

# What role for the internationally minded in SMEs?

## Analyzing the competences of 'internationals' in SMEs

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### 0. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In April 2005, the report titled '*Internationals for SMEs*' was published (cf.: Braaksma 2005). The authors aim to focus on the 'international' in Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SME), by giving an account of the professional profile of the more highly educated for international positions in SMEs.

The definition of an 'international' is a graduate with an international education from higher professional educational institute who aims for an international position at a Small or Medium sized company. An 'international' employed in a small company is a colourful person: a "jack-of-all-trades".

Through joint research undertaken by the 'Hogeschool van Arnhem en Nijmegen' (Arnhem Business School, since referred to below as HAN), in particular the Associate Professorship "SMEs in International Business", and EIM Business & Policy Research (since referred to below as simply EIM) in Zoetermeer, it has been possible to map out the wishes and requirements of SMEs regarding highly-educated professionals that set foot in the international market. The report of this qualitative research summarizes on the one hand the wishes and requirements as expressed in company interviews regarding professionally active 'internationals' in SMEs and on the other hand it summarizes the objectives that higher professional educational institutes (Business Schools) have in mind when training the aspiring 'internationals'.

In order to analyze the assumed international differences in the professional profile of the highly educated for international positions in SMEs, comparative research into the professional competencies of 'internationals' in SMEs in Germany was carried out in a joint effort with the Fachhochschule Bocholt in 2006. This article describes the results of this German research.

### 1. Competences in SMEs

#### *Research into the competences of 'internationals' in SMEs*

Based on the conclusions from the interviews, Business School graduates should have knowledge and a number of skills that stem from both practical experience and education. This combination of knowledge and skills is related to the international business activities of

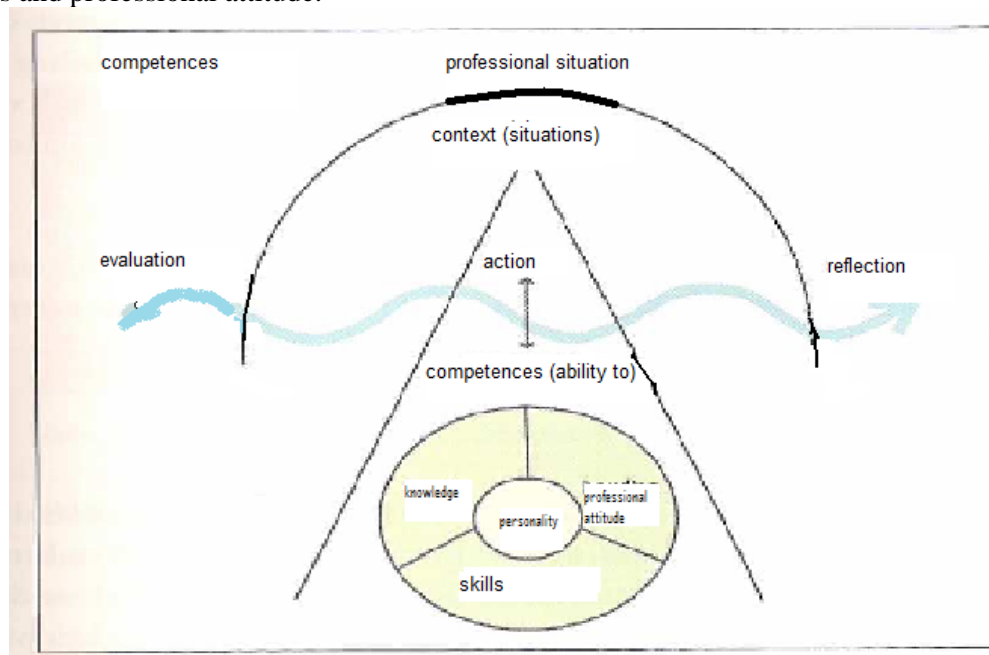
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<sup>1</sup> This text was translated from Dutch into English by M. Susijn, Susijn Translations, Amsterdam.

SMEs and together with a professional attitude they are called competences. All competences are set in contexts or situations that also play a decisive role when determining the suitability of a professional for a particular position Business Schools distinguish three levels of competence:

- 1 What is the student's capacity for studying? In other words, does the student meet the entrance requirements for Business Schools?
- 2 What is the student's capacity to graduate? Is the student capable of carrying out research for the bachelor thesis or final project independently?
- 3 What is the student's capacity to start a job? Can the student immediately start a professional career and what are his chances of being successful?

These three levels of competence are expressed in different types of qualities, with a distinction between generic Business School competences (cf. attachment 2) and profession-specific competences (cf. attachment 3). A student is supposed to be able to adequately assess his effectiveness in specific professional situations and is being taught to reflect upon this during his studies, *i.e.* to gear his actions to the demands of the professional context. The acquired competences feed his actions (cf. the competence-model in figure 1). The acquisition of competences as well as the competence-specific training is the responsibility of the teaching institute, however, the performance of employees pivots around it as well. Important are a combination of knowledge, skills and professional attitude that are reflected in constructions such as: 'the professional is able to perform .... (task) in .... (this context) and is able to reflect upon the effectiveness of his actions in specific professional contexts'. The figure below provides an example of competences as applied in the 'Hogeschool van Arnhem en Nijmegen'. Professional conduct is facilitated by competences (see the oval below the area) that are more or less consciously applied in professional situations. On top of that, the professional, situation-specific conduct consists of the employee's profession-specific evaluation in terms of, for instance, results achieved. Furthermore, individual self-reflection plays a crucial role in the professional environment. During job-evaluation meetings for instance, or in new circumstances, where the employee is thrown upon his own knowledge, skills and professional attitude.



