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The Study of Students' Talents and Skills as the Starting Point in Narrowing the Skills Gap of Human Resources in the Tourism Sector

ABSTRACT

Objective: The article refers to the measurement of natural talents and skills of students in an internationalised environment and possible use of empirical research to modify university curricula. The article aims to determine how to design and implement skills models to increase education efficiency and to adapt the curriculum to the labour market expectations.

Methodology: The evaluation was based on three empirical surveys conducted among students of a highly internationalised university: the Gallup test measuring natural talents, the Filipowicz test (measuring skills) and a poll among students, diagnosing their expectations as to student apprenticeships and traineeships.

Findings: Using the aforementioned tools allowed to identify strengths of university students in tourism programmes and to indicate areas for improvement during education.

Value Added: The conclusions drawn from the survey allowed to confront students' skills with employers' expectations and to develop student support methods, e.g. through appropriate modifications of curricula and traineeship programmes. University courses were extended to include modules reinforcing students' enterprise, the management of individual potential, cross-cultural communication and negotiating skills.

Recommendations: Such survey enables the creation of a talent bank among students where their talents – reinforced with the knowledge and skills acquired at university – will help develop their strengths and can be particularly useful in selected posts.

Key words: measurement of students' talents and skills, skills gaps, tourism, student traineeships and apprenticeships

JEL codes: J24, I21, M530

The substance of the issue. A review of the literature

The phenomena shaping the present labour market whose needs determine the preparation of university students change with exceptional dynamics (*Aktywni+ Przyszłość rynku pracy…*, 2017). In the past decade, there have been major developments: from an employer's market during the 2008 crisis to an employee's market 10 years later. Such changes require employers to prepare and follow various strategies for building their competitive advantages and employees need to cope with rapid changes in the job market and to adapt to its requirements. Major challenges are also faced by universities as they should provide learning results adequate to business expectations. Various surveys of employers, university teachers and students indicate a number

of skills gaps in human resources, both those already present in the labour market and persons preparing to take up employment. That phenomenon is also observed in other European countries (*Mapping and performance check…*, 2016). Such gaps are commonly understood as discrepancies between the skills taught at university and the labour market needs (Wartecka-Ważyńska, 2014; *Badanie opinii pracodawców…,* 2017–2018; *Narzędzie do badania 11 kompetencji…*, 2013; Wieczorek-Szymańska, 2012). It also concerns the tourism sector (*Badanie opinii pracodawców…*, 2017–2018) which additionally struggles with the shortage of skilled workers in many European countries. In the present labour market in tourism, the employee is expected to have not only knowledge and professional competence but also various interpersonal skills and personality strengths such as: communication, creative thinking, openness to experience, teamwork, emotional stability, stress resilience, willingness to learn, motivation or even optimism and enthusiasm (*Aktywni+ Przyszłość rynku pracy…,* 2017). Changes in the labour market and the need for mutual adaptation to expectations require significant flexibility from all the parties – labour market players, openness to upgrading skills and non-routine action (Piotrowski, 2017). Account must be taken of both employers' expectations and needs on the one hand and potential employees' capabilities and expectations on the other hand. According to recent research (*The Skillful corporation…*, (n.d.); Dworak, 2015) the recipe for the development of the Polish economy is to adapt educational programs to the needs of the labour market. Jagiellonian University has been monitoring the labour market since 2009, resulting in a Nationwide Human Capital Balance (2019) to identify areas of competence mismatch with labour market needs.

An enormous role in the process is played by higher education, increasingly required to prepare students for practical work in various tourism sectors. However, curricula must also take into consideration the behaviour and expectations of young people from generations entering the labour market (millennials, generation Z), frequently showing unconventional aspirations in

life, creative, more focused on themselves and success-oriented (Millennial Survey, 2018, 2019). Attitudes of the young generation pose a challenge to the labour market and must be considered both by professionally prepared employers and universities teaching skills needed in employment (PwC Survey…, 2019). They involve creating curricula, specialties and modules adapted to the labour market needs and expanding cooperation of the socio-economic environment with academia. This is also the direction of the 2018 legislative solutions in Poland imposing an obligation to extend apprenticeships.

