



## THE IMPORTANCE OF KEY COMPETENCES: THE ATTITUDE OF KLAIPEDA EMPLOYERS AND STUDENTS

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### Abstract

Key competences enable individuals for personal fulfilment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment. Therefore, the importance of key competences and means for enabling people to develop them has been highlighted in Europe Union and Lithuanian legal regulation documents on education and science for two decades. Still there are evidence that Lithuanian adults and young people have average key competences. Therefore, it is important to investigate whether today's students (future employees and entrepreneurs) perceive the importance of key competences and what competences they find actual. It is also expedient to compare the difference between employers and students attitudes in order to give students information and to encourage them to develop some competence and not ignore it's necessity. The article presents the quantitative research, which was implemented as a continuation of project for improvement of students' research implementing competences. The research revealed that respondents of a students group, in comparison with employers, diminish the importance of key competences and think that the special skills acquired by them are more relevant. Employers equally agreed with the importance of both special skills and key competences. For the employers five most relevant competences are: responsibility, communication in a foreign language, learning to learn, communication in the mother tongue and digital literacy. The five most relevant competences identified by the respondents of the students' group are communication in a foreign language, communication in the mother tongue, digital literacy, initiative and entrepreneurship, responsibility. Both respondents groups believe that competences of social and civic participation and cultural awareness and expression are least relevant for labor market. English, Russian and German languages are considered to be most important. But respondents of the student group have considerably lessened the relevance of the Russian language in the labor market. Respondents from the employers' group identified the top five competences in the future: cooperation, complex problem solving, critical thinking, negotiation skills, creativity. The future topical competences identified by the respondents of the student group are creativity, cooperation, complex problem solving, critical thinking, having opinion and decision making. According to the results of the research, respondents from the employers' group believe that the person and his family are most responsible for the development of key competences. The employers agree to improve the key competences of their employees, while future employees are more willing to share this responsibility with family, high school, and employer.

KEY WORDS: competences, key competences, student, employer, labour market.

### Introduction

Ongoing social, economic society change and the EU institutions pursuit to enable European citizens to adapt to the constantly changing conditions and to live and operate in such environment expediently cause a great attention towards key competences for almost two decades. "The Memorandum on lifelong learning" promulgated by European Commission in 2000 initiated European debate on a comprehensive of lifelong learning strategy in the individual and institutional level, and in the private and public spheres of life. In recommendation of the European Parliament and of The Council „Key competences for lifelong learning – a European reference framework“ (2006) competences are defined here as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the context. Key competences are defined as such competences, which all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment. The Reference Framework sets out eight key competences: communication in the mother tongue; communication in foreign languages; mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology; digital competence; learning to learn; social and civic competences; sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; cultural awareness and expression (Key competences for

... 2006). The importance of key competences, ways and means for their achievement were established in other European Union's and national documents. The importance of key competences and means for enabling people to develop them are highlighted in Lithuanian legal regulation documents on education and science: for example, Valstybinė švietimo 2013-2022 metų strategija (2014), Lietuvos Respublikos Neformaliojo suaugusiųjų švietimo ir tęstinio mokymosi įstatymas (2016). The importance and peculiarities of key competences were analyzed by Lithuanian scientists. Stoniene, Martinkiene, Šakiene and Romeryte-Šereikiene (2009), Vaščenkienė and Motiejūniene (2012), Tūtlys and Bortkevičienė (2014), Gedvilienė and oth. (2015), Gedvilas (2015), Zubrickienė and Adomaitienė (2016, discuss the classification of key competences, their manifestation and peculiarities. Vaičiūniene and Liorancaitė-Šukienė (2014) researched the peculiarities of communication in the mother tongue and communication in foreign languages competences. Stancikas (2015) explored the development of Lithuanian adults' cultural awareness. Vaitkevičius (2015) revealed peculiarities of computing and information society technology competence: participants of research have weak skills to use spreadsheets, database systems, have lack of knowledge in legal, ethical and

