BRIDGING THE GAP: ENHANCING COMMUNICATION AND PRODUCTIVITY IN ACADEMIC RELATIONS – EMPHASIS ON THE PROFESSOR-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

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Abstract

This study highlights challenges in communication between students and academic teachers. In addition, it describes how the university working environment, with its positives and negatives, influences professors' working productivity. As part of a research project, interviews were conducted with lecturers from higher education institutions in Hungary and Montenegro. The respondents were asked about their teaching methods, experiences in common communication, and collegial, and administrative problems that cause stress. Through the interview method, this article provides a view from the inside of the academic individual personalities representing sometimes hidden perspectives of the collective. The study shows the importance of a proper professor's approach to students and a healthy educator-student relationship. This research contributes to illuminating the multifaceted dimensions of communication in modern educational environments, as it provides a better view of the academic environment and helps in determining better ways of obtaining professor-student productivity.

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Discipline: pedagogy, sociology

Absztrakt

A SZAKADÉK ÁTHIDALÁSA: A KOMMUNIKÁCIÓ ÉS A PRODUKTIVITÁS FEJLESZTÉSE AZ AKADÉMIAI KAPCSOLATOKBAN – FÓKUSZBAN AZ OKTATÓ-HALLGATÓ KAPCSOLAT

A tanulmány a hallgatók és az egyetemi oktatók közötti kommunikációval kapcsolatos kihívásokat tárgyalja, emellett bemutatja, hogy hogyan befolyásolja az egyetemi munkakörnyezet a professzorok munkateljesítményét. A kutatási projekt részeként a szerző magyar és montenegrói felsőoktatási intézmények oktatóival készített interjúkat. A válaszadókat a szerző a tanítási módszereikről, a közös kommunikációval kapcsolatos tapasztalataikról, valamint azon kollegiális és adminisztratív problémákról kérdezte, amelyek stresszt okoznak a számukra. Az interjúk az oktatók személyes nézőpontjából mutatják be a kollektíva olykor rejtett perspektíváit. A tanulmány rávilágít a megfelelő professzori hozzáállás és az oktató-hallgató kapcsolat fontosságára. A kutatás azáltal, hogy jobb rálátást biztosít az akadémiai környezetre, hozzájárul a kommunikáció sokrétű dimenzióinak megvilágításához, valamint segít meghatározni a professzor-hallgató produktivitás elérésének módjait.

Kulcsszavak: akadémia, tanítási módszerek, kommunikációs problémák, oktató-hallgató kapcsolat, munkakörnyezet, akadémiai közösség, akadémiai kapcsolatok

Diszciplína: neveléstudomány, szociológia

As one of the forms of dialectics, the discipline of leading a discourse and drawing a response from the audience, the most productive and valuable method is the Socratic method. The Socratic method was named after the famous Greek philosopher Socrates, who lived around 469 BC (Knežić et al., 2010). This method that "[...]challenges one to produce reasons for one's view" (Ryan, 2023, para.17) arose from the life that the Greek philosopher led since he had the habit of walking around the city and engaging in spontaneous but philosophical conversations, gathering people to talk about a specific topic. Conversations about beauty, justice, the meaning of life, knowledge, and wisdom were pedagogical approaches that encouraged people to find deeper meaning and answers to the given topic or question. (Delić & Bećirović, 2016) By asking questions and analysing the text and the discussed topic, Socrates 'extracted' information from his students and participants in the conversation. The Socratic method emphasises questioning and critical thinking and inspires curiosity and engagement in students, fostering a deeper understanding of the subject matter. In this context, it is interesting to mention that the word 'persuasion' comes from the Greek verb 'to believe'. Accordingly, Aristotle believed in using discourse not only to convey information but also to gain acceptance of a belief and agreement with an opinion (Corbett & Connors, 1999). Additionally, the most effective method for promoting critical thinking is backed by decades of research demonstrating that individuals who possess critical thinking skills are

persistent, decisive, and capable of addressing a variety of tasks (Helpern, 2013). As an interesting example, we also mention the extreme version of Socrates' method, presented as part of John Osborne's (1978) novella "The Paper Chase". The novel speaks about a particular professor, Kingsfield, who terrorises his students with intense cross-examination about legal cases, humiliating them in various ways to force ideas and critical thinking. This is fiction, of course, but also an idea Osborn based on the fact that Harvard professors were precisely these types fifty years ago. They had zero tolerance for students' unpreparedness and lack of information for each lecture (Walsh, 2012).

