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REDUCING THE GAP ON ENHANCEMENT AND VALIDATION OF SERVICE-RELATED COMPETENCES IN WESTERN BALKAN UNIVERSITIES

Abstract: *This paper is built upon the work packages of the Enhancing and Validating Service Related Competencies in Versatile Learning Environments in Western Balkan Universities (e-VIVA), a project undertaken under the auspices of the Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education. The methodology employed in this paper is based on the e-VIVA project's work packages, mainly those dealing with the research and needs analysis, service related competencies learning approach, validation, desk research, interviews, online questionnaires, focus groups of universities for each Western Balkan country involved in the project during the meeting of November 2021 in Kotor, Montenegro. The findings of the project help to assess the current situation of the Western Balkan universities about the enhancing and validating competencies, as well as to make some recommendations to the relevant ministries of education, business partners and to the universities themselves.*

Keywords: *Competence based learning and teaching, e-VIVA project, Service related competencies, Western Balkan countries*

1. Introduction

After the 1990s, all higher education institutions in the Western Balkan countries engaged in a non-stop endeavour to reform themselves. However, the higher education system in all those countries does not stand alone and isolated. In fact, the education development policies adopted are shaped by the European Union's two main initiatives in the higher education, which are the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy (Elken et al., 2011).

On top of that, it is important to note that universities in the Western Balkan countries are rather young, since most of them were founded after World War II.

Apart from these distinctive features, executing structural reforms in the higher education is not simple since there are numerous risks and uncertainties. Such reforms are always far-reaching because, even though they are usually initiated by the respective governments of the Western Balkan countries, the responsibilities are to be shared among all the higher education partners and shareholders at all levels.

Three different waves of structural reforms are identified in the higher education of the Western Balkan countries initiated by means of the legislation enacted. The first wave was witnessed during the 1990s, but that did not change much of the higher education philosophy. During the late 1990s and early

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2000s, a second wave of structural reforms was implemented dealing mainly with the post-conflict period and the reintegration into Europe. The third wave of such reforms, undertaken during the 2000s, was all about the adopting and implementing the Bologna Process (Zgaga et al., 2013). At first sight, however, the most visible trait the reforms have produced is the liberalisation, expansion and massification of the higher education.

During the 2000s, all the Western Balkan countries adopted a wide range of profound higher education reforms in line with the Bologna Process, which included amendments to their legal framework as well as changes to their curricula and financing schemes. It looked as if the Western Balkan countries were in some kind of race to adopt and implement everything that the Bologna Process foresaw.

The exponential increase of the number of students from 2005 onwards has met the target for massification of the higher education, but this rapid increase has also highlighted numerous problems, which converge to a single point: quality (Musai, 2012).

By implementing the Bologna Process, the adoption of the concept of competencies as a basis for learning outcomes is the most appropriate way to institute the study programs. However, it is necessary to distinguish learning outcomes from competencies and to differentiate between the different roles of key actors in higher education, such as the academic staff and students. The academic staff formulate the desired learning outcomes, whereas the competencies are acquired or developed by students during the learning process.

It should be noted, however, that using the concept of competencies as a basis for learning outcomes is quite an intricate process and requires capacity building within the higher education institutions.

The society is continuously and firmly moving in a direction where we more and more operate in an increasingly personalized work-learning environment. This requires a new approach towards education, new and diverse competencies from both teachers and learners, as well as the adoption of new teaching and learning methods. Nowadays, it is essential for the approach towards education to be more informal, to be oriented by demand and driven by needs, and the learning design should be individually-focused. This is very different from the current traditional approach towards education, which is a lot more formalized, structured, and the training is more subject-focused and supply-oriented (REVEAL, 2013).

In the present development stage the world is going through, there is a great demand for highly trained professionals. Therefore, the teachers cannot simply restrict their actions only to the conveying of contents. There is a great expectation for the students to become highly skilled and competent professionals. This means that they must be offered the chance to acquire the knowledge needed for them to successfully perform in the society in which they live in and to be able to use their skills and capabilities in a responsible way as well as to be prepared and eager to keep on learning throughout their life (Mohedo & Bujez, 2014). The new approach to education also denotes a change in the university culture, therefore having a major impact upon the professional identity of lecturers. This definitely brings about new pedagogical challenges, which mainly deal with the innovative and proactive methodologies needed in order to prioritize the increasing participation of students in their learning process.

In 2020, the so-called digital learning has become more and more widespread and important, thus offering great opportunities. However, studies emphasize that digital learning should be used to promote learning and not to be its determining factor (Lakerveld, Scholze, & Tilkin, 2019). Technology is to be considered a very useful ally in order to allow learners to use it in a

proper and significant way, to make learners the future promotors of development. The whole teaching process needs to be focused more towards the learners, it needs to take up the role of sustaining them throughout their personal learning path and assist them in their endeavours to cooperate with others. Differently put, the teaching process should not predetermine the content and programmed learning.

