



BUSINESS & DIPLOMACY REVIEW

**1. évfolyam, 2. szám
2023/2**

TARTALOM

- Árpád Bánhalmi: Hierarchical Clustering Combined with Neural Networks
- Berta Péter: Luxusfogyasztás, elrendezett házasság és a családi élet politikai gazdaságtana
- Dalma Boldog: Media Awareness among Students of the Budapest Business University
- Bölcskei Attila: Multidimenzionális adatvizualizáció dinamikus Chernoff-arcokkal
- Papp-Váry Árpád Ferenc: Hogyan látnak minket, kutatókat, és miként javíthatunk rajta? – A tudományos kutatókról kialakult sztereotípiák a nemzetközi és hazai felmérések alapján
- Agneš Slavić, Maja Strugar Jelača, Nemanja Berber, Dimitrije Gašić: The importance of students' soft skills based on pilot research results from Serbia
- György Szondi: The Evolution of Public Diplomacy – Definitions and Goals

Business & Diplomacy Review

Kiadó: Budapesti Gazdasági Egyetem

Szerkesztőség

1165 Budapest, Diósy Lajos u. 22-24.

<https://uni-bge.hu/hu/business-diplomacy-review>

Főszerkesztő

Sáringér János

Felelős szerkesztő

Csekő Katalin

Szerkesztőbizottság tagjai

Csekő Katalin, elnök

Bába Iván

Ferkelt Balázs

Juhász Tímea

Nagy Milada

Marinovich Endre

Marosán Bence Péter

Murádin János Kristóf

Válóczi Marianna

Tipográfia és tördelés

Nagy és Heteyi Kft.

ISSN 3004-0116

HU ISSN 3004-0116

Business & Diplomacy Review állandó lektorai

Prof. Dr. Bajomi-Lázár Péter, PhD

Dr. habil. Buday-Sántha Andrea, PhD

Dr. Csekő Katalin, PhD

Dr. habil. Domonkos Endre, PhD

Dr. Ferkelt Balázs, PhD

Dr. Gyene Pál, PhD

Dr. Harsányi Dávid, PhD

Dr. Horváth Annamária, PhD

Dr. habil. Krasztev Péter, PhD

Dr. habil. Juhász Tímea, PhD

Dr. habil. Marosán Bence Péter, PhD

Dr. habil. Murádin János Kristóf, PhD

Dr. Nagy Milada, PhD

Dr. Pólya Éva, PhD

Dr. habil. Sáringer János, PhD

Dr. Válóczy Marianna, PhD

Dr. Zelena András, PhD

TARTALOM

Hierarchical Clustering Combined with Neural Networks <i>Árpád Bánhalmi</i>	5
Luxusfogyasztás, elrendezett házasság és a családi élet politikai gazdaságtana <i>Berta Péter</i>	20
Media Awareness among Students of the Budapest Business University <i>Dalma Boldog</i>	44
Multidimenzionális adatvizualizáció dinamikus Chernoff-arcokkal <i>Bölcskei Attila</i>	61
Hogyan látunk minket, kutatókat, és miként javíthatunk rajta? – A tudományos kutatókról kialakult sztereotípiák a nemzetközi és hazai felmérések alapján <i>Papp-Váry Árpád Ferenc</i>	71
The importance of students' soft skills based on pilot research results from Serbia <i>Agneš Slavić, Maja Strugar Jelača, Nemanja Berber, Dimitrije Gašić</i>	96
The Evolution of Public Diplomacy – Definitions and Goals <i>György Szondi</i>	121

THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDENTS' SOFT SKILLS BASED ON PILOT RESEARCH RESULTS FROM SERBIA

Agneš Slavić, Maja Strugar Jelača, Nemanja Berber, Dimitrije Gašić

Abstract

The rapid changes in the organizations' external and internal environment require highly competent, flexible and innovative workforce who have the knowledge and skills to adopt to the new situation. Tertiary education has to develop the professional competences and soft skills of their students in order to enhance their employability at the labor market. Soft skills represent psychological attributes that express how people learn, think, and act. The most well-known are communication, teamwork, flexibility, creativity, leadership etc. Research results show that there is often a gap between the students' soft skills and the employers' expectations. The reason for expectation gap may lay in the constant changes in the business context and therefore in the employers' requirements. The aim of the paper is to present a few research results on the importance of soft skills in the tertiary education, the evolution of expectation gap and a few best practices on development of students' soft skills word wide. Besides, the paper presents the results of a field research conducted in Serbia, Faculty of Economics in Subotica, University of Novi Sad on the students' perceptions about their soft skills. The obtained results may be useful for the development of study programs in Serbia and in the region.

Keywords: soft skills, tertiary education, employers' expectations, Serbia

Introduction

Higher education institutions are expected to serve as human capital providers for the nation. Tertiary education is concerned to be responsible not for the simple training of students and preparing them

for work, but it may be directly related to their personal development, too. The dramatic changes in business context, as well as in social, political and technological environment mean a constant challenge for higher education. The industrial revolution 4.0 requires highly competent human resources, employees who are qualified, agile, adaptive and responsive to rapid changes. Universities have to introduce study programs which prepares students for the changing contexts and complex expectations of the global labor market. Guerra-Báez (2019) underlines that e comprehensive university level training has to focus not only on theoretical and practical knowledge relating to a profession, but also methodologies aimed at promoting autonomy in learning, creativity for problem solving, critical thinking, commitment to society, and persistence in the face of adversity. [1]

According to Kember, Leung, and Ma [2] there is an increasing recognition for awareness that soft skills can support scholars to achieve academic and job-related aims upon their graduation. On this line of reasoning, soft skills have become increasingly critical parts of education. Tang further emphasized that higher educational institutions are grounds where scholars track their socialization and obtain and grow a variety of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and characteristics that shake the manner they act in and take part with broader society. This is why the industry's feedback is extremely important to determine the characteristics that the graduates must possess so that they can function effectively in their workplace.[3]

Even though there is significant interest of universities and students about the importance of soft skills there is still a significant gap between the students' soft skills and the employers' expectations about soft skills.

The importance of soft skills highly depends on the dimensions of organizational and national cultural. Even between neighboring countries we could not find the same pattern of communication, planning and organization in companies. Nowadays the process of globalization and digitalization require the cooperation of employers from different countries and cultures. For this reason, by our opinion, a study on the importance of soft skills and their development at tertiary education shall focus on the analysis of different practices from various national cultures.

