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**Developing students' knowledge, skills and  
social competences in international marketing research  
– cooperation of academia and business**

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**Abstract**

This paper is a part of a larger debate concerning the determinants of high quality education, which in the long term constitutes the bases for CEE countries competitiveness. The authors attempt to answer the question regarding possible levels of modern knowledge transfer into real-life business processes as well as the benefits for higher education institutions of cooperating with business practice representatives. The aim of the paper is to present good practices in the scope of providing students with timely knowledge, skills and social competences within the course of international marketing research (IMR) conducted under the auspices of the International Business program of the University of Economics in Katowice. The paper indicates the need to deepen the cooperation between universities and companies while identifying the beneficiaries of such cooperation also among the students. Examples of student engagement in the business processes of companies within the IMR course are presented. The meaning of social competences as a key educational effect is underlined and it is indicated that the main area of shaping this kind of competences is student participation in projects directed at solving problems of companies. On the basis of the experience assembled barriers of cooperation between academia and business are indicated.

**Keywords:** transfer of knowledge; international business programs.

**JEL Classification:** A22, F23.

## **Introduction**

In regard to the managerial courses there appears a need to include students in real-life managerial processes on the grounds of cooperation between the university and business practice. Only students' participation in actual managerial processes, directed at increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of operating on the international market, will enable them to gather the necessary wealth of experience. Gathering such experience allows students to consolidate the acquired knowledge, improve the skills and shape social competences.

The aim of this paper is to present how students' knowledge, skills and social competences in regard to marketing research are developed within the international business curriculum. Furthermore the aim is to indicate the necessity to apply in the educational process diverse teaching methods oriented at building knowledge, skills and social competences expected by future employees.

In the theoretical part of the paper determinants for market decision making by companies, especially those operating in the global market, are presented. Possessing up-to-date knowledge about the market in global scale based on marketing research results is indicated as valid managerial competence. Furthermore, institutional and systemic barriers that are faced by higher education institutions in the CEE region in the process of teaching business programs are discussed.

The next part of the paper discusses the meaning of developing knowledge, skills and social competences in the scope of international marketing research among International Business graduates. With information being the key ingredient in developing successful international marketing strategies these areas seem to be a necessary condition to understand and take advantage of the changes occurring in the global environment. Hence the international marketing research course has been characterized, the syllabus of the course being oriented at filling the identified needs of diagnosing and analyzing global environment.

The further parts of the paper discuss teaching methods and techniques applied within the course oriented at providing the students with most timely knowledge as well as skills and competences useful when operating on the global market. The exemplification of the teaching routines in the scope of international marketing research in the paper is a course offered by the University of Economics in Katowice within the International Business (IB) degree program. The whole program as well as the international marketing research syllabus has been inspired by the best standards and teaching routines elaborated in higher education institutions offering IB studies all over the world. This is why the challenges and barriers presented in the text may apply to teaching IB in a wider context.

## 1. Theoretical background

The 2011 report prepared by IBM, based on the opinions of more than 1700 marketing directors from all over the world (64 countries) representing 19 economy sectors indicated four key determinants for market decision making by companies [*From stretched...* 2011]:

- exponential growth of data,
- growing role of social media,
- development of marketing channels and instruments,
- change in the demographic structure of the clients.

Companies face the challenge of gathering large amounts of information and its quick analysis. It is particularly important for the internationalized firms operating in rapidly changing international conditions, among others the evolution of clients' demographic structure. New markets are created in China and India as a result of increasing significance of younger generations with their specific consumption models and ways of company information search. In the USA and Western Europe companies face the necessity to adapt their offer the aging society of the population boom in the 1970s and 1980s. The changes occur also on the economic level and concern purchasing potential of the dynamically developing Asian countries. India is a good example with its raise in the share of middle class of above 40% within two decades. Companies which used to focus only on the affluent part of Indian customers now modify their strategies to be able to target the needs of the ever growing middle class.

