

Mednarodna konferenca

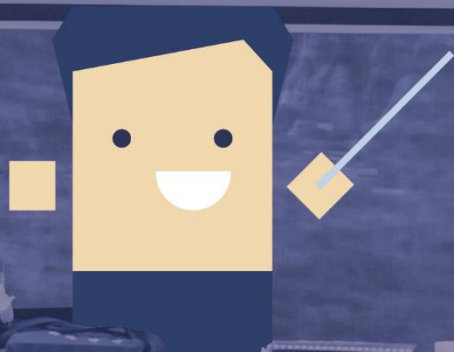
## **Kakovost visokošolskega učenja in poučevanja**

Izboljševanje procesov učenja  
in poučevanja v visokošolskem izobraževanju

International conference

## **Quality of university learning and teaching**

Improving Teaching and Learning  
Processes in Higher Education



**Zbornik konference  
Conference proceedings**

Brdo pri Kranju, 6. april 2016 / 6 April 2016

CIP - Kataložni zapis o publikaciji  
Narodna in univerzitetna knjižnica, Ljubljana

378.147(082)(0.034.2)

MEDNARODNA konferenca Kakovost visokošolskega učenja in poučevanja (2016 ; Predoslje)  
Izboljševanje procesov učenja in poučevanja v visokoškolskem izobraževanju [Elektronski vir] : zbornik konference = Improving teaching and learning processes in higher education : conference proceedings / Mednarodna konferenca Kakovost visokošolskega učenja in poučevanja, Brdo pri Kranju, 6. april 2016 =International Conference Quality of University Learning and Teaching, 6 April 2016 ; [organizator konference Center RS za mobilnost in evropske programe izobraževanja in usposabljanja ; uredila Katarina Aškerc ; prevodi povzetkov Babylon, Jezikovno izobraževanje in svetovanje]. - El. knjiga. - Ljubljana : Center RS za mobilnost in evropske programe izobraževanja in usposabljanja, 2016

ISBN 978-961-6628-50-1 (pdf)

1. Gl. stv. nasl. 2. Vzp. stv. nasl. 3. Dodat. nasl. 4. Aškerc, Katarina, 1984- 5. Center RS za mobilnost in evropske programe izobraževanja in usposabljanja  
285448704

**Kakovost visokošolskega učenja in poučevanja  
Zbornik konference / Brdo pri Kranju, 6. april 2016**

**Quality of university learning and teaching  
Conference proceedings / Brdo pri Kranju, 6 April 2016**

**Organizator konference / The conference organised by:** Center RS za mobilnost in evropske programe izobraževanja in usposabljanja

**Programski odbor (po abecedi) / Programme Board (in alphabetical order):** Katarina Aškerc, Slavko Cvetek, Viktorija Florjančič, Manja Klemenčič, Barica Marentič Požarnik, Sonja Rutar

**Organizacijski odbor / Organisation Board:** Katarina Aškerc, Urša Bajželj, Lina Bobovnik, Marja Medved  
**Uredila / Edited by:** Katarina Aškerc

**Izdal / Published by:** Center RS za mobilnost in evropske programe izobraževanja in usposabljanja

**Prevodi povzetkov / Abstracts translated by:** Babylon, Jezikovno izobraževanje in svetovanje, d. o. o.

**Oblikovanje naslovnice / Cover design:** Simetrija, d. o. o.

**Tehnična priprava / Technical preparation:** Tina Dobovšek

**Zbornik je dostopen na / The proceedings is available at:** [www.cmepius.si/knjiznica/](http://www.cmepius.si/knjiznica/)

**Format:** pdf

Ljubljana, junij 2016 / Junij 2016

Zbornik je brezplačen. / The proceedings is free of charge.

Publikacija je nastala v sklopu projekta: Support to the implementation of EHEA reforms. Izvedba projekta je financirana s strani Evropske komisije in Ministrstva RS za izobraževanje, znanost in šport. Vsebina publikacije je izključno odgovornost avtorjev in v nobenem primeru ne predstavlja stališč Evropske komisije. / This publication is the result of the project: Support to the implementation of EHEA reforms. The project has been funded with support from the European Commission and the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

