Competence
Focus Group Report
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Rupert Beinhauer
Methodology

While quantitative methods deliver results, which can be statistically analyzed and easily interpreted, they are usually not very powerful in providing researchers with initial ideas in the explorative phase of a study. Qualitative methods and especially focus group interviews have proven to be very useful to do exactly that. A focus group is a form of qualitative research in which a group of people are asked about their attitude towards a product, service, concept, advertisement, idea, or packaging. Questions are asked in an interactive group setting (preferably a round table) where participants are free to talk with other group members. Focus groups provide researchers with initial ideas in the exploratory part of a study, they can be useful in the process of interpretation and evaluation of results and situations and they can produce further research questions. In the COMPETENCE project we used focus group interviews to ask experts a number of questions, which need to be resolved before continuing. With these interviews we also aim to specifically analyze those specific and general competences, which are most important for the involved interviewees and their respective fields and to include those in the next research step – the survey. As an additional advantage of the method, the country researchers conducting the interviews get a better insight into the mindset of the interviewees and a good feeling for how much they already know about the topic and in which way the next steps can be planned. Considering the absolute novelty of the topic in the Western Balkans and the fact that the help of professors and specialists – exactly like those interviewed – is of utmost importance, this additional benefit cannot be overestimated. In our project we use the material derived from focus groups as explanatory background on which we build our quantitative research, in the form of fully structured questionnaires. Thus, we integrate them into our project as a part of our research strategy. The specific project relevant information delivered by the focus group interviews can be described as follows:

• Information, which help to understand competence based teaching/learning/thinking in different institutional settings

• Information, which help to understand experts perceptions of students and the competencies they need and the gaps between the university and industry.

• Information, which helps to understand “cultural” differences (regional, national, institutional) and relate these to other research results

• Information, which helps the local project coordinators to introduce competence based learning in their university.

Setup:

In each of the involved countries a moderator used an interview guideline to ask questions and to set the discussion in motion. Ideally there were 5-6 focus group members and one experienced moderator involved. The whole interview was recorded with a voice recorder or similar tool and put to paper (transcribed). The most important answers (which we call keywords) are located and highlighted in the text and translated to English. These keywords are collected for each question and written in a table. The table is compared by the work package leader with the results of the other groups, showing similarities and differences between the focus groups.
The whole process of the focus group interview was described by a step by step checklist, which included the following points:

- Ideal setup are 5-6 participants and a moderator around a round table. Usually the interview will not last longer than two times 45min, with a 15 min break. Plan for 2 hours.

- Participants must have a specific experience with the topic: preferably experienced professors and administrators who are involved in the design of curricula or courses.

- The following would be considered an ideal list of participants: 2 professors or administrators, 2 employers, 1 graduate, 1 student or decision maker

- An explicit interview guide must be used: A detailed guideline including the questions to be asked can be found below. It has to be used to assure comparability.

- The interview needs to be moderated and focused: While allowing space for interaction, the moderator always needs to get back to the guideline and the questions (the focus).

- The interview needs to be recorded and transcribed in its whole.

- The most relevant statements (keywords) need to be highlighted in the text and to be translated to English (result: ~ 2-3 pages of important statements)

- The translated keywords are listed in a table - the prepared table must be used.

- The tables will be compared and analyzed by the work package leader

Each of the participating universities made appointments for one or two focus group meetings after the appropriate participants were found. One person translated the questions from the question guideline into the respective native language; another independent person translated them back into English to make sure that the native language version was equivalent to the English original. After in such a way having developed a fitting guideline in each country’s language, the topic was discussed again with a different, independent person using the guideline to see if the translation was correct and the resulting guideline also worked well and was easily understandable. Each of the focus groups was then executed and recorded with voice recorders. A transcription of every word said was done. Using this transcribed text the most important topics were identified and marked in the original version. The important statements were translated and enter in the prepared table, which was sent to the work package leader.
The following question guideline was used:

**Question Guideline**

(Try to go through the complete set of questions, if not: state this in the documentation)

1. How would you describe **competence based learning**? What does the term competence mean to you?

2. What are the **most important** skills, abilities, and knowledge students should acquire during their studies? What are the most **practice-relevant** skills, abilities and knowledge?

   *(Advice to the moderator: Ask for details for the raised competences. Try to explore their meaning.)*

**BREAK!**

3. Where do you perceive the **gap** between competences delivered at the university and those needed in the labour market? Are students capable in delivering the relevant knowledge and competences in the work place.