The explosive growth of world trade has created huge demand for information about markets throughout the world. The need to collect information relating to international markets, to monitor trends in these markets, as well as to conduct research to determine the most effective strategies, is growing rapidly due to the global trend of expanding operations in countries outside the home market of companies. While the basic principles of marketing research are the same whether research is conducted in an international or a domestic context, the international marketing researchers are likely to encounter greater difficulties, than their domestic research counterparts. These difficulties stem from operating across national boundaries and in a diverse range of socio-cultural environments. Furthermore, the problem of comparability of research arises due to these differences. There are also a number of traps into which companies can fall when assessing foreign market entry, the most frequent one being exaggerating the size and attractiveness of the market [Arnold 2004]. Many international companies are facing the challenge of researching the fast changing markets of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), and trying to interpret the results of their market

research project in this region, compared with those from other parts of the world. However, it is often the case they do not pay much attention to differences between the CEE countries, thus perceiving them as one region, an entity labelled “former Soviet bloc”. Nonetheless, Poland and other Eastern European countries have all undergone a deep economic and social change. Whatever was true 20 or even 10 years ago, today it is irrelevant. Central and Eastern Europe constitutes a mosaic of nations and cultures exhibiting diverse purchasing power, education levels, purchasing habits, gender roles, not to mention the different languages. Those multinationals who traded in the CEE well before the fall of communism already learned that this is a complex region with a rich mix of cultures and traditions. This diversity presents enormous marketing challenge, including the necessity to adapt advertising, packaging and even recipes to local conditions. In most of the CEE countries the veneer of western superiority fell within a couple of years of the fall of the Berlin Wall and competition with local brands was reinforced by ethnocentric behavior in case of some product categories.

Hence, valid managerial competence is to possess up-to-date knowledge about the market in global scale based on marketing research results, which provide bases decreasing the risk of management decision making. Knowledge, skills and social competences within international marketing research are essential in conducting marketing activities on the international market in a professional way [Mazzarol 1998]. Companies operating in the global market face the challenge of permanently monitoring the changes exhibited by their target markets. The need to diagnose market situation is particularly important for companies operating in several country markets, having several brands in their portfolio, which often enough satisfy the same consumer need (e.g. Unilever, Procter & Gamble, Volkswagen). Precise definition of the target market as well as monitoring its stability under the behavioral and socio-cultural criteria are key marketing management areas for the contemporary manager. Hence, the constant changes in business structure of global enterprises, which adapt their organizations to regional markets conditions, among others in response to the identified standardization potential of conducting operations on global scale [Wygnański 2011].

The students of international business are likely to be encountered in their future professions with the necessity to analyze foreign market potential or evaluate the results of marketing research conducted by a professional research agency abroad. If they become marketing researchers they will participate more and more in marketing decision making. The speed of business, the flood of information provided by the new technologies and flatter organizational structures are driving this trend [Malhotra, Peterson 2001].

It seems that the key barrier in educating the students on a higher level in the CEE countries, particularly in the scope of social competences, is the lack of tradition for cooperation between universities and business. Research indicate that 80% of Polish academics have never undertaken any efforts to apply the results of their research in commercial activity and 56% of the investigated companies do not cooperate with higher education institutions. More than 60% of researchers admitted being proposed some kind of cooperation by companies, whereas 50% of the investigated companies stated never to have been proposed cooperation from universities [Orłowski 2011]. The representatives of business and academia indicate the following problems regarding cooperation [Tomkiewicz 2010]:

- limited amount of information sources, databases concerning academia-business cooperation which could enable the undertakings of such cooperation (databases of potential partners and their operations, databases of model formal documents, acts of law, the procedures implemented, solutions etc.);
- lack of elaborated models of academia-business cooperation;
- lack of university personnel dedicated to maintaining business contacts;
- lack of cooperation in the scope of providing projects potentially pursued by the students;
- problems of legal nature on the part of the universities, which make the decision making and establishing cooperation a lengthy and difficult process;
- failing to undertake the cooperation by academics, despite emerging offers on the part of business;
- insignificant number of cooperation and knowledge commercialization offers on the part of academics towards business;
- insignificant application of cooperation results of both sectors in order to popularize good practices of cooperation in the academia and business environment.

