

## THE ROLE OF KNOWLEDGE IN THE EDUCATION OF MANAGERS – COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF POLAND AND UNITED KINGDOM

Monika Jakubiak  
Maria Skłodowska-Curie University, Poland  
m\_jakubiak@o2.pl

Agnieszka Sitko-Lutek  
Maria Skłodowska-Curie University, Poland  
agnieszka.sitko-lutek@poczta.umcs.lublin.pl

### **Abstract:**

Globalisation and internationalisation processes pose particular challenges for universities. Modern universities ought to realise the educational process supplying comprehensive knowledge which allows students to solve socio-economic problems.

The present study aimed at defining the importance of managerial competencies, taking particular interest in knowledge, in students' prospective professional career and the level which these competencies were gained to in the course of studies. On the basis of these stipulations an attempt was made to define the competence gap (perceived as the difference in the level of competencies required and gained in reality).

The empirical material was collected on the basis of a diagnostic survey conducted in 2011. The survey was carried out in Lublin, Poland and Huddersfield, Great Britain. Respondents group consisted of final year students of economics and management university courses from three state universities in Lublin, namely John Paul II Catholic University, Maria Skłodowska-Curie University and Lublin University of Technology, and Business School University of Huddersfield as well.

Research results revealed that among both respondent groups, the importance of evaluated competencies exceeded the level of competencies gained during studies. The level of declared managerial competencies gained during studies differs in a statistically significant manner in favour of students from Polish universities.

*Keywords: the role of knowledge, managers' education, graduate competencies*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The present study aimed at defining the importance of managerial competencies, taking particular interest in knowledge, in students' prospective professional career and the level which these competencies were gained to in the course of studies. On the basis of these stipulations an attempt was made to define the competence gap (perceived as the difference in the level of competencies required and gained in reality).

The empirical material was collected on the basis of studies conducted in the years 2009-2010 with the use of a diagnostic survey. The study included final years students of management and economics from Lublin, Poland and Business School University of Huddersfield.

## 2. THE ROLE OF KNOWLEDGE IN THE EDUCATION OF MANAGERS AND LITERATURE OF THE SUBJECT

In the modern global world of profound and rapid socio-economic and technological changes the issue of competencies is frequently discussed in the literature of the subject. Due to the fact that managerial competencies are considered by researchers as complex, they are frequently analysed among all competence types in particular. Acquiring managerial competencies does not ensure a manager becomes competent as they ought to possess other characteristics allowing them to put their skills and knowledge into practice.

D.C. McClelland was the forerunner of research in competencies. In 1970s he put forward a statement that graduates' professional success cannot be associated with university grades. In order to diagnose professional predispositions he developed a test of competencies (McClelland 1973, pp.9-13). In the following years research in competencies was taken up by C.J Constable who claimed that competencies constituted the ability to implement knowledge and skills helping the manager to fulfil their role effectively. Therefore, all managerial skills could be regarded as competencies when used effectively. (Constable, 1988). L. and S. Spencer presented a similar point of view. They assumed that competencies encompass knowledge, skills, values, standards, motives, work ethics, enthusiasm and self-image (Spencer&Spencer, 1993, p. 388).

Modern authors emphasise the fact that, currently, knowledge and information have become a key factor in an organisation's success. Modern organisations can swiftly react to changes in unsteady environments and use them to solve problems with the help of all employees. It is possible owing to a considerable effort and streaming resources into the selection of appropriate talents as human resources, competencies of talented leaders of change in particular, seem to be the fundamental success factor (Prahalad&Krishnan, 2010, pp.160-180).

Researchers studying current issues of human resources are unanimous in their claim that human resources ought to be developed and perfected. What is more, organisational culture and effective training systems ought to be devised, which may benefit employee development (Sitko-Lutek, 2005, pp. 262-263; McCallum& O'Connell, 2009, pp. 152-166; Allio, 2009, pp. 4-12).

In order to dominate on the market, modern companies attempt to gain competitive edge by developing their key competencies (Prahalad&Hamel, 2000, pp. 3-22).