This paper is built upon the work packages of the Enhancing and Validating Service Related Competencies in Versatile Learning Environments in Western Balkan Universities (e-VIVA), a project undertaken under the auspices of the Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education. The project is led by the European University of Tirana, Albania, involving 16 partners from all over Europe and foreseen to last for three years, with a budget amounting to 993.581 euro.

The overall purpose of this paper is to present the findings and recommendations for enhancing and validating competencies, and especially the service related competencies, in the versatile learning environments in Western Balkan universities, based on work packages of the e-VIVA project.

The methodology is based on the e-VIVA project's work packages, mainly on the work package dealing with the research and needs analysis led by the University of Duisburg-Essen and on the work package dealing with the service related competencies learning approach and validation led by the Blinc eG, as well as on the work done through the focus groups of universities for each Western Balkan country involved in the project during the meeting of November 2021 in Kotor, Montenegro.

The findings of the project help to assess the current situation of the Western Balkan universities related to enhancing and validating competencies, as well as to make some recommendations to the relevant ministries of education, business partners and to the universities themselves.

2. e-VIVA project overview

One of the great challenges of the higher education system is to have the ability to adapt to the changes in today's society and its new demands, which is more and more emphasizing on the professional competencies of the concept of profession. Students are expected to equip themselves with various competencies during their studies at the university and, for that matter, previous studies have also indicated that many of these competencies actually do develop at university (Keneley & Jackling, 2011). However, the studies conducted also show that university students develop more theoretical knowledge and not so much academic competencies (Monteiro, Almeida, & Aracil, 2016). Competency-based learning approaches in higher education are still at the early stages of their development, thus indicating the need to share and acquire more academic experiences. To this end, the Western Balkan universities need to build the required capacity. At the same time, a rich diversity of digital environments and information and communication technology tools have emerged, successfully sustaining the design, execution and evaluation of competency-based learning.

e-VIVA is a project undertaken under the auspices of the Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education. The project is led by the European University of Tirana, Albania, involving 16 partners from all over Europe. The project got off ground in 2019 and the main aim was the establishment of a blended learning approach in order to enable and validate service-related competency developments, conducted in a more informal learning contexts in higher education institutions of the Western Balkan countries or in workplace learning contexts. The e-VIVA project was related to the Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education priority of recognition of qualifications and qualification framework (regional priority), and it developed a cross-cutting educational approach to create, asses and evidence

learning outcomes as an innovative validation method (EVIVA, 2018).

The objectives of the project were:

- Research on approaches to create and validate service-oriented skills and competencies;
- Enriching existing validation and certification systems through connection with existing European Qualifications Framework-based validation and certification systems, extracurricular activities in higher education including internships, learning activities at the work place and/or internships and learning in mobility, career counselling activities in the respective universities, including the Alumni association;
- Developing and refiningoverarching Information and Communication Technology-based assessment and validation systems;
- Applying a rich competency development and validation software for service-related skills and competencies;
- Piloting and evaluation.

In the context of the e-VIVA project, a web-based learning and validation platform was applied for a number of 300 licences in the Western Balkan countries, therefore enabling learners and validators to evidence developments of service-related personal and social skills in a process-oriented way.

The partners of the project were the European University of Tirana (Albania), die Berater Unternehmensberatungs GmbH (Austria), Blended Learning Institutions Cooperative - Blinc eG (Germany), University of Duisburg-Essen (Germany), Nova University of Lisbon (Portugal), Cyril and Methodius University of Skopje (North Macedonia), Mother Teresa University (North Macedonia), University of Sarajevo (Bosnia & Herzegovina), Sarajevo School of Science and Technology (Bosnia & Herzegovina), Aleksander Xhuvani University of Elbasan (Albania), Universum College (Kosovo), Kadri Zeka University of Gjilan (Kosovo), University of Novi Sad (Serbia), University of Nis (Serbia), University of Donja Gorica (Montenegro) and University of Montenegro (Montenegro).

3. Competency-oriented learning and validation

The sustainable development and social cohesion of all our societies depend very much on the competencies of all of our population (OECD, 2005). Competencies as defined by various European bodies, as well as by various education experts throughout the world. Competency can be defined as the capacity to use specific combinations of knowledge or cognition, skills or capabilities and the overt behavioural repertoire, as well as attitudes or emotions and values in the appropriate contexts (Baartman & Ruijs, 2011). Based on the Council of the European Union legal initiatives, competency is referred to as the proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in the professional and personal development (Council of the European Union, 2017).

