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THE CHANGING CONCEPTION OF THE UNIVERSITY CURRICULUM KNOWLEDGE IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA: FROM KNOWLEDGE TO COMPETENCE?

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Within the European Higher Education Area, the traditional conception of the university curriculum knowledge has been challenged. The notions of learning outcome and competence have been replacing the notion of knowledge as a central educational concept of the university curriculum. The European higher education policy urges the European universities to provide their students with competences, which are assumed to be necessary for employment and successful operation in the global knowledge economy. As a result, more generic rather than disciplinary forms of knowledge are placed at the centre of the current policy discourse. The present paper aims to conceptually analyse the changing conception of the university curriculum knowledge in the light of the EHEA and discuss the implications of this change. It seeks to map the socio-economic and political factors spawning the current advocacy of competences, discern the key patterns of the European higher education curriculum modernisation as well as discuss its implications. The study serves several qualitative research methods: an overview of research literature and a content analysis of official European policy documents.

Keywords: knowledge, disciplinary knowledge, competence, generic competence, transferable skill, curriculum, university, knowledge economy, the European Higher Education Area, higher education policy.

Introduction

In the context of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the university curriculum knowledge as traditionally associated with discipline-specific propositional knowledge and disciplinary skills has been challenged and reconceptualised in terms of competences and outcomes to embrace more generic forms of knowledge. A number of authors observe that the issue of knowledge has been increasingly absent in the contemporary educational debates and research (Wheelahan 2007; Barnett 2009; Young 2008, 2013; Magalhães 2010; Allais 2014). Michael Young argues that curriculum theorists have lost the object of curriculum theory (2015: 832). The focus has been shifted

away from knowledge as such to competences, learning outcomes and skills (Magalhães 2010; Muller, Young 2014; Oxenham 2013). Despite the fundamental significance of these epistemological curriculum changes in the context of the European higher education, so far, the educational debates and research have been largely confined either to pragmatic issues, such as input-output efficiency or occupational relevance of a new competence-based curriculum, or pedagogical issues, such as competence-based teaching and learning styles. Thus, a need arises for the discussion of epistemological implications of the current reconfiguration of the European university curriculum and situating it within a broader social context.

The *object* of this study is a changing conception of the university curriculum knowledge throughout the competence based curriculum modernisation as endorsed in the context of the EHEA and the implications of this change. The *problem* of this study can be outlined in the following research question – how does the conception of the university curriculum knowledge change throughout the competence framework in the context of the EHEA and what epistemological implications does this change have for university education?

The aim of the present paper is to conceptually analyse the changing conception of the university curriculum knowledge throughout the competence framework in the context of the EHEA and discuss the implications of this change. Thus, this paper is an attempt to engage with a fundamental curriculum question – "what knowledge is of most worth for the millennial citizen?" (Muller 2000: 41). First of all, it seeks to map the socio-economic and political factors spawning the current advocacy of the competence agenda. Second, it aims to discern the key patterns of the European higher education curriculum reforms. Third, it seeks to discuss the possible implications of these curriculum trends for university education.

The study serves a *qualitative content analysis* as a qualitative research technique to overview the research literature in question and analyse the official European policy documents. *The sample* of documents covered in this study includes a set of strategic European policy documents which formulate the European conception of the university curriculum knowledge. It is important to note that the EU educational documents often use a general term higher education which encompasses both vocational and university education; therefore, here, the term higher education will be sometimes used to refer to university education, too.

The Socio-Economic and Political context of the changing conception of the university curriculum knowledge

The current advocacy of competences and more generic forms of knowledge in the EHEA has to be situated and discussed within a broader socio-economic and political context. Among the key socio-economic and political factors which are said to have spawned the changing conception of knowledge at the macro level are globalisation, technological development, the emergence of the Internet, proliferation of information, as well as postmodernist philosophy and its scepticism about knowledge and truth. Furthermore, the rise of the neoliberal ideas in the 1970s and 1980s as followed by the knowledge economy policies have declared an increased economic importance of knowledge. In the European policy context, the so-called Lisbon strategy (European Parliament 2000) set a strategic goal for Europe "to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy". In order to achieve this goal, European strategic policies (European Parliament 2000, 2005; European Commission 2010) have defined universities and the knowledge they produce as new key drivers of economic development. In order to respond to these new social realities, universities have been urged to produce contextually relevant knowledge – knowledge of a flexible and applied form rather than discipline-specific knowledge (Gibbons *et al.* 1994; Nowotny *et al.* 2001).

Also, this has had inevitable repercussions on university curricula.

