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Специфика универсальных компетенций высшего образования России в контексте компетентностно-ориентированного образования: концептуальный анализ

Проблема и цель. В свете актуальных для современной эпохи трендов (технологических, социальных, техносоциальных и их ускорения) на первый план выдвигаются навыки и компетенции, универсальные для всех сфер деятельности – мягкие навыки, ключевые компетенции. Их российским аналогом в рамках высшего образования являются универсальные компетенции.

Цель статьи – выявление и изучение специфики концепции универсальных компетенций в контексте компетентностно-ориентированного образования.

Материалы и методы. Для достижения данной цели авторы используют методы этимологического, концептуального и сравнительного анализа, а также диалектический, диахронический подходы и дискурсивную рефлексию. Материалами исследования послужили документы и проекты в области компетентностно-ориентированного образования ЕС, ОЭСР, ЮНЕСКО, Всемирного Банка, а также монографии и статьи ведущих специалистов и научных групп по данной тематике.

Результаты. В рамках исследования проведена дифференциация понятия «универсальные компетенции» от содержательно близких понятий («мягкие навыки», «ключевые компетенции», «общие компетенции», «навыки 21 века»); выявлена роль универсальных компетенций как балансира для высшего образования в уравнивании его двух основных миссий: подготовка выпускников к успешной карьере и их формирование в качестве всесторонне развитых личностей. Показано, что терминологическая путаница и отсутствие консенсуса по многим вопросам компетентностно-ориентированного образования имеет амбивалентный характер. Определен замысел универсальных компетенций как российской версии средства (и следствия) интеграции двух противоположных интенций национальной образовательной политики: влиться в русло компетентностного подхода и не потерять свою уникальность. Также был внесен вклад в развитие понимания универсализма как фундамента для компетентностно-ориентированного образования, в т.ч. российского.

Заключение. Констатируем, что концепция универсальных компетенций способна как сделать компетентностно-ориентированное образование более сбалансированным в российских реалиях, так и, напротив, усугубить имманентно присущий ему дисбаланс.

Ключевые слова: Болонский процесс, высшее образование, ключевые компетенции, компетентностно-ориентированное образование, мягкие навыки, навыки 21 века, общие компетенции, универсальные компетенции

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Specific features of universal competences of higher education in Russia in the context of competence-based education: conceptual analysis

Problem and goal. Amid the currently advancing (technological, social, techno-social) trends, prominent attention is drawn to skills and competences, which are universal for all spheres of activity – soft skills, key competences. They are known as universal competences in Russian higher education.

The aim of the article is to pinpoint universal competences (UCs) and to analyze their specific features in the context of competence-based education.

Materials and methods. The authors use methods of etymological, conceptual and comparative analysis combined with dialectical and diachronic approaches and discursive reflection. The study was based on competence-based education-related documents and projects of EU, OECD, UNESCO, the World Bank as well as on monographs and articles of top experts and research groups.

Results. During the study, the term of universal competences was differentiated from the associated terms (soft skills, key competencies, generic competencies, and 21st century skills); the role of universal competences was identified as a balancer in higher education for equilibrating its two missions: Preparing students for successful career and helping them become well-rounded personalities. It has been found that the terminological confusion and the lack of consensus on many aspects of competence-based education have an ambivalent character.

The idea of universal competences was identified as a Russian version of a tool (and the outcome) of the integration of two opposite intentions of the national educational policy: Blending in the mainstream of the competence-based approach and retaining its uniqueness. A contribution was made to expanding the conception of universalism as the foundation for competence-based education, including the one in Russia.

Conclusion. We acknowledge that the concept of universal competences can make competence-based education more balanced in Russian environment or, on the contrary, it can aggravate its inherent imbalance.

Keywords: Bologna process, higher education, key competencies, competence-based education, soft skills, 21st century skills, generic competencies, universal competencies

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Introduction

The current stage of human development involves numerous transformational processes in different areas of life. They are generally represented by several global trends. For example, the expert sessions, Global Education Futures and Future Skills identified the following trends: Technological (Digitalization of all spheres of life, Automation and robotization); social (Demographic changes and Formation of a network society); techno-social (Globalization and Ecological awareness). All these changes are influenced by a common meta-trend – acceleration [42].

The above trends place primary importance on the skills and competences that, as opposed to job-specific skills, are not limited to the professional sphere; rather, they are essential both in personal and social life; they hold up in the time of rapid technological change, moving forward in their significance.

Thus, the impetus is given to the demand for people who are armed with a functional ‘invariant’ of strategies for thinking, communication and behavior [13] (thoughts, words and actions) in any job and life-related situation; this invariant is required “to lead a successful and responsible life and to face the challenges of the present and future” [45, p. 3].

Numerous terms are used to denote this ‘invariant’; they were arranged by Maria Cinque chronologically, with reference to organizations: Life skills (World Health Organization (WHO), 1993); Transversal skills (the Institute for the Development of Vocational Training for Workers (ISFOL), 1994/1998); Key competencies for a successful life and a well-functioning society (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2003); Key competences for lifelong learning (European Union (EU), 2006); Generic competences (Tuning Educational Structures, 2008); 21st century skills (OECD, 2009); Future work skills 2020 (Institute for the Future (IFF), 2011) [10].

