

TRANSCRIPT

HigherEd in Practice – Podcast series

EPISODE #1: A COMMUNITY FOR TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

[MUSIC – Introduction]

Helene Peterbauer

Welcome to HigherEd in Practice, a podcast series from the European University Association. In this series, we introduce you to selected practices in European higher education, covering teacher training and teaching enhancement, wellbeing, pedagogies and co-creative processes. I'm your host, Helene Peterbauer, and together with some of my colleagues, I sit down with higher education experts to give you insights into practices you might find inspiring, thought-provoking, or just interesting. In this episode, my colleague Thérèse Zhang interviews Nora Jansone-Ratinika from Rīga Stradiņš University in Latvia on the university's Centre for Educational Growth. The centre runs a junior school of academics, which plays a key role in supporting the university's teaching staff in the development of their teaching skills. In this interview, Nora explains the school history, its pedagogical approach and success factors.

Thérèse Zhang

So, Nora, your university, which is Rīga Stradiņš University in Latvia, has a so-called Centre for Educational Growth. So, what is that centre and what does it do?

Nora Jansone-Ratinika

That's right. I'm glad to say that the centre, originally focused on teacher training only, has grown into a threefold entity since 2014. We are responsible for analyzing study quality, providing continuing education for our academic staff, and we support pedagogical innovation projects. I would say that the centre also stands out among other higher education institutions in Latvia, because alongside the practical support we provide on a daily basis for academic staff and units, we also conduct pedagogical research, deliver courses and study programmes, and play a vital role in our university's strategic innovation development. Additionally, we offer training and consultations to other higher education institutions.

Thérèse Zhang

All right. So, a lot of things and a lot of tasks. Let's perhaps concentrate on one aspect, because I understand that the centre runs a school of junior academics whose function is to support the development of teaching skills among the participating academic staff. How does that work and how

does this school's approach differ perhaps from the other development courses, other professional development courses that many other higher education institutions offer to its staff? Could you explain that a bit?

Nora Jansone-Ratinika

Yeah, sure. Correct. So, the school was established by the centre in 2019 and it was designed as a so-called support platform for teachers who enter academic careers at Rīga Stradiņš University. What makes the school unique is that it is not composed of separate learning fragments, I would say, but rather a sequential learning experience aligned towards a unified goal. Furthermore, it is dynamically adapted to the specific learning needs and interests of each group. A single cohort usually consists of approximately 25 participants from [...] specific, various structural units, in our case it's health care, and also a bunch of social sciences. So, the active engagement takes place over a four-month period, altogether that is approximately 60 academic hours long. It is also important to note that the school operates on a voluntary basis, so it's not mandatory. That results in really highly motivated faculty members who are committed to their personal as well as professional growth. And about those specialties or specifics of our school, I would like to stress four things. We are creating a safe learning environment where we are sharing not only our successes but also difficulties encountered in the study process. And we observe that academics face similar challenges in their work. Encountering challenges is normal. It is considered to be normal, and engaging in collaborative thinking for new solutions provides a really strong motivation for their work. That is one thing. Another thing is flexible offering. What do I mean by that? Of course, there are certain topics included in each cohort, each group. But we begin with the joint learning journey, by identifying the specific interests, the specific needs of participants, and that promotes their pedagogical competence. And we promptly respond by incorporating new topics in the schedule. The third thing is reflection. After each session, the academics engage in reflection regarding the benefits gained and how the acquired knowledge can be integrated into practice, into their study courses. Reflections are uploaded in our e-learning platform and academics each receive personalised feedback on their submitted reflections. That helps with building self-efficacy and provides ideas and materials for individual and professional growth. And the last one is - again a unique thing in our school - structured observation. So, the observation of classes. During the school, academics have the opportunity to observe three lectures in classes led by other university instructors, colleagues from the same school, experienced professors from their own structural units, as well as colleagues from completely different structural units or fields. By doing so, we foster closer collaboration and bring together professionals from different disciplines, different structural units such as, for example, doctors and lawyers. It really effectively promotes interdisciplinarity and community building.

Thérèse Zhang

Thank you, Nora. Very interesting. Could you tell us then a bit more about precisely what was your university's rationale behind this approach? I understand it is a targeted cross-unit approach, but why did you choose such an approach taking place in a specific time range, instead of, say, a mandatory approach and mandatory annual courses for all teaching staff? What are the reasons for that?

