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BUSINESS STUDENTS COMPETENCES SELF EVALUATION IN THE CONTENTS OF LABOR MARKET REQUIREMENTS

Summary. The issue of the paper is business students competences self evaluation seen in two aspects – their meaning in the future job and level gained during studies. The empirical material was gathered on the basis of research conducted in the years 2009-2010 by the method of diagnostic survey. The respondents were 5th year students of 3 higher education public institutions: The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University and Technical University of Lublin.

The analysis of the study results revealed that in case of all the examined competences the students assessed significantly higher their role in their future professional career, compared to the level reached by them at university. In case of the four groups of competences distinguished for the purpose of our study the ranking of their significance at work corresponded, in students' opinion, with the ranking of the level concerning the competences acquired by them. It can be thus concluded that students will concentrate on learning whatever they find purposeful and on acquiring competences which are in their opinion significant for their future professional career.

Keywords: competences, business students, graduates' labor market

SAMOOCENA KOMPETENCJI STUDENTÓW KIERUNKÓW EKONOMII I ZARZĄDZANIA W KONTEKŚCIE WYMAGAŃ RYNKU PRACY

Streszczenie. Problematyka artykułu dotyczy samooceny kompetencji studentów kierunków ekonomii i zarządzania rozpatrywanych w dwóch aspektach – znaczenia w przyszłej pracy zawodowej oraz poziomu osiągniętego na studiach. Badania przeprowadzono w latach 2009/2010, wykorzystując metodę sondażu diagnostycznego. Badaniami objęto studentów piątego roku trzech lubelskich wyższych uczelni

państwowych, tj. Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego Jana Pawła II, Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej oraz Politechniki Lubelskiej.

Analiza wyników przeprowadzonych badań wskazała, że studenci w przypadku wszystkich z badanych kompetencji istotnie wyżej ocenili ich znaczenie w przyszłej pracy, niż poziom osiągnięty na studiach. W przypadku czterech wyodrębnionych na potrzeby badań grup kompetencji ranking ich znaczenia w pracy, w opinii respondentów pokrywał się z rankingiem poziomu nabytych kompetencji. Można tu wysnuć wniosek, iż badani studenci podczas studiów rozwijali przede wszystkim te kompetencje, które, ich zdaniem, będą miały największe znaczenie w przyszłej pracy zawodowej.

Słowa kluczowe: kompetencje, studenci kierunków ekonomii i zarządzania, rynek pracy absolwentów

1. Introduction

Issues connected with the expected attitude of a modern manager and the role of higher education institutions in the preparation of a graduate in this respect are ever more frequently becoming subject of discussion. In the period of economic slowdown, businesses operating in a highly competitive environment, the role and significance of managers are on the rise. “They are the ones responsible for planning, outlining and implementation of company strategies and for maintaining positive relations with stakeholders”.¹

While analyzing the phenomena occurring in managerial education, it can be noticed that since the beginning of the 1990s we were frequently dealing with „managerial skills” or even individual skills, such as assertiveness or negotiations. These days a term which has become more common is the idea of competences. This does not mean, however, that skills have been forgotten as they are still regarded as the key component of competences. In our times managerial staff are expected to be characterized by something more than merely qualifications, proper educational background and experience; they are supposed to possess competences which can be understood as the total of their knowledge, skills and attitudes.

The issues discussed in the present work refer to the competences possessed by people studying economics and management, examined in two aspects: their role in students’ future professional career and the level of competences achieved at university. The empirical material was collected on the basis of the studies done in the years 2009 – 2010 with the help of the diagnostic survey method. The studies involved the students of the fifth year at three universities in Lublin, namely Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski Jana Pawła II (the Catholic University), Maria Curie-Skłodowska University and Lublin University of Technology.

¹ Maliszewski T., Kacprzak A.: Etyczni – ekonomiczni – efektywni. Odpowiedzialne kształcenie menedżerów przez szkoły wyższe. „Nauka i Szkolnictwo Wyższe”, 2009, nr 2/34, s. 44-59.

