

THE IMPORTANCE AND THE ROLE OF STUDENT PRACTICE IN REDUCING THE GAP BETWEEN EXISTING KNOWLEDGE AND REQUIRED KNOWLEDGE BY THE EMPLOYER

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Abstract: Labor market demands are changing rapidly, leading to discrepancies in existing (available) and expected workforce knowledge, skills, and competencies. In this regard, conditions need to be developed to develop a quality workforce. This paper highlights the role and importance that student vocational practice has in creating the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary for the labor market and specifies the benefits that students, employers, and higher education institutions have in acquiring knowledge. An example of good practice explains how Novi Sad School of Business, through the Centre for Career and Professional Practice, provides continuous support to its students in career development, gaining practical experience through professional practice, continuing education, and employment opportunities.

Key Words: labor market, existing student knowledge, required knowledge, student practice

1. INTRODUCTION

Defining the knowledge and educational profiles needed in the labor market, that is defining skills that employers consider desirable play a major role at the moment in which there is great unemployment in the Republic of Serbia and a discrepancy between the labor market needs with the higher education system.

The basic form of non-compliance are reflected in the following [1]:

- The level of knowledge that a person has at his disposal is not at the level that requires a specific workplace.
- The level of education is not in accordance with the field of education, that is, people are educated but not for the jobs they perform.
- The level of skills and abilities that a person has at his / her level which are acquired in education cannot be expressed in a specific workplace and
- The level of skills and abilities of a person is not adequate or an obsolete knowledge is in question.

The reason for the mentioned problems should be sought in the discrepancy between work supply and work demand in the labor market in the Republic of Serbia. For example, there are large numbers of unemployed people who have completed their studies in the field of social sciences, and simultaneously there is a lack of IT professionals. In the last few years, the situation has improved on this issue, as the number of places for students enrolling in IT occupations has increased. This suggests that the economy of the Republic of Serbia faces the problem of inefficient use of human potential as an extremely important resource.

In the Republic of Serbia, in the third quarter of 2021, out of the total population, 2,924,500 were employed, while 341,500 were unemployed. In other words, the employment rate was 50.0% and the unemployment rate was 10.5%. Also, one of the significant problems is the high unemployment rate of the young population. Statistical data indicates that the population aged 15-24 make up 27.3% of the employed, i.e. 23.1% of the unemployed [2].

Efforts made by both unemployed and employers are high and at the same time the workplace remains vacant. Precisely for this reason, employers are often forced to employ persons who have either a higher or lower level of education in relation to the required level. On the other hand, workers will accept lower wages and workplace that do not correspond to their level of education just to be employed. If the tendency is long-term, the efficiency of the employer's business activities is unsustainable and can endanger the employer's life cycle, and investing in the process of educating workers will become a "failed" investment. On the other hand, the education system in the Republic of Serbia has undergone numerous reforms in all segments in the past years. Some of them have been successfully completed, some still take place and some have just started (for example, the formation of the academies of professional (vocational) studies according to the new Law on Higher Education).

The number of students enrolled at all levels of study in the school year 2020/21 in the Republic of Serbia was 242,550. There were 85.78% students enrolled at state universities and state higher schools, and 14.22% students enrolled at private universities and private schools. According to the method of financing, 42% of students are financed at the expense of the Republican Budget and 58% of students are self-financed. In addition, the structure of students enrolled according to the fields of education is also important. In the field of educational studies 5.31% of students, arts and human sciences 10.43%, social sciences, journalism and information 11.30%, business, administration and law 15.76%, natural sciences, mathematics and statistics 6.40%, information and communication technologies 9.51%, engineering, production and construction 19.74%, agriculture, forestry, fishery and veterinary 2.95%, health and social protection 11.54% and services 7.08% of students [3].

Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that traditionally, there are always many students enrolling in social, economic, and human sciences, for whom there is less demand in the labor market. A significant participation of students enrolling in the field of information and communication technologies and engineering, production and construction can also be noticed, for whom there is a greater need in the labor market.

The biggest problem regarding the non-conformity of the labor market and study programmes appeared due to the fact that in Serbia there was not a long-established National Qualifications Framework in line with the European introduction of the Bologna process. By adopting this framework, it is possible to identify, create and classify qualifications in accordance with the requirements of the labor market, further learning, science and society as a whole.

Despite the adoption of the NQFs, many of the new knowledge that students acquire are not recognized in the labor market, and higher education institutions continue to announce calls for applications for study programmes for which there is a little interest. On the other hand, the state does not change the way of financing educational areas or it does that to a lesser extent. These areas are financed on a larger scale than the requirements of the economy.

