

HOW TO IMPROVE THE LABOR MARKET INSERTION OF GRADUATES IN ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT

The changes of the Romanian society also affected the labor market, leading to unprecedented imbalances between the job offers and requests both quantitatively and qualitatively. In this context, we aimed at analyzing closely the evolutions in this field in the last years and the generating causes, to study the way the higher education graduates project and begin their career, to identify modalities through which the universities can become a real support for their students.

Our research capitalizes the opinions formulated by the young people studying within bachelor's and master's programs organized in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, opinions collected during a survey carried out between February and April 2014. The purpose of our questionnaire-based survey was to reveal the extent to which the surveyed students know the labor market and the employers' requests, they appreciate and capitalize the competencies they obtain during the study programs, they are interested in the prestige of the degree they will get, and they adopt career decisions founded on success models. The promised answers allowed us to check the validity of the six starting hypotheses.

Associating the conclusions of this research with the tendencies highlighted by the analysis of the evolution on the labor market in Romania and in the European Union, we formulated the priorities that the Romanian universities should take into account to fulfill their role as a partner in the business environment, to adapt to its higher and higher requirements, to consolidate its position against the competitors who activate in the field of education abroad, and to contribute more actively to facilitating the immediate integration of their graduates in the profession for which they prepared.

KEYWORDS: *business education, graduates, internship, labor market, unemployment*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Launching a research can have specific motivations, sometimes quite surprising. In our case, the topic was suggested by the events we are confronting with daily as observers, analysts or actors of the labor market in Romania, by the frequent debates we have with representatives of the business environment as regards the profile of the candidate graduate or as regards the modalities of organization, coordination or evaluation of the student internships. It is thus natural to have the initiative of analyzing a state of things, to start a research within the students so that to identify the modalities through which we can extend our role to facilitate the integration of the young graduates on the labor market. We considered that this approach will allow us to offer a credible answer to our research question: *how to improve the labor market insertion of graduates?*

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In order to fulfill our objectives, we structured this article in more parts: we clarified the concepts of labor and labor market, we analyzed the national evolutions and those of other countries of the European Union in this field, we launched a quantitative research within the students to know their opinions regarding the employers' expectancies and the barriers of the professional start, we processed the information collected by the means of a questionnaire filled in by 430 respondents and we formulated the primary directions of the academic business education through which can be supported the process of labor market insertion of the young graduates.

2. LABOR MARKET: FROM CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS TO CURRENT REALITIES

The concern to understand the labor market as dimension, structure, evolution, as factors of influence or as positioning of the first players is natural, if we take into account the role of labor in the development of the human society. The starting point for the analysis of this concept is *labor* itself. We can define *labor* as a human conscious activity (physical and/or intellectual) that aims an objective and that develops value to satisfy certain needs (Autor, 2010) or, as a source of richness (Preda, 2002). Or we can retain the fact that *labor* is an activity that produces something which has value for somebody. It is the first price or the first coin used to buy goods. It involves an expense of human energy that can be amplified through the increase of the level of satisfaction of the employees' needs (Manole, 2013). Without labor, the other factors of production would be null, incapable of satisfying people's needs.

The complexity of labor anticipates and explains the various, ample manifestations of the *labor market*. This represents the economic space where labor request (represented by employees) and labor offer (represented by employers) meet. In other words, on the labor market the client is represented by the employer, the supplier is represented by the employee, the transactional object is represented by the labor force and the price is represented by the salary (Krugman, 2012). Labor market can be characterized on the basis of four key dimensions (Cretu, 2010):

- *function of production*. Both the classical and the Keynesian views consider that production can rise only through the increase of the number of employees;
- *labor offer*. The real salary has to be equal to the marginal product of labor;
- *the employees' behavior and the labor contract*. Those dedicated to the classical view considers that the labor offer is a decreasing function in direct relation with the real salary;
- *condition for equilibrium*. This results from the fact that on the labor market there is a confrontation between offer and request.