Competencies of the company are comprised of the collection of competencies of all its employees (Prince, 2008, pp. 6-9). In this case, managerial competencies seem vital as it is managers who develop the company's strategies (Casserley&Critchley, 2010, pp. 287-295).

At present, researchers studying the issue of human resources are unanimous in the claim that the development and perfection, and consequently fostering culture and efficient training system advantageous to the development of employees in organizations seem fundamental. It is estimated that the rise of competitiveness among organisations on the global market, in the coming years, will lead to the necessity of modifying strategies regarding the issue. As a consequence, requirements for competencies of a leader will change. Ability to adapt to rapidly changing situations and environment will become the focus of this change fostering the ability among employee groups.

The need for development of leaders' competencies results not only from the dynamicity of the surrounding environment. Changes in the functioning of organisations themselves are also of importance, evolution towards the network model, growing openness and also organizational structure's flattening in particular (Listwan, 2005, pp.19-20). An additional premise stimulating research into the perfecting of managers' competencies is the character of work in modern companies, where task forces have become a fundamental element of structure for realisation of particular tasks.

Therefore, considerable employees' competence flexibility and becoming a learning organisation are required from a modern enterprise. The essence of a knowledge-based organisation is a constant change brought about as a result of continuous learning, mainly via challenging common thinking patterns, acting upon and considering numerous possible scenarios of own functioning (Chuen Huang&Shih, 2011, pp. 623-644). Such organizations value knowledge, support competencies and invest in employees' perfecting.

In order to meet requirements of the global knowledge-based economy (Drucker, 1993, pp. 6, 20), companies implement modern methods of knowledge management, competencies and organisation's perfecting. This entails a greater efficiency and effectiveness of company's operations and translates directly into an improvement in its financial gains (Ubeda Garcia & Liopis Vano, 2002, pp. 169-181). In the knowledge-based economy employees' qualifications and competencies provide value for the company. These valuable resources ought to be constantly supplemented and developed in order to provide means for a creative and efficient problem solving (Kambil, 2010, pp. 43-45; Chadam & Pastuszek, 2005, pp. 459-475). Globalisation and internationalisation processes pose particular challenges for universities. Modern universities ought to realise the educational process supplying comprehensive knowledge allowing students to solve socio-economic problems.

As a result of Poland's accession to the European Union and ensuing idea of creating the European Higher Education Area, the issue of graduates' competencies gained particular importance.

One of the main stipulations of the Bologna process is the necessity of reforming university curricula in order to unify competencies gained as a result of studying a particular subject in individual EU member states. Changes in this regard are to facilitate occupational mobility among individual EU member states (and as a result opening the labour market) and promote life-long learning. The process was initiated by the emergence of Framework for European Higher Education Area (QF for EHEA) which led to the development of National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in the signatory countries.

NQF is to become the reference point for individual university studies' majors based upon the effects of education and competencies. In this case, competencies are understood as the combination of knowledge and its understanding, occupational, interpersonal, intellectual and practical skills and also ethical values (Gonzalez & Wagenaar, 2003, pp. 4-5). Such definition of competencies was applied in the methodology of the present paper.

Currently, particular importance is attached to the development of the management in organizations. In literature, improvement of managers is presented as the process of constant learning and regarded as the key success factor, and also competitiveness tool (Sitko-Lutek, 2004, p.76). The process of managers' shaping begins during formal education stage, in the course of university studies in particular. Studies with particular influence upon the process are studies in economics and management. Therefore, for the purpose of the present paper, research among students of these majors was carried out. In Poland, studies in these disciplines became popular only recently – in 1990. The interest was sparked off by economic changes (political transformation) and the perception of economist's profession – more of a manager than an office worker. At present, studies in economics are offered by more than 300 public and private universities and higher education schools.

A special term pertaining to the issue of competencies is the competence gap. It may be perceived as a certain lack or deficiency of skills. The term may also be understood as "a difference between required and real competencies and structure and level of management's competencies and desired and required competencies" (Loboda & Sitko-Lutek, 2007, p. 23). Such understanding of competence gap found application in the paper.

