PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF UNIVERSITY TEACHERS' DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: CASE OF KLAIPĖDA UNIVERSITY

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Abstract. The Covid-19 pandemic brought about changes in the processes of teaching and learning in higher education institutions and affected all possible areas of the higher education process. The opinion of teachers of the Klaipėda University Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities on the changes of their professional competencies during the Covid-19 pandemic was chosen as the research object. The aim of the research is to reveal peculiarities of professional development of teachers of higher education institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic. According to qualitative content analysis of university teachers' answers, the concept of their role, the nature of teaching/learning methods and organization have changed, subject knowledge had to be adapted to suit online studies. A striking feature is that though there was no time to prepare for these conditions, teachers were forced to find a creative and an innovative commitment to act, learn, improve and demonstrate adaptability and flexibility by strengthening teacher-student communication in a virtual environment, using new online platforms, and ensuring appropriate follow-up study activities. It has also become clear that the constantly changing role of teachers, especially during a pandemic, requires more creative thinking and time for creating new teaching/learning methods, modules, and this implies extensive online/digital trainings. The research showed that distance learning in a higher education institution caused difficulties for teachers during the pandemic, but teachers were able to quickly master digital programs, manage information flows, collaborate with colleagues and students, engage in self-education, help students address the concerns raised that have really increased during the quarantine period, and at the same time maintain the continuity of the study process.

Keywords: competencies, Covid-19 pandemic, professional development, university teachers

Introduction

Study quality assurance is a priority area for higher education policy and management, the most important source of trust for European higher education (*Bucharest Communiqué*, 2012[1]; Gasiūnaitė, Juknytė-Petreikienė, 2015). The following

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[1] 8th European Higher Education Area Conference of Ministers (2012), Bucharest Communiqué. Making the Most of Our Potential: Consolidating the European Higher Education Area. Available

necessitates the development of an effective national study quality assurance policy that responds to European political agreements (*Lithuania 2030*, 2012[2]). One of the essential conditions of study quality assurance is the competence of the academic staff of higher education institutions. Therefore, the following condition can be described as an indicator of the intangible contribution that determines preconditions for the successful implementation of the study quality assurance process (Galkutė, 2008).

The *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development* (2020)[3] report states that the coronavirus pandemic has generated changes in the teaching-learning process in higher education institutions and has influenced all possible areas of the higher education process. Therefore, both university members and students came across many challenges. Universities also struggle with keeping the content of the course consistent and relevant, with communicating clearly with the academic community, with supporting and assisting university teachers, with focusing on e-learning, because the main challenges that teachers and students encountered were accessibility, connectivity, lack of appropriate devices, social issues represented by the lack of communication and interaction with teachers and colleagues (Coman, Tiru, et al., 2020).

The International Association of Universities (2020)[4] confirms that over recent years the overall acceptance of digitally enhanced learning and teaching in higher education had grown, but also that many institutions were still planning to develop a more systematic and strategic employment of digitally enhanced provision. On the eve of the crisis, most institutions (80%+) indicated that they had in place online repositories for educational materials, a centre or unit that supports teachers on digitally enhanced learning and teaching, as well as digital skills training. These capacities may not have been sufficient for the suddenly increased demand, and not all staff and students were familiar with them.

"The impact of the coronavirus on global higher education" (2020)[5] research revealed main challenges faced by higher education institutions during the crisis; health of university teachers and students; assurance of the normal course of the study process; transition from traditional to e-learning; planning, communication and uncertainty of

at: http://www.ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/Bucharest_Communique_2012_610673.pdf

[2] Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania (2012), National Progress Strategy "Lithuania's Progress Strategy "Lithuania 2030". Available at: https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.425517

[3] OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19) (2020). Education Responses to COVID-19: Embracing Digital Learning and Online Collaboration. Available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-responses-to-covid-19-embracing-digital-learning-and-online-collaboration_d75eb0e8-en

[4] International Association of Universities (2020). European higher education in the Covid-19 crisis. Available at: https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/briefing_european%20higher%20education%20 in%20the%20covid-19%20crisis.pdf

[5] The Impact of the Coronavirus on Global Higher Education. (2020). Exclusive QS survey data reveals how prospective international students and higher education institutions are responding to this global health emergency. Quacquarelli Symonds. Available at: https://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv%3A86429

continuity. In response to these challenges as well as claimed by S. G. Recio, Ch. Colella (2020), slowly, by learning from the different actions each high education institution was implementing, it was possible to see a huge added value in bringing them together, to share challenges, their context and to design opportunities together.

