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The knowledge-competence tension in the context of the European university curriculum restructuring

The case of Lithuania

Rūta Petkutė

SINCE THE INCEPTION of the Bologna process, there has been an ongoing wave of ambitious higher education reforms across Europe which have sought to shift the focus of the European university curricula away from the traditional academic knowledge towards practically applicable, market-oriented competences and skills. The broad purpose of the following chapter is to explore the emergent tensions between the recently introduced competence (outcome)-based conception of the curriculum and the traditional knowledge-based idea of the curriculum in the European higher education context. More specifically, I seek to analyze what kind of assumptions the European competence-based curriculum policies and approaches, as endorsed throughout the ongoing Bologna process, appear to make about the purpose and the nature of the *university, its knowledge and curriculum*. Then, I look at how these European assumptions *are taken up* at the national policy level and interpreted and responded to at the individual level by professional academics in the specific context of the post-soviet Lithuania. *The* inquiry into this subject seeks to contribute to the educational debates in the field of the sociology of higher education and curriculum studies.

Tero Autio, Liisa Hakala & Tiina Kujala (toim.)
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The emergent knowledge-competence tension in the European higher education context

'Which knowledge is the most valuable?' is a classical curriculum question, the importance of which was first articulated by Herbert Spencer (1860). The question was emphasized by the classical European educational philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), who stressed the liberal pursuit of knowledge for knowledge's sake as substantiated by the principles of academic autonomy and freedom (Ward 2012, 4). In the light of the German Bildung-Didaktik tradition, curriculum was conceived to be teacher-focused and knowledge-based (Lilliedahl 2015; Westbury et al. 2000; Willbergh 2015). However, knowledge was conceived not in narrow instrumental but broad intellectual terms. Autio (2007, 3) stressed that Bildung-informed academic traditions conceptualized the curriculum knowledge as "large cultural and historical bodies of knowledge and human achievements often carrying a moral or rational flavour, like humanity, humankind, World, objectivity, general". This Bildung conception of the purpose and nature of the traditional European academic knowledge goes along with Bernstein's (2000, 31) famous argument, which coherently builds on Durkheim's (1995) social theory of knowledge, that the traditional theoretical knowledge as acquired at schools or universities allows society to think the "unthinkable" and the "not-yet-thought". Furthermore, according to Autio, the German Bildung-Didaktik tradition positioned teachers as relatively autonomous and active agents who can use their professional judgement to freely decide on what knowledge should be produced and passed on to students. Even more, these normative curriculum decisions were seen as having moral, ethical and cultural implications.

The importance of the knowledge question has also been consistently reiterated by contemporary authors (Allais 2014; Autio 2016; Wheelahan 2007; Young 2008), who, however, have critically observed that, as a result of the recent ongoing educational reforms across Europe and beyond, the role of knowledge in curriculum has been systematically under-emphasized. In Europe, since the inception of the Bologna process in 1999,

the higher education policy trend has been a shift away from the traditional knowledge or input-based university curricula towards allegedly more efficient *competence or outcome-based curricula, which* situate competence as a new central educational category (Magalhaes 2010). The so-called 'post-traditional' or 'progressive' competence (outcome) approaches to curriculum are based on constructivist assumptions about knowledge (Young & Muller 2010, 14) and suggest that students "create knowledge" themselves and construct "their own meanings based on their own interests and experiences" (Derry 2008, 508–509). Therefore, they place a great emphasis on the choice of students and the learning process, rather than the teacher and the knowledge content (Moore & Young 2001). In addition to this, a number of authors (Bernstein 2000; Derry 2008; Wheelahan 2007; 2010; Young & Muller 2010) note that another important characteristic of these contemporary approaches to curriculum is their heightened focus on the interdisciplinary, generic competences or transferable skills. These new competences or skills are thought to be more readily applicable across different work contexts than the academic disciplinary knowledge and, thus, easier traded in the labour market.

However, despite a high level of political optimism about the competence agenda, it has been subjected to different kinds of criticism across Europe and the globe. To begin with, a politically promoted concept of competence is said to have an ambivalent meaning (Adam 2008; Bohlinger 2007; Hyland 1993; Mehaut & Winch 2011; Muller & Young 2014). Although *knowledge*, *skills* and *attitudes* are the most common descriptors of competence (Baartman et al. 2007), there are various inconsistent definitions of competence as the concept is often used interchangeably with skill (Adam 2008) and outcome (Adam 2008; Allais 2014). Yet, what all these concepts seem to have in common is that they refer to different kinds of 'know how' or practical forms of knowledge, rather than the academic theoretical or conceptual knowledge, the access to which traditionally has been considered to be the most important purpose of the university curriculum (Muller & Young 2014).

A number of authors stress that the reductionist approach to knowledge or, more specifically, the neglect of the theoretical or conceptual forms of

knowledge in the curriculum, can be explained by the behaviouristic roots of the *competence* (*outcome*) *approach* (Eraut 1994; Hodge 2007; Hyland 1993; Morcke, Dornan & Eika 2013; Sweetman, Hovdhaugen & Karlsen 2014; Talbot 2004; Young 2008; Willbergh 2015), which is argued to be particularly unfit for the broad intellectual purpose of higher education (Hyland 1993; Mulder et al. 2009). Autio (2016, 12) underlines that the negative effect of the currently prevailing *curriculum* approaches is that they replace the classical curriculum question 'Which knowledge is the most valuable?' with "fragmented questions about *what skills, competencies and, particularly, performances are most worthwhile* in the international competitive labour market of the global economy (...)". In addition to this, a number of authors point out that the current focus on job-relevant generic competences and transferable skills that the competence approach promotes runs the risk of diminishing the importance of the disciplinary knowledge in curriculum, as well as standardizing or 'de-differentiating' (Muller & Young 2014), fragmentalizing and instrumentalizing educational knowledge (Wheelahan 2007).