However, competency is a dynamic concept and it grows while learning.

In the history of competency research, there have been endeavours to develop models of competency for diverse contexts (Weinert, 1999). A theoretical competency model is ideally made up of three dimensions: (a) competency areas or competency structure (Hartig, Klieme, & Leutner, 2008); (b) competency levels; and (c) competency development (Koeppen, Hartig, Klieme, & Leutner, 2008).

The means to measure and document different competency levels are as old as they are complex. There are different taxonomies to evaluate the competencies.

Bloom's taxonomy is a system of hierarchical models used to categorize learning objectives into varying levels of complexity (Bloom, 1956). The framework elaborated in the studies conducted by Bloom and his collaborators consisted of six major categories: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The categories under knowledge were presented as "skills and abilities," with the understanding that knowledge was the necessary precondition for putting these skills and abilities into practice (Bloom, 1984).

In 2001, the original cognitive model of Bloom was modified Krathwol and Anderson, two noted education psychologists. The revised taxonomy emphasizes a more dynamic approach to education. This new and revised model helps teachers to plan and deliver appropriate instruction, to design valid assessment tasks and strategies, and to ensure that instruction and assessment are aligned with the objectives (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

European Qualifications Framework, together with the related European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET), represents a far-reaching educational construct of the European Union that makes compatible all levels of education in all of the European Union education systems (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2008).

The European Qualifications Framework is an eight-level learning outcomes-based framework for all types of qualifications. Generally speaking, it serves as a translation tool between different national qualifications frameworks. Each learning outcome in the European Qualifications Framework is defined as a statement of what a learner knows, understands and can do on completion of a learning process. The level increases according to the level of proficiency, where level 1 is the lowest and level 8 the highest. Therefore, the European Qualifications Framework emphasizes the results of learning rather than focusing on inputs, such as length of study. It is closely connected to various national qualifications frameworks and this way it provides a broad map of all types and levels of qualifications in Europe and which are increasingly accessible through qualification databases (Europass European Union, n.d.).

The European Qualifications Framework was first established in 2008 and later revised in 2017 (Council of the European Union, 2017). All the member states of the European Union committed themselves to further develop the European Qualifications Framework and make it more effective in relation to facilitating the understanding of national and international qualifications by employers, workers and learners. In addition to the member states of the European Union, 11 other associated countries work towards implementing the European Qualifications Framework and this includes all the Western Balkans countries.

Level 5 was developed by the REVEAL project (REVEAL, 2013) as a reference system based on the post-Bloom taxonomy blended with a derivate of the emotional intelligence taxonomy. This updated taxonomy enables the evaluation, documentation and planning competency developments in highly context-dependent environments.

In this reference system, competencies are contextualized with the help of some specific learning outcome descriptors. With the help of this reference systems, each competency can be properly described on five levels of quality and three basic dimensions (see Figure 1), which are the knowledge, skills or capabilities and the affective or value competency components (Lakerveld, Scholze, & Tilkin, 2019).

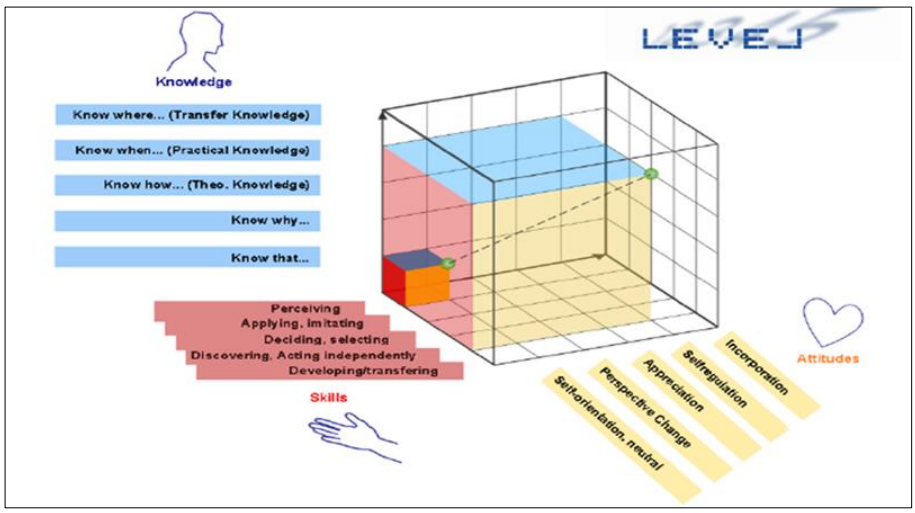

Figure 1. Level 5 Cube (REVEAL, 2013)

Competency development is an elaborate process, which is very much dependent on the competency itself. It is also dependent on the potentials or stages of the learners and also on the external factors, such as context and quality expectations. Level 5 was designed to enable and arrange learning in a competency-oriented manner in various learning settings, be them formal, non-formal or informal. It combines competency validation with the competency acquisition.

