

Practice as professional development promoter of hospitality students

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Abstract: At the Institute of Education and Home Economics, Latvia University of Agriculture, already for several years researches are being carried out, which are based on ecological approach in education and are closely related to the improvement and further development of the conception for professional practice. The aim of the research carried out was to give a scientific background for professional practice as a contributor to competitiveness of hospitality professionals from the point of view of pedagogy science, as well as to carry out a pilot-research in order to find out, analyse and evaluate the point of view of hospitality students on the organization and efficiency of professional practice. The aim of the article is to publish the results of the researches carried out.

Keywords: practice, competitiveness, hospitality students' competitiveness.

Introduction

The issue of hospitality specialists' competitiveness relates to the new specialists' transition from the process of acquiring higher professional education to the professional activity, which has its own demands and requirements. The main law of the open market "supply creates its own demand" efficiently works in the hospitality sector, where the employers' demands towards the institutions of higher education are constantly rising, i.e. "supply has to correspond to the demand", therefore they have to train competitive specialists – managers, who will easily align with the contemporary world labour market.

In Latvia it is possible to acquire professions connected with the tourism industry at 61 educational institutions; among them are institutions of higher education, colleges, and institutions of professional education (Valsts izglītības..., 2012). Consequently, a large number of hospitality specialists graduate from the Latvian institutions of higher education annually, and all of them desire to find a highly-paid job. It is a well-known fact that the labour market in the tourism industry is very active as workplaces in this branch are in great demand; always a large number of applicants apply for the announced job vacancies while the number of the latter is limited, which is proved by the quantitative discrepancy between the number of the unemployed and the vacancies in the professions of the branch, e.g., in December, 2012 there were 1106 managers/ directors (including the managers of hospitality and tourism enterprises) while only 49 vacancies were announced (Labklājības ministrija..., 2012). Consequently, not only specialists but also institutions of higher education face a competition for these desired vacancies. Among employers' main requirements for graduates is work experience, which has been gained during the study process and professional practices at university. It is just during the practice in the professional environment that students demonstrate their readiness for professional activity and strengthen their choice to become a competitive hospitality specialist. The authors of this paper are of the opinion that at the present time professional practices at universities are gaining priority in the study process, which confirms the topicality of the research. The efficiency, content, forms and methods of the professional practice as well as its sequence at all levels affects the professional qualification of the managers of hospitality enterprises and professional development possibilities of students as competitive specialists.

At the Institute of Education and Home Economics of the Latvia University of Agriculture researches which are based on ecological approach in education and are closely related to the improvement and further development of the conception of professional practice are being carried out already for several years. The aim of the research was to conduct a pilot research on the basis of the results of theoretical researches as a methodological base in order to find out, analyse and evaluate the hospitality students' point of view on the organization and efficiency of professional practice. The aim of the article is to publicize the results of the conducted researches. The methods of research: 1) theoretical research –

study, analysis and evaluation of scientific literature and the corresponding documents; reflection of authors' personal experience; 2) empirical research: students' survey and data processing methods for the statement of descriptive statistics.

Methodology

Theoretically methodological base of professional development

A country which is thinking about its future, i.e. it has a clear strategically economic and social position, constantly has to rise its employees' competitiveness as it relates to the economic competitiveness of the country on the whole. By not making massive investments in the training of every future specialist enterprises will not be able to hold the advantage of competitiveness, low-qualified employees, in turn, will be placed before the fact that they lack any prospect of self-development (Попреп, 1993).

The competitiveness of universities is determined by training good quality specialists; it activates the issue of their competitiveness in the labour market, i.e. the demand for new specialists and their employment, as competitiveness being one the main qualities of a working person is demanded in the environment of a competitive market.

