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# The positive attitude approach for teaching in higher education: An untrodden path for policy and practice

Ivana Miočić, Marija Brajdić Vuković & Jasminka Ledić

Ivana Miočić, University of Rijeka, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Marija Brajdić Vuković, Institute for Social Research in Zagreb

## Correspondence

Jasminka Ledić, University of Rijeka, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,  
Sveučilišna avenija 4, 51000 Rijeka, Republic of Croatia  
Email: [jledic@ffri.hr](mailto:jledic@ffri.hr)

## Abstract

This article reports on a study in which a new conceptual framework for fostering *a positive attitude towards teaching in higher education* (PATTHE) was developed. The PATTHE framework builds on a holistic four-dimensional theoretical concept and is not limited by the specificity of teaching within a particular discipline or national higher education contexts. The four dimensions of PATTHE pertain to (1) emotional dimension, (2) professional development, (3) constructivist approaches to teaching, and (4) the teaching and research nexus; all of which are relevant for empowering quality teaching at personal, institutional and/or national higher education policy levels. The purpose of our study was to test and analyse this conceptual framework. Creative qualitative research methods were used including identification of keywords, evoking participant opinions through visual materials, reactions to vignettes, and by documenting discussions regarding the proposed PATTHE conceptual framework. A purposive and critically informed approach was used for the selection of twelve higher education experts as research participants. Responses from the selected education developers were collected through an online protocol system. Research results revealed that participant reflections on a positive attitude towards teaching showed a high level of agreement with the proposed conceptual framework; the proposed theoretical concept is thereby deemed well-constructed and acceptable with minimal extensions.

**Keywords:** *creative qualitative methods; education developers; positive attitude towards teaching; qualitative methodology; teaching in higher education; university teachers.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Contemporary universities require capable teachers who are able to face the growing challenges within the academic profession. Recent policy documents for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) strongly emphasise the importance of improving teaching in higher education by encouraging initiatives and programmes for the improvement of teacher competencies and applying a student-centred teaching approach. For example, the *Report to the European Commission on Improving the quality of teaching and learning in Europe's higher education institutions* (2013) predicts a radical change in the role of teachers as they should be ready to gain completely new skillsets necessary for online teaching and learning. One of the recommendations of this report supports the idea that all teaching staff in European higher education institutions

should receive certified pedagogical training by the year 2020 (European Commission, 2013). The importance of creating opportunities for enhancing academics' teaching competencies is highlighted as an important goal in the *Yerevan Communiqué* (2015). Also, the *Paris Communiqué* (2018) notes as one of the goals to “support institutional, national and European initiatives for pedagogical training, continuous professional development of higher education teachers and explore ways for better recognition of high quality and innovative teaching in their career” (Paris Communiqué, 2018, p. 3).

As Dolenec, Baketa and Maassen (2014) claim, European higher education initiatives in the last few decades (especially the implementation of the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy) started exerting increasing influence in the Western Balkans higher education area, although investments in education remain below the European union average. The development of quality assurance standards and the popularisation of quality as a concept in higher education at the policy level in the last decades is evident (Kanazir, Papadimitriou & Stensaker, 2014), but there are still challenges that need to be addressed. As an illustration of those challenges in the Western Balkan region, we present in the following a short review of relevant policies and practices in the higher education system in Croatia.

Based on a review of quality assurance policy documents<sup>1</sup>, all Croatian universities offer formal professional development programmes for teachers and maintain student evaluations of teaching, which is seen as a notable effort for raising the quality of teaching. Most universities reward excellent teachers and encourage them to maintain self-evaluation of their teaching in order to improve their teaching competencies. In order to understand the higher education context in Croatia, it is important to mention the national *Strategy of Education, Science and Technology* (Croatian Parliament, 2014). The part of this strategy, which describes higher education, reveals that one of the biggest issues of the system is that the majority of teaching staff in the higher education system do not undertake any special training for acquiring teaching competencies. This means, in practice, that teachers in higher education rely on the experiences of their colleagues or on their own intuition and talent (Croatian Parliament, 2014). On this background, the higher education system in Croatia is dedicated to upgrading the competencies of teaching staff by obligatory initial training for developing teaching competencies. There is also an intent to form centres which would provide continuous professional education related to pedagogy, psychology, didactics, and methodology (Croatian Parliament, 2014). It should be mentioned that these goals have not been achieved yet.