The aim of the theoretical part of the paper is to present a few research results on the importance of soft skills in the tertiary education, the evolution of expectation gap and a few best practices on development of students' soft skills word wide. The empirical part of the paper presents the results of a field research conducted in Serbia, Faculty of Economics in Subotica, University of Novi Sad on the students' perceptions about their soft skills.

Background

The importance of soft skills in tertiary education

Polanyi (1966) has classified knowledge into two types including: soft skills and hard skills. [4] Both the students' soft and hard skills are important for their employability and higher education programs perform a vital role in assisting their scholars' employability. Author Tang highlights that employability is demonstrated in the claim of a combination of personal potentials and principles, considerations, skills, and the capability to replicate effectively on practice. Based on numerous research results it is considered that employers would like to look for additional skills besides graduates' qualifications and experience. [5] This means that the technical skills possessed by specialists are less important compared to those soft skills that can be transferred between different jobs and employment sectors when linked with different roles. This is why in recent years it has been identified that the training and development of soft skills of university students should be of central interest to higher education institutions since they are closely related to personal well-being, social adjustment, and adaptation to the work context. [6]

Rainsbury et al. [7] consider hard skills as those related to technical aspects to perform several tasks in work. Therefore, hard skills are basically cognitive and are influenced by intellectual quotient (IQ). Asbari et al. [8] emphasize that hard skills can produce something that is visible, explicit and direct, they can be assessed from technical or practical tests. Hard skills are mainly related to mastery of science and technology, they are easily documented, formed and articulated and usually constitute knowledge inherent in higher education. In

addition, hard skills can be created, written and transferred between higher education activity units. Hard skills are technical competencies specific to a particular discipline or field of work that enable the successful performance of certain academic and professional tasks. In the educational context, hard skills are traditionally limited to the development and acquisition of formal learning through subjects taught in schools. [9]

There are lots of definitions of soft skills. Schulz (2008) stresses that the perception of what is a soft skill differs from context to context. A subject may be considered a soft skill in one particular area, and may be considered a hard skill in another. [10] One of the definitions emphasizes that the concept of soft skills is comparable to the concept of life skills proposed by the World Health Organization, Division of Mental Health which defines them as a set of socio-affective skills that are necessary for interaction with others and that make it possible to cope with everyday demands and challenging situations. It is important to note that the concept of soft skills differs from that of social skills, because social skills are part of soft skills, but the latter are additionally formed by skills to learn, analyze, manage time, and innovate. These aspects go beyond the set of skills that allow interaction with others. [11]

Escola-Gason and Gallifa stress that soft skills represent psychological attributes that express how people learn, think, and act. Measuring soft skills is important because they are variables that allow students to predict their professional future and career orientation. [12] Asbari et al. (2020) underline that soft skills form the knowledge that is still in the minds of humans and is highly personal so that transformation requires personal interaction. These soft skills are rooted in one's actions and experiences, including idealism, values, and emotionality. Based on this understanding, soft skills are categorized as personal knowledge or in other words knowledge obtained from individuals or individuals [13].

According to Kallioinen soft skills refer to dynamic, interpersonal psychological attributes that describe a person's different ways of learning, thinking, and acting. [14] Kechagias (2011) emphasizes that soft skills have two essential characteristics: on the one hand, they are competencies that are not exclusively limited to academic performance. They are called "soft" because they also intervene in

the vital learning that any human being must perform to achieve a balanced and adaptive life at the psychological level. This means that soft skills are conditioned by certain personality traits and thus affect the psychological processes that characterize the vital development of human beings.

On the other hand, they are called “competencies” because they can be assessed at two levels: (1) as an optimal ability and (2) as a psychological state based on a person’s self-perception. These two levels are not mutually incompatible; rather, they are complementary. [15]

There are many classifications of soft skills. For example, Robles concluded that the most important soft skills in the work context are integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitudes, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethics. [16] In a comprehensive review, Gallifa and Garriga identified up to 66 soft skills, of which 27 were considered “generic competencies”. The most frequent soft skills in education are critical thinking, problem solving, leadership, responsibility, communication, and collaboration. [17]

Caeiro-Rodriguez, et al. presents the results of HERA project grouping the existing soft skills into 5 categories: (1) technical skills that comprise skills out of the standard engineering curriculum related to technical aspects; (2) metacognitive skills related to the management and improvement of the cognitive process; (3) intrapersonal skills related to one’s inner characteristics and also one’s attitude towards things, ranging from creativity or adaptability to self-discipline or perseverance; (4) interpersonal skills are skills that improve one’s capabilities to work with others; (5) problem-solving skills that help to identify the source of a problem and find a suitable and effective solution. [18]

Escola-Gason and Gallifa (2022) underline that in general, classifications of soft skills have two problems. First, the attributes included in the classifications change depending on the context and type of task to be performed. This results in the lack of a solid and generalist theory that explains which personal styles allow us to define soft skills. Unlike personality theories, soft skills do not present operational theoretical models. This is the predominant difficulty in the psychometric assessment of soft skills. Second, in most classifications, the difference between hard and soft skills is not well-defined.

The most exhaustive classifications in the educational field cannot be practically measured and require operational adaptations. [19]

The expectation gap concerning soft skills

Despite of the rising awareness of universities and students about the importance of soft skills there is a significant gap between the students' soft skills and the employers' expectations about soft skills. The differences in skills acquired from education providers and the expectations of employers is known as the "expectation gap". The main reasons for the expectation gap are the rapid changes in the employers' expectations and the impossibility of tertiary education institutions to incorporate these requirements rapidly in the study programs. [20] Author Schulz emphasizes that for decades employers, as well as educators frequently complain about a lack in soft skills of the graduates from tertiary educational institutions. Predominantly missed are communication skills, but additional knowledge in business or project management is also ranking highly on the list of missing skills desirable for graduates entering the business world. [21]

Author Kruger presents a survey conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities proving that there is a gap between how higher education institutions believe they have prepared their students to the expectations of the labor market and how employers evaluate the graduates' readiness for work. The results indicated that university graduates are found to be well prepared in written and oral communication, innovation, complex problem-solving, critical thinking and analytic reasoning, and applying their knowledge and skills to real-world settings perceived by about 25% of the surveyed employers. However, results showed that more than 60% of graduates rate themselves as well prepared in terms of these soft skills. The result underlines that tertiary education must identify innovative and active methods to measure and communicate their graduates' accomplishment. [22]

