

UNIVERSITY STUDENTS, EMPLOYERS AND THE LABOR MARKET: THE IMPORTANCE OF 'VALUE EDUCATION'

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Abstract

Values, knowledge, skills and attitudes are important in educating students for professional careers. Despite this, values are practically ignored in University courses. This paper identifies personal values of employers and of students at a Center of the Spanish University of Huelva, Department of Work Science. The methodology was based on the values scale proposed by Rokeach [1973]. Gaps between the values of both groups were found. Methods are suggested for students to increase their employability by adopting employer values.

KEY WORDS: University education, values, labor market, employers

INTRODUCTION

The concepts of attitudes and values and their analysis are central themes in the social sciences. Values are a key factor for understanding the attitudes that differentiate social groups. As Garrido [2004] points out, "this view of values as differentiating elements of distinct social groups is generally shared by sociologists and psychologists."

From a socio-educational perspective, values are regarded as referents (standards) leading human behavior towards self-realization; they are guidelines that give a particular direction to the life and conduct of each individual and every social group.

Education in values constitutes one of the essential pillars of teaching practice, along with the transmission of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Values are a fundamental part of the professional competences that university graduates must possess at the end of the teaching-learning process. Values will aid them in their professional lives as much and perhaps more so than knowledge and skills. Despite all this, values rarely tend to be considered or evaluated in courses.

The study reaffirms the importance of values both in higher education and in the workplace. The concern to provide students with values that are perfectly aligned with corporate requirements is shared by the academic authorities at the University of Huelva (Spain), who supported the teaching innovation project called "Personal values of the students of the Faculty of Work Sciences at the University of Huelva." The Vice-Rector of Studies, Doctorates and Teaching Innovation approved the study for the academic year 2003/2004.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

Values are not invented; they are discovered. Furthermore, it is assumed that is important for individuals to be conscious of the values they possess [González, 1992]. This research sought to identify the most deeply rooted personal values among the students in the Department of Work Sciences of the University of Huelva and among local employers. These latter respondents were also asked about what values they considered to be most important for the success of their firms. This enabled identification of any gaps that existed between the values of these two groups. Subsequently, changes in the students' education were suggested to narrow these gaps.

More specifically, the precise objectives of the study were:

- To identify the values of the students in the Department of Work Sciences and to note any differences that might exist when the course was given within the year or the nature of the academic program: Diploma in Labor Relations or Degree in Work Sciences (1).
- To identify the values of the employers of the province of Huelva (Southern Spain) – both their personal values and those regarded as most important for corporate success.
- To identify any divergence of values existing between these two groups.
- To propose the appropriate measures to reduce this gap in favor of the employers. .

Questionnaires on personal values for each student and each employer were designed based on the widely accepted Rokeach scale [1973]. This scale distinguishes between terminal values (referring to desirable conditions or end states of existence, both of a personal and a social nature) and instrumental values (referring to desirable modes of conduct or moral values). Terminal values express a final goal, an objective in life, while instrumental values describe how to achieve these goals. Although age and gender influence values, these variables were not deemed relevant for this study.

The two groups of respondents, students and employers, responded to each block of values (terminal and instrumental):

1. The degree of importance of each value on a semantic differential scale from 1 to 5 (from very unimportant to very important, respectively).
2. The five most important values in each block, in order.

Additionally, each employer was asked to rate each value's importance to the success of its firm.

The students attending classes on one of the core or compulsory subjects were surveyed in the second third of the academic year 2003/04.

Table 1 shows the year for each academic program, number of students registered as well as the number of questionnaires completed (in absolute as well as in percentage terms) the totals in each category.

TABLE 1

PROGRAM	YEAR	STUDENTS REGISTERED	STUDENTS SURVEYED	%
Diploma in Labor Relations (1 st cycle)	1 st	125	62	50
	2 nd	153	72	47
	3 rd	89	27	30
	Subtotal	367	161	44
Degree in Work Sciences (2 nd cycle) Faculty of Work Sciences	4 th (*)	111	15	14
	5 th (*)	50	23	46
	Subtotal	161	38	24
	Total	528	199	38

*These two groups are made up of two subgroups, one of which is part-time.

For a population of 528 individuals (N), a sample of 199 (n) is quite acceptable. Working with a significance level (α) of 0.05 (5%), normal in these cases, the margin of error (ϵ) turns out to be 0.055. The formula to calculate the optimum sample size, for finite populations, is as follows:

$$n = \frac{Z_{\alpha/2}^2 \times 0,25 \times N}{\epsilon^2 (N-1) + Z_{\alpha/2}^2 \times 0,25}$$

Where $Z_{\alpha/2}$ is 1.96 in the normal distribution, for a significance level of 0.05.