# KAZALO

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<b>UVODNIK</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>KATARINA AŠKERC in SONJA RUTAR</i>	
<b>AKTIVNO DO ZNANJA – PRIMER PROJEKTNEGA DELA PRI PREDMETU VARNOST ŽIVIL</b>	<b>3</b>
ACTIVELY TO THE KNOWLEDGE – CASE FOOD SAFETY	
<i>META STERNIŠA, ANJA KLANČNIK in SONJA SMOLE MOŽINA</i>	
<b>AN OVERVIEW ON LEARNING OUTCOMES AND ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION</b>	<b>12</b>
PREGLED UČNIH REZULTATOV IN OCENJEVANJA V VISOKOŠOLSKEM IZOBRAŽEVANJU	
<i>ANA SAVIĆ, DRAGANA PROKIN and IVANA STEFANOVIĆ</i>	
<b>CHANGES AND NEW METHODS IN TEACHING ENGLISH AND HUNGARIAN AS A SECOND LANGUAGE FOR MEDICAL PURPOSES</b>	<b>19</b>
SPREMEMBE IN NOVE METODE ZA POUČEVANJE ANGLEŠKEGA IN MADŽARSKEGA JEZIKA KOT DRUGEGA TUJEGA JEZIKA ZA RABO V MEDICINE	
<i>TIMEA NEMETH and ALEXANDRA CSONGOR</i>	
<b>CHANGING PERSPECTIVES: TOWARDS ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING AT TERTIARY LEVEL</b>	<b>26</b>
SPREMEMBA VIDIKOV: V SMERI ALTERNATIVNEGA OCENJEVANJA NA PODROČJU UČENJA TUJIH JEZIKOV NA TERCIRNI STOPNJI	
<i>VESNA LAZOVIĆ</i>	
<b>CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES OF HIGHER EDUCATION TEACHERS</b>	<b>32</b>
SODOBNI IZZIVI UČITELJEV V VISOKOŠOLSKEM IZOBRAŽEVANJU	
<i>SILVANA NESHKOVSKA</i>	
<b>CRITICAL APPROACH TO SCHOOL PEDAGOGUES' EDUCATION – EXPERIENCES FROM SERBIA</b>	<b>43</b>
KRITIČNI PRISTOP DO IZOBRAŽEVANJA PEDAGOGOVI – IZKUŠNJE IZ SRBIJE	
<i>ALEKSANDRA ANĐELKOVIĆ and DALIBORKA POPOVIĆ</i>	
<b>DEVELOPING AND IMPROVING THE QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM OF “ST. KLIMENT OHRIDSKI” UNIVERSITY – BITOLA</b>	<b>51</b>
RAZVOJ IN IZBOLJŠAVE SISTEMA ZA ZAGOTAVLJANJE KAKOVOSTI NA UNIVERZI SV. KLIMENTA OHRIDSKEGA” V BITOLI	
<i>NATASHA PETROVA POPOVSKI and MARIJA MALENKOVSKA TODOROVA</i>	
<b>DIVERZIFIKACIJA IN DELNA INDIVIDUALIZACIJA OCENJEVANJA PRI LABORATORIJSKIH VAJAH NA PODROČJU BIOLOGIJE - PRVA IN DRUGA STOPNJA UNIVERZITETNEGA IZOBRAŽEVANJA</b>	<b>56</b>
DIVERSIFICATION AND PARTIAL INDIVIDUALIZATION OF LABORATORY WORK ASSESSMENT AT BIOLOGY IN BACHELOR AND MASTER PROGRAMS	
<i>NADA ŽNIDARŠIČ, MAGDA TUŠEK ŽNIDARIČ, POLONA MRAK in JASNA ŠTRUS</i>	
<b>FROM UNDER ALL THE HATS OF QUALITY. AGREEMENTS AND OUTLOOKS EMERGING FROM A ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION AMONG TEACHERS, STUDENTS, QUALITY EXPERTS AND POLICY MAKERS FROM DIFFERENT DISCIPLINES AND COUNTRIES</b>	<b>65</b>
IZPOD VSEH KLOBUKOV KAKOVOSTI. STRINJANJA IN PREDVIDEVANJA OKROGLE MIZE MED UČITELJI, ŠTUDENTI, STROKOVNJAKI ZA KAKOVOST TER ZAKONODAJALCI RAZLIČNIH DISCIPLIN IN DRŽAV.	
<i>PETER PURG</i>	

<b>HOW TO REDUCE STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION OF PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS WITHIN EDUCATIONAL PROCESS</b>	<b>74</b>
KAKO DOSEČI ZMANJŠEVANJE STIGME IN DISKRIMINACIJE LJUDI Z DUŠEVNIMI MOTNJAMI V UČNEM PROCESU <i>VESNA ŠVAB, JANA KRIVEC and KRISTINA VODA ŠENT</i>	
<b>IMPROVING THE PEDAGOGICAL PROCESS BASED ON ACKNOWLEDGING STUDENTS' VISIONS</b>	<b>81</b>
IZBOLJŠANJE PEDAGOŠKEGA PROCESA NA PODLAGI POZNAVANJA VIZIJ ŠTUDENTOV <i>NIVES LIČEN, VESNA PODGORNIK in KATJA JEZNIK</i>	
<b>KAKO PRIPRAVLJATI ŠTUDENTE ZA SOOČANJE Z INOVATIVNIMI PRAKSAMI</b>	<b>90</b>
HOW TO PREPARE STUDENTS TO DEAL WITH INNOVATIVE PRACTICES? <i>NIVES LIČEN, VESNA PODGORNIK in KATJA JEZNIK</i>	
<b>»LOMLJENJE OREHOV« S FILOZOFSKIM RAZISKOVANJEM IN POVEZOVANJEM</b>	<b>98</b>
»NUT CREATING« WITH PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY AND FACILITATING <i>SMILJANA GARTNER in MARJAN KRAŠNA</i>	
<b>MEDNARODNA UČNA MOBILNOST KOT ORODJE EU ZA DOSEGANJE PAMETNE RASTI: POGLED SLOVENSКИH DELODAJALCEV</b>	<b>107</b>
INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY AS A EU TOOL FOR SMART GROWTH: THE VIEW OF SLOVENIAN EMPLOYERS <i>ŽIGA KOTNIK, JERNEJA KAPLAN in JOŽE BENČINA</i>	
<b>NARA - AN ICT PLATFORM FOR KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE: COOPERATION OF SUBJECT AND LEARNING/TEACHING EXPERTS EMPOWERS AGRICULTURAL KNOWLEDGE IN SOCIETY</b>	<b>116</b>
NARA KOT PATENT: SODELOVANJE PREDMETNIH/PODROČNIH STROKOVNJAKOV IN STROKOVNJAKOV ZA IZOBRAŽEVANJE SPODBUJA KMETIJSKO ZNANJE V DRUŽBI <i>VESNA POLEKSIĆ, ANA PEŠIKAN, SOFIJA PEKIĆ QUARRIE and SLOBODANKA ANTIĆ</i>	
<b>NOVI MODELI OCENJEVANJA ZNANJA ŠTUDENTOV</b>	<b>123</b>
NEW MODELS OF STUDENT'S KNOWLEDGE ASSESSMENT <i>TATJANA KOVAČ, TATJANA DOLINŠEK, PETRA VOVK ŠKERL in HELENA HORVAT</i>	
<b>POMEN CELOSTNE PODPORE ŠTUDENTOM PRI V CELOTI SPLETNO PODPRTEM ŠTUDIJU NA DALJAVO</b>	<b>134</b>
THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDENT SUPPORT IN FULLY ONLINE DISTANCE EDUCATION <i>MIRO PUHEK in IRENA AMIČ RAVNIK</i>	
<b>POUČEVANJE TUJIH JEZIKOV V VISOKOŠOLSLEM IZOBRAŽEVANJU: PRIMER DOBRE PRAKSE</b>	<b>140</b>
FOREIGN LANGUAGES TEACHING AT TERTIARY LEVEL: AN EXAMPLE OF GOOD PRACTICE <i>TATJANA KOROPEC</i>	
<b>PRILAGAJANJE POUČEVANJA ŠTUDENTOM S POSEBNIMI POTREBAMI</b>	<b>146</b>
ADJUSTMENT OF TEACHING FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS <i>ANITA GOLTNIK URNAUT</i>	
<b>PROCESS AND CONTENT IN TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMMES IN KOSOVO</b>	<b>161</b>
POSTOPEK IN VSEBINO V PROGRAMIH ZA IZOBRAŽEVANJE UČITELJEV NA KOSOVU <i>XHAVIT REXHAJ</i>	
<b>PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCES OF FUTURE TEACHER EDUCATORS</b>	<b>171</b>
STROKOVNE KOMPETENCE VISOKOŠOLSKIH IZOBRAŽEVALCEV BODOČIH UČITELJEV <i>MARGARETA GARABIKOVA and ZUZANA BILKOVA</i>	