The following research seeks to contribute to addressing the challenges posed by Covid-19 in higher education by finding out the opinion of teachers on how the pandemic affected their professional development, how the competencies changed, which were lost and which became a sign of professional growth and will be developed.

The opinion of teachers of the Klaipėda University (hereinafter: KU) Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities on the change of their professional competencies during the Covid-19 pandemic was chosen as *the object* of the research. *The aim* of the research is to reveal peculiarities of university teachers' professional development during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Methods*: analysis of scientific literature and documents, interview, content data analysis.

Teachers' Competences and Their Changes during COVID-19

Guidelines for the Development of Competencies of Teachers Working in Higher Education Institutions (2020) [6]discuss the following groups of teachers' competencies: teaching/learning, research, general (digital, leadership, intercultural). These groups include a number of more specific competences, including those relevant to the following research:

- creation of and participation in virtual and traditional learning communities;
- organization of teaching/learning activities based on active involvement of students in the learning process;
- updating of the course unit/module and improvement of the quality on the basis of self-evaluation results;
- development, adaptation and correct application of digital resources for the teaching/learning process;
- teaching/learning in the digital space;
- use of digital technologies to encourage active student involvement in the learning process;
- promotion, selection, development and evaluation of innovative ideas;
- active involvement in study and research interest groups, professional communities and other professional networks through traditional professional development tools and digital technologies;
- smooth communication in professional and informal contexts by initiating, supporting and summarizing discussions.

These and many other teacher competencies highlighted in the guidelines indicate a significant scope of each teacher's professional activity and growth directions. The

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[6] Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania, (2020). Order No. V-936 Guidelines for Developing Competencies of Higher Education Institution Teachers. Available at: https://www.esavadai.lt/dokumentai/8963-lr-smsm-isakymas-del-aukstuju-mokyklu-destytoju-kompetenciju-tobulinimo-gairiu-patvirtinimo-galioja-nuo-2020-06-20/

United Nations (2011) document *Learning for the future. Competences in Education for Sustainable Development* [7] also states that integrative thinking and practice are very important in the activities of a university teacher, when one is able to link different learning contexts and disciplines; embrace different cultures and perspectives; see different aspects of complex phenomena and situations. No less important is envisioning change, i.e. critical reflection and learning from the past; understanding of the current situation; vision of various future alternatives and ways to realize them.

The Order of the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania (2018) [8] states that the professional development of a university teacher takes place throughout the period of one's active professional activity, developing both horizontal and vertical professional careers. The following has become especially relevant as the situation in the world has changed, when the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has put the world of higher education, in Europe and worldwide, under great pressure. This crisis has forced Higher Education Institutions to swiftly change their *status quo*, their ways of working and their environments, dramatically shaking up our communities. At the same time, this situation has also brought to light the rigidity of our current higher education system, a rigidity we are now confronted with and which will inevitably have to change as a consequence of current or future lockdowns (Dennis, 2020).

Teachers were also impacted significantly at the workplace and professionally. The *Impact analysis, policy responses and recommendations* of UNESCO (2020) [9] report claims that the most evident impact on teachers is the expectation, if not the requirement, that they continue to teach using the virtual modality. In theory, at least, virtual education is present in most large HEIs and it is difficult to find one that does not have, a virtual classroom for each subject, as an extension of the physical classroom. In practice, the ability of each teacher to continue teaching largely depends on their experience in that regard.

