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*The effects of non-formal education on professional success.*

*An analysis of student NGOs.*

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## 1. Introduction

During the course of study, students experience learning through different ways, through formal, non-formal and informal education. They acquire knowledge, skills and competences by attending lectures, taking part in seminars and projects, in internships and work placements, as well as in extra-curricular activities and by interacting with fellow students on different levels. The various activities offer them possibilities to develop themselves in different areas, some of them more theoretical some other are more practical. Besides theory and practice, students get the chance to acquire soft skills like adaptability, initiative, assertiveness, ability to plan, ability to work in a team, etc. as well as to develop their personalities. Experience<sup>1</sup> shows that students are more likely to practice and develop these so called soft skills through non-formal education, in different extra-curricular activities, like the students' unions and different student associations, voluntary work in the community, student projects, tutoring etc. Depending on the activities and on their relation to the field of study, students also get the opportunity to develop practical skills in their area of specialization.

Previous studies show that in Europe 15 years ago students spend around 30 hours per week on attending lectures and other activities related to their field of study, almost 5 hours on work and 4 hours on extra-curricular activities on average. (Schomburg and Teichler, 2006) Depending on students' willingness and time, the influence of friends, family and the society, some students may spend more time or less time with practical activities in spite of lectures and other formal activities and will also increase their engagement in extra-curricular activities and voluntary work.

The professional and personal development of students through different types of activities has a certain impact on their further work performance. In addition, employers tend to be more and more aware of the necessity of soft skills when recruiting their employees, in addition to practical experience, personality, technical skills, recommendations and of course the expertise in their field of study.

Accordingly, skills and competencies acquired through extra-curricular activities might have an effect on the time spent on job search, the type of job in relation to the qualification of graduates and the level of education and these graduates are more likely to take over

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<sup>1</sup> the own experience of the author

assignments with high professional responsibilities than graduates who were formerly not engaged extra-curricular. These factors, time spent on job search, the relation between type of job and qualification as well as type of job and level of education, and high professional responsibilities partly define professional success as it is used in relation to extra-curricular activities.

This study investigates the implication of non-formal education on professional success. Specifically voluntary activities within the universities constitute the object of investigation. A special focus will be put on competencies acquired in student NGOs. Whether professional success depends on extra-curricular activities and to what extent this occurs will be part of the study as well.

A description of non-formal education, the various types of these activities and the particularities of voluntary activities will be part of the second chapter, as well as issues about learning and professional and personal development in student associations. The third chapter defines professional success and the meaning which was chosen for this analysis as well as the factors that contribute to professional success in general. The last chapter will combine the findings so far and will try to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent do graduates formerly active in student NGOs develop more competencies that are needed for their further job?
2. To what extent do graduates formerly active in student NGOs find better suitable jobs to their qualification?

It is important to mention that qualification in this context is not understood as formal qualification or higher education degree received, but rather the qualification they have chosen which allows them to do what they like to do and what they are good at.

Further, as a closing remark, the author will find to explain the contribution of non-formal education on professional success and tries to show that non-formal education, specifically activities in student NGOs, have an increasing effect on graduates' professional success.

Although scientific literature on student NGOs is relatively poor, as well as literature on the contribution of non-formal education to professional success, the author decided to include success stories of student NGOs alumni in her analysis, in order to strengthen her arguments.

## **2. Non-formal education**

Non-formal education finds its roots in adult education, when adults were learning out of a desire to enhance their knowledge, a desire which school education could not fulfil. Nowadays non-formal education and learning is practiced in voluntary associations, leisure activities and youth work. (Du Bois-Reymond, 2004)

Non-formal education, as the term reflects, is not following any strict and “formal” guidelines, although it is organized according to certain principles: it is carried out by trained leaders; it is systematically monitored and evaluated. Non-formal education, found in different activities, is still seen as complementary to formal education, which happens in education institutions. Non-formal education, as defined by the Council of Europe (1999) is a planned programme for personal and social education for young people designed to improve the range of skills and competencies, outside but supplementary to the formal educational curriculum.

While formal learning is systematic, graded, professionally qualified persons are expected to teach, is standardized with a fixed syllabus, and teacher oriented, non-formal education is more flexible, learner oriented and designed for specific learners’ needs and contexts. It is voluntary in nature (formal education is compulsory by law in most societies), is decentralized and it takes place outside the formal education system. (Konantambigi, Meghani & Modi, 2008)

Given this characteristics, students are motivated to take part in non-formal education for different reasons. Some of them know having extra-curricular activities on their CV looks impressive to potential employers. Some other may have some benefits during their studies (receiving points which will later increase the possibility for receiving scholarships). (Spinks & Wells, 1989) Still there are those students, who want to contribute, want to invest their free time in something useful, and want to feel important and part of a community. They may learn skills which will be later utilized in class or in work.

