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Positioning of University North for the contemporary labour market

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ABSTRACT: The positioning of higher education institutions, taking into consideration social developments as well as changes in education, is essential to the development and growth of an education and knowledge-based economy. The dynamics of modern economy and the scientific and technological revolution have created a complex environment and imposed a continuous need for adaptation and innovation in the field of education and knowledge. The education system, as the primary driving force of growth, needs to continuously review its own efficiency and competitiveness. The aim of the paper is to underline the position of University North in the current higher education landscape in Croatia as a thriving and successful university which is setting the bar and creating new values and expectations to meet the challenges and opportunities of the current labour market. The strategic concept pursued by University North is learning-oriented teaching, which is responsive to changes in the environment, new student needs, new occupational profiles, new partners, market demands and the very factors that drive students to learn. To do this successfully, the University has to adopt the latest advancements in technology for learning, and introduce new undergraduate, graduate and post-graduate study programmes. The paper lists new study programmes that meet the student as well as labour market needs. University North occupies a distinctive position in the market owing to its innovative study programmes and active learning.

KEYWORDS: new study programmes, active learning, knowledge society, higher education market, positioning

Introduction

There is a large difference between the information society and the knowledge society. According to the UNESCO report (2015), knowledge societies contribute to the well-being of individuals and communities, and encompass social, ethical and political dimensions. The report gives the

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example of Singapore, which started out as a developing country of shantytowns at independence and achieved economic growth rates that surpass those of most industrialized nations in just four decades by promoting knowledge (education) and creativity. Most theorists consider knowledge society as the contemporary human history, also referred to as post-industrial society, especially after the popularization of this concept by sociologist Daniel Bell in his *The Coming of the Post-Industrial Society* (Bell, 1973). According to Bell, an indicator of information society is primarily the number of employees who produce services and information. Although both information and knowledge society have become increasingly common subjects in public and political discourse, there is no consistent definition of these concepts. A large number of theoreticians agree that education is of vital importance in today's society as a driver of economic growth and development. On the one hand, education represents a critical input on which the pace and quality of economic growth and development depend. On the other hand, it is a valuable output, whose aim is to perform its dual role in the process, an important component of which is to promote social well-being (Todaro, Smith, 2011). Investment in education is an investment in human capital which benefits both the student and the entrepreneur as the employer, as well as the society as a whole. Human capital represents a cumulative outcome of earlier investments in various activities that increase the quality of human resources, i.e. labour productivity. Thus, knowledge, as the foundation for progress, requires collaboration of the government and universities with the industry, where all stakeholders are trying to accomplish a mission together (Etzkowitz, 2008: 74). A clear, complete and accurate description of the issues that need to be solved and possible solutions on the market can be provided only by considering the views of all stakeholders in different areas of the economy. Only through scientific approach can the education system ensure sustainable growth and development of the society as a whole, as well as the sustainability of the entire system. University North aims to be a reputable, modern university which is able to meet the labour market challenges and opportunities by providing content relevant for the development of the community (Hunjet–Kozina–Đukec, 2018: 333).

The role of University North in the future of education

In his work, Campbell claims that the contemporary world is not divided by ideology, but by the degree of development and innovation, considering that the world is currently going through the fourth industrial revolution, which differs from all previous industrial revolutions by its scale and complexity. The proof that the new industrial revolution is indeed taking place is the fact that genetics and artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, robotics, biotechnology and other modern sciences and technologies, which until recently were not interconnected, are now building on each other and driving global economic growth and development. The Fourth Industrial Revolution is characterized by a fusion of technologies that is blurring the lines between the physical, digital, and biological spheres. It is, in its nature, global. It creates enormous opportunities for economic and social development, but also brings about major threats to geopolitical security, the labour market, future jobs, income equality, as well as the system of values and ethical standards. In parallel with the new industrial revolution, socio-economic, demographic and geopolitical changes are taking place, which, individually and synergistically, are affecting the spheres of labour and education as parts of society's growth and development. Changes manifest themselves in the emergence of new jobs and occupations, which will partially or completely replace the existing ones.