*Figure I: A Competence-model (source: Final report of the Centre of Expertise for Learning and Training 2004)*

When we submitted our questionnaire to director owners, export-managers and HR-managers of the companies interviewed for their views on this model (cf. attachment 1), we obtained the following feedback: the important aspects of the performance of Business School graduates in international professional environments are the management and acquisition of international relations as well as their negotiating skills. These are skills that are dealt with more or less explicitly during their training at the Business School, but are above all related to the personal qualities of the professionally internationally active graduates. In the day-to-day activities, the interviewees value personal attitude and development more highly. These are not exclusively shaped during their training. Another important aspect that resulted from the interviews is the graduate's context of activities within which the graduate carries out in international business. What does his working day look like? What positions does he have? What determines these positions and what is the desired expected output from a Business School graduate? The interviews focus on actual practice as well as education and its importance to graduates that are professionally active within an international environment. Since many interviewees declare the international's 'personality' as crucial, we find the standard answers: command of languages, understanding of national and company culture, technical or expert knowledge, telephone selling skills, etcetera.

Below, we have a closer look at the discrepancy between what education can offer college 'internationals' and what skills SMEs require from them.

#### *The Research*

From September to December 2004, the professorship "SMEs in International Business" in cooperation with the EIM, carried out qualitative research with 47 SMEs in various lines of business (cf. 1.3.). By means of a questionnaire (cf. attachment 1), the interviewees plotted the day-to-day activities of an 'international'. The interviewees consisted of director owners, export-managers and HR-managers. The interviews are set up around knowledge, skills and personal qualities or characteristics that the 'international' should possess to successfully perform according to the interviewees. On the one hand 'expected' knowledge, skills and personal qualities were considered and, on the other hand, the role that vocational educational institutions could or should play in the acquisition of those qualities.

The starting point of the research was 'internationalisation' in the widest sense of the word. The importance that the interviewees attached to internationalisation varied from import and export to strategic alliances with foreign partners, outsourcing and joint-ventures.

#### *Selection of trades*

The table below shows an overview of the participating branches as well as the number of interviews conducted:

	#
High-tech industry	9
Traditional industry	10
ICT	9
Wholesale trade	8
Business Services	9

(Table 1: Number of interviews per trade (source: Braaksma 2005:22))

The above lines of business were selected based on the size of their international trade (10% exports or more). In technology, ICT, industry, business services and trade, there are business relations worldwide, from Germany and Belgium to China, the USA and Scandinavia (Braaksma 2005).

#### 1.4 Which competences does the 'international' need to have?

When asked about the required knowledge, skills and personal qualities, the interviewees list the following (elements of) competences:

##### *Knowledge*

- 1 *understanding of culture*
  - a make contact, inspire confidence, relations;
  - b elementary do's and don'ts in the (in)formal associations with relations;
  - c habits and customs of a country;
  - d good manners;
  - e general education.
- 2 *command of languages* (German, English, French, Spanish and in some cases a Slavic language, e.g. Russian).
- 3 *technical or expert knowledge*
  - a ranging from technical know-how to selling techniques;
  - b knowledge of commercial techniques as well as product knowledge.

##### *Skills*

- 4 *commercial skills*
  - a landing orders from abroad;
  - b commercial work experience.
- 5 *practical experience*
  - a knowledge of product-market combinations and commercial experience;
  - b work placement and/or other practical training (short term yield; school learning was generally viewed as limited and volatile).

##### *Personality/attitude*

- 6 *personal qualities*
  - a analytical powers;
  - b sales talent;
  - c potential, mentality and attitude.

(cf. Braaksma 2005: 25ff.)

According to the interviewees the future candidate for an international position would need to possess the above quality traits. It proves that skills and personality in particular are considered key to successful performance within a company that operates at an international level. Knowledge and skills are mainly left in the hands of the educational institute. It is assumed that students will have ample opportunity and time to acquire the knowledge and

skills during work placements or external projects for and assigned by companies. As far as personal attitude is concerned, students are challenged to a lesser degree. Not many students aspire to a work placement or study abroad for instance, while many institutes provide countless opportunities to do so (*e.g.* through agreements with associate institutes abroad). The question arises as to whether schools and institutes educating these ‘internationals’ should not make these international experience a compulsory part of their curriculum.

