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THE USABLE COMPETENCES OF GRADUATES IN PRACTICE (SLOVAK EXPERIENCES)

Summary. Our paper offers a reflection of the current situation in tertiary education in Slovakia. Based on the background of a short historical journey through university education in Slovakia after 1989, it looks into and names the critical factors which have long been influencing the situation in this social environment. On basis of the comparison of researches related to employability of university graduates, as well as employers' expectations, the paper points out the most significant deformations of the current model of preparing future university graduates for life. The authors attempt to identify the main reasons for the ongoing incongruity between the needs of the job market and the offer of the education market, namely the decreasing quality of university education, being available en masse, and thus the overall devaluation of education itself. Authors suggest to enhance the preparation of future graduates in key (personal) competences, which rank among the desired, but insufficiently developed, ones from the practical point of view.

Keywords: tertiary education, competences, social intelligence, employability of graduates, labor market.

NADAJĄCE SIĘ DO UŻYTKU KOMPETENCJE ABSOLWENTÓW SZKOLNICTWA WYŻSZEGO W PRAKTYCE (SŁOWACKIE DOŚWIADCZENIA)

Streszczenie. W artykule zawarte są rozważania nad aktualnymi zagadnieniami stanu szkolnictwa wyższego na Słowacji. Opierając się na krótkiej podróży po historii edukacji uniwersyteckiej na Słowacji po 1989 roku, Autorki oceniają i nazywają krytyczne czynniki, które od dawna wpływają na sytuację w tym środowisku społecznym. Na podstawie porównania badań przydatności

absolwenta na rynku pracy z oczekiwaniami pracodawców w artykule zwrócono uwagę na najbardziej znaczące zakłócenia obecnego modelu kształcenia absolwentów uczelni wyższych. Identyfikuje się przyczyny uporczywego niedopasowania do potrzeb rynku pracy ofert rynku edukacyjnego, co wskazuje na malejącą jakość dostępnej edukacji uniwersyteckiej, a tym samym całkowitą dewaluację wartości edukacji. Autorki proponują lepsze przygotowywanie przyszłych absolwentów w kluczowe (osobiste) kompetencje, które są wymagane, ale słabo rozwinięte w stosunku do potrzeb praktyki.

Słowa kluczowe: szkolnictwo wyższe, kompetencje, inteligencja społeczna, zatrudnienie absolwentów, rynek pracy.

Introduction

Schooling, education, science, and research, are the terms which have lately become quite popular and frequently used. They are interesting for both professional, as well as non-professional, public. The moment when a certain social topic (e.g. health care, judiciary system, extremism, or terrorism) becomes the center of attention, it suggests problems, an upcoming collapse, or the symptoms of a crisis. In case of education, university education in particular, we are witnessing a combined effect of long-existing and unresolved problems, and non-systematic forms. These have harmed the Slovak education system, rather than having helped it. It is a complicated parallel influence, which many have defined as the state of crisis, or even deterioration. Among the crucial problems are non-regulated ‘massification’ of university education, inadequately distributed and assigned financial sources, and insufficient conditions for the minimum quality standards in education at such en masse availability.

The consequences of the influence of these factors are felt by everyone these days. University graduates are our children, or children of our friends and acquaintance. The problem with their employability in the job market, which is the result of low quality preparation for practice at the university, is affecting more and more families in Slovakia. It is the job market that uncovers the real incongruity between the excessive theoretical focus of university studies and practical (un)preparedness of graduates in dealing with and managing their duties. The same situation is between orientation of the individual study programs and the developing areas of business practice. This kind of ‘degreed’ but unusable education is often accompanied by disinterest of the graduates themselves in the field they have graduated from. The obtained university degree per se becomes a symbol of devaluation of education itself. The paradox in this situation is that majority of graduates in Slovakia tries for and obtains a master’s rather than a bachelor’s degree. These are the institutions which, all through the history, have been a symbol of knowledge, science, freedom of thought, and cultivation of the nation’s elite. The fall of the totalitarian regime and the system of directive planning put an end to this trend in 1989. The following pro-expansive model of financing

education and the increase in its availability and accessibility to as large a proportion of population as possible, caused an enormous growth in the number of universities and colleges in our country. While in 1989 we had 13 institutions of tertiary education, in 2015 there were 40, out of which 17 are universities (www.minedu.sk).