As mentioned before, non-formal education can be found in various activities, inside and outside an educational institution. In this paper, a special focus will be put on voluntary student association and NGOs which deal mainly with students. These are usually connected to a certain higher education institution, and benefit from various resource offers of material and human nature.

## 2.1 Voluntary associations

Voluntary associations in general have been defined as “organizations that people belong to part time without pay, such as clubs, lodges, good works agencies, and the like and as spare-time participatory associations”. (Amis & Stern, 1974, p.91) Smith & Freedman (1972) limit the concept to a nonprofit, nongovernment, private group that an individual joins by choice.

Volunteer involvement in community activities has been and is valued and widespread in the whole world. In some societies it is part of the regular daily life of people, in other societies it is necessary to be more encouraged. More and more important becomes students’ involvement in community, which has implications for the future of the society as well as the university community. (Fitch, 1987) The 1992 reauthorization of the American Higher Education Act (Congressional Quarterly Almanac, 1992) defined community service "as service to improve the quality of life for community residents, particularly low-income people, in such areas as health care, child care, literacy training and education" (Eklund-Leen & Young, 1997, p.71)

Amis & Stern (1974) reviewed several research articles about voluntary associations and put together a list of 6 functions they fulfil. According to the authors, voluntary associations provide tools and the environment to achieve goals; they provide opportunities to socialization (social behaviour, engage in something creative); they support established institutions (implement important values, serve a governing function, support the economic and professional systems); allocate power and influence (distribute power, provide structures to distribute power at the grass-roots level, serve a mediation function); contribute to social integration (personal identity, self-expression, exchange of ideas, affective support, societal cohesion, integration of subgroups, negative feedback and corrective role); and contribute to social change (change the normative, power mechanism for and initiate social change, social innovations, adapting the social structure to changing conditions).

According to these functions of voluntary associations, narrowing down, one can think of some additional benefits for student involvement in voluntary associations, related to student development. Voluntary associations offer the benefits for (a) increased retention; (b) improved interpersonal skills including communication and group organizational skills; (c) a positive influence on skills in leadership, communication, teamwork, organizing, decision-making and planning; (d) greater satisfaction with their college experience on general dimensions compared with less involved students; (e) useful experience in obtaining a job and

providing job related skills; and (f) development of lifelong values of volunteerism and service to others as well as lifelong leisure skills. (Eklund-Leen & Young, 1997)

*“I am glad I’ve chosen to do voluntary work. I’ve learned in a practical and relaxed way and in the same time with pleasure. I’ve got friends. I developed myself and I was able to establish a system of objectives. I turned my, the one I am today, the one that believes in the power and the future of non-formal education.”* (Dabu, 2010, former volunteer in several associations)

In this review, the object of investigation will constitute the voluntary associations of students, also called student NGOs.

## **2.2 Student NGOs**

*“These young people find their passion put in line with their natural talents and start doing things.”*  
(Atanasiu & Olteanu, 2010)

NGOs have been variously defined. Due to their different functions they fulfill, Schepers (2006) explains, NGOs can provide assistance for those in need, they may assist local communities to promote and run their services, they even may want to have an influence on policy development at government of business level and others advocate for certain initiatives (e.g. the Red Cross advocates for greater public health initiatives).

The areas they choose to function in are various as well, be it environmentalism, human rights, or some local, national, or international cause and are driven by ideals of the founders and the members that engage in (Schepers, 2006); Student NGOs are mostly driven by needs ideals and rights of students. They can be professional oriented NGOs which focus on promoting the ideals of a specific student group studying in a specific study area (e.g. law, psychology, etc.) or they can be educational oriented NGOs, focusing on promoting and defending the rights of students within the academic community. They usually “succeed in disrupting universities, stimulating political crises and on several occasions precipitating revolutionary upheavals”. (Altbach, 1970, p.156)

Student NGOs, as defines by CROS, the Resource Center for Student NGOs, (2009) are “among the most active components of the universities. They stand on the intersection between the academic community and the socio-economic sector, and contribute thereby to the transformation of the universities in dynamic and open entities, connected to the reality. Student NGOs have a great potential to train leaders, entrepreneurs and active citizens.” (CROS, 2009, p.9) CROS further describes how members of these student NGOs experience

roles and instruments, learn about themselves, are creative and put their ideas into practice. Many of them get to experience something for the first time, learn from the other through interaction, learn new and efficient ways of communication, to manage time, resources and projects and to be passionate about what they do, because they do only what they like to do and what they are good at. In this context, student NGOs are seen open spaces, where passionate and motivated young people get together, learn new things and help other learn new things. For many of them it is the main area where they have the possibility, already during their studies, to apply what they know, what they are good at and to receive an insight on their future possible career.