The changes in the field of knowledge production have affected the European higher education policy, which in turn has been steering higher education reforms at the national level. Along similar lines of the Lisbon strategy, the ongoing Bologna Process, as initiated with the Bologna Declaration (1999), has been strongly driven by economic concerns. The goal of the Bologna Process has been to increase the competitiveness of the European system of higher education against the rest of the world by creating the EHEA, which aims to harmonise the European higher education systems (Tuning project n.d.a).

One of the tools to harmonise national higher education systems in Europe was the adoption of the European Qualification Framework (EQF) in 2008 which provides guidance for the designation of national qualifications frameworks (NQF). Within the EHEA, qualifications are conceived as competence-based or outcomes-based qualifications (Méhaut, Winch 2011: 31). The EQF has established the concept competence as the main learning outcome around which higher education curriculum is to be re-stipulated; meanwhile, knowledge has been increasingly pushed to the background. A new prominence assigned to competences and outcomes is noted in the following excerpt:

Ministers encourage the member states to elaborate a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their higher education systems, which should seek to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile (EHEA 2003: 4).

As the quotation above explicates, the mandated competence-based approach to curriculum is an outcomes-based model of curriculum based on explicit reference points which define what learners should learn and which are readable to all stakeholders involved.

In accordance with the European qualifications framework, the member countries of the EU have been designating their NQF and curricula around the concepts competence and outcome. In Lithuania, the competence approach in education has been initiated in the last decade (Duoblienė 2011); however, the process continuous during the current decade. Furthermore, in 2010, the Description of the Lithuanian Qualifications Framework was approved. It is based on competences as indicated in the excerpt below:

The Lithuanian Qualifications Framework corresponds to the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council […] on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning […] and 8 qualifications framework levels set out in it. Qualifications described in this Description are attributed to qualification levels set in this description which define functional, cognitive and general competences necessary to perform the activity of similar complexity, autonomy and changeability (LR Vyriausybė 2010: 1).

However, despite the fact that in Lithuania "the implementation of the NQF has started […] study programmes have not yet been completely re-designed on the basis of the learning outcomes included in the NQF" (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2015: 68).

At this point it is pertinent to clarify the meaning of the concept competence. There is a vast list of existing definitions of the term competence both in theoretical literature and different European policy texts. However, we will confine our focus to the definition of competence as provided by *Tuning Educational Structures in Europe* (2000) as this project has an authority to establish the common points of reference for degree programmes at the European level. It suggests that competence is "a dynamic combination of knowledge, understanding, skills and abilities" (Tuning n.d.b). The competence-based or outcomes-based approach to curriculum and qualifications marks a shift of focus from educational inputs to educational outputs, and, therefore, is associated with educational efficiency (Tuning n.d.a: 11). Among other alleged benefits of the use of competence-based approach is flexibility, transparency and comparability

(Tuning n.d.a.; EHEA 2007), as well as public accountability and quality assurance – the two features which are more explicitly articulated in literature (Talbot 2004; Harden 2007) rather than policy discourse. All these features have in particular gained a significance in the light of the Lisbon strategy and the Bologna process. In addition to this, competence-based approach to curriculum is alleged to have some pedagogical merits. It said to draw attention to the unused potentiality of effective teaching and learning processes in higher education due to its use of student-centred pedagogy. Moreover, the notion of competence is associated with the liberal, progressive and even radical ideologies of the late 1960s, which have stressed the need for education to engage with the "contemporary cultural, economic and technological change" (Bernstein 2000: 66). Nevertheless, the overview of European educational documents suggests that the advocacy of competences is largely based on economic and efficiency arguments. Competence is seen as a useful concept as it has a concrete value – it bridges education and job requirements (van der Klink, Boon 2002; Magalhães, Stoer 2003).

As part of the European competence agenda, generic learning outcomes such as generic competences or transferable skills have been introduced. The terms generic competence or transferable skill are used interchangeably in the European higher education documents to refer to "competences which are common and can be identified in different degree programmes at a certain level" (Tuning n.d.: 20). An extensive focus on generic competences or transferable skills can be traced through many European higher education documents (Tuning project n.d.; European Council 2009; European Council and Commission 2012). In Tuning, it is claimed that "In a changing society where demands tend to be in constant reformulation, these generic competences also become very important because they can offer more possibilities for employment" (Tuning n.d.: 20). Furthermore, it is argued that defining the "right" learning outcomes/competences provides the basis for transparency and comparison of different curricula outputs (Tuning, n.d.: 71). The European higher education trends are reflective of a tightening relationship between the university and society, and in particular, the world of work. The current initiatives to include generic learning outcomes as uniformly defined at the European level are associated with intensified attempts to respond to the new social exigencies, and in particular, new market demands, which, are presented throughout the policy discourse as something inevitable and unquestionable and, thus, to be naturalised.

