

RESULTS OF RESEARCH IN TEACHER FURTHER EDUCATION COURSE QUALITY AT THE LATVIA UNIVERSITY OF AGRICULTURE

Anita Aizsila

Latvia University of Agriculture
aizsila@llu.lv

Abstract. Education is one of the most important spheres of human activities without which the development of society is impossible. The system of education as a process characterising the development of people as well as of society is in continuous development. The dynamic development of society sets new tasks for education to react adequately to social novelties and changes. The process of education has become qualitatively richer. It is characterized by the trends – continuity, variability, and openness, access to knowledge that changes the essence of knowledge, their acquisition and application. The article analyses and evaluates the experience of professional development of teachers involved in the further education program at the Latvia University of Agriculture (LUA). The article analyses the newest research results obtained in 2011 implementing further education courses at the LUA. 157 teachers – attendants of the further education courses participated in the research. The aim of the article is to analyse and evaluate the compliance of the implementation of the teacher further education courses with the 21st century education quality requirements. In the research teacher further education is analysed and summarized, and it is explained how the mentioned problem is being solved in practice. The research is based on theoretical statements and empirical data mathematical processing methods.

Keywords: further education, development of professional skills, quality of education.

Introduction

Participation of Latvia in the global processes in the world requires essential reevaluation of the aims and tasks of the system of education, and to search for innovations in the content of education and teaching methods. The mentioned activities are related to teacher training and further education, development of new further education programs that would ensure development of teacher professional competence. In implementation of further education programs maximal attention is paid to the development of the system of improvement of teacher professional competency, their status and prestige.

Qualitative education forms the base for open and democratic society. The quality of teacher pedagogical activities is the base for qualitative education [1]. Changes and challenges of development require actualizing the importance of pedagogical competence and the possibilities of teacher professional development in the sphere of education. Further education is necessary to purposefully organize and manage a modern, scientifically grounded pedagogical process. It depends on the teacher abilities, talent and knowledge how educated, creative and able the young people will be after finishing school, how well they will be prepared for practical life. Teacher further education is one of the factors of personality professional development. To adapt to the changing conditions everybody should have possibilities for development of professional knowledge lifelong [2]. Teachers are a part of the society who have always had a necessity to be informed on the topicalities, therefore, participation in further education is one of their most characteristic activities.

The aim of the article is to analyse and evaluate the compliance of the implementation of the teacher further education courses with the 21st century education quality requirements.

Topicality of the problem

Teacher professional development is a topical issue as it covers the process of education and further education, and in total it is one of the most important factors of development and up-dating of the system of education. The task of development of further education is to improve the quality of education. It means that the efficiency of the system of education is first of all dependent on the level of teacher training and conformity for work. The issues of the quality of education have always been topical and disputable among the theoreticians and practitioners of education. Lately in discussions the issues of improvement of the quality of teacher further education are being discussed. Teacher further education is one of the priority trends of the education strategy.

Materials and methods

The methodological base of the research is further education conceptions and theoretical statements of today's scientists on further education problems: P.Jarvis (2001; 2004), M.Knowel (1980), T.Koçe (2005; 2012), D.Prets (2000) etc. Education quality issues are researched based on the statements of the following authors: A.Broks (2000), R.Demings (1982), M.Fulans (1999), J.Pildavs (2004), A.Rauhvargers (2003). Further education development issues are analysed using the following Latvian and European Union regulatory documents – Law on Education (1999), UN Decade of Education for Sustainable development (2002), Ž.Delor's report UNESCO Education for the 21st century (2001) etc.

Teachers can develop their professionalism in further education courses. The content of further education courses is in the competence of the State Education Content Center. Professional development programs have different numbers of sessions and they can be offered by any educational establishment that is registered in the Register of organizations if the programs are licensed. The programs are planned for a definite target audience. Since 2007 the Life-long Education Center (MC) of the LUA offers 56 further education programs in different spheres of competence [3]. Potential is needed for the university to ensure qualitative teacher further education. The teachers of the LUA as well as branch specialists are involved in implementation of further education programs. The Life-long Education Center has good co-operation with the institute of Education and Home economics in implementation of teacher further education programs.

To organize further education for teachers the interests and needs of the teachers for development of professional competence were stated. The research was performed in a longer period of time, but the article analyses the recent research results on the compliance of teacher further education program implementation with the newest statements in education in 2011. In the research 157 teachers from all regions of Latvia - Zemgale, Vidzeme, Kurzeme and Latgale are involved. The results of acquisition of further education programs are analysed from the point of view of the teachers. To get to know the teachers' opinion on the course quality and possibilities of professional development to meet the growing requirements for the quality of education an anonymous enquiry and an interview were performed and personal experience reflections analysed. The research methodology is based on the system analysis approach; the research instrument in data processing is the methods of generalization, grouping, analysis and synthesis. In the research in teacher further education the survey analytical and empirical descriptive kind of research is used.

