


## Competitiveness of Universities in the Context of Sustainable Higher Education

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**Abstract:** At the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, the humanity has entered a new stage of development when changes in various industries and spheres of human activity are not episodic, but obtain a lasting and continuous nature, so organisations, each individual of the society and the society as a whole must live with constant changes and be able to develop themselves in the interacting and constantly changing environment. Thus, the university teachers' competitiveness in an ever-changing environment is becoming topical in the context of sustainable higher education. The aim of the research: on the basis of the results of theoretical research, to develop a methodological base for studying the competitiveness of universities in the context of university sustainability. Theoretical research methods: study, analysis and evaluation of the content of scientific literature, and empirical research methods: reflection of the authors' experience, are used in the current research. There are various manifestation forms of competitiveness in the activities of universities. Aspirations of universities to ensure their viability, including competitiveness in the current changing conditions, as well as sustainability in the future perspective, greatly motivates university teachers to constantly improve professionally, thereby developing their competitiveness. There is a correlation between the competitiveness of the university and its teachers: the more competitive the university is, the more competitive its teachers are, and vice versa, the more competitive the university teachers are, the more competitive the university is as a whole.

**Keywords:** Competitiveness; sustainability of higher education; universities.

### Introduction

At the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, the humanity has entered a new stage of development when changes in various industries and spheres of human activity are not episodic, but obtain a lasting and continuous nature, so organisations, each individual of the society and the society as a whole must live with constant changes and be able to develop themselves in the interacting and constantly changing environment.

Such changing circumstances bring to life the finding that, for the purposes of ensuring the sustainability of education, universities and their teachers must not only be ready for sustainable changes in the environment of higher education, but also commence and implement such changes themselves (Hubers, 2020).

The meaning of educational changes that last is being re-conceptualised. Thus, the sustainability of higher education depends upon: 1) essential changes affecting the everyday practice of university teachers; 2) process of long-term changes of a cyclical nature, beginning when university teachers propose innovative ideas, and ending when the desirable results are achieved; 3) individual and organisational learning within the scope of universities, as well as changes in thinking, behaviour and conduct; 4) content of higher education and the conformity thereof to the future and present time dimensions; 5) human qualities in the personality of university teachers, as well as the competence to cooperate with new generations of students, understanding the specificity of such generations and how they differ from the older ones.

The sustainability of a university also depends on the scope of involvement of the university in ensuring and facilitating social and global sustainability (Sutz & Arocena, 2021).

Under such changing circumstances in the realm of higher education, the emphasis is also placed upon the development of competitiveness of universities, keeping in mind the competitive advantages (Abramo et al, 2016; Mahdi et al, 2019; Miotto et al, 2020), to promote the sustainability of higher education.

One of the competitive advantages of universities is the concentration of talented and competitive university teachers (Seginova et al, 2015).

*The aim of the research:* on the basis of the results of theoretical research, to develop a methodological base for studying the competitiveness of university teachers in the context of higher education sustainability.

## Methodology

The research question of the study is as follows: What is a methodological base for studying the competitiveness of universities in the context of university sustainability?

The research was carried out in the field of concurentology which is an interdisciplinary direction of educational sciences. In the concurentology, two subgroups can be distinguished in which studies are conducted and the relevance of which is evidenced by recent years' publications:

- research on the competitiveness of a person as a personality or as a specialist (professional) (Alavredov & Alavredova, 2019; Chen & Cheng, 2019; Hohlova & Rivža, 2021; Reese et al, 2022; Simionescu et al, 2021; Tarasova & Shaimakova, 2020);
- research on the competitiveness of educational institutions as environmental systems and also as organizations (Bacci & Bertaccini, 2021; Garcia-Alvarez-Coque et al, 2021; Mahdi et al, 2019; Margolis, 2019; Miotto et al, 2020; Sutz & Arocena, 2021).

*Research methods:* 1) theoretical research methods: study, analysis and evaluation of the content of scientific literature; 2) empirical research methods: reflection of the authors' experience.