In the study entitled *Technology transfer system and the commercialization of knowledge in Poland – driving forces and barriers* the barriers of cooperation between scientific institutions and companies have been grouped into four areas of factors [Matusiak & Guliński 2010]:

- 1) structural – concerning the economy as well as research and development sector – connected with the lack of elaborated strategies and improper allocation of EU funds, as well as with low development of regional growth centers, which influences the limitation of business environment institutions creativity;
- 2) systemic – connected on the one hand with excess number of legal acts and outgrowth of regulations and on the other, with scarce regulations mobilizing the research sector and business to innovative development; this concerns in particular the provisions regulating creating spin-offs by universities and tax obligations related to non-material transfers from the scientific sector into business;

- 3) public awareness and cultural – resulting from failing to disseminate knowledge about knowledge transfer processes, their understanding and acceptance, which translates into lack of trust, awareness, low social acceptance for innovative attitudes, mutual reluctance towards cooperation and lack of conviction about tangible benefits coming from the cooperation;
- 4) competence – related – connected to the lack of sufficient level of skills and effective actions of the system participants, i.e. local authorities, university authorities and administration and entrepreneurs, in the scope of pursuing and managing innovation processes.

Working on the removal of the above barriers and problems, being significant limitation to universities and business cooperation, should be considered a priority in enhancing business education.

It seems that a well prepared teaching staff is capable of providing up-to-date knowledge and shape necessary managerial skills based on the access to most timely literature, analysis of up-to-date case studies, using commercial databases etc. Naturally within the university courses the lecturers make attempts to shape social competences using modern teaching methods such as: drama, role playing, problem solving, concept based learning, business games, practical exercises [De Juan Vigaray et al. 2010; Küster & Vila 2006; Mwasalwiba 2010]. Yet, even the most effective and engaging teaching methodology is only a simulation of real-life problems the newly employed graduates are likely to encounter [Stringfellow et al. 2006]. It seems that an adequate level of the social competences is a necessary condition of applying in practice the knowledge and skills acquired during studies. Specialist knowledge and skills acquired in the course of the studies must be backed with appropriate social competences concerning: understanding of actual conditions in which companies operate on the market, being capable of functioning within time and budget limitations, accepting the specificity of working in a multi-cultural environment or coping with the problems of large amount of decision centers in the company's structure (delegating rights, the issue of responsibility for the project) [Ghemawat 2008]. An international business graduate equipped in the described way becomes an asset of full value for any company. Furthermore, an adequate level of social competences increases the probability of quick assimilation in a multi-cultural working environment, and as a result the chance of creating added value for the company by the newly employed also raises [Gill & Lashine 2003].

## **2. Research methods**

This paper is based on the analysis of secondary sources of information, mainly international business education literature and market research for international business. Based on this the trends in business education have been identified and analyzed in the context of a course offered by the University of Economics in Katowice. A review of international marketing research textbooks is conducted and the results of in-class participant observation of both authors are applied. Furthermore two case studies, based on students pursuing real-life business projects, are described in detail to illustrate how students become the beneficiaries of the cooperation between business and academia.

## **3. Research findings and discussion**

### **3.1. Scope of international marketing research course**

International marketing research (IMR) is an advanced course integrating students' knowledge from the area of international business, marketing research, marketing strategy and business analysis. The course is compulsory part for the International Business Program for the Master level at the University of Economics in Katowice (UEK). The main aim of the course is to make students familiar with the complexities of comparative international market research analysis based on secondary sources of information as well as the methodology and specificity of direct marketing research conducted in international and multicultural settings. After completing the course the students should possess in-depth knowledge on methods, techniques and tools of obtaining information on international markets, the analysis and interpretation of data, as well as concluding about socio-economic phenomena and processes in international scale. They should be able to use this in-depth theoretical knowledge in the scope of international business and associated areas in order to interpret and analyze the position of business entities operating in international markets.

Throughout the course the students are developing skills such as the ability to plan, conduct in practice and coordinate research involving several foreign markets and on the basis of the results obtained – the ability to formulate advice regarding the needs of a particular company. After finishing the course the participants are prepared to create compound projects of international nature taking into account legal, social, economic and political aspects.

As the course is taught in English to a group of multicultural students from different countries it is also aimed at developing such social competences as the

ability to work in a group, including a multicultural one. The idea is for the students to know and understand the phenomenon of a culture gap and to be able to work effectively in such environment. As the course involves preparing the final report and research plan in multicultural groups, cooperation and division of the workload and reaching some consensus are necessary. When faced with the necessity of working together in a multicultural research team, the participants, many of whom for the first time, have to discuss, confront and participate in discussions that challenge their beliefs systems about culturally, linguistically, economically and ethnically diverse issues. They learn in practice what conceptual equivalence entails and that it is not so obvious what people around the world consider beautiful, tasty, healthy or commonly accepted. The comparative aspect of the course can be confronted directly in the classroom.

