

## HOW HIGHER EDUCATION CAN DEVELOP GENERIC COMPETENCES?

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### Abstract

Training generic competences is a current, relevant and controversial issue. Today continue the debate about understanding the competence or skill concept and its relevance into the educational and business reality.

The training by competences at university level arises in Spain with the constitution of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and specifically with the "Bologna Declaration" in 1999.

In the professional field, the competence movement arises around 1973 with David McClellan who identified that to be successful we need something more than intelligence and knowledges.

In this research work we propose to train university students in personal competences and skills for their personal, academic and professional excellence and success.

Understanding that competences can be developed and taking this hypothesis to the university field, we intend to answer the question: How university could teach and develop these competences?

The general objective of this study is to reflect the need to develop generic competences at university. Competences that help students to move towards personal, academic and professional excellence and success in their lives.

To do so, we will start from the distinction between competences and skills, we will talk about competences in the professional and educational field and we will propose a university subject for the generic competences development. Finally, we will observe the evaluation that the first-year students of all the faculties of the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria (Madrid, Spain) give to this subject in the academic year 2018-2019.

**Keywords:** Generic Competences, Skills, Develop, Training, European Higher Education.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

We understand university education as an academic institution that provides an integral and integrating formation that should be the basis for students to continue improving their lives in their different fields: academic, personal and professional.

On the other hand, we do not consider that the university and its training programs must be oriented exclusively to the professional and technical fields, limiting ourselves to produce what companies need in terms of specific profiles for a given occupation. We understand that the university must train the student so

that, in addition to providing technical knowledge, it trains and helps them to develop competences and skills such as: personal knowledge, teamwork, communication (assertiveness, listening, empathy, oratory...), decision making, conflict resolution, task management, etc.

More and more companies are placing greater emphasis on the need to incorporate workers who, in addition to have the knowledge of their own degree (related to technical competences and skills), have developed certain generic competences. In this line we find among others, the studies of McClelland (1973, 2009) who worked the concept of competence and human motivation, Gardner (1983, 2016) who worked the concept of multiple Intelligences, Salovey and Mayer (1990) and Goleman (1995, 2016, 2018) who worked the concept of Emotional Intelligence.

In the processes of personnel selection, development, training and evaluation, generic competences have already been introduced as the backbone of what makes up an excellent. The technical knowledge and the results indicate what can an employee produce. But this kind of evaluation is no longer sufficient; in this sense it is also necessary to attend, the climate, the positivity, the environment that the workers can generate around them (related to generic competences). Therefore, we can observe how transversal or generic competences have become a relevant aspect for companies. The reason is related to the empirical studies that had been contrasted how productivity and efficiency are factors that increase the greater the development of generic competencies of their workers worker (Alles, 2017; Blas Aritio, 2007; Crespí, 2019; Olaz & Capitán, 2018; Villardón-Gallego, 2015).

On the other hand, the contributions of neuroscience have something significant to say at this point: Cognition and emotion are intimately related, so much so that, just as the cerebral cortex (cognitive) and the limbic system (emotional) are connected to each other, so are the hemispheres: left (rational) and right (emotional) (Bisquerra Alzina & Pérez Escoda, 2007).

Therefore, the university must provide training that facilitates not only cognitive but also emotional development.

Thus, for example, we understand that a student who studies the Degree of Education, must train or develop generic competences in addition to acquiring technical competences. Otherwise, we run the risk of forging future professionals that know a lot about their specific science but do not know how to manage its personal and social situation because basic generic skills have not been well developed. Generic competences like assertiveness, empathy, conflict resolution, etc. In this way, an adequate development of generic competences makes it possible for him to be a better professional with respect to his students, meetings with parents, carrying out projects with other colleagues (González & Wagenaar, 2003, 2006; Tuning, 2006).

It is important to point out at this moment that we propose the term competence as the set of knowledge, skills and attitudes related to an excellent performance with respect to a task, activity or function in life: academic, professional and personal (Crespí, 2018; Muñoz, Crespí, & Angrehs, 2011).

At the same time, it is worth asking what allows an excellent performance with respect to a task, role or function in life. In order to answer this question, we delve into the origin and the different meanings of the term competence.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1. A subject for Developing Generic Competences**

At the Francisco de Vitoria University (UFV) an integral personal training plan has been developed since its foundation with the aim of accompanying all their students of different grades and years of study.

To this end, it has several obligatory subjects in its curricula to develop generic competencies that guarantee this integral personal training; training that goes beyond the development of technical competences.

In the first grade, the subject oriented to develop generic competences is called: Personal Skills and Competences

Before explaining the subject, we will proceed to distinguish the terms: competence and skill.

#### **2.1.1 Competences Versus Skills**

Over time, many authors have worked on the competence concept. Some of the definitions that are more relevant are:

Competences are the characteristics and ways of making those who present a successful performance (McClelland, 1973). In this sense competences play a decisive role in the personal or professional success.

