

## Higher Education Graduates' Cross-Cutting Competences and Skills and Employability

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### Abstract

*The article is a product of the implementation of activities in the project framework CNFIS-FDI-2020-0652, Social Equity and Competitiveness in Partnership with the Socio-Economic Environment within a Modern European University. The project aimed at promoting the youngsters' access to higher education standing by the principles of equality of chances and non-discrimination, competitiveness, and permanent collaboration with the socio-economic environment. The analysis conducted demonstrates that all three categories of participants (employers, students, and professors) are focused on the importance of cross-cutting skills in the formation of a specialist (regardless of the study domain). The research results highlight the needs of the employers concerning the structure and the importance of cross-cutting skills of students/graduates when they are hired.*

*The most important cross-cutting skills that resulted from the study include creativity; critical/analytical thinking; utilization of information technology; oral and written communication skills in maternal/foreign language; flexibility/adaptability; initiative and entrepreneurial spirit; teamwork; openness to lifelong learning.*

**Key words:** higher education, competence, cross-cutting skills, labour market

**J.E.L. classification:** A 22, A 23, D 83

### 1. Introduction

The studies of specialists in education sciences and the endeavours of international organizations in the field of education bring to attention the importance of correlating higher education with the evolution of the environment to ensure economic development and increasing the labour market insertion. It can be noted that, to this end, the focus shifted from the professors to the students, in a larger vision that encompasses lifelong learning (Deaconu et al., 2014, p.693). The main actors in the educational process of higher education are the professors and the students, where professors transfer knowledge, while the others assimilate. Teaching seems to be the core explanation for the two orientations in higher education. Teacher-centred learning is characterized by a passive teaching process, in which the professors mainly use lectures to transfer knowledge, while the students' involvement is merely limited to taking notes. Student-centred learning aims at ensuring a new framework for learning involving the student more actively by practising adequate forms of teaching (Crețu, 2019, p.17). Professor Cerghit considers that “there are no good or bad methods, but adequate methods, well or poorly used” (Cerghit, 2006, p.51). Modern pedagogical methods aim at creating a framework for student participation in the act of teaching, guiding students to accomplish team projects, analyse, interpret, participate in debates, case studies, problem-solving, etc., to aid students to develop critical and reflexive thinking. This orientation requires the capacity to develop learning experiences for students. Student-centred education should not be regarded as an effort of professors to change their teaching style, but rather the professors must identify the learning needs of each student and offer guidance (Crețu, 2019, p.17).

Student-centred learning has positive effects for students, professors, and the higher education institution.

Even though in this study we deal with the importance of cross-cutting skills in the education of students at "Ovidius" University of Constanta, we consider that certain explanations regarding the concepts at the centre of the educational system reform are useful to our endeavours.

The ample process started in the '70s to modernize and reform education, so that it becomes adequate to the knowledge society, brings forth the concepts of curriculum and competence (Jonnaert et al., 2010, p.17). Curriculum may be defined as "...a system made up of a series of educational components. Articulated among themselves, these components permit the orientation and operationalization of an education system through pedagogical and administrative action plans" (Jonnaert and Therriault, 2013). The European higher education system applies the competency-based curriculum, but perceptions toward this orientation differ from country to country. At the same time, there are different approaches to competences, as the main pillar in designing the higher education curriculum as opposed to pre-university education (Crețu, 2019, p.184). Although there are different definitions of competences, there is not a generally accepted definition (Gilis et al., 2008 in Deaconu et al., 2014, p.695). Competences are regarded as "fuzzy concept", subject to debate and confusion and the cultural context influences the grasp of the notion (Le Deist and Winterton, 2005). Concerning the classification of competences, the literature breaks them in two categories – professional and cross-cutting (Leckey and McGuigan, 1997, in Deaconu et al., 2014, p.695). The cross-cutting skills received increased attention during the past years from both academia and international organizations such as Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which denote them by "21 century skills" (APEC, OECD). The cross-cutting skills besides the professional skills complete the professional profile of individuals and facilitate their insertion in the labour market. Furthermore, recent debates argue that all academic courses should provide students with generic competences (communication, teamwork, problem-solving, creativity and time management), there is mentioned the preoccupation with their assessment and with those types of competences that although not immediately connected to the career development become vital for society development (Chan et al., 2017). We are aware that the terms "competence" and "skill" are not synonyms, but are used interchangeably in certain contexts. In this study, however, we will not elaborate on the matter of competence vs. skill.

