

Competency paradigm for educational practice. Fostering key competencies for socio-economic development

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Abstract: Socio-economic development rests upon many factors, among which the intangible factors, especially social and human capital, gain in importance. The development of the capital should take place through shaping of a wide range of competencies, with social competencies being those of crucial importance. It seems that in the nearest future, not only a high level of employees' knowledge and abilities will be the key to functioning of establishments but also proper interpersonal behaviour and attitude. The article thus explains how the competency paradigm contributes to the progression of those abilities that are vital to socio-economic development.

Keywords: key competencies, social competence, competency paradigm, educational practice, educational strategy, social capital, human capital

Introduction

In the 18th century Adam Smith wrote that division of labour, technical capital and human abilities are the factors that contribute to the wealth of nations. Today, means of production

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and financial resources do not play such critical role and, at the very least, constitute neither sole nor dominating determinants of social development. Surely, they do not constitute components of the so-called *social capital*. Today, the social or human capital remains the intangible resource of economic and social development conditioning. Those, while going beyond the economic sphere, are of great significance to the spheres of economy, administration and culture.

The research conducted within the two aforementioned types of capital and their sources, proffer an evidence for having the indirect influence on the success achieved by the social groups and enterprises. Any negligence within the development of social and human capital augments the arising of the chain of interdependent failures (World Bank, 1995). Thus, in the countries that are aware of that fact, the enterprises and organizations allocate funds for professional qualifications and skills raising. Within the trainings, that are being offered, “the focus is put on enhancement of the engagement and motivation of the employees, encouraging to innovativeness, development of proper organizational culture, effective communication, discovering own talents etc. – all this serves to enlarge knowledge” (Kietliński, 2014, p. 40).

The array of socio-economic changes (the development of technology, telecommunication, Internet, electronic business, new lifestyles etc.), which contributed to modernization of those societies, entail the sphere of intangible resources, which include research results, knowledge in a broad sense, intellectual property, as well as individual and group competencies. World Bank (1995) research proves that the role of social and individual human capital is not to be underestimated not only within the scope of social but also economic sphere. Social capital of high quality can indirectly influence the growth of economic capital (Grootaert et al., 2004).

Towards competency paradigm

Contemporary management approaches and business or development strategies entail the so-called intangible assets. L. Edvinsson and M. S. Malone (1997) claim that the new

type of economy contributes to the allocation of the main value source of each organization within its intellectual capital. Thus, sustainable socio-economic development rests upon the ability to cooperate, interfacing, continuous self-development of the employees and the organization. Competencies, communicational skills, ability to resolve disputes and to face challenges – they all have an impact on economic growth and the quality of life within a society (Edvinsson & Malone, 1997, pp. 20-23). Tadeusz Oleksyn, in turn, predicts that, in the near future, the core of most organizations will be determined by defined competencies that include knowledge, skills, attitudes and, last but not least, moral activities such as valuing, decision-making, complex problems solving, conflicts and dilemmas resolving (Oleksyn, 2014). The economy, therefore, requires appropriate intangible investments, which will allow for the effective functioning of the individual equipped with adequate competencies.

In the light of the aforementioned, in recent years, one has experienced an increase in interest in the social sciences and the humanities with regard to the determinants, development and measurement of social competence, which constitute the essential element of human capital, and indirectly, social capital. The cultural and civilizational changes requiring the competitiveness and mobility of individuals, the need for life-long education, the collaborative nature of work associated with the need to interact with people with very diverse skills, views, standards and values constitute the challenges for the participation in public life that will increasingly involve appropriate social competencies. This urge has been addressed by the participants of World Economic Forum in Davos 2016, who point to the growth of the role of social competencies within the scope of employee's key competencies after the year of 2020 (World Economic Forum, 2016). The key competencies are not a simple derivative of human cognitive capacity. For the full development of these competencies, an individual requires specialized, permanent education both within the area of professional qualifications and in the sphere of the so-called social competence.

Contemporary education experts, such as Rolf Arnold (1997), speak of a breakthrough in the contemporary

system of life-long education which points to a significant role of competence. They set a competence-oriented training above standard professional qualifications, judging them to be far more effective, more rewarding for the learners and the educators, and contributing to the holistic development of individuals. Such competences are exercised through efficient application of knowledge and skills under regulatory (e.g. legal, ethical) constraints or in the face of social, professional and institutional challenges as well as individual needs and aspirations (Arnold, 1997). It is neither the possession of knowledge and information itself nor the access to social structures that is of importance, but the essential ability to implement them and adjust them properly.

It becomes apparent that the competency paradigm has already emerged as a paradigm of contemporary developmental trends propounding competence-oriented education, self-education and life-long self-improvement. Its focal point is to foster the ability and motivation for continuous self-development, participation in social life, and auto-creation, since only the last three conditions enable effective adaptation of the paradigm to variable living conditions throughout the entire living and professional activity.

Key competences

In order to implement the principles of the competency paradigm, the works have begun on developing a basis for those competences that are significant from the perspective of the demands of modern democratic and economic systems. To that end OECD (2005) has launched *DeSeCo – Definition and Selection of Competencies* project, which aimed for defining key competencies base underlying further goals and measures of education and life-long learning. Thus, for a competence to be called “key” or “basic”, it has to be significant both for the functioning of the individual in the society and for the society itself. Key competence is to allow individuals to successfully integrate into different social groups, while simultaneously maintaining their independence and ability to function efficiently in both familiar and unfamiliar environment.

