

## EDITORIAL

# THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

This issue of *Studies in Adult Education and Learning* is a result of the *Innovative Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (INOVUP)* project, which is taking place in all three public universities in Slovenia: the University of Ljubljana, the University of Maribor and the University of Primorska. Along with these three institutions, which represent the majority share of higher education in Slovenia, the project consortium also includes the Faculty of Information Studies in Novo mesto. Financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport with funds from the European Social Fund, the purpose of INOVUP ([www.inovup.si](http://www.inovup.si)) is to investigate and improve the quality of higher education teaching in Slovenian universities. Our goal is not only to analyse the current state but to use various forms of training to encourage higher education teachers to reflect on their own practices and to equip them with the skills they need to introduce new approaches into their teaching. The impetus for the project is the realisation that a teacher in higher education needs to not only excel in their own specific field but also be a skilful teacher, who along with all other aspects of their work also grows and evolves when it comes to teaching.

INOVUP's efforts are not new in the field of higher education. It is possible to track interest into the qualities of higher education teaching and learning at least to the beginning of the 1980s, to the publication of *Learning, Cognition, and College Teaching* (McKeachie, 1980). Its editor, Walter McKeachie (1980), lists three main areas that are (from the point of view of educational psychology) important for understanding higher education teaching and learning, and which are still relevant today: knowledge of cognitive processes, learning methods, and differences between students. Slovenia, at the time still part of Yugoslavia, was abreast of the times even then: Vlado Schmidt (1972) and Barica Marentič Požarnik (1978) were already addressing issues concerning higher education teaching. Thoughts on the quality and the results of higher education go even further back, for example, to Klapper (1950) in the 1950s. He wrote about the divergence between the learning objectives of a course and the students' actual achievements, and the need for higher education teachers to have at least some knowledge in the field of teaching. These ideas are still a topic of discussion in higher education today.

What is it that universities and teachers in higher education now face? Aoun (2017) writes that the 21<sup>st</sup> century brings with it the fourth industrial revolution and automation. These

changes are inevitable even when it comes to education, least of all at the higher level. Aoun is of the opinion that during the fourth industrial revolution, higher education in particular needs to create educational models that develop knowledge and skills impossible to replace with algorithms or robots: creativity, critical thinking, new (digital and other) forms of literacy, multiculturalism, and entrepreneurship (Aoun, 2017). The chief characteristics of the universities of the future are therefore not linked as much to technological infrastructure or even employability as they are to the “Enlightenment” goals of university education.

How can we achieve these goals? Are the current methods good enough or do they need to be improved? The universities taking part in the INOVUP project are following the developments in the fields of pedagogy and psychology, according to which the success of higher education depends on many factors, but one of the most important is certainly the quality of teaching provided by teachers, teaching assistants, foreign language assistants, etc. It is difficult to define the quality of teaching and even more difficult to measure it, but it is undoubtedly connected to appropriate teacher training. How innovative the teaching methods are is not as relevant here as the use of methods that are suitable for achieving specific learning goals or developing the competencies set out in the curriculum. Can one method help us achieve all this? Probably not. Does the use of so-called innovative teaching methods necessarily make a difference? Again, no. The choice of teaching methodology is composed of a myriad of decisions that a teacher makes in accordance with the goals, content, students and circumstances under which the university course takes place.

Martin, Prosser, Trigwell, Ramsden, and Benjamin (2000) think that it is not so much the teacher’s expertise or pedagogical knowledge that influence different styles of teaching, but what kind of knowledge the teacher wishes to impart to the students and how (with which methods or forms of teaching) he or she plans to achieve this. In the history of higher education teaching, there have been numerous debates as to which approaches are the most effective. In large part these debates were about empirical proof which would confirm or deny the effectiveness of student-centred teaching methods compared to content or teacher-centred ones. Although past results have indicated the different effects of the two approaches (e.g. Krumboltz & Farquhar, 1957; Webb & Baird, 1968), there seems to now be a more or less unified consensus on the benefits of methods that encourage active learning. Recent meta-analyses have repeatedly confirmed this as well (Chen & Yang, 2019; Cornelius-White, 2007; Deslauriers, Schelew, & Wieman, 2011; Schmidt, van der Molen, te Winkel, & Wijnen, 2009).

It is therefore not surprising that INOVUP is trying to encourage higher education teachers to “innovate” their own teaching practices by developing new approaches, improving on existing ones, and above all, sharing their experiences with colleagues and thereby encouraging the development of a community that will stay in place even after the project itself has come to an end. Of course, an overhaul of how the university study process is conducted alone will not make it possible to permanently improve the quality of higher education. This is particularly relevant in terms of using active learning methods with

university students – these usually take place in smaller groups, in well-equipped classrooms and with teachers with opportunities to further their own professional development. In view of this, the challenges universities face in developing and retaining a high standard of quality will be even greater than they are now after the INOVUP project is over.