The students also get a unique opportunity to confront one of the most important phenomena affecting international marketing research i.e. the self-reference criterion (SRC). This unconscious reference to one's own cultural values, the tendency to allow one's own beliefs bias one's opinion of situations in foreign markets is the major cause for the failure of research projects [Kumar 2000]. One of the extracurricular aims of the course is to make students aware of the possible biases or assumptions that they as well as the teachers may bring to the classroom.

### **3.2. Providing knowledge, shaping skills and social competencies – methods and techniques of teaching**

The key source of information in international marketing research is secondary data due to their ready availability, relatively low cost and their usefulness in providing background information relating to a specific country or industry. Therefore high quality desk research is an important part of most international market research studies. What is more a significant increase in the use of secondary data is predicted and more and more international marketing research problems is to be addressed based on secondary data alone [Malhotra, Peterson 2001]. Within the IMR course students are encouraged to use knowledge web portals encompassing country statistics such as globalEdge, integrated online information systems such as Passport GMID (former name: Global Market Information Database) and the websites of private consultancies such as AT Kearney, providing reports on Foreign Direct Investment Confidence Index, Globalization Index (GI). The students are never asked to use data bases which require payment.

The biggest challenge in applying secondary sources of information within the course seems to be to convince students to be more critical towards the



sources of data they are referring to. As the experience shows students pay attention neither to the reliability of the source nor to the possibility of reaching the most up-to-date information available. Anything found in the Internet is perceived “good enough”. A formal data base that needs logging in or accessing through the university’s computer system is perceived as too much of an effort.

Within the course assessment students are to prepare two research documents. The first one is a comparative analysis of 3-4 country markets, entirely based on secondary sources of information and for the needs of a selected company planning to expand abroad. The ground rule is that the markets selected cannot be home markets for any participants of the research team. The second document is an international marketing direct research plan, whose purpose is to supplement the initial secondary research results. In the first case students learn the difference between absolute versus relative measures when comparing country markets, the relevance of macro versus micro environment ratios and why product market data explain more than country market data. In the second case students get familiar with the methodological considerations of researching international markets, with the focus on planning the direct research but also interpreting existing research results.

As far as the application of primary data is concerned attempts have been made to engage the students into field work. In spite of the obvious difficulties which make direct international marketing research much less accessible to students than domestic research, some accomplishments have been made. The most rewarding of those was the virtual ethnography project, where students were asked to find an international English-speaking Internet forum devoted to a subject of their interests, such as music, travel, sports, etc. After providing a quantitative description of the forum, the students were to act as passive observers and analyze the content of the statements of a selected thread, both quantitatively and qualitatively. The final task was to sign up (only in cases when the students were not regular participants of the forum, which was rare) and engage in the discussion so as to obtain the rest of the information searched for according to the observation aim specified at the beginning of the study. This involved assisting a selected company’s decision making process regarding some aspects of their strategy in the given field.

Though very rewarding, the virtual research project also proved rather time-consuming, so in some years an alternative was applied in the form of preparing a detailed direct international marketing research plan, accompanying the initial project, based on secondary sources of information. The students had to identify information voids that for the reasons provided could not be filled based on secondary sources of information alone. Following that decision problem, research

problem and research questions were identified. The students formulated research hypotheses, indicated the research scopes, proposed adequate research methodology and sample selection method. All of this was done in the view of certain country's close and distant environment factors. As a result a complete research proposal was created.

### **3.3. Developing social competences in contact with business practice – engaging students in real business processes**

Providing the students with most timely knowledge and shaping their methodological skills in the scope of the course is a necessary but insufficient condition of fulfilling the growing demands of the business world. It is crucial to equip future employees with practical social competences which will allow them to pursue projects under different kinds of limitations occurring in business practice, including the most frequent ones such as time and budget. Authors' experience in cooperating with companies proves that being in possession of a suitable level of professional knowledge and skills developed within the course, the future researcher should be prepared for the following challenges:

- mistakes and negligence of companies regarding systematic gathering and analysis of market data (lack of timely results of syndicated research, fragmentation and incompleteness of market knowledge);
- long periods of time concerning confirmation of the research concept (a result of a number of departments being engaged in the project);
- the necessity to search for compromise within the pursued project: business goals of the project versus research goals. The selection of data collection method, the time period and budget devoted to the pursued project are on many occasions the result of convictions and embedded thinking patterns of the decision makers based on outdated marketing research knowledge or lack thereof;
- the necessity to cope in the situation of many decision centers of the pursued project (the headquarters versus local branch);
- the necessity to defend the proposed research methodology in view of diverse needs of the stakeholders groups engaged in the project (marketing department from the headquarters versus information needs of the sales department in the local market);
- the necessity to break many stereotypes embedded in the minds of decision makers as well as the only effective business models that have “always” been the determinants of success on a given market – the change of management's thinking patterns (breaking autostereotypes and stereotypes concerning particular markets, e.g. regarding the level of consumer knowledge, the expected quality level of products, accepted price levels, etc.);

- need to anticipate the effects of communicating research results in the context of future personal and organizational changes in the company – identifying potential to break the embedded thinking patterns of the management and propensity to introduce particular changes into business processes;
- willingness to change the person in charge of the project when it is still running – on many occasions this is the consequence of changes in the headquarters' structure as well as the structure of local branches. Then a necessity occurs to modify the project and even start over keeping the previously set deadline – the abilities in the area of managing limited resources: time and people, coping with stress;
- the risk of failing to deliver new knowledge from the gathered research results – ensuring the management about the validity of already implemented results and what follows, limiting the propensity of the management to conduct regular research in the future;
- blurring the responsibility for the project – people participating in the project have additional obligations of higher priority, so it is very difficult to retain motivation in the team and determination in the course of pursuing the project;
- time consuming research projects (e.g. half a year) conducted on international scale are prone to high risk of changing business contexts (market assumptions). This may be a result of competitors' actions (e. g. introducing a new, innovative product into the market) or a change in the level of accepted consumer risk in the face of an armed conflict, instability of public finances of leading world economies, as well as natural disasters etc. which limit the comparability of results among the investigated regions;
- frequent changes of business strategy in the course of the project, influencing the usability of the research conducted;
- the necessity to assist the decision maker in proper consuming of the research results, which means to take a role of an advisor, a consultant suggesting or even introducing changes in the organization as a result of diagnosing the market situation.

The above mentioned challenges present only a snapshot of the area of social competences that a student participating in the course of international marketing research should acquire. There is one more key aspect of social competences that is worth mentioning namely the ability to work with partners of different cultural origin. Lack of such competences effects in so called cultural shock [Deal et al. 2003; Feichtinger & Fink 1998] resulting from the necessity to accept and conform to diverse norms, values and behavior patterns of the international research team members or working with a foreign partner (a manager coming from a different cultural area). However, conducting classes in a nation-

ally diverse student group allows to agree that the offered course of international marketing research within the International Business program delivers suitable social competences in the area of multiculturalism.

As mentioned before the platform to accumulate social competences is the applied variety of didactic methods within the course of international marketing research. The teaching methods applied to the course involve interactive lecturing, case study analysis, supervised group work on research projects as well as problem and concept based learning (CBL). Traditionally curriculum and instruction has been more two-dimensional in design (know and able to do), whereas concept-based curricular and instructional designs are three-dimensional – that is, curriculum and instruction is focused on what students will know (factually), understand (conceptually), and be able to do (skillfully) [Erickson 2007]. The concepts are universal, timeless, abstract, and move students toward higher levels of thinking. They are broad ideas that transcend the perspectives and limits of any specific subject-area, therefore CBL enhances creative and critical thinking, questioning and research skills. Concept-based instruction, by placing the learning process in the “big picture” context of a transdisciplinary theme, leads students to think about content and facts “at a much deeper level” and “as a practitioner would in that discipline” [Schill & Howell 2011].

Given the scarcity of international marketing research literature [Cavusgil et al. 2009]<sup>1</sup>, comprehensive cases on the subject are not easily accessible and most of the existing cases are outdated. This obstacle can be overcome by a number of ways. First solution is accessing the marketing research industry magazines, which frequently publish research results and most up-to-date accomplishments in the field. A good example might be Quirk's Marketing Research Media providing readers with articles and case studies free of charge. In this way the problem of using “old cases” vanishes and the students appreciate more learning about the latest achievements of the industry, than when they are confronted with the marketing research history. Another way is to visit the websites of top research agencies which often publish the solutions proposed to their clients as “good practices”. The drawback of that is there is usually no insight into the entire research process and the whole research specification might not be revealed. Finally cases may be prepared based on press releases, which is the most time-consuming but also very rewarding option.

