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***“Mission, objectives and activities of the of Slovene University career centres”***

Related to topic: a) Transition From Education to Labour Market and Early Career

**Abstract and purpose**

Three main Slovene Universities (University of Ljubljana, University of Primorska and University of Maribor) have established and developed a joint consortium of University career centres. The unified system of university career centres enables the effective transfer of information, the exchange of knowledge, competences and best practices.

The article presents briefly the consortium which was established by the three universities in the field of lifelong career guidance. It describes the proposal of consortium for a joint concept of university career centres and, in more detail, one of the tools the centres plan to develop together, the so-called “Competence Portfolio”.

**Key words**

Tertiary education, competences, lifelong (career) guidance, career centres

## **Introduction**

Since 2006, the incentives at Slovene universities for creating formal system of career services have increased. Today, all three largest universities (University of Ljubljana, University of Maribor and University of Primorska) have their own career centres on the level of the rectorship, whereas Ljubljana and Maribor also have some separate career centres at some of the faculties. The existing mixture of centralised and decentralised models which has led to gaps as well as some overlapping, calls for a systematization of structure, functions, activities and financing.

## **Lifelong (career) guidance for university students in Slovenia**

### ***Background***

According to OECD (2004), lifelong (career) guidance refers to: “services and activities intended to assist individuals, of any age and at any point throughout their lives, to make educational, training and occupational choices and to manage their careers.”

These services may be found in any educational level and institution, in public employment services, in the workplace, in the voluntary sector and in the private sector. They may consist of individual or group activities, be face-to-face or at a distance. They include career information provision (in print, ICT-based and other forms), various assessment tools, counselling interviews, career education programmes etc.

In Slovenia, the question of lifelong career guidance for university students has not been debated yet at the national level. However, the situation is improving. Recent conference on lifelong guidance (organised on 4 September 2009 by Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs) included also a special workshop on guidance for students. The participants, ranged from representatives of Ministries of Labour; of Higher Education; and of Education, to representatives of the Employment Service of Slovenia, Employer’s Association, Slovenian Student Union, HRM experts and universities. The debate focused on the proposals prepared in the expert study for the creation of systemic approach to lifelong (career) guidance (Niklanovič 2009). The study proposes 2-step approach: first a definition of concepts, and second their implementation through projects. Main issues are:

- The concept of inclusion of lifelong (career) guidance in curricula,
- The concept of career centres,
- The concept of including other stakeholders, and
- The concept of developing the career guidance aspect of tutoring.

Below, we present the current situation in Slovenia and our proposal for improvement.

### ***Situation at the Universities***

Currently, there are about six career centres established at Slovenia’s three public universities. All together, these universities account for the majority of tertiary education students in

Slovenia, namely 92% of 98.128 students enrolled at university-level programmes in 2008/09.<sup>1</sup> Most of them, some 60.000 in total, study at the University of Ljubljana, while the University of Primorska accounts for 6.500 students.

Whereas University of Primorska is small and organised unitarily, the University of Ljubljana and University of Maribor have up to 27 member faculties with certain independence. Thus, certain initiatives for a career guidance office have seen light at individual faculties. For example, UL set improvement of links between students and employers in its strategy (UL 2006) and provided for student career guidance as one of the building stones of its quality system. Currently, at the UL, the most developed is the Career centre at Faculty of Economics, which provides its students with complete service (information, advising, counselling, promotion activities – career fairs, visit to companies, workshops for career management skills etc.), whereas 2 other faculties have established so-called career points, which primarily engage in information and advising. The situation in Maribor is similar, with a centre at Faculty of Economics, and initiatives of the rectorship as well of some faculties to develop a centre at the level of university and at faculties. UP has one career centre which is mainly oriented in advising, counselling and individual career development.

However, only two of these centres currently have employees who are designated only to perform guidance-related activities. Elsewhere the career offices are either run as a part of another office (eg. student's office), on voluntary basis, providing only information services, or, as it is the case of centralised career centres at Ljubljana and Maribor, as a development project.