Furthermore, the competence or outcomes-based approach while shifting the focus away from the disciplinary theoretical knowledge that traditionally has been at the centre of the university curriculum towards externally defined, market-oriented competences and skills, is said to diminish the academic freedom of professional academics in the realm of curriculum (Allais 2012; Young & Muller 2016). As some authors (Harden 2007; Talbot 2004) explain, the currently predominant competence or outcome-oriented approach to curriculum has been introduced as a tool to make educational systems and institutions more accountable. Also, for universities in *the North-Continental Europe the Bologna-led curriculum restructuring was not an unproblematic technical change. Rather, in this part of Europe it has meant a move away from the classical Humboldtian ideal of the university* (Lorenz 2010), as underpinned by the principles of the liberal pursuit of knowledge and academic freedom, *towards the philosophically alien, neoliberal Anglo-American outcomes-based curriculum* (Hohendahl 2011, 196).

In this chapter, I seek to analyze what kind of assumptions European competence-based curriculum policies and approaches appear to make about the purpose and the nature of *the university, its knowledge and curriculum*. Also, I look at how these European assumptions *are taken up* at the national policy level and interpreted and responded to at the individual level by professional academics in the specific context of the post-soviet Lithuania. *I am particularly concerned with how university academics perceive the implications of the curriculum restructuring for the curriculum and knowledge in the context of their discipline, also, inevitably, for their own professional work. I will begin by* analyzing the assumptions that European competence-based curriculum policies and approaches appear to make about the purpose and the nature of the *university, its knowledge and curriculum*.

The European policy assumptions about the university, its knowledge and curriculum behind the new competence approach

In order to study both explicit and implicit assumptions that the European competence-based policies and reforms make about the purpose and the nature of the *university, its knowledge and curriculum, as well as their* reverberations within the national context of Lithuania, I *served a conceptual content analysis of relevant European and Lithuanian policy documents*. As the European Bologna process, which was initiated by the adoption of the Bologna Declaration in 1999, is understood here as an integral part of overarching European 'knowledge economy' policies and the Lisbon Strategy (2000), it is first and foremost important to understand their underpinning objectives. The key strategic goal of the European Lisbon strategy and the concordant 'knowledge economy' policies has been to turn Europe into "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy" (Lisbon European Council 2000). In this wider European policy context, European universities have been ascribed a decisive role

in solving socio-economic problems and contributing to the economic growth (European Commission 2010), which implies that it is precisely the economic value of the university knowledge that has been politically emphasized. The often-declared ultimate intention of the Bologna-initiated higher education reforms is to make Europe's different higher education systems more transparent, compatible and comparable, which is to increase students' academic mobility across Europe. However, a closer look at the European educational policy documents suggests that at the very heart of the Bologna-initiated higher education reforms is not an educational but an economic ambition, which is to improve Europe's competitive advantage in the global higher education market and make higher education a more active player in the development of 'knowledge economy' (London Communiqué 2007). Against this wider policy background, European universities have been consistently accused of being inefficient and lagging behind their US competitors in producing and transmitting knowledge that can be readily transformed into practically applicable innovations and contribute to the EU's economic growth. It has been insisted that the traditional curricula of European universities are inefficient and too slow in equipping students with the right competences and skills needed in the ever-changing labour market and economy (European Commission 2012).

Against the background of this political criticism, European universities have been urged to modernize themselves in order to be able to more swiftly and effectively *respond to* the changing needs of the knowledge-based society and economy (European Commission 2012; Lisbon European Council 2000). National governments across Europe have been increasingly called to shift the focus of university curricula towards the development of market-relevant competences and skills (European Commission 2012). Thus, the competence or outcome approach to curriculum has been endorsed as an alternative to the traditional European knowledge or input-based curriculum (Tuning n.d.a., 11) which usefully enables the explication of anticipated competences and outcomes and gives the basis for transparency, compatibility and comparison of curriculum outputs across different contexts (London Communiqué 2007; Tuning n.d.a.). Yet, what emerges from the European policy

documents is that the key underpinning reason for the political advocacy of the competence-agenda is an attempt to increase the employability and the socio-economic relevance of the European higher education and knowledge (European Commission 2012). It is said that the competence framework is particularly suitable for this purpose as it institutes a demand-driven curriculum rationale that is flexible and open to the needs of employers and students. Also, rather than focusing on the disciplinary theoretical knowledge, it gives a special attention to the development of flexible, practical generic competences and transferable skills which are assumed to have a particular employability relevance as they help graduates to successfully operate within the knowledge economy. As it is argued, "In a changing society where demands tend to be in constant reformulation, these generic competences also become very important because they can offer more possibilities for employment" (Tuning project n.d.). In general, it could be argued that the re-orientation of the European higher education curriculum from educational inputs to outputs, as well as the heightened focus on work-relevant, generic competences or transferable skills have been largely justified on efficiency rather than educational grounds. These recent curriculum trends have been based on the assumption that the contemporary university, knowledge and curriculum should have a more instrumental, vocational purpose and economic value than traditionally it has been assumed. What is more, the European policy discourse on the curriculum restructuring creates an impression that the endorsement of the competence or outcome-based curriculum framework is inevitable and the only possible alternative across different national and disciplinary contexts in Europe. Also, it implies that the curriculum restructuring across these different contexts is a simple, technical process and the only prerequisite for its implementation is to provide the ones who are responsible for the change with technical guidelines and financial support.