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<sup>1</sup> International marketing research literature is not in abundance with two most recognized textbooks not being revised for several years. The title *International Marketing Research* by C.S. Craig and S.P. Douglas, regarded as the definitive textbook in its field, has not been updated since 2005 and unfortunately does not include case studies. The second most popular textbook by V. Kumar, although enriched by numerous cases, dates back to year 2000. Other book items, even though more up-to-date, lack the comprehensiveness of the former two.

It seems though that the biggest potential in building social competences paying dividends in the future employment of the graduates is the engagement of students in actual research projects pursued by companies operating in the international market (experiential learning projects and games). This form of acquiring social competences is available within educational platforms such as GMMSO, GEO, Globalview, Global Business Game or X-Culture, which enable participation in projects pursued for international companies [Taras et al. 2012]. However, a major disadvantage of such type of platforms is virtualization of contacts, which makes a key limitation in developing social competences. International student groups' contact takes place online most of the time (e.g. in X-Culture platform via: email, Skype, Dropbox, Google Docs, social media). Furthermore, there is no possibility of direct interaction with the representatives of the companies. When platforms such as GMMSO, GEO and Globalview are concerned, the project group are created out of the student group, which makes the level of experience acquired lower. The groups usually consist of students of the same nationality, who know one another for a longer period of time, hence the social competences increment is not as noticeable.

In contrast, within the IB program, on completing the course of international marketing research, selected students are offered an opportunity to pursue real-life projects for businesses. The candidates selected are those with the highest research potential (the evaluation criteria are the results in the area of knowledge, skills and social competences) and declaring some extent of relation to international marketing research in their professional future. Encouraging companies to include students in pursuing research projects takes place as a result of business contacts and ongoing business cooperation of the International Business lecturers. International companies operating in the Polish market report research needs to the lecturers, who then assess the possibility to pursue the project through including students. Afterwards the project is transferred to the students. In the next stage the lecturer proceeds with recruitment and the selected team, whose research manager is the lecturer, presents the research project proposal to the representatives of the international company.

A market research project conducted for a Dutch company was one of the research projects pursued in the academic year 2014/2015, which involved the participation of International Business students. The company is a global market leader in packaging (agricultural and industry products) and cooperates with partners from 40 countries offering packaging for clients all over the world (it has branch offices in Austria, the Benelux, Canada, Denmark, Norway, Germany, Italy, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Republic of South Africa, Great Britain and the USA). The project related to diagnosing the Polish market of

firewood and the project duration was three months. The scope of the research was the following:

- desk research of the Polish firewood market;
- analysis of the retail network in the scope of firewood packaging used (mystery shopper research);
- identification of the producers and companies trading in firewood and the packaging they use for firewood (in-depth telephone interview).

Among the students interested in taking part in the project one was selected, who was made responsible for the desk research and mystery shopper parts. The student participated in the project in the stage of data gathering, analysis and interpretation as well as preparing an English version of the report for the company. The quality of the report presented allowed for the company's CEO from the headquarters in Holland to send positive recommendation.

When conducting the project both the research skills and social competences of the students increased. Because it was necessary to gather representative research material, the student had to face certain problems at the stage of desk research such as:

- lack of some information;
- different levels of data aggregation in particular sources;
- the necessity to supplement existing information voids through generating orders to the Polish Central Statistical Office to prepare paid, specialist data sheets for the benefit of the project.

In contrast the mystery shopper research required from the student high mobility and sticking to the tight schedule of visiting 115 retail outlets. The problems encountered and finally overcome allowed the student to acquire the following skills and competences:

- improving analytical skills – big amount of the data gathered (price, assortment and packaging analysis, exposition analysis);
- identifying outlets offering particular assortment – improving practical communications skills within the telephone interview before visiting a given retail outlet;
- getting to know different systems of product labelling and identifying a suitable way of data aggregation in the report, adjusted to the standards of the Dutch company commissioning the study;
- improving interpersonal skills – difficult access to some retail outlets, overcoming difficulties in access to information.

