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Present and Future of Teacher Education Admission: Perspectives From Europe

Anita Pipere, Mārīte Kravale-Pauliņa and Eridiana Oļehnoviča
Daugavpils University, Daugavpils, Latvia

Abstract

The article presents small-scale qualitative research that reveals the views of teacher education (TE) experts from different geographical regions of Europe on teacher education admission criteria (TEA) today and in the future world. This exploration would open the international debate on the future need to reinvent the TE, TEA, and rethink the qualities of the TE candidates in a sustainable TE framework for the wide diversity of European countries. Data were collected from ten experts using a qualitative questionnaire with eight open questions, including one multiple choice question. Inductive and deductive qualitative content analysis was performed on the qualitative data collected. This study gives voice to professionals in TE and TEA, allowing them to express concerns, perspectives, and visions of current and future TE and TEA. In light of the cultural, social, political, and educational context in several European countries, the findings illustrate the scope of similar and unique discourses that are considered crucial in educational politics and decision making on the national, regional and pan-European scale.

Keywords: admission to teacher education, qualitative research, post-pandemic world, sustainable teacher education, Europe

Introduction

As it is common in qualitative research, research problem usually is closely related to the personal experience of researchers (Boudah, 2011). Thus, the idea for the given study stems from the experience of the authors of this paper, closely involved in teacher education (TE) practice and research. This experience currently revolves around the 1) lessons learned during the continuous reforms of the Latvian educational system; 2) issues related to ageing, inequality, burnout, retention of teachers, and 3) manifestations of accountability and performativity in the educational system and, peculiarly, in the TE of Latvia. Recent changes in TE programs toward centralization, consolidation, and marketization have also raised questions regarding teacher education admission (TEA). The situation was exacerbated and the system's bottlenecks were even more illuminated by the Covid-19 pandemics, ruthlessly and unexpectedly testing the durability, changeability, adaptability, and resilience of teachers, students, and parents. A similar

situation, or at least some aspects of it, was and still is evident in many other European countries.

As international research (EC, 2020, 2021; Falkenberg, 2010) shows, countries and institutions usually avoid replicating the TEA criteria or do not change them to be in trend with the latest global developments in the field. TEA criteria and requirements usually determine the real situation and context in a given country (even region of the country). The necessity of reflecting on the issues around the TEA and comparing these reflections with the views prevailing in other countries led to the idea of the given research. Therefore, we set out to explore the similarities and differences in the opinions of experts from several European countries regarding the TEA criteria today and in the post-pandemic world.

Looking for fast answers, probably under the impact of positivism, researchers sometimes search for the simple correlation between the TEA criteria and students' achievements (for example, the rating of the country in international assessments) (Lukaš & Samardžić, 2015). However, such designs would lead to spurious correlations, due to the myriad of other factors that determine student achievement in a given country. Probably, the root of the problem is not so much the strictness of criteria, but a nuanced and critical evaluation of contextual factors that affect the TEA in a complex system approach. This evaluation can potentially be provided by TE professionals, experts with extensive experience in a given field who encounter the need to implement the TEA more sustainably. Such a local situation evaluation would allow for clearer definitions of the goals, criteria, and requirements of TEA, considering the small number of studies on the criteria used for entry into TE programs (Darmody & Smyth, 2016).

There is still no research asking what kind of TEA criteria, processes, etc. should match the post-pandemic educational systems in different countries, although it might be that pandemics, no matter how long, will not make radical changes in centuries- and decades-long traditions and approaches. Given that research would start the international discussion not only on the need to reinvent the TEA process and criteria after Covid-19, but also on rethinking the qualities of candidates, who would be accepted in the new TE programs, teachers need to become capable of dealing with 'the new normal'.

According to Darmody and Smyth (2016), the TEA criteria could be changed, in part, due to concerns about potential skill deficits among newly qualified teachers, as well as inconsistencies and anomalies in the current TE system. They argue for further research that would define the existence, nature, and scale of such deficits and ask if these problems could be addressed through changing entry standards and/or through the design and content of initial TE programs. Again, this suggestion shows the complex nature of TE and TEA and the need for a deeper exploration of this topic.

The article starts with the position of the authors on the research topic and the main concepts of the study, asking what a good teacher is and what teachers we will need in the 21st century to set the scene for some general reflections on the TEA. Contextualizing the study in current circumstances, we will present a short overview of education and TE in the post-pandemic world and some observations regarding the possible reinvention of TEA in the future. The methodological part of the study will lead to findings, discussions, and reflections.

Theoretical Background

Defining a Good Teacher for Today and Tomorrow

In this study, our aim is to single out the views of European experts on TEA, which to some degree would be based on their own professional knowledge and understanding of the good teacher, since the aim of TEA is to recruit the applicants who, after the successful acquisition of TE, would become the good teachers. What teacher do we want to see in our schools today and in the future? The self-explanatory answer would be – just a good teacher. However, even the usage of the term was not generally accepted. Skimming recent studies, we found the term ‘good teacher’ (Baier et al., 2019; Duarte, 2013; Souto-Manning, 2019; Stronge et al., 2011) or even ‘good enough teacher’ (Gillespie & Thompson, 2021; Thompson & Jones, 2021). However, the term ‘effective teacher or teaching’ has also been used instead for some time (Crawley, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Goodley, 2018). Some authors also use terms such as quality teachers (Buchanan, 2017) or professional teachers (Gerrard & Farrell, 2014). The usage of different terms sets up the discussion of implied discourses. For example, the phrase ‘good enough teacher’ has been used in the critical discourse of social practice, while the concept of an effective or professional teacher reflects the normative neoliberal discourse of accountability and performativity.

The quality of teachers is the most significant within-school factor explaining student performance (Barber & Mourshed, 2007; Daly et al., 1999; Hattie, 2003, 2008; OECD, 2005), especially critical for lower-ability students (Aaronson et al., 2007).

