The New Challenge for Higher Education Institutions of Latvia: Directing Students’ Professional Career Development

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Abstract: Intensified competition between higher education institutions in terms of increasing enrolment rates and retaining students makes education managers reconsider their strategy aimed at identifying the elements and indicators of competitive advantage. In that regard, greater emphasis should be placed on providing university graduates with the necessary tools to successfully launch and manage their professional career. The aim of this paper is to initiate a discussion about the role of career guidance and counselling services in the higher education institutions of Latvia. The paper also reports the results of students’ essays content analysis giving their opinion on the actions to be taken by education managers to prepare students to be ready to perform in a multicultural environment and develop their professional career both in the local and international labor market. In the paper, it is argued that career development opportunities can be considered from different perspectives; modern universities provide various professional development opportunities for improving a wide range of transferable skills including career development skills, the latter being essential to a successful job search both in the local and international labor market. The paper is based on 1) the analysis of theoretical sources and official EU documents on the main issues of higher education in relation to students’ professional career management; 2) students’ essays content analysis (interpretation method).

Keywords: higher education, education manager, career planning services.

Introduction

Today, education and research are important prerequisites for the economic and cultural development of the society (The European Higher..., 2005). Modern universities are operating in an increasingly globalized environment that is characterized by fierce competition and by the emergence of new requirements (The role of..., 2003; Communication from..., 2013). Contemporary higher education institutions being sophisticated organizations, education managers operate in a very complicated context, the complex arrangement of many causative factors form the settings, in which educational managers make strategic decisions aimed at achieving competitive advantage and academic and research excellence (Stukalina, 2013).

As the international education market is developing fast, the main task for modern European universities is providing quality higher education in the framework of creating the European Higher Education Area (Bologna Declaration, 1999; Realising the European, 2003; The role of..., 2003; Standards and Guidelines..., 2005; London Communiqué, 2007; The European Higher..., 2012; High Level..., 2013). Intensified competition between higher education institutions in terms of increasing enrolment rates and retaining students makes education managers reconsider their strategy aimed at identifying the indicators and mechanisms of competitive advantage (Stukalina, 2014a,b). In that regard, greater emphasis should be placed on providing university graduates with the necessary tools to successfully launch and manage their professional career.

The aim of this paper is to initiate a discussion about the role of career guidance in higher education system of Latvia. This paper argues that career awareness and career development instruction must be provided to all students of Latvia throughout their studies. The paper also reports the results of students’ essays content analysis stating the role of higher education institutions to prepare students to be ready to develop their professional career both in local and international labor market. The paper is based on 1) the analysis of theoretical sources and official EU documents on the main issues of higher education in relation to students’ professional career management; 2) students’ essays content analysis.
Methodology

The paper is based on 1) the analysis of theoretical sources and official EU documents on the main issues of higher education in relation to students’ professional career management; 2) students’ essays content analysis (interpretation method).

The content analysis of written essays was used to explore Riga Technical University students’ opinions on the management of the students’ professional career. One hundred four students of Riga Technical University (RTU) wrote an essay “My University and My Professional Career Prospects Both in the Local and International Labor Market”. In the research, there participated students from different RTU faculties – the Faculty of Civil Engineering, the Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning, the Faculty of Electronics and Telecommunications, the Institute of Applied Linguistics and of different nationalities, among them: Latvians – 57 students; Russian speaking students – 27 participants; foreign students – 20 participants. Consistent with the theoretical literature (Hamel, 1993; Cropley, 2002; Kroplijs, Raščevska, 2004; Geske, Grīnfeds, 2006) the content analysis was done in the following way: 1) the text was divided into fragments, which consist of the statements given by respondents and which characterize or/and interpret their experience; 2) the meaning of the content was clarified; 3) the statements, which express similar ideas, were grouped in categories; 4) the categories were united forming more extensive concepts, the basis of which was the content of the categories.

Results and discussion

1. Analysis of literature and official EU documents on education

The analysis of official EU documents on higher education shows that the emphasis is placed on making modern universities internationally more attractive and competitive, European universities playing a critical part in the creation of a Europe of knowledge (The role of..., 2003; The Lisbon Strategy..., 2010).

The tertiary education systems of many OECD countries have experienced fast growth over the last decade; they are now facing new pressures as the result of a globalizing economy and labor market (Huisman, Santiago, 2007). As stated in the OECD Report “Education Indicators in Focus” (How are University..., 2013), between 2000 and 2011, the number of international students has more than doubled; almost 4.5 million tertiary students are enrolled outside their country of citizenship. Intensified competition between modern public and private universities in terms of increasing enrolment rates and retaining students makes education managers re-examine their strategy aimed at achieving competitive advantage.