Yet the greatest challenge the student had to face was the stage of preparing written report from the research. It turned out that in the initially used description of some of the features of the firewood market phenomena were suffering

from so called self-reference criterion of the researcher (SRC) [Feinberg, Kinnear & Taylor 2013; Kolb 2008; Schmidt & Hollensen 2006]. In the first version of the report a lot of mental shortcuts and simplifications occurred, which was the effect of making an erroneous assumption that the client knew Polish firewood market as well as socio-economic conditions in Poland. It turned necessary to introduce modifications to the report, which enabled the Dutch company to consume the obtained research results. The experience gained throughout the project allowed the student to enhance her skills and social competences as well as her attractiveness as an employee on the labor market.

Another project pursued with the participation of IB students was one realized for a meat processing company and a major Tesco supplier in three countries: Poland, Slovakia and Czech Republic. Several students were indicated by the International Marketing Research lecturer but the final selection of a team of 3 students took place after being interviewed by the company's representatives. The selected students' task was to prepare customer description in a certain product category (meat). The students were to:

- plan and conduct direct research regarding planned versus impulsive purchase, price and promotion impact, the product's location on the shelf and decision making process;
- preparing final report and delivering a presentation containing the research results to the company's management during a special meeting;
- preparing final product recommendation for the Client.

The students travelled to Tesco supermarkets located in the three countries and interviewed shoppers during purchase making as well as particular department managers. In this case the role of the lecturer in assisting the students was minor as they were offered support from the company's New Product Development Department and Category Management. The managers introduced the students into the business specificity, seasonality (grilling season), dynamism and diversity among the particular countries. The biggest challenge of the project was that the company's managers were used to surveys using standard questionnaires as the main research method and they were not very open to new ideas. However, the students made an attempt to convince the client to a more qualitative research approach offering deeper insights into the research problem. This turned out positively to both sides and the students were appreciated for their effort.

## **Conclusions**

Contemporary manager, a specialist within the international business area, should be equipped with grounded knowledge in the field of international marketing research as well as suitable scope of skills and social competences, which will pay off in the practice of company management. Hence, it is crucial to conduct the classes based on modern teaching methods which will allow to achieve the intended educational effects. At present a necessary condition for high quality teaching within the IB degree programs is for the students to have easy access to international commercial data bases, timely case studies, interactive forms of conducting the classes, assignments in the form of projects and working in international groups. Concerning the latter, the culturally mixed groups provide unique opportunity to develop social competences among students, preparing them to work in culturally mixed environments. In case of IB graduates, especially those whose professional future is connected with internationalized companies, it seems that the social competences acquired may to the biggest extent determine their professional career development [Thune & Støren 2015; Vuori 2015]. Hence, universities should create as much opportunities as possible to verify the knowledge, skills and competences acquired during classes while pursuing actual business projects. Experience gained so far within the International Business Program in cooperation with business practice has proven significant increase in students' skills and social competences after completing the projects. The cooperation allowed to generate benefits for all parties involved (students, lecturers, companies).

The barriers of cooperation between academia and business, described in the paper, effectively limit it, which is reflected in the problems faced by lecturers of the International Business program of UEK. The structural and most of all systemic barriers result in the lecturers seeking business partners for cooperation in an informal way. On many occasions private business contacts are used for creating ground for cooperation with business partners. As a result more than once the business partner had to accept lack of formalized cooperation with UEK as it would create many problems of civil and legal nature (e.g. signing contracts between students, the University and the business partner, transfer of copyrights, increase in the project's costs, etc.).

Unfortunately the lack of systemic capacity and structural barriers limit the potential to generate added value, which could have appeared should the potential of cooperation between academia and business be more effectively used. The number of students who could have taken part in business projects would have been greater. As the experience gained so far indicate, intensification of coopera-



tion could result in the increase of modern knowledge transfer on the academia-business level which would definitely raise the competitiveness of the cooperating companies.

The undertakings of the IB program make students the main beneficiaries of the cooperation between business and universities. During classes students take advantage of the most up-to-date academic achievements and knowledge provided based on modern educational methods. The knowledge and skills gained during classes as well as social competences acquired while working on real-life business projects within the studies all contribute to enhancing their value on the labor market.

This is why the achievements made so far should encourage the partners to remove the barriers and difficulties of cooperation on the business-academia level. Business-university cooperation should be a priority from the point of view of educational benefits, as only close contact with the business practice will allow universities to shape their graduate profile according to contemporary expectations of the labour market.

To obtain further comparisons it would be advised to broaden the scope of the research beyond CEE countries.

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