Results and discussion

How to get the teachers interested in changing their role, what means to use for the process of education to get new quality, how to ensure purposefulness in the process of changes and active teacher participation in it? There have been many initiatives in education but still there are problems to be solved. Teacher further education is topical to promote the pedagogical competence corresponding to today's requirements.

Further education – continuation of education and development of professional competence after formal; education and starting to work. Its aim is development of professional knowledge, skills and competence in formal or informal system of education [4]. Teacher further education is usually implemented parallel to work. It is important for the teachers to understand education as a value as education is the base for harmonic development. Education is a continuous process of development of knowledge, skills, competences and attitude. Education understood as a value can be an internally conditioned necessity as well as created by external social factors. Qualitative changes can take place if a teacher is interested, motivated, internally convinced and feels a necessity to implement changes [5]. Introduction of any education reform depends to a great extent on every individual teacher, his/her changes of values and skills to apply knowledge rationally [6]. Psychological changes are a difficult and complicated process for people – some adapt to changes easily, but others, especially older teachers, feel it as a long and hard stage in their lives. In society the requirement – to promote development of teacher knowledge, skills and competences – becomes more topical [7].

The aim of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, 2002 for the period of time from 2005-2014 is to promote development of education as a basic element for sustainable development of society. New requirements are set for education - learning to know:

- learning to do;
- learning to live together;
- learning to be [8];
- learning to change oneself and society, and understand education as means for self-development that offers new possibilities for a personality to materialise in life activities – recognising personal uniqueness, learning to co-operate with others, doing something valuable making the experience of the whole society richer [9].

The future requirements for education are formulated in the three priorities stated by the EU: clever development – based on knowledge; sustainable development – promotion of competitive economics and integrative development [9; 10].

The issues of education quality occupy a special place in the 21st century as due to severe competition in the world as well as information of society on quality the teachers have become more demanding and exacting towards the demand of the programs of further education. Understanding of quality and its ensuring in everything is especially important and it will be one of survival issues in future. In the context of education we can agree with the statement of A. Broks that for a small country to exist today education that it offers and demands should be of a very high quality [11].

Outstanding scientists have contributed to research in quality problems – L.Harvey, D.Green, W.Deming. The model developed by W.E.Deming is suitable for the development of further education programs where the following steps are observed: plan-do-evaluate-act [12]. The scientists L.Harvey and D.Green underline that possibilities to understand quality can be grouped in several categories among which the most important that are related to education are as follows: quality as excellence; quality as reorganization; quality as development and quality as compliance with the aim [13]. It is difficult to define the quality of education as its interpretation and its separate aspects are in complicated mutual interrelations. It is not possible to discuss the quality of education abstractly and generally but only in relation to a definite system of education or the aims and tasks set for its definite part. The quality of education is oriented to the aim of development [14].

There are different interpretations of quality as understanding of it has changed during the course of time. Today understanding of quality is determined by all forms of quality manifestation and it is assumed to be called as overall or total quality [15]. Quality can be defined as compliance with definite norms and requirements. Quality is not a single act in education; it should be a long and continuous process. Improving the quality of further education, developing the content and methods of education – it is a road to development of educated society and open system of learning.

Education quality is a totality of features and qualities characterizing the compliance of education as a process and education as a result with the demands and needs of individuals and society [16]. The scientist D.Prets relates development of education quality with formation of attitude that is especially important in implementation of further education. We should agree with the statement of D.Prets that two attitudes based on actual achievements have to be formed – interest in the subjects taught at further education courses, their content and confidence in abilities to work in this field. D.Prets mentions that attitudes are not formed by information that people receive but by their personal important experience [17].

Experience to learn strengthens readiness of adults to learn and realize why they are doing it, develops independent learning skills, including the skill to learn from own experience and experience of others. It is a kind how to strengthen the position of autonomous learning and promote valuable self-realization possibilities in society [9; 18]. Every teacher working in the sphere of education should understand the importance of education for sustainable development and should be able to plan the professional development.

Further education is one of the stimulating factors of professional development and competency. This idea becomes more appreciated in Latvia and in the world [19]. The scope of society development requires more serious attitude towards the issues of further education and search for

optimal solutions how to organize and ensure further education possibilities for a wide range of people [20].

Education has been put trust in formation of sustain able future, but qualitative training of teachers is a prerequisite for changes in education and changing of society. Further education in total includes uninterrupted continuation of education, improvement of professional dev elopement and profession al mastery. In Latvia teacher further education becomes a united, sustainable and purposefully guided process that has to ensure high quality standards in all stages of education [19; 20].