Although the topic related to the good teacher has been extensively discussed during the past decades, due to the limited volume of paper, we will sketch only some recent conceptualizations. Although there is little consensus on what constitutes a good teacher (Turner-Bisset, 2001), in-depth content knowledge or subject-specific knowledge seems to be a rarely questioned feature (Baumert et al., 2010; Hattie, 2008; McKinsey, 2007; Slater, 2013; Stronge, 2002). Furthermore, many studies have shown the need for pedagogical knowledge: instructional strategies to promote achievement, containing knowledge about classroom organization and management, learning theory, and general teaching methods (Cotton, 2000; Baumert et al., 2010). Later, pedagogical skills such as inter- and intra-personal knowledge and skills come into sight. Some authors speak about the dispositions of effective teachers, such as empathy, a positive view of others and self, authenticity, meaningful purpose, and vision (Usher et al., 2003). In their writings about TEA, Casey and Childs (2007) notice the four aspects of a good teacher emphasized in the literature. These are content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical communication and interpersonal skills, and attitudes/motivation toward teaching. However, we could ask if these four aspects are equally important or, for instance, content knowledge is more important than attitude toward teaching. This question is closely related to teachers’ expectations in the 21st century and TEA issues.

We have constrained our description of a good teacher mainly to traditional and formal approaches, depicting the narrowly targeted goals for TE. However, the literature on the teaching profession comprises many diverse trends and discourses like teacher identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Buchanan, 2015), teacher beliefs (Meirink et al., 2009; Wallace & Priestley, 2011), ethos in the teaching profession (Oser et al., 2021), agency of teacher (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015; Eteläpelto et al., 2013), practical

wisdom of teachers (Furman, 2018; Salite et al., 2009) etc., which also should be considered in the process of TE and TEA.

Now, based on our intention to explore the views of experts on the TEA in the future, it is important to provide at least a short insight related to the scholarly vision of teachers in the very complex world of the future. Trying to illustrate the present social and cultural context of our age in terms of the teaching profession, one of the main controversies asking for the transdisciplinary dialogue in this field is a widening gap between the vocational crisis ‘attracting fewer young people and losing others who have been trained to become teachers’ (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021, p.11) and ever-rising demands and expectations for teachers. Although we can assume that increasing demands and responsibilities would be partially responsible for the mentioned crisis, the issue is not as simple as it seems. The other juxtaposition is between the need for sustainable teachers, education, and TE and the frequent necessity to teach in a rather unsustainable learning environment (Iliško et al., 2014). Furthermore, future teachers will work in the future world of VUCA, characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (Johansen & Euchner, 2013).

In such circumstances, teachers themselves need the so-called 21st century skills to teach them to their pupils. These skills can be classified differently. One of such classifications presents knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and ethics in a common and straightforward way: 1) Ways of Thinking (creativity and innovation, critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, learning to learn, 2) Ways of Working (communication and teamwork), 3) Tools for Working (general knowledge and ICT literacy), 4) Living in the World (citizenship, life and career, personal and social responsibility, including cultural awareness and competence) (Saavedra & Opfer, 2012). Partnership for 21st century learning suggests similar themes: learning and innovation skills, information, media, technology skills, life and career skills (P21, 2016). One of the most recent and transdisciplinary elaborations on 21st century skills is the so-called Future Skills (Ehlers, 2020), created for higher education but easily adaptable to the TE and teaching profession. The Future Skills are defined as the ability to act successfully and in a self-organized way (see, for instance, Maclellan (2016)) on a complex problem in an unknown context, and they contain three interrelated dimensions: 1) the *subjective dimension* (abilities to learn, adapt, and develop to productively participate in the workforce of tomorrow, actively shape the future working environment, and to build the society able to cope with future challenges), 2) the *object dimension* (ability to act the self-organized way with an object) and 3) the *social dimension* (ability to act the self-organized way with the social environment). Although the list of demands for future teachers is not exhausted, the full description would require much more space, and thus, we will now turn to a short review of the TEA process in general.

Admission to Teacher Education

Formally, the TEA process involves well-defined stages and individuals in different roles (Thomas & Hirschhorn, 2005). The TEA process described by Canadian teacher educators could also be familiar in other countries: The submitted materials are considered together by a committee of faculty members or by staff in the given TE program; sometimes applicants would not meet a minimum requirement, occasionally the materials from applicants are assessed and rated, and admission first is offered for applicants

with the highest ratings; sometimes the commission is looking for applicants with specific characteristics (Hirschhorn & Sears, 2005; Thomas & Hirschhorn, 2005). Therefore, the TEA would aim to select applicants who will succeed in TE programs and have the potential to become good beginning teachers (Casey & Childs, 2007; Stronge, 2002).

According to Hirschhorn and Sears (2005), TE programs usually use four types of mechanism for vetting applicants, namely Academic Credentials; Personal Statements; References, and sometimes Interview/Performances, although the procedures for evaluation and relative importance of each type differ between countries (Darmody & Smyth, 2016).

Falkenberg (2010) advises the model (based on the Casey-Childs framework) for the selection of applicants for TE programs containing 1) the qualities of the applicants; 2) the vision of the qualities of the program graduates; 3) impact of given TE program on the applicant's development as teachers; 4) working conditions in schools; 5) the hiring criteria of school divisions. To his mind, selection criteria also depend on the focus of the TE program: programs focusing on personal qualities or practical wisdom of future teachers will apply stronger screening, while the programs aiming to develop routine expertise of teachers will require fewer prerequisites for applicants and will hope to develop such expertise in the program.

The core determinant of the TEA criteria is teacher qualities and attributes, or, in other words, characteristics of a good teacher and expectations about the skills and roles of teachers described in previous chapters of the paper. Similarly, important factors determining the TEA criteria are teacher supply and demand, as well as teacher retention, inevitably related to the demographic situation, the prestige of the profession, salary and working conditions, as well as opportunities for career progression. Countries with a shortage of teachers use lower qualification requirements to enter the profession (Darmody & Smyth, 2016), hoping that applicants will acquire the necessary competencies in the TE program. Although it is sometimes very problematic to motivate young people to enter the teaching profession, the initial motivation for TE applicants can later influence the professional effectiveness of beginning teachers (Hobson et al., 2009; Richardson & Watt, 2013).

