

## HUMAN RIGHTS STUDIES AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR ADVANCING STUDENTS' CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

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**Abstract.** In the last decade, interest in human rights and their role in citizenship education has become increasingly topical and developed in Latvia. In higher education, citizenship education plays a decisive role in the practical implementation of the citizenship competencies of young specialists. Citizenship and civic participation are the aggregates of life skills based on the comprehensive acquisition of human rights and their application in practice. The analysis of the content of the study programmes of the Latvian institutions of higher education shows that they contain a number of courses concerning human rights. Their acquisition is an important element for the development of the citizenship awareness of young specialists, based on the understanding of the versatile content of principal human rights and the diverse mechanism of their development. The aim of the study is to analyze and assess the role of human rights in the citizenship education of the teachers of studies within the system of higher education in Latvia. Materials and methods. The article is based on the analysis of theoretical literature, the regulatory acts of the Republic of Latvia concerning higher education, the documents of various institutions of higher education, curricula and study programmes concerning the acquisition of the values of citizenship education, the development of citizenship and its advancement in the context of human rights acquisition. The authors of the article consider that there is a close interconnection between human rights and the formation of individual's citizenship awareness. Results. Citizenship education and human rights education comprise essential fundamental values and understanding about the mutual dependence and interconnectedness of all aspects of social life. Consequently, it also ensures the formation of citizenship competencies of future specialists. In Latvia, citizenship education and human rights education can be acquired as an interdisciplinary system. This process is implemented in the context of changes and development, i.e., in a constructive context.

**Key words:** human rights, citizenship education, higher education, civic participation, complementarity.

### Introduction

Citizenship education and human rights education play an essential role within the context of social development in Europe. Besides, a considerable attention is devoted to it in the discussions concerning the development of knowledge-based society in Europe.

Preparing citizens for the life in their own country, in the European Union, and in the world is a significant task of the system of higher education [1].

In the last decade, interest in human rights and their role in citizenship education has become increasingly topical and developed in Latvia. In higher education, citizenship education plays a decisive role in the practical implementation of the citizenship competencies and civic participation of young specialists.

The importance of citizenship education was also emphasized in the Bologna process (2000) where principal guidelines for higher education were determined; it is also an integral part of the European Strategy of Lifelong Learning and the European Youth Policy. It should be noted that the European Commission document a New Impulse for the European Youth (1991) highlighted new forms of the European governance based on youth autonomy and active participation of citizens, while the White Paper defined openness, participation, responsibility, effectiveness, and coordination as the principles of good democratic governance.

Thus, the actualization of citizenship education is an important function of higher education with a significant moral, political, and legal capacity as it ensures the formation of the citizenship identity and citizenship competency of would-be specialists within the context of human rights.

In Latvia, the system of higher education, which undergoes continuous development, is one of the opportunities for introducing change. The potential of higher educational establishments, their resources and capacity in implementing educational reforms [2] ensure the development of an institution promoting citizenship education. Academic professionals striving to introduce changes play a key part there involving students in this process as well. Thus, reforms are promoted in a direct way,

based on the experience of the participants, active operation, reflection, and formation of the new systems of reference.

**The aim of the study** is to analyze and assess the role of human rights in the citizenship education of teachers, especially the teachers of social studies, within the system of higher education in Latvia.

### **Materials and methods**

The article is based on the analysis of theoretical literature, the regulatory acts of the Republic of Latvia concerning higher education, the documents of various institutions of higher education, curricula and study programmes concerning the acquisition of the values of citizenship education, the development of citizenship and its advancement in the context of human rights acquisition.

A specific aspect concerning citizenship education and civic participation refers to the acquisition of the complex content of fundamental human rights. The acquisition and knowledge of human rights develops the attempts to universalize and significantly expand the content of citizenship education bringing to the foreground a lot of common unifying elements and their interaction in the present and future [3].

The link between human rights, fundamental civil rights and civic consciousness has a close double-sided character. The interaction between human rights and fundamental civil rights is based on the difference between modern civil society and the state. Within the framework of national states, the society is formed mainly by individuals – citizens. The life of these individuals is closely connected with positive human rights, both natural and international ones, as well as with the fundamental civil rights of particular states. Only the jurisdiction of a particular country has the right to determine whether a particular person is subject to its fundamental rights.

In view of the structure of the content of human rights, they require universal applicability. It refers to absolute rights, the validity of which can not be justified by reference to the traditions, habits or historically developed laws of a particular society, but it can be done by declaring them the legitimate rights of all people [4].