The aim of further education is to develop and improve skills, knowledge and competences in relation to profession al work as well as to the personal aims and the aims of society. Education is a base for well-being of every person and society in total. People gradually come to the conclusion that learning includes a possibility to improve the quality of life and work, in turn, experience motivates for further learning. P.Jarvis states that purposeful learning is a typical trait of today. Learning from experience is conscious as well as unconscious; it can be considered as a synonym for conscious living [21; 22].

In order to state the usefulness of further education courses the teachers at the completion of them had to answer eleven questions to evaluate the significance of the courses, the acquired knowledge, their practical usefulness and to assess the work of teachers and express their proposals for improvement of work and criticism. 157 teachers participated in the enquiry from all regions of Latvia. To the question what factors influenced the choice to learn in further education courses – 61 % of the respondents mentioned personal interest (Fig. 1).

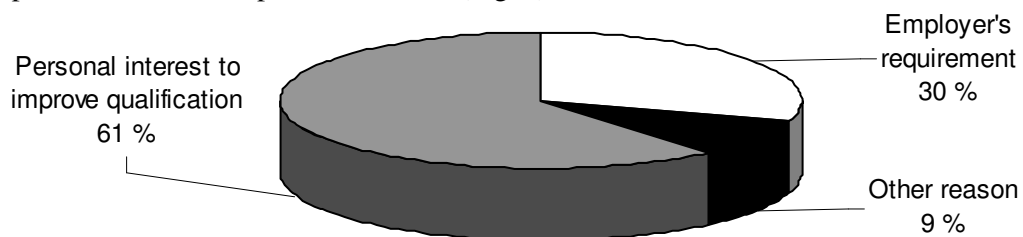


Fig.1. Factors stipulating to attend further education courses

This confirms the fact that today it is not possible to be competitive if a teacher does not improve the quality of knowledge. Further education is education to develop professionalism that proved the wish of the respondents to improve their qualification. The results of the enquiry show that the teachers understand the necessity for increasing their knowledge that is related to innovations in the education policy, professional work of teachers and the necessity to make their person al experience richer.

To the question if the set aim in the program was achieved – 96 % say that the aim has been achieved. Satisfaction of teachers' interests and needs is the main indicator that influences the wish to acquire new knowledge, skills and competences to work with new technologies. All participants of the courses agree that during the process of studies it was possible to participate actively, to discuss and exchange the experience. The respondents appreciate the quality of practical sessions most highly as the themes were deeply and particularly explained. The teachers consider practical work to be varied and interesting (Fig. 2).

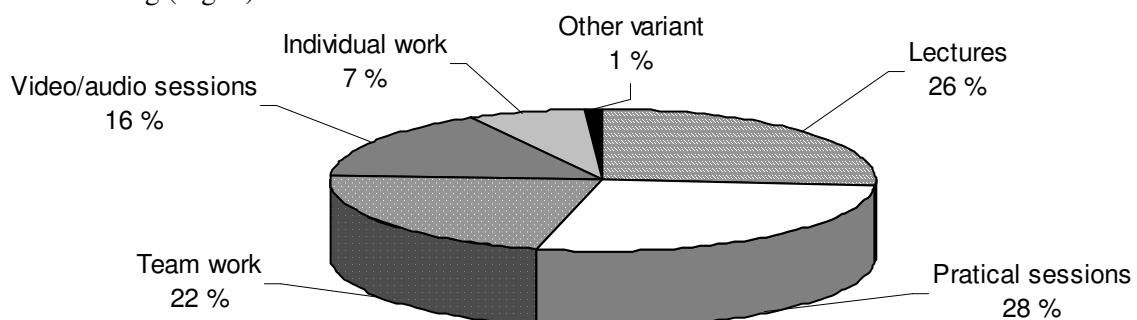


Fig. 2. Assessment of kinds of sessions

The second place was occupied by lectures (26 %) as there the newest information was analysed and it intellectually educated the listeners. During the lectures there was close contact between the teachers and listeners and emotionally favourable learning environment. Team work priorities were highly evaluated as it improves communication among the participants and introduces different kinds of team work.

The answers of the teachers about the quality of the further education courses (Fig. 3) had to be evaluated in detail according to four criteria – very good, good, average and poor.

