Manifestation of Stakeholders' Roles in the Context of Students' Preparation for the Labour Market

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Abstract: The scientific discussions emphasize that educating and training students as high quality professionals for future labour market calls for the active involvement of both educational institutions and other stakeholders who represent the norms and values of post-industrial, sustainability oriented society. Participation of these stakeholders is based on both rational and emotion-based interests, and the boundaries of their responsibilities differ in scope and manifestation. The aim of the paper is to identify the manifestation of stakeholders' roles (higher education institutions and labour market representatives) in the preparation of students for labour market. The qualitative research strategy employs conversation and semi-structured interview which enabled to disclose the experiences of research participants about the research question under the investigation. The sample of higher education institutions' representatives (19) consisted of deans and vice-dean of Lithuanian universities and colleges, supervisors of students' internship. The group of the labour market representatives (42) is made of the owners of business enterprises, directors and managers. The results of the research imply that both educational institutions and employers have to commit themselves to the process students' preparation for the labour market. However, the manifestade of their roles indicates the uneven distribution of the responsibilities. The educational institutions by default take the roles of educator, employer, mediator and observer while the employers tend to perform the roles of educators, partner and sponsor. However, the boundaries of their responsibility and commitment have not been clearly defined.

Keywords: stakeholders, students, higher education institutions, employers, labour market.

Introduction

The goals of „Europe 2020" strategy (to aim for advanced, sustainable and integrative development) make a demand for the EU countries to increase the potential of human resources by increasing the access to education, improving the study quality in higher education institutions, and implementing the study programmes that provide graduates both academic knowledge and skills including those that are transferable, which may influence their personal development and may be applied in their future careers. The quality assurance of study programmes is the priority of higher education policy and management (Bucharest Communiqué, 2012) and the learning outcomes have to ensure the skills applicability in labour market, employability perspectives and the successful living of a human being.

As European Parliament Resolution on education, training and strategy "Europe 2020" indicates, the issues of graduates' successful integration into labour market call for maintaining the dialogue between social stakeholders – first of all, small and medium enterprises, local and regional authorities, other public interested parties - and higher education institutions. This supports the idea of developing of quality culture in higher education institutions in which all stakeholders assume responsibility for quality assurance (Europe 2020…, 2013).

The stakeholder, according to E. Freeman's now classic text "Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach (1984), is "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (1984, 46). E. Freeman's fundamental argument in his Theory of Stakeholders is that organization is managed not only by shareholders, but by all the stakeholders or their structures, and the safeguarding of their interests operates as a tool for organizational development. This paper relies on the Freeman's definition of a stakeholder and refers to J.C. Hosseini and S. N. Brenner's (1992) category of stakeholder and his interest to influence the processes and results of higher education institution.

The stakeholders in higher education are generally divided into external and internal (Pukelis, Pileičikienė, 2005). The internal group of stakeholders consists of teachers, administration staff, technical staff; while graduates, employers, trade unions, associations, society and parents (when they

pay the fee) belong to the external group. A student belongs both to internal and external stakeholders. On the other hand, the stakeholders in higher education could be divided into the following groups: individuals (students, teachers, students' parents, graduates); organizations (higher education institutions, trade unions, non-profit organizations); employers (regional and national enterprises, international corporations, employers' associations) and governance authorities (regional and national authorities, the divisions of state institutions) (Kaminskienė, 2008).

This attention to stakeholders according to L. Leišytė, F. Westerheijden and E. Epping (2013, 4) is related to the transformed concept of higher education governance and its increased accountability and relevance to society. The internal and external stakeholders in higher education system, as L. Leišytė, F. Westerheijden (2013, 16) claim, take different positions, but keep the common interest in higher education quality assurance. These are the individuals or their groups (professional associations, organizations, alumni) that wish and are able to take responsibility for study programme quality (Pukelis, Pileičikienė, 2010, 109). The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015) emphasize the roles of students, employers and other interested parties in implementing the internal and external policy for quality assurance in higher education institutions. According to E. Weert (2011), employer engagement in higher education learning is defined as building the collaborative relationship between employers and higher education in line with meeting the interests of both academic and industries. R. Foskett (2005) argues that higher education institutions strive to improve performance quality and financial state, to develop research, to obtain data on labour market, to increase study programmes' demand, to improve reputation, while employers aim at increasing the flexibility of their employees, developing employees' understanding on company's interests, improving production quality, searching for new staff, improving the status of learners and the prestige of a company. The greater involvement of employers in the governance of higher education school has been driven by their wish to plan the necessary skills and to guarantee the increase of cheap qualified labour force (Weert, 2011).