The universal area of human rights is linked with fundamental civil rights, the aggregate of the rights and responsibilities of particular individuals, directly and closely by two major links:

First, regulated and consolidated human rights are an essential precondition for the implementation of socially meaningful actions and the consolidation of the responsible attitudes of individuals with regard to their own topical needs and the development of the society. Individuals actively participate in developing their own life.

Next, the consolidation of new rights and values, as well as the development of the ways and means of their realization and protection, takes place during the implementation of the activities mentioned above.

Even though the unity of rights and duties has an axiomatic nature, the area of human rights usually emphasizes the rights and issues concerning their protection, but as far as duties are concerned, the state and its institutions, rather than the subjects of fundamental rights, are considered to be the main bearers of responsibility, except for the duties directly addressed to the individuals.

On the other hand, it is the range of individual's duties that rouses interest with regard to the content of citizenship. It mainly concerns those duties the performing of which is not secured by the enforcement provided by the law. For instance, the freedom of speech and opinion is a fundamental civil right, but not a duty in the legal sense [5]. At the same time, the distribution of important information can be regarded as individual's duty as far as citizenship is concerned. Thus, within the context of citizenship and citizenship education the unity of individual's rights and duties acquires a new aspect – legally consolidated fundamental civil rights correspond to moral duties. This kind of unity of ethics and fundamental civil rights is a necessary precondition for the functioning of civil society [4].

In order to understand more closely the content of fundamental civil rights and civic participation, the issues concerning education and upbringing are of great importance. If citizenship is connected with exercising one's rights and duties, it can be acknowledged that people do not become citizens

from birth. Their upbringing and education also play a significant role. For instance, the loyalty, activity and responsibility of citizens are the qualities that have to be developed and cultivated at all levels of education. Consequently, if these qualities are important for a citizen, the “actual” citizens have to be brought up and educated accordingly.

Critical and socially oriented citizenship education helps people realize the whole spectrum of their fundamental rights, their social status and gives them broad opportunities for participation in their social environment [6].

Generally, citizenship education is underpinned by the principles of human rights, freedoms, responsibilities, and participation within a democratic society. It is determined by the particular role of citizens and the specific importance of citizenship in the democratic society. Citizenship characterises the desirable actions of citizens referring to democracy as well as their citizenship virtues.

Consequently, education is one of the joys of human existence and a reward of human life. The term “education” refers to all social processes with the help of which an individual is consciously learning to develop, while citizenship education is the very foundation of good citizenship.

It has to be noted that the list of citizenship virtues is very extensive nowadays. Along with the readiness to participate actively in the social life and protect the democratic system of the state, it also includes readiness to call into question the actions of the authorities, to take part in discussing serious issues, to take into account opponents’ views, to substantiate one’s attitudes, and to respect other people’s rights. Therefore, one has to agree to those authors who emphasize the need to analyze not only the formal sense of citizenship, but also its diverse content [7].

Similarly, education for citizenship and human rights development also includes rights, responsibilities, democratic practices and values, as well as understanding of the interdependence between all aspects of our societies. Citizenship education prepares students to understand and be committed to the values inherent in human rights. Thus, citizenship education activating the questions of human rights fosters competencies that are essential part of citizenship education, and it can be integrated into a wide range of curricula.

It must be underlined that to prepare young people for life in social reality, citizenship education should be underpinned by the focus on the common core values of human rights. Values such as respect, freedom, honesty, self-esteem, trust, courage, and equity would be typical core values, which could be fostered in higher education through different courses. The transmission of such values presupposes a creative environment in the institution of higher education based on the democratic decision making processes and discussions [8].

Thus, it can be concluded that the link between human rights education and citizenship education is ensured by the recognition of common values that promote both citizenship and ethical sustainability, focusing on the close link between various values, human life and the environment. From the perspective of sustainable development, there is a need to move from utilitarian and instrumental approaches and towards higher order values of respect and solidarity with the oneness of mankind and nature that supports ecosystems, equitable societies, and a more viable world.

Learning methodologies used in the process of studies should encourage the transmission of various core values through the creation of space for debate, discussion, sharing of ideas, creative problem solving, working in teams, thus developing critical thinking skills enabling future citizens to live in the real environment away from the protection of the safety of the higher educational establishment [9].