The (thematic) issue of *Studies in Adult Education and Learning* includes six articles from the field of teaching in higher education.

In her introductory contribution, “Improving Teaching and Learning in Higher Education by Training Tertiary Level Educators in Slovenia – Developments, Experiences and Problems”, Barica Marentič Požarnik describes the changes that have taken place in the teaching approaches in higher education over the past sixty years. The author emphasizes that efforts for improving teaching in higher education are not new and in fact have a long tradition in Slovenia. She presents the main forms, goals, content, methods, and achievements of teacher training in different time periods.

In the second article, “Promoting Active Learning as Perceived by Students”, Katja Košir, Tina Vršnik Perše, Sabina Ograjšek and Milena Ivanuš Grmek explore the concept of student-centred teaching, which is based on encouraging the student’s active role in the learning process. The authors stress that in order to successfully encourage this process, we need to understand the students’ learning process. Their research deals with the question of how students perceive higher education in terms of active knowledge construction and connecting theory and practice.

“Potential for Using Student-Centred Teaching and Learning Methods in Biology Subjects at UP FAMNIT” analyses the student-centred learning and teaching aspects as well as ICT use in biological subjects. In their research, Živa Fišer and Alenka Baruca Arbeiter wanted to determine which teaching methods were used in practical classes with students of biological subjects. The results have shown that the approaches used by the respondents support and build on experiential learning, that there’s no such thing as a “one size fits all” approach, and that higher education teachers make autonomous decisions about which approaches are suitable in terms of learning goals and content.

Concetta Tino’s “An Integrative Interpretation of Personal and Contextual Factors of Students’ Resistance to Active Learning and Teaching Strategies” also deals with student-centred approaches. Although their positive effects have been proven, the author points out that students do not always react to student-centred approaches in a positive way. A certain number of students, she writes, will always resist them. The reasons behind this vary and encompass both subjective and objective factors. Tino has developed some practical methods for reducing students’ resistance, which are centred around establishing a learning ecosystem that encompasses all of the factors that potentially influence the students’ negative attitudes to certain teaching and learning approaches.

In “The Professional Development of Teachers in Higher Education” Maja Mezgec provides illuminating insight into the models of professional development for higher

education teachers, considering both the factors that influence their professional development as well as its phases. Mezgec pays particular attention to on-the-job training and an overview of competencies. The first part of the article focuses on the doctoral degree as the foundation of a higher education teacher's career and professional development, and then examines the factors that affect their further and continuous professional development.

Monika Govekar-Okoliš and Nataša Kermavnar's "Nursing Mentoring and Mentors' Views on the Efficiency of University Students' Practice" presents the factors affecting the efficiency of the mentorship nursing students receive during their clinical practice. The purpose of the study is to determine the effects the mentorship of nurse mentors has and the ways it could be improved in future. The findings have indicated a need for the further pedagogical and andragogical training of the nurse mentors and for establishing an international network that would substantially contribute to their mentorship efficiency as well as improve the clinical practice experience and employment opportunities of nursing students.

Alenka Umek's article, "Reading Comprehension of Subject-specific Texts in a Foreign Language: The Role of Background Knowledge", determines the patterns used by students of business and economics when reading field-specific texts in a foreign language using the method of thinking out loud during reading. Umek has found that readers with strong prior knowledge in the field were more likely to correctly paraphrase, draw conclusions, explain, and evaluate information from the text. Readers with less prior knowledge were more likely to use a local approach to reading, focusing more on individual words. While talking about the text in Slovene, they also tended to use English expressions and inaccurate or inexact paraphrasing. In the conclusion, the author provides some tips for teaching foreign language reading skills and developing disciplinary literacy.

In the Reports, Replies and Reviews section, Monika Govekar-Okoliš, Katja Jeznik, Nika Breznikar and Klara Skubic Ermenc report on the *Days of Pedagogy and Andragogy*, which took place on 27<sup>th</sup> January 2020 at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. The final contribution comes from Klara Kožar Rosulnik, who reviewed Kalc, Milharčič Hladnik and Žitnik Serafin's book *Doba velikih migracij na Slovenskem (The Age of Great Slovenian Migration)*.

This issue has come into being during the COVID-19 pandemic, a time that has required self-isolation and a transition to distance learning. A taxing social and pedagogical experiment, it can undoubtedly also make us reflect on our teaching practices. The editors of *Studies in Adult Education and Learning* hope that this thematic issue can help contribute to such reflection.

**Marko Radovan**

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