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**IMPACT OF THE CAREER COUNSELING SERVICES ON
EMPLOYABILITY**

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Abstract

Entry into the labor market of higher education graduates is a major concern both for universities and graduates, but especially for organizations coordinating domestic and international education policies. The European Commission supports education reform structural policies, particularly at university level, that ensure the professionalization of graduates, the development of occupational competences as well as transversal competences with a view to enhancing, developing and capitalizing on their potential. In this context, universities supplement their student offers not only with educational services but with counseling as well as orientation services that help students manage their potential and define their educational and career path. This paper analyzes a positive experience within the project “*Practice today to become a manager tomorrow!*” financed through the Human Resources Development Operational Program and carried out at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. In this project, students benefited from complex psycho-pedagogy orientation and counseling services as well as from internships offered by potential employers. This paper provides a threefold view of the outcomes of this extensive study with respect to the impact that these services had on the students involved: from the point of view of the students, the employers, and those that coordinated the students’ activity at the level of the university. The study provides tangible data on the employability of the students involved in the case study, the relation between the specialized training received and its correlation with the labor market, the major factors contributing to the efficient entry into the labor market of graduates.

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1. Introduction

Faced with a heightened dynamic of the labor market as well as with major financial pressure, universities are required to make great efforts in order to tailor their educational offer to labor market requirements to train graduates so they can handle the challenges of the social and economic environment.

As such, universities are the link between the labor market, defined as the economic space where the demand for labor force, represented by employers and supply, is freely met, confronted and negotiated, and the demand, represented by those who are in possession of the labor force, in this case university graduates (Suciu, Lacatus, 2013). However, the insertion into the labor market and the graduates' social and professional integration represent problems for the employing organizations and the young graduates as well as for central authorities, which have a pivotal role in defining national policies. Organizations are continuously preoccupied with the different stages of the professional socialization process, with guiding new employees in their field (from recruitment all the way to effective integration), as well as with the performances of new employees, in the shortest timeframe. But social and professional integration is a complex, personalized process of an individual's adaptation to the social and professional environment, the requirements of the workplace and the behavior required by the organization where he or she works, and adapting his or her personality to that of the professional group. Employer requirements target an optimal combination between professional competences and transversal ones, which ensure professional activities are carried out with efficiency.

Increasingly, a significant number of young people abandon their studies and, with it, the possibility of obtaining an adequate level of qualification, which creates serious difficulties with job market integration. Precisely in order to curb this phenomenon, universities have initiated complex practical and theoretical training services and psycho-pedagogical counseling and guidance services for students. The European Commission advises educational reform, in particular at the level of higher education, in such a way as to help students develop professional and transversal competences and capitalize on their potential. The Bologna declaration shows that employability, expressed as the capacity of an individual to find and maintain a place of work, to maintain an adequate dynamic on the labor market, is crucial for higher education, which has the role of helping students develop the abilities and competences required by employers and the labor market.

In the context of this document and the situations presented, we are of the opinion that, in the long term, individual efforts by educational institutions can no longer provide the intended results. For this reason, it is necessary to define and adopt new coherent policies on the topic of the employability and flexibility on the labor market of fresh graduates, which incorporate the examples of good practice, disseminate and multiply them accordingly, all correlated in a tridimensional approach based on cost, time and performance. The synergy of the joint efforts of educational institutions, public representation and financing bodies, students / graduates as well as the business world must be constantly directed towards capitalizing on the potential of all those involved, in the context of national and international opportunities.

Local, regional and national development cannot be accomplished, in the corresponding terms of effects and efforts, without the contribution of universities, that allows on the one hand the transmission

of essential information to young people, the introduction and promotion of the effects of innovation, the creation of the necessary climate and material conditions for research and innovation, the promotion of performant educational services, as the base for all socio-economic activities (Peptenatu et al, 2012).

2. Problem statement

The project “*Practice today to become a manager tomorrow!*”, carried out in partnership between the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, the Romanian Management Consultants’ Association, The Consultancy Group for Development Company and the IT&C Students and Professionals’ Association, has set as its main goal to facilitate the transition from schooling to active life for 353 graduate students from economics programs, by offering complex services consisting of guidance, counseling, professional development, career mentoring and internships with potential employers. In this way, the students received the support needed for effective decision-making regarding their professional and educational trajectory, to develop their professional aptitudes and adopt appropriate attitudes towards work.

Taking into account the premise that universities need to be open towards partnerships in order to provide services adapted both to students and to the labor market, the project created a management internship community by involving the university, professional associations, NGOs, employers, mentors and interns. The quality of the internships was ensured by selecting partners based on the organizations’ interest and availability in providing internships, and the profile of the organizations correlated with that of the respective students.