The majority of the participants of research obtained in Malaysia in 2017 agreed that universities are dedicated to providing technical skills training effectively compared to the development of soft skills of their students. This is because most of the university courses are

planned to train students a specific capability, therefore university graduates are lacking in communication and interpersonal, problem-solving, team-working, and critical and creative thinking skills. [23]

A research from the accounting industry in New Zealand shows that the employers' expectations have changed following global transformation of business operations and require both accounting and generic proficiencies. The pace at which vocational education providers update and incorporate these required skills is slower than changes in the business environment. Most tertiary education accounting courses have not significantly changed from teaching traditional accounting principles and theories to innovative course contents that include the technical and generic skills required in accounting practice, such as analysis of facts to generate information for business decision making and emotional intelligence, which are described in as non-technical skills. Consequently, employers are sometimes concerned about the mismatch between accounting graduates' skills and the expectations employers have of those skills. It is important to underline that the gap between employers' expectations concerning technical accounting skills and the skills that tertiary accounting graduates acquire during their studies is not unique to the accounting discipline, the situation concerning engineering is very similar. [24]

The findings of a study from Greece also present an expectation gap concerning MBA study programs. The role of business schools and their MBA programs are to provide their students with the essential skills to connect business education to business practice. The research results indicate that an MBA degree contributes considerably to most of the managerial skills, although relevant criticisms regarding a gap between MBA programs and business needs are not groundless. The main argument regarding MBA studies concerns the gap between theory (general knowledge offered by the relevant courses) and practice (real business needs), arguing that the knowledge and skills delivered by the MBA programs relate poorly to practitioners' needs. This is proven by the MBA graduates' perceptions, the level of skills provided by their degree do not fully meet the level of managerial skills needed in real business. [25]

The empirical study from Australia also supported the gap between theory and practice and concluded that Australian MBA graduates

lack interpersonal and business-engagement content and fail to meet business needs. In addition, the results of a survey obtained among practicing managers revealed that the most important expectations from the labor market towards MBA graduates include interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, communication skills and capacity for business ethics. [26] Authors Baruch and Peiperl also stress that some of the qualities and abilities attributed to the MBA are associated with the 'hard' skills, such as research and accounting skills, whereas others concerned with general managerial competencies such as career management, decision-making and working in teams. [27]

A survey conducted by the *Financial Times* indicated that soft skills, such as the ability to work within a team and with a wide variety of people, were rated as the most valuable skills MBA graduates should have. [28] Some MBA graduates cannot meet the above-mentioned expectations unless they have graduated from reputable universities or have adequate work experience. The first reason for this negative perception might be due to the changing nature of the business school model, from in-person lectures to fully-online MBA programs. The second reason is that MBA programs are often criticized for not imbuing their graduates with the needed soft skills and ethical behavior, both of which are necessary in a corporate world. Soft skills would require not just theories but actions - actual practices and students may best acquire them through experientially learning. [29]

Overall, it can be concluded that a typical MBA program seems to assist graduates in enhancing managerial skills, though not at the level required by their employers. It also helps MBA holders to find enriching jobs with increasing compensation over time. On the other hand, it exerts a moderate to negligible influence on the selection/hiring process, job hopping and certainly on promotions. [30]

The development of students' soft skills

As during the last decades, the perceived importance of soft skills has increased significantly, it is of high importance for everyone to acquire adequate skills beyond academic or technical knowledge. Skills such as digital literacy, independent and autonomous learning, open-

ness to criticism, assertiveness or social interaction and empathy, generally known as soft skills, play a key role. Despite this growing interest on the introduction of soft skills in the curricula, there is no common understanding about what skills are important, or how to teach or assess them. In fact, the way soft skills are being taught and assessed in different countries and educational institutions is very diverse and this is an issue that should be addressed. [31]

Promoting soft skills of university students is a win-win situation. The students benefit from personal training; the educational institutions benefit from providing real comprehensive training, thus complying with basic institutional principles; the community benefits because it is served by professionals in training while, at the same time, students increase their transversal skills. The development of soft skills requires from universities some kind of fieldwork with communities and families close to the educational environment that can benefit from the technical or disciplinary skills that the students develop. Another basic pillar of training in soft skills is interdisciplinary as it is believed that it is not the task of educators alone, but the responsibility of psychologists, counselors, and other actors involved in the teaching and learning process. The third pillar is considering the cost of students' integral training as an investment where there is no loss. [32]

University lecturers have a special responsibility regarding soft skills, because during students' studies they have major impact on the development of their soft skills. Lecturers should actively practice soft skills with their students. A very effective and efficient way of doing this is to include soft skills training into the teaching of hard skills. As a positive side effect, the lessons will become more attractive, which in turn will increase the success rate of learners. Students need to adopt an active role where they can experience their capabilities, strengths and weaknesses in relation to soft skills. As a result, many different approaches are being considered, usually as some kind of role-playing game, or involving a classroom debate. The analysis of the literature shows that the main strategies used to develop soft skills in the university context comprise the design of activities linked to the curriculum that allow practical application. [33]

Author Schulz identified two methods of learning or improving soft skills. One way is enrolling for formal training with the advanta-

ge of having some kind of certificate at the end of the course, which might come in handy for job applications, but it is not always guaranteed that a certain course actually successfully enhanced a person's soft skills. The other way of acquiring soft skills is self-training, usually based on books and e-learning. A very pleasant way of self-training one's soft skills is frequent socializing with friends, colleagues and other members of society with the purpose in mind to enhance certain soft skills. There are a lots of communication skills, which can be practiced while chatting and discussing with others in an informal manner: language proficiency in general, listening, discussing, etiquette, self-esteem, or body language. [34]

Focusing on the development of soft skills at tertiary education a formal approach would be to incorporate soft skills subjects into a study program's curriculum. On lower levels a course may require students to do a bit of research and to present their results to the class afterwards. On graduate level a course on management skills, including some communication skills together with the management of time, conflict management or cultural issues would be useful. However, very often the curricula are already overloaded with hard skills courses, making it almost impossible to add or substitute courses. A very elegant way of offering soft skills training to students is to embed it into the teaching of hard skills. This way, no changes to a program's curriculum are necessary, instead the change will be reflected in the lecturers' teaching methodology requiring some re-thinking and re-planning of existing hard skill courses. [35]

Author Tang considers that there are four basic questions that should be answered while lecturers are designing activities for their courses. The four questions are including the purpose of this activity and the importance, what kinds of soft skill are developed through the teaching activity, and the methods that the students can apply what they have learned in their workplace. Focusing on the methods of developing soft skills Tang suggests that the employment-related skills such as critical thinking and communication skills can be embedded in role-playing instructional activities. Team-working skill can be developed in group work instructional activities. Other than soft skills can be taught in weekly teaching courses, companies who involved as parts of the university internship program can integrate these soft skills in those activities within their internship training.