Materials and methodological assumptions

The article aims to determine how to design and implement skills models to increase learning efficiency – especially in an international academic setting – and to adapt to the labour market expectations. It analyses three determinants of the correct selection of students as future employees for specific posts in the tourism sector: (1) their natural talents – strengths; (2) skills acquired; and (3) their expectations towards the labour market compared with employers' requirements. The analysis conducted in the article was based on the available literature, particularly on employers' opinion poll on the present and future skills of tourism workers (desk research) as well as on three empirical surveys of tourism and recreation students: (1) a survey intended to identify the students' career plans and expectations towards employers, (2) a survey of the students' natural talents using the Gallup test (CliftonStrengths assessment, formerly Clifton StrengthsFinder), (3) a survey of skills using the Filipowicz test. A major source of information on employer expectations was employers' opinion poll on the skills gap in human resources in tourism in Poland in 2017–2018 (*Badanie opinii pracodawców…*, 2017–2018).

As regards the first of the surveys indicated above (survey 1), the main objective was a better understanding of the students' career plans and expectations towards employers, discussing the students' opinions with representatives of the socio-economic environment (including managers of

hotels, travel agencies and business travel operators), followed by making use of the findings to modify the apprenticeships, traineeships and jobs offered by the University. The survey was conducted as a diagnostic poll among tourism and recreation students at a highly internationalised Warsaw university. It was based on an extensive questionnaire containing 17 substantive questions and 5 questions about the respondent. The scope of research, covering traineeships, apprenticeships and the students' career plans, had been consulted with representatives of tourism enterprises.

The various skills gaps pointed to by undertakings (*Badanie opinii pracodawców…*, 2017–2018) inspired the survey of natural talents of tourism students and their skills, followed by measures aimed at appropriate adaptation of curricula. The study of talents was based on the Gallup test (survey 2); its aim was to identify the students' talents among the Clifton StrengthsFinder thirty-four themes grouped in four domains described in the Gallup skills test: Strategic Thinking, Executing, Influencing, Relationship Building (*Maximize Your Human Capital…*, 2019).

The study of talents and professional aptitudes was carried out on a group of 163 tourism and recreation students with the use of two research tools:
- the Gallup StrengthsFinder test (https://www.gallup.com/cliftonstrengths/en/254033/strengthsfinder.aspx);
- the Grzegorz Filipowicz skills test (https://e-kariera.vistula.edu.pl).

It allowed to show the correlation between talents understood as patterns of thinking, behaviour and action bringing the best results (Rath, 2007) and skills acquired thanks to individual attitudes, knowledge development and practice (Filipowicz, 2019). The study was conducted in an international group of students nearly half of whom (48.4%) were Ukrainian, 25.2% – Polish, 15.7% – Belarusian, whereas other nationalities accounted for 10.7%.

Empirical research results

The observations from the poll, aimed at identifying students' career plans and expectations towards employers (survey 1), are consistent with national and global social surveys indicating a new way of life of the generations entering the labour market; all of them highlight the focus on work-life balance (*Młodzi 2011* Report; Millennial Survey, 2016, 2018). The surveys conducted among students indicate expectations of development and self-fulfilment opportunities and attaching importance to a good working atmosphere and soft skills of the employer (the ability to create a good working atmosphere, the employer's fairness, the ability to establish a relationship with the employee/apprentice/trainee). The survey reveals that students formulate different expectations towards traineeships and apprenticeships from those concerning their future jobs. According to the students surveyed, the perfect traineeship is primarily one that offers opportunities for development, shows the promotion path, allows to gain practical work experience (39% of indications). Much fewer indications (18.8%) refer to financial expectations (remuneration, perquisites, benefits), followed by soft skills of the employer (the working atmosphere, fairness, communication – 13.4%). Surprisingly, students attach little importance to opportunities for establishing international relations, business relationships or the firm status (4.2%, 2.9% and 1.7% of indications respectively). Considering the internationalisation of education and various student mobility support opportunities (e.g. Erasmus+), one may infer that establishing international relations is not an end in itself for students and that apprenticeships at small businesses are more beneficial than those at large and renowned corporations/chains/networks. Those trends, opinions and observations must be considered in both business management and the preparation of future human resources at universities. Traineeships and apprenticeships, playing an increasingly important role, must become a fully recognised method to verify learning results and to bridge the skills gaps between students' skills and the labour market needs. However, it is

