

# PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF STUDY PROGRAM MANAGERS: TOPICALITY AND ESSENCE

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## Abstract

*As today is the time of rapid changes, the activities of academic personnel become more and more complicated. This also refers to study program managers, who are the responsible persons for higher education study programs.*

*Study program managers are not specially trained to manage study programs. It is usually assumed that anyone with enough academic experience and specific academic degree can become a study program manager and manage it through its existence. However, being a study program manager entails a wide range of different responsibilities which underlies a need for study program manager to possess many competences that a manager in any other organization or position should have - specific knowledge, skills, abilities and also -preferably- certain personal traits. Taking this relevant issue into account, a research was carried out in two Universities of Latvia, where both lecturers and study program managers were asked to fill in questionnaires in order to define a set of professional competences a successful and effective study program manager should possess. Besides, it was concluded that study program managers do need further education and training regards improving their competences and acquiring new ones. Not surprisingly, this need for further education was more stressed by the lecturers than by study program managers themselves.*

**Key words:** *competences, management, professional development, study program manager.*

## Introduction

The social and economic processes that take place in the rapidly changing society of today affect all spheres of life, all economic sectors and education, of course, as well.

Personnel employed in the area of education can play an effective role during the process of changes; they can be both – active participants and supporters of this process. It is being consistently required that higher educational institutions are able to satisfy permanently growing and diversifying students' learning needs. Thus, the quality of education in higher educational institutions be-

comes more and more important and it is therefore essential that the higher educational institutions can maintain their potential at a high level and even increase it.

It is possible in various ways – by promoting and supporting the development of science, by effectively managing work of higher educational institutions and their structural divisions, by successfully organizing study process etc. As regards the later, it needs to be noted that besides good administration of study process, also the issue of study programs is relevant – whether study programs are up-to-date and consistent with labor market needs, whether they satisfy the requirements of the society and how coordinated and targeted the actions of study program managers and lecturers are. Consequently, more focus is laid on the diversity of study programs and their compliance with market needs, as well as on the quality of study programs' content, possibilities to improve it, professionalism of lecturers implementing study programs and effective management of programs. This article will focus on the later, namely, the management of study programs, and competences and professional development of persons responsible for it – study program managers. Study program manager can be defined as a person who is responsible for a higher education study program and whose activities become increasingly complicated.

The aim of the research, which is discussed in this article, was to examine whether study program managers need professional development and what its essence should be. Thus, these two previously mentioned issues were the research objects. The research questions were as following:

- do study program managers support further professional development on program management issues;
- do lecturers involved in the programs consider such further professional development of study program managers relevant and necessary;
- what issues/topics should be included in the content of further professional development.

## Defining the Problem

In order to perform successfully in an organization, institution or enterprise, its manager needs knowledge, and skills and abilities that are obtained through learning and practice, as well as his/her own position and motives for actions and the ability to create a competitive working environment through purposeful activities (Dāvidsone, 2008; Delamare le Deist & Winterton, 2005; Green, 1999; Spencer & Spencer, 1993; Sveiby, 2003).

Competitiveness is one of the necessary leading motives for successful performance. In this context, manager's personal traits, readiness and skills to manage people, willingness and ability to take risks and be responsible, willingness to achieve higher results, wish to learn on an ongoing basis, also from one's mistakes and other's experience and ability to orientate oneself towards change become very important (Tamkin, Barber, 1998).

Today also knowledge and skills in the area of information technologies and knowledge of foreign languages are of great relevance for managers. Besides, the actions of the manager are also influenced by the following factors - how he/she perceives his/her role, functions and tasks, what position he/she takes as regards the employees and what his/her working style is – how the management process is implemented, how manager uses his/her power, whether the manager has authority, whether he/she is also a leader, what competences manager possesses in order to perform management effectively and successfully. It should be emphasized, however, that it is relevant that the manager develops him/herself on an ongoing basis as it is possible to learn to be a good manager.

