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## Rethinking the essential questions in higher education : editorial

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## EDITORIAL

### RETHINKING THE ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

When discussing quality in higher education study programs, vital questions such as *what* to teach, *how* to teach, and *how* to assess student learning are often neglected while addressing such issues as external accountability, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness. Decisionmakers focus on the structural issues; educators should seek ways to actively engage students in their own learning experience by creating new knowledge and not being mere passive recipients of information transmitted by a lecturer (Hunt & Chalmers, 2021). Ways to maintain and strengthen the quality of higher education will continue to be considered as society changes and particularly as education becomes more informed by research.

The crucial *what* questions arise not just at the level of particular subjects, but also at the level of higher education systems so as to meet the challenges of a more diverse higher education sector (Curaj et al., 2015). Moreover, the number of students in higher education is constantly growing, and the question of *how* to create stimulating environments for a more diversified student population is becoming increasingly urgent (Gorard et al., 2006; Brücknerová et al., 2020). The challenge is to find *how* to transform the still prevalent teacher-oriented instruction into learner-engaging ways of instruction (Weimer, 2002), and *how* to efficiently employ new technologies to support the various needs of diverse learners (Sankey et al., 2010). An additional question to be asked in light of experiences from the COVID-19 restrictions is *how* online educational settings might alter on-site situations (Ali, 2020). All these *how* questions seem to put new demands on the flexibility and openness of higher education decisionmakers, institutions, and of course on the main actors: teachers and students.

The many rapidly changing technological, institutional, and social demands also pose new questions about the role of higher education, educational goals, and higher education teachers' aims, teaching beliefs, and motivation for teaching (McCune, 2019; Smith & Flores, 2019). In other words, as busy as we might be answering *how* questions, the *why* questions should not be left unattended. Such questions constantly reappear, as the values and normative orientations of those involved with higher education continuously co-constitute

the educational reality (Biesta, 2010). Moreover, when unexpected events such as pandemics, war, or lack of resources occur, there is a need to return to questions about the aims and the role of higher education to ensure that the higher education institutions and their actors will be able to face upcoming challenges adequately and with grace.

The articles in this issue capture this fruitful dialogue between *what*, *how*, and *why* questions and offer insights that might support appropriate methodological and instructional approaches and hopefully provoke consideration about aims, beliefs, and values in higher education settings.

Tomáš Lintner and Klára Šedřová, in their article *Aiming for Active Student Participation in Online University Lessons: A Case Study of Two Teachers During Emergency Remote Teaching*, integrate a quantitative approach to classroom discourse analysis, network visualizations, and qualitative data. This approach enables them to offer an in-depth explanation of how the teachers' attitudes and their answers to *why* questions influence their teaching orchestrations and, consequently, the shape of student participation during online lessons. Their findings support the notion that genuine care for student development opens meaningful ways to use IT, not vice versa.

The importance of university teacher beliefs and conceptions are highlighted by Marta Mateus de Almeida, Joana Viana, and Mariana Gaio Alves in their qualitative study *Exploring Teaching Conceptions and Practices: A Qualitative Study with Higher Education Teachers in Portugal*. They show that the shift from a curriculum-centered instructional paradigm to a learning-centered paradigm might still be rare within academia. Nevertheless, the authors indicate that focused teacher training might support such a shift, even online.

Another testimony of fruitful educational practice in online settings is offered by Sami Lehesvuori, Laura Ketonen, and Markus Hähkiöniemi in their study *Utilizing Informal Formative Assessment and Dialogicity During Reflections on Educational Dialogue in Mathematics*. Based on an analysis of video-stimulated joint reflections between mathematics student teachers and a teacher educator, they describe how particular moves during informal formative assessment contribute to the educational dialogue. Their granular analysis shows how the focus on the lesson goal might serve as a valuable tool for navigating between dialogicity and subject accuracy.

A focus on student learning in particular settings is presented by Nicol Dostálová, Libor Juháňák, and Lukáš Plch in *A Narrative Review of Eye-Tracking Research on Self-Regulated Learning from Multimedia Learning Materials in Higher Education*. They summarize how self-regulated learning processes while learning from multimedia materials have been researched by eye-tracking technology and indicate the areas where this approach might be developed.

Jaroslav Říčan and Roman Kroufek used a different methodological approach in their study *Factor Structure of a Self-Report Questionnaire Determining*

*the Epistemic Beliefs of Primary School and Kindergarten Student Teachers in the Science Domain.* The authors offer a tool for measuring the level at which student teachers are sure about the truths provided by science, which is a part of beliefs and attitudes that is distinctively mirrored in teacher decisions about teaching.

The issue concludes with the emerging researcher section, containing Barbora Nekardová's *The Role of Peer Learning Among University Teachers in Integrating Digital Technologies into Higher Education Teaching.* Nekardová draws attention to the under-researched area of informal workplace learning among academics. Identifying how university teachers share their ICT knowledge and what the shared contents are stresses the empowering role of peer learning and indicates how pressing *how* questions might suppress asking the right *why* questions.

We hope that this special issue of *Studia paedagogica* will contribute new knowledge and initiate new questions that will enrich the research and practices of teaching and learning in higher education, and thereby improve the quality of higher education.

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Editors

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