In the authors’ view, in Latvia the practical integration of the above mentioned triad – the knowledge of human rights values, skills, and citizenship attitudes is shown most clearly in connection with the issues concerning the education of the teachers, especially within the context of social studies. The changes necessary in the content of education in the future bring to the foreground the issue concerning the incorporation of a wider content of various aspects of social studies in the school curriculum. The purpose of the subject of social studies is to prepare students for sustainable functioning in the modern society, while the objectives are to help students understand themselves, their social environment and the crisis situations in it and to motivate students to take an active part in the social processes, to make their own conscious and justified choices within the context of the comprehensive understanding of the content of fundamental civil rights.

## Results and discussion

In Latvia, particular attention is devoted to the citizenship education of teachers, especially the teachers of social studies, within the context of human rights, their training for constructive cooperation both in the local, the European and the world context.

In the pedagogic aspect, the task of citizenship education is to develop an active personality, capable of functioning in a free civil society. At present, study programmes, such as “A Teacher providing the second level professional higher education,” are developed in Latvia according to the provisions of Education Law, the Law on Higher Education Establishment, the constitutions of higher educational establishments and other normative acts, as well as the Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers No 347 “Regulations on the Requirements Concerning Teachers’ Education and Professional Qualifications” [10] and No 461 “Regulations on the Professional Standard of the Second Level Professional Higher Education” [11], as well as the Direction of the Ministry of Education and Science No 116 “On the professional Standard – a Teacher” of 27.02.2004. [12].

The main purpose of the study programmes is to create opportunities for the acquisition of professional higher education and raise the qualifications of the teachers, to train teachers for practical work at schools, thus ensuring their competitiveness in the labour market. This is implemented by offering theoretical courses in various sciences – fundamentals of law, philosophy, sociology, economics, ethics, health education, and citizenship education with a particular emphasis on teaching methodology, as well as other topical courses promoting students’ professional development and broadening their citizenship competencies, developing critical thinking skills, and stimulating the understanding of the diverse human rights values necessary for life in a civil society with good democratic government. It is also necessary to provide an opportunity to apply the acquired theoretical knowledge, skills, and professional attitudes in the pedagogic practice, by involving students in tackling practical tasks (conducting classes, participation in projects, research, etc.). Lately, there has been more emphasis on the necessity to motivate students’ engagement in life-long learning so that teachers themselves could perfect their knowledge in the area of social sciences, evaluate the latest information according to the requirements of modern science and the needs of the educational process within the context of active European citizenship. Clearly, citizenship education plays an important role in ensuring social stability and sustainable development.

The authors of the study have used various 2nd level professional study programmes concerning teacher training developed at the University of Latvia (UL), Liepaja University (LU), Rezekne Higher Education Institution (RHEI), and Daugavpils University (DU). In order to analyse particular courses, there have also been used course descriptions from the accreditation documents available at the Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre (HEQEC), as well as the reports of the accreditation commissions and self-evaluation reports [12].

The accreditation materials available to the authors show that the themes of citizenship education and acquiring of human rights are included in the contents of various courses of studies. It appears that there is no one optimum way how to integrate the content of citizenship education into the study programmes as it is shown in Table 1.

It has to be noted, first of all, that courses concerning citizenship education based on the awareness of fundamental human rights provided in the curricula of various institutions are different and unique.

The authors of the article have to note that there is no single best way how to integrate the content of the human rights in the development of citizenship education of the teachers of social studies in one particular course or study programme.

Thus, the curricula offered by various institutions of higher education generally consolidate theoretical knowledge of human rights in law, economics, political science, philosophy, ethics, etc helping students to combine their understanding of human rights and democracy with a democratic approach towards tackling the diverse mechanism of their protection aspects and issues as well.

The conceptions of human rights and democracy are not narrow in the study programmes, and they focus on the prospects of participation in democratic processes. They recognize democracy as a social and political process that is continuous in promoting and respecting people’s rights and recognize people’s aspirations for a better social and economic future.

Table 1

**Courses offered by Latvian institutions of higher education in the programme  
“A Teacher of Social Sciences”**

<b>Courses of Studies</b>			
<b>University of Latvia (UL)</b>	<b>Daugavpils University (DU)</b>	<b>Liepaja University (LU)</b>	<b>Rezekne Higher Education Institution (RHEI)</b>
The Social and Political Structure of Society (3 ECTS) Civil Society in Latvia (3 ECTS) Introduction into Law (6 ECTS) Public Relations (3 ECTS)	Philosophy (1,5 ECTS) Social Sciences (6 ECTS) Ethics (3 ECTS) Labour Law (3 ECTS)	Social Philosophy (3 ECTS) Sociology (6 ECTS) Politics & Government (3 ECTS) Protection of Child Rights (1.5 ECTS) System of Social Security (1,5 ECTS)	The Fundamentals of Philosophy (3 ECTS) Philosophy of education (3 ECTS) The Fundamentals of Law (3 ECTS) The Fundamentals of Economic (6 ECTS) Political science (4.5 ECTS) The Rights of Local Governments (1.5 ECTS) Globalization (3 ECTS) Labour and Social Law (3 ECTS)