The changing conception of the university knowledge within the EHEA and its implications

As discussed so far, within the EHEA the conception of the university curriculum knowledge has been changing in a way that competence becomes a central educational concept and learning outcome. Magalhães refers to this change as "the reconfiguration of educational categories apparently taking place in the framework of the construction of the European Higher Education Area" (Magalhães 2010: 37). This section seeks to have a closer look at the change in the epistemology of the university curriculum that the new competence agenda implies.

To begin with, it is necessary to stress that traditionally the main purpose of the university or any school curriculum has been seen to entitle students to knowledge, which, according to Young (2008), is the *raison d'être* of education. As Wheelahan puts it, "the purpose of academic curriculum is to induct students into a body of knowledge in academic disciplines" (2015: 758). Meanwhile, the concept competence implies that knowledge, instead of being the main educational concept and learning outcome, is to be conceived as one of its constituents, and, thus, a subordinate element to competence. In other words, in the light of the competence approach to curriculum, the traditional hierarchy of curriculum knowledge concepts has been reversed.

Competence has been established as the main knowledge concept at the policy level despite the fact that it has been widely acknowledged to be a conceptually ambiguous concept. The term competence is often used interchangeably and, thus, has an obscure relation with terms skill (Adam 2008) and outcome (Adam 2008), as well as terms such as graduate attribute, capacity, and capability (Winch 2010 in Muller, Young 2014). All these terms are used to denote different kinds of "know how" knowledge (Winch 2010 in Muller, Young 2014) or, in other words, more practical kinds of knowledge. This has important epistemological implications for the university curriculum.

The argument to be developed here suggests that the university curriculum should be seen not only as shaped by social pragmatic exigencies but also by disciplinary epistemologies which influence a form of the university curricula across disciplines. This means that the two kind of exigencies, inner and outer, manifest within the university curriculum in a dynamic nexus varying across different disciplinary contexts. Some authors, mainly coming from the field of sociology of education, increasingly argue for the relationship between disciplinary knowledge form or structure and curriculum form or organization (Bernstein 2000; Young, Muller 2016). Even if curriculum form or organization does not rely only on knowledge form or structure (Lilliedahl 2015: 42), it is important to stress that the inner link between the two is of a fundamental significance, which, nonetheless, is often overlooked in the current educational policy and research.

A number of authors (Bernstein 2000; Wheelahan 2007, 2010; Muller, Young 2014), admits that curriculum is a mix of knowledge elements which have different qualities (Muller 2009; Gamble 2006; Wheelahan 2007). However, contrary to the competence-based approach, they stress the primary significance of the role of propositional or conceptual disciplinary knowledge within the university curriculum. According to Bernstein, disciplinary conceptual knowledge "takes the form of a coherent, explicit and systematically principled structure […] (2000: 30). Therefore, it is a precondition for a coherence of curriculum in a particular discipline. Also, disciplinary knowledge structure is argued to provide curriculum with a certain identity or distinctness.

Meanwhile, the current reconfiguration of the university curriculum around competences seems to imply a uniform shift from propositional or conceptual knowledge to "know how" or more applied kinds of knowledge irrespective of the inner logics of different or even contrasting disciplines. Bernstein asserts that the notion of "competence has divorced, even opposed, epistemological roots" (2000: 44). The competence-based approach, and, especially, the heightened focus on generic competences and transferable skills, shifts the weight within the university curriculum from disciplinary to generic or context-neutral forms of knowledge. Bernstein argues that competence-based approach to curriculum is an expression of a recent complex phenomenon of *genericism* or *generic mode* of knowledge organisation which shifts the focus from discipline-specific knowledge as largely reflective of academic concerns to generic forms of knowledge, which are largely constructed independently of academic disciplinary contexts and "are essentially directed to extra-school experiences: work and life" (2000: 53). Bernstein notes that "competence models tend to focus on procedural commonalities shared within a group" (2000: 50). He further explicates that generic modes primarily serve economic goals and are instrumental (2000: 54). Pedagogically, they are aimed at constructing "flexible performances" (2000: 55) through "the concept of trainability" (2000: 59). However, Bernstein stresses that "trainability" is "socially 'empty'" (2000: 62). Instead, he articulates the need for the "capacity to enable the actor to project him/herself *meaningfully* rather than relevantly", which is the outcome of a specialised identity (2000: 59).

