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## The Importance of Developing Soft Skills in Project Management - Students' Perspective, Based on the Example of IPMA-Student Certification

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Joanna Rzempala<sup>1</sup>, Kinga Janecka<sup>2</sup>, Mateusz Juźwik<sup>3</sup>

**Abstract:**

**Purpose:** The authors of the article have attempted to analyze which group of students are more willing to develop their management competences by getting external certification of specialized organizations.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** The team conducted research on a group of the most active students who obtain project management certificates during their studies. The aim of the study was to answer the question of whether students who have improved their competences in the field of management see the benefit, and what those benefits are. The study was conducted in year 2022, on a target sample of students who approached the IPMA - Student certification at several Polish universities.

**Findings:** The research was conducted using the CAWI method and the results were statistically analyzed and then consulted during the PM Education Seminar.

**Practical implications:** The problem of the competency gap in the labor market is a permanent issue and it seems that it will be increasing due to the environmental changes, the needs of clients, which causes an increasing challenge for entrepreneurs, whereas those entrepreneurs are seeking more and more specially educated employees.

**Originality value:** This article presents original research into the perception of the usefulness of certification and cooperation with professional organisations in project management by young generations leaving academic education and entering the labour market. It illustrates students' interest in developing competencies and how the labour market values this during recruitment and selection.

**Keywords:** Project management, project management competences, soft skills.

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<sup>1</sup>PhD, Assistant Professor at the Department of Organization and Management, Institute of Management, Faculty of Economics, Finance and Management, University of Szczecin, Poland, e-mail: [joanna.rzempala@usz.edu.pl](mailto:joanna.rzempala@usz.edu.pl);

<sup>2</sup>Mgr, Doctoral School of the University of Szczecin, Institute of Management, Poland, e-mail: [kinga.janecka@phd.usz.edu.pl](mailto:kinga.janecka@phd.usz.edu.pl);

<sup>3</sup>Mgr, Doctoral School of the University of Szczecin, Institute of Management, Poland, e-mail: [mateusz.juzwik@phd.usz.edu.pl](mailto:mateusz.juzwik@phd.usz.edu.pl);

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## **1. Introduction**

When attempting to define the labor market, it should be pointed out that it is one of the elements that function in the economy alongside markets such as the education market, the product market or the money market. In the literature of the subject it is defined as a place where labor service exchange transactions between employees and employers are made. In addition, the size, terms and price of these transactions are determined (Ehrenberg and Smith, 1991; Vosworth, Dawkins, and Stromback, 1996).

Today, there are many economic theories defining the functioning of the labor market, which are extended by neoclassical and Keynesian trends (Jarmołowicz, 2011). Researchers attempt to establish the key factors that determine the relationships between individual elements of the market (Day, 2000).

One of the representative concepts of the labor market presents its functioning by defining the elements of the internal and external market (Poppo, 1995). The former is defined as certain employment units where wages and labor allocation are governed by enduring norms and procedures. It also includes people participating in recruitment processes, ready to take up work in certain conditions. On the other hand, the external market is defined by researchers as an area containing elements not covered by the internal market (Jarmołowicz, 2011).

## **2. Review of the Literature**

### **2.1 The Needs of the Labor Market in Poland in Terms of Soft Skills**

Most employers now expect employees to improve skills such as teamwork and group development (Pant and Baroudi, 2008). The market is constantly changing, which also affects the way employers think. They began to notice that technical competencies, defined as competencies related to skills specific to a given sector or area of management, are not enough for an employee to be effective in a given position.

Companies began to identify the so-called soft skills as those important for the development of the company and increasing their competitiveness (Andruszewicz and Kulik-Grzybek, 2017; Chowdhury and Gkioulos, 2021). The term “soft skills” encompass interpersonal, communication, social and emotional skills (Jema and Suvasweta-Satpathy, 2017; Touloumakos, 2020).

They often complement technical competences and support the effective implementation of the organization's goals (Jema, Suvasweta, and Satpathy, 2017). They are related to the efficiency of long-term planning, assertiveness, motivation and broadly understood emotional intelligence (Konieczna-Kucharska, 2005).

