

## THE CONTINUING EDUCATION AT TECHNICAL COLLEGE OF APPLIED SCIENCES IN ZRENJANIN AND POSSIBILITIES OF IMPROVEMENT

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**Abstract:** In recent years the knowledge-based society, changes of economic environment, the problem of employability and globalization in general have imposed new challenges on every country and its educational issues. How to keep up with the technological development, how to timely recognize the future needs of economy and society, what new jobs and competences will be required? Those are some of the questions every country should have in mind when defining its educational policies and strategies. Understanding the nature of these new challenges seems to be the first step to successfully cope with them. Naturally, universities, college, as well as other institutions involved in education are well aware of their leading role in the progress of a country and nation and their contribution to economic growth. Therefore, they have decided to open up to society and economy more than they did in past times and introduced a set of activities. These new activities of higher education institutions (HEIs) are known as the third mission.

The present paper focuses on one pillar of the third mission, continuing education, and discusses the possibilities to enhance it on the example of the Technical College of Applied Sciences in Zrenjanin (TCAS).

**Key words:** third mission, continuing education

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In today's ever-changing socio-economic environment, third mission has been recognized as an equally important activity of higher education institutions along with their other two missions, education (teaching and learning) and research. The societal needs and market demands impose on universities a necessity to undertake yet another role and use their resources to engage with society in a mutually beneficial process. Although this activity has not been unknown to universities, it seems that its importance has come into focus since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century when technology began its fast growth. It is today defined as the activity of universities which includes three dimensions: technology transfer and innovation, social engagement and continuing education (CE).

### 2. THIRD MISSION IN SERBIA AND CONTINUING EDUCATION

Wishing to create prerequisites for the development of third mission at Serbian higher education institutions, the University of Kragujevac submitted a project proposal *Institutional framework for development of the third mission of universities in Serbia – IF4TM* [1]

During its implementation the project initiated changes and amendments in the legal framework on both national and institutional levels. The *Law on higher education* [2] was amended and now it offers the Serbian higher education institutions the possibility to organize short-cycle courses with clearly defined structure, purpose and learning outcomes and certificates awarded upon completion with clearly recognized competences.

Continuing education, adult education and lifelong learning are today used interchangeably since they all refer to "all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal civic, social and/or employment related perspective" [3] Regardless of the term used, they all refer to on-going gaining of knowledge and skills in order to keep pace with ever-growing demands of industry and labour market, but also of everyday life; however the term lifelong learning (LLL) has become more and more popular.

### 3. STRATEGY FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF ADULT EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

Being a full member of the Bologna Process/European higher education area since 2003, the Republic of Serbia, i.e. its government and education authorities, have prepared and adopted a series of laws, regulations and strategies in an attempt to regulate the academic life and make conditions for higher education institutions to approach the European standards in them.

Among other, Strategy for the Development of Adult Education in the Republic of Serbia until 2020 [4] and the Action Plan for the Implementation of the Strategy for the Development of Adult Education in the Republic of Serbia until 2020 [5] have been prepared in order to offer a legal framework in which educational institutions could organize continuing education.

The above mentioned Strategy and the Action Plan were analysed along with other existing Serbian laws and strategies relevant for establishment of the third mission in the Republic of Serbia. These analyses were all collected in a document **D.1.3 Report on existing strategies and laws in the Republic of Serbia related to third mission dimensions** [6], which was one of the first deliverables in the implementation of the project IF4TM.

Among others, the Strategy recognizes higher education institutions as service providers in the area of adult/continuing education. In this regard, beside amended *Law on higher education* and introduction of short-cycle courses, Serbian universities adopted and/or have amended their rulebooks which regulate this type of education, which is one of the IF4TM project results.

#### 4. MATERIAL AND METHODS

Although continuing education was one of activities of higher education institutions realized as various trainings, lectures, workshops and similar, it seemed that it lacked a system which would enable HEIs to organize this activity based on clearly set principles with established institutional framework.