### *Skills in Business schools*

Part of the research questionnaire put to the companies mentioned in 1.2 concerned a list of skills that form a standard part of the curriculum of internationally oriented training institutes. This list consisted of the following skills:

- 1 execute country analyses and market research;
- 2 draw up marketing plans;
- 3 draw up export plans;
- 4 evaluate a company’s foreign policy;
- 5 perform research into customer satisfaction and company image;
- 6 management and acquisition of international relations;
- 7 negotiate with parties abroad on behalf of the company;
- 8 perform SWOT-analyses of the company and suggest adjustment of foreign activities if necessary;
- 9 determine whether the internal organization is in line with foreign activities and suggest adjustments if necessary. (cf. attachment 1)

Assuming that professional tasks such as ‘draw up an export plan’, ‘perform research’, ‘perform SWOT-analyses’, etc. are linked to profession-specific competences offered by the educational institute in conjunction with the related field of interest, most professional products<sup>2</sup> that the ‘international’ yields during his studies contain several of the skills in the list. However, many of the competences to be acquired are often expressed in *measurable* professional products, *i.e.* based on knowledge and skills. We observe that of the nine skills taught in international commercial trainings that were put to them, (cf. attachment 1, question 17), the companies interviewed consider the *operational tasks* to be the most important, *i.e.*:

- 1 customer relationship management;
- 2 acquisition;
- 3 negotiations;
- 4 suggest adjustments.

The companies interviewed deemed as less important *management tasks* such as ‘evaluate foreign policy’, and ‘determine whether the internal organization is in line with the foreign activities and suggest possible adjustments if necessary’. It is remarkable that marketing- and

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<sup>2</sup> The ‘professional product’ is the end result of professional tasks performed. Several professional tasks can result in one professional product and one professional task can result in several professional products. Both, professional task and product, are determined by several training-specific and generic competences for Higher Professional Education, as well as by nationally set competences for bachelor courses in the ‘commerce’ domain. Attachments 2 and 3 show the generic competences for Higher Professional Education and the bachelor competences for the commerce domain respectively.

export-plans and customer satisfaction research are not seen to be as important. One would expect these international commercial activities to be valued more highly. Country analyses and market research, both of major importance during the international commercial studies, are similarly not valued as highly by Business Schools as had generally been assumed (cf. image on page 19; source: Braaksma 2005: 23). Entrepreneurs set more store by a graduates' personal qualities. Further research into these personal qualities would be of interest in a new research study.

The above information was distilled from the question what the activities of internationally active employees within SMEs consist of: what are their tasks and what do international their contacts entail in practice? The emphasis is on communicative skills and personal qualities that underlie the intercultural setting of international business (cf. attachment 1, question 11).

Based on the above, we can infer that the entrepreneurs interviewed deem the desired communicative skills<sup>3</sup> and personal qualities<sup>4</sup> (competences) more important than the ability to carry out research and to draw up marketing or export plans, while these are the specific knowledge aspects that are well-prepared in Business Schools' curricula and teaching plans. The practical skills and personal qualities listed under points 5 and 6 respectively on page @@, form the basis for successful execution of international tasks by those who are more highly educated that work within SMEs.<sup>5</sup>

The Business School student has clocked up a considerable amount of 'flying hours' in practice during his studies. Work placements and graduation assignments are currently the most important practical components. Furthermore, there are a number of major projects that include practical elements: acquisition, small-scale research, etc., even though these are usually executed on home turf. A large number of the companies interviewed indicate that they would not mind seeing an increase in the number of those projects, while emphasising the importance of making and maintaining international contacts as well as networking. The

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<sup>3</sup> Communicative skills include mainly the ability to: listen (including understanding the language of the customer that is being negotiated with), network, interpret a customers' wishes as well as pick up signals and translate those to the organisation at home. In other words: what can we do for our customer and what are the experiences with inter-personal and intercultural relations as well as foreign negotiation styles. The question is to what extent international training programmes within Dutch Higher Professional Education Institutes can shape these contacts and negotiation habits in a lifelike manner. Do courses on intercultural communication or intercultural management suffice? What would provide added value compared to current courses in intercultural management? Focusing on our own culture and cultural habits as well as considering the importance of an understanding of and ability to use different ways of communication fit in this scope too.

<sup>4</sup> Apart from the required communication skills, personal qualities consist of aspects of attitudes, *i.e.* the ability to deal with differences in work ethic and social skills and to be open to and appreciative of other cultures, have a curiosity for other cultures, the ability to apply knowledge and insights in other cultures. The Higher Professional Education Institutes hardly touch upon these qualities. Even though students are evaluated on their commitment, teamwork etc., these skills are difficult to train in practice and highly personal.

<sup>5</sup> The underlying research is a qualitative one. We can filter out some differences between trades based on a comparison (Cf. further on in this analysis), however, the basic idea of the results remains unchanged: practical experience and personal qualities.

