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**Project „MOST – mobility framework and standard for teacher trainees“, 2004-2007**  
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## **FUTURE TEACHER – A REALITY AND SEEK POINT. REFLECTIVE JOURNAL**

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### **Introduction**

Becoming a teacher is a process of systematic development, professional growth until certain experience is formed. This process of “becoming” should be understood as a lifelong process not as a period of time from the first independent lesson to the acquisition of the diploma certifying teacher’s qualification. Quality of studies organized by teacher training institutions and ability to ensure practice and theory coherence in the teaching and learning process play a very special role in the whole process.

The aim of this article is not to conduct a theoretical preparation of the future teacher or analyze competences that are developed. It is a critical analysis of a process – teaching practice – in an international project which took place three years. The analysis is based on reflection of its participants and organizers and its aim is to reveal the assumptions of future teacher’s standard development and its expression from the national point of view.

### **Before we started...**

It is worth to start the reflection from the introduction of the general teacher training situation in Lithuania. The research of the recent years shows the weakest point in organizing Lithuanian education reform in initial teacher training which does not correspond to the changes that took place in schools in the last decade. National education system is not ready for modernization of teacher training system, it does not accord with labour market and requirements raised by knowledge society. Universities are still too distant from general education school. These were the main reasons for Modern Didactics Centre (MDC) team’s participation in the project “MOST – mobility framework and standard for teacher trainees”. Involvement into this project was a challenging experience for the Lithuanian team. We were the only partners who still do not have a national initial teacher training standard. Concept paper is stuck in the ministry policy-makers’ and scientific workers’ groups as it has been perfected, changed, discussed for four years already. Every year the number of students who study at teacher training institutions, but do not relate their career with teacher’s profession, increases. Content of studies, especially of teaching practice, is not always directed to the student’s as future teacher’s competencies development. The order of teaching practice organizing is different in different teachers training institutions and even in the faculties of the same institution: students have a different number and different length of teaching practice, regulations, requirements and evaluation systems differ too. The quality mainly depends on the faculty members who are responsible for the teaching practice, competence, place of practice, mentors experience and their ability to conduct the student’ practice. For example, future mathematics teachers at Vilnius Pedagogical University have a possibility to practice at school only when they are fourth-year students. So, a student, who is going to get at teacher’s diploma, realizes that work at school is not for him/her. This situation is even strengthened by

the society's prevailing attitude towards teacher's profession that it is not promising, not prestigious.

We, as project partners, were influenced not only by general project framework, but by national and institutional aspects of teacher training. This paper reflects the development of beginning teacher standard: from form specification (*What is the best? How it should be?*), through content improvement (*What has to be changed?*) and search for coherence between content and form.

### **Search for Forms**

The first MOST students' practice mobility stage was a challenge for MDC team. Our experience in organizing international student exchange, especially with incoming students, was more modest. All partner countries – Belgium, Spain, Norway, Sweden and Malta – followed their own standards, deep mentoring traditions, settled and stable teaching practice order. Our colleagues had soled experience in students' exchange. The project was a great possibility for us and for our students to prepare professionally and responsibly for teaching practice. Students studied Lithuanian education system, analysed partner countries' history and culture, their education traditions. National coordinators get aquatinted with teacher training and teaching practice systems of partner institutions.

The choice of practice structure (1+3+1) can be named as the success at the first project year. The first week was for getting acquainted with the host institution, education system of practice country, culture, and traditions, discussing practice evaluation criteria, and meeting mentors. Three weeks were for practical work at school (lesson observation, preparation for lessons, lesson and after class activity organization). The last week was for students' self-assessment, reflection, discussion, practice assessment and evaluation. The last day of every practice week we organized contact meetings for incoming students and mentors to discuss and reflect together. Those meetings were very useful as encouraged open and critical exchange of ideas and plan next steps.

We have followed assessment guidelines developed together with MOST partners during the first project year. The guidelines consisted of three competences blocks: student's competences, beginning teachers' competences and social competences. It was decided that this document will be reflected through students' competences portfolio as final assessment tool. We had no strict portfolio structure and form at that time. The only requirement for every student was to include an essay "My teaching philosophy" and "Double diary".

An idea to develop portfolio was good, but not elaborated till the end. It was more as reflective journal without boundaries and limits. On the one hand, the indefinite requirements for portfolio revealed students' critical thinking, information analysis abilities; on the other hand, it complicated the assessment process for ourselves. We missed clear teaching practice requirements, identified assessment criteria, prepared lesson observation and discussion forms, involvement of mentors into the process of practice organization at the first project year. But this experience and project partners' reflections were good lessons for improvement of MOST students practice order, requirements, assessment system for the following project years.

### **Content improvement**

First stage mistakes analysis, experience of other countries, students' reflections and suggestions encouraged the Lithuanian team to look for better balance between the aims of teaching practice and the quality of its content. It was decided to leave the same practice form and the content of the first and the last week. We paid more attention to students' preparation

for practical work at school by including more elements of assessment document. This document described teacher competencies based on three levels: classroom, school community and society. More active involvement of mentors' into practice preparation stage was an important and significant change. They participated in development of student practice assessment requirements and in the process of practice planning as well. It was good decision to integrate Vilnius Pedagogical University students into MOST students' practice who had their teaching practice at that time. Their participation in the project was not only voluntary help as in the first MOST student mobility stage, but it was also the main part of their own teaching practice. Together they participated in various practice activities both at university and at school. The only difference was that Lithuanian students teaching practice was assessed according home institution requirements. Mixed group of students enriched discussions and reflections, helped to improve final project product – standard of the beginning teacher.