Devaluation of education

In our cultural environment, a scholar has always been considered a knowledgeable and a well-spoken person. The status of Middle Age universities guaranteed that a degree obtained at such institution (not at different-type institutions of those times) was valid and fully accepted within the whole area of Western Christianity. At the same time this degree represented an entrance ticket to a club of intellectual top of those days. The times when university education was only accessible to a small percentage of population, are, unfortunately, long gone. Massification of university education is natural in the development of a society. The same applied to increasing literacy of the nation by supporting grammar school education two centuries back, and, moreover, the expansion of tertiary education legitimately supported in the name of the development of knowledge economy, as well as the support of better employability of qualified graduates. Promotion and support of mass accessibility and availability of university education in 1990s, however, may be considered a fatal negligence of a responsibility to ensure the minimum quality standards in education. The mechanisms of financing and control were not set correctly. At the same time, there was a lack of regulation in new providers of university education entering the education market. These factors caused worsening of the situation in tertiary education. A growing number of graduates, parallel decrease in quality and requirements for obtaining a degree, isolation of education from the job market, and limited potential of knowledge use in practice decreased the social value of a university diploma.

Degradation of and dishonor towards widely available and widely required, but at the same time poorly respected, university study thus currently acquires an absurd outline. “The candidates for university studies largely prefer specializations with low intellectual demand. At the same time they compensate their weak education with a certain comparative advantage; therefore they have jobs along with studying at the university. Their study is then given very little focus. The opportunity of a majority of students to graduate universities with minimum effort subsequently negates the effort of other students and teachers who are making attempts towards increasing the quality of the educational process. The following generation of candidates repeatedly confirms their understanding that the requirements for graduating a university are low. This certainty enables even those who would not have dared to apply for a university study some centuries ago to maintain a high interest in studying and to complete it

successfully. Universities and colleges are now not selecting between candidates to choose the best quality, but rather engage in uncritical recruitment of such candidates who simply do not belong among the nation's intellectual elite. A university diploma is not a valued asset anymore. Among the students and their parents, however, it is still considered to be some kind of a certificate that guarantees a higher income and a prestigious job. On the other hand, for the employers, the university diploma is not a sufficient criterion. They perceive it as an essential, if not inevitable, condition for a candidate to be hired. A diploma obtained in such deformed ecosystem does not indicate an exceptional intellect, but merely represents the "basic kit of a job candidate"¹. This realistic view of the current situation in university education in Slovakia requires a fundamental and systematic solution: a radical change in the approach to higher education, rectification of the focus of study content, change in educational methods and techniques, and an open dialogue among the representatives of the job market and the educational institutions.

The imperative of employability

The common denominator of any changes in the current deformed system of education is the imperative of employability. Only the right understanding and non-biased perception of its nature can bring in a desired effect, or, on the other hand, cause more damage. The desired parameters of the relation between the job market and the university education cannot be set permanently, nor with one purpose in mind. The job market is a flexible system which requires, and thus enables, fast allocation of workforce, assuming that the employees are prepared and capable of substantial adaptability to changing job market conditions. Good quality education system must therefore promptly respond to changing conditions of the country's economy, and provide such education which will offer opportunities to assert oneself in the job market, thanks to latest knowledge, the acquired skills, and the competencies graduates have developed. The optimum alternative suggests employability and effective use of the acquired knowledge in the field a student has graduated from, in the adequate job position.

The existing absence of systematic communication between the job and the education markets is causing an uncritical disharmony and incompatibility in the offer of graduates and the demands of the employers. This has been documented by surveys and studies of The Institute of Information and Prognoses of Education (2007), The Center of Scientific and Technological Information of the Slovak Republic (2014), and the Economic Policy Institute

¹ Kleštincová L., Spájame vysoké školy s trhom práce. Bratislava : Inštitút hospodárskej politiky, n. o., 2011 [online]. Dostupné na: <http://www.ihp.sk/analyzy/IHP-Analyza%20-%20Spajame%20VS%20s%20TP.pdf> [cit. 11-03-2016].

(2011), which focused on the employability of university graduates. The results have shown that it is only two thirds of graduates who find employment in their field of study (44.4%) or a related field (15.9%). One third of young people with a university degree only need secondary education to do their first job (31.4%).

These facts clearly indicate a disproportion between the structure of study programs and the needs of the job market. The imbalance in how fast the number of graduates grows and how many job positions there are for them, is deepening. Graduates are forced to lower their requirements regarding financial reward for their work, but also the expertise needed for the position. They resort to so called “second-best” possibilities – job vacancies with lower qualification requirements. It results in them forcing graduates of secondary schools out of the job market. Some of the consequences are confusing signals in the job market, insufficient awareness of all participants, ineffective use of disponsible sources in the economy (may it be human capital or the financial resources in the labor and education government departments), or the overall devaluation of the concept of a university degree².

