

COMPETENCES OF UNIVERSITY GRADUATES FROM ECONOMICS AND MANAGEMENT, AS PERCEIVED BY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND EMPLOYERS – RESEARCH REPORT

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Abstract:

As a consequence of Poland's accession to the structures of the European Union and the resulting idea to create the European Higher Education Area, the issues related to the university graduates' competences acquired during their education have become particularly vital. One of the decisions by the Bologna Process is a necessity to reform the curricula of university courses in order to standardize the competences acquired as a result of studying particular university courses in individual European countries. The reform of higher education system offers colleges and universities significant autonomy regarding the development of university curricula which should be based on the effects of education (knowledge, skills and attitudes revealed by the graduates). National Councils for Educational Qualifications are supposed to create a reference platform for individual university courses at the higher level, based on educational effects and competences. Competences are understood here as a combination of knowledge and its comprehension, professional, interpersonal, intellectual and practical skills, as well as ethical values. This is the definition of competences that has been used in the present work. The present study constitutes a part of more extensive research regarding the competences possessed by the graduates from economics and management university courses, in reference to the requirements of the modern job market. The empirical material was collected on the basis of studies conducted in the years 2009-2011 with the use of a diagnostic survey. The studies included two groups of respondents. The first one was made by employers potentially offering work to the graduates of economics and management university courses. The other group consisted of students of the final, fifth, year at three state universities in Lublin, namely John Paul II Catholic University, Maria Skłodowska-Curie University and the Technical University.

Keywords: competences, economics and management students, significance of competences at work, the level of competences gained during studies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Changes observed on the global job market, the reform of university curricula, new expectations regarding the colleges of higher education among the society all imply a necessity to conduct research concerning the issues outlined in the title of the present work. They refer to the competences of economics and management university graduates, analyzed in two aspects – that of their role in the graduates' future professional career and their level acquired at university. The present study constitutes a part of a more extensive work concerning the competences of economics and management university graduates in reference to the requirements of the contemporary job market.

As a consequence of Poland's accession to the structures of the European Union and the resulting idea to create the European Higher Education Area the issues referring to the graduates' competences has become particularly vital. One of the main decisions of the Bologna Process was a necessity to reform higher education curricula in order to standardize the competences acquired during studying particular university courses in individual European countries. Changes in this area are supposed to facilitate the professional mobility of the citizens among different EU countries (as a result of opening their job markets), as well as to promote continuous learning.

This process was initiated by creating the Qualification Framework for the European Higher Education Area, or QF for EHEA in short, which was followed by developing guidelines for the National Qualification Framework (or NQF) in the signatory states. The European Qualification Framework is a common system linking the systems in particular countries and facilitating the comprehension of qualifications. The reform of higher education based on QF for EHEA gives universities significant autonomy regarding developing study curricula which should be based on educational effects (knowledge, skills and attitudes revealed by the graduates)¹. NQF are supposed to create a reference platform for individual courses at the higher level, based on educational effects and competences. Competences are understood here as a combination of knowledge and its comprehension, professional, interpersonal, intellectual and practical skills, as well as ethical values. This is the definition of competences that has been used in the methodology of the present work.

The empirical material was collected on the basis of studies conducted in the years 2009-2011 with the use of a diagnostic survey. The studies included two groups of respondents. The first one was made by employers potentially offering work to the graduates of economics and management university courses. The other group consisted of students of the final, fifth, year at three state universities in Lublin, namely John Paul II Catholic University, Maria Skłodowska-Curie University and the Technical University.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The issues discussed in the present work concern the competences of economics and management university graduates, regarded in reference to their role in professional career and the level reached at university. The respondents were asked to assess 30 general

¹<http://www.nauka.gov.pl/finansowanie/fundusze-europejskie/program-operacyjny-kapital-ludzki/krajowe-ramy-kwalifikacji/krajowe-ramy-kwalifikacji-dla-polskiego-szkolnictwa-wyzszego/>, November 2010.

competences and 10 managerial competences. The empirical analyses were conducted on the basis of the authors' own questionnaire.

The research tool was constructed with the use of the methodology used in the project entitled "Tuning Educational Structures in Europe" (Gonzalez & Wagenaar, 2003), distinguishing instrumental, interpersonal and systemic competences. Due to the specific character of individual courses analysed in the questionnaire, managerial competences were additionally taken into account. Following the structure of the Tuning tool, the answer cafeteria ranging from 1 (none, of low significance) up to 4 (significant) was proposed. The competences were regarded in two aspects, taking into consideration:

- their role in the respondents' future professional career;
- the level of competences reached by the respondents at university.