Willinsky writes about a managerial revolution in what might be thought of as a transformed commodities market, in which knowledge is regarded as the value-added and the most effective commodity which is derived from static interpretation of data, data analysis, market research and knowledge of different marketing strategies (Willinsky, 2005: 97). In this context, Peter Drucker (Drucker, 2006) predicts that knowledge workers will be the drivers of the knowledge society (Liessmann, 2008: 28), which indicates that a fundamental social transformation has taken place in which “the material economy” must be replaced by the so-called “symbolic economy” (Prisching, according to: Liessmann, 2008: 28). Liessmann also states that, through the concept of knowledge worker, Peter Drucker defined the vision of a new utopia of free and individual access to the crucial resources of the new society. In the years to come, jobs in the field of mathematics and informatics, architecture, and, to a lesser degree, management and trade, will gain in importance. Adverse trends will

continue in the manufacturing industry and production. Waste management, tourism, health and food industries have generated a range of new occupational profiles that require new competences, i.e. new skills and abilities, primarily in the field of communication, as well as new methodologies, and an understanding of factors and actors essential for growth. Considering the above, University North is striving to develop study programmes that meet the current demand, as evidenced by continued innovation of the educational process, expanded capacity, and new models of practice. In order to help young people develop 21st century skills, the process calls for innovation that will enable greater creativity and flexibility, and facilitate personalized learning and the acquisition of new skills (Hunjet–Geček–Mrvac, 2015: 237). With this in mind, University North strives to develop new functional skills and abilities in students. Quality education system is generally defined as a system which creates knowledge, skills, competencies and insights that improve the standard of living, and facilitates sustainable growth and development of a society as a whole (Hunjet–Kozina, 2014: 186). Future (new) occupations require the abandonment of the existing linear principle in education and require multi-functional practical training (new professional and specialist study programmes) as a prerequisite for specialisation in different scientific fields. University North is now reaching the level where creativity and freedom of choice lead to new occupations generated by the labour market.

New occupational profiles and knowledge capital

New jobs are project-based, which means that project has become a framework for initiating and implementing business activities. Project modelling and project networking into continued engagement on specific tasks, i.e. problem-solving is the basis of the new concept of education. The skills and abilities that students must develop at higher education institutions (cognitive skills, constructive problem solving, organizational skills, team work, etc.) form the basis of any occupation. In line with a comprehensive strategy for the polycentric development of science, art and higher education in the Republic of Croatia, University North needs to formulate useful knowledge in an appropriate way and identify models for using research and linking it with the economy, in particular in future development projects (Hunjet–Kozina–Milković, 2014: 216). The education system for future occupations must be based on creativity, intuition, and innovation for the purpose of

solving complex problems. Social skills, such as persuasion, emotional intelligence and negotiation, will be in demand more than equipment maintenance. These skills are called functional skills and they can also be gained through in-house. Cognitive abilities, which include creativity, mathematical reasoning, and visualization, as well as basic skills such as computer literacy, active learning, verbal communication, and process skills (active listening and critical thinking) are also gaining in importance. Unlike the functional, cognitive and process skills, which are developed through formal education, students acquire practical skills through practice. It is therefore necessary to link the economy with education so that through education students are equipped with skills that will enable them to successfully adapt to new situations and deal with future challenges as quickly as possible. Knowledge has market value today, and according to most modern theorists, it guarantees success and social well-being. Education and knowledge are the new factors of competitiveness. Thus, every active member of society, i.e. every employee is required to continuously enhance their existing knowledge. Efforts to achieve competitive advantage are primarily aimed at enhancing business productivity. In a modern global economy, investment in research and development and the improvement of the overall quality of business have become the main determinants of competitive advantage. Quality assurance and constant improvement of the teaching process, study programmes, and all other processes taking place in higher education institutions are becoming increasingly important in higher education (Horvat Novak–Hunjet, 2015: 464). Knowledge is becoming a product, and intellectual property today is more valuable than material resources. Contemporary companies are aware of their own intellectual capital, whether it is patents, knowledge of processes and technology, management skills, marketing and market information, competition knowledge, new product concept, customer and supplier research, analytical patents, rights, licenses, or ideas to improve processes or procedures. Knowledge is subject to continuous review, and it is necessary to invest in it in order to increase competitiveness and subsequently put the knowledge gained to practice. This is important for further professional training and advancement, whereby the acquired knowledge is turned into skills (Hunjet–Kozina, 2014: 419). Intellectual property management requires constant monitoring. In addition, a modern organization not only creates knowledge, but also increases its value. Achieving business excellence, i.e. the positioning on the market as an excellent company and creating high quality products and

services, as the main precondition for growth and development of a company, is not the responsibility of only one function, or one organizational unit, but the result of synchronized action of all functions in the company, according to precisely defined business goals, where knowledge plays a central role.

