

Next manager. Academic background versus labor market requirements

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The employability of graduates is today one of the major problems both of universities and economical environment. Also, employability, inserting optimum professional and social life is a problem of each graduate. It finds today, that a large part of are young drop out of school and thus possibility of qualify at a high level or have difficulty entering the labor market. European Commission recommends for member states reforming education, especially of the university so as to ensure the professionalization of the young people, developing their professional skills and transversal, harnessing their potential, enhance the relevance of education for youth and the labor market. Bologna Declaration shows that employability (ability to engage, to maintain the service and mobility in the labor market) is defining higher education, whose role is to familiarize students with the skills and competencies that individuals need to place on the job. (Bologna, 1999) This paper addresses the issue of employability of higher economic studies graduates, and analyzes a positive experience resulting from the provision of complex information, guidance, advice and orientation to students in POSDRU "Practice today to become manager of tomorrow". The paper presents the results of a complex study conducted on the impact that these services have had on the students involved, from three perspectives: students, employers, who guided activity students at the university level. The results show that there is a direct relationship between the increase in the number of students who have benefited from guidance, counseling and professional development appropriate to their needs and the number who have developed personal skills to substantiate decisions regarding their career paths and educational because of of information, advice, guidance provided in the project. These services have helped students to develop, to know better, know their own skills and abilities and to focus better on the labor market and / or educational services market. The conclusions have great relevance as a model of best practice in the development of complex programs of partnership between universities and businesses so that employability of graduates to grow and develop.

Keywords: employability, professional skills, transversal competences

JEL code: M10, I23, I25.

1. Introduction

The economic and social transformations which Romania is experiencing have left their mark, in particular, also on the educational system. Whether we are talking about substantive changes, caused by the admission to the European Union, or by those specific to the Bologna process, or by the reactions to the signals of the economic or industrial environment, all these represented influence and conditioning factors in determining the level of performance, but especially in how it is being quantified and monitored.

The university education in Romania, represented in a first phase by the public universities in Romania, was forced to switch, in a relatively short period of time, from a centralized system, that was planned in all directions and component processes, to a competitive globalized system, collaborated with other two extreme phenomena, namely the demographic decline and the modification of the structure of access to all types of resources.

Extended in a first phase from a quantitative point of view due to the emergence and diversification of the educational institutions at the local level, and later by the appearance of the private universities, the training of the young graduates from high schools, but also of other categories

of adults, benefitted from the contribution of a teaching staff anchored in a set of classic principles, scientifically valuable, but less flexible in terms of connection with other systems. Decentralization of the educational system and introducing a new model of reform was a priority for all central public authorities, but the degree of independence assigned resources management and administration forms were permanently changed. (Enachescu, 2011)

That fact that the issues related to the necessary resources for the training process have been neglected a good period of time, as well as because of the way the labor market has absorbed the more increasingly number of university graduates gave rise to distortions in the management of the system with less unexpected effects on the medium and long term.

2. Literature review

Once the euphoria of the quantitative expansion has passed, the higher education has faced other challenges with regard to globalization in education, liberalization of the movement and transfer of information, both for the pupils, students but also for the professors, changes in the national / international legislative frame and the limitation of access to resources, especially to the financial ones. A first reaction, justified, however, by the context, was concerning the orientation towards decentralization and individualized approach depending on the expected or wanted level of performance.

The external competitive pressure and the transition to objectives and projects oriented management brought the higher education institutions face to face with some organizational maturity stages, meaning that it was needed to create and stimulate a collaborative environment, able to respond to the new challenges of the external environment.

Assuming a proactive or reactive position to the multiple transformations has also determined a different positioning, both from a strategic point of view, but also from an operational one, in the sense of adopting a particular type of training of some concerned categories of resources and objectives and performance indicators.

When referring to the performance of the higher education institutions in the current context, it can be characterized by at least the following relevant issues. Firstly, we are talking about the international character of all performance assessments, the use of these assessment criteria generally acknowledged, about the fact that the assessment is done by independent organizations and institutions, but also about the fact that in the assessment are taken into account also the relationships with the external environment and with the key stakeholders from the institutions.