Competency validation refers to the validation of learning and it represents one of the main education initiatives in Europe. It comes combined together with a number of some very useful instruments, such as ECTS, ECVET and EuroPass. The overall aim of validation is to help make the skills and competencies of the individuals visible, transparent and transferable. On top of that, competency validation is also viewed as a strong contributor towards European mobility and social cohesion.

Validation, in so far as it being a European concept is concerned, is built upon a four-step procedure, which comprises identifying, assessing, documenting and recognizing. Learning outcomes make up the important part in the whole validation concept since they offer the descriptions of what a learner should know and what he will be able to do after the completion of the learning activity (Lakerveld, Scholze, & Tilkin, 2019).

In the e-VIVA project, service orientation competencies are acquired based on the EntreComp competency framework for entrepreneurship (European Commission, n.d.). They come with a particularly strong focus on the clients and their needs, involving an innovative teaching and learning approach based on the design thinking approach and on the instruments of blended learning modalities. It should be noted that design thinking concept and process includes the validation of the acquired competencies.

Level 5 system is based on the plan-do-check procedure (REVEAL, 2013). Level 5 promotes practical and informal learning and validation of competencies, such as internships, learning on the job, mobility programs, etc. Such a method documents the learning outcomes in the foram of a Level 5 certificate (see Figure 2), which also includes the dynamic of the Level 5 cube.

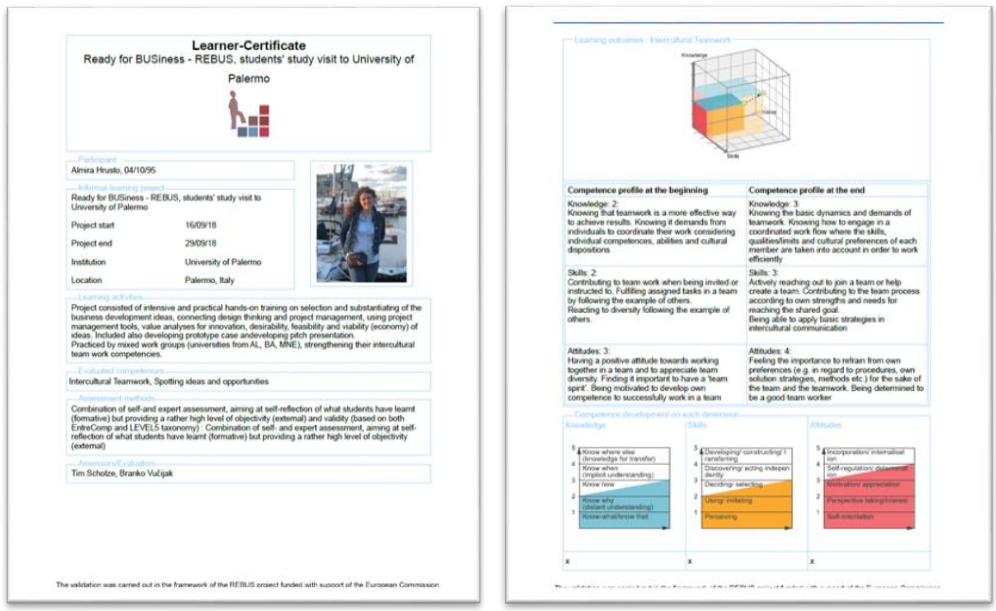

Figure 2. Level 5 Student certificate

Competency-based learning and competency-based education are generally built upon the assumption that the learners learn by experience and discovery. Furthermore, competency-based education means that, instead of focusing on grades and yearly curriculum schedules, the main focus of the teaching process is directed towards how competent every student is in the subject concerned.

The whole point of this education or teaching approach is that learners need to be actively involved in the learning process in tandem and interacting with others and with their surrounding environment. It emphasizes on the importance of teaching in a very responsive and learner-focused way, but without neglecting the obligation of opening up learners to new horizons and perspectives, as well as nurturing their enthusiasm for the new and unknown (Blinc, 2019).

Competency-based education focuses on preparing students for the next stage of their life by personalizing the learning experience for each individual student. This approach means that teacher must make sure that every student gains the full mastery before they can move forward (Prodigy, 2021)

4. Methodology

The e-VIVA project research methodology was developed in order to identify, analyse and describe, in theory and practice, the best education programs related to service orientation. The focus was on the interaction between the formal and informal learning situations in the higher education sector, as well as possible connections to validation practices in relation to the European Qualifications Framework, the various national qualifications frameworks and the related instruments, such as ECTS, ECVET and EuroPass (Blinc, 2019).