The present study aimed at defining the importance of managerial competencies, taking particular interest in knowledge, in students' prospective professional career and the level which these competencies were gained to in the course of studies. On the basis of these stipulations an attempt was made to define the competence gap (perceived as the difference in the level of competencies required and gained in reality).

### 3. RESEARCH

Empirical analyses were conducted on the basis of authors' own questionnaire. Respondents were asked to assess 10 managerial competencies, such as:

1. Managing change
2. Specialist knowledge
3. Knowledge concerning management
4. Knowledge of strategic management
5. Knowledge of the HRM
6. Knowledge of law
7. Knowledge of financial issues
8. Knowledge of marketing
9. Global thinking and action
10. Professional experience

Competencies were evaluated in two aspects, taking into consideration:

- their role in respondents' future professional career;
- the level of competencies gained by respondents at the university.

Cafeteria-style answers' evaluation ranging from 1 (none, of low significance) up to 4 (significant) was proposed.

Empirical material was collected on the basis of studies conducted in 2009-2010 with the use of a diagnostic survey. Studies encompassed two respondent groups. The first one was made up of 278<sup>1</sup> students of the final, fifth, year at three state universities in Lublin, namely:

- Maria Curie-Skłodowska University (UMCS), Economics, Management and Finance and Accounting majors;
- Lublin University of Technology (LUT), Management and Marketing majors;
- John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (KUL), Management majors.

The other group of respondents consisted of 50<sup>2</sup> students of Business School University of Huddersfield. The collected empirical data provided the opportunity for simultaneous comparative analysis as regards the importance of the evaluated competencies and the level of competencies gained by the two groups of respondents.

**Table 1:** The structure of respondent groups

Specification		PL (n=278)		UK (n=50)	
		n	%	n	%
Sex	Female	169	61	34	68
	Male	109	39	16	32
Place of residence	Rural area	97	35	11	22
	Urban area	181	65	39	78
Work for money	Yes	82	29	34	68
	No	196	71	16	32

<sup>1</sup> Research encompassed full-time students. Sample selection was purposive and exhaustive. The number of collected questionnaires depended on attendance in classes where research was carried out. Participation was voluntary. For this reason and due to the period of realization of the research 57% of surveyed students provided answers for the purpose of the analysis

<sup>2</sup> The number of collected questionnaires depended upon attendance in classes where research was conducted. Participation was voluntary. 45% of the final-year students of Business School University of Huddersfield provided input into the study.

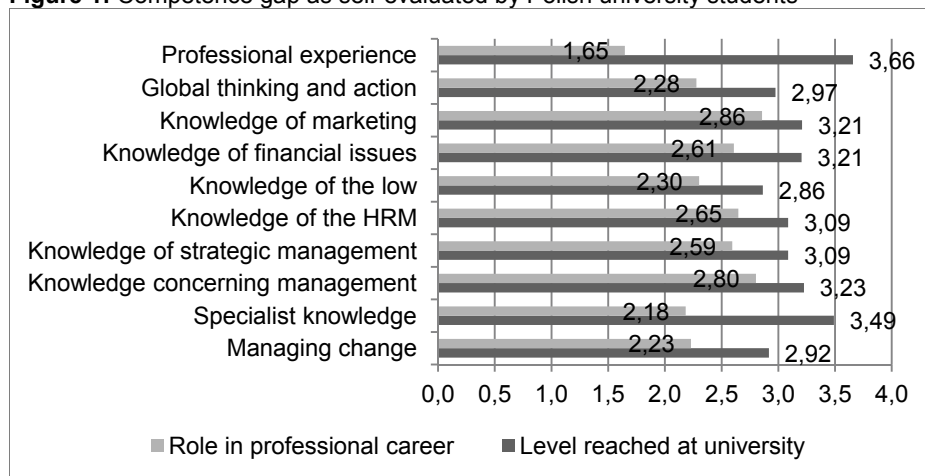
Material status	Good	75	27	7	14
	Average	177	64	35	70
	Low	26	9	8	16

Legend: PL – Polish students, UK – British students  
 Source: authors' own findings on the basis of a questionnaire survey.