Research Objectives

This research focuses on the relationship between students and their educators, communication, the work environment of the professors, and the collegial relationship. It explores how these factors influence their knowledge transfer and the reception of knowledge by the students, as well as the productivity of both academic staff and students. In this sense, it is essential to incorporate the view that the revolutionised education should be about 'teaching for wisdom', which should be differentiated from the formal, academic knowledge one receives (Maxwell, 1984). The goal of this study is to receive information on:

- Methods professors use to communicate with their students when teaching, and the success of these methods in terms of grades and student interest in learning.
- The impact of the working environment on teachers and its influence on their scientific and teaching productivity, as well as their relationships with students. This includes working conditions, the level of stress, collegial relationships, and administrative issues.
- Advice from the professors on how to fix the issues in the mentioned areas and enhance productivity. Productivity in this instance

refers to: The students' side: better grades, more enthusiastic interaction during classes, and willingness to participate in extracurricular activities. From the professor's side: More efficient execution of work tasks, higher scientific activity (publishing articles, translations, and books), a more enthusiastic flow of lectures and transfer of knowledge, an increase of desire for self-improvement for the benefit of the academic community.

The study highlights the importance of a well-functioning relationship between colleagues and administrative staff, creating strong connections that foster a positive rapport between faculty and students. Together, they enhance student engagement and influence how students approach learning (Mattanah et.al., 2024). The respondents demonstrate through their experiences the crucial role that teachers play in the development of personal maturity, as well as the social, emotional, and cognitive aspects of a student's personality. Mentoring, effective communication, and a favourable learning environment contribute to this development (Doskach et.al., 2022).

Methodology

Interviews

Broniclaw Malinowski's psychological multifunctionalism and his focus on the importance of fieldwork served as a springboard for this research. The importance of fieldwork for understanding the individual, and based on the individual and the entire society, that is, in this case, the academic collective, was taken very seriously. Therefore, through conducting in-person interviews, we can gain insights into how society functions, as well as its emotions, spirit, and thoughts, all through individual interactions. (Malinowski a., 1932). Malinowski believed that basic needs arise from biological needs, and that culture in the form of

society is organized in such a way as to respond to those needs. If the individual is satisfied, the whole society will be satisfied (Malinowski b., 1944). Here, we are considering a group of academic professors who each have individual needs. When these needs are met within the academic environment, they can function more effectively and contribute positively to the group as a whole. This qualitative ethnographic method provides in-depth information primarily based on the emotional and intellectual thoughts and experiences of a human being. Personal contact and conducting live interviews encourage openness and relaxation, leading to the collection of valuable data. This approach allows for simplified questions to be addressed to the professors, with the possibility of additional, information, explanation and clarification of certain points that the researcher is interested in. Certain topics have complicated backgrounds that are often overlooked by quantitative methods. This method gives a personal voice to professors, which is often overshadowed by standardized and numerically focused research.

Participants – Process of selection (sampling and criteria)

For this research, we utilized the purposive sampling method. The participants were chosen based on their years of experience and practical work at the university with students, as we believe they adequately represent the seriousness of the topic. Additionally, the interview method allows participants to share their personal approaches, experiences (both challenging and inspiring), and impressions, adding a human aspect to enrich the research qualitatively. Research reflects on the way professors function in the work environment, interact with students and colleagues and react to specific problems, obstacles, and (un)favourable circumstances. This includes advice for students, colleagues, and the educational system. Each interview was conducted in person with a subsequent agreement to anonymity having touched up on some academic problems which might cause internal issues with some of the interlocutors.