To date, however, it can be seen from national reports that not all European countries rush to implement the Bologna-spawned educational changes in higher education and that responses to them are mixed not only between countries (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2015; Méhaut & Winch 2011; Sursock 2015) but also within countries (Méhaut

& Winch 2011). What is common across the European countries, though, is that there is a gap between academics' less enthusiastic responses and more positive responses of political and institutional leaders (Sursock 2015). Also, according to Marvin Oxenham's (2013, 109) critical observation, the very fact that the European competence curriculum framework has been consistently reinforced through the EU funding mechanism makes economically more vulnerable member states respond to the European curriculum reform initiatives more eagerly, at least at the formal level. The post-soviet Lithuania could be considered to be one these countries.

The case of Lithuania

In order to better understand the background against which the European Bologna-initiated higher education curriculum restructuring was introduced in Lithuania, it is necessary to first and foremost briefly sketch some contextual peculiarities of this country. Lithuania is an interesting case study to explore the way the ambitious European curriculum restructuring is perceived at the national level due to its unique historical background. In the first half of the twentieth century, Lithuanian higher education was apparently influenced by the Humboldtian idea of the university and later on, when the country fell under the soviet rule, by the utilitarian soviet model of the university. In the inter-war period, (1918–1940), the academic culture of the first independent Republic of Lithuania was shaped by liberal humanist ideas of European thinkers, especially German philosophers. Meanwhile, while under the soviet rule, the intellectual life of Lithuanian universities was re-shaped in accordance with the communist ideology and oriented towards the instrumental function – the preparation of specialists for the soviet planned economy and industry. It is important to note, however, that during the transitional period in the 1990s, the policy-makers and educationalists of independent Lithuania were rethinking the idea of Lithuania's higher education and finding inspiration precisely in the interwar liberal humanist virtues which seem to have survived throughout the fifty-year period of the soviet

occupation. However, very soon this idealist pursuit of the liberalisation of politics in Lithuania that started with the transitional period took the form of what Lithuanian sociologist Norkus (2008, 595) calls "neoliberal shock therapy politics". Lithuania rapidly moved away from the communist to the capital system of the western countries and, with the accession into the European Union, swiftly adopted neoliberal approaches to policy-making. Given the historical background of Lithuanian higher education, it could be argued that, for Lithuanian universities, just like for other North-Continental universities, the Bologna-initiated shift towards the competence and outcome-based curriculum model has not been an unproblematic change. Rather, it has marked a fundamental break from the traditional knowledge or input-based curriculum and a radical move towards a more alien neoliberal Anglo-Saxon competence and outcomes-oriented curriculum.

Since the accession to the Bolognian process in 1999, Lithuania formally endorsed the competence approach to education at the policy level and in 2010 approved the Lithuanian competence-based Qualifications Framework, which is closely aligned with the European competence-based Qualifications Framework (Government of the Republic of Lithuania 2010, 1). What can be seen from Lithuanian higher education policy documents is that, in accordance with the European Bologna agenda, Lithuanian higher education policy has systematically stressed the need for higher education to become more responsive to the labour market (Republic of Lithuania 2015). Also, it has been insisted that it is necessary to include employers and other social partners into the studies process (Government of the Republic of Lithuania 2012, 4) and, in this way, ensure that students develop entrepreneurship (Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania, 2013) and "competencies required for future jobs" (Government of the Republic of Lithuania 2012, 4). However, the national report of Lithuania (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2015) has shown that in this country the overall re-orientation of higher education system towards outcomes has been slower than expected. While acknowledging Lithuania's formal political efforts to adapt the curriculum reform, the European Commission critically observes that, in real life, Lithuanian

higher education system is inadequately opened for collaborations with the business sector and, as a result, fails to improve the labour market relevance of higher education and curriculum (2015, 3). At this point, it becomes important to bring this discussion into a sharper focus and have a closer look at the way individual academics in Lithuanian universities make sense of and respond to the Bologna-initiated curriculum restructuring.

The qualitative empirical study *on Lithuanian academics' perceptions of* the European curriculum restructuring

This discussion draws on the *qualitative empirical data from the doctoral research project, which was carried out in 2016 with the aim to explore Lithuanian academics' perceptions of* the implications of the Bologna-initiated curriculum restructuring for knowledge and curriculum in their respective disciplinary contexts, as well as for their own professional work. *It was conceptually inspired by* the perspectives of the sociology of knowledge and curriculum studies and *approached university* academics *as legitimate experts of curriculum within their respective knowledge fields. The research took the form of an exploratory* case study and used semi-structured interviews to collect 'thick' but thematically focused data. To capture diverse perceptions and responses to the curriculum change, 24 academics from four Lithuanian universities and four different disciplines – physics, engineering, journalism and history – were interviewed. The underpinning educational philosophies and values of academics' possibly shape their perceptions of and responses to the curriculum change. In order to more systematically trace this shaping, only eight interviews were selected for developing eight detailed individual case studies (thematic portrayals) of the most thematically rich academics' narratives. Thematic portrayal is an element of the narrative inquiry that has been developed by Goodson (2017) as a methodological tool that serves to both analyze and present interview data in such a way as to gain more in-depth understandings. It is important

to note that, in this particular article, the discussion is focused on general patterns of academics' conceptions and not on specific differences in their conceptions across distinct disciplinary contexts. Also, in order to save space, here the original elaborate portrayals are not presented in full but extensively drawn upon in the form of excerpts to illuminate academics' underpinning educational philosophies and perceptions of the curriculum change.

