HOSPITALITY STUDENTS' PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE IN THE ASPECT OF ECOLOGICAL APPROACH

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Abstract. The issue of hospitality specialists' competitiveness relates to the new specialists' transition from the process of acquiring higher professional education to the professional activity. The professional development is the central category of mutual interaction between a person and his/her environment of professional activity. In the study process at the university, it is important to develop hospitality students' ecological competence, including the skills how to adapt to a changing environment, how to adapt to an environment of professional practice. Both, the academic staff at universities and practice mentors at universities and in enterprises have to explain students their new social role – the formation of a hospitality specialist during professional practice in various enterprises. An ecological approach is the basic conceptual approach in the research of the authors of this article. The aim of the research carried out was to give a scientific background for professional practice as a contributor to competitiveness of hospitality professionals from the point of view of pedagogy science, as well as to carry out a pilot-research in order to find out, analyse and evaluate the point of view of hospitality students on the organization and efficiency of professional practice.

Keywords: ecological approach, hospitality students' ecological competence, professional practice.

Introduction

The issue of hospitality specialists' competitiveness relates to the new specialists' transition from the process of acquiring higher professional education to the professional activity, which has its own demands and requirements. The main law of the open market "supply creates its own demand" efficiently works in the hospitality sector, where the employers' demands towards the institutions of higher education are constantly rising, i.e., "supply has to correspond to the demand", therefore, they have to train competitive specialists – managers, who will easily align with the contemporary world labour market.

In Latvia it is possible to acquire professions connected with the tourism industry at 61 educational institutions; among them there are institutions of higher education, colleges, and institutions of professional education. Consequently, a large number of hospitality specialists graduate from the Latvian institutions of higher education annually, and all of them desire to find a highly-paid job. It is a well-known fact that the labour market in the tourism industry is very active as workplaces in this branch are in great demand; always a large number of applicants apply for the announced job vacancies while the number of the latter is limited, which is proved by the quantitative discrepancy between the number of the unemployed and the vacancies in the professions of the branch, e.g., in December, 2012 there were 1106 managers/directors (including the managers of hospitality and tourism enterprises) while only 49 vacancies were announced. Consequently, not only specialists but also institutions of higher education face a competition for these desired vacancies. Among the employers' main requirements for graduates is work experience, which has been gained during the study process and professional practices at university [1].

The authors of this paper are of the opinion that at the present time professional practices at universities are gaining priority in the study process, which confirms the topicality of the research. The efficiency, content, forms and methods of the professional practice as well as its sequence at all levels affects the professional qualification of the managers of hospitality enterprises and professional development possibilities of students as competitive specialists.

Materials and methods

The professional development is the central category of mutual interaction between a person and his/her profession, in psychology it is viewed as the fundamental process of a human being's changes. The professional development is usually identified with progressive changes in the person: maturity, development, self-development, and self-perfection. The professional development is a continuous process, which does not start with the choice of a profession and does not end with completing studies at a higher professional school. It is a process which is continuing throughout all professional life, and

which includes regular chances and experience to plan and perform one's growth in the profession systematically. In the scientific literature of philosophy and sociology the highest stage of professional development is professionalism – the highest degree of mastery of one's activity. In labour psychology professionalism is understood not only as a high level of knowledge, skills and abilities but also as a definite systemic organization of a human being's psyche and consciousness [2-6].

One of the priority scientific and academic activity trends of the Institute of Education and Home Economics at the Latvia University of Agriculture is the *Ecology of Education* as philosophic methodological basis for prospective specialists' professional education and development, therefore the ***ecological approach is the basic conceptual approach in our research*** [7-12].

Two qualitative indexes of specialist training should be singled out as integral to its effectiveness: 1) the time needed by the university graduate to adapt to the environment in accordance with his/her specialty; 2) the number of related subdisciplines that enable the graduate to work without a substantial amount of time spent on adaptation and mastering these additional relevant specializations [13].