4. How would you include competence based learning **in your university** in the future? Where do you see prerequisites, starting points and possible barriers?
The following answer matrix was used:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Most relevant statements in whole sentences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How would you describe <strong>competence based learning</strong>? What does the term competence mean to you?</td>
<td>“Please put the translated statements here. Use full sentences and try to put the most thoroughly discussed and agreed upon points. Usually the most important statements can be collected in a few sentences (~4-5 statements per question)”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What are the <strong>most important</strong> skills, abilities, and knowledge students should acquire during their studies? What are the most <strong>practice-relevant</strong> skills, abilities and knowledge?</td>
<td>If the statements included here were not commonly agreed upon, but disputed please mark them with a asterix (*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Where do you perceive the <strong>gap</strong> between competences delivered at the university and those needed in the labour market? Are students capable in delivering the relevant knowledge and competences in the work place.</td>
<td>Please also note down if a question was not really discussed or you ran out of time for it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How would you include competence based learning in your university in the future? What are prerequisites, starting points and possible barriers?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Results

The following key results were found according to the questions above:

How would you describe competence based learning? What does the term competence mean to you?

In Skopje, the interviewees agreed upon the definition “competence is the ability to perform a specific task, action of function successfully” and according to Zenica “competence is based on [the requirements of the] final consumer” which seems to be the main elements everyone could agree upon also in the other countries. Other discussion groups also added a practical orientation like “a learning process that enables students to work just after graduation” (Novi Sad) or “learning which enables students to get knowledge and skills which are Important for practical work” (Novi Sad). “Starting point is a lecturer that has to be well educated, referenced [and has] practice experience.” (Zenica) So “each programme should have relevant competences and the professors should look for [their] own competences.” (Zenica) For describing specific competencies “specific knowledge that is recognizable as specific for Psychology and other professions can’t provide them” (Novi Sad).

Even though most participants did not have difficulties in defining the term competence or competencies, there seems to be little knowledge about competence based learning, with the exception that everyone seems to agree that competence based learning needs to be practice related. In Novi Sad one participant actually stressed that she does not feel any difficulties to define the term, but has many difficulties to exercise it in practise, which was echoed to some extend in Zenica, were one participant noticed that “for example this study program does have lecturers which are not competent [in the required fields themselves]. The results demonstrate that the concept is actually relatively new and there is no clear concept of competence based learning by now. It also demonstrated clearly that there are a lot of doubts concerning the practical usability of the concept, considering that many professors never have had practical experience as “most professors were assistants and never in the branch.”

What are the most important skills, abilities, and knowledge students should acquire during their studies? What are the most practice-relevant skills, abilities and knowledge?

The team in Kotor invested a lot of work in discussing this question in detail and produced an extensive list of competencies they consider important. These competencies were split into organisational, behavioural and technical competencies, each defined for specific and general competencies. The team in Skopje also came up with a list of 14 defined general competencies, specific competencies were not discussed. In Novi Sad and Zenica the discussion stayed on a more general level, but still a number of specific and general competencies were mentioned. In Novi Sad there was a short discussion to what extent can student improve those skills during education and what extend is genetically predetermined. The majority of participants believed those skills can be built through education.

In Zenica it was mentioned that students should have a possibility for specialisation in a number of specific competences much earlier in their studies.
In the field of specific competencies a number of examples were given and some similarities are obvious throughout the different interviews, even though the specific competences were not discussed as much as the general competences. Categories include:

- **A specific way of thinking:**
  "Engineering Logic" (Novi Sad), “Interest in understanding and helping people” (Novi Sad), “Entrepreneurial abilities” (Kotor), “The ability to notice long term tendencies and strategic behaviour” (Kotor), „Problem understanding in analysed approach“ (Zenica)

- **A specific way of perceiving:**
  „Recognizing different aspects of personality and regularities in human behavior” (Novi Sad), „The ability to predict consequences in business relations” (Kotor) “to identify influence on the environment” (Zenica)

- **An ability to manage specific processes:**
  “The ability to manage business processes and systems” (Kotor), Knowledge in managing interpersonal relationships, conflict resolution, and assertiveness (Novi Sad)

- **Knowledge of certain specific areas and the willingness to improve on it:**
  Examples include: “Practical knowledge and engineering skills” (Novi Sad), “The ability to improve knowledge and skills in the subject field“ (Kotor), „Counseling Techniques“ (Novi Sad), to adopt and use specific IT and software (Kotor), „Teaching should be directed much more on specific problems then broad knowledge.“ (Zenica).

