

## VET TEACHERS IN THE CONTEXT OF PROFESSIONAL GROWTH: REALITY AND ASPIRATIONS

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to indicate the preconditions for VET teachers' professional development and to provoke critical evaluation of current situation in VET teachers' in-service training in the context of nowadays changes in educational theory and practice. The article deals with actual problems in VET teachers' professional growth in Latvia. All the key documents for VET development stress teacher training as the priority to improve the quality of VET. Continuing training and self-education of educational staff is an important characteristic of the teaching profession, its right and duty, and one of the fundamental criteria for assessment of teacher quality. Many VET teachers take part in continuing training because of law pressure. That is why their attitude to learning process and content sometimes is indifferent. The analysis of VET teachers' profession development needs as a new reality have to be defined through reflection and self-assessment of professional competencies. Nowadays, when the qualitative aspect of learning is emphasised, it is necessary to reorganise the recruitment of VET teachers in continuous learning courses. The most important factor for improving the further education level of vocational school teachers is their intrinsic motivation and awareness of learning content. It brings to fundamental consequences not only to curricula design and the ways in which in-service training is organised, but also to what learners are expected to learn and how these desired outcomes are about to be assessed. It is a new challenge for VET teacher in-service training course providers to implement new ideas, to update their knowledge and skills for designing and assessing learning outcomes.

### KEYWORDS:

VET teachers professional growth, reflection, self-evaluation, self-assessment, assessment of prior learning, learning and training needs, self-initiated and self-directed learning, competence-based learning, learning outcomes

## INTRODUCTION

In 2005 Saeima of the Republic of Latvia approved the conceptual document “Model Development of Latvia. Man in Priority” about the main resource of Latvia, the potential of people’s knowledge and wisdom. Only a skilful implementation of the educational potential would help Latvia to attain the living standard of the economically developed countries some day. On the basis of this document, “The Plan of the National Development of Latvia from 2007 until 2013” had been worked out in 2007. After having made such a model, intellectual growth and high professional skills might be great challenges for Latvia concerning the quality of the workforce, efficiency of equity and assets along with the advanced technology. Community of advanced intellectual standard secures internal and external national safety.

Fast changes from the model of developing society we are changing into the society of information. More and more we are aware of the necessity to raise our level of education or change the level completely. Lifelong studies are considered as the cornerstone of EU policy in the area of human resources development. These changes are a great concern in the theoretical and pedagogical aspect of pedagogy. At present a student with his needs is in a highlight of all activities in the educational world. In the study process, the participant of learning is obliged:

- to get habits of individual performance;
- to apply the acquired knowledge to the innovations;
- to achieve senses of responsibility and self-sufficiency;
- to learn co-operate with;
- to encourage the necessity for lifelong studies, for professional perfection.

## 1. REVIEW ON VET TEACHER SITUATION IN LATVIA

Vocational educational system has a comparatively complex structure in Latvia. It is rather difficult to perceive VET teachers’ educational and further educational process. Vocational educational administrative subordination is quite diverse.

**Table 1.** Distribution of the vocational educational establishments in relation to subordination and the number of educationalists

Subordination	The number of schools	%	The number of educationalists	%
Ministry of Education and Science	66	68,75	3615	71,89
Ministry of Welfare	1	1,04	42	0,84
Ministry of Culture	14	14,58	96,4	19,17
Ministry of Interior	1	1,04	20	0,40
Local Government Education	6	6,25	181	3,60
Private school	8	8,34	206	4,10
Total:	96	100,00	5028	100,00

Subordination of the educational establishments to various institutions complicates the development of a unified vocational educational and further study system for educationalists. In a number of laws and regulations, however, the emphasis is put on the necessity for teachers to perfect themselves. There has not been made any unified comprehensive and public funded system of further education for vocational establishment teachers yet.

There is a problem of aging of VET teachers in Latvia. Almost 12 % of VET teachers are more than 60 years old; 57% are more than 40 years old. It means that they have to update their professional and pedagogical competencies. Only some of them are motivated to develop their professional competencies. It is difficult to involve a young teacher in VET because the salaries are not attractive to them. Teachers' salaries are determined by Cabinet of Ministry regulations of 15 February 2000 and the Teachers' salary reform approved by the government. As of 1 September 2002, the lowest monthly teacher's salary (per full-time post) for teachers having work experience of over 10 years is 130 LVL (97 LVL in 2000). One full-time post is equivalent to 840 teaching hours per year, or an average of 21 hours per week. During the last two years a mechanism has been developed to raise teachers' salaries; however, the average teacher's wage is low. In 2006 a monthly wage was 235 LVL (before taxes) of those gainfully employed; it does not encourage the arrival of new teachers at schools.