The process of education and its performance are not directly evaluated only in terms of direct contact between people of different categories, information technologies and virtual collaborations being more responsible. (Nastase, 2009)

As part of the whole the criteria and indicators used to assess the level of institutional performance, both in national and international context, the employability of the graduates with specific elements occupies a priority place.

Proactive attitude in the performance of universities must be oriented towards the creation and consolidation of joint structures between universities and the business environment on subject matters related to research, development and innovation, based on efficient and flexible communication mechanisms. (Serbanica, 2011)

The Bologna Declaration defines employability (the ability to be employed, to maintain the job and the mobility in the labor market) as being defining for the higher education, whose role is to train students in the field of skills and abilities, which the individuals need at the workplace and which are requested by the employers.

The analysis of the degree in which the employability of the graduates is ensured represents a complex process, in whose development are involved, on one hand, the internal institutional factors, but also the external factors, those of the environment, whose identification and quantification sometimes raises difficulties, on medium and long term.

We refer in a first analysis on how consistency is ensured between the bachelor or the master studies and the field in which the graduates find a job. Additionally, here there can be defined tasks, competencies and responsibilities that are not directly related to the graduate specialization but their names and their specifics can be interpreted in a more extensive integrated approach.

Another difficulty in assessing the level of employability of students is related to the ratio between the skills gained by the graduates before they are accepted to the university compared to those obtained during the university studies, and compared to the cross ones. A justified question here is related to the contribution of each category of those mentioned to the employment of the students in

their field of their studies. In the same direction of analysis of the degree of employability of the graduates must be also analyzed and defined the reference time interval, for which a person can be considered relevant, namely the time needed for the graduates to find a job that is compatible with the specialization of their university studies. It is known that the economic systems are functioning sometimes based on certain cycles that ensure the alternation of periods of time with very good results and thus high employability compared to periods of time of recessions and economic degradation.

With regard to these features of the macroeconomic area that are influencing the employability of graduates a series of questions can be raised. Do the universities, the main actor of the process, everything they can to increase this level of employability? Do they have the institutional capacity and the related resources for such a complex process? Are they permanently connected to the evolution of the labor market? Do they own the tools needed to manage such a process?

Studies have shown that development of entrepreneurship in a particular area or region is linked to the preparation of students for theoretical and practical capabilities accumulated by them during their academic studies. (Peptenatu et al., 2012)

The initiatives in this regard at the level of universities were supported by institutional steps that were taking into account, on the one hand, the diversification and the fact of completing the services offered to students and graduates, the creation and development of specialized centers, the design of information systems having a role in the collection, management and the analysis of the information related to student employability.

3. Research methodology

A main role in the development of such initiatives was also held by the European funding that has allowed, through the Operational Programme for the Development of Human Resources 2007 - 2013 universities to apply and to financially support activities exactly for increasing the level of employability of the graduates.

The main objective of this work was to identify the impact of the vocational counseling and guidance services, conducted under a European project on the employability of graduates of higher studies in economics, namely the graduates of the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest.

"Practice today to become a manager tomorrow!" is a project financed under the Operational Programme for the Development of Human Resources 2007 - 2014, developed in partnership by the Academy of Economic Studies, the Management Consultants Association in Romania, AMCOR, SC Development Consulting Group DCG SRL (Structural Consulting group) and the Association of IT&C-ASPI Students and Professionals.

The overall objective of the project was to facilitate the transition to the active life for 353 students at the masters in economic sciences programme by providing an integrated package of guidance, counseling and personal development services, career mentoring and internships at potential employers. Out of all the specific objectives of the project, the one that is of interest for the research carried out is the one that takes into account the improvement of the guidance, counseling and personal development services and support activities for 353 students in order for them to base their decisions regarding careers / education. The project dealt with an important issue for the graduates of higher education - master of economic sciences, namely that of their employability in accordance with the specialization of their studies. The target group was 353 students in economic sciences - Master cycle.