*„In a student NGO, I've had the most valuable experience of my life. I developed a passion for voluntary work, for student projects and for higher education. I entered a world where we take responsibility for our own education, a world in which motivation, initiative and responsibility play a crucial role our development, a world in which voluntary work guides our most important decisions and a world in which each of us find his or her own mission in life. I never left that world and even though I am not anymore a member of any student NGO, I follow the same principles, have the same motivation and thirst for learning.” (Mureşan, 2009 October, alumnus of several national and international student NGOs)*

It was shown that there is also a certain effect of the status students have in an NGO and their degree of involvement. (Eklund-Leen & Young, 1997) Several authors found a strong relationship between leadership designation and students' involvement on campus. Leaders seem to be more involved than members of an NGO and members more involved than non-members. This might also have the same effect in future work places, where it was shown that former members of a student NGO have more initiative than non-members. The same may apply for those who formerly had a leadership position and those who didn't have one. Additionally, Eklund-Leen & Young (1997) show that “involvement in student organizations enhances the educational outcomes of the institution. Student leaders might well become good citizens and, potentially, community leaders.” (p.78)

At this point one may ask what it is that makes the student NGO so special and how do all these successes occur? Spinks & Wells (1989) show in a study they conducted aiming to establish a student NGO that the enthusiasm of members and their willingness to contribute, their hard work, their motivations, but also external factors, like the successful recruitment within an NGO and the interesting activities have a great contribution to the success of an organization. “For an organization to begin, grow, and prosper, it needs the interest and effort of a few good students and exciting activities for its members”. (p.36) Additional, students

have the opportunity to learning by doing and to experience new things. The whole activity is seen like a learning experience, where students are allowed to fail in order to become creative. Some larger organizations have interesting activities by cooperating with companies which bring their know-how and their support in the NGO. Students also get the opportunity to get in contact with people from these companies or institutions and extend their networks of potential employers.

Another success factor is the model NGOs take from companies. Some of them simulate very well the organizational model of a company, Oane (2009, September 1) explains. They are organized in departments (like human resources, financial, etc.) elect leaders, design recruitment procedures, sometime even better than most of the companies. (Atanasiu & Olteanu 2010)

*„The experiences witin the [student] organization helped me develop and grow. I prepared and coordinated recruitment processes and worked in all human ressources systems; I learned project management, I did selling, marketing and design; I participated to conferences and business events, I was a good team player and I led teams. I found friends from around the world, and I already started visiting them. All these activities which I engaged in taught me a powerful lesson which I immediately started to put it into practice.”* (Olariu, October 2009)

This short insight from a graduate formerly active in several student NGOs, nowadays successful trainer in the corporate and NGO field, leads directly to the following summary prepared by CROS (in Cristea, 2009), about the reasons why students should be engaged in a student NGO:

- You can put your ideas and dreams into practice.
- You get to know many people and make friends.
- You learn things which you won't have the opportunity to learn in the university.
- You learn how it is to have fun working.
- You learn to go beyond your limits and challange yourself everyday.
- You get to know people like you.
- You learn about yourself and what you like to so.
- You learn about people and how it is to work with them.
- You change something.
- You learn to make choices and decisions.
- You create a new life style. (Cristea, 2009, p.93)

It is known that student NGOs around the world differ in their objectives, their missions, their objects of activities etc. There are international or continent wide (European) student NGO which also establish branches in different countries, and there are indigenous organizations which are more professionally oriented. These organizations may also build federation, on national or international level aiming to strengthen their professional orientation and foster exchange of knowledge and experiences among the member organizations in their specific field of study (e.g. EFPSA - psychology, ELSA - law). (Cristea, 2009)

Student NGOs within American universities, as described by the authors previously, define their activities in both professional and academic areas. On the other side, German student organization, the so called *AStA* and *Fachschaften*, have a more political and academic mission, there are rather engaged in student representation in the universities' bodies than organizing activities corresponding to a certain field of study. It seems that some other European countries share similar missions and objectives with the American student NGOs, like for example in Romania. Romanian student NGOs, in general, are involved in promoting a certain field of study and supporting thereby professional development of students in that specific field of study they belong to, as well as in representing student rights in the university and in the whole national education system. Other differences are related to the benefits students receive from their engagement, benefits reflected in skills and competencies acquired, or certificates for participation in certain activities or for organizing activities.

This paper won't focus on a specific country and neither on a specific type of student NGO, it will analyze student NGOs for what they offer to students in terms of learning experiences and opportunities for personal and professional development, for the changes that occur in the lives of those students engaged in this type of non-formal education. Also an important type of involvement we discuss in this paper is the voluntary work students pursue in a student NGO, because voluntary involvement is developing additionally skills and attitudes, important for students' development.