The employer surveys were conducted during July and August 2004, using the database of firms that the Faculty kept for work experience placements. These firms knew the students in the relevant courses. From an initial sample of 25 firms, 84% (21) responded.

The statistical analyses were carried out using the package SPSS 11.0 for Windows and included: descriptive statistics of central tendency and spread, bivariate correlations, non-parametric tests for independent samples and Kendall's W coefficient. Non-parametric tests (Kruskal-Wallis H or Mann-Whitney U) were conducted after ruling out the parametric ones (analysis of variance, ANOVA). None of the variables (values) had satisfied the normality condition (Kolmogorov-Smirnov test).

RESULTS: STUDENTS' PERSONAL VALUES

DIPLOMA IN LABOR RELATIONS

In the Diploma in Labor Relations program, students had three fundamental terminal values: happiness, freedom and equality. Other important values were respect for oneself, the family, self-realization and friendship. "A world of beauty" was the least appreciated (see Appendix 1).

Among the instrumental values, responsibility and honesty were the most appreciated, followed by cheerfulness and ability to love. Tolerance and ability to forgive were also mentioned (see Appendix 1). However, for both sets of variables, Kendall's W shows a notable heterogeneity among this group of students (Table 2).

TABLE 2

KENDALL'S W TEST	DEGREE OF IMPORTANCE		ORDER OF IMPORTANCE	
	Terminal values	Instrumental values	Terminal values	Instrumental values
Coefficient of concordance (between 0 - 1)	0.313	0.203	0.238	0.162

This coefficient rose to 0.677 and 0.615, for terminal and instrumental values respectively, when it was calculated globally; i.e., when degree and order of importance were both in the same measurement. Applying the Kruskal-Wallis test to the three course years of this program resulted in statistically significant differences in a number of terminal and instrumental values; see Tables 3 and 4.

TABLE 3

TERMINAL VALUES Test statistics	INTERESTING LIFE	NATIONAL SECURITY	RESPECT FOR ONESELF
Chi squared	12.507	11.514	11.754
d.f.	2	2	2
Asympt. sig.	.002	.003	.003

TABLE 4

INSTRUMENTAL VALUES Test statistics	TOLERANCE	IMAGINATIVE
Chi squared	7.756	12.716
d.f.	2	2
Asympt. sig.	.021	.002

Spearman's rho coefficient also indicated that there existed a positive and significant correlation between the student's course year (in the Diploma) and the importance attributed to the following values: an interesting life, respect for oneself and imagination (especially this last value). In other words, as students progressed in the diploma program from year to year, they generally placed more importance on these three values (the first two terminal and the third instrumental).

The opposite (negative correlation) occurred with the terminal value "national security." Spearman's rho coefficient showed no significant correlation between the value "tolerance" and the variable course year.

DEGREE IN WORK SCIENCES

Peace, freedom, equality and happiness are the most appreciated terminal values for the students studying for the Degree in Work Sciences, followed by the values of family and self-realization. In contrast, "beauty" is relegated to last place among their priorities (see Appendix 1).

There is no doubt which instrumental values students appreciated most: tolerance, honesty, ability to love, responsibility and ability to forgive. Obedience, on the other hand, was the least appreciated (see Appendix 1). There also is strong heterogeneity in the values of this group of students, as can be seen in the following table (Table 5):

TABLE 5

KENDALL'S W TEST	DEGREE OF IMPORTANCE		ORDER OF IMPORTANCE	
	Terminal values	Instrumental values	Terminal values	Instrumental values
Coefficient of concordance (between 0 - 1)	0.256	0.316	0.207	0.297

However, this coefficient rose to 0.676 and 0.662, for terminal and instrumental values respectively, when calculated globally – i.e., integrating degree and order of importance in the same measurement.

After applying the Mann-Whitney U test, the statistically significant differences between the two years in this second cycle course were limited to the following values (Tables 6 and 7):

TABLE 6

TERMINAL VALUES Test statistics	A WORLD OF PEACE	INNER HARMONY
Mann-Whitney U	121.500	58.500
Wilcoxon W	241.500	178.500
Z	-2.051	-3.838
Asympt. sig. (bilateral)	.040	.000

TABLE 7

INSTRUMENTAL VALUES Test statistics	ABLE TO LOVE
Mann-Whitney U	87.000
Wilcoxon W	207.000
Z	-2.923
Asympt. sig. (bilateral)	.003

The Spearman's rho coefficient clarifies the direction of these differences. There is a positive and significant correlation between all these values (peace, inner harmony and ability to love) and the variable course year.