Speaking of international comparative studies on TEA, we should mention a landmark study led by Darling-Hammond (2017) *Empowered Educators: How High-Performing Systems Shape Teaching Quality Around the World*, indicating that high-performing countries perform the careful selection of teachers. Among the common themes for TEA in Australia, Finland, Canada, Shanghai, and Singapore are competitive compensation and subsidies for preparation that make teaching attractive and preparation affordable, careful scrutiny of potential candidates, and checking the progress of teacher-candidates during preparation. In the mentioned countries, teaching is an esteemed, well-paid profession, and selection practice is a rigorous process, based not only on academic achievements, but also on interpersonal, communication skills, and conceptual, analytical, and problem-solving abilities. This study re-emphasizes the already mentioned idea that to educate highly qualified teachers, the country has to ensure not only the careful selection of candidates, but also subsidy the teacher preparation, guarantee the high prestige and relevant salaries of teachers.

Casey and Childs (2007) call on TE programs to "critically examine their admission criteria to ensure that those criteria, along with the preparation they provide, will lead their graduates to be successful beginning teachers" (p. 14) and to study the needs of

beginning teachers and the preparation offered by the TE programs. Nations can face the challenges of the teaching profession only by learning from each other about what matters and what works in different contexts (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017). Taking into account the need for research to establish sustainable TE programs and TEA criteria (Kansanen, 2018) our intention is to discover at least some factors evaluated by experts as having an impact on sustainable TE and TEA.

The Reinvention of TE/TEA in the Future

Considering the role of education in global transformation, 2020 (and the years ahead) is a time for teachers to rethink the roles of teachers and teachers' education for the 21st century (Jorge, 2020). The post-pandemic world will bring about the deterioration of the economic situation and growing unemployment that would influence the decisions what to study as to have employment security in the future (Croucher & Locke, 2020). Although the situation logically points to the higher number of applicants in TE programs, especially in countries with a shortage of teachers, Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) envisage the counterintuitive outcome leading to the simultaneous shortages and layoffs of teachers, at least in the US. This requires considering that "one in five teachers says that they are unlikely to return if schools open physically in the fall (of 2020 – *authors' note*)" (p. 88), a potential staff cut to meet budget shortfalls and already existing work-force challenges.

To provide a sustainable future, the educational community needs to reform the post-pandemic world to ensure the well-being and equality of all people (Oleksiyeenko et al., 2020). To reconstruct schools, we should emphasize collaboration in a dialogical mode of transdisciplinarity as well as transdisciplinary research frameworks (Pipere & Lorenzi, 2021; Salite et al., 2016) among students, staff, families and communities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Within this model, schools will become an integral part of an adaptive system that envisions reciprocal relationships with social, health, cultural, and economic aspects of life (Sahlberg, 2021). Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) suggest that in the post-pandemic world we will need the productive engagement of current and future teachers with distance learning, blended and hybrid learning models, authentic learning with formative assessments, as well as meeting of social and emotional needs of students and implementing trauma- and healing-informed practice to cope with the unprecedented situation of learning.

However, as recent studies show, teachers themselves suffer from emotional exhaustion, stress, anguish, or anxiety due to confinement and distance education (CSIF, 2020; Sokal et al., 2020). The issue arises: If this becomes the new normal for education, what kind of teacher will be necessary in this case? Furthermore, remote learning has aggravated the following dilemma between teaching core subjects for future examinations on the one hand and addressing social and emotional well-being and teaching competencies for real life (Sahlberg, 2021), on the other. Eventually, the main issue is not about the use of remote teaching (although it could be problematic), but rather about the fact that we cannot avoid possible crises impacting education in the future. Therefore, it is important that future teachers are able to cope with these crises and how these crises will influence the balance between approved and effective approaches and emergency or revolutionary approaches, as well as between teachers as implementers of 'what works' and committed professionals with research-informed practice (Flores & Gago, 2020).

Governments around the world will try to meet immediate needs in a post-pandemic economic and social situation, sometimes looking for alternative ‘fast track’ routes for teacher preparation (Price & McConney, 2013, p. 98). However, these new circumstances will require the recruitment, development and retention of highly effective and good teachers if we are to improve the well-being and sustainability of our communities and the global society (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Furthermore, in these challenging times, calling for decision-making in a short time and an evidence-based education policy, the importance of scientific studies on the views of TE experts is amplified (Croucher & Locke, 2020). Furthermore, the critical factor recognized by the group of scholars (Oleksiyenko et al., 2020), coinciding with the given research, is “moving away from the factory-style scientification promoted by the positivist hierarchy-oriented paradigms of education research” and engaging in an interpretative and qualitative inquiry on the visions of educational experts.

The theoretical discussions above lead to the following question: Should we ask for the final decision on these matters for teachers or teacher educators, or should these questions be answered only by education politics, administration, officials, and so on? For many decades, teachers had no real voice in education beyond the classroom. According to Johnson and McElroy (2010), politicians tell us how they will ‘fix’ education problems. The unions tell us how they will ‘represent’ the teacher. School boards and administrators tell us how they will ‘direct and manage’ teachers. However, the teacher, the most important actor of student success, has very little opportunity to assume leadership responsibilities that influence the process of education. Even more, already at the beginning of the 21st century, Darling-Hammond (2006) wrote that also “teacher educators seem to have lost their voice in arguing for – and helping to shape the kinds of schools and education that will allow teachers to practice well and children to learn and thrive” (p. 302). Hopefully, this qualitative study will give voice to TE experts who are closely related to TE programs and TEA, thus serving as a remedy for the mentioned problems.

Therefore, the present qualitative study aims to explore the views of experts from different European countries, common themes, and their variations, on the current situation and future perspectives of TEA in a post-pandemic world. The study will focus on the following questions:

- 1) What similarities and differences can be observed in the views of experts on the current situation with TEA?
- 2) What similarities and differences can be observed in the experts’ views on TEA in the future (post-pandemic world)?

Method

Research Design and Methods

The given study was envisaged as small-scale qualitative research based on a case study approach, with each participating country perceived as a single case. A qualitative questionnaire with open questions, including a multiple choice question, ensured data collection for this study. The qualitative questionnaire study is a popular method for collecting data on sensitive topics, maintaining participant anonymity (Braun et al., 2013), considering the specific nature of the questions, asking for deeper reflection and a busy schedule of research participants in times of pandemics.