The increase in demand for soft skills also applies to the area related to project management (Pant and Baroudi, 2008). The literature defines precisely the dimensions of soft skills important in project management, which include (Belzer, 2004):

- communication skills,
- team building skills,
- flexibility and creativity,
- leadership skills
- ability to manage stress and conflict.

According to the Deloitte Access Economics report, by 2030, 66% of jobs will require soft skills (Deloitte Access Economics, 2017). The report also points to the fact that currently 45% of employers have difficulty filling entry-level vacancies because candidates lack soft skills (Deloitte Access Economics, 2017). It can therefore be stated that the need to improve soft skills should be a priority, both for employees and employers.

According to The Future of Workforce Development report, 73% of recruitment managers say that creative and abstract thinking will become more important than technical skills, even in the so-called technical occupations (The Future of Workforce Development, 2017; Middleton, 2005). This confirms the above stated thesis that this scope of competence will be an important factor in recruitment processes, regardless of the job position.

According to McKinsey analysts, competencies of growing importance on the labor market can be classified into three groups of social competencies, for which demand will increase by 20% by the year 2030 (Włoch and Śledziwska, 2019). These include soft skills such as entrepreneurship, creativity and the ability to take initiatives (Włoch and Śledziwska, 2019). In addition, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, skills such as stress resistance and cooperation have also gained importance (Talent Shortage - Report, 2021).

The ManpowerGroup report indicates that 81% of companies encounter problems with recruiting employees with soft skills, such as logical thinking or problem solving skills (ManpowerGroup, 2022). Therefore, the available research indicates that, regardless of the specificity of the industry, soft skills will dominate the needs of the labor market in many job positions. This also applies to the area of project management, where soft skills are an important part of the competences of both the project manager and project team members.

## **2.2 Project Management Competences and the IPMA-Student Model**

The answer to these needs of all labor market actors is a close cooperation between entrepreneurs offering jobs and the academic community, which prepares specialist

staff. Such cooperation with the active operation of the IPMA Poland (International Project Management Association Poland) led to the launch, in 2013, of work on the system of accreditation of educational programs and assumptions for certification of students in the field of project management. Those actions resulted in development of the IPMA-Student Programme, which has been jointly applied since 2014.

Through the IPMA-Student accreditation program, the IPMA Poland Association offers universities the opportunity to confirm the compliance of education programs in the area of project management, implemented as part of first and second degree studies, with the competence requirements of IPMA ICB standard. It also means unifying vocabulary and concepts related to project management and the possibility of using common teaching tools. In addition, a network of coordinators appointed at universities enables students to verify and certify their competences.

The IPMA-Student competency model defines and standardizes the project management competencies that a student should possess to be prepared for active and effective work in a project team, and in the future to be a project manager. These competencies are divided into three areas:

- The "Perspective" area defines contextual skills and knowledge that is necessary in the broadly understood project environment;
- The "People" area defines personal and interpersonal competences required for effective participation in a project or in managing a project;
- The "Practice" area defines technical aspects of project management.

In addition to contextual knowledge and technical aspects, the IPMA-Student certificate also develops soft skills that have been included in the indicated area "People". This means that certification also plays an important role in the context of shaping in students the soft skills, which are currently in demand on the labor market.

### **3. Methodology**

Literature research included articles in the EBSCO, Web of Science and ProQuest databases. Entries related to competences and the labor market were filtered. The following terms were analyzed: "soft competence in project management", "labor market needs", and "labor market in Poland in project management area". About 100 items were accepted for analysis. In addition, the authors of the article, in cooperation with the IPMA Poland association, conducted in 2021 a research on the opinions of university graduates with the IPMA-Student certificate.

As part of the initiative, opinions of graduates were analyzed in terms of the usefulness of both the certification itself, but also the importance and usefulness of individual areas of project management competence in professional work. The participants of the study were people who passed the IPMA-Student exam in the

period from 2016 to February 2021. The questionnaire was sent to 964 people. Unfortunately, a number of e-mail addresses (i.e., 76) from the IPMA-Student Portal, the tool for conducting exams, were already inactive. Some students provided e-mail addresses with the domain of their university, which were no longer used at the time of graduation.