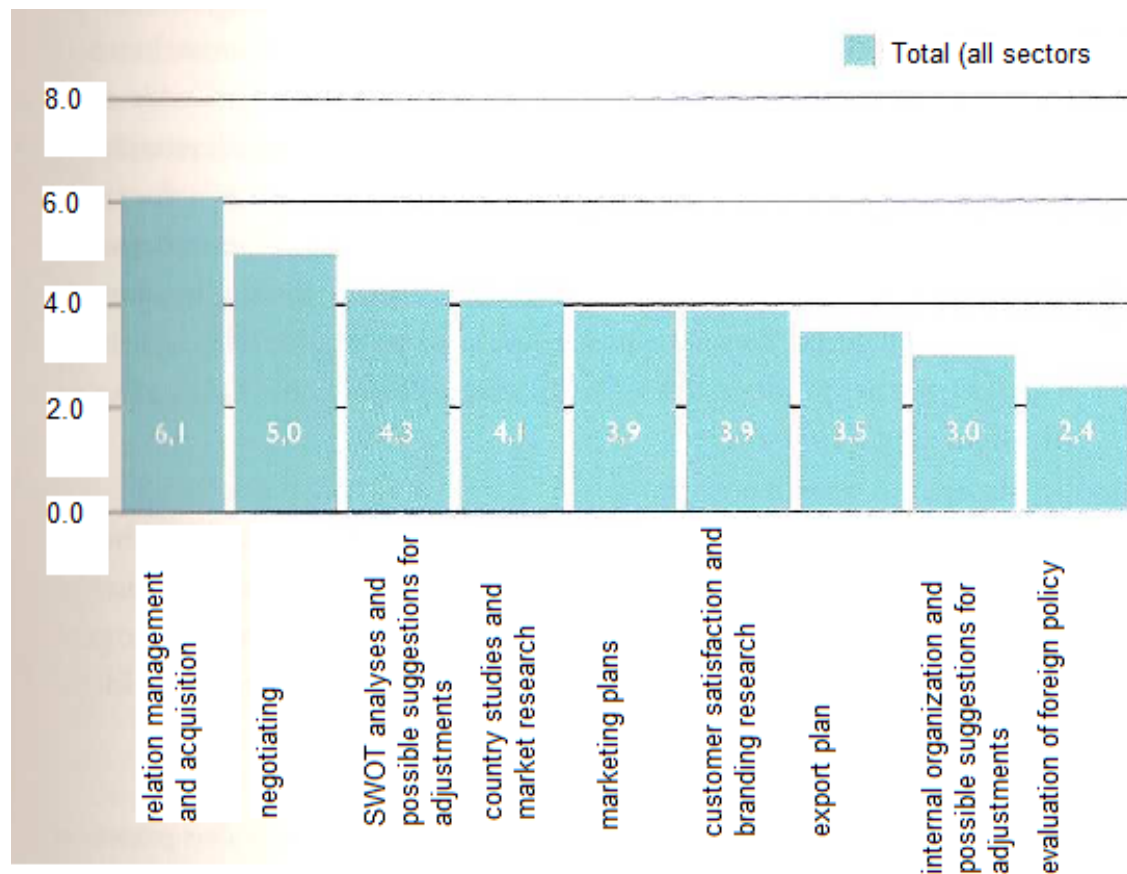
internationally trained graduate will have to gain practical experience outside the institute's curriculum.

Such practical experience could be obtained by working for internationally active companies in The Netherlands, be it under clear conditions as to the nature and scope of the work placement. The interviewees are of the opinion that work placements cannot consist solely of research and that the student should get some responsibilities regarding contacts and agreements with customers abroad. To that end, the associated professorship "SMEs in International Business" has now set up the HAN-export office, where students can gain actual practical international experience under the guidance of experienced export managers.

### 1.6 Professional skills and competence development

How do Business schools, in practice, ensure that the curriculum meets the standards that students are required to meet by SMEs in order to be able to work for them effectively, in an international context?

We already indicated above that there is a discrepancy between skills and knowledge on the one hand, and personal qualities, attitudes and the views of SMEs regarding the ideal training for 'internationals' on the other. It is important to determine how to prepare the future 'international' candidate during his training for the activities specific to his professional context. We use Braaksma's tables (cf. 2005: 23ff) as a starting point. A concise version, with aggregate or overall scores of all skills is shown in the graph below:



*Figure 2: Skills by importance according to SMEs (all trades)*

(cf. Braaksma 2005: 23)

The graph shows that relationship management and acquisition are considered as the most important skills. In terms of professional tasks<sup>6</sup>, these skills can more specifically be described as:

- *management* of relationships;
- *acquisition of, or canvassing for* new customers and orders (acquisition)
- *negotiations* with customers (buyers), interested parties at various levels (also based on product knowledge), management and employees, etc.;
- *suggesting* adjustments (and eventually their *implementation*).

By implementing the above tasks in the courses (cf. Braaksma 2005: 28 et seq), they become an integral part of the program and specific professional products can help contribute to enabling students to perform these tasks in an increasingly professional manner. Within the framework of demand-driven education, this approach is shaped more clearly during the final study phase. This results in a teaching environment that is increasingly challenging teaching environment, applying the various professional products. In the fourth year's course a feasible assignment must have been written and tested against reality. The quality of the end product, *i.e.* the thesis, plays an important, if not decisive, role.

The interviewees assume an 'average' college graduate, *i.e.* a graduate with a bachelor degree in engineering, economy or some such, who is applying for a position at this level. We are not considering intermediate graduates, nor employees who gained work experience elsewhere. Similarly, we are not differentiating between 'good', 'average' and 'bad' college graduates: does the graduate who during his studies, work placements or thesis has shown excellence have an advantage over the average graduate? Further new research into the quality of the graduates would be of interest.

The aforementioned skills and professional attitude must certainly be included in the development of powerful educational environments where the focus is on the student's own responsibilities. Reported shortcomings are:

- inadequate *self-organizing ability*;
- inadequate *multi-tasking ability* (as opposed to university-trained employees).

These two aspects also determine during his studies whether a student eventually will have the capacity to study and graduate (the first two levels in the current higher professional education system), as well as the ability to start working in a specific international professional environment. At the highest level of the bachelor course it would make sense to question what competences (skills and attitudes) a ready-to-start 'international' should have, *i.e.* which yardstick to use. The input from professionals, among others represented by various professional advisory committees is of the utmost importance.