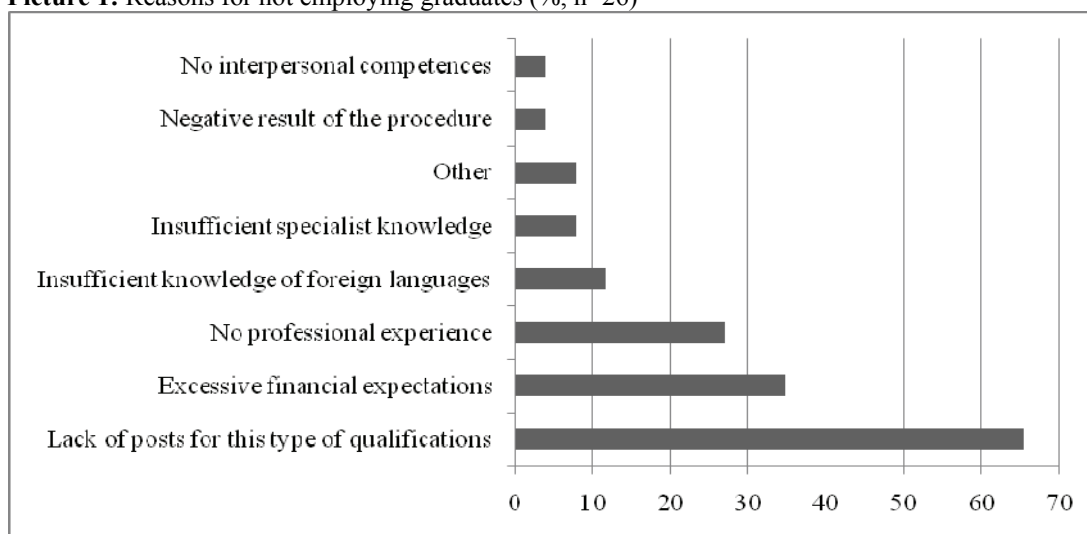
The empirical material was collected on the basis of studies conducted in the years 2009–2011 with the use of a diagnostic survey. The studies included two groups of respondents. The first one was made by the students of the final, fifth, year at three state universities in Lublin, namely:

- Maria Curie-Skłodowska University (UMCS), Economics, Management and Finance and Accounting;
- Technical University of Lublin (PL), Management and Marketing;
- John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (KUL), Management.

The other group of respondents was constituted by the employers representing companies potentially offering work to the graduates of courses in Economics and management.

The employers analysed in the study represented 80 companies with their branches in the Lublin Region. 54 (68 %) of the studied companies were currently employing university graduates of Economics and Management. The remaining 26 enterprises did not employ such people at the time of conducting the research. Picture 1 presents answers to the question about the reason for not employing such graduates in those companies.

Picture 1: Reasons for not employing graduates (% , n=26)



*The replies do not add up to 100 %, as it was possible to give more than one answer.

The most frequent reason for not employing the graduates of the studied university courses was the lack of vacancies for people with this type of educational background (65 % of the

respondents). A significant percentage of the respondents (35 %) indicated excessive financial expectations of the candidates seeking work. Another vital issue was the lack of professional experience among the graduates, which was suggested by 27 % of the respondents. The least significant factors were the negative result of the job interview and the lack of interpersonal skills, at the level of 4 %.

The remaining questions were addressed only at those employers who were offering jobs in their companies to the graduates of the analysed university courses. A vast majority (76 %) of the respondents declared maintaining the present level of employment in the near future, however 4 % admitted their plans to reduce the number of full-time posts (Picture 2).

Picture 2: Plans regarding employment (% , n=54)

