

**UNIVERSITY'S SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY
– LABOR MARKET PERSPECTIVE***

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Abstract

Changes in the socio-economic environment of universities require its tasks and social roles to be constantly reviewed and redefined. The present paper attempts to assess universities' responsibility for the outcomes of educational process. The outcomes are measured on the basis of graduates' preparedness for undertaking professional work. The paper's aim was to indicate the main discrepancies between employers' expectations regarding graduates' occupational training and the level of competences acquired by graduates in the course of their studies. A premise was made that the comparison of the views presented by the main stakeholders will enable the level on which the individual competences match the needs of labor market to be determined, and the strengths and weaknesses of university curricula to be indicated. The analysis encompassed both hard occupational skills, which are subordinated to the content-related educational profile, and key soft competences.

Keywords: university, university social responsibility, graduates, key competences

JEL classification: I23, J24, M14

Introduction

Discussions regarding the present problems of higher education in Poland increasingly raise issues pertaining to the universities' social responsibility. It is emphasized that the autonomy of universities, the traditional roles of these institutions, and the pursuit of academic values are inextricably linked with the social responsibility for the development of science, workforce, and knowledge transfer to societies. In relation to teaching, higher education institutions are obliged to ensure high standards of education and the adjustment of educational offer to labor market needs (Andrzejczak, 2015; Hall, 2011; Iwankiewicz-Rak, Wrona, 2006; Jawor, Szczupaczyński, 2011; Kochanowski, 2008; Szablowski, 2004).

Changes emerging in the socio-economic environment of universities require their social roles and tasks to be constantly reviewed and redefined (Barwińska-Małajowicz, 2015). Changes associated with the transformations of labor market in the period of globalization and economic integration in Europe necessitate the terms 'work' and 'career' to be modified. Therefore, monitoring of employers' expectations regarding the occupational training of graduates has become a prerequisite. The feedback originating from labor market ought to become the basis for the development of educational policies and the adjustment of university curricula to social needs.

The issue is reflected in the present paper. An attempt was made to evaluate universities' responsibility for educational outcomes measured by the level of graduates' preparedness for undertaking professional work. The paper makes a premise that university educational process ought to be assessed based upon the criteria determined by stakeholders' requirements. Therefore, when evaluating the universities' effectiveness regarding the supply of experts to labor market, a reference was made to the views and opinions of the main stakeholders, i.e. employers and graduates themselves. The study attempted to evaluate graduates' competences required on labor market. In addition, it was assumed that the identification of competence gaps and their scale may constitute a starting point in the search for solutions facilitating educational process and the improvement of university–labor market relationship.

1. Social Expectations vs. Higher Education

The literature of the subject increasingly discusses social expectations regarding responsible higher education. Several objections were voiced, e.g. over-theorization and the lack of association between curricula and economy. The necessity of making the graduate's profile more precise, and the clarification as to what purpose studies at a particular course are to serve (general development and training for further education, or preparation for a specific job) are emphasized (Białoń, Werner, 2012). Universities are also reproached for eliminating humanities-associated classes and introducing education for narrow specializations (Andrzejczak, 2015). In order to optimize graduates' opportunities on labor market, the need to devote more attention to the role of managerial competences and entrepreneurial attitudes is highlighted (Borowiec, Rachwał, 2011; Osuch, 2012; Kurek, Rachwał, 2011; Rachwał, 2006; Tracz, 2006). Challenges associated with growing social expectations require a successful deep dialogue with stakeholders to be introduced (Antonowicz et. al., 2016). Recently, universities have become the object of discussion in this context (Maliszewski, Kacprzak, 2009; Geryk, 2010; Leja, 2009). By being public institutions, universities ought to act upon social and ecological requirements, and generate the so-called added value for societies and economy (Białoń, Werner, 2012). This is associated with the changing role of the modern university, which, apart from the hitherto educational and research functions, ought to undertake initiatives to cooperate with their environment understood broadly. Universities' responsibility may be manifested in them assuming respect for the world (universal responsibility) or in them realizing specific tasks and initiatives (Kowalska, 2009).