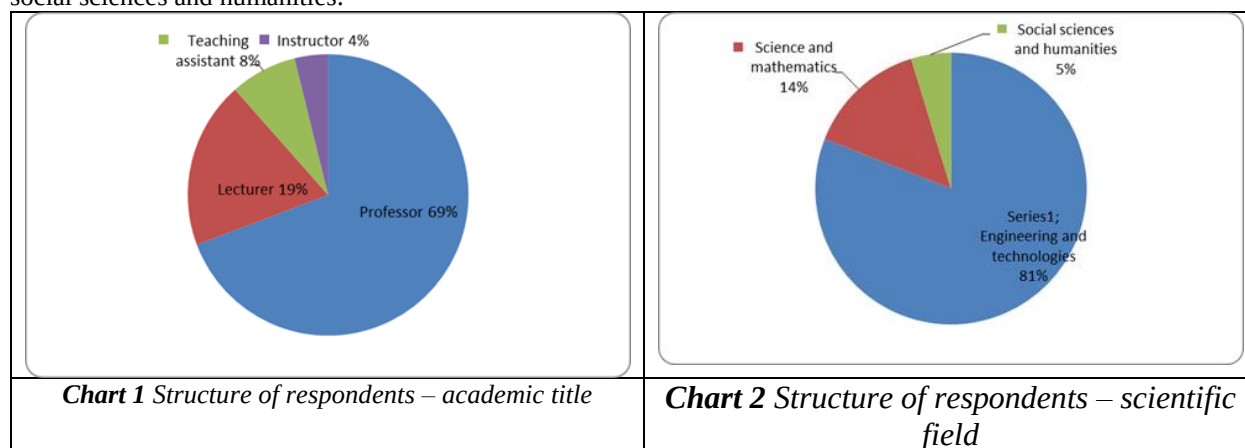
The first step in establishment of an organized system in this area was mapping the CE offer at Serbian HEIs [7] It was conducted in 2017 using two questionnaires, one (Questionnaire 1) meant for the HEI management and the other (Questionnaire 2) for teachers. The former consisted of a set of questions about institutional framework regulating continuing education while the latter contained questions for teachers engaged in continuing education.

#### 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The answers to questions asked in Questionnaire 1 shows that CE is one of the activities realized in TCAS as stated in its mission and Statute.

The results of Questionnaire 2 are especially interesting since they include the teachers' answers and show to what extent they are involved in CE as well as their attitude to this activity. We will concentrate on the results of those questions which could help understand the importance of institutional regulation of CE. Here are the most interesting results.

First of all, the results of the answers in connection with the structure of respondents (Chart 1): only 21 out of 35 teachers or 60% answered the questions given in the Questionnaire: 18 professors, or 69%, 5 lecturers, or 19%, 2 teaching assistants, or 8% and only one instructor, or 4%. Having in mind that TCAS has study programmes in engineering and technology field, the structure of teachers according to scientific fields they realize their teaching is quite understandable (Chart 2): most of them teach in the above mentioned field (81%), there follow those who teach courses in science and mathematics (14%) and the smallest percentage (5%) goes to teachers who teach courses within social sciences and humanities.



The years of teaching experience give us a pretty interesting picture (Chart 3). It seems that the teachers most interested in CE are those with more than 20 years of teaching experience (43%) followed by those with 5 to 10 years of teaching experience (38%). What may be considered a surprise is that only 14% of teachers experienced in teaching for 10 to 20 years participated in this survey. Those are the teachers who generally completed their formal education, they are experienced enough and halfway through their career so they should be reasonably considered as the leaders of every kind of action. On the other hand, only 5% of them with up to 5 years of experience decided to participate in the survey, which is understandable since they are at the beginning of their teaching career. Another interesting result is obtained from the analysis of the answers to a set of questions regarding teachers' involvement in CE programmes (Chart 4): 76% or 16 teachers claimed that they had never been involved in these programmes; when asked about the reason for that (Chart 5): 71% or 15 of them said that they had never been offered/invited to participate

in them. Five of them or 24% did not answer this question and one, or 5%, said that the offered course was not within his/her expertise.

