Graduates of agribusiness searching for a job in recession times

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Abstract
This paper analyses the area of application and the potential of the group intervention process on graduates of agribusiness searching for their first job. The study took place over the course of 2 months, with a survey on a sample of 68 graduates from the Faculty of Agriculture Zagreb, and carrying out exploratory group intervention on 8 volunteer graduates. Methodology of research was based on participants’ self-assessment before and after the intervention. The results show that group approach has potential of significant upgrade the personal capabilities of participants. Best results are achieved in terms of self-confidence, advanced self presentation skills and approach to short and mid term professional planning.

Key words: agribusiness graduates, youth unemployment, employability, group intervention.

Introduction
In the past two decades, Croatian society has faced a rapid change in economy, meaning a transition from a planned economy to a market economy. Market transition in general represents a similar process in all transitional countries, but these processes’ realization significantly differentiates in some social contexts. Differences among countries are the consequences of different political circumstances in which a transition is carried out and present traditional matrices in some transitional societies. Matrices are modelled through perennial historic reasons but nonetheless with types of socialistic regimes preceding the transition (Tomić-Koludrović, Petrić 2005). Transitional countries face the additional risk of society differentiation, decline in social protection level, and new risks like organized crime, juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, trafficking, etc. (Tivadar & Drvar, 2002). The most important reasons behind the vulnerability of youth are: lack of life and work experience, risky behaviour, indistinguishability of reality, need for prominence among peers, emotional and psychological fragility, economic dependency, social role and status (UNESCO, 2002). The transition of the economy as a matter of fact means the transition of the mind from what was a collective opinion on what the government may do for you, to what you may do from your standpoint. In that sense, the role of an individual person in life, among other things, is also influenced by a legacy of socio-cultural and value system. In Croatia, there is still a coexistence of former socialistic-collectivistic and contemporary capitalistic-individualistic European value systems, and in that sense the State “should” preserve its role in the social sphere. Transition reforms should result in combined optimized methods of state intervention (Jelušić, 2000). The scientific society in Croatia indirectly experienced an escalation of the economic recession in the country. A significant decline in industrial production, consumption, and GDP (-6% annually), consequently worsened the situation at the national labour market in the last quarter of 2008 (Matković, 2010).. The unemployment rate in Croatia has a cyclical character and oscillates ±4% (for the 2007-2009 period). (Matković, 2010). The average unemployment rate in Croatia for the period between 2006 and 2011 is 15.8% (Croatian Bureau of Statistics (CBS), 2011; 2012). At same time,
Croatian Universities annually release over 25 thousand graduates (25,573 in 2008; 30,156 in 2009; 32,378 in 2010) and from the annual total, in the period between 2008 and 2010 the percentage of unemployed graduates without experience registered at the Croatian Employment Service (CES) rose from 16.3 to 21.34% (CES, 2012). The Croatian national economy faces several pressing problems which significantly contribute to negative trends in the domestic labour market, i.e. foreign exchange balance, national debt, purchasing power parity, tax evasion, etc. At the same time, the Croatian higher education system in general may undertake a limited set of available adjustments of educational activities (short term actions) towards supplying the labour market with more employable or self-employable individuals, skilful young professionals respectively, as yet the low mobility of workforce mostly results from the traditional mentality towards the personal and collective expectation of "one job for an entire career". The unemployed in Croatia often neglect instruments available – expecting that a job should be granted, not searched for (Ilišin, et al. 2003). Graduates, like Croatian youth in general, are predominantly negative towards expectations on the labour market together with presumptions of their chances to equally compete for in-profession jobs or any jobs available. Serious issues for graduates include a lack of know-how skills in job searching and personal presentation together with lack of personal capabilities and awareness on how to compete in a market-driven economy (Ilišin, et al. 2003). After all, most faculty programs are based on the idea that a youth will enter a faculty with a career in mind and can complete a program in four years (Petrik, 2002). Additional key requests from contemporary businesses put in front of graduates (Oblinger and Verville 1998): critical thinking, effective communication, intra and cross-team working ability, IT competencies and systems thinking. A study (by Lazerson, Wagener and Shumanis 1999) emphasized what are the needs and problems in adjustments and in the implementation of advanced practices (active classrooms) in teaching and learning in higher education in the USA and interesting study (Muslim et al. 2012) shows results from work on the detection, improvement and limits of inculcation of essential generic skills to students in Malaysia. There are contemporary business requests (explained by Lane 2000) "...reminded by many professionals to become a competitive employee in the 21st century, students will need highly developed interpersonal, decision-making, technological and information-processing skills, in addition to specific career skills" to become competent leaders and managers (Repar et. al. 2012). On the other hand, labor market relations in Croatia become even more complex with escalation of the global recession, which easily overwhelmed fragile structures of Croatian economy (Mlikotic, 2011). The goals from this experiment are to test the effectiveness of group intervention in skills that are contained in the interpersonal and decision-making capacity of a person. The secondary goal was to verify the level of personal ability to share experience gained from group intervention. To confront selected challenges, it was intriguing to try to test the adjustability of the structure of group intervention as an effective supporting process on a graduate’s way of learning new behaviour or skill for personal-professional growth, together with the graduate’s secondary capability to transfer new skills to others. Logically, there were three hypotheses to be tested:

Hypothesis 1: Graduates reflect the cognition of high national unemployment rate through a negative attitude and expectations towards their chances of finding a job after graduation (N=68).

Hypothesis 2: Graduates have a lack of effective written and spoken presentation knowledge, skills, capabilities and self-confidence for the potential job qualification process (N1=8, N2=68).

Hypothesis 3: Through a group intervention process of 8 weeks, graduates will be able to acquire advanced written and spoken skills and develop personal-professional short and midterm goals (N=8).
Material and method

In order to certify Hypothesis 1, there was an inquiry created and eight graduates who participated in the group intervention part of the study also participated in the discussion about this inquiry design, and with their assistance the inquiry was distributed among 68 respondents and analysed. In order to certify Hypothesis 2 and 3, apropos the 8 graduates participating in the experiment with group intervention, there was a need to identify the entry level of effective written and spoken presentation knowledge, skills, capabilities and self-confidence for the potential job qualification by self-determination. The questions for self-determination contained a scale with marks ranging from 1 to 10 on what represented a subjective level of competence or confidence in: a) the quality of their personal curriculum vitae (CV), b) personal presentation, and c) personal professional direction and planning over the course of the next two years. Consequently, upon their exit survey questions were asked to indicate any improvements achieved through group intervention. The group intervention in itself was designed for all three sessions separately.

The curriculum vitae session (a) was designed as a workshop where graduates are put in the position of the company’s management board. The imaginary Management board received three applications for a job; participants were encouraged to share their thoughts and afterwards engaged in a discussion regarding the best candidate depending on the perceived quality of the curriculum vitae submitted. Some of the board directors received special tasks from the moderator in order to simulate special interests which may ordinarily appear in companies when there are employment discussions. The moderator took on the role of mediator and facilitator of discussion and unprejudiced initiator of additional arguments for discussion in moments of discussion exhaustion.

The personal presentation session (b) was designed as a role-play interview workshop where 1 student got the realistic role of a job candidate from a newspaper vacancy, 1 student got the role of a secret answer giver, 3 graduates were the employer representatives and 3 graduates were the observers. Employers had the task of asking the candidate the most unpleasant questions from interviews, Observers had the task of monitoring the behaviour of all the participants involved. After the role-play discussion and conclusions followed.

