

## **Forming Hard and Soft Skills for University Graduates Employability Enhancement**

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### **Abstract**

The paper discusses theoretical and practical approaches to forming hard and soft skills required for university graduates` employability enhancement. It is revealed that students` entrepreneurial environment being formed within the university provides further possibilities to develop professional and social and personal competences in students, it also influences students` self-identification as well as their motivational predisposition to professional performance. Based on the results of the conducted questionnaire surveys among students involved in innovative entrepreneurial track of the university (in international programme Enactus, in particular) the viability of students` work in social and entrepreneurial projects is justified from the point of view of acquiring unique real life experience, development of strong business and leadership abilities, sense of responsibility and commitment to serve the society.

**Keywords:** students` entrepreneurship, competitiveness, Enactus, graduates, employability, hard skills, soft skills

### **Introduction**

Enhancement of a country`s competitiveness, intellectual and creative potential of its professional mobile specialists is one of the main actual tasks of the modern society. Due to this the system of higher education is facing the challenges conditioned by new goals and objectives for its development. Universities at present are to play an important role in providing the quality of professional training of prospective graduates capable to multiple changes of their professional activities in highly competitive environment.

It is widely acknowledged that in rapidly changing environment and stiff competition the obtained higher education degree does not guarantee all the knowledge and expertise needed to succeed in modern society. At that the problem of youth unemployment has become quite actual. University graduates fall under the category of 20-24 year old citizens for which this problem becomes quite a serious challenge. What do today`s university graduates often lack to advance their careers?

The conducted analysis of various viewpoints of national and foreign authors as well as of business representatives revealed that the majority agrees about the necessity of forming hard skills in students, further, soft skills as personal and interpersonal skills are also in demand as a supplement to professional experience and expertise.

Thus, to enhance graduates` employability it is vital for prospective graduates to form so called “soft skills” during their university training. This includes the ability to determine and set priorities for

future career, self-management and time-management skills, effective work ethics, team work, tolerance to stress and other.

Absence of universally acknowledged definition of the term as well as of methodology of forming the competences offered by foreign and national universities leads to variations in understanding of so-called “universal competences”. These competences gain specific value in rapidly taking place global changes in international labour market due to their social character.

The performed analysis of national and foreign studies allowed to determine formed in universities practices:

- new trends and approaches to training offered in universities (active implementation of courses and modules aimed at development the supplementary professional qualities based on social and personal characteristics of prospective graduates);
- forming youth sociocultural and entrepreneurial environment necessary for balanced personality development, culture of project management, first of all in extracurricular activities in modern universities;
- promising forms and methods of training for entrepreneurship – “learning by doing” since early student years.

**The goal of the present research** is to formulate the grounds for the possibility of development in students of balanced presence of soft and hard skills conditioned by the university entrepreneurial and social environment which will facilitate balanced development of graduates` personality to enhance their employability. The paper presents the experience of forming professional and social and personal competences in students during their participation in entrepreneurial projects within the international programme Enactus.

**Theoretical grounds for the research** are based on the concept of entrepreneurial learning (training for entrepreneurship – a concept based on the abilities of an individual to realize ideas in real life, further the concept also includes such elements as personal development, business-development and entrepreneurship skills acquisition) as well as experiential learning (learning by doing – a concept based on the abilities of an individual to learn about the world around through perception and reflection of one`s own experience. The concept presupposes gaining practical skills in the first hand and only then reflection upon their acquisition and formulating conclusions).

The issues of enhancement of university graduates` employability are discussed in works of L.V. Volkova (2017), Kh. B. Dusaev (2014), D.A. Konoplyansky (2007), S.D. Reznik (et al.) (2011, 2013), A.M. Shechmirzova (2015, 2017), and S.N. Yaroshenko (2013) and others.

The analysis of the approaches taken by national and foreign researchers as well as of business representatives related to the actuality of forming soft and hard skills in prospective university graduates within the framework of enhancing their employability are discussed in the works of E. Aingorn, et al. (2013), E.A. Voylokova (2011), A.I. Ivonina, et al. (2017), J. Balcar (2016), P. Kaburise (2016), A. Khasanzyanova (2017), M.S. Rao (2015), E. Herman (2017).