Research conducted in higher education in Croatia indicate the need for improvement, especially when it comes to the position and needs of junior teaching and research assistants. Challenges identified include notably a lack of teaching competencies prior to entering university; the absence of opportunities for professional development (gaining and developing teaching competencies), frequent teaching overload, almost exclusively research-oriented academic promotion criteria, and a lack of connections between research and teaching activities (Ledić & Turk, 2017; Ledić & Brajdić Vuković, 2017). The lack of connections between research and teaching has been affirmed in recent research analysing perceptions of the teaching and research nexus among Croatian and Slovenian academics which showed that “Croatian academics agree with incompatibility of teaching and research much more than their Slovenian colleagues” (Flander, Rončević & Kočar, 2020, p. 187).

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<sup>1</sup> We have reviewed quality assurance strategies and handbooks for eight Croatian public universities: University of Zagreb, University of Rijeka, University of Osijek, University of Dubrovnik, University of Split, University of Zadar, University of Pula and University North.

A growing number of guidelines and research nationally and internationally underline the importance of the role of good teachers in higher education. For developing quality teaching in higher education, it is important to strengthen a positive attitude towards teaching among higher education teachers. To this end, a new conceptual framework for a *positive attitude towards teaching in higher education* (PATTHE) is presented in this article. We present a four-dimensional conceptual framework (Figure 1) and analyse how it was perceived by purposively selected higher education experts. This conceptual framework was originally created to explore ways for a better recognition of positive teaching practices in the Croatian national higher education context and to encourage a positive attitude towards teaching in the national higher education policy. However, we believe this framework is potentially relevant across national boundaries for exploring a positive attitude towards teaching in other contexts and on various levels—micro (personal level), mezzo (institutional level) or macro level (level of any particular discipline).

(FIGURE 1. ABOUT HERE)

## 2 THE PATTHE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The positive attitude towards teaching in higher education (PATTHE) conceptual framework is holistic in that it is not limited by the specificity of teaching within a particular discipline or national higher education context. The concept stems from a literature review in the field of higher education teaching. Four dimensions are recognised as relevant for nurturing good teachers and high-quality teaching. Key dimensions of quality teaching are (1) positive emotional experiences in teaching, (2) teachers' engagement in professional development, (3) constructivist or student-centred approaches to teaching, and (4) assigning equal value to both teaching and research.

The first dimension of the teachers' positive attitude is related to the positive emotional experiences (love, passion, enthusiasm) that teachers experience during teaching. Studies show that teacher enthusiasm has a positive influence on student motivation and accomplishments (Patrick, Hisley, & Kempner, 2000; Serin, 2017) and reveal that university teachers often describe the teaching profession in terms of positive emotions (enthusiasm, pleasure, empathy) and less often in the context of negative emotions (pressure, fear, frustration) (Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2011).

The second dimension of the positive attitude towards teaching approach posits that teachers need to engage in the continuous advancement and improvement of their teaching competencies and should be aware of the importance of professional development. The research literature confirms that teachers can improve their teaching skills by participating in effective professional development programmes and that the programmes for the initial and additional professional training for teaching in higher education have a great impact on the development of self-confidence and teaching competencies, and the selection of the appropriate approaches for teaching and teaching methods (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne & Nevgi, 2007).

The third dimension of this conceptual framework stems from discussions on the contemporary understanding of the learning and teaching process that underscore the importance of applying constructivist principles and approaches to teaching. Teachers and students are understood to hold an active role in the teaching process, and to be collaborators in the formation, construction, and reconstruction of knowledge. A number of studies show that focusing on students during the learning and teaching process supports students to transcend the subject's framework;

this contributes to developmental changes for students in their understanding of themselves and others (Åkerlind, 2004).

Part of a positive attitude to teaching includes assigning equal value to teaching and research, which implies the fourth dimension of this concept. This conceptual framework assumes that it is not possible to consider the teachers' attitude towards teaching as positive if teaching is perceived as the less important academic activity in comparison to research. Arimoto (2014) emphasises the necessity of a teaching and research nexus by claiming that research and teaching are two vehicles indispensable in academic work of modern universities. Accordingly, teachers in the academic profession need to accept their dual role as teachers and researchers (within their own specialised disciplines) (Arimoto, 2014).