These terms are aimed to bridge the gap between the emerging needs and challenges and the actual education.

In the present-day Russian higher education, the term ‘universal competences’ (UCs) has been introduced as an alternative term (based on the Federal State Educational Standards of Higher Education 3++ (FSESHE 3++)).

It would be interesting and useful (also for future studies) to identify and explore the conceptual specifics of UCs through the prism of the competence approach in education.

To achieve the above aim, we should look into the background and the mechanisms underlying the development of the competence approach, fine-tune its terms and definitions (first of all, differentiate between the terms ‘skill,’ ‘competence’ and ‘competency’), turn to the history of reforms in the modern system of Russian higher education and to the examples of educational policies of other countries, which team up with Russia in their aspiration to achieve two seemingly incompatible things – to fit into the competence approach, without sacrificing their uniqueness. Then, we will be able to understand the implication of UCs as the Russian option for integration of these two opposite intentions.

Materials and methods

The study is based on the generalization, systematization, and reflective analysis of sources in the field of theorizing the competence approach in education, which can be

grouped into five main blocks: 1) documents of international organizations (UNESCO, OECD, the World Bank, etc.); 2) documents (reports, analytical notes) of experts of the Higher School of Economics (HSE), significant due to their both theoretical and practical importance in determining the educational policy of Russia; 3) publications of the employees of the scientific laboratory of the Yaroslavl State Pedagogical University (YSPU), whose activities are aimed at studying the problems of the formation, measurement and assessment of universal competencies; 4) A.I. Subetto and his scientific school's works on the noospheric paradigm of universalism; 5) other foreign and domestic works.

The focus of the article is aimed at studying the specifics of the concept of universal competencies in higher education in Russia, which is carried out through the prism of diachronic, etymological, conceptual, and comparative analysis of the term 'universal competencies' and meaningfully similar terms 'soft skills,' 'key competencies,' and others. It also requires addressing the broader context of thinking about the specifics, merits, and limitations of competence-based education in general. This determines our attention to pedagogical, psychological, and philosophical approaches.

Results

Competence approach: Historical overview

Let's turn to the origins of the competence approach in education.

E. Klieme and J. Hartig suggest that the term 'competence' owes its use in social sciences to three independent origins: 1) Weber's sociology; 2) Chomsky's linguistic theory; 3) the 'functional-pragmatic tradition' in American psychology, the prominent representative of which is D.C. McClelland [25, p. 14].

While in Weber's theory of domination, the competence meant responsibility with associated means of enforcement, both in linguistics and psychology, it entailed capability and readiness. Out of these three origins, the two latter have gained the greatest popularity.

Most of the researchers tend to refer to N. Chomsky or D.C. McClelland as the founders of the competence approach, which, in our opinion, is not quite right, as both of them (and their followers) made a valuable contribution (which also proved to be useful for pedagogy) to promotion of this approach, though in different ways.

N. Chomsky offered the dichotomy of competence/performance to differentiate the 'speaker-listener's' potential knowledge of the language from the realization of this knowledge in actual human communication [9].

However, Chomsky's generative model of competences failed (due to its extra-contextuality) to satisfy psychologists who were interested in studying the relationship between contextual factors and human behavior. In White's opinion, the behavioral and psychoanalytic approaches also failed to explain the specific nature of the "effective interaction of the individual with the environment" [cited in 25, p. 16] – or the competence, as R.W. White defines it.

The concept offered by D.C. McClelland stemmed from his desire to understand human performance beyond the bounds of behaviorism and psychometry, to find driving motivators to achieve success (to improve productivity) in a particular activity [34].

His approach (modified by Lyle M. Spencer and Signe M. Spencer) changed the focus in studying the correlation between human behavioral characteristics and performance efficiency: From the traditional psychodiagnostic scenario 'parameters of methods –

characteristics of the subject (person, individual) – forecast of performance success’ to the scenario ‘requirements for successful performance (competence) – evaluation of the subject’s competences’ [26, p. 143]

They also defined the main characteristics of competences, which a) must be measurable, b) must be reliable when used for differentiation of the best workers from the average and worst ones; they see competences as a person’s basic qualities (motives, psychophysiological characteristics, self-concept, knowledge, skills) underlying the efficiency and (or) quality of the performed job [8].

By and large, the present-day interpretations of the competence approach are consistent with the above idea.

Along with the three above-mentioned origins of the competence approach, its early prototypes can be traced back to early 20th century and found in works of John Dewey, Frederick W. Taylor, and Edward L. Thorndike, the pioneer of the theory of connectionism, etc. [23].

Although, assumably, the competence-based education (CBE) started its rapid development in the 1970s or even in the 1960s (in the United States) [43], the current CBE differs significantly from its prototypes: 1) the concept of competence has been given new connotations; 2) the narrow, behavioristic view equating competence teaching with skill training, ‘drilling’ and coaching has been dismissed; 3) it reaches beyond the fields of teacher education and vocational education, extending into the heartland of basic education, higher education, and lifelong learning [60].

Competence vs competency

Long before the scientific research in this field, people encountered the ambivalence of the concept of competence, which is supported by the fact that two terms co-exist in the everyday (both in English and Russian) language: ‘Competence’ and ‘competency’ coming from the Latin word ‘competentia,’ which means agreement, symmetry. Their differentiation is complicated by terminological confusion*.