The questions in the questionnaire were derived from the existing literature and based on established research questions. The questionnaire consisted of four parts: 1) introduction, explaining the context, aim of the study, ethical questions, contact details of the research team; 2) instructions for completing the survey; 3) sociodemographic information (country, age, highest degree, position at a higher education institution (HEI) concerning TE, prior experience/current activities concerning TEA, TE programs implemented at the institution of participant); 4) questions (seven open questions and one multiple choice question). The central part of the questionnaire began with questions asking for a short description of the requirements, criteria, and processes of the TEA in a given country/institution. Then the multiple choice question with 12 options was offered to choose the TEA requirements and methods applied by the participant's country or institution. Subsequent questions focused on the current situation and future expectations regarding TE candidates and TEA in a given country/institution. The questionnaire was created in Latvian, piloted and refined with the help of relevant participants, and translated into English.

Sample and Procedure

Key informants by country (representing different European countries) and the field of expertise were selected using the purpose-sampling method. The authors searched for experts in the research topic capable of providing deeper insight into what was happening within their institutions and country in terms of TE and TEA (Marshall, 1996). In this research, the expert is an individual with specific technical, process, and interpretative knowledge in terms of the given professional area along with the experience of actions, responsibilities, and obligations related to the specific status of an expert within their institution or even at the country level. Experts should have general information, factual knowledge, and privileged access to information (Bogner, Littig, & Menz, 2009; Meuser & Nagel, 1991).

Out of the 30 experts invited to participate in the study, 10 experts (representing eight European countries) agreed to complete the questionnaire (see Table 1). In general, the selection of the most appropriate research participants was based on cooperation with TE networks and associations along with long-established professional contacts of the authors. The main reasons for refusing to participate were the complexity and length of the questionnaire, open questions that asked for written responses, and lack of time.

Table 1

Sociodemographic Portrait of the Research Participants (N=10)

Country	AL	CZ	IT	LV	LV	LV	LT	PL	RO	SE
Age	40–49	30–39	30–39	50–59	50–59	50–59	30–39	40–49	40–49	60+
Degree	Ph.D.	Ph.D.	Ph.D.	Ph.D.	Ph.D.	Ph.D.	Ph.D.	Ph.D.	Ph.D.	Ph.D.
Position at the HEI	SR	ASSIP/ CHD	ASSIP	SR	SR	PROF	PROF/ D	ASSOP/ VD	ASSOP/ CHD	ASSOP
Experience in TEA	2, 3, 4, 5, 6	1, 2, 3	2, 3, 4	1, 3	1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7	1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7	1, 3	3, 6	1, 3	1, 3, 4, 5, 6

Note: Countries: AL – Albania, CZ – Czech Republic, IT – Italy, LV – Latvia, LT – Lithuania, PL – Poland, RO – Romania, SE – Sweden. Position at HEI: SR – senior researcher, ASSOP – associate professor, ASSIP – assistant professor, PROF – professor, CHD – chair of the department, D – dean, VD – vicedean. Experience in TEA: 1) coordinator/chair of TE program; 2) participation in policymaking; 3) research; 4) participation/leading of local associations, working groups; 5) participation/leading of working groups, councils, etc. by the Ministry of Education; 6) participation/leading of international projects/mobility; 7) participation/leading of a unit responsible for TEA.

Thus, the general portrait of research participants substantiates their positioning as Europe-based experts: all research participants are holders of Ph.D. and represent different regions of Europe: Northern Europe (Sweden), Baltic countries (Latvia, Lithuania), Central Europe (Czech Republic, Poland), and Southern Europe (Albania, Italy, Romania). Most of the sample is older than 40 years, indicating a rich life and work experience. Participants occupy high positions at HEI: there are three associate professors, three senior researchers, two professors, two assistant professors, two chairs of the department, dean, and vice dean. All participants in this study have extensive prior experience in a given field: they research the relevant field, most of them are coordinators or chairs of TE program/s, and half of the experts have participated or led local associations or working groups. A smaller number of experts cooperate with the Ministries of Education, participate in international projects or mobility staff exchange, policy making, or specific TEA units.

Potential research participants received an email from the researchers with an invitation to participate in the study by explaining the context, aim, and general overview of the questionnaire, research procedure, and ethical issues. In case of agreement (by e-mail), they received the link to the online form of a questionnaire on Google Questionnaire. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire and submit it within two weeks after reception. The responses were delivered in a period of one week to four months (summer and fall 2021), probably due to the busy schedule of the experts.

In the introductory part of the questionnaire, the research participants were again ensured that their privacy and research records would be kept confidential and the published results would not include their names or any other information that would personally identify them in any way; all references to the participants would be coded or applied as a pseudonym. Electronic responses to the Google Questionnaire were securely kept in a locked file and only researchers had access to the data. The texts were

anonymised and assigned coded labels to differentiate the country and the question asked. The research participants received assurance that on their request they would obtain all publications reflecting the results of the given study.

Data Analysis

Data from the multiple choice question (2nd question) will be presented in combination with the descriptive answers to the question about the current situation with TEA in a given country (1st question). The answers to these two introductory questions of the questionnaire (regarding the TEA in a specific country/HEI) cross-checked with the data obtained from the EU documents will be presented in the Results section concisely.

Qualitative content analysis was used to explore the qualitative data of seven open questions in the questionnaire. The investigation was carried out according to the research questions: The first part of the analysis was related to the first research question on similarities and differences in experts' views on the current situation with TEA. For this part of the results, the data obtained from the textual responses of the experts to Questions 3, 5, 6, and 8 were analyzed in an integrated form. The second part of the data analysis refers to the second research question on similarities and differences in the views of experts on TEA in the post-pandemic world. For this part of the results, the textual responses to Questions 4 and 7 were analyzed in an integrated way.

