UNIVERSITY TEACHERS' SKILLS AND ROLES IN STUDENT CENTERED EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT. In academic education, according to the regulations imposed by the Bologna Process, the student is placed in the center of the educational process, fully considering the trainee interests for deepening the knowledge and taking into account the own personality, as autonomous and responsible citizen. This paradigm attributes to student an active role, becoming in this sense a partner for teacher in the fulfilment of own training and professional development. Based on constructivist theory, student-centered education emphasizes the understanding, building and reconstructing of knowledge experiences, experimentation, reflective approach related to teaching-learning process, involving also the adaptation of the teaching methods to learners' interests and needs, creativity and innovation. The relationship between teacher and student has multiple values, it is based on respect and trust, in order to achieve common goals. Feedback has an important and relevant role in optimizing the educational process.

In the current socio-economic and cultural context, amplified by the effects of the pandemic, the rate of school leaving becomes high, which implies the adoption of effective measures for students to benefit from support, help, counseling and guidance. In addition to their roles required by student-centered education, teachers must express more openness, flexibility, ability to adapt to online constraints and understand the students' needs.

The paper aims to identify the expectations that students have in relation to university teachers and to design a teacher's skills pattern in the actual context. For this purpose, 245 students from Valahia University of Targoviste, enrolled in the Teacher Training Department programs have been interviewed and asked to express their expectations, attitudes and perceptions about their teachers.

Keywords: teacher's skills; teacher's roles; student-centered learning; students' perception.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG. In Anbetracht der Vertiefung des Wissens des Auszubildenden und unter voller Berücksichtigung der eigenen Persönlichkeit als autonomer und verantwortungsbewusster Bürger steht in der akademischen Ausbildung, gemäß den Vorschriften des Bologna-Prozesses, der Studierende im Mittelpunkt des Bildungsprozesses. Dieses Paradigma weist den Studierenden eine aktive Rolle zu und macht sie in diesem Sinne zu einem Partner des Lehrers für die Erfüllung der eigenen Ausbildung und beruflichen Entwicklung. Auf der Grundlage der konstruktivistischen Theorie betont die studentenzentrierte Bildung das Verstehen, den Aufbau und die Rekonstruktion von Wissenserfahrungen, das Experimentieren und den reflexiven Ansatz im Zusammenhang mit dem Lehr-Lern-Prozess, der auch die Anpassung der Lehrmethoden an die Interessen und Bedürfnisse der Lernenden, Kreativität und Innovation beinhalten. Die Beziehung zwischen Lehrkraft und Studierende hat mehrere Werte, sie basiert auf Respekt und Vertrauen, um gemeinsame Ziele zu erreichen. Das Feedback spielt eine wichtige und relevante Rolle bei der Optimierung des Bildungsprozesses.

Im gegenwärtigen sozioökonomischen und kulturellen Kontext, der durch die Auswirkungen der Pandemie noch verstärkt wird, ist die Schulabbrecherquote hoch, so dass wirksame Maßnahmen ergriffen werden müssen, damit Studierende von Unterstützung, Hilfe, Beratung und Anleitung profitieren können. Zusätzlich zu ihrer Rolle, die die studentenzentrierte Bildung erfordert, müssen die Lehrerkräfte mehr Offenheit, Flexibilität und die Fähigkeit, sich an die Online-Zwänge anzupassen und die Bedürfnisse der Studierende zu verstehen, zeigen.

Das Papier zielt darauf ab, die Erwartungen zu identifizieren, die Studierende in Bezug auf Hochschullehrkräfte haben, und ein Kompetenzmuster der Lehrkraft im aktuellen Kontext zu entwerfen. Zu diesem Zweck wurden 245 Studierende der Valahia-Universität aus Targoviste, die in den Programmen für die Lehrerausbildung eingeschrieben sind, befragt und gebeten, ihre Erwartungen, Einstellungen und Wahrnehmungen gegenüber ihren Lehrkräften zu äußern.

