COMPETENCES ACQUIRED BY GRADUATES THROUGH MARKETING HIGHER EDUCATION TRAINING – FINDINGS FROM THE EMPLOYERS' PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract
The primary purpose of the economic higher education in providing the graduates with marketing competences is to train them for employment. In light of the said objective, two important aspects must be taken into account by educators. First, the gap between theory and practice must be eliminated. Secondly, educators must select and provide the competences required by employers so that new graduates may obtain employment matching up to their training. The purpose of the present study is to highlight the main dimensions which define employers' perception of the marketing competences developed by the graduates whom they have employed. The starting point of the present scientific endeavour is the evaluation of the variables which define the transversal competences and the marketing-specific competences.

Key words: competences, curriculum, employers, evaluation, quality assurance

JEL Classification: M1, M3, M31

Acknowledgement
This paper highlights some of the findings obtained through the implementation of the project "Research and development of a complex, multidisciplinary and interactive platform for the improvement of the marketing educational system through interconnection between the Romanian academic environment and labour market, in the context of sustainable development", financed by MECT through CNMP, Domain DC 9, project code 92-103/2008.

INTRODUCTION

Romania's economic changes of the last twenty years and particularly the new approach to business peculiar to the market economy have brought about the need for the business people to adopt a business philosophy adjusted to the new context, created specific needs on the labour market and, as a consequence, imposed new requirements concerning the competences acquired by graduates during their academic training. Therefore, the academic environment currently voices a particular concern over the competences that a student should acquire during his/her academic training so that, after graduation, he/she may be able to perform all the activities pertaining to marketing in a professional way. This concern comes first from the universities' interest in having an offering adjusted to the needs of the business environment, which is a

criterion for competitiveness on the labour market, and from the national, European and even international framework of qualifications in higher education.
The objectives set by the European Union through the Bologna Declaration (June, 1999), Lisbon Summit (March 2000), Copenhagen Declaration (December 2002), Ministerial Conference in Berlin (September 2003), Ministerial Conference in Bergen (May 2005) and Ministerial Conference in London (may 2007) are to reform the higher education systems so that they should become capable of providing offerings compliant with the needs of the contemporary society. The corresponding body in Romania which implements these European orientations is the National Agency for Qualifications in Higher Education and Partnership with the Social and Economic Environment (ACPART) which set up the National Framework of Qualifications in Higher Education (CNCSIS) in February 2008. CNCSIS "complies with the European requirements concerning the access to and advancement in the academic career and student mobility and satisfies the national needs by creating a coherent model of organization and classification of qualifications, by exposing the academic training system to the social and economic environment and ensuring balance between supply and demand of education and training" (CNCIS 2008). The CNCSIS' objective in terms of university curriculum optimisation in Romania relies heavily on extensive research for each particular specialization and the involvement of competent and motivated researchers. Settling this issue, however, is not as simple as it might seem on the surface in view of the fact that the interest in this topic is in an early stage in Romania.

Literature review

The bright side of this endeavour is represented by the existence of extensive research already conducted and published in international specialised literature (Rositer 2001: 9-26; Aistrich 2006: 73-80; Rust 2006: 1-3; Ramocki 2007: 18-24; Jackson 2009: 85-98; Wellman 2010: 119-134). These studies deal mainly with competences that a student should acquire during his/her marketing training at university or the differences between the current academic supply and the demands the marketers are required to cope with. The curricula that the students are expected to follow during their university education are also subject to ongoing and heated debates among academics. The comments made about the congruence between the educational supply and the employers' needs were more often than not critical. In one of their study, Pfeffer and Fong (2002: 78-95) suggest that the business administration faculties operate much like providers who screen and recruit customers to make use of their services whereas their educational supply features a lack of relationship with the real needs of the labour market. With even more caustic remarks, Mintzinberg and Gosting (2002: 33-37) highlight that in faculties where business administration specialists are trained, incorrect or less substantiated concepts are inappropriately being taught to an audience unsuitable for with no interest whatsoever in the field of business administration.
The incongruities invoked between the academic marketing supply and the real needs of the corporate world have aroused, and continue to arouse, the interest of more and more researchers. Well-known specialists from around the world have approached, investigated, researched and debated for a long time these aspects (McKenna 2002: 680-702; Simkin 2002: 120-126; Brennan and Skaates 2005: 77-89; Stringfelloww et al 2006: 245-256; Brownlie et al 2007: 395-409; Munch 2008: 16-23; Jackson 2009: 85-98; Wellman 2010: 119-135). Their endeavours highlight the role that educators and trainers play in the academic training of the future marketers. They also attempt to devise the most appropriate ways and means so that student training may be accomplished with more responsibility toward the society. All researchers share the opinion that a better match between the academic supply and the needs of the business environment is a must and one of the main tasks of the marketing educators is to provide appropriate training to any individual who wishes to obtain a marketing qualification.