Nevertheless, the cooperation between educational institutions and stakeholders (students, employers, public organizations) enable to assure study quality and to provide graduates with the appropriate knowledge in their professional field along with understanding of social, economic, legal issues and professional ethics and transferable skills (Pileičikienė, 2011; Bucharest Communiqué, 2012).

As K. Pukelis, I. Savickienė (2010) notices, the effectiveness of stakeholders' cooperation depends on the similarities among their values, mutual trust and the clearly defined and articulated aims to be achieved. However, the following tendency has been observed: the fundamental educational values of humanism, democracy, nationality and renewal have been accompanied by the orientation to employability, focus on universities' role in regional development (Trippl, Sinozic, 2014; Gjelsvik, Arbo, 2014; Neave, 2006) and new models of university governance in cooperation with stakeholders (Boer, Enders, 2007; Trakman, 2008). The empirical findings disclose the reasons why business do work with higher education institutions (Lee, 2000; Olssen, Peters, 2005), the stakeholders' involvement into universities governance (Amaral, Magalhaes, 2002; Boer, File, 2009), stakeholders' input into the study quality assurance (Skolnik, 2010; Tsinidou, Gerogiannis, 2010). This article refers to Lithuania's case and aims to highlight the spectrum of roles emerging for higher education institutions and the employers as stakeholders in the context of preparing students for the labour market. The qualitative research approach enables to reveal peculiarities, role overlapping and challenges.

Methodology

Aiming to investigate the manifestation of stakeholders' roles (higher education institution and labour market representative) in preparing students for labour market, the qualitative research based on the phenomenological philosophy (Colaizzi, 1978; Kvale, 1996; Creswell, 2007). In the course of qualitative research, the relationship between the theoretical description of phenomenon (the roles of higher education schools and labour market representatives) and its manifestation in social reality has been searched.

The procedures and instruments of qualitative research. The qualitative phenomenological research on the manifestation of stakeholders' roles in preparing students for labour market employed the *dialogue* which helped to reveal the experiences of these individuals (Kvale, 1996; Mayring, 2000). Accordingly, the *interview method* enabled to explore the perceptions of research participants, meanings of the

phenomenon and construction of reality (Silverman, 2003a, 2003b; Creswell, 2007). The participants of research were surveyed by *semi-structured interview*, i.e. the open questions were submitted.

The justification and selection of research sample. The implementation of qualitative research was based on the representativeness of research sample (Silverman, 2003a, 2003b; Bitinas, 2005). The sample of interview participants was formed in accordance to research aim and the adequate criteria: *the target or criteria based selection* was used when the individuals are chosen deliberately with the aim to receive the specific important information that could not be retrieved in other ways (Kvale, 1996; Bitinas, Rupšienė, 2008).

The sample of qualitative research is made of those subjects under observation who are sufficiently informative in terms of the research and represent the population which is responsible for a particular activity relevant to the research (Bitinas, 2005). Two target groups were formed from the persons who have direct interests in successful preparation of higher education students for the labour market: 19 members of higher education institutions (universities and colleges) [E stands for education] and 42 representatives of labour market [L stands for labour]. The research was carried out in September-November 2013. In data processing stage each participant received a code with the identification of target group ([E] or [L]), a numeral meaning of case and the page number of transcribed text where the meaning context, i.e. the example of statement, was presented.

Data analysis methods for qualitative research. The qualitative research data on the manifestation of stakeholders' roles (higher education institutions and labour market representatives) were processed with the qualitative analysis methods of *phenomenological and content analysis.* The phenomenological analysis searched for the answers about the complex nature of phenomenon by describing it according to different approaches. Therefore, phenomenology served not only for describing, but also for interpreting the experiences of participants related to the phenomenon under investigation. The method of *qualitative content analysis* was employed for examining the texts. The meaningful units/statements were derived from the text data. They reflect the experience and the attitudes of research participants related to research issues. The units were coded into explicit categories; the frequency of their usage was calculated and the relationship among distinct elements of text and the whole information scope was evaluated.