Inductive content analysis, as described by Elo and Kyngas (2008), was used in the study. The unit of analysis was the answer to the specific question of the expert questionnaire. Data inspection in general consisted of the initial coding of the data by the lead author and the generation of preliminary themes followed by negotiation, refinement, and agreement between the three authors. Most of the questions in the questionnaire retained answers, suggesting inductive analysis, while the data from two questions (the satisfaction with the criteria of the TEA and the qualities of future teachers) suited the deductive way of analysis and some quantification of the answers.

Trustworthiness of the study: Following the suggestions of Elo et al. (2014), we will briefly describe the trustworthiness of this study in the preparation, organization, and reporting phases of the research process. Trustworthiness was ensured in the preparation phase of the content analysis study by collecting unstructured data, piloting and refining the questionnaire content, and objective sampling of experts. The organization phase of this study featured several people who participated in data analysis, according to the recommendation: "One researcher is responsible for the analysis, and others carefully follow up on the entire analysis process and categorization" (Elo et al., 2014, p. 5). In the reporting phase of the study, trustworthiness was ensured, observing that "the structure of results is equivalent and answers the aim and research questions" (ibid. p. 5) and the findings reflected the voice of the participants presented in representative quotations.

Findings

In general, all research participants provided descriptive responses (from 1–2 sentences to several paragraphs) to all the questions, except for the four cases where the experts did not provide the response or answered with "yes" or used short replies. The

findings of this study will be presented in three subchapters, starting with a general overview of the TEA in each country. This will be followed by the subchapter on the perception of experts of the current situation with TEA (comprising two themes, views on candidates for TE and views on TEA) and the subchapter on the vision of experts on TEA in the post-pandemic world (comprising two themes, teachers in the post-pandemic world, and TEA in the post-pandemic world). Each chapter will first show the similarities of views and then turn to the specific features of countries. The names of countries will be provided in full and as abbreviations.

TEA Requirements and Selection Methods

This section will provide a brief description of the situation with TEA in each country participating in this study. In light of the changing situation due to pandemics and current reforms at different levels of educational systems, TE and TEA in many countries, our approach to obtain the necessary data was based on the verification of expert answers to the first two questions in a questionnaire with information from formal EU documents (Eurydice, 2022) to obtain the latest historical and experience-based facts on TEA. The countries are alphabetically listed as in Table 1.

Albania. The average grade for admission to HEI is calculated as a simple average of indicators: a) a simple arithmetic average of final annual grades of courses for all years of schooling in upper secondary education, and b) an arithmetic average of the marks of the state Matura exams. HEI may establish additional admission criteria, made available to the Center for Educational Services and the Ministry responsible for education. All candidates who have completed upper secondary education with an average grade of 7.5 are eligible to apply for admission to HEI in bachelor study programs, which provide access to second cycle master programs in teaching.

The Czech Republic. Secondary education completed with a Maturita examination is the fundamental requirement for entering a Bachelor's degree program of TE. The initial teacher education (ITE) 3-year bachelor study program (EQF6) for secondary vocational schools admits candidates based on an online general knowledge test, a successful maturity test, and an average secondary education score. In some cases, enrollment proceedings consist of a written and oral examination on the relevant subjects and a motivational interview, or they can take the form of a general written test. Some faculties admit all applicants without entrance examinations.

Italy. The entry requirements at the university depend on the field of study, i.e., for some programs, candidates have to pass an admission test. For secondary school teachers, admission requirements are a diploma of secondary education.

Latvia. The main access requirement is to have a general higher education certificate (with marks in subjects relevant to the program). However, the training institution, depending on the course or area of specialization, establishes selection methods and has the right to state additional admission requirements. Recently, practical selection procedures for state-financed study positions are based on the results of centralized examinations passed at the end of secondary education, but may also include competitive entrance examinations and (or) a ranking according to the marks in secondary education certificate. The latter can be accompanied by an interview.

Lithuania. To apply for state-funded ITE (EQ6), candidates must have a diploma in secondary education. The selection of candidates is based on the competition score

(compiled annually from upper secondary school achievements such as Matura examinations and/or annual grades, sports, Olympiads, other achievements, and other criteria) and motivational tests (assessing the motivation and personal qualities and values of candidates).

Poland. To enter the first and long cycle (5-year master program for preschool and elementary teachers), candidates need a secondary education diploma (maturity exam) and a relevant GPA of secondary education.

Romania. Admission to bachelor's degree programs is based on the average of the baccalaureate exam and various subjects studied during high school, along with the grade obtained in the admission exam organized entirely by the HEI. For pre-school and primary school ITE programs, admittance is based on the average at the baccalaureate examination and a vocational test (sing a song, reading a text, drawing after a model).

Sweden. To enter pre-school, primary school, and lower secondary school teacher programs, a diploma of secondary education (basic requirements) is the only criterion. For teachers of subjects in upper secondary school, selected subjects must be completed in upper secondary school.

Experts' Opinion on the Current Situation With TEA

The opinion of experts on the existing situation with TEA allowed us to establish two main themes, the views on the candidates for TE programs and those on the TEA process and criteria. The mentioned themes describe two main interrelated aspects of TEA. The description will begin with a presentation of the consonant views found in the answers of experts on these two themes. Quotes from experts are in italics.

Views on Candidates for TE Programs

The main theme was divided into subthemes on the positive and negative characteristics of the candidates. We will start with the positive features, although they were mentioned much less and did not allow for subthemes. The Latvian representative indicated that the candidates for the new TE program expressed great motivation, leadership, and drive to become teachers. The Romanian expert also acknowledged the aspirations of some candidates: *They want to become a teacher at the preschool and primary level.* Other Latvian experts and experts from the Czech Republic recognized the compliance of applicants with the requirements and criteria for TE programs, in general.