Lithuanian academics' perceptions of the curriculum restructuring

Before I begin, it is important to note that university academics' narratives are by no means monolithic and, sometimes, even within a single unfolding narrative it is possible to trace several contradicting ideas, which suggests a complex nature of the contemporary curriculum change in higher education and the challenges to make sense of it. Yet there are some recurring themes threading through most of them, which can give some insight into Lithuanian academics' predominant conceptions of the academic knowledge and curriculum, as well as their perceptions of and responses to the ongoing curriculum change. I will start by looking at academics' underpinning assumptions about the purpose of the university, as well as the nature of its knowledge and curriculum. What generally emerges from the narratives is that academics tend, whether explicitly or implicitly, to think about university as a classical idea where university is seen as a unique site for intellectual development and knowledge creation and where its knowledge is conceived as a public good that serves to improve society as a whole. "*Cause it (science) should be approached, I dunno, as a necessary means to the society's improvement*", says an engineer Lukas. In a similar vein, a historian Justas argues that, ideally, the university is, or should be, "*a symbolic place of high level knowledge for knowledge's sake*". Given these underpinning assumptions about the purpose of the university, it is not surprising that academics' main motivation for coming to work in the university largely stems from their intellectual curiosity and

a passionate excitement about the subjects they research and teach within their fields. "*I'm deep in the topics of the subjects I teach and my own scientific research which is so attractive and interesting to me*", says a journalist Fausta. It appears that academics, even those from more practical professional disciplines, such as engineering and journalism, tend to conceive the university knowledge as qualitatively different from the everyday practical knowledge for it aims to theoretically address complex or 'big' questions.

> But neither the theory of relativity, nor quantum mechanics can apply that everyday intuition. So in that case you have to create a new one (...) I can compare it (physics) to philosophy, which used to be physics, right? Until that physics came up as a separate discipline. You can try to answer a question only based on your mind power, yeah... 'What is the earth and what is the sun?' (Benas, physicist)

As some of the academics note, the value of the academic theoretical knowledge lies in the fact that it frees people from thinking only about individualistic pragmatic issues, yet by enabling them to better understand the world in which they live, it also has an indirect practical relevance.

> (...) differentiate ideas or to reason about the world by distancing themselves from shoe tongues and bread prices to at least some extent. It's this certain abstractedness which isn't directly consumed in practical activities, you can't buy it. (Justas, historian)

Academics tend to admit that the academic knowledge created and acquired in universities is not readily useful, yet they see the very pursuit of knowledge as valuable in itself because in the longer run it can bring unexpectedly useful or less visible practical results. A historian Justas vividly articulates the value of the academic knowledge: "*The endless usefulness of useless things*." Accordingly, academics from all four disciplines stress the need for an open-ended, curiosity-driven research that does not necessarily result in pre-specified outcomes and immediately applicable knowledge. A journalist Fausta makes an implication that, in order to

ensure an open-ended scientific pursuit of knowledge, university, just like church, needs to be given autonomy and intellectual independence from external influences: "*In my opinion, university and church are the places with no space for negotiation*."

However, some academics shared their worry about the ever-growing political and institutional pressure to steer their academic research and, accordingly, curricula, towards the development of practically applicable knowledge. Even university physicists who comparing to academics in other disciplines have the most convenient position to undertake research, as it can justify its practical applicability, admit to experience an external pressure to produce a more utilizable and commercially valuable knowledge. "*There's this dissatisfaction, right, that you aren't doing something... you can hear it often in the media that you're engaged in who knows what, in something needless that doesn't generate any money*." (Tomas, physicist)

Yet, all academics note that the steering of their academic work from external forces is indirect.

As for their teaching role and educational purposes, academics were radiating a natural desire to share their own research-based knowledge and insights with curious students, who could become their own future colleagues. "*So yeah, except those scientific ideas, there's always been, and I don't know why, but this sort of wish, maybe, to convey the knowledge to those younger future colleagues*." (Alex, engineer) "*And, you see, I think, this wish to share something with expectant children who have their eyes wide open, it's, it's an amazing opportunity*." (Fausta, journalist)

As some of the academics note, it is important to draw on their own research-based knowledge to revitalize the curriculum knowledge content to, not only enrich students' knowledge, but also to inspire and motivate them. "*So a way to be attractive to students is doing something on your own and telling, sharing it with them*", Fausta maintains.

In line with their general assumption that the mission of university is to pursue knowledge and understanding, most academics, irrespective of their disciplinary backgrounds, tend to conceive the intellectual development as the key goal of university education, and, therefore, place the theoretical or conceptual knowledge at the very centre of its curriculum.

> But the aim, most probably, would be this place, where, actually, there's this good greenhouse for young mind, I mean to unfold, gain some knowledge and reach maturity. (Benas, physicist)
>
> But, in my opinion, knowledge, knowledge is the most important thing. (Lukas, engineer)

Hence, what they explicitly and implicitly emphasize is the educational potential of the very curriculum substance and intellectual ideas as such. According to a physicist Benas, "*The goal is to immerse a person into a certain environment, full of thoughts and ideas, so that s/he could hear as many of them as possible and learn how to generate them based on their abilities*." Here, it is important to stress that academics tend think about university education and its knowledge as valuable in themselves and highlight liberal, open-ended nature of learning in university. What a historian Justas tells to his students at the beginning of an academic year is the following: "I *still believe that at least some of you believe that we're studying all of this in pursuit of knowledge for knowledge's sake*". It is also important to mention that, for several academics, the curriculum goal of a liberal, open-ended intellectual development goes hand in hand with moral development:

> "And that's the way I understand university, and it doesn't matter that I teach very specific things there, but, by teaching those things, I manage to open other spheres of university to them, too, in the moral sense and so on." (Fausta, journalist)
>
> "So yeah, in my opinion, the most important objective is this sort of individualist who understands him/herself and has noble concerns for the sake of general good." (Justas, historian)

Besides this broad intellectual development, most academics consider students' mastery of professional knowledge in a respective field to be another important aspect of the university curriculum. As a physicist Benas puts it, "*You need to teach people to be physicists, right? How physicists should see the world, and how physicists can tackle and solve some various scientific and practical problems both*." Yet, some of them clarify that this

should not be mistakenly understood as preparing narrow specialists for the market but rather as professionals with broad knowledge and understanding of their respective knowledge fields. As a historian Justas accentuates, "*you still demand from that programme minimally specialised preparation and maximum formation of a human being with self-recognition of their individuality*."

