

Contemporary Higher Education Teacher's Challenges. The Perspective on the AI in Studies

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Abstract. Contemporary higher education teacher faces the challenges in their professional activities, which are both similar and a bit different than the challenges previous generations of teachers faced. This paper is dedicated to analysis of the situation and subjective interpretation of the situation by teachers in higher education. The paper aims at analyzing contemporary university teacher's challenges, including perspective on the AI in studies. The analysis is organized on the basis of three RQs. The methods of critical analysis of sources, analysis of personal experiences and a study based on qualitative methodology approach were employed for the development of this paper. The results of the theoretical analysis show that the challenges that contemporary HE teachers face are not unique, rather the degree of their manifestation is greater; in some cases the degree is more pronounced (e.g., IT (including AI) in studies) than in the other (e.g., marketization). The results of empiric study enabled conclusion that in some cases the theoretical considerations were empirically validated (teachers note challenge and opportunities prompted by technologies; pressure to publish), in some cases the challenges were not validated (marketization; multicultural setting as a challenge). Also empirical study enabled adding other challenges that a contemporary teacher faces on a regular basis: a challenge to deal with excessive, constant changes in legal stipulations and bureaucracy and a challenge to motivate students and help them grow.

Keywords: university/HE teacher; challenges; IT/AI in studies; marketization; multicultural setting.

Introduction

Contemporary higher education teacher faces the challenges in their professional activities, which are both similar and a bit different than the challenges previous generations of teachers faced. This paper is dedicated to analysis of the situation and subjective interpretation of it by teachers in higher education, because, while numerous studies and thus publications are dedicated to the situation, interpretations, feelings that

students face, not too many, however, are dedicated for at least the glimpse on how teachers are dealing in contemporary context (or at least studies again are linked to the feeling of students, James et al., 2019).

Terms *university* and *higher education* here are used as synonymous, though that may not apply for all countries; yet in significant portion of systems of education globally the synonymous usage is acceptable, if tertiary education in college or university is at focus. While *higher education* is a wider term, historically, *university* has more links, heritage and recognizability in the course of the last thousand years.

The paper **aims** at analyzing contemporary university teacher's challenges, including perspective on the AI in studies.

The analysis is organized on the basis of three **RQs**:

- What are the challenges (pressures) that a contemporary higher education teacher faces?
- What are the unique features of the contemporarily experienced challenges (as opposed to historically experienced)?
- What is the perspective of higher education teachers on those challenges (including the AI in studies)?

The **methods** of critical analysis of sources, analysis of personal experiences, and a study based on qualitative methodology approach were employed for the development of this paper.

HE Teacher's Challenges: Unique versus Universal

While we had thought that the historical horrors, such as the Holocaust, which wiped away into unimaginable suffering the entire Jewish communities, including devoted and enthusiastic university communities (Bacon, 2017), the contemporary events showed how mistaken we were to think about those horrors as something that we read about just in history textbooks. The authors of this paper discussed the theme, its importance for several months, more than a year into another human misery caused by a war in the Ukraine, which resulted in profound challenges for the Ukrainian higher education communities (Sytnykova et al., 2023; Ma et al., 2022). And, as if history teaches us nothing at all, the October 7th, 2023 brought back the worst memories, with the most horrific events happening again (<https://www.foxnews.com/world/rocket-barrages-strike-southern-israel-operation-claimed-hamas>), even if these are not directly related to higher education.

In the context of the suffering, profound challenges that either historically, or right here, right now university teachers had endured or are enduring, the theme of pressures that any other university teacher faces in a peaceful country seems mundane; and we feel a bit humbled and a bit ashamed to pursue it. Yet, human condition, while it is, unfortunately, still, even in 21st century, seems unavoidably linked to war, it is also linked to peace, to aspirations to live a happy, fulfilling life, to strive towards accomplishments, creativity, self realization, to aspirations to show one's best and to enjoy what best is out there in our civilization. Otherwise, human life will be void of any meaning, if the hope for progress is lost. Thus, even if in the face of recent events the challenges and crossroads for higher education teachers seem mundane, we will still

invite readers to join the conversation on what challenges we face today, and what is needed for us to be better equipped to face those challenges.

Contemporary higher education faces similar tasks that were there historically, just some of them are at a different degree; while in some cases the difference is minor, in other cases the magnitude of the degree is of different order thus making us think that the challenge is completely new. We are cautious about such classification.