The issues mentioned above drive competitive advantage and performance of higher education institutions of Latvia as well. They are closely related to students’ professional development that encompasses all educational activities and includes students’ intellectual growth and career development. The Lisbon agenda for growth and jobs requires that EU citizens are equipped to “manage labor market changes more effectively”, and are given opportunities to “develop their skills, and gain access to information, advice and guidance to handle their careers” (Career development..., 2008). In this respect, lifelong information, advice and guidance play a prominent role in supporting individual citizens on their learning and career paths (Lifelong guidance..., 2011).

Thus, the role of universities in providing their students and graduates with appropriate career management is increasing. The need for career guidance increases due to some important factors.

- Universities operate in a globalized and extremely competitive international environment; this fact makes adopt new market-oriented strategies.
- More effective career guidance would promote university graduates’ participation in lifelong learning.
- More active career management will support the development of a knowledge-based economy as well as benefit individuals, employers and society in general (Career development…, 2008).
- The expansion of tertiary participation broadens its purposes beyond preparing students for traditional professions and the link between particular study courses and specific labor market destinations becomes less direct (Education Policy …, 2003).
The EU Member States regard the development of career management skills as a lifelong process, which should be supported by information, advice and guidance (Lifelong guidance..., 2011).

Creating a successful and competitive European Research Area that includes a substantial number of skilled researchers and diversity of research groups

The necessity to secure growth prospects and innovation within the EU by integrating older workers in the labor market (Second Career..., 2013).

The constant progress of globalization will make higher education institutions of all kinds prepare students with skills and knowledge that will support their inclusion in an increasingly borderless economy (Altbach, Reisberg, 2009). Thus, various professional development opportunities should be available to university students for improving a wide range of transferable skills including career development skills, the latter being essential to a successful job search both in the local and international labor market.

Career development opportunities can also be associated with the internal career development resources provided by a university. Students’ professional development is a process that occurs at every stage of their graduate career, so all students must be afforded professional development opportunities throughout their studies. Today, many universities worldwide manage students’ career development through Career Development Centers that focus on creating partnerships with industry to help students find their career paths. Modern universities are no longer expected to work in isolation; they work closely with industry, community and government (Altbach, Reisberg, 2009).

In the EU, guidance and counselling are regarded as key strategic components for implementing lifelong learning and employment strategies at regional and national levels; “as European knowledge-based societies are committed to developing individuals and economies through lifelong learning, citizens require information, guidance and counselling more than ever before to make proper education and career choices and acquire the right skills for successful adjustment to their environments” (Establishing and developing..., 2008). So, higher education institutions should offer their students career guidance and counselling services that will promote their intellectual evolution and career development. In the context of lifelong learning and active labor market policies, managers responsible for career guidance services face the challenge to move from helping students decide on a job or a study course, to the broader development of career management skills linking it to students’ overall development (Education Policy ..., 2003). Today, a wide range of services should be made available to enrollees, students, alumni and even employers, the services being aimed at maximizing the students’ employability after graduation and supporting their lifelong employability. These services can be different in each higher education institution.

2. RTU students’ essays content analysis

According to students’ opinion, the management of students’ professional career starts early – before students have entered a higher education institution. In their essays, students write that the choice of the profession is the most important and complicated decision of their life (Latvians – 2, Russian speaking students – 1, foreign students – 2): “I have thought of my professional career since childhood because this decision will influence all my life - the conditions of life, the environment and the family. Professional career begins already in the childhood, at school. It is determined by the way of life, personality, environment and conditions” (Latvians – 9, Russian speaking students – 4, foreign students – 9). Students also express the opinion, which proves that they have failed to choose the right profession: “I cannot affirm that the specialty I am studying now is the most appropriate for me”, “The most serious problem is the problem that we do not know what we want to do to succeed in our life”, „I do not like the profession I have chosen because I do not feel to be talented in this field” (Latvians – 3), “It is possible I will study abroad to get other profession” (Russian speaking students – 1). Therefore, the data indicate that schools and higher education institutions should pay more attention to the issues of pupils and students career management to help them to make the right choice.

Students also mention a few preconditions that may help them choose the most appropriate profession. In their point of view, it is necessary to choose the profession characterized by the following features.
It is interesting, enjoyable and useful – “No job could be done well if you are not happy doing it”, “I know I will develop if I do something I really like”, “It is not enough if you like your profession it is also important if your profession is useful and needed” (Latvians – 6, Russian speaking students – 2, foreign students – 4).

