



# Teacher Training for Pupils' Sexuality Education in Lithuania: An Evaluation of Study Programmes and the Preparedness of Students of Pedagogical Studies

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**Annotation.** The paper presents findings from an evaluative mixed-methods study on teacher training for sexuality education in Lithuania. The analysis of the course outlines of pedagogical studies has identified the scope of preparation for sexuality education, the topics of the content presented, and a typical programme of preparation for sexuality education. Based on the data from the survey of students and graduates, conclusions about their readiness to carry out sexuality education were formulated.

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**Keywords:** *teachers' training, sexuality education, social sensitivity, teachers' training standards, components of sexuality education.*

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## Introduction

Sexuality education is a particularly timely issue in the context of present-day education policy and practice. Nowadays, students live in a highly sexualised socio-cultural environment: they watch films and TV series with sexual (including crude) elements (Bleakley et al., 2012), and most of them are exposed to (or consciously seek out) online pornography, where there are no boundaries to sexual content (Abeele et al., 2014). In this context, even moderate-quality sexuality education has an added value: it creates

preconditions for dialogue on sexuality topics among students, teachers, parents, and other individuals. However, the lack of teacher training in the implementation of socially sensitive sexuality education curriculum leads to teachers' anxiety about making mistakes, angering or upsetting parents and students, receiving public backlash, losing their jobs, or even being perceived as a paedophile (Shannon & Smith, 2015).

As previous research has shown (Bytautas & Daukilas, 2022; 2023), sexuality education is a socially sensitive topic: it is of interest to teachers, students, parents, and influencers who have their own views on how sexuality education should be delivered. For this reason, the job of a teacher of sexuality education carries a disproportionately high social responsibility, which causes psychological and social distress.

Organizing the education process in such difficult working conditions makes it particularly important to properly prepare teachers. For this reason, the following *research questions* are posed:

- To what extent and in what structural components is the preparation for sexuality education provided in teacher education programmes?
- What are the competencies of pre-service teachers to carry out activities in the field of sexuality education?

*The aim of the study.* To investigate the content of teacher training in the field of sexuality education for pupils and the competencies of pre-service teachers to carry it out.

## Experiences of teacher training for sexuality education in Lithuania and other countries

As education policymakers in Lithuania plan the implementation of sexuality education programmes (USURŠLU, 2000; RŠLU, 2007; SLURŠ, 2016; GĮU, 2023<sup>1</sup>), they are faced with the problem of a lack of competencies among educators. According to Bytautas and Daukilas (2023), “in just over half of the schools, teachers perceive the importance of sexuality education (59.5%), a quarter (25.1%) of the teacher respondents, describing their emotions before attending sexuality education classes, indicated that they do so “reluctantly” and even a third (32.3%) of the respondents indicated that they remain indifferent to this activity. Only a minority of respondents (42.9%) reported an adequate level of methodological training.” (p. 162).

Although sexuality education has been implemented in Lithuanian schools for more than 20 years, the issue of teacher training is highly problematic, given the issues of teacher competence and attitudes. However, this problem is not exclusive to Lithuania.

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<sup>1</sup> Universal health education, preparing for family and sexuality education program, 2000; Preparing for family and sexuality education program, 2007; Health, sexuality education and preparing for family program, 2016; Life skills education program, 2023.

As Eisenberg et al. (2010) point out, the lack of teacher training for sexuality education quality is observed in many countries around the world. One study found that while most teachers know the general guidelines for sexuality education content, 60% of them still do not understand how to teach the subject (UNFPA, 2014). This is particularly relevant given the importance of teacher training in sexuality education: Martínez et al. (2012) conducted a large-scale study (N = 3760) concluding that teacher training experience is one of the most important factors in ensuring the quality of sexuality education practice.

Since the introduction of sexuality education programmes in Northern Europe in the early 1960s, countries such as Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Netherlands have been leaders in terms of the quality and quantity of sexuality education (Bartz, 2007; Weaver et al., 2005). As Bartz (2007) notes, this success is mainly due to the homogeneity of the societies (religious, racial, cultural) and socio-economic advantages (level of education, financial status). The most effective and comprehensive teacher training for sexuality education is in the Nordic countries (Kontula, 2008). According to Timmerman (2009), teacher training in this field has been carried out in the Netherlands for more than 100 years.

Despite many years of experience in the field of sexuality education, a study in the UK found that there is no hope of an increase in the quality of teacher education in the near future (Dewhirst et al., 2014). As these researchers argue, such change is mostly hindered by an education policy stance that does not identify preparation for sexuality education as a necessary part of the teacher education curriculum. It is also hampered by the limited time resources that can be devoted to sexuality topics (Dewhirst et al., 2014).

Teacher education is defined in this paper as “Any of the formal programmes that have been established for the preparation of teachers at the elementary- and secondary-school levels” (Taylor, 2016, Introduction section, para. 1). Such a programme has three main elements. The first is the study of one or more academic, cultural or aesthetic subjects with the aim of furthering the student’s learning and providing him or her with the knowledge needed for his or her teaching career. The second is the study of pedagogical principles in the various disciplines of the social sciences (psychology, sociology, philosophy and history). The third element consists of practical training and experience in school. (Taylor, 2016) However, teacher education for sexuality education differs from teacher education for other subjects in terms of innovation: for other subjects, pre-service teachers arrive with a large baggage of observational practice, but for sexuality education, prior preparation is minimal. According to the model developed by Harland and Kinder (2014), a successful innovation in teacher education must achieve 9 outcomes: (1) Material and provisionary; (2) Informational (about the enhancement of content); (3) New awareness (about the meaning and value of the enhancement of content); (4) Value congruence; (5) Affective (eliciting teachers’ interest in the enhancement of content); (6) Motivational and attitudinal; (7) Knowledge and skills (enabling a full and comprehensive understanding of content change); (8) Institutional (commonality and collaboration); (9) Ensuring impact on practice (Harland & Kinder, 2014, pp. 670–674).