In the study process at the university, it is important to develop hospitality students' ecological competence, including skills how to adapt to a changing environment, how to adapt to an environment of professional practice. This competence is one of the preconditions of professional success, professional development and accumulation of positive practice. Students have to think and act ecologically – they have to orientate themselves to *I within the Environment of professional activity* and not *I and the Environment of professional activity*. Therefore, it is important to shift the emphasis from the future specialists' professional training to their readiness for professional activity, including psychological readiness. Owing to the lack of psychological readiness, it is often the case that students are not able to prove their professional competences during practical training. Both, the academic staff at universities and practice mentors at universities and in enterprises have to explain students their new social role – the formation of a hospitality specialist during professional practice in various enterprises [8; 14; 15].

The aim of the research was to conduct a pilot research on the basis of the results of theoretical researches as a methodological base in order to find out, analyse and evaluate the hospitality students' point of view on the organization and efficiency of professional practice. ***The methods of the research:*** 1) theoretical research – study, analysis and evaluation of scientific literature and various documents; reflection of the authors' personal experience; 2) empirical research: students' survey and data processing methods for the statement of descriptive statistics. A questionnaire was designed on the base of the methodology of the research carried out by scientists T. Lam and L. Ching of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, by adapting and modifying both – the criteria for assessment of the practice and their analysis. The questionnaire consisted of 27 questions on the Likert scale. On the basis of the proportion of positive responses ranking was made according to which year a student is in [16].

Results and discussion

For the purposes of enhancement of the organization of hospitality students' practice at the Latvia University of Agriculture there was conducted an empirical pilot research to examine the present situation. The research was conducted from May 2012 until March 2013. The research base included: 1) the Institute of Education and Home Economics of the Latvia University of Agriculture (theoretical research); 2) the Department of Nutrition of the Faculty of Food Technology at the Latvia University of Agriculture (empirical research). In the research participated: second year students ($n = 50$), third year students ($n = 38$), fourth year students ($n = 27$) of the study programme "Catering and Hotel Management" in the study – year 2011/2012. The questionnaire was completed by 115 students 2 months after the end of the practice. The aim of the empirical research was to find out, analyse and evaluate hospitality students' point of view on the organization and the efficiency of professional practices. Study and professional practices at the university improve the knowledge gained in the continuous process of hospitality training. Each step of the study and professional practice is the last one in the corresponding training stage of the study course and it serves as the basis for a student's transition to a new level of professional development. In the organization of the practice such aspects

as continuity and sequence (consistency) in the preparation of various stages in the continuous training system of hospitality have been taken into consideration.

By ranking the students' responses to the questions included in the questionnaire (Table 1) it was found out that there was a concordance of opinions on several issues, namely, students from all courses were of the opinion that practice will be useful for their CV (in this response the results of the 2nd study year students indicated rank 1, but the 3rd and the 4th study year students – rank 2) and that during practice it is possible to learn about their strengths and weaknesses, here the ranks of the responses were as follows – responses of the 2nd study year students indicated rank 2 but the 3rd and the 4th study year students – rank 1. A remarkable consonance was among the students also as regards the statement that practice develops interest in the hospitality profession on the whole – R_4 – the 2nd study year, R_5 – the 3rd study year, R_1 – the 4th study year (here and henceforth: R – rank, R_3 – the response ranks in the 3rd place).

Table 1

Students' Assessment of Professional Practice

Criteria of practice assessment	The 2nd study year		The 3rd study year		The 4th study year	
	Proportion of positive assessment, %	Rank	Proportion of positive assessment, %	Rank	Proportion of positive assessment, %	Rank
Competitive payment for practice	19.35	26	5.00	26	27.03	24
Practice will be useful for my CV	46.81	1	44.78	2	47.06	1
Comprehensive practice programme	39.29	16	36.21	19	38.64	19
During practice I will get reference (feedback) from enterprise managers	37.50	19	43.08	6	47.06	1
Good relationships among peers	39.76	14	37.29	17	46.00	7
Vast work experience	41.18	9	40.32	12	34.15	22
Interesting and challenging work	39.29	16	41.27	9	43.75	13
Good work environment	39.76	14	44.78	2	47.06	1
Sufficient support from the enterprise practice mentor	40.48	11	38.33	15	42.55	17
Professional mentor	41.86	8	41.27	9	44.90	11
Competitive extra pay (e.g., for overtime)	12.28	27	2.63	27	25.00	25
Good co-operation between the university and enterprise	24.24	25	11.90	25	18,18	27
Good possibility for self-development	44.44	5	43.08	6	44.90	11
Recognition and praise from the enterprise managers	40.48	11	39.34	13	43.75	13
Feeling of being a team member	40.24	13	38.33	15	46.00	7
Enterprise practice mentor is responsive in solving work problems	43.82	7	41.27	9	43.75	13
High degree of independence (autonomy)	26.47	24	27.45	22	25.00	25
Reasonable amount of work	41.18	9	39.34	13	47.06	1
Promotes innovative ideas	28.57	23	28.85	21	38.64	19
Permanent work in shifts	35.06	20	30.19	20	40.00	18