worth identifying and taking account of the expectations and aspirations of the students themselves as they expect not only fair financial remuneration of their work but also opportunities for personal development and finding life-work balance. In that context, it must be emphasised that employers – seeking soft skills in their future employees – should also develop them in their own environments (a good working atmosphere, fairness, responsibility).

As regards the study of talents (survey 2), the Gallup test distinguishes between 4 talent domains:

1) Relationship Building domain;
2) Strategic Thinking domain;
3) Influencing domain;
4) Executing domain (Rath, 2007).

According to the empirical research results, tourism and recreation students mostly show talents from the Relationship Building domain (figure 1).

Figure 1. Talent distribution among tourism and recreation students
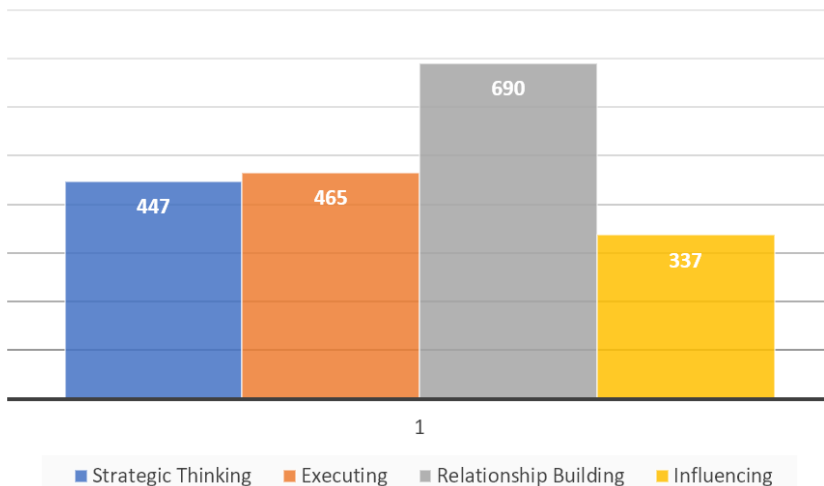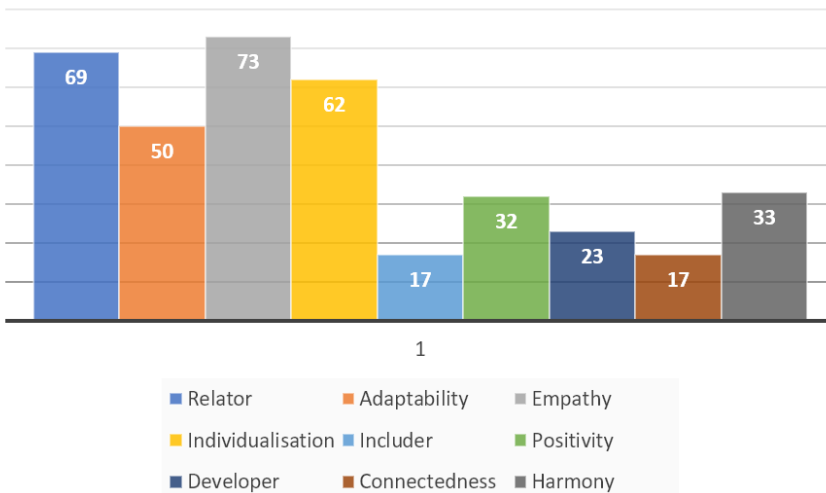

Source: research by the authors.