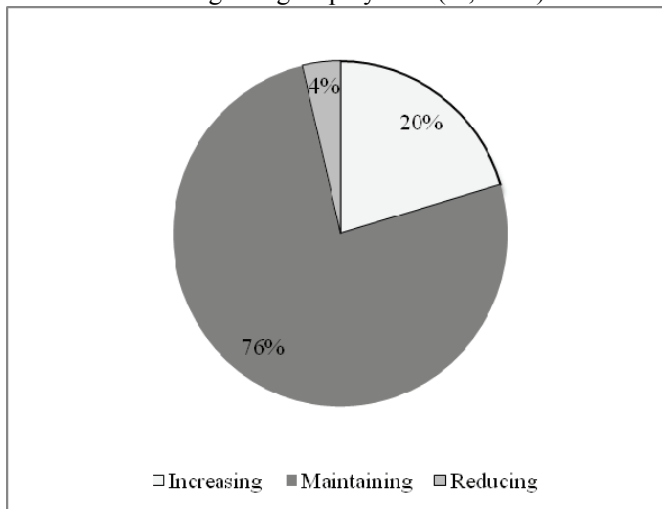


Table 1 presents the structure of the studied enterprises, half of which were companies offering services and 30% was manufacturing and sales businesses. Nearly 40 % of the respondents were medium-size companies (employing 50 to 250 people), and the least numerous were micro businesses (1 to 9 employees).

Table 1: The structure of the analyzed companies (% , n=54)

Sector*	manufacturing	30
	sales	30
	services	50
	public	15
	other	2
Number of employees	1 to 9	11
	10-49	22
	50-250	39
	above 250	28

* The replies do not add up to 100%, as it was possible to give more than one answer .

Most of the respondents representing the analysed companies were women (Table 2, 61 %) and people occupying managerial positions (52 %). The least numerous individuals were people occupying executive positions (4 %).

Table 2: The structure of company representatives (% , n=54)

Sex	F	61
	M	39
Position	Manager	52
	Independent specialist	44
	Executive	4

The study included a total of 292 students. After verifying the correctness of the completed questionnaires, we finally considered 278 questionnaires.

The structure of the respondents is presented in Table 3. The most numerous group was represented by the young people studying at PL and UMCS (85 % altogether). The least numerous group studied at KUL. While characterizing the respondents according to their sex, it should be noted that 61 % of them were women. Most of the respondents were residents of urban areas (65 %). Nearly 30 % of the respondents were earning their living. The majority of the respondents (64 %) defined their material status as average, and only 9 % as low. Analyzing the respondents' structure in reference to their educational achievements (measured by the mean arithmetic of their grades in the final year of studies), it was observed that nearly half of them (47 %) were good students with their average grade above good.

Table 3: Respondents' structure – fifth year students (% , n=278)

University	
KUL	15
PL	44
UMCS	42
Sex	
F	61
M	39
Place of residence	
Rural area	35
Urban area	65
Working for money	
yes	29
no	71
Material status	
good	27
average	64
low	9
Mean results	
up to 3.5	16
3.51-4.0	37
4.01-4.5	38
4.5 and above	9

3. REASEARCH OUTCOME

Tables 4-7 present the results of comparative analyses in reference to particular groups of competences.

Table 4: A comparison of instrumental competences in both groups of respondents

Item	Instrumental competences	Role in professional career		Difference between 1 and 2	Level reached at university		Difference between 3 and 4
		P	S		P	S	
		rank	rank	rank	rank		
		1	2	3	4	di=1-2	di=3-4
1	Ability to analyze and synthesize	5.5	9.0	-3.5	2.0	8.0	-6.0
2	Organizational and planning skills	2.0	1.0	1.0	5.0	5.0	0.0
3	Basic general knowledge	9.0	10.0	-1.0	6.0	3.0	3.0
4	Rudiments of general knowledge in particular profession	8.0	8.0	0.0	3.5	9.0	-5.5
5	Using mother tongue in speech and writing	4.0	6.0	-2.0	10.0	1.0	9.0
6	Foreign languages	10.0	4.0	6.0	3.5	10.0	-6.5
7	Basic IT skills	7.0	7.0	0.0	9.0	4.0	5.0
8	Ability to manage information	3.0	5.0	-2.0	7.0	2.0	5.0
9	Problem solving	1.0	3.0	-2.0	1.0	6.0	-5.0
10	Decision taking	5.5	2.0	3.5	8.0	7.0	1.0

Legend: P – employers, S – students of the fifth year, di – difference between ranks.

The analysis comparing the opinions expressed by employers and fifth year students on the role of instrumental competences revealed the biggest differences in case of the ability to speak foreign languages, with the employers placing it on the last, tenth, position and the students regarding it as the fourth most important skill.

As regards the competences acquired at university, students indicated a significantly higher level in reference to:

- written and oral communication in their mother tongue; extremely different markings were observed here in the hierarchy of importance regarding this quality (the 10th position among the employers and the 1st position according to the students);
- basic IT skills (the 9th position to the employers, the 4th position to the students);
- the ability to manage information (no. 7 to the employers, no. 2 to the students).