Table 1 (continued)

Criteria of practice assessment	The 2nd study year		The 3rd study year		The 4th study year	
	Proportion of positive assessment, %	Rank	Proportion of positive assessment, %	Rank	Proportion of positive assessment, %	Rank
It is possible to apply theoretical knowledge in practice	45.56	3	44.78	2	46.00	7
Practice develops interest in the hospitality profession	45.26	4	44.12	5	47.06	1
Chance to get a job in the enterprise	38.55	18	37.29	17	46.00	7
High team spirit in the group	30.56	22	25.49	23	38.64	19
It is possible to find out own strengths and weaknesses	45.65	2	47.14	1	47.06	1
It is possible to develop professional skills	44.44	5	43.08	6	43.48	16
Involved in supervision tasks	35.06	20	21.28	24	30.77	23

The students' responses also showed similarity in their opinion on the questions about the lack of competitiveness as regards the payment for practice (R_{26} – the 2nd study year and the 3rd study year, R_{24} – the 4th study year), namely, students are not paid during their practice, which in our opinion is understandable and acceptable as during practice students have to learn and gain a deeper insight into the work of hospitality enterprises as much as possible and not work in one position. The students' answers to the question on versatility of work experience testify that such things happen: the fourth study year students' answers rank in the 22nd place, the 3rd study year – in the 12th but the 2nd study year – in the 9th place. However, gaining of the vast work experience is not always interesting and challenging (R_{13} – the 4th study year, R_{16} – the 2nd study year, R_9 – the 3rd study year). During the second study year in the Hotel Practice students master specific features mostly of the work of chambermaids, cleaners as well as receptionists. There is no direct contact with a client, whereas in the 3rd study year in the Restaurant Practice students often get acquainted with the waiter's/waitress's work, they communicate with guests, solve various problems, which seems interesting and challenging. Although, when we speak about extra pay when working overtime employers would have to pay (R_{27} – the 2nd study year and the 3rd study year, R_{25} – the 4th study year). Also researchers Shirobokov and Roe [13] emphasize the number of interdisciplines acquired by students as an indicator of quality for a successful professional practice and point out that it shortens the adaptation time in the enterprise.

Students' transition to the real work environment is not easy, the relationships among peers are quite tense – R_{14} – the 2nd study year, R_{17} – the 3rd study year, R_7 – the fourth study year; the support of a mentor in the enterprise is quite often not felt – R_{11} – the 2nd study year, R_{15} – the 3rd study year, R_{17} – the 4th study year, also the team spirit is low – R_{22} – the 2nd study year, R_{23} – the 3rd study year, R_{19} – the 4th study year.

According to the students' point of view the practice programmes must be improved in all professional practices – the responses were ranked as follows: R_{19} – the 2nd study year and the 4th study year, R_{16} – the 3rd study year, as well as the co-operation between the university and practice enterprises has to be promoted – R_{25} – the 2nd study year and the third study year, R_{27} – the 4th study year. The opinion is divided on the issue whether theoretical knowledge can be applied in practice – the 4th study year students were more critical R_7 – the 4th study year, R_3 – the 2nd study year, R_2 – the 3rd study year. It can be explained with a fact that in the 4th study year students write a bachelor's paper. The 4th study year students also more disagree than agree (R_{16} – the 4th study year) to the statement that during practice it is possible to develop technical skills (e.g., serve guests at the table, lay beds, clean rooms, work with mechanical equipment, work with special hospitality programmes, e.g., R-Keeper system of restaurant management and record-keeping). The other students admit that they have improved these skills, namely, R_5 – the 2nd study year, R_6 – third study year. Also there was a