<b>RAČUNALNIŠKO PODPRT POUK VZORČENJA TKANIN</b>	<b>177</b>
COMPUTER ADDED EDUCATION OF WOVEN FABRICS DESIGN	
<i>KRSTE DIMITROVSKI, MATEJA BIZJAK in KLARA KOSTAJNŠEK</i>	
<b>RAZISKAVA PRAKS ŠTUDIJA FIZIKE NA EVROPSKIH UNIVERZAH - PROJEKT HOPE (OBZORJA V POUČEVANJU FIZIKE)</b>	<b>184</b>
RESEARCH OF PRACTICES OF PHYSICS EDUCATION AT EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES - PROJECT HOPE (HORIZONS IN PHYSICS EDUCATION)	
<i>ALEŠ MOHORIČ</i>	
<b>RAZVIJANJE ZAPOSILJIVOSTI ŠTUDENTOV: IZZIVI PRI POUČEVANJU IZBIRNEGA PREDMETA NA MAGISTRSKIH ŠTUDIJIH BIOTEHNIŠKE FAKULTETE, UNIVERZE V LJUBLJANI</b>	<b>189</b>
DEVELOPING THE EMPLOYABILITY OF STUDENTS: CHALLENGES IN TEACHING AN ELECTIVE SUBJECT AT THE MASTER'S STUDIES AT THE BIOTECHNICAL FACULTY, UNIVERSITY OF LJUBLJANA	
<i>MAJA PAŠ, VASILKA MAGDEVSKA, MARKO BLAŽIČ, MARTINA AVBELJ, NEŽA ČADEŽ, POLONA JAMNIK in HRVOJE PETKOVIČ</i>	
<b>REAL-LIFE LEARNING LAB MODEL ENGAGING INTERDISCIPLINARY GROUPS OF STUDENTS WORKING ON REAL-LIFE INDUSTRY AND SOCIETAL ASSIGNMENTS</b>	<b>199</b>
MODEL UČNEGA LABORATORIJA V REALNEM OKOLJU: OBLIKOVANJE INTERDISCIPLINARNIH SKUPIN ŠTUDENTOV S CILJEM REŠEVANJA PRAKTIČNIH IZZIVOV INDUSTRIJE IN DRUŽBE	
<i>GREGOR CERINŠEK, DAN PODJED and SLAVKO DOLINŠEK</i>	
<b>SNOVANJE IZOBRAŽEVALNIH RAČUNALNIŠKIH IGER KOT AKTIVNA OBLIKA UČENJA V IZOBRAŽEVANJU UČITELJEV</b>	<b>212</b>
SERIOUS GAMES DESIGN AS AN ACTIVE LEARNING ACTIVITY IN TEACHER EDUCATION	
<i>JOŽE RUGELJ</i>	
<b>SODOBNI DIDAKTIČNI PRISTOP PRI POUKU VIZUALNIH KOMUNIKACIJ V VISOKOŠOLSLEM IZOBRAŽEVANJU</b>	<b>219</b>
MODERN DIDACTIC APPROACH TO TEACHING VISUAL COMMUNICATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION	
<i>MARTINA KAČ NEMANIČ</i>	
<b>SPODBUJANJE KAKOVOSTI IZOBRAŽEVALNEGA PROCESA Z UPORABO TEORIJE IGER</b>	<b>225</b>
ENCOURAGING THE QUALITY OF THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS WITH THE USE OF GAME THEORY	
<i>DRAGO BOKAL in ANDREJA SMOLE</i>	
<b>TEACHING AND LEARNING OF MATHEMATICS IN RELATION TO THE TEACHING PROGRAM ELECTRICAL ENGINEERING – TRADITIONAL AND DISTANCE APPROACH</b>	<b>232</b>
POUČEVANJE IN UČENJE MATEMATIKE	
<i>ANA SAVIČ, GORAN BJELOBABA, SVETLANA ŠTRBAC-SAVIC and IVANA STEFANOVIČ</i>	
<b>TISKANO ALI ELEKTRONSKO GRADIVO – KATERO SPODBUJA AKTIVNI ŠTUDIJI?</b>	<b>241</b>
PRINTED OR ELECTRONIC MATERIALS – WHICH SUPPORT ACTIVE STUDY?	
<i>VLASTA ZABUKOVEC in POLONA VILAR</i>	
<b>UČBENIKI, SPOL IN IZBOLJŠEVANJE CELOSTNE KAKOVOSTI VISOKOŠOLSKEGA IZOBRAŽEVANJA</b>	<b>250</b>
TEXTBOOKS, GENDER AND PROMOTION OF TOTAL QUALITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION	
<i>NEVENKA MAHER IN SILVA ČRNUGELJ</i>	

**UPORABA SPLETNIH STRANI O UČENJU PLAVANJA PRI ŠTUDIJU NA FAKULTETI ZA ŠPORT IN  
POUČEVANJU NASPLOH** **260**

PRESENTATION OF THE NEW WEBSITES ABOUT SWIMMING LEARNING AND ITS APPLICATION IN TEACHING SWIMMING  
AND FOR STUDYING AT THE FACULTY OF SPORT