The methodology is based on the e-VIVA project's work packages, mainly on the work package dealing with the research and needs analysis led by the University of Duisburg-Essen and on the work package dealing with the service related competencies learning approach and validation led by the Blinc eG

(Blinc, 2019), as well as on the work done through the focus groups of universities for each Western Balkan country involved in the project during the meeting of November 2021 in Kotor, Montenegro.

The research framework implemented in the e-VIVA project, represented as a work package on its own, consisted of three parts: desk research, online questionnaire, and interviews with various stakeholders, conducted individually or in focus group. The interviews have also served to substantiate the online questions.

The service related competencies survey was made up of the following components (Blinc, 2019): level of awareness about these competencies among the target groups, rating of the importance of these competencies for the target groups, a more detailed understanding of which sub-competencies are considered important in a service rendering enterprise or sector. The reason behind such content of the survey was to identify how these competencies can be acquired. The survey was used to gauge the following target groups: educational stakeholders: potential employers (enterprises, nongovernmental organizations, public institutions, industries), and learners (students or learners in formal education).

The desk research consisted of four parts: service-related competencies in practice; service-related competencies in higher education and continuing professional development; learning technologies and blended learning in higher education; job related competencies, informal learning and validation. Each part of the desk research consisted of a set of questions and each partner performed desk research, and afterwards partners from each country created national desk research.

The online questionnaire consisted of six parts: target groups; measuring the importance of the service-related competencies; acquisition of service-related competencies; validation of service-related competencies; digital learning; future communication details. Partners from each country participating in the e-VIVA project conducted national analysis of answers on online questionnaires.

Interviews were conducted either as individual interviews or as focus group interviews. Each partner country institution performed interviews separately. Interview consisted of five parts and each part included a set of questions as guidelines for the interview. Those parts making up the interview were: the overall demand for education on service-related competencies; stakeholders support; provision of service-related competencies education; methodology (concerning learning location and technologies blend of different learning modalities and blended learning aspects); validation and assessment of service-related competencies.

At the end, the partner country institutions compiled a national report, which included the desk research, analysis of results of the online questionnaire and interview reports, as well as interpretation of research and needs analysis. Based on the national reports from all partner countries, a transnational report was compiled.

5. Findings

Based on the research tools clarified in the methodology, the search results are presented grouped in desk research and interviews, and online questionnaires for each Western Balkan country as follows.

5.1. Desk research and interviews

In Montenegro, the higher education law determines an obligation to provide a 25% practice at program and / or study program for all study programs/levels in higher education organizations, through cooperation with the so-called basics for organizing practical lectures. To enable the creation of service-related competencies, universities in Montenegro have considered important to

involve individuals from business organizations in teaching. Efforts were implemented to improve students' competencies through the involvement of business.

Higher education institutions are aware of the importance of validating competencies, but have not yet set up systems / approach to accomplish it. Meanwhile, the labor market and especially business has a growing interest in service-related and other competencies, as well as schools or levels of education that enable their creation. There are huge opportunities for service related competencies because the demand is high, so the respondents stressed the need to modify existing educational practice because it does not stress them enough or does not include it in the sufficient level.

In Albania, based on the Deloitte survey First Steps into the Labor Market 2018 of International Survey Students and Recent Graduates (Deloitte, 2018) just 19% of Albania and Kosovo respondents believe university has prepared them well for the job market. Most respondents are very confident in their competencies, but even fewer of them (15%) feel they have been well prepared to look for a job. They are of the opinion that education can improve the effective learning, logical thinking and teamwork.

Based on the Upskilling & Reskilling in the New Normal 2020 the top four most needed skills to develop at managerial and senior level in Albania are: adaptability/resilience; communication/collaboration; planning and organizing; and digital skills. Most required skills during pandemic for graduates were: customer focus, team spirit, communication and problem solving. Top emerging job categories in the next five years in industries will be: business development, database / network, information security, project management, people and culture, customer experience, data analysis, digital marketing, software and apps development, digital transformation.

Furthermore, on the First Steps into the Labor Market 2021 International Survey of Students and Recent Graduates (Deloitte, 2021) the respondents aged between 18 and 22 years, appreciated the chance of entering an organization at a junior level. They understand that the competencies sought after among junior staff members are logical and analytical thinking, teamwork and the ability to effectively learn new things.