### ***2.2.1 Learning in student NGOs***

Learning in student NGOs occurs naturally. Through every activity, every get-together, every project, the involved members learn, get better and contribute thereby to increase expertise of the entire NGO. Students in NGOs differ from their cohort fellows by their attitude; they are motivated and have a sense of initiative already before they enter the NGO. They have a

willingness to learn and evolve. (Arévalo, Ljung & Sriskandarajah, 2009; Atanasiu & Olteanu (2010)

This subchapter will analyze 2 models that describe learning in student NGOs or that could be easily adapted to understand learning in student NGOs.

Prinks & Wells (1989) recognize that organizations play a crucial role in education by giving students the opportunity to apply concepts learned in the university, because “learning by doing is one of the best ways to maximize the learning process”. (p.34)

In this context one can relate the outcomes of the learning process in student NGOs with the learning outcomes of problem based learning and notice that there is a very close relationship between them.

***Problem based learning (PBL)*** is a method used mainly in the “classroom” context. It enhances student learning by relying on students to work in groups, learn from each other, share information and their perspectives. PBL requires a certain level of cross-disciplinary understanding, because this cross-disciplinary learning is of key importance for PBL.

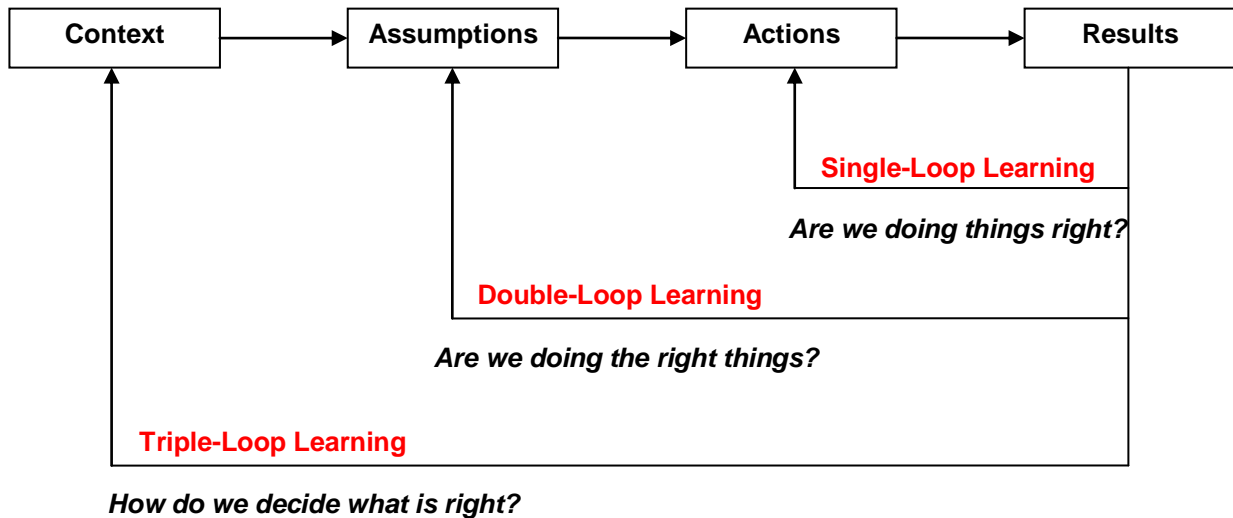
So far the description of the learning process happening through PBL is very similar to learning that occurs in student NGOs. The only difference is that PBL is coordinated by a teacher while the learning process in student NGOs is driven by the students themselves.

Therefore in the following learning through PBL will be put on the same level with learning in student NGOs, because in both learning processes, students learn how to identify information needed to fulfill a task, where and how to seek for information, how to organize the information in order to make sense and how to communicate it to others. This helps students develop their sense for initiative, organization skills, efficient communication skills, and social skills. (Kloppenberg & Baucus, 2004) The authors explain further that through the interactions with other peers, “students view and treat one another as valuable knowledge resources” (p.622). A certain level of reflective learning occurs as well, because students need to continuously reflect on their achievements so far and develop strategies and new ways to continue and fulfill the tasks.

“Students appear to learn more and better retain what they learn through our PBL approach.” (Kloppenberg & Baucus, 2004, p.628) In this spirit, one can also conclude that the learning experience in student NGOs is significantly contributing to the overall baggage of knowledge and practical experience of a student.

Additionally to this practical learning model where students learn by experiencing things and learn by doing, learning occurs at different levels and in various orders. Arévalo, Ljung & Sriskandarajah (2009) explain learning in an NGO on a *triple loop learning model*. This model describes learning on three levels, each level providing the context for the next in a “nested manner” (see table 2.1).

