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THE EXAMINATION OF PERSONAL COMPETENCIES AS COLLATERAL OF SUCCESS FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF STUDENTS

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Abstract: Although the labour market situation of the young in Hungary has been showing some promising signs, this is mainly due to the recovery from the crisis. The situation is aggravated by the fact that the expectations and the abilities of the young do not really meet the employers' requirements. Our paper presents the importance of the proper knowledge of competencies regarding a successful career, professional experience and the recent changes. We wish to draw attention to key competencies and personality traits as essential ingredients for success and also show the re-evaluation of competencies in the labour market. We have chosen interviews as a method of primary research and standardised questionnaires were designed for undergraduate students as an instrument. After the literature review and the methodological part our findings are discussed. To conclude, we found that putting a proper stress on competencies are of vital importance in education, which could promote (better) harmonisation with the labour market.

Keywords: competency, human resources, (higher) education, labour market situation of the young

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays the labour market situation of the young is one of the most popular topics of research. Several researches conducted [4] state that the expectations and abilities of employees do not really meet those of the employers. Unfortunately, there are too many factors that hinder the success of the graduates on the labour market, which became the topic of several surveys carried out in Hungary during the last few years (the empirical results of the Magyar Ifjúság /Hungarian Youth/ 2012 examination [8], [13]). The common feature of these researches is that they do not try to take a general picture. Instead, they strive to explore the real factors for the labour market success of the young. Among others, the most important ones are mass education, the rapid pace of economic life and choosing a study programme in higher education that does not suit the student's interests. As the reason for the latter one, we suggest the improper knowledge about competencies. That is why they are being examined closely now.

Competencies have become one of the key terms of human resource management as they help answer the question what factors are necessary for employers and companies to have excellent and competent employees (and thus, efficient organisations) who perform above the average.

The reason for the popularity of competencies can derive from the decline of classical scientific culture in parallel with the spread of mass higher education systems in the world of postmodernism [15]. In order to manage work and career successfully it is essential to possess the proper resources and competencies [14]. Some Anglo-Saxon countries still prefer terms like *ability*, *skill*, *know-how* and *qualification*.

However, there is no unified definition for competencies yet. It always depends on the context or situation what we actually mean by this term. Moreover, competencies are job-related. Job competencies are such knowledge, skill and ability parts that play a central part in career management and which can be influenced by the individual [1].

The Competent Manager by [2] is still a great treasury for competency profiles and examples in which the manager has a key role. According to Boyatzis job competency is an underlying characteristic of a person that leads to or causes superior or effective performance. Another useful resource is the book written by SPENCER – SPENCER (1993) 10 years later in which more than 1500 competency models can be found. As a result, competency profiles were born for certain positions, which could be quickly reviewed. The well-spread definition for competencies by Spencer and Spencer is the following: 'A competency is an underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to criterion referenced effective and/or superior performance in a job or situation' A competency is a set of distinctive individual skills, related knowledge and attributes that allow an individual to successfully perform a task or an activity within a specific function or job [12].

McClelland went on arguing that the best predictors of outstanding on-the-job performance were underlying, enduring personal characteristics that he called competencies [11].

However, not all the authors supported competency models or the idea itself. Who were against it noted that it is difficult, expensive and time-consuming to use [10]. [5] argues that competency models are a waste. He proposes that the two main flaws with current competency methods are the lack of future orientation and the means by which one could acquire these requisite future skills.

Previous researches have proved that the transforming and changing expectations lead to uncertainty, depreciation and the feeling of injustice [9]. However, all these changes, processes and tendencies have led to the predominance of human resources in economy [6]. That is why we think it is important to enhance labour market success by interpreting and assessing competencies.

Among others, in our paper we wish to highlight what key business competencies (can) enhance the success of employees and their competitiveness in the labour market and also what personality traits have a powerful impact on decision making mechanisms. An answer is also sought to the question of how competencies have been transformed, how their role was appreciated and re-evaluated and what skills and abilities are no longer necessary for success in the labour market vs. the ones that were not required previously but have become indispensable these days.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

We have chosen interviews as a method of primary research and standardised questionnaires were designed as an instrument. They mainly consisted of closed questions and typically based on nominal and metric scale. Bi- and multivariate correlation analyses were carried out while processing the results of the quantitative phase. In the present paper univariate statistical analysis was used to analyse the competency structure first tested in 2009 and finalised in 2014.