The said document of UNESCO indicates that there are many teachers who, not having previous experience in distance education and their institutions not having had enough time to train them adequately, have appropriated all the communication media at their disposal to develop what has been called Emergency Remote Teaching or, also, *Coronateaching* which has been defined as the process of "transforming the presential classes to a virtual mode, but without changing the curriculum or the methodology". This abrupt entry into a complex teaching modality, with multiple technological and pedagogical options, and with a steep learning curve, can result in sub-optimal results,

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[7] United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development (2011). Learning for the future. Competences in Education for Sustainable Development. Available at: https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/env/esd/ESD_Publications/ Competences_Publication.pdf

[8] Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania (2018). Order No. V-501. Pedagogues' Training Regulations. Available at: https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/ TAIS.364217?jfwid=fhhu5mn4s

[9] UNESCO (2020). COVID-19 and higher education: Today and tomorrow. Impact analysis, policy responses and recommendations. Available at: http://www.guninetwork.org/publication/ report-covid-19-and-higher-education-today-and-tomorrow-impact-analysis-policy-responses

frustration and overwhelm due to adaptation to an educational modality never before experienced without the corresponding training.

Ch. Rapanta, L. Botturi and others (2020) argue that teaching staff of all backgrounds and ages have had to prepare and deliver their classes from home, with all the practical and technical challenges this entails, and often without proper technical support. On top of that, a significant challenge for university teachers has been their lack of the pedagogical content knowledge needed for teaching online.

The *Impact analysis, policy responses and recommendations* of UNESCO (2020) report indicates that the efficient use of technology in distance higher education is very steep and requires external support in the technological and pedagogical fields. This is where teachers can see the difference between those HEIs that make tools and resources available to them, such as training courses, and those that do not. Since there was no more time to prepare these conditions, teachers have been challenged to find the creative and innovative resolve to act and learn on the go, demonstrating adaptability and flexibility in the contents and designs of the courses for learning in the different training areas.

Sh. Dhawan (2020) claims that with the COVID-19 pandemic taking place around the world, there was an overnight shift of normal classrooms into e-classrooms, that is, educators have shifted their entire pedagogical approach to tackle new market conditions and adapt to the changing situations. Online teaching required more individual follow-up and a strengthened engagement of and communication. Online teaching requires thorough training, adaptation of the content to the tool used, and multi-faceted investment, among other things the work and balance is greatly affected: due to the significant increase of online activities, working time has blurred for students and teachers and it has become more difficult to combine family duties with professional ones.

Redesigning classes in digital formats requires thorough staff training in new methodologies, in communication tools, video tools, etc. and the lack of a systemic approach and coordination among all academics and staff is sometimes an issue (Salmi, 2020).

S. G. Recio, Ch. Colella (2020) outline the actions taken by Young European Research Universities. The strongest focus is on enhanced communication and mentoring from teachers, by using new platforms and ensuring an adequate follow-up with students.

Concerning trainings for staff, virtual trainings have been offered regularly to assist them in this new teaching context. New interdepartmental collaborations and practice sharing have emerged to address current challenges (e.g. upskilling staff, sharing competences among colleagues, drama teachers supporting teaching staff in delivering content online, etc.). Live-streamed online lectures were made available, with the possibility for students to watch the classes multiple times and at different timings.

As for improving the evaluation of students remotely: adding an oral component to check if the students have done the exam themselves can be a good solution, as well as using more 'take-home' exams (making sure to give students detailed information

on deadlines and plagiarism). More personalized and individual evaluations should be implemented in the future.

Constantly, and especially during the pandemic, the rapidly changing role of university teachers requires more creative thinking and time to develop new teaching/learning methods, modules, thus higher education institutions must find ways to motivate academic staff to devote time to developing, assessing and improving the following methods and modules (Gasiūnaitė, Juknytė-Petreikienė, 2015).

Research methodology

Qualitative research helps to understand and interpret the social world, while human behaviour is perceived as being dynamic, situational, helping to investigate cases without aiming at representativeness (Žydžiūnaitė, Sabaliauskas, 2017).