The European Commission's Strategy for Higher Education mentions the need to reform the university education so as to ensure the professionalization of the youth with the necessary skills for the exploitation of the potential in terms of employability and professional insertion. The project addressed these priorities by providing a package of guidance and counseling services (which allow the defining of a personal profile and the identification of those skills that exploit the intellectual / professional potential) and by providing internships in different organizations. (COM, 2013).

The causes of the level of employability of graduates are also based on the reduced relevance of the education to the labor market, namely the underdevelopment of labor skills at the level of the graduates. Through internships, guidance and counseling services for the students (defining personal profile, educational route, career plan) and support activities for counseling (workshops for the development of personal skills), we felt that the project has acted on the causes that affect the students' ability to integrate into the labor market, including initiation and management of their careers.

The analysis of the impact of the performance of internships and of the activities of guidance and counseling on the performance of the students that benefited from the project is very important

given the fact that it aims to facilitate the transition from school to the active life of the graduates and to empower them with transversal skills related to the exercise of professional and social roles.

Motivated by this situation, we developed an *empirical sociological research* for the direct observation of the studied reality by applying specific methods and techniques for the collection of information (in our case - the survey based on a questionnaire and the analysis of social documents) in order to process them and to obtain information about the phenomenon studied.

For this research we have established the following two hypotheses:

I1. There is a direct dependence between the increase in the number of students who have benefited from the guidance, counseling and professional development services appropriate to their needs and the number who have developed personal skills for the substantiation of the decisions regarding their career and educational paths;

I2. There is a direct dependence between the increase in the number of students who were involved in internships corresponding to the training and the skills and the ease of the transition from school to active life, reflected in the employment time of the students in the field;

Correlated with the established hypotheses, we have set the following objectives through which we planned to assess the impact of the project, namely how the project:

O1. Has helped ease the transition from school to the active life of the benefitting students;

O2. Has developed the ability of the benefitting students to adapt to the workplace;

O3. Has developed guidance, counseling and professional development services appropriate to the needs of the benefitting students.

The questionnaire-based survey was conducted among the persons involved in the project: master students from the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest. "Omnibus" questionnaires were used, which address several topics, have a low cost of implementation in relation to the volume of information obtained and have led to the possibility of obtaining a larger amount of information that can be subject of further analyzes (primary and secondary).

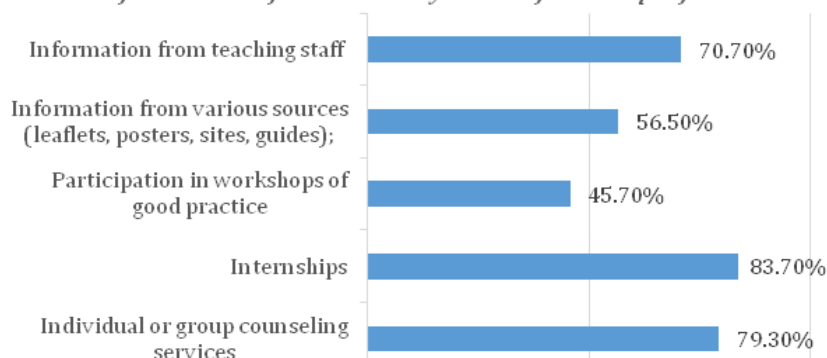
How the questionnaires were applied: direct, online, in self-managed system and the invitation to participate in the research was addressed individually to each person, a member of the target group of the project.

3. Discussion of the research results.

The questionnaire was answered by a total of 92 students from the target group; here are taken into account only the complete questionnaires, the duplicates are being removed and they are verified in terms of belonging to the targeted group.

The questionnaire was composed of 18 questions, which were targeting: the identification and affiliation of the persons, the way in which they have been involved in the activities of the project, the way in which the offered services were perceived, the preference for certain categories of services, the level of appreciation and assessment of certain activities, the assessment of the performance in the provision of services, the establishment of priority actions for universities but also for the business representatives. In relation to the assumptions and objectives of the research, we selected for this paper and analyzed the responses offered by those involved in a number of questions considered relevant in terms of quantity and quality.

Picture No. 1: Statistics for the answers to the question
Of what kind of services did you benefit in the project?