**Figure 2.1** *Levels of Learning*



Source: Adapted from Arévalo, Ljung & Sriskandarajah, 2009, p.44

The authors inspired this model from the double loop model of Argyris & Schön (1996). The later show that single loop learning occurs when members of an NGO learn “how to do things”. This is also called routine learning, because no deep change is happening, but instrumental learning occurs, although according to the goals, values and strategies of the NGO. When the focus of the NGO and its members switches to the issue of “doing the right things” instead of just doing the things right, this is called double loop learning. On this level, the situations and tasks are examined critically and the acts are in accordance with the goals, values and strategies of the NGO. Triple loop learning is the most complex level where learning occurs on a so called meta level or from an analytical perspective. Learners step back and reflect on their activities and their developments, on the goals, values and strategies and the relation among them.

Although the model is very structured, the authors mention that it is not clear if the different levels of learning take place in a successive manner, from single to triple mode, or if they occur more or less simultaneously. This might depend on the composition of the learners

group, if the majority of the members went through the “lower” levels several time, they might be ready to switch to more complex ways of learning and development.

This model shows how learners, here students in NGOs, develop certain abilities, just by being part of an organization, where such complex learning processes occur, and of course getting involved in the activities and work tasks. Students learn to do things, so they learn to practically apply their knowledge, then they learn why they do specific work or tasks and not others and later they can learn, related to their own aims in accordance to the NGO goals, why they want to do certain work or tasks. Various types of competences are developed during this learning process, from operative competences to personal competences, social competences and analytical competences (Schomburg, 2007)

This learning experience contributes more concrete to personal and professional development and students. Additionally to the skills and competences described above, which are very important for the professional development of students, student NGO members learn very much about themselves and about the what they want and like to do.

### ***2.2.2 Personal and professional development in student NGOs***

Student development in student NGOs occurs in different ways. The whole experience in these organizations is a learning experience. Atanasiu, practitioner and analyst in this field, explains that these young people, in comparison with their generation fellows, when they graduate and they finish their experience in the student NGO, are much better prepared for the professional life, are more engaged citizens, follow democratic and organizational values and practices for keeping engaged, they have some valuable reflexes. (Atanasiu & Olteanu, 2010)

Students involved in organized student activities are developmentally more mature than students who do not choose to get involved outside the classroom. Several authors recommend that students participate in organized student activities also because these seem to be one of the most effective ways of stimulating personal development. (Williams & Winston, 1985; Eklund-Leen & Young, 1997)

Spinks & Wells (1989) showed in their research that being part of a student organization and getting involved in activities is beneficial to developing careers, because these activities prepare students “to plan, organize, lead, participate in, control, and improve projects”. (Kloppenborg & Baucus, 2004, p.615) Miller (1987) confirms the development of these abilities and adds that in student councils or student association with more representative

character, but also in student NGOs with professional character (and limitless membership), students get the opportunity “to develop leadership skills, communication skills, interpersonal skills, self-esteem, a sense of belonging, and a sense of worth” (p.124)

This learning experience occurs in several ways. On the one hand the NGO member learns to apply practical the knowledge in his / her area of expertise or field of study. On the other hand the possibility of learning what is appropriate for somebody, to discover one’s passion for a certain area or to develop new professional skills is part of the experience as well. Further members in student NGOs develop social and organizational skills, which are hardly found in formal education activities. Every activity, every event is organized as a project in a student NGO. Every project is a new challenge and a new valuable experience where the student and the NGO develop a win-win relationship. The students get the opportunity to apply knowledge and to develop themselves further. Through their intrinsic motivation and their specific baggage of skills and knowledge, these students bring a certain added value to the development of the organization as a whole. These young people, as Atanasiu & Olteanu (2010) explain, who develop themselves in this environment, show themselves every day that it is possible to succeed, that it is possible to contribute to the society, that it is possible to fulfil dreams.

### **3. Professional success**

Professional success is a complex concept which is defined differently in different research projects and by different authors. In this chapter definitions are being compared and proper conceptualization for the purpose of this paper is being chosen.

#### **3.1 What is professional success?**

Professional success is different to different people. For some people, professional success means climbing up the hierarchical ladder, and earning a lot of money. For others, professional success means loving your job, being able to implement ideas and having a good balance between work and private life. Goals and priorities are very different, and for many people these change over the course of their life. Despite the many different opinions, there is however a certain common understanding of what sets professionally successful people apart from the rest.