The example of such difference is the fact that contemporary higher education is heavily influenced by globalization, which results in multi-cultural; multi-heritage classes. It may seem as a sign of contemporary developments, which undoubtedly add to pressures for a contemporary teacher (Zelenková and Hanesová, 2019). While we agree that the degree of multi-cultural representations is almost a given in almost any university, but historically, a university has been a multi-cultural hub for the last thousand of years (Zuzeviciute, 2011); just the degree is much more pronounced and visible. People from the far away territories (the term 'territories' is intentional: to denote the fact that several hundreds of years the states as we know them now did not exist or at least their borders shifted significantly) travelled to Bologna, then Oxford (starting at 11th, 12th c.), to Paris (starting at 13th c.), then to Krakow (starting at the 14th c.), because there were so few universities at that time. With Reformation and Contra-Reformation and also general civilizational advancements, the number of universities increased, thus the territorial needs for education started to be better, more readily accommodated in more accessible vicinities. Yet during the first several hundreds of years of the last millennium (thus at least 700 - 600 years ago) multi-cultural representation was a fact for those few operating universities that Europe had.

The next challenge, which seems associated just for the recent times is the fact that universities, due to their expansion and accessibility nationally and internationally in the last hundred years, became the market agents just as any other entity, competing for the market (Kind and Bunce, 2020; Praneviciene et al., 2017). These developments, due to profound changes triggered by the Reformation, Industrial revolution, Modernity are younger: spanning, just three - four hundred years. Reformation had a set of ideas, which are all of profound importance, but for our analysis the positive attitude and even encouragement for literacy (even if at first the literacy was valued as mainly a vehicle to read the Holy Book) is of most importance. The shift in thinking from literacy as something just for the few and probably not that good anyway, to thinking that literacy is important, changed the society immensely in the territories where Reformation ideas reigned. Then the ideas of Enlightenment joined, further strengthening the human potential, which resulted in advance of Modernity, with its science and technology, industrial revolutions (Zuzeviciute, 2011). While this paper does not hold ambitions to provide a comprehensive historical account, but rather it aims at illustrating the context of contemporary university. From being something rare, unique eight hundred years ago, in recent centuries it became absolutely necessary due to the elevated level of competencies necessary to run a highly sophisticated, technologized societies. The high number of universities, their relative accessibility, and mass university coverage however, led to the consequence of having to perform better than the next kid on the block. Hence: marketization, advertising, showing off one's colorful plumes. Thus, though this challenge is quite recent for the academia, teachers in higher education, but it became exasperated in recent decades. That happened due to the changing demographics, namely, the decreasing number of young people in societies, which have the longest history of modern universities, and the highest number on universities. Now,

the accomplishment of having many and accessible universities is becoming a liability, and, in order to proceed, the internationalization and global marketization are the two processes that joined forces to remediate the challenge of decreasing number of potential clients (that is: students). Thus higher education teachers today are more than ever encouraged, invited to participate in the activities that historically were not attributed to university teacher's activities. Such as participation in public events, in media and similar (Heck, 2022); while university teachers for hundreds of years had an active role in public life, but the contemporary change is not in the contents (still - to provide a valuable, evidence based, high quality consultation/opinion/expertise/insight), but in the purpose. That is, rather (or - at least next to) than provide valuable contents, it also has a purpose also to add to visibility of a given university. This task definitely adds to the pressure for a contemporary higher education teacher.

The third challenge that is constantly barraging a contemporary higher education teacher is the pressure to publish (Nguyen et al., 2021; MacPhail and O'Sullivan, 2019), which require some specific skills for academic writing (Hardy et al., 2022). But most importantly, in order to publish, a teacher has to participate in large, medium or at least small scale research in laboratory or in the field. No one argues the need to participate in research, the axiom itself was formulated by Humboldt two hundred years ago (here from Zuzeviciute, 2011). What is of concern, though: at times the balance, the efforts, the time, other resources are not being adequately distributed or the resources are scarce. Or the pressures outweigh resources to the point that an individual teacher feels abandoned and without a compass for the way forward with internal and unhelpful competition or/and administrative pressure starting dominating otherwise very important and rewarding aspect of university teacher's activities (Johansson, 2022). Though, most teachers find their way.