In the Relationship Building domain, Gallup distinguishes between 9 talents, the so-called *themes* (Rath, 2007) – those characterise tourism and recreation students in the following order:

• empathy, i.e. understanding other people's emotions and the ability to respond;

• relator, i.e. the ability to establish and build lasting relationships;

• individualisation, i.e. the ability to identify and adapt to the needs and expectations of individuals;

• adaptability;

• harmony;

• positivity, which means a positive attitude towards people, situations and problems;

• developer;

• connectedness.

Figure 2. Talent distribution in the Relationship Building domain

Source: research by the authors.

The second most frequent group of talents shown by the students surveyed appeared to be those from the Executing domain (figure 3). The themes from the Executing domain were found in the following order:

• restorative, i.e. solving problems and supporting other people in dealing with theirs;

• responsibility;

• achiever;

• focus;

• deliberative;

• consistency;

• belief;

• discipline;

• arranger.

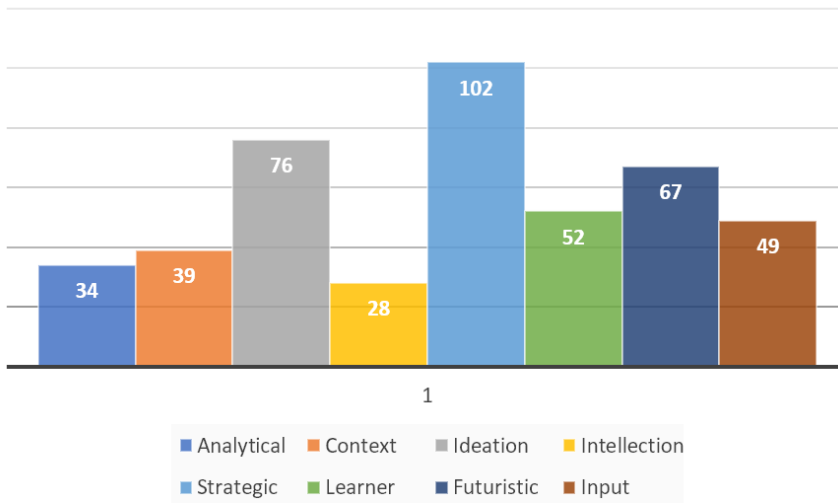Figure 3. Talent distribution in the Executing domain
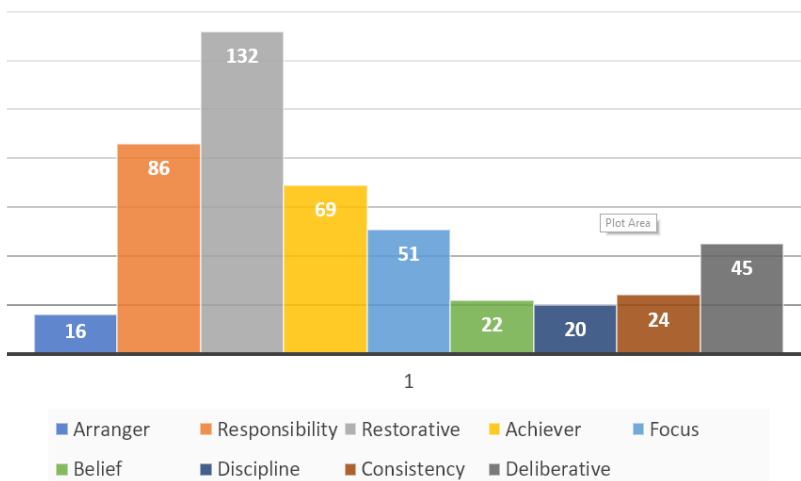
Source: research by the authors.