Universities' performing the role associated with social responsibility may manifest in e.g. generation of social benefits in the form of educated graduates, impact upon public opinion from the perspective of scientific experts and authorities, care for their image, and maintaining good relations with their socio-economic environment (Cybal-Michalska, 2015; Białoń, Werner, 2012).

Universities' social responsibility is also expressed in the necessity of satisfying the expectations of various stakeholder groups. However, it is highlighted that the actions undertaken in the framework of universities' social responsibility must be mutually beneficial (Geryk, 2014), both organization- and stakeholder-wise (Burchell, Cook, 2013).

Socio-economic changes and the rapid accumulation of knowledge necessitate changes in the structure of employment and employees' competences (Taradejna, 2014). Modern workers are expected to possess competences encompassing expert knowledge and skills, but also general predispositions, significant from the point of view of development and self-actualization of individuals, which enable them to function effectively in various situations and environments (Jeruszka, 2011). The significance of key competences is indicated in the results of studies conducted among employers. The following encompass the most vital competences expected by employers: personal/interpersonal competences including effective communication, openness to learning and development, team working, flexibility, and adaptive skills (*Kompetencje i kwalifikacje...*, 2012).

2. Methods of research

The paper presents the results of a survey study encompassing 72 employers employing (or planning to employ) graduates of the University of Physical Education in Warsaw, Biała Podlaska branch. The views of employers were compared with the results of pilot studies conducted among 28 graduates of the same university, who graduated in 2015 and 2016. The studies were conducted in 2017. Sampling was purposive (employers) and exhaustive (graduates). The respondents were presented a list of 25 competences characterizing the graduate's profile with regard to the selected aspects of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and personal features. The employers scored the level of competences required on labor market in reference to the employed graduates (significance). On the other hand, the graduates evaluated the level of acquired competences (achievements). Scoring was based upon a 5-point Likert scale. In the case of the significance, 1 denoted little significance, and 5 – great significance. In the case

of achievements, 1 defined a very low level, and 5 – a very high level. Cronbach's alpha was applied in order to evaluate the reliability of the tool (Brzeziński, 1997).

The paper seeks answers to the following research questions:

1. Which graduates' competences are significant in the employment process?
2. How do graduates evaluate the level of competences they acquired in the course of studies?
3. Which graduates' competence areas reflect employers' expectations, and which ought to be improved?
4. To what degree the evaluated university conforms with the criteria regarding social responsibility for occupational training of graduates?

When searching for the answer to the question on the extent to which the university pursues its mission of educating a graduate prepared for entering labor market, a comparative analysis of employers' and graduates' views was conducted.

In order to verify the thesis on the existence of a competence gap between the level of acquired competences and their significance in professional career, student's t-distribution was applied. Statistically significant differences were set at the level of $p < 0.05$. In addition, in order to identify the aspects of graduates' occupational preparedness which require the application of corrective measures the most, the Importance Performance Analysis (IPA) was applied.¹ The IPA enables strengths and weaknesses of graduates' preparedness to be determined by means of the following two criteria: significance and the recognition of achievements in the same group of variables. IPA principles were applied in order to compile a comparison of competences required in the employment of graduates (in employers' opinion), and the level of acquired competences (in graduates' self-assessment).

The results pertaining to the required (significance) and acquired competences were presented in a coordinate system (axis X – achievements; axis Y – expectations). Arithmetic means of the evaluations of significance and the means of the levels of achievements constitute intercepts.

Each pair of scores (the level achieved by graduates and the level required by employers) is represented by a point in the coordinate system, and occupies a particular place in a specific quadrant (Figure 1). The first quadrant encompasses the features of the graduate's profile significant from the point of view of employers (expectations) which also scored high in graduates' self-assessment. The competences located in the second quadrant of the IPA grid are important

¹ IPA method is considered a useful practical tool for evaluating quality in higher education sector (O'Neill, Palmer, 2004; after: Szejnberg, 2008, p. 111).

from the point of view of labor market (the score is higher than the average score of employers), and, at the same time, scored relatively low in the self-assessment of graduates (below average). Therefore, the identification of these competences is associated with the necessity of them being prioritized and improved by means of corrective measures. The competences from the third quadrant are characterized by a relatively low level of significance and a low level of graduates' achievements, and are defined as 'low priority'. Finally, the competences located in the fourth quadrant are less significant as far as employers are concerned, and indicate a relatively high level of graduates' achievements (Sztejnberg, 2008).