Participants of the research. The sample of informants when performing qualitative research depends on the aim of the research (Bitinas, 2013). Since the research sought to reveal the opinion of university teachers about the peculiarities of their professional development during the Covid-19 pandemic, the sample units selected for the qualitative research from the general sets have been chosen by applying the targeted sampling method. Targeted sampling is such sampling, when the researcher selects elements into the sample depending on the aims of the research. The implementation of targeted sampling includes individuals, who can provide the researcher with meaningful information about the research subject. In this case, it is teachers working in KU Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities. There were 10 teachers working in this faculty (hereinafter: T). The following sample is sufficient, because when applying the semi-structured interview, the recommended sample size is from 5 to 30 people (Žydžiūnaitė, Sabaliauskas, 2017). There were 3 male and 7 female university teachers who participated in the research. It was established that the pedagogical work experience of the participants is from 1 to 42 years (average: 24 years). The teaching staff is quite experienced, has considerable experience in pedagogical work, therefore the answers of the research participants are significant enough and their opinion is valuable.

The research was conducted in February – March 2021. The semi-structured interview method was chosen for the implementation of the research being one of the most convenient survey methods during which it is possible to obtain as much unstructured information about the research issue as possible. Semi-structured interview provides the researcher with an opportunity, depending on the course of the interview, to steer the questions in the right direction. The obtained interview data were analysed by the method of *content analysis*: on the basis of the theoretical analysis the categories of the researched phenomenon were identified and the obtained data were assigned to them, the obtained results were interpreted and analysed, examples and category illustrations have been provided. This is a valid method that allows conclusions to be drawn on the basis of the analysed text (Bitinas, 2013). The following ethical principles have been followed during the implementation of the qualitative research (interview): goodwill, respect for the dignity of a person, justice, right to obtain accurate information.

Findings

The research sought the opinion of teachers on the change of their professional competencies during the Covid-19 pandemic. Firstly, it was sought to examine the opinion of informants on how their professional competencies as teachers changed in the period of the Covid-19 quarantine. Informants' responses in the following subcategories are presented in Table 1.

TAB. 1. Changes of teacher's competence in professional activity during the Covid-19 quarantine

Category	Subcategory	Number of responses	Excerpts from interview texts (informant)
Change of teacher's competence in professional activity during the Covid-19 quarantine	Use of IT	6	*"Quarantine prompted to acquire additional competencies for work in a virtual environment (Zoom, Teams platforms). I improved my skills of working remotely"* (T1). *"Taming" my computer. Learn to work on several different platforms"* (T2). *"In a short time, I've mastered a number of tools necessary to adapt to the changed situation, intended to organize, facilitate, diversify distance learning, so there has undoubtedly been a significant qualitative leap in this area"* (T3). *"I had to use IT more, install new computer programs, conduct classes remotely"* (T4). *"I had to use IT more, install new computer programs"* (T9). *"Information technology competencies have been strengthened"* (T5).
	Communication with students	4	*"Consult students by phone and communicate by e-mail"* (T4). *"<...so, there was a lack of direct professional communication and cooperation with students"* (T7). *"It's hard to say, because I've just started to work with students and in 2 months had to turn to distance learning. It was difficult to communicate"* (T8). *"<...conduct classes remotely, consult students by phone and e-mail, communicate through social networks"* (T9).
	Adaptation of materials and tasks to distance learning	3	*"Adapt tasks to distance learning"* (T2). *"Search and apply new digital sources, IT during lectures"* (T6). *"I had to, some professional competence courses and similar tools, prepare materials for distance learning by using IT"* (T7).

	Role of the teacher	3	*"Probably competencies related to the implementation of changes have changed most, because my role as a teacher has changed"* (T3). *"<...my, as of a teacher, teaching/learning methods have changed"* (T6). *"I became more actively involved in the teaching process, the teaching itself at a distance"* (T10).