The education system is purpose-built, and this is uncritically supported by the growing pressure on pragmatism of the acquired knowledge. With this approach, only such knowledge that is useful is significant. This type of reasoning sets for a potential danger of creating a borderline between the useful and the enriching knowledge. It conforms to the demand for currently relevant, very narrowly specialized work positions. In practice, these positions only require possession of a limited amount of easily learned knowledge and procedures. The risk of education obtained in this way is in being short-term and unsustainable, since the characteristics of the job market development mentioned above point out its considerable flexibility and elasticity. In such environment, a narrowly focused specialization is rather ‘disqualifying’. The changing working environment does not only call for competent professionals and technologically skilled employees. It also needs individuals who are personally and professionally mature to be able to deal with the turbulences in the job market. It needs those who are able to retrain if necessary, or are capable of lifelong education. This does not only require knowledge, but also a desire, will, and motivation.

A possible response to adequate consideration of the imperative of employability in the job market is the institutional (formal) and content-related (real) separation of the two existing levels of tertiary education in our country: the bachelor’s and the master’s studies. The bachelor level of education, and the related degree (Bc) has, unfortunately, not found sufficient support in our conditions. Students, as well as employers, do not accept this form of education (degree). This level of education should in fact meet and cover the demand for those graduates whose preparation for practice is based on special field related knowledge, development of professional, technical, service, or other practical skills. A parallel support of development of independent professional colleges (similar to Hochschule in Germany) may

² Ibidem.

provide the job market with an adequately prepared workforce for rapidly developing industries and services, in a relatively short time frame. Higher, university, level of education could continue providing general education to a smaller group of students who have a real interest in such study. This type of study assumes better personal motivation, existence of a connection (relation) to the field of study, an effort to excel and achieve the best results. This intellectual elite would have a potential to engage in innovations, create quality, and relate to exceptional development of human capital. There should, however, only be a few of these types of universities in Slovakia.

What competences are required in practice

The proposed independent levels of university studies would differ in their requirements for theoretical and practical knowledge, as well as how well this knowledge should be learned. What the two levels of study will have in common is development of personal potential of the future graduates. After entering the job market, graduates will work in a new environment, and assert themselves in new, very often multicultural, teams. They will have to bear responsibility, and show independence, flexibility, and/or loyalty towards their employer. They will represent their culture or nation, act as citizens, participate in public affairs, such as elections, and thus make decisions about our future. These and other required competences are a reflection of the level of social intelligence of an individual, and a result of a targeted complex cultivation of a personality at both levels of tertiary education. The problems of competences and their development therefore deserve the great attention they are given at the national, as well as international, levels. Within the frame of education policy of the EU, the so called key competences, which an individual should possess, have been defined. These should ensure an individual employability and competitive advantage. Among the key competences belong: communication in native language, communication in foreign languages, communication in the field of mathematics and basic competences in natural sciences and technologies, competences in the field of digital technologies, ability to learn, social and civic competences, and cultural awareness and expression³. Based on this program, a European frame of key competences has been defined, which forms a foundation to a reform of the education system in individual member states.

The term “competence” has not been clearly defined in the expert discourse on the topic. In modern terminology, competence is understood as such abilities of an individual which

³ Filipová L., *Lidský kapitál a jeho efektivní využití jako zdroj ekonomického růstu v České republice: Štúdia. Národohospodářský ústav Josefa Hlávky, Praha 2008. s. 5.*

lead to an exceptional performance and effectiveness⁴. Most approaches agree that competence is measurable characteristics of an individual related to his or her success at work. It may be a behavioral skill, technical skill, quality, or an attitude. As to the classification of competences, a common opinion has not been agreed on among scholars. The traditional model KSA (knowledge, skills, abilities) is now modified by other, different, approaches. Some attempt to distinguish between competences and skills; e.g. the mentioned European qualification frame specifies the educational outcomes in three categories – knowledge, skills, and competences. The National System of Professions of the Slovak Republic divides competences into: general capabilities, professional (job-specific) knowledge, and professional skills. Another popular and commonly used approach is classification of competences into transferable skills and job-specific hard skills. According to this classification, transferable competences might be used in different jobs (e.g. communication skills), while the non-transferable ones are related to a specific job position or a profession (e.g. working with a specific technology). Transferable competences are further divided into “transferable soft” and “generic hard” competences⁵.