As noted by V.S. Lykova, the analysis of Russian sources used to clarify the meaning of the terms ‘competency’ and ‘competence’ leads to the conclusion that while, generally, competency defines “the totality of knowledge and abilities of a person, the level of the person’s knowledge in a particular field of human activity,” and competence is understood as “the range of powers of a person or an organization,” in scientific literature, these terms are either synonymous or have the opposite meaning [30].

I.A. Zimnaya draws a semantic distinction between these terms to show the difference between two approaches: “The competence-based approach, first of all, puts an emphasis on the practical, action-centered aspect. In its turn, the competency-based approach entails a broader application associated with humanistic values of education” [61, p. 17].

Here we can see an attempt to keep and reconcile two dimensions in educational policy, which is quite understandable, considering that the CBE is strongly criticized for its preference of instrumental and practical measurements over the humanistic ones [1; 16; 36].

These terms are also differentiated to emphasize the difference between general and individual in the context of competence education: “A ‘competence’ is a detached,

*However, “both ‘competence’ and ‘competency’ collapse into a single word in Romance languages (e.g. compétence in French, competencia in Spanish) [2, p. 3].

predefined social requirement (standard) for a student's education required for his proper productive activity in a particular field, while 'competency' is the set of a student's personal qualities (...) acquired through his social and personally significant activities" [24].

The authors of the international report (entitled *Universal Competencies and New Literacy: From Slogans to Reality*) deem appropriate to reserve the term 'competency' for education and pedagogy (to refer to a person's intrinsic ability to perform a certain activity), separating it from the term 'competence,' which is commonly used in the legal industry and in reference to extrinsic requirements for a job candidate [12, p. 37, note].

We do not share this approach, as it limits the heuristic scope of the dual terminology.

In pedagogy, the competence is seen as the *manifestation* of competency (being the totality of knowledge, abilities and skills) in different activities. We will use this term, which, as shown in the conclusion at the end of this section, is consistent with the theories of N. Chomsky and D.C. McClelland.

The similar view is offered by such a reputable source as DeSeCo (the acronym of the OECD project *Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations*), according to which "a competence is defined as the ability to successfully meet complex demands in a particular context through the mobilization of knowledge, (cognitive, metacognitive, socio-emotional and practical) skills, attitudes and values. Underlying is an action competence mode" [45, p. 3].

The underlying meaning of the term 'competence' is a capability (readiness) to use knowledge, skills and abilities in practice. In the psychological context, such readiness includes the following components: Cognitive (intelligence), affective (emotions) and conative (motivation).

Obviously, not every competency (as a latent construct) can turn into a competence; for this, it should be manifested in activity. Here, we can clearly see the connection between the competence approach and the activity approach adopted by the Russian pedagogy.

In this sense, competency cannot be observed directly; it can be perceived only through actions actualizing it. One can know the rules of chess game (or grammar rules of a foreign language), but still be incompetent in using them in an actual situation.

The terms competency/competence are complementary: They go together, the one is impossible without the other.

As demonstrated by this analysis, the pedagogical (including Russian) science used Chomsky's theory to borrow his dichotomy, while the functional-pragmatic tradition contributed with its view of competences as acquired and transferable context-specific performance dispositions functionally associated with specific (and job-related) situations and requirements. Here, the 'competence' has the meaning of 'performance' in Chomsky's theory; therefore, Chomsky's dichotomy, being transferred to pedagogy, takes the form of competency/competence.

Competence vs skills

The relationship between the term competences and the term skills is quite difficult to identify: Scientific literature presents a cacophony of views and conflicting opinions about them [32; 44]. This refers to English sources where the terms 'competence' and 'skill' are either used interchangeably or (similar to Russian sources) the skill retains its initial narrow definition as the "dexterity or coordination especially in the execution of learned physical tasks" [49] as opposed to a broader definition of the competence, where the skill is only one of its components.

Anna K. Touloumakos offers three levels for the key factors contributing to gradual expansion of the term 'skill': 1) the rhetorical level (the transition of the adjective 'skilled' used as a characteristic referring to people and professions toward the noun 'skill'; this shift in the policy rhetoric reflects the reification of the skill the attitude towards it as an essence or a property of an individual); 2) the definitional level (associated with the emergence of new categories of labor and additional criteria distinguishing between skilled and unskilled jobs); and 3) "the dispositional character of term itself within different scientific fields" [54, p. 3].

The continuous semantic expansion of the term 'skill' presents new types of skills (soft, generic, key) as well as its interchangeable use (which may be not justified) with such words as traits of character, aptitude, experience, competence, etc.

This leads to endless multiplication of entities emerging from various combinations of adjectives 'life,' 'generic,' 'core,' 'key,' 'enabling,' 'transferable' and 'transversal' with nouns 'attributes,' 'skills,' 'capabilities' or 'competencies' [18, p. 4].

To avoid any confusion, we will use a limited number of the commonly accepted word combinations (soft skills, 21st century skills, key competences, generic competencies), the legitimacy and definiteness of which are supported by their conceptualization through efforts of leading international organizations.