While preparing the paper the analysis of national and international researchers` works has been performed concerning the issues of forming entrepreneurial and sociocultural environment in universities at present. Among the works are those of N.B. Panchenko (2015), O.A. Khairtudinova (2013), N.O. Chistyakova, et al. (2013), G.V. Shirokova, et al (2015), L.A. Pittaway, et al. (2016), S. Riahi (2010), U. Schoof (2006).

Considerable contribution into development of conceptual aspects of training for entrepreneurship in universities is made by E.V. Kulikova, et al. (2016), I.L. Logvinova (2015), I.A. Gazieva, et al. (2016), D.J. Miller, et al. (2017), D.J. Taylor, et al. (2014), L. Padilla-Angulo (2017).

Questions of forming different competences for graduates` successful employability through participation in international entrepreneurial projects and programmes as well as via influence of students` societies on intentions and capabilities of students to become engaged to entrepreneurial activities, are reflected in the works of T.V. Belyaeva, et al. (2016), E.Yu. Bogatenkova (2016), O.E. Kuzovenko (2013), R.F. Lopatina (2013), Yu.V. Sarkisyan (2016), I.A. Soldatova, et al. (2014), O. Fatoki (2014), N. Tshikovhi, et al. (2015). However, A. Schmitz with co-authors mentions the increasing number of publications on the stated subject, commenting fragmentary nature of findings (2017).

Actuality and debatable character of the issues of enhancing the university graduates competitiveness via forming professional and social and personal competences, insufficient depth of current investigations and at the same time their prospective high practical value conditioned the theme of this research, its goals and its contents.

### **Research Methodology**

The following research methods were used during the study: review of the published theoretical works and grounds, comparison, summary, content-analysis. Further, empirical data received by the authors as a result of questionnaire surveys was analyzed. The questionnaire surveys were performed among Russian teams of students – Enactus participants. The data was also gathered from interviews of participants of international schools on social entrepreneurship. The materials were summarized using the sparse tableau analysis and the graphical method.

### **Discussion of the Obtained Results**

The specifics of such category as students - prospective graduates` competitiveness is of debatable character for researchers and specialists in many fields. The issues discussed in research literature within this theme allow to characterize this notion as multidisciplinary as per se it exists between and on the boundaries of many sciences (A. I. Dalibozhko, 2017, p. 308).

Analysis of modern trends in higher education reveals that graduates` employment competitiveness can be reduced by a number of factors: absence of live experience, inability to take on initiative and responsibility, inability to make independent decisions, presence of psychological problems in communication, unpreparedness and unwillingness for intensive work (Reznik et al, 2013).

Thus the majority of researchers agree in the opinion that only balanced professional and social and personal competences is the must requirement for achieving high rates of university graduates employability at present.

The issues of searching for the ways to enhance graduates` employability have become the heart of discussions for instructors, specialists and employers. Further, they have also become the grounds for consistent revamping of training programmes, active implementation of courses and modules aimed at development of supplementary professional skills based on social and personal competences of university graduates.

### **Training for Social Entrepreneurship**

At present the mission of modern universities lies within facilitation of economical and societal development on the principles of sustainability.

I.L. Logvinova's research (2015) represents profound analysis of foreign experience of training for social entrepreneurship since early student years. The research is highly actual for national higher education as in Russia entrepreneurship training in general and training for social entrepreneurship in particular are at the beginning of its development.

Training based on entrepreneurial performance influences entrepreneurship knowledge and interpersonal relations which in their turn develop intentions to undertake entrepreneurship. Thus in the work of N. Tshikovhi (2015) it is mentioned that there is no sufficient research related to the issues of extracurricular activities or experience received via training for entrepreneurship in early university years as well as to its influence on entrepreneurial intentions. It is also argued there that high level of knowledge about entrepreneurship positively influences attitude towards entrepreneurship (N. Tshikovhi, 2015, p. 152).