2. Theoretical framework

Management competences have nowadays become the subject of numerous research studies and the topic for scientific literature. Competences have been commonly analyzed in many areas, e.g. a lot has been said about managerial competences, indispensable competences of the employees or key competences of the organization. Some chaos has been produced due to using the terms of “competences” and “skills” in a different context by some authors. This refers to both Polish and foreign publications. Among different opinions it is possible to come across adherers of equating these two notions. However, there are also researchers who treat skills as a phenomenon which is wider than competences. Yet the most popular view claims that skills make the key component of competences.

The imprecision regarding a different interpretation of the idea of “skills” may result from the following:

- different understanding of the terms “competences” and “skills” in different countries;
- the interdisciplinary character of the science of management and the influence of different current;
- transferring scientific achievements from other countries without emphasizing clearly the roots of the discussed terms.

Although many publications referring to the issue of managerial skills reveal certain similarities concerning the presentation of individual skills, such as the skills of communication or steering a conflict etc., relatively little attention has been paid to the very essence of skills. One could have an impression that we often deal with something resembling “a black box” called “managerial skills”. The idea of managerial skills often remains under the influence of training courses organized for companies where we have to do with skills developed in such a way that they should suit a particular situation. Such an approach is too procedural and too narrow. On the other hand, there is an approach in which managerial skills are presented as certain “natural” abilities whose manifestation is conditioned by the situation. R.L. Katz, the author of the classical classification of managerial skills warns us against understanding manager’s social skills as a kind of techniques which can be recalled from memory and applied if necessary and later they “come back” to memory.

In studies analyzing managers’ effectiveness, described by English-speaking authors primarily, the term „skills” is often accompanied by antonyms, such as managerial “abilities” and “competences”. In everyday English understanding “competence” means “the ability and skill to do what is needed”.² In this case competence is equivalent to skills. On the other hand,

² Longman, Dictionary of Contemporary English. PWN, Warszawa 1989.

“the ability” should be associated with “something that you are able to do”.³ On the basis of these definitions, it is hard to mark a distinct dividing line between these notions.

M. Dale suggests adopting the idea that „the ability” is a physical or mental quality of an individual. According to the author, the process of skill acquisition is affected by knowledge, attitudes and systems of values. The ability refers to behaviors related to performing tasks (task behavior), which may be acquired through learning and improving, through practice and consulting.⁴ On the other hand, competence is understood in the aspect of skills. A competent manager is a person who does their work very well, possesses relevant knowledge and skills, and can use them adequately.

Many authors believe that skills are related to the effective performance of a particular activity in optimal time. So an individual can be said to have skills if the activity is performed in compliance with required standards, which does not necessarily agree with formally possessed qualifications.⁵

The theory of skills has been developed by psychologists. A significant contribution to understanding the essence of managerial skills was made by an Oxford psychologist, M. Argyle, who developed a model of skills. The central position of the model is occupied by the idea of “skilled performance”. According to the author, acting skillfully (doing one’s job) is a result of both the aims of the work itself and the employee’s internal motivation.⁶

C.J. Constable believes, on the other hand, that competences are abilities to use knowledge and skills leading to playing the role of a manager effectively. Thus all managerial skills may be regarded as competences when they are used effectively.⁷ He also developed a list of abilities which are indispensable for managerial competences. They include the ability to form proper judgments, creativity, readiness to take up risk and a high level of energy.

From the point of view of pragmatics of improving managerial skills a specially valuable concept of managerial skills is that developed by K.S. Cameron and D.A. Whetten, concerning the possibility of “increasing managers’ competences in individual skills”.⁸ The authors present a behaviorist standpoint. According to them, abilities are different from inborn features of character (such as aggressiveness), motivation (e.g. the need to feel safe), managerial roles (e.g. supervising others’ work) and functions (e.g. planning). Abilities are something more than individual activities performed by managers, such as writing reports,

³ Tamze.