The terms '21st century skills'* and 'soft skills'*** owe their origins to the United States, while the terms 'key competences'**** and 'generic competencies'***** were coined in Europe. These terms are used everywhere, far beyond the limits of individual countries and even the Western world.

As for universal competences, which will be discussed further, they were born in the attempt of Russian education reformers to transfer the ideas captured in the above terms to Russian soil.

While the term 'soft skills' (soft skills ('know how to be') contrast hard skills ('know how to do') [52]) generally applies to a corporate environment, such terms as '21st century skills' (now frequently replaced by '21st century learning'***** and '21st century competencies'), 'key competences' and 'generic competencies' were introduced for educational purposes [4] and are generally used in education*****.

The interchangeability of these terms is explained by their conceptual affinity: All of them tend to be supra-professional, supra-subject, cross-cutting and fitting multiple contexts.

Speaking about terms 'soft skills,' 'key competencies,' 'generic competencies,' 'universal competencies,' the synonymous use of these terms is quite justified.

As explained by the international group (consisting of 20 scholars): Fine nuances of meanings are pinpointed in research papers; however, they are not relevant when used in practice and in regulatory documents [12, p. 36]. To avoid confusion, they decided to stick with the term 'universal competencies' (in Russian versions of their publications) and 'key competencies' (this term was chosen because of its consistent use in European strategic documents) in English versions.

* The emergence of the 21st century skills concept as a focus of educational reforms is associated with the publication of A Nation at Risk: The Imperative of Education Reform, the final report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education.

** The first official use of the term 'soft skills' can be found in the training manual for the US Army in 1972 [38, p. 351].

*** The term 'key competences' or 'key qualifications' was offered in the 1970s by the Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung (IAB) [35].

**** The terminology of the Tuning Educational Structures in Europe project [56].

***** The renaming of 21st century skills as 21st century learning was caused by the fact that the American organization Partnership for 21st Century Skills was renamed as the Partnership for 21st Century Learning.

***** though the fact that corporations and government institutions are initiators and, consequently, beneficiaries makes the academic community feel uncomfortable as they think that these authorities should not impose educational priorities

In their monograph, I.Yu. Tarkhanova et al. identify universal competences with soft skills, while professional competences are equated with hard skills, assuming that they should be developed jointly rather than as substitutes for each other, “forming a single context of educational outcomes socially significant for digital economy” [53, p. 300]. A.A. Sharov et al. argue that “the FSES 3++ universal competences are classical soft competences” [47]. In their article for the World Bank, F. Hénard et al. write about soft skills in Russian higher education, meaning universal competences [20].

As for the term ‘21st century skills’, it emphasizes not so much its ‘supra’ nature as the fact that these skills are needed to master to work, live successfully and thrive in the 21st century [55]. Not without reason, initially (in the 1990s and early 2000s), these skills were generally understood as ICT skills. This interpretation has retained its relevancy, though it has become more balanced, which is reflected by the vision of future education by the Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21) and the Assessment and Teaching of Twenty-first Century Skills Project (ATC21S). J. Greenlaw deconstructs the 21st century skills movement as the metanarrative of ‘salvation through technology’ [19, p. 895]. Although the implication of supra-professional is always present in 21st century skills and competences, it is not an essential attribute for their definition.

In the meantime, we think that these terms should be seen as intersecting rather than overlapping sets.

This analysis makes it clear why in our work we study UCs, correlating them with the key (or, more rarely, with generic) competences: Soft skills transcend the scope of education; 21st century skills and competences, though associated with education, have different underlying principles.

Universal competences and competence approach in education

1. Universal competences in the Bologna Process context

The establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the subsequent reforms known as the Bologna Process were aimed at ensuring compatibility of standards and quality of higher-education qualifications to enhance international competitiveness, learning mobility and opportunities for employment. The goal can be reached through establishing a unified degree structure, adopting a common credit system and a system of quality assurance.

All the above propelled the need for adopting a unified approach to education, the competence approach being first in line to the position.

The Tuning Educational Structures in Europe project (Tuning project) pointed out learning outcomes and competences as ideal tools of the Bologna Process, as they make it possible to achieve comparability and compatibility of learning programs, to maintain transparency, to use common language, to move from the focus on ‘inputs’ to the focus on outputs, to facilitate adoption of new forms of education (‘lifelong learning’), and to increase employability [6, p. 79].

During its implementation, the project highlighted the importance of two types of competences in education – subject-specific (related to professional activities) and generic (comprehensive, key) having a supra-professional nature: Instrumental, interpersonal, and systemic [56].

This division of competences into generic and specific shows the influence of the human capital theory or, more specifically, the division into general and specific human capital [31].

The competence approach signifies changes in the previously dominant educational paradigm: From transferring knowledge to acquiring a set of competences, which will help the graduate get ready for sustainable living in the VUCA world (VUCA is an acronym for English words volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity [29]).

The adoption of the competence approach shifts the focus from *what* students study to *how* they study, from the content to methods and techniques.

Russia, as the country that joined the European Higher Education Area, is committed to put its educational policy on the CBE footing.