The project CNFIS-FDI-2020-0652 *Social Equity and Competitiveness in Partnership with the Socio-Economic Environment within a Modern European University – SMART-COMPETE* is a national project financed through the Institutional Development Fund and implemented by "Ovidius" University of Constanta during May-December 2020. The project promoted the idea that education is the only sustainable way of evolution for both individuals and society and it sustained the principals of equality of chances and non-discrimination, the competitiveness, as well as the constant dialogue and collaboration between the university and the socio-economic environment. In accordance with the scope of the project, one of the project activities aimed at consolidating the partnership between the university and the socio-economic environment and at identifying the labour market needs concerning the cross-cutting skills of graduates. The project is an example of how the professors of the "Ovidius" University of Constanta are involved in ensuring the students' education fits the present requirements of society and the labour market at national and European level, following the university's mission "to develop a competitive and collaborative educational and research environment aimed at creating, maintaining and delivering knowledge to society" ("Ovidius" University of Constanta Charter, art.10).

## **2. Theoretical background. The general framework regarding student-centred learning and competency-based education**

Student-centred learning based on competences with a focus on learning outcomes makes the object of different actions initiated by institutions at national and European level. We will only bring to attention those essential to the purpose of the present article. The Europe 2020 Strategy acknowledges and emphasises the importance of education and training (European Commission, 2010). The European Qualification Framework (EQF) was set in 2008 and revised in 2017 and is

extremely useful for achieving transparency, comparability and transferability of individuals' qualifications (<https://europa.eu/europass/en/european-qualifications-framework-eqf>).

In Romania, the National Framework of Qualifications in Higher Education (CNCIS) was created. CNCIS is compatible with the European framework and aims at “optimizing the university curricula to ensure the legibility and convergence of learning outcomes at all levels and forms of the national qualifications system” (CNCIS Methodology. Implementation Guide, 2013). CNCIS classifies competences in professional competences and cross-cutting competences. The professional competence is “the proven capacity to adequately select, combine and utilise knowledge, skills, and other acquisitions (values and attitudes) to successfully solve a certain category of work or learning situations, related to the respective profession, in conditions of efficacy and efficiency”. The cross-cutting competences are “those that transcend a certain field or study program, having a transdisciplinary nature. These include teamwork skills, oral and written in maternal/foreign language skills, information technology and communication skills, problem-solving, decision making, knowledge and respect of diversity and multicultural skills, autonomous learning, initiative and entrepreneurial spirit, lifelong learning, development of values and professional ethics, etc.” (CNCIS Methodology. Implementation Guide, 2013).

Competency-based education is also stipulated in the National Education Law, art.4 (Law 1/2011). Furthermore, Article 117 refers to the mission of higher education to “generate and transfer knowledge to society through initial and continuous training at the university level, to the end of personal development, professional insertion of individuals and satisfying the need for competencies of the socio-economic environment” (Law 1/2011). The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (A.R.A.C.I.S.), member of the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education – ENQA, registered in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education – EQAR, is the Romanian institution which has the mission to evaluate the quality of education in higher education institutions and other organizations which offer higher education study programs. ARACIS specific standards regarding external evaluation of the academic quality of study programs at bachelor and master degree levels stipulate that “the students' professional and cross-cutting competences acquired by graduation should be sufficient to allow their insertion in the labour market, the development of their businesses or the continuation of study to the next level” (ARACIS). The ARACIS specific standards refer to several aspects regarding the operationalization of skills in higher education. Therefore, the professional and cross-cutting competences should be mentioned in a separate section of any curriculum of a study program. The syllabus elaborated for each discipline of the curriculum contains the professional and the cross-cutting skills acquired by students. Furthermore, the competences acquired are mentioned on the bachelor diploma supplement (per the Ministry Order no.5289/2008) or the master diploma supplement (per the Ministry Order no. 4151/2010).