The new specialists' professional parameters do not always meet employers' demands. 91.4% entrepreneurs point out that taking on employees in the sector of tourism a very important criteria is employees' professional skills, among other important criteria they have indicated performance of work skills (84.9% respondents) and foreign language skills (75.5%), the latter being especially important because of the branch specificity (Valsts izglītības..., 2012). As an essential factor has been mentioned the specialists' professional experience, which the new specialists usually lack, consequently, it is difficult for them to be competitive in the labour market (Митина, 2003; Емельянова, 2008; Кирилюк, 2008;). By a successful organization of the professional practice it is possible both to introduce students with the environment of the professional activity and to apply the acquired theoretical knowledge in practice. The rapid development of the new technologies in the sector also make universities cooperate more closely with employers, whose financial possibilities to introduce the new technologies are larger than those of the educational institutions (Shortt, 1992). This is why employers have to be aware that the new specialist will be able to start his /her professional activity after an additional training or after an efficient professional practice, during which he /she will be introduced with the enterprise and the specifics of its work.

On condition that employers become involved in the study process, considerable improvement of the study quality as well as the professional development of students as future hospitality specialists is possible.

The professional development is the central category of mutual interaction between a person and his/her profession, in psychology it is viewed as the fundamental process of a human being's changes. The professional development is usually identified with progressive changes in the person: maturity, development, self-development, and self-perfection (Зеер, 2006). The professional development is a continuous process, which does not start with the choice of a profession and does not end with completing studies at a higher professional school. It is a process which is continuing throughout all professional life, and which includes regular chances and experience to plan and perform one's growth in the profession systematically (Walling, Lewis, 2000; Cochran-Smith, Lytle, 2001).

In the scientific literature of philosophy and sociology the highest stage of professional development is professionalism – the highest degree of mastery of one's activity (Игнатов, 2002).

In labour psychology professionalism is understood not only as a high level of knowledge, skills and abilities but also as a definite systemic organization of a human being's psyche and consciousness (Климов, 1996).

Akmeology, where a personality and its activity form a unified wholeness, in its turn views professionalism as a system consisting of several subsystems: a dialectic unity of a personality's professionalism and professionalism of activity (Деркач, Зазыкин, 2003).

The Russian scientist V. Bodrov (Бодров, 2001) has worked out a model of professional development. As the scientist notes, there are the following levels of professional development: professional knowledge; professional experience; professional competence; professional usefulness; professionalism. During studies, hospitality students` professional development is in the stage of formation, namely, during this process a student acquires a totality of the required professional activity and moral virtues (Вершиловский, 1983) , as well their professional self-determination takes place (Кудрявцев, 1981). It is just during the studies at university that by applying a set of methods of social influence conditions for the formation of an individual's value judgments, outlook, professionally important knowledge, skills, attitudes and qualities have to be created (Strode, 2010).

Ecological approach in the mentoring of practice

To let the hospitality students` professional development take place it is essential to take into account a human being's ecology aspects, which emphasize interaction and changes between a human being and the environment (Taylor, 1934; Visvander, 1986; Bronfenbrenner, 1996). Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) writes: „The ecology of human development is the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation, throughout the life course, between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by the relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded”. According to the ecological approach in interaction between a human being (a hospitality student) and the environment (the setting of professional activity), the human being is the active agent who promotes his/her development. Therefore it is vital to provide an answer to the question how a student, the future hospitality specialist, perceives the environment of professional activity. Reflection of experience shows that the outer environmental setting of hospitality enterprises is one of the key factors in the choice of the future profession. The beautiful interiors, informal atmosphere attract the young people. Nevertheless, the setting of professional activity (inner) with its long working hours, low salary and emotional tension often make the youth become frustrated. The scientists I. Katane, R. Baltushite (Baltušite, 2012; Katane, Baltušite, 2007) point out that it is important to shift the emphasis from the future specialists` professional training to their readiness for professional activity, including psychological readiness. Owing to the lack of psychological readiness, it is often the case that students are not able to prove their professional competences during practical training. Both the teaching staff at universities and practice mentors at universities and in enterprises has to explain students their new social role – the formation of a hospitality specialist during professional practice. Students have to think and act ecologically – they have to orientate themselves to I WITHIN THE ENVIRONMENT OF PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITY and not I AND THE ENVIRONMENT OF PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITY (Katane, 2007b). A student has to learn to control himself/herself, overcome the encountered difficulties within the setting of professional activity. Self-regulation must be intentional, perceived and goal-oriented. By paraphrasing the founder of the Club of Rome Aurello Peccei: the future specialist is faced with a dilemma – under the conditions of the changing environment he/she either has to change as a personality (..) or he/she is doomed to disappear from the Earth (Katane, 2010). Being aware of the fact that in the forthcoming years the hospitality specialists` work space is going to expand, i.e. it will not be within the boundaries of one country but several ones, the future hospitality specialists have to change their thinking, which is one of the functions of ecological approach in education (Katane, 2007a), and practice mentors play an important role in this process.

