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Paulina Chobot

Extracurricular student activity and its impact on developing students' job competencies. The case of students working at BEST Gdansk

Abstract

With practical abilities (mostly soft skills) currently gaining importance in professional endeavours, university students need to acquire and improve competencies expected by their potential, future employers, as they may not be able to fully develop them during traditional university courses. This study aims to determine whether the extracurricular activity of students influences the development of job competencies.
To test the hypothesis that such type of activity impacts the development of these competencies, an analysis of the basic framework of extracurricular activity was conducted, followed by a survey. As members of a student organisation operating by the Gdańsk University of Technology, the respondents were presented with a questionnaire and asked to assess the level of 12 chosen competencies before and while working at the organisation. The results showed that all participants experienced growth in their level of competencies, which illustrates that the extracurricular activity of students positively influences the development of job competencies.

Keywords: extracurricular student activity, student organization, competencies, development, professional endeavours, soft skills

Introduction

Nowadays, with practical skills becoming increasingly more important, especially as employers tend to expect some experience before offering a job, it is crucial to develop competencies whilst studying at university and at the same time gain knowledge beyond the theoretical spectrum usually taught during university courses. Some researchers believe this could be done through extracurricular activity (Montelongo, 2002; Rosch & Collins, 2017; Watson, 2011). Students willingly and enthusiastically join student organisations or associations for various reasons, which although it could indicate students' desire to socialise and meet new people, there might also be another underlying factor, such as students' aspiration to raise individual qualifications, including employability skills (Chapman et al., 2023).

Benefits of extracurricular student activity

Students' extracurricular activity is an essential tool when it comes to gaining practical competencies. Despite the wide range of possibilities for development that universities propose, it is often out of their reach to ensure training of all skills needed at work, due to the high specialisation of most companies. This is where extracurricular student activity becomes helpful, as it provides the chance for students' individual improvement according to their field of interest, but also enables hands-on experience needed in their future professional endeavours.

Students often have to balance studying at university with family commitments and working to cover tuition fees or living costs (King et al., 2020). Nonetheless, many undergraduates still seek extracurricular activities, especially during the second year of their studies, as this is considered to be the time to develop their employability portfolio

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(De Sisto et al., 2021). However, it is worth mentioning that not all students engage in extracurricular activity only to raise their strictly work-connected abilities. Tinto's Student Integration Model, which tries to explain why students decide to leave university, could be helpful here, describing the conditions that need to be met to increase student retention. Despite the model's variables having a rather small impact on retention (Chrysikos, 2017), some authors claim that since each student's individual needs and expectations towards university differ, the model can still be useful in analysing this process. What is crucial here is that the model divides the university experience that students have into two categories: the academic and social system. Whilst the academic system is a predictable answer, not everyone considers the social system as a factor of student retention, with an important role played by extracurricular student activity. Its significance is often perceived as lower than it is in reality, while it may actually strengthen students' sense of belonging to the university (De Sisto et al., 2021).

Extracurricular student activity can also have a positive impact on students' success and academic performance (King et al., 2020), as it may help with satisfying psychological needs or dealing with stress thanks to interaction with peers, lecturers and other university staff (King et al., 2020). Emotional well-being positively influences proactive learning (Geertshuis, 2019), thereby contributing to better academic performance.

Participating in extracurricular activities raises students' cultural awareness as far as working with people from different backgrounds is considered. As Junfang Fu indicates, such activities are "effective ways to adjust to a brand-new culture or social environment and to develop necessary skills for future employment" (Fu, 2018, p. 96). The reason for this is not only due to direct contact with diverse individuals, but also thanks to extracurricular activity helping break through intrinsic barriers of a university (King et al., 2020). Such impediments can include prejudices connected to one's financial situation, family background, class and ethnic discrimination or a university's dominant culture[1]. The latter conveys the superior position of teachers over students and, as Godor points out, "the requirement for students to pass certain examinations, in a certain way, using certain language in order to still be eligible for an academic degree" (Godor, 2017, p. 268), resulting in a student's feeling of being restrained.

A student's creative or mental block, possibly caused by the barriers mentioned above, may decrease a student's motivation and thereby lower self-efficacy, and there is a connotation between that and extracurricular activity. Apparently, students engaged in such form of activity evince higher self-efficacy at university, compared to those who are not (Griffiths et al., 2021). However, it is worth mentioning that this self-efficacy may not only show itself in academic performance but also lead to self-confidence in daily life, as well as higher chances for finding employment, which refers to the concept of "whole person education" (Chan, 2016), which should be a desirable goal of every student.

Even though extracurricular activities can be perceived as an "unnecessary source of stress" for some students, due to the lack of time for choosing activities with direct benefit (Dickinson et al., 2021), which may not be clearly defined in terms of extracurricular activities, a lot of undergraduates continue to participate in order to gain experience and skills valuable to their potential, future employer.

Extracurricular activities may take a variety of different forms, with some events being organised by the university, although usually by students themselves, starting from less formal through traditional classes with the teacher, to working off-campus. Nonetheless, the best example of such activity could be a student organisation, which usually combines all the crucial aspects of extracurricular activity.