#### 4. RESEARCH RESULTS

Figure 1 presents self-evaluation of managerial competencies as seen by Polish students. Each of the assessed groups of competencies was evaluated much lower in comparison with the opinion expressed in reference to their role at work. This fact seems to confirm the existence of competence gap as regards all evaluated competencies. The most significant differences occurred in relation to professional experience which was evaluated as the most vital in professional career with the average of 3,66 on a 4 point scale but at the same time the one realized the least in the course of studies (1,65 points). In addition, significant differences pertained to specialist knowledge whose importance in professional career scored 3,49 points but its realization in the course of studies received only 2.18 points. In case of the remaining competencies connected with knowledge, differences were not as considerable, however they were statistically significant.

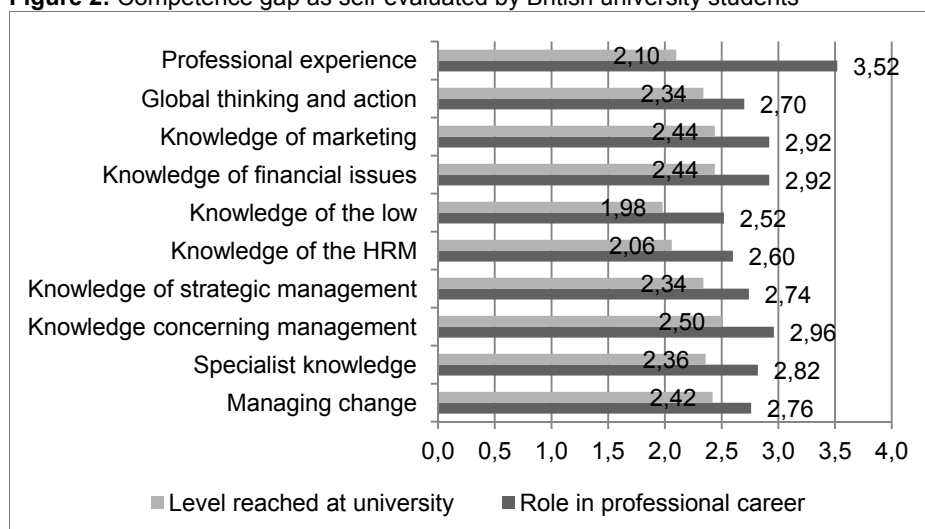
**Figure 1:** Competence gap as self-evaluated by Polish university students



Source: Authors' own findings on the basis of a questionnaire survey.

Figure 2 is a graphic presentation of the competence gap as regards competencies connected with knowledge as self-assessed by students of the British university.

**Figure 2:** Competence gap as self-evaluated by British university students



Source: Authors' own findings on the basis of a questionnaire survey.

Similar to the case of the Polish students regarding all evaluated competencies, statistically significant differences were found in competencies related to professional career and their level exhibited by students. Professional experience was evaluated as the most significant as regards prospective employment (average 3,52) but at the same time realized the least in the course of studies (2.10 points). In case of the remaining competencies, differences in ranking were slightly lower and amounted to 0,5 percentage point. Unlike Polish students' rankings, individual competencies received similar scores in both rankings. The following areas scored the lowest scores in both classifications: law (averages respectively 2,52 and 1,98) and human resources management (average 2,60 and 2,06).

From the perspective of the present paper, the comparison of competencies evaluated by both British and Polish final year students seemed interesting. Results of comparative analyses can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1:** A comparison of managerial competencies in the assessment of both groups of students