*JERNEJ KAPUS*

**USING SYSTEM ARCHETYPES IN EDUCATION** **267**

UPORABA SISTEMSKIH ARHETIPOV V IZOBRAŽEVANJU

*JOVANA ZOROJA, MIRJANA PEJIĆ BACH, ILKO VRANKIĆ*

# CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES OF HIGHER EDUCATION TEACHERS

## Sodobni izzivi učiteljev v visokošolskem izobraževanju

SILVANA NESHKOVSKA<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Higher education is currently under increasing pressure coming from different directions. Modern society, in general, undergoes drastic changes instigated by new economic, cultural, and political factors and trends. They are all inextricably linked to higher education, dictating and imposing alterations in its structure and performance. The advent of new technologies greatly affects the functioning and the organization of higher education. Teaching the new generations of students who are frequently dubbed 'digital natives' presents a major challenge for higher education teachers. Amidst all these intensive currents, teachers face the daunting task of keeping themselves updated with the latest insights into their specific field of interest while making personal contribution by conducting research and presenting and publishing original scientific papers. This study offers fresh insights into the current state of affairs in higher education, or more precisely, the challenges teachers in the higher education sector meet in the Republic of Macedonia.

Key words: higher education, teachers, challenges, Macedonian

### Povzetek

Visokošolsko izobraževanje se trenutno sooča z naraščajočim pritiskom iz različnih smeri. Sodobna družba na splošno doživlja drastične spremembe, katerih gonilo so novi ekonomski, kulturni in politični dejavniki in trendi. Prav vsi so neločljivo povezani z visokošolskim izobraževanjem, ki diktira in uvaja spremembe v svoji strukturi in delovanju. Pojav novih tehnologij pomembno vpliva na delovanje in organizacijo visokošolskega izobraževanja. Poučevanje novih generacij študentov, ki jih pogosto označujemo z digitalnimi »naravnimi govorniki« (digital natives), predstavljajo velik izziv za učitelje v visokošolskem izobraževanju. Poleg vseh teh intenzivnih tokov, se učitelji soočajo z zastrašujočo nalogo, da ostanejo v koraku z zadnjimi dognanji in razvojem dogodkov na njihovem izbranem področju interesa in hkrati prispevajo k znanosti z izvajanjem raziskav in predstavljanjem in objavo izvernih znanstvenih člankov. Ta študija nudi svež vpogled v obstoječe stanje na področju visokošolskega izobraževanja oz. izzivov visokošolskih učiteljev v Makedoniji.

Ključne besede: visokošolsko izobraževanje, učitelji, izzivi, Makedonija

## Introduction

The 21<sup>st</sup> century's modern Macedonian society undergoes drastic changes instigated by a host of new economic, cultural, and political factors and trends. These are all inextricably linked to higher education, dictating and imposing alterations in its structure and performance. This means that the state of art of Higher Education (HE) in the Republic of Macedonia (RM) at the beginning of the new century is still rather fluid and undefined. Currently, there are 5 state<sup>2</sup> and 10 private<sup>3</sup> universities in

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<sup>2</sup> State universities in the Republic of Macedonia: "Ss Cyril and Methodius" University – Skopje, "St. Kliment Ohridski" University – Bitola, University of Information Sciences and Technologies "St. Apostol Paul" - Ohrid, State University in Tetovo, "Goce Delchev" University – Shtip.

<sup>3</sup> Private universities in the Republic of Macedonia: FON University- Skopje, European University- Skopje, South East European University – Tetovo, University of Tourism and Management – Skopje, University American College Skopje, MIT University, University of Audio and Visual Arts – ESRA Skopje, International University Struga, International Balkan University Skopje, and International Slavonic University-Skopje.

RM. In other terms, there are approximately 140 university units (69 state and 71 private university units), each of which offers numerous graduate and postgraduate study programs – master, doctoral, and postdoctoral studies. Consequently, the number of options prospective students have when taking the decision where to enroll is truly immense if we take into consideration the fact that RM is a relatively small country whose population hardly exceeds two million people. In addition, we should not lose sight of the fact that there is a continuous and marked tendency of encouraging new HE institutions to spring into existence which makes this choice even more varied. On the face of it, the clear advantage is the creation of a more pronounced and healthy competition which should lead to higher quality of the HE, yet, as the number of students is – unfortunately, rather limited currently, the effect is rather reverse. Namely, with their existence at stake, the university units seem to have been left with no other choice but to lower the previously established high academic standards to a certain extent and, thus, attract as many prospective students as possible.

Bearing this in mind, it is quite evident that HE in RM is currently under increasing pressure coming from different directions which unavoidably and especially affects HE teachers, who as the main stakeholders of this sector are thrust in the whirlpool of these turbulences. Thus, for instance, with this trend of new universities, dispersed studies, novel student profiles, and study programs intended to meet the newly emerging market needs, HE teachers find themselves in the awkward position to try hard to strike the right balance between maintaining high academic standards in teaching, on the one hand, and fostering business acumen which will keep their institutions afloat and, consequently, preserve their posts, on the other hand.

Furthermore, the advent of new technologies greatly affects the way HE is organized and functions in its entirety. Thus, for instance, the process of teaching and keeping pace, primarily, with the new generations of students who are frequently and rightfully dubbed 'digital natives', presents a major challenge for HE teachers as these students have practically limitless access to various sources of information and have grown used to getting instantaneous replies to all their queries and dilemmas.

Amidst all these intensive and ongoing currents, HE teachers face the daunting task of keeping themselves updated with the latest findings and insights into their specific field of interest while making personal contribution by conducting new research and presenting and publishing reports on their findings and results. Unfortunately, the financial aspect of this challenge by far outweighs the mental aspect, thus, putting teachers in a very strenuous position of constantly investing in their professional development in order to retain their university posts despite their modest income.

This study offers fresh insights into the current state of affairs in Macedonian HE, or more precisely, the challenges teachers in this sector face. Although the findings presented in the study rest on an analysis of a questionnaire filled in by HE teachers who are based at various university units within one state university – “St. Kliment Ohridski” University – Bitola, it is a fact that the responses elicited reveal the attitudes and viewpoints of HE teachers in RM in general. The questions in the questionnaire deal with some of HE teachers' major predicaments and concerns and how they normally tackle them.

