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Putting Competence at the Core: Experiences of using the European Key Competences for Lifelong Learning in Postgraduate Programmes. (0214)

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Background

This paper presents key findings from the PROPOUND project supported and funded by the European Union Lifelong Learning Programme. The aim of the project is to contribute to the modernisation of universities in Europe by promoting curricular reforms to improve the employability of postgraduate students. The PROPOUND project encourages dialogue between universities and enterprises in the design of curricular strategies enabling postgraduate programmes to respond to labour market needs while promoting the development, assessment and certification of the key competences of postgraduate students. The project explores how postgraduate students acquire key competences - that is non-disciplinary, or transversal, competences additional to the subject specific content of any particular programme - during their postgraduate studies.

The project piloted and validated different models for identifying and evaluating European Key Competences that are the basis for the employability of graduates. The project worked with various postgraduate programmes across the participating countries of Spain, Italy, Netherlands, UK and Estonia. Each partner contributed a review of Key Competences in their country, case studies of the development, assessment and certification of Key Competences along with a pilot project for experimentation and validation focusing on Key Competences.

This paper describes the research methodologies applied in the U.K. specifically and the PROPOUND project as a whole. We discuss the research findings and implications of these for higher education institutes, employers and policy-makers in terms of implementing a Key Competences approach for university postgraduate programmes in Europe.

The National Policy Context

Analysis of the U.K. policy context suggests the following aspects as relevant to the PROPOUND project:

- Education and Training policy is largely devolved to the administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with the national government responsible for England along with networks of national bodies such as Sector Skills Councils, professional associations and regulatory bodies. Within these networks, universities have considerable autonomy over their individual programme curricula.

- A system of Functional or Key Skills (Core Skills in Scotland) is well established, with formal qualifications available at school level, transition to higher education, apprenticeships or work, and at adult (remedial) education. There is little uniform policy or practice for key competences at bachelor or masters degree levels.
- Functional/Key/Core Skills can all be readily mapped onto the eight European Key Competences. But the reverse is not necessarily the case
- A learning outcomes based approach to curricular design has been described as an “almost universal feature of UK higher education programmes” (Quality Assurance Agency, 2007).

This combination of learning outcomes, subject benchmarks, and professional and/or regulatory accreditation provides a powerful mechanism for embedding key competences within postgraduate programmes.

Furthermore, graduate employability receives increasingly significant attention (Pegg et al., 2012) yet employers continue to express disappointment at the work skills of graduates (CBI, 2009).

Implementation

The PROPOUND project activities conducted in Scotland mapped the European Key Competence 5 (Learning to Learn) against learning outcomes and performance criteria in different types of masters programmes (Conversion; Advanced; Research and either PSRB accredited or non-accredited). The ‘Learning to Learn’ competence is described as:

... the disposition and ability to organise and regulate one’s own learning, both individually and in groups ... the ability to manage one’s time effectively, to solve problems, to acquire, process, evaluate and assimilate new knowledge, and to apply new knowledge and skills in a variety of contexts ... In more general terms, learning to learn contributes strongly to managing one’s own career path (European Commission, 2004).

Research was conducted using questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and documentary analysis. The research findings were reviewed and discussed at a U.K. National Workshop attended by postgraduate students, employers and professionals in higher education institutions.

The findings highlighted the limited conscious consideration of Learning to Learn among postgraduate students. Learning was perceived as a process of knowledge acquisition by the individual from an ‘authority’ figure rather than something to be developed or constructed individually or socially. Students had a limited focus on problem-solving skills or on reflection in learning despite acknowledging the importance critical thinking skills. Recent graduates showed greater awareness of Learning to Learn but with an instrumental focus on meeting programme expectations and gaining employment.

Suggestions

The PROPOUND project identified two main approaches to the formal recognition of Key Competences in postgraduate programmes:

Route A Discrete: where Key Competences are developed outside formal programmes and delivered through, for example, seminars, internships and workshops.

Route B Embedded: where Key Competences are developed as part of programme learning outcomes and assessed alongside subject-specific knowledge, skills and understanding.

Implications

Drawing on the wider findings of the PROPOUND project, a clear emphasis is placed on the centrality of the individual learner in establishing and implementing Key Competences within a wider framework of lifelong learning. In turn, this places a focus on the self-regulated and self-directed nature of developing Key Competences to successfully navigate the dynamic and flexible contemporary labour markets. The project identified learners' portfolios as a powerful mechanism to give structure and content to this self-regulated approach. Underpinned by the portfolio approach, the Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) can bridge the competence needs of the individual and their wider context through formulating and answering concrete learning questions.

A critical success factor for including Key Competences in the formal recognition process is consensus-building in the university communities of teaching staff and students deciding together that Key Competences are to be valued and formally recognised.

Implications for employers revolve around the demand for graduates with relevant (hence transversal) skills and competences. This requires better synergy between the worlds of education and work in order to support investment in developing more relevant and better skills, (including transversal ones). Yet, there is hesitancy among some employers to invest in training unless it involves specialized skills.

A key challenge for policy-makers involves creating a successful education-to-employment system while also addressing the constraints on the resources of education providers, such as finding qualified faculty and investing in expansion, that also undermine attempts at providing students with authentic practice-based learning to ensure that they can evidence their work-ready competences.

References

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