However, what generally comes out from the narratives is that academics across all disciplines, while acknowledging the importance of practical knowledge and skills, still go on to emphasize the central educational role that the fundamental theoretical knowledge and disciplinary principles play in the university curriculum. "*I, on the other hand, stick to my opinion that there have to be fundamentals and an ability to adopt to a situation. Even if it means losing some practical skills*." (Alex, engineer)

> But they should teach the principles of... the principles should be taught and enunciated, they should be substantiated from the philosophical point of view, as, for example, in media philosophy or, maybe, media sociology, they should be based on various, well, knowledge, so that, after graduating from their Bachelor's studies, people could be able to apply them in their activities. (Matilda, journalism)

It appears that the reason why academics find theoretical knowledge so educationally important is because it serves to intellectually challenge students, expend their existing knowledge as well as develop their systematic and independent thinking.

> "And, in my opinion, I'm able to make them interested in the things they've never even thought about before. (...) I try to make, to show them that the things which, most probably, haven't been interesting to them before, that they might..." (Zakas, historian)
>
> "So this is why this discipline, it's so interesting to me and... Well, for students, essentially, it's as interesting as it is complicated, because they need to wrap their heads around

> the familiar world in a new way, the world which is no longer familiar." (Benas, physicist)

> But the main tool has to be this [points to his head]. Because it has to check all the tools, and this, and that one, and this one, and to look at it creatively and systematically, too. (Lukas, engineer)

In addition to this, students' mastery of the traditional theoretical knowledge is seen by some as a prerequisite for students' development of practical knowledge and their ability to make systematic practical decisions.

> So that they could take some sort of problem, solve it systematically, and run it through all these variants they have in their heads, all these protectors, check it, and then make the decision. (Lukas, engineer)

> But you must have this ability, 'cause after this abstractedness, general phenomena and the ability to recognise their meanings, come practical decisions of every moment in our lives – what do you choose, what are you doing? (Justas, historian)

Another important theme emerging from most of the narratives is academics' expressed desire to feel free of external forces and constrains and be able to make independent decision related to curriculum.

> In free American universities I got used to the principle, that, when the doors of an auditorium are closed, nobody [accentuates] can command me. I can only be kicked out, replaced. And, essentially, nobody is commanding me. (Justas, historian)

Interestingly, while at the beginning of our conversations academics made an impression that they do not feel any restrictions on their academic freedom, every time we started to talk about the recent higher education reforms and curriculum restructuring, their tone would became highly sarcastic and critical, revealing a fuller and less idealist picture of the present-day academic reality in Lithuanian universities. All academics at

least heard or knew something about the European Bologna process and its curriculum reform initiatives in higher education. While most of the academics admitted that the Bologna process positively enhanced the opportunities for academic mobility, they tended to talk about its effects on the academic curriculum, knowledge and their own professional work in a negative and, sometimes, hostile way. "*I dunno, everybody's cursing it, but, maybe, other people don't dislike the idea of making everybody uniform… No, I know nothing. Really, I don't*", says a historian Zakas. Academics are generally critical of the Bologna-endorsed university curriculum re-stipulation around competences and outcomes because they perceive it as an externally imposed change that begins to regulate the way they approach curriculum and teaching. A journalist Matilda reflects: "*Let's take this Bologna Process, it's sort of very mandatory, it's being enforced on us somewhere from up above, this unification, so, well, you're sort of managed, you're put in a certain frame that determines your behavior.*" Accordingly, academics find the newly introduced educational concepts, such as competences, generic competences and transferable skills, as bureaucratic and conceptually alien. What most of them note is that this vocabulary has been introduced precisely through accountability procedures, such as self-examination.

> The problem is that those concepts have been come up by somebody somewhere (…) They are totally from outer space… We can google what they mean, and write about them, but, so, yeah, they were specifically in the self-examination. (Tomas, physicist)
>
> Well, sure, I've heard these concepts, but, to me, they fall into this black list of nasty, ugly bureaucratic tools. (Justas, historian)

As the new educational concepts were externally imposed, academics struggle in understanding their meaning and educational value.

> It's been flying around everywhere, in papers, and here, too, everywhere… competences, competences… And what is this competence, may I ask? [ironically] (Alex, engineer)

> Sometimes, it seems to me, you have this bubble in front of you and you wonder what it means, sometimes you feel so stupid, you can't understand where's it come from. (Matilda, journalist)

As some academics suggested, there was no need to change the traditional knowledge-focused curriculum as it has served its purpose well. Academics maintain that, even without the external interventions, they constantly change their taught curriculum in accordance with their own professional understanding. Whereas the currently ongoing curriculum re-stipulation around competences and outcomes is generally perceived by academics as a declarative act, which serves to demonstrate the 'progressive' nature of the university curriculum. Also, as it can be inferred from the narratives, for academics, the externally imposed change shows the system's distrust in their professional judgement.

> But this moving for the sake of movement, when we need to change everything only for the sake of changing and showing that we want to change, let's move forward... it's a bit suspicious. The need to change should be justified (...) People, who work in this area, they see perspectives and the like, well, and, most probably, if there had been a need for change, most probably, they did that, and they improved, and they did it quietly, maybe, without making this noise. (Alex, engineer)

Moreover, some academics shared their insight that the competence approach is a tool of the economically-driven European policies to increase the applicability and international competitiveness of the knowledge generated in European universities.