The international BEST as an example of a non-profit organisation

The abbreviation BEST stands for Board of European Students of Technology and is a student organisation taking the form of a non-profit organisation[2] and operating next to different Technological Universities across Europe. The concept was conceived in Stockholm in 1987, where a European conference for students of physics and mathematics was conducted (*History*, n.d.). The International Weeks that were established during the conference acted as an impulse for founding BEST, and its first official status was formed in April 1989 in Berlin (Fonseca, 2019). Its headquarters are currently in Brussels, but that does not mean it operates only in Belgium, and it is officially described as an international association (*Statutes of the Board of European Students of Technology*, 2021[3]).

The organisation is deeply structured and consists of an International Board, international departments, and subsidiaries, also called Local BEST Groups (LBG for short). Each LBG has its own status. After fulfilling the conditions to be a part of BEST as a whole, such as i.e. operating by a technological university in Europe, the joining group is first given the status of Observer, and with time, after meeting all the requirements, it can be promoted to a higher position, gaining at the same time new privileges. Each status can be acquired

[1] The concept described by B. P. Godor.
[2] BEST is officially described as a non-profit association, however its structure makes it closer to a non-profit organisation because of the defined roles and functions of its members. For this reason such naming was applied.
[3] Internal document of the organisation, available only to registered members.

after engaging in making a contribution to or enhancing the reputation of BEST as a whole, i.e. by organising internal[4] and external events (*Statutes of the Board of European Students of Technology*, 2021).

The organisation's regulations strictly formulate all the conditions that must be fulfilled to receive Full Member status, which allows it to have a bigger impact on the organisation's operations and new regulations. What is more, this scheme also translates into the internal structure of a particular LBG. After joining a local subsidiary of BEST, each new member also receives the status of Observer and can progressively become a Baby Member and eventually a Full Member. There is the possibility of being promoted to a higher status after proportionally bigger engagement and active participation in activities conducted by BEST. In this case, it gives the right to be a part of the board and to vote during each 6-month official meeting at the same time letting the members be a part of the decision-making process for the original LBG.

BEST currently operates in 32 countries, with 90 local groups and more than 3,300 volunteers (*BEST in Numbers*, n.d.). What brings all these people together are 5, officially formulated and coherent for every LBG, basic values, which are:

- flexibility,
- friendship,
- fun,
- improvement,
- learning.

All of these allow members to identify with the organisation along with its vision, which is „Empowered Diversity", and its mission, which is „Developing students" (*Identity of BEST*, n.d.).

BEST Gdansk and its characteristic

BEST Gdansk, or rather LBG Gdansk, is one of the subsidiaries of International BEST and operates by the Gdańsk University of Technology, providing additional chances for improvement to all students of this institution. Nevertheless, the biggest development opportunities would still be possible for the members of a student organization, as a lot of competencies could be gained while organising various events. The latter would not be possible without a strong people base, and LBG Gdansk, with 79 active members, definitely does not need to complain[5].

In order to manage it well, members of LBG Gdansk are divided into 4 working groups, which are HR, PR, CR and LG/IT (Logistics and IT), and each group has a responsible member of the board. These groups are the core of the organisation and allow members to voluntarily develop in the area of their choice. After picking a group, the member may not change it during their participation in BEST, although this does not mean that their area of activity is final. One may choose a secondary group or even actively participate in the work of other groups without being a part of them, which allows for gaining competencies from different domains and can be beneficial during future employment, as it provides all-round development.

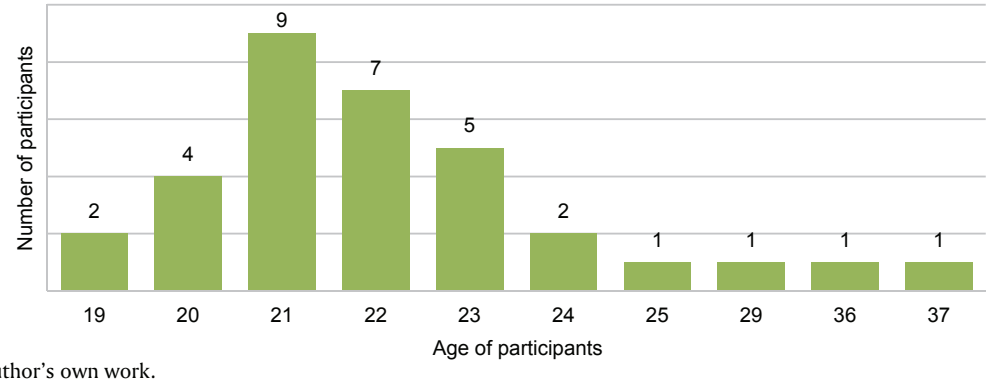
Methodology

Research sample

The research was conducted on students actively working in BEST Gdansk and those with alumni status. Although 38 members took part in the research, 5 participants had to be excluded from the sample as they had been active for only around one month when conducting the study, thus their period of working at the organisation was too short to show the development of any competencies. The analysed group therefore consisted of 33 respondents. As BEST Gdansk operates by the Gdańsk University Technology, all participants were students or graduates (in the case of alumni) of this university.