The personal professional planning session (c) was designed in the form of a workshop where graduates had a first task of determining their most important personal priorities. The second task was to creatively visualize their professional goal in terms of affirmative thought, place, time, rationale, environment, obstacles, responsibilities, and the first action towards achieving that goal. Every step was discussed in a group and every participant had the chance to share his or her opinion with others with the whole process being supervised by the moderator, who had an active role in the discussion, guiding the discussion in terms of time and quality and also including his own opinions and experiences, resulting in an improvement in the level of trust among the participants, who consequently expressed their opinions more openly.

To verify the approach, the monitoring, and evaluation of the experimental group intervention, for the first group of 8 graduates several surveys was carried out:

Firstly, there was an entrance survey before the intervention containing numerical questions with a scale ranging from 1 to 10 questioning the present state of graduates’ skills in oral and written presentation, certainty in personal plans and questions which would provide descriptive answers regarding general and professional expectations, life goals, the intervention approach style they would prefer and the general quality of present living and aspirations.

Secondly, after each intervention session (three in total) there was a short evaluation (12 questions, with a scale ranging from 1 to 5) enquiry distributed, for the purpose of monitoring the achievement of the learning goals, the working materials, the moderator delivered
performance, the conditions of the space where the intervention was held, the progress of
the group intervention and the immediate usability of individual learning gained.
And thirdly, an exit (numerical and descriptive) survey carried out to detect subjective
changes in graduates after group intervention (again in a scale ranging from 1 to 10) and to
descriptively evaluate the general potential of group intervention and notice possible
suggestions for the redesign of the group intervention design in order to influence the
possible gaps. In total, there were 5 surveys carried out.

Results and discussion

The results of the inquiries carried out on sample of 68 graduates from the Faculty of
Agriculture in Zagreb showed that they mostly have a negative attitude of their chances and
competencies on the labour market of Croatia. graduates mostly point to the national
government, entrepreneurs, the labour market’s supply and demand, and local municipalities
as being responsible for the situation. It is very indicative that graduates expressed the
assumption that most of the jobs in Croatia are found through informal connections, what
may sound alerting for the situation on the labour market in Croatia and the efficiency of the
public institutions participating in the formal labour market. Additionally, the most
important stress factors for graduates are the following: lack of responses from potential
employers, rejection, testing and waiting for an answer. As the most important personal
weaknesses, graduates bring up a lack of experience, “wrong profession”, and a “thin”
curriculum vitae. For the group of eight graduates participating in the group intervention, the
answers from entrance inquiries shown that they perceive their skills in curriculum vitae
writing, personal presentation and professional planning mediocre (six or bellow on a scale
from 1 to 10). The results of the group workshops provided on the test group of eight shows
that group approach has “self-assesed potential” of significant average upgrade the personal
capabilities of participants, i.e. curriculum vitae writing skills +30.9%, personal presentation
+22.1%, and professional planning +39.3%. Best results are achieved in terms of self
confidence, advanced self presentation skills and will to develop short and mid term
personal-professional plan. An important limitation which must be noted is that the inquiry
is distributed only to graduates, and only at the Faculty of Agriculture.

Conclusions

There are objective reasons to put blame on the “recession” i.e. outer reasons for
unemployment of young people. In the “controlled” environment of the workshop it was
possible to tackle difficulties which (beside complex economy environment) directly
influence outcomes of the dialogues between job seekers and employers in times when there
is surplus of workforce. We showed that it is reasonable to consider designed group
intervention to affirmatively influence personal experience of the unemployment in complex
environment. Taking into account the results from the exit inquiry and the descriptive score,
it is recommended that a combination of methods utilized for this exploratory study be
further improved and additionally tested in different groups. The availability of standard
opinion surveys about the student population is easy attainable source of information which
may be used as an adequate input for a relatively small group sizes (6-15) intervention. In
order to steer unemployed groups into action, it is reasonable to assume that training in group
intervention methodologies for government staff dealing with unemployed populations may
result with new ideas, programmes, or even preventive interventions in the education system
to effectively overcome the most important personal difficulties, when accesing labor
market.
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