Schlüsselwörter: Fähigkeiten der Lehrkraft; Rolle der Lehrkraft; studentenzentriertes Lernen; Wahrnehmung der Studierenden.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, for the young people, one of the main challenges is to acquire a set of complex skills which should ensure adaptation to the requirements and changes met in the labor market, in all the fields. In this respect, not only valuable basic communication skills (such as reading and speaking) are sufficient, but also listening and collaborating skills, together with processing information from multiple perspectives are strongly requested. The capacity to recognize and even create relationships between the novelty and various inputs of different information is rewarded in this new century (Gordon et al., 2012, p. 4).

As a directional educational paradigm, the student-centered learning aims at acquiring some competences and practices which enable independent, autonomous and creative development of the personality, formation of an individual who should be able to solve problems and learn throughout their life (Young & Paterson, 2007, p. 5). In this process, the student is the actor responsible for the learning process, whereas the teacher fulfils multiple roles and therefore creates various contexts and effective opportunities to produce and facilitate learning, to stimulate interest and develop motivation. The accent focuses on the student, around whom the instructive-educative endeavors are built, so that they become interested, motivated, capable, passionate and responsible in their own evolution.

2. Theoretical concepts: student-centered learning

The paradigm of student-centered learning is based on the *constructivist* learning theory according to which the ones who learn should build and rebuild their own knowledge in order to learn efficiently. This educational model derives from the pedagogic conception of several theoreticians such as Hayward (1905), Dewey (1956), Piaget or Rogers (Attard et al., 2010, p. 4), the idea finding its origins in the paper *Emile, or on Education*, by J.-J. Rousseau (Cristea, 2008).

Following the Bologna Declaration signed in 1999, a series of objectives aimed to ensure on raising the quality in education, among which the student-centered learning became a priority in higher education.

The student-centered learning may be regarded from multiple perspectives: as paradigm with a major impact on exploitation of human resources, and increasing the quality of the activity carried out; as ethical and deontological position consisting in valorizing the learning subjects; as strategic option based on the capacity of the learning subject in the educative process, and as method to approach the instructive-educative process based on the needs, interests, aspirations and potential of the learning subject (active strategy) (Șoitu, & Cherciu, 2006, p. 58).

The student-centered learning is focusing on the educational needs of the student, and imposes on teacher several roles to be assumed: learning *facilitator*, *creator and organizer* of authentic learning contexts which should determine the student to go from the stance of passive actor to the one of an active individual, who gets involved in the process of own development, *counselor*, *guide*, *moderator*, *planner*, resource *manager*, *evaluator* (Todorescu, 2009).

In addition, the teacher should exploit his/her psychological skills toward understanding the cognitive, emotional, skill-related characteristics of the students, in order to develop different responses to the latter's intellectual needs. Weimer (2002), cited in Jony (2016, p. 173) indicates the roles of teacher and student in the process of changing, according to the student-centered learning paradigm - the teacher shifts from *sage on the stage* to *guide on the side*, viewing the students not as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge, but as seekers to be guided along their intellectual developmental journey. Consequently, it emerges a partnership between teacher and student with a common goal, to form skills required to successfully integrate the individual on the labor market, both at national and European level.

In reference to higher education, the student-centered learning implies the following elements: flexibility and freedom in terms of time and learning structure; more teachers who are better trained, who strive to share knowledge with their students and who are responsible for helping the student to acquire skills; teachers' emphatic attitude, in order to understand students; harmonious hierarchical relationships within higher education establishments. Additionally, it represents a continuous process of improving the didactic demarches, based on a positive attitude of both teachers and students, who work together toward building a relation set up on respect, and interdependence, beneficial to both partners, enabling an active, authentic learning, and a profound understanding (Attard, Di Iorio, Geven, & Santa, 2010). In this approach, the student has a big personal and professional responsibility, together with an increased sense of autonomy. Those all imply a reflexive approach on the teaching-learning process, both for student and teacher (Lea et al., 2003), involving creativity, as well as good metacognitive skills.