It is appropriate for your personality, and with a help of which you may realize your talents and grow professionally – “The professional career is not so dependent on the country you live but on your skills, knowledge, experience, interests, talent, moral standards, the influence of parents and friends. There always and everywhere will be difficult situations and conditions, everything depends on the personality” (Latvians – 25, Russian speaking students – 4, foreign students – 2), “It is important to have a profession you can realize your aims and ideas” (Latvians – 5, Russian speaking students – 1, foreign students – 2), “If you have specific skills, a high qualification, creativity and willingness to work, it is easy to find a job and get an appropriate payment both in your native country and abroad” (Latvians – 9, Russian speaking students – 4).

It gives a possibility to work in a positive atmosphere (Latvians – 1, Russian speaking students – 2, foreign students – 4).

There are possibilities to grow and be promoted - “At the beginning I agree on working for a lower payment if I am offered a training and can develop professionally, be among the best, work in an innovative environment” (Latvians – 3, Russian speaking students – 2, foreign students – 2).

It can which guarantee a stable and competitive salary, comfortable living conditions (Russian speaking students – 1, foreign students – 4).

Since the key task of a contemporary higher education institution is to help students acquire an assortment of transferable skills and prepare them for professional activities, it is necessary to find out how the students evaluate the role of education and a university in the development of their professional career. In their essays students, mainly Latvians, evaluate the role of a higher education institution positively emphasizing that a good education is the first step to make a successful professional career (Latvians – 15, Russian speaking students – 2, foreign students – 2): “The level of education in my specialty is high and gives the opportunity to make a professional career also abroad”, “The studies abroad are not so qualitative in comparison with Latvia” (Latvians – 1), “I can learn from my teachers at a higher education institution” (Latvians – 4).

Students also stress the undoubted significance of combining the theoretical knowledge with a practical experience to be competitive in the labor market - “The practical experience is highly evaluated in the labor market” (Latvians – 2, Russian speaking students – 1); “The graduates of the higher education institutions in Latvia have difficulties to find a job because of the lack of experience. It is also complicated to find the internship during the studies” (Latvians – 11, Russian speaking students – 2). That is why graduates have a tendency to work in the field which is not connected with their studies. The insufficient payment is also the reason of it - if the salary is higher, students choose the job in a different field (Latvians – 2, Russian speaking students – 1).

To conclude, the main preconditions, which are necessary for developing a successful professional career, are the following: a good education, practical experience and use of advanced modern technologies.

Students’ professional career could be developed both in their native country and abroad. In the context of achieving the main goals set in the Lisbon Strategy (2000) – preparing specialists who could be internationally competitive, could work in a multicultural environment, and have advanced language skills and intercultural communication skills – it is essential to find out if students consider themselves to be enough competitive to develop a professional career abroad. The obtained data show that there are a lot of students, especially foreign students, who are going to develop an international career: Latvians – 14, Russian speaking students – 5, foreign students – 11. The most popular reasons why students choose a professional career abroad can be summarized as follows:

- there are large international enterprises abroad that need young and competent graduates.

Foreign labor market is open to highly qualified employees (Latvians – 21, Russian speaking students – 7, foreign students – 2);
• there are better working conditions, a higher salary, social guarantees and a more flexible work schedule, which allows to have more time for a family (Latvians – 15, Russian speaking students – 9);
• it is possible to get new experience – to “see the world”, get new information, improve language skills and intercultural communication skills; though “going abroad” is always risky. For some students, it is important to take the risk, because “we never know” what exactly may help us to become good specialists”. And there is always a possibility to return back but with a different experience and skills (Latvians – 3, Russian speaking students – 6);
• it is important to gain an international experience, which on return they would use to help the native country to develop and cooperate with other countries (Latvians – 5, foreign students – 2).

Students also mention the possible problems, which may occur when making an international career abroad; they can be summarized as follows:

• there is a fierce competition in the international labor market; young people do not have necessary experience and specific skills which are demanded in the labor market; not always immigrants have a possibility to get a high status position; it is necessary to have contacts to get a “good job” (Latvians – 10, Russian speaking students – 2);
• because of the reasons mentioned above young people choose to do an unqualified work when working conditions and environment are often not favorable for people’s health and life; the payment also does not correspond to the work done; immigrants have to do jobs which are not popular among the local people (Latvians – 5, Russian speaking students – 4);
• the life abroad is more expensive than in Latvia (Latvians – 3, Russian speaking students – 1);
• mentality, people, language, environment are not familiar; there is no homeland, family and friends (Latvians – 4, Russian speaking students – 9, foreign students – 1).