Additionally, some of the participants highlighted the importance of coaching and mentoring in order to sustain these soft skills. Another proposal is that the advisory boards of each faculty in higher education institutions should include practitioners so that they can constantly appraise their program and their instructional methods according to the board members' feedback. In order to enhance graduate employability, faculty should include externships into their programs with the aim to develop scholars' professional experiences. A substantial follow-up such as the faculty can survey the employers regarding their scholars' performance after six months of the students' placement. [36]

Caeiro-Rodriguez, et al. analyzed the promotion and teaching of soft skills in higher education across five European countries: Greece, Estonia, Denmark, Portugal and Spain. The research provides an overview of the best practices on these countries, focusing also on technological solutions to actually enable the development of soft skills. In their research students were asked if they thought that the current educational system allowed individuals to develop the skills that they consider to be important in their academic and future professional careers. Students mostly tended to provide a negative answer (45%) although the number of undecided students was equally high (41%) and only 14% responded positively. The students acknowledge the existence of a variety of pedagogical methods to teach and learn soft skills. However, they tend to value most those with which they are more familiar, such as those directly involving teamwork or those applied in regular course activities (making decisions, solving problems, etc.). [37]

The research from Indonesia focused on four soft skills during an MBA program in Indonesia: teamwork, communication, ethical responsibility, and leadership based on an outdoor training. The study offers two recommendations that could improve the effectiveness of the training, especially in behavioral change. The first recommendation concerns the timing of the training announcement and schedule. The other is a clear understanding of the purpose and goal of the training, and the training activities. These suggested enhancements could increase participants' acceptance levels of the training events and improve their level of absorption in the training inputs. The enhancements are also expected to create a positive atmosphere,

one in which the participants can completely concentrate on learning throughout the training session. [38]

Author Tang analyzed students' soft skill development based on focus groups from Thailand, United Kingdom and Vietnam. The results of the study indicated that graduates believed their education and skills were sufficient and higher education institutions reflected their confidence in preparing their scholars for the transition to the workplace. Unfortunately, literature reviews indicated that new graduates are found to be lacked essential soft skills for employment, revealing impractical expectations and demands for higher wages by graduates as examples. Such distinct viewpoints must be taken into consideration for effective resolutions to enhance the graduate employability. It can be concluded that employers are seeking for graduates who are well-informed and experienced and simultaneously retain the required characteristics. The research results suggest to higher education institutions to redirect their resources from classroom-based initiatives to employment-based training and internships to enhance graduates' soft skills thus provide immediate projections and support graduates in the transitional stage into employment. [39]

In the last few decades, companies in Serbia – like other organizations world-wide - have been faced with numerous challenges, such as globalization, growing competition, the emergence of new information and communication technologies. [40] New technologies, environmental and climate concerns, globalization, shifts and uncertainties caused by the Covid-19 pandemic are all disrupting, reshaping, and transforming today's business environment in Serbia, too. [41] Companies need competent and talented employees who have the soft skills which will help them to adopt to the changing business context. Research conducted in 2011 in Serbia showed that enthusiasm, teamwork, flexibility and communication skills are the highly ranked soft skills what by managers from all sectors expect from their employees. [42]

The research of Milić et al. (2023) on perception of engineering students in Serbia has shown that when it comes to the importance of various soft skills needed for future careers, students rated teamwork and communication skills as the most important, and creativity and leadership as the least important soft skills. Students rated their own levels of soft skills, problem solving, and flexibility/adaptability

were rated with the highest scores, while presentation skills and stress management were ranked lowest. The results show that students are becoming more aware of the importance of non-technical skills. But there is still a gap between the importance level of skills needed for future work and the level of student's self-assessment of soft skills. The results suggest that educational institutions, professors, students and companies have to cooperate in order to succeed. [43]

Methods

In order to analyze the students' current perception on their soft skills a questionnaire-based field research was conducted, as a part of international study on the importance of students' soft skills. As the questionnaire was filled out by the students of Faculty of Economics in Subotica, University of Novi Sad, Serbia, it may be considered as pilot research for Serbia. The on-line anonymous questionnaire was filled out by university students of all levels (bachelor, master and PhD students) from October 2022 till January 2023. The total number of respondents was 245. The questions were focusing on the students' perceptions on their soft skills, the students' opinion about the employers' expectations and the students' perception on how they meet those expectations. The figures 1, 2 and 3 show the respondents demographic data, while figure 4 presents the respondents' structure based on their work experience.

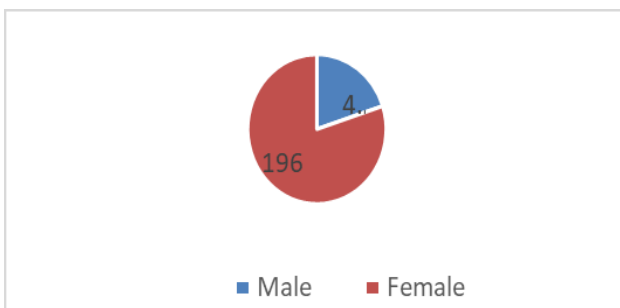


Figure 1: Sample structure regarding respondents' gender.

Source: Authors' research

The majority of the respondents (about 80%) were female, and it mainly represents the students' structure at Faculty of Economics in Subotica, University of Novi Sad, as the majority of students are female. Figure 2 presents the respondents' structure due to their age.