Although theories on managers and competences have mainly been developed within the context of business management, it has been admitted that there is no good reason why they could not be equally used and attributed to managers in educational institutions (Gaither, 2007). Of course, the peculiarities of academic environment and specific features of activities that are performed in this area need to be taken in due account.

It has been concluded in the researches on management issues that competences can be universal (thus can be applied to any working environment). However, differences also can be obser-

ved – manager in an academic organization differs from that in a business enterprise because the former alongside with being a manager is also a researcher, he/she manages process of creation among academic personnel, manages study process and is engaged in other specific activities (Spendlove, 2007; Wisniewski, 2007).

As regards study program managers, it has to be noted that they are not specifically trained to manage study programs. It is usually assumed that anyone from the academic personnel of the higher educational institution after having worked in a university for some time and obtaining certain scientific degree, as well as professional and social status, at the same time acquires skills needed to be a manager. Thus, study program can be managed by any academic employee, of course, according to the Rules on the study program manager, adopted by the higher educational institution.

Unmistakably, work experience has to be taken into an account, it needs to be analyzed, assessed and used when applicants are chosen. Quite often a person who is invited to become study program manager or who brings forward his/her own candidacy clearly has an outstanding competence in a scientific area he/she represents, is very skillful and knowledgeable lecturer, has obtained numerous academic degrees, is very successful researcher, often takes part in conferences etc. However, in the process of program management this person has to deal with many problems that can be of organizational nature or linked to issues of communication and cooperation etc. This is because a tight interaction exists between study program manager and lecturers, students, representatives of administration, employees of other structural units/departments/universities, and this cooperation is especially important to gain and increase results. The above mentioned means that also the manager in a higher educational institution just like in any other organization needs to be able to critically evaluate and deal with different kinds of information; he/she has to be competent in many issues, such as organization, cooperation, communication or any other activity; to use his/her knowledge and skills in practice; to adapt to changing circumstances, to take risks, to be ready to acquire new experience through learning new things or to develop already existing competences. To conclude, in order to be a good manager, also in an educational institution, an individual needs to possess different competences. In this context, ability to manage oneself can be named as one of the important competences a good manager should have.

It is even being stressed that it is not possible to successfully manage others before one has obtained the ability to manage oneself – his/her working style, attitude; before an individual has recognized the necessity to develop him/herself (McCaffery, 2004).

Continuous learning and gaining experience during work process is one of its manifestations. Actually, willingness and readiness to develop oneself is considered as one of the most relevant traits of a good and powerful manager. Although it is not an easy process, a manager needs to develop him/herself, to take care of him/herself and try to be him/herself. An individual can develop him/herself professionally all life long, independently to the profession and job position. However, everybody has a specific vision on the process of his/her further education which is influenced by particular needs, necessities, possibilities, wishes and many other factors.

As Fulan notes, change is inevitable, development – possible; it is not possible to choose whether to change or not, but it is possible to choose how to react (Fulan, 1999).

The topicality of professional development is determined by whether the manager – study program manager – possesses competences that are required for performing a specific job and what the level of those competences is. The most common way, how to determine if one is suited for manager's role, is to evaluate one's competences, then - to focus on deficiencies and weak points and to elaborate an action plan to eradicate those drawbacks and to develop necessary skills and gain necessary knowledge.

Besides, it is also very important whether the professional development of study program manager as a manager, not only as a professional in a specific academic domain is being highlighted and supported by the work place, in this case – educational institution. (Bolden, Gosling, 2006).

It can be done in various ways, for instance, by assessing study program manager's competences and their level, by emphasizing the opportunities a good study program manager as a manager

can provide for the study program and everybody linked to it or – quite on the contrary – how activities of study program manager or lack of such activities could endanger the existence of study program, and its further development, and thus – eventually – even study quality.

“Continuous professional development should not be, nor should you consider it, a matter of optionality. It is no less than a lifetime obligation and responsibility.” (McCaffery, 2004, p. 294).

## Methodology of Research

A quantitative and qualitative research was carried out in year 2008-2009 in two Universities of Latvia in order to study the role and activities of study program manager in the process of study program implementation.