Classification of competences which takes individuality and personal talents of an individual into consideration divides competences into – job-specific and key (personality-related) competences. Professional competences are closely related to a specific profession (job). They enable and facilitate the performance related to a certain profession or a job. They are essential in mastering these professions. Qualifications may be ranked among professional competences. As those qualifications which exceed the individual professions gain more importance, the job requirements also change. The emphasis placed on the key competences grows in importance. Key (personal) competences are then defined as such knowledge, abilities and skills which appear to be essential for being successful not only in the job market, but also in everyday life. Mastering these competences should contribute to higher flexibility of workforce in general, and thus support their abilities to perform various job-specific tasks, as well as the ability to switch between professions with no major difficulties. This will enable coordination of abilities and skills of the employees with the job requirements defined by the employers⁶.

As to the ongoing differentiation of work duties, as well as jobs themselves, such universal competences, which are transferable among individual professions or fields, are growing in importance. This knowledge, skills and competences are important to successfully

⁴ Uriga J., Úspešný absolvent na trhu práce = kompetentný: V systéme stredoškolského a vysokoškolského vzdelávania je málo programov na rozvoj kompetencií 2013. [online]. Dostupné na: <http://blog.etrend.sk/januriga/uspesny-absolvent-na-trhu-prace> [cit. 04.04.2016].

⁵ (Horný P., Ďurina J., Prenositel'né kompetencie absolventov slovenských vysokých škôl. Bratislava: Centrum vedecko-technických informácií SR, 2014. [online]. Dostupné na: <http://vysokoskolacidopraxe.cvtisr.sk/sk/aktuality/napisali-k-teme/prenositelne-kompetencie-absolventov-slovenskych-vysokych-skol.html> [cit. 11-03-2016].

⁶ Kalousková P., Vojtěch J., Potřeby zaměstnavatelů a připravenost absolventů škol – souhrnný pohled, 2008. [online]. Dostupné z internetu: http://www.nuov.cz/uploads/Vzdelavani_a_TP/Potreby_zamestnavateleu_souhrn.pdf [cit. 23.03.2016].

deal with everyday life situations. They increase a person's adaptability and flexibility. From the point of view of a graduate, it is then extremely important to distinguish which of the above mentioned requirements their employer demands. In the field of production, technical or other closely specialized job positions, job-specific preparation prevails, while a sales position, on the other hand, requires specific personal competences⁷.

The described typologies are relevant in elaborating and creating the individual competence models, which enable targeted profiling of graduates. The purpose is to develop the desired competences on the basis of the employers' requirements. By using these models in the process of university education, better agreement and cooperation between the job market and the preparation of graduates will be achieved. As it is obvious from the analysis of research studies (UPJŠ 2014; Absolvent 2014; Profesia, 2014) which examined the competences most required by the employers, most of these fall into the category of key – personal, or transferable – soft competences.

A survey related to perception of the importance of chosen competences by employers within a project of the UPJŠ in Košice (2014), the target competences were classified into two categories:

1. The proposed key (personal) competences:

- Flexibility
- Coping with stress
- Self-presentation
- Practical knowledge and skills

2. The proposed professional (job-specific) competences:

- Knowing foreign languages
- Good IT knowledge

Fifty-two respondents – employers in different fields (information technologies, education, health care, law, public administration, etc.) have participated in our survey. As to the field/industry (health care, education, law, IT companies, public administration) the competences the employers considered essential to do the job were those which are directly related to the job-specific knowledge within the individual fields. However, percentage-wise, the employers, regardless the field/industry, have stated that they consider it to be of utmost importance (100%) for the employees to possess the IT skills at the basic level. Ranking as the second most important is the communication competence. These are the results concerning the overall need of the employers as a whole. Out of the number of proposed competences, it has been confirmed by employers that all of them are important. We can therefore state that employers tend to put more and more emphasis on key competences (flexibility, coping with stress, self-presentation, practical knowledge and skills).

⁷ Kozáková E., Absolventi na trhu práce [online] 2014. Dostupné z internetu: <http://rady-a-tipy.monster.cz/hledani-prace/jak-zacit-s-hledanimprace/absolventi-na-trhu-prace/article.aspx> [cit. 11-03-2016].

A survey named Absolvent 2014 has also shown very interesting results in this area. The survey was based on an elaborated model of competences and was conducted within the frame of the National Project of the Slovak Center of Scientific and Technical Information (2014). The following table presents an overview of the proposed model of competences of a graduate's profile (Table 1).