Despite the current educational ambition to integrate the content of the various subjects, such integration in the context of sexuality education often overshadows the content and reduces its quality. Carman et al. (2011) investigated teacher education programmes in relation to sexuality education in Australia and found that the content of sexuality, health, and physical education subjects tends to present sexuality education in an integrated way. An assessment of the curriculum content of 45 teacher training institutions in Australia found that only 9% of the relevant modules provided sufficient knowledge of sexual and reproductive health (Carman et al., 2011). O'Brien et al. (2020) highlight the lack of standardisation in teacher education. According to them, the curricula present different knowledge and emphasis on different components of sexuality education, leading to a fragmented understanding of sexuality and sexuality education.

Xiong et al. (2019) studied young teachers who are aware of the importance of sexuality education and found that teacher education must develop the skills: to (1) deliver sexual and reproductive health knowledge, (2) communicate with students, and (3) create a supportive learning environment. Due to the phenomenon of social sensitivity, these aspects are of particular importance in the sexuality education curriculum and are therefore indispensable for the success of the education process.

Allen (2007) stresses that for quality sexuality education to be ensured, teachers need to be encouraged to speak freely on socially sensitive topics. This is particularly important if pupils are to develop positive attitudes towards personal sexuality, including sexual pleasure, which is an important goal of sexuality education (Ollis, 2015). Ezer et al. (2022) found that it is the teacher's ease and comfort in discussing sexuality topics that are most strongly associated with the quality of sexuality education and the amount of class time devoted to it. However, this comfort takes time to achieve, which is why these authors recommend that preparation for sexuality education be organised from the first year of study and spread throughout the duration of studies.

According to de Haas and Hutter (2021), teachers' personal experiences of sexual initiation have a strong influence on their motivation for delivering sexuality education and on their empathy towards their students (although it is weakly related to the choice of curriculum). This makes it important for teacher education to focus on measures to promote self-reflection among prospective teachers, thereby identifying the factors that contribute to their intrinsic motivation for the delivery of sexuality education.

It is not only teaching competency that is important for the effectiveness of teacher education programmes in the field of sexuality education. Mayberry (2014) draws attention to the individual work done during the course: all participants in the study in question expressed the need to do individual assignments at home that are useful for practice, such as preparing lesson plans and curricula, collecting various teaching materials, and preparing oral presentations.

Despite the low prevalence of teacher training in sexuality education worldwide, various researchers have described the potential success of such training. Sinkinson

(2009) studied pre-service teachers during a 3-year study and found that training in sexuality education changed the participants' perceptions of sexuality and its education (they began to see it not only as disaster prevention but as an opportunity to develop open-mindedness, tolerance, and personal empowerment as well as personal and interpersonal relationship skills), and also changed attitudes towards sexuality education (the pre-service teachers began to see it as a fundamental part of health education). Kotkowski et al. (2021) conducted a 6-day (27-hour) teacher training programme on sexuality education and found an increase in the ability of study participants to teach randomly assigned sexuality education topics. In Burns and Hendriks's (2018) study, just a two-day workshop was sufficient to induce statistically significant changes in teachers' attitudes and fluency when talking about sexuality topics.

## Methods

*The design of the study.* The study adopted an evaluative research strategy based on the principle of triangulation. Firstly, an evaluation of the course outlines of teacher education programmes in the context of the structural components<sup>2</sup> of pupils' sexuality education was carried out, then the results obtained were revised by contacting programme supervisors or other responsible persons by telephone, and finally, the competencies of students and graduates of teacher education programmes to carry out pupils' sexuality education in the context of the different structural components of the content were assessed by means of a survey.

*The sample of the study.* Course outlines of interest in 23 of the 43 study programmes<sup>3</sup>, some of them abridged, were received which were shared by 5 of the 8 higher education institutions preparing teachers in Lithuania. Representatives of 38 programmes were subsequently contacted. 71 respondents took part in the quantitative survey (Table 1). Of those, 9 questionnaires were rejected due to a lack of internal logical consistency (verified by non-statistical methods) and incompleteness of the questionnaire (the rate of completion must be above 70%).

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<sup>2</sup> The structural components of sexuality education are clusters of sexuality education content topics: (1) Relationships; (2) Values, Rights, Culture, and Sexuality, (3) Understanding Gender; (4) Violence and Staying Safe; (5) Skills for Health and Well-Being; (6) The Human Body and Development; (7) Sexuality and Sexual Behaviour, and (8) Sexual and Reproductive Health (UNESCO et al., 2018).