These four dimensions of PATTHE can serve as lenses for a comprehensive overview of teachers' personal (positive) attitude towards teaching, but also as mechanisms to recognise indicators of good teaching and teachers. At the same time, this concept can be used as the framework for understanding the institution specific approach to teaching; that is, it can reveal the level of the institution's contribution to the development of the specified dimensions; and thus, its indirect influence on the development of the positive attitude of its teachers towards teaching.

### **3 METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research questions**

The phenomenon on which our research focused was a positive attitude towards teaching in higher education. We are interested in how the experts—education developers—understand and describe this phenomenon. The research questions we identified pertaining to this problem were: Which concepts are present in the descriptions of a positive attitude towards teaching? What is the essence of a positive attitude towards teaching, which words and images are used to describe it? To what extent does our conceptualisation of PATTHE accord with the views of education developers?

#### **3.2 Method**

In considering the research questions, we applied “creative research methods” (Brearley, 2008; Kara, 2015; Mannay, 2016) within the qualitative research approach. The creative research methods are not a new practice, but the attempts to consolidate them into methodological handbooks are recent (Kara, 2015). Creativity in research methods implies good knowledge of different methods, and practices that manage methods by developing, combining, and applying them in creative ways, within the framework of known good practices (Mumford, Waples, Antes, Brown, Connelly, Murphy & Devenport, 2010).

Our sample consisted of a specific population of experts working in the field of the phenomenon in question—education developers in higher education. The selection of participants was critically informed and purposive. Education developers have experience in institutional policies of teaching and the advancement of teaching in higher education, and they work with teachers on advancing teaching in higher education. Therefore, they can contribute to a better understanding of the requirements for the development of a positive attitude towards teaching in higher education on the personal, as well as the institutional and education policy level.

#### **3.3 Instruments**

During the protocol development process, in addition to common open-ended and closed-ended questions for establishing demographic profiles and teaching experience, we were guided by the

idea that the four different creative approaches were required in order to examine the phenomenon of a positive attitude towards teaching. The central idea leading the research was to use an emergent approach. We wanted to find out whether there are other concepts, experiences, ideas related to a positive attitude towards teaching that fall outside of our conceptual framework, and the details related to those components the concept already encompasses. Therefore, all of our instruments serve the purpose of eliciting as much information as possible pertaining to positive attitudes toward teaching.

We started by identifying keywords in the context of the prevailing discourse on the positive attitude towards teaching. The participants were encouraged to provide a short description—five keywords—that reflect a *personal* and *institutional* positive attitude towards teaching. Keywords are the words that express the central concepts within the framework of contexts and discourses. They contain both continuity and discontinuity, as well as conflicts associated with values and opinions. Keywords reflect what individuals deemed as important regarding a problem or topic during conversation, reflection, and writing processes because what are perceived as problems are inextricably linked to the manner in which we examine and discuss them (Williams, 1983). Therefore, the keywords facilitated the understanding of central concepts in the discourse on the positive attitude towards teaching at the micro, mezzo and macro levels.

Besides keywords, we used a photograph as an instrument for communicating and sharing experiences in order to evoke participants' thoughts about the "situation" in which a positive attitude towards teaching takes place (van Dijck, 2008). In order to evoke descriptions of a positive attitude towards teaching in everyday contexts, a photograph depicting scientists in a laboratory observing a process, while joyously laughing, was presented to participants. Social research recognises that the interpretation of images is associated with multiple methods of cognition including perceptions, signs, and symbols (Parker, 2009). Images serve as catalysts for a reflexive dialogue in research and stimulate "reflexive" thought in research participants (Clover, 2006). In order to achieve the type of reflections that position a positive attitude towards teaching within the context of active professional routines, we examined participant descriptions of a positive attitude towards teaching prompted by the "positive" photograph of the job's research component.