Nora Jansone-Ratinika

I get what you mean. Well, I must describe our model. So, the model of pedagogical CPD (Continuous Professional Development) encompasses a regular offering for everybody. That includes a total, usually up to 200 academic hours of training activities per year. Academic staff are required to select a minimum of eight academic hours every two years. That includes four academic hours of participation in a regular training and four of those class observations. That is a mandatory component of their professional development. That is an overall model of CPD, and the school of junior academics is a specialised activity, but that is also within the continuing education for our academic staff that is specifically offered to the target group of junior teachers. We wanted the driving force really to be the motivation of the participants to take part, which is reinforced by the benefits shared by our graduates with others. So those teachers are really highly motivated, as I said, and actively seek a community for their professional growth. They are mostly professionals in their respective fields who do not possess any formal pedagogical education, usually. This means that their teaching experiences are mostly based on their own past experiences as learners, as students, or their perception of how teaching should be conducted. That's their experiences. That's their background. We offer a package tailored to individual needs, and we witness our graduates quickly become agents of change within their structural units, and they really contribute to the learning and teaching culture within the whole university. And they acquire significant learning and teaching competencies, generate bright ideas for modernising study process and establish a wide network of fellow members from various units, which strengthens their positions in teaching and learning.

Thérèse Zhang

Thank you very much, Nora. That's really interesting because we also discuss often at European level and with colleagues how CPD and training generally contribute to build up the representation of the teacher that young academics want to be. And what you explain really answers that. So now this school has existed for a few years, what I want to know is - would you say it is a success? Does it work? How does it work?

Nora Jansone-Ratinika

A lovely question. Most certainly. Of course, we would like to expand and have a bigger capacity to ensure an even more personalised approach, personalised manner. However, the results are really life changing. That's what we witnessed. That's what we see on a daily basis and that's the feedback we get from our participants. Academics recognise teaching and learning as a field that is constantly evolving and refining and they realise they're not born ready as educators, but they become ones. And it is a never-ending process of perfection. But perfection is a process, not a goal itself. So there are numerous and diverse examples I would like to share. But to illustrate one, I will quote a colleague who described herself as a major conveyor of information before participating in the school. She would arrive at the lecture, for example, share what she knew and then leave. However, during her time in the school, she significantly developed her teaching philosophy and approach. And philosophy is a very important thing. It's the mindset, how we think. And now she creates learning opportunities and tasks for students in which they discover the knowledge themselves. This is the very same knowledge that the teacher could have simply explained. But through this approach it becomes a

learning experience for the students themselves, involving exploration, analysis, making mistakes, asking questions and collaborating between each other.

Thérèse Zhang

It's really fascinating when I listen to you explaining this because it becomes so reflective. Well, I feel like I would like to take one of those courses with you now.

Nora Jansone-Ratinika

You're very welcome.

Thérèse Zhang

Looking back in the past years then, is there anything you would think about doing perhaps differently? Or have you maybe already made plans or you plan to make some plans for the future? So, some adjustments to the school approach or anything you would do a bit differently, perhaps based on the lessons you have learned so far?

Nora Jansone-Ratinika

Absolutely. We reflect all the time within our team of the centre members and with our participants, our alumni and eventual participants. So, to be honest, we are full of ideas to implement new things. But to mention some specific things. Each group of our alumni requests that after a certain period we establish a second group or a course where they could evaluate all the new integrated ideas in the study courses that they have gained during the school and continue learning together. So, we think of some extension of the school in a bit shorter version – or longer, but implementing little fragments of learning during the way. Another thing we plan is to involve our graduates in providing regular continuing education to our colleagues. That was the thing I mentioned. Specifically, they could work in pairs or groups to develop teaching sessions where they would pass on the knowledge and skills they have acquired to other university members, other university teachers, so that in this way they would continue their own learning journey at a new level while contributing to the professional development of their peers. And of course, so many other things.

Thérèse Zhang

Thank you very much, Nora. That was really an interesting conversation, and I hope we will find some way to prolong it or to continue it through other learning and teaching related activities with EUA. So, thank you very much for sharing with us. And see you soon!

Nora Jansone-Ratinika

Thank you very much for having me here and for helping recognising the importance of learning and teaching in higher education.

[MUSIC – Outro]

Helene Peterbauer

Thank you for listening to this first episode of our HigherEd and Practice series. If you would like to know more about the Junior School of Academics, have a look at the links in the show notes. In our second episode next month, I will interview Pieta Anniina Sikstrom from the University of Jyväskylä in Finland on the university's policies for staff and student well-being. If you don't want to miss it, make sure to subscribe to our podcast.