Nearly the same role was played by talents from the Strategic Thinking domain, in particular the Strategic, Ideation, Futuristic and Learner themes (figure
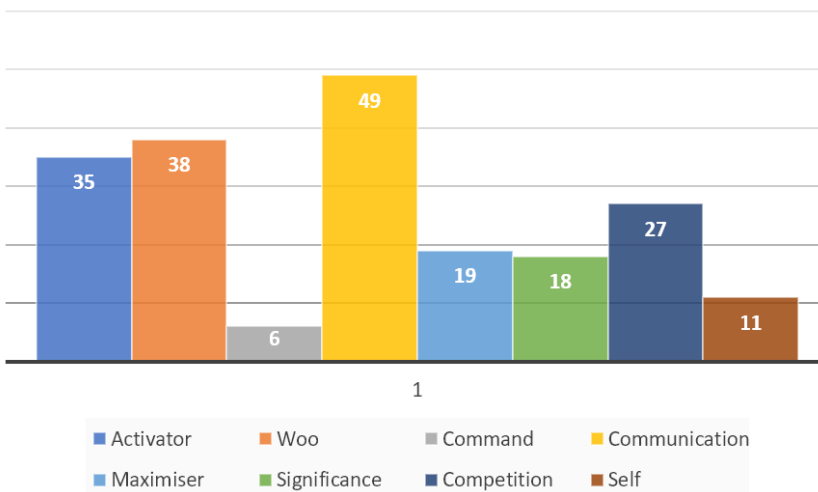
4). The least important talents were those included in the Influencing domain, the Communication, Activator and Woo themes being the most frequent – figure 5).

Figure 4. Talent distribution in the Strategic Thinking domain

Source: research by the authors.

Figure 5. Talent distribution in the Influencing domain
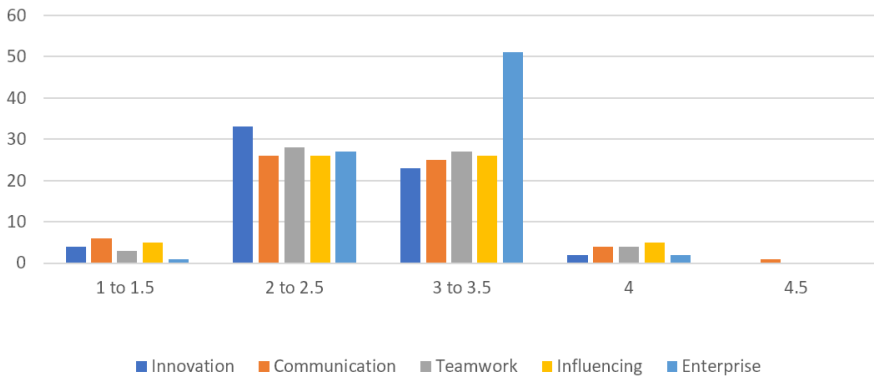

Source: research by the authors.

As regards the survey of students' skills (survey 3), it allowed to divide those into: professional, self-organisational (self-management in time, independence, taking initiative, stress resilience), interpersonal (the ability to communicate, cooperation in a group) and the so-called soft skills (e.g. communication). The survey results for each skill were interpreted based on a rating scale identifying five levels of skill acquisition. The outcome allowed to infer on the respondents' level of acquisition of the skill concerned. The survey conducted and the interpretation of its findings followed the principles of skill measurement discussed in various studies by G. Filipowicz (2002; 2019). As demonstrated by preliminary results of the students' survey, the most significant strengths of those surveyed are *innovation and communication*. Full results of the survey were analysed in consideration of basic variables characterising the respondents (gender, nationality; the nationality variable was taken into account due to high internationalisation of the student community surveyed).

The Grzegorz Filipowicz skills test examines 32 skills – the surveyed group of tourism and recreation students took a test verifying levels of the following skills:

- innovation;
- communication;
- teamwork;
- influencing;
- enterprise.