hygiene standards of working with computer. Tūtlys and Bortkevičienė (2014) carried out a research of entrepreneurial competence revealed Lithuanian population weaknesses and enabled researchers to develop entrepreneurial competence module to improve and develop the missing skills and acquire new skills needed for entrepreneurship. Stanulevičienė's (2014) study of learning to learn points out that Lithuanian adults perceive that learning to learn competence helps current workers, the unemployed and senior citizens in finding jobs, keeping the job, doing a professional career and social life; respondents stressed the importance of taking responsibility for learning. Skarbalienė and Minelgaitė-Snaebjornsson (2017) explored the application of innovative methods for students' leadership development and revealed high demand of students to develop their leadership competences during the studies at the university. Martinkienė (2014) identified the list of 25 managerial competences, which can be developed during the participation in Business Simulation Enterprises. The researchers analyzed particular various competencies and distinguished their dimensions, formulated capability maps and recommendations for the improvement of competences.

During two decades different societies and economies have experienced significant changes, digital and technological innovations as well as labor market and demographic changes, which impact daily life work and leisure. Still according to the 2018 research data all key competences remain relevant (Council Recommendation on Key ... 2018). In spite of great attention to key competences for two decades the results of Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, (PIAAC) (Ką apie Lietuvos gyventojus ... 2016) indicate that Lithuanian adults have average level of literacy and there are more adults which have no competences of using information technologies and digital problem solving. Talking about this competence Lithuanian young people's skills are at a lower level than average (Ką apie Lietuvos gyventojus ... 2016). Whereas applications of Information Technology are evolving very rapidly, employers want a different application of knowledge and skills (Ivanikovas, Valavičius 2014). "Already 90 % of all jobs require at least some level of digital skills" (Reflection paper on ... 2017). Special attention in EU documentation and other surveys of key competences is paid for youth education and their competences (Key competences for ... 2006; Ką apie Lietuvos gyventojus ... 2016; Council Recommendation on Key ... 2018), or on the role of youth work in supporting young people's development of essential life skills that facilitate their successful transition to adulthood, active citizenship and working life (Council Conclusions on ... 2017). Therefore, it is important to investigate whether today's students (future employees and entrepreneurs) perceive the importance of key competences, and what competences they find actual. It is also expedient to compare the difference between employers and students attitudes, in order to give students information and to encourage them to develop some competence and not ignore it's necessity. This is especially relevant for institutions of higher education in order to compose study programs, which are adequate to labor market

requirements, and achieve satisfaction of their clients, both students and their employers. Therefore, such questions are asked in the research: what is the attitude of students and employers towards key competences and special skills; what competences do those two groups of respondents find relevant in nowadays activity and in the future; do employers and students feel responsibility for development of key competences.

The object of the research – the attitude of employers and students towards key competences.

The purpose of research – to identify the differences of employers and students approach towards the key competences relevant in 21<sup>st</sup> century labor market.

Research methods. The article presents the quantitative research, which was implemented as a continuation of project for improvement of students' research implementing competences. Research was implemented by questionnaire survey of students and standardized closed interview with employers.

## Review of research methodology

*The research methodology* is based on such provisions:

- Constructivist approach, which emphasizes that education / learning is an active and constructive process;
- Sociocultural approach, stating that the development of competences takes place in the environment of social interaction. Therefore, the above mentioned development is characterized by didactic, organizational cultural and other characteristics.

*Two groups of subjects* participated in the research:

- Students, studying in Klaipeda city high schools. All population is about 7500 students. Sample is 1396 respondents (with probability – 99 percent, error – 3 percent). The representative probabilistic selection of the cluster was used to select the respondents (Kardelis, 2009; May, 2011). The choice of students for the research was determined by age, gender, form of study and course in which the students were studying.
- Employers of Klaipeda city. All population is about 6600 employers. 120 employers participated in research (with probability – 99 percent, error – 12 percent). An objective selection was used to select them. The choice of employers for the research was determined by the size of their company, location, status and type of activity.

The numbers of respondents in both groups were calculated using the formula of the V. I. Paniotto sample volume. The aim of the research and the characteristics of the research populations (i.e., the size and criteria of homogeneity in the research attribute), the accuracy and representativeness of the sought data, the characteristics of questionnaires (Bitinas, Rupšienė, Žydžiūnaitė 2008; Valackienė, Mikėnė 2008; Kardelis 2009) were also taken into account.