OVERALL RESULTS

Globally, there were three main terminal values among the students: happiness, freedom and equality. Family, respect for oneself, peace and self-realization were also very important for the group. "A world of beauty" was the least valued of all the variables (see Appendix 1). Four instrumental values generally stood out: responsibility, honesty, ability to love and ability to forgive. Tolerance and happiness were also relevant (see Appendix 1). Table 8 shows the degrees of concordance of the respondents' evaluations.

TABLE 8

KENDALL'S W TEST	DEGREE OF IMPORTANCE		ORDER OF IMPORTANCE	
	Terminal values	Instrumental values	Terminal values	Instrumental values
Coefficient of concordance (between 0 - 1)	0.300	0.213	0.228	0.178

However, this coefficient rose to 0.675 and 0.618 for terminal and instrumental values respectively, when it was calculated globally, integrating degree and order of importance in the same measurement.

Considering the five course years for programs in the Department, the following tables indicate the values for which statistically significant differences have been detected:

- Terminal values:

TABLE 9

Test statistics	INTERESTING LIFE	INNER HARMONY	NATIONAL SECURITY	RESPECT FOR ONESELF
Chi squared	13.599	24.006	11.565	12.357
d.f.	4	4	4	4
Asympt. sig.	.009	.000	.021	.015

- Instrumental values:

TABLE 10

Test statistics	TOLERANCE	IMAGINATIVE	ABLE TO LOVE	OBEDIENT
Chi squared	24.639	14.781	10.244	12.290
d.f.	4	4	4	4
Asympt. sig.	.000	.005	.037	.015

The Spearman's rho coefficient shows a positive and significant correlation between the student's course year and the following values: an interesting life, tolerance and imaginative. The correlation is negative for the value obedience.

Comparing the two qualifications (diploma and degree), the statistically significant differences found are as follows:

- Terminal values: none.
- Instrumental values:

TABLE 11

Test statistics	TOLERANCE	OBEDIENT	COURTEOUS
Mann-Whitney U	1880.500	2072.000	2368.000
Wilcoxon W	14921.500	2813.000	3071.000
Z	-4.083	-3.267	-2.093
Asympt. sig. (bilateral)	.000	.001	.036

The Spearman's rho coefficient reveals the direction of these differences: a positive and significant correlation in the case of tolerance, and a negative and significant correlation in the case of obedience and courtesy.

RESULTS: EMPLOYERS' PERSONAL VALUES

It is important to note that the firms used in this study were quite homogeneous; all of them were small or medium-sized, and well-established local companies, with no significant differences. The group of employers analyzed had four widely shared main terminal values: respect for oneself, friendship, happiness and peace, although freedom, family and equality followed closely. Conversely, limited importance was given to social recognition (refer to Appendix 1). Four instrumental values stood out: honesty, responsibility, tolerance and competence. Employers also regarded ability to love and ability to forgive as very important (see Appendix 1).

The employers' evaluations were somewhat more homogenous than the students', according to Kendall's W test (Table 12):

TABLE 12

KENDALL'S W TEST	DEGREE OF IMPORTANCE		ORDER OF IMPORTANCE	
	Terminal values	Instrumental values	Terminal values	Instrumental values
Coefficient of concordance (between 0 - 1)	0.428	0.337	0.224	0.226

Taking both these evaluations together (degree and order of importance), the degree of concordance reached coefficients of 0.701 for the terminal values and 0.664 for the instrumental values.

RESULTS: VALUES AND CORPORATE SUCCESS

From the perspective of corporate success, the participating employers stressed honesty above all other values, respect, relationships with others and being faithful to one's commitment, followed. Perseverance and discretion were also very highly valued. "Strength" stood out as being unimportant (see Appendix 2). The agreement level between respondents at the global level was very high (68.7%). (Table 13).

TABLE 13

KENDALL'S W TEST	Degree of importance	Order of importance	Global
Coefficient of concordance	0.159	0.162	0.687

CONCLUSIONS

Values are important because they help influence and motivate human actions and behavior. In business, values define an organization's character and describe what the organization fundamentally stands for. If employers' values coincide with those of students (potential future employees), the firm will benefit in several ways: higher morale and trust, better collaboration, more productivity. Also, converging values will lead to converging and shared interests of all members in the organization. This comparison is summarized in the following table (Table 14).

The alignment (convergence) between students' and employers' values is not perfect, since the latter assign a higher rank to being competent, showing respect and aspects concerning relationships with others, such as friendship. If these desired 'employee values' are to be espoused to a greater extent by students, concrete steps are required to make this happen. Educators need to develop ways to instill these values in their students and employers need to encourage and support appropriate interactions and behavior in their organizations.

