

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES AS VALUE FOR THEIR PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES DEVELOPMENT AND FUTURE EMPLOYABILITY

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Abstract: The rationale behind this research is based on the claim that the students actively involved in university-gear extra-curricular activities (ECAs) in foreign languages gain higher employability than their uninvolved peers. With the recruitment market toughening and the universities' budgets tightening, the role of ECAs in increasing a student's profile needs revisiting. This paper examines the correlation between participation in free-of-charge and fee-paying ECAs in foreign languages and greater opportunities for better employment. In recognizing the value of extra-curricular input in their future, student's views of themselves are reshaped. This outcome results in an increase in the number of student-led versus teacher-initiated activities, thus developing students' autonomy, critical thinking, and cognitive skills. This article reports on the review and findings of the benefits of ECAs in a Russian economic university. The survey shows that employer-focused ECAs in foreign languages unfailingly provide university graduates with an added edge. The paper concludes with a proposal that inexperienced job-hunters have more confidence to seek better employment when armed with a portfolio of achievements in ECAs and non-degree courses.

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Introduction

Possessing a single diploma in tertiary education is no longer adequate for seeking jobs since the global recruitment market now requires graduates to diversify in their job search. Narrowing the pathways to work paradoxically necessitates a great deal of versatility from those searching for their first career opportunity. Prospective employers are longing to see potential applicants' flexible approach and seek adaptable staff that does not fear new challenges and change. Recruiters worldwide are, to a less extent, convinced of an applicant's ability to work effectively, judging solely by his or her diploma, and demand 'ready for work' graduates with clear evidence of specific job competencies. The contemporary knowledge-driven economy is witnessing a downturn in the number of employers offering induction courses or training programs for novice graduates and a secure career ladder. Fry (2009) claims that there are increasingly more qualified people available for most jobs than has been in recent memory and adds that what has changed is the level of competition and the need, more than ever, to set the applicant apart from all other contenders. Moreover, IT-powered modern society has completely reshaped the job application process. Job seekers now forward their curriculum vitae (CV) through email or complete applications on-line for screening by special corporate filters that automatically reject those that fail to conform to basic specifications and requirements.

A major commitment of modern universities is to equip their graduates, not only with standardized academic qualifications but also with an array of 'extra-curricular skills' to allow them to stand out in the crowd and boost their employability. It is a topmost concern for a business that students leave university with a wide range of employable skill sets (BIS, 2010, p. 8).

Employability, in contrast to employment, is a term increasingly used, especially in describing students and graduates. According to Fancourt and James (2005, p. 5), "employment refers to having a job, while employability, or being employable, refers to the qualities needed to maintain employment and progress in the workplace." As interpreted by Hillage and Pollard (1998), employability is the capability of gaining initial employment, maintaining jobs, and obtaining employment where required. Some universities are especially active in promoting their extra-curricular component and additional educational services and narrow the definition of employability to that applicable specifically to their graduates. For example, the University of St Mark & St John, in their Marjon Employability Strategy 2013–2015, declared that their Marjon Plus program would act as a vehicle for acknowledging extra-curricular achievements. The University spells out employability as the set of accomplishments, understandings, and personal attributes that make their "graduates more likely to gain employment and

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be successful in their chosen occupations” as stated by Kalei (2016, p. 1).

During the development stage, researchers had difficulty defining extra-curricular activities (ECA). For some time, different names for ECA co-existed, e.g., after-school activities, co-curricular activities, out-of-school activities, and extra-classroom activities causing some confusion in terminology worldwide. Today the complications are so many and varied that, in the authors’ view, it remains difficult to provide an unequivocal definition of ECAs. Generally, ECAs are attributed to those activities that are not the components of the academic curriculum but are an integral part of the education environment, comprising sports, singing, music, debate, dance, drama, and social services. Co-curricular activities (CCAs) are defined in *The International Dictionary of Education* as follows:

Activities sponsored or recognized by a school or college which are not part of the academic curriculum but are acknowledged to be an essential part of the life of an educational institution, such as sports, school bands, student newspaper etc. They may also be classed as ‘extracurricular’ i.e. activities carried on outside of the regular course of study; activities outside the usual duties of a job, as extra class activities. (Page, Terry, Thomas, & Marshall, 1977)

However, although all authors accept that ECAs take place outside of curriculum hours, there is no unanimity as to whether these activities include activities practiced within a university setting exclusively or whether they should include those conducted externally as well. Including the latter expands the definition of ECAs to an exorbitant range of activities, from all types of sports and youth associations to non-degree (L2) courses.