Furthermore, we applied vignettes—"short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond" (Finch, 1987, p. 105); that is, "concrete examples of people and their behaviours on which participants can offer comment or opinion" (Hazel, 1995, p. 2). In this technique, specific and sensitive situations connected with teaching are depicted, with the expectation that participants give a generalised response based on their own experiences, both individual and institutional. We asked the research participants to predict how the three specific situations would unfold. The purpose of applying this technique of evoking responses in the form of participant comments or opinions about the proposed steps in the vignette is to facilitate the understanding of the participants' perceptions, opinions, and attitudes about the research problem in a specific manner. We concluded that this technique was optimal for the participants because it does not require expressing an expert or personal opinion, but a generalised reaction to the situation, which contains the aspects of the authenticity and honesty of the research participants' responses.

As a last approach in the protocol, we decided to share our conceptual framework of a positive attitude towards teaching with our respondents for their comments, reflection, and feedback.

### **3.4 Sample and procedures**

We used three channels for soliciting the participation of education developers in higher education. Invitations to participate in the study were sent in November 2019 to 96 e-mail addresses—to representatives of organisations that are members of the *International Consortium for Educational Development* (ICED)<sup>2</sup> and to selected representatives of the *Staff and Educational Development Association* (SEDA)<sup>3</sup> and *European University Association* (EUA)<sup>4</sup> organisations. The participants responded to questions through an online protocol system. With an exception of the socio-demographic questions, all of the questions were open-ended, the respondents were requested to enter their opinions, ideas and reflections manually, and the language of interaction (both questions and answers) was English. Upon entering the protocol, the participants were offered the informed consent form. In addition to providing basic information regarding the purpose of the study, the form informed participants that all the data were encrypted and confidential, and that it would not be in any way possible to reconstruct the participants' identity. In order to protect the research participants' identity, the participants' names were coded.<sup>5</sup>

Twelve education developers in total responded to the call—three men and nine women aged from 39 to 72 years, with approximately half of the participants being under the age of 49. All of the participants had a minimum of 10 years of work experience in higher education and they worked in the area of social sciences (e.g. education, adult education, didactics, literature, and politics). The participating experts were from Croatia, Australia, the UK, Japan, Italy, Iceland, and New Zealand.

We asked research participants to describe their attitude towards teaching from their first experiences until the present day. Individuals in our sample had positive and intensely thought-through, as well as reflexive and personal attitudes towards teaching, even if their first experiences were challenging. The participants perceived teaching as a process; they associated it with continuous personal growth and development, which one achieves through lesson planning and through exchanges with students. A number of the participants were motivated by and recognised the wider function of teaching which involves the development of critical thinking in the social context.

## 4 RESULTS

### 4.1 Central concepts of the discourse on the positive attitude towards teaching

Keywords obtained from participants in response to questions were analysed and grouped by categories in order to link and differentiate between them. Keywords are presented in Table 1.

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<sup>2</sup> The *International Consortium for Educational Development* (ICED) promotes educational and academic development in higher education world-wide. ICED includes 26 organizations (member networks) from different countries promoting the development of teaching and learning in higher education. Invitations were sent to 26 e-mail addresses of representatives of ICED member organisations with a request to distribute the research invitation to education developers within each organisation.

<sup>3</sup> The *Staff and Educational Development Association* (SEDA) is a professional association for staff and education developers in the UK which includes over 80 institutional members. For the requirements of this research the database of education developers' contacts was created using information available on the SEDA official website. Invitations to participate in the study were sent to 28 experts.

<sup>4</sup> The *European University Association* (EUA)—represents more than 800 universities and national rectors' conferences in 48 European countries. For this study, a database with contact information for experts who participated in the 2019 *European Learning & Teaching Forum* (Warsaw – 14 and 15 February 2019) was used. Invitations were sent to 42 experts.

<sup>5</sup> A two-part code consisting of gender, and age.

(TABLE 1. ABOUT HERE)

The keywords and concepts that participants used to describe a positive personal and an institutional attitude overlapped where terms were used to describe good teaching, for all other categories the keywords were different. The words and central concepts used to describe a personal positive attitude towards teaching were associated with strong emotional components (e.g. *enthusiasm, enjoyment, commitment, challenge, trust, passion*). The keywords in the category of personal growth and development are especially interesting because they indicated reciprocal action and personal benefits for the teacher; that is, growth and development of not only good teaching, but also personal growth and development. When it comes to the institutional perspective, all the categories (except those describing good teaching) can be seen as institutional policies and activities. However, a more specific grouping reveals prominent aspects of the institutional policy, such as the recognition of teaching or the facilitation of academic development, as well as the emphasis on the linkage of research to teaching.