Geographically, North-Hungary (Heves County, the region of Gyöngyös) and Central Hungary (Pest County, Gödöllő and Budapest) were marked for the test. The sample consisted of such undergraduate students (altogether 745) who have already had professional experience and gained an insight into the world of the labour market either through their internship or part-time employment. Most respondents currently study agriculture and its related areas followed by the students of arts and sciences, commerce, marketing and economics. Students are in their first, second or third year. As far as gender is concerned, 35% male and 65% female filled in the questionnaires.

Due to the volume and content limitations as well as the high number of competencies in our primary research we have selected one of the segments of personal competencies and the eight key competencies defined by one of the EU committees in 2006: communication in the mother tongue, communication in foreign languages, mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology, digital competence, learning to learn, social and civic competences, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship and cultural awareness and expression.. This list was extended with a list of personal competencies that were regarded relevant in our former preliminary research, i.e. that were mentioned most frequently by the students or whose role was regarded to be essential in the labour market.

We decided to analyse this competency portfolio as previously in our preliminary research we also tested the 8 key competencies of the EU with another set of competencies whose elements we wished to assess based on our personal opinion and interest by hypothesising their relevance in human resource management. Although repertoires of job-related general and key competencies¹ have also been published in Hungary we feel that personal competencies are not properly stressed in many cases and they are not paid enough attention in some areas of their application.

Personal competencies and personality traits are far too often generalised in the job specification so that is why it would be practical and essential to tailor and update them in line with the system of education. At the same time, by examining the key EU competencies the representativeness of the other group of competencies that are not related to jobs can be ensured and also the question, whether the Hungarian companies comply with the EU's competency expectations and if so, they meet them or not, can be analysed.

Our competency structure can be regarded of novel nature as such a mixture of competencies has never been examined in Hungary. In our opinion another novel feature of our examination is that the correlations explored concentrate on the application of the results and the development of competencies in higher education.

When compiling the standardised questionnaire we strived to adjust questions to every level of measurement (nominal, ordinal, interval and ratio scale), which were open or closed questions. Scales were used in order to help respondents. Nominal, interval and ratio scales were typically associated with closed questions. Altogether 745 questionnaires were returned that could be assessed (of which 435 were filled in by full time students and 310 by correspondent students). There were no significant differences between the responses to the questionnaires of these two groups so our paper presents the results of the entire sample.

¹FEOR-08, 2011 <http://eletpalya.munka.hu/foglalkozasok>

3. RESULTS

Table 1 summarises the results of our survey that were based on the students responses gained by applying a 5-point Likert scale.

Based on the results *good communication skills are the most important for a successful career* followed by *IT and foreign language skills*. This was also proved by an examination on a 156-member sample carried out in 2014 by CZEGLÉDI – JUHÁSZ where IT skills and foreign languages were associated with high scores, as well. This research did not separately deal with communication competencies. These soft competencies are essential ingredients for becoming a successful entrepreneur –that is why they can also be termed as modern entrepreneurial competency mix.

The main part of the deviation of the entire sample can be explained by these soft parts, i.e. the most significant difference in the opinion of the students in the sample can be found alongside the latent variable.

At the top of the ranking presented by Table 1 traits and characteristics assessed as important or very important can be found (generally evaluated above 4.5). Here little deviation (0.6) also show that the assessment of these factors is very unanimous. By going down the list not only values decrease but also deviations increase, which shows that there is definitely difference in the respondents' opinion about these traits, i.e. assessing less important characteristics.

The labour force of the future sees *the collateral of a successful career in being able to make use of the knowledge gained*. At present there is a need for adequate knowledge tailored to labour market requirements which can be used in practice, too. The *improvement of basic skills and competencies was also marked as a very important objective and requirement in a message to (higher) education institutions* as developing personality traits and personal competencies were stressed in the ranking. The results are presented by Table 2. This justifies the fact that higher education institutions have a key role in imparting the best and updated knowledge to their students tailored to market challenges, trends and requirements in addition to adapting to professional concepts and scientific standards.

We also asked the students *what competencies they most frequently use at work*. On the basis of the results of the preliminary research we compiled a list whose elements were weighed and those most frequently mentioned were considered based on the percentage of mentioning them. The following parts of the list could be selected:

- ≡ rely on knowledge gained in higher education,
- ≡ have to gain new knowledge,
- ≡ use my skills and abilities,
- ≡ rely on knowledge not imparted in higher education,
- ≡ rely on my old experience.