In total, we interviewed eight educators: four from Montenegro and four from Hungary. Selected four professors are experts in cultural Anthropology and ethnography, mathematics and computer sciences, and literature. Four associate professors are experts in Anglo-American literature, English language, and migration studies. (table 1.). All have years of experience teaching, working with students, researching, and extracurricular academic activities. Three male participants are aged between 37 and 63. Five female participants are aged between 39 and 58.

The interviewees were met with the ethical regulations and the breadth of freedom they have as interlocutors: the interlocutor can refuse a question, get a different version of the question, and withdraw his statement. All interviews totalled 9 hours and 20 minutes, which were transferred verbatim into the transcript material. The interviews lasted between November 13, 2023 and April 19, 2024 (when the last interview was conducted).

The content analysis

Academic beginnings Most of the examined respondents started their careers as very young people who, in most cases, were also newly graduated teachers. Within this question, they talked about the transition from a student role to the role of an educator. Although most admitted they were very young and new to things, they did not feel a significant change. When asked what attitude they took regarding the amount of authoritativeness, all of them declared a "relaxed, friendly approach" with minor deviations.

Table 1. Participants. Source: Author.

Hungary			Montenegro		
Code	Main research area	Degree	Code	Main research area	Degree
HU A	Philosophical anthropology, German philosophy in the XIX. century, history of cultural anthropology, assimilation and minorities	Dr. habil. in Philosophy, professor	MNE A	Anglo-American literature and culture, literary theory and criticism	PhD in Literature, associate professor.
HU B.	Sacredness and dance, the relationship between movement symbolism, dance and Christian culture	Dr. habil. in History and Ethnography, professor	MNE B	Anglo-American literature, literature and religion/psychology /sociology studies	PhD in Literature, associate professor
HU C	Travel writing studies, migration studies, US culture, US-Hungarian relations	Dr. habil. in literature, associate professor	MNE C	American and British literature and culture, literary criticism	PhD in literature, professor.
HU D	Mathematical Analysis, Functional Equations, Inequalities Computational Mathematics, Virtual Reality	Dr. habil. in Mathematics, professor	MNE D	Anglo-American literature and literary criticism	PhD in Literature, associate professor

When asked what attitude they took regarding the amount of authoritativeness, all of them declared a "relaxed, friendly approach" with minor deviations. None of the answers have a single extreme feature but a positive connotation with minor differences that depend on the character. Some experienced the transition from student to teacher quickly, without any additional adjustments. Certain interlocutors for this research took a relaxed and friendly approach towards their students. These individuals usually belong to a group that identifies with the students and does not believe in the firm approach. **MNE C**, being against authoritarianism, describes her approach as "a string that should not be pulled too tight". "Relaxed and friendly approach" was an almost identical response among male ones who, in the transition, might have experienced short-term discomfort due to new circumstances but nothing significant. The female lecturers had a similar attitude, essentially the same, with remarks that in the beginning, as young teachers, they had a dilemma about how to position themselves. They even, perhaps, took a slightly firm stance due to excessive expectations of themselves, inexperience, the naivety of a young person and the desire to prove themselves. They see it as a subconscious defence mechanism that requires an authoritative attitude from a young educator, which, with time, experience and self-work, grows into a balanced, measured and open attitude towards young people who are learning.

The relationship between a student and a professor: then and now

„Research shows that the stimulation of a student's learning interest depends on a lecturer's personal competencies, the teaching style, teaching involvement, overall approaches, methods and other teaching aids used." (Rebisz et.al, 2016, as

cited in Boyer, 1997; Herda-Płonka, 2013, p.50) Respondents complained that previously, the relationship between students and lecturers was strained, alienated and distant which encompassed Hungary and Montenegro. Respondent **HU B** marks it as a "relic of the past" and following the impositions of that era, relations were also formed. **MNE B** points out that now it seems drastic to everyone because of the "familiarity" syndrome that exists today, which was not natural back then. Therefore, in those days, no one thought the change process should be initiated if something was "unnatural". On the other hand, the other respondents note that the change was initiated later and mostly came from the "Anglo-American" side. On that matter, **HU C** claims described their institute was always like a small island: isolated from the norm both in the past and today. They and their colleagues never had a problem with the strictness, distance and limitations of the precisely because their older, now retired colleagues also studied and worked in America. Even fifty years ago, their work was much more modern than other institutes today.

