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Work-based learning as a shift towards improved labour market skills in VET in Latvia

Kształcenie w miejscu pracy drogą do poprawy umiejętności na łotewskim rynku pracy

Słowa kluczowe: rynek pracy, umiejętności, uczenie się w miejscu pracy

Streszczenie: Kształcenie w miejscu pracy nabiera coraz większego znaczenia, jeśli chodzi o szkolenia pracowników. Rynek pracy wymaga nowych umiejętności, a wraz z umiejętnościami zawodowymi rośnie znaczenie umiejętności ogólnych. Różni interesariusze mogą mieć różne opinie na temat umiejętności wymaganych od pracowników. Celem badania była analiza poglądów pracodawców, instytucji kształcenia zawodowego i studentów na temat kilku aspektów umiejętności współczesnego rynku pracy. Do badań empirycznych wykorzystano ankietę przygotowaną dla pracodawców, kierowników placówek kształcenia zawodowego i studentów. Do oceny i porównania opinii wszystkich interesariuszy zastosowano te same pytania z tą samą skalą ocen od 1do10, gdzie 1 oznaczało wartość nieistotną, a 10 bardzo ważną. Wyniki badania wykazały, że wszystkie zaangażowane grupy mają podobne poglądy na temat głównych aspektów umiejętności na rynku pracy, wyraźnie wskazując na duże znaczenie umiejętności ogólnych oraz umiejętności zawodowych.

Key words: labour market, skills, work-based learning

Abstract: Work-based learning is becoming increasingly important in training of competitive employees for various fields. The labour market requires new skills, and the importance of generic skills tends to grow, alongside with the professional skills. Different stakeholders could have different opinions on the skills required for employees. The aim of the current research is to investigate views of employers, vocational education institutions and students on several aspects of today's labour market skills. Methods used for empirical research: survey of employers, vocational education institutions' managers and students. For the evaluation and comparison of all stakeholder's opinions, the same questions were used with the same evaluation scale 1-10, where 1- not important; 10-very important. For data analysis of survey data the following indicators of descriptive statistics were used – indicators of central tendency or location: arithmetic mean, mode, median; indicators of dispersion or variability: range, standard deviation, standard error of mean. Survey results indicated that there are similar views on all main aspects of labour market skills by all the involved groups, clearly recognising the importance of generic skills, alongside with the professional skills in the labour market context.

Introduction

Over the past decade work based learning (WBL) is a high level priority of vocational education and training (VET) policy in Latvia. A particular attention is being paid to the development of skills. It is in line also with the recent European Union level policy developments – European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience (2020), setting the objectives to be achieved by 2025 and the Council Recommendation on a framework for quality and effective apprenticeships (2018). Also the most recent OECD study on Latvia – OECD Skills Strategy Latvia (2019) is primarily dedicated to the issue of skills formation, and the results of this study forms the basis for the Latvian Education Policy Developments Guidelines for the period 2021 – 2027. Thus, also for the coming decade skills formation will be in the focus of education policy makers, and the role of researchers' contribution for the implementation of research informed policy may continue to grow.

The present paper endeavours to study the issue of WBL in relation to skills formation. More specifically – regarding the relevance of the various labour market skills from the perspective of the involved stakeholders. Work-based learning started in Latvia as a pilot in 2013. After the initial difficulties it gradually gained stakeholders' support and in 2016 a full respective legal framework came into force – after a prolonged consultation with social partners and other public, non-governmental and private bodies. The existing WBL regulation stipulates the rights and responsibilities for all the involved stakeholders: employers, VET institutions and students in VET programs. The new Latvian WBL approach aims at increasing the labour market skills and employability of VET students. For this reason it was seen useful to our research team under the National Research program to follow up on this new VET policy development also from research perspective.

The University of Latvia in collaboration with the Employers' Confederation of Latvia in 2019 organised a survey involving the three main partners in WBL – employers, VET institutions and students. The survey was structured with specific questions for each target group (stakeholder), at the same time deliberately including several identical questions for all. Consequently, it became possible to compare the results – and thus, opinions – obtained from these target groups regarding the same questions. In the present paper out interest has been focused on one particular aspect within the survey – the stakeholders' opinions on the skills useful and necessary for a successful integration into labour market.

The **purpose** of the study: to identify the various perspectives stakeholders may have on necessary and most useful labour market skills. The **tasks**: 1) study evaluations of different stakeholders (employers, educators and students) on the relevance of various skills for the labour market; 2) to draw conclusions on the perspective of the stakeholders in relation to the question under study. The primary **methods** used – statistical data analysis of survey results (employers, educators and students). For data analysis indicators of central tendency or location, indicators

of variability, cross-tabulations, testing of statistical hypotheses using t-test and analysis of variance (ANOVA), correlation analysis were used. Additional material for investigation was obtained from qualitative analysis as well – drawing conclusions from comments by the target groups.

