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Employability Skills in Higher Education and the Case of Greece

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Abstract

The development of employability skills has dominated the educational research the recent years. This study reviews the notion of employability skills and their emergence in the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) through the analysis of the relevant literature. Furthermore the study explores employability skills development in the Greek HEIs and the difficulties associated with it considering work-placements structure and current attitudes especially in the area of accounting education.

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1. Introduction

Within the framework of continuous changes in technology, work processes and global institutional transformations, firms strive to secure competent and skilled labour. Governments, businesses and policy-makers connect employability rates with the level of skills and competences that Higher Education (HE) graduates have acquired and with the overall prosperity of nations (Frank & Meyer, 2007; EC, 2010; PwC, 2014). Accounting Education has also come into the centre of the employability skills agenda.

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2. Background

The transition of traditional industrial firms from a task-centred to a process centred approach, the increase of people working in commerce and service sector of the economy as well as information technology and globalisation affect all working population. In the new era, managers, employees and workers need to accomplish tasks with responsibility and personal capability and find solutions to possible problems that arise. The competent professional is a problem-solver able to cope with unanticipated and unusual situations without running to management for guidance, holding a “reservoir of knowledge, grounding in the discipline that underlies the job as well as an appreciation for how this knowledge can be applied to different situations” (Hammer, 1996, p. 47). These qualities signify the presence of a professional that need constant learning and training. Two terms that describe very well the post-Fordist working environment are “delaying” and “empowerment”. “Delaying” is the word that reflects the process of restructuring by taking layers of management out of the organisations’ chart. In this way more people are doing rather than supervising, but those doers should be able to supervise themselves. “Empowerment” reflects the culture of giving more responsibility to workers who should have greater discretion on how they manage their job. Both terms imply that personnel can work in self-directed work teams which are appraised by the target outcomes of their performance rather than being told exactly how to do the job with constant supervision (Herbert & Rothwell, 2005). The idea of flatter, less hierarchical and more trust-based organisations is also supported by Lloyd and Payne (2004) who argue that human resources hold the key to competitive success of businesses through higher discretion on jobs and higher thinking levels of employees.

The idea of the “new knowledge economy” and the potential of the new technology and the required upskilling of workforce, has taken with it scientists and policy-makers despite the arguments that modern work and the scientific-technical revolution is leading to deskilling of workers (Baldray et al., 1998). The new economy is dominated by ICT and knowledge-intensive companies that use and produce intangible ideas and products. Personnel management that includes professional training and skills development is valuable as it can deliver profitability at several levels for the enterprises and the region they operate (Vitouladiti, 2014). Knowledge and skills of firms’ workforce represent the new source of wealth for industrial economies (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995).

2.1. Employability and Skills

Over the years employability has been approached through different dimensions. While Hillage and Pollard (1998) defined employability as de facto equated with the gaining and retaining of fulfilling work, Fugate *et al.* (2004) offered to employability a new direction of “pro-active adaptability” that includes the dimensions of career identity, personal adaptability and social networking skills (social and human capital).

Harvey (2001) claimed that most definitions of employability elaborate on five characteristics: a) the job type b) the timing c) the attributes on recruitment d) further learning and e) employability skills. Employability is understood as the possession of basic “core-skills”, or an extended set of generic attributes, or attributes that a type of employer (discipline-linked, sector-related, company-type) specifies. Employability is not just dependent upon the labour market forces, but also on other factors like willingness, capacity, mobility training (skill enhancement) and functional flexibility (changing shifts, working beyond job description) (Misra and Mishra, 2011). Employability is ultimately “the ability to be employed”.