The vocational pedagogues working in vocational education and training institutions traditionally are mainly specialists with the appropriate secondary special or higher education in the vocational field. Most of them do not have a specific pedagogical (diploma) education. The pedagogical personnel in vocational education establishments mainly has two types of education: in vocational field (higher or secondary vocational) or in pedagogy (higher). Qualification necessary for teachers can be acquired through:

- a higher vocational education programme that confers a qualification of "teacher", or an academic programme of studies in education that confers a bachelor's or master's degree;
- professional development programmes (teacher training courses including at least 320 contact hours, programmes lasting at least one year), that confer a certificate that follows a template approved by the Ministry of Education and Science, if a person has acquired vocational secondary education (or general upper secondary education and a master craftsman's qualification granted by the Latvian Chamber of Crafts), or has acquired higher education and is employed by a vocational education institution (this applies only to vocational subject teachers);
- acquirement of teaching knowledge and skills via self-learning, continuing education courses, seminars, projects and other teaching skills development activities.

Continuing training and self-education of educational staff is an important characteristic of the teaching profession, its right and duty, and one of the fundamental criteria for assessment of teacher quality. Different courses for teachers are offered by universities, local government training centres, city and regional education administrations and teachers' professional associations.

The Vocational Education Teacher Certification Committee instated by the Minister for Education and Science evaluates and takes decisions concerning the compliance of knowledge and skills acquired by teachers through professional development courses or through self-learning to the Model Basic Vocational Education Teacher Training Programme (authorised by Ministry of Education and Science Decree No. 346 of 3 June 2002 "Concerning the Model Basic Vocational Teacher Training Programme").

Conferral of the above-mentioned certificate is regulated by the Decrees of the Minister of Education and Science No. 420 "Concerning the Model Certificate" and No. 419 "Concerning the regulation for certification of vocational education teachers" of 26 July 2002. Since the Law on Vocational Education was implemented in January 2004, all VET teachers are now required to gain a pedagogical qualification. Since 2004, all VET teachers must be in one of the following situations:

- have a vocational qualification and pedagogical training;
- have a vocational qualification and participating in pedagogical training;
- have a higher pedagogical qualification or an academic degree and a pedagogical qualification.

According to the Law on Education, the Ministry of Education and Science is the institution responsible for co-ordination of teachers' training and continuing education. Improving teacher training and professional development system is one of the main action points in the White Paper on the Development of Education in 2002/2005 developed qualitative aspect of learning. It is created by the Ministry of Education and Science, aimed at ensuring the quality of vocational training according to the needs of society and economy.

*The vocational education development programme 2003/2005* is the key document for VET development. The programme includes teacher training where the priority to improve the quality of VET includes improving the further education level of vocational school teachers. Regulations have gone further since 2005, where Order of VET teachers' education and professional development (*Cabinet of Ministers*, October 2005) covers the different qualifications required by VET teachers who provide basic vocational education, lower and upper secondary vocational education and continuing vocational and professional development programmes. All pedagogical staff (VET teachers, school director, deputy directors, methodologists, interest education teachers, social pedagogue, librarian etc.) should participate in further training to improve their professional qualification every 3 years. Different continuing education programmes, courses, seminars, projects and other pedagogical tools could be used as long as they are not less than 36 contact hours in total. The Law on Education states that a teacher is responsible for his/her professional development. Teachers have the right to use 30 calendar days every 3 years for professional development as a paid training leave. It is the responsibility of the Director of a VET school to monitor their staff development (*ReferNet*, 2005).

Various organisations provide continuing training for VET teachers including school boards, municipalities, professional associations, the vocational education centre, the teaching and examination centres, universities and higher education institutions as well as continuing vocational training centres.

That is defined by the strength of the law in the teacher's educational process. The teachers' opinion poll testified that the basic motive, why they had been involving into the course program, is documental attestation of obtained pedagogical education. That leg of distance has been finished with. Now it would be useful to think over every educationalist's self-motivated and self-directed perfection in the context of lifelong learning.