Positive and negative results from the professors' behaviour towards students

HU D stated that detailed explanations and even returning to the essential things were the keys to a better pedagogical approach and productivity. He pointed out that he won over many students and even former 'math despisers' because of this approach. Some professors in earlier days had zero tolerance for students' unpreparedness and lack of information for each lecture (Walsh, 2012). According to HU D, this proved to be a handicap for the students and a method that caused regression, not progress. This is precisely why this teacher supports the opposite position: going back to the basics, but more on that in the analysis part. Many students at the university are still stuck at

some point when they do not understand something, and they carry it with them throughout their subsequent schooling. This approach is not the case with his colleagues, who believe that the basics should not be bothered with. HU A claims that students are mostly motivated by the motivation of their teacher, his/her enthusiasm and passion for his/her subject.

The process of "everyday recon-ceptualisation" or perspective change is vital, and this recon-ceptualisation of the self is used in psychotherapy and has proven effective. For a person to make a change, two phases must occur: a contrasting process between a poorly adjusted self and the current better self and the transformative point that led to the realisation (Ribeiro, 2022). Following Ribeiro's example, *I was in a non-productive or stagnant situation. However, I started doing things differently (reconceptualisation – transformative point). Now, I am more productive and moving forward. In this way, an educator must constantly move from the potential point of stagnation, be aware of it, and finally, come to a new position of change that looks at things differently.*

Each lecture establishes a psychological connection between the students and the lecturer, and the state of the students (positive or negative) reflects the lecturer and his approach. On the other hand, "students define excellency in teaching as holding strong interpersonal relationships that are positive, supportive, respectful, and inspirational. Interpersonal relationships are essential in the context of teaching, regardless of the educator's knowledge"(Saidi & Vu, 2021, 174-175)

Furthermore, interviewees jointly point out that encouraging students through the framework of "you can do it" and having an honest conversation with the students about their aspirations can work. Humour is an essential item that should be implemented in classes so that students can relax and thus be more productive. However, the problem is in the trend of decreasing concentration and focus.

Many professors struggle with motivating students to work. However, Mark (2023) states that "[...]focused attention occurs in rhythms, and it seems to correspond to the ebb and flow of our mental resources that we have available" (para.10). Also, certain extremes leave the teachers in no man's land, which **MNE A** called the "bad generation syndrome". This does not necessarily mean literally that the entire generation is bad at work and productivity. However, according to the testimony of some, no matter how hard they try, they find groups of students who are not interested in active work. Such groups should not be presented with the work dynamics that other students would otherwise receive but should be approached with something new.

Radical change in teaching and relating to students

Reevaluating Approaches to Teaching and Student Relations

All respondents agree that the training system, and therefore the access to students, should be changed radically in the following areas: increasing standards and knowledge criteria, better control of cheating on exams, better control of the production of master's degrees, and changing the Bologna system. This and increasing awareness of proper academic behaviour, will bring things back in order. This should eventually be implemented in the program as a compulsory subject for students and, on the other hand, as training for staff. More specifically, no matter what the conditions are or whatever a teacher has to deal with, one should be their own person and not create a universal personality for everyone. "Never close your emotion out of the teaching activity", notes **HU A**, adding that a professor is, first of all, an emotional being and that if he never shows himself, he will never be credible to his students. He will not establish the necessary connection with them.

HU B spoke about about the 'Kodaly Method', an educational approach to music, designed in Hungary by the Hungarian composer Zoltán Kodály during the mid-twentieth century. The efforts of the creator of this method were absolute inspiration for further developments in teaching. Kodály criticized the inadequacy and obsolescence of the music education system, educators, and general preparation for music lectures (Dobszay, 1972). This now thoroughly established pedagogical method continues to serve its purpose around the world (Houlahan & Tacka, 2015). Again, bearing that in mind, it is clear that new methods are still needed, following new technological possibilities, precisely because the 'relics from the past', that **HU B** spoke about, are still present.