Most of the informants who participated in the research (6) distinguished the use of IT as a changed professional competence. Teachers claimed: *"quarantine prompted to acquire additional competencies for work in a virtual environment (Zoom, Teams platforms). I improved my skills of working remotely"* (T1); *"in a short time, I've mastered a number of tools necessary to adapt to the changed situation, intended to organize, facilitate, diversify distance learning, so there has undoubtedly been a significant qualitative leap in this area"* (T3). Much more frequent and professional use of IT was also mentioned: *"learn to work on several different platforms"* (T2); *"Information technology competencies have been strengthened"* (T5), etc. The following competencies are also discussed by S. G. Recio, Ch. Colella (2020), who claim that one of the important tasks during the COVID-19 pandemic was the transition from traditional to e-learning, in which teachers' competencies in using IT became very important. Informants also singled out the competence of communication with students, which, in their opinion, changed during the extraordinary period of worldwide quarantine and distance learning. Informants (4) claimed that they were forced to transfer not only their teaching, but also communication with students, consultations with them to distance and social networks: *"<...conduct classes remotely, consult students by phone and e-mail, communicate through social networks"* (T9); *"consult students by phone and communicate by e-mail"* (T4). It was not easy for teachers to do the following, there was a lack of direct communication: *"<...so, there was a lack of direct professional communication and cooperation with students"* (T7); *"It was difficult to communicate"* (T8). A. Khan et al. (2017) indicate that teachers need clear communication for the good understanding of students and avoiding the problems for students while learning from their lecture. It is also needed by the teachers to understand first himself before teaching to students. Therefore, it is believed that teachers who participated in the following research also noticed the change in the communicative competence, which had to be adapted very quickly, and started to act in the context of distance learning. Teachers (3) also mentioned changes in their activities in preparing and adapting teaching materials and tasks for students to distance learning: *"Search and apply new digital sources, IT during lectures"* (T6); *"had to <...> prepare materials for distance learning by using IT"* (T7); *"adapt tasks to distance learning"* (T2). L. Espino-Díaz, G. Fernandez-Caminero and others (2020), on the basis of research state that teachers carry out continuous training throughout the academic year and demonstrate skills in certain areas of digital teaching competence such as security and communication, although there is still a deficit in the creation of digital content.

The research also sought to determine the opinion of teachers about their professional competencies that have been reduced during the quarantine. Informants' responses in the following subcategories are presented in Table 2.

TAB. 2. Teacher's competencies that have been reduced during the quarantine period

Category	Subcategory	Number of responses	Excerpts from interview texts (informant)
Teacher's competencies that have been reduced during the quarantine period	Envisioning change	6	*"It's not possible to accurately plan the scope and content of work"* (T2). *"I may have not lost my professional competencies, but it's not easy to improve them, implement and foresee how to plan some of the planned activities"* (T7). *"<…it's hard to understand the current situation, the future is uncertain, so it's difficult to foresee alternatives, prospects and visions"* (T6). *"There were difficulties in planning lecture times, interim reports, etc."* (T9). *"It has become more difficult to think about the future, because all attention is on the present, opportunities of not only one's own survival, but also to help students…>"* (T3). *"There were difficulties with time management…>"* (T4).
	Communication	4	*"I missed "live" communication with students and colleagues. I hope I didn't lose these competencies for all"* (T1). *"Competencies in public speaking and "live" communication with colleagues have decreased"* (T5). *"Students connect without cameras, it's hard to tell if they understand, if they get on, if they are near their computers or are already eating something in the kitchen or are watching TV"* (T8). *"This is because at any time you try to help students to deal with problems that have occurred and really increased during the quarantine period"* (T4).
	Procedures for organizing teaching and learning methods and student assessment	4	*"It's not possible to use different teaching strategies"* (T2). *"It's not possible to ensure uniform criteria for assessing students' knowledge and identify real problems of students' non-learning/negative results"* (T5). *"It's difficult to choose student assessment methods"* (T10). *"<…there were difficulties with the choice of teaching methods…>"* (T4).