Knight and Yorke (2003) apart from Understanding, Skills and Efficacy beliefs of graduates introduce Metacognition as the most interrelated concepts to employability. Metacognition in this case means three things: knowing what you know, knowing how it can be used, and knowing how you get new knowings. Metacognition is an essential attribute because according to Knight and Yorke (2003, p. 8) it “contributes to the continued learning that professionals need to do if they are to grow and to keep pace with changes in the demands of their work. Those professionals who lack the reflective capacity are likely to be professionally frozen”. Meta-cognitive skills that include the capacity for self-observation, self-insight, and self-monitoring, are essentials for career self-management. Employees will also need assistance to develop competencies in self-evaluation, self-promotion and career management skills. Individuals will need to learn how to evaluate their skills, knowledge and abilities and how to market those skills either within or outside of the organisation (Bridgstock, 2009). Mutual obligation and responsibility for developing and maintaining “advanced general skills” as opposed to the more traditional concept

of “firm-specific skills” is emphasised and “the new way of work is for employees to think of themselves as self-employed even when they are employed by an organisation” (Garavan, 1999). Employees and employers can work together so that employees develop a range of generic, transferable skills, such as interpersonal skills, communication skills, problem-solving skills, teamwork and decision-making skills (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Vitouladiti, 2013, 2014).

2.2. *The Skill's gap and the role of Higher Education*

Several authors describe anomalies in the capitalist economies that are to a lesser or higher extend connected to workforce skills gap. The relationships of globalised operations and industrial innovations have shifted the need for a different set of expectations by the workforce. This is perceived by a gap in the skills and competencies of the workforce in order to fully support the industries (Barrett *et al.* 2005). Technological reshaping of operations, new literacies demanded by implementation of internationalised standards, accelerated innovation in product and process to compete globally are directly related to the *skills transformation* of the workforce (Belfiore *et al.*, 2004). These factors are perceived by the industry leaders and by the policy-makers as *skills and knowledge gaps between what existing workers can do and what is desired performance*.

Research in a variety of professions like geology (Griffiths *et al.*, 1997), management (Floyd & Gordon 1998), accounting (Albrecht & Sack, 2000; Hassall *et al.*, 2005; Bui & Porter 2010), marketing (Kelley & Bridges, 2005), software development (Marks & Scholarios, 2008), engineering (Stiwne & Jungert, 2010) designate that the pace of technology and global business expansion is not moving in parallel to the pace of professionals' skills improvement.

Policy-makers, employers and commentators point to the HE's main responsibility to the development of marketable skills (CBI, 2003). HE graduates in most cases show a low level of communication, interpersonal and critical analysis skills including accounting and business administration (ABA) graduates (AAA, 1995; Hurt, 2007, Asonitou, 2014). European Commission and local governments have issued a series of practices, laws and policies in order to improve skills development of graduates and through this to improve employability, employment rates and competitiveness of EU. The establishment of European Crediting and Transferring System (ECTS), the National and European Qualifications Frameworks for the European Higher Education Area (QF- EHEA), the EQF for Lifelong Learning (EQF-LLL) and various research and reports (EC, 2008; Cedefop, 2013; Tuning, 2010) are intended to support the introduction and development of professional skills within HEIs. Accounting Education is recognised as the prime agent who will teach to future accounting practitioners and present students how to become “employable” that is how to develop a range of employability skills which include not only hard skills i.e. discipline specific skills, technical and IT skills but perhaps most importantly soft skills i.e. communication and interpersonal skills, ethics, critical thinking, leadership, entrepreneurship, life-long learning, problem-solving, social responsibility, adaptability, flexibility and others.

Researchers are pointing to various methods in order to promote employability skills in HE students like adapting the curricula to include specific skills courses, experiential and new instructional methods, using information technology in innovative ways, service learning, career planning, students' logbooks, extra-curricular activities, work-based education and others (Blackwell *et al.*, 2001; Bennett *et al.*, 2000).

3. Accounting Education and Employability Skills' gap in Greece

The importance of introducing employability soft skills and competences in the Greek workforce as well as the responsibility of HE to upgrade graduates' employability rates is starting to emerge in recent years (SEV, 2004; Katexi *et al.*, 2011; Panagiotakopoulos, 2012, EKPA, 2014; Kokkos, 2013). Studies have shown that in Greece similarly to other nations there is a gap between the actual and the expected skills of graduates in several professional fields (Asonitou, 2014; Vitouladiti, 2013).