The survey questionnaire was sent in the period from March to July 2021, using the GetResponse tool. In order to better reach, it was decided that invitation to participate in the survey would be sent three times: on March 9, April 27, and June 2. The total number of openings of the e-mail containing the link to the survey was 724, of which 155 receivers (from three mailings) clicked the survey link.

As a result, 129 correctly completed surveys were received. The process of sending survey e-mails at different times is presented in Table 1, indicating the detailed sending rates. The study used a statistical method. MS Excel 2013 software was used to develop the results of the analysis. Basic statistical analyzes were performed. The group is purposeful and complete.

**Table 1.** Reports of communication with the target group

Action	1st mailing	2nd mailing	3rd mailing
Number of emails sent	964	849	673
Number of emails delivered	888	802	626
Number of emails opened	339	260	125
The number of clicks on the hyperlink to the survey	81	46	28

*Source:* Own study based on reports generated via the GetResponse tool.

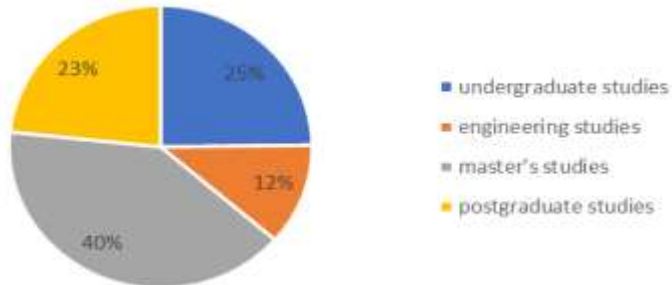
#### **4. Research Results and Discussion**

The analysis covered 129 students and graduates from accredited universities in the IPMA-Student program. Such a group filled in the correctly sent research questionnaire sheet. The results are shown in Figure 1.

The starting point for the qualitative analysis was to identify the graduates' approach to being active in non-formal learning initiatives, such as science clubs, student organizations and conferences. This information was used to define activity of the research group. It was important whether people who actively develop their competences outside of classes at the university proceed to certification.

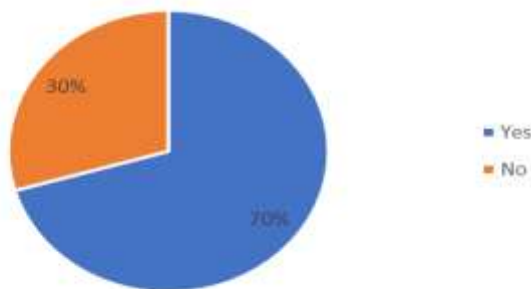
Figure 2 shows that this is the case, 70% of people taking the exam are people actively involved in university activities, both organizational and scientific.

**Figure 1.** Participants of the study broken down by the degree of studies within which they proceeded to the IPMA-Student certification.



*Source: Own study.*

**Figure 2.** Percentage of students involved in academic initiatives



*Source: Own study.*

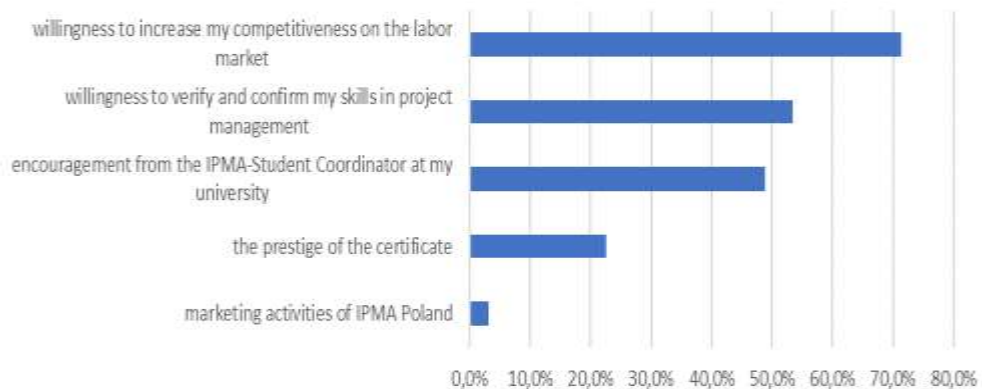
The analysis of the research in Figure 3 shows that the largest number of students took part in the certification to increase their value on the labor market. Another incentive was the recommendation of a lecturer and, at the same time, IPMA-student coordinator from their university. Another argument was to verify their competences through an independent organization specializing in project management.