On the other hand, the employers attributed more importance to the competences regarding:

- foreign languages (3.5 according to the employers vs. 10 according to students);
- the ability to analyze and synthesize (positions 2 and 8, respectively);
- rudiments of general knowledge in a particular job (3.5 vs. 9).

Table 5: A comparison of assessment regarding interpersonal competences by both groups of respondents

Item	Interpersonal competences	Role in professional career		Difference between 1 and 2	Level reached at university		Difference between 3 and 4
		P	S		P	S	
		rank	rank		rank	rank	
		1	2	3	4	di=1-2	di=3-4
1	Criticism and self-criticism	4.0	6.0	-2.0	2.0	3.0	-1.0
2	Ability to work in team	1.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	1.0	0.0
3	Interpersonal skills	2.0	2.0	0.0	5.0	2.0	3.0
4	Ability to work in an inter-disciplinary team	3.0	4.0	-1.0	6.0	4.0	2.0
5	Ability to communicate with experts in other disciplines	5.0	3.0	2.0	4.0	6.0	-2.0
6	Understanding diversity and cultural pluralism	7.0	7.0	0.0	7.0	5.0	2.0
7	Ability to work in international environment	6.0	5.0	1.0	3.0	7.0	-4.0
8	Ethnic engagement	8.0	8.0	0.0	8.0	8.0	0.0

Legend: P – employers, S – fifth year students, di – difference between ranks.

In case of assessing interpersonal competences, we observed a clear unanimity in the opinions expressed by both groups of respondents in reference to their significance at work and the competences acquired during studies. Only in a few cases the opinions of the employers and students varied, and the biggest discrepancy was noted in case of the level of the ability to work in an international environment, acquired at university, with the students assessing themselves much worse than the employees (the 3rd place in the employees' ranking vs. the 7th to the students).

Table 6: A comparison of the assessment of systemic competences by both groups of the respondents

Item	Systemic competences	Role in professional career		Difference between 1 and 2	Level reached at university		Difference between 3 and 4
		P	S		P	S	
		rank	rank		rank	rank	
		1	2	3	4	di=1-2	di=3-4
1	Ability to use knowledge in practice	3.0	1.0	2.0	8.0	10.5	-2.5
2	Ability to do research	11.0	11.0	0.0	5.0	10.5	-5.5
3	Ability to learn	4.0	7.5	-3.5	4.0	1.0	3.0
4	Ability to adapt oneself to new situations	6.5	2.0	4.5	9.5	5.0	4.5
5	Ability to create new concepts	5.0	3.0	2.0	12.0	8.0	4.0
6	Leadership skills	10.0	10.0	0.0	3.0	9.0	-6.0
7	Understanding the culture and customs in other countries	12.0	12.0	0.0	11.0	12.0	-1.0
8	Ability to work independently	1.0	4.0	-3.0	7.0	2.0	5.0
9	Developing and running projects	9.0	9.0	0.0	1.0	3.0	-2.0
10	Initiative and entrepreneurship	6.5	6.0	0.5	9.5	7.0	2.5
11	Caring about quality	2.0	5.0	-3.0	6.0	6.0	0.0
12	Will to become successful	8.0	7.5	0.5	2.0	4.0	-2.0

Legend: P – employers, S – students of the fifth year, di – difference between ranks.

The comparison referring to the systemic competences showed that both groups of the respondents were unanimous as far as the last position in the ranking of the significance of particular competences in the professional career was concerned. As for the higher positions, the biggest difference was observed in reference to their assessment of the ability to adapt oneself to new situations. According to the employers, this competences was not particularly vital at work (they placed it in the middle of the ranking), while the students decided that it was very important and put it in the second place. Bigger discrepancies were also noted in case of assessing the level of competences acquired during studies, with the employers giving more significance to leadership skills among the graduates (3 vs. 9) and the ability to do research (5 vs. 10.5).

On the other hand, the students attributed more significance to their skills regarding:

- independent work (7 vs. 2);
- becoming adapted to new situations (9.5 vs. 5);
- developing new concepts - creativity (12 vs. 8).

