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**GEOGRAPHICAL FIELD TRIPS DURING UNIVERSITY**  
**STUDIES. WHERE TO?**

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***Abstract***

For the professional training of university students in the field of Geography, at the Faculty of Geography, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, the curricula in all years of study, at the Bachelor's level, include two field trips organised by the faculty, where professors co-ordinate the activities. The aim of our paper is to realise proposals for improving these activities. Therefore, we chose to find out the opinions of a sample which was represented by university students in their 3<sup>rd</sup> year of study, at all specialisations within the field of Geography (Geography, Geography of Tourism, Cartography, Hydrology-Meteorology, and Territorial Planning). We collected the data (students' answers) using an online questionnaire. They informed us about the reasons they had for taking part at the respective field trips, about the efficiency of diverse activities, about students' diverse roles during fieldwork and the usefulness for their learning and training, about what they recommended and preferred. They also realised a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis of the field trips they participated at. Taking into account the findings, we concluded that students considered field trips relevant for their professional training and we were able to provide a series of recommendations for improving them, based on students' opinions and suggestions.

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**Keywords:** University geographical studies, field trips, online survey, training, competence.



## 1. Introduction

At the European Union level, the European Parliament and the Council defined eight key learning competences (*Recommendation 2006/962/EC*, 2006; *Brochure: Key Competences for Lifelong Learning - European Reference Framework*, 2006), out of which we consider that three could be formed and developed during geographical field trips in general, and especially during university studies. These are: basic competences in science (involving the understanding of human activity induced changes and the relation between theory and practice), learning to learn, and social and civic competences.

Fieldwork is considered intrinsic to geographical research (Breitbart, 2012) and education (Dulamă, 2010a, 2010b, 2012; Scott et al., 2006), a vital way of teaching Geography (Kent et al., 1997), and central both for Physical Geography (Dunphy, & Spellman, 2009) and Human Geography (Hope, 2009). Thus, researchers, notably in Sciences of Education, focus on various topics of interest in relation with fieldwork: the effectiveness (Boyel et al., 2007) and the value of fieldwork compared with desk-based teaching (Fuller 2006), as, due to fieldwork, students are more self-reflexive as learners (Holton, 2017); whereat, for the difficult task of assessing the students learning from fieldwork, several authors suggest the use of reflective diaries (Dummer et al., 2008; Ilovan, & Havadi-Nagy, 2016). In addition, the attitude of the students towards field trips (Dunphy, & Spellman, 2009) is a further subject, with implications in the affective domain (Boyel et al., 2007; Hope, 2009).

Moreover, several surveys emphasize the value of fieldwork as a pedagogic device which consists particularly of providing students with a better sense of real world environments and processes, with first-hand experience of the real world, facilitating an enhanced understanding of their subject, promoting active learning, enabling skills development (transferable and technical), and enabling opportunities for social interaction that cannot be duplicated in class (Fuller, 2006; Fuller et al., 2006; Hope, 2009; Havadi-Nagy, & Ilovan, 2013; Ilovan, & Havadi-Nagy, 2016).

Regarded as a vital teaching and learning tool, fieldwork should be flexible and adapt to the changes in higher education and should be better integrated into pedagogic strategies (Scott et al., 2006), with a carefully integrated preparation of project-orientated fieldwork, including a debriefing and feedback after field visits (Kent et al., 1997).

Taking the above mentioned ideas into account and also the Romanian literature on developing competences in Geography (Dulamă, & Ilovan, 2009; Dulamă, Roşcovanu, 2007; Dulamă, 1996; Dulamă 2008a, 2008b; Dulamă et al., 2016), we considered a research for improving fieldwork during field trips in the Geography university system in Romania. For the professional training of university students in the field of Geography, at the Faculty of Geography, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, the curricula in all years of study, at the Bachelor's level, include two field trips organised by the faculty, where university professors co-ordinate the activities. The aim of our paper is to realise recommendations for improving these activities.