<sup>3</sup> All STEAM specialisations were considered separate study programmes. Foreign language teacher education programmes are separated by main language (i.e. Polish and foreign (French) language as well as Polish and foreign (German) language were considered as one programme). The work did not assess programmes in special educational assistance, social pedagogy, preschool, and early childhood education. The list of study programmes also includes vocational pedagogical studies. Source: <https://www.aikos.smm.lt/Registrai/Studiju-programos/SitePages/Pagrindinis.aspx?ss=2c577252-bdd4-4e7a-8c18-4ce66bd1e4e2> [2023-06-10]

**Table 1**  
*Respondents' Socio-Demographics*

| Criterion                       | Values                               |                                |                                  |                                |                   |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------|
| By age                          | <i>20–24 yrs.</i>                    | <i>25–29 yrs.</i>              | <i>30–34 yrs.</i>                | <i>35–39 yrs.</i>              | <i>40–47 yrs.</i> |
|                                 | 37 (59.7%)                           | 7 (11.3%)                      | 4 (6.5%)                         | 7 (11.3%)                      | 7 (11.3%)         |
| By the year of study completion | <i>2021</i>                          | <i>2022 (4 yrs. completed)</i> | <i>2023 (3 yrs. completed)</i>   | <i>2024 (2 yrs. completed)</i> |                   |
|                                 | 6 (9.7%)                             | 26 (41.9%)                     | 22 (35.5%)                       | 8 (12.9%)                      |                   |
| By teaching experience          | <i>Studies (doing a traineeship)</i> | <i>Works in a school</i>       | <i>Attends refresher courses</i> |                                |                   |
|                                 | 45 (72.6%)                           | 32 (51.6%)                     | 13 (21.0%)                       |                                |                   |
| By field of pedagogic study     | <i>Primary education level</i>       | <i>Pedagogy of a subject</i>   |                                  | <i>Special education</i>       |                   |
|                                 | 30 (49.2%)                           | 25 (41.0%)                     |                                  | 6 (9.8%)                       |                   |

**Data collection.** The study collected course outlines of Lithuanian higher education institutions' teacher education programmes (primary, post-primary, and secondary education) in subjects related to psychology, social, emotional, cultural, and health education. The collection of the outlines took place from June to September 2022.

Once the course outlines were collected and analysed, short telephone interviews were carried out with programme supervisors, deans of faculties, and lecturers of the courses of interest. Representatives of one study programme responded to the questions by e-mail, as did one course lecturer, and one interview with a course lecturer was held face-to-face. A total of 18 interviews were carried out, lasting between 3 and 19 minutes. This part of the study allowed for the collection of data also from those study programmes for which no course outlines were obtained. The interviews took place from September 2022 to November 2022.

For the quantitative study, respondents were sought by e-mail. Contacting representatives of most HEIs, requests were made to encourage students in the third and fourth years of their bachelor's degree programmes in teacher preparation and those who had graduated in the previous year (as well as those in vocational pedagogy studies) to complete the questionnaire. In the phase of data analysis, it was decided to include the questionnaires completed by second-year students as well, given that most programmes offer courses in sexuality education in the first or second year of study in HEIs. The quantitative survey took place in June 2022.

**Data analysis.** The course outlines' data were analysed using qualitative and quantitative content analysis. After collecting the documents, the items<sup>4</sup> of the course outlines that correspond to at least one of the structural components of sexuality education listed by UNESCO et al. (2018) were identified. Then, the domains of sexuality education mentioned in the course outlines of each study programme were evaluated, as well as the quantity, completeness, and relative importance of the items referring to these domains in the context of all the items of the course outline and the extent of the courses in ECTS credits. The calculations assumed that different items in the course outlines are given the same extent and that topics in one item can be divided into parts of the same extent. Such a division was necessary for the assessment of those items that also contain topics outside the scope of sexuality education (e.g. 'Holistic definition of health and sexuality education. Health education domains, risks, and reinforcing factors. Growth, development, and expression of sexuality in preschool children and younger school-age pupils'). In addition to these evaluation criteria, it was also determined in which subject area (psychology, social, emotional, cultural, or health education) the content of the courses contains elements of sexuality education and in which study semester the courses are taught. During the interviews, the extent of the preparation for sexuality education in ECTS credits, the number of hours of lecture time devoted to sexuality education, and the homework assignments in the course were clarified.

The quantitative study assessed respondents' perceived competence to carry out the structural components of sexuality education as defined by UNESCO et al. (2018), as well as their subjective perceived importance of these components. Assessment of the quality of teacher preparation for sexuality education was also conducted using standards for teacher training in sexuality education as described by Barr et al. (2014) (Table 2). This instrument was developed by researchers in the USA to help higher education institutions improve their curricula by integrating sexuality education content. It is designed to be used by the academic body of a higher education institution to identify strengths and areas for improvement in the curriculum. Although the primary purpose of the research instrument is not a self-assessment of the teacher, in agreement with the authors of the instrument, it was decided to apply it to the primary assessment of the situation under study (students of pedagogical studies in Lithuania). The instrument was translated into Lithuanian for the first time.

Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks test was applied to compare responses to different questions from the same sample and the Mann-Whitney U test was applied to compare unpaired samples. Significance level:  $p = 0.05$ .

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<sup>4</sup> Items were defined as topics or groups of topics mentioned in the content or annotation parts of the course outline (usually an item is made up of several topics corresponding to a single curriculum stage, e.g. 'Personal and environmental cleanliness. Personal hygiene and body care. Oral care. Cleanliness of the body. Environmental hygiene and safety').