Placed in the European or even international context, the labor market in Romania has undergone in the last 25 years major and complex changes. And according to all possibilities the process is not over yet. We would like to be able to anticipate the future evolutions but, in an age of technological changes, of information exchange, of development of knowledge-centered industries it is difficult to identify the needs of the labor market. However, we can take over the signals received from the immediate or father reality:

- the rise of unemployment in Member States of the European Union and in the developing countries of East Europe, combined with the technological change can lead to continuous modifications of the labor market offer, which involves that the educational offer should be harmonized with the requirements of the labor market (Tudose, 2013).
- the Member States of the European Union have examined more methods for predicting the necessary job offers to identify the future needs according to the educational requests, cultural and professional level that characterizes various activity sectors (Vadasan, 2011).

- the development of these predictions will require the use of some qualitative and quantitative methods will lead systematically to data organization and to some analyses concerning education and training, as well as the sectoral and professional needs. (Tudose, 2013)

The labor market in Romania has undergone in the last 23 years a constants decrease. For instance, in 1990 the number of employees was 8,142,000, and in 2013 their number reached 5,113,075. Also, the number of persons retired in 2013 was higher with 62% in comparison with 1990.

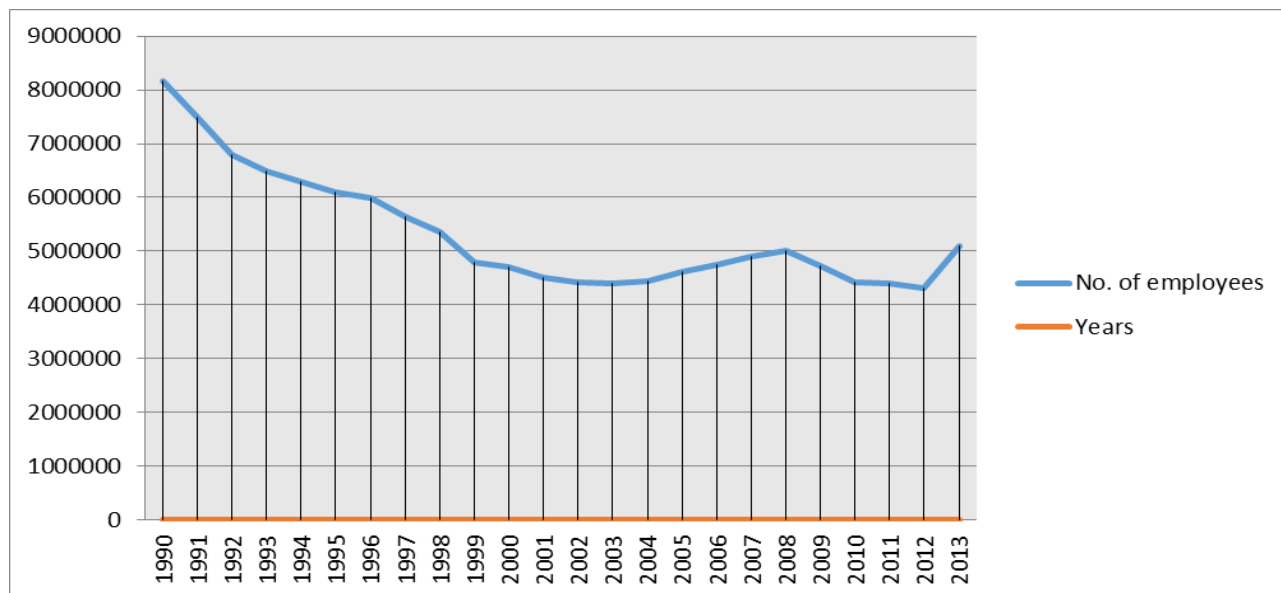


Figure 1. Evolution of the number of employees in Romania

Source: adapted from the National Institute of Statistics

At the end of 2013, the unemployment registered in Romania was 5.65%, and the number of unemployed, in continuous rise, was 512.333 persons.