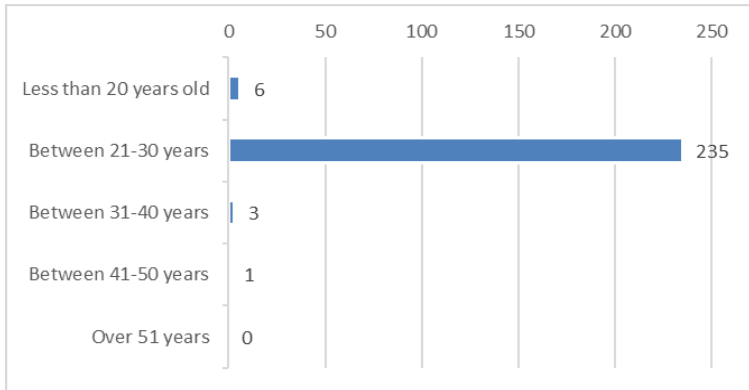


Figure 2: Sample structure regarding respondents' age
 Source: Authors' research

The respondents' age distribution shows that the great majority (96%) of respondents is between 21 and 29 years. It is important to note that in Serbia children begin the elementary school with 7 years, not with 6 years as it is the case in Hungary and other European countries. The older students (older than 30 years) make only about 4% of the sample. It also represents the students' structure at the faculty, as the share of older students is significantly lower than in the EU countries. Figure 3 gives an insight about the respondents' highest qualification.

The two thirds (66%) of the interviewees are master students, with college or university education, while one thirds of respondents are undergraduate students. This structure does not represent the faculty's students, as the majority are undergraduate students.

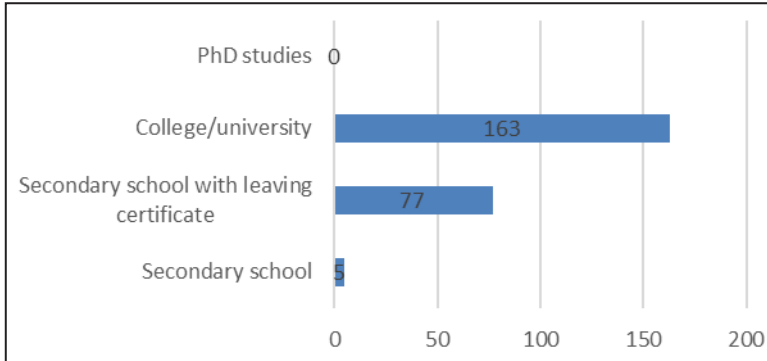


Figure 3: Sample structure concerning respondents' highest qualification. Source: Authors' research

Figure 4 shows the structure of respondents based on the length of their work experience.

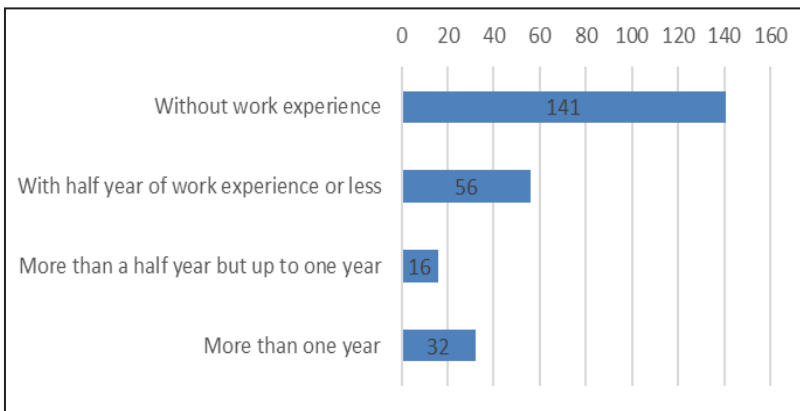


Figure 4: Sample structure concerning respondents' work experience. Source: Authors' research

The majority (58%) of analyzed students has no work experience, while about 23% of them have worked for a period between half a year and one year. It represents the students' structure at the faculty, as the share of students with work experience is significantly lower than in the EU countries.

Results and discussion

The research on the students' perception of their soft skills analyzed different aspects, but in this paper we show the following data: the respondents' perceptions on employers' expectations from candidates with tertiary education, students' perceptions on the level of their soft skills, students' perception on how well they meet the employers' expectations, respondents' perception on where they can improve their soft skills, and their perception on who may influence the development of soft skills.

First the interviewees were asked to identify the most important soft skills the employers expect from a candidate with a university education and to value how do they meet these requirements concerning the soft skills. A five-point Likert scale was used to document the answers. Table 1 presents the students' perception about the ten most important skills employers expect from university graduates and their perception on how they meet these expectations. The means and the standard deviation data are presented.

According to the obtained data students consider that employers expect from university graduates the following skills: communication skills, language skills, teamwork, planning and problem solving, flexibility and creativity. Based on the students' self-evaluation they have the highest level of communication skills, teamwork skills, planning and organization skills and flexibility. The students consider that they have lower level of language skills and presentation skills. Students assume that they meet the employers' requirements the best concerning their ability to work in teams, the group of communication skills and flexibility.

*Table 1: The respondents' perceptions about soft skills
(1- not important at all 5-the most important)*

The most important skills	Students' perception on employers' expectations from candidates with tertiary education		Students' perceptions on the level of their soft skills		Students' perception on how well they meet the employers' expectations	
	Mean (1-5)	Stand. dev.	Mean (1-5)	Stand. dev.	Mean (1-5)	Stand. dev.
Communication skills	4.48	0,808	4.28	0,761	4.24	0,838
Good communication skills	4.48	0,771	4.38	0,793	4.19	0,818
Language skills	4.46	0,765	3.77	0,990	4.01	0,889
Ability to work in team	4.40	0,832	4.29	0,878	4.26	0,786
Planning and organizational skills	4.40	0,775	4.27	0,790	4.11	0,884
Problem solving	4.38	0,838	4.04	0,836	4.07	0,822
Flexibility	4.34	0,851	4.26	0,808	4.17	0,817
Presentation skills	4.32	0,767	3.96	1,022	4.02	0,925
Creativity	4.27	0,873	4.01	0,943	4.03	0,903
Time management	4.26	0,822	4.02	0,936	4.01	0,896

Source: Authors' research

The questionnaire consisted a multiple answer question concerning what students think where they can improve their soft skills. The answers are presented in Figure 5.

The respondents consider that the most important place to improve soft skills is the workplace, as 78% of them choose this alternative. The second-best place to improve soft skills is among friends, as about 40% of students marked this answer. The third place for the improve-

ment of soft skills, according to our respondents, is at school, as 40% of them choose this alternative.

At last, we present the data on students' perception on who influences them in developing their soft skills based on the answers to a multiple-choice question.

