A COMPARATIVE INVESTIGATION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF CURRENT UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO GENERATION Z: RURAL VERSUS URBAN STUDENTS

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Understanding the audience is the key to successful communication. Therefore, an effective teacher has to consider manifold differences among the students in any given classroom: the characteristics of the students, the mindset of the generation, the variety of learning styles, the students' needs and goals, and their educational background. Since Aleksandras Stulginskis University (ASU) awards the degrees in food sciences and agriculture, a sizeable part of the students come to study from rural areas. Recent educational research in the USA, UK and Lithuania have revealed a significant difference in the academic performance of the students from rural and urban areas, however, it is still an unresolved problem for the educational institutions in Lithuania. This area has an insubstantial amount of research documented. Thus, the current research aims at investigating the relationship between the location of the school, a student graduated from, and the results of the English Language Diagnostic Test as well as analysing the academic performance of the Agronomy Faculty students through the 2nd, 3rd and 4th semesters. The study focuses on our current undergraduate students - the always-connected, app-happy, smartphone-dependent, born with the Internet, technology, and social media Generation Z. The research methods involve the statistical and comparative analyses of the urban and rural student academic performance (diagnostic test results, examination grades of the 2nd, 3rd and 4th semesters) in the English language; the theoretical assumptions based on the related scientific literature and documents on educational statistics, and the investigation of motivational factors influencing the academic performance of the Generation Z students in line with the processed survey results. The research was initiated in 2015, student academic performance was monitored through the period from 2015 to 2017, and the survey was administered in 2017. The research findings indicate that students from rural schools have an inferior level of the English language compared to the students that finished schools in urban areas, whereas the examination results through the second, third and fourth semesters unveiled an unexpected tendency. Figures show that students from rural schools not only managed to catch up with their colleagues from urban schools, but also outperformed their urban-school peers by roughly increasing rates of their performance. The research evidence could aid teachers and education policy makers, providing a better understanding of Generation Z students from rural and urban areas and factors influencing students' performance.

Keywords: rural, urban, English Language Proficiency, generation Z.

INTRODUCTION

Students have different desires and needs, different attitudes to teaching and learning, and different responses to the specific educational instructions. Understanding the audience is the key to successful communication. Therefore, an effective teacher has to consider miscellaneous differences among the students in any given classroom: the characteristics of the students, the mindset of the generation, the variety of learning styles, the students' needs and goals, and their educational background. "The more thoroughly instructors understand the differences, the better chance they have of meeting the diverse learning needs of all of their students" (Felder, 2005). The better a teacher knows his students, the better he can tailor teaching strategies, resources and study material to the students of today, who they really are, satisfying their expectations. "We may exhibit an admirable command of content, and possess a dazzling variety of pedagogical skills, but without knowing what's going on in our students heads, that knowledge may be presented and that skill exercised in a vacuum of misunderstanding" (Brookfield, 2006).

Knowing the student is fundamental to real differentiation and creating student-centred classroom. Designing an effective course, it is important to consider the prior knowledge that a student possesses since new knowledge is built on the existing one. Before developing a curriculum it is important to determine what the students are likely to know coming into

the course and how well they know it. Consequently, first-year students at our university have to take a diagnostic test, which helps to evaluate and assess the level of the foreign language proficiency and group them according to their level.

Since Aleksandras Stulginskis University (ASU) is the only institution of higher education in Lithuania awarding the degrees at PhD, MSc and BSc levels in the fields of food sciences, agriculture, forestry, water and land resources management, bioenergy and mechanical engineering, climate change and sustainable use of natural resources, a big part of our students come to study from rural areas. Teaching Business English, English for Specific Purposes and Professional Communication at ASU, our teachers encounter many difficulties in teaching the students with diverse educational background, difference between the urban and rural students. Moreover, most of the teachers discerned that the generation born with the Internet, technology, and social media in their hands differs greatly from the students we had five years ago. Gerhard Falschlehner (2015) compared this generation change to the change from nomadic to sedentary societies in the Neolithic era. Marc Prensky (2001), an American writer and speaker on education, claims that "today's students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach". Reconsideration of the educational practices at the university for the learners of the new generation – Generation Z became a must. Facing the imperative for change, as educators, we speculated upon the possible answers to the questions: Do the students from rural areas really differ? Is there a relationship between the location of school the students graduate from and their academic results? To what extent does their language proficiency level differ? How are they progressing? Do they catch up with their colleagues from urban schools? How to deal with such educational inequality? Should we shift instructional practices to engage the Generation Z students? For this reason, in 2015 the research was initiated by the teachers from Language Department.