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The reduced competence of envisioning change (6), which includes both professional aspects, such as tasks and activity planning, and time planning, etc., was most frequently mentioned by the informants: *"It's not possible to accurately plan the scope and content of work"* (T2); *"<... it's not easy to foresee how to plan some of the planned activities"* (T7); *"<...it's hard to understand the current situation, the future is uncertain, so it's difficult to foresee alternatives, prospects and visions"* (T6); *"there were difficulties in planning lecture times, interim reports, etc."* (T9); *"there were difficulties with time management...>"* (T4); *"it has become more difficult to think about the future...>"* (T3). At the same time, the United Nations (2011) document *Learning for the future. Competences in Education for Sustainable Development,* states that envisioning change is very important in the activities of a university teacher, i.e. critical reflection and learning from the past; understanding of the current situation; visions of various future alternatives and ways to realize them. 4 informants, who participated in the research, singled out a decreased communicative competence, which was mainly associated with a lack of "live" communication: *"I missed "live" communication with students and colleagues. I hope I didn't lose these competencies for all"* (T1); *"competencies in public speaking and "live" communication with colleagues have decreased"* (T5); *"students connect without cameras, it's hard to tell if they understand, if they get on, if they are near their computers or are already eating something in the kitchen or are watching TV"* (T8); *"this is because at any time you try to help students to deal with problems that have occurred and really increased during the quarantine period"* (T4). According to the *Impact analysis, policy responses and recommendations* of UNESCO (2020), during the quarantine period, teachers of the higher education institution had to demonstrate their competencies in many areas of professional activities, adapt them creatively, both in terms of communication and other activities. The reduced competencies in the organization of teaching and learning methods and student assessment were indicated by 4 research participants. They claimed: *"it's not possible to use different teaching strategies"* (T2); *"it's not possible to ensure uniform criteria for assessing students' knowledge and identify the real problems of students' non-learning/negative results"* (T5); *"it's difficult to choose student assessment methods"* (T10); *"<...there were difficulties with the choice of teaching methods...>"* (T4). According to J. Salmi (2020), even though many if not most higher education institutions tried very hard to make online education work, the degree of readiness for the rapid transition to online teaching and learning was highly unequal across countries and institutions.

The research sought opinions of teachers on their professional competencies that have increased during the quarantine period caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Informants' responses in the following subcategories are presented in Table 3.

TAB. 3. Teacher's competencies that have increased during the quarantine period

Category	Subcategory	Number of responses	Excerpts from interview texts (informant)
Teacher's professional competencies that have increased during the quarantine period	Use of IT	8	*"IT literacy"* (T2). *"<...I will be forced to develop IT in the future"* (T1). *"In order to come up with tasks that would not only help students gain subject knowledge, but also feel less isolated, I found IT solutions"* (T3). *"More intensive use of IT"* (T4). *"Mastering remote work, IT tools"* (T5). *"<...the use of e-tools will be able to improve/supplement the arsenal of my teaching tools, but only to the extent...>"* (T6). *"Remote work, use of IT at work"* (T7). *"More frequent use of IT"* (T9).
	Visions of professional development	6	*"I think that experience of working in a virtual environment has contributed to my professional growth...>"* (T1). *"<...I will definitely use and improve the proven tasks in the future!"* (T3). *"<...the use of tools will be able to complement the arsenal of my teaching methods...>"* (T6). *"<...I have no doubt that I will make more use of platforms intended for distance and independent learning/teaching in the future...>"* (T10). *"<...participation in various remote trainings and development of qualification during them...>"* (T5). *"Ability to get out of any situation"* (T8).
	Linking of teaching contexts and application innovation	2	*"<...I think that my innovative teaching solutions helped students gain subject knowledge and also feel less isolated...>"* (T3). *"I started to use more and more diverse and innovative methods"* (T10).
	Critical reflection and situation assessment	2	*"<...I also have no doubt that I will make more use of platforms intended for distance and independent learning/teaching in the future, because I've critically assessed the possibilities of this situation to organize independent work of students. I see opportunities to automate and adapt part of the subject content"* (T3). *"<...possibility to more flexibly learn remotely"* (T5).

