

Business and university collaboration: how partnership leads to gaining key competences by graduates?

Sylwia Alicja Biały¹, Jacek Markowski¹ and Monika Brzakala¹

¹Wrocław Environmental and Life Sciences University, Norwida 25, 50-375 Wrocław, Poland

Abstract. This paper explores the role of business environment in connection between students and the labour market. Many employers claimed graduates do not possess essential skills that allow them to adapt effectively in the work environment. It is not caused by new workers' lack of knowledge or their not proper technical skills, but it is rather fault of their lack of drive and work ethic. University is often blamed for mismatch between student's skills and demands of the labour market. As a partner in education reform, the business environment can help students with gaining key competencies and skills.

Keywords: soft skills, employer, competencies, partnership, university, business

1. Introduction

Employers are becoming more and more demanding towards graduates who enter today's labour market. They demand from graduates skills and competences that should allow them to adapt effectively in the work environment. What we can observe in many countries is that employers are not satisfied with the skills graduates possess. It is said that there are too many graduates and what is more, most of them are not prepared for the world of work [12]. This tendency does not occur only in the European labor market. In one of the biggest American concerns, the Boeing Company, employers admit that they have to spend 13 weeks for training new employees for the jobs that used to require only half of this time. The reason is that the graduates did not have proper skills to operate materials effectively [9].

If we quote opinion of McKinsey Global Institute, that about 60% of occupations have at least 30% of their activities that are automatable, we will come to the conclusion that students should acquire competences that cannot be replaced by technologies. Thus it is essential that we should create education which enables acquisition of relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills. The purpose of education today should be concentrated on better compatibility with the needs of labour markets, education and also training systems [1]. This purpose can be achieved through collaboration between university and business.

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✉ jacek.markowski@upwr.edu.pl (J. Markowski); monika.brzakala@upwr.edu.pl (M. Brzakala)

🌐 <https://bazawiedzy.upwr.edu.pl/info/author/UPWr5cf3283bdc3b4b9d8941f7334b112a9a/> (J. Markowski);

<https://bazawiedzy.upwr.edu.pl/info/author/UPWrd5fd635941eb49698fb01778737b97b9/> (M. Brzakala)



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The most valuable sources of information about the needs of the labour market are the employers. They are practitioners, thus they can reflect upon this issue from a recent and updated point of view. In this context we are more focused on the competences, skills and graduates' way of thinking. Knowledge is also important, but every job requires some prior training.

The aim of this paper is to show that business can help universities in connecting students with the world of work [9]. We will focus on competences that are necessary in the modern workplace and we will try to prove that collaboration between university and business can help students acquire these skills.

2. Key competences in the today's workplace

In 2017, the level of unemployment among young people aged 20–34 who neither undertook professional activity nor studied in the European Union was 17.2%. Figure 1 shows the level of unemployment among young adults broken down by individual EU countries.

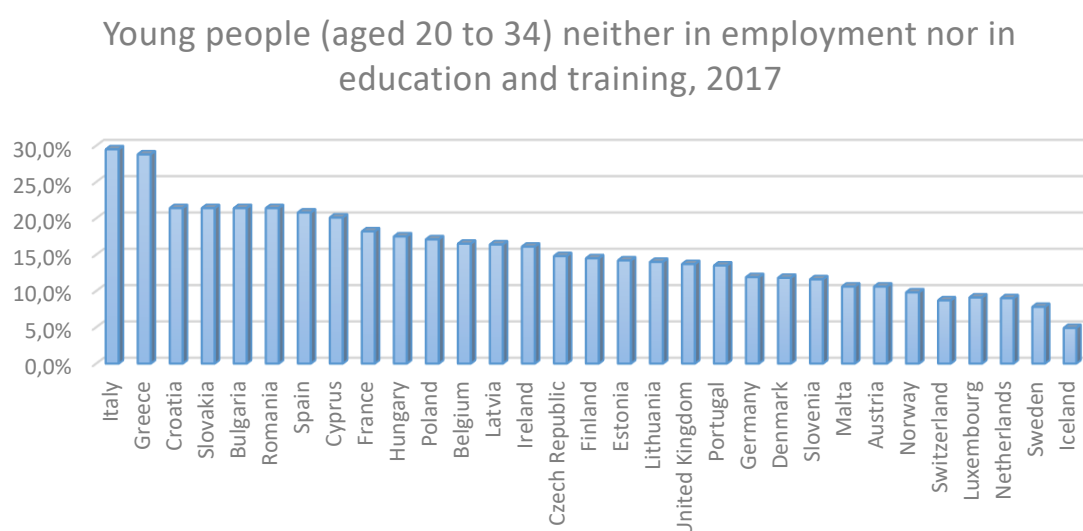


Figure 1: Young people (aged 20 to 34) neither in employment nor in education or training, 2017 (based on statics: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics_on_young_people_neither_in_employment_nor_in_education_or_training&oldid=397040).