As mentioned above, the negative characteristics of the candidates prevailed and were divided into two subgroups: lack of motivation and low quality of the candidates. The following quote strikingly illustrates the problem of motivation: *A large number of candidates do not have a passion for this profession and often enter teacher training because they failed to get admission to other more prestigious university courses such as psychology or law (PL).* Representatives from Lithuania and Albania also expressed similar thoughts, blaming the lack of clarity for the choice and choosing teaching as the second choice or simply having higher education. The Lithuanian expert also mentioned the lack of prestige of the teaching profession. Writing about the low quality of the candidates allowed us to discern two subgroups: poor performance in STEM and other weaknesses. Experts from Lithuania and Latvia noticed weak knowledge in mathematics

and STEM subjects, in general. Therefore, the Latvian expert emphasized *the insufficient number of candidates that meet admission requirements (average mark not less than 7 in special subjects of secondary education, especially STEM)*. Then another group was assembled from observations from Sweden, Albania, and Latvia. It showed the low quality of candidates in general, great variation in the cohort of students, and regret that *teacher candidates do not always have an adequate view on the specifics of teacher work, the volume of psychological and emotional pressure, the necessity to work in constantly changing situation, the disparity between the wage and efforts, and amount of unpaid work (LV)*.

Views on the TEA Process and Criteria

The treatment of this theme will begin with the identification of the satisfaction of experts with TEA in their countries, followed by the description of the positive characteristics and success of TEA and the negative or challenging aspects of TEA. Again, as in the case with the positive and negative characteristics of the TE candidates, the experts were much more eloquent and detailed writing about the negative characteristics and challenges.

Most experts were satisfied (LV, LT, SE, RO) or partially satisfied (CZ, ITA) with the TEA criteria in their country. Only experts from AL and PL expressed dissatisfaction with these criteria or lack of such a thing. However, to avoid unnecessary repetition, the substantiations for their decisions will appear under the themes related to positive / negative characteristics and success/challenges of TEA.

Experts from Sweden and Latvia mentioned the positive aspects of TEA, namely, the correlation of the level of the TE study with the grades of secondary school and the appropriate criterion of the average grade for admission to ITE. The negative aspects or challenges of the TEA were divided into two groups: the number of candidates and the attraction of students. Experts from four countries (LV, LT, AL, SE) explicitly referred to the small number of candidates and tried to explain the reasons for this: *the number of students enrolled in study programs in the field of teaching has decreased due to the nonfulfillment of the average grade of admission in these programs (AL)*. The main reasons mentioned by the experts were the low quality of the candidates and the prestige of the profession. The second challenge, closely related to the small number of candidates, is the attraction of candidates, both in numbers higher (AL) and with higher qualifications (SE). Representative from Albania noticed that universities avoid setting higher TEA criteria, as this could result in losing students and closing study programs. The expert from the Czech Republic admitted the challenge of making the teaching profession more attractive to young people, while an expert from Latvia pointed to the challenge of choosing *the best ways to inform potential candidates about the possibilities of studies, the relevance of the profession, and to get that information across*.

Analysis of the responses also revealed some divergent responses related to the current TEA. Thus, only the Romanian expert declared the wish of the candidates to become teachers in preschool and primary school. Regarding the admission requirements, the majority of experts mentioned specific features, such as lack of autonomy for universities to select students for specific study programs and the need for the motivational test (AL) or, on the contrary, revolt against the motivation test, as this criterion can be faked (LT). Experts from Latvia described the curiosity that an MD applicant could not

be admitted to the ITE program due to low secondary school grades in compulsory subjects (since the students cannot repeat secondary school). The expert from Poland urged the creation of new clear TEA criteria in Poland as they were a decade ago, since currently the only requirement is only the secondary school graduation exam (matura), while the expert from the Czech Republic mentioned the differences in TEA for primary, secondary, and secondary technical schools.

Expert Views on TEA in the Future (Post-pandemic World)

The views of experts on TEA in the future (post-pandemic world) determine two main themes: views on teachers and views on TEA. This description will show the alignment of experts' views on both aspects and will be followed by specific opinions on these two topics.

Imagining Teachers in the Future

Since the theoretical conceptualizations of good teachers are widely present today, the experts were asked to provide a list of qualities of future teachers for the purpose of deductive analysis. Therefore, we used a framework of four aspects of good teachers (Casey & Childs, 2007): content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical communication and interpersonal skills, and attitudes/motivation toward teaching. As the content analysis also allows for the quantification of answers, to maintain the accurate description of the future teacher, we will use the numbers showing the frequency of a given aspect in the total pool of features.

The largest group of characteristics related to attitudes / motivation toward teaching ($n = 24$) contained four subgroups. The first subgroup was the motivation group ($n = 8$); two experts mentioned the need for motivated teachers, others emphasized love and passion for the profession, several experts mentioned being satisfied, happy, dedicated teachers, enjoying their work. The following two subgroups were professionalism and activity groups ($n = 6$ each): former group represented a professional, competent, reflective, responsible teacher with credibility, who is also a very moral person, while later featured an active or proactive, driven, energetic, dynamic teacher, engaged in active citizenship. A smaller subgroup of elements was related to self-development ($n = 4$). The future teacher is ready to look for answers, new challenges, improvements, eager to participate in self-development and further education. The next aspect of future teachers included characteristics describing *pedagogical communication and interpersonal skills* ($n = 10$). This aspect represented leadership skills, communication, and cooperation (each mentioned by two experts), along with the command of group dynamics, openness, love, and care for children. Furthermore, a relatively large number of features ($n = 7$) on *content knowledge* was found. The experts were willing to see a multidisciplinary teacher with thorough professional knowledge, a high command of theoretical subjects ($n = 4$), capable of applying integration in their work. Finally, the aspect of *pedagogical knowledge (didactic)* ($n = 4$) included characteristics such as self-development in didactics, broad pedagogical knowledge, the use of digital technologies and skills to plan, implement and evaluate the teaching/learning process. The qualities that could be related to any group mentioned above were creativity ($n = 2$), critical thinking, and the willingness to prepare students for life in the 21st century.

TEA in the Future

The answers to the questions also showed the merging views of experts on TEA in the post-pandemic world. Interestingly, only two main themes were discerned from the responses of the experts, one related to the digital transformation of education/TEA, while another included suggestions for specific changes in TEA.