<p>Quadrant 2</p> <p>High expectations level</p> <p>Low achievements level</p>	<p>Quadrant 1</p> <p>High expectations level</p> <p>High achievements level</p>
<p>Quadrant 3</p> <p>Low expectations level</p> <p>Low achievements level</p>	<p>Quadrant 4</p> <p>Low expectations level</p> <p>High achievements level</p>

Figure 1. Required (desired) and acquired competences in light of the method

Source: authors' own study on the basis of Sztejnberg (2008), pp. 112–113.

3. Results of the studies

The present paper presents the results of a survey study encompassing 72 employers employing (or planning to employ) graduates of the University of Physical Education in Warsaw, Biała Podlaska branch. The views of employers were compared with the results of pilot studies conducted among 28 graduates of the same university, who graduated in 2015 and 2016. The respondents were presented a list of 25 competences characterizing the graduate's profile with regard to the selected aspects of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and personal features.

3.1. Graduates' competences required on labor market – employers' perspective

The discussions regarding the competences required on the market were illustrated by the results of studies conducted among employers employing (or planning to employ) graduates of the University of Physical Education in Warsaw, Biała Podlaska branch, and among graduates with a year's or two years' work experience.

The analysis of empirical data enabled two research areas to be isolated from 25 attributes of the graduate's profile. The areas encompass hard (occupational – 11) and soft competences (key, general – 14). The reliability of the isolated competence scales was evaluated by means of Cronbach's alpha. The values of the coefficient spanned the range between 0.86 and 0.97, which proves high reliability.

The results of the survey study conducted among employers revealed a slightly higher demand for graduates' general preparedness (4.49 vs. 4.41 – hard competences). In light of these results, apart from appropriate general and expert knowledge, the ability to apply theory in practice constitutes the most sought after hard competence. On the other hand, employers consider the ability to work in work groups, effective time management, problem-solving, and the need for permanent development and creativity, as the most important soft competences in the graduates' profile.

3.2. Competence gaps – required vs. acquired graduates' competences

The research results encompass the self-assessment of the competences acquired in the course of studies. The graduates assessed their soft competences higher than hard ones (4.26 vs. 3.74). Graduates' strengths regarding their content-related preparedness pertained to e.g. computer skills, course-related knowledge, and the competences associated with licenses and trainings. As far as general (soft) competences are concerned, the following were evaluated the highest: the skills associated with the adjustment to a new work environment, team working, and work under pressure. The comparison of acquired competences as self-assessed by graduates with those required by employers enabled the so-called competence gaps to be identified.

The attempt at verifying the thesis regarding the responsible education of graduates of the selected university in relation to labor market expectations revealed numerous discrepancies. Among 11 of the evaluated hard competences, statistically significant differences between the level of competences required on labor market and the level acquired by graduates were indicated in the case of 8 competences (to the disadvantage of graduates' self-assessment). The largest competence gaps pertained to the familiarity with legal regulations associated with a particular sector, professional experience, and the ability to apply the acquired knowledge in business practice (Figure 2).

