earning more money than other working students.

71% of the surveyed second year students said that was the main reason why they were pursuing higher education was that they wanted to learn a profession which would lead to successful career and material well being. Students most often emphasized that knowledge would open up wider opportunities in the labour market, as well as that there were much greater opportunities in Riga to achieve a better social status. The latter view was particularly expressed by students from the Latvian countryside.

41% students cited the need to learn and the understanding that one needs good education as the reason why they come to the university. Some respondents stressed that they needed to go to the university in order to obtain more knowledge and to increase existing knowledge. Some were motivated to attend the university because they were interested in the world around them. Still other referred to the importance of education for their future.

36% of the students said that they had personal reasons to study – they wanted to improve themselves, to become wiser, to be intelligent people, etc. These students said that they should constantly learn new things and develop their skills and talents.

Only 6% of students said that their decision to go to university was stimulated by their interest in a concrete program of study or the desire to become a scientist who understands his or her profession more precisely and who works at a job that he or she really likes.

### Conclusions

Latvia will continue to have many university students for some time to come, and it these human resources are to be utilized in an optimal way, higher education must be more closely focused on the national economy and on trends in the labour market. Educational policies must be based on the some trends, especially it the interests of the nation are taken into account.

A classical mismatch of the priorities set by higher educational institutions and employers has been observed. While educators pay more attention to teaching theoretical principles to students and not adequate attention to social skills, employers rank social skills and the application of theoretical principles higher than theoretical principles. To bridge the gap between educators and employers a formal mechanism should be established.

The culture of co- operation is highly important to educate a student for an orientated into the future, open and democratic society of Latvia, as well as in the context of the integration process of trans- national society.

To conclude, Latvia's industry and education relations leave a lot to be desired. Both educators and employers have to learn how to move toward more consultative and co-operative relations otherwise both sides will lose as Latvia falls behind in the race for global competitiveness. Institutions of higher education should take responsibility to educate graduates ready to enter the world of work, and it should be done by making the learning process more efficient and the knowledge gained applicable.

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