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Developing Entrepreneurial Competencies of the RLG Project Participants – Applicability of Assessment Tools and Results of Pilot Studies

Abstract: the paper shows the results of the research on competencies, including assessment of acquisition of ten entrepreneurial competencies specified within the Reaching Lost Generation (RLG) project. The competencies developed among participants are classified to broadly describe the sense of initiative and entrepreneurship as one of the eight key competencies in the European education system. In Poland, competency assessment was based on the observation of participants in the two selected schools-partners of the RLG project. The target group were students of final grades of upper secondary schools, who were preparing for the matriculation exam and had serious problems in choosing their educational and career path, and had a weak sense of mastery of entrepreneurial competencies. The assessment of acquired competencies was based on the observation tasks carried out during the initial and final evaluation. Based on the study, it can be concluded that the level of acquired competencies of the participants after completing the course of workshops for all tested ten competencies has increased significantly among both groups analysed, as well as in most individual cases. In addition to that, self-assessment of workshop participants was conducted. With the help of a questionnaire, the workshop participants assessed their acquisition of given competencies. The results of participants self-evaluation also show an increase in acquired competencies, although they are not as vast and clear as in the case of the assessment done by the observers, which may indicate a high sense of responsibility and prudence in the self-assessment among workshop participants. The conducted research can be a starting point for further studies and analysis of the process of developing entrepreneurial competencies among students of different types of schools and teaching profiles, especially showing the process and methods of acquisition of skills necessary for finding an attractive profession in the rapidly changing labour market. Nevertheless, the results of the pilot studies conducted during the test phase of the project indicate the usefulness of the proposed tools, both regarding the assessment of the level and the development of entrepreneurial competencies in the training practice.

Keywords: business competencies; competencies assessment; entrepreneurial competencies; key competencies; NEET; sense of initiative and entrepreneurship

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Introduction

The changing dynamics of social and economic development in European countries confront the education system with particular challenges of shaping key competencies of children and young people, as well as adults, in lifelong education. One of these core competencies is broadly understood entrepreneurship, allowing for active participation in the socioeconomic life and career development, according to individual interests and skills. At the same time, in many European countries, despite the observed symptoms of recovery from the global crisis and the shortage of skilled workers in many sectors of the economy, high rates of unemployment among young people are noted (Kilar et al., 2016). In some countries, there has also been lots of discouragement among young people to address the challenges of further education and preparation for active professional life. There is often a claim attitude towards the welfare system, i.e. waiting for state aid. Among young people, there is also little need in many European countries – compared with other nations in the world, such as the United States – to set up and run their own business. The situation as mentioned earlier was one of the prerequisites for the development of the European “Reaching Lost Generation” (RLG) project aimed at shaping entrepreneurial attitudes of young people entering the labour market, with particular emphasis on low-skilled young people discouraged from further education and work. These difficulties refer in particular to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe which have undergone post-1989 systemic changes, from the centrally-controlled economy to the market economy and the significant transformation of social and economic structures (Rachwał, 2015; Dominiak, Rachwał, 2016). The situation in Poland in the field of unemployment among young people has improved significantly in recent years. Since 2002 the subject of “entrepreneurship” has been implemented in general education in secondary schools (see Rachwał, Kurek, Boguś, 2016). In many fields of study, also non-economic, there are courses offered in the area of entrepreneurship (Płaziak, Rachwał, 2014), and the level of entrepreneurial intentions of students in Poland is quite high (see, for example, Jaminez, Wach, 2014; Rachwał, Wach, 2016; Wach, Wojciechowski, 2016). However, for many groups of young people, especially those who do not continue their education in college, development of entrepreneurial attitudes is a necessity. To this end, various initiatives are undertaken to develop methods for assessing the level and development of entrepreneurial competencies, one of which is the RLG project.

With the above-mentioned in mind, the aim of the article is to present the possibilities of using tools developed in the RLG project to assess ten key competencies of entrepreneurship in young people who need to choose a further path of education or enter the labour market. The paper presents conditions for the implementation of the program, the role of key persons in its application, and the results of research conducted in Polish schools on the effectiveness of these tools during the pilot phase of the project. It allows, on the one hand, to assess the opportunities for the development of entrepreneurial competencies as a result of the RLG training, and, on the other, point out the practical benefits

of using these tools and educational materials in school practice and in various educational institutions in shaping entrepreneurial attitudes.