The key **results** indicate that all the involved groups recognise the importance of generic skills in the labour market context. The generic skills are being evaluated as equally important to the specific professional skills related to the qualification. The primary **conclusions** show that, alongside with the importance of specifically professional skills, the students see the role of WBL as a pathway developing their ability for socialisation. Possibility for socialisation in adult professional environment for the students may be seen as an additional factor contributing to the attractiveness of WBL and thus of VET in general. Consequently, it is seen necessary to continue studing not only WBL as an approach for professioanl skills' development, but as an important strategy for raising the VET attractiveness for students and a tool for early and improved socialisation competence of the future labour force – professionally and as citizens in general.

Theoretical background

Work based learning is continuously being analysed by researchers around the globe paying attention to various aspects of its role in skills' formation, for examples, as a learning strategy in support of the Australian Qualifications Framework (Baker, Peach, Cathcart, 2017). Researchers are focusing on several aspects of apprenticeship in the Netherlands, analysing connecting school and work based learning (Onstenk, Blokhuis, 2007) with attention to organisational and legal aspects of implementation of this kind of education.

Employer involvement in work based learning process is a challenge in many countries, consequently analysis by researchers is being devoted to various implementation modes, for example, using the knowledge transfer partnership approach in undergraduate education and practice-based training to encourage employer engagement (Harris, Chisholm, Burns, 2013) where the role of the government is being stressed in particular. Researchers have concluded that practitioner capability and supporting critical reflection during work based placement has a significant impact (Smith, Martin, 2014).

The role in vocational teachers and their qualification improvement cannot be underestimated. Substantial amount of research is being devoted to the development of pedagogical competencies of the vocational teachers. For example, in Italy and Lithuania: implications of competence-based VET curriculum reforms (Tacconi, Tūtlys, Perini, Gedvilienė, 2020) with a particular focus on working conditions and wages and other aspects related to vocational education teacher training.

Researchers have performed detailed analysis of the necessity of part time work as a site for undergraduate work-based learning (Shaw, Ogilvie, 2010) with the

conclusion that work based learning is an important pre-condition for subsequent job satisfaction. Researchers have concluded that professional development projects are important part of work-based learning in the curriculum (Toledano-O'Farrill, 2017). The role of supervising work-based learning students in workplace is being stressed in research as well (Talbot, Lilley, 2014), paying attention also to the importance of e-learning.

A framework for work-based learning: basic pillars and the interactions between them as an important aspect in vocational education and training is being stressed (Ferrández-Berrueco, Kekale, Devins, 2016). Analysis of work-processes in designing competence-based occupational standards and vocational curricula shows the significance of these aspects (Tūtlys, Spöttl, 2017) indicating also to the methodological and institutional challenges that are to be faced.

Researchers are evaluating the various aspects between policy and practice on structuring workplace learning in higher vocational education in Sweden and Finland (Lindell, Stenström, 2005) having already extensive experience in the field and in reaching goals through various pathways. The process of Swedish reform in advanced vocational education (Lindell, 2006) from formulation to implementation had several challenges, and creative solutions in involvement of several stakeholders were offered. International industrial standardisation serves as a driver for cross-national convergence in training processes especially in certain fields, like aviation apprenticeships in England and Germany learn from mutual experience (Lahiff, Li, Unwin, Zenner-Höffkes, Pilz, 2019) in the situation of increasing international regulation.

Work-based learning for the creative industries has indicated that in fields of web design and social media (Riley, 2017) employers increasingly can have access to well-prepared specialists. Labour market requires qualified specialists, however, the demographic situation in many countries creates lack of young people. This requires to find different solutions by involving older people who often lack skills for employment. For this reason many countries pay a lot of attention to adult education and are evaluating to what extent their vocational qualifications system fits for adults. Thus, researchers are suggesting ideas for the university and industry linkage (Lester, 2015) where the proposed approach offers individual solutions for adults, as well.

Analysis of research results

The present paper is based on a survey that comprised approaches for quantitative and qualitative analysis. The survey including also several identical questions for all involved target groups. Consequently, it became possible to compare the results – and thus, opinion – obtained from these relevant target groups. In the present paper our interest was focused on one particular aspect within the survey – their opinions on the most useful skills the employee would need for a successful integration into the labour market.