difference of opinion as to the issue about the possibility of self-development, where the 4th study year students were the most critical – R_{11} – the 4th study year, R_5 – second study year, R_6 – the 3rd study year, although as regards the issue about possibilities in future to get job in the practice enterprise the fourth study year students are the most convinced – R_7 – the 4th study year, R_{18} – the 2nd study year, R_{17} – the 3rd study year. The obtained results can be explained by the fact that when students are in their fourth year after having acquired all four year theoretical courses and professional practices their self-confidence rises, and they evaluate their competitiveness as relatively high. A specialist's competitiveness is an aggregate of his/her personal and professional qualities, including various competences, based on the experience acquired during the life time, including the process of training.

The study programme "Catering and Hotel Management" trains future managers of hospitality enterprises, for this reason great attention in the professional practice programmes is devoted to various issues about management. As regards the issue about students' engagement in supervision tasks, mostly negative responses were received – R_{20} – the 2nd study year, R_{24} – the 3rd study year, R_{23} – the 4th study year. Students' creativity was not appreciated in enterprises either – R_{23} – the 2nd study year, R_{21} – the 3rd study year, R_{19} – the 4th study year. This is vitally important in the fourth study year Management practice, where the emphasis is placed on various supervision tasks. As the students have evaluated practice supervisors in enterprises as being professionals R_8 – the 2nd study year, R_9 – the 3rd study year, R_{11} – the 4th study year, the university practice supervisors have to explain the enterprise practice supervisors the aims and tasks of each practice; as well the students' degree of independence after their adaptation in the practice enterprise should be raised – R_{24} – the 2nd study year, R_{22} – the 3rd study year, R_{25} – the 4th study year. Scientists McMahon and Quinn define practice as "work experience under supervision", which differs from work in the hospitality sector as it is performed in solitude. In fact, this supervision has to be such that a student could feel autonomous but in cases of uncertainty or problems could apply for help [17]. In the authors' opinion, it is possible to organize professional practice of good quality by organizing Practice Vacancies Fair, when representatives from enterprises would go to universities and inform about the practice vacancies, university practice supervisors would draw attention to the practice aims and tasks but students would choose the most appropriate practice enterprises. There can conflicts arise between the parties involved in the organization of professional practices (directly and indirectly) as they have a different vision of the benefits of cooperation, they have different needs and expectancy [18]. This can lower the quality of professional practices, namely, it can cause students' unwillingness to work in the hospitality sector [19]. In order to find out how the assessments of students about practice match in 27 evaluation criteria of the questionnaire, the secondary processing was done, using Kendall's W Test, SPSS 21 software programme. To sum up, the Kendall's Coefficient of Concordance ($W = 0.856$) approaches more "1" than "0", $\chi^2 = 66.77 > \chi^2_{0.05; 27} = 40.11$, but p-value $= 0.000 < \alpha = 0.05$, meaning that there is statistically important concordance among all students.

Conclusions
1. In the study process at the university, it is important to develop hospitality students' ecological competence, including skills how to adapt to a changing environment, how to adapt to an environment of professional practice. This competence is one of the preconditions of professional success, professional development and accumulation of positive practice. Students have to think and act ecologically – they have to orientate themselves to *I within the Environment of professional activity* and not *I and the Environment of professional activity.*
2. On condition that employers become involved in the study process, considerable improvement of the study quality as well as the professional development of students as future hospitality specialists is possible. Professional practice of good quality can be accomplished by organizing Practice Vacancies Fair. Both, the academic staff at universities and practice mentors at universities and in enterprises have to explain students their new social role – the formation of a hospitality specialist during professional practice in various enterprises.
3. The Kendall's coefficient of concordance $W = 0.871$ approaches more "1" than "0", meaning that there is concordance among all students in the evaluation of practice.

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