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<sup>6</sup> The term 'professional task' is nowadays used in the demand-driven HBO-curriculum to denominate the specific tasks that a students needs to acquire during the course of his studies in order to eventually become competent enough to start. In this approach, the profession or the professional context, and no longer the material offered, are leading. The latter does not get meaning until applied in the said professional context.



It is obvious that there are differences between the skills in the participating selection of trades. In general we can state however, that the development of personal skills needs to receive higher priority within the curricula to be developed.

## 2 Competence tables

Based on research (Braaksma 2005) and the skills and traits mentioned, we can draw up several tables<sup>7</sup> below, in which specifically knowledge, skills and attitude have been entered as elements mentioned by the interviewed companies. We have included a competence-table as well as a table specifically stating all personal qualities deemed crucial by the companies interviewed for the successful performance of an ‘international’.

With these tables, we would like to show the elements of skills, attitude and knowledge that are relevant to the international professional. A larger-scale research would possibly render more information, although we doubt whether the conclusions would differ dramatically. Prevailing research into the performance of Business School graduates in international jobs shows similar results (cf. Boorsma et al. 2004; Vermeulen et al. 2005).

The colour coding is based on distinguishing characteristics. The colours have been chosen at random, but as far as we are concerned, they do symbolize that an ‘international’ in SMEs is a colourful person, and a “jack-of-all-trades”:



First of all, we will use two tables to show the competences that SME entrepreneurs deem necessary for international trade as well as the contributions from educational institutes towards the training of ‘internationals’:

Necessary competences according to companies interviewed	The task at hand for education: according to companies interviewed the competence-driven training of ‘internationals’
1 Product knowledge: export management and activities, expert knowledge	1 Product knowledge: international developments, cost-benefit analyses, market research
2 Cultural knowledge and skills:	2 Cultural knowledge and skills: know

<sup>7</sup> These tables are based on Braaksma (2005), chapters 4 and 5 (p 19-39).

knowledge of the country including from a macro-economic perspective. Furthermore, knowledge of the EU and its laws and rules, ability to deal with cultural differences	the customs of a particular country habits and their role in international trade
3 Quality care: knowledge of the quality of international trade processes and the ability to safe-guard these qualities	3 Quality control: models and schools of thought on quality management
4 Communication skills: presentation and writing skills	4 Customer-orientation: respond to customers' wishes
5 Innovative and creative thinking: ability to think out-of-the-box, outside existing frameworks, ability to participate in international meetings and to respond appropriately	5 Act innovatively and creatively: ability to put alternative procedures in an international context, ability to avoid inflexibility of thought and in actions
	6 Data collection and analysis, model-thinking and the ability to recognize specific problems that need creative solutions
6 Flexibility: ability to let go of the rigid way of thinking in The Netherlands (as opposed to our conviction that we are flexible)	7 Flexibility (ability to use different modes of conduct as well as to interpret multilaterally)
7 Command of languages	8 Command of languages and cultural knowledge: English and a second foreign language (German, French, Spanish, Italian, Russian)
8 Consultative skills (at different levels)	9 Consultative skills (generic)
9 Ability to adapt to foreign export activities	10 Ability to adapt to foreign export activities (respond to current processes)

Table 2: Competences of starting “internationals” in SMEs: an overview

In actual fact, both columns in table 2 mention competences that generally belong to the curricula of Business Schools and that can be found in the competence lists of the respective commercial trainings (cf. attachment 3 for the competences in the bachelor domain ‘commerce’). The question that we consequently need to ask ourselves however, is whether these competence are being taught *sufficiently well* (at the desired level) and *in the right manner*. Are they geared towards the specific professional profiles? This is especially important where the companies interviewed indicate that initially it is not the knowledge and skills, but rather attitudes that are crucial (cf. table 3; cf. “Van scholen hoor je soms wekenlang niets” (2006)<sup>8</sup>). It is remarkable that generally speaking, SME entrepreneurs are very satisfied with the quality of work placements and bachelor theses. The question remains:

<sup>8</sup> Title translates as: “Sometimes weeks go by without a sign of life from the institutes”

how justified is their satisfaction?<sup>9</sup> Does this have to do with the ‘average’ level of tasks to be carried out or are there other reasons to be considered, such as the personal qualities of the trainee that match those desired by the companies interviewed? This could lead to the question whether there is still any specific added value to the institutions. Further research into the matter is necessary in the future.

When we consider the list of specific attitudes that have been mentioned by the interviewees, it is striking that the entrepreneurs seem to think that they learn this from interaction with their classmates rather than through formal course work (cf. question 9 in attachment 1). The answers to question 13 of the questionnaire (cf. attachment 1) regarding the specific skills the institutions should teach showed that Business School graduates rarely contained any of the personality traits listed (randomly) below:

*Personality traits assumed present by the entrepreneur*

- 1 Good business sense
- 2 Sensitive to atmosphere
- 3 Ability to work independently
- 4 Ability to work in a team (both nationally and internationally)
- 5 Potential to be the king pin of the company
- 6 Entrepreneurship<sup>10</sup>
- 7 Be a personality and have personality
- 8 Have integrity and a sense of responsibility
- 9 Have the guts to take decisions
- 10 Be a problem-solver
- 11 Show motivation and ambition
- 12 Be flexible
- 13 Not have a 9-5 mentality
- 14 Be immune to stress
- 15 Have a helicopter view
- 16 Be presentable

*Table 3: Personality traits that ‘internationals’ should possess according to the interviewees*

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<sup>9</sup> This is at odds with the conclusion by Vermeulen et al (2005: 9), which states that “in respect of higher education in the Netherlands the axiom applies that signs of education, shown through command of languages, time spent studying, time spent on extra-curricular activities, work experience abroad and training have no influence on a particular graduate’s job opportunities”.