This paper summarizes the experiences from more than 20 years of voluntary ECAs, which have been university-gearred and professionally-focused, and of the supplementary educational service in foreign languages at the Plekhanov Russian University of Economics (PRUE). It also presents the manner in which these programs not only support students’ linguistic competence but also enhance their employment opportunities.

Literature Review

The first studies summarizing extra-curricular experiences in colleges and universities appeared as early as the 1920s. These recognized the value of ECAs and administering, guiding, and promoting the ECAs, and thus demonstrated that such activities could and, often worthily, contribute towards achieving educational aims and goals. Some educators were inclined to set the same values for curriculum and extra-curriculum programs (Koos, 1926). An early philosophy behind ECAs was that they should “grow out of curricular activities and return to curricular activities to enrich them” (Millard, 1930, p. 12, cited in Broh, 2002, p. 71).

Recent researchers in ECAs diverge to embrace a whole array of topics and outcomes. Stuart, Raht, and Smith (2011) attempted to re-vision the teacher-learner roles through ECAs. Chan (2010) suggested that the locus of control and ECAs influence the learning approaches of full-time and part-time sub-degree finance students and concludes that the deep approach is positively associated with academic achievement. Holloway (2002) studied ECAs and student motivation in educational leadership, while Clegg, Stevenson, and Willott (2010, p. 1) place considerable focus on the “blurring of boundaries in conceptions of the curricular and extra-curricular” in regards to the United Kingdom (UK) higher education.

Many researchers highlight the correlation between ECAs and academic achievement. Seow and Pan (2014) prepared a literature review on how participating in ECAs affected the academic performance of accounting students and offered three major theoretical frameworks, zero-sum, developmental, and threshold, in explaining such. Wilner (2005) studied the role of ECAs in helping students choose an appropriate career path and a support network to thrive. Yorke and Knight (2006) stated that ‘employability’ is a more complex construct than that of ‘core’ or ‘key’ skills, suggesting that employability becomes part of the curriculum. According to Yorke and Knight (2006, p. 2), “employability can be enhanced through personal development planning, but success will depend upon the extent to which students see a ‘pay-off’ for the effort that they put in.” When the students know that ECAs are included in their profile, their participation becomes more fervent. Thompson, Clark, Walker, and Whyatt (2013) admitted that although an excessively active ECA engagement can

be detrimental to academic study where it is framed in structured institutional schemes, it would enable students to increase their employability.

In Russia, research in university ECAs in foreign languages, as well as their effect on graduates' employability, is in its infancy, and corresponding publications are infrequent. Though many colleges and universities persistently organize a supplementary educational service and a variety of forms of ECAs in foreign languages, the information about these is fragmented with no serious attempts to systematize and publicize evident to date. Publications of Russian researchers' studies in ECAs in foreign languages relating to universities are second to none. However, these studies only highlight individual aspects of ECAs in foreign languages (Kuimova & Gaberling, 2014; Pashkova & Solodovnikova, 2013) and no studies connect ECAs with employability.

Data and Methodology

This study was a desk research that included theoretical literature and empirical studies on the topic of ECAs and employability. The literature included scientific periodicals, companies' and universities' websites, publications on employment, application forms, recruiters' blogs and posts from world's largest professional networks. This approach aimed to elicit information on ECAs in foreign languages that would be advisable to include in university graduates' CVs in response to likely questions during job interviews. This information would reflect their experience gained from ECAs in foreign languages, and account for the contribution of ECAs in successful job-hunting. The field research component involved collecting first-hand information from a series of interviews with human resources (HR) managers from different companies, lecturers from PRUE's Human Resources Management Department, administrative staff of PRUE's foreign languages non-degree courses, foreign language teachers from PRUE, and bachelor and master's undergraduates and alumni.

Interviews with the companies' HR practitioners and PRUE's HR for teaching staff with the knowledge and expertise in this area of research focused on the evaluation of ECAs achievements for the employment decisions. There were two questions asked: 1) Is there any benefit of ECAs in foreign languages for a graduate in the initial job-hunting? 2) If yes, then which ECAs are especially valuable for the work in the economic sector?

Interviews and panel discussions with 28 foreign language teachers provided details of their experiences in organizing various L2 teacher-gearred ECAs at PRUE and conducting non-degree courses. This activity elicited ideas for further development and improvement. To be more objective and to monitor the dynamics of the students' lifecycle in ECAs, the study used data collected from only those teachers who had worked at the Chair of Foreign Languages for more than four years.

Statistical data about students' participation in non-degree courses of foreign languages were collected from the administration of the courses, at the chairs of Foreign Languages, to analyze the breakdown of students' interests in fee-paying foreign language activities at PRUE during 2014–2016.