Table 7: A comparison of the assessment regarding managerial skills by both groups of the respondents

Item	Managerial competences	Role in professional career		Difference between 1 and 2 di=1-2	Level reached at university		Difference between 3 and 4 di-3-4
		P	S		P	S	
		rank	rank		rank	rank	
		1	2		3	4	
1	Managing change	4.0	9.0	-5.0	3.0	8.0	-5.0
2	Specialist knowledge	1.0	2.0	-1.0	4.0	9.0	-5.0
3	Knowledge concerning management	3.0	3.0	0.0	1.0	2.0	-1.0
4	Knowledge concerning strategic management	8.0	6.5	1.5	10.0	5.0	5.0
5	Knowledge concerning managing human resources	9.0	6.5	2.5	9.0	3.0	6.0
6	Knowledge of legal problems	10.0	10.0	0.0	7.5	6.0	1.5
7	Knowledge of financial issues	6.0	4.5	1.5	5.0	4.0	1.0
8	Knowledge of marketing	2.0	4.5	-2.5	6.0	1.0	5.0
9	Global thinking and action	7.0	8.0	-1.0	2.0	7.0	-5.0
10	Professional experience	5.0	1.0	4.0	7.5	10.0	-2.5

Legend: P – employers, S – students of the fifth year, di – difference between ranks.

The analysis of the ranking of managerial competences revealed the largest discrepancies concerning the role regarding change management which were more significant to the employers than to the students (4 vs. 9), and the professional experience which was the most vital in this particular group of competences in the opinion of the students (5 vs. 1). The ranking concerning the level of competences acquired during studies showed more differences. The employers had a higher opinion on the level of competences revealed by their employees in reference to:

- global thinking and action (2 vs. 7);
- change management (3 vs. 8);
- specialist knowledge (4 vs. 9).

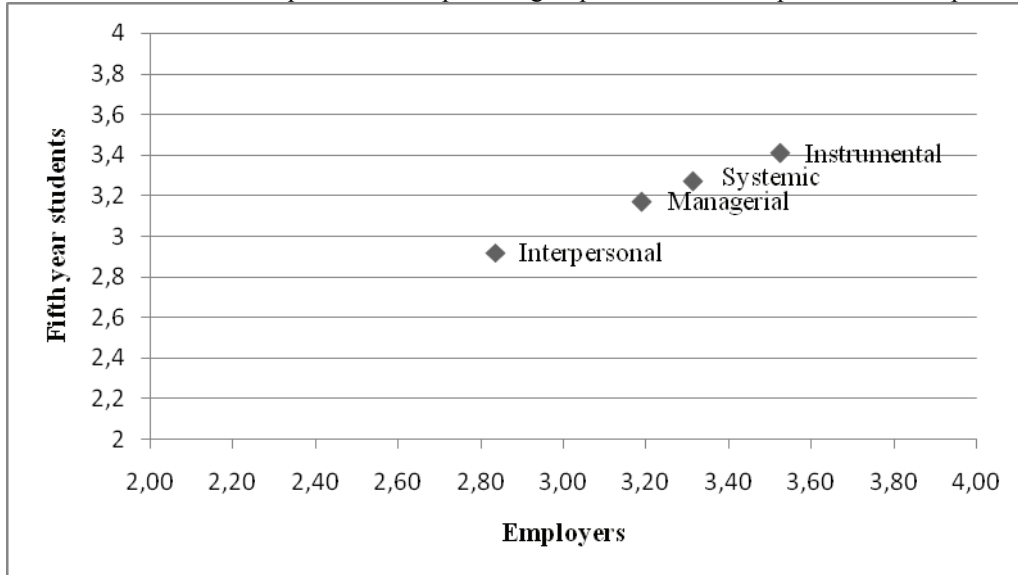
On the other hand, the students gave a higher position to the knowledge acquired by them during their studies, in the area of:

- human resources management (9 vs. 3);

- marketing (6 vs. 1);
- strategic management (10 vs. 5).