The well-implemented student-centered learning generates real and visible benefits: high motivation for learning, better knowledge retention, more profound understanding and positive attitudes (Collins, & O'Brien, 2003), receptivity to what is new, independent, autonomous students who are confident in their own abilities, self-assessment capacity, critical thinking, interest in one's formation.
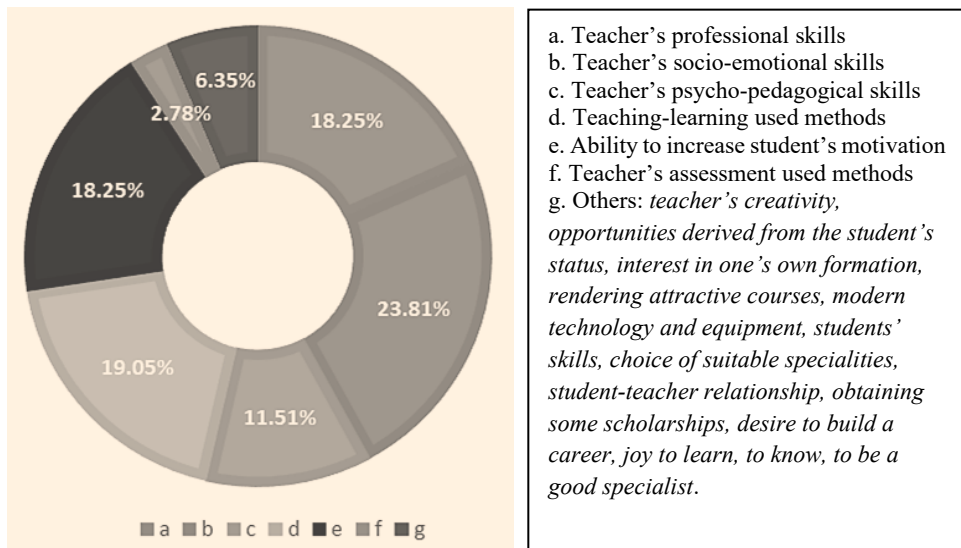

3. Methodology of research

There is no secret related to the decreasing number of students who complete their university studies, in report to the number of students who started their studies, over the past years. This means that the academic staff has the major responsibility of identifying, at an early stage, the factors leading to studies

abandonment, and finding the best solutions, to minimize this phenomenon. The teacher's personality, the didactic style, the methods used, the way they relate to students, flexibility and capacity to understand and adapt better the student-centered learning, may be important factors in reducing the abandonment rate.

In this respect, the goal of the research was to identify the students' expectations, attitudes and perceptions of their own teachers and to outline a general profile of the teacher's skills, in the context of involving student-centered learning paradigm. The sample of the research was represented by 245 students, enrolled in the first academic year of studies, all of them from Valahia University of Targoviste, preparing to become teachers (psycho-pedagogical study program). The research exploited their feedback expressed in a specific questionnaire (Annex 1).

4. Results and discussions

In order to identify the students' perception in relation to the factors which ensure success in higher education, they were requested them to rank a series of given variables, considering a seven point Likert scale (from 1 - the most important, to 7 - the least important).

a. Teacher's professional skills
b. Teacher's socio-emotional skills
c. Teacher's psycho-pedagogical skills
d. Teaching-learning used methods
e. Ability to increase student's motivation
f. Teacher's assessment used methods
g. Others: *teacher's creativity, opportunities derived from the student's status, interest in one's own formation, rendering attractive courses, modern technology and equipment, students' skills, choice of suitable specialities, student-teacher relationship, obtaining some scholarships, desire to build a career, joy to learn, to know, to be a good specialist.*

Fig. 1. Factors on which academic success depend, in students' perception

As shown in figure 1, the results obtained indicate the fact that the respondents value - in a great measure - the teacher's *socio-emotional skills* (point *b*): understanding, communication, relating to others, knowing the others, empathy, adaptation etc. Moreover, the students attach a major importance to *methods used by teachers* (point *d*) and consider that they intercede and streamline the educational process. The following position in the respondents' choices is represented by the teachers' *professional skills* (point *a*) and also *students' motivation* (point *e*). The students ranked in last position the *assessment* as process (point *f*), which means one more negative perception on this component of the actual education, since assessment is seen as a sanction (in many cases), as a process which generates dissatisfaction, associated with negative feelings. The teacher - placing the student in the center of the educative demarche - should use other alternative assessment methods, as: works (themes) related to student's interests, portfolios, individual/group projects, or self-assessment / mutual assessment etc., minimizing therefore the negative perception on this important component of the instructive-educative process. The clear assessment criteria and transparency may also contribute to improving the perception of the students on assessment and increasing their motivation for learning.