The research aim: to disclose the relationship between the location of the school, a student graduated from, and the results of the English Language Diagnostic Test analysing the change in academic performance of rural and urban students in the period of 2015-2017, through the 2nd, 3rd and 4th semesters focusing on the factors influencing students' performance.

The research object: profile of urban and rural undergraduate students of ASU ascribed to Generation Z.

The objectives: to conduct a statistical analysis of the results in the English language diagnostic test and the examination results from the 2nd, 3rd and 4th semesters from 2015 to 2017 providing a comparative analysis of the urban and rural student achievement; to analyse motivational factors influencing the English language proficiency and academic performance of the Generation Z students born between 1995–2010.

RESEARCH METHODS

Participants

A review and analysis of the related scientific literature and documents on educational statistics, a self-administered survey-questionnaire method to identify student motivation and characteristics of Generation Z, statistical and comparative analysis of the obtained findings were applied.

The research part 1 carried out in 2016 involved 587 students, born between 1995 and 2000, who entered ASU in 2015. Students of five faculties: Agronomy, Forestry and Ecology, Economics and Management, Water and Land Management, Agricultural Engineering were investigated testing their level of the English language proficiency. According to the information from the Office for Undergraduate Admissions in our university all students were divided into two focus groups: students from urban and rural schools. According to the Law of the Republic of Lithuania on Territorial Administrative Units and its Borders, the residential areas of the Republic of Lithuania are divided into urban areas (cities to which they are included) and rural areas (towns, villages and settlements)).

The research part 2 focused on the academic progress of the students from the Agronomy Faculty. Students from rural schools (72 students) were investigated and compared to their counterparts from urban schools (117 students).

Theoretical Foundation
Generation Z

The term *generation* defines a group of people linked with each other by common values and abilities due to the unique life experiences manifested through economic conditions, culture, politics or technological advancement (Smith and Clurman, 1998). Generations differ from each other and are unique in a way they perceive the world, speculate, communicate, engage and learn and what works for one generation does not necessarily fit to others. Generational differences is one of the fields that constantly interests market specialists and educators to deepen the understanding of customers, employees and students of the emerging generations. Thus, generational differences have been recently subjected much scrutiny by Western scholars (McCrindle, Wolfinger, 2009; Pierson, Mante-Meijer, Loos, 2011). So far, a few researches on generations have been conducted in Lithuania focusing on the characteristics and didactic-pedagogical issues (Mikulionienė, 2012; Petrikaitė, 2012; Pečiuliauskienė, Valantinaitė, Malonaitienė, 2013; Targamadzė, 2014; Targamadzė et al, 2015; Sasnauskienė, 2016).

Since there is no standard classification of generations based on the years people were born and the dates range according to the source used, generations in this article are categorised into the following distinct groups with reference to one of the most recent publications in the field *Generation Z Goes to College*: the Baby Boomer generation (1946–1964), Generation X (1965–1980), Generation Y (1981–1994), Generation Z (1995-2010) (Grace and Seemiler, 2016). While the terms baby-boomers and Generation X are designed for the USA and Western Europe, Generation Y is the first generation to share common characteristics and features irrespective of any specific country, so it is considered to be the first 'global' generation (Bejtkovský, 2016). Generation Z (Gen Z) is regarded as the most diverse generation of all. Highly influenced by economic recession Gen Z is characterised as loyal, compassionate, thoughtful, open-minded, and

determined (Grace and Seemile, 2016), concerned about the environment and mobilised by causes (West, 2014). They see entrepreneurship as one of their skills (Grace and Seemiler, 2016).

Since Gen Z has always been surrounded by different electronic devices such as mp3 players, mobile phones, PDAs or IPads, they are sometimes referred to as Digital Natives or Ebay babies (Addor, 2011; Kapil and Roy, 2014) and considered to be tech savvy and easily adapting to ongoing technological developments (Harmanto, 2013; West, 2014). Being so well integrated with technology, all of them are multitaskers switching between up to 5 screens. With information so easy to access, Gen Z can perform a number of tasks simultaneously such as texting, reading, watching, talking and drawing at the same time and in a very speedy way. However, the ability to multitask and divide attention result in a short attention span that is why this generation is no longer able to analyse larger and more complex pieces of information (Harmanto, 2013). It prefers fast delivery of content and visual forms of learning to auditory ones, hence interactive games, or collaborative projects are valued much more than a traditional lecture or discussion. Using internet browsers so often, however, Genzers are not able to assess information credibility, as well. Furthermore, they give preference to working in a group (Rothman, (n.d.)).