## 2. REFLECTION AS PRECONDITION FOR VET TEACHER SELF-INITIATED LEARNING AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

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In Latvia the VET teacher education is very academic in nature, as it was incorporated into universities. Mainly it was very strictly structured and subject-oriented. Development of quality of education is strongly connected with self-evaluation and reflection of students and teachers (course providers). Reflection gives a systematic possibility to detect actions to improve quality. In order to optimize the in-service programme design, the structured interview is composed by course provider (Riga Technical University Humanitarian Institute) every year. When asked to react to the various components of in-service training programme, VET teachers revealed the discrepancy between educational theory and the realities of VET school practice. During the interview respondents tended to stress the need for more practical components of subject matter. The majority of VET teachers characterise such subjects as "Philosophy of Education", "Sociology" as too abstract and less relevant for their professional development. They do not feel that it could help them to be more professional in their teaching. Respondents identified the subjects of practical pedagogy ("Strategies of Learning", "VET Pedagogy", "Pedagogical Psychology") as the most relevant. It is a matter for reflection: Are the VET teachers too narrowly and pragmatically oriented? it is our teaching too abstract and without VET context? How should the content of general subjects be presented to feel it more relevant?

The discussions about educational and didactical believes try to answer the question how to build the VET teacher in-service education on scientific basis and simultaneously make it more practical and VET teachers' needs-oriented. The educational research provides us with the basis for pedagogical practice. The key contributor to this topic is Gage. According to Gage (Gage, 1978), teachers should learn about the techniques of teaching. They should know the pedagogic subject matter knowledge and teaching rules. No doubt, that VET teacher education and in-service training curriculum has been developed on the scientific foundation, but it has to be changed from subject oriented to competence oriented and VET teacher - centred content.

Nowadays one of the trends in VET teacher professional perfection is based on a humanistic paradigm of education. The humanistic approach emphasises that significant learning takes place when the subject matter is perceived by the learner as having relevance to his own purposes, when a student sees his learning as relevant to the achievement of his or her desired objectives. It has to be worthy for personal development. Self-initiated learning which involves the whole person of the learner - feelings as well as intellect - is the most lasting and pervasive. The goal of teacher education is to develop the personality and support his image of himself as a teacher. An ideal teacher is seen as a harmonious personality who is able to analyze teaching situations and develop his own personal situation dependent strategies for different individuals and groups. The survival of our educational culture depends on our ability to develop teachers for whom change is a central feature of life and who have the ability to encourage their students to be ready for rapidly changing world.

During last decade, the interest in learner and teacher reflection has grown massively in education research and has become a key concept in discussions about teachers' profession.

In order to discuss the perfection of competencies, one has to appreciate what sort of competence do I myself as a teacher have, what are my strengths, in which area shall I pursue more, what experience shall I get. The necessity to learn something else for professional competence is a huge source of inner motivation and inner drive of self-assertion of gaining momentum. That is a new challenge for the teachers of vocational education and teacher trainers as well.

Many VET teacher in-service education courses claim to be based upon a reflective model: helping teachers to analyse, discuss, evaluate their own teaching, their professional competencies and find out the necessary for further education/training. Do the VET teachers have necessary knowledge and wide spectrum skills for reflection? How do VET teacher trainers foster self-reflection and self-evaluation? Creating and implementation the introduction course that helps VET teacher to become more analytic about their pedagogic practice and take charge of their own professional development is a task for VET in-service providers and educators.

In order to encourage VET teachers motivation for further professional perfection, there is a need for methodology as a means of appreciation of knowledge and experience that has been gained in the previous period, as well as methodology for diagnosing the current learning necessities.

The author of the article concerning the concept "the previous experience" demonstrates her comprehension about the knowledge, ability and attitude that has been obtained in the process of the cognition of the world during the author's lifetime activities and in the process of professional activities. Nowadays the study process is understood as an active process which is based on the previous or present-day experience, their knowledge and comprehension. In the constructive didactics, the necessity to actualize and appreciate the previous experience and to aggravate the contradiction between the existing now and new material to

be learned is stressed. That in turn makes a new background for making a new experience.