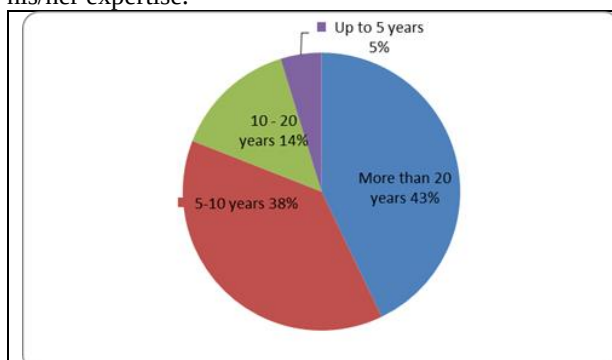


**Chart 3** Years of teaching experience

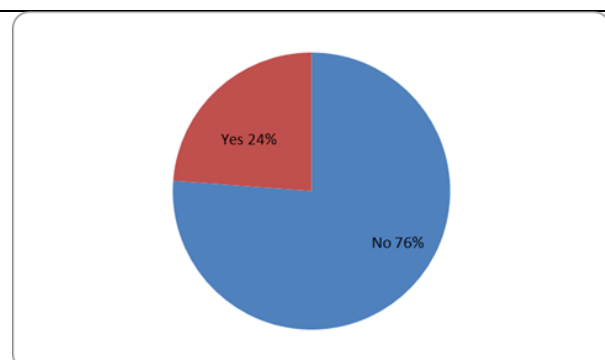


**Chart 4** Teachers' involvement in CE programmes

When asked if TCAS offered any kind of incentives for teachers involved in CE, some of those (4) who said that they had never been offered/invited to participate in CE courses gave a positive answer! Most of them (12, or 57%) answered “I don’t know” (Chart 6). This indicates that there is an urgent need to regulate this activity which would involve various incentives to teachers.

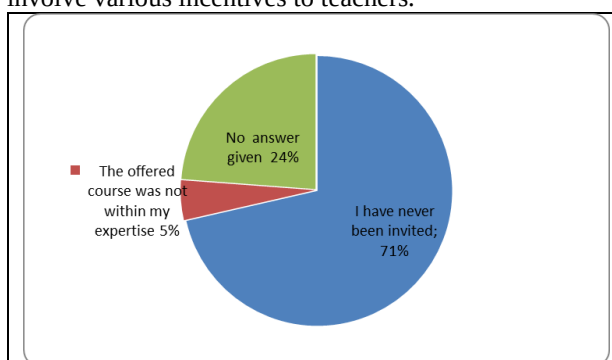


**Chart 5** Reasons for non-involvement in CE programmes

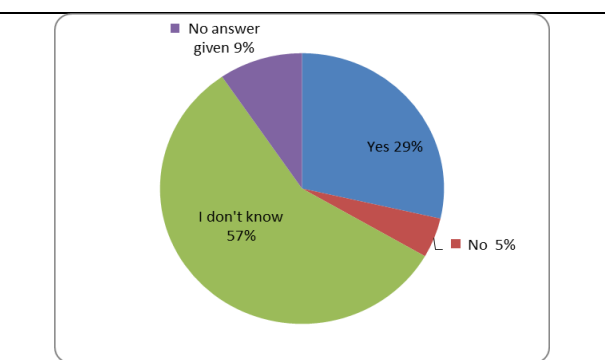


**Chart 6** Does your institution offer some type of incentives for the teachers engaged in CE programmes?

When answering the question whether CE courses are useful for full-time students (Chart 7), the respondents mostly answered with “Yes” (76%) and none of them chose “No” as their answer, while 24% ticked “I don’t know”. They were also asked to give reasons for their opinion and here are some of them: CE courses can help them boost their CV, find a job, acquire new knowledge and skills or update the ones they already have. These results are encouraging since we can see that most of them recognized the importance of CE for former students as well.