All of the students and respondents of this particular survey are ascribed to Generation Z, whereas their teachers are representatives of either Generation X or Generation Y. With this in mind, no surprise that due to generational gap students sometimes find difficulty in being engaged into studies while teachers are not able both to provide the most effective study methods and form relationships with students. Having a comprehensive profile of both urban and rural students and understanding the difference of how they perceive the world, speculate, communicate, engage and learn was presumed to be more advantageous than analysing a uniform profile of the Gen Z student.

Rural versus Urban

The difference between rural and urban students is a highly topical problem. The National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that America faces the problem of low college enrolment among rural teenagers although students in rural districts experienced higher graduation rates than their peers in cities and towns. Polly Curtis (2009), an education editor in *The Guardian* reported that pupils from disadvantaged rural areas are now among the lowest scoring teenagers in the UK. Despite strong improvements in The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) results overall, a new gap has opened up between urban and rural students in this country.

The situation in Lithuania is very similar to the situation in other countries of Eastern Europe: Latvia, Russia, Hungary, Slovakia, Moldova, Romania and Macedonia. The results of The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) revealed that the average reading results differ significantly (about 30 points of literacy score) in urban and rural areas. However, the comparative assessment that measures student learning in reading revealed that in Scandinavian countries there is no statistical difference between the results of urban and rural children. According to the National Agency for School Evaluation and National Examination Centre in Lithuania, the results of General Education Assessment (2014) in mathematics are lower in rural schools, whereas the results of the Lithuanian (state) language are higher in rural schools, except the results of big gymnasium schools in urban areas.

The Education and Training Monitor 2015, prepared by the Directorate-General of Education and Culture (DG EAC), with contributions from the Directorate-General of Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL) and the Eurydice Network, unmasked differences in urban and rural areas covering such aspects as participation in early childhood education and care programmes and the quality of education. As municipal funding capacity is not equal, resources allocated to early education and care are distributed unevenly, and therefore the quality of services varies among the regions. National Examination Centre (NEC) evaluates the knowledge of the 10th grade pupils every year by organising a Basic Education Achievement Test (BEAT). It is obligatory for everyone who wants to acquire basic education. Saulė Vingelienė (2016), the head of National Examination Centre, admitted that "the achievement gap between the results of pupils from urban and rural school is observed in almost all national studies, no matter which class, and which subject is being studied." According to the BEAT, rural school achievements are lower than urban. Among the cities, five major cities should be distinguished, with higher results than the remaining ones. Furthermore, the difference between the mathematics results of children in rural and urban areas in Lithuania is estimated at 57 percentage points and is one of the largest in the European Union (EBPO, 2012).

Lithuanian urban and rural residents were researched according to their knowledge of the foreign languages and age groups, but the study did not focus on their level of language proficiency. No research was found on the results of the foreign language proficiency in urban and rural schools, thus our pioneering study in the proficiency of the foreign language among the students from urban and rural schools could be of great value to the teachers and scientists concerned about the quality of teaching foreign language and tertiary education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH PART 1

The statistical analysis revealed that 33% of the first year students in the year 2015 came from rural schools. As evidenced by Figure 1, the biggest number of students - 72 (38%) from rural schools were admitted to the Agronomy Faculty. The English Language Diagnostic Test of the "upper intermediate" (B2) level, as common practice, was administered to all first year students at ASU. Candidates who pass the diagnostic test can further develop their English language skills at B2 level by studying Business English (students from the Faculties of Agronomy, Forestry and Ecology and