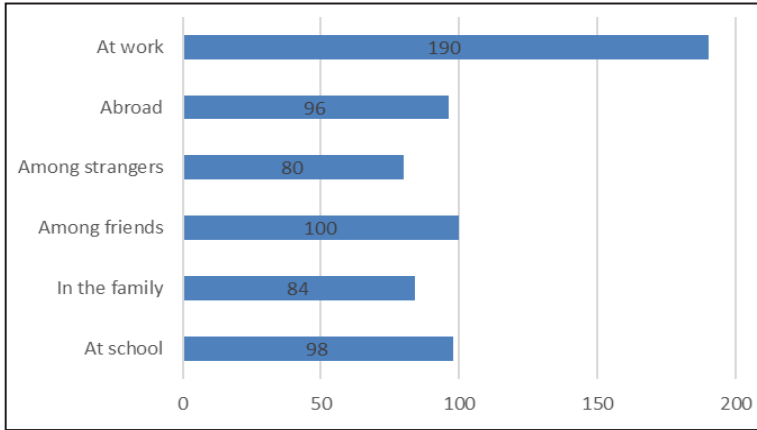


Figure 5: Respondents' perception on where they can improve their soft skills. Source: Authors' research

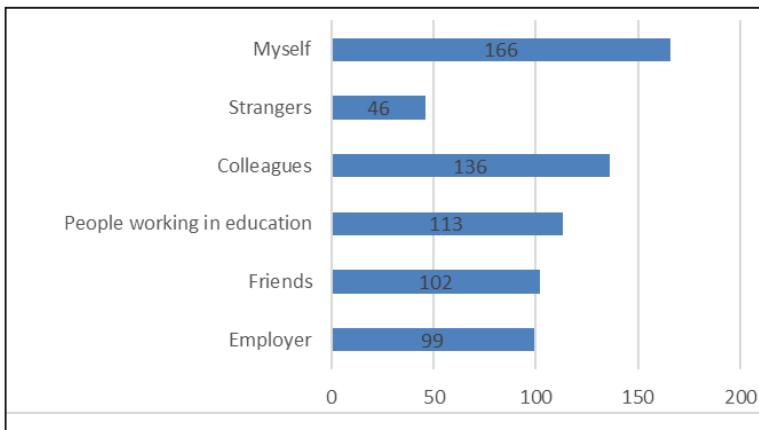


Figure 6: Respondents' perception on who may influence the development of their soft skills. Source: Authors' research

The obtained answers show that young tertiary educated people consider that they influence themselves the most regarding the development of soft skills (68% choose this alternative). Besides, their colleagues (55%) and people working in education (46%) may have a significant influence on the development of their soft skills.

Based on the results of the questionnaire-based research it can be concluded that the situation in Serbia concerning the importance of soft skills in tertiary education is similar to the situation presented in the literature. Students consider soft skills very important for their employability, they are aware of the employers' expectations and consider that they roughly meet those expectations. The best fit is found considering the ability to work in team, communication skills and flexibility. Besides, there is an expectation gap, as students assume that they have a lower level of skills than expected by the employers, mainly considering languages skills and presentation skills.

The importance of tertiary education in developing soft skills in Serbia is moderate, according to the students' perception as they consider that they can better improve their soft skills at work or among friends, than at school. But it is promising that they claim that beside themselves and their colleagues, people in education may have an influence on the development of their soft skills. The fact that students consider that they themselves have the highest influence on the development of soft skills is hopeful and is in line with the conclusion of cited authors, who emphasize that soft skill development require the active role of students and the of self-training.

Conclusions

The industrial revolution 4.0 requires highly competent employees who have professional competences and soft skills to successfully cooperate in the global business context. This is why universities have to introduce study programs which prepares students for the changing contexts and develop not only their knowledge, but soft skills, too. The development of soft skills during a formal tertiary education is challenging as soft skills form the knowledge that is in the minds of humans and is highly personal so that transformation requires personal interaction. Even though universities and students have realized

the importance of soft skills there is often a gap between the structure and level of students' soft skills and the employers' expectations. The rapid changes in the business context result in a shift between the employers' expectations and the possibility of tertiary education institutions to incorporate these requirements rapidly in the study programs, risking the adequate employability of students. There are numerous examples of the intention of faculties to develop soft skills. It is important to note that students should be aware of the importance of soft skills and encouraged to enhance them.

The most widespread approach is to incorporate soft skills subjects into a study program's curriculum. But very often the curricula are already overloaded with hard skills courses, making it almost impossible to add or substitute courses. Furthermore, some lecturers might be ignorant of the importance of soft skills and hence, do not support dedicated courses in this regard. A more efficient way of offering soft skills training to students is to embed it into the teaching of hard skills. But it may be reflected in the lecturers' teaching methodology requiring some re-thinking and re-planning of existing hard skill courses.

The aim of the empirical part of the paper was to present the research results on the students' soft skills in Serbia. According to the obtained data students consider that employers expect from university graduates the following skills: communication skills, language skills, teamwork, planning and problem solving, flexibility and creativity. Based on the students' self-evaluation they have the highest level of communication skills, teamwork skills, planning and organization skills and flexibility. Students assume that they meet the employers' requirements the best concerning their ability to work in teams, the group of communication skills and flexibility.

Besides, there is an expectation gap, as students assume that they have a lower level of skills than expected by the employers, mainly considering languages skills and presentation skills. The importance of tertiary education in developing soft skills in Serbia is moderate. Students assume that that they can better improve their soft skills at work or among friends, than at school. Even though they consider that teachers have some influence on the development of their soft skills. The students consider self-training as the most effective way of developing soft skills.

The obtained data are in line with the conclusions of other researches world-wide as the results demonstrate that students of economy from Serbia, University of Novi Sad are aware of the importance of soft skills and the requirements of employers, but there is still an expectation gap. In comparison to the perception of Serbian students of engineering – presented in the research of Milić et al (2023) - students of economy consider communication and leadership skills as more important.

The practical implication of the research is that the results of the pilot research from Faculty of Economics, University of Novi Sad may be useful in creation of new study programs for future graduates of economy and business administration in Serbia and in the region. It is important to incorporate interactive teaching methods into the hard-skill courses in order to develop teamwork, and problem solving and flexibility of students. Besides, introducing soft skill courses, like communication or leadership may significantly develop the students' employability. In the development of new curriculum and study courses it will be recommended to involve the representatives of local employers, too. The limitations of the study apply to the pilot character of the study, the number of respondents and the focus on only one faculty of economy from Serbia.