As a result, the Russian standards in higher education have significantly changed in the last 20 years. While the first and second-generation standards (1994 and 2000) captured the traditional, knowledge-based approach, the new-generation standards (FSES (2011), FSESHE 3+ (2012) and FSESHE 3++ (2018)) have refocused educational programs toward educational activity outputs, the requirements for which were presented in the competence-based format [20, p. 8].

The latest FSESHE 3++ introduced the term ‘universal competencies’ (UCs), the novelty of which is the fact that they (as opposed to general cultural competences promoted by the earlier FSES versions) were adopted as uniform and standard for each level of higher education and incorporated continuity and differences in the levels of higher education.

Universal competences (UCs) are divided into 10 groups [14] and have to be developed by higher school graduates: Systemic and critical thinking (UC-1); Project development and implementation (UC-2); Teamwork and leadership (UC-3); Communication (UC-4); Intercultural collaboration (UC-5); Self-organization, self-development (including health protection) (UC-6, UC-7); Life safety (UC-8); Inclusive competence (UC-9); Economic culture, including financial literacy (UC-10); Civil position (UC-11).

The list of these UCs was made considering their priority and value for Russian society as well as their consistency: Each UC is dependent on the other.

In Russia, the continuity between secondary and higher education is achieved, as each universal competence has its actual base in meta-subject and personal outcomes of secondary general education.

At the same time, N.P. Ansimova and O.A. Belyaeva point out the alternation of integration and differentiation of educational outcomes during the transition from one stage of education to another: At the preschool stage, they are integrated into generalized outcomes; at the school stage, they are differentiated into subject-specific, meta-subject and personal; at the higher stage, competences become truly universal, integrating the meta-subject* and personal aspects in their structure [3].

This ‘integration – differentiation – integration’ succession mirrors the patterns of physical, psychic and social development of an individual.

In secondary school education, supra-subject competences *are formed and developed* (as meta-subject outcomes of learning); in vocational secondary education, they *are developed* (as general competences); in higher education, they *are developed and mastered* (as UCs).

There is a reason why competences become universal at the stage of higher education.

Interestingly, Russian educationalists chose the adjective ‘universal’ (from Latin *universalis* (general, common, comprehensive)) to denote the competences that were defined as ‘key competencies’ in fundamental European documents. We think that this choice has nothing to do with the mere ambition to introduce a specific term.

* Except for UC-7 and UC-8, which are based on subject-specific outcomes rather than on the meta-subject component

The group of authors of the international report *Universal Competencies and New Literacy: From Slogans to Reality* (some materials of which have been used in OECD and World Bank projects) explains their choice preference, saying that the word ‘universal’ gives the best description of the place of these competences in a complex sphere of human activity [12, p. 47].

The universality of competences is manifested in their supra-professional, supra-subject, cross-cutting, transferable, transmittable (from one context to another – so that they are not limited to a particular field) and meta-level nature. They refer to “such abilities to act in specific situations, which are universal for any content area” [12, p. 47]. The same characteristics apply to key and generic competences; however, they place an emphasis on the significance of competences, while in UCs, their holistic nature is emphasized. The existence of such terms as ‘subject core competencies’ [58] and ‘disciplinary key-competences’ [59, p. 56; 60, p. 10] (cf. in China) demonstrates that these adjectives (key, core, generic) do not always exclude the subject-related component. Conversely, ‘universality’ can pair up with subject-focus, subject specificity, specification, etc. as an oxymoron.

2. Universal competences and the mission of higher education

What is the practical significance of this interpretation of universality? Let’s turn to the most important consequence (generative in relation to others).

To this day, ideas and thoughts about the mission of higher education have been impacted by the dichotomy between the traditional ‘enlightenment’ view about the role of the university (generating and satisfying the thirst for knowledge and ambitions, developing reflective citizens and social critics*) and the ‘down-to-earth’ view coming from the required development of employability.

The adoption of UCs makes this dichotomy contrived or even false.

Cassandra Star and Sara Hammer explain the viability of this dichotomy by the existence of “a two-tier system, with universities on the top and technical and advanced education colleges on the bottom” [50, p. 9].

The Russian higher education was based on the binary system: Higher schools providing classical education (universities) and professional (industry-specific) higher schools (institutes, schools, academies (two latter names were reserved for higher schools of arts)). They were equal in their status, though even their names emphasized their difference: The word ‘university’ means generality, universality, and excludes specificity and specialization: A ‘specialized university’ is an oxymoron.

Classical universities aimed to give what is now known as ‘universal competences’; the other higher schools were focused on professional (and associated general professional) competences. Note that we are talking about the emphasis rather than the well-defined differentiation (which is impossible in actual education, regardless of a higher school).

Since the late 1990s, the terminology rules have lost their strictness. The terminological confusion is not at fault; the educational realities have changed [17]. The convergence of different types of higher schools and the promotion of universal competences adopted for each level of higher education imply the trend towards overcoming the above dichotomy. UCs make it possible to balance the focus on labor market needs, which is inherent in the competence approach.