In Serbia, an analysis conducted in all of the 1 201 study programs offered in all the universities there shows that as many as 47.8% of students do not take any courses during the studies that even partly involves the development of some of the service-related skills. Graduated students possess mainly theoretical knowledge gained from professional courses, but during the studies they receive very little practical experience, and, at the end, they lack service-related skills necessary for modern day jobs.

The new education strategy in Serbia for the period until 2025 recognized that problem and, as the basic goals of education, proclaims the development of personal business skills and imposes them as an obligation to educational institutions as a general learning outcome. Analysis of the job ads at Serbian most important internet portals devoted to the job search shows that as much as 81% of job ads look for service related skills, while only 19% seek exclusively professional business skills. Most important skills for Serbian companies, by the order of importance, are: oral and written communication, teamwork, dedication, focus on results, self-initiative, negotiation ability, professional ethics, creativity, leadership, stress management, ability to learn, conflict management, flexibility, building connections, cultural adaptability, making decisions, continuous improvement, customer orientation, adaptability to changes, analytical skills.

In Kosovo, universities seem to have little interaction with the labour market and industry. In fact, very few universities have

paid attention to students´ professional practice. Stakeholders, the likes of the Chamber of Commerce, Kosovo Business Agency, etc., have not developed any initiative to link the market with the providers of higher education sector.

The higher education providers should develop direct contacts with large service or manufacturing businesses in order to build focus groups that can potentially contribute to the development of demand-based or need-based programs. Furthermore, the establishment of institutes at higher education institutions is very important, and together with the network of partner businesses of these institutions, could develop training modules that can contribute to the development of new staff.

It is extremely important for students to pursue internships in order to develop their competencies and practical capacities. Another point of view, also very important for students is to incorporate non-formal education, based on international cooperation as well to incorporate learning technologies in competence development.

In Bosnia & Herzegovina, there are several ministries and agencies, chambers of commerce, centres of entrepreneurship and innovation that have responsibility to support service economy development. However, direct support from public or other parties to promote the acquisition and validation of service- related competencies is not visible.

Higher education institutions emphasized that few universities offered education in entrepreneurship as core study programs. Businesses emphasized that the partners from real economy could contribute to development service-related competencies in the higher education, if curricula was in line with market needs and that businesses had to find interest to involve students in practice in more adequate way. The higher education institutions should be providing mentoring by professors and by people from real business sectors.

Interviewers emphasized regarding competence evaluation that students taking courses in service economy should have tests which are specifically designed to evaluate the development of their knowledge related service. The evaluation of their practical skills and attitudes could be achieved through practical projects and observing students in internships in companies.

5.2. Online Questionnaire

In Montenegro, the service-related competencies are viewed as important by 80% of the respondents. The reasons they refer to include their personal development, success in education, finding a job, career advancement and development. The majority of respondents states that service-related competencies can be obtained in all of the possible ways that were offered in formal education: the school education is seen as very important and medium important by more than three-quarters of respondents. The similar number can be seen for adult education, vocational education and training and higher education, where the cumulative number for two answers was more than 90%.

Learning about service related competencies at the work place is evaluated by 91.25% respondents as important; learning through voluntary work is evaluated by 82.5% as also important, while learning through internships or traineeships is evaluated as important by 93.75% respondents. The workplace is presented as the best option for learning about service related competencies and mobility, voluntary work, internships and traineeships are seen as very relevant as well.

Discussing an awareness of respondents about any learning program or learning activity which promote the acquisition of service related competencies, it can be see that most of respondents in Montenegro (90%) said “no”.

Regarding validation of service related competencies, most of respondents answered that they are not familiar with the concept of validation of these competencies: 47.5% said that they do not have an idea about the validation of these competencies. while 45 % stated that they do not possess any knowledge about it. Majority of respondents (70%) answered that they consider validation of competencies as important, 6.25% consider it as unimportant, while 23.75% respondents did not know. On the other hand, 88.75% of respondents answered that they have never heard of any approach to validation of service relating competencies, while just 11.25% heard about it.

In Albania, the concept of service related competencies is seen as important by around 90% of respondents. The respondents rated vocational education and training and higher education as very important, higher than adult or school education (100% of respondents rated higher education as very and medium important).

The service related competencies can be acquiring to different informal learning contexts, it is very important to acquire service related competencies at the workplace (81.48% as very important and 18,52% as medium important) and during internships or traineeships (77.78% as very important and 18.52% as medium important) more than during mobility or voluntary work. According awareness about the learning programs or activities for promoting the acquisition of service related competencies, the majority of the respondents answered “no” (83.33%).

According the means of validation of service related competencies, only 33.33% of respondents answered that they are somewhat familiar with the concept of validation of these competencies, while more than half of them (51.85%) stated that they have no idea about the validation process of these competencies, but they find it important (88.89%).

