

THE USEFULNESS OF A BA IN ENGLISH STUDIES PROGRAMME: STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

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The paper reports on the results of a research project which focuses on the extent to which the BA in English Studies programmes in Hungary are useful and effective in terms of developing competences and knowledge for the European labour market. The starting point of the research is the hypothesis that there is a discrepancy between the competences and knowledge graduates need in the labour market and the objectives and expected outcomes of BA in English Studies programmes in Hungary. The research was carried out focusing on and comparing the perceived needs of first year and third year English major students at Kodolányi János University College, Hungary using survey techniques. The paper reveals the participants' motivation for enrolment, their career plans as well as level of proficiency. It also gives focused attention to students' perceived needs in terms of their proficiency level, content and skills they would like to master by the end of their studies. Results clearly show what content and skills students find useful and/or interesting. They also indicate the extent to which students are satisfied with their own achievements.

Keywords: EFL learning, English studies, higher education, labour market, needs analysis, skills

Research Background

The attractiveness and popularity of Modern Philology programmes have been decreasing in the European Higher Education Area (Coleman, 2004; Eurydice, 2008; Kelly & Jones, 2003). This is the case in Hungary as well where the decline of language degree programmes, including English studies, coincides in time with the implementation of the Bologna Process in 2006 (Sárdi, 2010:72).

As five years have already passed since the introduction of the three-cycle system in Hungary, and the first BA degrees were issued in 2009, it has become possible and indeed necessary to investigate whether and to what extent the new BA in English Studies programmes can be useful and effective in terms of developing the competences and knowledge needed in the labour market. This paper sets out to report on the preliminary results of such a research project.

Aims of Research

The overall research project takes a closer look at the situation in Hungary, and focuses on how the introduction of the three-cycle degree system has influenced the curriculum of BA in English Studies programmes in the recent years. The broad aim is to test the hypothesis if there is a discrepancy between the competences and knowledge language graduates need in the (European) labour market and the objectives and expected outcomes of BA in English Studies programmes in Hungary.

This paper focuses on one particular aspect of the study: it investigates students' needs and expectations regarding the aims, content and outcomes of the BA in English programme in a Hungarian higher education institution.

In order to do this, the following research questions have been asked:

1. What is the value of a BA in English degree according to students?
2. What career plans do students studying for such a degree have?
3. What level of proficiency is needed for this according to students?
4. What competences are needed for this according to students?
5. What content is needed for this according to students?

Research Design

A needs survey was carried out to collect the data necessary in order to answer our research questions. As the size of the overall target population was quite large (n=99), the data were collected by means of questionnaires. On the basis of our results, it will be possible to carry out follow-up focus group interviews later.

The needs survey was carried out at Kodolányi János University College, a non-state higher education institution which is fully accredited by the state. The BA in English Studies is the only language degree programme offered here.

First year and third (final) year students studying towards their BA in English degree took part in the needs survey. Participants included both full time and part time students.

Two questionnaires, one designed for the first and the other for the third year students were used. The questionnaires contained mostly closed questions, but allowed the respondents to give additional information too. The questions focusing on our five research questions were identical and therefore comparable in the two questionnaires.

After piloting the questionnaires, first year students were approached in the beginning of their first semester and third year students were asked to fill in the questionnaire before their last exam period. Participation was voluntary and anonymity was ensured as well.

Frequencies and rank orders were calculated. Categories were developed on the basis of the analysis of the responses to the open questions. Excel 2007 was used for data organisation and to run the statistics.

Results and Discussion

The overall population of the two target groups was 99 students. A high percentage of them (70%, n=69), completed the questionnaires. The representativeness of the sample was checked against two variables: gender and study mode, and the results were sufficient in both cases.

Perceived value of a BA in English studies degree

One aim of the survey was to find out students' opinion about the value of a BA in English Studies degree in terms of future career plans. Thus, both questionnaires contained a closed question asking students to rate the value of the degree, and an open question seeking students' reasons behind their evaluation. The results of the closed question are summarised in Table 1.