## Methodology

The main research instrument used in this research was a questionnaire purposefully designed to examine Macedonian HE teachers' (MHET) attitude toward many different aspects of tertiary education. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section addressed MHET teaching activities; whereas the second section referred to MHET research activities (see Appendix).

The first set of questions was aimed at disclosing how teachers feel about teaching the new generations of 'digital natives', and whether they find them sufficiently motivated and dedicated to



their studies. The teachers were also asked to express their opinion regarding the frequent introduction of new study programs and the abolition of the 'old' ones and how these changes affect their performance. Similarly, they were prompted to state their opinion about the growing number of dispersed studies and HE institutions in our relatively small country. They were also expected to explain if the preparation of lectures and regular classroom activities are more demanding and time consuming than the examination and assessment of students' knowledge.

The second set of questions examined MHET position towards their research activities, i.e. the publication of scientific papers and participation in conferences. The teachers were encouraged to voice their opinion regarding their ability to strike the right balance between teaching and doing research. In addition, some of these questions tackled the actual outcome of MHET research activities, i.e. the number of scientific papers they manage to put together and publish, and the number of conferences they attend yearly. In addition, one of the questions touched on MHET attitude towards the latest changes in the Law on Higher Education of the Republic of Macedonia – hotly debated in 2015 and whose enforcing was postponed till January, 2018. In view of the fact that this new Law on HE does not list conference participation among re-election prerequisites teachers ought to meet, MHET were also invited to dwell on the significance of the scientific conferences and on the possibility of dispersing their scientific findings solely via scientific publications. Almost all of these questions posed in both sections of the questionnaire offered optional answers for the teachers to choose from and enough space for further explanation.

Finally, the last section of the questionnaire encouraged HE teachers to put forward their proposals as to how the overall organization and performance of HE in Macedonia could be consolidated and improved so that it would become much more compatible with both their needs and the current trends taking place not just in our country but globally as well.

The questionnaire was distributed among 50 MHET with a vast academic career which in most cases included more than 15 years of tertiary education work experience. All the respondents are currently based at various units within "St. Kliment Ohridski" University – Bitola (Faculty of Education, Faculty of Economics, Faculty of Technical Sciences, Faculty of Information and Communication Technologies and Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality) and teach a variety of courses (English, Computer Studies, Geography, Ethics, Management, Communication, Religious Systems, Music, Arts, Economics, etc.). The summing up of the results and their presentation in charts and pies was greatly assisted by the Google application – Gmail forms.

## Results

### MHET' teaching activities

As the teaching component of every HE teacher primarily consists of delivering lectures and conducting oral and written examinations, the interviewed teachers were asked to appraise which of these two requires more time and energy. In that respect, the majority of the teachers (77%) state that it is much more demanding to prepare and deliver lectures than to conduct exams and assess students' knowledge (Chart 1.). Despite the fact that merely one third of MHET made an effort to explain their viewpoint, those who did so, seem to agree that the preparation of lectures is more painstaking since it entails doing extensive research in pursuit of the newest and most relevant developments in their specific field of interest; comparing and selecting data; and devising suitable methods and techniques to deliver their lectures and to make them more accessible to their students.

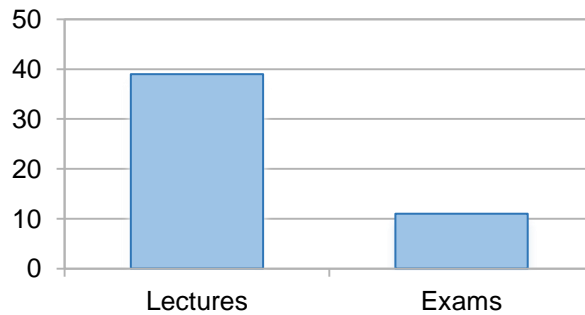


Chart 1: Q1. Is delivering lectures more demanding and time-consuming than conducting examinations?

The teachers whose position was that conducting exams is the more difficult part explained that since the introduction of the ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) and the mandatory mid-term exams as an addition to the regular examination sessions, they have become preoccupied with producing tests and checking students' scores on those tests almost all the time. On the basis of all teachers' answers, it can be deduced that HE teachers definitely need to spend a lot of their time preparing lectures and conducting examinations providing that they strive towards excellence in their teaching practice.

Given that one of the most fulfilling and rewarding aspect of the teaching profession is the imprint teachers make on their students' knowledge and conduct in general, the questionnaire set out to explore teachers' relation with the new generations of students whose existence is inextricably linked to information and communication technologies. In that respect, almost all of the respondents (97.2%) agree that teaching the so-called 'digital natives' does not intimidate them at all (Chart 2.).

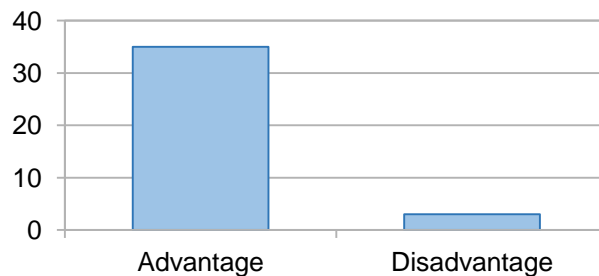


Chart 2: Q2. Is teaching 'digital natives' an advantage or a disadvantage?

On the contrary, MHET perceive it as a huge challenge and an advantage both of which prompt them to keep pace with the opportunities ICT offers nowadays. By way of illustration, they mention the fast access to a wide range of sources, and the greatly alleviated communication with their students, which – in turn, results in much smoother knowledge transfer from teachers to students and, sometimes, vice versa as well. Nevertheless, several of the teachers (5.6%) deem it worthwhile to highlight some disadvantages associated with ICT omnipresence in students' life. They argue that ICT have turned a great deal of students into rather unsociable young individuals who seriously lack in communicative skills. They also express their concerns about their students' impatience and eagerness to get ready-made and instantaneous answers to almost everything. The teachers also complain that students do not nurture their reading habits due to their propensity to spend a considerable amount of time on social networking websites such as Facebook, My Space, Twitter, etc.

