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Work-Integrated Learning as a Potential for Developing Students' Professional Competencies

Extended summary

Current educational trends in students' initial education are aimed at building stronger links between universities and the institutions in which they will work, with an emphasis on stronger inter-institutional integrations and shared responsibilities for the outcomes of the students' educational process. The development of students' professional competencies by providing access to practical work represents an opportunity for improving the quality of work at both universities and students' future workplace. The theoretical part of this paper elaborates on the concept of work-integrated learning (WIL) as a way for achieving this goal. This concept initiates the connection of academic disciplines with host organizations which, just as much as faculties, give due attention to the development of professional competencies of students. The purpose of work-integrated learning is the development of a coherent approach in building workforce, skills, and individual abilities, the approach that is increasingly being recognized as a useful tool for the development of qualified graduates, prepared for a successful performance at their workplace. Work-assisted learning is also viewed as a technique for improving students' generic competencies. Work-assisted learning has many advantages, but there are also downsides in terms of unfavourable conditions for learning and teaching in many schools, such as crowded classrooms, a huge teacher workload, and the lack of time and space for mentoring. The key research question is aimed at examining the preparedness of the school pedagogues to meet the school objectives by

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using the competencies and knowledge gained during their initial education. The way in which the studies of pedagogy are developed and organised determines the field of the pedagogues' professional competence which is manifested, confirmed and developed in a continually changing practice full of professional challenges for all expert profiles, including the pedagogues. The aim of the research is to assess the impact of initial education on job preparedness. The sample included school pedagogues (N = 91), and the instrument created for the needs of a wider research examined their preparedness for work in schools.

According to the research results, the pedagogues feel that they are least prepared for:

- development of the school curricula, development plans, and participation in the preparation of individual educational plans,
- participation in monitoring the effective operationalisation of general and specific standards,
- motivating teachers to participate in the continuous professional development and create professional development plans,
- providing assistance in organising experimental and demonstration lessons, designing work with students who need additional support, and preparing for the state teachers' license exam,
- team work in carrying out activities with teachers, professional associates, and parents, as well as with a local community.

The pedagogues seem to be least prepared in those areas that they did not study within the framework of initial education, considering the age structure of the respondents and the fact that these are the tasks that have been part of the work of the school pedagogues for ten years, and that were also defined in the 2012 Rulebook. Therefore, we stress the importance of initial education for developing the future pedagogues' professional competencies, as well as the importance of the WIL concept, given that establishing bonds between faculties and host schools contributes to developing the pedagogues' competencies through work-integrated learning, which, in turn, helps the dissemination of theoretical knowledge into practice and encourages learning. i.e., professional development of the school employees.

The key directions of action stemming from the obtained results are reflected in the changes of the university curricula and innovative organisational solutions of faculties and schools during the organisation and implementation of students' professional practice, but also in a differently prescribed legislation on the cooperation between host schools and faculties, which would help initiate a shared care for, and commitment to, educational outcomes of students as the underlying ideas of the concept of work-integrated learning. While we support the idea of improving the university curricula by including more students in the teaching process in schools, we recommend a thorough consideration of the WIL concept, which would bring about a twofold benefit. On one hand, creating stronger bonds between faculties and host schools would contribute to a better development of students' professional competencies, and, on the other hand, it would contribute to the improvement of the professional competencies of the pedagogues already working in schools, given that students acquire modern theoretical knowledge at university and incorporate it in the pedagogical practice together with the employed pedagogues.

Keywords: WIL – work-integrated learning, initial education, school-university cooperation, professional competencies.

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