Looking at the overall results, it is apparent that the value of the degree is regarded as low by the majority of students: two thirds of them chose the categories 'low' or 'very low' from the list. Examining the two target groups separately, however, we find a significant difference in their opinions. While almost every third year student (85%) perceived the value of their degree as low, the opinions are more positive in the case of first year respondents. Nearly half of them felt that they studied for a valuable degree. A reason for this difference may be that third year students started their programme in 2008, only two years after the introduction of the three-tier higher education system in Hungary. At that time, the BA in English Studies programme was still new for all stakeholder groups and the first graduations were still one year away. First year students, however, enrolled in 2010. By that time, graduates had already tested the value of their degree for two years.

Table 1. The perceived value of the BA in English Studies degree according to students

Value of degree	Overall		First year		Third year	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Very low	4	6	2	5	2	7
Low	40	58	19	45	21	78
High	19	28	17	40	2	7
Very high	1	1	1	2	0	0
No response	5	7	3	7	2	7
Total	69	100	42	100	27	100

Respondents were also asked to explain their evaluation regarding the value of the degree. Three categories were formed on the basis of the arguments underlying the low value of the degree. These relate to (1) English, (2) a lack of profession, and (3) the level of the degree. Opinions regarding English state that a large number of people have a high level of proficiency in this language already. Another view in close relationship with this is that competence in one foreign language is not enough. As for the content of the degree, many respondents find it a problem that no profession is included in it. As a consequence, a number of students feel that the degree equals a language exam. The third line of thought concerns the degree level. Some respondents regard any type of BA degree only as an entrance to MA studies.

Two categories were formed on the basis of the arguments supporting the high value of the degree: (1) English, and (2) the perceived needs of the labour market. As regards English, respondents stress its importance due to its role as the major international language globally. They feel that they will be able to reach their career aims only with a sufficient proficiency in it.

Arguments in the second category stress the respondents' perception that the likelihood of finding a good job is higher with a BA degree than without it.

The above findings indicate that students formed their opinions along similar lines regardless of their positive or negative judgement of the degree's value. Thus, they often emphasised one or the other side of the same coin. For example, the importance, frequent use and popularity of English is seen as a difficulty by some respondents while others regard this as an opportunity for career building. Also, the degree level, regardless of its content, is seen only as an entrance for further master studies in some cases, while other students stress that a BA degree can open up career opportunities for its holder. The relatively high number of comments focusing on the difficulties may partly stem from a negative attitude towards life in general, a characteristic feature of many Hungarians.

From the point of view of our research, two findings need to be highlighted, however. One is that respondents find it a problem that the degree does not include a profession. This can clearly be a disadvantage in the labour market. The other finding is that the degree is not worth more than a language exam. This finding relates closely to the previous one and indicates that the aims of the BA programme may not be entirely clear and the outcomes seem to be questioned by some of the respondents. This is an issue we will return to later in this section.

Career plans

Our Research Question 2 focused on students' career plans. In the questionnaires, 12 options were given, divided into two categories: work-related (n=7) and study-related (n=4) plans. The list was open-ended, respondents could add other options too. Table 2 shows the results in rank order. The findings underlie that the majority of students feel that the completion of their BA in English is only the first step in their university studies. Thus, the most frequently selected plans are study-related aims, and 'doing an MA course' is the first in the rank. Approximately two thirds of the respondents chose this option, while 'studying translation/interpreting', the third in the rank, also seems a realistic aim for over 30 percent of the participants.

It is interesting, however, that both 'doing another BA degree' and 'studying abroad' are less popular study-related aims and can be found in the lower part of the rank. In fact, only 12 percent of the respondents thought that they wanted to invest into another bachelor's degree after graduation. This may also be an indication that the perceived pragmatic value of a degree at a BA level is lower than that of a master degree by students. As for 'studying abroad', chosen only by 6 percent of the overall sample, it is possible that financial reasons play a role in the relative unpopularity of this possibility.

While 'studying abroad' does not seem a realistic plan for many respondents, 'working abroad' appears to be an entirely different issue. This is the second in the rank since almost half of the participants indicated that this is a realistic option for them after graduation. This aim appears to be in accordance with those of the European Union regarding international job mobility. Further research is needed to identify the job types students would like to and could hold abroad making use of their degree.

