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## The Role of a Higher Education Institution in Enhancing Students' Auto-educational Activity

### Abstract

The main objective of this article is to present the role of a higher education institution in enhancing auto-educational activities from the perspective of students of pedagogy at the University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland. The main research tool that was applied in the research included the method of document analysis. By means of both classic and modern methods of document analysis, the author analysed and interpreted documents created intentionally – essays, i.e. respondents' written opinions on issues of importance from the scientific point of view. The research results revealed that students' auto-educational activity regarding the development of the intellectual (cognitive) sphere connected with acquiring social competences, self-discovery, biological sphere (e.g. caring for one's health, physical condition, appearance) and spiritual sphere is only to a small degree determined by a higher education institution.

**Key words:** *students' auto-educational activity, a higher education institution didactics.*

### Introduction

Changes in civilization create increasingly high expectations for people living in today's world. They are expected to show creative, innovative and constructive attitudes in their lives. In order to meet these requirements, individuals should learn and try to develop their knowledge and personality throughout their lifetime. Consequently, one may observe that an individual's auto-education becomes

a necessity in today's rapidly changing society and world. It is viewed as a condition, fulfilment of which helps to achieve existential happiness that corresponds to the standard of a particular society. (Wróblewska W., 2008, p. 91). Auto-education may give an individual a chance to live a creative, respectful, interesting and satisfactory life. However, an individual's efforts to become a person capable of living a creative and quality life have to be accompanied by the activities undertaken by other people, school and out-of-school institutions. It is education that has important goals to achieve to arouse an individual's desire to pursue auto-educational goals and facilitate their realisation. (cf. e.g. Jankowski D., 2002, p.122; Bogaj A., 2000, p.78).

It particularly refers to a higher education institution, whose main objective is to stimulate motivation and create proper conditions enabling students to work in an active and independent manner. In a higher school, auto-education should prevail over a guided form of education, and various elements of work performed by a higher education institution, such as methods and techniques of work, work organization forms, university teacher-student relationships, technical and financial conditions, etc. should have a positive effect on students' auto-educational activity directed at their own development. (cf. Wróblewska W., 2008, pp.229–230; Okoń W.,1995, p.163; Jaskot K.,1984, p.18).

Is it really the case? The research results described in this article reveal the preliminary outcomes of wider analyses regarding the conditions the university provides for students' auto-educational activity. The above-mentioned research was conducted among 126 fifth-year students doing both a part-time and full-time course in pedagogy at the University of Silesia in Katowice, in the academic year 2009/2010. Therefore, the group of respondents who took part in the research consisted of future educators, who are obliged to be engaged in a constant auto-educational activity. Moreover, while following their professional career, educators should also try to arouse the desire in others for auto-education, inspire their students to undertake actions with the aim of self-development and improve their students' autonomy.

The research tool applied in the research included the method of document analysis, which involved the description and interpretation of works broadly understood as any objective things that are results of human activity connected with science, culture, personal life, production activity. (cf. Łobocki M., 2005, pp. 211–212 and Góralski A., 1994). The author analysed and interpreted documents created intentionally (cf. Łobocki M., 2005, p.216) – essays, i.e. the respondents' comments in writing on subjects of great importance from the scientific point of view. In this case, students of pedagogy were asked to write an essay on the

following subject: 'The role of a higher education institution in enhancing students' auto-educational activity'. This topic was expanded by the following question:

- Does the university which you attend **determine** your auto-educational activity? And if so, in what way?

The topic formulated and expanded in such a way referred to an issue with which the respondents were closely familiar. It directly referred to their experiences connected with a five-year period of studies at the University of Silesia, therefore it aroused interest and triggered a natural need to make open confessions. All the respondents were given a written instruction informing them that the documents which they were supposed to create would be used for research purposes and that their works would remain anonymous. The respondents were given a possibility to express freely and openly their thoughts, feelings, comments, evaluations, reflections and complaints. However, the instruction guidelines were formulated with a view to helping the students direct their train of thoughts in a way which would allow the essays to be used as a basis for a reliable analysis leading to finding a solution to the previously formulated scientific problem. Therefore, the instruction contained the possible way of understanding auto-education as a process of self-development carried out in a manner consistent with one's motivation and referring to the development of the whole personality, including the development of the cognitive sphere, i.e. independent learning. It was emphasised that auto-education is an authentically subject – and autonomy-oriented process, directed by the subjects of development, i.e. the individuals themselves set their goals, choose methods, forms, and select the ways of controlling and evaluating their work. As a result of such a perception of auto-education, the respondents could share their opinions regarding the influence of the university on their own level of activity related to, e.g. the development of the intellectual (cognitive) sphere, biological (caring for one's health, physical condition, appearance) sphere, spiritual sphere connected with gaining self-knowledge and acquiring social competences. The instruction also contained detailed component parts of a higher education institution activity, to which the respondents could make references in their essays.