Entrepreneurship and innovation of the RLG project

The RLG project was co-financed by the EU under the Erasmus+ program (Key Action 2 – Strategic Partnership). The project implementation covered three years from 1 September 2014 to 31 August 2017. The RLG project was targeted specifically at low-skilled young people, often classified as NEET (not educated, employed or trained) in each partner country, i.e. Poland, Germany, Hungary and Scotland (the UK). Thus the target group was primarily the unemployed young people aged 16–24 with low qualifications and low labour market activity. At the stage of the testing of tools and didactic materials, at least 96 people in the four countries were supported. In the case of Poland, a target group were students of the last classes of high school and technical secondary school, who were at the point of starting their careers and entering the labour market. For motivational reasons, student workshops were developed under the theme of the Reach for your Life's Goals (RLG). The detailed objectives and tasks in the project implementation were presented in previous studies (Kilar et al., 2016).

The innovation of the RLG project is primarily its holistic approach to addressing the low level of competency of the target group. With the tools to determine the level of these competencies (specially developed questionnaire and Initial Assessment tasks) before the start of training, it was possible to assess the level of each of the ten entrepreneurial competencies of the program participants. It enabled selecting the appropriate tasks from the available workshops activates for developing these competencies, with an emphasis on those whose deficit was greatest in the light of the previous diagnosis. Then it was possible to examine the effects of their implementation with the Final Assessment tool.

The innovativeness of the developed training program also involved the selection of compelling, differentiated tasks, developing specific competencies using a variety of methods and techniques of work, which counteracted the possible lack of interest of the participants and increased their involvement in the exercises.

Entrepreneurship was inseparable from the very essence of the project since the competencies developed by the participants were widely understood as one of the eight key competencies in the European education system. During workshops, some skills directly involved in business or work in any company or organisation were developed, such as planning and coordinating, decision making, creative problem solving and business thinking (Table 1). Therefore, all the elements of entrepreneurship and initiativeness defined in the concept of key competencies for the European education system were developed in practice. It was how young people were prepared to take responsibility for their lives, both private and professional, the skilful choice of further education paths, finding themselves in a dynamically changing labour market and developing their careers.

Research profile of the target group

In the case of the Polish partner of the RLG project, the target group consisted of students of the last years of high schools who were preparing for the Matura exam and had serious problems deciding about their educational and professional path while feeling a lack

Table1. Entrepreneurial competencies diagnosed and developed within the RLG Project

No.	Competency	Significance range of competencies – expected skill or presented attitude
1.	Willingness to learn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – desire to acquire new knowledge and expertise – ability to self-reflect on own strengths and weaknesses – recognising own limitations and opportunities for further study and work
2.	Interpersonal skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – ability to communicate effectively – ability to precisely express own thoughts and feelings – ability to work in pairs and as a team – ability to work with different people – ability to perceive the feelings of others – ability to communicate assertively and use it to solve conflicts – ability to actively listen – ability to negotiate – ability to build and maintain proper social relationships
3.	Strong initiative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – strong and persistent motivation to act – actively seeking new opportunities and solutions – ability to search and choose the best way to reach own goal
4.	Problem solving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – ability to define a problem – creativity in finding possible alternatives to the problem – ability to use acquired information to address the problem
5.	Taking responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – awareness of the consequences of decisions – willingness to take responsibility for actions taken
6.	Planning and organising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – assigning tasks necessary to achieve the goal – ability to determine the order and timing of subsequent tasks – consistency in the implementation of the prepared plan
7.	Adaptability and flexibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – capacity to revise and change own views, behaviours and actions to adapt to changing conditions
8.	Business thinking and awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – ability to find the right sources of information – understanding the operation of administrative structures – ability to accurately locate resources
9.	Willingness to take risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – ability to assess the risks of the decisions made (or to be taken) – accepting the need to make decisions in the event of uncertainty or incomplete information – ability to conclude from past events
10.	Decision making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – ability to analyse issues from different angles – making decisions at the right time – making decisions to the possible benefits and dangers stemming from them

Source: own work based on the materials developed during the implementation of the RLG project

of entrepreneurial competency and lack of willingness to undertake the business activity. Two groups were selected for the study, both from the Małopolskie Voivodeship. The first one was more professionally profiled, as it was the Hospitality class in the Poviát Centre for Vocational and Continuing Education in Wieliczka (Powiatowe Centrum Kształcenia Zawodowego i Ustawicznego – PCKZiU). The second one was represented by students of different high school classes in the 11th High School (XI Liceum Ogólnokształcące – XI LO) in Kraków. In total, 11 students of the Matura class of the PCKZiU from Wieliczka

(both boys and girls) and 13 students of the XI LO Matura classes in Kraków (girls only) participated in the research.

Methodology of the research

By carrying out both Initial Assessment and Final Assessment in the selected Kraków and Wieliczka schools, the level of acquisition of competencies by workshop participants was assessed via observation and questionnaire surveys. The level of acquisition of each of the ten entrepreneurial competencies listed in the RLG project was assessed (Table 1). The assessment was made in points (according to the formulas in the evaluation questionnaires) and then converted to a percentage share of the competency acquired.

