

THE ROLE OF FOOD PROCESING COMPANY EMPLOYERS IN INCREASING QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The stakeholder involvement in the guidelines for quality assurance itself in Europe is an indicator of the relevance of stakeholders to the higher education quality assurance. The quality of higher education activities refers that they have an impact not only on the development of society as a whole but also on the development of the economy in particular. Employers' involvement, as part of external stakeholders in quality assurance, is very important and useful. Employers and industry representatives share a particular interest in qualitative activities in HE that implies qualitative competencies development of students, their potential employees. The conducted analysis in different countries and universities shows an evident discrepancy in the quality perception between students and employers. The space for employers' inclusion in quality assurance seems to be more than necessary.

The purpose of this research is to examine the northwestern North Macedonia private companies' needs regarding the student competencies, respectively future employees. The data are part of the University of Tetova research project, "Stakeholder involvement: a need for higher education quality enhancement." The qualitative research included ten processing companies, eight of which deal with food processing as well as two with construction materials processing. A total of 29 participants from 39 departments of the abovementioned companies were included.

The results indicate an urgent need for the approximation of student competencies emerging from the academic offer to the employer's needs.

Keywords: employers, competencies, quality assurance, higher education.

1. Introduction

Quality in higher education is one of the most important contemporary challenges related to the development of education and society as a whole. Quality assurance agencies in different countries show raised awareness about the stakeholder value and in this regard, they include the tendency to find ways how to meet the needs of various stakeholders (Beerkens & Udan, 2017). When stakeholders, students, and employers, appreciate the quality of education, they orient towards evaluating the study program. The major part of stakeholders accentuates that to decide to study or cooperate with a HE institution, the contents of the study programs are crucial and then follow the accreditation of the study program or the institution (Bach et al, 2014). However, there is a divergence between employers and students themselves about the perception of the HE quality. Matei and Iwinska (2016) show that in the US, 66% of surveyed students feel that higher education prepares them well in critical/analytical thinking, while only 26% of employers state the same. Such obvious divergence

between employers and students' views is also encountered related to verbal and written communication skills, teamwork, ethical judgment, and decision making as well as knowledge application in real life. This data supports the QA standards that the employers should be included and consulted in drafting study programs. In Estonia, the employers perceive HE quality as graduates' preparation in fields that are necessary for the labor market, and they also expect their needs for graduates in specific fields to be taken into account and evaluate how much they correspond to the market needs (Beerrens & Udan, 2017).

Employers can help in various ways for universities to reflect on the updates of the programs they offer to align their goals with the needs of the market. Their involvement can be in different ways such as by participating in program design, recruitment, student training, creating internship programs, and the like (Spaulding & Martin-Coughey, 2015). Employers, by focusing on the current economic condition can help create curricula oriented to developing skills appropriate to ongoing market changes (Johnson, 2018). Market needs and realistic expectations for competent workers make the universities challenge themselves and be up to date by providing education relevant to the labor market. Besides, employers should support the development of programs and training for future employees. With this kind of cooperation, they make sure that tomorrow they will find competent and suitable workers for their working needs.

In line with this, Bridges (2000) raises the questions of curricula contents as an essential challenge in the 21st century higher education: a. which knowledge should be presented in the faculties and how should it be constructed both in the epistemological aspect and in the perspective of learning; b. how should this knowledge be institutionalized but also from the teacher's perspective? Bridges adds that for the restructuring of curricula to be in line with contemporary developments and meeting the market needs, in terms of creating and developing relevant competencies for future workers, five epistemological pressures are involved: Subject deconstruction; Incorporating essential skills in the curricula; Learning through experience; Web-based curricula; Re-affirmation of the subject as an academic and organizational identity.

The challenges of designing modern curricula correspond to the demands of the competences of future workers. Khare (2014) defines employability skills as necessary skills, attributes, and powers to conduct a specific work. Employment is perceived as achieving individual skills and abilities and personal attributes to accomplish the specific activities of the chosen work (Bridges, 2000). However, except for knowledge, skills, as well as attitudes, the employment also highlights their positioning (the employees) in relation to the others in the workplace, both on a horizontal and vertical level (Khare, 2014). This understanding of employment and employee competences to become successful employees is achieved precisely through course deconstruction, basic skills development and also learning from experience which already are the features of more modern curricula. The curricula enable creating and developing future workers' competences, or in other words, activating the individual's capacity to gain but to also use the knowledge, skills, abilities to accomplish the required task or activity at work. In this regard, the purpose of this paper is to examine the employers' needs in private companies in the northwestern part of North Macedonia regarding the student competences, respectively their future employees.

2. Methodology

The research included ten processing companies (the data is part of the University of Tetova research project: “Stakeholder involvement: a need for higher education quality enhancement.”) eight of which deal with food processing (dairy, meat, juices, fruit preservation) as well as two with construction materials processing. Based on their size according to the number of employees, four companies are small, while six are medium-sized. The staff involved from these companies included sector managers whose work, in its essence, contains management with staff who should have finished higher education.