The above indicates that a more detailed analysis of the labor market mismatch with the education system needs to be carried out, increase the state's investment in education (especially in areas where there is a demand on the labor market), improve the existing ones and introduce new study programmes for which there is a need in the labor market and abolish or reduce the participation of those for whom there is no demand, improve practical teaching and cooperation between higher education institutions and employers, introduce short courses and work on the mobility of students and teaching staff.

The labor market or employers need students with functional, applicable knowledge, skills, and abilities. In addition, lack of work experience is one of the most common obstacles to youth employment, so it is necessary to achieve "contact" with the labor market during the formal education process. This can be achieved by more actively involving students in the attendance of professional practice, allowing them to adopt and develop specific knowledge and skills during their studies to take a favorable position in the labor market immediately after graduation. On the other hand, in order for the education system to adapt to the real needs of the labor market, it is necessary for employers to continuously inform competent institutions and higher education institutions of expected knowledge, skills, and competencies.

This paper aims to point out the importance and role that student professional practice plays in creating knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for the labor market.

2. STUDENT PRACTICE AS A FACTOR IN REDUCING THE GAP BETWEEN EXISTING AND REQUIRED KNOWLEDGE

Student practice has been introduced since the 1970s into the education systems of most developed countries and soon became conjunction between the education system and the labor market. The number of students attending internships while studying has increased exponentially in the last 30 years. For example, in the 1980s about 10% of students participated in the practice during their studies, and by 2009, about 10% of students participated in the practice. In 2014, about 9.4 million students performed some vocational practice with different employers in European Union countries, and that number is steadily increasing [4].

Student practice is a limited period of paid or unpaid vocational training of students for work that includes learning to acquire practical knowledge and skills in the field of studies for which the student is educated.

The benefits of student practice are multiple for several users. For students, student practice ensures the application of acquired theoretical knowledge at work, developing work habits, gaining the necessary work experience, and creating opportunities for future employment. Student practice brings employers access to more skilled young workers, improving productivity and quality of the workforce, using new and innovative ideas in business, reducing the cost of selecting new workers. Finally, for higher education institutions, student practice provides better cooperation with employers and obtains the information necessary to update study plans and programs according to the needs of the labor market, additional funding opportunities, work on joint projects, and research in cooperation with employers. However, student practice carries certain restrictions, such as exploitation of students as a cheaper workforce, lack of adequate positions for students in individual employers, inability of employers and mentors to devote themselves to working with a student, etc. [5]

The programmes of professional practice and the acquisition of practical experiences during the studies can significantly contribute to the reduction of unemployment and a discrepancy between the knowledge and skills that the youth possesses and those skills and knowledge needed in the labour market. A survey conducted by the European Youth Forum shows that gaining work experience during the studies can increase the chances of finding a job by 44% and reduce the disparity in supply and demand in the labour market for 26% [6].

The performance of student practice is regulated by the Rules of Professional Practice adopted by the universities and higher schools of professional studies for their study programmes. This type of activity (teaching) is required in the utmost number of these study programs. Student practices represent the practical work of a student in a business environment to acquire the theoretical knowledge gained and connect theoretical knowledge with the practical knowledge and skills necessary for performing future work. Student practice is realized during the education of students at all levels of studies (basic, specialist and master studies).

According to official standards for the accreditation of study programmes of the first and second level of studies, defined by the National Body for Accreditation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education, professional practice has been presupposed as the obligatory activity of the student. Within the Standards and Guidelines for accreditation of the first and second level of study (see: standard 5), the duration and manner of realization of student practice in specific educational fields are defined (Table 1).

Table 1 – The realization of student practice by educational fields in the Republic of Serbia

Educational fields	The first level of study (basic study)	The second level of study (master study)
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Natural-mathematical sciences	90 hours in the last year of study 3 ECTS	90 hours in the last year of study 3 ECTS
Technical-technological sciences	90 hours in the last year of study	90 hours in the last year of study
Social-humanist sciences	90 hours in the last year of study 3 ECTS	90 hours in the last year of study 3 ECTS
Pedagogical studies	90 hours in the second, third and fourth year of study	180 hours 6 ECTS
Professional studies	90 hours in the second and third year of study	90 hours in the first and second of study

Source: National Body for Accreditation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education (NAT) [7]

The ways of organizing and realizing professional practice may vary, depending on the specific teaching area to which higher education institutions belong. Professional practices are organized in laboratories, business organizations or public institutions, pedagogical institutions, and the like. Higher education institutions sign a contract or agreement with the mentioned institutions that undertake to organize professional practice for students in a longer time period. Moreover, a student can independently find and suggest an institution with which the school does not have a contract, and in which the student would like to perform the compulsory practice. If there is school consent, the practice can also be done in this way.

The student practice is realized in terms and deadlines defined in accredited study programmes (usually from the sixth semester). Higher education institutions are obliged to determine mentors for student practice and organize and realize the practice as defined by individual rules for conducting professional practice.