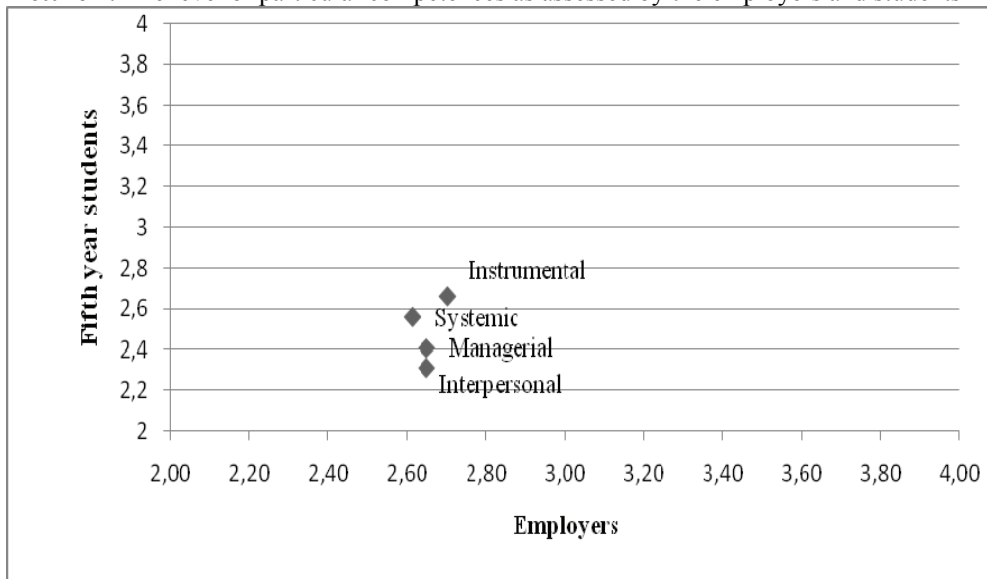
Pictures 3 and 4 present a graphic comparison of the opinions expressed by both groups of the respondents on the meaning of particular competences at work (Picture 3) and the level acquired by the students at university (Picture 4).

Picture 3: The role of the particular competence groups at work in the opinion of the respondents



The opinions of the employers and students on the significance of particular competences in professional work are relatively similar, which is confirmed by the situation of the points on the graph along the main diagonal. Individual groups of the competences were assessed as follows: instrumental competences were most important at work according to both groups of respondents, followed by systemic, managerial and, finally, interpersonal competences.

Picture 4: The level of particular competences as assessed by the employers and students



The level of particular competences presented by the graduates of economic and managerial university courses employed in the companies (according to the employers) and the students of the final year of these courses is shown graphically in Picture 4. Each of the assessed groups of competences was evaluated much lower in comparison to the opinion expressed in reference to their role at work (Picture 3). Students' self-evaluation revealed a particularly low significance given to interpersonal (2.31) and managerial (2.41) competences. In both cases the importance hierarchy of particular competences was maintained (identical like in case of their significance at work – Picture 3).

4. SUMMARY

The analysis of the results revealed that the opinions expressed by the employers and the students on the role of particular competences in professional career were quite unanimous. According to both groups of the respondents, the most important competences at work were instrumental competences, followed by systemic, managerial and, finally, interpersonal competences.

On the other hand, the ranking of the level of particular competences presented by the graduates employed in the analyzed companies and the students of the final year at university demonstrated that each of the estimated competence groups was assessed by the respondents much lower than it was observed in case of judging their significance at work.

The relationships of the rankings look slightly different when individual partial competences are regarded. A comparative analysis of the respondents' opinions regarding instrumental competences showed the most significant differences in respect to the role of foreign languages in professional career. According to the employers, foreign languages were least important among all the competences considered, whereas the students placed linguistic competences higher than half-way through the ranking. Reversed results in the area of the knowledge of foreign languages were presented in the ranking of the acquired competences. Students who believed that foreign languages were important at work admitted at the same time that they had developed such competences to the lowest degree during their studies.

The analysis of opinions concerning interpersonal competences revealed a high similarity between the opinions presented by both groups of the respondents, regarding both their role at work and the competences acquired at university.

The respondents were equally unanimous in their assessment of the meaning of systemic competences at work. In this sphere an interesting difference was observed, however, in case of the abilities to adapt oneself to new situations. It was not particularly vital in the employers' opinion, whereas the students regarded it as very important. This may suggest a high awareness of the market reality in which flexibility and adaptation to changes resulting from the environment are vital in case of young people trying to find a job.

In case of some competences the employers assessed the graduates working in their companies much better when compared to the students' self-esteem. This referred, among others, to competences such as leadership skills and the ability to do research. On the other hand, the students assessed much better their knowledge of managing human resources, marketing and strategic management, acquired at university.

Among the managerial competences considered here, the most significant property, in the students' opinion, was professional experience which was placed by the employers in the middle of the ranking. This confirms market tendencies which deny the opinion that employers expect young people to have a longstanding experience at work. This is particularly difficult if, like the students participating in the study, young people study at regular daily courses (frequently at two different departments simultaneously). Sometimes students forget that practice can be acquired also in some other ways, e.g. through doing work placement during their stay at university or student activities (student self-government, sports associations, scientific associations), becoming involved in voluntary activities or traveling abroad (students' exchange programs, holiday placements). As specialists in the job market claim, any form of professional activity undertaken during university studies becomes not only an entry in one's CV but may also initiate your professional career.

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