

Enhancing teaching practices at Penza State University

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Abstract. The article examines the major challenges that Russian higher education institutions face while introducing the principles of the Bologna Process into current teaching practice. Their participation in the international projects together with European HEIs is seen as one of the possible ways to overcome the encountered difficulties. The role of the Capacity Building projects under the Erasmus+ Programme is illustrated by an example of Penza State University and its involvement in the ENTEP project (Enhancing Teaching Practice in Higher Education in RUSSIA and CHINA). The main stages of implementing the project at PSU are revealed, the project outputs and outcomes are described, as well as the perspectives for further adaptation of the project results are outlined. The article describes the professional development course “Enhancing teaching practices at PSU”, which was developed within the ENTEP project and offered for teaching and administrative staff of the university. The project contribution at the university is assessed in terms of adopting the best teaching practices in the context of the Bologna Process and European Higher Education Area.

1 Introduction

Over the past two decades, European higher education has successfully undergone fundamental changes at the systemic and institutional levels associated with national reforms, Bologna Process, and European Union initiatives. Consequently, student-centred teaching and learning, quality assurance and learning outcomes are the key elements of higher education in Europe today.

The consensus is absolute on the need to further improve access to education for all citizens, to build capacity for their inclusion in the teaching and learning process, and to ensure diverse educational experience. Expanding the scope of teaching and innovative pedagogy, strengthening the connection between education and research, promoting the use of new technologies for teaching and learning, as well as raising awareness of the importance of higher education for the individual and society as a whole are the topics on

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the agenda, which are discussed and actively explored at the national and institutional levels throughout the EU.

The Russian Federation became a full-fledged member of the Bologna Process in 2003 upon joining the Bologna Declaration. The national laws and regulations that ensured the legal status of the Bologna Process implementation in higher education were significantly amended following that decision. In addition, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education prepared several steering documents to stimulate Russian higher education to integrate the values of the European Higher Education Area.

Establishing the legal basis for transformations provides opportunities for reviewing and reshaping education stakeholders, but this requires HEIs to develop brand new approaches to education planning, management and implementation and, primarily, to teaching and learning.

2 Relevance and background

Despite the fact that the basic principles of the Bologna Process have been legally institutionalised in the Russian Federation, national higher education institutions still face some challenges concerning its implementation:

1. The adherence to the Bologna Declaration is not fully accompanied by reorganising and restructuring the system of Russian higher education;
2. There is a gap between the official documents and academic environment, as these steering documents have a declarative nature and do not produce specific recommendations;
3. Teaching and administrative staff of higher education institutions require relevant expertise and experience to adapt the Bologna Process and European Higher Education Area to their teaching practice;
4. Student-centred teaching and learning are viewed as a basic approach to higher education that is not substantiated by the reliable and practical guidelines;
5. The correlation between the National Educational Standards and Qualification Frameworks is limited, so that many professional fields have not been governed by the Qualification Frameworks yet.

Teaching staff in the Russian Federation traditionally receive very good education corresponding to their study field [1, 2]. However, this system is not designed to systematically train teachers for higher education institutions with due regard to the specific features of higher education. Their training (normally carried out through internships, postgraduate and doctorate studies) ignores the prognostic model of future outcomes in graduated specialists and excludes the latest achievements in pedagogy and psychology of higher education, as well as fails to recognize the legislative requirements for teachers of higher education institutions presented in the official documents. Teaching staff have little opportunity to undergo continuous training in order to explore the up-to-date teaching methods and approaches (especially, student-centred teaching and learning) and complement their teaching with new technologies.

Staff development and teaching competency improvement are identified as the major aspects in enhancing teaching and learning. Within the European Higher Education Area, the most common initiatives are teacher training and lifelong learning, which are provided by HEIs through professional development courses. The compulsory courses are offered by 37% of institutions, in 77% of cases the courses are optional.

It is obvious that professional development courses for improving teaching competency may be compulsory due to the policy of educational institutions, external requirements and need to motivate staff. HEIs with centres for teaching and learning more systematically

advance teaching competency of their staff and build their capacity: 93% of such educational institutions offer additional staff development courses, 50% – compulsory ones.

However, quality teaching in most higher education systems may be assessed, but tends not to make a big difference in the career development of teaching staff in contrast to research performance, which remains a more important factor. This is typical of Russian universities as well.

3 Ways to address the identified challenges

In order to improve the professional and pedagogical competencies of higher education teachers in the context of the Bologna Process, Russian universities have been incorporating the following mechanisms:

- promoting academic mobility programmes with European higher education institutions for teaching and academic staff;
- providing teaching staff with professional development courses and lifelong learning programmes with the view to psychology, pedagogy and methodology;
- involving experts in the delivery of open lectures, master classes and trainings on integrating the Bologna Process principles and instruments into the educational activity of the universities.