One-to-one interviews and communication with the undergraduates using on-line social and professional networks provided the means of collecting feedback of their positive and negative reflections from participating in ECAs in foreign languages. One-to-one interviews with former graduates working in multinational companies sought to collect their perceptions on the relevance of these activities for their current job practices and experiences.

Results and Discussion

Language Training in an Employability Context

Established in 1907, PRUE currently has over 17 000 enrolled students in bachelor, specialist, and master's degrees and supports over 100 educational programs. The university holds a practical approach towards students' instruction, thus, highlighting the entrepreneurial traditions as an essential social value. Many PRUE graduates with a decent command of L2 seek employment where the office operates in the English language. The feedback collected from our alumni indicated that among the main objectives of English language studies there should be more emphasis on training students in cross-cultural issues as well as immediacy and clarity of communication.

Undergraduates directly linked their future employability with their English language advancement, thus voicing exaggerated expectations of the curricular L2 courses. Having to act within the rigid syllabus boundaries and being well aware of the inherent limitations of both obligatory and elective L2

courses, teachers in PRUE were increasingly encouraging their students to engage in both teacher-directed and self-initiated ECAs. Additionally, to compensate for the lack of traditional classroom language practice, the enrollment for foreign language non-degree courses was promoted.

Teacher-led activities in foreign languages were on an *ad hoc* voluntary basis, but students were aware that participation in these could help them outscore their more academically gifted peers, raise their rating, and accessorize their CVs for the future. Achievements in most activities were documented by way of certificates, screenshots from the University website, photos of events, and publications, which provided students with credibility. Hence, by graduating, students can accumulate a diversified portfolio of extra-curricular achievements, demonstrate to prospective employers their language abilities, and strive for self-development and self-actualization in a recognized manner.

Most HR specialists who were questioned agreed that involvement in ECAs in foreign languages enhanced the former students' employment chances. As Julia Kosareva, the Head of PRUE's Career Development Centre wrote: "generally, the employers from economics graduates' target companies prioritize three core requirements for the successful applicant, computer literacy, advanced knowledge of English, and team-working skills." Inna Shirko, Director for Academic Activities Coordination, PRUE, contemplated that principally there are two sets of questions that can be tackled with the applicants' recollections about their participation in ECAs in foreign languages: 1) What do you consider most important for the interviewer to know? and 2) Are you able to relate the story back to the job? Petr Karasev, Vice-Rector for Education and Methodology Work, PRUE, outlined that to prove the graduates were valuable candidates there were two recommended answers. One was to tell the interviewer a story about their awards, non-degree course enrollment, interests, or hobbies, and thus, relate their success to examples that reflected well on their character (e.g., their excellent people skills). The second was to share a personal story of being involved in or initiating some project in the ECAs.

The rise of the electronic job market in recent years has accentuated the wider implementation of electronic portfolios in the recruitment process. Unlike a paper-based portfolio, which is a collection of an applicant's certificates and diplomas, an e-portfolio presents various electronic samples, such as videos, audios, as well as posts on the blogs or websites. Dudeney and Hockly (2007) believe that modern recruiters consider an e-portfolio to be a richer way of assessing a job-seeker, as it provides a much clearer idea of their achievements and personality than formal grades and test scores. E-portfolios are also becoming increasingly common in tertiary education because university graduates can include the most relevant information about themselves and highlight their interests and needs, streamlining their e-portfolios in line with the aims of their career objectives.

University-Gearred Employer-Focused ECAs in Foreign Languages

Being focused on the academic outcomes rather than their personal development, students did not always recognize the employability enhancement that their participation in ECAs could bring to them. Thus, the mission of the chair of Foreign Languages was to expose PRUE students to a better understanding of the value of ECAs. The framework of teacher-directed professionally-focused ECAs in foreign languages has been evolving in PRUE for at least 20 years. Now the chair of foreign languages has a well-established system of extra-curricular activities and additional educational service embracing bachelor, master's, and post-graduate students of all ages with different linguistic abilities. Apart from foreign language non-degree courses, organized by the chairs of foreign languages, and taking international certificate exams, which are fee-paying, all other activities are free of charge, while none are obligatory.