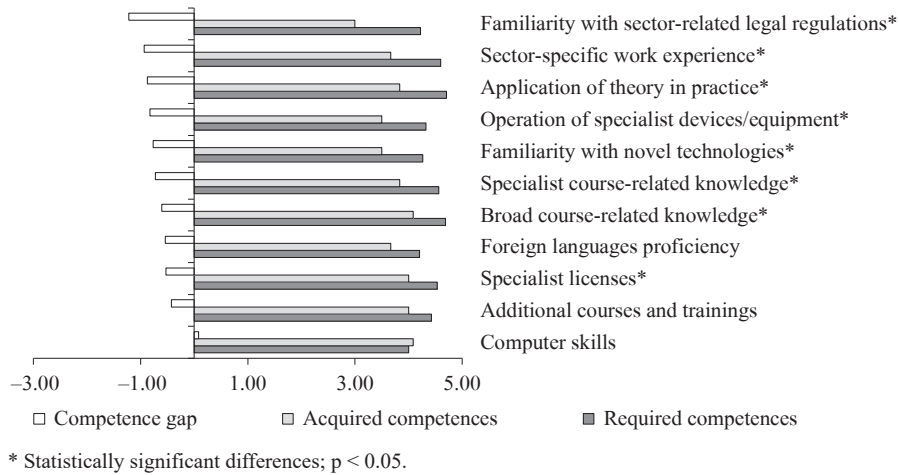


Figure 2. Hard competences as viewed by employers (required) and graduates (acquired)

Source: own elaboration.

Less significant discrepancies were observed in the case of soft competences (43%). In this case, the most significant gap pertained to such attributes as creativity (innovation), time management skills, decision-making skills, and problem-solving (Figure 3).

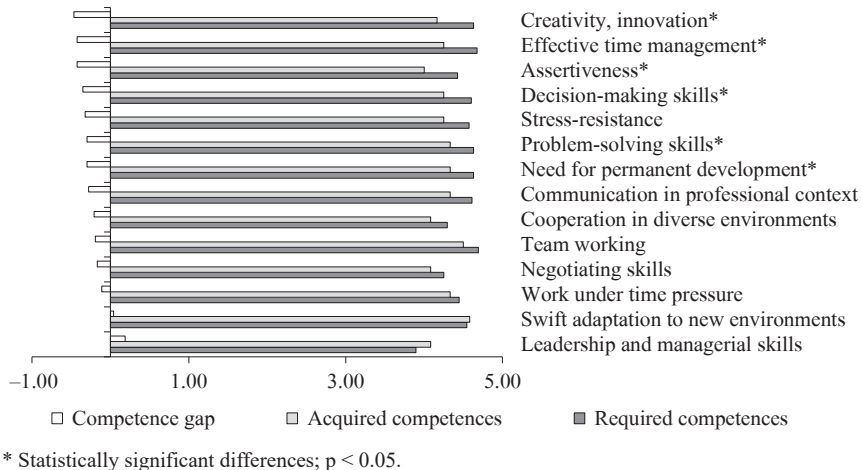


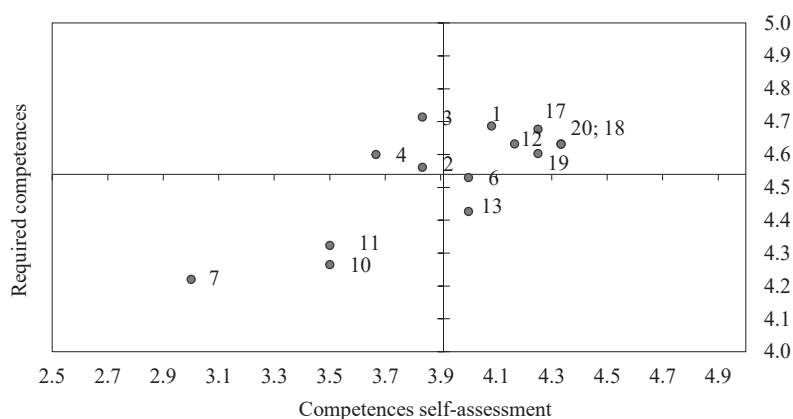
Figure 3. Soft competences as viewed by employers (required) and graduates (acquired)

Source: own elaboration.

The results of analyses indicated that the following competences fail to match employers' expectations: technical competences associated with computer skills, preparedness in relation to trainings, managerial skills, adaptive skills, and work under pressure. As a consequence, the attributes of the graduate's profile prove the effectiveness of the assessed university's mission regarding social responsibility towards its main stakeholders.