Economics and Management) and English for Specific Purposes (students from Water and Land Management and Agricultural Engineering) from the second semester. Students who show poor results (lower than 5) are offered a remedial course of English in the first semester.
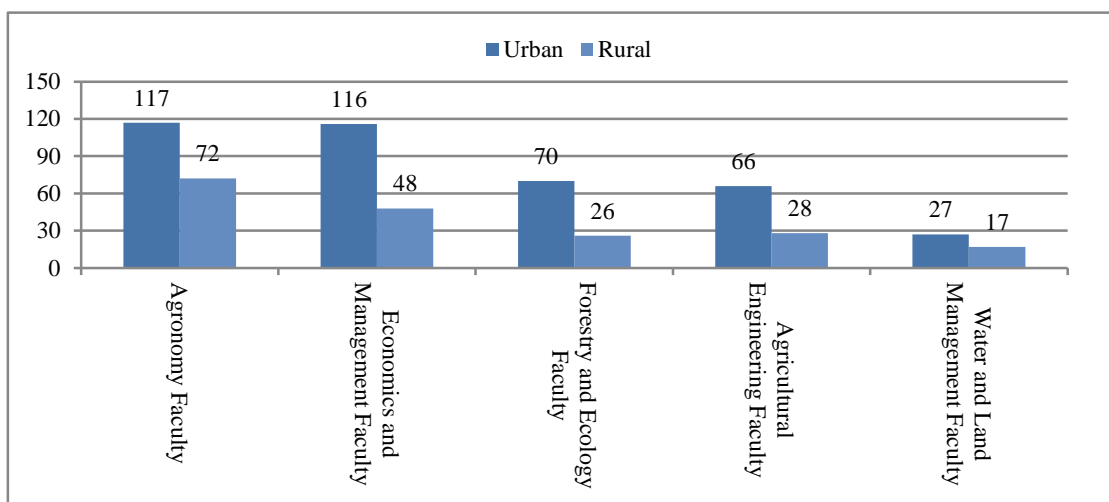

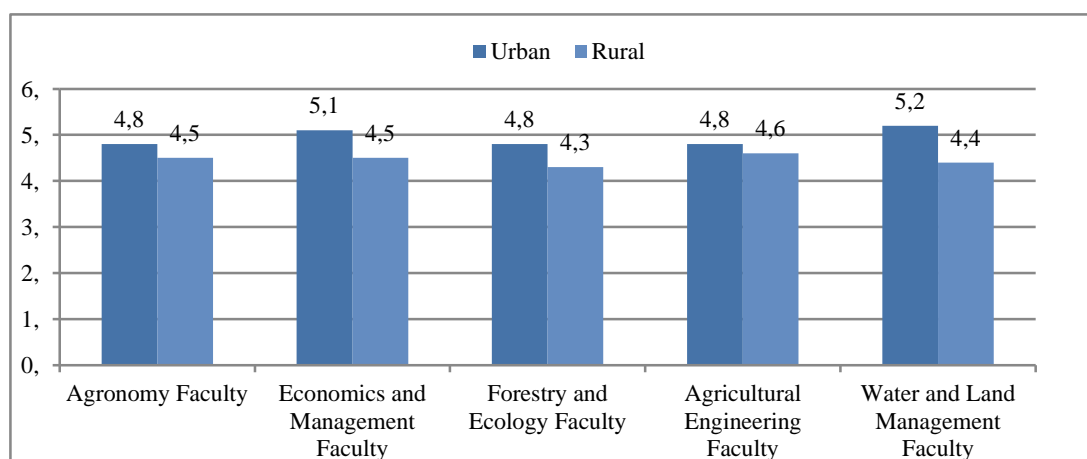Figure 1. Number of students from urban and rural schools

Figure 2. Results of English Language Diagnostic Test in 2015

When the proficiency of the English language was tested, a comparative study revealed that the best results were obtained by the students of Water and Land Management (5.2) and the students of Economics and Management (5.1) Faculties, among the students from urban schools. However, students from rural schools in Forestry and Ecology Faculty demonstrated the lowest results (4.3). Moreover, students from rural schools in all five faculties scored lower results as compared to the results of the students from urban schools. The achievement gap between the students of urban and rural schools varies from 0.2 to 0.6 marks. Recent educational research proved that students from rural schools have an inferior level of the English language compared to the students that live in urban areas.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH PART 2