The team in Kotor also defined „competencies“ which are very complex, rather like fields of expertise, which require a combination of skills, abilities, knowledge and attitudes which are mostly specific to a company of to a certain field of experience. They can be considered to need a set of general and specific competences to fullfill:

- **Examples include:**
  „The ability to introduce TQM into an organisation“, „The ability to use various instruments in organisation running“, „The ability to select the best staff and increase their motivation“

In the field of general competencies discussions were a lot more thorough, showing a far greater need of definition and a lot more time was invested in them. It seems that academia and industry might differ stronger in their definitions of general competencies, which are needed by the students, then with the specific competencies. Some similarities are again obvious throughout the interviews. Categories include:
Social Competences:

**Teamwork and Relationships:**

The ability to work in teams and to utilize appropriate interpersonal skills to build relationships with colleagues, team members or external stakeholders. (MISLEM)

- Interpersonal relationship: Interpersonal relationship (Novi Sad), Attitude toward co-workers (Novi Sad) to respect competence (Kotor), to respect diversity (Kotor)
- Conflict recognition and resolution: Conflict resolution (Novi Sad) or to handle conflict situation (Kotor), ability to recognize irrational thinking and behaviour. (Novi Sad)
- Networking: Networking (Novi Sad) or the ability to form a network (Kotor)
- Team work: Team work (Novi Sad & Skopje) or Collaborative ability (Skopje) or Collective work ability (Kotor)

**Communication:**

The ability to communicate clearly and concisely, *the ability to use communication skills to positively influence individual behaviour*, using a range of verbal and written methods (MISLEM)

- Communicativeness: Communication Abilities (Kotor & Zenica) or to listen and to manage communication. (Novi Sad)
- Customer Orientation (Kotor)

**Presentation**

The ability to prepare and deliver effective presentations to different audiences (MISLEM)

- Teaching: the ability to share knowledge (Kotor)
- Presentation Skills: Presentation skills (Zenica) or to present problems in public (Zenica)

Note: The MISLEM category “Influencing and Persuading” was not referred to in the focus group interviews. It can be assumed, that for the degree programmes involved this competence does not seem to be important enough to be used as an stand alone competency. It could be seen as part of “Communication”
Abilities:

**Critical/Analytical**

The ability to analyze problems and situations in a critical and logical manner (MISLEM)

- Analytic Thinking: Analysed approach, ability to conclude (Zenica), Analysis and synthesis (Novi Sad), to analyse basic and complex problems (Kotor)
- Critical Thinking: to think in a critical and self-critical way (Kotor)
- Problem based thinking: Problem orientation (Novi Sad), to identify basic and complex problems (Kotor)

**Ability to see the bigger picture**

Ability to see how things are interconnected; ability to think both strategically and operationally, *working across borders*. (MISLEM)

- Global Thinking: Global Thinking (Skopje), multidisciplinarity (Kotor), Entirety (Skopje)
- Project Management: to manage projects (Kotor & Zenica), Organisation and Planning (Kotor), managing resources (Zenica)
- Efficiency: apply theoretical knowledge in practice in an optimal way (Kotor)
- Internationality: Globality (Skopje), take into consideration local and global factors (Kotor), to work in global surrounding (Kotor)
- Ethical Thinking: Responsibility (Novi Sad), to follow ethical codes in a profession (Kotor)

**Self and Time Management**

Ability to organize oneself, one’s time and schedule effectively *and reliably* (MISLEM)

- Global Thinking: Global Thinking (Skopje), multidisciplinarity (Kotor), Entirety (Skopje)
- Persistence: Persistence (Skopje), to cope with stress and routine (Kotor)
- Self reliability: Individual Work Ability (Kotor)
- Reliability: Reliability (Skopje & Zenica) or Work under pressure (Skopje), Optimization (Skopje) or quality consequence (Skopje) or self quality control (Skopje)
Leadership

Ability to take responsibility for a task, give direction, provide structure and assign responsibility to others. (MISLEM)