Another frequently mentioned work-related plan is 'becoming a translator'. This is the fourth in the rank, and a quarter of the overall sample chose this option. At the same time, however, fewer respondents thought that 'becoming an interpreter' could be their profession in the future, and, as a

result, this aim can be found in the lower part of the rank. The difference between the popularity of becoming a translator or an interpreter may stem from respondents' beliefs regarding the difference in the difficulty in developing the necessary competences and knowledge needed for the two professions.

'Getting a job at a company' is the fifth most frequently mentioned plan in the list, approximately one fifth of the sample chose this aim. It is important to note that this is the first plan in the rank that may be fulfilled without further studies in the Hungarian context. The case is similar when we look at 'getting a better position', which was the sixth most frequently chosen option by respondents. At the same time, it is also notable that neither 'getting another job' nor 'getting a pay rise' seemed a realistic aim for most of the participants. These findings also indicate that further studies are regarded as a priority by a large number of first degree students.

Responses to the open-ended option (i.e. 6% of the overall sample) revealed that some participants would like to continue their studies in order to become language teachers, and some of them thought even beyond the master level and mentioned the possibility of future PhD studies. Only 4 percent of the overall sample did not mention any career plans.

Table 2: Students' career plans

Career plans	Overall		First year		Third year	
	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%
1 Doing an MA course	1	62	1	67	1	56
2 Working abroad	2	46	2	45	2	48
3 Studying translation/interpreting	3	32	3	33	3	37
4 Becoming a translator	4	25	4	29	4=	15
5 Getting a job at a company	5	19	5	21	4=	15
6 Getting a better position	6	13	6=	12	4=	15
7 Doing another BA degree	7=	12	6=	12	7=	11
8 Becoming an interpreter	7=	12	8	10	7=	11
9 Studying abroad	9=	6	13	7	7=	11
10 Other	9=	6	9=	5	10=	4
11 Getting another job	11=	4	9=	5	10=	4
12 I don't know	11=	4	11=	2	10=	4
13 Getting a pay rise	13	1	11=	2	13	0

Proficiency level

Our Research Question 3 focused on proficiency and aimed to find out what level of proficiency students felt they needed to achieve for graduation in order to fulfil their career plans successfully. Hence, students were asked to indicate the level of proficiency they perceived they needed, and also, to estimate their actual level of proficiency at the time of giving the response with the help of the descriptors provided in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (European Commission, 2001:24).

According to the 289/2005 *Government Decree*, C1 is the proficiency level BA in English students need to achieve in order to successfully graduate. Results (see Table 3) indicate that no students thought that a proficiency level below C1 could be sufficient. The findings also show, however, that a large number of students seem to be more ambitious and demanding than the decree. In the overall sample, the most frequently chosen proficiency level was C2. Examining the two target groups separately, it becomes apparent that there is a significant difference between the opinions of the two groups. The majority of third year students indicated that C1 would be a sufficient level for them. At the same time, however, a much larger number of first year students felt that they needed to achieve C2 by the time they graduated. A reason for this difference may be that third year students were very close to the completion of their studies at the time of the investigation and awareness regarding their actual level of proficiency might have influenced their responses. Another reason may be that third year students were more aware of the difficulties in achieving C2 (i.e. near native proficiency) and hence more realistic about it. Still, it is important to emphasize that the findings concerning the perceived needs indicate that students' expectations towards the BA in English programme are very high in terms of English language development.

Table 3: Proficiency level needed at graduation for career purposes according to students

Proficiency level	Overall		First year		Third year	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
B1	0	0	0	0	0	0
B2	0	0	0	0	0	0
C1	28	41	11	26	17	59
C2	41	59	31	74	10	41
Total	69	100	42	100	27	100

Respondents were also asked to estimate their actual level of proficiency. Results suggest that there is a discrepancy between perceived needs and present proficiency according to students (see Table 4). While every respondent expressed a need to reach at least level C1 by the end of their studies, almost two thirds of the overall sample claimed that their proficiency was still at B2 while 16 percent of the respondents felt that their command of the language was only at B1. These results would not be reassuring even if the distribution of the responses indicated that mainly final year students regarded themselves as proficient users of the language. What our findings suggest, however, is that the difference in the estimated proficiency levels of the two target groups is not significant. In fact, 74 percent of the third year respondents felt that they were still at an intermediate or upper intermediate level while this rate is only 4 percent higher (78 %) in the case of the first year students. While further research is needed to investigate how students' self-evaluation corresponds to proficiency test results, the above findings suggest that the BA in English programme may not entirely be in correspondence with students' expectations.