Table 1. Main statistical indicators on evaluations by employers on the importance of respective employee skills for the company

Statistical indicators		Personal interest to fulfil tasks	Initiative and creativity	Specific professional knowledge and skills	Ability for independent work	Ability to plan own time	Ability for co-operation	Reliability and loyalty to company	Language skills	Digital skills	Interest and ability to improve knowledge and skills	General knowledge on societal developments
N	Valid	496	493	488	498	485	494	488	488	484	487	491
	Missing	352	355	360	350	363	354	360	360	364	361	357
Mean		9.33	8.79	8.45	8.94	8.60	8.96	9.00	7.22	7.44	9.05	8.43
Std. Error of Mean		0.053	0.060	0.076	0.059	0.069	0.060	0.061	0.106	0.098	0.053	0.067
Median		10	9	9	9	9	9	10	8	8	9	9
Mode		10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	8	10	10
Std. Deviation		1.178	1.340	1.685	1.307	1.523	1.325	1.337	2.336	2.155	1.162	1.475
Range		9	7	8	6	8	7	7	9	9	7	7
Minimum		1	3	2	4	2	3	3	1	1	3	3
Maximum		10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10

Source: Authors calculation based on employers survey, n = 948

Evaluation scale 1–10, where 1 – not important; 10 – very important

In the present chapter analysis will be made on the responses to the identical question for all target groups regarding the most relevant labour market skills. Studying the obtained results will enable drawing conclusions on the preferences of each target group, as well as comparing the priorities between the target groups. Main statistical indicators on evaluations by vocational education institutions on the importance of respective skills for the company are reflected in table 1.

Survey data indicate that employers have attributed high evaluations to all aspects, but by their evaluations the most important is Personal interest to fulfil tasks with the highest arithmetic mean of evaluations 9.33. Most frequent evaluation by respondents (mode) was 10, median was 10 as well, followed by next highest evaluation for Interest and ability to improve knowledge and skills with arithmetic mean of evaluations 9.05; mode 10 and median 9. The lowest evaluations by employers was for language skills, with arithmetic mean of evaluations 7.22; most frequent evaluation by respondents (mode) was 8, half of employers gave evaluation 8 or less and half of employers gave evaluation 8 or more (characterised by median). Although the evaluations by employers differed, the lowest variability of evaluations by employers were for Interest and ability to improve knowledge and skills, there were the lowest evaluation's dispersion – the smallest standard deviation and standard error of mean.

Main statistical indicators on evaluations by vocational education institutions on importance of respective skills for the company are reflected in table 2.

Survey data indicate that VET institution managers have attributed high evaluations to all aspects in question, but by their evaluations the most important is *Personal interest to fulfil tasks* with the highest arithmetic mean of evaluations 9.54, most given evaluation by respondents (mode) was 10, median was 10 as well, followed by next highest evaluated for *Interest and ability to improve knowledge and skills* as well as *Ability for co-operation*, for both mentioned aspects with arithmetic mean of evaluations 9.25; mode 10 and median 9. The lowest evaluations by VET institutions was for *digital skills,* with arithmetic mean of evaluations 8.14; most given evaluation by respondents (mode) was 8, half of employers gave evaluation 8 or less and half of employers gave evaluation 8 or more (characterised by median). Although the evaluations by VET institution managers differed, the lowest variability of evaluations by VET institution managers were for *Personal interest to fulfil tasks,* there were the lowest evaluation's dispersion – the smallest standard deviation and standard error of mean.

Main statistical indicators on evaluations by VET students on the importance of respective skills for the company are reflected in table 3.

Survey data indicate that students have attributed high evaluations to all aspects, but by their evaluations the most important is *Ability for independent work* with the highest arithmetic mean of evaluations by respondents 8.35; most frequently given evaluation by respondents (mode) was 10, half of students gave evaluation 9 or less

Table 2. Main statistical indicators on evaluations by VET institution institutions on importance of respective employee skills for the company

Statistical indicators		Personal interest to fulfil tasks	Initiative and creativity	Specific professional knowledge and skills	Ability for independent work	Ability to plan own time	Ability for co-operation	Reliability and loyalty to company	Language skills	Digital skills	Interest and ability to improve knowledge and skills	General knowledge on societal developments
N	Valid	28	27	28	27	28	28	28	28	28	28	29
	Missing	21	22	21	22	21	21	21	21	21	21	20
Mean		9.54	8.63	8.96	8.96	9.04	9.25	9.00	8.36	8.14	9.25	8.52
Std. Error of Mean		0.131	0.214	0.227	0.210	0.196	0.142	0.192	0.263	0.256	0.151	0.208
Median		10	9	9	9	9	9	9	8.5	8	9	9
Mode		10	9	10	10	10	10	10	8	8	10	9
Std. Deviation		0.693	1.115	1.201	1.091	1.036	0.752	1.018	1.393	1.353	0.799	1.122
Range		2	4	5	3	3	2	3	5	5	2	4
Minimum		8	6	5	7	7	8	7	5	5	8	6
Maximum		10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10