The results of our examination are illustrated by Figure 1. Figure 1 reflects that most respondents rely on their knowledge gained in non-formal education in addition to their skills and abilities and also students thought that gaining new knowledge is also essential for success. The picture can be made much clearer if we examine the students' opinion about shifts in the importance of competencies. The three alternatives given in advance were: increased, did not change and decreased. The responses are presented by Table 3. Based on the data of Table 3 the significance of communication, foreign language and IT skills was also pointed out. The respondents mostly use their mother tongue and IT competencies in their present jobs. It is interesting to note that they were the strongest skills and the areas to be developed together with foreign languages. Seemingly, it does not matter how strong these competencies are, they are in need of constant development.

It is technical skills, economic skills and entrepreneurial skills whose importance has significantly increased in the past 5 years. Students stated that the skills and abilities inevitable to become a successful entrepreneur (flexibility, decision making, discretion, taking risks and endurance) should be more prioritised in higher education and should be developed predominantly.

More than half of the respondents also mentioned the significance of learning from mistakes, discretion, self-discipline, persuasion and problem solving as the most important soft competencies.

Table 1: The importance of competencies for a successful job in the future (average, deviation)

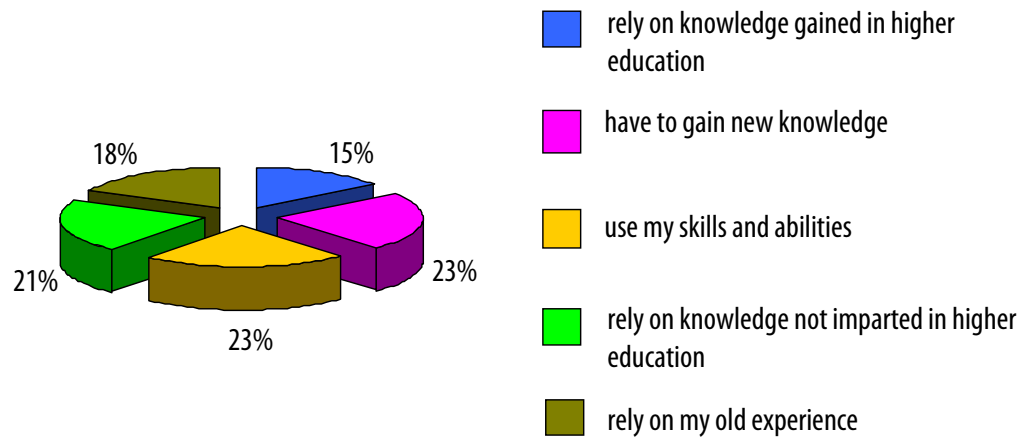
Competencies	Average
communication	4.6
foreign languages	4.5
IT skills	4.4
negotiation techniques	4.3
self-knowledge	4.2
economic skills	3.8
social skills	3.5
social awareness	3.2
technical skills	3.2
EU basics	3.2
cultural skills	3.2

Source: authors' research, N=745; deviation: 0.6-1.05

Table 2: Respondents' opinion about the collateral of a successful career (average, 1= do not agree at all, 5= entirely agree)

Skills	Average
utilising knowledge gained	4.4
basic skills, competencies and their development	4.1
developing personality traits	3.9
a good qualification with which one can land a job	3.8
a competitive degree	3.5

Source: authors' research, N=745; deviation: 0.6-0.7



Source: authors' research, N=435

Figure 1. The extent of using competencies at work (average)

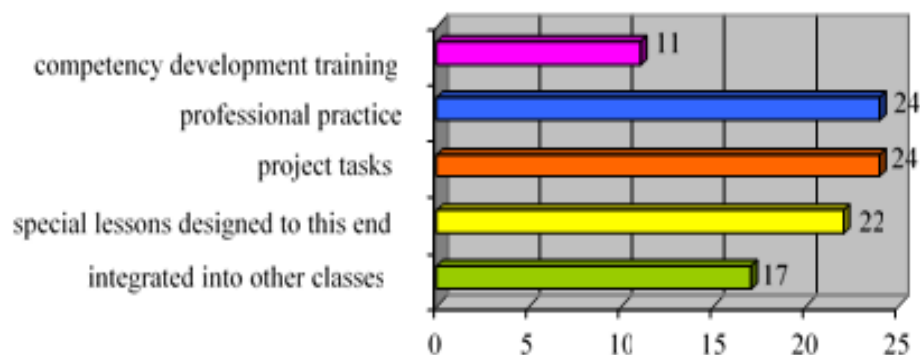
A little gap between labour market requirement and competency development by higher education was present here, which can be utilised in rethinking competency development at schools and in higher education to show the shift in importance and also the skills that have to be stressed in developing to meet the demands of the labour market. By looking at the results we suggest that the respondents might not see the importance of self-improvement.