The opportunities for introducing advanced teaching and learning practices include closer cooperation with European partners, implementation of joint initiatives, and exchange of experience and study of best practices.

Penza State University has been taking an active part in this programme since 2015. Currently it is a member of the ENTEP consortium, which implements the project “Enhancing Teaching Practice in Higher Education in RUSSIA and CHINA”. The project wider objective is to contribute to the higher education reform in the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China through establishing a system of sustainable professional development in higher education following the best EU teaching practices and equipped with contemporary innovative teaching methodologies and pedagogical approaches with the emphasis on quality and regulation. This objective is achieved through establishing and operating the Centres for Teaching and Learning Erasmus+.

Within the ENTEP project, Russian and Chinese partners under the guidance of European experts address the common issues of advancing higher education, primarily improving the pedagogical competencies and teaching skills among teachers of higher education institutions, who do not have a degree in teacher training in the field of higher education. In addition, PSU Development Strategy focuses on improving the quality of education in line with the Bologna Process and in accordance with the national and international quality standards. PSU need for participation in the ENTEP project stems from the existing problems in improving professional competency of teaching staff:

- at the institutional level there are no systemic mechanisms linking teaching activity with teaching competency formation / improvement;
- HEIs do not offer professional development courses for teaching staff to form / improve their teaching competency;
- teaching staff are not fully aware of best practices and approaches to classroom management developed and adopted within the European Higher Education Area;
- the extent of understanding and applying the principles of student-centred teaching and learning based on learning outcomes varies among teaching staff.

The comprehensive analytical study carried out under the project in 2018 – 2019 included:

- designing a questionnaire to identify challenges and needs in higher education;

- interviewing teachers from Russian and Chinese universities participating in the project;
- evaluating the results obtained and preparing an analytical report.

The analysis of the survey results identified the major challenges in teaching management in Russian and Chinese HEIs [3]:

1. When planning classes: teaching staff tend to plan classes based on developed programmes regardless of student individual needs; they have difficulties in correlating available teaching and learning materials and requirements for degree programmes, in adapting discipline content to student needs, in conforming time costs and available resources;
2. When conducting classes: teaching staff face difficulties in selecting and adopting methods and techniques to encourage and motivate students; they have insufficient knowledge about working with students with special educational needs;
3. When assessing learning outcomes: teaching staff encounter difficulties in selecting and developing tools for student learning outcomes assessment, in defining assessment criteria and performance indicators.

Following the study, the ENTEP consortium developed the Didactic Manual and Guide. The ENTEP Didactic Manual comprises a comprehensive set of professional guidelines and teaching tools for higher education teachers and leaders and enables them to select the most appropriate teaching strategies in both online and face-to-face contexts [4]. The ENTEP Guide gives an insight to designing modules and their components centred on learning outcomes [5]. These materials are used in the Centres for Teaching and Learning Erasmus+ to introduce trainees of the professional development courses to the contemporary teaching practices.

At Penza State University, the Centre for Teaching and Learning Erasmus+ was created in 2019. The Centre aims at promoting student-centred teaching and learning at the university within the Bologna Process, fostering professional development of higher education teachers, upgrading academic curricula, working out innovative courses to be implemented into master and postgraduate curricula. In addition, it provides teaching staff with academic support through its courses, services, and resources, facilitates regular collegial shadowing between teachers and encourages collaboration among PSU teaching and administrative staff to stimulate innovations in teaching and learning.

Since January 2020, the centre has been offering a professional development course “Enhancing teaching practices at PSU” for teaching and administrative staff of the university. This course is delivered by a team of five teachers, who completed trainings at European partner universities in autumn 2018 and designed the course programme under the guidance of European experts and in line with the Didactic Manual and Practical Guide. When developing the course, the foreign practices of constructing the models for professional development of teaching staff were also considered [6, 7, 8].

The aim of the professional development course is to increase teaching competency of university staff in the new student-centred learning environment based on the pedagogical innovations of the European Higher Education Area. In order to achieve this aim, the following objectives are set:

- to help trainees improve their knowledge and professional skills in designing outcome-oriented curricula and integrating the principles of student-centred teaching and learning and requirements of the National Educational Standards and Qualification Frameworks;
- to provide trainees with the opportunity to upgrade their skills in applying innovative assessment and supporting feedback approaches and techniques fit for learning outcomes of the discipline;

- to introduce trainees to the innovative teaching methods and approaches in the new student-centred learning environments.

The course consists of several modules. They are: “Curriculum development and learning outcomes”, “Assessment and feedback”, “Classroom management”, “Innovative teaching approaches and methods”, “Integration of innovative information technologies into teaching practice”. It sets a comprehensive assignment for trainees to modify the programmes of the disciplines they teach.