> A lot of time ago I attended a seminar presenting that Bologna Process. (...) The idea itself is good, but there we heard euro-bureaucrats say the main motif a couple of times, that 80 percent of the world's fundamental research takes place in Europe and only 10 percent of that transforms into applications. The biggest part is applied in America and now in China. So there was this

> wish expressed to outrun America and catch up in this area... firstly, catch up and then – outrun. (Tomas, physicist)

What the interview excerpt above interestingly illuminates is that academics in the post-soviet countries, such as Lithuania, are more skeptical of the ambitious European Bologna-initiated reform agenda and its effort to compete with America for the international higher education market. For academics of the post-soviet Lithuania and other countries that share a similar past, the current European policy enthusiasm for the competition unpleasantly resembles the economic ambition of the former Soviet Union to outrace America. As Tomas says, "*And it was extremely funny to the representatives of the post-soviet world, because many people still remember Khrushchev and that idea that we're going to outrun them 'with milk', outrun them 'with meat'. So, here we are once again trying to catch up with America*."

Most academics share a belief that the competence and outcome approach to curriculum may have more negative, rather than positive effects because it is incompatible with a specific nature and purpose of university education. They name a number of dangers that the use of this approach in the university context involves. To begin with, it is seen as enforcing an overly narrow and pragmatic understanding of the purpose and nature of the university, its knowledge and curriculum. What academics largely agree upon is that the university curriculum and knowledge should not be primarily aimed at preparing students for employment and meeting the presentalist needs of the pragmatic and short-sighted labour market. As an engineer Lukas argues, "*Science, it's not an element of the market, the sheer preparation of a specialist shouldn't be understood as an element of the free market*." They directly and indirectly suggest that universities should follow their traditional core mission of developing knowledge and understanding, which can be used to think about societal problems in a broader perspective. A physicist Benas expresses his position, saying that "*But I don't think that, that we need to, how can I put it, associate university education and employment*" and adding "*I mean, we, at universities, don't have to simply solve the current problems the state or employers have, actually, but to take a longer period into consideration*."

Moreover, the 'progressive' competence or outcome-based rationale, with its emphasis on the employability goal, is thought to result in a "factory-type" approach to university education. In addition to this, what some narratives interestingly suggests is that, in the specific post-soviet context of Lithuania, the introduction of this curriculum model is perceived by academics not as a progress but as a step backwards to the limited soviet-type model of the university, which was narrowly focused on preparing technocratic specialists for the soviet planned economy and industry. As a historian Justas observes, "*one way or the other, everything still goes back to a primitive replica of this soviet, industrial era university that imagined itself as a forge of specialists*." This expresses the worry that the current pragmatic pressure for employability, generic competences and skills is crowding out the academic theoretical knowledge and the university education is being vocationalized.

Some academics put forward an argument that the present-day shift away from theory and intellectual ideas to practice is indicative of a problematic trend towards technocratizing academic knowledge and education, which in its essence is in a deep conflict to their "*classical idea*" of university as a site of knowledge and intellectual development.

> But I am a member of the Journalism Bachelor's Study Programme Committee, so, you know, I can sometimes see how, actually, there have been many self-evaluations and assessments by experts, and you can constantly see, how, usually, they concentrate on professional competences more, more on this technocracy, and not on, you know, the way we understand – and, I don't know, but believe you understand it the same way, too – university as a classical idea, right? (Fausta, journalist)

> Competences and all these things seem very much oriented towards instrumentality. (Zakas, historian)

In addition to this, a historian Justas observes that the orientation of the university curriculum towards the practical needs of the market and discrete measurable outcomes institutes not only an overly instrumental,

commodified approach to university education, but also leads to the fragmentalization of academic knowledge. As he explains, the current prioritization of the immediately utilizable forms of knowledge over other forms of knowledge has the effect of disrupting the development of all-rounded professional knowledge and understanding.

> (...) professionals aren't what this merciless market needs anymore. The market needs only certain body parts of a professional and only for about two years until they're still totally fresh, tabula rasa, when they're most innovative, so they can give away, I mean, resources of ideas they have and which are usually meant to be used for the rest of their lives. Two years, and then they must be replaced by others, 'cause they've already been used up. (Justas, historian)

Also, some academics explicitly or implicitly argue that the rigid specification of anticipated learning outcomes of curriculum threatens to undermine the open-ended learning in the university. This point of view was expressed by a physicist Benas: "*(...) strict determination of aims, especially if these aims are reached, it limits the possibilities to grow and develop. And it's not a very good practice, in my opinion, for such an ever-growing organism as a university is*." Furthermore, in the context of this instrumental, market-oriented and student-centred approaches, academics feel pressured and constrained by the market, policy-makers, university managers and even students to make the university curriculum more practically and work relevant. As a journalist Matilda says, university students make a pressure on academics to prioritize practical competences over theory and understanding.

> Actually, they want less... even much less... We still try to include all these, I mean, these principles of media philosophy, these sheer... I dunno, some discussions, debates and so on. But they think that it's totally unnecessary. And it sometimes puts you off, 'cause, well, you see that these are the fundamental things that explain why the media operates in this way, how it operates, and why it has this effect and not a different one, and

> so on, so you want to convey these things... But, no, "theory is too far apart from practice, we don't need it. (...) They really, you can see that they are able to do more than just simply put some sort of radio stories together or something. So that's why I think we need more of those. (...) at the Bachelor's level, all that university educational foundation has been erased in an overly radical way. (Matilda, journalism)

What she witnesses and criticizes is that the system treats students as customers and, thus, lets their often pragmatic, short-sighted expectations determine the very constitution of the curriculum:

> Well, you know, students are even bigger agents of the preparation for the market. (...) Because, actually, everything's oriented towards students, so they, I mean that... But sometimes students lack understanding to define what they need and so on, but, well, this notwithstanding, students occupy this central position nonetheless. And with this little knowledge about what students need, there are efforts to satisfy or, well, at least to make them feel good, I dunno...