#### **4.2 Participant descriptions prompted by a photo**

Research participants were presented with a photo that depicted scientists in a laboratory observing a process and laughing joyously. The caption read: *“This photograph is an example of a positive attitude towards research.”* The purpose of presenting the image was not for the participants to reflect on their perception of the photograph’s content, but to stimulate the participants’ visualisation of their own image of a *“positive attitude towards teaching.”* We gave a simple instruction: *“Imagine that you have just witnessed a scene depicting the professor’s positive attitude toward teaching—how would you describe that scene, what would be your ‘photograph’?”*

Participant responses noted that the described nonverbal communication indicated closeness and equality in teacher-student relationships, one of the participants used the expression *“building community”* (woman, 52 years) to describe the situation. Related to the “emotional tone” of the visualised scenes, the participants often visualised facial expression associated with comfort and pleasure: *“people will leave smiling”* (man, 69 years); *“the pleasure is reflected in their faces”* (woman, 47 years). A smile is surely the most obvious indicator of the feeling of pleasure, which can represent many positive emotions such as motivation, enthusiasm and passion. In addition to the facial expressions, the hubbub and positive atmosphere in the classroom were also recognised as *“raised energy levels”* (man, 69 years) or *“positive atmosphere”* (woman, 40 years).

While analysing the actions of the characters in the photo prompt, a number of the participants pointed out that the characters in the scene were “active” and showed “engagement”. Other participants offered a very precise description of the types of activities and collaboration depicted in the scene, while describing a positive attitude towards teaching as one in which characters exchange experiences, solve problems, express opposing, but substantiated opinions, engage in teamwork, and participate in discussions. Even though the activity in question was less specific, it is interesting to point out the following example which demonstrates a student centred focus in teaching: *“Students are eager to learn more—by themselves, with peers, from teacher—and inspiring lifelong inquisitiveness and learning”* (woman, 39 years). In general, the scenes visualised of a positive attitude towards teaching were rich with interaction between all participants in the imagined situation.



### 4.3 Vignettes about teaching

We asked research participants to predict how three specific situations would unfold, while making sure that those were realistic situations facing teachers at the beginning of their teaching experiences at universities:

1. Immediately after completing her studies, Anne found a job at a university as a junior researcher who also engages in teaching. She did not complete any professional development course on teaching in higher education. Even though her colleagues and mentor had given her advice and provided teaching materials, she was scared because she did not have experience in teaching. In your opinion, what did Anne's beginning in teaching look like?
2. Anne graded exams for the first time. More students failed than passed the exam. In your opinion, what will Anne do in this situation?
3. Anne has decided to talk to someone about her experience in teaching. In your opinion, who did she talk to and what did they tell her?

The objective of the first vignette was to ascertain what happens when a young teacher who is not formally educated for the teaching profession begins to teach. Our analysis reveals that the attention of our respondents was focused on the teaching process and the outcomes for students, followed by the psychological consequences for the young teacher. However, the participants predicted a positive resolution of the situation. There is an understanding that every inexperienced teacher is less successful until they gain experience. This was illustrated by claims such as *"a good, reflective, and responsible teacher has to be aware that there is less success at the beginning of the career"* (woman, 40 years). That is, the research participants thought that the described situation had a direct negative influence on students. In other words, the consequences of the situation were described as "fatal" for the students in a way that *"many of her students had difficulty keeping up"* (woman, 72 years); *"her class was far away from the students"* (man, 47 years); *"students noticed that the lectures were unsuccessful"* (woman, 49 years). The anticipated psychological consequences for the junior researcher included fear, a sense of loneliness, being overwhelmed, and having low self-confidence. In addition, the respondents expected that there was going to be too much time devoted to lesson planning, too many details, low focus, too many goals, a bad performance during the lectures, focusing exclusively on content and not on the student, and reading from the materials.

Our analysis shows that what were perceived as crucial elements for the resolution of this situation were mentoring, support from colleagues, and knowledge of the basic formal characteristics of teaching (e.g., determining the outcomes). These elements are not only important for the development of a positive attitude towards teaching, but also for teaching in general. Reflection, personal investment, and a positive attitude towards teaching were recognised as the solution for the positive outcome of this situation: *"If she thinks about/reflects on what she does, she'll improve quickly"* (man, 69 years); *"She overcame the obstacles by investing in herself and having a positive attitude"* (woman, 48 years).