The same exercises were planned as part of a preliminary assessment for XI LO in Kraków and PCKZiU in Wieliczka. However, for the final evaluation, different tasks were performed so that they were not boring to the participants. What is more, the students might have remembered correct and incorrect answers from the Initial Assessment. Exercises in the final evaluation checked the same ten selected competencies, and the scores were given in points, which were then converted into the percentage of available competencies.

Besides, self-assessment of students' competencies was carried out according to the accepted questionnaire form. All the participants of the workshop from both schools completed a self-assessment questionnaire at the beginning of the seminar cycle and after the completion of the workshop cycle.

The role of the observer in evaluating competencies of the workshop participants

Before the implementation of the workshop, a training session was held for trainers and observers. During the "train the trainer" session, trainees were given the opportunity to use teaching materials to assess the development of competencies, as well as the necessary documentation (including observer cards) and to train the trainers also to act as observers. It was important for future observers to understand the importance and responsibility of the role they were to play, as they needed to evaluate the level of competency acquired by workshop participants. It was particularly important during the initial assessment of the "in-entrance" competencies were conducted, as well as during the final assessment conducted after the workshop. Close, real cooperation was required between the lead trainer and the observers.

It was suggested that in training workshops for groups of about 12 students (in the case of Polish schools) at least four observers took part so that the number of individuals observed was not higher than four. It seemed necessary for the precise observation of the participants and the assessment of their competency acquisition. In this case, each trainer-observer evaluated three previously selected students. Observers did not change the observed students during workshop sessions, as this might have led to unnecessary confusion and less precise assessment of competency development, and thus might have influenced significantly the outcome of the study. One can agree with the statement that the more observers, the more objective and precise the assessment of the acquisition of competency by workshop participants.

Analysis and evaluation of the results of participants' competency research – observers' assessment

The assessment of the workshop participants conducted by observers¹ within the initial and final assessment, for both groups participating in the project pilot phase, showed an increase in all competencies as a result of the workshops (Fig. 1). The highest growth was recorded in the “willingness to learn” competency from 51% to 91%, i.e. 40 percentage points (pp). Substantial increases were also observed in business thinking, decision-making and strong initiative.

The results of the study of changes in the level of competency before and after the workshop, however, differed for both schools.

The results of the conducted research and the level of acquired competency during the initial and final assessment for the 13 participants of the XI LO in Kraków are presented in the bar graph (Fig. 2). Based on the studies conducted, it can be concluded that the level of acquired competencies of the participants after completing the workshop for all the ten competencies examined increased significantly. The highest increase in the competencies assessed was for business thinking – increase by 39 pp (from 38% to 77%), problem-solving – increase by 27 pp (from 42% to 69%), willingness to learn – increase by 26 pp (from 57% to 83%).

The smallest increase in the competencies surveyed was in willingness to take risks (from 51% to 58%). Among the remaining competencies analysed there was an increase of about a dozen percentage points. It can, therefore, be said that the planning and implementation of a 72-hour cycle of entrepreneurship workshops for a group of 13 participants brought the desired result.

The results of the conducted research, as well as the preliminary and final level of acquired competencies for 11 participants of the PCKZiU in Wieliczka, are presented in the bar graph in Figure 3.

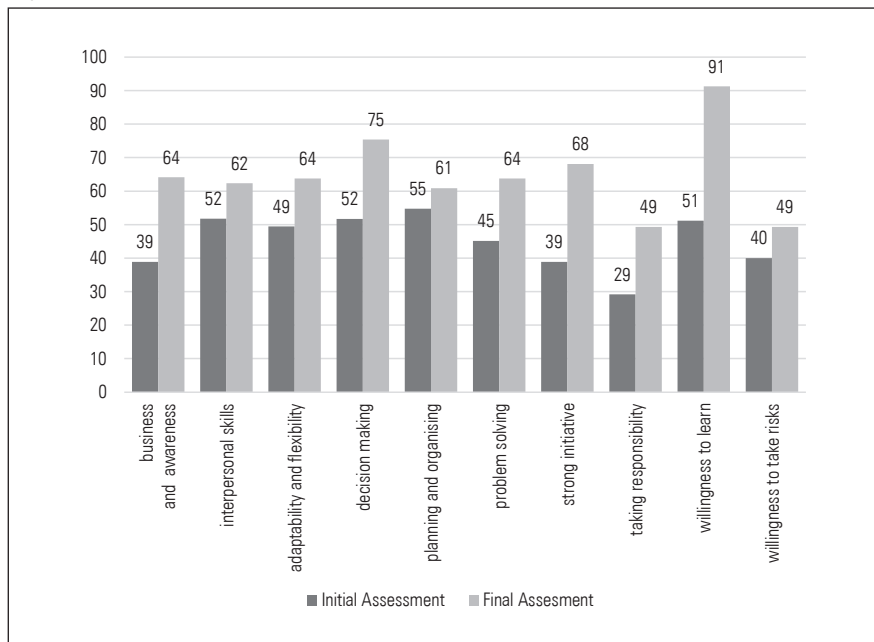
Based on the conducted studies, it can be concluded that the level of acquired competencies of participants after the workshop course for nine of the ten competencies examined increased significantly (similarly to the group from XI LO in Kraków). The highest increase in the analysed competencies was for willingness to learn – an increase in the level of competency acquisition by as much as 55 pp (from 45% to 100%), a strong initiative – an increase by as much as 38 pp (from 35% to 73%), decision-making – an increase by 27 pp (from 49% to 76%), and willingness to take risks – an increase of 24 pp (from 21% to 45%).