Constitution, laws, and other normative acts, as well as the programmes and procedures of the authorities are binding attitudes and conditions seriously affecting basic human rights. The principles and values of human rights and freedoms are at the centre of the constitution of Latvia. Within the context of different branches of law, constitutional law occupies a coordinating, stabilizing and regulating role and position. It should be noted that the real bearers of fundamental rights are all individuals, and in their daily life many of them have to be informed about various matters of legal character in the society, the state, and the world within the context of their implementation and protection. Thus, for instance, Article 89 of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia is very important regarding the implementation of the fundamental human rights of law-based state. It prescribes: “The State acknowledges and protects basic human rights according to the Constitution, Laws and international agreements binding in Latvia.” [5]. This constitutional norm makes the state responsible not only for setting up and providing an effective system of human rights protection, but also grants each individual rights to obtain information, express his/her opinion, and participate in the decision making processes concerning the citizenship activities, as well as to influence their judiciousness and balance. Such approach to citizenship education and human rights education regarding the aspect of sustainability also ensures its transversal role and interdisciplinary character.

Problems arise due to conflicts caused by diverse human goals in environmental, social, cultural and economic areas, as well as people’s unwillingness to change and accept changes. Constructive thinking and active lifestyle are offered as solutions to these problems; they are also characterised by the emergence of new concepts like close connection between individuals and economic and social issues, as well as participation in searching for common solutions. These processes have an impact on higher education as well: the participation of the institutions of higher education in the transition processes, setting up of the centres of environmental studies, changes in the study programmes, course syllabi, etc also determine the necessity for the development of new concepts like sustainable economic development, social sustainability, cultural sustainability, environmental sustainability, etc.

Differences can also be observed concerning the methodology in the acquisition of social sciences, which develop students’ understanding of the role social sciences play in the school curriculum (standards), as well as consolidate theoretical knowledge in economics, political science, philosophy, ethics, etc, thus helping students to relate their understanding of human rights and democracy with a democratic approach to the organisation of the process of learning.

In RHEI programmes the theoretical basis of professional education is formed by four blocs of core courses: citizenship education, economic education, ethical education and health education as well as interrelationships in the content of core theoretical courses.

When comparing the study programmes in teacher education offered by the Latvian institutions of Higher Education, it should be noted that the admission requirements in the professional study programmes are a bit different. In general, applicants are required to have a higher professional education in pedagogy, while the University of Latvia (UL) also requires a minimum of one year working experience in an institution of general education.

The programmes are similar in the number of credit points allocated for qualification practice: DU – 12 ECTS, RHEI – 15 ECTS, UL – 26 ECTS (students get 14 credit points for their pedagogic practice during their studies; 6 credit points are considered equal to one year's working experience in a primary school, and 6 credit points are incorporated in the study courses devoted to various issues concerning the methodology of the process of studies.

The UL study programme places a particular emphasis on the development of general and specific professional skills. Students have to deal with a range of practical tasks in an educational institution concerning the development of integrated learning models, the development of tests and assessment of learning, assessment methods, approaches to work and interactive techniques.

The accreditation materials available to the authors show that both traditional methodologies of instruction: lectures, seminars, practical classes, and the methodologies and approaches which promote students' participation: project work, discussions, case studies, the analysis of documents, and research are used in the study process. Students are encouraged to make public presentations of the results of their work, do self-evolution, reflect on their own identity, express a critical attitude, and explain concepts. Various courses include seminars aimed at the development of the skills of democratic cooperation, accepting or clarifying different points of view. For instance, the main forms of seminars practiced in RHEI are:

- discussions (questions – answers, debates, dispute);
- discussions of reports (oral or written, e. g., writing reviews of the reports submitted);
- a theoretical conference, a press conference (in a group or among different groups);
- seminars – excursions (visits to the local government, judicial institutions, objects of cultural and historical value, etc.).

Many of the techniques described above reflect humanistic tradition in higher education with an emphasis on individuals' development regarding citizenship education and broader understanding of the content of human rights values.