University education should include, as an element of the professional competences students are expected to develop, the values demanded by their labor market. Desire values for University of Huelva students have been clearly identified through this study. The authors suggest, that curriculum changes at the University which add these values, do not conflict with the values already enshrined in the 1978 Spanish Constitution. The University of Huelva has embarked on an ambitious project called "the student 10". The program promotes and recognizes ten cross-disciplinary competences:

- Knowledge
- Interpersonal and social skills
- Computer science skills
- Studies at several universities (mobility)
- Participation in university activities and organizations
- Collaborative spirit
- Creativity
- Social commitment
- Communication skills in foreign languages
- Training in companies or other organizations

Through this project the University does much more than merely encouraging academic performance, the traditional measure of student achievement. From the day they enter the University, students know what the expectations of an 'employable professional' and good citizen are.

TABLE 14

TERMINAL VALUES	EMPLOYERS	STUDENTS		
	PERSONAL VALUES	DIPLOMA IN LABOR RELATIONS	DEGREE IN WORK SCIENCES	FACULTY OF WORK SCIENCES
A comfortable life				
An interesting (exciting) life				
Self-realization (a sense of accomplishment)		*	*	*
A world of peace	*		X (1st)	*
A world of beauty				
Equality	*	X	X	X
Freedom	*	X	X	X
Happiness	X	X (1st)	X	X (1st)
Inner harmony				
National security				
Pleasure				
Self-respect	X	*		*
Social recognition				
True friendship	X	*		
Wisdom				
Family first	*	*	*	*
INSTRUMENTAL VALUES				
Ambition				
Tolerance (broadminded)	X	*	X (1st)	*
Competent (capable)	X			
Cheerful		X		*
Brave (courageous)				
Ability to forgive	*	*	X	X
Honest	X (1st) a	X (1st)	X	X
Imaginative				
Independent				
Intellectual				
Ability to love	*	X	X	X
Obedient				
Responsible	X	X (1st)	X	X (1st)
Courteous (polite)				
Self-disciplined (Self-controlled)				
Neat and tidy (clean)				

X Outstanding values.

* Other important values.

a Considered the most important for corporate success, followed by respect, relationship with others, faithfulness, perseverance and discretion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following measures are proposed to increase the convergence of values:

- To promote competence – one of the most desired values – educators need to instill in their students the importance of the changes affecting society at such breathtaking speed. Students

need to adapt quickly to these changes. An essential tool to help them achieve this is self-study, i.e., life long learning. It is important to impress on students that if they desire to remain employed, they must remain employable. This means being able to acquire and create new knowledge, thereby adapting to the needs of the labor market. To achieve this, from time to time, they will need to return to the university to up-date their knowledge base.

- Employers need to change the traditional paradigm of power within the organization, the paradigm of the professional who, in order to maintain his/her status, keeps information and knowledge to himself/herself (information and knowledge equals power). Today, being employed is less important than being employable. The concept of the 'employable professional' breaks with tradition. What is expected of the employable professional is readiness to share/pass knowledge, to generate trust and to promote shared leadership. Temporary absence from the team of an 'employable professional' should not impact adversely on the performance of the team. Therefore, strategies need to be designed and developed to encourage a culture of continuous learning and shared purpose. Effective methods would include: e-learning, blended learning (face to face and online learning as in the academic program this research reports on), coaching and open-air training (games and activities in the open-air or open spaces) based on the premise that individual learning contributes to the development of the group. Ultimately, an effective teaching-learning process needs to be anchored in communities of practice, networks allowing students and employees to share, develop and apply their knowledge. Educators and company managers need to stimulate the creation of such networks.
- To promote good relationships with others, respect and commitment, values that can only be achieved through positive, non-individualistic attitudes, educators should encourage teamwork (and brainstorming) for problem solving. Building work teams facilitates and directs problem solving and generates action plans. Working individually is less conducive to achieving to improved problem solving. Adopting new information and communication technologies may prove valuable in the pursuit of these goals.
- Finally, corporations, employers, need to promote these values by promoting teamwork and open-air training methods. Knowing how to work in a team is important in any organization. A willingness to take part, leadership skills, an ability to lead meetings, the application of certain tools (analysis methodologies and problem solving, brainstorming, project management, etc.), team spirit, communication and negotiating skills are all necessary components of team work and will lead to improved result.