On the basis of the obtained and analyzed results we can state that for the current jobs, the most desired competences are:

- Ability to handle responsibility
- Ability to identify and solve problems
- Ability to cope with stress and obstacles
- Having an active approach
- Ability to work with information

and the least desired competences according to respondents of the survey are:

- Mathematical skills
- Entrepreneurial spirit, being able to find new opportunities
- Legal competence
- Ability to work in intercultural / international environment
- Knowing the conditions under which it is possible to use the professional methods and theories in practice

As noted by the graduates, the least significant difference between the requirements of the practice and the preparation at the schools is in the areas related to mathematical skills, job-specific knowledge, ability to learn, ability to use the general knowledge, and the presentation skills. The biggest difference is seen in the following:

- Ability to communicate with people and negotiate
- Language skills in a foreign language
- Ability to identify and solve problems
- Ability to handle responsibility
- Having an active approach

Table 1

Model of competences used in the National project

Transferable “soft” competences	
General knowledge and ability to use it	Having an active approach
Ability to utilize the acquired knowledge in practice	Entrepreneurial spirit, being able to find new opportunities
Knowing the conditions under which it is possible to use the professional methods and theories in practice	Ability to cope with stress and obstacles
Ability to work with information	Ability to handle responsibility
Creative and flexible thinking and actions	Ability to communicate with people and negotiate
Presentation skills	Ability to adjust to change and new conditions
Writing skills	Ability to work in intercultural / international environment
Ability to make decisions	Ability to learn and organize one’s learning
Ability to work in a team	
Transferable “hard” competences	
Language skills in one’s native language	Mathematical skills
Language skills in a foreign language	Computer skills
Ability to think and act economically / economic competences	Legal competences
Job-specific “hard” competences	
Professional theoretical and methodological knowledge	

Source: CVTI SR, 2014, and own elaboration.

From the employers’ point of view, managers and superiors consider the following most important to be possessed by graduates:

- Having an active approach
- Ability to work with information
- Ability to identify and solve problems
- Ability to cope with stress and obstacles
- Creative and flexible thinking and actions

The biggest difference between the current level of competences of Slovak graduates and the level of competences required for their job positions is observed by the employers in the following areas:

- Ability to identify and solve problems
- Ability to communicate with people and negotiate
- Ability to cope with stress and obstacles
- Ability to handle responsibility
- Creative and flexible thinking and actions.

By comparing the data from the competence model of graduates according to their direct superiors, and the average profile of a graduate, we can identify several groups of competences:

“The important problematic” competences – are considered important by both the employers and the graduates, and according to both groups of respondents, these represent a large difference between the reality and the requirements of the practice:

- Ability to identify and solve problems
- Ability to handle responsibility

“The important non-problematic” competences – are considered important by both the employers and the graduates, but do not represent a large difference between the reality and the requirements of the practice:

- Ability to work in a team
- Ability to work with information

“The unimportant problematic” competences – are not considered important and according to both groups of respondents, these represent a small difference between the reality and the requirements of the practice

- Mathematical skills

Conclusion

After a complex analysis of several fundamental criteria, which are:

- the level of competences required by the employers as perceived by graduates,
- professional (related to study program) structure of graduates,
- the level of competences required for work as perceived by employers,
- most successful graduates as to income,

we can state that eight competences have been ranked among ten most important in each of the used approaches to classification. Besides the ability to work with information, all competences belong among the set of so called personal competences. These are all

predispositions to social intelligence of an individual, which, according to the results of the analyzed studies, are required across multiple professions and jobs in practice. It is the following competences:

- Ability to handle responsibility
- Ability to identify and solve problems
- Ability to cope with stress and obstacles
- Having an active approach
- Ability to work with information
- Ability to make decisions
- Creative and flexible thinking and actions
- Ability to work in a team

It appears that this represents an overlapping area for cultivation of personalities of university graduates. Development of these competences needs to be given a substantially higher attention at both levels of tertiary education. It is of utmost importance, as the conducted survey has shown that besides the qualifications and intellectual predisposition, the employers also require higher level of personality traits, or moral competences of graduates.

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Omówienie

W artykule pojawia się kompleksowa ocena kilku podstawowych kryteriów, które mają znaczenie przy zatrudnianiu absolwentów uczelni. Można powiedzieć, że w każdej ze stosowanych metod osiem kryteriów przypada na pierwszą dziesiątkę. Poza umiejętnością pracy z informacją, wszystkie kompetencje stanowią tzw. kompetencje osobiste. To odnosi

się do inteligencji społecznej jednostki, w zależności od wyników poszczególnych badań wymaganych w porównaniu z zawodami i praktyką.

Wydaje się, że oznacza to nakładające się obszary kultywacji osobowości absolwentów uczelni. Rozwojowi tych kompetencji należy poświęcić więc znacznie więcej uwagi, także na poziomie szkolnictwa wyższego. Jest to niezwykle ważne, ponieważ przeprowadzone badania wykazały, że oprócz kwalifikacji i predyspozycji intelektualnych, pracodawcy wymagają od absolwentów wyższego poziomu cech osobowości lub kompetencji moralnych.