The fourth challenge is the changes and accessibility in available technologies. Again, seemingly, nothing new here, because historically technological advancements were intrinsically interwoven with other aspects of university life, because the very essence, the very purpose of university is to serve society via producing new knowledge and the ways to apply it, that is, technology. What changed, though, in recent decades is the relation to technologies. That is, the technologies, especially the IT based communication gained potential in the process of teaching and learning. That is, technologies, rather than being 'out there' in economy or –at best- supporting organisation of studies, gained the potential of actually becoming the medium or even an agent in teaching and learning. Yet, until the pandemic struck in 2020, many teachers avoided using IT too much, because of the respect for sensitive and facilitating human interaction. This was changed in a dramatic way during the almost two years of pandemic, with a short breathing break being again followed by introduction (invasion?) tools of AI entering the busy market in the end of 2022. Technological, methodological support higher education teachers (especially in social sciences, humanities, where the competence to use IT tools probably had to be expanded) received during pandemic (Bruggeman et al., 2022) was extremely important for their competence and confidence. Especially, when the targeted support was reinforced by peers' support (Gast et al., 2022). But, for many the achieved competence and confidence evaporated in the context of the new reality. Now, by the end of 2023 teachers are faced with questions, on the role of the AI tools in studies; on ethical considerations, on their own role in this new reality.

While we discussed at least four challenges (pressures?) that a contemporary higher education teacher faces with historical contextualization of those challenges, namely: 1) multicultural setting; 2) marketization; 3) publication ('publish or perish'); 4) impact of IT, it seems warranted to reiterate that some of these challenges/pressures are not unique for contemporary teacher's experience.

Probably, with the exception of marketization (even in this case some historical examples may be provided on the opposite side of argument).

Multicultural setting, expectation to participate in research and publicize it, develop and offer for wider society's application of technologies always comprised the realities of a teacher at university. But – which deserves a special emphasis - the degree of manifestation of those challenges is noticeable.

Firstly, the depth and breadth of the challenges today are much more pronounced than they ever were.

Secondly, the number of teachers who are exposed to these challenges is almost universal, that is, for example: if previously (just a decade ago) we had some teachers who were very active in international study programmes, and some were less so, but today we will have to look twice for a teacher who does not participate in international study programmes in some way. Previously, just five years ago, we had some teachers who were using IT in their classes to a significant degree (e.g., Moodle for testing or for delivery of materials), but today we will have to look twice for a teacher who does not use the IT platforms in everyday work.

While marketization and publishing also used to comprise a reality of a teacher, today it is much more pronounced, yet the advent of AI tools is at the centre of contemporary discussions among academia.

In order to validate at least to some degree theoretical considerations and the analysis of our personal experiences, the study was designed and implemented in 2023.

Methodology and procedure

The international study was implemented during 2nd-3rd quarters of 2023. The study is based on qualitative research methodology; the set of questions was developed on the most pressing issues that colleagues (teachers in higher education) may face. The purpose of the study was to validate whether the four challenges (multicultural setting; expectation to publish; expectation to participate in marketization; impact of IT/AI in studies) are among the challenges that teachers note as impactful challenges. The interviews were conducted by the authors either face to face or using el. formats; the anonymity of participants was safeguarded by eliminating the identifiers and by shuffling the responses in the phase of data analysis (Content analysis was used).

Participants

Totally 16 participants shared their ideas, impressions on what is exciting, difficult, interesting for them in their work. 2 representatives from Romania, 2 from Portugal, 2 from Poland, 1 from Latvia, 4 from the Ukraine, 1 from Lithuania, 1 from the Czech Republic, 1 from Italy, 1 from Finland, 1 from India shared their perspective.

The colleagues were well established in their careers: experience of higher education teacher spanned from more than 50 years to 9 in that capacity (more than 50;

37; 34; 30; 29; 27 (2); 28; 25; 18; 17 (2); 15; 13; 11; 9). Teachers teach: logics; cultural industries; economics; management; social work; psychology; foreign languages; social sciences; informatics, natural sciences, climate studies, human resources development.

Thus quite a comprehensive coverage in terms of the experience in higher education, in terms of the subjects taught and in geographical coverage (from 10 countries), thus even if the qualitative approach will always result to certain degree of **limitation**, but the wide geographical and thematic coverage serves as a compensatory factor.

In total, colleagues were invited to share their ideas on 9 questions. If participant provided more than one idea, the ideas were counted, rather than participants, thus the N of answers/categories is not set: the N for some questions may exceed the total number of participants. Due to the limitations for the scope of the paper only a part of data is shared here (the answers to 5 questions out of 9 questions).