In our case, the interviewees’ reactions show a different picture regarding at least a number of the above-mentioned elements.

<sup>10</sup> Regarding ‘entrepreneurship’ PiMedia offers some interesting points of departure to divide the competence ‘entrepreneurship’ into: entrepreneurship, market- and customer-orientation and networking (2002: 44-57). Every subdivision distinguishes ‘attitude examples’, ‘particulars’, ‘START questions’, ‘coaching activities’ (inform, assist, defer) and is rounded off with ‘DIY-tips for the employee’ as well as a description of the ‘fit’ and ‘non-fit’ with the personality. For entrepreneurship a fit would be: “is inquisitive and recoils easily”, and a non-fit would be: “is reticent about the unknown and sometimes recoils”. (PiMedia 2002: 47). By defining entrepreneurial competences in this manner, a fair professional profile, in which personality traits play an important role, emerges. To our opinion, it provides HBOs with the means to evaluate students as to their suitability for professions where entrepreneurship is an essential competence (which is the case in SME).

The above are all personality characteristics that students gain from previous experiences such as experiences at home and at sports clubs or other social clubs, upbringing or predisposition. Our question is therefore whether these skills are being assumed as sufficiently present, or whether they need to be incorporated into the curriculum of internationally oriented study programmes. Consequently, the question arises as to whether evaluation or testing of these skills at the end of modules such as international entrepreneurship, training personal effectiveness, the work placement or a bachelor thesis is advisable or even required – what exactly is tested?

### *Professional field and education*

An important conclusion from the research is that a large number of entrepreneurs interviewed assumes that the more highly educated have such essential personal qualities at their disposal when they graduate successfully. There is not a lot training institutes can do about that.

The largest problem is that Business Schools can hardly simulate realistic situations and judge the students on their performance in those situations. The first test is often the work placement in year three. However, the emphasis during these work placements is more often than not on a well-defined assignment that does not challenge the creativity of the student. In view of the importance of the work placements for the companies this cannot be expected. The work concerns mostly operational tasks that are executed based on *knowledge*. A student's personality traits can tip the scales to an internship that is successful or to one that is less successful. This could then be stated as part of a review which in turn could serve as input for a final assignment, where more independence and creativity are expected of the student. According to the entrepreneurs, students have to be trained in reflection during their studies. In view of recent developments towards a more demand-driven educational format, this is indeed likely to gain a more prominent position. It can be done for example by having them write and manage a personal development and training plan. The authors feel that there is real progress to be made in this area.

Scoring or measuring personality traits such as decisiveness, appearance, independence and/or teamwork remains a difficult point. These characteristics often depend on the situation and specific tasks that the international employee carries out. Practical reality constitutes an important source for development or even discovery of these characteristics. Nevertheless, education will most probably (continue to) play a marginal role. At the same time, students could be confronted with issues such as working under pressure, working as a team, and the need to increasingly assume responsibilities (for example by being informed of, and judged on, whether or not they join in desired behaviour, as could sometimes be the case, or whether they showing unacceptable behaviour). In our opinion this means that in many cases *a larger input from trade and industry (SMEs) in tasks and assignments that are of an international nature is needed*. More often than not the initiative lies with the teaching staff, while a student should be increasingly confronted with the consequences of his own decisions (*i.e.* his behaviour). Competence-directed education in conjunction with input from SMEs could have a positive contribution.

### **3 Conclusion**

Research into “matching the more highly educated with the international professional reality” is a core activity for the Associate Professorship SMEs in International Business(cf. Van Weerden 2005: 21). Entrepreneurs, as future employers of these higher educated as well as educational programmes benefit from this activity. Matching training and practice would appear to state the obvious, however the interviews and the above gathered conclusions indicate that it is not. In what way does business show an interest in professional trainings institutes’ plans and actions?

To what extent are teachers and their organizations familiar with the developments in trade and industry? Students have their work placements, write their theses commissioned by companies, but the synergy between education and practice remains limited. We have visualized this in the figure below (figure 3). Education should be immersed in practice, but in actual fact there are only occasional connections. The focus should be on the practical reality. The figure below should be turned over vertically so that education returns to the centre of professional reality. If that were to be the case, there is a risk that education becomes too dependent on professional practice, diminishing education’s responsibility for training students. For instance, in order for creativity and innovation to develop, it is unwise to take only a professional’s wishes into account only. It is important to develop proper creative and innovative force from within the educational institutes.