⁴ Dale M.: *Developing Managerial Skills, Techniques for Improving, Learning and Performance*. Kogan Page, 1993, p. 28.

⁵ Creig M. [in:] Trulove S. (ed.): *Handbook of Training and Development*. Blackwell Business, 1982.

⁶ Argyle M.: *The psychology of International Behavior*. Penguin, Harmondsworth 1967.

⁷ Constable C.J.: *Developing the Competent Manager in a UK context*, Report for the Manpower Services Commission, Sheffield 1998.

⁸ Whetten D.A., Cameron K.S., Woods M.: *Developing management skills of Europe*, Addison-Wesley, 1996.

and something less than repetitive actions related to performing classical managerial functions. The authors believe that it is difficult to draw a distinct line between what presents such an ability and what does not. Skills refer to cognitive knowledge and to the way of performing activities, yet they are wider than the knowledge itself. The authors claim that managerial skills include the model of a sequence of behaviors manifested towards achieving an intended result.⁹

A review of the definitions suggests a dominating opinion that competences are a notion wider than skills, and the acquisition of skills is not a sufficient condition for a manager to become competent. A competent manager is a person who, due to their adequate attitude and personal qualities, will be willing and able to apply their knowledge and skills in a positive manner.

3. Methodology

The problems discussed in the present work refer to the competences revealed by students of economics and management, analyzed in their two aspects: their role in the students' professional career and the level achieved at university.

The respondents were asked to assess 30 general competences and 10 managerial competences. The empirical study was carried out on the basis of a specially developed questionnaire.

The empirical material was collected on the basis of the studies performed in the years 2009-2010, using the method of diagnostic survey. The study included the students of the fifth year at three state universities situated in Lublin, that is:

- Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, the departments of economics, management and finance and accountancy;
- University of Technology (PL), the department of management and marketing (5th year);
- John Paul II Catholic University (KUL), the department of management.

While constructing research tools, we used the methodology applied in the project called "Tuning Educational Structures in Europe",¹⁰ distinguishing instrumental, interpersonal and systemic competences. Due to the specific character of the university courses the questionnaire considered also managerial competences. On the basis of the construction of the

⁹ Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁰ Gonzalez J., Wagenaar R. (ed.): Tuning Educational Structures in Europe Final Report. University of Deusto, University of Groningen, 2003.

Tuning tool the adopted cafeteria questions scale was from 1 (no or very insignificant meaning) to 4 (vital). The competences listed were considered in two aspects taking into account:

- the meaning they will have , according to the respondents, in their future professional career;
- the level of competences they achieved during their studies.

The questionnaire also had a demographics section including a set of independent variables characterizing the respondents, i.e. the university they were attending and their major course, their sex, age, address, mean results obtained in the final year of their study, their material and professional status and parents' educational background.

The study included the total of 292 students. After verifying the correctness of completed questionnaires, the researchers finally accepted 278 forms.

The majority of the students represented the PL and UMCS (85%). The lowest number of the respondents studied at KUL. More than 60% of the students were female. The majority of the respondents were living permanently in urban areas (65%). Less than 30% of the respondents were working to earn money, and the majority of the students (64%) defined their material status as average, and only (9%) as difficult. While analyzing the structure of the respondents regarding their achievement at university (calculated as the arithmetic mean value of their grades from the final year), it should be noted that almost half of them (47%) were good students with the mean result good and above.

4. Results

Figures 1-4 present the results of the empirical studies. The individual figures contain arithmetic mean values calculated on the basis of respondents' individual assessment regarding the role of particular competences in their future professional career and the level of such competences that they reached at university.