The project tackled a vital issue for economics graduates, namely their employability in their field of study. The project matched the students with the internships based on the correlation between each student’s profile, interests and aptitudes, defined through the guidance and counseling activities, and the offer from the organizations, considered internships centers. Throughout the implementation of the project, the students were monitored and assessed by project specialists and mentors. Through the complex guidance and counselling services offered (personal profile development, educational trajectory, career plan) and the counseling support activities (workshops for the development of personal abilities), internships, the project addressed the causes which affect students’ ability to integrate into the labor market, including starting and managing their own career: lack of vision regarding the professional environment, lack of motivation and perspective for studying and working, insufficient self-knowledge etc. (Richiteanu - Nastase, 2009).

3. Research questions

Through the research carried out and outlined in the present article, we set out to highlight the existence of a direct dependence between the number of students who benefited from information, guidance, counseling and professional development services suited to their needs and the number of students who developed personal decision-making abilities regarding their professional and educational trajectory.

Moreover, a second line of research focused on establishing the correlation between the complexity of the information, guidance and counseling services as well as that of the internships and facilitating the transition from an educational setting to active professional life, reflected in the

employment duration and the correspondence between the field of work and the field of study of the students.

4. Purpose of a study

In accordance with the directions of study established, through our research we undertook to highlight the importance that the complex services offered by the project (provision of information, guidance and counseling, monitoring during internships) had in facilitating the social and professional insertion of the project beneficiaries and in developing the beneficiaries' ability to find and adapt to the work place.

5. Research methods

To assess the impact of the internships and information, guidance and counseling activities on the performances of the students taking part in the „*Practică azi pentru a deveni managerul de mâine!*” project, an *empirical sociological research* was carried out which allowed for the direct observation of the reality being studied through the use of a questionnaire-based survey. The survey was carried out among those involved in the project: graduate students of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (358 beneficiary students, of which 200 did internships), the representatives of the management and implementation team of the applicant and project partners (15 representatives of the management and implementation team who are responsible for the professional development of the beneficiary students and for providing them with information, coordination, guidance and counseling), mentors (designated individuals) from the organizations where students carried out internships (90 mentors from the internship centers). The questionnaires were answered by 92 students, 10 team representatives and 13 mentors. The sampling methods used were: *nonprobability sampling* and *group sampling*. Three distinct “omnibus” questionnaires, which allow for the collection of a large number of data at a low cost, were applied between September 20 – October 10, 2015 to the 3 groups studied. The questionnaires were applied directly, online and self-administered, with the help of electronic instruments created on the google-drive platform; they were emailed to all the participants of the 3 groups studied, the contact data being available in the project database.

6. Findings

The surveyed students felt they had benefitted from complex services within the project, as follows: individual and group counseling services (79.3%), internships (83.7%), best practices workshops (45.7%), information from various sources – leaflets, posters, sites, guides (56.5%), information from faculty (70.7%). Most of the surveyed students feel that career guidance and counselling services are beneficial for them (94.6%) and helped them know themselves better, raised their motivation to enter the labor market, stimulated their capacity to project and plan their career and helped them identify professional alternatives.

The opinions of internship mentors (potential employers) and the project team representatives regarding the services students should have available to them in order to make a more successful transition from a school setting to professional life have been centralized in table 1.

Table 1. Types of services students should have available to them

Types of services students should have available to them	Internship mentors			Representatives of the project management and implementation team		
	In a small degree	In a large degree	In a very large degree	In a small degree	In a large degree	In a very large degree
Career guidance and counseling services	0%	30/8%	69.2%	0%	40%	60%
Professional activity guidance / mentorship services in university and the internship center	0%	23.1%	76.9%	0%	20%	80%
Information regarding the culture of the organization hosting the internship	7.7%	46.2%	46.2%	10%	50%	40%
Theoretical information about professional activity	23.1%	38.5%	38.5%	20%	60%	20%

The similarity in results for the two respondent categories shows a unitary perception regarding the services that universities have to provide to students: guidance, counseling, consultation for a successful insertion on the labor market. The aspects related to familiarizing himself or herself with the working environment, knowing the culture of an organization must not be ignored as decisive factors of insertion. We are of the opinion that students, the future employees, must become aware of this aspect to adequately decipher both the visible culture of an organization, as well as, more importantly, the informal culture which would make their integration in professional organizations easier. (Coulon, 1993).

With regard to the internship, the surveyed students stated that a number of their expectations were confirmed: *they carried out an internship in an organization/department in line with their field of study* (70.7% in a large degree or a very large degree), *they were informed of the expectations related to the internship before beginning their activity* (66.5 % in a large degree or a very large degree), *they were given an introduction on the organization, the internship center* (76.1%), *they were guided by a member of the faculty* (76.1% in a large degree or a very large degree), *they were guided by a mentor* (77.2%), *they carried out professional activities in line with their field of specialty* (68,5% in a large degree or a very large degree), *they put into practice the theoretical knowledge accumulated* (63% in a large degree or a very large degree), *they were given explanations regarding where they were wrong and why* (64.1% in a large degree or a very large degree), *they developed their professional abilities* (65.2%), *they came into direct contact with the employers and their requirements* (62% in a large degree or a very large degree), *they gained relevant professional experience* (64.1% in a large degree or a very large degree) *and they have found or will find a place of work more easily* (63% in a large degree or a very large degree).