This article focuses on presenting the role of a higher education institution in developing students' auto-educational activity in different areas of development. An attempt has been made to find the answer to the following question: Does the higher education institution attended by the respondents determine in any way their auto-educational activity? What areas of development are particularly affected? And why? The research results regarding detailed component parts of a higher education institution activity became, however, the subject of another article.

## **Results**

Owing to the application of the document analysis method, it was possible to obtain empirical material consisting of 126 original essays written by the students of pedagogy. The content of these essays was thoroughly analysed and interpreted by means of both classic and modern techniques of document analysis (cf. Łobocki M., 2005, pp.221–222; Zaczyński W.P., 1995, pp.166–168). On the basis of the text analysis and evaluation, it is possible to observe that the students can perceive the influence of the higher education institution on the development of their own auto-educational activity; this influence, however, is not always evaluated positively (Diagram 1). 86 out of 126 respondents taking part in the research included in their essays a statement assessing in an exhaustive way the activity of the university in this scope. The majority of the respondents from this group admitted that their university determines their auto-educational activity, but in a rather negative way (48.8% of the respondents). The positive impact of the university was pointed out only by 17 students, which constitutes 19.8% of the group of respondents taking part in the research. On the other hand, 29.0% of the research participants could not express their explicit stance on this matter, and only 2.3% of the respondents claimed that their university does not have any influence on their auto-educational activity. The results obtained are not very optimistic, particularly because the respondents made comments and statements reflecting their disappointment with the five-year course in pedagogy at the University of Silesia. Below are some comments expressed by the respondents themselves:

The university motivated me to act in the following way: minimum effort – maximum effect”; “The university does not have an influence on auto-education. For this period of 5 years I have only learnt that if you want to achieve something in your life you have to be able to live by your wits instead of working hard and being conscientious”; “If it hadn’t been for psychology that I was studying, I would have really regretted spending 5 years studying pedagogy”; “The university has not prepared me adequately for working in my profession, which motivates me to do additional internship and voluntary work. It is sad that it is the only role I can attribute to the university.

Additionally, the comments of the students who noticed a positive impact of the higher education institution on the development of auto-educational activity mainly focused on the natural character of this impact. The respondents came to the conclusion that, e.g. “rigorous rules of certain subjects make them work independently”, “sometimes the manner of conducting classes provokes students to

be more active". The majority of the students in this group did not elaborate on this matter. They only limited their comments to a statement that a higher education institution determines students' auto-educational activity in a positive way.

More optimistic results were obtained by analysing and evaluating the essays from the perspective of the role of a higher education institution in developing students' auto-educational activity in different areas of development. In all the essays it was possible to find quite extensive reflections on the matter, which focused mainly on the intellectual, social, related to self-discovery, biological and spiritual spheres (Diagram 2). From the analysis and evaluation of the respondents' comments it follows that a higher education institution has a positive influence particularly on auto-educational activity regarding the cognitive, intellectual sphere connected with gaining new factual knowledge as well as broadening and expanding this knowledge (45.7% of all the answers obtained in the research). The students participating in the research indicated precise examples of activities undertaken with relation to auto-education, such as, e.g.: voluntary service; attending courses that may be helpful in future professional career; participating in "interesting" scientific conferences and training courses. But not for everyone taking an action, gaining new factual knowledge and searching for knowledge is determined by the activity of a higher education institution. According to some of the students, it results rather from an 'inner need' to prepare oneself to pursue a professional career and gain pedagogical competences. One person pointed out:

The university has not prepared me properly to work as a teacher, therefore I am forced to undertake my own actions to make up for it.

The students also emphasised, although less frequently, the fact that they had to search for the literature themselves in order to prepare for classes or to write their MA dissertations. There were also comments not related directly to the subject of this research but concerning a positive impact of 'studying' on broadening students' horizons, changing the perception of the world, gaining the ability to think openly, the ability to express one's own opinions, and the ability to 'learn fast'. All these 'elements' seem to be important as they may to some extent determine the quality of the undertaken activity regarding auto-education.