Results and discussion

Roles of education institutions when solving the problem of students' preparation for the labour market. The informants believe the roles of higher schools in the process of preparing prospective qualified specialists for the labour market are miscellaneous, interrelated and coloured with different undertones. In the belief of the education system representatives, higher schools perform the role of an educator that commits them to "*prepare the young people for life responsibly*" [E6, 23], "*<...> develop social and personal skills of the learners; teach them to learn independently*" [E1, 286]. Simultaneously, a higher school also becomes a student, learns and "*<...> carries out the academic work*" [L2, 378], so that it could disseminate the most up-to-date knowledge and experience. Moreover, the roles of an education institution may be intertwined; for example, besides the role of an educator, a role of a mentor is also necessary to enable the young people to find the right choice, "*<...> to tell them that they chose the wrong speciality ("out of his/her element"), would you like to transfer to another speciality that <...> is close to your heart*" [L21, 213]. However, the opinions of informants on this issue: "*a university must do everything to prepare the students for the labour market in the best way possible*" [L4, 86] – single out one of the key roles befalling an education institution – preparing the students for the labour market. This shows that higher schools should commit themselves to become "*a trustworthy bridge between a young person and economy of the country*" [E7, 32], "*to search for a point of contact with employers and businesses*" [L13, 80], "*<...> joint projects, commissions are necessary*" [E14, 142]. Nonetheless, in the opinion of employers, the current situation shows an insufficient contribution of the higher schools to the strengthening of relationships with business companies: "*more involvement would be needed from the part of education system and higher schools*" [L36, 67].

Another role of higher schools of equal significance is that of an observer: "*the interest of education institutions is infinite, <...> whether we examine universities or colleges, they are sufficiently actively involved in monitoring where the young people go, how many of them find jobs*" [L13, 79]; however, that is not enough. Seeking to satisfy the needs of the constantly changing labour market, higher schools

should perform a self-assessment: "*not all specialities are necessary any more <...>, business is changing, a need arises for entirely different professions*" [L2, 382] and, while focusing on the needs of the labour market, the education institutions should "*narrow down the opportunities for the students to waste their time, i.e. reduce the number of specialities and students accepted, monitor the dynamics of the demand for them according to the labour market requirements*" [L6, 119].

The role of an education institution as an employer commits higher schools "*to feel an interest in the abilities of lecturers, one of them being – demanding that the students possess knowledge; that is a proof of their competence*" [L4, 50]. Unfortunately, too big "a stone is cast" at the lecturers working in education institutions, seeing that "*<...> currently, lecturers of higher schools are out of touch with the modern practices – the things that are relevant to the companies*" [L28, 381]. In the opinion of the representatives of the labour market, problems concerning the employment of students also arise because "*<...> higher schools first of all think about attracting the students, who bring the "darned" basket*" [L31, 488]. This proves that a higher school as an employer operates ineffectively under the market conditions and produces a non-competitive "product" – the prepared specialists face difficulties when integrating in the labour market and increase the share of unemployment, although the demand for qualified specialists remains.

The interview content analysis helped distinguishing the subcategories reflecting the contents of the qualitative category **"Roles of education institutions when solving the problem of student's preparation for the labour market"**: *educator and employer*.

Subcategory **"Educator"** (20 notional contexts) denotes the actualisation of the higher school mission in a constantly changing modern environment. Education is one of the priority objectives of a modern higher school. Its attainment would allow nurturing mature and active personalities. Participants of the interview also emphasised the importance of the mission of education institutions: "*<...> first of all, knowledge has to be provided <...> you have to convey a corresponding portion of theory and to create all possibilities for them to implement and test those in practice*" [L11, 60]. However, it is the belief of employers that the implementation of this objective encounters multiple challenges: "*recently I have been noticing that students are loaded with superficial knowledge*" [L5, 34], whereas the labour market "*requires specialisation rather than generic subjects, it requires namely professional specialisation*" [L39, 130]; in the meantime, if "*<...> the specialisation were to be significantly more narrow, at least ten times deeper, including more practical experience, then the students would face no problems getting a job*" [L42, 123]. Hence, activities of higher schools when pursuing their main mission – preparing prospective qualified young specialists receive significant criticism and reveal the unwillingness or inability of institutions to admit mistakes and search for solutions. Employers propose the following solution: "*education institutions should create a system and approve programmes according to which students could be taught, that would be attractive and necessary for the labour market, and attractive for the students*" [L7, 50]. This allows forecasting that higher schools willing and seeking to perform the roles ascribed to them face a complex systematic period of readjustment that would enable them in the future to prepare specialists in demand in the labour market thus becoming in demand themselves.