Among the participants of the research were 14 women and 19 men, with an age range from 19 to 37 years old (see: Figure 1), with most respondents aged 21 or 22 years old (27% and 21% of all participants, respectively).

Figure 1
Age of participants



Source: author's own work.

[4] Internal to a specific LBG.
[5] Data from an internal report of the board, presented on 8.01.2022.

The duration of activity in BEST is crucial to see the level of development, so a question to this regard was posed. As illustrated below (Figure 2) the biggest amount of participants, with a total of 10 (30%), have been working at the organisation for 1 to 1.5 years, 9 (27%) have been active for 6 months, 10 have been working for 2–3 years or more than 3 years (5 persons (15%) per category) and 4 respondents (12%) have alumni status (those 25–37 years old). Such time intervals were adopted due to the recruitment process to the organisation being organised twice a year: during spring (usually in late March) and autumn (usually in late October). There is no possibility to join between these two recruitment events, so there are no other periods of activity in the organisation.

Among the respondents, less than half were currently employed (45.5%), while the rest (54.5%) were only studying (Figure 3). Participants with professional experience were divided into 3 groups: studying and working, although not in the field of study (4 persons), studying and working in the field of study (6 persons), working and not studying (5 persons).

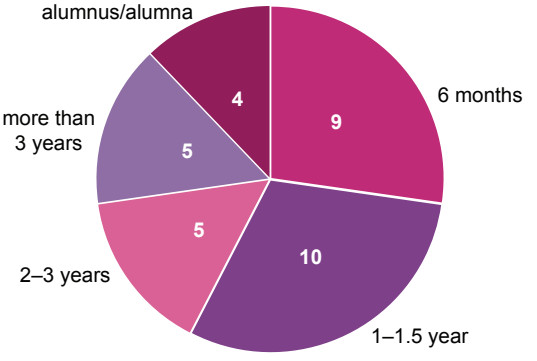
Almost all respondents (32) also named the university's faculty where they are studying or studied before, with the most often mentioned faculties being the Faculty of Electronics, Telecommunications and Informatics (8 persons), the Faculty of Management and Economics (7 persons) and the Faculty of Electrical and Control Engineering (6 persons). There were fewer representatives of other faculties, such as Mechanical Engineering and Ship Technology (4 persons), Civil and Environmental Engineering (4 persons), Applied Physics and Mathematics (3 persons) and Architecture (1 person). None of those taking part in the research were students of the Faculty of Chemistry. As some participants may have been studying at more than one faculty, the total number of inserts is bigger than the number of valid answers in the survey.

Research methods

During research, respondents were presented with a questionnaire consisting of 22 different types of rooms, such as dichotomous and cafeteria questions, Stapel scales and open-ended questions. Qualitative and quantitative methods were applied.

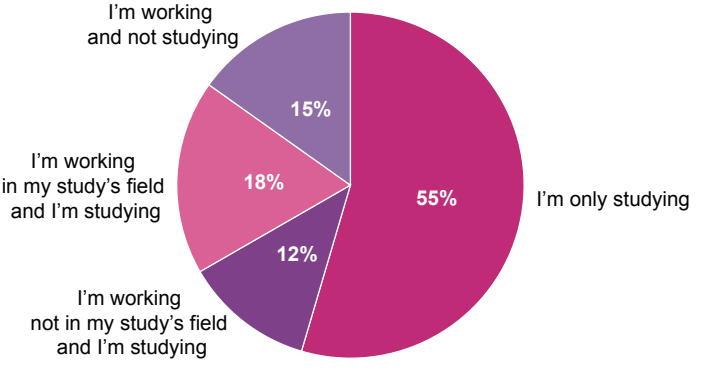
The research could be roughly divided into two parts. Firstly, participants were asked to evaluate the level of their competencies before starting to work at BEST, and then during or after their activity, by assessing the degree to which these competencies

Figure 2
The duration of respondents' activity at BEST (by number of persons)



Source: author's own work.

Figure 3
The employment status of respondents



Source: author's own work.

were developed, using Stapel scales[6]. These two periods were separated in the questionnaire, so the participants wouldn't be able to compare their answers and wouldn't modify their responses to show bigger growth than actually happened. The other part concerned the value (in the eyes of respondents) of the analysed competencies for employers.

Analysed competencies

Based on works from other authors and their research on which competencies are the most important for professional endeavours or landing a job, 12 job competencies were analysed. The list included the following competencies:

- communication,
- teamwork,
- interpersonal relations (empathy and social sensitivity),
- leadership skills,
- self-confidence,
- time management/ self-organising and planning,
- problem-solving skills,
- analytical/logical thinking,
- creativity/creative thinking,
- responsibility,
- flexibility/adaptability,
- honesty.