It may be said that thanks to UCs, the present-day competence approach has an opportunity to follow the course of classical education on new grounds (cf. ‘the Oxford

* In Russia, the best analog is the term ‘intelligentsia’ as opposed to ‘an intellectual’

Greats experience' [7, p. 54], 'liberal arts education,' 'American liberal arts colleges'); this classical education used to introduce students to languages and ideas of ancient cultures and to 'Great Books.' As for the complaint about fast (in the dynamically changing world) obsolescence of the educational content, in classical education it is irrelevant, as this content is initially outdated (to be more precise, is timeless, everlasting, 'eternal' like classics); yet, this education built such human qualities, which helped graduates efficiently handle situations characterized by uncertainty, unpredictability, danger and complexity (for example, during the expansion of the Empires – British or Russian). The emphasis on developing the qualities (attributes, competences, everything that is known as UCs) that help to withstand challenges of the VUCA world constitutes the core of CBE. Sharing the above with classical education, it tries to overcome its elitism. What was affordable and sought-after by few people in the past (education focused more on character building than on developing targeted subject-specific skills and knowledge) has been converted into mass higher education.

Thus, UCs become a suitable innovative tool for promotion of the traditional role of universities in developing reflective practitioners, respectable citizens and social critics ('universal man' following Subetto's terminology [51]), though outside the purely university education and on the new (more 'down-to-earth') grounds. In this way, the UC concept help higher schools protect themselves from any risk of being turned into 'big vocational schools' [5, p. 5], which is inherent in such trends of higher education as internationalization, professionalization and massification as well as the adoption of the narrowly-defined competence approach.

3. Universal competences and the universalism paradigm

Another, not less important aspect of universality is its relationship with the paradigm of universalism as an ethical world view and form of thought, where the universum is seen as a whole.

UCs are based on the paradigm of universalism. They follow the most elaborate, comprehensive and integral frameworks of competences, which were developed in the leading international projects. While the sustainable development and the related requirements (more pressing for UNESCO [57]; though for OECD [39] their rhetorical significance is also rising [37]) form the foundation of the foreign universalism, the Russian universalism is based on a noospheric model. It is being developed and adapted to education, in general, and to universal competences, in particular, by the famous Russian philosopher A.I. Subetto (the author of the fundamental monographic trilogy) and his scientific school.

The DeSeCo OECD Project [40] describes three categories of key competences, which, in our opinion, can be correlated with the man and universum relationship at three interconnected levels: The first category – at the individual level (self-self); the second one – in the space of community/society (self-another); the third one – the level of relationship between a Homo sapiens and nature or the planet (self-the world). The same levels of relationship between an individual and universum can be identified in three key notions selected by UNESCO as the basis for Education for Sustainable Development: Towards achieving the SDGs (ESD for 2030) [57].

The Russian thought tends to show the universum in four main dimensions: Man-nature; man-society; man-technology; man-man. By the way, these dimensions are included in career guidance programs for schoolchildren. However, the present-day classification of UCs [8] correlates with the three-level (hierarchical) system of dimensions for the human-

universum relationship to a greater extent than with the Russian four-component (flat) system, and in this way, it is consistent with the above frameworks (see Table 1).

Table 1

Competence frameworks in the context of three levels of human connection with the universe

The initiator and conception			Three levels of human connection with the universe
OECD The OECD Project DeSeCo	The Russian Federation The concept of universal competencies	UNESCO ESD for 2030	
Key competencies	Universal competencies	The key notions as the basis for ESD for 2030	
The framework			
Acting autonomously	UCs are reserved for human life activity (UC-6, UC-7: Self-organization, self-development (including health protection))	Transformative action	The individual level (self-self)
Interacting in socially heterogeneous groups	UCs for labor and mobile behavior in the labor market (UC-1: Systemic and critical thinking; UC-2: Project development and implementation; UC-3: Teamwork and leadership; UC-4: Communication; UC-5: Intercultural collaboration; UC-9: Inclusive competence; UC-10: Economic culture, including financial literacy; UC-11: Civil position)	Structural changes	The social level (self-another)
Using tools interactively	UCs competences for preservation of life on Earth – noospheric competences (UC-8: Life safety).	The technological future	The planetary level (self-the world)

Therefore, universality as manifestation of the paradigm of universalism underlies not only Russian supra-subject competences.

However, in A.I. Subetto’s opinion, the problem is that the Bologna process is not focused on ‘universal man’; rather, its main target is ‘competitive man’ (cf. the marketing character orientation in Erich Fromm's book *Man for Himself*), who can meet requirements and needs of the labor market [51].

This assumption is fair and applicable to the Russian concept of UCs. Our table is very illustrative regarding the imbalance: Eight UCs are intended for occupational and mobile behavior on the market, while two UCs are reserved for human life activity, and only one (noospheric) competence is left for preservation of life on Earth. In our opinion, these eight UCs have broader purposes than those assigned by classification of V.V. Belkina and T.V. Makeeva [8]. However, the man-society relationship still prevails to the disadvantage of other relationships with the universum. Undoubtedly, in reality, competences overlap and transcend their bounds; however, the above breakdown is quite revealing. Besides, Master’s programs do not have UC-7–11. It is assumed that by that stage they should have been developed, though they cannot be seen as fully mastered and upgraded.

This situation prevents perceiving the UC concept as completely compliant with the principles of universalism. On the other hand, such compliance is lacking in other systems of competences, including international ones. However, there are efforts made in this field, and Russian reformers may agree to revise UCs to adapt them better to the universalism format.