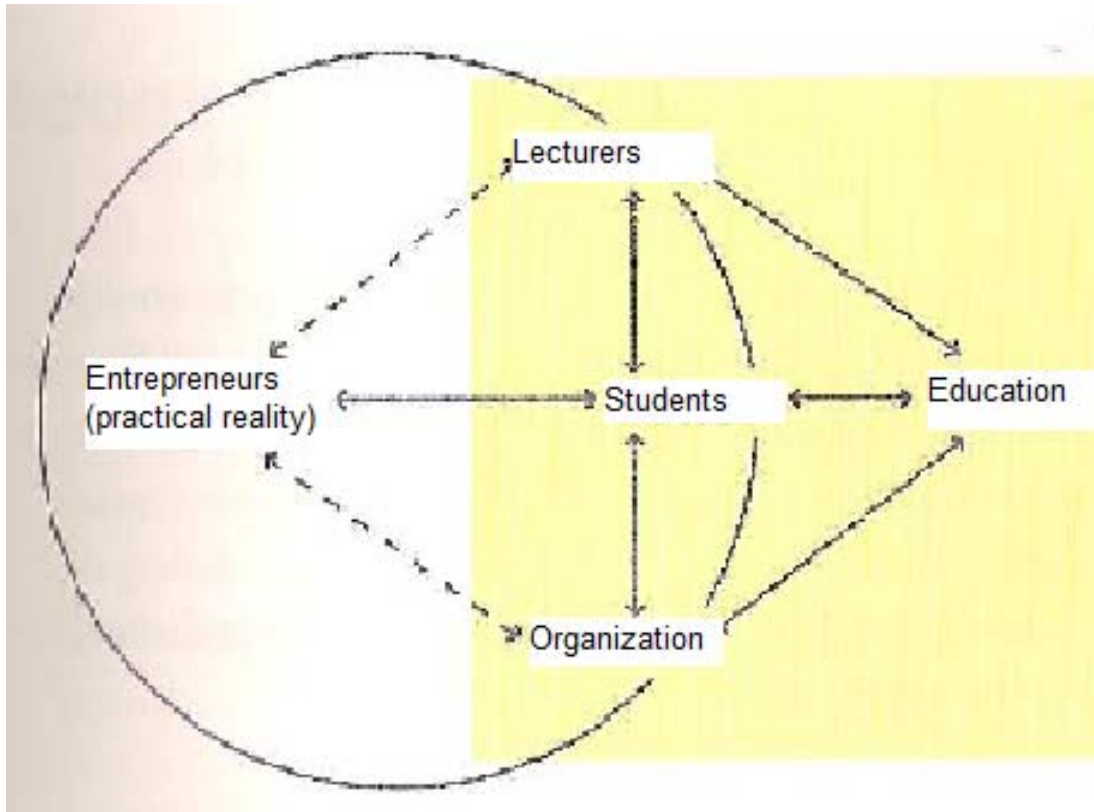


Figure 3: Integration of education and practice

Perhaps it would be interesting to review competence-directed education by aiming for more intensive integration of vocational education and entrepreneurial reality. It could then be assessed to what extent wishes of SME-entrepreneurs regarding the competences, in particular

personality traits or the professional attitude, of their ready-to-start ‘internationals’ do deserve a place in vocational education. Further research will tell.

#### 4 Literature

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### ATTACHMENT 1

#### Checklist

- 1 briefly ask, or find out through the website what the company's activities are
- 2 what is the nature of your company's foreign activities [*open question; circle answer; then continue. Re. turnover rough indications suffice!; does not need to be split up in turnover by country*]; cf. reporting manual further on

a	export	> to which countries	> turnover share (roughly)
b	import	> from which countries	> turnover share (roughly)
c	outsourcing abroad	> which countries	>turnover share (roughly)
d	production facility abroad	> in which country?	
e	company-owned sales office(s) abroad	> in which country/countries?	
f	strategic alliance (=informal cooperation) with (a) foreign partner(s)	> in which country/countries?	
g	joint venture with (a) foreign partner(s)	> in which country/countries?	
h	Licencee of foreign licences		

- 3 what is the expected development of your company's foreign activities in the next three years? [*grow or shrink, considerably or limited, which (new) activities*]
- 4 to what extent are these planned activities? [*probe why: vision for the future*]

- 5 does your company have a special department / dedicated employee(s) for your foreign activities?
- 6 how many Dutch employees have direct relations with your foreign partner(s)?
- 7 which position(s) do(es) the dedicated employee(s) have?
- 8 how many of those employees are higher educated (Business School), and what are their positions?
- 9 name the five most important connotations that you have with the skills you deem essential for a Business School graduate to successfully perform foreign activities for your company [*what must he be capable of /have, in five key-words; probe for exact meaning!*]
- 10 [*if command of language is not mentioned*] how important is a command of foreign languages? [*probe when of lesser importance*]
- 11 [*in case of more than one answer on international activities, select the most important one*] could you give us a short description of the typical activities of this employee in an ordinary working week? [*what specific tasks does the employee perform*]
- 12 which output do you expect from this employee (e.g. export orders, business plans for new export activities, letter of credit), or, in other words: what are the performance indicators in order to judge a performance as good or bad?

**[questions 13 and 14 are crucial questions; therefore, take the time and push the entrepreneur to give some thought to the tasks of educational institutes, even if it is hard!!]**

- 13 which skills do you believe should be taught during a students' training period and are the responsibility of the educational institute? [*probe into entrepreneur's opinion regarding the current situation and possibly find out which elements are underexposed*]
- 14 [*if more than three skills are mentioned*] if you were having to choose" which three skills would need to be taught regardless? [*probe why, and how in practice; make it as tangible as possible*]
- 15 will you be making greater demands on your 'internationals' competences? [*probe why*]
- 16 do you expect to hire (more) Business School graduates in the future? [*probe why*]

*Put list below to the entrepreneur*

- 17 how much importance do you attach to skills learned by students during their studies?