During the first phase of the research both study program managers and lecturers participated in a survey which was carried out in order to examine:

1. what are the necessary competences for study program managers – knowledge, skills, abilities, personal traits;
2. how is the work during the study process organized;
3. what is the organizational role of the study program managers during the implementation of the study process;
4. whether study program managers need professional development;
5. what the essence of further professional development should be.

To inquire into the above mentioned issues, a questionnaire was elaborated; study program managers and lecturers, who are involved in the implementation of study programs, were asked to fill in the anonymous questionnaire.

During the second phase of the research representatives of the administrations, as well as heads of faculties and departments, under the guidance of who or in close cooperation with who study program managers work, were interviewed. Interviews were recorded (audio recording) and allowed to study the opinions of the previously mentioned university officials on the following issues – the competences that are relevant for study program managers in order to manage programs effectively; the organization of the study process and the role of study program managers in successful implementation of the programs. The results and analysis of issues included in the interviews are however not included in this article.

The research was a case study due to the particular interest of the researchers to study the roles and activities of study program directors in these institutions - two faculties of University of Latvia and University of Liepaja. Both Universities differ in terms of number of study program managers, students and lecturers and types and quantity of study programs that are implemented there. Total number of respondents - study program managers, lecturers, representatives of administrations, as well as heads of faculties and departments of two university type higher educational institutions – University of Latvia (two faculties) and University of Liepaja – was – 292 (85.38% from 342<sup>1</sup>). 260 respondents – 51 study program manager and 209 lecturers involved in implementation of the programs – took part in the quantitative survey; 91% of all questionnaires (48 and 191 accordingly) were received back. 32 respondents were interviewed.

This article summarizes the results from one part of the research, namely, the answers of the respondents to the questions included in the questionnaire as regards the relevance and necessity of professional development of study program managers and the essence of further professional development.

A question “*Is further education – professional development – necessary in order to manage a study program or manage it better?*” was included in the questionnaire. Both study program managers and lecturers were asked to answer this question. Answer options were the following - “fully agree”, “agree”, “do not agree”, “other answer”, “no answer”.

<sup>1</sup> The total number of academic employees working in the two faculties of the University of Latvia and University of Liepaja.

Study program managers and lecturers were also asked to provide answers to the question “*What are the issues on which study program managers should receive further education and training?*”. As regards lecturers, their experience working with different study program managers was to be taken into an account. Both groups of respondents could choose from already prepared answer list; they were asked to rank the answers in the order of priority; there was also an option to write in their own replies.

## Results of Research

The analysis of the obtained answers to the question – “*Is further education – professional development – necessary in order to manage a study program or manage it better?*” shows that 43.8% of the respondents – study program managers – fully agree and 25.0% agree to it (table 1). That testifies – the majority study program managers realize the relevance and necessity of further development; besides, almost half of the respondents, as mentioned before, support this principle unconditionally.

**Table 1. Professional development of study program managers.**

Answers' options	Managers (n=48)		Lecturers (n=191)	
	n	%	n	%
Fully agree	21	43.8	129	67.5
Agree	12	25	53	27.7
Do not agree	6	12.5	5	2.6
Other answer	8	16.7	0	0
No answer	1	2.1	4	2.1
<b>In total:</b>	48	100	191	100

However, quarter of the respondents, while agreeing to it in principle, are not absolutely convinced, and, obviously, consider that certain conditions should be met before further development becomes a pending matter. Such conditions could be, for instance, increasing requirements for quality of education and study programs, changing provisions for study program elaboration and evaluation, etc.

Although this clearly shows a positive trend among study program managers towards professional development, as many as 12.5% of all respondents do not agree that further development is necessary and 16.7% have another answer. In their extended answers respondents mainly use such explanations – additional education and training as regards management is not needed because this process does not require any specific knowledge and skills; previous experience in managing programs and academic experience is sufficient for being able to manage programs effectively; it is enough to have regular professional development in the particular academic domain or specialty, there is no need for specific training in management issues. In this context an interesting correlation was observed between study program managers' experience in program management and opinions on the relevance of professional development – managers with longer management experience and longer academic experience support further professional development less. As understanding the relevance of professional development is a very important precondition for engaging in further education and training activities, some concerns arise that the lack of such understanding might negatively influence not only the development of study program manager him/herself, but a wider range of issues that are dependent on the manager – study process smooth functioning, its quality etc.