The survey identifies the level of each skill on a scale of 0 to 5.

Figure 6. Level of specific skills of tourism and recreation students

Source: research by the authors.

Discussion: skills gaps and directions of bridging them

Although the notion of *skills* is not related to a single and widely accepted definition, they are usually understood as combined knowledge and abilities gained and developed during education, whether formal or informal, allowing the acquisition of occupational competence necessary to function efficiently in the domestic and international labour markets (*Zintegrowana strategia umiejętności 2030*, 2019). Regardless of the definition adopted, skills are associated with the possibility to perform differentiated functions at work, whereas in the area of tourism – with preparedness for taking up various posts, the possibility to combine functions (e.g. of tourist and travel guides) and openness to new requirements emerging along with new products and forms of tourism. According to surveys conducted in 2018–2019 within the project entitled 'Increasing the knowledge of occupational competence needs' among employers in the tourism sector, analysing the level of skills involves distinguishing between and separate examination of several key sub-sectors: travel agencies, hotels, food- and beverage-serving establish-

ments, travel guides, wellness tourism, leisure and entertainment. In spite of different expectations towards persons employed in the abovementioned sub-sectors, the surveys showed an unquestionable role of the following three skills: (1) communication, leading to competence in areas such as customer knowledge, the ability to establish relations and to develop desirable relationships; (2) influencing, allowing to solve problems and relating to negotiating skills; (3) teamwork skills facilitating decision-making and human resource management (*Badanie opinii pracodawców…*, 2017–2018). The analysis conducted under the abovementioned project pointed to the usefulness of soft skills such as cooperation/working together with other people, problem solving, creative thinking, human resource management, emotional intelligence, inference, negotiation and decision-making (*Badanie opinii pracodawców…*, 2017–2018). Considering the unquestionable fact of changing tourist needs and – thus – the emergence of new products addressing new needs, it is worth including innovation and adaptability in the education process. With regard to the aforementioned skills, the surveyed representatives of travel agencies indicated preparedness for implementing innovative products/services, new IT solutions, seeking new channels of promotion and new ways of building and maintaining customer relationships as well as providing travel advice. Employers in the hotel industry expect preparedness for implementing new technologies, the use of online communication for contacting customers, conducting promotional campaigns, price management and functioning in the environment of the electronic sale of services (*Badanie opinii pracodawców…*, 2017–2018).

The analysis of key skills indicated by businesses raises the question about the degree to which those expectations are reflected in the learning results, the adopted curricula and the level of skills acquired by students (table 1).

Table 1. Expected skills and abilities

| Skill	Expectations		Average level of the skills analysed**
	In the curriculum: the learning results assumed in the curriculum	Of employers*	
Innovation and adaptability	inspiring action, using modern methods, technologies, procedures and tools, including information and communication technology	using modern information sources, the ability to adapt to changing and not fully predictable conditions, adjusting actions to the circumstances, the ability to create innovative programmes for package travel	2.85
Communication	communicating with the use of specialist professional terminology, the application of the available and business-specific ICTs in communication; communicating with the business environment in a foreign language	communicating in the business environment in a manner ensuring good collaboration with tourists, tour operators and producers of tourism services; respect of the cooperation culture; building relationships with customers; openness, politeness and empathy in the performance of tasks and functioning in multicultural settings; using social media for marketing communication; psycho-physical characteristics of a travel guide ensuring communication: voice production, verbal and non-verbal communication with a group, command of a foreign language	2.93
Influencing	inspiring professional actions, preparedness for using appropriate negotiation techniques	Negotiating skills, conscious selection of communication tools in a manner allowing to deal with difficult situations, to prevent conflicts involving package travel participants, preparedness for playing the role of an inspiring leader	2.96

