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The Influence of Teacher Trainers' Attitudes Towards Digitalization on Their Digital Practices

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ABSTRACT

This study examines university lecturers' attitudes toward digitization in higher education and how they influence their actual practices in the teachers' training. Sixty-two lecturers participated in the study. A methodology involving interviews and classroom observations was used to identify similarities and differences in university lecturers' strategies for integrating digital technologies in teaching. The study provides a reliable picture of lecturers' attitudes toward digital technologies in the training of future teachers, as well as their approaches to their integration into real practice. A correlation was found between lecturers' attitudes and the range and diversity of digital practices. Lecturers who exhibited positive and critical attitudes incorporated more interactive and creative teaching activities, whereas those with neutral or pragmatic attitudes tended to adopt more limited use of digital tools. The study highlights the need to improve digital practices in teacher training programs in Bulgaria by encouraging university lecturers to participate in lifelong learning activities focused on the field of digital pedagogical competence.

KEYWORDS

Teacher Trainers, Higher Education, Attitudes, Digitalization, Digital Practices

INTRODUCTION

The widespread digital transformation of recent decades in industry and business has triggered fundamental changes in contemporary society. One of the most significant strategic priorities, as outlined in key documents of the European Commission, is the digitalization of teaching, learning, and education. The Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027) of the European Union (EU) defines a common vision for high-quality, inclusive, and accessible digital education across Europe. It aims to support the adaptation of Member States' education and training systems to the demands of the digital age.

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In this study, the term "digitalization of education" is understood as the process of integrating digital technologies into all aspects of the educational process, including teaching, learning, assessment, pedagogical communication, and administration, as well as the development of students' digital competences. This process was accelerated in the educational sphere worldwide by the COVID-19 pandemic. A wide variety of online and hybrid approaches to teaching and learning became more widespread, even within "traditional" universities. This created favorable conditions for changes in existing teaching and learning practices in higher education, including university-based teacher education.

Alongside established practices, new technology-enhanced learning approaches emerged. However, the rapid transition to distance learning exposed pedagogical, technological, administrative, and personal difficulties. Some academic staff were negatively influenced toward information and communication technologies (ICTs)—the digital tools and systems used to create, store, process, and communicate information—and limited their use in training student teachers. In some cases, these challenges led to the rejection of digital technologies in teaching. Beyond digital infrastructure and formal teacher qualifications, the effectiveness of ICT integration in higher education depends on interrelated factors, including lecturers' beliefs and attitudes toward digitalization, their willingness to integrate technology, and the extent to which ICT is meaningfully embedded in instructional practice (Basilotta-Gómez-Pablos et al., 2022; Fathema et al., 2015; Tondeur et al., 2019).

Public expectations of university lecturers involved in the preparation of future teachers center on motivating and equipping new generations of educators to teach in modern classrooms, where digital technologies are increasingly used alongside established methods. Numerous studies highlight the key role of university lecturers in adapting teaching practices to prepare student teachers for the integration of ICT into their future professional practice (Adnan et al., 2024; Aesaert et al., 2018; Nelson et al., 2019).

Research on ICT integration in teacher education has a long tradition. As early as the beginning of the 21st century, scholars examined its potential and proposed conceptual frameworks to provide a sound theoretical foundation for these efforts (Angeli & Valanides, 2009; Cuban, 2001; Harris et al., 2009; Mishra & Koehler, 2006, as cited in Maderick et al., 2016). More recently, attention has increasingly turned to reshaping the education of university-based teachers in response to emerging educational priorities and the evolving demands of students' future professional roles (Dolezal et al., 2025; Tomczyk, 2024; Tondeur et al., 2012). In this context, university teachers are expected to design technology-rich learning environments and actively support the development of students' digital competencies.

Despite strong European and national policy support for the digitalization of education and European Commission reports indicating continued improvements in digital infrastructure and opportunities across EU countries (European Commission, n.d.), research evidence suggests that students' progress in developing advanced digital skills remains limited (Vuorikari et al., 2022). Findings from the International Computer and Information Literacy Study, conducted across 22 European education systems, indicate that 43% of students possess only limited digital skills, posing a significant challenge to achieving the EU target of reducing underachievement to below 15% by 2030 (European Commission, 2023).

Over the past decade, there has been a significant increase in the number of publications focusing on the digital skills of student teachers (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2021; Peters et al., 2022; Tomczyk, 2024). However, considerably less attention has been paid to the digital competences of university lecturers and to the technology integration practices they employ in teacher education programs (Basilotta-Gómez-Pablos et al., 2022).

These findings point to the need for a more in-depth examination of factors influencing successful digitalization in higher education, particularly on the role of university lecturers' attitudes. While existing research has extensively examined lecturers' digital competences and attitudes toward digitalization, fewer studies have systematically explored how these attitudes are reflected in actual