**Table 2***Standards for Teacher Training in Sexuality Education According to Barr et al. (2014)*

| <b>Standard</b>               | <b>Description of the Standard</b>   |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Professional Disposition      | Teacher candidates demonstrate comfort with, commitment to, and self-efficacy in teaching sexuality education.   |
| Diversity and Equity          | Teacher candidates show respect for individual, family, and cultural characteristics and experiences that may influence student learning about sexuality.                        |
| Content Knowledge             | Teacher candidates have accurate and current knowledge of the biological, emotional, social, and legal aspects of human sexuality.   |
| Legal and Professional Ethics | Teacher candidates make decisions based on applicable federal, state and local laws, regulations and policies, as well as professional ethics.                                   |
| Planning                      | Teacher candidates plan age- and developmentally-appropriate sexuality education that is aligned with standards, policies and laws, and reflects the diversity of the community. |
| Implementation                | Teacher candidates use a variety of effective strategies to teach sexuality education.   |
| Assessment                    | Teacher candidates implement effective strategies to assess student knowledge, attitudes, and skills in order to improve sexuality education instruction.                        |

**Research ethics.** All information gathered during the study that could be directly linked to the study participants was kept confidential. Any information that could be used to identify individuals was coded and presented in as general a manner as possible. The data collected during the study were used for scientific purposes only. After the publication of the research report, research data of a personal nature (course outlines, transcripts of interviews) were destroyed. The use and adaptation of the Barr et al. (2014) survey instrument for the purposes of this study is in agreement with the authors and Wiley-Blackwell, publisher of the Journal of School Health.

## Findings

**Evaluation of the curricula of teacher education programmes in the context of the structural components of pupils' sexuality education.** The evaluation of the collected course outlines revealed differences between the teacher training for the different structural components of sexuality education (Table 3). The components of relationships and values, rights, culture, and sexuality are addressed in almost all teacher education programmes. A significant proportion of programmes also devote time to the components of violence and safety, sexuality and sexual behaviour, and understanding gender. Unfortunately, the remaining structural components are usually omitted.

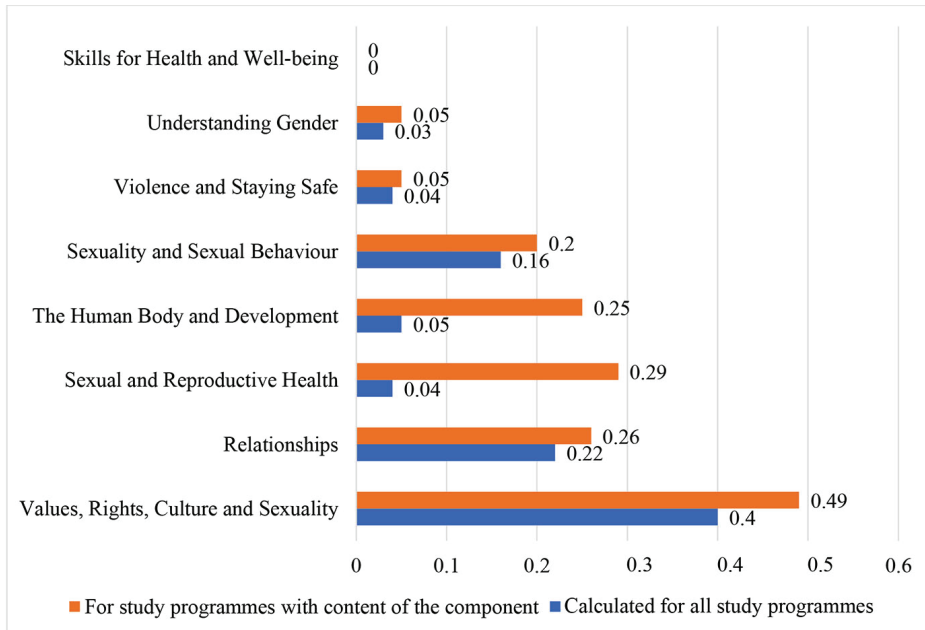


**Table 3**

*Evaluation of the Course Outlines According to the Structural Components of Sexuality Education as Defined by UNESCO et al. (2018)*

| The structural component of sexuality education | Number of study programmes that include this content (N=23) | Number of component-related items in study programmes | Average quantity of items related to the component | Examples of wording  |
|---|---|---|--|--|
| Relationships                                   | 19  | 21  | 0.91   | ‘Social health: friendship and love, resilience to risky behaviour.’   |
| Values, Rights, Culture and Sexuality           | 19  | 30  | 1.30   | ‘Violations of children’s rights and their prevention at school. Prevention programmes.’<br>‘Principles of marriage <...>. Mixed marriages. The problem of divorce.’ |
| Understanding Gender                            | 16  | 16  | 0.70   | ‘<...> a holistic conception of sexuality <...>.’  |
| Violence and Staying Safe                       | 18  | 19  | 0.83   | ‘Human safety training. Areas of safety enhancement, <...> creating a healthy and safe environment.’   |
| Skills for Health and Well-being                | 0   | 0   | 0.00   | –  |
| The Human Body and Development                  | 4   | 5   | 0.22   | ‘Excretory and reproductive systems. Anatomical changes during puberty.’   |
| Sexuality and Sexual Behaviour                  | 18  | 19  | 0.83   | ‘<...> the role of parents and educators in the development of positive gender expression.’  |
| Sexual and Reproductive Health                  | 3   | 3   | 0.13   | ‘Sexual cycle regulation.’   |

The study also calculated the average extent of the different structural components of sexuality education in ECTS credits (Figure 1).

**Figure 1***Average Extent of the Different Structural Components of Sexuality Education in ECTS Credits*

The extent of sexuality education was also calculated by pedagogy fields (Table 4). Of the three vocational pedagogy studies examined, none had any content related to sexuality education.