*Methods of the research:* questionnaire survey of students (a pre-prepared questionnaire was used) and standardized closed interview with employers (a pre-prepared standardized questionnaire was used). The pre-prepared questionnaires were composed referring European Union' key competences classification and scientific literature. Both questionnaires contained six

main questions related to key competences and block of demographic questions (employers: type of activity, size, sector; students: age, gender, course). Electronic questionnaire and the invitation – request to participate in the research was sent to 346 organizations, which e-mail addresses were published on the websites. Klaipeda companies were selected using the information platform <http://rekvizitai.vz.lt/imone>.

*Accessibility of the research instrument.* Students and employers have filled out research instruments on the website [www.apklausa.lt](http://www.apklausa.lt) or directly in the instrument form after the contact with researchers.

*The duration of the research* – June, 2017 – May, 2018.

*The control of the quality:*

- The internal verification of the research process: 100 percent control (completeness of the questionnaire, consistency of the research);
- The external verification of the research process: research is carried out in accordance with the methodological requirements; the principle of selection of respondents is intact.
- The control of data insertion: checking at least 20% of entered data array.

*Ethics of the research.* The research follows the principles of ethical research: protection, secrecy (anonymity and confidentiality), benevolence, universality, significance, respect for personal dignity, justice and the right to receive accurate information (Bitinas, Rupšienė, Žydzūnaitė, 2008; Kardelis 2009; May 2011). The ethics of the research provides commonly acceptable subjects for this research (sample size, sample selection, data collection, generalization, etc.) that led to consideration of alternatives to the whole research process, anticipating their strengths and weaknesses, and choosing the most appropriate research course.

*Data analysis.* Research data was analyzed using Microsoft Excel program. Opinions of two respondents groups are counted and compared in tables.

## Findings of research

Before starting to analyze the results of the research, it is expedient to review the demographic data of respondents. In the research of the importance of the 21st century competencies, 1396 students from Klaipeda high schools participated in the research. The distribution of respondents by age is: 18 years old – 9 percent, 19 years old – 28,4 percent, 20 years old - 36,2 percent, 21 years old – 16,6 percent, 22 years old – 5 percent, 23 years old and more - 4,7 percent. 67,9 percent of respondents were women, whereas 32,1 percent – men. Students distribution by course: first course – 33,7 percent; second course – 42,6 percent; third course – 23,1 percent; fourth course – 0,7 percent.

The distribution of employers' organizations participating in the research by the field of activity varies widely. Most often, the company's activities were named as trade (22,75 percent), logistics and transport services (8,99), manufacturing (15,6), education (13,3), etc. (accounting, sewing, information technology, health care, environmental management, catering, etc.). 82,5 percent

of respondents from the employers' group belong to the private business sector, while 17,5 percent – public sector. Thus, the results obtained reflect not only private but also public sector opinion. Data show that 67,5% of respondents represent small businesses, 20% - medium and 12,5% - large.

First of all, respondents were asked about the importance of key competences in today's labor market. The distribution of respondents' answers is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** The percentage of respondents' opinion on to the importance of key competences in today's labor market

Importance	Employers	Students
Very important	55,0	42,2
Important	35,0	31,6
Neither important nor unimportant	5,0	20,7
Unimportant	2,5	5,5
Absolutely unimportant	2,5	0

The analysis of the importance of key competences in today's labor market assessment (Table 1) has shown that employers value the importance of key competences more than students do. Even 20,7 percent of the respondents in the student group believe that key competences are neither important nor unimportant, and another 5,5 percent think that they are not relevant. Thus, respondents of the student group, in comparison with employers, underestimate the importance of key competences in today's labor market.

The research also sought to identify which skills respondents rated as priorities (see Table 2). It was revealed that respondents from employers' groups almost unanimously accepted both the importance of special skills (45%) and the importance of key competences (42,5%). In addition, even 12,5% of respondents from this group felt that both special and key competences were equally important. Meanwhile, according to respondents of the student group, the special skills acquired by prospective employees are more important for them (55,8%). It can be assumed that students feel that a future employee must come to the labor market with many already acquired special skills. In addition, employers are aware of the specifics of the activities of different companies and believe that if the prospective employee has strong key skills, then they can easily adapt / improve their specific skills. But, as it is indicated in Council Recommendation on Key ... (2018) it appears no longer sufficient to equip young people with a fixed set of skills or knowledge; they need to develop resilience, a broad set of competences, and the ability to adapt to change. As such, the need for and value of a lifelong learning perspective, where people acquire new and more relevant competences throughout their lives, is more evident than ever. So, the ability to learn is truly vital.