## Results and Discussion

Nowadays, the globalisation process brings along versatile changes in the higher education environment, creating new challenges for both university teachers and students. The process of globalisation highlights the role of competitiveness of each country, relevant society and each individual thereof, inter alia, university teachers and also students as future specialists. Therewith, it is necessary to constantly enhance yourself in interacting with an ever-changing environment, developing yourself both as a personality and as a specialist-professional in your branch.

The impact of the globalisation process on the higher education environment has been emphasised in a number of scientific publications, with a special role being granted to the internationalisation of higher education (Adam, 2020; Aponte & Jordan, 2020; Hsieh, 2020; Shields, 2019). Therefore, the university administrative and academic staff must change their way of thinking. The majority of universities try to ensure their sustainability and also competitiveness by attracting foreign students, offering them an attractive study content and the process of studies itself, thus compensating the reduction in the number of local students. "Export" of higher education requires a high level of academic competence (including, competence in didactics of the higher education) from university teachers and professional competency in their field. Besides, in the context of connectivism theory (Aponte & Jordan, 2020; Martincova & Lukešová, 2015), not only does the digital competence and distance learning methodological competence of university teachers become increasingly topical, given that many study programmes are offered in the distance learning regime, but also media competence and social competence (especially, communication competence), multicultural competence, incl., foreign language competence of university teachers. Within the scope of multicultural competence, a special role is also to be granted to the knowledge of ethnic culture and mentality of students from other countries and attitudes - showing respect for diversity. This aspect must be specifically considered, when interacting with students during on-site classes. Cross-border education has become topical in the Latvian education environment, being a term with broad meaning. Cross-border education in higher education is implemented within the scope of different projects, rooted in cooperation between universities of different countries (Rauhvargers, 2008). Personal experience also shows that the interstate borders are gradually disappearing in the current higher education environment: 1) new international study programmes are created as a result of interuniversity cooperation; 2) university teacher and student exchange takes place within the scope of Erasmus + and other international cooperation agreements; 3) students from different countries are increasingly choosing study programmes offered by Latvian universities, as the Latvian higher

education environment becomes more and more open to international studies; 4) the distance learning/e-studies possibilities in the Latvian higher education are expanding, thus also attracting foreign students; 5) many foreign students wish to study in Latvia, by also getting acquainted with Latvian culture, including language; at the same time they have the need to communicate with university teachers in foreign languages they know, therefore it is important to respect the culture and diverse needs of foreign students studying in Latvia; 6) teachers from foreign universities more often show a willingness to work in Latvian universities; 7) the millennial generation start their student life in universities of Latvia. This sets new requirements for higher education.

At the same time, along with cooperation, many researchers emphasise the existence of competition and its relevance on the education environment, making universities seek new ways of promoting the development of their competitiveness and, therewith, also sustainability. It is also increasingly more often the case that the opinion is expressed that, in order to ensure a certain balance, along with the globalisation process, the glocalisation process must also be maintained and promoted, ensuring the observance of national interests of each country in economics, education, culture within the globalisation process, as well as in providing the sustainable development of the public at large (Hsieh, 2020; Lehnberg & Hicks, 2018).

The first main competition transformation in higher education is connected with the establishment of research universities. Growth of competition also implies the transformation of involved participants, as the universities and the heads of universities increasingly become more influential players in competing for the quality of higher education and status of the university. Competition among universities creates a multi-level competition environment on a global scale and transforms research universities into competitors, with one of the advantages of universities being the quality of conducted scientific studies, number of scientific discoveries and inventions, including the number of obtained patents, and publishing the referred to results in the global scientific environment. Competition in the higher education environment is not only related to the research and scientific activity of the university teachers. Competitiveness of a university has many different manifestations: ability to attract students, grants, patents, new study courses, state and private resources, reflection of scientific discoveries in the study content and the study process itself, etc. As the competition among research universities increasingly grows, this competition focus has shifted from the national level to the international or global level (Musselin, 2018). It is important for most universities to ensure prestige and a high-level rating among the universities, transforming from regional universities into competitive nationwide or international universities in the global higher education space. The main goal of modern universities, seeking to ensure a high level of quality of education (education content, process, education environment as a whole), is to ensure the availability of a diverse education environment not only for the citizens and permanent residents of the country, but also the residents of other countries, educating "global citizens". The studies conducted by the researchers of such universities address international issues, and not only local issues, and they are less dependent upon public funding and authorities, as they have managed to ensure other sources of funding (often from international projects and the tuition of foreign students).