From January to November 2020, 71 staff members underwent the professional development course at PSU Centre for Teaching and Learning Erasmus+. As the follow-up of the course, they responded to a questionnaire, which was designed to measure their satisfaction, receive feedback and make adjustments to the course in the future. We analysed the replies of trainees and obtained the following results:

- 92% of respondents noted that the aim of training was clear in advance, its content was well structured, the information was provided in a comprehensible manner, the materials (handouts, presentations, etc.) were useful and relevant;
- 95% of respondents outlined their plans to apply gained knowledge in designing and conducting classes in the future.

However, 50% of trainees in the first group expressed their desire to learn more specific examples of integrating student-centred teaching and learning into the delivery of disciplines within their study fields. Later this problem was partially solved, since the team of the centre is interdisciplinary (Foreign Languages, Economics, Computer Science, Linguistics, Chemistry), and each trainer selected examples from the corresponding study field.

All trainees also highlighted the practical focus of assignments, namely designing outcome-oriented programmes of the discipline they teach. On successful completion of the course, they not only explored new materials, but also received a specific product that can be used in their teaching practice.

In the context of the challenging epidemiological environment, the fifth module of the course dedicated to the integration of innovative information technologies into teaching has acquired particular significance. The principles of online learning, blended learning and flipped learning, the features of using e-learning tools for assessment and feedback, as well as the outline of collaborative e-learning tools and activities aroused interest among trainees, as all classes at Penza State University have been conducted online since March 2020.

In addition to operating the Centres for Teaching and Learning Erasmus+ and running the professional development courses, the ENTEP project focuses on modernising the existing master and postgraduate curricula in partner higher education institutions through introducing modules on Teaching Methodology, Pedagogy and Psychology.

To date, some PSU staff members, who completed the professional development course “Enhancing teaching practices at PSU”, have modified the content of such disciplines as “Methods of Teaching Economic Disciplines” (Master’s degree programme International Economy), “Modern Approaches to Teaching Foreign Languages” (Master’s degree programme Teacher Training: Language Studies) and “Pedagogy and Psychology of Higher Education” (Postgraduate programmes) in line with student-centred teaching and learning and with regard to the revised learning outcomes.

Through the implementation of professional development courses, more and more higher education teachers familiarise with innovative teaching practices and modern teaching methods, principles of student-centred teaching and learning and basics of designing outcome-oriented programmes. Thus, innovative assessment and supporting feedback approaches and techniques fit for learning outcomes of the disciplines will be applied and innovative teaching methods and approaches in the new student-centred

learning environment will be introduced. In general, these courses enable enhancing the quality and relevance of learning and teaching at the university.

4 Conclusion

The introduction of student-centred teaching and learning principles requires a transformation of educational institutions in terms of offering more personalised learning with flexible content suitable for different students and student groups. The challenge is to convince all teaching staff to constantly improve teaching methods and approaches and to significantly focus on student learning. This requires addressing a whole range of strategic structural, formal and didactic issues:

1. The high priority of teaching and learning and focus on quality are the integral parts of the university mission and vision, as well as its strategy;
2. The university leadership promotes and contributes to the teaching and learning enhancement;
3. Teaching and learning are seen as a collaborative and inclusive process involving cooperation of different stakeholders within and beyond the university;
4. The teaching and learning enhancement requires sustainable resources and effective structures to support the transformation process.

In terms of management, the teaching and learning enhancement is a process, under which the university leadership plays an important role, i.e. facilitates and sustains the educational activity. In this regard, the development of a university teaching and learning strategy comes to the fore. The strategy should include the following elements:

- policy on academic staff development;
- opportunities for international cooperation;
- measures to enhance teaching and learning;
- procedures for developing, approving and evaluating degree programmes and their components;
- student support services;
- formation of the learning environment;
- modern educational technologies;
- opportunities for lifelong learning;
- quantitative indicators for measuring strategy / policy goals;
- operational plans for implementing strategy / policy.

Thus, the further step of PSU is to work out the teaching and learning strategy in the course of introducing innovations into the teaching and learning process through continuing staff development, teaching competency improvement, and academic support. Therefore, the existing centres for teaching and learning / centres for professional development of teaching staff are essential for the successful implementation of strategies.

In general, this confirms the importance of cooperation in the field of teaching and learning, as well as the added value that European and international partners can bring to institutional and national teaching and learning strategies. New ideas generated within the ENTEP project, its outcomes and outputs encourage PSU initiatives on learning and teaching enhancement, support professional development of academic staff with teaching responsibilities, facilitates teaching excellence in higher education.

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