Open-air training technique consists of games and activities in the open-air or open spaces, methodology used in experiential education, consisting of logical sequential activities where participants draw conclusions that help them improve their personal and professional environments. Expert educators, who facilitate learning through experience in a relaxed environment, conduct these activities. The activities combine competitiveness, teamwork, leadership and communication. Important benefits of this technique include: increased confidence, development of leadership skills, ability to delegate, ability to communicate effectively, ability to deal with pressure, better motivation and commitment to daily work routine. In short, the goal of open-air (outdoor) training programs is encourage employees to commit themselves to improve their firm.

ENDNOTES

1. The "first cycle" of a university course in Spain generally lasts three years and results in the diploma. This is optionally followed by a "second cycle" of two more years allowing students to deepen their knowledge and complete their degree.

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APPENDIX 1

TERMINAL VALUES	STUDENTS						EMPLOYERS	
	DIPLOMA		DEGREE		FACULTY		D.I. (mean)	O.I. (pts.)
	D.I. (mean)	O.I. (pts.)	D.I. (mean)	O.I. (pts.)	D.I. (mean)	O.I. (pts.)		
A comfortable life	4.29	106	4.24	35	4.28	141	4.19	10
An interesting (exciting) life	4.10	41	4.24	18	4.13	59	3.90	7
Self-realization (a sense of accomplishment)	4.55	263	4.63	47	4.57	310	4.57	23
A world of peace	4.47	239	4.68	75	4.51	314	4.67	33
A world of beauty	2.98	4	2.87	0	2.95	4	3.19	8
Equality	4.60	247	4.61	72	4.60	319	4.62	34
Freedom	4.73	302	4.68	62	4.72	364	4.67	22
Happiness	4.78	327	4.62	62	4.75	389	4.71	37
Inner harmony	4.40	115	4.39	31	4.40	146	4.48	18
National security	4.14	31	4.13	14	4.14	45	4.19	0
Pleasure	3.92	45	4.03	1	3.94	46	3.76	7
Self-respect	4.60	145	4.55	38	4.59	183	4.81	33
Social recognition	3.73	36	3.68	4	3.72	40	3.48	0
True friendship	4.59	239	4.42	37	4.56	276	4.81	37
Wisdom	4.01	30	4.11	7	4.03	37	4.00	0
Family first	4.55	297	4.34	67	4.51	364	4.24	46
INSTRUMENTAL VALUES								
Ambition	3.14	93	3.13	9	3.14	102	3.00	8
Tolerance (broadminded)	4.23	242	4.71	101	4.32	343	4.43	41
Competent (capable)	4.07	113	4.34	42	4.12	155	4.43	33
Cheerful	4.47	234	4.32	40	4.44	274	4.33	17
Brave (courageous)	3.86	97	3.84	23	3.86	120	4.05	2
Able to forgive	4.34	218	4.45	62	4.36	280	4.29	20
Honest	4.53	275	4.63	68	4.55	343	4.81	51
Imaginative	3.66	60	3.76	6	3.68	66	4.05	10
Independent	3.89	149	3.79	46	3.87	195	3.95	12
Intellectual	3.84	110	3.63	14	3.80	124	3.52	13
Able to love	4.39	240	4.42	82	4.39	322	4.57	17
Obedient	3.73	39	3.18	0	3.62	39	3.48	9
Responsible	4.47	329	4.47	68	4.47	397	4.48	49
Courteous (polite)	3.89	35	3.59	3	3.83	38	4.14	12
Self-disciplined (self-controlled)	3.89	67	3.74	3	3.86	70	4.00	18
Neat and tidy (clean)	3.89	49	3.71	3	3.86	52	4.10	3

D.I.: Degree of Importance (from 1 to 5).

O.I.: Order of Importance (points).

APPENDIX 2

VALUES AND CORPORATE SUCCESS	EMPLOYERS	
	DEGREE OF IMPORTANCE (mean)	ORDER OF IMPORTANCE (points)
Willingness	3.95	16
Faithful to commitment	4.43 (5th)	33 (2nd)
Careful	3.86	4
Order	4.19	5
Hope	3.52 (20th)	5
Self-esteem	3.76	9
Creativity	3.90	19
Loyalty	4.24	15
Perseverance	4.33 (6th)	23 (4th)
Enthusiasm	4.29	12
Honesty	4.62 (1st)	44 (1st)
Impartiality	3.95	1 (20th)
Relationship with others	4.52 (2nd)	23 (4th)
Discretion	4.48 (4th)	20 (6th)
Service	4.24	18
Respect	4.52 (2nd)	31 (3rd)
Kind	4.24	8
Truthful	4.24	8
Coherent	4.14	13
Strength	3.62 (19th)	3 (19th)