A traditional Week of Foreign Languages (WFL) held in November each year, which lasts up to three weeks, is the initial go-ahead impetus for involving first-year students into ECAs. The WFL's program includes such activities as drama contests when participants perform chosen episodes from books of their home reading lists, a newspaper contest to try themselves in writing articles in English, and various English-speaking countries' quizzes. All events are photographed and displayed on the faculties' pages on the PRUE website. More experienced second-year students participate in additional professionally-focused events within the WFL, which may include roundtables, workshops, and individual business presentations. The awards, ranging from certificates to two-week courses in a language school in Great Britain, encourage a plethora of students to participate eagerly. As far as

participation data were concerned, 93% of first-year full-time students typically join the events of WFL. However, this number generally decreases to approximately two-thirds of the total in the second year. This decrease occurs for two reasons: 1) students become less interested in General English activities, and 2) some students start working part-time and have less extra-curricular time.

A permanent and functional Functioning on a permanent basis a student-led English club organizes such activities as roundtables, watching and discussing movies, celebrating dates and holidays, playing language games, and questing into English speaking countries' culture. The English Club involves 9% of the first- and second-year students. Such ECAs provide an excellent opportunity to practice the language in informal situations within a circle of friends and partners and show students how to work together in teams. Thus, students learn to communicate and broaden their social network.

Numerous interdisciplinary and inter-university presentation and case-study contests attract a broad participation of undergraduates. Both individual and group presentation contests aim to improve student's public-speaking skills, help overcome the fear of the stage, and advance their computer skills; benchmark the best practices; provide knowledge transfer from senior to junior students; and offer impetus for passive listeners from the audience to try themselves next year. For example, some ambitious students participate in presentation contests for 2–3 years running until they finally win. In fact, these presentation and case-study contests are viewed by potential employers as the showroom of the brightest PRUE students. In these, students' predominant choice of topics is mostly career-focused, as they anticipate the links on the event's websites about their participation will enhance their e-portfolios.

Selection for the case-study and presentation contests usually follows a multi-stage procedure. The process restricts the number of second- and third-year students participating in the contests, with only one representative or group allowed per department. This selection results in approximately 15–20 contestants in the interdepartmental final, with every department holding semi-finals to define the representative who will compete on the final contest day.

Another form of ECAs in foreign languages involves guest lectures in English by world-famous scientists and economists. In the case when even the biggest auditorium fails to accommodate the expected number of attendees, as was during the presentation by marketing guru, Philip Kotler, in 2014, these lectures are broadcast through in-house cable television, Plekhanov-TV, for viewing in halls and lecture rooms. During such ECAs, students gradually progress from passive listening to active involvement in organizational support and from seizing unique opportunities to communicate personally with the world's leading specialists.

International and interdisciplinary research conferences crown the hierarchy of ECAs in foreign languages. These conferences include the International Research Conference Synergy of Accounting, Analysis, and Audit and the Youth Science Week that are annually organized by the chair of Foreign Languages in conjunction with subject-matter departments. Both Russian and foreign undergraduates present interim and final results of their research at the conferences, which have become a platform for regular scientific exchange for interaction of students of economics with scientists, prospective employers, university teaching staff and students from other universities and countries, and other representatives from various academic and non-academic institutions. Most conferences are joint projects of several universities, and therefore, the undergraduates have an opportunity to expand their professional network. Finally, a selection of submitted articles is published in the inter-university research conference proceedings or the internal, domestic, or international periodicals, e.g., the Proceedings of Scientific Conference International Plekhanov's Readings, or International Conference on Teaching Humanities at Economic University. Such events mostly involve senior bachelor, master's, and post-graduate students, since the writing stage of the graduation paper is approaching and the students are willing to demonstrate their academic potential.

Notably, the only fee-paying ECA, the non-degree courses of foreign languages, annually attracts 3.0–3.5% of the total number of full-time students, i.e., 250–300 students each year. The breakdown of student interests and enrollments in the non-degree courses of foreign languages at the University in 2014–2016 were as follows: 50% of these student groups were enrolled to study English as a foreign language, and 44% of these were learning English to prepare for an international examination. The international examination certificate would provide them with a competitive edge as well as the

opportunity for selection in overseas student exchange programs. The interest in such overseas studies has increased participation in ECAs organized and promoted by the foreign languages chair. The number of students taking international examinations varies from 107 to 121 according to 2012–2016 data. Another 50% of the students were studying non-English foreign languages. Those studying Spanish comprised a quarter of these, though no ECAs in this language were available for the students. The remaining 25% accounted for students learning a foreign language to diversify their potential employment portfolio. The range of available foreign languages in additional educational programs has resulted in response to student demands. For instance, the launch of Chinese, Swedish, and Italian language studying groups was due to a student-initiated activity resulting from their search for potential employment.