Positioning of University North

Compared to other types of education institutions, a university is specific due to the very nature of its functions, i.e. the provision of knowledge necessary for performing various activities in a society, and the creation of all necessary preconditions that, in some students, may lead to performing scientific work. The position and role of University North in the labour market of the Republic of Croatia has changed since it was founded. However, throughout its existence some constants have remained. It has been at the forefront of scientific and cultural development; it has encouraged scientific and social criticism and provided a fertile ground for the development of innovative ideas in all spheres of social life. This is evidenced by the high number of students enrolled in undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate study programmes. University North promotes, advances and applies the latest scientific and professional knowledge; it has adopted the concept of lifelong learning; it maintains good relationships and collaborates with similar institutions in the country and abroad (Hunjet–Kozina–Dukec, 2018: 797). Successful segmentation of the education market requires differentiation, i.e. the development of distinctive study programmes. This is what will make University North stand out in the eyes of prospective students. The concepts of positioning and differentiation are closely related to each other, but not synonymous. The latter is aimed at making the study programmes provided by University North distinctive to avoid competition with other study programmes, while positioning implies becoming the preferred choice of university for prospective students. Positioning on the education market encompasses a complex set of perceptions, impressions, feelings, plans and wishes of prospective students when choosing the study programme and the place of their studies. University North is facing increasing competition from other higher education institutions and needs to take into consideration the fact that more and more people of all ages strive to improve their education level as education has never been more im-

portant to business, society and the economy. Due to increasing global competition, many education programmes on the market are very similar in their primary functions; however, their positioning depends on the quality of the programme, but also on its reputation and perceived value. For instance, in addition to University North, various programmes in the field of economics are also delivered by the faculties of economics in Zagreb, Rijeka, and Osijek, as well as numerous private higher education institutions such as VERN and Međimurje Polytechnic in Čakovec. Students choose to pursue an education at University North because of the brand it has developed which ensures that they will follow a high-quality programme at an affordable price. Teaching to small student groups to allow teachers to give each student enough individual attention and time, and increasing the number of teachers' office hours to allow direct interactions between teachers and students, as well as the provision of technical support to teaching staff will facilitate the positioning of the University on the education market. Bearing this in mind, the positioning of University North is a combination of the differentiation strategy and the strategy of segmentation of the education market that is based on the comparison of different studies and educational programmes by students.

Table 1. New study programmes and new occupational profiles at University North

New study programmes at University North	New occupational profiles	Academic year in which the study programme was launched
Mechanical Engineering – Graduate study programme	Master of Mechanical Engineering / Mechanical Engineer	2018/2019
Civil Engineering – Graduate study programme	Master of Civil Engineering / Civil Engineer	2018/2019
Multimedia – Graduate study programme	Master / Engineer of Multimedia and Graphic Technologies	2018/2019
Nursing – Management in Nursing – Graduate study programme	Master of Nursing	2018/2019
International Economic Relations and Management - Postgraduate (doctoral) study programme	Doctor of Social Sciences, Field of Economics	2017/2018
Entrepreneurship and EU Funds - Postgraduate specialist study programme	University Specialists in Economics	2018/2019

A programme of transformation has been set up that will position University North as a university that provides competitive study programmes and is capable of responding to industry needs and the challenges ahead. *Table 1* lists new study programmes, new occupational profiles, and the academic year in which a specific study programme was launched.

In order to develop a competitive higher education institution, it is necessary to understand short- and long-term factors that affect the institution and the education market. The effectiveness of education can be defined as the output of a specific analysis that is measured by the level of achievement of the specific learning outcomes of a higher education institution. Measuring the performance of a study programme or a higher education institution is carried out through a variety of procedures that involve monitoring, observing and visiting the institution. In order to measure the performance of an institution, it is necessary to collect relevant indicators, information and evidence that best reflect the efficiency of the institution in terms of student learning and academic achievement. Measuring the efficiency of education creates added value through the process of quality assurance and accreditation and contributes to the building of a culture of evidence at that institution (Hunjet–Kozina–Đukec, 2018: 336). In order to manage education effectively, maintain growth and high level of performance, the University needs to focus on students and labour market stakeholders in the future. Globalization has inevitably led to significant changes not only in the business environment, but also in higher education institutions. The impact of globalization is closely linked to the positioning strategy and is reflected in the creation of a competitive atmosphere that resembles the product market, i.e. the design of new study programmes. In the future, University North will develop marketing strategies to create a brand recognizable on the education market and to differentiate itself from other higher education institutions with the motto “University North, the smarter choice”. Some of the main guidelines for the future development of University North are as follows:

- continuously improve and modernise the teaching process;
- apply an adequate combination of different teaching methods and approaches with the aim of increasing student motivation and engagement in creative and critical thinking activities;
- apply contemporary methods of active teaching (fostering of critical thinking, reasoning and argumentation, group work);
- increase promotional activities with the aim of enhancing the University’s image.

The branding of University North involves not only the branding of an education institution but also the branding of the education itself. The knowledge society and the concept of lifelong learning have become the core values as well as a socio-economic need in a contemporary society.

