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What to Offer in Career Service Trainings? Competencies and Skills Needed on (German) Labour Market for Graduates

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Abstract: Preparation for the labour market (LM) is one of Higher Education purposes (in Germany). At many institutions, career services provide LM oriented competences/skills trainings. However, it is not clear which competencies/skills are relevant for LM. This study aims to identify concrete characteristics university graduates must have to successfully enter and participate in LM. The results show a common understanding for competencies/skills needed on the graduates' LM in Germany. However, we observed three parallel LMs with different demand for competencies/skills: **LM for professions** with a structured career pathway, defined entering criteria and demand for specialised knowledge. **All-rounder LM** representing the majority of jobs and asking for broad competencies/skills profile; hard skills are of minor importance; teamwork, communication, dedication and problem-oriented work attitude are crucial. **Sustainable LM** is similar to all-rounder LM, but the social aspects (e.g. social responsibility) and personal development on the job are pivotal.

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In Germany, four purposes of Higher Education have been identified: production and teaching of scientific knowledge, students' personal development, enablement for participation in civic life and preparation for the labour market (LM) (Schaper 2012). The last point has been widely discussed under the key word ´employability´. Three strategies regarding the implementation of LM related elements in the academic curriculum have crystallised at German higher education institutions: integrative approach (implementation of LM oriented competences/skills training in subject-related courses), additive approach (particular curses focussing on a specific LM oriented competence/skill) and mix strategy (combining those two methods) (Eimer et al. 2019). LM related elements are implemented on the central university level and in decentral units, such as faculties or institutes.

At the University of Cologne central offer for additive courses was implemented at ProfessionalCenter (PC). PC was established 2007 as a part of the Vice-Rectorate for Teaching and Studies. PC's aim is to provide LM oriented competences/skills trainings and career orientation. However, the strategies and the choice of competencies/skills courses offered are not made explicit. In fact, the author of this paper is unaware of any studies describing systematic strategies at career

services in Germany regarding the choice of competences/skills courses offered to the students.

The project `Successful at the labour market´ aims to identify concrete characteristics, be it competences, soft skills or hard skills, university graduates must have to successfully enter and participate in the LM. The findings will be used for revision of the PC course offer. To reach this aim, the project takes employers and employees' perspectives into account. Sample selection was based on job position, field of work, professional experience's duration and gender. In total, 26 problem-centred interviews (14 employees, 12 employers) (Witzel & Reiter 2012) incorporating Q-sorting (Brown 1980) were conducted. As graduates from the University of Cologne tend (85% of graduate year 2016) to stay in Cologne metropolitan region, the project focuses on the regional LM (Cologne +/- 50km).

Besides the narrative part, the participants were asked to sort 43 items according to their subjective relevance for LM (Q-method). This Q-set, 43 items describing soft and hard skills, was selected i.a. from scientific papers regarding graduates' skills/competencies and skill rankings from commercial providers.

The interpretation of three factors extracted in Q-analysis (varimax, PCA, 48% of the variance explained), complemented by the narrations´ analysis, leads to following results: As the correlations among factors are strong it may be concluded, there is common understanding for competencies/skills needed on the graduates' LM in Germany. However, items constellations in the factors show that there is no one-fits-all competencies/skills set for all areas of the graduates' LM. In fact, three parallel LMs with different demand for competencies/skills came to light. (1) **LM for professions** with a structured career pathway, defined entering criteria (e.g. bar exam) and extreme demand for specialised knowledge. (2) **All-rounder LM** representing the majority of jobs and asking for broad competencies/skills profile; hard skills are of minor importance, but teamwork, communication, dedication and problem-oriented work attitude are crucial. (3) **Sustainable LM** is similar to all-rounder LM, but the social aspects (e.g. social responsibility, respect toward others) and personal development on the job are pivotal. The latter LM representation is observed in teams using agile methods and may be considered as the LM of the future.

Additionally, the results show that employees and employers have similar views on competencies/skills needed on the LM. Employees, however, rate the importance of ability to adapt to new situations and ability to work under stress higher than employers. Employers rank the ability to criticise and ability to take the initiative higher than employees. In general, an experience abroad is not seen as relevant for LM. The same is true for civic engagement. Digital competences are placed in the middle field, which is surprising given the booming demand for IT-specialist.

The asset of Q-study incorporated into an interview in comparison to a closed-question questionnaire was that participants ranked the skills in dependency of one another and not as independent items. Instead of repeating buzz words, complementary narrations allowed to unfold meaning and content of competencies/skills in focus, thus facilitating the development of curriculum. In this manner this study can be seen as quality assurance for the PC course offer. In the long-term perspective it has to be decided, if a quality assuring instrument will be implemented as an integral part of PC quality management so that it can provide students with competencies/skills they need for their career.

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