Hence, it is obvious that as HE teachers' basic call is constantly acquiring new knowledge, they gladly grasp the opportunities that new ICT offer to them, but they also are quite concerned about the ways in which ICT influence their students' behavior in general and their attitude towards their studies.

The questionnaire also examined the teachers' perception of their students' motivation and dedication to their studies. The teachers' opinions in that respect are divided. Namely, somewhat less than half of them (47.9%) are convinced that the majority of their students take their studies very seriously and do their best to attain the best possible results, while the rest of them (52.1%) argue that their students are not sufficiently motivated and that their approach towards their studies is shallow and lacks seriousness and persistence (Chart 3.).

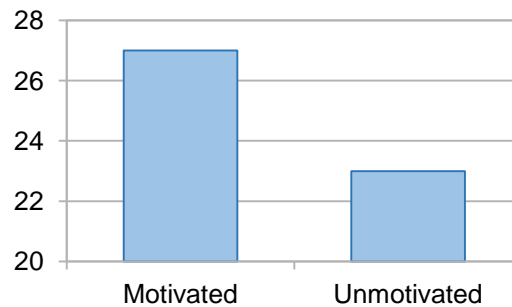


Chart 3: Q3. Are your students sufficiently motivated and dedicated to their studies?

Those who advocate the latter position attribute students' lack of motivation and dedication to their studies to the unfavorable climate in society at large, which, they claim, instigates the young to pursue their dreams not in their native country but elsewhere. Consequently, teachers explain that they are fully aware of the fact that large proportion of their students are not really after knowledge and that they use their studies to simply buy time prior to leaving their homeland, oftentimes forever. Logically, on the basis of these findings, it can be inferred that HE teachers nowadays have to be prepared to adjust their working principles and standards towards different profiles of students ranging from highly motivated students with impeccable student record, to students who are not driven by a genuine thirst for knowledge and whose main purpose is solely the acquisition of a university diploma.

Considering that almost all university units currently face the same challenge - the need to maintain their competitiveness on the market, they find themselves in a position to constantly experiment with 'fresh' study programs which are supposedly in line with the latest trends. In that context, the respondents were asked to share their personal experience. A considerably larger number of teachers (82.9%) state that they are overtly against this latest trend of constantly abolishing 'old' study programs and introducing new ones (Chart 4.).

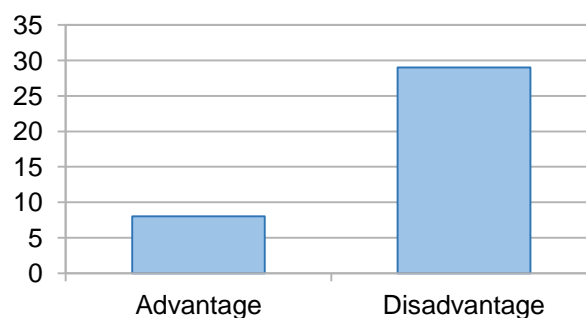


Chart 4: Q4. Is the constant emergence of 'fresh' study programs an advantage or a disadvantage?

More than half of the teachers elaborate on their answers and explain that these constant and 'untimely' changes are, undoubtedly, very disadvantageous since they disrupt the continuity of the educational process, which, in turn, results in a drastic decrease in quality. They go on to state that teachers are particularly affected by these changes because they are expected to shift their focus quickly, and adapt and re-adapt all the time. Thus, according to the majority of the teachers, these changes leave HE in a state of chaos whose sorting out requires a lot of time, energy, human and material resources as well as tons of administrative work.

Similarly, MHET were almost unanimous that dispersed studies are also very detrimental to the quality of Macedonian HE (Chart 5.). They enumerate a wide variety of reasons to explicate that the dispersed studies in RM result in poor quality education and that they significantly lower the academic standards as they lead to the creation of 'unhealthy competition' and 'hyper-production of students'.

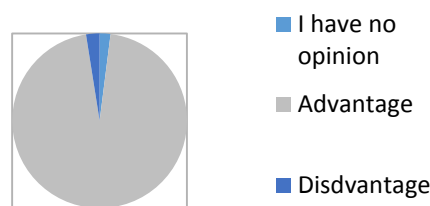


Chart 5: Q5. Are the dispersed studies an advantage or a disadvantage?

On the basis of the interviewed teachers' answers to the two previously discussed questions, it becomes obvious that HE has hardly any room for hasty changes and experiments and that each step taken towards its advancement and upgrade should be based on thoroughly analyzed and well-thought-out actions.

**MHET' research activities**

Bearing in mind that HE teaching goes hand in hand with research, MHET were also asked whether performing both these activities equally well is easy or difficult for them. According to 67.3% percent of the teachers, working simultaneously on both of these related but still completely different areas is difficult; in fact, 12% of MHET state that it is extremely difficult (Chart 6.). The teachers who were willing to explain their position underline more or less the same reason – both teaching and research require a lot of time, efforts, and dedication in order to be successfully completed and to yield high quality results genuinely. Only about 10% of them go to the other extreme and argue that teaching and conducting research simultaneously pose no hardships for them at all.

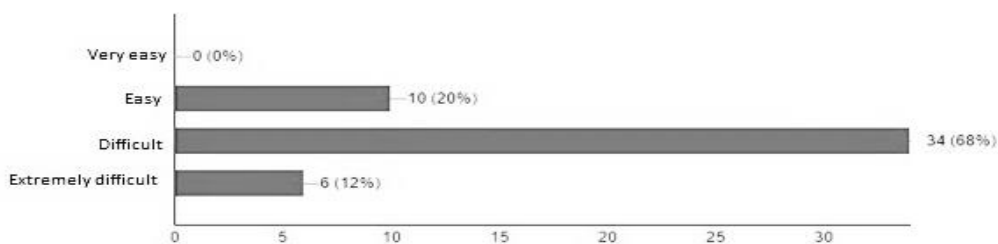


Chart 6: Q6. Is striking the right balance between teaching and doing research easy or difficult to achieve?

As publishing scientific papers is not only one of the major outputs of teachers' research activities but also a basic legal requirement they have to meet in order to be re-elected, i.e. to keep their posts and to advance in their university career, this issue was also addressed in the questionnaire. More than half of the interviewees (60%) argue that the optimum number of papers a teacher can realistically write and publish annually – provided that they strive towards quality and not just quantity, is 2 or perhaps 3 papers at the most (Chart 7.).