Table 4: Self-evaluation of proficiency level by students

Proficiency level	Overall		First year		Third year	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
B1	11	16	9	21	2	7
B2	42	61	24	57	18	67
C1	13	19	8	19	5	19
C2	2	3	0	0	2	7
No response	1	1	1	2	0	0
Total	69	100	42	100	27	100

Competences

The aim of Research Question 4 was to investigate students' opinions regarding competences. In this paper, by the term 'competence' we mean the ability of a person to perform a task, a role or a job properly. The term 'skill' is used as a synonym for our purposes. In the questionnaires, the two target groups were asked to indicate the importance of ten competences from the point of view of their career plans. The competences were selected using the *289/2005 Government Decree* and the list of graduate key skills by the *Chartered Management Institute (2002)*. The competences can be divided into three broad categories depending on whether they relate to (1) language use, (2) work situations or (3) further studies. Students were asked to give their opinion using a four point Likert scale. Table 5 shows the ranking of competences as well as the mean and mode of the overall responses.

Table 5 Ranking of competences according to importance by students

Competences	Overall		
	Rank	Mean	Mode
Mediating between languages	1	3,91	4
Proficiency in English	2	3,86	4
Communication skills	3	3,68	4
Preparing for MA studies	4	3,55	4
Intercultural competence	5	3,48	4
Relevant theoretical knowledge	6	3,28	3
Work-related skills	7	2,90	4
Research-related skills	8	2,80	2
Personal skills	9	2,54	2
IT skills	10	2,11	1

Our findings show that competences relating to language use seem to be the most important for the students. Indeed, the top three places of the rank are occupied by skills that belong to this category, while 'intercultural competence' another skill very strongly related to appropriate language use,

follows them closely. We can draw the same conclusion if we observe the mode of the competences. The mode is 4 (i.e. 'very important') in the case of six out of the ten competences, including every language-related one (n=4). It is interesting that 'mediating between languages' is at the top of the list showing that students find this skill even more important than 'proficiency in English'. This finding suggests an awareness regarding the wide range of situations where mediation between languages is a very useful and necessary skill.

The ability to prepare successfully for the MA studies is a very important study-related skill according to the students. It is the fourth in the rank, and its mode is 4 as well. It is interesting to see, however, that the importance of other study-related skills also crucial for the successful completion of an MA degree, are somewhat underrated by the respondents. Thus, both the ability to use 'relevant theoretical knowledge', and the development of 'research related skills' can be found in the lower part of the rank. Also, while most respondents regarded the former as 'important' (mode 3), they seem less aware of the importance of the latter (mode 2, 'to some extent important').

'Work-related skills' as well as 'personal skills' can be found towards the bottom of the rank. While these skills are necessary in work situations, according to the findings students do not seem to regard it as important to enhance these competences during their BA studies. One reason for this may be that they do not expect the BA in English programme to focus on such skills. Existing research results indicate, however, that labour market expectations towards the aims and outcomes of degree programmes include the development of work-related and personal skills as well (REF!). Another reason behind these results may be that most students are planning to continue their studies after graduation, hence the relative importance attributed to study-related skills.

Another finding is that the development of 'IT skills' is regarded as the least important competence by the students despite the fact that it is frequently needed both in study and work situations as well as for communication purposes in general. This result may point to two directions. One is that students are likely to regard their own IT skills as already sufficient, and the other is that respondents may not be fully aware of the IT applications necessary for translation and research purposes. Follow-up interviews will help clarify the issues mentioned in this section.

Content

Research Question 5 focused on the content of the BA in English programme. Our aim was to find out students' perceived needs, and thus respondents were asked to indicate, on a four point Likert scale, how interesting and useful they regard each of the seven modules of the programme. The overall ranking of the modules as well as the mean and mode of the responses are shown in Table 6 below.