In the process of studying there also occurs, according to the respondents (25.0% of all the comments), development of the social sphere; however, a higher education institution does not have a direct influence on auto-educational activity in this scope. Students undertake independent actions aiming at group integration. They try to organise trips, parties and charity events. The majority of them are convinced

that the higher education institution does not support their activity and does not encourage them to develop pro-social attitudes: "(...) swotting is all that matters". Moreover, some component parts of higher education institution activity make it even more difficult to undertake such actions, e.g. timetable which is 'unfavourable' for a student. In addition to this, the respondents feel that not many lecturers are interested in their students' social development:

Lecturers are usually indifferent. They tolerate our actions, e.g. a collection of toys for children's homes, but this is it, nothing more. I have met only one lecturer who showed his involvement once and helped us to collect dog food for a dog shelter.

Some of the respondents, mainly those who were doing a part-time course, expressed also a sense of loneliness in their comments:

Doing a part-time course, I realised that I could only rely on myself;

I'm supposedly a part of a group, but frankly speaking when you're studying on a part-time basis, you do not have an opportunity to form bonds with other people. Everyone thinks about their own business and tries to figure out how to survive without any losses.

In their essays, the students paid their attention to the sphere regarding self-discovery (17.5% of all the comments obtained in the research). However, only 6 respondents noticed an intentional influence of a higher education institution on auto-educational activity in this scope. The respondents emphasised two elements determining students' independent work on discovering themselves, namely: curriculum realized during some subjects, predominantly that of axiological, prescriptive qualities and individual contact of a student with a lecturer, for instance at MA seminars. One female student wrote this interesting comment:

I have been lucky to meet an exceptional lecturer – a master. Every seminar gives me a chance to see myself through his eyes and it opens a door to self-discovery for me.

However, the majority of the respondents claimed that a higher education institution does not undertake actions which could intentionally and directly influence the development of a student's auto-education regarding self-discovery. According to them, self-discovery *happens by itself* in the process of studying:



all that time spent at university provokes you to reflect on yourself, who you are and who you want to be;

thanks to studies I've learnt more about myself, how I behave in difficult and stressful situations. Now I know what I should change myself;

During studies I've gained knowledge about myself, my strengths and weaknesses, but I cannot say that the university can take credit for that. The biggest credit belongs to my university friends, who impress me with their ideas for life.

A significantly lower number of the respondents addressed the biological sphere in their essays (9.0% of all the answers obtained in the research). The students stressed the importance of health education, ecology and health and safety classes in raising their awareness of a healthy lifestyle. The curriculum implemented as part of the above-mentioned subjects became a factor encouraging the students to independently expand their knowledge. It also increased their motivation to care for their local environment, their health condition and the health condition of their family and friends. This group was strongly convinced that a higher education institution provides an insufficient number of classes concerning generally understood health education.

Some of the respondents admitted that they care about their physical condition, body immunity and try to *lose a few unnecessary kilograms*, however a higher education institution does not have an influence on the actions they undertake in this respect. The comments expressed by three students seemed to be particularly worrying. They claimed that a higher education institution makes it difficult to lead a healthy lifestyle since by offering expensive dinners in the canteen, the university *condemns* students to get through the day without a hot meal and forces them to consume sandwiches or buy *unhealthy food and drinks from a vending machine*.

There was a significantly lower number of comments on human spiritual development (2.6% of all the respondents' comments obtained in the research). Only a few students stressed the importance of some parts of curriculum for encouraging students to reflect on the sense of life and they appreciated the qualities of discussion and the use of problem-based methods during classes, aiming at provoking students to *share their thoughts* and *introducing them to the world of certain values*. Generally, the prevailing opinion was that a higher education institution does not influence auto-educational activity regarding the spiritual sphere of human development. A female student who was studying simultaneously for a second degree in theology wrote this comment:



With all certainty I can say that I am developing spiritually by studying theology. Pedagogy does not give me such a possibility, however, it does provide me with a lot of information concerning humanities.

Another respondent shared the following reflection:

Perhaps my expectations were too high when I decided to study pedagogy. It turned out that everything that is supposed to be seemingly objective is relative here, different systems of values – often contradicting my own outlook on life. There is of course a university chaplaincy, but information and promotion actions are conducted at an embarrassingly low level. Therefore, I am developing spiritually outside the university, which is a bit of a shame ...

