Implementation of information competencies as key employment skills at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

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Abstract - In order to improve the quality of their study programs, universities/faculties today are facing increasing demands to include employment skills into their curricula in order to maximize the potential of their students for a successful career. One of the key aspects in developing such skills is increasing students' employability - a set of skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. While there is a broad consensus amongst key stakeholders in the process (HEI, employers, students) on the importance of addressing employment skills within higher education, there are still open questions on how this can be achieved. While universities/faculties tend to put more emphasis on developing specific knowledge and skills within their field of education, a number of reports issued by employers urged them to make more explicit efforts to develop the "transferable" or "generic" skills needed in many types of high-level employment. In an ever increasing world of information, as one of the core components of these generic skills is developing information competencies – skill set needed for effective gathering, evaluating and communicating information in all its forms and contexts. This paper aims to explore how these information competencies are implemented at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb by conducting research across its study programs on the masters' level. Following that approach, this research will provide a snapshot of current situation and give recommendations on possible optimizations in including information competences into the curricula at the faculty level.

I. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In the wake of rapid growth in higher education and the increase in global market competition experienced by many employers, universities came under intense pressure to equip graduates with more than just the academic skills traditionally represented by a subject discipline and a class of degree. A number of reports issued by employers' associations and HEI organizations urged universities to make more explicit efforts to develop the 'key', 'core', 'transferable' and/or 'generic' skills needed in many types of high-level employment [1].

Head et al., [2] list studies have been published about employers' perceptions of information literacy needs throughout the workplace [3] [4]. In these studies, most employers were unfamiliar with the phrase "information literacy", yet they agreed it was important for employees to be able to find, evaluate, and use information. Employers frequently had a difficult time distinguishing information literacy and research skills from other skills such as presentation, writing, and technology competency. Authors conclude that these studies show that employers place a higher premium on graduates' information competencies, but the results do not say which information competencies are important in the workplace and why [2].

In defining what those skills should be some authors are using the term "core" for discipline-specific skills, and "generic" to represent "the so-called transferable skills that can support study in any discipline" [5]. Developing those generic skills is increasing students' employability - a set of skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy [6]. For some employers, even the degree subject studied is not as important as the graduates' ability to handle complex information and communicate it effectively and that graduate recruiters want a variety of other skills, personal and intellectual attributes, rather than specialist subject knowledge [7].

In an ever increasing world of information, as one of the core components of these generic/transferrable skills for graduate students is developing information competencies – skill set needed for effective gathering, evaluating and communicating information in all its forms and contexts [8]. In this context, becoming information literate is considered a product that can be measured against a set of educational standards. Claims emanate from the library

and education sectors about the generic and transferable nature of skills gathered under the term "information literacy". The concept of information literacy as a skills-based process is increasingly being adopted by training colleges and universities as a "graduate outcome" [9]. *Information literacy competency standards for higher education* [8] provide a framework for identifying what an information competent/literate individual is able to do:

- Determine the extent of information needed
- Access the needed information effectively and efficiently
- Evaluate information and its sources critically
- Incorporate selected information into one's knowledge base
- Use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose
- Understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and access and use information ethically and legally

Although these competencies are related to information technology skills, they have broader implications for the individual, the educational system, and for society, because "the information literacy of young people has not improved with the widening access to technology: in fact their apparent facility with computers disguises some worrying problems" [10].
In the tertiary education landscape the generic qualities of information literacy are emphasized. Information literacy is viewed as a suite of skills which constitute a competency, developing student information skills which can be applied across a range of academic disciplines and which prepare students for continued formal learning throughout life [11].
To provide an overview how these information competencies are implemented at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Zagreb, a research across its study programs on the masters' level is conducted. Following that approach, this research will provide a snapshot of current situation and give recommendations on possible optimizations in including information competences into the curricula at the faculty level.

II. METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

After consulting key documents on the topic, the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (ALA, 2000) was selected as a joint framework for research on which the terminology and the definition of key components of information competencies were based. Following the information competencies present in

the Standards, research across study programs [1] at the masters' level of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb was conducted in order to explore how these information competencies are implemented in the projected course outcomes.

At the faculty students can study 4 master studies from the area of Social Sciences (Information and Communication Sciences, Pedagogy, Psychology, Sociology) and 30 master studies from the area of Humanities[2].

A total of 34 master study programs were analyzed with a total of 1752 courses. Each course description and outcomes were analyzed and investigated for potential inclusion of generic information competencies in its curricula.