According to human resources companies the essence of professional success is often reduced to 3 points: a professionally successful person (1) has special skills and know-how, (2) has interesting tasks and responsibilities, and (3) can master difficult situations. Additional to these professional abilities it is important that professionally successful people like their workplace, have fun on the job and are able to make decisions, are self-motivated, ready to take responsibilities and receive support from their employers (Neumann International, 2010, p.1)

Research studies approach professional success in different manners. Schomburg (2007) analyses this issue and recognize that professional success is often represented by income, other times by the employment status at some time after graduation (employed or not employed), or by other factors such as autonomy at the work place or the content of the work tasks. A classification of these aspects is given by Schomburg & Teichler (1997) according to subjectivity and objectivity of measures for professional success:

- subjective measures are: job satisfaction and work autonomy
- objective measures are: income and employment position.

A later definition of the concept approaches professional success from an extended perspective “with a broad range of measures, such as: the smoothness of the transition process, status, income, success with regard to the nature of the work, e.g. use of knowledge and the extent to which work is characterized by autonomy and challenging tasks, and the overall appreciation of employment and work.” (Schomburg, 2007, p.35)

This detailed explanation is hardly going to be covered by the literature found on this topic, therefore a focus on the acquired competencies and their application in the work place as well as the adequateness of the job to the area of qualification will be part of the analysis.

Though, there is no recipe to become professionally successful. As seen before there are many factors that contribute to becoming professional successful and additionally to these factors, important is that these factors work together and complement each other. Still this is no guarantee for professional success, only possibilities to increase the probability of success.

Professional success is not directly connected to a certain field of study. Looking to worldwide known successful people they can be entrepreneurs or managers of large firms (such as Bill Gates – Microsoft; Steve Jobs - Apple), politicians (Barack Obama), film stars (Angelina Jolie), athletes, musicians, models, scientists, but also local business personalities,

famous journalists, the own boss, the own teacher, one's brother or sister, parents or even the primary school teacher. (Neumann International, 2010, p.1)

### **3.2 Factors that contribute to professional success**

A variety of factors are taken into consideration when talking about professional success. Especially important is it to know which factors have a greater contribution and to what extent can graduates' professional success be explained through these different factors.

Schomburg (2007) analyses professional success of graduates in 11 European countries and Japan (as part of the CHEERS study) in relation to their socio-biographical background, their education prior to study, various study conditions and provisions, study behavior and the competences acquired in the course of study.

He found out that in many countries field of study seems to play a role for professional success (in terms of income, transition time, status), although this role is minor. Irrespective from this, the relation between acquired competences and professional success was analyzed on the competences classified as following:

- *Social competencies*: loyalty, integrity, tolerance, appreciation of different points, getting personally involved, social perceptiveness;
- *Communication competencies*: oral communication skills, written communication skills, adaptability, cross-disciplinary thinking;
- *Personal competencies*: working under pressure, power of concentration, accuracy, attention to detail, time management, management of material resources;
- *Field specific competencies*: field specific theoretical knowledge, field specific knowledge of methods;
- *Analytical competencies*: self assessment skills, problem-solving abilities, reflective thinking, creativity;
- *Operative skills*: manual skills, fitness for work, working in a team
- *Leadership competencies*: assertiveness, decisiveness, persistence, taking responsibilities, initiative, negotiating;
- *Organizational competencies*: applying rules and regulations, planning, understanding complex social organization, coordination of actions and people, monitoring / assessing personal performance and performance of others;
- *Special competencies*: technical skills, foreign language proficiency;

Results showed that competences constitute a relevant factor for all aspects of professional success, especially for income, status, use of knowledge and work autonomy. The same was confirmed for study behavior and work orientation. Nonetheless employer dependent factors like employment conditions and professional development of employee was often relevant for professional success.

The probably most important result of this study is the fact that none of these variables are very influential if alone. That means, that one has to keep in mind that only a interrelation of the variables may have a significant contribution to professional success, both subjective and objective variables, employee dependent or employer dependent. As the author further says “No king’s road to professional success can be found.” (Schomburg, 2007, p. 56)

#### **4. Professional success of graduates formerly active in student NGOs**

Activities in student NGOs are very rich in experiences that have great contribution to the personal and professional development of the NGOs members. The students entering a student NGO have a special motivation to do so, go through a certain recruitment process, in some cases more strict in others less, and develop an intrinsic motivation to keep engaged. They learn about the fellow members, about working together about achieving aims together, about learning from each other about teaching each other and the list could continue.

This chapter will describe and analyze the relation these activities and acquired competencies and skills have on the professional success of graduates formerly active in a student NGO. Professional success will here be understood as applying the skills and competencies in the new work place, but also finding a job one likes to do and does it with dedication.