Item	Competencies	Role in professional career		Difference between 1 and 2	Level reached at university		Difference between 3 and 4
		PL	UK		PL	UK	
		rank	rank		rank	rank	
		1	2	di=1-2	3	4	di-3-4
1	Managing change	9.0	6.0	3.0	8.0	4.0	4.0
2	Specialist knowledge	2.0	5.0	-3.0	9.0	5.0	4.0
3	Knowledge concerning management	3.0	2.0	1.0	2.0	1.0	1.0
4	Knowledge of strategic management	6.5	7.0	-0.5	5.0	6.0	-1.0
5	Knowledge of the HRM	6.5	9.0	-2.5	3.0	9.0	-6.0
6	Knowledge of the law	10.0	10.0	0.0	6.0	10.0	-4.0
7	Knowledge of financial issues	4.5	3.5	1.0	4.0	2.5	1.5
8	Knowledge of marketing	4.5	3.5	1.0	1.0	2.5	-1.5
9	Global thinking and action	8.0	8.0	0.0	7.0	7.0	0.0
10	Professional experience	1.0	1.0	0.0	10.0	8.0	2.0

Legend: PL – Polish students, UK – British students, di – difference between ranks

Source: authors' own findings on the basis of a questionnaire survey.

The analysis of significance of competencies as regards professional career indicated that the greatest convergence applied to professional experience (1st place in both rankings), global thinking and action (8th place) and knowledge of law which was evaluated as the lowest by both respondent groups (10th place). Slight differences pertained to knowledge of strategic management, knowledge concerning management, knowledge of financial issues and knowledge of marketing.

Comparative analysis as regards knowledge gained in the course of studies indicated greater disparities. Only global thinking and action was evaluated in the same way (7th place among both respondent groups). The least significant differences pertained to knowledge concerning management, knowledge of strategic management and knowledge of financial issues and knowledge of marketing.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Research results revealed that among both respondent groups the importance of evaluated competencies exceeded the level of competencies gained in the course of studies. The level of declared managerial competencies gained in the course of studies differs in a statistically significant manner in favour of students from Polish universities.



Research results in both respondent groups, revealed the existence of competence gap in relation to all evaluated competencies associated with knowledge. In the light of the research, undertaking corrective measures in order to fill the gap between the significance of individual competencies in professional career (in students' opinion) and the level of these competencies exhibited by graduating students seems vital. For that reason greater students' involvement in the process of gaining knowledge, skills and social competencies is crucial.

Due to the fact that diagnosis of predispositions and skills of an individual takes place in the course of studies, students ought to make greater use of available forms of professional development support offered by e.g. university career services (i.e. professional counselling, workshops, trainings). Students ought to be made aware of the necessity of greater activity in the course of studies, involvement in social and scientific activities, student exchange and university life.

Empirical data revealed the greatest gap, as regards professional experience, which implicates the necessity of a greater student's involvement in acquiring such experience in the course of studies. Studies are the time of making attempts at cooperation with various organizations not only in the form of full or part-time work but mainly in the framework of internships or voluntary work.

Filling the competence gap is not possible without the involvement of universities educating students of economics and management and potential employers employing graduates of these. For that reason universities ought to devote more attention to cultivating not only theoretical knowledge but also providing the ability of putting the knowledge into practice and solving problems. In response to European Commission's guidelines presented in „The European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning” (EQF), the youth ought to be supported in gaining competencies fundamental on labour market. The last three levels of competencies defined in guidelines are concerned with effects of studies in the higher education level. The following items belong to the levels: knowledge, skills, personal and professional skills (Bohlinger, 2007, pp. 96-118).

In order to support the development of students' competencies as regards knowledge and practical experiences, the involvement of universities in establishing cooperation with businesses or employers' organizations seems advisable, especially in terms of reinforcement of practical aspects of education by:

- more practical classes not only at the university but also in companies;
- organization of student and graduate internships in cooperation with businesses;
- inviting experienced entrepreneurs to conduct classes for students;
- greater emphasis on practical character and applicability of diploma theses- subjects solving real problems of businesses;
- joint organization of conferences, job fairs, panel meetings, competitions, study visits to inspect production lines, etc.

Conducting supportive activities for young people, assisting them in developing their talents by organizing additional activities, enabling participation in science clubs, etc. is worthwhile. A vital role is also played by supportive activities assisting students in making decisions regarding their career and developing their competencies (including social competencies) e.g. personal support services, group workshops or professional trainings.

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