We would like to add that the problem pinpointed by A.I. Subetto is not limited to the Bologna process; it is extended to CBE in general. At the same time, CBE finds

demand from the educational systems and from the countries that are not involved in the Bologna process.

4. The competence approach and hybrid educational policy

The competence approach is a manifestation of globalization in education, but interaction with local forces leads to hybrid educational policy.

Y. Kuzminov et al. note that in such countries as China, Singapore, South Korea, Japan, and Finland, the local contextual factors: National-cultural features and institutional practices (for example, the model of ‘high stakes’ criticized by the present-day pedagogy for its high level of stress) have a great positive impact on the quality of education compared to OECD’s universal formulas, including innovative teaching methods or refocusing education on key competences.

On the other hand, the authors clarify that the problem is “that the OECD’s solutions are not universally applicable, but also that countries are not transforming their education systems actively enough” [27, p. 29].

No wonder that some of the countries that had adopted CBE wound it down either partially or completely: England, Sweden, Poland, Japan. They either moved back to the content-based curriculum or created hybrid programs where competences were incorporated into subject-specific goals [2]. In Russia, the desire to retain the balance between a focus on competencies and a focus on subject-matter knowledge is still quite strong.

The attempts to combine (not on paper, but in practice) discordant focuses within a hybrid not always produce a harmonious result. Furthermore, there is a risk of ‘centaurization,’ which becomes more apparent when theoretical constructs (frequently utopian) must be converted into effective programs.

However, the hybrid model is most rewarding for the efforts to join the mainstream of reforms aimed at competence approach and to preserve its national distinctness in education. Thanks to hybridity, Chinese reformers, as shown by Li Deng and Zhengmei Peng, were able to integrate Confucian (“reinforced by over-a-thousand-year-old tradition of Imperial Exams or keju” [28, p. 80]) and socialist features into the international format.

In Norway, the hybrid model helped combine the ideas of social democratic progressivism and Bildung with the competence approach [21]. In Russia, the above approach is seamlessly combined with the home-designed systemic-activity approach. Their conceptual principles are similar, thus giving some scholars (cf. V.S. Lykova [30]) reason to think that the competence approach is a re-named version of the systemic-activity approach.

The enthusiasm about opportunities opened up by CBE is accompanied by criticism: In conceptual terms – for the absence of consensus on the main terms; in regulatory terms – for the movement towards higher standardization and unification of education; in ideological terms – for “an instrumental view of education for the political and economic agenda of international organizations or different countries” [60, p. 4].

However, such hybridization makes it possible to ward off some arrows of criticism toward CBE, demonstrating that weaknesses may become strengths and limitations may turn into opportunities.

For example, the absence of consensus on the terms ‘competence approach’ in general and ‘competence’ in particular (as well as on the general list and framework of competences, which was approved by all the interested parties) helps local reformers push their own ideas, while using the disputable terms as a ‘Trojan horse’ (as P. Clément puts it [11]). It provides room for maneuvering: Having officially joined the international initiatives promoting the competence approach to education, countries become

eligible to support, but they are not obliged to conduct a national reform in education in strict compliance with the international documents. As a result, the risk of excessive standardization and unification of education is decreased. As explained by A.E. Fedorov et al., the bottom line is not “the universal quality standard, not the unified design and content of education; rather, it is the alignment of principles and approaches, similarity of structures, configurations, goals and means” [15, p. 4].

From this perspective, UCs are Russian tools (and outcomes) of the integration of two opposite intentions (also relevant for national educational policies of other countries): To join the CBE mainstream and retain its educational distinctness.

By and large, it should be admitted that the advancement of the competence approach in education systems of different countries is propelled not only by the significance of the competences that the approach promulgates as the key to the future successful life of the younger generation, but also by the fear ‘of being left behind’ in the international competition on the education market.

Discussion

Several foreign and Russian researchers (for example, K. Anderson-Levitt, M.P. Gardinier [2]; M.S. Dobryakova, I.D. Froumin [12]; A.E. Fedorov et al. [15] etc.) reveal a dissonance between the practice of widespread implementation of the competence approach in the educational systems of different countries (including those that are not affected by the Bologna Process) and its insufficient and incomplete conceptualization. This, as noted in their monograph I.Yu. Tarkhanova et al., manifests itself in creating a “conceptual and terminological situation, which many researchers and educational policymakers characterize as a conceptual mess” [53, p. 17].

So, for example, the dyad competency/competence is problematized by its being used for different purposes: For differentiation between the humanistic and the instrumental-practical dimensions of the educational policy (I.A. Zimnaya [61]); for highlighting the differences between the individual and common basics (A.V. Khutorskoy [24]); for separation of knowledge, abilities, skills and their actualization in a specific activity (V.S. Lykova [30]).

In Russian (and to a certain degree – in foreign) pedagogy, the dominant meaning captures the latter interpretation of the competence/competency dyad, which is rooted in Chomsky’s theory and functional-pragmatic tradition in American psychology, and the combination of their ideas caused an inversion of the dichotomy created by N. Chomsky. We join this understanding.

Within the framework of CBE, supra-subject, supra-professional multifunctional, and multidimensional competencies designated by international organizations as *soft skills*, *key competencies*, *generic competences*, *21st century skills* are of particular importance.