Research methodology and results

The primary motivation for this research is the current stagnation of the education market, which makes the positioning of University North crucial to its continued success and viability in the education market and the development of new study programmes.

Table 2. **Distribution of respondents by study programmes**

Study programme	Number of respondents - full time students	Number of respondents - part-time students
Business Economics - Graduate study programme	-	60
Public Relations - Graduate study programme	-	43
Technical and Economic Logistics - Undergraduate study programme	30	7
Physiotherapy - Undergraduate study programme	20	93
Mechanical Engineering - Undergraduate study programme	19	3
Civil Engineering - Undergraduate study programme	37	-
Production Engineering - Undergraduate study programme	38	-
Multimedia, Design and Application - Undergraduate study programme	37	30
Electrical Engineering - Undergraduate study programme	37	-
Nursing - Undergraduate study programme	28	80
Total number of respondents (full-time and part-time students)	246	317

The main prerequisite for increasing competitiveness is an adequate strategic framework that meets labour market needs for new occupational profiles and distinctive study programmes. The main goal of the research

is to identify the target market; i.e. prospective students, so that communication can be directed towards them, as this is the most important part of the positioning strategy. Next, it should be determined whether University North needs to develop a new communication concept for its (re)positioning considering the new study programmes. The research was conducted at University North (University Centre Varaždin) from March to July 2018, during first year student enrolment period. The sample comprised 562 respondents, of which 62.09% were full-time students and 37.91% were part-time students. 18.32% of the respondents enrolled in graduate studies, while 81.68% of them enrolled in undergraduate studies.

In the academic year 2018/2019, 18.39% of all respondents enrolled in graduate studies, of which 58.25% enrolled in Business Economics. 60.19% of the respondents are aged 25-40. 61.16% of graduate study enrollees are female. 71.61% of the respondents are from Varaždin County, while 13.59% are from Zagreb County. This suggests that University North needs to improve its visibility in Zagreb County and intensify its efforts to position itself among the prospective students of the graduate study programme. 96% of the respondents found out about University North via the Internet. Due to its accessibility, the Internet is an essential tool when it comes to attracting students. The Internet and social networks have influenced the lifestyle of the new generation and the way the new generation thinks, thus confirming McLuhan's thesis that every new medium reshapes human consciousness. To establish a distinctive position relative to its competitors, University North has to develop an effective positioning strategy that will involve increased use of social media as a means of communication with prospective students, thus increasing the speed of information flow, and enhancing its ability to maintain or increase enrolments. 23.48% of the respondents expressed their intention to continue their studies at the University's postgraduate university (doctoral) study programme; 12.98% of the respondents intend to enrol in the postgraduate specialist study programme. The greatest interest in continuing their studies at the postgraduate level is observed among Civil Engineering students (3.74% of the total number of surveyed students) and students enrolled in Multimedia, Design and Application (2.85%).

Conclusion

The contemporary society is witnessing rapid changes that have affected people's lifestyles as well as the nature of work. The education system is under a lot of pressure, as it is the most effective tool in the process of economic and social adjustment to the new conditions. Today, more than ever, there is a need for a wider approach and greater accessibility to education, and in particular the need for high quality and diversified education. The education system of the Republic of Croatia must undergo fundamental changes to be able to stay current. There is a need to provide quality education that is distinctive. Taking into consideration the above, study programmes provided by University North aim to enable students to be not only education recipients but also education providers. Only by adapting and innovating study programmes and curricula and by developing integrated technologies in the field of education, can today's education meet the current needs of the market, broaden future employment opportunities, and enable the development of new knowledge creation models that provide added value. Through new study programmes, University North aims to address primarily the issues relating to (un)employment, (in)adequate employment, and (non)engagement of students in project solution.

The complexity of the University as a higher education institution and the need for it, as the youngest HEI in Croatia, to position itself as a thriving and successful university in the Croatian education market require that it be managed as a modern corporation. The demands placed before the deans, vice-deans and heads of departments, in terms of management, which are becoming increasingly similar to those placed before company managers, drive the development of new study programmes that meet the labour market needs. Today, education is at the heart of global economic, technological, social, political, and cultural transformation that redefines the values of potential economic development. The theoretical contribution of the paper is that it establishes the elements necessary for effective positioning of the University on the education market. The research has major implications for the management as its results suggest that the identified elements are crucial for the positioning of the University. They include continuous improvement of the quality of study programmes as well as the quality of teachers and teaching. This involves, among other things, small group teaching and increasing the number of teachers' office hours.

Teachers should engage students in the learning process and create meaningful learning experiences for them, as this is another contributing factor to the University's effective positioning on the education market.

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