HE courses could significantly contribute towards filling the skills gap and thus providing the market with highly qualified personnel which in turn can raise not only the firms' profits but also the overall prosperity of society. Vitouladiti (2014, p. 129) argues that in the tourism industry sector “the quality of human resources and services stands out as the most influential factor, for destinations that have reached maturity in their life cycle”. HE

accounting courses in an international context have been recognised as agents of change in the need to reinforce the generic employability skills of future accounting professionals (AECC, 1990; Big 8 White Paper, 1989; Hassall *et al.*, 2005).

In the Greek framework the need to re-organise accounting education structure, has started to appear by investigating the international accounting education trends and transformations (Asonitou and Hassall, 2008; Tourna-Germanou, 2006; Santouridis *et al.*, 2014). Two primary means exist among others that support the reinforcement of professional skills of accounting students; improving teaching and learning approaches and extending efficient work-based education in all tertiary education accounting programs (Leveson, 2004; Beard, 2007).

3.1. *Teaching approaches in Greek Accounting Education*

The Greek HE system is characterized so far by the wide spread of the lecturing method and the flat traditional approaches to teaching (Kokosalakis, 2000). The teaching of accounting, like other disciplines, is delivered in large size classes, is treated as a mainly technical subject and the teacher-centred concept dominates accounting classrooms. Other methods, like peer teaching, group projects, role-playing, case studies, active participation and simulations, are rarely used and depend on the teacher's initiative (Asonitou and Koutoulas, 2013). The assessment of accounting courses typically consists of technical questions and problems to be resolved with one correct answer. Promoting employability skills is not a priority for accounting teachers.

Recent research during the economic crisis (Asonitou, 2014) has investigated the opinions of all stakeholders regarding the introduction of generic employability skills in ABA departments of Greek HEIs. Accounting teachers, ABA students, and accounting practitioners were surveyed for their opinion on the need to introduce professional skills in Greek HE accounting courses. Preliminary results indicate among others that there is actually a gap between the expected and the actual employability skills delivered by the Greek HEIs. The reasons for this mismatch constitute a complex issue that tap on different sides of the Greek society. Among them is the attitude and culture of accounting teachers who find soft/employability skills "nice to have" but not imperative at this point of time by the accountants, the missing motivation for teachers to devote extra time taken from research activities and the lack of teacher training. On the other side accounting practitioners stress the necessity for accountants to acquire a wide range of professional skills as the working environment is becoming more and more competitive and demanding. Students in accounting courses are not prepared to participate in active and demanding learning. They appear unwilling to undertake the responsibility for their own learning; they usually evaluate lower the teachers who make efforts to apply innovative teaching methods therefore teachers tend to abandon their efforts.

3.2. *Work-based education in Greece*

Internship programs or work-placements (W-P) have been recognised as one of the most efficient methods to bridge the gap between education and employment requirements. The contribution of internships is huge given the learning opportunities which improve the work choices, support students to develop initiatives, self-confidence and maturity and offer to prospective employees secure low-cost training (Sapp & Zhang, 2009; Raelin, 2011).

In the Greek public HEIs work-based education has been well established the last decade. Work-placements have become an obligatory stage for students studying ABA and other disciplines in Higher Technological Educational Institutions (ATEI) and is an optional one for students of Universities. Although the usefulness and importance of internships in the Greek educational system cannot be doubted and is continually spreading in Universities (Mihail, 2006) there is evidence that changes and new tools should be used in order to reap more benefits from W-P following the example of other Institutions abroad (Beard, 2007; Beck and Halim, 2008). The following points are suggested in order to make W-P an interactive, easily evaluated and effective experience.

- Reassure it is an added value process for all students. Should make sure that work-placement is a period with added value and not just one more compulsory prerequisite for the student to obtain his degree. There are cases that students complain about the boring and repetitive character of their 6-month occupation during internship. This result in W-P becoming a ritual process and not a "living experience". Businesses should be committed to

occupy partly the trainee in a specific high demanding project next to experienced executives so that the trainee is not occupied solely in routine, low - demanding tasks.