Table 6 Ranking of modules according to popularity and usefulness by students

Modules	Interesting			Useful		
	Rank	Mean	Mode	Rank	Mean	Mode
Culture	1	3,54	4	4	3,29	3
Language development	2	3,37	3	1	3,81	4
History	3	3,29	4	5=	3,16	3
Business English and translation	4=	3,18	4	3	3,43	4
Literature	4=	3,18	4	7	3,5	3
Applied linguistics	6	3,12	4	2	3,49	4
Linguistics	7	2,77	2	5=	3,16	3

The overall results show that the rank order of interesting versus useful modules differs in four cases. Thus, while 'culture' is regarded as the most interesting module of the programme, its usefulness seems somewhat questionable by the students. Similarly, when we look at 'history' and 'literature': students find these studies more interesting than useful for their future purposes. At the same time, the views appear to be the opposite in terms of 'applied linguistics'. Here the ranking suggests that while students are aware of the usefulness of knowledge and skills in this field they do not find such studies equally interesting. These results indicate that students seem motivated to focus on the above fields of study. The difference can be found in the extent to which their motivation is intrinsic or extrinsic in each case.

There are three modules where we cannot see a large difference in the opinions when we look at the ranking of interesting versus useful modules. 'Language development' is regarded as both interesting and useful. This finding relates closely to results we discussed in Sections 7.1 and 7.3, and indicates that students' motivation is probably strong to reach their aims. It is not possible to expect the same in the case of 'linguistics', however. This appears to be the least popular module; in fact, it is the only case where the mode is 2 indicating that most respondents found this module only 'to some extent interesting'. Also, it is close to the bottom of the list in terms of usefulness as well. 'Business English and translation' is the third module that needs to be mentioned here. It is a 50 credit specialisation with a twofold aim: (1) to focus on knowledge and skills useful in work situations and particularly in business settings, and (2) to provide an introduction to the theory and practice of translation. The module can be found in the middle of the ranking both in terms of popularity and usefulness. At the same time, the mode is 4 in both cases, which suggests that most students appreciate the inclusion of the specialization in the programme.

The only significant difference between the opinions of the two target groups can be found in the case of 'culture'. While both groups regarded it as the most interesting module, their views are rather different in terms of its usefulness. Interestingly, it is the third year group that found cultural studies the second most useful module. While this might result from personal experiences of the respondents, follow-up interviews are necessary to shed more light into the issue.

Conclusions

This study showed the preliminary results of a survey into the needs of BA in English students concerning their degree programme in Hungary focusing on five research questions.

The perceived value of the degree was regarded as relatively low in general, and the most often mentioned reasons were the lack of a profession associated with the degree, the level of the degree and that it focused only on one foreign language. Investigation into students' career plans provided similar results: the most frequently mentioned aim was to continue studies after graduation in order to gain a profession. Results also showed that students had great expectations regarding the development of their proficiency level. While the majority of them wished to reach near-native proficiency, this is probably not a realistic aim in most cases as most respondents thought that their actual proficiency level was B2 or B1. Findings regarding competences correspond to the above needs. Language use-related skills were regarded as the most important followed by those related to further studies. As for content, linguistics (excluding applied linguistics) was the only module which respondents did not find interesting or useful.

On the basis of these findings, we can conclude that BA in English students appear to regard the value of the degree as low, and they also seem ready to continue their studies after graduation in order to enhance their career perspectives. Results clearly indicate that the students' strongest expectation towards the BA programme is that it should develop their communicative competence to the mastery level of English proficiency. While this seems an understandable desire in the given context, it raises two issues. One is that the aim of the programme is different: its targeted proficiency level is C1. This is clearly a discrepancy between students' perceived needs and the officially expected learning outcomes of the programme. Discussions with students may help clarify this issue. Also, focusing on effective learning strategies and independent learning can raise students' awareness in terms of their own language development and may involve them more in the process. The other issue is that the degree programme does not equal an advanced level EFL course. Still, although it has aims other than proficiency level development, students do not seem to fully accept this. Since the aims and expected outcomes of the programme have been defined on the basis of the requirements of the *289/2005 Government Decree*, a national level discussion could address this issue and even consider a shift in the relative importance of aims so that they meet students' needs more. Further research using triangulation is needed in order to refine these results.

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