The members of modern societies require a wide range of competencies to face the complex challenges of today's world. Nevertheless, creating an exhaustive list of all the competencies, taking into account a vast number of contexts is impractical in terms of policy-making. Therefore, the experts, working on the OECD project, have limited themselves to the optimum by proposing a set of key competencies that would set goals for broadly defined education processes.

OECD (2005) indicates four key competence categories that delineate some key competencies from the perspective of social and economic systems:

(1) Interactive use of tools. The need for the use of tools (such as language or information) is emphasized here within the context of interaction with the environment. It is crucial for an individual to understand and master information and communication technologies and socio-cultural technologies so that they can be adapted to the individual's own goals. Within this group the following key competencies have been distinguished:

1. *The ability to use language, symbols and text interactively* involves the efficient use of spoken and written language skills, counting and application of other mathematical skills in various situations (OECD, 2005, p. 10).
2. *The ability to use knowledge and information interactively* – this competency covers critical analysis of information along with its socio-cultural context; such competence is essential both for understanding participation in information exchange and for informed decision making (OECD, 2005, p. 11).

(2) The ability to use technology interactively. Information and communication technologies have the potential to change the way people operate – to enable remote cooperation, to extend information sources, and to facilitate interaction with others. In order to utilize these capabilities, the individuals must possess competencies that go beyond basic technical skills. Not only must they be able to handle technological tools, but also understand their potential, so that they can adapt them to their own conditions and goals and perform their tasks even more efficiently (OECD, 2005, p. 11).

(3) Interacting in heterogeneous groups. The increasingly interdependent world requires the individuals to be able to build and develop good relationships with others and to collaborate with people of divergent social, ethnic or cultural backgrounds, different views, needs and life goals. Within this group the following key competences have been distinguished:

1. *The ability to relate well to others* is increasingly valued within the economic sphere. It assumes that people are able to respect and mutually appreciate their values, beliefs, cultural and historical backgrounds in order to create an inclusive environment that is hospitable and optimal for development. Empathy, effective emotion management and ability to cooperate – they all constitute basic components of good relationships with people (OECD, 2005, p. 15).
2. *The ability to manage conflicts* is the key to effective conflict resolution, which is recognized as a process that can and has to be managed constructively, not escalated and denied. This competence obliges to take into account the interests and needs of all parties of the conflict and to seek solutions, with each party having its share and profiting from it. Conflict management must, therefore, include the following capabilities: ability to analyze problems and interests (e.g. recognition of merit, division of labour); ability to perceive the origins of conflict and justification of the cause; ability to perceive the spheres of agreement and disagreement; ability to revise the problem; ability to define priority needs and goals, ability to evaluate what the parties are prepared to give up, and on what basis (OECD, 2005, p. 13).

(4) Acting autonomously. Individuals, capable of autonomous actions, must be able to take on the responsibility for managing their own lives, be able to place their lives in a broader social context, and to make nondependent decisions (i.e. nonconformist decisions, which may, however, take into account the reasons acknowledged within the discourse and interpersonal deliberation) (OECD, 2005, p. 5). Within this group the following key competences have been distinguished:

1. *The ability to act within the big picture* is the ability to understand and consider the broader context of actions and decisions. It also includes the ability to refer one's own decisions and actions to the relevant social norms, social and economic institutions. This competence requires i.a. the knowledge of the system in which an individual functions, identification of the direct and indirect consequences of their activities, or the ability to choose between various options by reflecting on their potential effects on individual and common standards and goals (OECD, 2005, pp. 14-15).
2. *The ability to form and conduct life plans and personal projects* requires individuals to perceive their own lives as an organized narrative, with a tangible purpose and sense, also in the face of an environment subjected to constant changes. It presupposes an orientation to the future as a life project, which, in turn, implies optimism and potential development, always considered in the light of viable opportunities (OECD, 2005, p. 15).
3. *The ability to assert rights, interests, limits and needs* is of great importance both within the context of structural rights and in the context of defending the interests of individual rights in everyday life. Although most of the rights and needs of an individual are established and protected by formal legal or contractual agreements, ultimately their actual implementation depends on individuals' ability to identify and evaluate their rights, needs and interests, to pursue them actively and defend them. This requires an individual to participate in democratic institutions and in local and national political processes. This competence pertains to the ability to understand one's own interests (e.g. in the elections), knowledge of the written rules and principles, or argumentation of one's own needs and rights (OECD, 2005, p. 15).

Concluding remarks

All of the key competencies identified above constitute a coherent set, which incorporates almost the entire range

of life areas of an individual. Social or interpersonal competences are assumed to be equal to instrumental or systemic competences. The authors of the lists of competencies emphasize that each competence is of equally crucial importance, with neither of them being superior.

Equality in the context of competence ideals means that all competencies are equally important for social and economic integration processes. Perhaps some of them will be less important to the citizens of those societies that have not yet experienced multiculturalism, multilingualism and pluralism. Nonetheless, when one is to examine the most important educational documents in the EU (cf. European Commission, 2013, 2014a, 2014b) or national educational and developmental strategies (cf. Boni, 2013), it is the social competence that is declared to be a priority for modern education.

The task of the development of key competencies is to emphasize their role and promote them in knowledge-based society institutions, especially in education. They are the guarantor of social cohesion, innovation, productivity and competitiveness of societies. Individually – they affect citizenship, active participation in public life, effective functioning of the labour market, flexibility and adaptability, personal development, self-fulfilment and family life.

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