Empirical Research

For the purposes of enhancement of the organization of hospitality students` practice at the Latvia University of Agriculture there was conducted an empirical pilot research to examine the present situation. A questionnaire was designed on the base of the methodology of the research carried out by scientists T. Lam and L. Ching (Lam, Ching 2007) of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, by adapting and modifying both the criteria for assessment of the practice and their analysis.

The research was conducted from May 2012 until March 2013. The questionnaire consisted of 27 questions on the Likert scale. On the basis of the proportion of positive responses ranking was made according to which year a student is in.

The research base included: 1) the Institute of Education and Home Economics of the Latvia University of Agriculture (theoretical research); 2) the Department of Nutrition of the Faculty of Food Technology at the Latvia University of Agriculture (empirical research). In the research participated second - year students (n=50), third - year students (n=38), fourth - year students (n=27) of the study programme “Catering and Hotel Management” in the study – year 2011/2012. The questionnaire was completed by 115 students 2 months after the end of the practice. The aim of the empirical research was to find out, analyse and evaluate hospitality students` point of view on the organization and efficiency of professional practices.

Results and discussion

Study and professional practices at the university improve the knowledge gained in the continuous process of hospitality training. Each step of the study and professional practice is the last one in the corresponding training stage of the study course and it serves as the basis for a student`s transition to a new level of professional development. In the organization of the practice such aspects as continuity and sequence (consistency) in the preparation of various stages in the continuous training system of hospitality have been taken into consideration.

By ranking students` responses to the questions included in the questionnaire (Table 1) it was found out that there was a concordance of opinions on several issues, namely, students from all courses were of the opinion that practice will be useful for their CV (in this response the results of second - year students indicated rank 1, but third - year and fourth - year students – rank 2) and that during practice it is possible to learn about their strengths and weaknesses, here the ranks of responses were as follows – responses of second - year students indicated rank 2 but third - year and fourth - year students – rank 1. A remarkable consonance was among students also as regards the statement that practice develops interest in the hospitality profession on the whole - R_4^1 =second – year, R_5 =third-year, R_1 =fourth-year.

Table 1

Students` Assessment of Professional Practice

Criteria of practice assessment	Second-year		Third-year		Fourth-year	
	Proportion of positive assessment, %	Rank	Proportion of positive assessment, %	Rank	Proportion of positive assessment, %	Rank
Competitive payment for practice	19.35	26	5.00	26	27.03	24
Practice will be useful for my CV	46.81	1	44.78	2	47.06	1
Comprehensive practice programme	39.29	16	36.21	19	38.64	19
During practice I will get reference (feedback) from enterprise managers	37.50	19	43.08	6	47.06	1
Good relationships among peers	39.76	14	37.29	17	46.00	7
Vast work experience	41.18	9	40.32	12	34.15	22