Some may argue that leadership skills are rather not a competency and self-confidence, responsibility or honesty are more of character trait. Whereas this assumption might not be wrong, all of these are mentioned as valued competencies for some authors as it is i.e. for Robinson (2000) or Aasheim et al. (2009). In Aasheim et al. list of 10 top skills for IT managers, honesty is actually in first place. What is more, in the division of competencies by Cheetham and Chivers (1996, 1998), personal competency in fact takes into account behavioural competencies, which means that personal characteristics are also included, and which is why these notions were treated as competencies in this research.

Results

Evaluation of the level of competency development

The first analysed competency was communication, which overall mean of development before the activity at BEST was 3.4[7]. There was a 34%[8] growth to 4.5 thanks to working at the organisation, with a difference between male and female respondents also noted. Women have a higher level of communication, with a mode of 4 compared to 3 for men. However, men have a higher percentage growth of improvement than women considering the mean (a 46% and 22% increase respectively).

The next competency was teamwork. The result shows growth from an average 3.3 level to 4.5 thanks to being a member of BEST, with a difference observed between male and female participants. The first (male) group's assessment was 3.2 and 4.2, before and during activity. The latter (female) group's initial grade was 3.5, rising to 4.9. Nevertheless, it can be observed that the increase for both groups was quite similar, totalling 33% for men and 40% for women.

The third competencies on the list were those connected to interpersonal relations such as empathy and social sensitivity, with male respondents evaluating their level as 3.5 before and 4.2 while working at BEST. Similarly, the values for female participants were 4.1 and 4.5, and therefore their grades were higher than those of representatives of the opposite sex. However, their development growth was lower (9%) as it was up to 21% for males.

The following competency – leadership skills, showed the lowest value pre-development (among all the analysed competencies), especially for male participants – equal to 2.4, with the mean for all respondents at 2.6. Nevertheless, thanks to activity at BEST, it actually had one of the biggest increases, as it reached an average of 4 (to 4.4 for women and 3.8 for men), and thus grew by 48% for female and 60% for male participants. Moreover, for members that were active for 2–3 years, the value rose by 90% between these two periods. Nonetheless, despite this substantial growth, it still remains one of the two lowest-graded average levels of development during working at the organisation.

The other lowest evaluated competency was self-confidence. As in the case of leadership skills, it also rose to 4 during the activity, although it cannot be omitted that there was also quite a significant increase, by 49%, from the starting point of 2.7. The biggest growth happened to members working for 2–3 years and more than 3 years. The first ones experienced a 100% increase (from 2.2 to 4.4), and the latter group showed a 70% growth (from 2.5 to 4.25), which is much higher than the average increase, as it is lowered by persons active for 6 months or 1–1.5 years (42% and 36% growth, respectively). It should also be noted that no visible difference appeared in the assessment of male and female respondents for this competence.

The next analysed competency was time-management, which can be expressed in self-organising and planning. For this ability both female and male respondents achieved similar values while working at BEST, summing up to 4.2. As the initial grade was 2.6, participants experienced the biggest average growth in development of this competency, equal to 59%.

[6] From 1 to 5, with 1 meaning „very poorly" and 5 meaning „very good".
[7] The values were rounded up or down to one decimal point according to standard rules of rounding.
[8] The percentage increase was calculated based on the unrounded respondents' assessment value.

Another crucial competency, in sources treated as the most desirable one for employers, are problem solving skills (NACE, 2024), with an average value of 3.3 before, rising to 4.5 during activity at the organisation. The participants experienced a 34% improvement, with no major difference between respondents of opposite sexes.

The following competency – analytical or logical thinking, actually had the highest value before working at BEST, totalling 4.1. What is more, for this competency alone, male respondents' evaluation before the activity was higher than that of female respondents (4.2 for men and 3.9 for women). Nevertheless, their results as members of the organisation are similar, with only a 0.04 difference (4.43 for females and 4.47 for males), giving an average of 4.45. As a consequence of such a high value before the activity, the overall increase was rather small, rounding up to 10%.

A competency where both the female and male participants' evaluation was almost the same was creativity or creative thinking. The overall mean was 3.7 before, with a 10% increase to 4.4 while working at BEST. Considering the duration of activity, the results vary. Even though the final grade is similar for members of all periods, the starting value differs, bringing various percentage increases. The most significant growth happened for respondents being active for more than 3 years (a 50% increase), although participants with alumni status or working at the organisation for 2–3 years also experienced a bigger than average boost (a 29% and 31% increase, respectively).

For some competencies, the differences between the answers of male and female respondents were quite substantial, and one of these was responsibility. The values before working at BEST were 3.5 for men and 4.2 for women, whereas while working at BEST female participants experienced a 10% increase to 4.6, but the final grade for male respondents was not much higher than the level of females before the activity, totalling 4.3. The overall mean for both sexes was 3.8 and 4.45 before and during working at BEST.

The next analysed set of competencies – flexibility and adaptability – saw a similar evaluation for both male and female participants, with similar values even considering the duration of working at BEST. The overall mean pre-development at the organisation was 3.4, rising to 4.5 during the activity, showing an increase of 32%.