Since the Agronomy Faculty admitted the biggest number of students from rural schools, our further research focused on the results of this faculty. Therefore, the academic progress of the students from rural areas (72 students) was investigated and compared to their counterparts from urban schools (117 students).
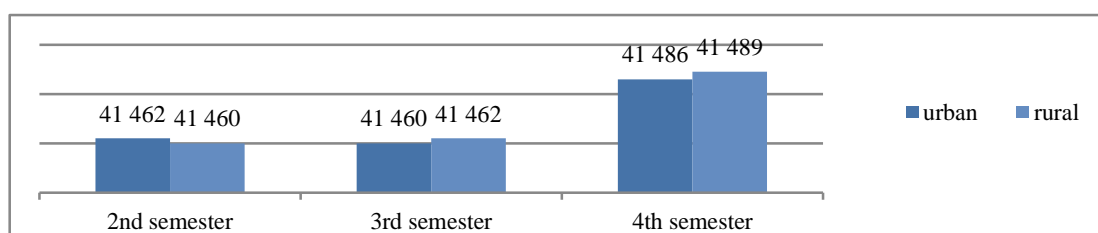

Figure 3. Examination results of urban and rural students in Agronomy Faculty

The analysis of the examination results of Business English and English for Specific Purposes through the 2nd, 3rd and 4th semesters in the period from 2015 to 2016 unveiled an unexpected tendency. Figures show that students from rural schools managed not only to catch up with their colleagues from urban schools, but also outperformed their urban-school peers by roughly increasing rates of their performance from the second to fourth semester - by a full grade. The findings came as surprise and they will send waves through the broader education-research community.

To explain the reasons that led to the striking results of the comparative analysis further research of the Agronomy Faculty students relying on the results from an online self-administered questionnaire was undertaken. It aimed at disclosing the student's profile to reveal the differences between the characteristics and attributes of the students from rural and urban schools. The empirical research was conducted in a period of two months, September and October in 2017. The questionnaire was composed of 22 statements logically divided into 3 sections. The first section covered such motivational triggers as willingness to be involved into studies as well as related transferable skills, the other section aimed at disclosing the attitude to technological advancement and its effect on the Agronomy Faculty students as representatives of the Gen Z, and the last section was related to career and entrepreneurial factors. The respondents were chosen at random and were asked to complete online questionnaire by ticking the answer 'agree' or 'disagree' anonymously. By the end of the survey period, data had been collected from 88 respondents.

In the initial stage of filling out the questionnaires students from rural schools appeared to be up to two times more active than their urban counterparts. After the completion of the questionnaire, the tendency remained unchanged since 56 respondents from rural or small town schools participated in the survey as compared to 32 respondents from urban areas. This is an unexpected result since, comparing urban students with rural ones, they comprised the majority of students admitted to the Faculty of Agronomy (72 and 117, respectively).
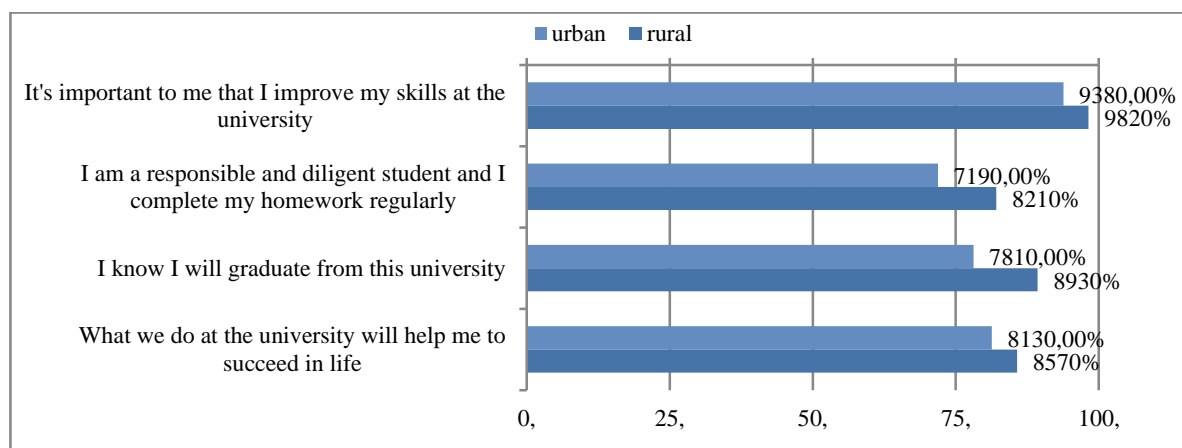

Figure 4. The results of the Survey Part 1

The statements of the first section are concerned with students' involvement into studies and such transferable skills as responsibility and diligence. Findings clearly underline students' eagerness to develop their skills at university, since 98.2% of rural students and 93.8% of their urban counterparts show their willingness to be engaged into studies and seek for professional development. Slight difference of more than 4% between rural and urban students' eagerness and enthusiasm towards studies is further reinforced by the findings of the second research statement indicating that 82.1% of the respondents from rural schools and 71.9% from urban schools regard themselves as "responsible and diligent student [s] [who] complete …[their] homework regularly".