The level of two competencies of those surveyed – planning and organising – slightly decreased, i.e. by 2 pp (from 52% to 50%), while the willingness to take risks by 17 pp (from 56% to 39%). Out of the remaining competencies, their acquisition increased by about a dozen percentage points.

It can be stated that the initial level of competencies among the participants from the XI LO in Kraków in many analysed competencies was higher by about a few to a dozen percentage points compared to the participants of the PCKZiU in Wieliczka. This difference can be explained by the fact that Kraków high school students initially achieved more top results of the acquisition of competencies compared to the students

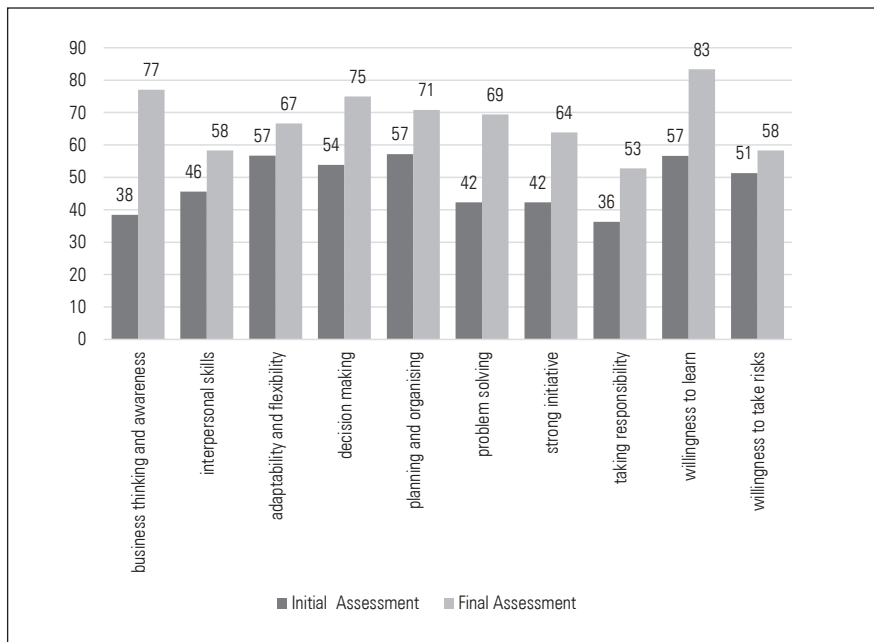
¹ Example exercises were presented in an earlier publication (Kilar et al., 2016).

Fig. 1. Development of competencies of the workshop participants – both schools



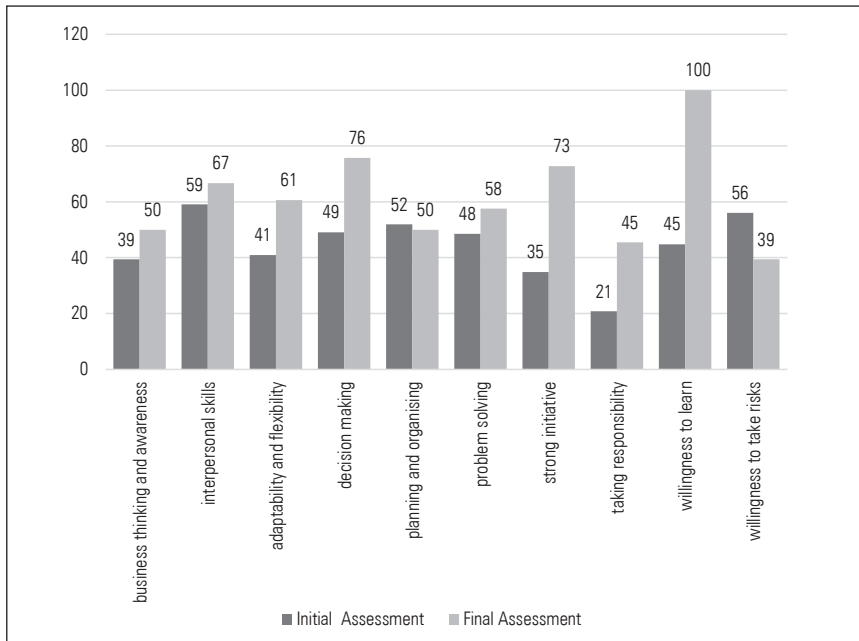
Source: own work based on the research results during the RLG project implementation