Similarly, journalist Fausta is upset that, if earlier university had "*its certain status, certain inner logic*" and university teachers' professionalism was respected, today it is students who "*can evaluate the professionalism of a teacher, 'cause these are the inquiries you might find in surveys*". The university administration's use of students' surveys as a means to assess academics' teaching quality makes Fausta feel deprofessionalized and demoralized. Also, all these pressures, she maintains, institute the market-oriented vision of university education that is devoid of the traditional underpinning academic values and moral goals. She reflected: "*(...) there were really a lot of people here who've contributed to the moral upbringing of journalists one way or the other, 'cause it was necessary in those times. Now it's a little, no, not a little, it's diametrically a different situation. And I dislike the fact that universities are dependent on business*."

Furthermore, what academics have experienced is that the outcome-based curriculum profoundly reconfigures the nature of their own

professional work. For example, a journalist Matilda notes that the orientation towards strictly defined outcomes is bureaucratically burdensome and time-consuming: "*I think that it puts this huge load of administrative work on the shoulders of our teachers, 'cause you have to think about these things*". A physicist Benas reiterates that the outcome approach shifts the attention away from the very substance of curriculum and the learning process to the bureaucratic, measurable end results: "*But I mean this isn't the aim of studying. And the fact that I'm forced to think about the competences students are going to have after the lecture instead of thinking about what I want to convey to them, that already is, well, a total waste of our time, essentially.*" As he sees it, stipulating all curricula around discrete, comparable outcomes as well as basing them on the externally derived universal criterion of employability relevance not only leads to a simplistic standardization of academic outcomes, but also subjects universities and academics to a greater external accountability:

> It is my deepest belief that, when we talk about university, it's harmful to formulate these aims and objectives in a strictly bureaucratic form every step of the way. Maybe it's not harmful to formulate them, but the final formulation always has in itself that some people, whose job is to supervise higher education, so they can take that formulation and start checking literally word after word whether the results and that university comply with what's been formulated. (...) it sort of implies that there's this perfect university, which, well... we're given this information about what it has to be, so university comes, concentrates, hires good specialists, pays good money to them, reaches that result, and everything's really wonderful.

The way Benas perceives it, the externally prescribed outcome-based curriculum template de-professionalizes university academics and undermines their creative freedom:

> If everything's been regulated to such a level that a bus driver can take the description and teach at a university, that's bad for everybody. It's bad for those who's done the regulation, and for

> those who studies, and for those who... Because, well, I mean, nevertheless, a university must... There has to be some sort of order, but I believe that it has to have as much creative freedom as possible.

Given these arguments, most academics consider the competence and outcome-oriented curriculum reform to be educationally ineffective or even detrimental to students' open-ended learning. A historian Justas says, "*And I don't believe that these measures will help them reform it. I don't believe it one bit. Counter-reform (accentuates)*", adding, "*if we do respect the principle of knowledge for knowledge's sake, so, again, this wordplay of bureaucratised terms, it leads nowhere*." What an engineer Alex misses in the ongoing curriculum restructuring process is its initiators' clear articulation of its motives, meaning and possible consequences. He takes a position that any introduced educational change needs to be primarily justified in educational terms:

> "What's it gonna give us, is it really gonna give us something? Or is it just a revolution with no direction, just as it was with [pauses] atomic bomb, right, when the foreseen results were foggy, unknown, so... But it can change some things, and, instead of getting a positive, we can get a negative result. Yes, it can look like we're moving forward, but, in reality, it's gone sideways".

Thus, university academics generally tend not to support and passively resist the curriculum restructuring: they rewrite descriptions and plans of their taught courses in the required competence and outcome vocabulary but in reality tend to ignore them.

> "We're sceptical, they're the advocates. By "we", I mean teachers, and "they" are bureaucrats, the Ministry of Education with all its institutions. (...) Well, I don't know any more advocates, I haven't seen any among my colleagues." (Tomas, physicist)
>
> "So, personally, I don't particularly care for these competences. (...) So, yeah, there are many of such documents, and I usually go through them very quickly, 'cause I feel it's a waste of my time,

> actually, it is. (...) I do it with my teeth clenched and that's it [laughing]." (Matilda, journalist)

A historian Justas is the only academic from all the project participants that openly refuses to rewrite his course curriculum in line with the outcome-based framework. He warns that, if not resisted by "*conscious and creative people*", the externally imposed pragmatic educational logic will gradually push out the principle of "knowledge for knowledge's sake" from universities to some other alternative places and, as a result, will impoverish Lithuanian universities. "*And I believe that if there are still no such places, in the future, totally informal, non-institutional or more or less symbolic places of high level knowledge for knowledge's sake will form*.", he concludes.

Conclusions

This study has illuminated the emergent tension between the recently introduced competence (outcome)-based conception of the curriculum and the traditional knowledge-based idea of the curriculum in the European higher education context. The overview of the relevant European policy documents reveals that *the new European* competence-based curriculum approaches, as based on the Anglo-American curriculum model, are largely underpinned by reductionist, instrumental assumptions about the *university, its knowledge and curriculum. This underpinning is in a stark contrast with the European Kantian or Humboldtian idea of the university that stressed the principle of academic freedom and the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge's sake*.