Please score the following skills in descending order, i.e. 1 = most important, ....., 9 = least important

Please note: every score can only be used once

<i>Skill</i>	<i>importance (fill in score)</i>
j execute country analyses and market research	#...
1 draw up marketing plans	#...
2 draw up export plan	#...
3 evaluate company's foreign policy	#...
4 execute research into customer satisfaction and company image	#...
5 international relations management and acquisition	#...
6 negotiate with parties abroad on behalf of the company	#...
7 execute SWOT-analyses of the company and suggest adjustments to foreign policy if necessary	#...

8	assess whether the internal organization is in line with foreign activities and suggest adjustments if necessary	#...
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18 Which skill(s) are lacking from this list?

## ATTACHMENT 2

### *Generic competences Business Schools*

(Source: Prikkelen, Presteren, Profileren; eindrapport van de commissie Accreditatie Hoger Onderwijs; September 2001)

- 1 **Wide professionalization:** means that the student is evidently equipped with actual knowledge in keeping with recent (scientific) know-how, understandings, concepts, research results, as well as with (international) developments in the professional field of interest as defined in the professional profile, with the object of qualifying for:
  - a the independent execution of tasks appropriate for a novice in the profession;
  - b performing within an organization;
  - c the further professionalization of his own profession/performance.
- 2 **Multidisciplinary integration:** the integration of knowledge, insights, attitudes and skills (from various professional disciplines), from a perspective of acting professionally.
- 3 **Scientific application:** the application of available relevant (scientific) insight, theories, concepts and research results to issues graduates will be confronted with during their professional life.
- 4 **Transfer and wide employability:** the application of knowledge, insights and skills in various professional situations.
- 5 **Creativity and complexity in proceedings:** professional issues, the complexity of which is not obvious and to which standard procedures do not apply.
- 6 **Problem-directed operation:** independent definition and analysis of complex problematic professional situations on the basis of relevant knowledge and (theoretical) insights, the development and application of useful (new) strategies to solve the problems and the evaluation of their effectiveness.
- 7 **Methodical and reflective thinking and operating:** setting realistic goals, planning and/or systematic approach to tasks and reflecting on (professional) conduct, based on the collection and analysis of relevant information.
- 8 **Social-communicative capability:** communication to and cooperation with others in a multicultural, international and/or multidisciplinary environment and meeting the demands put to participation in a professional organization.
- 9 **Basic qualification for management positions:** execute simple executive and managerial tasks.
- 10 **Sense of social responsibility:** understanding of, and involvement with ethical, normative and social issues in conjunction with the application of knowledge in the (future) professional environment.



## ATTACHMENT 3

### *Domain-competences Bachelor of Commerce*

#### *Short characterization*

This domain applies mainly to areas where the organization touches on specific parts of the outside world, but it can also refer to the primary activity of an organization with specific business objectives: acquires raw materials, materials and capacities from elsewhere that are instrumental to the operation or results and achieves the sales products or services in the market; organizes and manages sales and buying, marketing and negotiations, informative communication concerning products and services; works in an international and national context with a potential appeal to the competence of multilingualism; independent entrepreneurship; trade specific aspects always play a role.

Marketing is used in the widest sense of the word, *i.e.* market- and consumer driven and with systematically attuned company processes, including commercial processes: marketing management and policy, consumer marketing and business-to-business, market research (including research into quality of use and users, such as ergonomic and sensory aspects).

#### *Domain-competences*

- 1 Initiate and create products and services, independently and doing business.
- 2 Execute, interpret, check and evaluate market research.
- 3 Determine relevant trends and development, strengths and weaknesses of the company and its opportunities and threats on the national and international market, as well as advise on actions to be taken.
- 4 Develop marketing policy within the decided company strategy based on a risk analysis of market opportunities and activities of a locally, nationally or internationally operating company.
- 5 Draw up, execute and adjust plans on the basis of marketing strategy.
- 6 Acquire and manage business relationships for the benefit of sales and services.
- 7 Communicate in various languages, taking into account cultural differences, internal and external, national and international.
- 8 Manage (part of) a company, company processes or a project.

#### *The two generic domain-competences*

- 9 Social and communicative competence (interpersonal, organization):
  - cooperate in a professional environment and help think about objectives and make-up of an organization, resulting in requirements regarding the following aspects: multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary organization, customer-orientation, collegiality, managerial qualities (the social aspect of this competence);
  - communication, verbally and in writing, internally at all levels, effectively and in contemporary corporate language, often in Dutch and/or English (in terms of professional tasks, this includes drawing up and writing plans and memo's, inform, discuss, create support, stimulate, motivate, convince, verbalize decisions)

10 self-managing competence:

- manage and regulate own development concerning learning, result-oriented performance, taking initiative, independency, flexibility;
- contemplate and reflect on, and take responsibility for, own conduct, which indicates involvement and critical self-evaluation;
- develop a professional attitude with initiative or room for normative-cultural aspects, respect for others, a professional code and ethical principles regarding professional conduct;
- contribute to further professionalization of the trade, publish, contribute to conferences, etc.