A "mirror" assessment of the academics' opinion, as against the employers' opinion, on the nature and contents of the educational offering meant to ensure the required competences, could take the form of a more balanced investigation and could provide more accurate information on this important topic. Therefore, valid information obtained from both sides—employers and academic world—is the only basis for designing curricula capable of imparting knowledge that combines a high level of academic competences with qualification-specific competences.

The training necessary to apply for a job is obviously a legitimate, all-important objective of any marketing graduate. In the light of the literature reviewed we appreciate that in order to identify those competences that employers regard as the most relevant, the academics and the corporate world should carry out a common assessment of the nature and structure of the academic supply with a view to building up the optimal profile of competences demanded by employers. This undertaking would take the form of a balanced investigation and would provide accurate and valid information that might serve as the basis for designing comprehensive curricula in which the knowledge required by the marketing practice and that imparted in theory should be appropriately intermingled. And, last but not least, the curricula would contribute to the development of marketing-related competences. As shown by Semeijn (2005), the ever-growing interest expressed by international researchers in this topic is generated by the fact that competences have shown to be stronger predictors for job allocation and follow-up training than traditional indicators such as field, grade-point average and BA/MA thesis results.

The technical literature (Boshuizen 2009: 279-404) regards domain-specific competences as the baseline for developing expertise in a profession. Likewise, domain-specific competences facilitate access to jobs (Heijke et al. 2003). The arguments supporting the importance of useful competences in obtaining and preserving a job may be approached from various angles. Thus, a study on the job performance among master graduates with expertise in the domain of business administration (Arts et al. 2006: 387-401) shows that they pay far more attention to information than graduate students regardless of whether the information is relevant or irrelevant. The same study reveals that the latter need at least eight years of work experience before they can accurately distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information.

In contrast, experts focused on structural features and patterns pay far more attention to strategic issues, and the knowledge of graduates is highly organized (Nievelstein et al. 2007: 1043-1064), contributing to achieving high performance in domain-related issues (Feltovitch et al. 2006: 41-66). At the same time, they can retrieve this knowledge very quickly from memory, even under high stress conditions (Woods et al 2006: 973-979). Although such findings are more difficult to measure, they ought to be taken into account in the curriculum design.

An individual's chances to get a job depend not only on the level of domain-specific competences but also on how well he/she is able to combine them with the so-called generic competences (ability to learn new things, attitude, communication, teamwork, adaptation to unpredictable situations). The specialized literature places this kind of competences, which are useful in many other contexts as well, in the category of key competences, academic competences, or key qualifications (Rychen & Salganik 2001). Their general character comes from the possibility to use them on any particular job, regardless of the curriculum previously followed. They often constitute the baseline for selection of follow-up training. Even if, from a theoretical viewpoint, researchers have intense debates on the need to clearly delineate domain-specific from general competences, in reality the two kinds of competences cannot be acquired separately within a curriculum (Van der Velden 2006). Moreover, authors such as Merrienboer and Kester (2008: 441-456) argue that separating the acquisition of generic and domain-specific competences inhibits the transfer of what has been learned to practice. Consequently, as suggested by researchers, both kinds of competences should be learned simultaneously in a variety of authentic situations across the curriculum. Therefore, we state the opinion that in order

for a student to acquire all competences there must be well-organized curricula whose purpose is to specifically promote knowledge acquisition and development of abilities and integrated professional attitudes.

RESEARCH PURPOSE

Departing from the above-mentioned concerns which emphasize the need of a better coherence between the business administration educational offering and the labour market requirements, a need that has been underlined by authors from around the world, in the present study we set to investigate the Romanian employers' perception of competences acquired by native graduates through the academic marketing training. Moreover, starting from the evaluation of the variables which define the transversal competences and the marketing-specific competences, we set to identify, by means of factor analysis, the main dimensions which define employers' perception of the marketing competences acquired by the graduates whom they have employed.