Having conducted the analysis of theoretical sources it turned out that the concept "assessment" comprehension is not unequivocal. In the comprehension of American scientists (Thompson, 1991; Vesna, 2000; and others) "assessment" is a process that "assesses" real achievements in learning, whereas the "evaluation" is perceived as the assessment, reflection. Consequently, it might be acknowledged that "evaluation" is a process, action, a result of which is assessment. Any assessment is based on the defined criteria measurements or in the process of observation would get information.

A teacher should always make self-analysis and self-assessment of his professional activity corresponding to the developed criteria of the professional competence. Reflection is a basis for a lifetime learning and momentum. Having researched himself, a VET teacher marks new guidelines to his perfection, new self-realization possibilities. Educationalist R. Alijevs considers the reflection as a meditating reason which can resort to oneself or like thinking could be elevated up to the reasoning, apprehension, and cognition and to the self-cognitive power subject (Alijevs, 2005). The strongest parts of the personality are to be conscious through the reflection; the competencies are appraised as necessary as knowledge and skills for the perfection of one's professional activity. A person who is in the possession of reflection skills is critically able to perceive and analyze offerings of the educational possibilities, the contents of a particular course, as well purposefully and in the way of motivation to master the necessary knowledge exactly chosen for him. All this averts VET teachers from inert and sluggish idleness and non critical attitude concerning both the proposed contents and learning methods.

### 3. EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT SYSTEM FOR VET TEACHER PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

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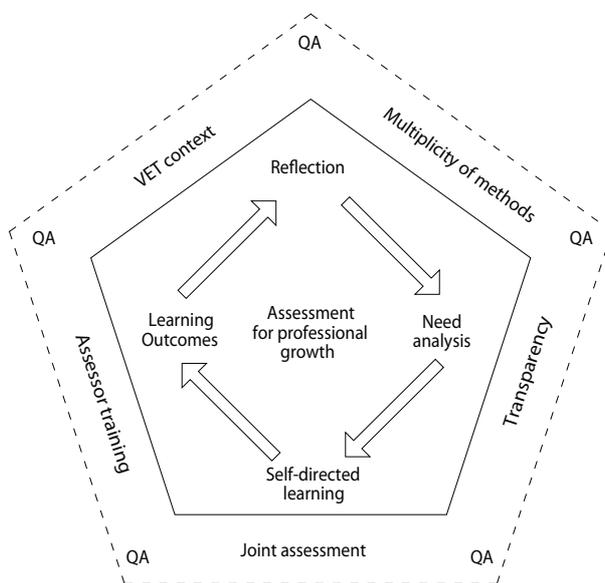
Development of the assessment system and implementation of assessment and documentation methodologies of prior learning are further activities underlining the increasing importance of self-initiated learning. What VET teachers learn in formal education covers only some needed knowledge and skills they need in real pedagogic practice. The role and function of assessment is crucial to basic methodological choices.

Whereas in our past education tradition we believed that an educated person was the one who was able to acquire and recall large amount of knowledge, we now appreciate idea that it is more valuable to be able to process information and create new knowledge. Such skills as gathering and analysing data, applying knowledge in new situations, solving problems, and regulating our own intellectual processes are in the centre of high quality education and learning. When the qualitative aspect of learning is emphasised, it has fundamental consequences not only for curricula design and the ways in which in-service education and training is organised, but also for what learners are expected to learn and how these desired achievements are about to be assessed. Recognition of competencies have to become tools for VET teacher professional growth rather than those of control and inspection. The traditional input-related curriculum has proved to be too focused on the VET teacher in-service provider instead of the learner/VET teacher. Consequently, there is a paradigm shift moving the emphasis from teaching to learning and to accept student-initiated and student-centred learning. This change has been associated with a need for a more concrete and detailed curriculum design, and an acknowledgement that more effective and varied learning styles do benefit the learner. There are many useful texts and web sources that provide detailed advice on the process of writing learning outcomes. Educationalists D. Gosling and J. Moon (2001) explain how it is important to understand the difference between aims and learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are concerned with the achievements of the learner rather than the intentions of the teacher (expressed in the aims of a module or course).

They can take many forms and can be broad or narrow in nature. There is often some confusion between learning outcomes and aims and objectives and certainly many regard learning outcomes and objectives as the same thing and use the terms synonymously. Aims are concerned with teaching and the teacher's intentions whilst learning outcomes are concerned with learning. There is no absolutely correct way of writing learning outcomes. Moon J. (2002) reflects on concept „learning outcomes“ and explained that one way to distinguish aims from learning outcomes is that aims indicate the general content, direction and intentions behind the module from the designer/teacher viewpoint.