**Table 4***The Extent of Sexuality Education by Pedagogy Fields*

| Pedagogy field              | Number of field programmes studied | Number of courses covering sexuality education in the curriculum | Average number of items related to sexuality education in a study programme | Estimated expected extent of sexuality education training in ECTS credits |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|--|---|---|
| Primary education           | 4                                  | 1-5  | 8.75  | 1.83  |
| Moral education             | 2                                  | 2-3  | 7.50  | 3.14  |
| Physical education          | 1                                  | 3  | 5   | 0.88  |
| Language education          | 3                                  | 2  | 4   | 0.57  |
| Art education               | 3                                  | 2  | 4   | 0.57  |
| Humanities                  | 1                                  | 2  | 4   | 0.57  |
| Natural sciences            | 6                                  | 2-3  | 4.50  | 0.64  |
| Vocational pedagogy studies | 3                                  | 0  | 0   | 0   |

A significant amount of 3.14 credits is devoted to sexuality topics in teacher education programmes in the field of moral education. Similarly, compared to the sample, primary education teachers receive a high level of training in sexuality education (1.83 credits). However, the standard deviation in this pedagogy field is particularly high (1.17), which means that this amount varies considerably from one higher education institution to another. Teachers of biology and physical education are trained more than others in the human body and development component. However, even in these cases, the extent is small (0.31–0.43 credits).

There were two study programmes in the sample that stood out from the rest in terms of the extent of preparation for sexuality education. They include 3.58 and 5.71 ECTS credits, respectively. This suggests that different curriculum developers have different views on the importance of sexuality education and is an example of the fact that even in a tightly packed curriculum, there is room for sexuality education.

It is important to note that when counting the items corresponding to the structural components of sexuality education, it was inevitable that the statements be interpreted in terms of whether or not they fall under the sexuality domain. Due to the extremely low number of all items of interest, the choice was made to assign statements that were questionable or only partially met the UNESCO et al. (2018) definition to the different components. For example, the item ‘Personal hygiene and body care. <...> Body cleanliness.’ was assigned to the sexual and reproductive health component, ‘Psychosocial development: development of relationships with parents/guardians; development of relationships with peers; development of morality.’ – to the relationship’s component, ‘Teaching human safety. Areas of safety enhancement, prevention of injuries and accidents. Characteristics of safety training for children. Implementation of hygiene and safety requirements in educational establishments, creating a healthy and safe environment.’ – to the violence and safety component. The figures in Tables 3 and 4 are therefore the best possible estimates of the course outlines studied.

As many as 20 of the 23 study programmes studied deal with addiction prevention. However, only one of them mentions addiction to pornography. This shows that developers of the curricula and course outlines are still unaware of the threat posed to school-age children and adolescents by this global issue.

In the course outlines of the various study programmes, the following items were found, which do not focus on individual structural components of sexuality education, but on sexuality education in general: ‘Family preparation and sexuality education’ (calculated at 0.18 ECTS credits), ‘Guidelines for sexuality education’ (0.38 credit), ‘Sexual maturation. Sexuality education. Gender equality’ (0.42 credits), ‘Preparation for family life and sexuality education’ (0.19 credits). With this limited time allocated to sexuality education, it is not possible to provide quality teacher training in this area. The identification of sexuality education as a single topic shows a lack of understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon of sexuality.

An illustrative example of a typical teacher training programme in the context of sexuality education identified during the interviews is presented in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*The Typical Curriculum for Teacher Training in the Context of Sexuality Education Identified During the Interviews*

| <b>Title of the course</b>                                 | <b>Proportion of study programmes that include this or a similar course<sup>5</sup></b> | <b>The usual components of sexuality education in the content of the course</b> | <b>Typical time spent on the components of sexuality education in lectures, hours</b> | <b>Description of the content of the course in the context of sexuality education</b>                          |
|--|---|---|---|--|
| Developmental/Educational psychology                       | 79%   | Relationships   | 0.5   | Communication with peers in adolescence.   |
| Health education for the child                             | 58%   | Violence and staying safe   | 3   | Resistance to risky behaviour, violence prevention.  |
|  |   | Values, rights, culture and sexuality   | 1   | Concept of sexuality and its education, values.  |
| The social/emotional education of the child                | 24%   | Relationships   | 2   | Friendship, communication and cooperation skills.  |
|  |   | Health and well-being skills  | 1   | Communication, decision-making, negotiation skills.  |
| Sexuality education (often combined with health education) | 11%   | Values, rights, culture and sexuality   | 6   | Concept, aims, importance, challenges, and social sensitivity of sexuality education.                          |
|  |   | All remaining   | 4   | Most components are covered, but only briefly. Content knowledge and methodological tools are rarely provided. |
| Human anatomy/physiology                                   | 11%   | The human body and development  | 2   | Sexual organs, reproduction, menstruation.   |
| Human/child rights   | 8%  | Values, rights, culture and sexuality   | 2   | Pupils' rights to equality and non-discrimination.   |
| Human safety   | 5%  | Violence and staying safe   | 2   | Resistance to risky behaviour, violence prevention.  |

<sup>5</sup> Only those courses with components of sexuality education were considered

Despite the fact that most study programmes integrate the components of sexuality education into the content of several (in some cases, even 5) courses, which are taught throughout the study period, the content is usually limited to a few topics of sexuality. In most cases, these topics are those of a values-based nature (the concept, objectives, and importance of sexuality education, occurring difficulties, social sensitivity) and those that are indirectly related to sexuality (communication, friendship, resilience to risky behaviour). Knowledge of the educational content and methodological tools are usually not provided.