In E. Herman's research (2017) the issue of motivation for starting one's own business is raised in relation to the level of received training in entrepreneurship. The differences in intentions are analyzed of students receiving business degrees and of those receiving engineering degrees. This forms the grounds to draw a conclusion that "influence of university training on graduates' intentions for entrepreneurial performance is more efficient for graduates with economics majors rather than for graduates with engineering majors".

### **Enabling Youth Entrepreneurial and Sociocultural Environment in Modern Universities**

In the work of N.O. Chistyakova, I.V. Krakovetskaya, E.S. Vorob'eva (2013) it is mentioned that this is the university environment that facilitates development of innovative entrepreneurship spirit in modern youth as modern universities possess significant innovative potential and are capable of becoming the site for realization of various youth entrepreneurial projects. Due to this the development of students' entrepreneurship is becoming more and more important direction of universities activities. The researchers D.J. Miller and Z.J. Acs (2017) note that modern entrepreneurial ecosystem of a university is to enable accessible assets, freedom and diversity for students engaged in entrepreneurial performance by creating possibilities for development and stimulating entrepreneurship and innovations.

This will allow to understand in what direction one should proceed and which competences are to be formed and facilitated. Contrary to hard skills, soft skills require additional practice in situations which demand from an individual making independent decisions. Namely development of such soft skills is targeted by the majority of forms of students' self-governments and by university support programmes.

### **Enactus – Learning by Doing**

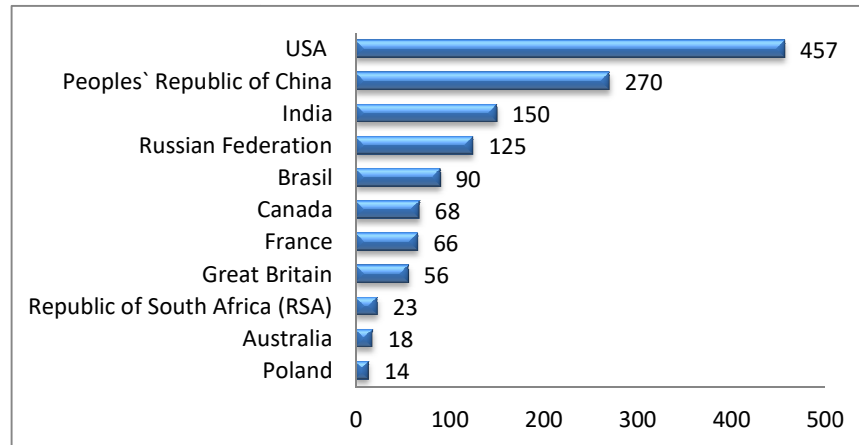
One of the possibilities enabling youth engagement to entrepreneurial environment can be participation in the international programme Enactus – the largest nonprofit organization which unites students, business leaders and universities. Enactus teams develop and run projects focused on raising quality of life and living standards. 750 universities worldwide are members of Enactus network. Participation in this programme allows to organize students' exchanges and raises educational institutions ranking.

Enactus students gain diverse practical experience of projects' realization in real life. They generate, develop and implement entrepreneurship ideas into real life. Students master technologies and methods of contemporary business.

Enactus students' advantageous qualities are: leadership skills, team work skills, effective communication skills, business planning and budgeting, skills of public talks.

In overall perspective the majority of skills being developed are those soft skills, development of which is of significant importance for enabling talented and successful business-leaders. In this respect many leading companies identified Enactus as the key resource of socially responsible business talents (Enactus Russia official webpage).

Established in USA in 1975 (Enactus Worldwide official webpage), Enactus has been successfully developing and now it embraces 36 countries of the world (Pic. 1).