McClelland (1973), after carrying out a research project, commissioned by the United State Department, for the selection of the best diplomats, concluded that: "neither intelligence and aptitude tests nor academic results are sufficient to establish reliable forecasts of professional success". With this statement, McClelland set out to observe diplomats who stood out for their excellence. He discovered that among the traits that distinguished these people were qualities such as transcultural empathy, resilience to complicated situations and understanding of networks of influence. It recognizes, therefore, that knowledge is not enough to speak of excellence in an activity or a job position. In this way, the concept of competence arises to agglutinate all other factors that determine excellence. McClelland (1973) concluded that the key to an individual's job excellence lies in discovering what knowledge and what attributes or qualities are necessary to adequately perform each job.

Spencer and Spencer (1993) determine that competence is related to underlying characteristic of a person resulting in effective and/or superior performance in employment.

Bunk (1994) proposes as a competence definition: a set of knowledge, skills and abilities needed to exercise a profession, solve professional problems autonomously and flexibly, and be able to collaborate with the professional environment and in the organization of work.

In this sense, as we see, although sometimes we speak indistinctly of skills and competences, it is more correct to speak of competences; because these are the set of skills, knowledge, values and attitudes, for the precise performance of a task (Muñoz et al., 2011).

This is not the time to delve into each of competence classifications, but we can conclude that, at times, we speak of the same competences albeit with another nomenclature. As Bisquerra (2007) says, that although different, all of them allude to two great typologies of competences: those of a technical-professional or functional nature and those of a socio-personal or emotional nature. We initially took this typology of Bisquerra (2011) as a reference for our research.

Functional or technical-professional competences are those related to the performance or activity itself of a certain task. That is to say, they are those related to the specific knowledge and procedures of an activity or task. We refer to "knowledge" and "know-how" that are critical for the specialized performance of a task.

Socio-personal competences do not present a unanimous nomenclature among the different authors. Some denominations, as Bisquerra (2007) states, are: participative competences, personal competences, basic competences, key competences, generic competences, transferable competences, relational competences, life skills, interpersonal competences, transversal competences, basic competences for life, social competences, emotional competences, socio-emotional competences, etc.

In the following section we present our own classification of generic competences, which is nourished by that of Bisquerra (2007) and also by Gardner's Multiple Intelligences (1983, 2016) specifically intrapersonal and interpersonal Intelligence and the concept of Emotional Intelligence by Salovey and Mayer (1990) and Goleman (1995, 2016, 2018).

### *2.1.2 The Subject: Personal Skills and Competences*

The subject of Personal Skills and Competences, which is taught in all UFV grades at first year, aims to contribute to the integral formation, with a clear vocation to accompany all their students in their personal development through the generic competences; both types: intrapersonal and interpersonal competences.

First, we should distinguish between generic intrapersonal and interpersonal competences:

a) Those of intrapersonal character: those competences in relation with oneself, intimate and personal of an individual. Related to the ability to recognize, accept and/or understand and overcome, trying to give the best response in each situation that presents us. Examples: proactivity, personal knowledge, self-criticism, self-management, etc. These are similar to what Bisquerra (2007) calls self-reflection capacities, that is to say, capacities aimed at identifying and regulating one's own emotions adequately.

b) Those of an interpersonal nature: those competences in relation with other individuals. Related to the capacity to recognize, accept and understand others, helping them to give the best of themselves. Examples: communication (empathy, feedback, assertiveness, listening, making requests, verbal, non-verbal communication), leadership, teamwork, conflict resolution, negotiation. These are what Bisquerra (2007; 2003) refers to as the ability to recognize what others are thinking and feeling: social skills, empathy, capturing non-verbal communication, etc.

Second, we describe how the subject or program can develop those intrapersonal and interpersonal competences:

a) Intrapersonal competences are developed through a mentoring program. An expert trainer accompanies the student individually during 6 sessions for the development of competences such as: personal knowledge, proactivity, personal improvement and search for meaning.

b) Interpersonal competences are developed through 27 classroom sessions. An expert trainer accompanies all students through experiential learning in the development of skills such as: teamwork, problem solving, communication and leadership.

In both cases, classroom and mentoring, teacher and mentor work on the basis of experiential learning (Gómez Pawelek, 2018; Kolb, 1984, 2015). In this way, the students can really improve and develop the competences that are the object of the subject. In this way, we can talk about significant learning, due to this improvement impacts on the life of the students.

### 3. RESULTS

We have explained how the professional and personal environment requires the development of generic competencies. In this sense, the university has the duty to provide adequate training to its students that responds to what they need to build their lives integrally. For this reason, a specific subject for the development of generic competencies is a good way to respond to all the challenges just described.

At this point we wanted to observe the evaluation of this subject by the students in the two areas: classroom and mentoring for the 2018-2019 academic year. In this sense, an 18-item questionnaire was passed, with a Likert type scale from 1 to 6 (where one is nothing or never and six is always or totally). Item 19 was an open question to collect qualitative comments about the subject. The questionnaire was passed in April 2019 to all first-year university students, a total of 1997. Finally, the final sample was 1443 students for the mentoring and 1489 students for the classroom part. The sample is therefore significant.