- Define the student's preferences. The student should define his working targets in advance i.e. financial accounting, auditing, management accounting, logistics or marketing and should decide jointly with the HR department of the firm about their occupation. There are times that students do not really make any choice because either they are eager to start or they do not know which their preferences are or the firm imposes its decisions.
- Internships should start earlier in the educational process. Small portions of employment should be provided to the students by organizing short periods of (one or two-month) working experiences early in their academic life even at the end of the first year of studies. Should not leave all W-P to happen at the last year. This activity would introduce students to the professional world, help them mature and even identify and decide easier on their own professional preferences.
- One-day working service. Special agreements with firms could be signed so students can selectively work in specific projects for one day per week for a defined period for specific tasks. Again this would introduce them on the needs and the expectations that employers will have from them in the future. This service might count as part of their mark on a specific course with proper provision for their assessment.
- Increased communication between teachers and trainees. There should be continuous communication between the trainee and the academic supervisor during the internship so that the trainee has the feeling of the continuity of the educational experience.
- Strengthen the reflective practice. Feedback and reflection is missing from the current organization of the W-P. The students undertake their internship at the 8th semester of their studies (last semester) and normally have passed the majority of the courses. Even if the student has not passed the courses the full-time W-P makes it impossible for the student to attend any courses and therefore misses contact with his/her studies. The result is that the W-P as the last step of a learning experience does not provide the student with the opportunity to discuss his/her experience, to clarify issues and questions raised during internship and generally there are no opportunities for feedback. Therefore we need to reorganise our W-P in such a way that at the end of the process there is time and the proper procedures that allow for feedback, discussion, evaluation and transfer of ideas from work to education in real terms. Students when they finish their W-P should write a short report and make an oral presentation. This presentation could include a description of the company, their tasks during internship, their estimated learning, the benefits they received, their critique on the curriculum related to the real world. Future trainees, teachers and representatives of the firm could attend and participate in the dialogue. This process would enhance the students' communication and presentation skills.

4. Discussion

The above proposals target to introduce a reflective practice on the work-based education so that the cycle of learning can be completed and the theoretical concepts that were delivered in previous years can be coupled with an experiential dimension. A second important reason is the transfer of ideas, practices, and knowledge from the working world to the educational world. Teachers will have the opportunity to receive critical comments over educational procedures and over curriculum in a responsive, dialogical and direct manner.

Teachers involved in W-P face a time-consuming and difficult task that takes valuable time from their research interests and is not rewarded or appreciated as it should be (English & Lewison, 1979). In order to be successful in their mission teachers not only should be personally engaged but should have the support of their department, their colleagues and the Institution they work for. Therefore they should be provided with the proper resources for administrative, technological and communication needs. They should also be supported for the organisation of day-conferences and presentations and should be given teaching hours allowances for their engagement with W-P. The re-organisation and enrichment of W-P is highly important for HEIs and for the country to be left to continue as a ritual that is repetitively organised, unchanged and untouched by the changes and needs of society.

Finally, action should be undertaken to change the attitude of the Greek accounting firms towards W-P. The majority of them use interns in order to satisfy short-term needs for low qualified personnel with boring, repetitive

tasks. Very few companies, mainly the large ones or multinationals, invest on trainees, assign specific trainee supervisor and treat W-P as the main pool to select and recruit future employees.

5. Conclusion

The discussion on employability skills is starting to emerge in the Greek society and HEIs. Teachers and policy-makers agree on the importance of providing skills and competences in students but in real terms this has not yet come into the forefront of the educational practice and the reasons should be further explored. The role of governments should also be examined. Organizations and states need to take into consideration the way they may communicate with the public in different sectors (Kavoura, 2013). The role of media and social media with the creation of communities of like-minded people (Kavoura, 2014), in the specific case of people associated with employability issues, may well play a significant role and needs to be further explored. The development of competitive advantage, based on technology (Sakas, Vlachos, Nasiopoulos, 2014)

Attitudes, methods and practices need to be re-examined in relation to teaching and learning approaches, assessment and work-based education in the Greek public HEIs.

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