This is due to the unstable financing. The universities themselves namely do not have sufficient funds to finance the activities completely. On the other hand, these centres find it hard to compete on the market with companies specialized in HRM. Solely a database of students is not enough. Therefore, development projects should provide with an answer on the function of career centres, type of models (centralised, decentralised, a mixture of both), the possible organisation (which activities are to be performed on the central -rectorship- level, which can be let to the faculties, can this be different from one faculty to another etc.), standards the centres and their services should meet, and most of all a sustainable system of financing.

One can conclude that the situation in Slovenia is not as good as the sheer number of institutions would indicate. It seems to be stuck in the situation the OECD described in 2004: the range of services that should be provided is not available to all students equally; there is a lack of trained personnel, with the focus of existing career offices on providing workshops and information (OECD, 2004). Another issue is the lack of building a systemic approach to career development: it should be included in the curriculum.

Luckily, the universities have already acknowledged this problem and are looking for solutions. In the next section, we describe a potential way out of the deadlock through the consortium of university career centres.

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<sup>1</sup> SURS (2009), [http://www.stat.si/novica\\_prikazi.aspx?id=2311](http://www.stat.si/novica_prikazi.aspx?id=2311).

## Consortium and the joint concept of university career centres

Three main Slovene Universities (University of Ljubljana, University of Primorska and University of Maribor) have established and developed a joint consortium of University career centres. The unified system of university career centres will enable the effective transfer of information, the exchange of knowledge, competences and best practices.

Performing its main activities, university career centres offer their users the support, counselling, and competence development in order to plan their careers in the best possible way. Furthermore, the employers play a major role in the process of competence development since they are best acquainted with the labour market needs. University career centres therefore produce and reinforce the active link between education system and labour market.

The University career centres' mission is as stated:

- They facilitate **employers** the search for career centre users (future employees) and enable employers to take an active part in the competence development process in the time of users' formal education and according to real market needs.
- The **career centre users** are provided with directions and support in order to effectively enter the labour market, which finally results in lower unemployment rate within young people.
- **Education institutions** are provided with relevant information that presents the basis for future improvement of the quality of education programmes and teaching plans. The information is acquired through the process of career tracking of the centre's users after they finish their formal education.

The added value of the University career centres consortium is formed as stated:

1. The preparation of unified **competence portfolios** for career centre users that will be formally acknowledged as diploma supplements and will present an important document for the career centre users as well as for the employers;
2. The development of unique **computer application** that will enable the transfer of relevant information to the career centre users, the electronic formation and review of competence portfolios, and enable the process of career tracking of the career centre users.
3. The consortium can easily develop and offer the unified base of different **formal and informal education programmes** for the career centre users.
4. The **common information base** on labour market needs will enable employment directions to the career centre users and their effective transition onto the labour market.
5. Activities of University career centres are in accordance with the **Bologna process** as they enable the active part of employers in the process of competence development of career centre users in the time of their formal education.
6. The consortium will also strive for a definition of **standards**, related to the career centres, its potential **organisational structure** (which should be case-specific given the size and organization of Slovene universities), and determine the level of joint activities, including the education and training of centres' staff.

## **Competence portfolio – an added value of the university career centres**

As stated above, one of the tools the consortium plans to develop jointly is the so-called “competence portfolio”. The aim is to create a tool which would be common for all three universities and their students and supported by a special computer application.

As the modern society is constantly changing, the old understanding of career development does not apply. Today, careers are not being once and for all; they are being built. In this society knowledge and the usage of knowledge is one of key issues. Constant upgrading of one’s knowledge and skills is a must. In 2000, the EU adopted the Memorandum on lifelong learning, which outlines the need for permanent improvement and development of the acquired knowledge (Svetlik, Ilić, 2004 in Mihalič, 2006: 189). It promotes a new culture of learning, which comprises of permanent and systematic education, study and training throughout whole life (Mihalič, 2006: 189).