In addition to these topics, biology and physical education teacher training programmes also cover the topics of genitals, reproduction, and sometimes menstruation. However, these are not linked in any way to sexuality education: pre-service biology and physical education teachers are not expected to teach sexuality education. This problem is best described by an interview with a course lecturer, who had asked the researcher to come to an interview face-to-face. As it turned out later, the reason for this was the research participant's lack of understanding of how a course on human physiology relates to sexuality education. Eventually, it was suggested that the dean's office be contacted.

The study found that the majority of study programme representatives consider preparation for sexuality education to be very important. They also mentioned existing barriers to the quality of the training, such as a lack of time and human resources. Despite these obstacles, there are lecturers who take the initiative, even in the face of time constraints, to discuss sexuality topics in more depth and to assign related practical homework.

### *Competencies in the delivery of sexuality education developed by the students and graduates of pedagogical programmes*

In order to assess the readiness of pre-service teachers to deliver sexuality education, it is important to examine their experience in sexuality education. However, this study is limited to general education and higher education experiences. This is because it is in these institutions that the experiences gained are directly applicable to future pedagogical work.

Just less than half of the participants (27; 43.5%) had received sexuality education during their time in general education school. Although the number of hours spent on it during the whole general education process ranged from 1 to 50, as many as 16 (59.3%) of the respondents indicated 1–5 hours. Thus, only 9 (14.5%) of the participants in the study received more than 5 hours of sexuality education. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that only a minority of teacher education students arrive at their studies with more or less an understanding of what sexuality education is and how it should be delivered.

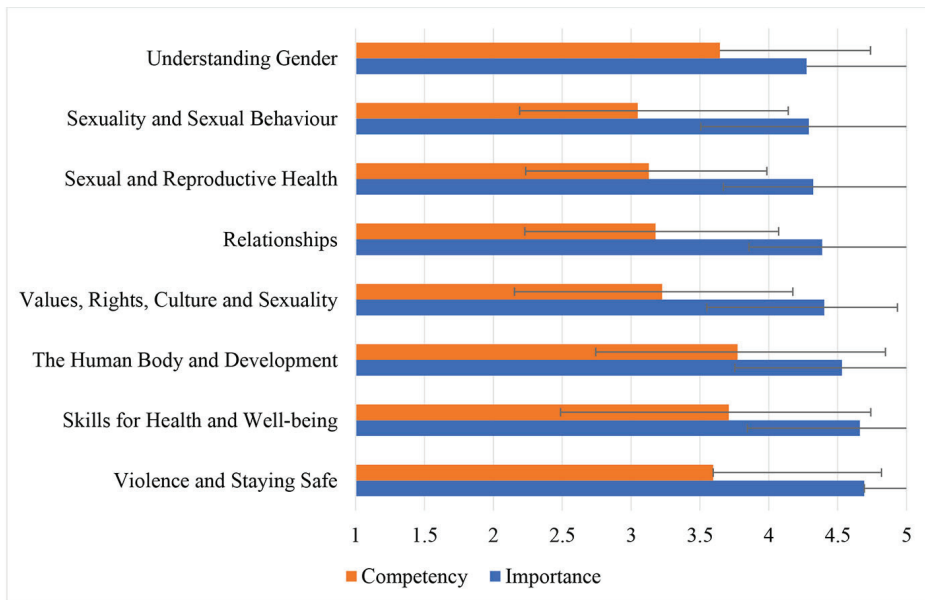
Although students rarely have experience of sexuality education in school, their own competencies in the delivery of sexuality education are hardly developed during their studies. Of the 4 respondents (6.5%) who indicated that they had received training in sexuality education during their studies, only 3 indicated how much time was spent on it and during which courses. However, these students also have different perceptions

of the phenomenon of sexuality education. In terms of the time spent on sexuality and sexuality education during their studies, one of them indicated 3 hours, while the other two, although on the same study programme, indicated 2 and 20 hours, respectively.

Participants were asked to rate their competencies in the different structural components of sexuality education and their perceived importance of these components (Figure 2). All of the structural components of sexuality education were rated as important or very important (mean rating on a five-point scale ranged from 4.27 to 4.69). The standard deviation of the ratings was highest for the structural components of sexual and reproductive health (0.95) and sexuality and sexual behaviour (0.94), and lowest for violence and staying safe (0.53) and health and well-being skills (0.65). However, when comparing respondents' ratings of perceived importance and their competencies, there is a significant difference in mean scores. In all cases, competencies were rated significantly lower (rating differences between importance and competencies were 0.63–1.24,  $W \in [0; 144.5]$ ;  $p < 0.002$ ;  $r \in (0.522; 0.888)$ ).