**Fig. 1: (compiled by the authors based on the analysis of Enactus Worldwide official webpage [42])**

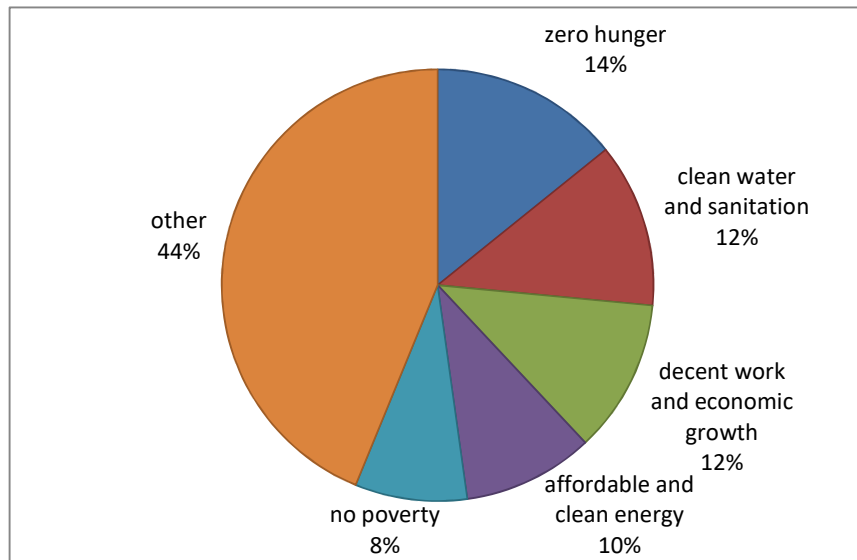
The topics of Enactus projects incorporate all 17 Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations in "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" (UN official webpage):

1. no poverty;
2. zero hunger;
3. good health and well-being;
4. quality education;
5. gender equality;
6. clean water and sanitation;
7. affordable and clean energy;
8. decent work and economic growth;
9. industry, innovation and infrastructure;
10. reduced inequalities;
11. sustainable cities and communities;
12. responsible consumption and production;

13. climate action;
14. life below water;
15. life on land;
16. justice and strong institutions;
17. partnerships for the goals.

Based on the studies of Enactus official webpages (Worldwide, Enactus Russia and Tomsk State University), having performed the analysis of annual reports presented by Enactus teams the classification of the projects has been prepared in compliance with Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations.

The ratio of 5 most popular team projects is given below depending on which of the global goals is in focus (Pic. 2).



**Fig. 2: Classification of Enactus teams projects in compliance with Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations (as for 2016)**

In collaboration with the stakeholders the teams conduct in-depth evaluation of needs, determine the possibilities for real and measurable improvement of living standards of the target audience. During the projects development striving for improving life conditions Enactus teams cooperate with business, authorities, researchers – innovators, people of retired age, students, countrymen.

The main goal of Enactus projects is “real and measurable improvement of living standards and quality of life of the target audience” (Enactus Russia official webpage).

### **Foresee the Possibility, Undertake Action, and Enable Progress – Prospects of International Cooperation**

The key foundation of Enactus programme lies in the statement described in the phrase “Give a Man a Fish and he’ll eat for a day. Teach a man to fish and he’ll eat for a lifetime”. In its essence this

approach represents learning by doing when students do not simply search for an option to solve a problem but rather consider various pathways to reach the result by the means of learning and teaching others.

Work in the international programme Enactus presupposes a wide range of opportunities for students' academic mobility. This may be participation in regional and national Enactus competitions, various internships (e.g. for studies of Enactus teams experience in other countries (Yu.V. Sarkisyan, 2016), as well as in international schools on social entrepreneurship. The authors of this paper discuss the results obtained based on the experience of forming joint international projects within the framework of Enactus programme.

Enactus winter school on social entrepreneurship was conducted on National Research Tomsk State University premises. The international programme Enactus students from 9 countries took part in the school. They came from Russian Federation, India, Morocco, France, Canada, Great Britain, Brazil, Republic of Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic. Enactus winter school embraced 10 days of series of master-classes, panel discussions, talks and projects presentations of the teams – participants of the school. It involved sharing experience in project work in the field of social entrepreneurship (National Research Tomsk State University Enactus official webpage).

During the school proceedings the events were organized to actively involve heuristic methods which allow to overcome psychological inertia of thinking and enable youth for search of non-trivial ideas and means of their realization. Usage of this instrument allowed to stimulate creativity and innovative thinking of project teams' participants (V.S. Nikolaenko et al., 2013).