III. RESULTS

From 34 master programs analyzed, in 9 of them no generic information competencies were found. All of 9 studies belong in area of Humanities. Since these studies, all except one can be studied only as double major we assume that students other major could provide courses with generic information competencies.
Out of 1752 courses in 128 (7.3%) courses in 25 study programs generic competencies were identified which makes an average of 3.8 courses per study.
Further analysis of generic information competences was based on those 128 courses in which they were found.

A. Social science vs. Humanities

When comparing the presence of courses with generic information competence in Social Sciences and in Humanities, we found that all 4 studies (100%) in Social Sciences have generic information competencies, and 21 (70%) out 30 studies in Humanities have courses that include generic information competencies.
Number of courses with generic information competencies in Social science was 31 (13%) out of a total of 236. Since one of studies in Social Science is Information and Communication Sciences we assumed that it will have more courses with generic information competences than other studies. Analysis confirmed that

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[1] Graduate programs at Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb. URL:
http://www.ffzg.unizg.hr/programi/diplomski.html (20.12.2013)
[2] Anthropology, Archaeology, Art history, Comparative literature, Croatian studies, Czech language and literature, Dutch studies, English studies, Ethnology and cultural anthropology, French language and literature, German studies, Greek language and literature, History, Hungarian studies, Italian language and literature, studies of India-based languages, Latin language and literature, Linguistics, Philosophy, Phonetics, Polish language and literature, Portugal language and literature, Romanian language and literature, Russian language and literature, Slovak language and literature, South Slavic languages and literature, Spanish language and literature, Swedish language and culture, Ukrainian language and literature, Turkish studies.

assumption showing that generic competencies were found in 16 (52%) courses in Information and Communication Sciences, which is more than all other 3 Social Sciences studies combined (pedagogy, psychology, sociology) where they were found in 15 (48%) courses.

Number of subjects with generic information competences in Humanities was 97 (6.4%) out of total number of 1506.

Distribution of total number of courses per study, number of course with generic information competences (GIC) and percentage of courses with generic information competences (GIC) of total number of courses in study is shown in Fig. 1.
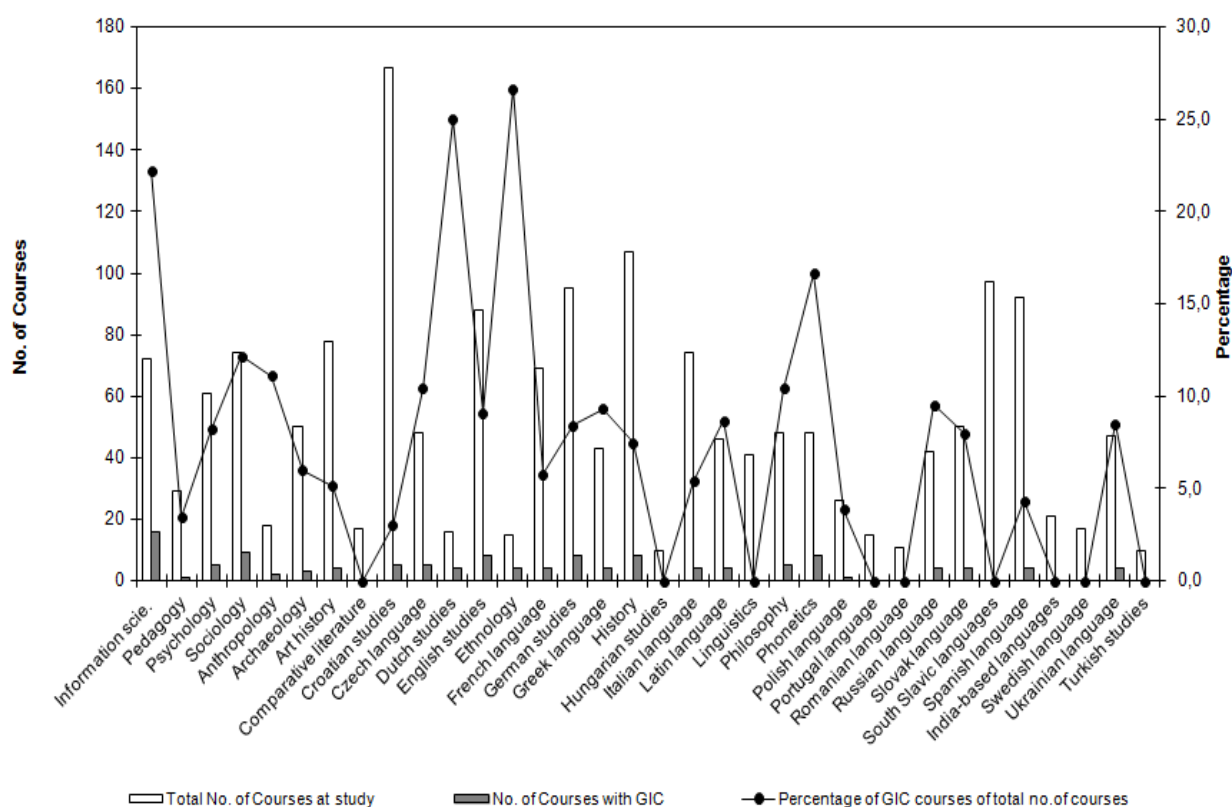