If we look at the data in the table below (Table 1) we see that, in general terms, the results of the student assessments are very satisfactory. We observe that the average of the evaluation of the mentoring is 5.13 over 6. The average of the classroom is 4.69 over 6. Nevertheless, the students seem to value the mentoring part better than the classroom part. Probably because mentoring involves an individual and totally adapted accompaniment to the student that allows him to feel better accompanied in his personal development than in the classroom.

Within the mentoring and classroom part, students especially value 3 areas:

Individual student attention, with an average of 5.4 for mentoring and 4.94 for classroom, especially emphasizes the accompaniment and respect received by the mentor and teacher.

Fulfillment of obligations, with an average of 5.28 for mentoring and 4.95 for classroom, especially emphasizes the fulfillment of commitments and the closeness and willingness to care for the student.

Content domain, with an average of 5.27 for mentoring and 4.79 for classroom, especially emphasizes the specialization of the mentor and teacher in their explanations and doubts resolution.

In this sense, we see a coherence between the most valued areas in the subject, both in the classroom and in the mentoring: individual student attention, fulfillment of obligations and content domain.

Area	Item	CLASSROOM			MENTORING			
		Sample: 1.489			Sample: 1.443			
		Area Mean	Item Mean	Mode	Area Mean	Item Mean	Mode	
Programming – Teaching Organization	1	4.53	"I have sufficiently clear the initial planning of the subject (activities, evaluation criteria)".	4.55	5	5.11	5.15	6
	2		"The teaching methodology of the subject favours my learning".	4.5	6		5.07	6
Content Domain	3	4.79	"The explanations about the content of the subject are clear to me".	4.68	6	5.27	5.21	6
	4		"The doubts raised are resolved".	4.91	6		5.34	6
Teaching Innovation. Motivation	5	4.55	"I can connect the subject with real life situations".	4.76	6	5.00	5.19	6
	6		"My desire to learn is encouraged".	4.34	6		4.81	6
Interaction	7	4.71	"The activities developed	5.07	6	4.97	4.88	6

with class group		encourage interaction with the group in class".					
	8	"The topics dealt with make me ask questions".		4.34	5		5.05 6
Individual Student Attention	9	"I feel respected in my opinions".	4.94	5.04	6	5.40	5.44 6
	10	"I feel accompanied by the teacher".		4.85	6		5.35 6
Evaluation	11	"I have felt adequately demanded by this teacher".	4.59	4.68	6	5.04	5.20 6
	12	"The evaluation method makes it possible to reflect what I have learnt".		4.5	5		4.87 6
Results	13	"I receive significant feedback that allows me to improve".	4.51	4.67	6	5.00	5.14 6
	14	"I learn by taking this subject".		4.35	6		4.86 6
Fulfillment of obligations	15	"The teacher is punctual in his commitments (attendance at class, delivery of grades...)".	4.95	4.91	6	5.28	5.22 6
	16	"It is accessible in the attention to the student (tutorials, mails, etc...)".		5	6		5.34 6
Items-Criterion	17	"From a general consideration: evaluate the teaching work of this teacher as a facilitator of your learning".	4.63	4.75	6	5.12	5.20 6
	18	"If you could, in which degree would you enrol in another subject taught by this teacher?".		4.49	6		5.03 6
GLOBAL AVERAGE			4.69	4.69	5.83	5.13	5.13 6.00

Table 1. Personal Skills and Competences Assessment Questionnaire

On the other hand, the qualitative evaluation indicates that students value and are especially grateful for the personal development space provided through the subject.

They particularly value: having individual (mentoring) and community (classroom) support, having highly professional and qualified mentors and teachers, the learning that this subject gives them for personal, academic and professional areas, the closeness of teachers and mentors and, finally, having developed generic skills necessary for their lives in general.

Finally, we can say that there is a coherence between the data obtained in a quantitative and qualitative way. Students value the support, professionalism, and closeness of their teachers and mentors, and they also recognize that they have learned and improved in the generic competences that are the object of this subject.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Sectors such as education (infant, secondary and university) together with business, promote and progressively demand training in generic competences, something that goes beyond the provision of knowledge or specific competences.

We have talked about how excellence has to do with the competences. We have given many definitions of relevant authors in the field of the term competence distinguishing it from the term of skill. Finally, we can say that competence can be defined in terms of values, attitude, skills and knowledge.

We have proposed a subject to the university community that is specifically capable of developing generic competences, both intrapersonal and interpersonal, through two distinct areas: classroom and mentoring.

The training in generic competences provide the students competences that they already demand today for their personal and academic life, but which they will undoubtedly also need in their closest professional environment.

And finally, we have been able to demonstrate, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the very positive evaluations of the students (for classroom and mentoring) with respect to the accompaniment and attention received, the degree of professionalism of the trainers, as well as the impact of this subject on their learning

of generic competencies with value for their lives in their different areas (personal, academic and professional).

In this way, through the instrument for measuring the teaching activity of the subject and the qualitative evaluation we can consider this subject as a good quality space for personal and integral development through the generic competences.

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