Enterprise	Willingness to think and act with enterprise; solving problems related to work activities; monitoring changes in the socio-economic environment and taking account of them in long-term planning of market operations	Skilful preparation of appropriate documentation relating to professional tasks connected with the provision of services as a travel guide and a leisure time animator, including financial documents, reporting, activity journals	4.12
Teamwork/ cooperation in a team	Readiness for leading a team, planning and organising (individual and team) work activities	Self-organisation, team management, preparing plans of individual and team performance and preparedness for adjusting them to the circumstances	2.98
Responsibility	assuming responsibility for one's actions; observing the principles of professional ethics; readiness for critical analysis, assessment and making use of such knowledge; appreciation of the importance of knowledge in resolving cognitive and practical problems; the ability to correctly select, evaluate and critically analyse information from various fields and to use it for tactical and strategic activities	taking care of tourists; preparedness for assisting tourists in dangerous situations; willingness to be patient and composed in unusual situations encountered during the performance of various professional tasks and assuming responsibility for one's decisions and actions	The skill was excluded from the survey

*Based on Recommendation No. 2/2019 of the Sector Skills Council for Tourism: Rekomendacja nr 2/2019 Rady ds. Kompetencji w sektorze turystyki https://www.parp.gov.pl/storage/grants/documents/116/ZA-CZNIK_15.2D_REKOMENDACJA-RADY-TURYSTYKI-9obowizujcy-od-15.05.2019r._190515.PDF 19.1.2020

**Weighted average, with the numbers of the surveyed persons having the skill concerned as weights, on a scale of 0 to 5.

Figure 7. Levels of selected skills among tourism and recreation students: empirical research
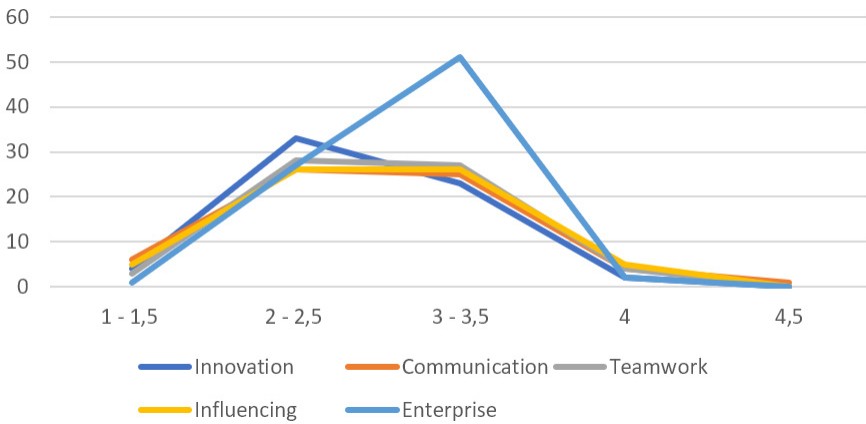
Source: research by the authors.

According to surveys of students (in period *t = 0*, i.e. at the beginning of studies), the levels of communication, influencing and teamwork skills were similar (the majority of those surveyed had 'good' skills, ranging from 2.93 to 2.98). The lowest level of skills was found in the area of innovation and adaptability (an average of 2.85), whereas the highest score concerned enterprise (4.12). The wide gap between students' aspirations, as follows from the high assessment of enterprise skills, and their innovation and adaptability suggest that the education process should place a special emphasis on those skills. The differences between the expected and empirical levels of skills are presented in figure 8.

Figure 8. Skills gaps: selected skills
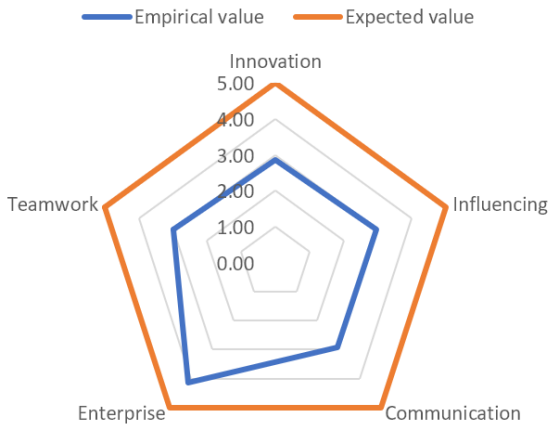
Source: research by the authors.