During the research plan drafting, starting from the presented sectors as parts of the company structures in their web pages, it was planned that a total of 52 sector managers will be included, of which, 36 from food processing and, 16 from construction materials processing companies. Nevertheless, parts of company sectors did not exist or were covered by external cooperators, not by the companies’ staff. The overall real number of company sectors included in this research is 39, while participants in the study were 29. From ten companies subject of this research, interviews were held in four companies, while focus groups with company sector managers were organized in six of them.

The data from the participants were gathered based on nine questions of the semi-structured interview, respectively focus group guide¹. The questions were oriented towards gathering data for (I) necessary knowledge that employees should possess to carry out activities in the relevant sector, namely the employees of the profiles: food technology engineer, as well as construction and machinery engineers; (II) skills/abilities to apply the gained knowledge; (III) Possessing communication skills in interactions with others and abilities to evaluate and skills for further learning.

3. Findings

I. *The needed knowledge to accomplish professional activities in the food and construction industry*

According to the survey data obtained, the sector managers responsible for the employees in the field of food and construction engineering industries noted that the employees, but also the candidates who apply for employment in their companies, possess the necessary knowledge about the raw materials, knowledge related to technological operations, chemical reactors. Some of the participants highlighted that the knowledge about mathematical and statistical operations necessary to determine the number of nutrients to produce the products is not enough.

“It is necessary that the employees possess knowledge about the characteristics and specifics of raw materials, the ways, and conditions of preserving the raw material used in production...”

(Food technologist, small company)

“...lack of math knowledge...give them an assignment to determine the proportion of the ingredient in the product, they don’t know how to calculate...”

(Food technologist, medium-sized company)

¹The answers, as well as the discussion with the participants in the focus groups, were oriented towards the necessary competencies based on different professions. The data, i.e the information of the participants in the research, are from their experience with candidates for potential workers who have been students and graduates from various existing universities in the country and the region.

II. *Understanding and applying knowledge in practice*

In general, with minor exceptions, participants stated that there is a lack of knowledge applying skills in practice. They added that it is necessary to systematically organize student practice in coordination with teachers and related to the level of knowledge gained by students depending on the year of study. Knowledge application on safety measures at the workplace was highlighted as a very important need but employees do not possess sufficiently. In line with this, applying knowledge both at the stage of work preparation for processing, practicing technological operations, and handling laboratory instruments is at an unsatisfactory level.

“...they say they know the HACCP system...and when I say let’s implement it...then they don’t know what to do...”

(Food technologist, medium-sized company)

“...they don’t even read the instructions on how to use the materials they work with...that they are harmful...they need to work wearing gloves...”

(Construction engineer, medium-sized company)

“...I don’t know which year of studies they are...the level of insights they have gained...so I can guide related to what they have learned in theory...so I don’t take them to the operations they will learn about in the last year of studies, while they are still in the second year...”

(Construction engineer, medium-sized company)

III. *Possessing communication skills in interactions with others and learning skills*

The lack of communication skills, both verbal and written, of employees in the food technology and construction industry, was accentuated as a great need by the participants in the research. All participants emphasized that it is very significant that employees are interested in the work, to be able to identify a problem if one such emerges, to be able to eventually find a solution but also to find ways how to overcome the particular problem. Essentially, critical thinking, the ability to solve problems, and teamwork are some of the essential skills that they consider necessary for employees but they lack, both in the food technology and construction sectors.

“...they should write and e-mail or call the manufacturer...there is a machine malfunction...they should know how to tell what is wrong...”.... “if we have visitors they should know to express well about what they work...”

(Food technologist, small company)

The skill for further learning was the determining criterion to employ someone noted by the participants in the research.

“to love their job...to be dedicated...interested...curious...learn by themselves...let’s see what’s new on the Internet...”

(Food technologist, medium-sized company)

“to love their job...not only look if you are watching them working...they should all by themselves check what is new on the internet and read about some device...”

(Construction engineer, medium-sized company)

4. Conclusion

Due to the lack of research regarding to the employers' needs and student competencies of food and technology profile, we cannot compare our data with other findings. Therefore, we will present the conclusion based only on the data of our research.

Participants from the companies involved in this research stress the lack of food technologist profile framework. Faculties that offer programs of this profile should be oriented to offer their offer to the young people as much as possible, by presenting it as a profile with an enviable perspective for employment.

The study programs in terms of their content manage successfully to convey the necessary knowledge for the realization of the work of the food technologist as well as that of the construction engineer. Students who complete their studies in the above-mentioned profiles are equipped with contemporary information and knowledge, necessary for the successful realization of their profession.

However, the transformation of knowledge into practice is a process that complicates the effectiveness of young workers. Coordinating and planning a system for practical work between employers and faculties is seen as a serious way to overcome this difficulty. In essence, the presence and planting of essential skills are presented as one of the most contemporary requirements that future workers should possess. The value of hidden curriculums remains one of the future challenges of professors when compiling programs in these profiles.

The goals of universities to equip workers who apply the gained knowledge, have the essential skills developed in terms of critical/analytical thinking, and be effective in teamwork is still unfulfilled. Creating and developing the ability to judge and skills for further learning in future workers remains a particular challenge for universities. The drafting of practical but also learning-oriented curricula based on experience will help reduce the gap between the university competence offer and the workers' competences the companies need.

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