The advantages of active participation in university-geared and student-led ECAs in foreign languages are various, and student perceptions show such advantages have a significant input in overall personal development. The participants of ECAs emphasized that participating in the ECA increases their enthusiasm for both foreign language studies and economic disciplines, as well as enhancing their study and broadening their future professional horizons. As most ECAs have undefined outcomes, students were invited to contribute to thought-provoking and open-ended discussions to develop their critical-thinking and rhetorical abilities. The ECAs in a foreign language undoubtedly improve academic achievements by way of providing expanded language practice and access to more authentic materials. Thus, they foster linguistic competencies and facilitate a practical approach within the course. Such participation would add to the individual scholar rating as extra activities are non-obligatory, and, in no way, degrade the student's academic record. Rather, such activities would benefit the involved student's worth in comparison with peers who are uninvolved. Involvement in ECAs teaches students character-building lessons for their future study habits and other aspects of their lives. By participating and persevering in these activities, the students noticed that they gained a sense of self-confidence and self-respect. Students of average abilities often struggle with their self-esteem, and ECAs can help them find where they can stand out, thus giving their self-regard a boost. Closely connected with building character is the development of solid networking and team-building skills. Students involved in ECAs accentuated that they had extra practice on how to act appropriately in different social situations. This, in turn, would affect their overall well-being. Participation in various group projects teaches them how to compromise and work in a group. Knowledge is gained, not only from reading textbooks and listening to lectures, as students obtained an incredible amount of supplementary information and experience from their peers through ECAs. Students involved in ECAs underscored that they acquire better time management skills and learn to prioritize their commitments. Students learn about long-term pledges because when they join a club or attempt to study another foreign language, they expose themselves to that activity for a long period, thus developing a great sense of responsibility. The supplementary e-portfolios of the ECAs display a range of skills but are not reflected in a test score. As stated by Lunenburg (2010, p. 3): An important objective of the total learning process” and being the amalgamation of knowledge, ECAs are “integrative in nature because they tie together many areas of knowledge and experience. They don't provide abstract and isolated pieces of learning, but rather synthesize many aspects of real-life situations.” Both students and teaching staff benefit from cross-fertilization of ideas and close working relationships that they develop. As minimal bureaucracy was attached to these projects, a democratic approach rather than an authoritarian style of formal instruction exists. Most activities are undertaken in affiliation with the students' societies.

Most relevant, the documented extra-curricular achievements in foreign languages provide a prodigious testimony when applying for further studies (master's or post-graduate) and employment. Joining such programs and attempting to gain employment in one's own country, let alone abroad, requires a successful candidate to demonstrate abilities beyond the mainstream curriculum. University authorities and HR managers expect students to have completed more than purely theoretical work. The ECAs in which students participate reveal a great deal about them and thus would carry weight for their admission to committees by recruiters.

Conclusion

Graduates armed with a portfolio of ECA rewards presented with greater confidence in regards to gaining worthwhile employment. Achievements in ECAs in foreign languages added value to resumes

and revealed fundamental skills that employers expect in a professional environment. The ECAs in foreign languages develop employable skills, such as communication, organization, and teamwork. In line with requirements of recruiters for boosting a graduate's employability, the portfolio of undergraduate achievements diversified by the active participation in ECAs in foreign languages in universities is positively associated with success and proves the ambitions to hit the career ladder. The certificates and other forms of the documentary proof show the prospective employer that applicants, rather than graduating from 'exam factories', can also demonstrate proficiency in a foreign language and, furthermore, have developed such traits as perseverance, self-motivation, self-control, and resilience. Understanding the value of the extra-curricular input for their future reshapes students' views about them. At the onset, in most ECAs that are teacher-led there is a marked shift towards increasing the number of student-led activities. Students are invited to submit their own proposals for supplementary education service, e.g., by requesting to introduce another foreign language to the non-degree study offer and ECAs in foreign languages. Student proposals can also involve themes for research conferences. Where the value of the proposal is established after discussion in the student's group and with the chair staff, language teachers do their utmost to enable the most successful applicants to jump-start their ideas.

A properly organized and administered ECA in foreign languages not only brings increasingly more scores to future graduates but it also in many cases helps graduates out-perform their more academically advanced peers in employability. Further, it raises a university's profile among other tertiary educational establishments and business schools, both nationally and internationally. Thus, it increases the university's competitiveness. As well, ECAs in foreign languages foster cross-institutional student interaction, generate a sustainable medium for knowledge transfer, and enhance the credibility of the students' work. Perkin, Ahearn, and Lamb (2012, p. 2) considered one approach was to "offer employers the opportunity to learn about the students' activities, meet the students and engage with the institutions". The participation and attendance rates prove that students perceive ECAs in foreign languages as generating high value for their professional competencies development and future employability, notably shifting to more career-biased ECAs as the graduation is approaching.

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