In addition, there were defined several factors considered to be successful in school: teacher's creativity, opportunities derived from the student's status, interest for one's own formation, attractive courses, modern technology and equipment, students' skills, choice of the suitable specialty, teacher-student relationship, obtaining some scholarships, desire to build a career, joy to learn, to know, to be a good specialist.
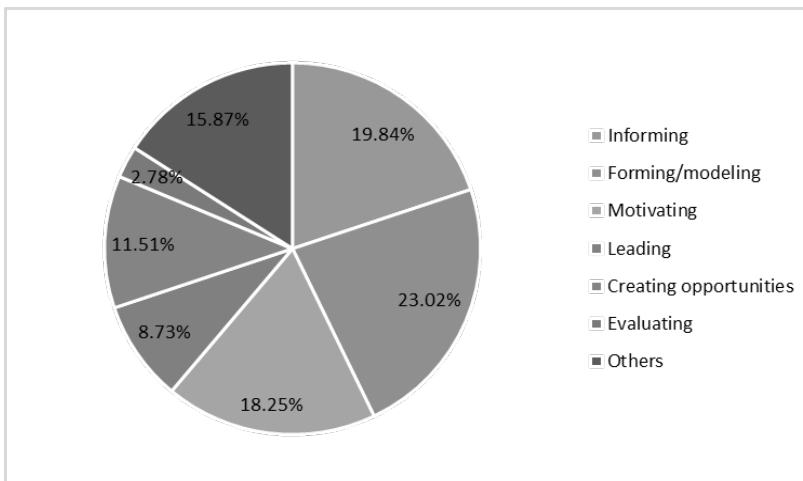

Fig. 2. Activities carried out by an efficient teacher in relation to students' expectations

In order to identify the students' expectations in relation to the activities carried out by an efficient teacher, we have requested them to rank a series of given variables on a seven point Likert scale (from 1 - the most important, to 7 - the least important). Therefore, figure 2 shows that most respondents appreciate that an efficient teacher *forms or shapes* the trainee's personality, fact which indicates appreciation and valorization of the didactic profession, as mission moving beyond the borders of the classic vision (teacher as a transmitter of knowledge) and attaches it a fundamental role in the process of human development. Shaping the personality represents an art, a special issue which implies vocation and requires high level skills on assuming the role of *shaper* (implying to be a model yourself...). This perception consolidates the need for student-centered learning.

In the second place, the students mentioned the *information*, which requires knowledge derived from knowing better the contains of particular discipline taught by the teacher, significant knowledge, large cultural universe, quality professional training. Then, in students' perception, *motivating* is also mentioned to be valorized by an efficient teacher.

The last position is filled by the assessment (again), which confirms the previous conclusion: i.e. assessment has negative valences in the students' vision.
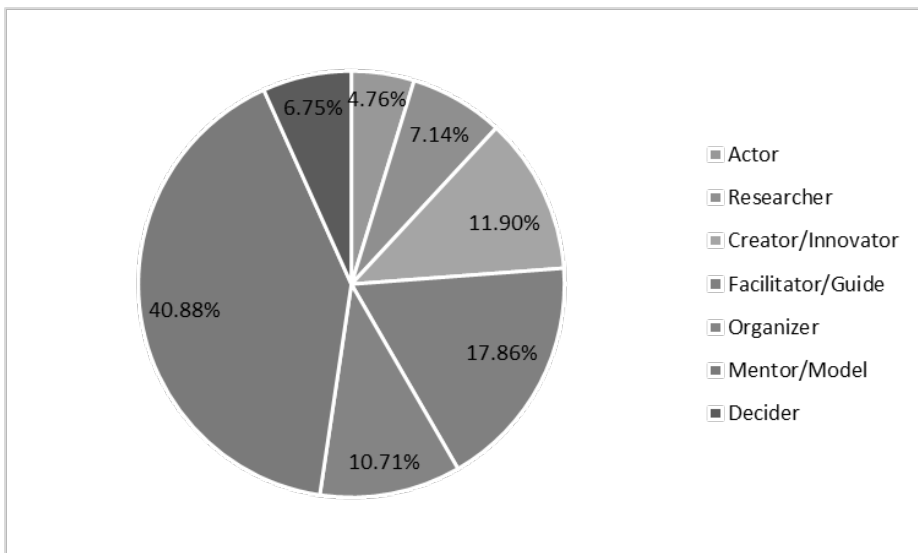
Fig. 3. Roles fulfilled by an efficient teacher in relation to students' perceptions and expectations