¹ Here and henceforth – R- rank, R_3 - the response ranks in the 3rd place

Criteria of practice assessment	Second-year		Third-year		Fourth-year	
	Proportion of positive assessment, (%)	Rank	Proportion of positive assessment, (%)	Rank	Proportion of positive assessment, (%)	Rank
Interesting and challenging work	39.29	16	41.27	9	43.75	13
Good work environment	39.76	14	44.78	2	47.06	1
Sufficient support from the enterprise practice supervisor	40.48	11	38.33	15	42.55	17
Professional supervisor	41.86	8	41.27	9	44.90	11
Competitive extra pay (e.g. for overtime)	12.28	27	2.63	27	25.00	25
Good co-operation between the university and enterprise	24.24	25	11.90	25	18.18	27
Good possibility for self-development	44.44	5	43.08	6	44.90	11
Recognition and praise from the enterprise managers	40.48	11	39.34	13	43.75	13
Feeling of being a team member	40.24	13	38.33	15	46.00	7
Enterprise practice supervisor is responsive in solving work problems	43.82	7	41.27	9	43.75	13
High degree of independence (autonomy)	26.47	24	27.45	22	25.00	25
Reasonable amount of work	41.18	9	39.34	13	47.06	1
Promotes innovative ideas	28.57	23	28.85	21	38.64	19
Permanent work in shifts	35.06	20	30.19	20	40.00	18
It is possible to apply theoretical knowledge in practice	45.56	3	44.78	2	46.00	7
Practice develops interest in the hospitality profession	45.26	4	44.12	5	47.06	1
Chance to get a job in the enterprise	38.55	18	37.29	17	46.00	7
High team spirit in the group	30.56	22	25.49	23	38.64	19
It is possible to find out own strengths and weaknesses	45.65	2	47.14	1	47.06	1
It is possible to develop technical skills (e.g. work with mechanical equipment)	44.44	5	43.08	6	43.48	16
Is involved in supervision tasks	35.06	20	21.28	24	30.77	23

Students` responses also showed similarity in their opinion on the questions about the lack of competitiveness as regards payment for practice (R_{26} =second-year and third-year, R_{24} =fourth-year),

namely, students are not paid during their practice, which in our opinion is understandable and acceptable as during practice students have to learn and gain a deeper insight into the work of hospitality enterprises as much as possible and not work in one position. Students' answers to the question on versatility of work experience testify that such things happen – fourth-year students' answers rank in the 22nd place, third-year – in the 12th but second-year – in the 9th place. However, gaining of the vast work experience is not always interesting and challenging (R₁₃ - fourth-year, R₁₆- second-year, R₉ – third-year). During the second-year in the Hotel Practice students master specific features mostly of the work of chambermaids, cleaners as well as receptionists. There is no direct contact with a client, whereas in the third-year in the Restaurant Practice students often get acquainted with the waiter's/ waitress's work, they communicate with guests, solve various problems, which seems interesting and challenging. Although, when we speak about extra pay when working overtime employers would have to pay (R₂₇= second-year and third-year, R₂₅= fourth-year).

Also researchers S.N.Shirobokov and R.C.Roe (Shirobokov, Roe, 2005) emphasize the number of interdisciplines acquired by students as an indicator of quality for a successful professional practice and point out that it shortens the adaptation time in the enterprise. Students' transition to the real work environment is not easy, the relationships among peers are quite tense - R₁₄ = second -year, R₁₇= third -year, R₇ = fourth -year; the support of a supervisor in the enterprise is quite often not felt - R₁₁ = second -year, R₁₅= third -year, R₁₇ = fourth -year, also the team spirit is low - R₂₂ = second -year, R₂₃= third -year, R₁₉ = fourth -year.

According to the students' point of view the practice programmes must be improved in all professional practices – the responses were ranked as follows: R₁₉ = second -year and fourth -year, R₁₆= third -year, as well as the co-operation between the university and practice enterprises has to be promoted - R₂₅ = second -year and third -year, R₂₇ = fourth -year.