References

1. Guerra-Báez, S. P. (2019). A panoramic review of soft skills training in university students. *Psicologia Escolar e Educacional*, 23.
2. Kember, D., Leung, D. Y., & Ma, R. S. (2007). Characterizing learning environments capable of nurturing generic capabilities in higher education. *Research in Higher Education*, 48, 609-632.
3. Tang, K. N. (2019). Beyond Employability: Embedding Soft Skills in Higher Education. *Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology-TOJET*, 18(2), 1-9.
4. Polanyi, M. (1966). The logic of tacit inference. *Philosophy*, 41(155), 1-18.
5. Tang, K. N. (2019). Beyond Employability: Embedding Soft Skills in Higher Education. *Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology-TOJET*, 18(2), 1-9.

6. Guerra-Báez, S. P. (2019). A panoramic review of soft skills training in university students. *Psicologia Escolar e Educacional*, 23.
7. Rainsbury, E., Hodges, D. L., Burchell, N., & Lay, M. C. (2002). Ranking workplace competencies: Student and graduate perceptions.
8. Asbari, M., Purwanto, A., Ong, F., Mustikasiwi, A., Maesaroh, S., Mustofa, M., ... & Andriyani, Y. (2020). Impact of Hard Skills, Soft Skills and Organizational Culture: Lecturer Innovation Competencies as Mediating. *EduPsyCouns: Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling*, 2 (1), 101-121.
9. Escolà-Gascón, Á., & Gallifa, J. (2022). How to measure soft skills in the educational context: psychometric properties of the SKILLS-in-ONE questionnaire. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 74, 101155.
10. Schulz, B. (2008). The importance of soft skills: Education beyond academic knowledge.
11. Guerra-Báez, S. P. (2019). A panoramic review of soft skills training in university students. *Psicologia Escolar e Educacional*, 23.
12. Escolà-Gascón, Á., & Gallifa, J. (2022). How to measure soft skills in the educational context: psychometric properties of the SKILLS-in-ONE questionnaire. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 74, 101155.
13. Asbari, M., Purwanto, A., Ong, F., Mustikasiwi, A., Maesaroh, S., Mustofa, M., ... & Andriyani, Y. (2020). Impact of Hard Skills, Soft Skills and Organizational Culture: Lecturer Innovation Competencies as Mediating. *EduPsyCouns: Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling*, 2 (1), 101-121.
14. Kallioinen, O. (2010). Defining and Comparing Generic Competences in Higher Education. *European Educational Research Journal*, 9(1), 56-68.
15. Kechagias, K. (2011). Teaching and assessing soft skills.
16. Robles, M. M. (2012). Executive perceptions of the top 10 soft skills needed in today's workplace. *Business communication quarterly*, 75(4), 453-465.
17. Escolà-Gascón, Á., & Gallifa, J. (2022). How to measure soft skills in the educational context: psychometric properties of the SKILLS-in-ONE questionnaire. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 74, 101155.

18. Caeiro-Rodríguez, M., Manso-Vázquez, M., Mikic-Fonte, F. A., Llamas-Nistal, M., Fernández-Iglesias, M. J., Tsalapatas, H., ... & Sørensen, L. T. (2021). Teaching soft skills in engineering education: an European perspective. *IEEE Access*, 9, 29222-29242.
19. Escolà-Gascón, Á., & Gallifa, J. (2022). How to measure soft skills in the educational context: psychometric properties of the SKILLS-in-ONE questionnaire. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 74, 101155.
20. Edeigba, J. (2022). Employers' expectations of accounting skills from vocational education providers: The expectation gap between employers and ITPs. *The International Journal of Management Education*, 20(3), 100674.
21. Schulz, B. (2008). The importance of soft skills: Education beyond academic knowledge.
22. Kruger, K. (2015). US universities should follow UK in promoting students' soft skills'. *Times Higher Education*.
23. Tang, K. N. (2019). Beyond Employability: Embedding Soft Skills in Higher Education. *Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology-TOJET*, 18(2), 1-9.
24. Edeigba, J. (2022). Employers' expectations of accounting skills from vocational education providers: The expectation gap between employers and ITPs. *The International Journal of Management Education*, 20(3), 100674.
25. Mihail, D. M., & Kloutsiniotis, P. V. (2014). The impact of an MBA on managerial skills and career advancement: The Greek case. *The International Journal of Management Education*, 12(3), 212-222.
26. Segon, M., & Booth, C. (2012). Are MBAs meeting business's needs. *World Journal of Management*, 4(2), 1-13.
27. Baruch, Y., & Peiperl, M. (2000). The impact of an MBA on graduate careers. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 10(2), 69-90.
28. Richardson, J. C., Maeda, Y., Lv, J., & Caskurlu, S. (2017). Social presence in relation to students' satisfaction and learning in the online environment: A meta-analysis. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 71, 402-417.
29. Ginting, H., Mahiranissa, A., Bektı, R., & Febriansyah, H. (2020). The effect of outing Team Building training on soft skills among MBA students. *The International Journal of Management Education*, 18(3), 100423.

30. Mihail, D. M., & Kloutsiniotis, P. V. (2014). The impact of an MBA on managerial skills and career advancement: The Greek case. *The International Journal of Management Education*, 12(3), 212-222.
31. Caeiro-Rodríguez, M., Manso-Vázquez, M., Mikic-Fonte, F. A., Llamas-Nistal, M., Fernández-Iglesias, M. J., Tsalapatas, H., ... & Sørensen, L. T. (2021). Teaching soft skills in engineering education: an European perspective. *IEEE Access*, 9, 29222-29242.
32. Guerra-Báez, S. P. (2019). A panoramic review of soft skills training in university students. *Psicología Escolar e Educacional*, 23.
33. Ibidem
34. Schulz, B. (2008). The importance of soft skills: Education beyond academic knowledge.
35. Ibidem
36. Tang, K. N. (2019). Beyond Employability: Embedding Soft Skills in Higher Education. *Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology-TOJET*, 18(2), 1-9.
37. Caeiro-Rodríguez, M., Manso-Vázquez, M., Mikic-Fonte, F. A., Llamas-Nistal, M., Fernández-Iglesias, M. J., Tsalapatas, H., ... & Sørensen, L. T. (2021). Teaching soft skills in engineering education: an European perspective. *IEEE Access*, 9, 29222-29242.
38. Ginting, H., Mahiranissa, A., Bekti, R., & Febriansyah, H. (2020). The effect of outing Team Building training on soft skills among MBA students. *The International Journal of Management Education*, 18(3), 100423.
39. Tang, K. N. (2019). Beyond Employability: Embedding Soft Skills in Higher Education. *Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology-TOJET*, 18(2), 1-9.
40. Sretenović, S., Slavković, M., & Stojanović-Aleksić, V. (2022). Conceptual framework of remote working in Serbia: towards gender differences. *Anali Ekonomskog fakulteta u Subotici*, 58(48), 51-64.
41. Mašić, B., Dželetović, M., & Nešić, S. (2022). Big data analytics as a management tool: an overview, trends and challenges. *Anali Ekonomskog fakulteta u Subotici*, 58(48), 101-118.
42. Babić, V., & Slavković, M. (2011, June). Soft and hard skills development: a current situation in Serbian companies. In *Proceedings of the Management, Knowledge and Learning International Conference* (pp. 407-414).