In the second vignette, the junior researcher is facing the consequences of the majority of students failing the exam. The goal was to examine the anticipation and the descriptions of the problems related to grading, as well as to determine the focus of the anticipation and the

descriptions of the possible solutions. Our analysis shows that the respondents were completely focused on the solutions to this problem, and those were again found in the domain of the junior researcher's reflection about the situation. Additionally, the majority of the research participants considered reflection to be a constituent part of teaching. The proposed solutions were the following: (1) understanding and having knowledge of the grading process, (2) understanding and having knowledge of the evaluation and assessment process, (3) reflecting on subject matter content and the manner and method of teaching, and (4) understanding institutional goals and standards with regard to grading. This is illustrated by the following statement: *"She will check whether she is using the correct grading system. She will use this situation to learn and develop professionally"* (woman, 48 years). Furthermore, the importance of attending the professional development programmes which focus on teaching methods were emphasised, as well as conversations with colleagues and relying on a mentor, as stated by one participant: *"Hopefully [she will] seek advice from a friendly co-worker or seek assistance from the university teacher centre if available"* (woman, 62 years). In a number of the responses, a mentor was seen as an individual responsible for giving instructions about the student assessment criteria.

The objective of the third vignette was to examine what participants anticipated in the situation when Anne decides to share her teaching experiences and to identify the important individuals that could help this young teacher in her current situation. Our analysis shows that participants anticipated support in the form of peer-mentoring from trustworthy colleagues, as illustrated by the following verbatim statement: *"She talked with the closest colleagues, e.g. those she shared a room with"* (man, 62 years). Study participants identified the emotional support from colleagues and encouragement as the most important element. Colleagues were expected to offer advice such as *"they told her not to worry, that she'll work it out as she gets more experience"* (woman, 39 years); *"she will talk to other teachers, her young colleagues because they will understand her better"* (woman, 40 years). Participants noted in particular the role of the mentor, emotional and professional support provided by the mentor, and support provided by professional development programmes.

#### **4.4 Reflection on a concept of PATTHE**

At the very end of the protocol, we invited participants to read the description of the PATTHE conceptual framework (see introduction) and to reflect on the concept. Our analysis of participant reflections indicates an affirmative perception of the concept. This is illustrated by the following statements: *"this positive description of teaching is excellent"* (woman, 72 years); *"this is very close to my own position"* (man, 69 years); *"I absolutely agree with this position as it is in accordance with my opinion about learning and teaching in higher education"* (woman, 49 years).

In addition to the experts' acceptance of the concept, which supports its applicability, participants discussed a number of topics they deemed important. Their reflections revealed criticism of the education system, their personal experiences and views about teaching. The most common remarks were related to the importance of the relationship between teaching and research. They recognised the importance of the affirmation of both activities and the fact that identifying with one identity (that of the researcher or the teacher) was not an obstacle for the development of a positive attitude towards teaching. Or, as in the respondents' own words: *"Teachers who are passionate about teaching have a lot of satisfaction if they share with colleagues and try to de-privatise their teaching. Their involvement in teaching brings them joy and satisfaction like the research. We are asked to be good researchers but also good teachers, so it is really very important to invest in both fields"* (woman, 52 years). Some of the participants emphasised in addition the

importance of the emotional dimension: *“Passion is critical, as is joy”* (woman, 39 years), while others commented on the general understanding of the concept of a positive attitude by highlighting its importance.

Finally, in addition to affirming the proposed conceptual framework, a number of participants added to it by describing their opinions about teaching. For example, one participant emphasised that a positive attitude towards teaching needs to be observed in the context of the teachers’ general value system and life: *“I would add that a teacher is first and foremost a person, and those with a positive attitude to teaching fit their conception of themselves as teachers into their holistic view of the value of their life”* (woman, 72 years). Furthermore, the PATTHE concept includes the emotional dimension that stems from teaching. However, research participants pointed out that it is important not to disregard the love of the discipline: *“I love my discipline(s) and the pursuit of knowledge and understanding both for myself and for others”* (man, 69 years). The importance of developing a relationship with students was also emphasised: *“Be honest with your students about the developmental process that is learning and you’ll hold them closer to your teaching, improve their learning, and pass on your enthusiasm for knowledge, understanding, and the subject!”* (man, 69 years).