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Teachers who participated in the research mentioned the use of IT (8) as their most increased competence: *"IT literacy"* (T2); *"<…I will be forced to develop IT in the future"* (T1); *"In order to come up with tasks, I found IT solutions"* (T3); *"more intensive use of IT"* (T4); *"mastering remote work, IT tools"* (T5); *"<…the use of e-tools will be able to improve/supplement the arsenal of my teaching tools…>"* (T6); *"remote work, use of IT at work"* (T7); *"More frequent use of IT"* (T9). The following statements that assess increased competencies are not surprising, because various IT became the only tool during the quarantine period and their mastery became the reason for this improvement. Since teaching staff of all backgrounds and ages have had to prepare and deliver their classes from home, with all the practical and technical challenges this entails, and often without proper technical support (Rapanta, Botturi and others, 2020). Informants also pointed out to their increased competence related to the anticipation of professional development (6): *"I think that experience of working in a virtual environment has contributed to my professional growth…>"* (T1); *"<…I will definitely use and improve the proven tasks in the future!"* (T3); *"<…the use of tools will be able to complement the arsenal of my teaching methods…>"* (T6); *"<…I have no doubt that I will make more use of platforms intended for distance and independent learning/teaching in the future…>"* (T10); *"<…participation in various remote trainings and development of qualification during them…>"* (T5); *"ability to get out of any situation"* (T8). L. Espino-Díaz, G. Fernandez-Caminero and others (2020) believe that this pandemic led to the paradigm shift that is assuming the transfer from face-to-face teaching to online teaching, which is inevitably related to changes in teachers' professional activities and competencies. Therefore, it is natural that participants of the following research understand that it is important to change and improve in many areas, including pedagogical, social, ethnical, technical, etc. Participants of the research also highlighted the increased competence of linking teaching contexts through innovation (2): *"<…I think that my innovative teaching solutions helped students gain subject knowledge and also feel less isolated…>"* (T3); *"I started to use more and more diverse and innovative methods"* (T10). As the study process has substantially changed during the quarantine period, these competencies that have been enhanced and distinguished by the informants are encouraging and suggest that it is teachers' ability to manage the situation, adapt and help students adapt. Informants claimed that they felt that their competencies of critical reflection and situation assessment have been enhanced (2): *"<…I also have no doubt that I will make more use of platforms intended for distance and independent learning/teaching in the future, because I've critically assessed the possibilities of this situation to organize independent work of students. I see opportunities to automate and adapt part of the subject content"* (T3); *"<…possibility to more flexibly learn remotely"* (T5). The following opinion of informants is related to the thoughts of S. G. Recio and Ch. Colella (2020), who state that, gradually, when learning from different actions that were implemented, we begin to see tremendous added value in bringing them together, sharing challenges, contexts and creating opportunities together.

The research sought to find out the assessment of the situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of the professional change of a teacher. Informants' responses in the following subcategories are presented in Table 4.

TAB. 4. Informants' assessment of the situation from the aspect of a teacher's professional change

Category	Subcategory	Number of responses	Excerpts from interview texts (informant)
Assessment of the situation from the aspect of a teacher's professional change	Change in the teaching contexts	4	*"I had to give up integrated lectures (excursions, practical training in other institutions, etc.), so the content of lectures had to be filled with "flimsy" materials, "imitations"* (T2). *"<… distance learning has opened up a hitherto underused niche in teaching"* (T3). *"Working remotely and preparing for lectures take more time, it's more difficult to organize group work and exercises, receive feedback"* (T4). *"I think that working remotely is "licking candy through glass". It cannot replace work in the classroom, but is useful when there are no other alternatives for it."* (T1).
	Change in the teacher's well-being	4	*"It didn't seem like that a year ago, but now I'm glad that there was a forced transfer to distance learning…>"* (T3). *"It would be good to maintain and strengthen positive experience, even after the ease of COVID-19-related restrictions"* (T5). *"We had to overcome challenges related to the limitations of social communication, we had to see and hear students' regrets about the lack of social contact, psychological well-being"* (T7). *"<…unfortunately, such work would never replace direct contact…>"* (T6).
	Change in the concept of the teacher's role	3	*"<…try to find ways to make lectures interesting and that students would want to participate"* (T8). *"<…it stimulates creativity of the teacher"* (T2). *"The role of the teacher has changed, we've learned to work "at a distance"* (T7).

	Training	2	*"The situation would have been facilitated by non-general courses on how to use one platform or another, advice from specialists in a specific field, demonstration lectures on how to teach"* (T2). *"I think it's necessary to participate in various conferences, seminars…>"* (T8).