After reviewing the contents of subcategory **"Employer"** that revealed itself through 17 statements, it can be proposed that this role commits an education institution to acting in such a way as to rally its staff – educators (lecturers) and those being educated (students) for striving towards and implementing the objectives of their own as well as those of the institution. It is noteworthy that this category should be more emphasised as a marketing task: strengthening the positions within the rating of higher schools through attraction of talented, critically-thinking and creative students who search for solutions, and competent lecturers from Lithuania and abroad as well as supporters from business companies. However, the situation of higher schools in Lithuania, in the opinion of representatives of the labour market and education, is threatening due to several reasons. First of all, "*diplomas of Lithuanian higher schools are not recognised <...> globally*" [L12, 7], secondly, they employ "*<...> lecturers who are out of their depth in the subjects they teach, although they should be also competitive-able*" [L17, 103], "*there are still quite many professors in our higher schools <...>, who have been teaching the same subject for 15 or 20 years and all the time saying almost the same things; I have experienced that myself*" [L15, 82]. Thirdly, "*up to date subjects are being taught <...> that no longer exist in practice*" [L16, 114]; fourthly, "*the greatest problem is that we prepare master and bachelor graduates as theorists, not practitioners*" [L12, 15] and fifthly, "*it seems like <...> (higher schools) are concerned*

with themselves rather than the people they are training" [L14, 44]. Consequently, fundamental questions arise quite naturally for the employers: *"<...> who prepares the students of nowadays? How well qualified are those trainers? I mean lecturers. What requirements are posed to them?"* [L5, 19], *"let us also think about the fact whether the students are presently prepared by some of the people who, like the students, also had been making their choice from 14 specialities and when they had no place to go they went to study wherever they had entered <...> and now they teach others? What kind of specialist is that?"* [L18, 32]. Hence, higher schools, albeit aware of their shortcomings, respond to the shifts in external environment and changing needs of the labour market slackly or inconsistently, although these would allow initiating changes in the activities of universities and colleges.

Roles of employers when solving the problem of students' integration in the labour market. Qualitative content analysis of interviews allowed distinguishing the qualitative category ***"Roles of employers when solving the problem of students' integration in the labour market"*** that reflects the contribution in terms of community sense of employers when solving the problems of higher school students' integration in the labour market. The research revealed different attitudes of the representatives of the education system and labour market to the building of relations between the business and the society. A number of employers represent the position of the proponents of theoretical branch of neoclassical economics and agency theory evolved from it, which separates the relationships of business and society when solving social problems, whereas funds allocated to social projects are considered to be a waste of money: *"This is not the prerogative of employers, because an employer is not interested in creating jobs (the less jobs, the higher the profits). The employers seek to make products incurring lower labour costs"* [L30, 231]. Other employers, on the contrary, recognise the importance of relationships between the business and society, and support the stakeholder theory: *"It depends very much on the level of employers whether they contribute to the solution of this problem or do not care about it. This means they their role depends on their level"* [L38, 425]. Being responsible, employers also solve the problems arising in the society together with other stakeholder groups, thus forming a setting conducive to the functioning of business and attainment of positive performance results in the future.

Following the principle of the sense of community, employers perform the *roles of educator, supporter and partner,* which reflect three fundamental qualitative subcategories.

When solving the problem of students' integration in the labour market, the role of the employer as an ***"Educator"*** (subcategory contains 21 notional contexts) is among the most significant ones in their relationship with the environment that reveals the employees' participation in young people's preparation for professional activities through contribution to the preparation of students for the labour market: *"<...> it is popular all over the world that the corporations cooperate with higher schools, <...> send their leaders to give lectures, thus contributing to focused preparation of students for the labour market"* [L10, 44]. In the meantime in Lithuania, the role of employers as educators manifests itself only at the end of studies: *"I see problems when students search for a company that would accept them for an traineeship – no one accepts them"* [L1, 486] as well as upon completion of studies: *"after employing the students, employers provide them with additional knowledge, train and develop them as needed"* [L4, 56], *"<...> we teach the students who come to work the most fundamental things, which they ought to have mastered during their studies, because we are not so rich that we could hire the highest-charging engineers"* [L5, 36]. However, *"more initiative should be shown by the employers, they should invite young people and create project groups"* [L12, 50], employers *"need to input the efforts when teaching the new recruits; only then you achieve a result"* [L25, 38]. As shown by experience, *"the largest companies look around for the first-year students, enable them to participate in traineeships, thus checking if an individual is right for them"* [L41, 75], *"<...> substantially larger or perhaps financially stronger companies retrain <...> the students, <...> they have internal training courses, <...> they train the graduates of higher schools according to their specifics"* [L14, 48]. This corroborates that employers who want to have good employees should *"contribute to traineeships and try to mould the image of a desired employee together"* [L20, 98].