In the end, everything mentioned goes hand in hand with the general 'dehumanisation' of sciences, which is the road to disaster. The academic community, **MNE B** adds to the previous sentence, must return to its beginnings as soon as possible and bring humanism back to universities, especially in technical sciences. Under dehumanization, **MNE B**. sees a catastrophic decline in empathy and compassion among staff and students, as well as people in the community in general. The focus falls on career ambitions, positions, and career advancement.

Being "on guard" with the students: The possible issues

Finding professional boundaries in professor-student relationships can be a significant challenge. Mohammadi et. al. categorise these boundaries into three main areas: emotional (respectful behaviour and avoidance of emotional relationships), communicative (transparency and privacy), and power boundaries (transparency and non-discrimination) (2023). If, for example, these behavioural fields are taken into account, it can be said that the professors have given their own examples for this research that they adhere to. They were asked to

express their most significant concerns regarding interaction with students, and the majority expressed their fear that a relationship with a student that is too friendly is unnecessary due to possible abuses. Several interlocutors are generally friendly, but outside the university premises, they do not communicate further because that is not their job. Others know how to go for an occasional coffee with a student and do not see anything counterproductive because the boundaries always exist and the rules at the university are always respected. According to **HU D,** certain teachers cross the line in the sense of excessive emotional investment in something that should not be their burden; for example, students cheat on the exam, no matter how hard one tries. After that, the teacher takes the situation personally and becomes emotionally destabilised. There is no need for it because, in the end, the educator is not responsible for the student's unethicality.

The model of a "golden student."

Every academic or non-academic teacher, including those interviewed, likes to see students who genuinely participate in class and express their interest in what they are teaching. Of course, that interest cannot be 100% for every subject because the students themselves are overloaded. However, the respondents stated, that it is nice to see a student who pays attention, provides feedback, gives constructive answers, asks constructive questions and is motivated to work. For this research, the term "golden student" was coined to represent a student who is not perfect but a young man or woman on the right path. The term "golden student" is included as it is a standard and/or a habit to use "perfect student" as a phrase to describe the most desirable one. In author's opinion, there is no perfect human being, let alone a teacher or a student. Having that in mind and the usual Serbian phrase "golden middle" (used to describe 'the best of both worlds' but not perfect

situations), the term "golden student" was coined in order to question the professors. A young person who knows that they must use everything the academic community offers them to reach their goal. The teachers say that a "golden student" describes a young person unafraid of future challenges, constantly thinking about their life path and the next step. Such a student, states **MNE B,** not only actively participates in the university program and the department where he studies but is also active in other fields and contributes to the community. A golden student is "the one who can realise this type of self-reflexivity permanently", and as **HU A** adds, "[...] possesses a critical awareness to discern what holds value and what does not."

Cheating on exams

Male professors uniformly expressed that cheating on tests does not disturb them emotionally, even if students persistently try to do it with their maximum effort. They do not experience this as their defeat but as the moral instability of the students themselves, who should be responsible for themselves. A "golden student" who could potentially disappoint their lecturer would never even put himself in that situation. Therefore, the others are not worth the emotional reaction. Students who cheat regularly or have bizarre ways of cheating and accompanying reactions, most often fail the exam or generally have a terrible passing score. Female professors described their responses to cheating attempts much more efficaciously. They stated that such situations used to shock them a lot and even lead to emotional stress due to the student's immorality, irresponsibility and unethicality, but not because of the personal implications. It was most often at the beginning of their career, but even today, students surprise them from time to time. There are already extreme deviations from normal student behaviour here. **MNE D** discussed an incident where a

student viciously denied the obvious cheating mishap using scaring tactics, blackmail and manipulation to avoid the failing situation. **MNE B** also cited a situation where she saw a female student cheating. When she got caught, the student said: "What's the big deal, professor? Everyone does it." The respondent says she was not shocked by the act of cheating itself but by the student's lack of moral awareness.