In the light of generic modes of curriculum organisation, the focus shifts from students' mastery of discipline-specific knowledge to

instrumental knowledge or procedures. As Barnett puts it, there has been a move "from knowing to doing" (2009: 430) and, thus, he argues for "a universal shift in the direction of performativity" (2000: 255). It is argued that the over-reliance on generic forms of knowledge such as generic competences or transferrable skills tend to prioritise pre-specified processes or procedures at the expense of content or understanding concepts of a particular discipline and may result in marginalisation of disciplinary propositional or conceptual knowledge (Wheelahan 2007, 2010; Muller, Young 2014). Thus, it may lead to "de-differentiation" and "de-specialization" of curriculum knowledge (Muller, Young 2014: 138). Given these arguments, the primary role given to competence and the heightened focus on generic forms of knowledge within the contemporary university curriculum, which, traditionally, has been associated with intellectual endeavour, becomes surprising. Therefore, it can be argued that while acknowledging the importance of competences and outcomes within the university curriculum, there is an ever-increasing need to rearticulate the significance of disciplinary conceptual knowledge, which, as noted before, is a prerequisite for maintaining the coherence and systematicity of university curriculum knowledge base as well as differentiation of university curricula across disciplines.

Conclusions

To conclude, the present qualitative content analysis of the research literature and the official European policy documents has revealed that since the second half of the 20th century the socio-economic contingencies along with the European policies have been gradually changing the conception of the university curriculum knowledge. It has shown that throughout the Bologna Process and the EHEA the reconceptualisation of the university curriculum knowledge has been largely underpinned by the economic concerns and the focus on the educational "outcome", which are presented in the policy discourse as inevitable and unquestionable. Competences and, in particular, generic competences or transferable skills have been given a particular policy importance within the EHEA due to their alleged employability value. The explication of competences is, supposedly, to ease the recognition of graduates' learning outcomes by both the employers and employees and, thus, facilitate graduate's mobility from higher education to the labour market. However, notwithstanding the formal adoption of competences and outcomes into the university curriculum and qualifications, their actual implementation in the EU member states has been reported to be slow and fragmented.

As a response to the current policy trends at the European level, an increasing number of authors have been arguing that the use of competences and outcomes as central educational concepts reduces the focus of higher education discourse to pragmatic concerns and the development of applied or procedural forms of knowledge, while, at the same time, eliminating abstract theoretical disciplinary knowledge and the intellectual dimension of the university education out of the policy discourse. In this light, for educationalists it becomes crucial to articulate the following curriculum question: what educational is left out of the university curriculum without the theoretical, the disciplinary and the intellectual? The theoretical, the disciplinary and the intellectual have been historically the very cornerstones of the idea of the European university. They are a prerequisite for coherence and differentiation of university curricula across different disciplines and are the safeguards from the fragmentation of the university curriculum conceptual knowledge base. Thus, in the context of the EHEA, while acknowledging the significance of competences and outcomes in the university curriculum, there is an ever-increasing need to rearticulate the fundamental role of disciplinary knowledge within the university curriculum.

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KINTANTI UNIVERSITETINIŲ ŽINIŲ SĄVOKA EUROPOS AUKŠTOJO MOKSLO ERDVĖJE: NUO ŽINIŲ PRIE KOMPETENCIJŲ?

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Europos aukštojo mokslo erdvės kontekste tradicinei universitetinių žinių sąvokai keliamas iššūkis. Žinios, tradiciškai buvusios centrine universiteto *curriculum* edukacine sąvoka, keičiamos studijų rezultatais ir kompetencijomis. Europos aukštojo mokslo politika ragina Europos universitetus suteikti savo studentams kompetencijų, kurios, manoma, yra būtinos studentams įsidarbinti ir sėkmingai operuoti globalioje žinių ekonomikoje. Todėl dabartinio politinio diskurso centre atsiduria ne disciplininių, bet bendrojo pobūdžio žinių formos. Šiuo straipsniu siekiama aptarti kintančią universitetinių *curriculum* žinių sąvoką Europos aukštojo mokslo erdvės kontekste ir šios kaitos implikacijas. Siekiama įvardyti socioekonominius ir politinius veiksnius, darančius įtaką šiandieniniam kompetencijų propagavimui Europos aukštojo mokslo erdvėje, aptarti pagrindines Europos Sąjungos aukštojo mokslo *curriculum* modernizavimo kryptis ir implikacijas. Darbe taikomi keli kokybinio tyrimo metodai: oficialių Europos Sąjungos dokumentų turinio analizė ir aktualios mokslinės literatūros apžvalga.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: žinios, dalykinės žinios, kompetencija, bendroji kompetencija, perkeliamasis įgūdis, *curriculum*, universitetas, žinių ekonomika, Europos aukštojo mokslo erdvė, aukštojo švietimo politika.