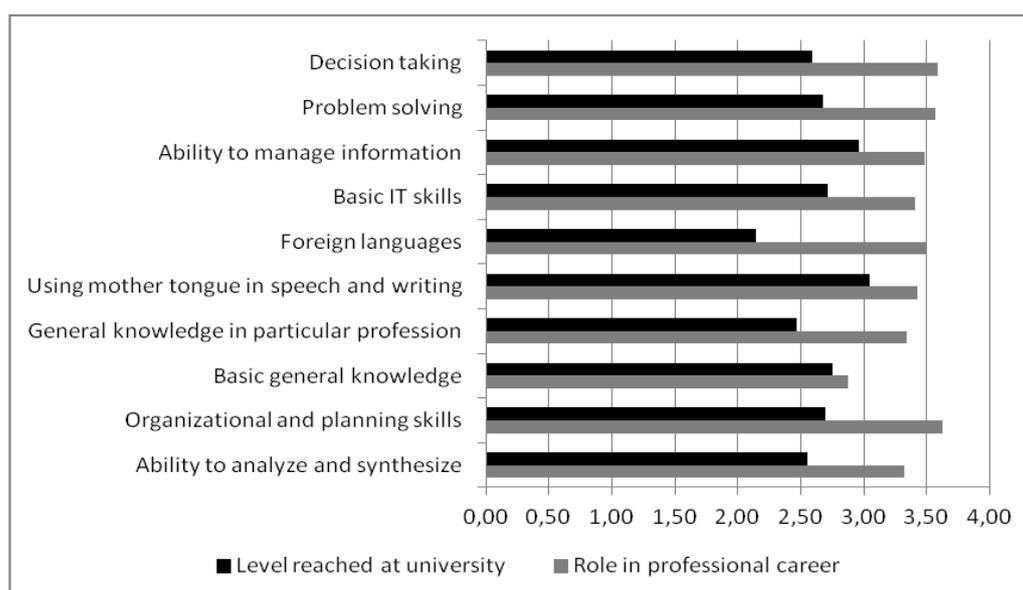


Fig. 1. The assessment of respondents' instrumental competences

Rys. 1. Ocena kompetencji instrumentalnych przez respondentów

Notation: All differences statistically insignificant.

Source: Authors' own study based on questionnaire analyses.

Among 10 instrumental competences important in their future professional career, the respondents attributed the greatest role to organizational and planning skills (the average of 3.63 in a 4-point scale). Lower meaning was given to decision making (3.59) and problem solving (3.57). On the other hand, the lowest score was given to basic general knowledge (2.87). The ranking of the level of competences acquired during their studies looked slightly different in respondents' self-assessment. The greatest role in this importance hierarchy was attributed to the ability of communication in speech and writing using their mother tongue (3.04), the next item was information management (2.96) and then the level of basic general knowledge which was on the lowest position considering the role in the professional career. The respondents were most skeptical about their knowledge of foreign languages (2.14) which, at the same time, they indicated as quite important in their professional career (the 4th position with the mean score of 3.5).



Fig. 2. The assessment of respondents' systemic competences

Rys. 2. Ocena kompetencji systemowych przez respondentów

Notation: All differences statistically insignificant.

Source: Authors' own study based on questionnaire analyses.

The respondents who were assessing 12 systemic competences (Figure 2) regarding their role in their future professional career and the degree of their realization attributed the highest position to the ability of using knowledge in practice (mean indication of 3.7). However, this particular ability was found on the 11th position when they were rating the competences achieved at university (with the mean score of 2.24). The highest position in the hierarchy of the competences acquired at university was occupied by the ability to learn (2.99). The students were unanimous in determining the last, 12th position, which was given in both ratings to understanding the culture and customs in other countries (mean scores of, respectively, 2.42 and 1.93).