This approach is essential, as the students need not only to be actively involved in their studies, but also to acquire the methodologies they will have to use when teaching social studies in schools. The future teachers have to adapt and develop new approaches, both as citizens and educators, which will enable them to get involved reflectively and critically in the fundamental social transformations. Therefore, the pedagogic practice takes place after the acquisition of basic courses in the methodology of teaching social studies. During the practice the students can:

- consolidate their skills in planning, organising and assessing the integration between educational content in social studies and the process of upbringing, to learn the experience of a particular school and teacher, to analyse the actual problems of human rights;
- gain a deeper insight into the schools of various types, problems encountered by the teachers of social studies and their solutions;
- consolidate skills necessary for integrated learning of social sciences and working in the team of teachers;
- to gain understanding on the necessary areas of self-development and the possibilities to implement it.

In general, it can be concluded that the acquisition of human rights and citizenship education takes place concurrently with the formation of the motivational attitude of students' participation. Various assessment methods are used: completing practical tasks, class observation, oral examinations, essay-type tasks and examinations, as well as writing of the diploma thesis, where

students can use the research carried out during their pedagogic practice, obtained experience, and conclusions. For instance, all LU students carry out research work according to the programme requirements. The forms of students' research work are: reports and research on topical social issues related to the content of the study courses.

While studying the courses offered in the programmes, students acquire theoretical knowledge and practical skills, as well as realise their self-determination in accordance with the professional qualification of a teacher of social sciences.

The analysis of the accreditation reports concerning the study programmes makes it possible to identify the following positive features:

- generally, the content of the programmes is well structured and organised; it is logical and carefully considered;
- the programmes are open to further development and perfection;
- generally, the programmes are linked with the basic guidelines of European education.

A similar situation can be observed in the experience of other EU member states concerning their educational processes [13].

On the other hand, the drawbacks and shortcomings pointed out by the accreditation commissions are as follows:

- it is necessary to pay more attention to students' areas of specialisation;
- it is necessary to limit the diversity of minor courses and to combine them together in more meaningful blocks giving more credit points;
- it is necessary to reach a higher degree of integration in the acquisition of social sciences, to emphasise the unity and systemic character of the programmes.

It is pointed out in the reports that programme participants tend to acquire and use modern methods of instruction, but inappropriate technical resources hinder this process. This does not allow the academic staff and students to fully use the possibilities of computer technologies, multimedia and the Internet, which would enhance the acquisition of the content of studies and its quality.

For human rights studies to perform its mission of promoting civic competence, students must learn not only a body of knowledge, but how to be flexible in using many resources to resolve civic issues.

The accreditation materials show that the forms of work and teaching methodologies used in the process of studies are not only the traditional ones: lectures, seminars, practical, classes, but also those promoting students' participation: project work, discussions, case studies, the analysis of documents, and research. Students are encouraged to make public presentations concerning the results of their work, do self-evaluation, reflect on their own identity, express a critical attitude, and explain concepts. Various courses include seminars aimed at the development of the skills of democratic cooperation, accepting or clarifying their point of view.

Many of these techniques reflect the humanistic tradition in higher education. This approach is essential as the students need not only to be actively involved in their studies, but also to acquire methodologies which they will have to use when teaching social studies at school. The future teachers, both as citizens and educators, have to adapt and develop new approaches which will enable them to get involved reflectively and critically in the fundamental social transformations.

## Conclusions

Citizenship education plays a significant role in acquiring human rights and ensuring the stability of a society. It promotes the active position of young specialists and their rational, critical and responsible participation in the implementation of democratic sustainable values.

The link between citizenship education and human rights education is ensured by shared common values, which reveal the sense and importance of both citizenship rights and duties and basic human rights.

Higher education ensures the intellectual potential of the society and trains new specialists who develop and consolidate citizenship values in the pedagogic process.

Citizenship education is an important function of higher education with a significant moral, social, political, and legal capacity. It promotes the consolidation of the principles and values of human rights, ethics, responsibility, law and participation in the democratic society. Thus, the actualization of the issue of citizenship education based on the awareness of fundamental human rights and the mechanism of their protection is an essential function of higher education with a significant moral and politically-legal capacity. It ensures sustainability for the formation and consolidation of the citizenship identity and citizenship competency of future specialists

Citizenship education and human rights education comprise essential fundamental values and understanding about the mutual dependence and interconnectedness of all aspects of social life. Consequently, it also ensures the formation of citizenship competencies of future specialists.

In Latvia, citizenship education and human rights education can be acquired as an interdisciplinary system. This process is implemented in the context of changes and development, i.e., in a constructive context.

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