43. Milić, Bojana, Jelena Spajić, Danijela Lalić, Jelena Ćulibrk, and Dunja Bošković (2023). Assessing soft skills in information systems engineering students: importance and self-assessment. Proceedings of IS2023 International scientific conference.

Publikálás a Business & Diplomacy Review folyóiratban

A Folyóirat az alábbi témákhoz kapcsolódó kéziratokat fogad be lektorálásra:

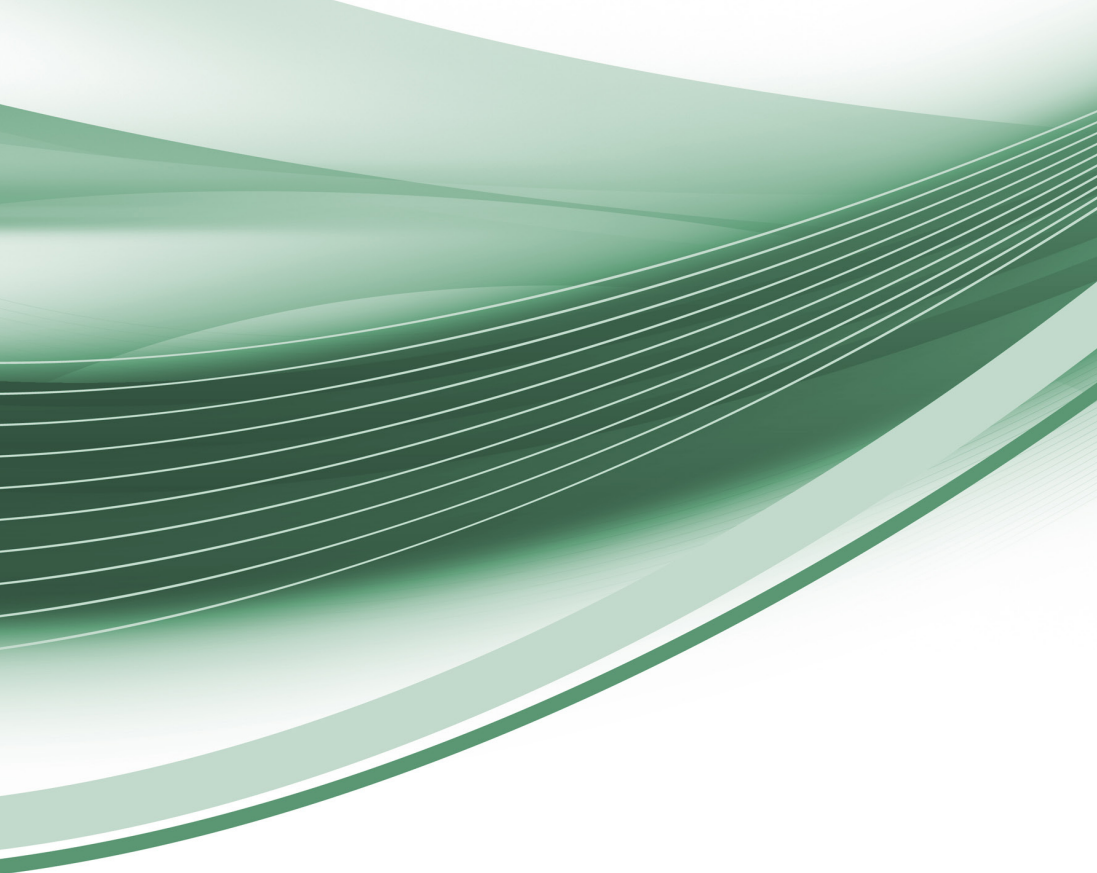
- gazdaság,
- kereskedelem,
- pénzügyek,
- nemzetközi kapcsolatok,
- diplomácia,
- nemzetközi kommunikáció
- társadalomtudományok;
- közgazdasági tudományok.

A tanulmány absztraktja minden esetben angol nyelvű. A tanulmány magyar vagy angol nyelvű, amelynek terjedelme 30 000–40 000 leütés (az absztrakttal együtt).

A kéziratok előzetes befogadásának feltételei:

- a kézirat és annak szerzői megfelelnek a Folyóirat etikai szabályainak;
- a kézirat, illetve ahhoz tartalmában nagyon hasonló tanulmányt még nem publikálták;
- a benyújtott kézirat megfelel a formai követelményeknek.

A Folyóirat a szerzőknek tiszteletdíjat nem fizet. A Folyóirat minden egyes befogadott kézirat esetében kettős vaklektorálást alkalmaz, ami azt jelenti, hogy az anonimalizált anyagot a szerzők által nem ismert lektorok értékelik. A Folyóirat csak abban az esetben fogad be kéziratot publikálásra, ha azt mind a két vaklektor publikálásra ajánlja, és vaklektor(ok) által kért javításokat/kiegészítéseket a szerző(k) végrehajtotta/ák. Amennyiben az egyik lektor javításokkal publikálásra ajánlja a kéziratot, míg a másik nem, akkor a javítások után a témában jártas újabb vaklektornak kell értékelnie az anyagot. Akkor minősül egy tanulmány tartalmában nagyon hasonlóknak egy korábbi tanulmányhoz képest, ha azok egyezősége 60% felett van. A szerzők minden egyes esetben kötelesek a vaklektorok által írt kifogásokra/javaslatokra tételesen írásban reagálni.



Kiadja: Budapesti Gazdasági Egyetem, Budapest

ISSN 3004-0116
HU ISSN 3004-0116