## **5 DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

This qualitative study was conducted with the participation of twelve experts in education development. Participant selection was purposive and informed by critical theory; participants represented different countries, genders and ages. All were experts in higher education, actively engaged in teaching, and held thoughtful and positive attitudes towards teaching. In that context, the possibility to make generalisations from this research are limited. In accordance with the qualitative paradigm, statistical generalisation is not possible and was not intended; nevertheless, transferable generalisation (transferability) is possible and valuable. The data collected in this study are rich in terms of describing the work context of respondents and in terms of their deep reflections related to teaching. Other teachers working in similar contexts will likely recognise parts of their experiences and opinions in our findings. Furthermore, the theoretical generalisation is also valuable because the PATTHE concept was doubly tested during this research, first through different techniques as an “emerging” concept, and then by discussing the concept with participants. This testing has proven analytically that PATTHE is a concept that is relevant to the experience of higher education experts and describes teaching in higher education well.

The data collection techniques we used stimulated participant reflections. Participant responses enabled us to identify the main concepts, content, and meanings which education developers in higher education ascribed to problems associated to a positive attitude towards teaching. The definition of the concept was included in the last survey question and could not have influenced the proceeding responses of our participants. However, our analysis revealed that the participants’ answers aligned with the proposed conceptual framework. In reflecting on the vignette prompts, participants provided detailed general descriptions of the importance of continuous reflection, as well as investing in oneself, one’s teaching skills, and knowledge, recognising the importance of professional development and the advice from experienced colleagues. Our analysis of keywords and descriptions prompted by an image depicting a positive attitude towards teaching, revealed notably an emotional dimension. Respondents gave detailed descriptions of teachers’ and students’ emotional reactions and described a pleasant atmosphere in the classroom as a very important characteristic of a positive attitude towards teaching. The attributes of good teaching that describe the elements of the constructivist approach to the teaching dimension (active learning,

student-centredness, etc.) were mentioned as keywords from both personal and institutional perspectives. This was demonstrated by descriptions of activities that emphasised the cooperation between teachers and students, or among students. The professional development dimension—which due to the form of the question was absent from visually prompted descriptions—was prominently represented in the keywords used to describe the institutional perspective. Respondents underlined the importance of the research and teaching nexus in the selected keywords, revealing that participants were aware of the connection between research and teaching as an important dimension of a positive attitude towards teaching.

Overall, this study has contributed to the understanding of a positive attitude towards teaching in higher education (PATTHE) and confirmed that the proposed four-dimensional conceptual framework is an important tool for understanding the development of a positive attitude towards teaching. It is important to note that due to the research design, the causal relationship between the four dimensions of PATTHE and good teaching has not been explored in this study and therefore remains an open question for further research. Furthermore, the concept should be further tested on other stakeholders involved in teaching in higher education, which would also deepen the understanding of this important phenomenon.

The current higher education context in Croatia and neighbouring countries have been described as systems that are not evolving and where current promotion policies do not value teaching (Flander, Rončević & Kočar, 2020). On this background, we propose PATTHE as a potential tool for enhancing the quality of teaching at higher education institutions and for guiding national higher education policy makers in the Western Balkan region as well as the wider European context. In our opinion, this seems particularly achievable at the institutional level, especially in the context of professional socialisation of junior researchers into teaching. In all probability the national and regional context will continue to have a strong influence on higher education however, we believe that higher education in Europe will also be considerably affected by supranational and supra-regional initiatives such as the European Universities Initiative. In such a context, the development of higher education will be less dependent on the national and regional frameworks, and more on the supranational. Institutions that are members of networks will be able to promote institutional strategies in a more efficient way (for instance, by implementing them using bottom-up approaches). The PATTHE concept could in this context be particularly useful and relevant due to its potential for improving teaching practices. In particular as academic professions are undergoing changes due to growing internationalisation and diversification of the student body.