**Figure 2**

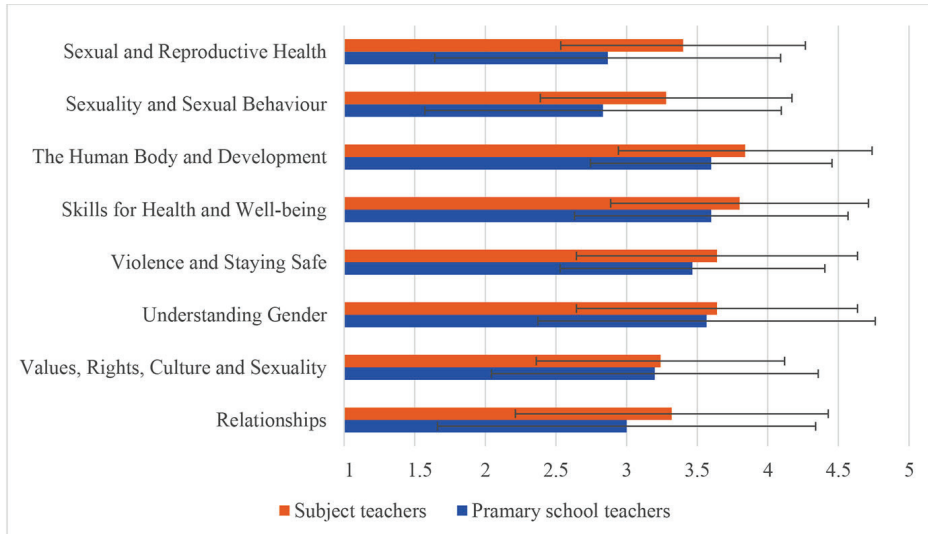
*Means and Standard Deviations of Respondents' Ratings of Competencies and Subjective Importance in the Different Structural Components of Sexuality Education*



When comparing the competence of primary school teachers and subject teachers in the delivery of sexuality education, subject teachers scored higher in all areas (Figure 3). However, no statistically significant differences were observed ( $p \in (0.095; 0.958)$ ).

**Figure 3**

*Comparison and Standard Deviations of the Assessment of the Competencies of Pre-Service Primary School and Subject Teachers in the Different Structural Components of Sexuality Education*



While the differences in the competencies of the two groups of respondents are not significant, statistically significant differences were found in the perceived importance of the different structural components of sexuality education, such as understanding gender ( $U = 220.0$ ;  $p = 0.004$ ;  $r = -0.386$ ), the human body and development ( $U = 253.5$ ;  $p = 0.015$ ;  $r = -0.327$ ), and the components on violence and safety ( $U = 282.5$ ;  $p = 0.044$ ;  $r = -0.272$ ). However, in contrast to the assessment of competencies, the importance of all the structural components of sexuality education was rated higher by primary school teachers.

When comparing the ratings of the different age groups, the only statistically significant difference was found in the assessment of their competency to carry out the violence and staying safe component. Respondents aged 20 to 24 years are more likely to rate their competence in this area as high (3.81) than those aged 30 years and over (3.17;  $U = 172.5$ ;  $p = 0.005$ ;  $r = -0.383$ ). Teaching experience had no or insignificant effect on the respondents' ratings.

According to the results of the respondents' self-assessment according to Barr et al.'s (2014) standards for sexuality education (Table 6), pre-service teachers' self-assessment in all standards was similar (mean scores on a 5-point scale ranging from 3.14 to 3.74). However, respondents rate themselves most highly on the standard of diversity and equity (3.74), and especially on the statement 'I am able to create a safe and inclusive classroom environment for all students' (4.03). This is partly due to the fact that a high

proportion of primary school teachers responded to the questionnaire (the mean score for this statement in their group was 4.13).

**Table 6**

*Results of the Assessment of the Preparedness of Students and Graduates of Pedagogical Programmes for Sexuality Education*

| Standard                         | Number of statements assessing the standard | Average of ratings on a 5-point scale | Standard deviation | Cronbach alpha value |
|----------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Professional Disposition      | 5   | 3.39                                  | 0.83               | 0.86                 |
| 2. Diversity and Equity          | 3   | 3.74                                  | 0.72               | 0.70                 |
| 3. Content Knowledge             | 6   | 3.16                                  | 0.91               | 0.91                 |
| 4. Legal and Professional Ethics | 4   | 3.27                                  | 0.97               | 0.85                 |
| 5. Planning                      | 5   | 3.14                                  | 0.98               | 0.94                 |
| 6. Implementation                | 4   | 3.15                                  | 1.01               | 0.93                 |
| 7. Assessment                    | 3   | 3.20                                  | 1.02               | 0.93                 |
| <b>Overall preparedness</b>      | <b>30</b>                                   | <b>3.29</b>                           | <b>0.81</b>        | <b>0.95</b>          |

Surprisingly, students who indicated that they had received training in sexuality education during their studies rated their compliance with all the standards for sexuality education as lower or significantly lower (except for one respondent's rating on diversity and equity, and on legal and professional ethics standards). The average difference is as high as 0.66 points. The highest differences were found for the standards on implementation (1.06), assessment (0.75), planning (0.74), and content knowledge (0.73) (statistical test was not applied to test the significance of the differences due to the small number of respondents who had experienced sexuality education training,  $N = 3$ ). This suggests that students who have had experience of sexuality education have a better understanding of the complexity, scope, and amount of knowledge and skills needed to carry out sexuality education, while those who have not had such experience have a narrower understanding of sexuality education and have more confidence in their own skills.

As mentioned above, a high proportion of respondents (56.5%) in this study reported that they had not received any sexuality education during their time in general education. No statistically significant differences were found in the questionnaire results of these participants compared to those who had received sexuality education sessions. Interestingly, however, the mean standard deviation of their scores was higher: 1.076 and 0.982, respectively ( $U = 822$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ;  $r = -0.338$ ).