The last evaluated competency was honesty, with a starting value of 3.9 for both men and women. The difference appeared in the assessment while working at the organisation. For female participants it grew to the level of 4.4, although for male respondents it increased by only 4%, giving a value of 4.1. Moreover, the average development increase for both sexes was the lowest among all analysed competencies, equal to only 8%.

The total average level of development of the evaluated competencies was equal to 3.4 before and 4.3 while working at BEST, with an overall percentage improvement of 29%. The average assessments for each of the analysed competencies can be seen in the table below (Table 1).

Table 1

Results of respondents' assessment of analysed competencies

Competence	Average level of development		
	Before working at BEST	While working at BEST	% increase
Communication	3.4	4.5	34%
Teamwork	3.3	4.5	37%
Interpersonal relations (empathy and social sensitivity)	3.8	4.3	15%
Leadership skills	2.6	4	55%
Self-confidence	2.7	4	49%
Time-management / self-organising and planning	2.6	4.2	59%
Problem-solving skills	3.3	4.5	35%
Analytical / logical thinking	4.1	4.5	10%
Creativity / creative thinking	3.7	4.4	20%
Responsibility	3.8	4.5	18%
Flexibility/adaptability	3.4	4.5	32%
Honesty	3.9	4.2	8%
Mean for all competencies	3.4	4.3	29%

Source: author's own work.

Most valuable job competencies

As there were different assessments of the analysed competencies, with some being generally graded higher than others, the respondents were asked to determine which of these competencies are most valuable. However, before doing so, participants currently employed (15) were asked to choose 5 listed competencies that helped them in landing a job. Overall, the most often mentioned competency was communication, pointed out by 12 respondents (80%). Another 3, also named many times, were problem-solving skills (10), teamwork (9) and self-confidence (8), totalling a 66.7%, 60% and 53.3% share of all answers, respectively. For the fifth most often listed one, 3 competencies were actually tied, and were time-management (7), analytical or logical thinking (7), and responsibility (7). Honesty was mentioned the least, with only 2 participants pointing it out. There were no differences in the assessment depending on sex or the faculty the participants were studying in.

Apart from choosing which of the aforementioned competencies helped some of the respondents get a job, they were asked to determine, in accordance with their own opinion, which competencies are the most valuable for employers. Considering the results from the perspective of the participants' faculty, the assessment varies.

The first analysed group of respondents were studying at the faculty of Electronics, Telecommunications and Informatics, and for them (8 persons) the 2 most often mentioned competencies were communication (7) and teamwork (7). Moreover, for this group they were the most often listed competencies, achieving 87.5% of all answers of participants from this faculty. In second place were analytical thinking and problem-solving skills (5 respondents for both competencies). Other competencies worth mentioning here are flexibility, chosen by 4 participants, and also honesty, evaluated as not very valuable, and which was mentioned the most times for this group compared to respondents from other faculties, constituting 37.5% of this faculty students' answers (chosen by 3 persons).

For the faculty of Management and Economics, problem-solving skills came in first as the most mentioned ones by participants from this faculty (7 persons), chosen by 6 respondents (86% of this group's answers). For other listed competencies, the division of those that are valuable was rather clear, as the following 4 competencies were pointed to the same number of times (by 5 respondents), totalling 71% of this faculty participants' choices, including: communication, teamwork, flexibility/adaptability and time-management. Moreover, none of this group's respondents chose self-confidence as a valuable asset.

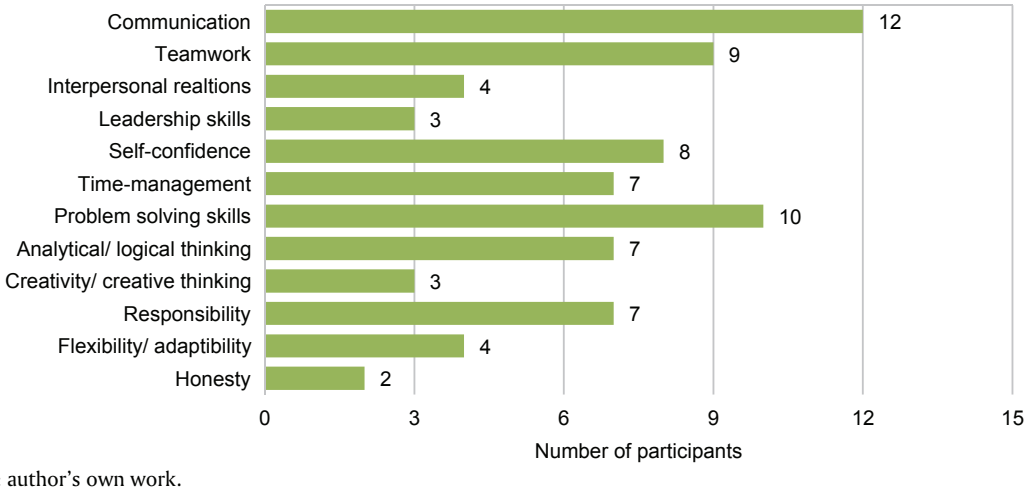
The next group from the faculty of Electrical and Control Engineering (6 persons) chose problem-solving skills (5), followed by teamwork (4) and time-management (4) as the most important competencies for employers. Responsibility, together with communication and flexibility, also scored quite high (mentioned by 3 persons each). What is worth mentioning here is that interpersonal relations were listed the most compared to the percentage share in other groups' answers, totalling 17%, although they were chosen by only one person.