3.3. Required vs. acquired competences in light of IPA method

Further analyses pertained to competences manifesting statistically significant differences between the level required on labor market and the one acquired by graduates. The IPA method was applied in order to establish which competences ought to be prioritized and included in corrective measures enabling graduates' preparedness to be improved. The results representing the acquired and required level of individual competences (Figure 4) were positioned in a bi-dimensional coordinate system. Arithmetic means of both analyzed features (achievements = 3.91; significance = 4.54) constituted intercepts.



Note: The sequence of the competencies: 1 – Broad course-related knowledge/general knowledge; 2 – Specialist course-related knowledge; 3 – Application of theory in practice; 4 – Sector-specific experience acquired during internships; 6 – Specialist licenses; 7 – Familiarity with sector-related legal regulations; 10 – Familiarity with novel technologies applied in work; 11 – Operation of specialist devices/tools; 12 – Creativity, innovation; 13 – Assertiveness; 17 – Effective time management; 18 – Ability to formulate and solve problems; 19 – Decision-making skills; 20 – Need for permanent development.

Figure 4. IPA grid

Source: own elaboration.

In light of the data presented in Figure 4, the first quadrant contains the attributes which are significant in the employment processes and which scored high among the graduates. The quadrant

is labeled as the area of maintaining good work (Targaszewska 2013). The competences included here (50% among those encompassed by the IPA analysis) do not require any intervention on the part of the university. The third quadrant, labeled 'low priority', contains the competences on which both stakeholder groups reached a consensus. These competences have low significance and, at the same time, scored low with regard to achievements (both categories scored below average). The competences included in the second quadrant require particular attention. These competences are highly sought after by employers, but scored average or below average among the graduates. Only three features of the graduate's profile are included in the quadrant: expert course-related knowledge, the ability to apply theoretical knowledge in business practice, and professional experience. The location of these competences entails the necessity of treating these as priority and applying corrective measures.

On the other hand, the position of 'assertiveness' in the fourth quadrant indicated a relatively low level of significance of the feature among the employers and a relatively high level presented by the graduates.

Conclusions

The introduction of the Bologna Process and National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education posed challenges for universities regarding the responsibility for the quality of education, and matching educational outcomes to labor market needs and the requirements of socio-economic environment. The essence of universities' social responsibility revolves around the development of specific values, and the satisfaction of commitments towards the institutions' stakeholders.

The present paper concentrates upon the assessment of the university's responsibility for graduates' preparedness to perform prospective occupational roles. The assessment was based upon the results of the studies conducted among the main stakeholders, i.e. graduates and employers.

The literature of the subject emphasizes that the transition of university graduates from education to employment constitutes one of the most complex mechanisms present on modern labor market. University studies can be undertaken by people of diverse intellectual potential, which implies the emergence of problems associated with ensuring proper graduates' quality (Barwińska-Małajowicz, 2015; Piróg, 2013).

When reviewing the responsibility of the assessed university for graduates' education, the fact that the graduate is not always equipped with the competences required on labor market

ought to be emphasized. The results of the present study reveal numerous competence gaps between graduates' attributes required on labor market and the level of graduates' competences. However, the disproportion between graduates' abilities and qualifications on the one hand, and employers' expectations on the other hand, may stem from various reasons. Students' lowering level of preparedness in face of growing social expectations regarding graduates' 'quality' may constitute one of the reasons. In addition, the graduate's initial choice with regard to their prospective profession and a particular university is not always premeditated and preceded by an appropriate analysis and consideration. The relationship between the education system and the situation of the individual on labor market is multi-faceted and frequently ambiguous (Antonowicz et al., 2016).

In conclusion, it ought to be highlighted that the limitations associated with purposive sampling preclude the application of the current results to other academic environments. However, the formulation of the following final thoughts is possible. The conclusions constitute answers to the research questions:

1. Apart from the appropriate level of general and expert knowledge, and the ability to apply theoretical knowledge in practice, the following high general competences are required in employment processes: the ability to work in work groups, effective time management, problem-solving, the need for permanent development, and creativity.
2. Self-assessment of the acquired competences considerably diverges from the level required on labor market.
3. In accordance with the IPA method, the following require priority treatment and the application of corrective measures: expert course-related knowledge, the ability to apply the acquired theoretical knowledge in business practice, and work experience acquired in the course of studies.

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