Fig. 2. Development of competencies of the workshop participants – XI LO in Kraków



Source: own work based on the research results during the RLG project implementation

Fig. 3. Development of competencies of the workshop participants – PCKZiU in Wieliczka



Source: own work based on the research results during the RLG project implementation

from outside of Kraków, mainly from the vocational class. However, more detailed studies, in the larger population of participants, seem necessary, as the limited research group in the pilot phase of the project does not allow for such a generalisation.

Based on the research conducted, however, one does not see the same tendencies among the participants from the XI LO in Kraków and PCKZiU in Wieliczka in terms of the growth of the same competencies. This can be explained by the different class profiles in the two schools, as well as by a diverse group of trainers who conducted the workshops. It should be emphasised that, despite the use of the same tools (exercises carried out during the workshop), the trainers, in particular, their competency concerning specific tasks and the ability to maintain good relations with participants, can have a significant impact on the outcome. Nevertheless, growth is noticeable.

Self-assessment of acquired competencies of workshop participants – theoretical considerations and research results

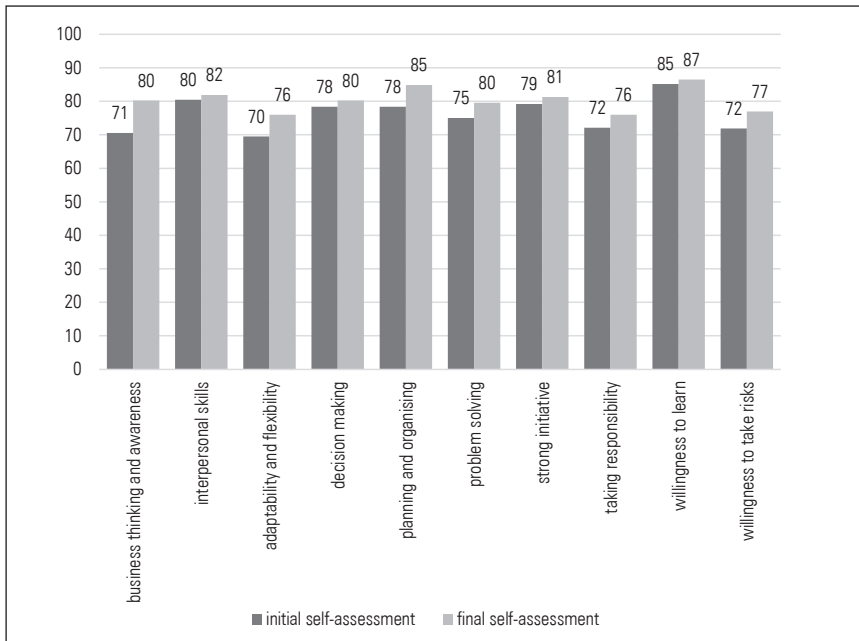
In addition to evaluating the level of competency of the project participants' through the observations made by the observers during the Initial Assessment and Final Assessment, it is also important – according to the authors of the project – to assess the personal competencies of the participants themselves. The students' responses to the self-assessment questionnaire at the beginning and the end of the project allowed them to determine how they perceived their entrepreneurial knowledge and skills before and after the workshop cycle. The competency and self-awareness of their level are necessary for participants not only for their future careers but also for their private life.

Perceiving own knowledge and skills is an essential element of self-esteem, understood as “the attitude towards oneself, especially own abilities, as well as other features of social value” (Szewczuk, 1985: 275). The competencies developed in the project, such as interpersonal skills, problem-solving, decision-making, or willingness to learn, are such competencies. Self-esteem follows Higgins’ self-regulation theory (1987) from the own comparison between the “real me” and the “ideal me”. “Real me” includes true qualities and competencies possessed by a person, while “ideal me” is the intentional image of the individual, resulting from the overlap of own expectations and the demands of the society (Higgins, 1987). The feeling of divergence between the two images causes the desire of individuals to reduce the distance between them (Oleś, 2008), and its achievement gives a sense of self-satisfaction. By evaluating ourselves, we are never objective. That is why there are two types of self-esteem: high (positive attitude towards oneself) and low (negative attitude towards oneself). Type of self-assessment influences well-being, especially the nature of social relationships and career. People with low self-esteem are insecure, have less motivation and lower aspirations, so they do not undertake challenges, assuming that they will fail (Kulas, 1986). They are more likely to take easier tasks and thus achieve less in life than they objectively could have reached (Kulas, 1986). Paradoxically, they are not safer – in adult life they have far more financial and professional problems than people with higher self-esteem. People with low self-esteem are susceptible to criticism from others and are afraid of being ridiculed, so they tend to withdraw from social life, and it is tough to include them in social relationships (Grabowiec, 2011, Wosik-Kamala, 2007, Kulas, 1986). People with high self-esteem are the opposite; they boldly face more difficult challenges, are more focused on them and are more flexible in solving problems (Baumeister, Smart, Boden, 1996). They are more satisfied with themselves and their lives, making them more likely to have close social relationships and more apt to enjoy personal and professional success (Diener E., Diener M., 1995).