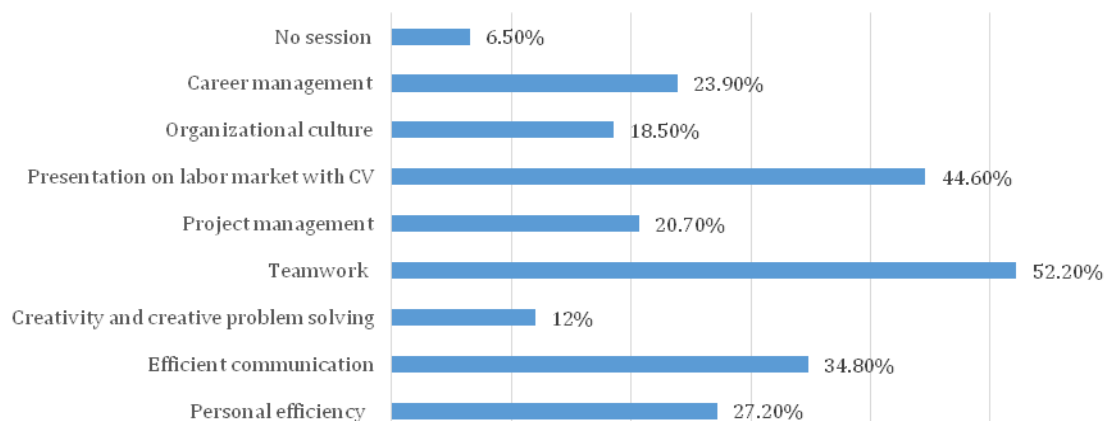


The first question selected for analysis was related to the respondents' participation in all the services provided by the project or only to some of them. In the graph from Picture 1, we can observe

the significant shares of the students who opted to perform internships and of those who benefited from individual and group counseling. From the obtained results, we can observe the preference of the students from the master cycle for the information provided by professors, compared to the information from other sources, which recorded a much lower percentage. The participation in the workshops of good practice was limited in terms of the number stipulated in the funding application and the budget of the project.

Given the importance of the counseling services in the project, we wanted to know the priority options of the students for certain topics and their congruence with the prospects of career management. The statistical analysis of the answers provided by the participants is shown in Picture 2.

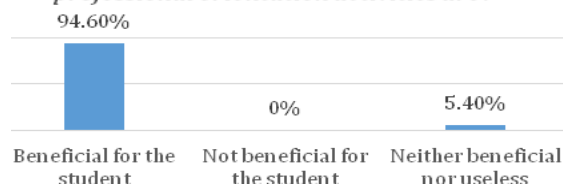
Picture No. 2. Statistics for the answers to the question:
Which of the group counseling session from the project did you attend?



From the statistics of the answers provided by those surveyed, we observed the major share of the participation in the counseling sessions dedicated to teamwork and presentation on the labor market (CV, cover letter), which ensures the development of those competencies of soft skills type. It should be noted that career management was a favorite theme in a small percentage, which highlights a limited concern for the professional future or a limited degree of knowledge of the potential of this area. The results are in compliance with the preferences of employers who mentioned in top 10 skills needed for new graduates in the employment process, communication and teamwork ability. (The Council for Industry and Higher Education, 2008)