Interestingly, the findings of the above mentioned statements characterise students as true Genzers who by developing skills that can be transferred to future jobs demonstrate personal responsibility for their own brand (Jenkins, 2015). According to the findings of the survey undertaken by Robert Half (2015), 77% of Gen Z are ready to work harder than their parents and representatives of Generation Y as a consequence of the experienced economic recession and a competitive environment in business. Dan Schawbel, the founder of Millennial Branding admits that "since Gen Z has seen how much Gen Y has struggled in the recession, they come to the workplace better prepared, less entitled and more equipped to succeed" (Millennial Branding, 2014).

As determination is one of the key characteristics attributed to Gen Z, students from rural schools are considered as true Genzers since 89.3% of rural students are more likely to graduate from university they entered in comparison with 78.1% of their urban peers (Grace and Seemiler, 2016). Finally, 85.7% of students from rural areas and 81.3% of their urban counterparts believe that "What ... [they] do at the university will" help ... [them] to succeed in life.

Thus, in the light of our experiential study, there is a correlation between the level of rural and urban students' involvement into studies and such transferable skills as diligence and responsibility and the difference in rural and urban students' academic achievement in the English language. The stronger the eagerness of being involved into studies and the more developed transferable skills are observed, the higher results of the English language proficiency are achieved. On the other hand, low results in the English Language Diagnostic Test could have stimulated students' determination, diligence and involvement into studies resulting in higher achievement. However, deeper investigation has to be carried out to prove these presumptions.
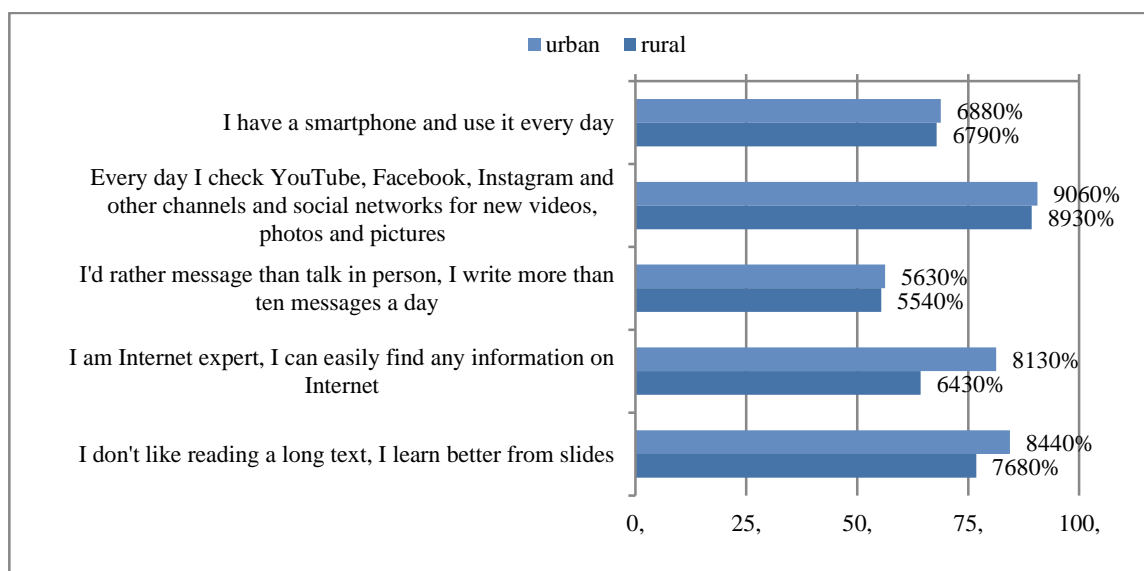
Figure 5. The results of the Survey Part 2