As for students' reactions to being caught cheating, interlocutors report that the students feel embarrassed, apologetic, and defeated. Some immediately apologise, some plead guilty later, and others refuse to admit anything, even when caught red-handed. On the other side of cheating on exams, educators **HU C** and **HU B** strive to provide conditions in which cheating is impossible or has no sense or benefit. In such cases, they prepare tests for which answers on the internet are irrelevant or even allow the use of literature (but not electronic means) to help with essay-type tests. Such circumstances benefit everyone: the teacher experiences less stress, and the students have additional, albeit almost seeming, help with the test.

Work environment and private life stress: The effect on the productivity and relations with students and colleagues

Most interviewees agree that stress rarely comes directly from the "classroom" or interaction with students but rather from circumstances at work and life situations outside of work. Situations at work often include stress caused by overload and the imposition of various tasks that an employee has at the university. The problem, as **MNE D** says, is not in the variety of functions but in the quantity. A professor is expected to be an expert in everything, a multidisciplinary person a lecturer, a promoter and an administrative worker with no expiration date, and always with 'full batteries'.

Chronic stress can negatively affect professors' health, impacting their ability to perform well if they are tired or underpaid. **MNE A** warns, using a personal example, that stress at work can disrupt the physical health of professors. Some studies highlight the negative impact of workplace stress on the physical health of academics. Common stressors in the academic environment can include high demands, lack of support from colleagues, hierarchical tensions, and broader institutional or political challenges. Research indicates that fostering a supportive and collegial atmosphere and prioritising academic staff's well-being can lead to more effective and motivated individuals. As Collie et al. (2012) note, teachers (and by extension, academics) are not isolated from their environments; their perceptions of this environment significantly influence their well-being and motivation. A healthy, low-stress environment is therefore considered essential for academic professionals to thrive and make meaningful contributions to their research and teaching.

Challenges in the academic environment

Some researchers have discussed the impact of a 'toxic environment' on well-being, where prolonged exposure to stress can have detrimental effects (Sonnentag & Frese, 2003). While stress is often linked to the desire for efficiency, the challenges in such environments may stem from factors beyond individual control, including poor management and lack of social support (Taris & Schreurs, 2009). Research suggests that continued exposure to negative environments could lead to long-term health consequences, particularly mental health and cardiovascular issues (Kivimäki & Steptoe, 2018). However, taking everything into account, it is essential to base conclusions on a wider range of evidence to fully understand the broader implications of these findings.

Administrative obstructions: Potential impact on professors' productivity

Although interlocutors agree that bureaucracy is necessary and, unfortunately, always a handicap for an academic, they also add that it can hold back an individual eager for progress, development and change. Academia is a competitive world in which adversity, favouritism, and coercion are celebrated (DalPezzo & Jett, 2010), all for survival at work. Even that is debatable because the pressure to publish studies is high and overwhelming. (Morrissette, 2011). Practically speaking, administrative sabotage can be extreme, and due to the rigidity of the system and the indifference of the people who represent it (because the system is not an imaginary thing), it can lead to more significant problems such as job loss and loss of health due to stress.

Non-collegiality: Potential impact on professors' productivity

The respondents agree that non-collegiality is a moral disease in every working environment and that they will never have peace if they allow themselves to be disturbed. As a part of the life attitude, "I will not achieve anything by stressing", **HU D** always tries to understand their colleagues. However, they admit that the internal discord within the department can create big problems and distance the academic community from progress. Students refuse to cooperate when they notice no mutual respect and functioning among the collective that teaches them.

One must ask what "non-collegiality" really is: trivial everyday moments or crucial life situations. A person should not deal with it too much because it can affect health, but what to do when difficult moments come, and there is no support from colleagues? **MNE B** cited a problematic period of job loss when there was no collegial support as an example of non-collegiality. In addition, some interfered negatively instead of positively, which caused them to be incredibly disappointed in humanitarianism. **MNE A** conveys a similar situation when they did not receive support from many colleagues, and some even tried to sabotage them during a difficult moment for their health. However, there are always examples of humanity in those moments which make a person feel hopeful and move forward.