Two female respondents also pointed out the university's negligence regarding attention to the cultural development of the individual:

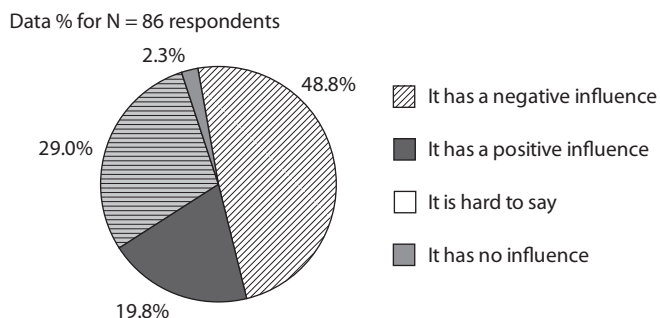
An insufficient number of cultural events, actions promoting the latest theatre performances, exhibitions, music events. I get the impression that studying means only swotting, getting credits and surviving"; "The timetable is so terribly organised and curriculum requirements so high that little time is left for cultural development.

## **Conclusions**

To sum up, it is possible to note that:

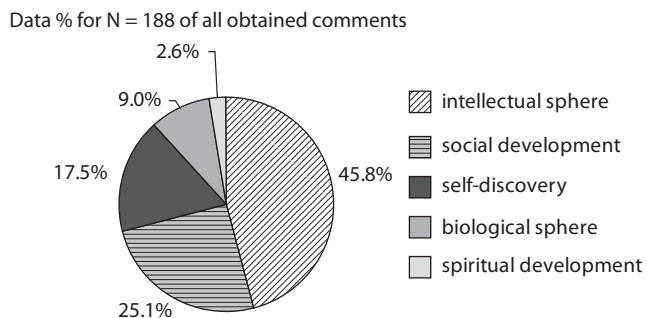
- according to the majority of the pedagogy students taking part in the research, the university which they attend does not play a significant role in developing their auto-educational activity;
- the influence of the higher education institution on undertaking independent activities by students may be observed mainly with regard to the intellectual sphere. However, the students' attempts to search for new knowledge and achieve self-development and improvement of their skills result predominantly from a desire to prepare themselves to pursue a professional career. It has less to do with a need to prepare for didactic classes or accomplish tasks that are part of MA seminars;
- the higher education institution does not sufficiently support the students' activities regarding social development. It does not promote pro-social

**Diagram no. 1** Role of a higher education institution in enhancing students' auto-educational activity in view of the respondents' comments



Source: data obtained on the basis of author's own research (on the basis of intentionally created documents – students' essays)

**Diagram no. 2** Role of a higher education institution on students' auto-educational activity in different spheres of development based on the respondents' comments



Source: data obtained on the basis of author's own research (on the basis of intentionally created documents – students' essays)

attitudes. Moreover, the conditions related to the organization of university activities as well as the lecturers' indifferent attitude to independent activities undertaken by the students themselves make the development of this sphere even harder;

- the higher education institution does not have a direct impact on the development of auto-education related to self-discovery. There are two elements of the education process, which – according to the respondents – may determine students' independent work on discovering themselves:
  - curriculum of axiological, prescriptive character;
  - individual nature of the student – lecturer contact;
- the higher education institution has little influence on the pedagogy students' auto-educational activity regarding the biological sphere connected with caring for one's own health and the close environment. The students' auto-educational activity in this sphere is influenced by the curriculum of certain subjects;
- the higher education institution does not have a great impact on the respondents' auto-educational activity regarding the spiritual development. According to only a few respondents, some parts of curriculum and methods of teaching, particularly problem-based methods and discussions, provoke students to make a reflection on the sense of life and system of values.

The obtained research results indicate the need to undertake further empirical explorations concerning the creation of adequate conditions at the university which would encourage students to engage in the process of auto-education. Within the context of the deliberations presented in this article, according to which a higher education institution plays an insignificant role in developing students' auto-educational activity, it seems interesting to present an opinion of a group of respondents on the influence of particular component parts of university activity, such as: educating methods, forms of class organization, student-lecturer relationships, financial conditions, etc. on the course and level of students' auto-education. This is of particular importance as research carried out in this area could contribute to developing a process of university education capable of inspiring students to use auto-education, which seems to be one of the essential needs of the present time.

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