A.A. Margolis (Margolis, 2019) accentuates the characteristic features of the most effective and competitive education systems on a global scale: 1) raising the attractiveness of the image of a teacher, including university teachers, allowing one to attract to the environment of schools and universities, competent university graduates - young professionals, engaging them in academic, educational and scientific activities; 2) high-quality pedagogical education, based on the best practice samples, recorded in the professional activities of teachers; 3) independent appraisal of general and professional competencies of secondary school graduates, future teachers, ensuring double selection: (a) teacher's profession is chosen by the most knowledgeable and apt applicants (school graduates); (b) the best professionally prepared, apt and competent university graduates start their pedagogic activity in education institutions after graduating from universities; 4) introductory mentoring programmes in the first year of work for young professionals, providing support, experience sharing and supervision on the part of competent, experienced teachers and concurrently also colleagues, fulfilling the duties of mentors; 5) support in solving professional problems; 6) effective professional development system, enabling one to eliminate the shortage of professionals, and problem-solving through constant methodological support, in cooperation with other teachers during the process of individual

professional development; 7) career growth opportunities and provision of work remuneration, ensuring progress towards high-quality educational activities, the support thereof and preserving high-level specialists in the field of education; 8) active involvement of teachers in the implementation of innovations and reforms, providing for versatile educational activities.

Sustainability of the national level education, including higher education, is one of the key prerequisites for the sustainable development of our society. In turn, one of the goals of higher education is to ensure the development of a competitive knowledge society, ensuring the promotion of development of competitiveness of young professionals, whose readiness to engage in independent, creative and responsible professional activities is one of the indicators of competitiveness (Katane & Īriste, 2013; Sohach & Plugina, 2015), highlighting the importance of the competitiveness of university teachers. Competitiveness of educators (including university teachers), in modern social sciences (including educational sciences) is one of the topicalities of research, as demonstrated by a number of scientific publications (Alavredov & Alavredova, 2019; Chen & Cheng, 2019; Donina & Sirova, 2018; Grebennikova & Rybkin, 2017; Tarasova & Shaimakova, 2020). The more competitive the university teachers are, the more competitive the university is as a whole, and vice versa. There is a correlation between competitiveness of university teachers and competitiveness of students as prospective specialists as well. Therewith, for the purposes of university teacher competitiveness, many universities set high requirements for university teachers, therefore promoting the development of their competitiveness.

## Conclusions

- The socio-economic changes caused by globalization, internationalization and digitalization of higher education and demographic situation in Europe today, including also Latvia, update and make changes on the competitiveness of universities in the national and international higher education environment. One of the tasks of modern education is to ensure the sustainability, including balance of higher education in the ever-changing context of both globalization and glocalization.
- There are various manifestation forms of competitiveness in the activities of universities. The competitiveness of universities is largely manifested in their interaction with each other, including cooperation in the higher education environment on national and international levels. One of the manifestations of cooperation between universities is cross-border education. Competitiveness is also demonstrated by the development of the university as a research university, in the scientific research activities of its teachers and researchers, including international publicity of the conducted study results. The aspiration of regional universities to become nationwide universities, whereas national universities to become internationally recognized universities is another indicator of the competitiveness of universities.
- There is a number of factors that influence the sustainable development and competitiveness of universities in the higher education environment. Nowadays an important prerequisite for the competitiveness of universities is the competency of their teachers. Aspirations of universities to ensure their viability, including competitiveness in the current changing conditions, as well as sustainability in the future perspective, greatly motivates university teachers to constantly improve themselves professionally, thereby developing their competitiveness. There is a correlation between the competitiveness of the university and its teachers: the more competitive the university is, the more competitive its teachers are, and vice versa, the more competitive the university teachers are, the more competitive the university is as a whole.

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