Figure 1.   Distribution of courses with generic information compentences by studies

B. Mandatory vs. Elective Courses

Since all of the studies analyzed have mandatory and elective courses, it was important to further analyze the presence of generic competencies based on those criteria. If competencies are present in any of the mandatory courses we can say that all students from that study will be obliged to acquire them. Elective courses, however students can pick and chose, which means that students will adopt those competencies only if they chose to enroll in that course.

It was shown that only 9 studies have courses with generic information competencies in its mandatory curricula. Out of 9 studies 2 of them are Social science studies and 7 are Humanities studies.

TABLE I.   DISTRIBUTION OF COURSES WITH GENERIC INFORMATION COMPENTENCES BY TYPE OF COURSE

Area	Number of courses				
	Mandatory courses		Elective courses		Total
		Teaching module		Teaching module	
Social sciences	14	2	11	4	**31**
Humanities	11	17	17	52	**97**
Total	**25**	**19**	**28**	**56**	**128**

Out of 128 courses with generic information competencies 44 (34.4%) courses are mandatory and 84 (65.6%) courses are elective courses (table 1).

Social sciences have 16 (52%) mandatory courses out of 31 courses with generic information competencies, and 15 (48%) elective courses. On average social sciences have 4 mandatory courses per study and 3.8 elective courses per study in which generic competencies were found. Most of the mandatory courses 11 (69%) are courses from Information and communication Sciences, while other 5 are all from Sociology.

Humanities have 11 (29%) mandatory courses out of 97 courses with generic information competencies, and

69 (71%) elective courses. On average Humanities have 0.9 mandatory courses per study and 2.3 elective courses per study in which generic competencies were found.