The analysis of participants’ responses regarding own competencies before and after the workshop showed that the students raised their self-esteem. In the case of all ten competencies developed in the project, the average level of mastery of each of them increased. Before the workshop, the project participants in both schools assessed their competencies positively, on average, from 70% to 85% (Fig. 4). The results were higher than those resulting from the assessment of the tasks performed by observations in the first evaluation. On average, the students rated worse their competencies in adaptation and flexibility in the new situation (70%) and business thinking (71%). They also poorly rated own ability to take responsibility and willingness to take risk (72%). Students from both schools rated highest their willingness to learn (85% on average) and interpersonal skills (80%). As a result of the workshops, the participants raised their self-assessment. In their view, they showed highest average progress in business thinking (average rating increased by 9 pp), planning and organising (by 7 pp), as well as adaptability and flexibility (by 6 pp), which are the competencies which they initially rated the weakest. The smallest progress in their assessment was made in the case of those competencies that had already been ranked high, such as interpersonal competencies or learning motivation (by 2 pp). As a result of the workshops, according to the self-assessment of the participants, their level of competency rose from 2 to 9 pp, depending on competency.

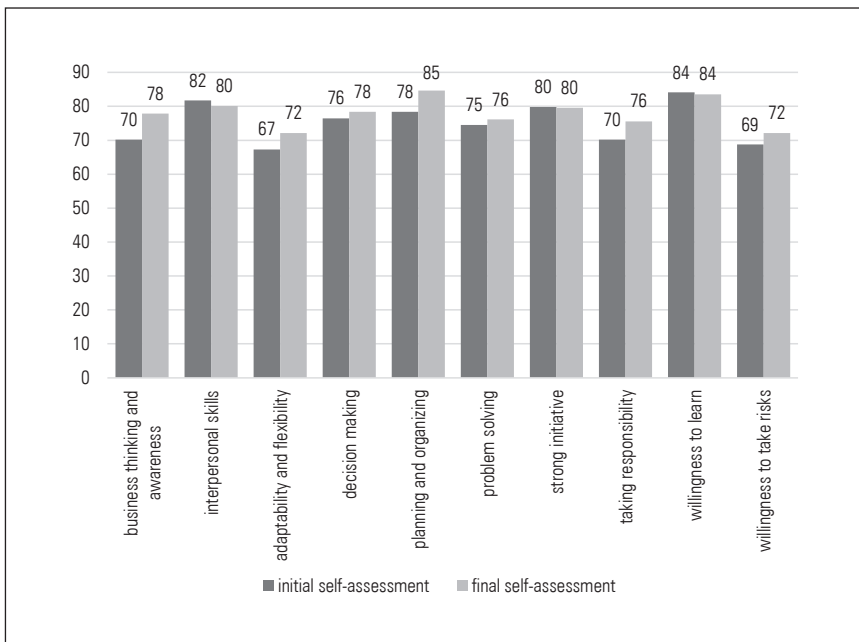
A separate analysis of the changes in the self-evaluation of participants in the project in the XI LO in Kraków and the PCKZiU in Wieliczka showed that the differences in the