Opinion is divided on the issue whether theoretical knowledge can be applied in practice – the fourth -year students were more critical R₇ = fourth -year, R₃ = second -year, R₂= third -year. It can be explained with a fact that in the fourth -year students write a bachelor's paper. Fourth -year students also more disagree than agree (R₁₆ = fourth -year) to the statement that during practice it is possible to develop technical skills (e.g. serve guests at the table, lay beds, clean rooms, work with mechanical equipment, work with special hospitality programmes, e.g. R-Keeper system of restaurant management and record-keeping). The other students admit that they have improved these skills, namely, R₅ = second -year, R₆= third -year. Also there was a difference of opinion as to the issue about the possibility of self-development, where the fourth -year students were the most critical - R₁₁ = fourth -year, R₅ = second -year, R₆= third -year, although as regards the issue about possibilities in future to get job in the practice enterprise the fourth -year students are the most convinced - R₇ = fourth -year, R₁₈ = second -year, R₁₇= third -year. The obtained results can be explained by the fact that when students are in their fourth-year after having acquired all four year theoretical courses and professional practices their self-confidence rises, and they evaluate their competitiveness as relatively high. A specialist's competitiveness is an aggregate of his/her personal and professional qualities, including various competences, based on the experience acquired during the life time, including the process of training.

The study programme „Catering and Hotel Management” trains future managers of hospitality enterprises, for this reason great attention in the professional practice programmes is devoted to various issues about management. As regards the issue about students' engagement in supervision tasks, mostly negative responses were received - R₂₀ = second -year, R₂₄ = third -year, R₂₃= fourth -year. Students' creativity was not appreciated in enterprises either - R₂₃ = second -year, R₂₁ = third -year, R₁₉= fourth -year. This is vitally important in the fourth-year Management practice, where an emphasis is placed on various supervision tasks. As students have evaluated practice supervisors in enterprises as being professionals R₈ = second -year, R₉ = third -year, R₁₁= fourth -year, the university practice supervisors have to explain the enterprise practice supervisors the aims and tasks of each practice; as well the students' degree of independence after their adaptation in the practice enterprise should be raised - R₂₄ = second -year, R₂₂ = third -year, R₂₅= fourth -year.

Scientists McMahon and Quinn (McMahon, Quinn, 1995) define practice as “work experience under supervision”, which differs from work in the hospitality sector as it is performed in solitude. In fact, this supervision has to be such that a student could feel autonomous but in cases of uncertainty or problems could apply for help.

In the authors' opinion, it is possible to organize a professional practice of good quality by organizing Practice Vacancies Fair, when representatives from enterprises would go to universities and inform about practice vacancies, university practice supervisors would draw attention to the practice aims and tasks but students would choose the most appropriate practice enterprises.

There can conflicts arise between the parties involved in the organization of professional practices (directly and indirectly) as they have a different vision of the benefits of cooperation, they have different needs and expectancy (Davies, 1990); this can lower the quality of professional practices, namely, it can cause students' unwillingness to work in the hospitality sector (Wariszak, 1999). In order to find out how the assessments of students about practice match in 27 evaluation criteria of the questionnaire, the secondary processing was done, using Kendall's W Test, SPSS 21 software programme. To sum up Kendall's Coefficient of Concordance ($W=0.856$) approaches more „1” than „0”, $\chi^2=66.77 > \chi^2_{0.05; 27} =40.11$, but $p\text{-value}=0.000 < \alpha=0.05$, meaning that there is statistically important concordance among all students.

Conclusions

- A specialist's competitiveness is an aggregate of his/her personal and professional qualities, including various competences, based on the experience acquired during the life time, including the process of training.
- On condition that employers become involved in the study process, considerable improvement of the study quality as well as the professional development of students as future hospitality specialists is possible. A professional practice of good quality can be accomplished by organizing Practice Vacancies Fair.
- Kendall's coefficient of concordance $W=0.871$ approaches more „1” than „0”, meaning that there is concordance among all students in the evaluation of practice.

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