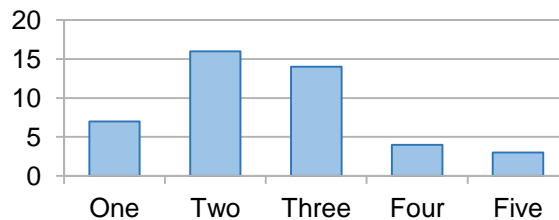


Chart 7: Q7. How many scientific papers should HET put together and publish per year?

Those teachers who have provided additional comments explain that what prevents them from publishing more papers annually is the serious lack of finances and the fact that their teaching activity consumes most of their time.

In fact, these two questions in the questionnaire tackle one of HE teachers' major challenges – the need of constant improvement of their knowledge and practices via research activities parallel the legal obligations they are bound to fulfill in order to be able to practice their profession. Considering their answers, the obvious conclusion is that having one's attention constantly split into two halves (teaching and research) puts HE teachers in a very strenuous position and that quantity and quality in this context barely goes hand in hand.

Taking into consideration the fact that the new Law on Higher Education places the accent entirely on publications, i.e. journals with an Impact Factor indexed in Web of Science, teachers were asked to state which criterion they thought was the most important in the process of publishing their papers. The majority of the teachers (55.6%) single out the field of interest as the most important criterion in choosing the journals where they would publish their scientific papers. Quite a large number of them (42.2%) choose the international review committee as the most important criterion. Interestingly, in contrast with the requirements set out in the Law on Higher Education, only some teachers agree that merely publications with an Impact Factor which have been indexed in the Web of Science should be considered relevant (28,9% and 11.1%, respectively) (Chart 8.).

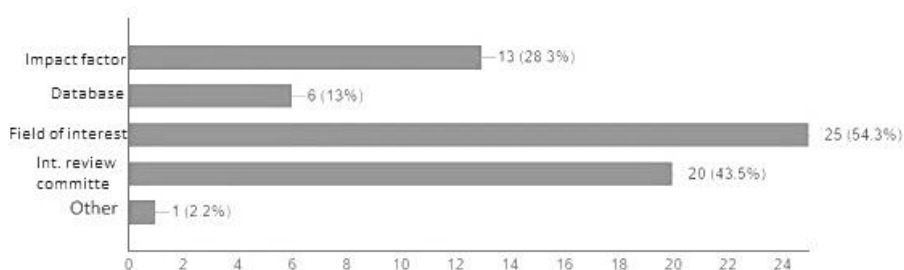


Chart 8: Q8. What is the most important criterion in choosing adequate journals for publishing scientific contributions?

As far as their participation in conferences is concerned, 66% of the respondents share the same opinion, i.e. that the optimum number of conferences a HE teacher should participate in per year is two (Chart 9).

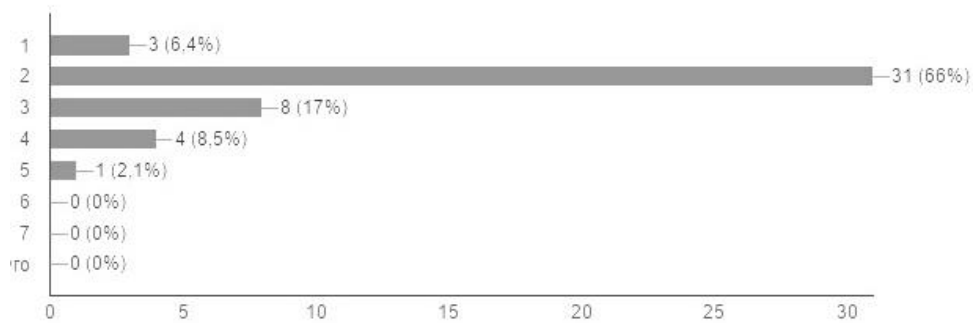


Chart 9: Q9. How many conferences should HET attend per year?

However, the majority of the interviewed teachers provide additional comments in this context and claim that but for the serious lack of finances they would more than gladly accept to participate in more conferences (Chart 9.).

In addition, in the context of conferencing, the teachers were expected to state whether publishing their scientific contributions in adequate journals is more beneficial than presenting them in scientific gatherings such as conferences. This question was also instigated by the latest changes introduced in the Law on Higher Education which discourages conference participation by not listing it among the other key criteria necessary for re-electing teachers. A huge proportion of the respondents (85.1%) perceive this as completely unacceptable and they all come forward with the same reasons – conferences offer opportunities such as establishing contacts with fellow professionals; sharing invaluable ideas and experiences; initiating fruitful cooperation among different institutions, etc. (Chart 10.).

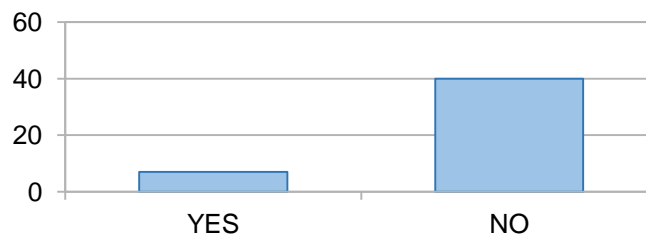


Chart 10: Q10. Should publishing papers entirely replace conferencing in the process of professional development of HET?

The last question in this section of the questionnaire was quite general and it addressed the changes introduced in the new Law on Higher Education, or more precisely – whether these changes are completely unnecessary, necessary and real, or necessary but unreal.

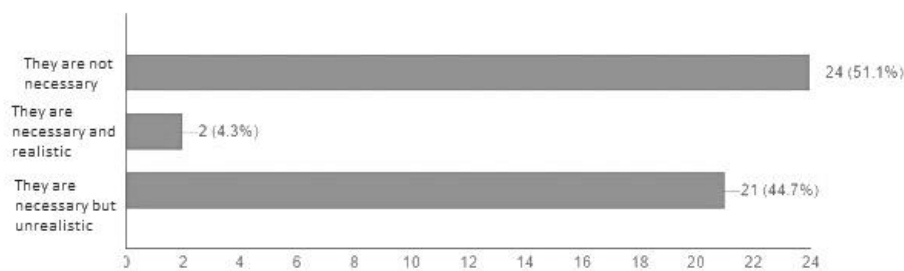


Chart 11: Q11. Are the changes introduced in the new Law on HE necessary and realistic?