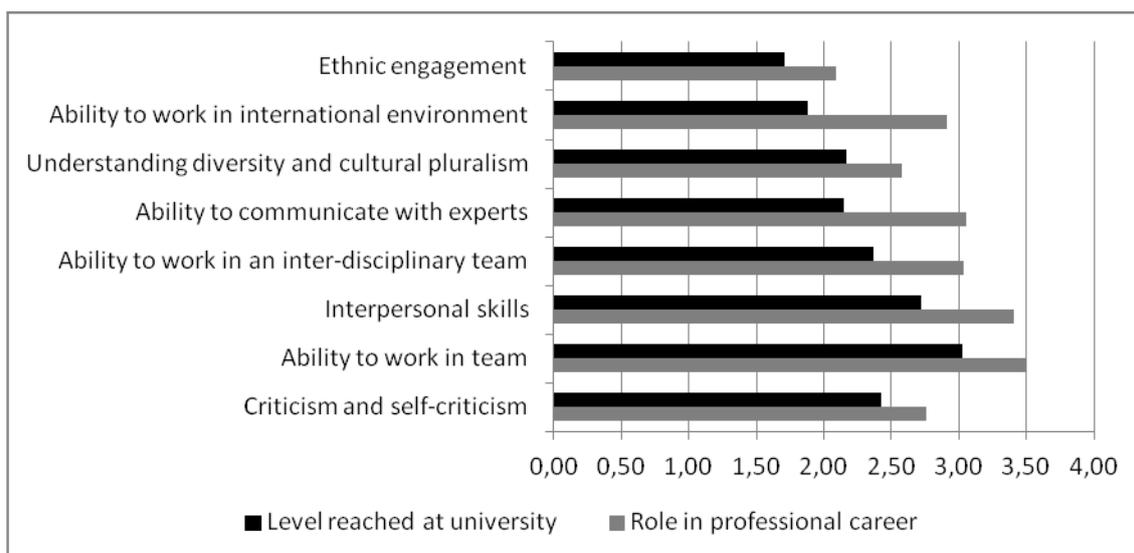


Fig. 3. The assessment of respondents' interpersonal competences

Rys. 3. Ocena kompetencji interpersonalnych przez respondentów

Notation: All differences statistically insignificant.

Source: Authors' own study based on questionnaire analyses.

The analysis performed by the authors revealed a high correlation between the hierarchies of the role and the achieved level of interpersonal competences in the respondents' assessment. And thus: the ability to work in a team was regarded as most significant at work and best developed among all the competences in this group (mean 3.51 and 3.03, respectively). The second position in both classifications was occupied by interpersonal skills (3.41 and 2.72). Definitely, the lowest meaning was attributed to ethnic engagement (8th position in both ratings, with the mean of 2.09 and 1.71, respectively). At the same time, it was observed that the level of achieved competences significantly differed from the level of the meaning attributed to them in the aspect of respondents' future jobs (Figure 3).



Fig. 4. The assessment of respondents' managerial competences

Rys. 4. Ocena kompetencji menedżerskich przez respondentów

Notation: All differences statistically insignificant.

Source: Authors' own study based on questionnaire analyses.

The respondents also assessed the role and level of managerial skills. The most significant role in the context of their future work was attributed to professional experience (with the mean score of 3.66) which, however, they had hardly acquired during their studies (10th position, with the mean of 1.65).

Summing up, it should be noted that in case of all the analyzed competences the respondents gave a much higher score to their role in their future professional career, compared to the level they had reached at university.

The general character of the significance and the level of the particular groups of competences acquired by the students is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Mean values for scores in individual groups of competences

Lp.	Type of competences	Xm	SD	V(%)	Ym	SD	V(%)
1	Instrumental competences	3.41	0.20	5.99	2.66	0.24	9.00
2	Systemic competences	3.27	0.33	10.18	2.56	0.31	12.22
3	Managerial competences	3.17	0.24	7.44	2.41	0.34	14.20
4	Interpersonal	2.92	0.42	14.53	2.31	0.40	17.42

Notation: Xm – mean score for the significance of competences in one's professional career; Ym – mean score for the level of acquired competences; SD – standard deviation; V – variation coefficient.