Finally, it is interesting that almost the same percentage of respondents said they planned to organize CE course (48%) as those who gave a negative answer to this question (47%) (Chart 8). At the same time, this result could be worrying although the reasons for negative answers are unknown, they could be either the absence of proper regulations, lack of any interest or experience in delivering those courses.

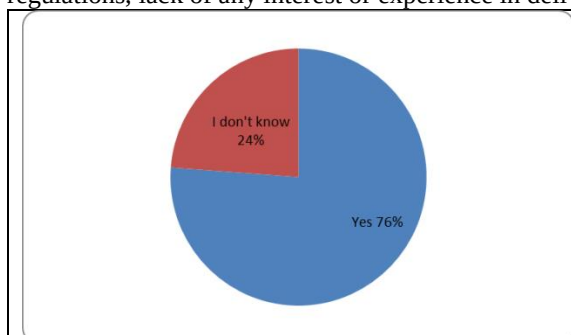


**Chart 7** Do you think that these courses can be useful for full-time students?

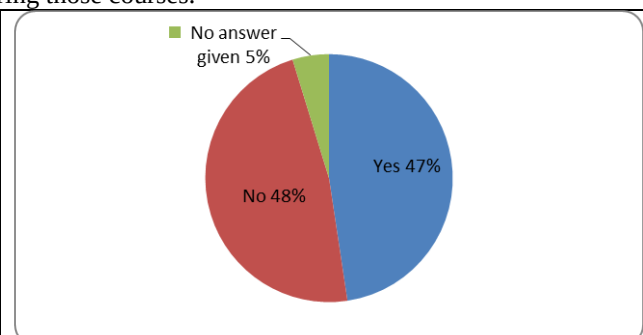


**Chart 8** Do you plan to realize new courses?

## 6. CONCLUSION

According to the answers obtained from respondents, CE courses at the TCAS are organized from time to time, depending on the demands of interested stakeholders or within national or international projects. The percentage of

teachers who participated in this survey (60%) could lead to the conclusion that it could be higher if there were clear regulations and rules and if they were more familiar with the term itself. Nevertheless, the result which shows that a relatively high percentage of teachers have never been invited to teach CE courses must not be neglected especially because most of them teach courses which are essential for qualifications offered by TCAS study programmes.

In order to improve this activity at TCAS there are several recommendations which could be offered: To include CE as a regular and on-going activity of TCAS, to give the opportunity to teachers to develop courses, to create a database available to the public with information about courses/trainings/workshops and published on the official site and the media, to establish a cooperation with companies, Chamber of Commerce, National Employment Service and other stakeholders to gather information about their demands

On the other hand, TCAS must provide a systematically regulated institutional mission which should offer incentives for teachers since CE activity cannot rely only on teachers' enthusiasm. When defining incentives for teachers one must have in mind two things: first, teachers must be motivated to play the role of authors of the appropriate courses based on relevant information, or their providers, or both, and on the other hand, when engaged in any kind of activity related to CE courses, their work must be fairly and properly valued and clearly defined beforehand. In this regard, there are two types of incentives which may be recommended:

1. Non-material incentives, aimed at building of mind-set of teachers on the significance of their participation in the development and realization of CE activities in terms of their personal and professional development (opportunity to boost their CVs, professional advancement and promotion, establishment of contacts with stakeholders, work with participants in multidisciplinary teams.
2. Material incentives, which include properly valued time they dedicate to this work, satisfaction of being able to provide personal financial benefits and on the level of the institutions as well, in order to invest them in further personal and institutional development.

CE activity could be best organized by a specially established unit which would be led by a small team of teachers who would collect data about participants in CE, various information necessary to develop on demand courses tailored specifically to the needs of particular users and would be responsible for administrative work.

Finally, the incentives for all stakeholders on national and local levels are not to be neglected. Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, Chamber of Commerce, National Employment Service would have a prepared database with all relevant information which they could use in preparing their strategies and plans for improvements in education and cooperation with the industry. Likewise, industry, especially on the local level, would have a reliable and competent partner that could respond to its need for well-trained employees.

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