For the faculty of Civil and Environmental Engineering, all respondents (4) listed communication as a valuable job competence, with teamwork and time-management mentioned by 3 participants. Other mentioned assets were analytical thinking (2), self-confidence (2) and leadership skills (2), with the last one only chosen by this group, as none of the respondents from different faculties treated this as important.

Members of BEST from the faculty of Mechanical Engineering and Ship Technology have similar assessments as those from the aforementioned faculty of Civil and Environmental Engineering. The only visible difference was that all participants (4) here chose flexibility as a valuable asset, and only half of them

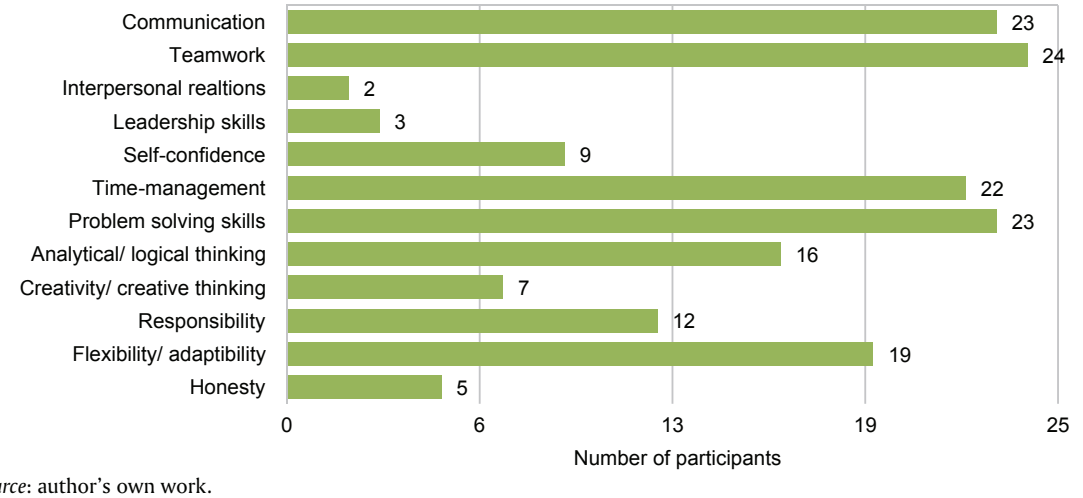
Figure 4

Competencies that helped respondents get a job



Source: author's own work.

Figure 5
Respondents' assessment of most valuable competencies for employers



Source: author's own work.

treated communication (2) the same way. Time-management and teamwork were listed by 3 respondents and together with communication, analytical thinking, self-confidence and responsibility were mentioned by 2 persons from this group. For both this faculty and the previous one, honesty was not chosen by any of the members.

The answers from members of the Applied Physics and Mathematics or Architecture faculty were not analysed separately, as there were two few representatives of these faculties (2 and 1 respectively).

In the overall, cumulative analysis, teamwork was in first place as the most often mentioned valuable competency, listed by 24 respondents. Next came communication (23) and problem-solving skills (23), while 22 participants chose time-management, putting it in fourth place[9]. In last place among the 5 competencies listed, the most frequently mentioned were flexibility and adaptability, pointed out by 19 respondents. The division between these 5 important assets and other competencies was easily visible, since the remaining competencies were mentioned a lot less often (see Figure 5).