According to a review of the research results on graduates in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina from 2014, the average grade regarding the presence of professional practice in study programmes was 2 (on the Likert Scale from 1 - not at all to 5 - to a great extent). The study program's professional practice and its quality were assessed with an average grade of 2.35 (on the Likert scale from 1 - very low to 5 - very high) [8].

The mentioned results are the consequence of the problems that most higher education institutions face in terms of the low motivation of large and successful companies and institutions to organize professional practice for students of the final years. Precisely for this reason, many higher schools established Centers for Career Development and Student Counseling, which provide career information and counseling, keeping a register of employers interested in accepting students to practice, mediating between students and potential employers, and the like.

Despite the fact that according to the standards for the accreditation of study programmes, a minimum number of classes is provided for conducting professional practice, professional schools have different approaches in terms of determining the duration of the practice. Unlike many European countries, in the Republic of Serbia students who apply for student practice with the employer do not receive compensation for their work (although it can be contracted). Namely, domestic legislation did not regulate the contractual relationship between a student and an organization or organization in which professional practice is organized. Contracts are generally concluded between the school and the employer and they define the rights and obligations of both parties, as well as the rights and obligations of the student.

In addition to compulsory professional practice, there is also optional professional practice whose realization is desirable. Students in the final years of the first and second level of studies, as well as young people, who have completed formal education, often use the opportunity to gain the necessary experience in the area they were educated or the area they are interested in, based on informal oral agreements with the employer. Unlike compulsory professional practice, this form of practice is organized on the initiative of a practitioner and / or an employer and is not part of the mandatory curriculum of study programmes. Large companies, state authorities or public companies often advertise opportunities for admission of practitioners through public calls.

A national model of student practice has been devised and adopted as a document that will enable young people to realize and evaluate their practical experience in enterprises during their studies as their first work experience. It should be highlighted that the National Council for Higher Education in 2015 brought a reminder for student professional practice. Thus, numerous universities and higher schools within the career centers offer employers cooperation and achieve it through the formulation of practice offers and activities of career guidance. Students are also provided the portal www.studentskapraksa.com, representing a unique base of offer and demand for students' professional practices.

3. NOVI SAD SCHOOL OF BUSINESS AS AN EXAMPLE OF GOOD PRACTICE

Novi Sad School of Business has established a Career Development and Vocational Practice Centre to more accessible and faster-connecting students and the economy. Through the Centre mentioned above, the School provides continuous support to its students in career development, continued education, and employment. In other words, the School is an example of good practice and a reliable "partner" for its students in trading their professional careers. On the other hand, the School is a "partner" to employers in reaching a staff that has all the necessary knowledge and skills. In this regard, special importance is given to the organization of professional practices in many companies and institutions (over 50) with which permanent cooperation has been agreed. During professional practice, students get acquainted with business processes, gain practical experience by participating directly in business activities and develop the spirit of work atmosphere and team spirit.

Pursuant to the requirements for accreditation of study programs, Novi Sad School of Business, as well as other higher education institutions, is obliged to provide a certain number of hours of professional practice in undergraduate and master studies in their study programs (Table 1). On five study programs of basic studies and one study program of master studies,

which are currently being realized, it is planned to attend professional practice in the last two years of basic study studies and both years of master studies. Students have the opportunity to realize professional practice independently or through the Center for Career Development and Professional Practice.

In the first case, the student independently finds a company to perform professional practice and, based on the consent of the mentor (subject teacher of the School) realizes professional practice in the selected company. However, in the realization of professional practice through the Center, choosing a company to perform an internship is facilitated for students because the Center itself takes over all necessary activities in this regard (announcing and opening the competition, recording applications for professional practice, selecting candidates, publishing the competition results, preparing documentation, and giving the most important instructions for the procedure).

Thanks to this approach, many students take positions in the most responsible positions in the private and public sectors after graduation. According to the latest data from the Center for Career Development, in 2021, 50 students of the School found employment either during their studies or immediately after graduation, thanks to practical knowledge and experience gained during the implementation of professional practice [9].

4. CONCLUSION

A very important dimension of a quality education system is its ability to respond to the needs of the labor market. The skills, abilities, and competencies a particular person has at the end of education are vital benchmarks in employment. In this regard, professional (student) practice is an important method for acquiring practical knowledge and experience of students during the study period. The professional practice benefits many beneficiaries (students, employers, higher education institutions). These professional training programmes can reduce unemployment and the gap between students' knowledge and skills and those that employers need. Novi Sad School of Business through the Centre for Career and Professional Practice, as an example of good practice, provides continuous support to its students in career development, gaining practical experience through professional practice, continuing education, and employment opportunities.

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