The next step was to verify the opinions of students whether they realized these benefits as a result of obtaining the IPMA-Student certificate (Figure 4).

The vast majority of all respondents answered definitely yes (36%) or yes (35%). People who currently work in project management respond in a similar way (% Chart). Most of the respondents (70.6%) answered that the decision to take the IPMA-Student certification exam brought the expected benefits. It is interesting that in both cases quite a large group of respondents (20%) cannot give a clear answer whether the decision was right or not. It is difficult to determine the cause of this

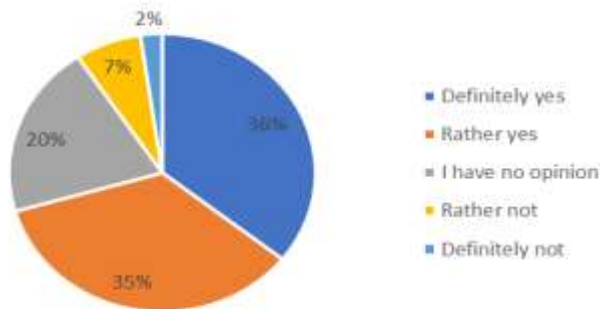
phenomenon. It is worth emphasizing, however, that the IPMA-Student certification program probably fulfills its function, because students still see real benefits in it, even after a few months or years.

**Figure 3.** *Basic premises determining participation of students in the IPMA-Student Programme*



*Source: Own study.*

**Figure 4.** *Percentage of responses to the question about obtaining the assumed benefits from IPMA-Student certification in the entire group of respondents*



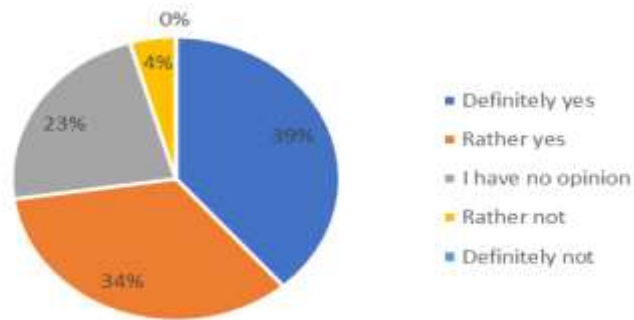
*Source: Own study.*

Graduates also referred to increasing their competitiveness on the labor market. 48% of respondents stated that their situation on the labor market has improved, but what is crucial, as many as 30% have no knowledge on this subject.

This may be due to the fact that the respondents do not know which factors decided about their employment during the recruitment process. Perhaps the certificate had an impact on increasing the chance of getting a job, but it is problematic to identify because various factors shape the image and position of the candidate. It is worth noting, however, that a small number of respondents declared that the IPMA-Student

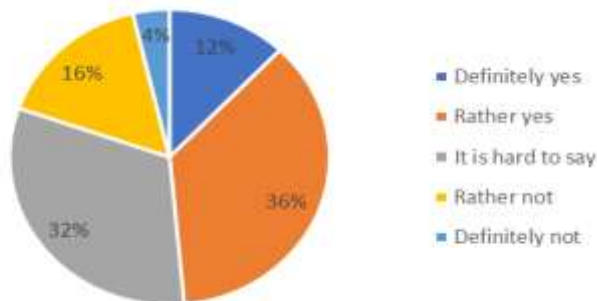
certificate definitely not (3.7%) and rather not (12.1%) affected their competitiveness on the labor market.