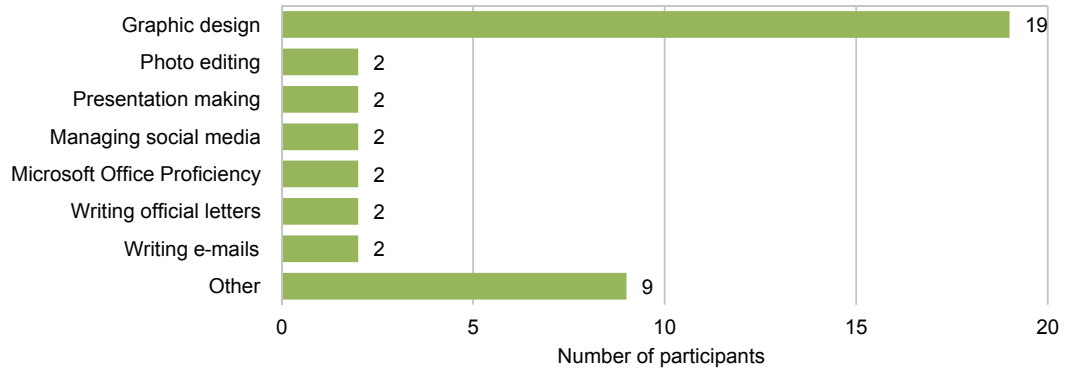
Other developed competences

Despite evaluating levels of development of competencies or assessing which are the most valuable for them, respondents were also asked to list what other competencies they acquired while working at BEST. Firstly, they named the hard skills they managed to develop, with 8 participants claiming that there was no improvement or acquirement of hard skills thanks to working at BEST, and the rest (25) finding that they did enrich their sets of hard skills during this activity (Figure 6). The most often mentioned skill was graphic design, which was acquired by 19 respondents (76% of participants who developed some hard skills and 58% of all participants). Some learned how to edit photos (2) or make presentations[10] (2), and 2 respondents also gained knowledge on how to run social media profiles, which is connected with graphic design or photo editing. They also improved their ability to use Microsoft Office, especially for professional purposes (2 persons). Among others, more formal acquired skills were proficiency in writing official letters or proposals (2), as well as correctly coding and writing e-mails (2) (using established subject labels, etc.). The rest of the respondents named other skills, although each was mentioned only once. Among hard skills, those worth specifying were improving their level of English, writing reports or offers for companies, working with a CRM system[11], accounting skills, or PR in the broad sense.

Despite hard skills, some respondents (14) also listed other competencies that they managed to develop while working at BEST. Among them were presentation skills, thus the ability to not only make an engaging presentation, but also to well present oneself, with 5 participants (15% of all respondents) improving their knowledge in this area, and negotiation skills also being mentioned in this context by 4 respondents. What is more, 2 participants even developed ways to deal with stress, connected to, for example, public speaking, thanks to working at the organisation. Other acquired competencies were named only once, by one respondent each, including:

[9] Third place was omitted, as there were 2 competences ex aequo in second place.
[10] Not how to present, but to make slides for presentations, i.e. in Canva.
[11] Customer Relationship Management System involving getting, analysing and then using the data about customers to better adjust the services (Yong Ahn et al., 2003).

Figure 6
Respondents' developed hard skills



Source: author's own work.

- knowledge about managing a team,
- ability to delegate tasks,
- knowledge about methods of creative and efficient work,
- emotional intelligence,
- being open to others,
- spontaneity,
- patience.

There were also some skills or competencies that some members of the organisation (10) wanted to develop, but haven't had a chance yet. The most often listed one was graphic design (5), and 2 respondents wanted to further improve their communication or leadership skills, as they felt that their growth was not sufficient so far. Some of the mentioned competencies were listed above, as ones that some of the participants have already developed, including running social media profiles, being open to others, and gaining knowledge about PR or negotiation skills.

The process of competency development at BEST

Respondents were asked to provide a few tips on how to better develop the competencies while working at the organisation. Some of them focus more on giving ideas on how to ameliorate the process of development as a whole, so rather giving new directions for the organisation, although the majority of participants listed ways to improve the level of competency development for individual participants. Nevertheless, the most often mentioned tip was to take part in training courses (12), both those already held by BEST and those yet to be organised. Another way to experience better growth of the competency level was to simply be open and willing to engage in different types of activity (mentioned by 9 persons), while 8 respondents even specified that it is crucial to be part of a core team, as it permits to acquire more specific skills. Connected to these 2 tips is another one listed by 5 participants – willingness to face new challenges, even if you do not feel ready for them. According to the respondents, it is the best way to leave one's comfort zone, and thus develop new competencies.

Since BEST is operating in different European countries, members also have a chance to engage in international events organised by the organisation, and 6 respondents think that it is of high importance in order to improve the level of their skills or learn new ones. The rest of the participants name 2 additional ways to ameliorate individual resources, by taking part in weekly meetings held at the organisation (2 persons) or running for a place on the organisation's board (1 person). The latter is supposedly the most developing, as it permits to have insides into all the projects organised by the LBG, therefore allowing to acquire specific skills connected to all of them.

Discussion

Having analysed all the gathered data, it is clear that working at a student organisation can develop competencies. It can be observed that all the respondents did improve the level of their competencies while working at BEST. For some participants, there may have been slight decreases. As one female respondent elaborates, her lower self-confidence level while working at the organisation than before was not a consequence of bad competency development, but appeared after realising how much there is yet to learn, which is not necessarily an unsatisfying answer in this context.

The variance in grades that respondents assign to certain skills, especially the differences between representatives of two sexes, might occur because of natural conditioning, making women usually keener (or socially persuaded) to focus rather on softer, interpersonal skills[12], such as empathy, social sensitivity,

[12] As described throughout centuries, starting from the *yin yang* division (women are soft, gentle, flexible) in *Yijing* (Nie, 2016).

communication or teamwork. This could also partially explain why men had higher scores prior to working at the organisation in analytical and logical thinking, as this competence is not in any way emotional. Moreover, this particular competence had the highest values before working at BEST, the reason for which possibly being the fact that all respondents are or were students of a technical university.