From the chart we can see that in Italy and Greece the level of unemployment among young people is quite high – 29.5% and 28.8%, respectively. Then in Croatia, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania the level of inactivity among students is also quite high – it amounts to 21.4%. The group includes people who are professionally inactive and have not studied for at least four weeks during the survey. The potential cause of quite a large percentage of NEET in Europe, among others ones, can be lack of appropriate skills to work in a given area.

In the recent years there is a growing interest in the problem of how students' skills and competences fit today's labour market.

Employers do not only require basic skills from employees. Their expectations are higher. Some of the skills can be learned during work and most companies provide adequate training. However, some of basic competences are required from the beginning [4]. „Employability” of graduates depends on various factors – and „employability” is not only regarded as simply „getting a job”. More important is to have skills that allow an employee to stay in the job and strive to get a promotion [2]. What skills are the most required? The Federal Government in the Australia has indentified a list of skills that increase probability of achieving a success in the work life. Although this list is related to another continent, we can see that these skills are universal for most of the workplaces [2]:

1. Communication
2. Teamwork
3. Problem solving
4. Initiative and enterprise
5. Planning and organising
6. Self-management
7. Learning
8. Technology

A good balance between these skills – based on other circumstances such as position, profile of industry etc. – provides a good worker. They are essential for various work environments. As we can see, not all of the skills are connected with technical competences. Communication, teamwork, problem solving or planning and organizing are more associated with „soft skills competences”. It is noticeable that in the recent years employers are also more focused on this area. We do not know if the forecast about automating most of the activities in the workplace is too wishful or maybe just accurate, but the fact is that employers are more and more appreciative of skills that are not connected with science or IT. Still, they are very important but according to the report by Todd [11] proper judgment and decision making or critical thinking are more significant. Even the best computer cannot replace these skills.

Why soft skills are so important? Because they cannot be replaced and they influence relations among employees, co-workers, clients. Especially when we work with clients – in this context „clients” might be a house buyer as well as a student – we must have the ability to communicate effectively with various people. Also we have to understand clients’ need and reasoning, and be able to make a good self-presentation. Employers from UK emphasized in the survey the importance of soft skill competences. Nearly 100% of them consider „social and interpersonal skills” and „verbal communication skills” essential for workplace. At the same time they admit that most of these skills are learnt within the family context (61%) or at school (55%) – only 33% think that they can be learnt in college. Undoubtedly these skills are part of lifelong learning and they depend on various factors, but higher education can help with acquiring or developing them.

According to employers many of graduates do not possess essential skills. Based on „Diagnoza stanu Szkolnictwa Wyższego” (*Diagnosis of the State of Higher University Education*) prepared by Ernst & Young Business Advisory study programs do not match the needs of today’s labour market and do not equip students with the necessary, universal (transitive) skills and do not

teach appropriate work culture to them. Such opinions are also to be found in other countries. American employers, for instance, claim that finding a suitable job applicant is difficult. It is not caused by candidates' lack of knowledge or their not proper technical skills, but it is rather due to their lack of drive and work ethic. In the Australia employers were often disappointed with such skills as teamwork, leadership, verbal communication ability and interpersonal skills of graduates [2]. In the UK the government blames universities for this mismatch. It is hard to discuss advisability of this statement, because obviously not only higher education is responsible for acquiring these competences. Still, university can be the institution which supports students in the developing the above mentioned skills, especially in collaboration with other partners. We can repeat after The Education Task Force of the Illinois Business Round Table that *The business community, in partnership with political and education leaders, must play a significant leadership role in education reform* [9]. According to many authors partnership between higher education institutions and industry is a good method for insertion in the labor market, for the student's professional skills and competences development [10].

3. University-business collaboration

There are two paradigms of thought about the role of the university and higher education. The first one is based on a more practical approach, which includes global and supranational recommendations (including the World Bank, OECD and European Commission) along with the directions of higher education reforms supported by the ideas of New Public Management. On the other hand, we have a more traditional paradigm, according to which the academic community is a value in itself that needs to be cultivated – and the academic environment itself is characterized by elitism [5]. In this text we show that only the first of these paradigms can contribute to the development of the university and will allow for more practical education, preparing students for future professional life – and therefore it is necessary to follow the path of reforms. In the past education might not have a link with the surroundings. Why? Because most of the students came from wealthy families – they did not have to gain competences essential for the labour market. When somebody was an excellent student, they could start their own academic career [8]. Now the situation has changed. Students have to be prepared for the labour market – and one of the university's mission is to train future workers. Obviously, not only university is responsible for that.