Fig. 4. Changes in self-assessment of competencies – both schools



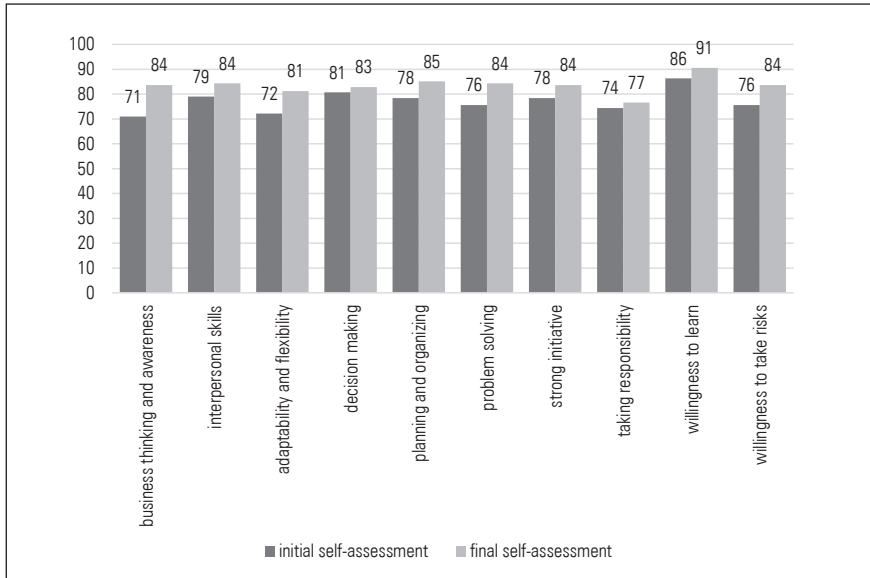
Source: own work based on the research results during the RLG project implementation

Fig. 5. Changes in self-assessment of competencies – the XI LO Kraków



Source: own work based on the research results during the RLG project implementation

Fig. 6. Changes in self-assessment of competencies – the PCKZiU in Wieliczka



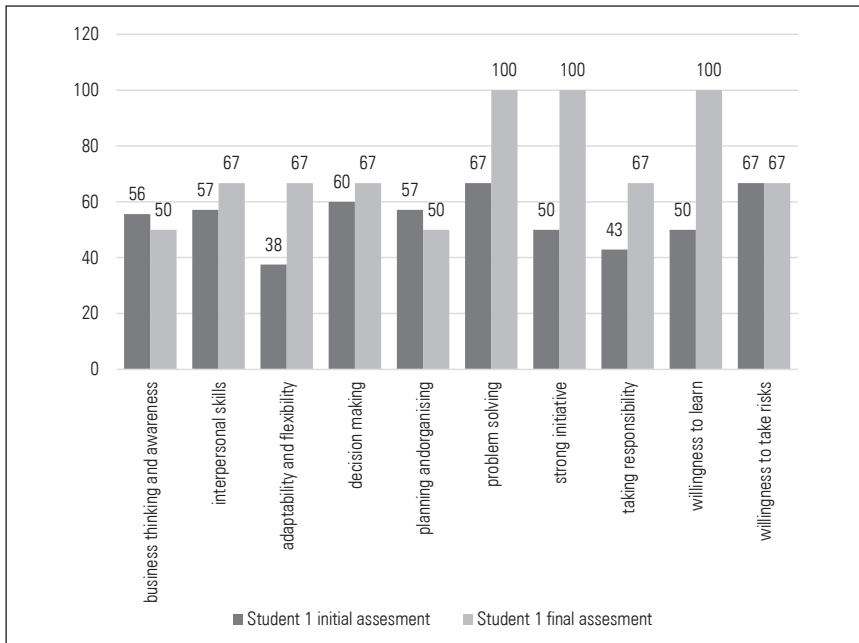
Source: own work based on the research results during the RLG project implementation

responses of pupils are small. Among the differences observed, high school students tended to underestimate their competencies at the beginning of the project, particularly concerning typically entrepreneurial skills, such as risk taking or flexibility and adaptability in changing conditions. It was not surprising that the students of the vocational training centre, having a lot of practical subjects preparing them to enter the labour market, rated their entrepreneurial skills higher than the high school students, for whom entrepreneurship is limited to one school subject – Basics of entrepreneurship.

High school students were also more cautious in the final evaluation of their competency at the end of the workshop cycle. Their generalised responses indicate that they did not raise their interpersonal skills and competency as a result of the workshop. However, this result is ambiguous for interpretation. During the workshop, they were able to recognise that they initially overestimated their own assessment of these competencies, and after the training they assessed them more consciously. However, this is only a guess, so it is necessary to re-examine the exercise in the two competencies indicated, and revise the training program addressing those competencies. The students in Wieliczka assessed slightly higher their competencies in the initial phase of the project, and their final answers indicated that they raised their level as a result of the project workshops.