Therefore, we chose to find out the opinions of a sample which was represented by university students in their 3<sup>rd</sup> year of study at all specialisations within the field of Geography (Geography, Geography of Tourism, Cartography, Hydrology-Meteorology, and Territorial Planning). Field trips for each specialisation have different characteristics: some are technical and stationary field trips taking place only in certain locations, and include the use of technical equipment (field trips of the specialisations

Cartography, Hydrology-Meteorology and Territorial Planning), while others suppose approaching complex routes, where the visiting of certain objectives, meeting with experts and practitioners, and understanding geographical phenomena prevail (for the specialisations of The Geography of Tourism and Geography). As a result, field trips have different features and contents from a specialisation to another and this induces different expectations and communication using specialised vocabulary.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The new educational paradigm, focused on forming and developing competences and on student-centred education, requires a new approach in the Romanian Geography university system also in the case of activities taking place outside the lecture rooms and labs. Unfortunately, there are no data about the students' needs during field trips other than their feedback during informal discussions, but it is clear that there is a need for modernising and/or adapting these field trips to the changes in the educational system, to the social and economic changes in the Romanian society, to the requirements on the labour market, and therefore to students' training necessities.

## **3. Research Questions**

The research questions were the following: What were the students' reasons for taking part at the respective field trips? What was the efficiency of diverse activities during field trips? Which were students' diverse roles during those field trips and what was their usefulness for their learning and training? What were the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of geographical field trips? What did they prefer from a learning and training perspective during the field trips they attended? What did they recommend for field trips to answer their needs or what should be done to improve geographical university field trips?

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

By analysing the answers to these questions, we seek to provide decision-makers from the faculties of Geography in Romania and worldwide and researchers, in Sciences of Education and in that of Geography, some information regarding the ways of improving specialty field trips, based on students' opinions and recommendations.

## **5. Research Methods**

### **5.1. Data collecting and processing**

In order to collect the data, we used the investigation method through a questionnaire realised using the Google Forms application from Google Drive. We collected students' opinions about their training during field trips and about their training needs. The questionnaire included multiple choice items and also items requiring students to assign a score on a five point Likert scale. The questionnaire was carried out in May 2017 by e-mail. We used the Excel programme to process the collected data.

### **5.2. Participants**

The questionnaire was filled in voluntarily and anonymously by 50 university students (about 30% of the total number of students) in their 3<sup>rd</sup> year of study (because they have the richest experience due to

taking part at many field trips), at all specialisations within the field of Geography at the Faculty of Geography (Geography, Geography of Tourism, Cartography, Hydrology-Meteorology, and Territorial Planning), Babeş-Bolyai University. We decided that the respondents were students from all specialisations at the Bachelor's level in order to have the whole image of the impact and relevance of these field trips (both the compulsory and the optional ones).

### **5.3. Research material**

The research material is represented by the answers to the online questionnaire.

## **6. Findings**

By administering the questionnaire, we obtained students' opinions on the following issues: the reasons they had for taking part at the respective field trips, the efficiency of diverse activities during field trips, and students' diverse roles during those field trips and their usefulness for their learning and training. In addition, they realised a SWOT analysis of the field trips they participated at and they mentioned recommendations and preferences in relation with the field trips.

### **6.1. Students' opinions on the field trips organised at the Faculty of Geography**

According to the curricula and to the respondents' answers, at the Faculty of Geography, between 2014 and 2017 (the last three academic years), two categories of field trips were organised: (1) compulsory ones (two per year for each of the five specialisations), where students got grades and transferable credits and (2) organised by one or more professors to help students better learn for certain courses (e.g. the applicative part). The latter is compulsory or not, according to the professors' requirements.

During the three academic years (between 2014 and 2017), students had to take part at four compulsory field trips, organised by one or more professors (two field trips in the first year and two in the second one). The summer field trip in the second year of study and the one in the third year of study are not collective. Each student has to prepare his or her Bachelor's thesis. Therefore, these individual trips take place in diverse institutions where students collect information and acquire experience for their thesis and according to each specialisation.

All types of field trips organised by the Faculty of Geography have different financing. According to our students' experience, they may be free (34%), paid by students (64%), sponsored by the faculty (38%), partly sponsored by the faculty and partly by the participating students (76%), sponsored by other institutions or by scholarships (2%) and sponsored by European financed projects (i.e. The Sectoral Operation Programme for Human Resources) (24%).