In Serbia, the respondents stated that they are mostly familiar with the concept of service related competencies. Their opinion was that almost every job ad today has those competencies stated as desirable. All interviewees agreed that service related competencies should be validated in some way and most of them stated that maybe validation should not be in the form of numerical grades but rather in some descriptive manner.

Survey respondents rated their knowledge on the concept of service related competencies mostly as medium (63.41%) or low (29.27%), while only 7.32% rated their knowledge as high. The respondents rated vocational education and training (53.66% as very important and 34.15% as medium important) and higher education (41.46% as very important and 43.90% as medium important) as important than adult or school education.

Regarding the awareness of respondents about any learning program or learning activity which promote the acquisition of service-related competencies, overwhelming majority respondents answered “no” (95.12%).

Learning about service related competencies through internships or traineeships (87.81% as very and medium important) and in mobility (85.37% as very and medium important) were rated slightly higher than workplace (80.48%) or voluntary work.

Regarding validation of service related competencies, the respondents 53.66 % answered that they do not have an idea about the validation of these competencies, meanwhile 46.34 % stated that they are somewhat familiar with the concept of validation of these competencies. Majority of respondents (56.10%) answered that they consider validation of competencies as important, while 39.2% respondents did not know. Most indicative was the answer to the question whether the respondents are aware of any approach or tool for validating service related competencies. Overwhelming

majority (95.12%) answered that they never heard of any such approach.

In Kosovo, the respondents stated that they are mostly familiar with the concept of service related competencies, they rate the knowledge on the concept of service related competence as high 17.39% of the respondents, as medium 67.39% of the respondents and 15.22% of them have rated as low.

Regarding the acquisition of the service-related competencies learning context the respondents rated the vocational education and training (53.65% as very important and 34.15% as medium important) and higher education (41.46% as very important and 43.90% as medium important) as important than adult or school education. The respondents highlighted that vocational training education and higher education are the most important levels/form of education where service related competencies were best acquired.

The answers showed that 63.42% of respondents indicated workplace as very important informal learning contexts where service related competencies can be acquired workplace, 56.10% indicated internships or traineeships as very important, following by in mobility with 31.70% and voluntary work with 29.27%.

Regarding awareness of respondents about the learning programs or activities for promoting the acquisition of service related competencies, 82.38% were not aware of the learning programs or activities for promoting the acquisition of service-related competencies.

Answers on validation of service related competencies showed that 80% had an idea about the validation of these competencies. The importance of validation of competencies 84% of respondents considered the validation as important, and 16% considered it as not important. Regarding knowledge about validation approaches 60% answered that they knew the approaches, 25% indicated that they didn´t know, while 15% stated that they do not possess any knowledge about approaches for validating service-related competencies.

In Bosnia & Herzegovina, the respondents consider as very important the service-related competencies and they are mostly familiar with them. Nevertheless, they were mostly unaware and unfamiliar with programs that promoted their acquisition and the approaches to evaluate and validate them.

The respondents consider that in non-formal education domain, best service related competencies could be acquired in working place (62.71% as very important and 34.75% as medium important) and on internship (57.63 % as very important and 33.90% as medium important) as important than adult or school education. Furthermore, according to the respondents, best service-related competencies in formal education could be acquired in vocational (60.17% as very important and 35.59 % as medium important) and higher education domain (62.71% as very important and 34.75% as medium important). However, based on respondents' opinion, service-related competencies could be acquired in both formal and non-formal education domain and in all available programs.

The respondents (72.88%) evaluated their knowledge about service-related competencies as high or average, while 27.12% as low. About 90% of respondents were unfamiliar with programs or courses that promote acquisition of service-related competencies and its validation. In addition to this, 91.53% of respondents were unfamiliar with service related competencies validation approach while 61.86% of respondents considered validation of service related competencies as important.

6. Conclusion

It must be noted that there is an overall shortage in qualified people. The shortage is visible in terms of expertise because of

demographic reasons, stemming mainly from the young university graduates leaving the country to work and live abroad. The shortage of qualified people is also visible in terms of possession of service-related competencies. However, entrepreneurs and managers are very well aware of the importance of these competencies.

The research conducted in and by the Western Balkan universities participating in the e-VIVA project, through the online questionnaires and interviews, clearly indicated that the service-related competencies are recognized as an important concept. The surveys showed that respondents were familiar with the overall service-related competencies and consider them to be very important. Their opinions emphasised the fact that such competencies could benefit individuals in many ways, including their personal development, career advancement and professional development. They also emphasised that such competencies can significantly help them to better navigate the job market.