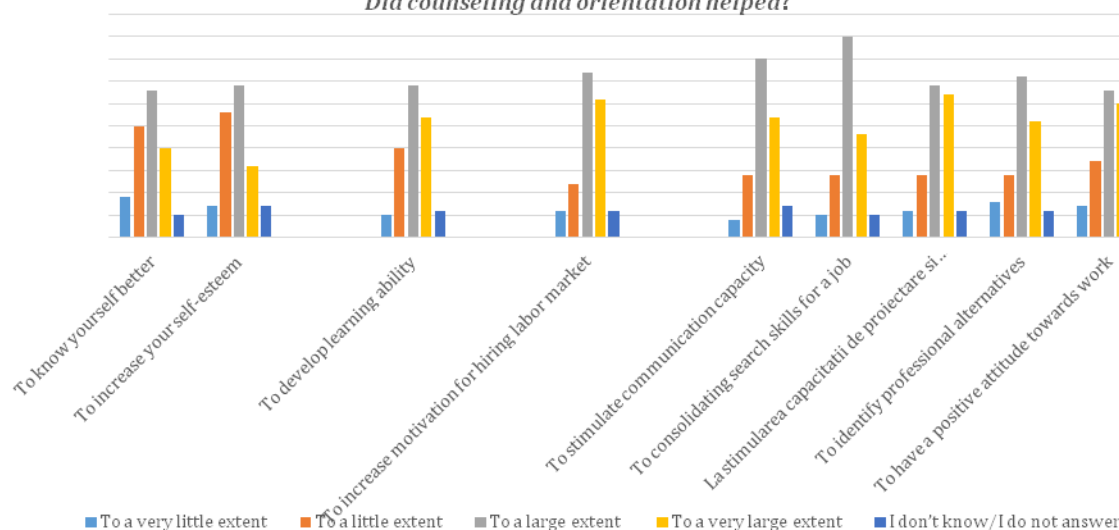
Picture No. 3. Statistics for the answers to the question:

Do you think that the counseling and professional orientation activities are?

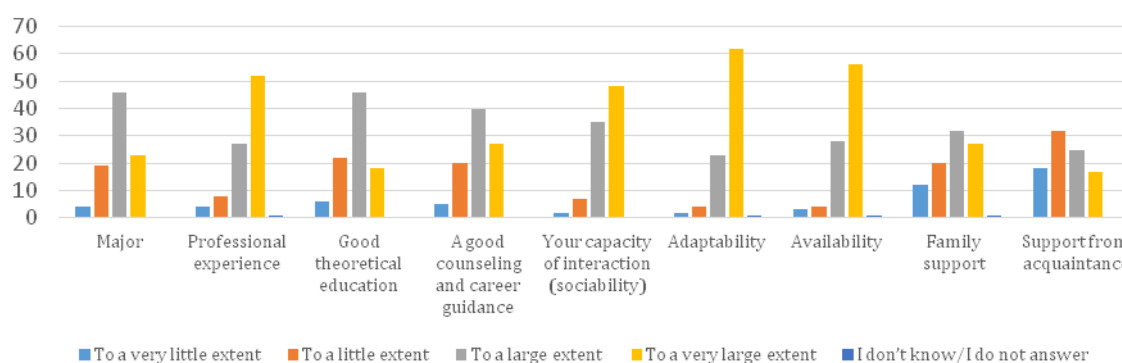


Regarding the participation in various services offered by the project, we wanted in the research conducted to investigate how graduates perceive the need for such services. The significant share of those who consider the counseling services as beneficial for the professional career, as shown in Picture No. 3, highlights the fact that the classical education program, of university type does not offer a lot of alternatives.

In order to highlight the impact of the counseling services and professional guidance we interviewed the respondents about the benefits of these services, differentiated from a qualitative point of view on elements specific for the personal development but also quantitatively, in the sense of quantifying the impact on four different categories, namely: to a very little extent, to a little extent, to a large extent, to a very large extent and I do not know / I do not answer.

Picture no. 4. Statistics for the answers to the question:
Did counseling and orientation helped?