Depending on their duration and complexity, these field trips fall into three categories: (1) short duration and low complexity field trips (1-2 or 3-4 hours long and focus on one or two concrete issues); (2) average duration and complex field trips (5-8 or 9-16 hours long) and (3) long duration and high complexity field trips (17-24 or over 25 hours long). The compulsory ones, which are also partly sponsored by the faculty, fall almost entirely in the third category, focusing on complex geographical issues, which are located in areas at long distance from each other. Respondents participated at all types of field trips, while the highest number of participations was at more than 25 hours long field trips.

Students' reasons for taking part at field trips organised by the Faculty of Geography are many: field trips are compulsory and are assessed with grades and have credits, students want to acquire skills, they want to understand geographical phenomena and processes in the field, they want to socialise with their colleagues, etc. When we elaborated this item, we grouped the reasons students may want to participate into several categories: reasons related to compulsoriness and deriving from this (i.e. getting a grade that ensures passing the exam, getting the credits), costs and duration, socialising with colleagues, the proposed routes with the objectives to visit and activities, understanding geographical phenomena and processes, etc.

From the respondents' answers, we understand that their participation at filed trips (compulsory or optional) is supported by all these types of reasons. In addition, we deduced that, irrespective of students' specialisation, in case of all these students, the main reason is to learn. It is a fact that Geography is a science promoting the direct relation with the field and with the geographical phenomena and processes the field hosts, enabling students' understanding of all these.

On the second place, it is students' need to pass the exam, because, in most of the cases, field trips are compulsory. The next reasons in students' established hierarchy are the following: their wish to get professional training, especially forming their skills and competence to conduct research in the field, the touristic objectives proposed to be visited, the places they get to visit, clarifying certain issues, and learning more in-depth about certain themes. To sum up, students' reasons for taking part at field trips are both intrinsic and extrinsic in nature and the source is students' wish to understand geographical phenomena and processes and to form and develop their field skills.

The reasons related to the social component of the field trips are secondary in comparison with the ones relating to students' professional training. Thus, the last in this hierarchy are the organising professors, taking part together with colleagues, the other students taking part at field trips and colleagues' recommendations. Less important are the reasons related to costs for participating at these field trips, their duration, and the fact that some are international ones.

Students prefer dialogue in observation points in the field, with the professors who should offer the necessary information in order to initiate a guided discussion, leading to finding out students' answers and explanations. Moreover, students prefer team work instead of tasks to be solved individually. Individual work, without guiding, and discussions with older students present during field trips are not that much appreciated by our respondents. This is either because they do not know which is the aim or on the spot recognition of their work or because they do not trust more experienced colleagues' explanations, or it may be that they did not have such occasions and cannot assess their learning benefits because of this.

Geography university students consider that field trips are vital for forming/developing their competences in the specialty, because they are aware of the fact that in this specialisation, knowledge and skills are very important for understanding the theory and for their professional becoming.

**Table 01.** Students' opinions on the field trips organised at the Faculty of Geography in Cluj-Napoca, on a 5 points Likert scale, where 1 = low, 5 = high

Analysed issue	Mean value
The importance of field trips for developing/forming competences in your speciality	4.62
Your interest for field trips	4.47
Professors' level of involvement in organising field trips	4.41

Your satisfaction degree about field trips	4.22
Correlating theoretical knowledge with visualizing the elements you learnt about during field trips	4.17
The level/volume/quality of the knowledge you achieved during the field trips organised by the professors at the Faculty of Geography	4.02
Your level of involvement (attitude and behaviour) in organising field trips	3.83

The strengths of field trips (compulsory and optional) organised in the Faculty of Geography, according to students' opinions, were placed in the following hierarchy:

- realising connections between theoretical and practical knowledge. They think this is the aim of field trips. This is why they are useful and should continue under the specialty professors' coordination;
- comparing elements, structures, and geographical processes in the field. We consider Geography is a pragmatic science and the geographical field offers the reality of most of the phenomena and processes discussed during lectures and seminars/labs;
- forming and developing practical abilities and conducting direct observation of territorial components, of geographical structures and processes.