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Data collection was made in the Transylvania counties between in October 2010, as part of a field survey. Due to the complex nature of the issues approached, data input was made by interviewers at the office of the investigated organizations. A total of 171 valid questionnaires were collected. Departing from the premise that there are noticeable differences, in terms of objectives pursued, between the organizations' domains, the sample included producers (25.1%), retailers (30.4%), and financial service companies (9.4%), tourist organizations (5.3%), as well as companies which offer other services (29.8%). In terms of the company's start-up year, the sample reveals that most of the companies (82.4%) were established after 1989, 22.8% between 1990 and 1995, 18.1% between 1996 and 2000, 27.5% between 2001 and 2006 and 24% were set up after 2006. The companies included in the survey that ware set up before 1989 represent a small percentage of 7.6%.

Another relevant criterion used in the selection of companies was the annual turnover. According to this indicator, the sample is fairly homogeneous, 21.6% of companies recording an annual turnover below 100.000 Ron, 21.1% between 100.001 and 500.000 Ron, 17% between 500.001 and 1.000.000 Ron, 12.3% between 1.000.001 and 2.000.000 Ron whereas the annual turnover of 28.1% of the companies exceeds 2.000.000 Ron.

50.3% of the corporate officers who took part in the survey are administrators, 30.4% general managers and 19,3% marketing responsible. The overwhelming majority of the officers interviewed completed a bachelor's degree (50.3%) or a postgraduate degree (39.8%) while very few of them graduated from high-school (5.2%) or completed an associate's degree (4.7%).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to accurately identify the employers' perception of the competences acquired by graduates during their academic marketing training, a series of multivariate data analyses have been conducted. The role of the said tests is to demonstrate the validity, objectivity and reliability of the data subject to analysis. To this effect, we set to determine Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha (α) which measures the internal consistency of the items (variables) which make up a model, a factor or a scale (Peterson 1994: 381-391). By determining the Alpha coefficient, the variables which, by their variance, fail to explain very well the phenomenon being studied can be eliminated from the analysis. The closer to 1 is the value of Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha (α), the more reliable are the data. According to various authors, the calculated value of the coefficient alpha for a set of items must be at least 0.7. However, lower values may also be admitted on condition that they are computed for three items at most (Hälsig 2008: 121; Kuß 2007: 97; Nunnally 1978: 9). By applying the "item-total" correlation, one can determine the

items which, by their removal from the model, may contribute to increasing the value of Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha (α) (Churchill 1979: 64-73). A model's validity can also be verified by means of the exploratory factor analysis conducted in the SPSS Software. By means of it, the volume of analyzed data is reduced, thus highlighting the existing correlations between the observed items. The result thereof is obtaining factors around which are grouped the items (variables) which load together on the intended factors, a fact that accounts for the high percentage of the variance. Each obtained dimension must reflect an as high percentage as possible of the variance of variables, namely, to explain as best as possible the phenomenon being studied (Backhaus et al. 2008: 259-274; Plăiaş 2008: 558-560). Finally, the researcher's task is to properly name the resulted dimensions/factors. The number of resulted dimensions should ideally be as small as possible, as they are thought to be representative of the studied phenomenon. At the same time, each variable should load on a single factor a value greater than 0.4. The reliability of the factor analysis is proven by carrying out the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test (referring to the homogeneity of the initial items, its recommended value being greater than 0.5) and Bartlett's test of sphericity (the calculation of chi square [$\chi 2$], the number of degrees of freedom [df] and the probability [p] to guarantee results). Finally, the obtained dimensions may be subject to permutation, a process that facilitates correct data interpretation (Bagozzi 1981: 375-381; Kuß 2007: 253-256; Backhaus et al. 2008: 334-337; Bühl, Zöfel 2005: 465-484).

Research Results

As the domain-specific competences that graduates should acquire have been conceptualized, an exploratory factory analysis has been carried out in the first instance on the set of studied items. Five factors have been obtained and Cronbach's coefficient alpha has been applied on the items which load on each of these dimensions. The values obtained for each individual factor have been satisfactory and in compliance with the requirements of the technical literature. Factor one was the only factor for which the variable measuring "the proper management of the negotiation process and conclusion of contracts" has been removed. Thus, the analysis conducted for the remaining items pinpointed a Cronbach coefficient alpha of 0.828 as against the previous 0.823. The Cronbach coefficient alpha was 0.738 for the second factor, 0.809 for the third, 0.777 for the fourth and 0.704 for the last obtained factor.