The examination of both the assumed learning results and employers' expectations points to *responsibility* as an important skill in the tourism sector, in particular in the sub-sector of travel guides. It should be included in skills research, especially that responsibility ranks high among the surveyed students' talents from the executing domain. Interesting conclusions can also be drawn from analysing the gap between the expectations indicated by employers and the very good survey results with regard to *enterprise*. The skill is typically associated with expectations towards managers/owners of businesses, e.g. industry knowledge, the ability to work with other members of staff and external institutions, coping with stressful situations, precise and convincing communication of one's ideas, goal setting (*Badanie opinii pracodawców…*, 2017–2018). The question arises whether the surveyed employers seek such employees. When analysing the reasons for the existence of the gap, it is worth noting that the tourism sector is dominated by small firms that tend to look for executing workers rather than for entrepreneurs or managers. Such a structure of enterprises certainly determines the indication of key skills sought in the market. At the same time, their development is fully

justified in university curricula, preparing students for performing managerial functions and starting businesses as well.

Summary

According to the survey results, a tourism and recreation student tends to be characterised by dominant talents in Relationship Building – in the Empathy and Relator themes – and in the Executing domain – the Restorative and Responsibility themes. A major role is also played by Strategic Thinking, especially the Strategic and Ideation talents, as well as by the highest levels of Communication and Woo from the Influencing domain. It is worth emphasising that the nature of the test allows to use it for comparative analysis – at the beginning and at the end of each stage of studies.

The comparison of the above results with the students' skills levels (50 persons rated very good at enterprise, 27 persons assessed as good; 33 and 23 persons rated good and very good, respectively, in innovation and adaptability) allows to characterise the students' professional aptitudes as a useful starting point for designing curricula taking account of students' aptitudes and preferences.

The results and scope of the surveys and tests conducted offer various opportunities to analyse selected student groups, including the following group selection criteria:

- the cycle of studies: bachelor programmes, master programmes;
- the mode of studies: full-time, part-time;
- nationality;
- sex;
- year.

The three-dimensional analysis of: (1) the talents of students beginning their studies, (2) the skills test results in several selected areas and (3) the expectations following from the survey of employers' needs and of the assumed learning results led to the identification of the gaps between the

students' skills and the labour market needs and the possibility to narrow them by adjusting curricula and apprenticeships and to indicate the degree to which the developed curricula and assumed learning results allow to bridge those gaps. They should undoubtedly serve as one of various sources to modify university curricula and to subsequently verify their effectiveness through skills tests taken upon the completion of education.

Using the Gallup test and the Filipowicz skills test allowed to comprehensively identify future employees' strengths and to indicate areas for improvement at university (through mentoring programmes, apprenticeships and traineeships, curricula). Conclusions based on the results of both tests and of the survey of students' expectations as to apprenticeships, traineeships and their future jobs allowed to develop and implement student support methods, e.g. through appropriate modifications of curricula and traineeship programmes. University courses were extended to include modules reinforcing students' enterprise, the management of individual potential, cross-cultural communication and negotiating skills. In the preparation of students for their working lives, it is worth remembering the necessity of continued development, applicable to every worker. Skills gaps are not permanent, they require continuous verification and bridging (e.g. amendments to legal regulations or changes in the purchasing behaviour of consumers/ tourists give rise to new gaps). The study conducted not only allowed to improve the degree of curriculum alignment with the labour market needs in tourism, but it also enabled the creation among students of a talent bank where their talents – reinforced with the knowledge and skills acquired at university – will help develop their strengths and can be particularly useful in selected posts.

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