The respondents from the Western Balkan countries consider their respective countries to still be in a transition period from the centrally planned state-owned economy to the free market economy. They also think that the service-related competencies are still underdeveloped.

A very high percentage of respondents were not familiar with the validation of service-related competencies. However, they considered validation as an important and necessary step for the formal recognition of service-related competencies.

The overall research has shown that there is a deficiency of appropriate connections between the higher education sector and business enterprises in the Western Balkan countries. In fact, the general perception is that the business enterprises seem to stay away from cooperating with universities.

The respondents were mostly unaware and unfamiliar with programs that promote the acquisition of service related competencies. A very high percentage of respondents were not familiar with the validation of service related competencies, but they considered validation as an important and necessary step for the formal recognition;

The workplace and internships and traineeships are presented as the best options for learning about service related competencies; higher than mobility or voluntary work. The respondents rated vocational education and training and higher education as very important to acquire the SRC, higher than adult or school education.

Competence Oriented Learning and Validation is a rather new concept which goes along an innovative idea of teaching and learning The stakeholders should understand the need of a paradigm shift from traditional teaching to competence oriented learning, to a more learner centered educational approach which is neither common in the EU member states nor in the Western Balkan countries. The purpose of validation is to make visible the entire scope of knowledge and experience held by an individual, more transparent and comparable.

Competence Oriented Learning implies some challenges for stakeholders in service economy. Challenges for HEI are: flexible curricula, internships and projects connect with real business. Challenges for the Business partners: Where and how to implement concept of the e- VIVA project with interns.

7. Reccomendations

Policymakers, researchers and other education actors in the Western Balkan countries must initiate a discussion on approaches and solutions related to practicing the competency-based teaching and learning. The COVID-19 crisis reinforced such needs and opened new questions for education actors. In order to reach the full potential of competency-based learning, education actors must work hard to

gain service-oriented and digital competencies, spend more time in self-reflection, focus on long-term planning and development, engage in discussion with peers, students, and available experts.

Education must respond to the needs and challenges of circular economy in order to become less formal and more flexible, more open and participatory. The education system needs to offer a multitude of entry gates for adult learners with interfaces between the formal and informal sector.

The potential of the competency-based learning for the overall improvement of the quality of education is significant, but only if techniques and tools are wisely chosen and used efficiently with the appropriate pedagogical approaches. That is needed in order to avoid the waste of normally insufficient resources available for the education sector.

The Western Balkan universities should develop and improve their curricula and syllabuses based on competency-based learning and teaching and especially based on Level 5 with the aim that in the future most students graduating equipped with service-related competencies. Higher education institutions in Western Balkan countries can use the Level 5 methodology for different competencies (such as service-related, entrepreneurship and others) in order to reflect on their curricula, syllabuses, internships, projects, etc. This approach could also be very effectively used for formative assessment of acquired competencies.

However, both state-funded agencies or institutions and private businesses should team up together in increasing the level of service-related competencies right away (instead of waiting for the effects of reformed curricula and syllabuses) either through short courses, tutorials and workshops or through cooperation with higher education institutions where businesses offer scholarships, internships and mentorships to students, mostly those in the domain of information technology or tourism.

The following institutions in Western Balkan countries should benefit from these recommendations; ministries of education, the institutes or agencies for education quality and evaluation, the chambers of commerce, universities, enterprises, training agencies involved in the competency-based learning.

The agencies for the quality in higher education could recommend the establishment of programs in higher education institutions based on the Level 5 methodology, as well as engage in a promotional campaign for raising awareness about the importance of the Level 5 methodology with all stakeholders (state institutions, business sector and higher education institutions). The public institutions, at the central and local level, as well as international organization should provide financial support for the adoption of the Level 5 methodology and assist in additional training for lectures or trainer.

The service economy is rapidly growing and there is a strong need for service-related competencies. Provision of such competencies can be successfully achieved only by including all the relevant stakeholders in the process. The governments should support the business sector which is collaborating with the universities and which are involved in the education process. A combination of learning from both enterprises and universities will not only bridge the gap between the theory and practice but also provide a better understanding of what enterprises demand. The universities should define the courses or modules, which create service-related competencies and apply the Level 5 methodology for their enhancement and validation.

The collaboration among Western Balkan countries and Western Balkan universities should be enhanced with the aim of exchanging the good practices and to support

each other. The integration of the Western Balkans countries into the European Union requires very important political, legal, and economic reforms. Education remains one of our most important sectors funded by the European Union and the success of this sector affects all other sectors since it contributes to the preparation of the workforce serving the needs of the economic development of the respective countries. The implementation of the e-VIVA project methodology in higher education creates premises for improving the quality of education and meeting the needs of the labour market at local, regional and international level.

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