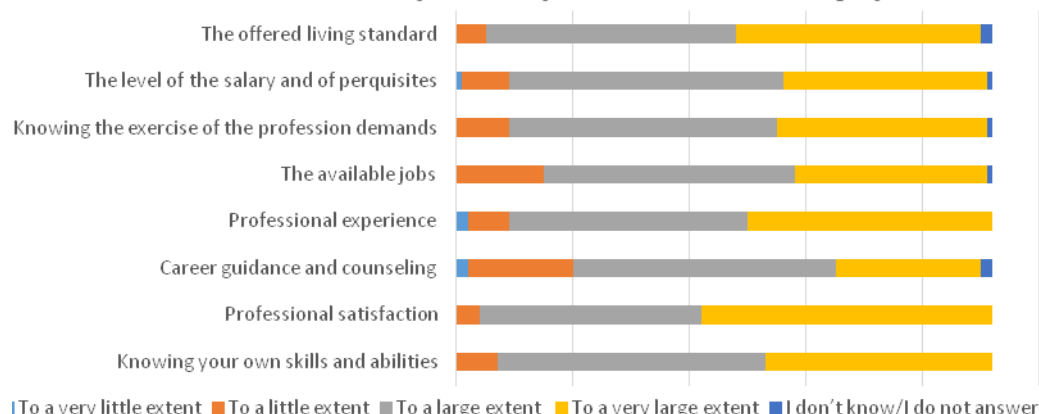
From a quantitative point of view, the answers were mainly in the area of an impact to a large extent, reflecting on the one hand, the need of the students to be involved in various counseling and guidance activities, and on the other hand, that these services have a multidimensional contribution to the proposed subject matters. The highest values are recorded for the criterion regarding the enhancing of the skills for the search of a job, respectively for the stimulation of the communication ability. Interesting is the fact that of all respondents, there is a relatively small number of those who do not know or do not respond, which denotes that the activities were not sufficiently disseminated or the communication policy was insufficiently adapted to the students' profile.

Picture No.5 Statistics for the answer to the question:
Which are the factors that you consider that will contribute to your professional succes?

Relevant to the proposed research and for the assumptions that were set, we considered also the manner in which the students know and perceive the factors that can contribute to the professional success. In this regard, we have proposed a set of features, learned from the previous experience of the collaborations, for which we have also requested an evaluation in terms of quantity. On the first three positions in the standings of the answers offered by the students, were the features that were taken into consideration: adaptability, availability and professional experience. It is to be noted that these three features are not strictly related to the educational process, in which students are involved, which contradicts the expressed desire of students to participate in as many educational activities and projects as possible.

To the other end, we found the features that are related to the support of the family and acquaintances, which is gladdening in light of the fact that the respondents are trying to build their careers without external support.

Fig. nr. 6. Statistics for the answers to the question:
Which factors contribute when you found your decision to seek employment?

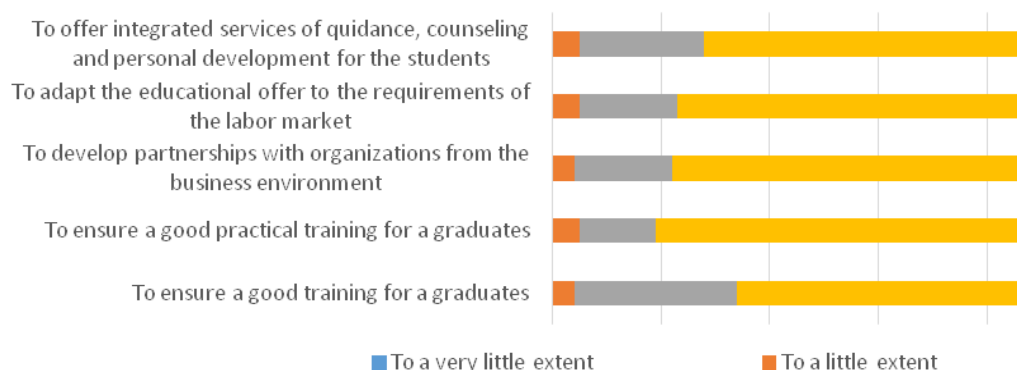


In order to complete the proposed research approach, we selected as relevant also the answers given to the question **“Which factors contribute when you found your decision to seek employment?”** The respondents rated as major factors that influence to a very large extent of the job satisfaction and of the standard of living ensured by the job. Also, to a large extent, the students also are influenced by the fact of knowing their own abilities, the career guidance and counseling, as well as by the salary levels and perquisites.

Based on these preliminary findings, we can identify the directions of improvement of the services offered in the educational programs of universities.

To meet these requirements of the students better, we have also researched the respondents' opinion about the services that should be offered to students. The question took into account **“What should the universities do for a better insertion of the graduates on the labor market?”** And the answers were distributed as shown in Picture No. 7.