The first theme was represented by the larger number of codes, and it could be divided into two subthemes, namely 1) technologies and education and 2) digital TEA. The first subtheme suggested the development of digital pedagogical competence for both school teachers and teacher educators, flexibility with hybrid teaching / learning, and blended mode of training. Thus, an expert from Sweden admitted that *there would probably be necessary changes in making teaching and learning more flexible with hybrid solutions of campus and net-based teaching/learning*. On the other hand, an expert from Poland insisted: *Teacher educators must stop faking the use of technology and learn how to use it properly to improve the quality of future teacher education. There are so many online tools that can improve education; you just have to be willing to use them*. The digital TEA subtheme appeared in responses from two experts (from Romania and the Czech Republic) who advised the new online admission forms.

Furthermore, the second theme of the TEA changes included two subthemes: 1) attraction of teacher candidates and 2) improvement of admission criteria. In terms of the first subtheme, representatives from Sweden and Albania suggested improving the professional image of teachers and looking for new strategies to attract high-quality candidates. The representative of Lithuania pointed out that *the pandemic situation would not change the motivation to study pedagogy or be a teacher*. The second subtheme was presented by a much larger number of responses and was related to different types of improvement of the TEA process and criteria. Since Poland did not have such criteria, the representative of this country urged the work on clear criteria, which were in place about a decade ago, following the Finland model. The Lithuanian expert suggested the omission of the mathematics examination, since poor knowledge of this subject would prevent candidates from enrolling in state-funded studies and motivational tests (as it can easily be faked). On the other hand, an expert from Albania argued for *a higher average score of secondary education and an assessment of motivation to become teachers*. Two suggestions from Latvia were related to the new criteria for medical opinion on mental health for all TE candidates and the proper pronunciation for preschool and elementary TE candidates.

Data analysis also revealed several specific responses related to teachers and TEA in the post-pandemic world. Only the Latvian experts, speaking of future teachers, mentioned their satisfaction with wage and work conditions, active citizenship, and love for children. Only one representative of Latvia, writing about future teachers, named their digital competence. Furthermore, in relation to TEA, only the Latvian experts indicated the specific characteristics of professional suitability, such as mental health and proper pronunciation. Representatives from other Baltic countries suggested the need for multi-disciplinary teachers and provided the observation that Covid-19 did not (and, maybe, would not) change the motivation to become teachers. Only the representative from Poland expressed a holistic view that future teachers would be *ready to support their students to live in the next decades of the 21st century*. Exclusively, the expert from Romania put the specific emphasis on moral characteristics of the teacher and the development of the child as a personality, while the representative of Albania provided an

extensive illustration of issues related to substantial reforms in preuniversity education, the unification of TE in the country, and reforms of TE curricula.

Some experts provided their ideas on topics that were not related to TEA, although essential for their educational context. Two experts (LV and CZ) mentioned the necessity of induction years *to support novice teachers in their careers in the first few years of their practice* (CZ). Experts from Albania, Italy, and Latvia covered the topic related to current or upcoming reforms and associated challenges in secondary, tertiary, and ITE.

Discussion and Conclusions

The presented qualitative study aimed to explore the perspectives of experts from different regions of Europe on the current situation and future perspectives of TEA in a post-pandemic world. In this section of the paper, we will reflect on the main results, observe the limitations, options for further research, and practical implications of this exploration.

Among the turmoil of changing circumstances due to pandemics and current reforms at different levels of educational systems in many countries, it appears that the main requirements for TEA, at least in considered countries representing various regions of Europe, are academic credentials (Hirschhorn & Sears, 2005) – diploma of secondary education and GPA of secondary education. In some countries, TEA requirements for teachers at different levels of education (preschool, primary school, lower/upper secondary school) also differ: usually stronger demands are for higher levels. In other countries, the HEI can have greater autonomy in setting additional requirements for TEA. Despite some nuances, the formal TEA requirements and processes in the researched countries are based on similar principles and guidelines and reflect the capacity for higher education and educational politics in a given country (Darmody & Smyth, 2016).

According to the implicit logic of the questionnaire, the views of experts on the current situation with TEA were divided into two groups. One of them reflected the experts' viewpoint on candidates for TE programs, and the other reflected the TEA process and criteria. The negative aspects of the candidates were mentioned more frequently and represented a greater variety of qualities than the positive aspects, which implicitly indicated the general dissatisfaction of experts with the candidates. Among the positive characteristics, representatives from three countries mentioned the high motivation of candidates for specific ITE programs and the standard compliance with the TEA requirements. Representatives from five countries (Albania, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden) outlined negative characteristics such as lack of motivation and low quality of candidates (namely, poor achievements in STEM and other weaknesses). These findings, in general, reflect the vocational crisis of teaching across Europe (Eurydice, 2021).

Focusing on the opinions of experts on the TEA process and criteria, we should say that, in general, when asked directly, experts were satisfied with the TEA criteria in their country. However, in their writings on the positive and negative aspects of TEA, latter prevailed. This could be explained in part by the fact that the challenges of the TEA were defined as the small number of candidates and the difficulties with the attraction of candidates (greater in numbers and higher quality). In general, this does not relate to formal selection criteria or requirements. These responses again echo the themes related to the characteristics of TE candidates and justify the satisfaction of experts with relatively low TEA requirements in their countries, reflecting the low number and quality of appli-

cants. According to statistics, all countries involved in this study experience a teacher shortage or both a teacher shortage and ageing (Eurydice, 2021). However, as some recent studies have shown, increasing the GPA criteria for the initial TEA would decrease the diversity of the teaching population and the number of teachers (Fisher, 2007; Van Overschelde & López, 2018).

The experts provided their diverse opinions on the TEA process and the criteria. Representatives from almost all countries involved in the study named the specific positive or negative characteristics of these countries. It again points to the complex nature of TEA, contextuality, and reciprocal relationships between TEA and different aspects of social, political, and economic life (Sahlberg, 2021). Somehow, these answers also mirror the very rapid changes in various directions, prevailing in the TEA situation today and showing both proactive and reactive moves of educational decision makers in different regions of Europe to cope with the vocational crisis in the teaching profession.

The views of experts on TEA in the post-pandemic world were also analysed in terms of future teachers and TEA requirements and processes.