Finally, we have witnessed that the outbreak of the coronavirus disease COVID-19 pandemic in the first half of 2020 has pressured universities to adjust to new and complex circumstances, which also resulted in the need for fast development of new teaching skills, especially those related to online teaching. It remains to be seen whether the foreseeable future will bring about online, offline or a mixed teaching context, as well as whether it will cause other substantial changes in higher education and the academic profession as a whole.

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#### Data availability statement

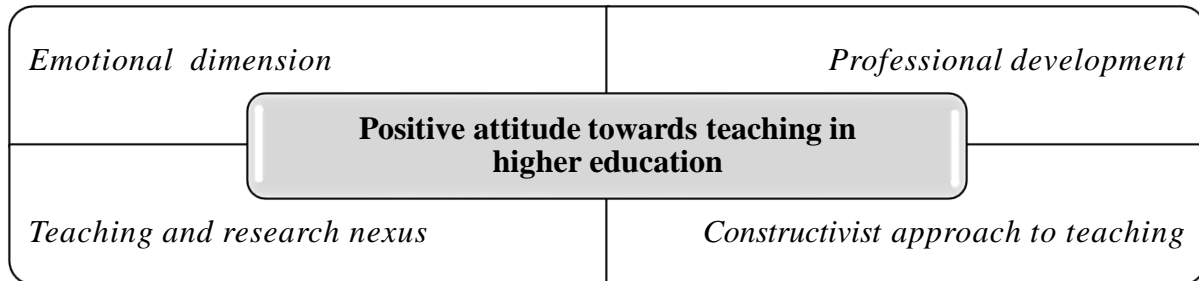
The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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Figure 1. Conceptual framework for a positive attitude towards teaching in higher education (PATTHE)



Source: Authors

Table 1. Keywords for a positive attitude towards teaching in higher education (PATTHE)

<i>Personal</i>				
<i>Attributes of good teaching</i>	<i>Personal growth and development</i>	<i>Emotions</i>	<i>Supporting environment</i>	<i>Social welfare</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· command of a subject</li> <li>· clarity</li> <li>· variety</li> <li>· flexibility</li> <li>· interchange</li> <li>· active learning</li> <li>· individual teaching</li> <li>· well prepared</li> <li>· argumentation</li> <li>· interesting</li> <li>· innovation</li> <li>· communication</li> <li>· responsiveness</li> <li>· inspiring</li> <li>· responsibility</li> <li>· creativity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· personal transformation to best possible self,</li> <li>· willingness to try (and fail)</li> <li>· commitment to work</li> <li>· intellectualism</li> <li>· thinking</li> <li>· learning by teaching</li> <li>· professional development</li> <li>· scholarship of teaching and learning</li> <li>· growth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· beauty</li> <li>· love of knowledge</li> <li>· enthusiasm</li> <li>· enjoy</li> <li>· motivation</li> <li>· interest</li> <li>· commitment</li> <li>· challenge</li> <li>· trust</li> <li>· passion</li> <li>· caring</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· good management</li> <li>· favourable conditions that go beyond the teaching process itself</li> <li>· quality atmosphere</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· social equity - improvement to better societies,</li> <li>· change agent</li> </ul>
<i>Institutional</i>				
<i>Academic development</i>	<i>Institutional policy / activities</i>	<i>Attributes of good teaching</i>	<i>Recognition of teaching</i>	<i>Research and teaching nexus</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· promoting / commitment to / having time for academic development</li> <li>· education</li> <li>· training</li> <li>· workshops</li> <li>· pedagogical competencies</li> <li>· self-evaluation</li> <li>· peer review</li> <li>· lifelong learning</li> <li>· support for enhancing teaching and learning</li> <li>· growth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· money</li> <li>· ranking</li> <li>· measurable</li> <li>· benchmarked</li> <li>· institutional growth</li> <li>· projects</li> <li>· mentoring of young teachers,</li> <li>· supervision,</li> <li>· aligned priorities for teaching and learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· friendly</li> <li>· polite</li> <li>· student-centred</li> <li>· learning-entered</li> <li>· argumentation</li> <li>· interactivity</li> <li>· responsibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· respect</li> <li>· reward</li> <li>· affirmation</li> <li>· celebration</li> <li>· support</li> <li>· recognition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· linkage of research to teaching</li> <li>· equality with research</li> </ul>

Source: Authors