**Figure 5.** Percentage of answers to the question about obtaining the assumed benefits from IPMA-Student certification in the group of people currently working in project management.



*Source:* Own study.

**Figure 6.** IPMA-Student certification and competitiveness on the labor market



*Source:* Own study.

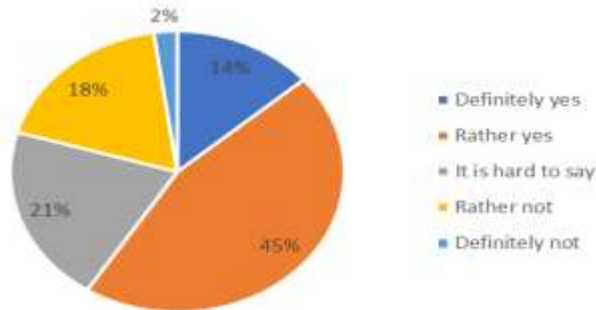
This may indicate that the respondents feel that the IPMA-Student certificate can contribute to increasing competitiveness as one of the decisive factors. Slightly different answers to the questions are given by people who currently work in project management, they more often indicate that the certificate is a prerequisite for increasing competitiveness and job opportunities for graduates (Figure 7).

The surveyed group of people who currently work in project management was also asked which competences, i.e. behavioral, technical or contextual, are most useful for them in their professional work. The results indicate that these are behavioral competences, otherwise known as soft skills (63%). Secondly, the respondents indicated technical competences in project management (23%). They are about



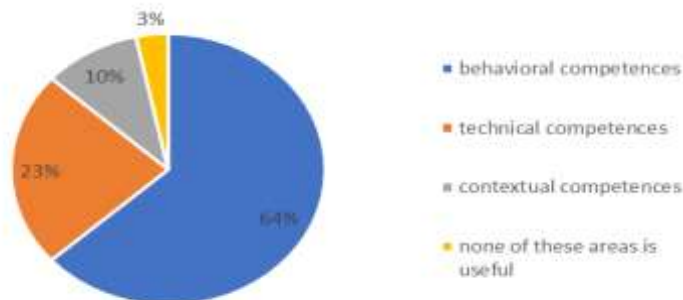
issues related to planning, implementation and knowledge of methods and techniques used in all phases of the project life cycle (Figure 8).

**Figure 7.** IPMA-Student certification and competitiveness on the labor market in the group of people working in project management.



Source: Own study.

**Figure 8.** Percentage of answers indicating which competencies are most useful in professional work in the group of people working in project management.



Source: Own study.

It can therefore be assumed that the respondents are aware that these are currently competencies most valued by employers on the labor market.

**Table 2.** Role in projects and the answer to the question: "Which competences verified during the IPMA-Student certification should be expanded?" broken down by individual job positions.

	Competencies			
	technical	behavioral	contextual	none
Project manager	27,3%	40,9%	18,2%	13,6%
Team member	41,4%	20,7%	27,6%	10,3%

Project support	33,0%	23,6%	23,6%	19,8%
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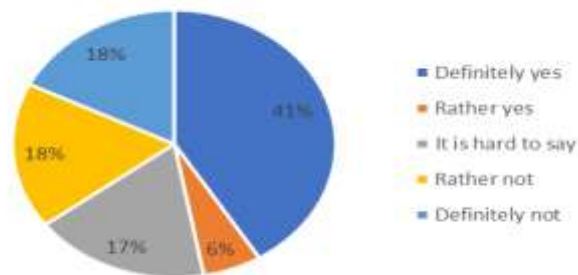
*Source: Own study.*

When we analyze the results in relation to the current function in project management, we can observe that project managers value behavioral competencies the most, while team members and other people supporting the implementation of the project value technical competencies the most. It is consistent with the IPMA ICB competency model, which assumes that along with the increase in position and responsibility in project management, the importance of behavioral competencies, which are most needed in these positions, increases.

The research also asked people who currently work in project management positions whether obtaining a certificate had an impact on their professional promotion or financial raise. The results show that 47% identify the impact of the certificate, and as many as 17% have no opinion on it (Figure 9).