Source: Authors calculation based on vocational education institution managers survey, n = 948

Evaluation scale 1–10, where 1 – not important; 10 – very important

Table 3. Main statistical indicators on evaluations by VET students on importance of respective skills for the company

Statistical indicators		Personal interest to fulfil tasks	Initiative and creativity	Specific professional knowledge and skills	Ability for independent work	Ability to plan own time	Ability for co-operation	Reliability and loyalty to company	Language skills	Digital skills	Interest and ability to improve knowledge and skills	General knowledge on societal developments
N	Valid	561	560	557	560	559	559	557	559	558	559	561
	Missing	341	342	345	342	343	343	345	343	344	343	341
Mean		8.30	7.80	8.10	8.35	8.24	8.50	8.22	7.64	7.66	8.26	7.23
Std. Error of Mean		0.080	0.074	0.077	0.074	0.076	0.074	0.078	0.078	0.074	0.075	0.087
Median		9	8	8	9	9	9	9	8	8	9	7
Mode		10	8	10	10	10	10	10	7	8	10	7
Std. Deviation		1.906	1.754	1.828	1.763	1.793	1.740	1.852	1.851	1.741	1.773	2.061
Range		9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9
Minimum		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Maximum		10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10

Source: Authors calculation based on student survey, n = 902

Evaluation scale 1–10, where 1 – not important; 10 – very important

and half of students gave evaluation 9 or more (characterised by median), followed by next higher evaluated aspect *Personal interest to fulfil tasks* with arithmetic mean of evaluations 8.3; mode 10 and median 9. For all the analysed aspects students in their evaluations have used all evaluation scale from 1 to 10 with highest differences in evaluations – biggest standard deviation and biggest standard error of mean for *General knowledge on different society development;* for this aspect it was the lowest average evaluation – arithmetic mean 7.23, mode 7, median 7.

The analysis of the obtained results show that the importance of generic and professional skills are highly evaluated for all three target groups – with slight prevalence on the importance of certain generic skills, such as *Personal interest to fulfil tasks* and *Interest and ability to improve knowledge and skills*. These two aspects coincided in the highest evaluations by the employers and the VET institutions. As to the students, their preference concerns *Ability for independent work,* followed by *Personal interest to fulfil tasks*.

Thus, for all the three target groups the top priority is still given to generic skills, over the specifically professional skills. Even though for all aspects the evaluations are relatively high (over 7), it is quite striking that all the three target groups have attributed a relatively low evaluation for the digital and language sills – if compared to their evaluations for other skills. This issue presents material for further studies, since it implies certain contradiction to the overall education goals and conceptual approaches in the Latvian education and VET policy. At the same time, it should be taken into account that the survey was performed in 2019 when there was no experience of the Covid-19 pandemic which has definitely changed the attitudes towards digital approaches, at least. Thus, it would be important to investigate further the reasons for the actual attitude towards language skills. In the case of students – also the relatively low evaluations towards the overall competence in societal developments also can have certain implications worth further studies.

Conclusions. Implications for future VET policies in Latvia

The acquired experience has been used for further policy developments in Latvia, especially regarding WBL. Based on the OECD study on Latvia – OECD Skills Strategy Latvia (2019) regarding skills formation – the Latvian Education Policy Development Guidelines for the period 2021–2027 have been drafted. The Guidelines envisage a shift towards more focused approach in WBL developments. Apart from the national perspective on labour force development, the regional aspects are becoming increasingly important. The local and regional stakeholders in collaboration with employers' organisations and the sectoral actors are focusing on regional needs regarding skills formation for regional industries. Work-based learning is being seen as an effective measure for addressing the real needs and demand from the labour market. An increasing attention is being paid to the development of generic skills, since these are being recognised as highly relevant also by the employers.

Another identified challenge to be addressed is promoting WBL in adult education – as a means for upgrading and reskilling the existing labour force in compliance of today's developments. Skills formation is at the core of the process and also here the regional labour market developments are becoming increasingly important. Thus, also for the coming decade skills formation – and the collaboration among the various key stakeholders – will be in the focus of education policy makers, and the role of researchers' contribution for the implementation of research informed policy may continue to grow.

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