When considering the participants' assessment of their level of development, one could assume that permanent functions, such as being a member of the board or core team, that the respondents were performing had no impact on their evaluation values. However, this is not true. Even though the differences in grades between e.g. members with an HR or PR function cannot be observed, it does not mean that each function does not develop certain skills in particular. As one of the BEST values is flexibility, members may engage in performing tasks from various areas and take part in meetings of every working group[13]. There is also a lot of training from different areas available to all members, which could help in competency improvement, allowing respondents to experience all-round development, testified by the presented results. What is also worth mentioning here is participation in international events – there was no difference between respondents who took part in them and those who did not. Nevertheless, it does not necessarily mean that such events do not enhance the development of competencies, as participants who had an opportunity to engage in such activities might have shared gained knowledge, thus helping others to acquire these abilities.

Some competencies developed to a greater extent by respondents prescind from different grades depending on sex, with participants actually experiencing the smallest percentage growth for competencies that were mentioned the least as those valuable for employers. One of these was honesty, which came in 10th place out of 12 in the assessment of the most desirable job competencies, and was in fact the least developed while working at the organisation (an only 8% increase in grades). Other competencies include:

- interpersonal relations (a 15% increase and 12th place in the assessment),
- responsibility (an 18% increase and 7th place in the assessment),
- creative thinking (a 20% increase and 9th place in the assessment).

The only exception in this reasoning would be analytical and logical thinking, with only 10% growth in development thanks to working at BEST, although it still placed 6th in the respondents' ranking of the most valuable competencies for employers. Nonetheless, this may be the consequence of exceptionally high values even before working at BEST, thus leaving little space for improvement. Two other rarely-mentioned skills were leadership skills (11th place) and self-confidence (8th place). Even though there was a substantial improvement (a 55% and 49% increase, respectively), their values while working at the organisation were still the lowest out of all competencies, so at the end they were still not as developed as other competencies that are treated as more important. Moreover, for the top 5 most often mentioned valuable assets (teamwork, communication, problem-solving skills, time-management and flexibility) respondents experienced the biggest percentage growth (expect for the aforementioned leadership skills and self-confidence). This could indicate that participants (maybe unconsciously) attach more importance to developing these 5 competencies, as they generally find them more desirable than others.

What could also be surprising is the fact that none of the participants who chose honesty (2) or interpersonal skills (4) as the ones that helped them in getting a job chose them as valuable in further assessment. This is rather an unexpected outcome and might be the reason for such low frequency of these 2 competencies' mentions in the evaluation of most desirable assets.

The differences in the respondents' assessment of the most valuable competencies for employers are definitely noticeable depending on the faculty participants were studying in, with the reason behind this potentially being different employer expectations subject to the various domains. For example, competencies demanded by the IT industry would probably differ from the required skills for a position in the environmental engineering industry.

Considering the research, there is one phenomenon that may be of concern, namely the low level of self-confidence and leadership skills. Since the latter could be improved by providing proper training, self-confidence is more of a personal asset, connected rather to one's psychological state of mind, and thus harder to develop through working at the organisation. For this reason, the final grade of this competency should still be considered as satisfactory, thanks to the substantial improvement that occurred.

Considering competencies that respondents would like to develop in the future, it can easily be seen that all of the mentioned skills were already put on the list of the previously analysed 12 competencies, or were listed by some participants as additional ones that they managed to develop while working at BEST (like graphic design or negotiation skills). This shows that all of the respondents' desirable assets could be acquired whilst working at the organisation. Members that mentioned these probably didn't yet have a chance to perform a function or take part in training regarding learning this set of skills, although they might do so in future, whenever there is an opportunity.

[13] The 4 working groups are HR, CR, PR and LG/IT.

Conclusions

Results show substantial growth in the level of development of all the analysed competencies thanks to working at BEST, equal to a 29% average increase. Considering the rather short period of activity of most respondents (6 months or 1–1.5 years), the outcome is definitely satisfactory and can be treated as an indicator that developing or acquiring new skills is efficient at BEST. What could also be observed is a connotation (without 3 analysed exceptions) between the value for employers that respondents attach to the competency and its improvement thanks to working at the organisation, making the most desirable assets the most developed ones.

Apart from the analysed competencies, participants also listed skills that they managed to acquire whilst working at BEST, showing a vast variety of abilities that respondents gained as a result of working at the organisation. Skills that some members who took part in the research would like to develop have already been acquired by other participants, illustrating that working at the organisation will probably fulfil their expectations in the future.

Limitations

Obtaining even better results would require conducting research on this group of participants before they started working at BEST and presenting them with a validated questionnaire to test their actual level of competencies. As the current assessment was based on the individual's personal feeling, the level of competency may be biased by their own judgment.

For further research, one should also consider analysing the exact tasks participants undertook while performing their function, or specifying in what training they took part and analysing changes in their level of competencies individually to see which actions had the biggest impact on developing their competencies.

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