This may indicate that employers do not reward or vaguely indicate that they reward improving competences related to project management, including behavioral competences. A certain inconsistency can be observed here in relation to the opinion expressed by employers that these are the competencies they are most looking for on the market.

**Figure 9.** Percentage of answers to the question regarding the identification of the relationship between obtaining a certificate and professional promotion among people working in the area of project management

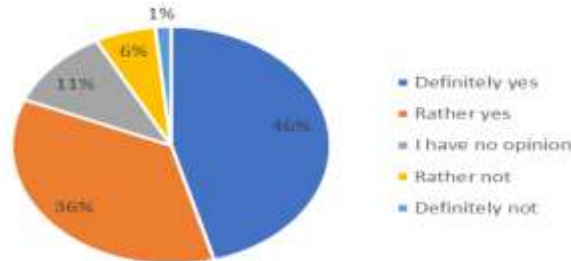


*Source: Own study.*

Another area of the study was to determine the readiness to recommend IPMA-Student certification. Over 84% of all respondents would recommend or rather recommend to other students to take the IPMA-Student certification exam. Only 7.8% gave a negative answer. The obtained results may indicate that the IPMA-Student program is appreciated by students and they are willing to recommend this form of competence verification to other people.

This gives the opportunity to develop the IPMA-Student certification system based on one of the most effective marketing tools, which is the opinion of people who have used the product (Figure 10).

**Figure 10.** *Recommending IPMA-Student certification*



*Source:* Own study.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis conducted on the basis of the obtained data shows that students who take the IPMA-Student certification are a group which is active in other initiatives and forms of non-formal education, such as science clubs, internships or participation in conferences. Obtaining the certificate and the related increase in competitiveness on the labor market are the main motivations declared by students taking the IPMA-Student certification.

It is worth noting that although the surveyed students recognize the value of certification and its potential impact on their future careers (48%), there is also a significant number of respondents who are not aware of the full range of benefits of this type of certification (30%). Graduates who did not take up work directly related to project management during the course of the research, feel intuitively that the decision to develop competences in the field of project management had a positive impact.

On the other hand, the group of respondents who currently work in project management sees the degree and scope of this impact on their professional development (14% definitely see the impact and 45% see the impact). In addition, some of these people also declare getting a promotion or increasing the level of remuneration as a result of obtaining the IPMA-Student certification (47%). Unfortunately, in most answers to questions about the impact of the certificate on their competitiveness, promotion, benefits, there is a group of up to 20% of people who have no opinion on the subject. It can be assumed that the reason for this phenomenon are unclear criteria and procedures for recruitment, selection, but also bonuses, which make it difficult for students to assess the clear impact of their certification.

From the point of view of graduates the most useful are soft skills, otherwise known as behavioral competences. Among people working in projects, the answers are more diverse, in particular with regard to the position held. People performing the function of project manager appreciate soft skills the most, people working as members of project team and people working as support for projects see the greatest importance in the so-called technical competences, which are related to the ability to apply specific methods and techniques at individual stages of the project life cycle.

The conducted research is qualitative in relation to the target group of students and graduates who participate in the IPMA-Student program and cannot be fully generalized to other certification programs. Nevertheless, they show that competence development programs such as IPMA-Student are trusted by students, even if some of the benefits are perceived intuitively. This is indicated in 82% of people who would recommend IPMA-Student certification to their younger colleagues.

The authors of the article are aware of the limitations regarding the generalization of the research results obtained. It is indicated that entrepreneurs who, on one hand, accept the particular importance of project management competences, including soft skills, do not verify certification in this field as part of the recruitment processes. In the authors' opinion, this is an interesting phenomenon that may determine the need for further research.

Therefore, the direction of further research should be the analysis of recognition of certification programs among employers. The authors plan to analyze job offers on the main recruitment portals to determine how often a certificate from an external professional organization is a prerequisite for obtaining a job in project management positions. Are there significant differences in relation to the area of the country and the size of the company? There were no such differences in the study of graduates.

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