Relations with the environment are according to the “Diagnosis of the State of Higher Education” the third mission of Polish universities and one of the key activities aimed at reforming higher education. One of the issues in this area is cooperation between universities and employers in order to adapt education programs to the needs of the modern labor market. It should be noted that this action will be beneficial both from the point of view of the university and students as well as employers themselves. Thanks to such cooperation, the university has the opportunity to improve the education program and teach students in accordance with the needs of the labor market, as well as in the field of external activities – to promote the institution itself and to gain additional funds. On the other hand, the business environment has the chance to recruit candidates equipped with the necessary skills, as well as get an opportunity for additional education for their employees (lifelong learning) and raise their qualifications,

and as a result – higher employee productivity. Cooperation builds a positive image of both entities.

The model of collaboration between university and business is shown at figure 2.

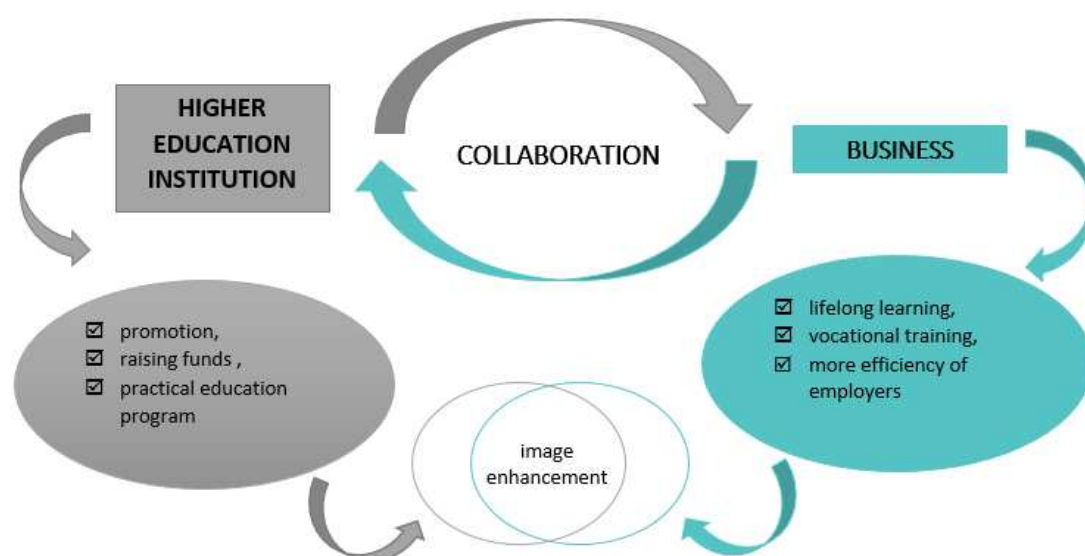


Figure 2: Model of U-B collaboration.

The third element is the satisfaction of the students themselves, who in the studies carried out in the EU27 in 2007 almost unanimously (97%) stated that the most important thing for them was that the universities should provide them with the skills and knowledge necessary in the labor market. In addition, the level of qualifications of students is also of interest to the business environment. A graduate equipped with the necessary skills is at the same time a good employee. Therefore, we have three groups of beneficiaries: university, business and students. The model of this collaboration is shown at figure 3.

Benefits from this collaboration are clarified. Now we can consider how university can collaborate with business. In the State of European UBC Report there have been pointed out 8 possible types of such cooperation [3]:

1. Collaboration in R&D (Research and Development) – consists in R&D activities, contract research, R&D consulting, collaboration in innovation, joint publications with company scientists/researches and also joint supervision of Bachelor, Master or PhD theses or projects in cooperation with business environment.
2. Mobility of academics – includes temporary movement of professors, researchers from HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) to business; also employees, managers and researches can transfer from business to HEIs.
3. Mobility of students – students temporarily move from HEIs to business (internships).
4. Commercialization of R&D results – includes the commercialization of R&D results.
5. Curriculum development & delivery – includes mutual development of courses, modules,