**Table 2.** The percentage of respondents' opinion on priorities for specific future worker skills or high-level key competences (percent)

Competences	Employers	Students
Special skills	45,0	55,8
Key competences	42,5	43,1
Special skills and key competences are important in the same way	12,5	1

The following table provides research data on respondents' opinions on current competences relevant to the labor market (Table 3). Respondents were allowed to choose an unlimited number of relevant competences, therefore the total expression is more than 100 percent. According to the research data, first of all, it should be noted that respondents of the students' group, more than respondents of the employers' group, assessed the relevance of the majority of competences. The five most relevant competences of the employers' group are: responsibility, communication in a foreign language, learning to learn, communication in the mother tongue and digital literacy. The five most relevant competences identified by the respondents of the students' group are: communication in a foreign language, communication in the mother tongue, digital literacy, initiative and entrepreneurship, responsibility. Comparing these five, one can conclude that employers are more likely to appreciate future employees' ability to learn, while students find it more relevant to be proactive and entrepreneurial. Also it is worthwhile to note that both groups of respondents believe that the competences of social and civic participation and cultural awareness and expression are least relevant for today's labor market. Council Recommendation on Key ... (2018) highlight civic competence and the role of citizenship, shared values and human rights. It is increasingly important to empower individuals to act as responsible, active people able to contribute to peaceful, tolerant, inclusive and secure societies.

**Table 3.** The percentage of respondents' opinion on the most relevant key competences in today's labor market

Relevance	Employers	Students
Communication in the mother tongue	<b>60,0</b>	<b>89,0</b>
Communication in a foreign language	<b>62,5</b>	<b>94,2</b>
Calculation, exact and natural sciences (analysis, solution of problems using mathematical models, etc.)	32,5	35,1
Digital literacy	<b>60,0</b>	<b>89,0</b>
Learning to learn	<b>62,5</b>	45,0
Social and civic participation	25,0	21,5
Initiative and entrepreneurship	55,0	<b>81,3</b>
Cultural awareness and expression	35,0	35,1
Responsibility	<b>82,5</b>	<b>62,4</b>

As the ability to communicate in Lithuanian and foreign languages is actualized in European Union documents, scientific sources and empirical research, respondents were asked what languages are relevant for employment and working in the 21st century labor market. The distribution of respondents' answers is presented in Table 4. Respondents were allowed to select an unlimited number of response options, so their total percentage exceeds 100 percent. A similar distribution of responses can be observed in both groups of respondents: the most important languages are English (97.5% of the respondents in the employers' group, 98% of the respondents in the students' group), Russian (72.5% of the respondents in the employers' group, 48.8% of the respondents in the students' group), German (40.0% of the respondents of the employers' group, 34.3% of the respondents in the students' group). It is noteworthy that respondents of the students' group significantly less appreciated (not appreciated) the relevance of the Russian language in the labor market. Respondents from both groups who chose the answer "other" mostly indicated Chinese (30%) and Scandinavian language groups (20%).

**Table 4.** The percentage of respondents' opinions about relevance of languages in employment / work in the 21st century labor market

Language	Employers	Students
English language	97,5	98
Russian language	72,5	48,8
German language	40,0	34,3
French language	7,5	9,1
Polish language	5,0	10,9

As Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong learning (2018) indicates "Skills such as creativity, critical thinking, initiative taking and problem solving play an important role in coping with complexity and change in today's society". Respondents were asked what competences will be relevant to the future labor market. Respondents were allowed to choose an unlimited number of relevant competences, therefore the total expression is more than 100 percent. (Table 5). According to the research, respondents from the employers' group identified the following five areas of future competences: cooperation, complex problem solving, critical thinking, negotiation skills, and creativity. The future relevant competences identified by the respondents of the students' group are: creativity, collaboration, complex problem solving, critical thinking, having opinions and decision making. Such relevant future skills, identified by the two groups of respondents, suggest that employers believe that future employees will work in teams / organizations. Meanwhile, the students themselves believe that in the future labor market their opinion and the ability to make decisions, i.e. - their individuality will be more valued. While in the future The Council Recommendation on Key ... (2018) highlight creativity, the ability to plan and manage processes, and deal with risk as part of informed decision-making as essential dimensions of entrepreneurship competence.