Within the framework of the school Enactus students' teams were offered to develop projects which would target 17 Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations. Participants of the school chose 5 goals: zero hunger, clean water and sanitation, good health and well-being, quality education, decent work and economic growth, and developed the concept of an international project for each of the goals.

Enactus winter school has become the venue for meeting of likeminded individuals of Enactus movement: students worked in teams for the projects which are relevant for the global human society. The main goal of such kind of events is to provide the starting point after which students from different countries will be able to continue their work on international projects in the format acceptable for them (National Research Tomsk State University Enactus official webpage).

Recently the course "Social Entrepreneurship" has been introduced to curricula of many educational programmes in universities. Thus, all teaching activities within the school framework with the focus on social entrepreneurship were performed based on the developed by National Research Tomsk State University course "Social Entrepreneurship". Due to this all participants who successfully completed the school programme not only received the certificates of participation but also the opportunity to include the course "Enactus. Social Entrepreneurship" into their individual plans of university studies. The course is recognized by all countries – Enactus participants.

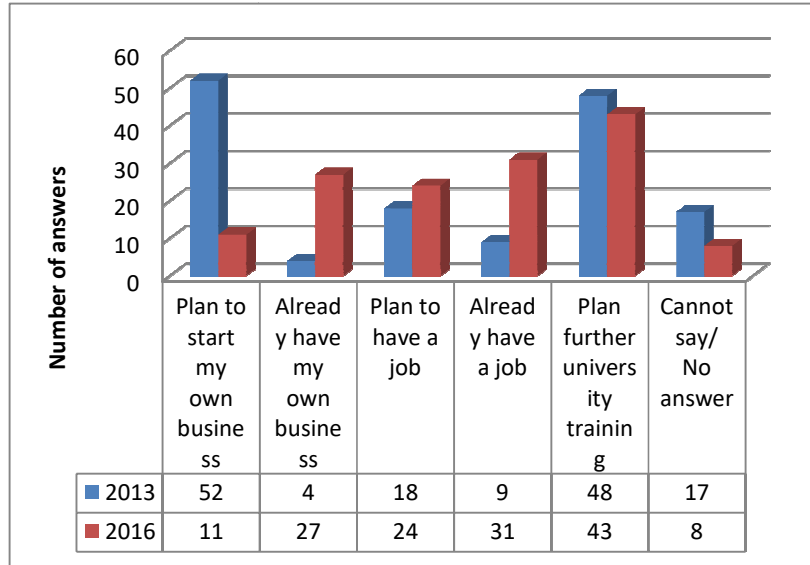
### **Possibilities of Graduates' Employability Enhancement: Forming the Competences for University Graduates to Succeed In Youth Labour Market**

The authors of this paper conducted the questionnaire survey among Enactus Russia graduates to investigate how the programme enabled them to realize their career intentions and which new skills were enabled for development during team work (Pics. 3, 4).

Pic. 3 demonstrates career and entrepreneurial intentions of the first and second year bachelor degree students enrolled to Enactus programme as compared to realization of the intentions demonstrated by

students after university and programme graduation. The same cohorts of students participated in the questionnaire survey in 2013 and 2016.

150 students took part in the questionnaire survey in 2013 while 144 students took part in the questionnaire survey in 2016. The difference in students` numbers is due to the fact that 6 students left their teams having worked for less than a year. In such case the responses were not taken to consideration.