Table 2 centralizes the advantages of carrying out internships in organizations, as seen by the mentors and representatives of the project management and implementation team.

Table 2. Advantages of carrying out internships

Advantages of students who have carried out internships	Mentors			Representatives of the project management and implementation team		
	In a small degree	In a large degree	In a very large degree	In a small degree	In a large degree	In a very large degree
Students developed their professional abilities	0%	38.5%	53.8%	0%	40%	60%
<i>Students applied their theoretical knowledge</i>	7.7%	7.7%	76.9%	0%	50%	50%
Students came into contact with employers and their requirements	0%	0%	100%	0%	40%	60%
<i>Students came into contact with elements of the organizational culture at the work place</i>	0%	15.4%	84.6%	0%	40%	60%
Students developed their abilities to relate and communicate	0%	53.8%	46.2%	0%	30%	70%
<i>Students learned from professionals</i>	0%	30.8%	69.2%	0%	50%	50%

The results show shared opinions towards the benefits of internships, both from students, as well as from those who coordinated and monitored them: the development of professional abilities, the development of transversal communication and career management abilities.

The research carried out and the statistical processing of gathered data show an interdependence between the number of students who benefited from information, guidance, counseling and professional development services and the number of students who developed personal decision-making abilities regarding their professional and educational trajectory. Out of the 92 students surveyed, 40 were employed in their field of study (53.3%), 31 were employed in a field other than their field of study (33.7%), 16 were currently searching for a place of work (17.4%). Another positive outcome of the research is the fact that 26 (36.1%) of the respondents were at the time employed with the company / organization which had hosted them as interns.

The services provided by the project have a positive impact, as can be seen from the elevated rate of employability registered at the end of the project: out of the 200 students who did an internship, 71 found a place of work (35.5%).

The correspondence between the complexity of the information, guidance, counseling services and internships on the one hand, and the facilitation of the transition from a school environment to an active professional life on the other hand, was reflected in the time dedicated to finding a place of work, the strategies used for this purpose as well as securing employment according to their qualification. A large number of the employed students surveyed declared that they had found a place of work within 3 months of beginning to search for one (42.5% spent less than a month searching for a place of work, 28.8% less than 3 months). An analysis of the employability field revealed that the largest number are the employees who hold economic and financial positions (35.06%). The guidance provided as part of the project offered students solutions to finding a place of work. From a statistical standpoint, 76 (82.6%) of the surveyed students declared having sent CVs / letters of intent to employers, 67 (73.9%) declared that they

had hiring interviews, 44 (47.8%) consulted dedicated sites, 36 (39.1%) asked for assistance from acquaintances/ friends, 35 (38%) enlisted in recruitment databases, 23 (25%) participated in hiring competitions, 11 (12%) consulted the vacancies posted by National Agencies for Employment, 8 (8.7%) sought the services of a recruitment agency.

We hold the opinion that a decisive factor in the students' development were the various subjects provided during group counseling (personal efficiency, effective communication, creativity and creative problem solving, teamwork, project management, approaching the labor market with a CV and letter of intent, company culture, career management) and ensuring individual guidance and monitoring for the students.

The positive impact of the project, as well as the perceptions of those involved, show that the universities must adapt and customize the offer of complex guidance and counseling services and internships, to actively support the graduates' social and professional integration. The project team representatives considered, during the research carried out, that these services need to be diversified (see table no. 3).

Table 3. Types of activities in which students should be involved

Types of activities in which students should be involved	In a large degree	In a very large degree
Research visits to professional organizations	50%	50%
Internship in professional organizations	0%	100%
Internships in organizations relevant for the field of specialization of the students	10%	90%
Professional counseling and guidance	0%	100%
Taking subjects with a highly practical character	40%	60%
Specialized conferences hosted by universities	70%	30%
Job fairs	40%	60%
Accessing job-related information provided by universities	40%	60%

7. Conclusion

The results outlined above are part of a complex study and show an example of good practices which universities can develop in the short and medium term in order to ensure a good level of sustainability.

In this context, the lines of development of professional training programs provided by universities in order to increase the employability of graduates can take into account the following:

- adopting a flexible curriculum with a higher content of applied activities when considering lectures/seminars and the curriculum plan;
- training faculty members to offer guidance and counseling to students, to communicate, cooperate and be orientated towards partnerships;
- motivating the faculty and employers to build partnerships;
- developing complex psycho-pedagogical guidance and counseling services for students;
- disseminating and capitalizing on positive experiences at the level of the academic community and employers.

However, for such initiatives to be implemented, it is necessary to achieve a level of interest among all involved entities in a joint medium and long term effort. If the first to have a stake in the process are universities, with a view towards a better integration of graduates, later on the representatives of the business world become primarily interested in it as a result of having an interest in the quality of new hires and subsequent specialty training costs.

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