As the society changes, so does the way of entering the labour market. If in the past, a certificate of formal education would suffice, this is no longer the case. Now, the competences and the practical knowledge that one possesses, play the main role. Individuals need to develop career management skills and other competences. One of the main tasks of career centres is the rising of awareness on the importance of competence development. Only individuals, who are aware of their qualities and can market them successfully, will be able to get a proper employment. Lifelong learning is getting more acknowledged also in organizations, as permanent education stems from lifelong learning.

With the acquiring of new knowledge and new skills, a system to note all the achievements needs to be developed. Therefore the “Competence Portfolio” as a document, which would holistically present a job-seeker to future employer, would be helpful.

There are many definitions for competences; some focus on desired work outputs, others on the attributes that people need to bring to their work (e.g. knowledge, skills, motives etc.). Generally speaking, a competency can be understood as a disposition and can be attributed to individuals, teams and organizations. Furthermore a competency is a latent attribute and it is identified and defined in a community of practice. Ultimately, a competency is not a personal construct (a trait) but an observable aspect of performance (required behaviours and activities) in specific circumstances (Spencer and Spencer, 1993).

The competency approach focuses on what the individual can do rather than what the person knows. It is based on observable behaviour and not espoused behaviour as well. According to TENcompetence ([www.tencompetence.org](http://www.tencompetence.org)) we can define competencies as “abstractions of the effective and efficient actions that are needed to deal with the critical incidents, problems or tasks that can occur in a certain context”.

Competence portfolio will enable individuals to systematically note and control their own competences, and will be at their disposal anytime they would need it.

The portfolio would include individual's:

- a) personal profile (his characteristics) and individual career plan,
- b) CV section,
- c) section on formal education and,
- d) section on competences and informal education.

The portfolio can be filled-in electronically by using the computer application and can be overviewed and consulted by the individual, the interested employer or the career counsellor. Individual can therefore chose which data can be available to the employer and which will remain hidden.

- a) Personal profile and individual career plan are based on the advising and counselling sessions. The purpose is that the individuals become aware of their values. Individual thus cannot create it only by themselves, as the method requires several consultations with the counsellor. Personality is a relatively permanent and unique unity of psychological, behavioural and physical characteristics of individuals and determines their adaptation to the environment (Musek 1993). Individuals' characteristics, defined in the personal profile, determine their behaviour.
- b) The CV section is the graphical outline – it comprises of all the data a person wishes to include in the Europeass-like CV form. The CV will be available to the person, the employer and the career centre advisor.
- c) Formal education section will contain information on achieved education. Education institutions will be enabled to confirm electronically the data included.
- d) Competence section will be formed after a broad research on competences among HRM-experts, employers and educational institutions. The survey will present the competences that are most required in the market (in the case of employers), and, in the case of education institutions, the competences that are most obtained by graduates. A joint model will consist of the most common ones and will serve as a template. A person will be able to include other competences as well, but they will not be a part of the model.

## **Conclusion**

Performing its main activities, university career centres offer their users the support, counselling, and competence development in order to plan their careers in the best possible way. The competence portfolio therefore forms an important document that serves individuals in order to present their major qualities, work experiences, characteristic, or in short competences, to the employers. It provides a special formal confirmation of all work experiences that were gained during the work process and were yet not confirmed in any other document or certificate.

Furthermore, the employers play a major role in the process of competence development since they are best acquainted with the labour market needs. This is in accordance with the Bologna process as university career centres enable the active part of employers in the process of competence development of career centre users in the time of their formal education. They produce and reinforce the active link between education system and labour market. Through the competence portfolios the employers and human resource managers gain important information on competences that individuals have obtained during their formal education.

The development of unique computer application will enable the transfer of relevant information to the career centre users, the electronic formation and review of competence portfolios, and enable the process of career tracking of the career centre users. Therefore career centres facilitate employers the search for their future employees and enable employers to take an active part in the competence development process in the time of individuals' formal education and according to real market needs.

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