Picture no.7. Statistics for the answer of the question: **“What should the universities do for a better insertion of the graduates on the labor market?”**



For all the features shown, the answers were concentrated on the significant impact, which confirms that the offer of the types of services offered by the university is in line with the expectations of the students. The practical training is on the first place in the preferences of the students, and from this point of view, the European projects that have funded these activities were considered beneficial for everyone involved. The summary of the results obtained after processing the information gathered through the conducted research highlights some particularities in addressing employability, for the students in the master programmes of the University Of Economic Studies Of Bucharest.

5. Conclusions and proposals

We believe that all the project assumptions were confirmed, as follows:

- The research findings show that there is a direct dependence between the increase in the number of students who have benefited from guidance, counseling and professional development services appropriate to their needs and the number who have developed personal skills to found the decisions regarding their career and educational paths. The advisory services offered through the project have helped students to develop, to know themselves better, to know their own skills and abilities and to orientate themselves better on the labor market and / or educational services market;

The study results also show that there is a direct dependence between the increase in the number of students who were involved in internships appropriate to the training, skills and facilitation of the transition from school to active life, reflected by the duration until the students in the field found employment. Most employed students that were surveyed said they have found a job before three months of search (42.5% searched for less than a month, 28.8% searched for up to 3 months). The analysis of the employability domain shows that the largest share is held by the employees with jobs that have a specific economic and financial nature (35.06%).

We believe that there is a direct dependence between the increase of the degree of complexity of the information, guidance, counseling and monitoring services offered to the students as part of the community of practice and the degree of consolidation of the partnership university - business environment, reflected by the number of partnerships made in a certain time (the first two years after the services were provided). The services offered under the project were complex: advice, guidance and personal development in individual and group counseling sessions, internships, exchange of good practices, job fairs. Everyone involved in the project: students tutors, members of the project team, said that the project had an impact on them; the students have appreciated the offered opportunities, the tutors and the team members expressed their desire to be involved in future activities starting from the good experiences of the project.

The employability of the students from the master's program has become a constant concern in their activity, on the one hand, due to financial constraints, the recommendations and pressure from family or acquaintances but also due to the fast desire of professional success.

Orientation of universities to the needs of the labor market reflects an approach more on the demand while addressing in terms of increasing the level of skills of graduates reflect on the offer's concentration institutions. (COM, 2014)

That's why the students are willing to try and to broaden their activities in order to complement the theoretical knowledge with the practical ones, but this is done in a random manner without being established the main landmarks of the future careers. This highlights the need for a rapid intervention, at university level, in the supply plan, with specialized counseling services, able to help the students to establish better what they want, depending on the stage of training in which they are. The results of data processing in the questionnaire are consistent with trends recognized in other studies, which show that with increasing age children in the education system, they want to spend increasingly less time at school and the rest to be dedicated to the other extracurricular activities. (OECD, 2012)

Most of those surveyed want to get a job, but they do not know very well in which field and what they should do about it. The internships, the counseling services and the discussions with the professors are most accessed activities by the students for career orientation, and as part of the whole counseling themes that are considered of crucial interest, the teamwork and presentation on the labor market also occupy the main places among the preferences.

The employability of higher education graduates, as revealed in studies, is influenced by the ratio of soft skills (communication, relationships interpersonal etc.) are combined with the hard type, such as technical or technological. (Andrews & Higson, 2008)

Another important conclusion of the research targets the key elements appreciated by students as having the greatest contribution to professional success, and here we refer to adaptability, availability and professional experience. Therefore, we consider that, as part of the whole cross competences offered by university studies, for the three highlighted aspects, that it should be created, either individually or complementary, specialized training modules.

The decision in career is influenced mainly by job satisfaction and by the ensured standard of living, options that highlight the fact that they are not necessarily interested in working in the field of their studies, but in any area that provides greater satisfaction or a higher living standard. Basically, the occupational mobility degree increased significantly, and the graduates are willing to change any job easier in order to achieve their objectives.

Last but not least, we remind that the practical training and the encouraging of partnerships with the business environment constitutes the main directions in which the universities should orient their activities. Although the majority of them took important steps in this direction, however, it should also be considered the effectiveness of these practical activities in accordance with the professional training and skills offered and the defining of an optimal relation between theoretical and practical activities, depending on the studies program and the analyzed specialization.

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