The replies of the lecturers provide a different perspective – as 67.5% of the respondents fully support and 27.7% of the respondents support professional development of the managers, and only 2.6% think that it is not necessary. A conclusion can be drawn from these responses that the issue of further education and training of study program managers is not only relevant for lecturers; it is

even more important for them than for the study program managers themselves. And, indeed, lecturers in their elaborated answers wrote that study program managers often lack knowledge and skills for positive and open communication and cooperation within the program, they are weak leaders in the program or do not possess leader traits at all, they are not able or do not want to motivate those working in the program, they sometimes are chaotic in dealing with administrative issues; frequently are not satisfied and lack self-control expressing their emotions; are not interested in the development of the program; some are described as authoritarian.

Probably, one of the reasons, why managers are more skeptical towards further education and training, is their perception of it as something undesirable; if admittance that some professional development is necessary and good might undermine their qualification.

To sum up, as regards issue of further professional development of study program managers, the majority of the respondents – study program managers (68.8%), support it. As the approval of such necessity was obtained also from lecturers (95.2%) involved in implementation of study programs, a conclusion can be drawn that this issue is topical and relevant.

In order to study *what are the issues, on which study program managers should receive further education and training*, responses were received from study program managers and lecturers. As regards lecturers, their experience working with different study program managers was to be taken into an account. Differences were observed after comparison of study program managers' and lecturers' responses. (Table 2).

**Table 2. The content of professional development of study program managers.**

Content issues	Managers		Lecturers	
	n <sup>1</sup>	%	n <sup>2</sup>	%
Management theory	14	10.7	92	14.2
Quality management	28	21.4	118	18.2
Communication and cooperation	19	14.5	136	20.9
Health	7	5.3	38	5.8
Competences	22	16.8	129	19.8
Learning and improving knowledge of foreign languages	23	17.6	64	9.8
Work with Internet resources	14	10.7	63	9.7
Another answer	4	3.1	10	1.5
<b>In total:</b>	131	100	650	100

Table 2 shows that 21.4% of the respondents – study program managers – consider program quality management to be the priority. Learning foreign languages and improving the existing knowledge (17.6%), topics on the issue of competences (16.8%) and cooperation and communication (14.5%) received little less support; however, the percentage difference between the above mentioned issues is not significant. Apparently, as the higher educational institutions lately pay particular attention to the qualitative functioning of study process, as the requirements of students and societies in general towards the quality of education have changed in the past years, as the study programs tend to become more and more competitive, study program managers more than ever need to focus on promoting qualitative study process, on contributing to program development and attracting highly professional lecturers, also guest lecturers, to work in the program. Clearly, it is linked to the improvement of knowledge and skills – managers need to know and understand latest developments in the European education space, need to be able to integrate them in the managed program; it is also important to be able to orientate in the “record keeping tunnels”; to know how to develop program in order to make it competitive, to promote further education and professional development of lecturers.

<sup>2</sup> Number of times mentioned as the first priority.

Issues connected with management theory – 10.7% and working with Internet resources – 10.7% received equal, but less support. Good work organization and distance communication today can not be imagined without usage of modern technologies and possibilities offered by the Internet. However, likely, this experience is being obtained during the every day working process and no additional training is particularly required. Therefore it is rather understandable and explainable why this issue does not seem to be of the highest relevance. On the other hand, surprisingly, that management theory issue received as much (or – more precisely – as little) support and, accordingly, in the opinion of the respondents does not seem that important. Authors of the article believe this issue is not irrelevant and should have received more support. However, as already mentioned above, probably, managers perceive their previous program management and academic experience as sufficient grounds for successful and effective management of study programs.