When requested to value (from 1 - the most important to 7 - the least important) the roles fulfilled by teachers (figure 3), the students appreciated first the teacher as *mentor* or *model*. Their choice indicates two aspects: students need models, values, standards in their lives. In addition, they have major expectations from their teachers - ethic, moral, civic etc. The second choice was oriented on *facilitator/guide*, which means that the teacher should know how to project the learning activity in the best format considering the necessary and useful knowledge related to a specific content; facilitating implies good knowledge and ability to transfer it to students, while guiding means subtly providing students with a direction, without cancelling the individual's creativity and initiative. The next choice directed the teacher as *creator/innovator*, receptive to newness, to changes, adapted also to changes.

The respondents ranked last the role as *actor* - which is associated mostly to "playing a role", or being a character. We consider that this choice expresses the need for something authentic, real, spontaneous, natural, in relation to the teacher.

5. Conclusions

There are many challenges associated to the status of student. Some of them relate to internal variables - students' perceptions and expectations, motivation, capacity to make the best decisions on one's own formation and career, knowledge, cognitive skills, adaptive possibilities and social skills. Nevertheless, there are also difficulties related to the external environment, organizing courses, timetable, specificity of teaching in higher education, didactic strategies and teaching style of academic staff - factors which may be altered in a way or need intervention.

The students' educational expectations represent important variables in this context, as they influence motivation, behavior and academic success. A holistic approach of the factors leading to success or, on the contrary, lack of success, school dropout etc. highlights the need to place the student in the center of the educational process. Knowing their needs, openness, involvement, building an authentic relationship between teachers and students, may constitute some footholds of the foundation that underlying their success. The students need support and additional academic guidance, especially in their first year of study.

In the above-considered analyze, the students' feedback indicates the following issues:

- the students express that teacher has an important status, role and special mission, closely connected to forming one's personality, character, values, development of life skills;

- the student-centered learning is absolutely necessary - its principles are in line with the student's profile in the actual society;

- it is required to foster positive approaches on learning;

- it is required to clarify the importance of the assessment and to improve the related process;

- it is necessary to provide more counseling and support.

All the above mentioned issues are in line with the recommendations formulated by the European Commission for Higher Education. Like stated for the teaching profession, "the EU teachers' and school leaders knowledge, skills and attitudes are seen as great importance, and their quality and professionalism direct impact on the students' learning outcomes" (European Education Area).

Implemented in such manner, the student-centered learning brings a series of benefits (Attard et al., 2010, p. 9), such as: increasing the quality of education, limiting the dropout ratios in higher education, attracting students, developing the lifelong learning culture and related skills, and in an indirect sense, valorizing the status of the academic staff.

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Annex

We are interested in your views on the factors that determine the academic success, the activities that effective teachers perform and the roles associated with them. Please answer to the following items with honestly. We assure you that the data you provide will be kept confidential; your answers will only be processed for statistical purposes. Thank you!

1. Please, rank (from 1 - the most important to 7 - the least important) the factors on which academic success depends:

a. Teacher's professional skills	
b. Teacher's socio-emotional skills	
c. Teacher's psycho-pedagogical skills	
d. Teaching-learning used methods	
e. Ability to increase student's motivation	
f. Teacher's assessment used methods	
g. Others (please, mention!)	

2. Please, rank (from 1 - the most important to 7 - the least important) the activities that an efficient teacher performs effectively:

Informing	
Forming/ modeling	
Motivating	
Leading	
Creating opportunities	
Evaluating	
Others (please, mention!)	

3. Please, rank (from 1 - the most important to 7 - the least important) the roles fulfilled by an efficient teacher:

Actor	
Researcher	
Creator/ innovator	
Facilitator/ guide	
Organizer	
Mentor/ model	
Decider	