- Leadership (Skopje & Zenica) or to head multidisciplinary teams (Kotor)
- Initiative: Initiative (Skopje)
- Decision Making: Decision making (Skopje & Zenica) or ability to make optimal decisions in given circumstances (Kotor), to think in logical way in decision making processes (Kotor)

Creativity and Flexibility

Ability to adapt to a situation or to solve a problem in a new way, openness of mind for new situations, solutions and ideas. (COMPETENCE)

- Creative work (Novi Sad). to solve a problem in a creative way (Kotor)
- Innovativeness: Innovativeness (Skopje), Spirit of Innovation (Skopje) or encourage innovation (Kotor)
- Flexibility: Flexibility (Skopje), Adaptability (Skopje) or Maneuverability (Skopje), to be flexible in adapting to an organisation (Kotor), ability to adapt to a new working surrounding (Kotor)
- Willingness to learn: live long improvement ability (Kotor), to acquire proficiency in methods, processes, and activities of research by means of information technology (Kotor), to improve knowledge and skills in the subject field (Kotor)
Where do you perceive the gap between competences delivered at the University and those needed in the labour market? Are students capable in delivering the relevant knowledge and competences in the work place?

This question was discussed in some detail in Novi Sad and in Zenica, while there is little detailed data from the other interviews.

The following results were found in Novi Sad and Zenica: Participants all perceive that the main gap comes from vast lack of practical work at faculty level, that the university often does not seem to have a clear picture of how knowledge is applied in industry and that teaching is not organized according to the universities own experience from projects with industry. That implies that students have solid theoretical knowledge but no practical experience, what makes their knowledge inapplicable just upon graduation, and takes more time together with personal devotion to capacity building in order to link theoretical knowledge with real life situations and to gain main skills for entering the industry. Also one participant has pointed out that she doubts whether proper mechanisms for estimation of labour market needs exist in Serbia. She has also expressed reservations concerning the capacities of Serbian labour market to anticipate it’s needs for 5 to 10 years ahead in order to give solid ground for university to develop corresponding study programmes.

The team in Skopje discussed the general competences they found and the perceived gap between students skills and markets needs in some details. Professors, students and employers were asked and mostly they agreed on a common level of competencies the students have. Faculty, industry and students, seem on reflecting their competencies to have the more or less same picture of students abilities. They, however also agree on some relevant weaknesses, like very low performance in globality and persistence. It also seems that the students (of course) have a better opinion of themselves then their professors and employers.

This gap could be decreased with more practice, earlier specialisation and more elective courses on senior years of study (upper bachelor years and master cycle), more student exchange programmes, student seminars and study visits.

How would you include competence based learning in your university in the future? What are prerequisites, starting points and possible barriers?

“First of all, at the state level there should be adopted overarching education policy that would define all basic issues and offer solid guidelines for long-term strategies in education and labour market.” (Novi Sad) as there is currently "a lack where founder (government) is deciding" further on a “Strong commitment from top management - at the University and Faculty " (Skopje) is needed and a “Education of the teaching staff on the topic of Competence Based Learning"(Skopje) needs to be done. “The “Private sector executives should be involved in teaching process.” (Zenica) and “Professors should be asked to transfer practice experience during teaching process” (Zenica) “Without effective system, competence based learning will depend on personal teaching stuff preferences” (Novi Sad).

“Possible barriers include professors themselves, as they will restrain any change that potentially can threaten their position and existence (Novi Sad).”, which was seen in the same way in Skopje were a participant simply called it “inertia of the
professors”. There are also administrative and legal barriers and “the relatively great amount of efforts needed due to the needed changes in almost all educational process” (Skopje). “In case of bigger changes in the curricula the needed accreditation of the new curricula must be undertaken” (Skopje)

“Starting point can be structured feedback from former students employed in the industry targeting study programmes and actual needs of labour market” (Novi Sad). “Also, starting point may include more integrative approach to curriculum design and study programmes” (Novi Sad) together with the governmental authorities “Government is expecting UNZE to suggest commissions for introduction of new studies” (Zenica). For this of course the “establishment of a centre of competence and recruitment of trained staff” (Skopje) is a necessary precondition. As soon as the curriculum design is adapted and the study programmes have been redesigned “Lectures should include different specific problems from practice and to train students in solving problems” and “Teaching must be in a small discussion groups” (Skopje). However “the development of success stories should start on a small scale” (Skopje)