## Discussion and Conclusion

The social sensitivity of sexuality and sexuality education creates conditions that are unfavourable for its implementation, both in terms of communicating with parents and in terms of training the teachers who will carry out this work. The phenomenon described by Bytautas and Daukilas (2023), where parents of school-age children, avoiding sharing their own experiences, talk about sexuality from an opinion (value) perspective, is also observed in the evaluation of course outlines. The structural components of sexuality education, such as the human body and development, sexuality and sexual behaviour, sexual and reproductive health, and health and well-being (resisting social influences on sexual behaviour), are the ones that have been identified least frequently in the curricula, while values, rights, culture, and sexuality have been identified most frequently. It is likely that the principle of placing values above content knowledge is not resisted in the actual education process in higher education as well. This principle is also evident in the results of the student survey. Students are more or less in line with the standard of diversity and equity, which is indirectly related to sexuality (in terms of values), but least in line with the standards of content knowledge, planning, and implementation.

The lack of quality in teacher training for sexuality education is observed in many countries around the world (Eisenberg et al., 2010). The situation in Lithuanian higher education institutions is no exception, where teacher training is fragmented, with topics on sexuality and its education mostly omitted or covered in one course, with no more than 1 ECTS credit (except for the two cases described above). Such organisation of teacher training does not create the conditions, as described by Ezer et al. (2022), for the formation of teachers' freedom to talk about sexuality topics. At best, teachers are only introduced to the phenomenon of sexuality education.

None of the bachelor's degree programmes has a separate course on sexuality education (only one professional pedagogy course does). The most comprehensive courses in this respect are integrated with health education and sometimes other fields of education. Although this strategy is not unique to Lithuania, integrated training for sexuality education is not an appropriate option due to the already discussed phenomenon of social sensitivity (Carman et al., 2011). Integrating sexuality education with other fields of education undermines its importance and eventually, as lecturers seek to avoid socially sensitive communication with students, they start to avoid sexuality education itself.

The structural component of violence and staying safe was the only one for which statistically significant differences were found between respondents of different age groups when assessing competence. Surprisingly, however, the difference contradicts Beaulieu's (2010) data, indicating that younger teachers face more difficulties in carrying out the educational process on this topic.

In contrast to most subjects, students entering higher education in Lithuania usually have no experience learning about sexuality education in general education. This means

that without prior observational experience, they should receive much more in-depth training for sexuality education in higher education. However, according to the student survey, they are not prepared for it at all (except in the 4 cases described above). This leads to a lack of competencies of students to carry out sexuality education. Nevertheless, students see sexuality education as an important part of general education.

The most worrying finding is that, according to the student survey, pre-service teachers with experience in sexuality education rate their competencies to deliver it lower than those without. This is best reflected in a comparison between primary and subject teachers. As described above, it is the primary teacher training programmes that cover the greatest amount of content on sexuality and sexuality education, but this group scores lower on their competencies and higher on their perception of the importance of sexuality education. This suggests that teachers who have received training in sexuality education in higher education are aware of the complexity and importance of this phenomenon, but do not feel to have acquired sufficient practical skills.

According to the findings of the study, it is reasonable to say that pre-service teachers who have had no experience with sexuality education have contradictory perceptions of the phenomenon of sexuality education. They tend to choose extreme values when assessing their competencies in the delivery of sexuality education. It is likely that these teachers will not have the opportunity to acquire an in-depth understanding of the content of sexuality education when they start working in schools, because, according to Giniotaitė (2018b), Lithuanian teachers still do not have a common understanding of the phenomenon of sexuality education. For this reason, it is particularly important to at least familiarise pre-service teachers with sexuality education, its content, and methodological tools during their studies, as otherwise schools are staffed and run by individuals with little understanding of sexuality education (according to Bytautas and Daukilas (2021), as many as 89.8 % of schools integrate sexuality education into the curriculum of various subjects).

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## Mokytojų rengimas mokinių lytiškumui ugdyti Lietuvoje: studijų programų ir pedagoginių studijų studentų pasirengimo vertinimas

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### Santrauka

Švietimo politikams Lietuvoje planuojant lytiškumo ugdymo programų įgyvendinimą, susiduriama su pedagogų kompetencijos stygiaus problema. Šiomis aplinkybėmis svarbu įvertinti mokytojų rengimo programų turinį, siekiant atsakyti į tyrimo klausimus: kokios apimties ir kokiais struktūriniais komponentais yra vykdomas rengimas lytiškumui ugdyti pedagogų rengimo programose bei kokia būsimų mokytojų kompetencija vykdyti lytiškumo ugdymo veiklas. Tyrimo metu buvo taikyta vertinamojo tyrimo strategija, vadovaujantis trianguliacijos principu: atlikta studijų programų dalykų aprašų kokybinė ir kiekybinė turinio analizė, interviu su programų atstovais bei studentų ir absolventų anketinė apklausa. Nustatyta, jog daugumoje studijų programų lytiškumo ugdymo temoms skiriama apimtis nesiekia 1 ECTS kredito. Beveik visais atvejais dėstomos tik vertybinės bei netiesiogiai su lytiškumu susijusios temos. Pedagogikos

programų studentai į aukštąsias mokyklas įstoja neturėdami jokios lytiškumo ugdymo mokymosi patirties arba ta patirtis yra minimali. Šios spragos neužpildo aukštosios mokyklos, nes, studentų ir absolventų vertinimu, jose apskritai nėra rengiama lytiškumo ugdymui.

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**Esminiai žodžiai:** *mokytojų rengimas, lytiškumo ugdymas, socialinis jautrumas, mokytojų rengimo standartai, lytiškumo ugdymo komponentai.*

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