An employer could contribute to the improvement of the study process in higher schools by performing the role of a ***"Supporter"*** (subcategory contains 10 statements): *"In order to achieve an excellent final result, employers are interested not just in participation in the process, but also in supporting higher schools"* [L18, 89], *"students could be incentivised too, but they have to assume the initiative and in their papers solve true rather than fictitious problems of a specific company. I see a great potential*

here" [L19, 30], *"companies could establish a foundation or assign bonuses, <...> motivation for the students appears that perhaps one of them will be noticed"* [L12, 52]. This is a voluntary initiative from the employers' part. If used irresponsibly, it could yield negative results, because *"recently, business has been viewed as a sack of money; it should support, sponsor, give away"* [L12, 121].

Although in our country, *"the patronage practice is not common yet, where they could contribute financially as well as give lectures from the practical point of view"* [L1, 502], the first steps, nonetheless, have already been made: employers are partners of higher schools. Content (18 notional contexts) of the subcategory ***"Partner"*** reveals that *"we cooperate with a number of higher schools and never refuse to help"* [L32, 122], *"we accept as many as we can for the traineeships"* [L14, 46]. However, *"the presence of business at universities"* is insufficient, because *"the initiative of employers to renovate the laboratories, introduce specific technologies and equipment is lacking, so that the students could create, solve real problems of companies proposed by employers in the course of their studies and learned to operate the equipment"* [E4, 42]. The enduring unfavourable situation on the labour market where graduates trained by higher schools find it difficult to integrate themselves in the labour market albeit vacancies are available due to the shortage of qualified specialists inspires the employers to take the initiative in solving this problem. The informants state that *"employers have to interact with the science more. Currently, this process is moving along with great difficulty. More accurately, when someone exerts some pressure, they gather together to talk <...> there should be common objectives"* [L7, 55]. Furthermore, *"an important role should be played by Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Crafts, <...> they join all employers, <...> universities and colleges are also members, let us come together and <...> talk about the specialists we need"* [E8, 38]. Territorial labour exchanges could become and serve as an intermediary between the employers and higher schools: *"we cooperate intensively with the labour exchange and search for good specialists there, however cannot find them"* [L28, 37]. Nonetheless, *"the employers should involve themselves rather more actively"* [L30, 100], because *"if you want to get a good employee you must contribute: whether to the training base or establishment of their practical skills; otherwise one should not expect a well-trained specialist"* [L5, 61].

The research results suggest that the responsibility for preparing higher education students for labour market should be shared among educational institutions and employers; their interaction, however, is negligible and the manifestation of their roles is not evenly distributed. The educational institutions by default play the roles of educator, employer, mediator and observer, while employers tend to perform the roles of educator, supporter and partner. Unfortunately, the boundaries of their responsibility and commitment are not clearly defined.

Conclusions

The stakeholders (both the employers and educational institutions) have been performing significant roles in the process of preparing students for labour market. On the declarative level, they clearly perceive that their roles of *educator, employer, mediator, observer* and others are important and their mutual cooperation is vital.

However, the analysis of qualitative research results revealed the controversies in the manifestation of the mentioned roles. Employers' role as *partner is* limited to the oral support; their role of *supporter* is problematic because of the lack of clear understanding how the mechanisms of sponsorship for students operate. The role of *educator* is performed in the end of study process and this implies the notion of *instructor's* role when undergraduates are introduced to the workplace and are trained to perform the specific functions attributed to this workplace.

The *educator's* role performed by educational institutions is one of the essential roles; however, it is criticized by employers. This fact calls for the significant transformations of this role with the intention to prepare high quality specialists in demand by labour market. The role of *employer* implies for the educational institutions to hire and maintain the high quality teaching staff who directly influences the quality of study process and study programmes.

In conclusion, the participation of stakeholders in the preparation of students for labour market is more politically declarative than proactive and lacks the mutual dialogue and cooperation.

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