Lecturers' opinions differ from the point of view of managers as regards the primary topics on which managers should receive further education and training. Lecturers hold the view that the priority for the study program managers should be the improvement of their knowledge on communication and cooperation issues – 20.9%. These replies show that from the viewpoint of lecturers, the most significant are social and personal competences – cooperation, interaction and communication skills. These skills should be obtained and developed. In every work place positive emotional background creates pleasant and favorable working conditions, motivates employees, increases their productivity and improves their performances. The issues of cooperation and communication are followed by topics on competence – 19.8%, quality management – 18.2%, and management theory – 14.2%. Lecturers comprehend that today issues like student interest in the program and the number of students participating in it, as well as positive feedback and evaluation of the program, support for the program from the management of the university etc. are very significant for the program.

However, only a small number of respondents from both respondent groups (5.3% of the program managers and 5.8% of the lecturers) agreed that health issues should be included in the essence of professional development. Notwithstanding the fact that program management requires major emotional efforts, creative approach and that frequent tension and stress situations and exhaustion moments occur, most of the study program managers and also lecturers did not think that additional information and knowledge as regards health promotion issues is necessary. One of the explanations could be that long work experience and professional approach, as well as the way managers perceive and interpret events allow them to deal with stress effectively. Another explanation – respondents are supporters of healthy life style already and thus they do not have any health problems, or do not see the necessity to publicly mention any.

Meanwhile, an assumption can be made that this answer does in general comply with the particularities of Latvia's society, namely, taking into account overall economic and social problems, it might seem inappropriate and irrelevant to emphasize such a personal and even obvious issue. However, as nowadays stress in the work place and its negative consequences is a very common and serious problem, it would not be correct to disregard it.

However, despite the low relevance of personal health issues, the following extra issues and topics were stressed by respondents in their open answers as rather important – time management, "self-management", conflict recognition and solving, new trends in the area of education, ways of relaxation. That proves that lecturers and – more important – also managers realize that many issues and aspects are important for a good manager – manager. They understand that not only formal administrative skills and general communication abilities are important; but a broad set of various issues has to be covered if one wants to be a good, effective and successful manager. Besides, it is not only possible, but also necessary to acquire these competences.

## Conclusions

The aim of the research was to examine whether study program managers need further professional education and development and what its content should be.

It has been concluded during the research that in general both - study program managers and lecturers - support further development of the managers. It was also concluded that:

- study program managers realize the necessity of further professional development, besides, almost half of all respondents accept such principle unconditionally, but a quarter of respondents apparently consider that professional development becomes a pending matter in certain circumstances, when certain conditions are met. Consequently, in general, a positive trend can be observed as regards professional development;
- the issue of further professional development of study program managers as managers is not only relevant for lecturers, who work under their guidance and supervision, but even more important than for managers themselves;
- views on the priorities of the content of further training and education vary: study program managers more support issues that are linked to quality management, learning foreign languages or improving the existing knowledge; on the other hand, lecturers stress topics on communication and cooperation, and, then, also quality management and competences.

The analysis of the obtained data allows considering the issue of program managers' further professional development to be topical; it also gives the possibility to outline the essence of further professional education and training.

However, it should be underlined that issues of professional development and its content specifically for managers – study program managers – have been rarely examined and studied in the theoretical literature. Therefore this research was built mainly on general theoretical conclusions on management and managers of different levels in the higher education.

Yet, this discussion has some limitations – firstly, opinions of representatives of educational institutions' administrations and heads of the departments, in subordination of who or in cooperation with who study program managers work, were not discussed in this article. However, their viewpoints and attitudes are important, as the support from educational institution's administration or requirement to be a professional employee - study program manager – can promote further professional development. Secondly, as regards the research - the results of it apply to the particular group that was covered in this research, namely, study program managers of these two educational institutions, and thus can be further used for professional development of them; the results, however, do not allow considering, whether issues of study program manager's professional development and its content in the provided interpretation are relevant and topical for all higher educational institutions of Latvia.

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