An innovation in VET teacher in-service education and training is the provision of special topic or module oriented courses which will now be offered in a more flexible way. It supports the aim of creating new pedagogical environment that promotes VET teachers' self-directed learning based on the needs of individual VET teacher. However, it is not always clear what teachers should know and be able to do after in-service education and training, how to assess their progress. One of the preconditions for better in-service training quality is a clear understanding of what teachers should learn and how we can measure it. Perhaps a more challenging aspect of this new approach is the lack of necessary tools/methods and skills for designing and assessing learning outcomes. Learning outcomes and "outcomes-based approaches" have a strong impact on curriculum design, teaching, learning and assessment, as well as quality assurance.

The *Figure 1* (adopted and adapted from Stenström & Laine, 2006) illustrates the complexity of VET teacher competencies assessment. It covers the main components of the process of assessing and recognising a wide range of knowledge, skills and attitude, which VET teachers develop throughout their work experience, self-directed in-service training and learning. The integration of VET context within all units of multidimensional assessment environment leads to the necessity for systematic further professional perfection of teacher trainers as well.



**Fig. 1.** Elements of multidimensional assessment environment for VET teacher professional growth (QA - quality assurance)

In terms of curriculum design and development, learning outcomes are at the forefront of VET teacher educational and training change. They represent an adjustment in emphasis from teaching to learning, from the traditional course provider-centred viewpoint to a student (VET teacher) -centred approach. Student-centred learning produces a focus on the teaching – learning – assessment relationship and the fundamental links between the design, delivery and measurement of professional growth. The traditional perspective on educational assessment is based on the positivist view that aims at objectivity through independent data collection, control of variables, and interpretation of data using statistical methods. There is a growing consensus among the education specialists that new understanding of assessment is to measure a broader range of competencies and to give individual learner better information about his or her progress and professional achievement. It is a new challenge for VET teacher training providers to develop the competence based curriculum and the multidimensional learning and assessment environment for VET teacher professional growth.

## CONCLUSIONS

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The overview of the situation in Latvia of VET teachers' professional growth reveals the gap between aspirations, educational theories, and new ideas in VET pedagogy and VET teacher in-service training practice. The analysis of VET teacher in-service training and education in Latvia shows the following weak points that could be improved:

- the lack of system of VET teacher professional development;
- no legislative base for assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning;
- formal demands defined by the Law on Vocational Education initiate formal attitude and low VET teachers' motivation for self-initiated learning;
- the lack of criteria how to evaluate, to assess and recognize the competencies acquired during pedagogical practice or in-service education and training.

To develop and implement the system for VET teacher professional growth, the current VET teachers' in-service training and education programmes have to be analysed and updated. One of the objectives of VET teacher professional growth is to create deeper, holistic and critical VET teacher in-service learning and training experiences that would better reflect the demands and expectations of teachers in a dynamic vocational education environment.

Changes in education and in society forward new demands on teaching profession. No advanced VET education system can survive without continuous upgrading of teachers professional competencies, regardless of their experience and their age. Nowadays VET teachers and trainers are asked to develop more collaborative and constructive approaches to learning and expected to be facilitators and learning managers rather than transformation of information. VET teachers' in-service education and training is, therefore, essential and needs to be analysed and discussed in the context of VET teacher competencies. In this regard, competency based curriculum with concrete and measurable learning outcomes (specific knowledge, skills, attitudes or beliefs) in every in-service course/module is one of the prerequisites for supporting VET teacher professional growth.

To promote the VET teachers' self-initiated and self-directed in-service learning, the teachers have to analyze and evaluate their own teaching, to reflect on their professional competencies and find out the necessary for further education and training. Creating and implementing the introduction course that helps VET teacher to become more analytic about their pedagogic practice and take charge of their own professional development is a task for VET teachers' in-service education and training providers. The intention of such a course is to generate a multidimensional dialogic assessment environment.

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**PAGRINDINĒS SĄVOKOS:**

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profesijas mokytojų profesinis augimas, reflektavimas, įsivertinimas, ankstesnio mokymosi įvertinimas, mokymosi ir mokymo poreikiai, savarankiškai inicijuotas ir savarankiškas mokymasis, kompetencijomis grįstas mokymasis, mokymosi rezultatai

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