Source: Authors' own study based on questionnaire analyses.

Analyzing the obtained empirical data, we can observe that in case of their future professional career the respondents attributed the greatest significance to instrumental competences (mean score of 3.41 in 4-point scale), followed by systemic (3.27), managerial (3.17) and interpersonal competences (2.92). The same sequence (though with much lower mean scores) was obtained in the analysis of respondents' self-assessment regarding the level of individual competences achieved by them at university.

5. Conclusions

The level of competences gained during studies is verified by the labor market. Study results presented in 2010¹¹ indicate that the modern employer expects from applicants with economic education the knowledge of the subject and computer skills. The majority of employers requires not only expert knowledge but also foreign language skills (English language in particular). The next group of competences are interpersonal skills facilitating team cooperation in project teams and also personality predispositions such as the ability to cope with difficult situations and stress resistance related to the ability, independence and willingness to develop oneself (self-perfection).

The analysis of the study results revealed that in case of all the examined competences the students assessed significantly higher their role in their future professional career, compared to the level reached by them at university. In case of the four groups of competences distinguished for the purpose of our study the ranking of their significance at work corresponded, in students' opinion, with the ranking of the level concerning the competences acquired by them. It can be thus concluded that the respondents were acting rationally. During their study they were developing in the first place such competences which they regarded as the most vital for their future professional career.

The relationships between the ratings look slightly different when particular partial competences are considered. Among the total of forty competences analyzed in the study the respondents pointed to professional experience as the most vital competence in their future job. However, the students admitted that this particular competences was the least developed one during their time at university. Young people often associate professional experience merely with full-time employment related directly to their work. Taking into account the fact that the respondents were full-time students, it is hard to expect them to have this type of experience. Practice, however, may be acquired in other ways, as well, by getting a placement with a company, becoming active at the university (student self-government, sports

¹¹ Jakubiak M.: Rynek pracy absolwentów kierunków ekonomicznych i zarządzania, [w:] Kicia M. (red.): Zeszyty naukowe studentów i doktorantów Wydziału Ekonomicznego UMCS, nr 1, Lublin 2010.

associations, scientific societies), becoming involved in voluntary work, participating in foreign exchange programs (student exchange, placements, summer jobs). According to the experts in the job market, any form of professional activity taken up during university studies may become not only an entry in one's CV but also initiate their professional career.¹² Employers admit that such undertakings are a very successful means of recruitment. The work and the level of involvement are monitored directly on site, which allows the skills and competences of the trainees to be verified in a project team. For a few months, students have the opportunity to display their advantages and become familiar with the company. This is a far more effective form of recruitment of candidates for work than any other used for that matter.

The lowest positions in both ratings were taken by the competences related to working in multi-cultural teams, i.e. understanding diversity and cultural pluralism, ethnic engagement, understanding the culture and customs of other countries. This may suggest that the respondents do not intend to look for a job abroad after graduation. Yet progressing globalization of the job market has provoked a situation in which international corporations are playing an increasing role, also among the enterprises operating in Poland.¹³ Co-operation with people from other countries requires paying attention to cultural differences as well. Moreover, this type of organizations often require from their employees to be able to communicate using the language of the owner of the capital, and this particular competence had a rather low score among the respondents.

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¹² Kołakowski P.: *Student poszukiwany*, [w:] Gutry A. (red.): *Przewodnik „Praktyki 2010”*, Grupa Pracuj sp. z o.o., Warszawa 2010, s. 22.

¹³ Mucha-Leszko B.: *Rozwój powiązań w gospodarce światowej – etapy globalizacji, regionalizacja procesów gospodarczych*, [w:] Mucha-Leszko B. (ed.): *Gospodarka światowa. Handel zagraniczny i marketing. Wybrane problemy*. Wydawnictwo UMCS, Lublin 2003, p. 87-89.

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