The statements of the second section focus on technological adaptation of the students since being tech savvy is a basic criterion for individuals attributed to Gen Z (Addor, 2011; Kapil and Roy, 2014; West, 2014). Firstly, "cell phones have become so ubiquitous in class that teachers don't know which students are using them to take notes and which ones are planning a party" (2019 Beloit Mindset List). As evidenced by the survey findings, nearly the same number of students from rural and urban schools "have a smartphone and use it every day" (67.9% and 68.8%, respectively). Surprisingly, although such electronic devices are relatively expensive, students from rural areas possess no fewer smartphones than those from cities what can be interpreted as approximate financial situation of both groups of respondents under investigation. However, according to the study *Generation Z. New Insight into the Mobile Mindset of Teens* (2016), smartphone usage by the teenagers in the US aged 13-17 accounts for 78% whereas even 87% of young US adults aged 18-24 use smartphones. The difference in the number of smartphones US and Lithuanian young adults possess can be explained in terms of the country's economic development. Next, Genzers "have grown up treating Wi-Fi as an entitlement" (2019 Beloit Mindset List). Hence 89.3% of rural students and 90.6% of their urban counterparts comprise the substantial majority of students who "check YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and other channels and social networks for new videos, photos and pictures" every day as they have access to internet from the early childhood. However, overwhelmed by technology and social media, only 55.4% of the students from rural schools and 56.3% of their urban counterparts give priority to messaging rather than face-to-face communication. Surprisingly, the findings of this survey correspond with the results of the above mentioned worldwide survey undertaken by Millennial Branding (2014) indicating that in spite of immersing into virtual reality, 53% give preference to face-to-face communication. What is more, although nearly the same number of students from rural and urban areas possesses smartphones-interactive electronic gadgets, only 64.3% of rural students consider themselves as "Internet experts" who "can easily find any information on Internet" as opposed to 81.3% of urban students. The implication is that either students from rural schools are less computer literate and tech savvy than urban ones or they are less self-confident to acknowledge their competence than urban students.

According to the survey findings *How Teens Do Research in the Digital World* (2012) conducted by Pew Research Centre, 94% of high school students are likely to use Google or other online search engine, and 52% of students would use YouTube or other social media sites for a typical research assignment. Looking up for information through such search engines as Google in a speedy and convenient way rather than choosing library resources Gen Z students believe that most of the information online is reliable and accurate (2019 Beloit Mindset List, (n.d.)). As far as the findings of this survey statement are concerned 84.4% of urban and only 66.1% of rural students have an ability to judge the reliability and credibility of internet sources. This is another important attribute of Genzers seen as a negative effect of the constant use of technologies (Rothman, (n.d.)). It might be argued that rural students are not only worse "Internet experts" but have less developed skills in determining the credibility of online information, however, this does not correlate with rural students' better results of the English language.

The last statement of the second section "I don't like reading a long text, I learn better from slides" is related to learning methods Genzers are most accustomed to. Responding to this statement 76.8% of rural students and 84.4% of urban ones express their negative attitude towards reading long texts. This is logical since Gen Z students find difficulty in focusing on information that is too long, they prefer other forms of learning such as slides (Rothman, (n.d.)). All in all, rural students revealed to be less technologically advanced and computer literate.
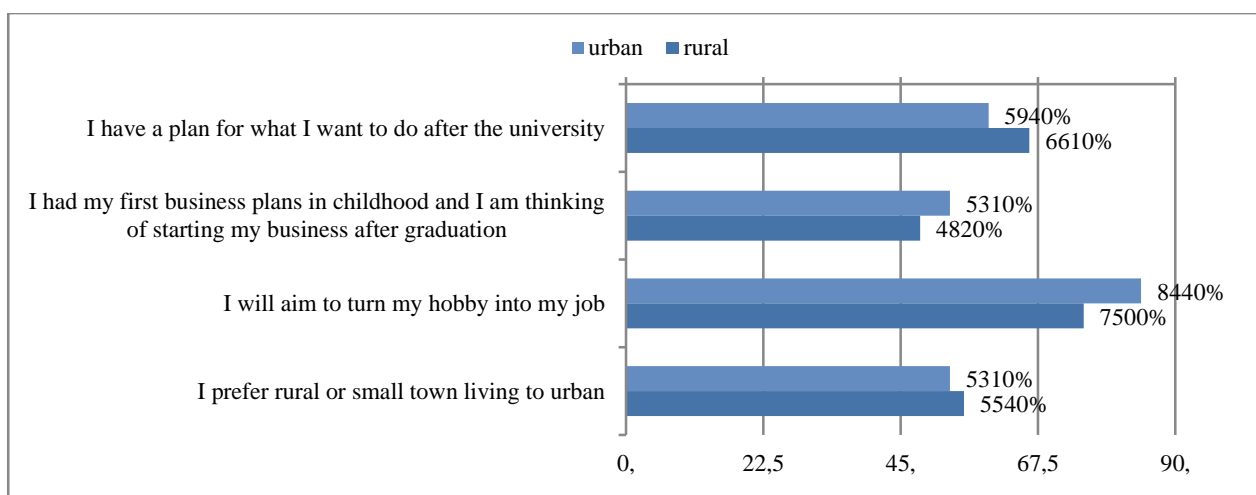
Figure 6. The results of the Survey Part 3