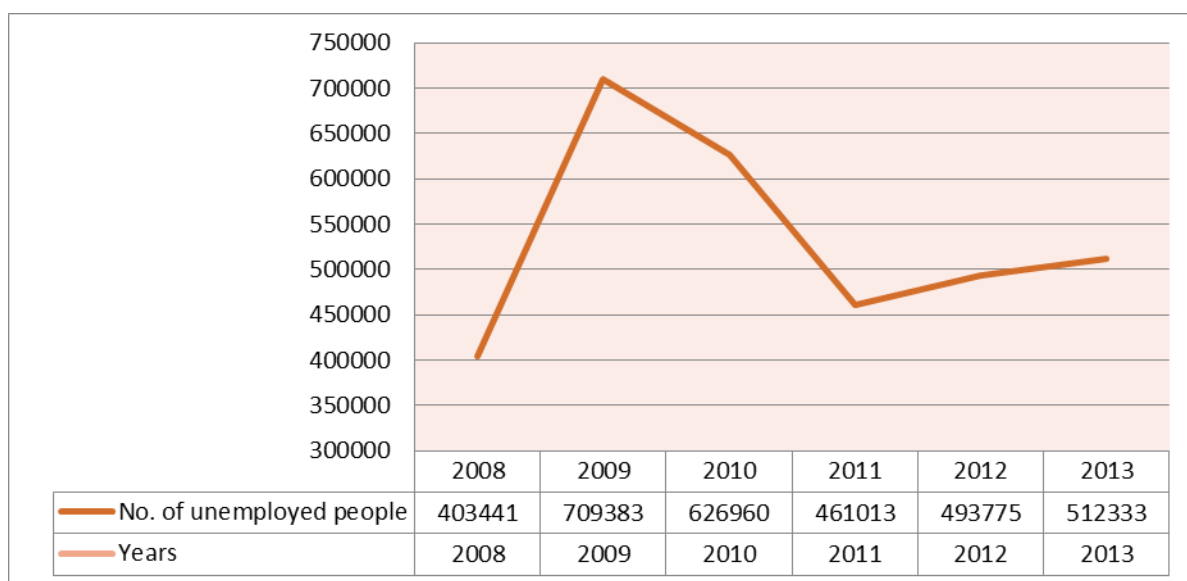


Figure 2. Evolution of the number of unemployed people in Romania (2008-2013)

Source: adapted from National Agency for Employment

In the European Union the evolution of the employment engaged a clear rise until 2008 when, because of the financial crisis a significant decrease began, reaching 68.3% in 2013. The objective of the European Union for 2020 is to attain an employment level of at least 75%. In this context, Romania registered in 2013 an employment level of 63.9% and for 2020 aims at a rise of this indicator up to 70%. To have a general view we present in the following comparative information about various European countries.

Table 1. The employment level in EU countries (20-64 year-old people)

	2013 employment level	2020 objective
EU28	68.3	75
Belgium	67.2	73.2
Bulgaria	63.5	76
Austria	75.5	77
Poland	64.9	71
Portugal	65.6	75
Romania	63.9	70
Slovenia	67.2	75
Slovakia	65	72