Assessing the situation in terms of the teachers' professional change, informants pointed to the change in the teaching contexts (4): *"I had to give up integrated lectures (excursions, practical training in other institutions, etc.), so the content of lectures had to be filled with "flimsy" materials, "imitations"* (T2); *"<… distance learning has opened up a hitherto underused niche in teaching"* (T3); *"working remotely and preparing for lectures take more time, it's more difficult to organize group work and exercises, receive feedback"* (T4); *"I think that working remotely is "licking candy through glass". It cannot replace work in the classroom, but is useful when there are no other alternatives for it."* (T1). The following responses show that changes that have taken place in the teaching contexts are related not only with positive (informant T3), but also negative (informants T2, T4) assessments of the situation. J. Konig, D. Jager-Biela and others (2020) claim that the COVID-19 situation requires not only knowledge and skills but also confidence regarding success in online teaching. The efforts that the teacher puts into one's activities and how long one can work in challenging conditions are very important. Informants also mentioned change in the teacher's well-being (4), which can be also divided into positive (T3, T5, T7): *"it didn't seem like that a year ago, but now I'm glad that there was a forced transfer to distance learning…>"* (T3); *"it would be good to maintain and strengthen positive experience, even after the ease of COVID-19-related restrictions"* (T5); *"we had to overcome challenges related to the limitations of social communication, we had to see and hear students' regrets about the lack of social contact, psychological well-being"* (T7) and negative: *"<…unfortunately, such work would never replace direct contact…>"* (T6). Ch. Rapanta, L. Botturi and others (2020) claim that this whole situation has become a major challenge and has undoubtedly affected the well-being of teachers. Teachers were overloaded with a variety of information, thus frustration and helplessness were feelings that could often arise. Nevertheless, it is gratifying that most teachers in the following situation see positive things and an opportunity to overcome obstacles. Informants claimed that they assess the situation as the change in the concept of the teacher's role (3): *"<...try to find ways to make lectures interesting and that students would want to participate"* (T8); *"<...it stimulates creativity of the teacher"* (T2); *"the role of the teacher has changed, we've learned to work "at a distance"…>"* (T7). Espino-Díaz, L., Fernandez-Caminero, G., et al. (2020) assess that the sudden metamorphosis of teaching activity from the face-to-face model to the online modality opened not only technical gaps, gaps in tools and even competences and other, but also caused changes in the usual functions and activities of the teacher, as well as change in the role in the society. Assessing the

situation in terms of the teachers' professional change, informants indicated training (2): *"the situation would have been facilitated by non-general courses on how to use one platform or another, advice from specialists in a specific field, demonstration lectures on how to teach"* (T2); *"I think it's necessary to participate in various conferences, seminars…>"* (T8). The following responses show that the extraordinary situation has led to the need for professional development and also teachers' visions of the future.

Discussions and conclusions

Qualitative content analysis revealed that sudden changes caused by unforeseen conditions affected participants of the study process, posed new challenges for all teachers of the higher education institution. According to university teachers, the concept of their role, the nature of teaching/learning methods and organization have changed, subject knowledge had to be adapted to suit online studies. A striking feature is that though there was no time to prepare for these conditions, teachers were forced to find a creative and an innovative commitment to act, learn, improve and demonstrate adaptability and flexibility by strengthening teacher-student communication in a virtual environment, using new online platforms, and ensuring appropriate follow-up study activities. It has also become clear that the constantly changing role of teachers, especially during a pandemic, requires more creative thinking and time for creating new teaching/learning methods, modules, and this implies extensive online/digital trainings. A variety of digital and technical tools have been used for distance learning: online platforms, social networks, general and specialized digital programs for the development and demonstration of learning materials. The research showed that distance learning in a higher education institution caused difficulties for teachers during the pandemic, but teachers were able to quickly master digital programs, manage information flows, collaborate with colleagues and students, engage in self-education, help students address the concerns raised that have really increased during the quarantine period, and at the same time maintain the continuity of the study process.

In summarizing the results, the limitations of the research should also be noted. When planning and conducting the interview requirements for this type of research have been complied with, the generalization of the research results and their applicability are limited in part by the small number of research participants. It is the results of the qualitative research that are unique and specific to the individuals involved in the research. It would be incorrect to apply the findings of the following research to all teachers of higher education institutions, but it is likely that the opinion expressed by the participants of the following research allows to understand the experiences of teachers in teaching in a virtual learning environment while working remotely. The results of the research allow to predict further and deeper continuity of the study of the following phenomenon, as well as to find out the opinion of students and administration and to distinguish the most important steps in the organization of distance teaching/learning in a higher education institution.

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