Approximately 51.1% of MHET believe that these changes are not necessary. However, the fact that almost 45% of them welcome these changes, but qualify them as 'unrealistic', 'too high', 'unattainable', and 'inapplicable in the context of our higher education' should not be disregarded either. (Chart 11.). Several of them even point out that if this law is eventually enforced, it would lead to total demotivation of HE teachers. Some claim that the greatest oversight related to this law is that teachers were not consulted in the process of devising the changes, and, consequently, their needs were not taken into consideration adequately. In this context, the serious lack of finances was again brought to the foreground by some of the teachers who claim that the new requirements imposed on teachers are unrealistic as their materialization would necessitate substantially better financial conditions than the ones they have at the moment. They also add that such 'unrealistic expectations' and 'strict criteria' which considerably restrict teacher's academic freedom, at the end of the day, cannot possibly be expected to yield favorable results.

The analysis of the teachers' answers points to the fact that the legal requirements imposed on HE teachers and their own visions and expectations are not completely in line with one another, and that the only way for them to be aligned would be via provision of adequate financial resources invested in HE and HE teachers' professional development.

Finally, the last section of the questionnaire invited teachers to make suggestions as to the measures that need to be taken so that the current state of HE in RM can be improved significantly. Two thirds of the interviewed MHET responded and offered two suggestions on average. Their proposals range from terminating the dispersed studies and setting much higher academic bars so that the final outcome would be producing a lower number of highly motivated students. They also propose investments in new modern laboratories within the university units where students can realize extensive practicum, and provision of suitable conditions for real professional development of the teaching staff such as free access to electronic libraries, subscription to prestigious scientific journals, and adequate funding for extensive research activities. Some of the proposals refer to the re-election criteria as well. Thus, for instance, some of the teachers strongly object to the fact the new Law does not place the production of monographs and course books on the part of teachers among the valid re-election criteria, despite the fact that it costs them a considerable 'chunk' of their careers.

There were also a number of other quite concrete suggestions. One of them is hiring more teaching staff at the universities, and, subsequently, distributing the teaching workload proportionally among more professionals, thus leaving more room for research activities of all the stakeholders involved. Moreover, some of the interviewees suggest reintroducing the practice of conducting mandatory oral exams for the students, in addition to the written ones, as that could raise the standards and the quality of the educational process in general. Some teachers propose introducing a salary system based

on teachers' engagement, i.e. on the number of classes they have, the number of scientific papers they publish, and the number of conferences they attend. Finally, some of the teachers express their concerns that the implementation of the ECTS system in the context of our education does not yield the expected results, and consequently, some of its aspects require urgent modification.

Evidently, on the basis of their profound personal working experience in HE, the interviewed teachers were quite prolific and resourceful in providing ideas and suggestions as to what needs to be done to transform the very unstable and inefficient HE that we have at the moment into a modern, efficient, and future-oriented HE in MK.

## Conclusion

The focus of this study was the state of art of Macedonian HE from HE teachers' perspective. Macedonian HE is definitely not immune to the current events and trends in the society at large and consequently, and is undergoing some major transformations at the moment. Although teachers act as the major driving force which provides HE with the momentum it needs to move forward, they also find themselves struggling to 'survive' in this whirl of changes and challenges, such as, for instance, the obligation to be equally successful as teachers and researchers at the same time.

Generally speaking, teachers seem to be aware of the fact that changes are inevitable or even necessary at times, but they also insist that the implementation of these changes be carried out properly, proportionately, and in a timely manner. The conclusion reached by analyzing teachers' statements suggests that their major concern is that changes just for the sake of changes, without serious attention to and analysis of the deep-rooted problems and the needs of both the teachers and the students could only exacerbate the state HE is in currently. As they are directly affected by all these new trends and changes and as they have first-hand experience with all these aspects of HE, they also offer an abundance of ideas and suggestions whose implementation is very likely to significantly ameliorate the conditions in HE.

Finally, the recommendation which inevitably stems from this study should perhaps be addressed to the law makers who need to realize that any attempts to put the academic thought into too strictly defined frameworks, forcing it to move only along certain predetermined and restricted pathways, cannot be expected to yield any really favorable results. Quite on the contrary, real progress can be made if the intellectual potential of higher education is 'unleashed' and provided with adequate resources so that higher education teachers can be truly inspired to work on their continuous professional development, i.e. on the improvement of both their teaching and their research practices.

## References

- Law on Higher Education of the Republic of Macedonia (Official Gazette no. 35/2008, 103/2008,26/2009, 83/2009, 99/2009, 115/2010, 17/2011, 51/2011, 123/2012, 15/2013, 24/ 2013, 11/ 2014, 116/ 2014, 130/ 2014)
- Law on Introducing Changes and Amendments to the Law on Higher Education (Official Gazette no. 10/2015, 20/ 2015, 98/2015)

## Appendix



Questionnaire “Challenges of Teachers in Higher Education”

**A. Teaching activities**

- Q1. Is delivering lectures more demanding and time-consuming than conducting examinations?
- Q2. Is teaching 'digital natives' an advantage or a disadvantage?
- Q3. Are your students sufficiently motivated and dedicated to their studies?
- Q4. Is the constant emergence of 'fresh' study programs an advantage or a disadvantage?
- Q5. Are the dispersed studies an advantage or a disadvantage?

**B. Research activities**

- Q6. Is striking the right balance between teaching and doing research easy or difficult to achieve?
- Q7. How many scientific papers should HET put together and publish per year?
- Q8. What is the most important criterion in choosing adequate journals for publishing scientific contributions?
- Q9. How many conferences should HET attend per year?
- Q10. Should publishing papers entirely replace conferencing in the process of professional development of HET?
- Q11. Are the changes introduced in the new Law on HE necessary and realistic?

**C. Teachers' comments, ideas and suggestions**