C. Teaching module

Each of 34 master studies can have they own specialization. For example English study has 4 specializations in graduate program: Literature and Culture, Linguistics, Translation and Teaching. Each student chooses only one specialization in order to achieve graduate degree. In all 34 master studies we found 80 different specializations across studies.
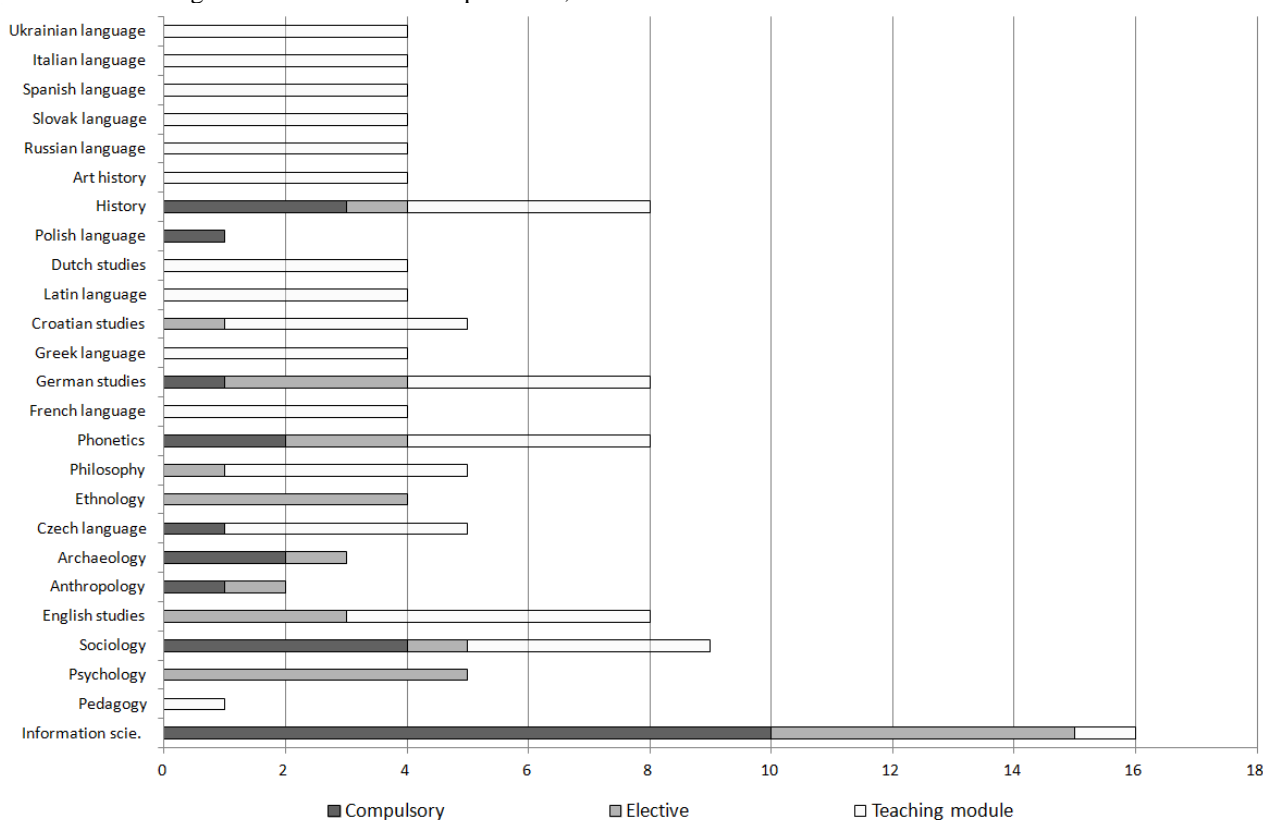

Figure 2.   Distribution of courses with generic information compentences by type of course

Analyzing 128 courses with generic information competencies, we found that a big part of those courses (75 courses or 58.6%) belong to the teaching module. Only students interested in obtaining a teaching degree have to enroll in that module.

From 75 courses in teaching module only 19 (25.3%) are mandatory courses and 56 (74.7%) are elective courses. In social science 50% of courses in teaching module are mandatory courses. While in Humanities 25% of courses in teaching module are mandatory courses (Fig. 2).

Also, 11 studies offered courses with generic information competencies that are included only in

teaching module: 1 (25%) in social science and 10 (33.3%) studies in humanities.

In we reexamine data from mandatory and elective courses by including courses from teaching module also into electives we can see that most of the courses with generic information competencies will be elective courses (Fig. 2). Out 128 courses with generic information competencies 25 (20%) courses are mandatory and 103 (80%) courses are elective courses i.e. elective courses and courses from teaching module. Social sciences have 14 (45%) mandatory courses out of 31 courses with generic information competencies, and 17 (55%) elective courses. Humanities have 11 (11%) mandatory courses

out of 97 courses with generic information competencies, and 86 (89%) elective courses (Fig. 2).

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper provided an overview how information competencies are implemented across study programs on the masters' level at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Zagreb.

A total of 34 master study programs were analyzed with a total of 1752 courses. The results have shown that 9 study programs from the area of Humanities do not teach their students generic information competence, and only in 128 (7.3%) courses in total generic competencies were identified.

Analyzing 128 courses with generic information competencies, we found that a big part of those courses (75 courses or 58.6%) belong to the teaching module which only students interested in obtaining a teaching degree have to enroll in, an in addition only 19 (25.3%) of them are mandatory courses.

Lowden, et al. [12] argue that developing graduate employability skills and attributes should be included in HEIs' strategic and faculty/departmental level planning. Universities need to promote employability skills and attributes in their mission statements, learning and teaching strategies, course framework, strategic documents and practical guidance. The analysis has shown that most of the study programs rely on either elective courses or teaching module to teach information competencies to students, with the logical exception of Information and Communication Sciences study program. Being as it is means that a large majority of students will adopt those competencies only if they chose to enroll in some of the elective courses offered at the faculty, but their study program mostly offers only "core", discipline related skills.

We can conclude that information competencies as a vital part of the employability skills aren't strategically incorporated at the Faculty level and that the implementation of information competencies is still not recognized as a vital part of the curricula being only sporadically present across different study programs.

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