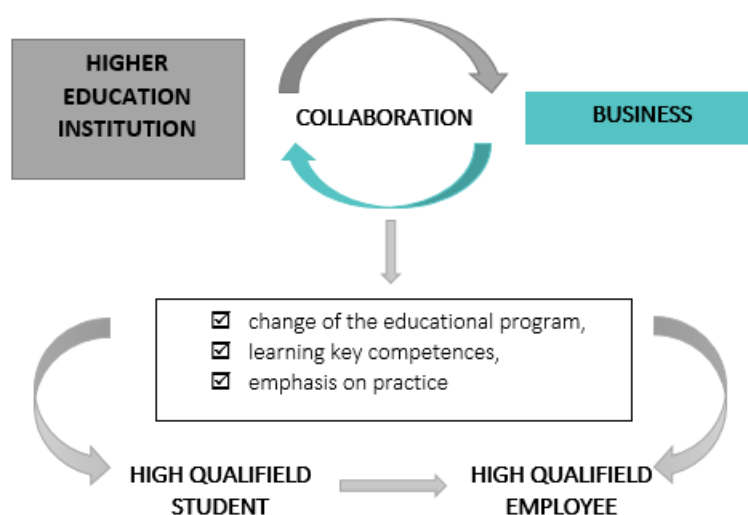


Figure 3: Model of U-B-S collaboration.

majors or minors, planned experiences as well as guest lectures by delegates from both private and public organizations with undergraduate, graduate or PhD programs.

6. Lifelong learning – is related to adult education, permanent and/or continuing education involving the acquisition of skills, competencies, knowledge attitudes and behaviours by HEIs to people working in organization.
7. Entrepreneurship – includes HEIs action towards the creation of the new ventures or developing entrepreneurial mind-sets in collaboration with business.
8. Governance – considers academics who are involved in firm decision-making or sitting in company boards and also having business leaders involved in HEI decision-making or play the role of a faculty manager.

In this paper we are interested especially in Curriculum development & delivery, lifelong learning and entrepreneurship. However, we would like to emphasize that every aspect of this collaboration is important. According to the results of the research of „The State of University-Business Cooperation in Poland”, it was proved that collaboration between university and business in Poland is lower than in other European countries.

There are different ways of collaborating with business. At the highest level in terms of structure, we will talk about cooperation between the entire university and a given company. All the above examples are based on this type of cooperation. Then, cooperation between non- departmental university units and enterprises can be distinguished – for example, the implementation of a specific project. Finally, one can distinguish designing single courses or classes that will be adapted to the needs of the labor market. We can involve entrepreneurs here, who also have a general education, to give a lecture or conduct the entire course during a semester. However, even the participation of representatives of this environment is not necessary in each case – we can use teaching methods that will meet the needs of the labor market without direct participation of the company. An example of such a method will be

presented later in this text. The structural ways of collaborating between HEI and business is shown at figure 4.

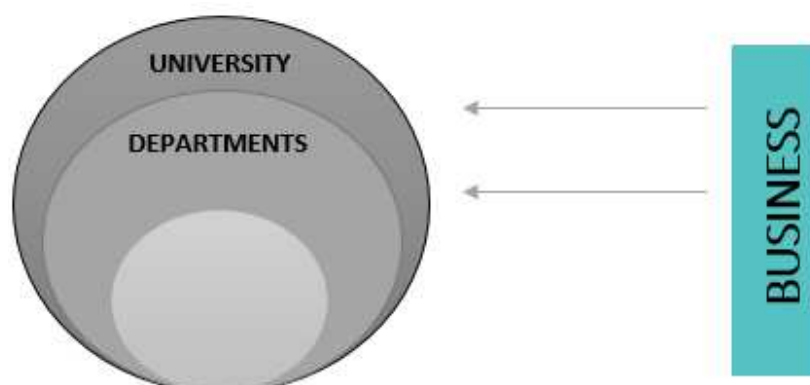


Figure 4: The model of collaborating between HEI and business.

We can also design courses for employees. The best form to design courses in harmony with work environment is e-learning and modern technology. The use of technology and multimedia to assist in education is quite an old concept, but it is still expanding [7]. Technology skills were mentioned in the previous list and it is not negotiable that they are a very important competence. Additionally, e-learning as a common form of learning in higher education (blended learning) and in business environment can be beneficial in this collaboration. Especially in the aspect of lifelong learning of employees it seems to be the best solution. We have to remember that business is a specific area – and time is one of the most valuable things for this environment. And how to save time and learn? By doing it in any time in any place – and that is that what e-learning can provide us with. There are plenty of e-learning courses, but the guarantee of quality is something that university offers.

Collaboration between business and university takes various forms. However, regardless of the form academic education could not occur in isolation from the surroundings. Only including the needs of today's labour market will allow us to create an educational program that teaches essential skills and competences. In spite of this university does not become less elitist through collaboration with industries. This kind of collaboration can increase the educational potential of an institution and have a good influence on university's image, promotion and funds. Business environment also benefits from this kind of partnership. Better students are better graduates – and in the near future better employees. The main beneficiaries of this collaboration are students. They have a chance to gain key competencies and fit in today's labour market – which is not always easy.

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