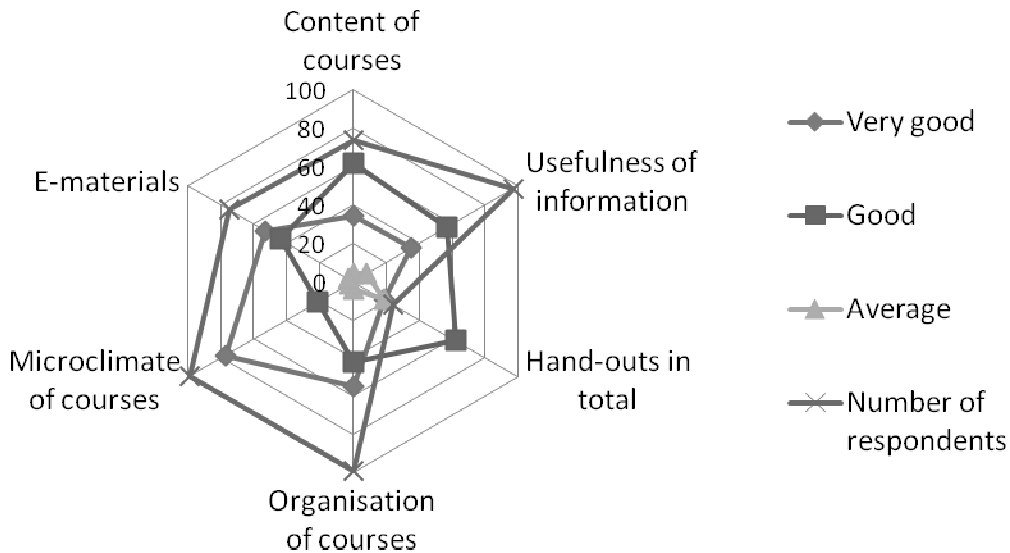


Fig. 3. Evaluation of further education courses, in per cent

The content of the courses, usefulness of information, organization of the courses, microclimate during the process of studies, methodical teaching materials and e-materials had to be evaluated. The content of the courses was evaluated in 96 % level by the teachers (very good and good). The microclimate of the courses was highly evaluated – 77 %. The figure shows that the teachers have evaluated the quality of the courses from different aspects according to the set parameters.

Participants of the further education courses assessed the teacher competence, presentation skills using technical aids. It delights that the course participants evaluate the teacher competence (70 %) and positive attitude during the process of studies very highly (Fig. 4).

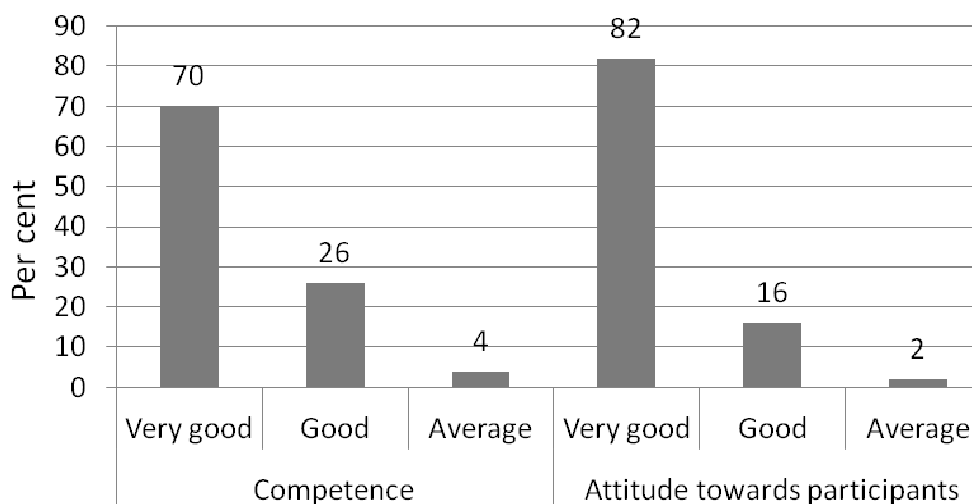


Fig. 4. Evaluation of teachers by further education teachers

The feedback made it possible for the teachers to analyse their work and compare it with the evaluation of the participants of the further education courses.

There is a demand in society for teachers who are ready for constant changes, able to develop and continuously improve the level of their competence. Further education is and will be means for promotion of implementation of the new trends in education. The main strategic aim of further education is to create scientifically founded, sustainable, stable and up-dated system of further education and methodical support for teachers that would ensure co-ordinated, purposeful development of teacher professional competence and motivate them for further education. Considering that the research is done based on one higher school (LUA) the results of it cannot be considered representative for the country in total, but it gives an insight in the research in teacher further education quality.

Conclusions

1. Education is one of the most important spheres of human activities without which qualitative development of society is impossible. Fast development of life requires continuous teacher further education professional development.
2. The importance of teacher further education courses increases year by year. It is proved not only by the growing number of participants at these courses but also by their satisfaction (96 %) with the achieved result, practically oriented sessions and favourable emotional environment.
3. The teachers evaluated the acquired knowledge and their practical usefulness highly as the knowledge acquired in the courses can be used in everyday work at school, for improvement of the study process and in social life.
4. The teachers wish to get better support for their further education activities from the school administration – moral as well as financial support.

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