### **3. Research methodology**

The present study comprises a desk research on points of view of education sciences experts on the importance of competences in designing the curriculum, and also a direct research using the focus group method (Jupp, 2010, p.207-208). The intersectoral forum for identifying the needs of cross-cutting skills and competences in the labour market organized by “Ovidius” University of Constanta in the frameworks of the afore-mentioned SMART-COMPETE project, CNFIS-FDI-2020-0652, in December 2020, was the occasion to collect qualitative information from three relevant categories: employers, students/graduates, and professors. The objectives included: the creation of an adequate framework to develop interactive discussions among participants, about the way the competency-based educational system in Romanian is known by the employers and students/graduates, the importance of cross-cutting competences and skills for the employability, how the employers evaluate the level of competences of graduates, the role of the professors in the development of students' competences. This working method based on free expression of opinions and debate facilitated the gathering of presumably non-biased information about the common interests of the three categories of participants concerning the development of professional and especially cross-cutting skills and the graduates' employability.

#### **4. Results and discussion**

The forum gathered professors, students, and employers from different fields – industry, services, tourism. At the beginning of the event, there were introduced the objectives and the expectations of the organizers. Next, a detailed presentation about professional and cross-cutting competences and skills and their role in the modern approaches to higher education was delivered. Subsequently, the organizers moderated the discussions in which the participants expressed their points of view regarding the cross-cutting competences and skills and their individual importance in different contexts, domains, and work situations, the relationship between acquired cross-cutting skills and the employability of graduates, and the ways through which education contributes to the development of these competences and skills, in addition to the development of the professional ones. The representatives of the employers agreed on the high importance of cross-cutting skills for the employability of graduates, the relevance of cross-cutting skills at hiring being even higher than that of professional skills. This conclusion was in line with those of international organizations (APEC, OECD). Employers value increasingly the need that graduates prove the acquirement of a set of cross-cutting skills and the capacity to apply those skills in practical work situations. The professors, through teaching and research activities, are increasingly involved and contribute to the development of cross-cutting skills by the students.

The main conclusions that emerged include: the development of the cross-cutting competences and skills should start as early as possible, even in preschool; the student is the first who should understand and be involved in the development of their cross-cutting skills; the employers bestow increasing attention upon the cross-cutting skills when selecting new employees/interns; the acquired cross-cutting skills improve the graduates' employability.

The employers agreed upon a hierarchy of the cross-cutting competences and skills: creativity; open-mindedness; critical/analytical thinking; use of information and communication technology; oral and written communication skills in maternal/foreign language; flexibility/adaptability; initiative and entrepreneurial spirit; teamwork; lifelong learning.

The professors raised the issue of the need to improve and refine the teaching methods and to develop extracurricular activities to raise students' interest to actively involve and improve their cross-cutting competences and skills. The debates reached the consensus that the collaboration between the university and the socio-economic environment should be strengthened by a more profound implication of the employers in the educational process. An identified and agreed-upon solution was that to involve the representatives of the socio-economic environment in the design of research themes and/or practical applications for students.

#### **5. Conclusions**

The cross-cutting competences and skills acquired by the students of the faculties within the “Ovidius” University of Constanta (which supply study programs in very varied fields – humanities, social sciences, medical sciences, engineering, arts, and theology) condition their employability. The professional competences are important, but at the same time, they must be doubled by cross-cutting competences and skills to ensure the graduates' competitiveness and smooth insertion in the labour market. The main conclusion of the presented study is that only through the close cooperation of all categories in the labour market (employers as representatives of demand, and students and professors as representatives of the supply) the proper development of cross-cutting competences and skills may be achieved at pace with the evolution of the society and thus ensuring the employability of graduates and the sustainable development of the educational process.

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