Additional to the professional development, soft skills which are developed in the student NGOs are more and more asked by employers. It seems that nowadays employers ask intentionally for extra-curricular activities when they hire higher education graduates, because they say these graduates show more initiative and are more likely to take major responsibilities, due to the leadership experiences many of them have in student NGOs and have “some experience and knowledge of their academic major outside of the classroom”. (Spinks & Wells, 1989, p.34)

### ***Competences on the job and in student NGOs***

Employers tend to request more and more management skills (especially project management, time management, and resource management in general), leadership skills, communication, skills, social and organizational skills, etc. “There is a shift to project-based work in organizations and a need for project management skills and knowledge”. (Kloppenborg & Baucus, 2004, p.610)

Thus, students who acquire these skills and competences already during their course of studies have a better chance to receive a job. But in our universities nowadays, competence oriented teaching is not happening on a regular basis, therefore students try to find various ways for attaining certain skills and competences they might need in their future employment. Kloppenborg & Baucus (2004) explain that “students who learn project management concepts and pursue self-directed learning while engaged in accomplishing key projects for real organizations can more easily translate and use their knowledge in organizations that employ them after completion of the course than can students in more traditionally designed, content-based classes”. (p. 611)

Not only the opportunity to learn to apply the knowledge is of great importance for employers, but the ways how their employees work, how they further learn and how they act with their fellow employees. Working in a team is productive not only for tasks which require cross-disciplinary understand, but also for the whole learning process of the people involved, because the same authors believe that people learn best in teams while engaged in cooperative work.

Students, who work in real projects in non-profit organizations, learn to be more engaged and master challenges and complexity much easier than students who do not engage in such projects or engage in traditional project management courses. As showed in chapter 2, student NGOs provide the possibility of getting involved in real projects, often in cooperation with companies or institutions, where the involved students may want to work after graduation.

The areas of activities in student NGOs is very broad, from professional, to social, cultural, academic and representation activities, what results in a broad range of skills and competencies. Schomburg’s (2007) classification of competencies shown in subchapter 3.2, can be adapted as following to describe the acquired skills and competencies in student NGOs:

- Social competencies (loyalty, integrity, tolerance, appreciation of different points, getting personally involved, social perceptiveness - being aware of others' reactions and understanding why they react as they do) are acquired during the preparations of project, team meetings, but also by only being part of the community, that promotes such values.
- Communication competencies: oral communication skill, written communication skills - communicating effectively in relation to team members, partners and clients; adaptability, cross-disciplinary thinking; negotiation;
- Personal competencies: working under pressure, power of concentration, accuracy, attention to detail, time management – helps students learning about themselves and about themselves in relation to others.
- Field specific competencies: field specific theoretical knowledge, field specific knowledge of methods, reliability of arguments; research skills - proper use of methodologies, planning and conducting a research project (steps, the tasks and responsibilities);
- Analytical competencies: self assessment skills - assessing the own performance and developing new strategies for improvement; problem-solving abilities, reflective thinking, creativity;
- Operative skills: manual skills, fitness for work, working in a team
- Leadership competencies: assertiveness, decisiveness, persistence, taking responsibilities, initiative, negotiating; teamwork; management of material resources - obtaining and seeing to the appropriate use of equipment, facilities, and materials needed to do certain work; time management - managing the own time and the time of others;
- Organizational competencies: applying rules and regulations, planning, understanding complex social organization, coordination of actions and people; instructing fellow colleagues; monitoring / assessing personal performance and performance of others;
- Special competencies: technical skills – several computer programmes needed to fulfil the projects, foreign language proficiency – exchange between NGO at international level;

This list of competences classified according to Schomburg's example, shows us that all and more competences that were important to employers are developed in a practical and fun way in student NGOs. This may lead to the conclusion that students, who will need these

competences at work, will definitely have where to search for. In the same time it is questioned, if students find their jobs according to that what they can do and they in the same time like to do? This question is part of the next part of this chapter.

### ***Finding the “dream job”***

It has been shown in several studies that a 100% match of qualification and job requirements is not possible. Education and labor market are too little connected in order to ensure a very good insertion of graduates into the labor market. (Allen & Van der Velden, 2001; Di Prieto & Urwin, 2006; Allen, Badillo-Amador & Van der Velden, 2007). In the same time, experience shows that graduates formerly active in student NGOs have higher expectations and higher motivation to work in a place that fits with their beliefs, where they can apply the skills and competencies they have and a job that likes them (Brumă, 2009; Muresan, 2009; Oane 2009; Olariu, 2009; Dabu, 2010;).