Resuming the factor analysis for the entire set of selected factors, the next variable to be removed was "proper management of the enterprise's range of performances" as it loaded simultaneously unacceptable values (below 0.4) on factors three and five. A possible explanation for this phenomenon could be a vague wording of the variable as the management of the range of performances could be a component both of the upstream and downstream market. We further resumed the exploratory factor analysis, the results of which are presented below.

Table 1 – Final Factor Analyse

Items (Variable)	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5
easy design and implementation of marketing plans and strategies	0,76				
competent managing of marketing studies and research	0,73				
conduct serious analysis of the competition environment	0,67				
are able to properly organize promotion campaigns	0,66				
apply data-base marketing in the relationship with partners	0,51				
have a good command of at least one international language		0,82			
possess developed computer abilities		0,72			
know to handle production stocks			0,79		
know the manner of conducting the cost-benefit analysis			0,73		
possess comprehensive training in material resources procurement			0,69		

Items (Variable)	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5
display excellent organizational abilities				-0,72	
possess developed abilities to work in a team				-0,67	
possess high analysis/synthesis ability				-0,67	
possess developed communication and persuasiveness abilities				-0,63	
possess well-developed powers of observation				-0,62	
are willing to learn and improve on a regular basis				-0,61	
explore the market efficiently to attract new customers					-0,76
process and analyze the sales data in a professional way					-0,57
manage properly the relationship with dealers					-0,56
maintain properly positive relationships with customers					-0,53
Eigenvalues	6,54	2,01	1,69	1,45	1,02
% variance	32,68	10,07	8,48	7,23	5,12
KMO = 0,834 ; χ^2 = 1433,329 df = 190 şi p ****					

Factor extraction method: Principal component analysis, Oblimin rotation with Kaiser Normalization
Source: own research;

A first challenge that we met in our endeavour was represented by the proper naming of the obtained factors. In our opinion, the items that load on the first factor (design and implementation of marketing plans and strategies, competent managing of marketing research, conduct serious analysis of the competition environment, proper organization of promotion campaigns, application of data-base marketing in the relationship with partners), could be regarded as "Marketing knowledge", as it actually comprises the whole body of knowledge applied within an organization. The second factor could well be named "communication and computer skills", which represent extra knowledge with significant impact on the marketing practice. In our opinion, the items loading on the third factor make up the body of knowledge that an organization should possess in relation to the upstream market. Therefore, we believe that the third factor could be properly named "procurement knowledge". The fourth factor, "management and negotiation skills", contains elements that contribute substantially to graduates' personal and professional development. Finally, the fourth factor contains marketing knowledge about an organization's upstream market. Thus, we believe it should be named "skills in market analysis and maintenance of relationships with its players". Viewed from a different perspective, of outstanding importance is the manner in which the dimensions obtained within the exploratory factor analysis interact on each other. The multiple regression analysis conducted on the factors highlighted by the exploratory factor analysis shows that marketing knowledge has significant influence over communication and computer skills. As marketing is, by its nature, an open activity and more and more computer applications have been developed for the marketing practice, this correlation is accounted for by the fact that marketing has become a driving force behind specialists' availability and performance in terms of technical and interhuman communication. We could also take into account the use of computer equipment for the collection of marketing data and information.

Marketing knowledge → communication and computer skills					0,156*
Procurement knowledge → communication and computer skills					$0,109^{n.s.}$
Skills in market analysis and maintenance of relationships with its players → communication and computer skills					$-0,035^{n.s.}$
Model fit					
F	3,504***	R^2 adjusted	0,042	Durbin-Watson	1,955
Legend					
*p<0,1		**p<0,05	***p<0,01	****p<0,001	n.s. - insignificant

Conclusions

According to our findings, respondents expressed a favourable opinion about the level of training of employees' engaged in general marketing activities and in specific activities related to the upstream market. A favourable opinion has also been expressed concerning the generic competences, such as computer or linguistic skills. Respondents expressed a less favourable opinion about the level of training of employees who carry out marketing activities in relation to the downstream market and about a range of skills related to their individual and professional development.

The application of the factor analysis on the 20 variables that we deemed relevant for the evaluation of the variables that define transversal and marketing-specific competences allowed us to identify five dimensions which were named "marketing knowledge", "communication and computer skills", "procurement knowledge", "management and negotiation skills", and "skills in market analysis and maintenance of relationships with its players". As the analysis has shown, these dimensions mirror the complexity of the marketing activity, touching on upstream and downstream market-related skills as well as management and communication skills.

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