Results

The first result that was observable from the very start was the stark difference between the answers from colleagues in all the 9 countries and then the Ukraine, thus resulting in creating in some cases almost two sets of categories. Namely, the colleagues, experiencing war for almost two years repeatedly indicated 'war', 'working under air raids' as the challenges they have to overcome every day and every hour. The challenge was not taken into consideration during theoretical analysis, which only reinforces two of the axioms of research: firstly, we are all biased, even as researchers who invest specific and focused effort to maintain objectivity. E.g., in this case, while representing a country, which is not in war, we did not think of this challenge. Secondly, while war rages, many of the things, which are taken for granted are being re-evaluated and judged differently.

However, the Ukrainian colleagues, while indicated stress of war, always used 'but', and still provided answers to the questions according to the logics of questions, thus their answers are not excluded, but included into the analysis.

To the question *What is the most exciting thing for you at this moment in your profession (as a teacher in Higher education)?* 4 main categories of answers were identified (Table 1).

Table 1. What is the most exciting thing for you at this moment in your profession (as a teacher in Higher education)?

Categories	Entries
New technologies	6 (2 of them specifically indicated AI) entries
Complementing teaching and research, especially, while involving students	3 entries
Working with creative, motivated, innovative, enthusiastic and empathetic students	3 entries
Developing/creating new course-units/curriculum, which is reflective of the contemporary developments	2 entries

One participant elaborated on the optimism as based on the experiences of the pandemic, when the IT was used so productively (thus making optimistic expectations for AI in studies logical). Also *partnership and student's autonomy and creativity* was noted by one of the participants as one of the most exciting issues in higher education.

Regarding the next question: *What is the most difficult thing for you at this moment in your profession (as a teacher in Higher education)?* 3 main categories were identified (Table 2).

Table 2. What is the most difficult thing for you at this moment in your profession (as a teacher in Higher education)?

Categories	Entries
New IT technologies in class	8 (2 of them specifically: to organize remote work under the duress of air-raid); 1 of them specifically on using AI) entries
Motivate students	6 (3 of them: specifically under the constant stresses posed by war; 1 of them: specifically on-line studies during pandemic, especially for girls) entries
Additional bureaucracy (reporting; additional paper work without substantiating its purpose or need, internal 'politicking')	5 entries

Two more participants' indicated *new application of educational methods* without specifying whether the application is related to IT, thus the category is outlined as a separate one. One colleague mentioned the problem of *low attendance*, which leads to difficulties for motivating students and their intellectual growth, also, one colleague, indicated *no problems/difficulties*. Another contributor identified *developing and offering students a motivating, creative tack that is conducive to learning* as a demanding task.

While sharing their ideas on question *What other influences/factors/events/processes do you identify today that have an impact on your work as a teacher in higher education today?* participants identified several factors, which were categorized as follows (Table 3).

Table 3. What other influences/factors/events/processes do you identify today that have an impact on your work as a teacher in higher education today?

Categories	Entries
Technologies in class	8 entries
Constant changing in legislative requirements and additional work outside the class	4 entries

Colleagues also noted *constant stress caused by war* (2 entries) and *stress to keep up with smart/educated/worldly students* (2 entries).

The question *How do you feel today as a teacher in Higher education after the pandemic, the AI influence and other influences/factors/events/ processes/changes?* was less objectivity orientated as it supplied a possible focus for the answer.

Interestingly, the answers supplied at times completely opposite opinions (the first **three** categories) (Table 4).

Table 4. How do you feel today as a teacher in Higher education after the pandemic, the AI influence and other influences/factors/events/ processes/changes?

Categories	Entries
This is exciting, and I am looking forward to what it will bring to studies	4 entries
That is and will be a huge challenge	3 entries
I am not yet aware of the AI having a role in studies	2 entries
This is so new I am stressed out and I lack support	2 entries
I feel exhausted and overwhelmed and think on giving up the profession	1 entry

Two more entries equaled challenges to *war* experiences without specific focus on the AI, which illustrates the notion discussed earlier in the paper: those extreme duress changes perspectives and the priorities. One more contribution emphasized the *need to help student to get ready for different and - possibly – disadvantaged eventualities*, which may be related to the contributions on war.

While teachers, our colleagues in 10 countries were asked to share ideas on *What other influences do you identify that make your work more challenging/difficult, that make a positive impact on how you perceive your profession?* several expected, but also unexpected responses were received, which were categorized as follows (Table 5).