*All these activities which I engaged in taught me a powerful lesson which I immediately started to put it into practice. About all of them I would like to tak [in the first job interview]. (...) In few minutes i will have an interview at the company I aspire to work in. I learned about them [the company] in a project organized by us [the student NGO] and in which they were involved as partners. We got the opportunity to interact and I think this helped me a lot. The most attractive are the people which I will meet there. (...) Sometimes I ask myself how things would have been without all this [the activities in student NGOs]” (Olariu, October 2009)*

This is only one example of successful graduates, who found their dream job while being active in a student NGO and there are for sure much more - more people who are intrinsically motivated to do something and know exactly the place where they can to what they want, what they like and what they are good at.

It has been recently shown that this quality students from NGOs have, of being intrinsically motivated to do things, is wining lots of attention. Pink (July 2009) that in the 21 century extrinsic motivation, reward – and – punishment approach doesn’t work anymore and often does harm the people and companies. He further explains the new approach that is being scientifically proven by scientists among others at MIT and London School of Economics; an approach built more on intrinsic motivation. This new approach is built around “the desire to do things because they matter, because we like it, because they're interesting, because they are part of something important” (min. 12:29-12:35). This new approach is based on 3 elements, also called building block of a new operating systems for businesses: autonomy, mastery and

purpose. Autonomy explains people's desire to organize and make activities how they like, when they like and with whom they like; mastery stays for people's desire to become better and better in the things which are important to them; and the purpose is naturally people's desire to belong to something great and to contribute to something larger than ourselves, something important to the humanity. (Pink, July 2009)

Connecting these findings with the competences developed in student NGOs, one can conclude that it is possible to find the dream-job, if the necessary baggage of skills and competences is available. It is for sure not the only way and it is for sure not 100% successful, but it is the added value that can make it happen.

## **5. Conclusions**

The active engagement in student NGOs during studies has a positive effect on the professional success of the graduates. Graduates are more likely to take responsibilities and have initiative on their work place, what makes them feel confident and trust their knowledge baggage they bring from their studies. Often the activity in student NGOs is seen as complementary to the formal education student receive in their study programmes, therefore the practical skills developed in the NGO added to the knowledge acquired during the course of study gives them the whole package for a good start of their work and a quick adjustment to the new situation. Additional soft skills like proactivity, action, interaction, creativity (bring different solutions to old problems), intrinsic motivation, mastership, high aims, responsibility as well as the "personal tendency" towards developing certain skills is a "bonus" for further professional development on the job. To support this thesis, Atanasiu & Olteanu (2010) describe the students who decide to join a student NGO as those students who have already the abilities and qualities required like proactivity and engagement, they just further develop them within the student organization. They further explain: "The student NGO environment is the so called nursery of tomorrow's leaders and entrepreneurs. They are those people that have, somehow in their genetic code, the abilities and qualities the society needs for growth and development, (...) those people which are going to change the society" (Atanasiu & Olteanu, 2010, min.19:30).

As shown in the numerous practical examples of former or current NGO members, as well as in the literature found in this area, even though a little poor, employers tend to value voluntary work more and more. Some critics put this in relation with the little student oriented formal

education, where emphasis is put on the degrees received at the end and not on the learning processes and especially the learning outcomes that happened during the education process. Dabu (2010) explains that education should be focused on development and innovation and needs to offer a baggage of knowledge which will last for long time. In this context, Atanasiu & Olteanu (2010) declare in an interview that some employers don't even take into consideration formal education anymore when they look into a CV of an employment candidate. They want to know what the young candidate is able to do, what he / she has done so far, in terms of extra-curricular activities, voluntary work, etc. It has been also shown that during their work in student NGOs, members get lots of experience in project management, coordinating a team, put ideas into practice and to practice networking. "This way, these activities might be the first step towards professional success." (Dabu, 2010)

Although professional success can't be put in the responsibility of non-formal education solely, it is shown that the contribution is promising. As Krempkow & Pasthor (2006) showed in their model of the determinants for professional success, extra-curricular activities, as well as a high specificity of professional and social skills increase the employment chances. This gives much credit to non-formal education, especially the type approached in this paper, activities in student NGOs. As research on professional success of graduated shows there is not one factor in charge of ensuring professional success, but a combination and complementation of several factors. Non-formal education and specifically student NGOs may be one relevant factor, although further research on this topic is necessary and required.

The arguments brought in this analysis to support the thesis are more of practical nature and less of scientific nature. Due to the little research in this specific area, experiences of practitioners and former student NGO members, create a reliable basis for for the analysis and give a proper insight to further research.

*„I am a master student and research assistant,  
student tutor and co ordinator of an eLearning platform.*

*In all these activities,  
I apply and develop what I've learned in the student NGOs I was engaged in”,  
because, she says, „I never left that world  
and even though I am not anymore an active member of any student NGO,  
I follow the same principles,  
have the same motivation and thirst for learning.”*

*(Mureşan, 2009)*

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