However, there is a large number of students who want to make a professional career abroad. There are also many students, mainly Latvians, who have plans to stay and work in their native country (Latvians – 43, Russian speaking students – 7, foreign students – 5) - “My native country is developing very fast and there are good job prospects” (Latvians – 14, Russian speaking students – 5, foreign students – 10); “Old employees retire and are substituted by young ones – graduates. There are not large enterprises in my professional field but they are stable, modern and have their place in the labor market” (Latvians – 12, Russian speaking students – 2).

The data indicate that there are also other advantages to develop the professional career in the native country – “you know local people, their behavior, environment, economics etc. “I feel much more comfortable in my native country. Abroad you have to start from the beginning” (Latvians – 8, Russian speaking students – 4, foreign students – 1); “Latvia is my motherland, I have been brought here, here is my culture and language, I am a patriot” (Latvians – 11). It is also important for students “to be with their family and friends, be supported and helped by them” (Latvians – 9, Russian speaking students – 4, foreign students – 1).

At the same time, students also mention some problems when developing their professional career in the native country; they are the following.

• There are not enough possibilities to have a job according to the education and interests, realize the potential, work in a highly competitive environment – “There is a small number of large, international enterprises in my professional field. It is hard to promote and make a top level professional career here. My professional development could be slow here” (Latvians – 6).
• The competition in the largest and most popular enterprises is very high here – “You have to be the best” (Latvians – 3), “It is possible to find a job only with a help of necessary “contacts” (Latvians – 8); “The smaller the country is, the smaller its possibilities to provide people with a job are” (Latvians – 8, Russian speaking students – 1).
• Salary is insufficient – “There is a lack of high qualification specialists in my native country who leave it because of a better payment abroad” (Latvians – 6, Russian speaking students – 2, foreign students – 3).
Politics, economics, environment and conditions in the native country are not favorable for the development of private enterprises (Latvians – 6, Russian speaking students – 2).

In general, the performed analysis has produced a few interesting findings.

- Higher education institutions should pay more attention to the issues of students’ professional career management, and offer learners career guidance and counselling services throughout their studies.
- Higher education institutions should take into account the most important preconditions, which help students to choose the most appropriate profession – interest, suitability, promotion possibilities, financial security and a positive working environment.
- To manage students’ international career development higher education institutions should take into consideration the main reasons why students choose to develop their professional career abroad (e.g. more possibilities to be promoted, better working conditions, a higher salary, social guarantees, etc.).
- To help students to develop their international career abroad higher education institutions also have to take into account the possible drawbacks, which they may encounter in the international labor market (e.g. necessity to have specific skills and qualification, a high level of competition, cultural differences, etc.).
- To manage students’ career development in the local labor market higher education institutions have to consider the main reasons why students choose to develop their professional career in their native country (e.g. good prospects to make a career for young and qualified graduates, a familiar culture, friendly environment, etc.).
- To help students perform a successful career in the native country the main drawbacks of the local labor market should be also taken into account (e.g. a lack of opportunities for having a job according to the education and interests, realizing the potential, working in a highly competitive environment, an insufficient salary, unfavorable economic and political conditions and business environment.

Conclusions

In the context of globalization, development of the knowledge-based society and life-long learning, career development opportunities can be considered from different perspectives. Broadly, career development opportunities can be associated with the main trends for the future of higher education. They can also be related to the internal career development resources offered by a university. Modern universities provide various professional development opportunities for improving a wide range of transferable skills including career development skills, the latter being essential to a successful job search both in the local and international labor market.

It is long overdue for higher education institutions of Latvia to become better at monitoring and directing their students’ professional development. Universities should offer their students career guidance and counselling services that will promote their intellectual evolution and career development throughout their studies. This can be done by managing students’ career development through Career Development Centers that focus on creating partnerships with industry to help students find their career paths.

People have different career guidance needs at different stages of their education. As diverse kinds of education and training are interconnected (pre-school education, primary and secondary education, higher education, post-graduate education, distance education, etc.), universities have to work in close partnership with schools, colleges, government agencies, non-governmental and business organizations. This way, they will be able a) to facilitate the transition of learners between different institutions and phases of education; b) to connect career development and employability with lifelong learning.

Bibliography