An extensive amount of literature is devoted to their conceptual analysis (in particular, S.I. Marin-Zapata, J.P. Román-Calderón, C. Robledo-Ardila, M.A. Jaramillo-Serna [32]; M.L. Matteson, L. Anderson, C. Boyden [33]; A. Pampouri, P. Tsolakidou, A. Mavropoulos [41], and D. Rychen [45]); however, as for the theoretical understanding of the conceptual specifics of universal competencies as a purely Russian concept, there is a particular gap. Our study intends to contribute to this.

To do this, we attempted to explore the specific features of UCs (as a solely Russian term) through their etymological and conceptual analysis. We found that the word ‘universality’

contributes the nuance to UC (holism and complete exclusion of any possibility to incorporate subject or discipline focus or context dependence), which makes it possible to differentiate it from other semantically close terms (soft skills, key competences, etc.), which Russian scientists (M.S. Dobryakova, I.D. Froumin [12]; F. Hénard et al. [20] etc.), whose position on this issue we do not share, use interchangeably with UCs.

Understanding the conceptual specifics of UCs is necessary for a clearer determining of their significance in higher education in Russia. UCs being introduced into educational programs of higher schools can prevent degrading higher education to the function of 'adaptability' to immediate requirements of the labor market, which is consistent with the opinions of V. Maltseva [31] and S.A. Hurrell [22]; and also, according to V.I. Baidenko [5; 6], Yu.B. Drobotenko [13], A.I. Subetto [51], I.Yu. Tarkhanova [53], whose opinion we share, they (UCs) can prevent turning higher schools into 'big vocational schools' through their all-encompassing propagation of the university-specific mission for developing 'universal man.'

However, the scientific community frequently neglects the fact that the UC concept performs the function of a balancer, which brings the higher education system into balance, moving it away from its excessive professionalization, which can result from the narrow view of the competence approach. In this case, we can observe the contradictory nature of CBE, which may either facilitate adverse effects or protect against them (including the effects caused by CBE).

Using their noospheric paradigm of humanization of educational space, A.I. Subetto [51] and representatives of his school justify the need for CBE to move to the paradigm of universalism. We share the main message of their theory, which served as a constructive impetus for our thoughts. We correlated the UC concept with the frameworks of the DeSeCo OECD Project and UNESCO, bringing them in line with the hierarchical system of measurements for the human and universum relationship at three levels: Individual (self-self); social (self-another) and planetary/noospheric (self-the world). It can be seen as a genuine contribution based on our study to expansion of the understanding of universalism as a necessary foundation for CBE.

This also echoes the ideas not only of the scientific school of A.I. Subetto, but also of other educational philosophers who emphasize the need for all three pillars (which must be equally strong) for the sustainability of education – personality, society, and nature, such as A. Shutaleva et al. [48], and also María Ángeles Murga-Menoyo [37] or Edgar Morin, on whose views she relies on when building her biocentric humanism.

However, as the classification of V.V. Belkina and T.V. Makeeva [8] demonstrates, the UC concept, despite its universalist potential, is clearly biased towards the self-another (society) relationship, and this relationship is pragmatically driven. Therefore, we agree with Russian authors who rightly state that the UC concept was not in full agreement with the paradigm of universalism, and we assumed that the UC concept may go through changes, considering the steps taken by international organizations in this direction.

The analysis of scientific researches and regulatory documents within the framework of the problem field leads us to the conclusion that the terminological confusion, problems associated with conceptualization of competences, their systemization, building their universally acceptable framework, which still exist in the scientific discourse and international initiatives, have not only an adverse impact on the theory and practice of the competence approach (which is pointed out by most scholars), but also a positive effect. First of all, they give room for maneuvering in educational reforms and help national systems of education preserve their distinctness when adopting CBE (through hybridization of educational

programs), which is consistent with the results of the studies collected and summarized by K. Anderson-Levitt and M.P. Gardinier [2]. This effect is quite significant in the context of the course towards enhanced standardization and unification of education, which are promoted by international organizations.

Conclusion

The competence approach encapsulates an attempt to overcome a multitude of antitheses, which have been lying at the core of the educational thought since antiquity: Mental versus manual, intellect versus feeling, theoretical versus practical, mind versus body.

However, it may lack stability, combining centripetal forces, which pull it apart when it is torn between the professional education narrowed down to learning technical skills and the liberal education being out of touch with reality; between practice-focused and value-based dimensions; between the unconstrained unfolding of a student's potential, which is opened up by the constructivist core of the competence approach, and the narrow bounds of the ideal graduate, whose characteristics are defined by exhaustive catalogs of competences; between the uniformity of values and cultural relativism; between globalism and uniqueness.

The endogenous reason for this lies in the habit to perceive skills and knowledge, soft and hard skills, supra-professional and professional competences as dichotomies rather than continuum.

The exogenous factor is associated with the initial ambivalence of CBE: On the one hand, it meets the political requirement for channeling education along the neoliberal, mercantilist path; on the other hand, it has a humanistic potential.

The concept of UCs can add balance to CBE in the Russian context, or it can aggravate the imbalance inherent in CBE. The future will show what role this concept is going to play in the competence approach and what role the competence approach is going to play in Russian education.

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