The last group of the research statements related to careers and jobs were presumably regarded as the most influential motivational triggers, explaining the dynamics of rural students' academic performance. The presumption was that since the specialities offered at the Agronomy Faculty are closely related to the jobs in rural areas, the studies are more attractive to the students from rural areas and thus rural students are more motivated to achieve better results. The overall response to the first statement "I have a plan for what I want to do after the university" revealed that 66.1% of respondents from rural schools as compared to 59.4% of respondents from urban ones had a future career plan. This is especially relevant for Generations Y and Z since according to the study *High School Careers*, 57% of college students feel pressure from their parents to acquire professional experience during their college studies (Millennial Branding, 2014). Entrepreneurship is seen as one of the skills typical to Gen Z as it can be found in their DNA (Grace and Seemiler, 2016). What makes Gen Z different from other generations worldwide is that 72% of high school students and 62% of college students believe they will start their own business in future (Millennial Branding, 2014). However, by indicating that 48.2% of students from rural schools "had ... [their] first business plans in childhood and ... [were] thinking of starting ... [their] business after graduation", they proved to be less entrepreneurial as compared to 53.1% of the students from urban areas, though the difference of 4% is clearly insignificant. The results of the last statement (84.4% and 75%, respectively) obviously confirm that urban students are more inclined to "to turn ... [their] hobbies into ... [their] job". In addition to that, both more than 50% of students from rural and urban schools would give preference to rural or small town living and would not see rural areas as a neglected place to live.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study has been successful in identifying the relationship between the location of the school, a student graduated from, and the results of the English Language Diagnostic Test. As study shows, students from rural schools in all five faculties scored lower results as compared to the results of the students from urban schools. The achievement gap between the students of rural and urban schools varies from 0.2 to 0.6 marks. Recent educational research proved that before starting their English Language course, students from rural schools had an inferior level of the English language compared to the students from urban schools.

The comparative analysis of the examination results through the 2nd, 3rd and 4th semesters unveiled that students from rural schools managed not only to catch up with their colleagues from urban schools, but also outperformed their urban-school peers by roughly increasing rates of their performance from the second to fourth semester-by a full grade. Even at the initial stage of filling out the questionnaires AF students from rural or small town schools appeared to be up to two times more active than their urban counterparts.

The empirical research, undertaken to explain the reasons that led to the striking results of the rural students of the Agronomy Faculty, revealed a correlation between the level of involvement into studies and transferable skills such as diligence and responsibility and the difference in rural and urban students' academic achievement in the English language. The stronger the eagerness of being involved into the studies and the more developed transferable skills are observed, the higher results of the English language proficiency are achieved. On the other hand, low results in the English Language Diagnostic Test could have also stimulated students' determination, diligence and involvement into the studies resulting in higher achievement. However, deeper investigation has to be carried out to prove these presumptions.

All in all, rural students are less technologically advanced and computer literate, however, the technology hardly supports detecting a trustworthy source and using information in a productive manner. In spite of immersing into virtual reality, both rural and urban students give preference to face-to-face communication. Rural students are not as entrepreneurial as their counterparts, but they are much more active, diligent, responsible, and eager to work harder, satisfied with the skills and knowledge they get at the university.

The current study set a direction for the future research, therefore a follow-up research awaits to be conducted on the exploration of the potential of the Generation Z, selection of strategies and resources for teaching ESL, adapted to the needs of Generation Z student, bearing in mind the differences of rural and urban students. Embracing the change and allowing the Generation Z to unlock its full potential, we will contribute to the shaping of tomorrow's workforce since this generation will be entering the labour market in a few years.

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