The most efficient ways of competency development were project work and professional practice (Figure 2).

Table 3: Changes in the importance of competencies (skills, abilities) in the past 5 years (percentage)

Competency	Significance in the past 5 years		
	increased	did not change	decreased
IT skills	83	1	16
communication in a foreign language	72	8	20
communication skills	62	5	33
economic skills	60	6	34
learning from mistakes	60	12	28
technical skills	57	8	35
discretion	55	22	23
self-discipline	53	25	22
problem solving	51	14	35
entrepreneurial skills	50	10	40
persuasion	50	8	42
hard working	49	25	26
initiative	49	16	35
EU skills	49	9	42
punctuality	48	20	32
ability to learn	47	12	41
loyalty	45	26	29
organisational skills	45	12	43
preciseness	44	25	31
decision making	44	19	37
sense of responsibility	42	22	36
social awareness, empathy	41	41	18
reliability	40	30	30
coping	38	27	35
motivation	35	28	37
taking risks	35	21	44
independence	35	19	46
patience	32	45	24
flexibility	32	14	54
cooperation	30	33	37
self-improvement	26	14	60
coping with stress	22	20	58
endurance	21	15	64

Source: authors' research, N= 745



Source: authors' research, N=745

Figure 2. Ideas in connection with competency development (% relative frequency, more than one answer)

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While assessing the questionnaires the importance of the so-called modern entrepreneurial competencies (ICT: communication, foreign language, IT) has been revealed, which is in perfect harmony with the requirements of the business sector.

In close cooperation with enterprises and companies the institutions try to provide services beyond education and further training including both laboratory tests and purchasing specialized books [7].

As there is a need for developing competencies from the side of both parties, we would suggest developing these competencies more intensively either under institutionalised circumstances (at schools) or non-formal education. Society should give high priority to the organizational development and operation of human resources and infrastructure of training places based on changing market needs [3]. It must also be noted that updating the personal competencies and putting a proper stress on them are of vital importance in the content of the training, which could promote (better) harmonisation between the labour market and education.

As a result of the examination we have proved the further appreciation of the examined and prioritised competencies in the future based on the opinion of the respondents. In addition, we have also concluded that it is necessary to improve the practical side of education and developing professional and general skills and abilities. It is one of the points where the dialogue between the labour market and education could be improved. The students questioned do not really see the importance of self-improvement. It is of vital importance that not only educational institutions have a role in improving competencies but also individuals and workplaces. In our society constant renewal is expected so that is why the continuous development, improvement and revival of competencies is a must to maintain professionalism.

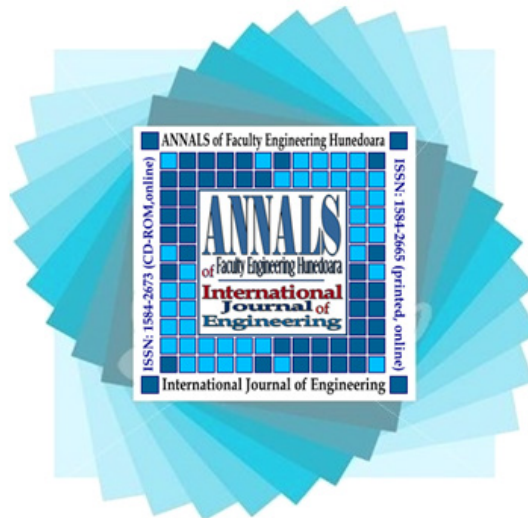
In our opinion the size of the sample was too small partly due to funding and time limitations. The research was only concentrated on a single area, which resulted in surveying and acquiring results by making use of our social capital.

However, as one of the main results the paper helps highlight what business competencies were regarded to be essential by the large number of students involved in the examination as current and future players in the labour market that increase and increase the competitiveness and success of employees. Among others, we were striving to find an answer how competencies have been re-evaluated nowadays and what are the skills and abilities that are no longer necessary for success in the labour market and also the ones that were not necessary before but now they have become indispensable. By creating and testing a unique competency structure we tried to draw attention to the reassessment and the importance of updating personal competencies. There are further opportunities in extending the elements in the sample by including other higher education institutions and giving new directions to the survey.

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