The interviewed professors concluded that non-collegiality stems from a complex combination of private-individual problems (see section 'Work environment and private life stress) and the imposition of academic pressures for higher scientific achievements, which in turn leads to competitive stress. Overall, these factors are not conducive to collegial relations. These problems can diminish the put-in work and performance in front of students.

Advice for the students

All interviewees offer one piece of the most crucial advice: "Do not be afraid!". In this spirit, they advise students not to be afraid to constantly ask questions and introduce themselves to unfamiliar situations because they will learn from such circumstances. They advise students not to miss the opportunities offered, even if they seem fruitless. Such opportunities may be highly beneficial in the long term, eventually leading to job opportunities or scholarships. Students must make contacts and meet as many people as possible, which increases their chances of finding a path to success. Interviewed lecturers advise students to preserve their personalities and not blend into the crowd permanently. Thinking freely and engaging in mental, physical and spiritual activities prepares a young person for life challenges. Therefore, students should work on themselves so that, in the end, their future does not escape from them.

Advice for colleagues

MNE D advised her colleagues to increase their receptors for accessibility, empathy and cooperation - with students and colleagues. Although challenging, professors advise one another to exclude emotional trifles from everyday business life and not allow them to affect their essence. Cooperation is crucial, states **HU A,** between colleagues because it is not worth being a "lone wolf" today. It used to be the standard and not a rarity; however, today, as one says, it is just a handicap. An educator must pay attention to their empathy towards students. However, they should remember that they are not there to take on the responsibility of therapists, psychologists or, in some extreme cases, mothers or fathers. Such moments can only worsen the situation if the person is not qualified for what they are doing, adds **HU C.** The advice is to be more interested in "how" and not only in "what". **MNE C** advises colleagues to find their long-lost receptors for feedback and listen to their students better. This happens due to the gradual decline of interest and desire to work. All conclude that no one is untouchable when it comes to mistakes, showing emotions, and harmful practices, but that in the end, the professor must have a standard and adhere to it when it comes to: keeping one's word, transparency, clarity, precision, empathy, and understanding.

Thoughts on the Bologna educational system

In general, looking at the system, teachers are the ones most affected by the problem of being burdened with administrative duties that lecturers should not have to deal with. Also, the amount of varied work is too large and underpaid. The system should focus on those issues first to improve the staff's productivity. The "cosmetic changes" are pointless. The ones who run "the system" need to establish priorities and focus on them: what works for the team and what does not. A particular

problem of universities is the lack of pedagogical knowledge among the academic staff, states **MNE B** To make matters worse, she adds, some institutions do not even present it as a necessity. Professors noted that the criteria should be increased. **HU B** claims that the style, loftiness and quality of the lectures have declined so much that teaching at the bachelor's level now is the same as giving a class to high school students. The Master has become the new Bachelor. As for the Bologna education system, all agree that they do not see the point in such a system and do not understand why it is still active if the results (or lack thereof) clearly show that it does not work. **HU C** claimed the point of view of his occupation, he does not see the point in the Bologna system because it is not practical. In the past, when students finished their five-year basic studies, they would have the teaching profession. Today, after three years of bachelor's degree, students do not have a profession and do not even know what exact knowledge they have acquired

This issue is not only a concern among professors interviewed for this research, but also among others from the academic community, criticizing the Bologna Process for lacking direct academic involvement, as addressed in the article by Corbett and Henkel. Decisions are largely made by political representatives, with academics often being sidelined, leaving the implementation inconsistent. The authors highlight a disconnect between political rhetoric and actual academic practice (Corbett & Henkel, 2013). The countries involved in the Bologna Process have pursued different policy paths due to varying starting points, domestic issues, and governance structures, and this has led to reforms and outcomes that sometimes deviate from the original intentions of the Bologna Process (Huisman et.al., 2012). The differing contexts also explain why some countries have achieved certain objectives more effectively and sooner than others while facing challenges in

achieving different goals (Huisman et.al., 2012). The fact that these issues are being discussed twelve years later highlights the extent of the problem.

