

Academic development for generic competencies for the unknown future

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This debate focusses on how academic development initiatives can contribute to the development of new competencies essential in future society. The emphasis is on the need for a fundamental transformation of education and training to meet the skills and competencies in demand to increase employability, personal development, social inclusion and active citizenship. Preparing students with adequate competencies required by the socio-economic changes emerged as a result of, amongst others, globalisation and technological progress is a challenge for universities and other HEIs, as recognised by related works. This claim on academic development initiatives raises several questions: What are these “new competencies” needed in our future society? Can universities develop a reliable strategy to enhance some generic digital competencies amongst all students? If we assume that the future is unknown, then, we can argue that also the competencies appropriate for it are unknown. Accordingly is an academic development ambition not self-evident as we might focus on irrelevant topics.

The main question to be discussed is if it is relevant to strengthen the universities academic development with ambition to develop generic competencies for the unknown future.

Keywords: Tertiary education; Academic development; Generic digital competencies; Unknown future

Rationale

Digital competencies are one of the 21st-century skills that every individual must have to increase employability, personal development, social inclusion and active citizenship⁷. Achieving that requires new education strategies from universities. As recognised by the digital agenda for Europe⁸, a fundamental transformation of education and training is essential to meet the skills and competencies that are in demand. The challenge thereby for universities is to prepare students with adequate competencies needed for the socio-economic changes resulted by, amongst others, globalisation and technological progress.

Future labour market is often described as equipped with increased automation, business models based on algorithms, big data, artificial intelligence, cloud computing, dexterous robotics, etc. and the competencies on demand are both digital skills and other generic skills such as collaboration and entrepreneurial skills (Fossen & Sogner 2019, Meyer-Guckel et al. 2019). Although there could be a possibility that socio-economic statuses in future might not precisely be predictable by the current trends (Barnett 2019, Jørgensen 2019).

Universities are, by all means, educating students to be adequately skilled for upgraded job profiles, and the labour market is demanding that students should possess diverse skills to be employed. Current political discussions mainly highlight teacher education (Starkey 2019) and students' employability in relation to specific fields when leaving the university. Designing a curriculum and practising a pedagogy suitable for such a task is far from the practices that we readily understand. (Barnett 2019). General digital competence is thus something that extends further from merely using digital tools, which is often a requested competence of university teachers and students. In teacher pre-service education, this wish is heard with a background that students who are trained as teachers should have good knowledge of information technology that they can use in their professional practice and thereby strengthen the pupils' digital skills. We describe general digital competence as digital-related competencies that are desirable by the students leaving the university, for enhancing their general employability and active citizenship.

⁷ New skills agenda of Europe <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/research-topic/learning-and-skills>

⁸ http://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/bitstream/JRC101254/jrc101254_digcomp%202.0%20the%20digital%20competence%20framework%20for%20citizens.%20update%20phase%201.pdf

Considering that new skills are essential for each individual in society, there is a visible shortage of supply by the education sector. The universities lack educational offers that convey future competencies that embrace all students (Meyer-Guckel et al. 2019). However, some initiatives are taken to include competencies in existing curricula, i.e., in Australia and New Zealand, students learn critical skills alongside learning how to “leverage robotic process automation”. (<https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20190612130456922>)

We are debating the relevance to strengthen the university’s academic development with ambition to develop generic competencies for the unknown future.

The attendees will get arguments for and against an ambition to strengthen academic development for generic competences needed in an unknown future.

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