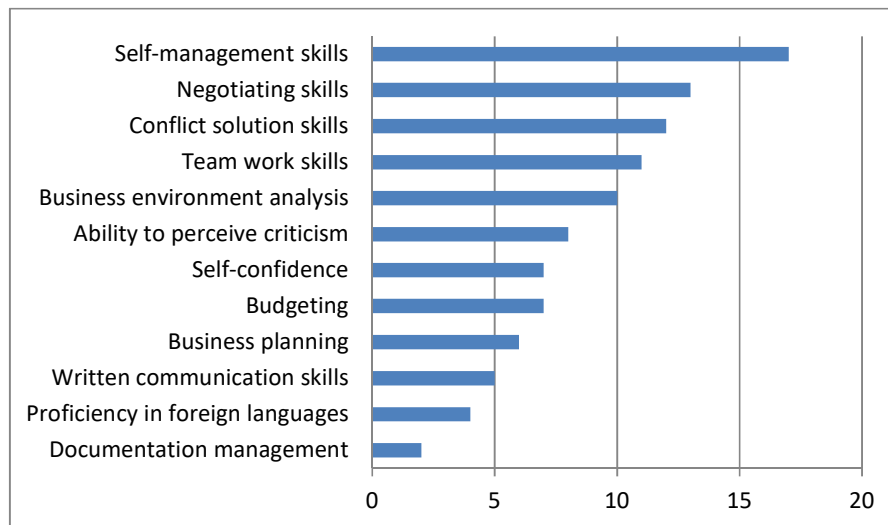


**Fig. 3: The survey results “What are your prospective career goals after graduation from Enactus programme?”/ “Which goals has Enactus programme enabled you to achieve?”**

The larger number of students was revealed as planning to start their own business in their early university years rather than to be hired for a job (52 and 18 students, respectively). At the same time 13 students were running their own business or were hired for a job.

In 2016 from the same number of students only 11 were planning to start their own business, at the same time 27 students were already running their own business. In total 23 students out of 52 realized their entrepreneurial intentions. At the same time the intention to be hired for a job was revealed by a larger number – 24 students in comparison to 18, while 22 students were hired for a job for the first time. During the programme students gained diverse experience of the projects practical realization in real life. Students generated, developed and implemented entrepreneurial ideas, at the same time they mastered technologies and methods of modern business. It is of importance that students were exposed to opportunities to gain their first professional experience. Thus, Pic. 4 demonstrates the skills grid. The skills were acquired by Enactus students during the time of their participation in the programme.





**Fig. 4: Enactus students` skills developed during participation in the programme (as for 2016)**

The value of Enactus programme is in the fact that students do not only obtain hard skills as 34 students noted. Students also gain soft skills as was mentioned by 47% of respondents that is 68 students.

Enactus programme offers to students the possibility to make a significant contribution to society development; at the same time students recognize and shape their potential for further achievements in their prospective roles of business-leaders. When realizing complex projects, Enactus students have their business and personal qualities developed, as well as sense of responsibility, predisposition and readiness to serve the society.

It is not every participant of youth entrepreneurial events, projects, forums to run one`s own business in future. However the experience of work in real projects, social responsibility contribute to forming such a personality of a young entrepreneur who welcomes challenges and becomes a valuable asset for any organization in any field. Exactly such approach allows to form next generation leaders capable of independent creative work.

## Conclusions

It needs to be said that different approaches to forming the mechanisms for realization of training for entrepreneurship are used by universities. The paper discusses the prospects of new format of international exchange that is hosting international schools on the national and foreign universities premises. Such exchanges allow for experience sharing among Enactus teams from different countries, as well as shaping ideas about realization of possible joint international projects targeted to contribute to realization of 17 Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations.

Development of students` entrepreneurship in Russia will facilitate solving the issue of youth unemployment by providing wider range of opportunities for self-employment and conditions for further realization of university graduates` capacities.

## Directions for Future Research

Students` entrepreneurship in Russia is only taking on its active role. It requires detailed studies, specification of definitions and concepts, research into national specifics, search for new promising entrepreneurial forms and initiatives within universities environment. The goal of university

graduates` employability enhancement via training for entrepreneurship requires theoretical and methodological approaches which will allow to design tools for more efficient development of university graduates` competences in demand in labour market.

Accumulated experience of other countries in facilitating students` entrepreneurship, motivating entrepreneurial intentions in students and using new forms of enhancing entrepreneurial performance as well as studies in search for adaptation options and opportunities for the above mentioned measures to national university environment can become the goals of the prospective research for the authors of this paper.

The results of this research can be used by governmental authorities, university senior management bodies when developing measures to support and facilitate students` initiatives. They can also be of use for business representatives to identify and build further collaboration with talented graduates.

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