New teaching Trends in the Field of Trade and Tourism

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to describe an application of the project-based learning method, which was implemented to Management of Commerce study programme in the academic year 2015/16, and to define course’s processes that should be improved to ensure a higher level of students competencies. A suitable method of such key competencies development can be an implementation and wider use of project-based learning methods. This approach can be characterized by creating the students’ research teams to work individually on long-term projects, which are connected to business practice and that are designed to solve problems.

Based on implementation of the project-based learning methods on the Faculty of Economics, the University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice in recent years, the Department of Trade and Tourism created and started own subject called Specialization project in the academic year 2015/16. The purpose was to integrate and develop competencies of every student through working on projects in the areas of trade, marketing and tourism. All projects were specified by particular companies, which expected students’ relevant recommendations for solving concrete problems.

Key words: Competency · Project-based learning methods · Tourism · Trade

JEL Classification: A22 · I21

1 Introduction

According to the needs of employers, economically educated graduate should be communicative and independent individual, who is able to work in a team and is able to take an effective action to solve tasks and problems (Dušek, 2014; Koucký, Ryška & Zelenka, 2014). For a satisfactory skills’ level in mentioned areas, the students should have a certain personal assumptions. Only in this case, the competencies can be further developed and deepened, for example at the university (Bender, 2012).

Figure 1 Important key competencies

Source: Armstrong, 2011; Mitchell, Skinner & White, 2010; Belz & Siegrist, 2001
The suitable method of mentioned key competencies development can be an implementation and wider use of project-based learning methods. This approach can be characterized by creating the students’ research teams to work individually on long-term projects, which are connected to business practice and are designed to solve the real problems (Slavík, 2012; Atkinson, 2001).

However, the successful implementation of the project-based learning method depends on the basic students skills in certain key competencies. For example the ability to work in team, communicate or understand and solve the problems. During the work on the projects these competencies are further systematically developed (Kašová, 2013; Mitchell, Skinner & White, 2010). The most important key competencies examples are shown in the figure 1.

2 Methods

The aim of this paper is to describe an application of the project-based learning method, which was implemented to Management of Commerce study programme in the academic year 2015/16, and to define course’s processes that should be improved to ensure a higher level of students’ competencies. The structure of the new Specialized project course was inspired by various researches focused on effective competency-based development and project-based learning methods (Allen, 2005; Atkinson, 2001; Bender, 2012; Krompf, 2007; Lee & Lim, 2012; Maltese, 2012; Weber, Finley & Crawford, 2009). To adapt the course to the local conditions we built it on the results of the research called REFLEX - The Flexible Professional in the Knowledge Society published in 2014, which contains relevant data about Czech graduates’ success on the labor market and the employers’ needs – for example the most the required graduates’ competencies as shown in the table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key competency</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional expertise</td>
<td>19.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal skills</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial/entrepreneurial skills</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovative creative skills</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic/organizational skills</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General academic skills</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Koucký, Ryška & Zelenka, 2014

Based on the study of various researches about implementing project-based learning courses mentioned above, we defined the general objectives that should be fulfilled by the implementation of the Specialization project course to the Management of Commerce study programme:

1. Integration of a wide range of knowledge and skills.
2. Connection with practice and the business reality.
3. Linking the students knowledge and skills with the experience, which helps to increases efficiency in the learning process.
4. Activate the student to lifelong learning.
5. Developing the ability to work and to communicate in a team.
6. Developing the organizational skills.

3 Research results

The Specialization project course purpose is to integrate and develop competencies of each student through working on different projects in the areas of trade, marketing and tourism. It is inspired by project-based learning methods, so all projects are specified in cooperation with various companies. According to course structure, at first students should obtain enough relevant theoretical sources in the research area and then start to work on concrete solutions to a given problem by a company, which expects relevant recommendations suggested by students.

Due to the necessary knowledge and skills level of participating students, the Specialization project course is intended only for students of Management of Commerce study programme, who are in their last year of study. The whole process flow of created Specialized project course is shown in the figure 2.
3.1 Project topics

Final report, respectively project documentation, which is the main course output, should contain relevant recommendations for solving concrete problems in accordance with the aim of the project. The projects were mostly focused on the following topics:

1. Marketing research,
2. Data mining,
3. Event management,
4. Brand management,
5. Marketing,
6. Destination management,
7. Tourism and service management.

3.2 Project evaluation

As mentioned in the figure 2, the first semester of the course is evaluated with a credit (based on quality project plan and literary research made by all teams), while the second semester is evaluated with both credit and examination. Students receive credits for presenting the project outputs at the SVOČ conference, which is intended mainly for students to introduce their scientific works. The special section only for the Specialization project course presentations was created for SVOČ conference 2016. There were presented 12 final reports by students’ teams. Every speaker had a certain amount of time to inform the audience, the conference committee and other participants about their final results.

Final grade for every team is always based on criteria prepared by course guarantor in cooperation with supervisors. The main criteria are as follows:

1. Level of target achievement,
2. Quality of SVOČ presentation,
3. Quality of literary research,
4. Quality of final report,
5. Contracting authority satisfaction,
6. Quality of the team self reflection.
3.3 Course feedback and suggestions

Based on the Specialization project course comprehensive feedback by both students and contracting authorities, we can confirm our initial expectations that in the new course, theory and practice are effectively combined, so that, in effect, the students are more enthusiastic about this new project-based learning method. On the other hand, there were certain weaknesses that had an impact on the project results of some students’ teams. Following this, we were able to define the processes which should be modified in academic year 2016/17 to make course more efficient, especially in the area of communication between course participants.

The main recommendations are as follows:
1. Improve the communication process between the students’ team, the participating company, and the supervisors.
2. Setting the rules of communication and cooperation within the students’ team.
3. Greater involvement of participating companies at the SVO Č conference.

However, the contracting authorities’ feedback shows that the companies appreciate the opportunity to test students’ competencies and knowledge in practice, so employers are able to choose the right candidates for theirs actual graduate jobs more easily. This finding is confirmed by the recent employment of several graduates in the cooperating companies. These students were in fact members of the most successful teams in the Specialization project course.

4 Conclusions

The aim of this paper is to describe an application of the project-based learning method, which was implemented to Management of Commerce study programme in the academic year 2015/16, and to define course’s processes that should be improved to ensure a higher level of students’ competencies. Based on the study of various researches about project-based learning courses implementation, the new two semesters course called Specialization project was set up for academic year 2015/16. The main purpose was to integrate and develop competencies of each student through working on projects in the areas of trade, marketing and tourism. The course have been inspired by project-based learning methods, so all projects for students’ teams are specified in cooperation with various companies.

According to course structure, students should at first obtain enough relevant theoretical sources in the research area and then start to work on concrete solutions to a given problem by a company, which expects students’ relevant recommendations in the final report. After the first run of course Specialization project we were able to define the processes which should be more efficient. It is particularly useful to improve the communication process between the student team, the participating company and the supervisors and setting the rules of communication and cooperation within the students’ teams too.

References