The answer to our question about the equal importance of the four aspects of a good teacher (Casey & Childs, 2007) was negative. Most importantly, experts stressed the attitude and motivation of future teachers, acknowledging the need for high motivation, professionalism, activity, and self-development. It was not surprising, considering the current challenges with TE candidates and TEA mentioned by experts at the beginning of the questionnaire. The next two considerably smaller groups of categories were related to pedagogical communication and interpersonal skills along with the mastery of content knowledge. It clarifies the question, stated at the beginning of the paper, about the skills of the 21st century most important for the teachers. Presumably, motivation and passion for work would ensure retention, while pedagogical communication and care of children would enable meeting the needs of students and stimulate their well-being in the post-pandemic situation (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Some responses represented the aspect of pedagogical (didactic) knowledge, showing the less relevance of mastering didactics in the current situation. However, focusing only on motivation, communication skills, and orientation to well-being in the near future could backfire in the long run, with a significant drop in overall academic quality. Although creativity and critical thinking are the principal ways of thinking in the 21st century (Saavedra & Opfer, 2012), they were mentioned only by two experts.

Naturally, one of the main themes related to TEA in the future pertained to the digitalization of education and TEA, since this issue has been the main focus of educational research and discussions from the beginning of Covid-19 and even well before it (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Experts first mentioned the digital pedagogical competence of teachers, applied in the context of new digital modes of training, and then suggested the digitalization of the TEA process. Another major topic, which discusses the future of TEA in detail, was suggestions for specific changes in TEA. The experts pointed to new ways to attract ITE applicants and enlisted several recommendations to improve the TEA criteria and process, mainly related to the introduction or omission of specific criteria. A small number of suggestions coincide with overall satisfaction with the current TEA criteria and requirements.

Reflecting on the answers of the research participants related to the future of TEA in the post-pandemic world, it appears that experts do not see other significant changes in the discourse of TE and TEA, except for the digital transformation of education. Some

of them doubt that pandemics will change the motivation to become teachers, although this seems to be a new urgent topic for further research.

When checking the agreement between the answers of experts, our attention was drawn to the disparities between several themes. Therefore, looking at the characteristics of the candidates for TE and future teachers, it is evident that the main concerns are caused by attitudinal and motivational problems. However, except for an expert from Albania, the experts do not suggest motivational tests as the new criteria of the TEA, arguing against such tests as easily feigned. Again, the second feature indicated by experts for future teachers, pedagogical communication, and interpersonal skills, is also hard to assess and include in TEA criteria, although some scholars argue for the need for such criteria (Hirschkorn & Sears, 2005). This criterion becomes even more controversial in the age of online teaching and learning. Overall, it leaves the hope that student teachers, according to Falkenberg (2010), will develop motivation and communication skills in the program.

One more discrepancy was discovered when comparing the characteristics of future teachers and changes in a TEA in the post-pandemic world: only the expert from Latvia included the digital competence in the list of qualities of future teachers, while the pool of answers regarding the future TEA contained a much frequent and detailed explanation of digital transformation in education. This inconsistency calls for a deeper analysis and exploration of the reasons why the ultimate digitalization and technologization of the education and teaching profession, at least in some countries, would face opposition in the most unexpected places.

To sum up, although, on a global scale, it seems that Europe, at first glance, has a monolith approach to TEA, a deeper analysis shows both the similar features and the specific details of each country. The situation in some countries seems to be relatively stable, while in other countries reforms on different levels and of various scope constantly change all educational systems, TE and, therefore, the TEA system.

Many cases mentioned by experts have already been reflected in EU statistics or national documents. However, it is critical to reveal that these issues continue to linger on the horizon of the meaning of TE experts from countries that are not yet among the high-performing countries described in comparative studies (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). This kind of research, which elicits answers to a broader range of questions, also indicates cognitive dissonance, which is not as easily noticed by professionals themselves and is rarely exposed in statistical data or in focusing only on the issues of their own country daily.

Although this study does not provide a detailed and quantified overview of TEA issues, criteria, and processes in each region/country of Europe – for this, we would need much more resources, it nevertheless gives voice to professionals in this field, allowing for the expression of concerns, perspectives, and visions of future TE and TEA. Implemented together with quantitative studies, this research would serve educational leaders in their evidence-based decision-making for a more sustainable future of education.

Limitations. One of the main limitations is the small number of participants, some of them without specific experience in TEA units. This restriction is related to the current circumstances: teacher educators, similarly to many other university teachers/researchers, have become quite exhausted during Covid-19 and suffer from the lack of time, preventing them from participating in activities not related to their direct work. Furthermore, the slight dominance of Latvian experts could be perceived as a limitation of this study.

Furthermore, the data collected through the questionnaire did not allow for additional clarification and questions from the researchers, which would be helpful considering that each country has a specific TE and TEA background that is sometimes not fully explained in shorter answers.

Further research. In addition to some areas of exploration mentioned above, research on this topic would use face-to-face data collection methods such as interviews and focus groups, which would allow for much broader and more detailed expressions of the concerns and suggestions of experts on TEA. Furthermore, further studies would include a much longer list of European countries or, just oppositely, focus on specific geographic or historical regions of Europe to make specific recommendations for this region. A new exploration on a much larger scale might also help explain the contradictions found in this study.

Practical implications. Considering the future of TEA in light of practical implications, we can see quite contradictory suggestions for the development of TEA, specific for each country. These controversies again indicate the contextual nature of TEA. The unique nuances of TEA found in this study should not necessarily be generalized to the entire country or region of Europe; however, in light of the cultural, social, political and educational context in the given countries, they illustrate the scope of discourses that should be considered in educational politics and decision-making on both the regional and European scale.

As Crawford stated very recently (2021), “the future of learning and teaching practice requires innovators and early adopters to digest and assess why we teach and learn and how we engage in such practices with purpose. This requires careful and critical reflection of how we were, what we are now, and the places we may go next ” (p. 3). We hope that this study will open the debate and contribute to this reflective search for essential answers related to the future of sustainable European TE, TEA and, potentially, education in its truest sense.

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Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Prof. Anita Pipere, Daugavpils University, Parades 1-432, Daugavpils, LV 5401, Latvia. Email: anita.pipere@du.lv