The second year students had to prepare a portfolio as the first one. Portfolio requirements were simplified as the idea of competence portfolio was changed to practice portfolio (the experience of the first stage showed that it was too difficult for the students to distinguish their as beginning teachers' competences and justify them using direct and indirect proofs collected during practice). At the same time requirements for portfolio structure and its content were clearer. Lesson observation forms, lesson observation guidelines and teaching analysis gave certain structure and put in the form students' reflections. Special attention was paid to student's self-assessment and self-analysis, e.g. at the end of practice students were asked to analyze their experience on three levels: professional (I am a teacher), social (I am a community member) and educational (I am a student). Those analyses were based on the essay "My teaching philosophy" written at the beginning of the practice, reflections, and the results of lesson discussions.

*„I am flexible and I like to be well prepared for a lesson. Sometimes I feel, I must still learn to be more expressive in my talking“*

*„I learned to teach with as less material as possible...It was also an experience to teach a group with different language“ (Jokke, Belgium, 2006)*

*„One most important thing I learned is that our way of teaching is not that divine as I thought it was. There are a lot of teaching philosophies that aren't worse or better, but different from ours. “*

As the extracts from students' works show, such tasks prompt comprehensive self-assessment, deepen self-analysis skills, and develop critical reflection.

More formalized practice assessment criteria, active mentors involvement contributed to the more simple assessment procedure – it became more individualized, targeted on students as the beginning teachers' competence assessment.

### **Coherence between content and form**

The aim of the third, final, MOST practice stage was directed not only to incoming students, their practice organization and analysis. It was very important to analyze the developed standard for beginning teacher and other documents, their practical application. So students' as standard evaluators' role was very important in this stage. For that purpose we slightly corrected practice form and content structure. More attention was paid to the analysis of standard in the light of the national and European education contexts. According to the developed standard student preparation for practice at school was organized in two directions – discussions about teacher profession as such (Visualization exercise, My teaching

philosophy) and school community as space and environment where teacher acts (Active meeting). While discussing the importance of integration into school community on the efficiency and quality of teaching process it came out that students worry about first days at school, possible communication problems with pupils (making contact, mutual relationship, communication, discipline), other teachers and other school staff.

The feedback given by students helped to improve teaching practice organization at school. Local coordinators and mentors looked for possibilities for every student to work with one class pupils during the whole practice period, i.e. a student could observe different subject lessons of the same class and the work of different teachers with them and after had lessons themselves and organized extra school activities with the same pupils. It was good that the mentors were the class teachers, students worked with, at the same time. Incoming students had better possibilities to be involved into overall teaching process and school community life. Students had more opportunities to get acquainted with pupils, analyze and assess the organization of teaching process and, what is the most important, use this experience for lesson preparation. Another important aspect was that both mentors and students had a possibility to record and reflect teaching and learning process, initiate necessary changes. Students were part of school community as they participated in common events, school celebrations, discussions with other teachers.

Students had to present a portfolio for practice assessment as overall result of their work. Portfolio included students self introductions, first impressions about the country and school, detail lesson plans and their own thoughts on preparation, class management skills, pupils motivation and evaluation. Logical and structured lesson observation and practice evaluation forms simplified both – self-assessment and practice evaluation processes.

*„Through this portfolio I learned how important it is to reflect on this experience. It is important that you can be critical for yourself, especially as a teacher ...“* (Vicky, Belgium, 2007)

*„Because of this portfolio I learned to analyze myself, my pupils and even my mentor. I have learned to tell good things about myself, but also negative things. Before I was afraid to tell something negative about myself, I thought I will have bad marks. Now I know that everybody makes mistakes and that you learn out these mistakes...“* (Charlot, Belgium, 2007)

### **Summing up**

The three-year process was useful for all – students, practice organizers, tutors and mentors. International practice experience was so deep and rich that proved students broader abilities and competences gained outside ordinary national environment.

*„...I learned a lot about myself and other people. This experience gave me a possibility to understand what kind of teacher I would like to be. I will become a teacher who isn't afraid to reflect on herself, a teacher who isn't afraid of negative things, but ALWAYS tries to find a better way to teach the next time. “*

*“The lessons and the experience to teach in a totally other situation where you really should try to take care of stuff yourself and be independent is useful on itself just because it makes you stronger for the practice in national environment. Also reflecting so much is a great mirror and makes you think about yourself. ”* (Bjorn, Belgium, 2006)

The thought expressed by MOST student from our university could serve as a final summary and a topic for an open further discussions about teacher training.

*“During five practice weeks in Sweden I realized the mission of the teacher – to help pupil learn. I felt relieved as a child who had disclosed a big secret. When I returned to university routine, in the first lecture I heard: “Your, as teacher’s duty is to teach a pupil ...” I could not listen to this any more. I was shocked. There was the only question in my head – why this way? And that thought that I do not want to be a teacher...”* (Kristina, Lithuania, 2007)