If these strengths are significant for students' training and their satisfaction is high, one should consider also the others as important. However, students are also dissatisfied with some issues. Such dissatisfaction should be solved quickly and it refers to students' need, during field trips, for team work (that develops faster and more easily skills and induces mutual trust), using more often the modern tools (that the faculty has) for investigating the geographical space (e.g. drones, GPS, sonometers, automatic total stations, mobile phones, photo cameras, video cameras, etc.), focusing on developing students' research skills and on using research methods and techniques for learning about diverse areas.

Thus, on the first place in students' hierarchy was the opportunity of forming/developing certain skills, students identifying the aim of these field trips: to understand theory by relating it to the territorial reality. Next as importance, students placed the opportunities to create data bases after researching the field, the possibility to interact with qualified personnel in diverse domains (tourism, environment, industry, hydrology, meteorology, local public administration, etc.), and the possibility of using modern technology for research and especially for data collecting.

Unfortunately, the faculty cannot finance all student field trips during the Bachelor years and cannot provide more time for these. Students placed these two weaknesses of the field trips on the first places. The next weaknesses that the students identified were put in the following hierarchy: using inappropriate equipment, some students' inappropriate attitude or behaviour during field trips, heterogeneity of the students' physical condition, no accompanying medical personnel present in case of emergency/accidents, students' not observing regulations, instructions, the law, the appearance of fatigue, too much information received in a relatively short time, expositive activities prevail in comparison with the research ones, students' low competence level for communicating in foreign languages of international circulation, too many students participating, too long routes, etc.

We underline that, at the Faculty of Geography, there is a document concerning the *Regulations on field trips* (2016) that stipulates very precisely how students should behave and act during field trips in order prevent any threats or danger.

Students assigned scores to a series of measures that should be taken when organising future field trips (compulsory, occasional), organised by professors at the Faculty of Geography in order to increase their efficiency for students' professional development (Table 2).

**Table 02.** Hierarchy of students' recommendations for increasing the efficiency of field trips

<b>Students' recommendations</b>	<b>Mean value</b>
Realising thematic routes differentiated according to specialisation and year of study	4.51
More time for professors' discussions with students, in observation points or in research/study areas	4.26
Organising more research activities involving team or individual work	4.25
More time for research activities	4.25
Assigning roles and getting students more involved into research activities	4.22
Identifying sponsors/projects for obtaining funding	4.18
Accommodating students to partner universities/student houses	4.10
More time for professors' debates with students, in observation points or in research/study areas	4.04
More field trips a year	3.94
Discussing with students the results they obtained during the field trips and the difficulties they had	3.91
More time for students' questions, in observation points or in research/study areas	3.89
Solving more tasks/exercises/problems in the field, in teams and individually	3.84
Complete financing from the university	3.81
Observing/researching/studying using an observation protocol	3.70
Organising field trips for/with students from different specialisations	3.67
Making routes longer	3.65
Making field trips longer	3.62
A smaller number of objectives/observation points a day	2.89
Making routes shorter	2.81
Making field trips shorter	2.18

## **7. Conclusion**

Based on our findings, we concluded that improvement is required to increase students' satisfaction about their training during field trips: better correlation between theoretical knowledge and the practical one achieved in the field, comparing geographical elements, structures and processes in the field, stronger focus on forming and developing students' research skills, encouraging team work, and using more modern technologies and tools for investigating the geographical space during field trips.

It is also clear, that an integrated preparation of the field trip is advisable for its positive outcome: from the initial presentation of the programme with its aim, arguments (its relevance for students' professional training, why it takes place in the respective manner), expected results and procedure, the early clearing of organisational and behavioural issues, through a continuous monitoring during the activities, and to a final debriefing and feedback after field visits.

Students' interest in field trips is high, as these represent the brand of our Faculty of Geography. Professors' involvement in organising and participating at field trips is considered a good one and students' satisfaction about this is similar. Nevertheless, according to the survey, there is room for improvement.

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