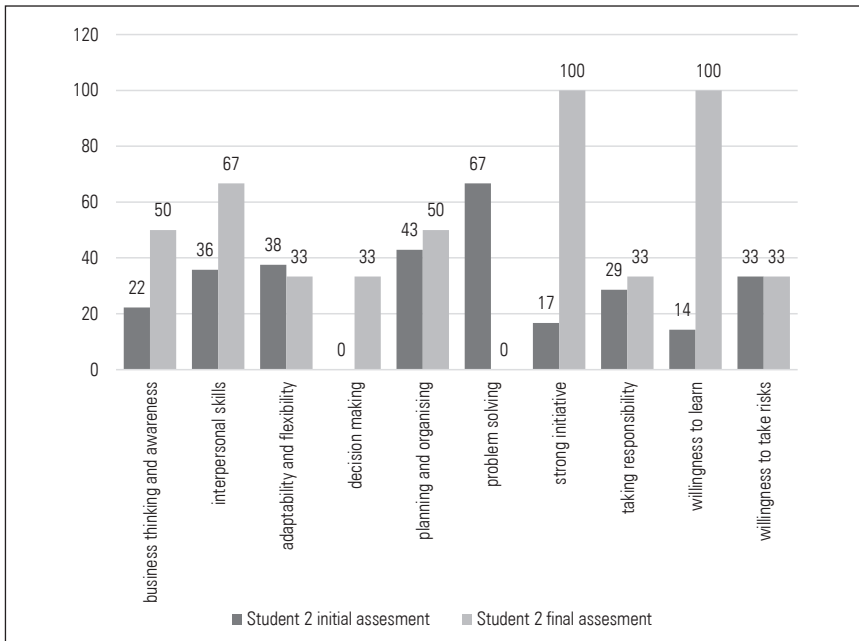
The analyses and assessment of the acquisition of competencies by individual participants in the workshop were also performed. The graphs below present the results of the acquisition of different competencies for two selected participants from the PCK-ZiU in Wieliczka (Figs 7 and 8). Based on these two examples, it is clear that there was a significant increase in the acquisition of competencies (in one case milder and predictable, in the other one slightly more dynamic and less predictable). In individual cases, there were even examples of a decrease in the level of development of analysed and assessed competencies, although this particular instance seems to be unusual (Fig. 8).

Fig. 7. Changes in self-assessment of competencies – student 1



Source: own work based on the research results during the RLG project implementation

Fig. 8. Changes in self-assessment of competencies – student 2



Source: own work based on the research results during the RLG project implementation

The participant determined exactly half of their competencies higher and half lower than before the start of the workshop. As mentioned above, it is probably the effect of overestimation or underestimation (depending on the type of self-assessment of the individual) of own competencies at the beginning of the project and verification of this assessment during the workshop exercises. In this case, it is hard to talk about the uniquely positive, measurable effects of the training itself.

Apart from the general conclusions and tendencies indicating that the workshops underpin the participant's self-assessments and the level of their entrepreneurial competencies, it was also necessary for the authors of the project to analyse the changes in the self-assessment of the individuals participating in the project. Most of the respondents rated their initial level of competency, depending on the person and the type of competencies, within 60–70%, while their final level of competency was higher, within 80–90%. However, there were also some students who did not present this regularity. An example is a participant whose self-esteem is displayed on the graph (Fig. 2). Except for the very high growth of willingness to learn (up to 100%), the remaining competencies became more balanced (75%–87.5%) than before the workshop. The fact that level of self-awareness of the individual increased is critical and the obtained information is used to evaluate the workshops and further develop the resulting learning tool. Information about the assessment (by observers) and self-assessments (by the participants themselves) of the competencies that were collected during the project are also valuable material for further work with project members. They also provide the basis for the proper management of further training of individuals and can provide both them and professional counsellors with information useful in career planning.

Conclusions and final remarks

Generally speaking, the results of the competency research for both schools (XI LO in Kraków and PKZiU in Wieliczka) showed that for this group of participants there was a marked increase in acquisition of all ten entrepreneurial competencies. It demonstrates that the workshop program achieved the goals set, i.e. it fostered the development of each competency. On the other hand, the individual achievements of the workshop participants in the acquisition of particular competencies depended on some factors, including individual characteristics, particularly visible and assessed during the Initial Assessment, and then their contribution to work and commitment to solving tasks that shape and develop individual competencies. Not all competencies can be prepared similarly by the participants. It must be borne in mind that the development of competencies is influenced by some factors relating to the participant's personal and external circumstances, including the conditions of the place of the workshop and time of the course, the competency and involvement of the trainer, etc.

The research may be the starting point for further research and analyses of the process of shaping entrepreneurial competencies in students of different types of schools and curricula. More research is needed among the larger student populations to confirm proposed generalisations and conclusions, especially showing the process and methods of acquiring the skills required to find an attractive occupation in a dynamically changing labour market. Nevertheless, the results of the pilot studies carried out in the test phase of the project indicate high usefulness, i.e. Attractiveness and effectiveness of the

proposed support tools, both regarding diagnosis (assessment) of the level and development of entrepreneurial competencies in the educational practice².

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² Teaching materials and tools for assessing the level of competencies developed within the project will be available in Polish, English, Hungarian and German after its completion, i.e. At the end of 2017. To receive information on their availability, get in touch at rlg@up.krakow.pl

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