

The impact of the student companies programme on the development of social skills of the youth

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Summary

Introduction

The issues of youth unemployment refer to the fact that the skills acquired at school are becoming increasingly important. Social skills are considered important when entering the job market and people with adequate social skills are highly valued (Keltikangas-Järvinen, 2011). Therefore, it is essential to investigate whether and how the student companies programme supports youngsters' social skills that are increasingly important when entering professional life and becoming an active citizen.

As no solid definition for social skills can be found in the literature, the study will mainly handle approaches that cover social skills related to entrepreneurship. According to Walker and colleagues (1995), social skills are a collection of competences that help initiate and preserve positive relationships and enhance peer acceptance, and allow the individual to adapt more effectively in a larger social environment. According to Gresham and Elliot (1993), social skills are socially acceptable learned skills that allow the individual to communicate with others in the way that evokes positive reactions and helps avoid negative reactions.

As social skills are defined differently, their classifications also vary. The current study relies on the taxonomy suggested by Caldarella and Merrell (1997). According to their classification, social skills are divided into five categories: peer relations, self-management, academic skills, compliance, and assertion skills (ibid.).

Gresham and Elliot (1993) consider the development of social skills as one of the most important outputs of the learning process. In addition to academic teaching methods, social skills can also be taught experientially using methods of experiential and active learning. These methods develop knowledge and social skills through experience and exploration, and link the different fields of life (Ploom-Zilmer, 2013). The student companies programme handled in the current work is also a practical outcome of active learning of Entrepreneur-

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ship and Economy. There are two essential components when defining the concept of an Entrepreneurship programme: entrepreneurship as an attitude/personal trait, and knowledge and skills. An entrepreneurial person thinks creatively, he initiates with confidence, acts wisely and is caringly responsible (Ettevõtlusõppe edendamise kava..., 2010). The goal of student companies is to acquire entrepreneurial skills and to develop entrepreneurial spirit via practical activities. The sub-goals of a student company include completion of the life cycle of a business while taking the role of an entrepreneur and a leader of a company, developing creativity and group work skills, building responsibility, learning time management, developing skills of research (market research), presentation and communication (Eide & Olsvik, 2017).

This research aimed at investigating the increase in social skills after completing student companies programme in Tartu, Võru and Põlva County. The research question was posed as follows: whether and to what extent does the student companies programme support the development of social skills and personality traits?

Methodology

The study sample who participated in the student companies programme comprised 10th–12th grade students from three South-Estonian counties – Tartu, Põlva and Võru County. The pre-test was responded by 117 people, the number of respondents in the post-test was 112. The number of people who responded to both, the pre- and post-test was 94, a total of 43% of the study sample. 21 students came from Põlva County, 30 from Tartu County, and 43 from Võru County. 61.7% of the sample were girls, 38.3% were boys. The respondents' average age was 17.01 years ($SD=0.31$).

The study was conducted using quantitative methods. Pre- and post-testing was conducted using a web-based questionnaire based on a Likert-type scale including thirty nine questions in three sub-divisions: objective characteristics (gender, age, county), self-reported statements divided into five categories: peer relations, self-management, academic skills, compliance, assertion skills, and personality traits: entrepreneurial spirit, creativity, innovation, flexibility, self-confidence, responsibility and perseverance.

Data analysis was conducted using the software programmes Excel and SPSS 24. The data was analysed using descriptive and comparative statistics, ANOVA, and a paired samples t-test was used to evaluate the change in the social skills of the participants.

Results and conclusions

To reveal potential differences in the students' social skills between the three counties, their pre-test results were compared. As ANOVA revealed no statistically significant differences in any of the factors related to the social skills or personality traits, it could be claimed that at the beginning of the student companies programme the students from the three counties did not distinguish in their social skills. In order to investigate whether and how much participating in the student companies programme supported the development of the students' social skills, a paired samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the means of pre- and post-tests.

The paired samples *t*-test showed statistically significant improvement in self-management and academic skills among the students of Tartu County and academic skills and assertion skills by the students of Põlva County. However, the only county that revealed no statistically significant change based on the paired samples *t*-test was Võru County.

Also the development of various entrepreneurship-related personality traits connected to the student companies programme was explored. Similarly to the first part of the analysis, only two counties, Tartu County and Põlva County, showed statistically significant change in the personality traits. The results of the paired samples *t*-test revealed significant improvement in entrepreneurship, creativity and flexibility among the youth of Tartu County. In Põlva County, the student companies programme supported the development of creativity and innovation of the youth. The data on the youth of Võru County did not reveal statistically significant change in the development of personality traits. The differences between the findings of the three counties can be explained by the situation that in Tartu and Põlva County, in addition to the general student companies programme, the youth also had access to additional activities, such as mentoring and idea competitions. Therefore, it might be assumed that various supportive activities are essential to this programme while developing participants' social as well as entrepreneurial skills. No change in social skills or personality traits among the youth in Võru County, in the context of the student companies programme, might be related to the tutors having too many students to supervise. In addition, no mentors were involved in the activities of the student companies in Võru County and the students did not participate in other supportive activities during the school year.

In conclusion, the student companies programme supports the development of social skills and personality traits according to the estimates of the young people. It is important as in the future, it enables them to effectively enter the job market as well as contribute to the society as an active citizen.

However, in the development of social skills the supportive factors, such as mentoring, environment, etc., which were not studied in the scope of this work, are probably important factors as well, and the author's suggestion is to focus on these more thoroughly in the follow-up study.

Keywords: student companies, social skills, personal characteristics