**Table 5.** The percentage of respondents' opinion on the most relevant key competences in the future labor market

Competences	Employers	Students
Complex problem solving	42,5	48,5
Critical thinking	37,5	45,0
Creativity	32,5	51,5
Skills necessary to work with people	30,0	21,5
Cooperation	52,5	48,8
Emotional intelligence	20,0	17,2
Having opinions and decision making	25,0	45,0
Attitude to helpfulness / service	10,5	9,1
Negotiation skills	35,0	31,0
Cognitive flexibility	20,0	10,9

The answers of the respondents to the question of who is responsible for the development of employees' competences are presented in Table 6. Respondents were allowed to choose an unlimited number of relevant competences, therefore the total expression is more than 100 percent.

**Table 6.** The percentage of respondents' opinion about the responsibility for the development of key competences of current / future employees

Statement	Employers	Students
Family	42,5	45,2
High school	32,5	45,0
Employer	25,0	38,4
Person himself	82,5	62,9

According to the results of the research, respondents from the employers' group believe that the person (82.5%) and his family (42.5%) are responsible for the development of key competences. It is noteworthy that the employers themselves agree to improve the key competences of their employees (25%). Comparing the opinion of the students' group, it is obvious that for the improvement of their key competences only 62.9% of the respondents chose the person's responsibility (i.e., almost 20% less than in the group of employers). This group of respondents chose other answers approximately in the same frequency. This data suggest that employers expect responsibility for developing key competencies from employees, while future employees are more willing to share this responsibility with their entire environment (family, high school and employer).

## Conclusions

It was found out that 90% of the researched employers and 73.8% students believe that the person's key competences are important and very important. Thus, respondents of a students' group, in comparison with employers, diminish the importance of key competences in today's labor market. Employers equally agreed with the importance of both special skills and key competences. Meanwhile, according to respondents of the students' group, the special skills acquired by them are

more relevant in the labor market. It can be assumed that students feel that a future employee must come to the labor market with a lot of already acquired special skills.

According to the employers' group, the five most relevant competences are: responsibility, communication in a foreign language, learning to learn, communication in the mother tongue and digital literacy. The five most relevant competences identified by the respondents of the students' group are: communication in a foreign language, communication in the mother tongue, digital literacy, initiative and entrepreneurship, responsibility. Comparing these top five ones, it can be concluded that employers are more likely to appreciate future employees' ability to learn, while students find it more relevant to be proactive and entrepreneurial. It is worthwhile to note that both groups of respondents believe that the competences of social and civic participation and cultural awareness and expression are least relevant for today's labor market. Respondents in the students' group more than respondents from the employers' group appreciated the relevance of many competences.

In the labor market, English, Russian and German languages are considered to be the most important ones. It is worthwhile to note that respondents of the students' group have considerably lessened the relevance of the Russian language in the labor market. Respondents from both groups also chose the languages of the Chinese and Scandinavian language groups.

Respondents from the employers' group identified the top five competences in the future: cooperation, complex problem solving, critical thinking, negotiation skills, creativity. The future topical competencies identified by the respondents of the student group are: creativity, cooperation, complex problem solving, critical thinking, having opinion and decision making. Employers believe future employees will work in teams / organizations. Meanwhile, the students themselves believe that in the future labor market their opinion and the ability to make decisions, i.e. - their individuality will be more valued.

According to the results of the research, respondents from the employers' group believe that the person and his family are most responsible for the development of key competences. It is noteworthy that the employers themselves agree to improve the key competences of their employees. Comparing the opinion of respondents of the students' group, even one fifth of respondents in the group of students indicated that the person himself is responsible for the improvement of his/her key competences. This data suggest that employers expect responsibility for developing key competencies from employees, while future employees are more willing to share this responsibility with their entire environment (family, high school, and employer).

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