A closer look at relevant Lithuanian policy documents shows that Lithuania *swiftly adopted the Bologna-endorsed* competence or outcome-based curriculum model *at the formal level and tuned its higher education policy agenda closely in line with the new European* conception of the university, its knowledge and curriculum. What this suggests is that Lithuania, when formulating its own higher education policy and curriculum reform agendas, uncritically uptakes the ready-made European, Bologna-endorsed agenda.

However, the result of the empirical study suggest that Lithuanian academics are less convinced about the value and meaning of the curriculum restructuring. The most common way that the interviewed academics choose to respond to the curriculum reorientation towards outcomes and competences is formal compliance, whereas in reality they do not internalize the change but stick to their own educational agendas, as underpinned by their own educational philosophies. Academics' personal stories help to see that academics largely make curriculum decisions based upon what they themselves personally believe to be valuable in the context of their discipline. Their silent resistance to the curriculum restructuring deeply stems from the existing discrepancy between the politically endorsed notion of the university curriculum and their own conceptions. Academics tend to think about the university as a classical idea – as a unique site of the quest for knowledge and understanding as ends in themselves and where respect is given to academic freedom and intellectual independence. Most of them stress the importance of the university curriculum's purpose to provide students with the access to the disciplinary theoretical knowledge and intellectual ideas as they believe that this kind of knowledge has the most potential to contribute to students' intellectual, moral and professional growth, and, ultimately, benefit society at large. What they implicitly and explicitly argue is that the objective of the university curriculum is to challenge students by 'big' ideas and problems and, by doing this, move them beyond their everyday knowledge and experience to alternative understandings of society and the world in which we live.

However, academics express a concern that the national educational policy as aligned with the European reform agenda for universities, impose on them a more instrumental outcomes-based curriculum that is focused on market-oriented employability competences. Most of them are concerned that the new curriculum model threaten to crowd out the traditional intellectual and moral goals of the university curriculum. What academics' narratives suggest is that the growing economic, political and managerial pressures as well as the institutional policies that favour students' choice and the endless curriculum reforms to which they are

subjected to not only begin to govern their own academic practice but also negatively affect students' learning.

The narratives gradually unveil one of the key reasons of academics' indifference and passivity to the curriculum restructuring: they perceive this change not as arising from the educational needs of their discipline and students but as externally imposed on them in order to steer the university curriculum and their professional work towards the politically defined, economically-driven goals. Thus, academics tend to portray the outcome and competence-based curriculum framework not as an educational, but standardization and accountability tool, which not only leads to the homogenization of the curriculum outcomes but also the bureaucratization of academics' work and limiting the academic freedom that is essentially needed for both teaching and learning in university.

In the face of the mounting economic, political and administrative pressures to restructure curriculum and the growing consumer-like demands of students, academics find themselves left with increasingly less decision-making power within the realm of curriculum, which makes them feel de-professionalized, demoralized and demotivated. Even more, academics observe that the market-oriented higher education policy and ongoing curriculum restructuring shifting the focus away from disciplinary knowledge to work relevant competences and skills inevitably have negative educational effects. In their understanding, it is dangerous to subordinate the university curriculum to narrow pragmatic demands of the market as it runs the risk of vocationalizing university education and instrumentalizing and fragmentalizing its knowledge. Interestingly, the findings of the study also suggest that, in the context of the post-Soviet Lithuania, the European curriculum reorientation towards practical, employability relevant competences is received by academics more skeptically due to the nation-specific historical reasons. For Lithuanian academics, it unpleasantly resembles the soviet-time utilitarian and outcome-oriented university model, which pragmatically sought to prepare specialists for the soviet industry. Another reason why some academics see the detailed specification of competences and outcomes as a problematic approach to the university curriculum is it shifts the focus away from the

philosophical questions about the very purpose and value of university education to more utilitarian concerns about employability relevance, which is at odds with the liberal, open-ended quest for knowledge that characterized the traditional European university. There is a worry that relentless educational reforms may displace the "principle of knowledge for knowledge's sake", thus, leaving Lithuanian universities intellectually and morally deprived.

In conclusion, what can be seen from the study results is, while Lithuania's move towards the European outcome-based curriculum, as based on the efficiency-oriented Anglo-Saxon educational rationale, has been swift and enthusiastic at the national policy, its implementation at the curriculum level by individual university academics has been much slower and more formal. A closer look at the study results suggests that, despite the relentless policy efforts to instill the new market-oriented values within the academe, Lithuanian academics continue to shape their curriculum' practice by the traditional academic values and conceptions that are closer to the North European Humboldtian educational ideal of Bildung, which sees knowledge and education as a value in itself. This discrepancy between the new educational philosophies and values that underpin the recently introduced curriculum reforms and the ones that shape Lithuanian academics' curriculum practices can, at least partly, explain academics' formal and superficial implementation of the curriculum change, as well as a growing alienation from the policy world. What can be learned from this study, in order to avoid the ever-widening alienation between those who initiate and monitor the change and those who are expected to implement it, it is important to recognize professional university academics as legitimate experts of curriculum, as well as active, autonomous agents of the curriculum change in their respective knowledge fields and fruitfully draw on their professional insights to inform and improve curriculum policy agendas. Also, in trying to improve curriculum policies and practices, it is important to understand that the inherited academic traditions and personal educational philosophies cannot be swiftly replaced with the new ones and need to be respected. In the case of Lithuania and other North Continental European countries

that traditionally have followed the Humboldtian vision of the university and currently are trying to modernize their higher education systems, a fresh look at the educational philosophy of Bildung could be a way to overcome the limitations of the present-day curriculum policies, which, as this study illuminates, are underpinned by reductionist and instrumental assumptions about knowledge and education.

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