Table 5. What other influences do you identify that make your work more challenging/difficult, that make a positive impact on how you perceive your profession?

Categories	Entries
New technologies in general have a positive impact	5 entries (3 of them specifically on AI)
New generation of technology savvy colleagues	3 entries
Changes in all fields, including professional, thus making lifelong learning an absolute necessity (thus a burden on balancing work, family life)	2 entries
Excessive bureaucracy	2 entries

One colleague shared the similar concerns, regarding *unhelpful policies, excessive bureaucracy*, but added that these factors do not hinder the enjoyment of teaching. Also, the pride in one's university's resilience and revival even under the duress of war was indicated; the issue of *remuneration* and as well the *excessive and changing legal requirements* were mentioned. Another contributor indicated that even seemingly negative factors, such as *excessive bureaucracy, new technologies may give (and are giving) opportunities* for personal and professional growth.

The empiric study enabled to collect subjective perspective of teachers/colleagues in several countries on theoretically identified considerations. In some cases enriching perspectives were received, in some cases the theoretically formulated challenges did not receive any validation from participants, in some cases the validation was received (Figure 1).

Challenges that were validated:	
Teach and encourage learning of students within the context of AI	The challenge was definitely validated in empirical study
Need to participate in research and publication	The challenge was validated to some small degree empirically
Challenges that were not validated:	
Expectation to participate in marketization	The challenge was not at all validated empirically
Need to work in a multicultural setting	The challenge was not at all validated empirically
The empirical study enabled identification additional challenges that contemporary higher education teachers face	
Excessive and constantly changing legal regulations and additional tasks (bureaucracy)	
Motivate students (taking into account low attendance, necessity to develop creating engaging tasks)	

Figure 1. The validated, non-validated and added challenges for a contemporary higher education teacher

The challenge related to overcoming war were indicated several times, but it was not indicated as a separate challenge, because it is obviously self-explanatory.

Conclusions

Theoretical analysis (critical analysis of sources and analysis of personal experiences of authors) enables formulation of some conclusions.

Within historical contextualization, a contemporary higher education teacher faces at least four major challenges/pressures: 1) the need to work in a multicultural setting; 2) the expectation to participate in marketization; 3) the need to participate in research and publication; 4) teach and encourage learning of students within the context of AI. Some of these challenges/pressures are not unique for contemporary teacher's experience. While a multicultural setting, and expectation to participate in research and publicize it

always was among intrinsic expectations for a teacher at university, however, marketization may be indicated as a more recent one.

However, the degree of manifestation of those challenges/pressures is different. Firstly, the depth and breadth of the challenges today are much more pronounced than they ever were. Secondly, the number of teachers who are exposed to these challenges and have to perform in the face of those challenges is almost universal as opposed to just some proponents and enthusiasts.

The results of empirical study enable formulating conclusions on the perspectives of teachers in HE.

In some cases, the theoretical considerations were empirically validated:

Technologies (entries were indicated among the answers to almost all of the interview questions; e.g., for question What other influences/factors/events/processes do you identify today that have an impact on your work as a teacher in higher education today: 8 entries were allocated in the category indicating the fact that technologies became the integral part in classes).

Pressure to publish was mentioned (e.g., answers to the question: What is the most exciting thing for you at this moment in your profession (as a teacher in Higher education)? – 3 entries mentioned excitement to complement teaching and research, especially, involving students).

In some cases they were not validated (marketization; multicultural setting as challenges were not mentioned at all).

The fact that marketization was not identified may hypothetically be explained by the assumption that administrative apparatus at universities take upon this task, and that indeed the publishing of research findings comprises marketing function to major degree in the academia. The findings that teachers did not indicate multicultural setting as a challenge were unexpected; the authors of the paper do not have explanation for this finding.

Empirical study enabled adding other challenges that a contemporary teacher faces on regular bases:

The challenge to deal with excessive, constant changes in legal stipulations and excessive bureaucracy (e.g., answers to the question: What other influences/factors/events/processes do you identify today that have an impact on your work as a teacher in higher education today? 4 entries indicated frustration with constant changes in legislative requirements and additional work outside the class).

The challenge to constantly motivate students and help them grow (e.g., answers to the question: What is the most exciting thing for you at this moment in your profession (as a teacher in Higher education)?: 3 entries reflected the need to help students to maintain enthusiasm with their studies, to create challenging, motivating tasks, etc.).

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