On a positive note, some professors have high-lighted that the Bologna system, in its various applications across countries, offers greater oppor-tunities for continuous, lifelong, and flexible learning. One of the most notable advantages is the increased mobility for both students and teachers, which helps reduce barriers to professional and academic mobility.

Limitations of the study

The small sample size significantly limits the ability to generalise the findings to the wider population. This limitation affects the conclusions drawn from this study and their applications to different contexts, settings, or larger groups. Addi-tionally, the risk of bias exists for the study may not capture the full range of experiences and perspectives. Therefore, in the future development of this study, a larger sample size will be implemented to better represent the diversity of students, teachers, and academic environments.

Conclusions based on the analysis of the answers

How can the student-professor relationship, general communication, and productivity of both sides be improved? Based on the responses provided by the participants, there is an indication that improvements in the work environment could significantly enhance the well-being and effectiveness of professors. Many respondents em-phasised the importance of creating a work environment where professors can perform their duties effectively while building healthy relationships with their students. A stress-free and supportive environment is crucial for academic staff to work efficiently. Work responsibilities must be distributed in a transparent and manageable way

to avoid overloading employees. The university must improve the efficiency and fairness of task assignments, ensuring that professors can con-centrate on their areas of expertise and make the most significant contributions to the academic community. This underscores the importance of maintaining a healthy work environment, as a toxic atmosphere, including issues like miscommu-nication with administrative staff, lack of colle-giality, and inadequate empathy, can negatively impact staff health. Research suggests that chronic exposure to stress can have long-lasting effects on the brain (Lupien et al., 2009).

Regarding empathy, some respondents noted that a lack of empathy among colleagues or admi-nistrative staff can contribute to a toxic work environment. Empathy is a complex concept, often confused with sympathy and compassion, and studies suggest that while empathy can be automatic, it can also be cultivated and regulated (Singer et al., 2004, Hodges & Wegner, 1997). This insight aligns with the respondents' views that in environments where status is prioritized over empathy, collaboration and support among collea-gues may suffer. However, it is important to note that several respondents also shared positive ex-periences, such as instances where a collaborative approach led to mutual support and personal growth. These experiences highlight the potential for positive change in the work environment.

While challenges exist, many respondents acknowledged that support from colleagues and the administration could improve significantly with a more open and empathetic approach to commu-nication and interaction. It was also mentioned that academic professionals in poor health struggle to establish effective communication with their stu-dents, which, in turn, affects their contributions to the academic community. Insufficient pay was highlighted as another demotivating factor, particularly for professors who are responsible for teaching large groups of students.

In discussing the core issues affecting the higher education system, respondents emphasized that academic staff must take personal responsibility for their actions and behaviour within institutions. While students are also accountable for their actions, professors, as more experienced individuals, bear considerable responsibility in shaping the educational environment. To be effective educators, professors need to adapt to changing educational demands and student needs. Many respondents indicated that they are open to exploring innovative teaching methods, recognising that traditional approaches may no longer be as effective in today's rapidly evolving academic landscape. A more empathetic and flexible approach to teaching could support both students' learning and professors' professional development while maintaining high standards of professionnalism.

On the other hand, although academic life might sometimes prove to be challenging, it is clear that the supportive relationships established between students and faculty, as well as among colleagues, play a key role in overcoming these obstacles. A harmonious, trusting relationship with students can be incredibly motivating, transforming potential stressors into sources of inspiration and fulfilment. Likewise, a sense of companionship and support among colleagues strengthens the collective drive to succeed. As one interviewee put it, maintaining humanity in every interaction, whether with students, colleagues, or administrative duties, is essential to overcoming academic obstacles. In the end, mutual respect and care within these relationships ensure a successful productive academic environment in which both faculty and students can thrive.

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