Source: adapted from Eurostat

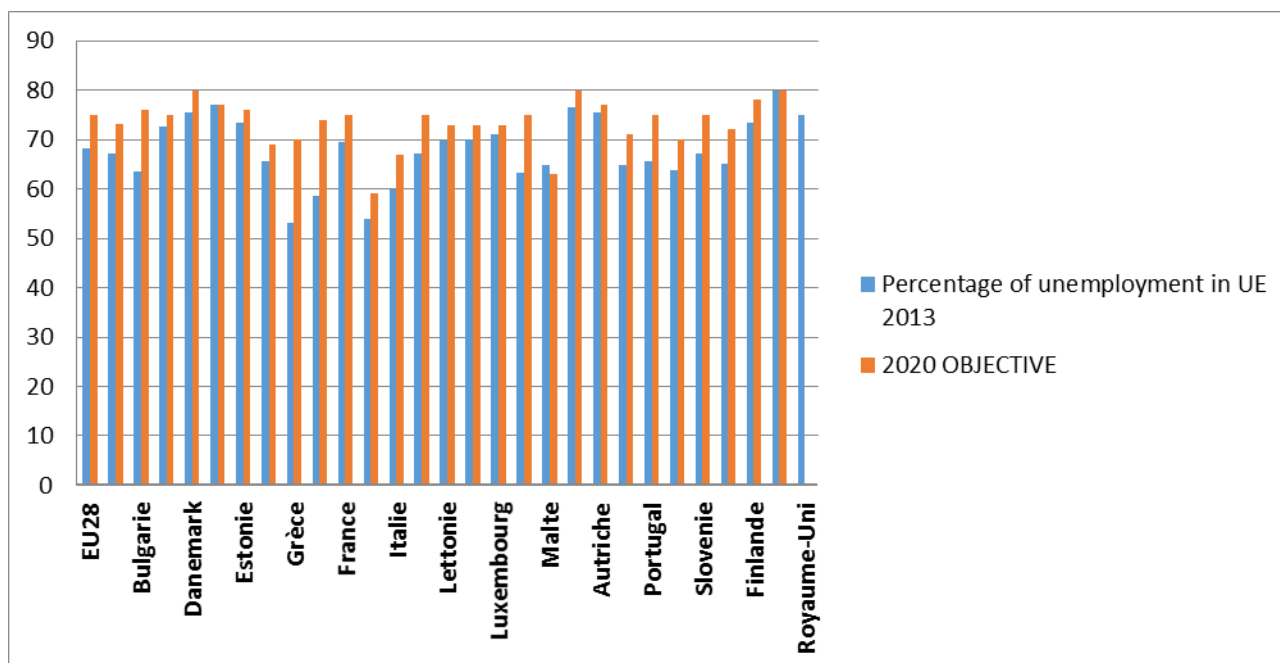


Figure 3. The percentage of employment in EU countries (20-64 year-old people)

Source: adapted from Eurostat

Taking into account our interest for the labor market insertion of the young graduates of higher education, we closely analyzed the characteristics of the job offers and requests. Thus, at a first glance we notice that the influence of the economic crisis on the young people in the European Union

countries was higher and had many negative consequences. In 2009, the unemployment of the young people in the European Union was of 5.5 million. 17% of the persons with the age between 18 and 24 did not have a job and were not involved in any form of education in 2011. In 2013 the number of the young unemployed reached 5.6 million. Romania occupied, according to the data in 2009, the 13th place in the European Union, with a level of unemployment of the young people of 19.6% (in comparison with 18.3% as registered in EU). (Serban, 2012)

In compliance with the data published by the National Institute of Statistics (NIS), in 2010, the employment level of the active population with the age between 20 and 64 years was of 58.8% and the percentage of employment of the graduates of higher education was at a level comparable with the former years. In 2010 the employment level of graduates of higher education was 80% (for persons with low education it was only 42%). At the end of 2012 and at the beginning of 2013, Romania occupied the 12th place in the European Union with an unemployment percentage of the young people of 22.2 (in comparison with the European average of 23.2%).

Table 2 Unemployment level of young people in the European Union

	Unemployment percentage of young people			
	2010	2011	2012	2012Q4*
EU-27	21.1	21.4	22.8	23.2
Zone Euro	20.9	20.8	23.0	23.7
Belgium	22.4	18.7	19.8	22.0
Bulgaria	21.8	25.0	28.1	28.4
Czech Republic	18.3	18.1	19.5	19.3
Denmark	14	14.2	14.1	14.2
Germany	9.9	8.6	8.1	7.9
Estonia	32.9	22.3	20.9	19.3
Ireland	27.6	29.1	30.4	29.4
Greece	32.9	44.4	55.3	57.9
Spain	41.6	46.4	53.2	55.2
France	23.6	22.8	24.3	25.4
Italy	27.8	29.1	35.3	36.9
Cyprus	16.6	22.4	27.8	31.8
Latvia	37.2	31.0	28.4	24.7
Lithuania	35.3	32.2	26.4	24.2
Luxembourg	15.8	16.4	18.1	18.5
Hungary	26.6	26.1	28.1	28.8
Malta	13.1	13.8	14.2	14.5
The Netherlands	8.7	7.6	9.5	9.8
Austria	8.8	8.3	8.7	8.7
Poland	23.7	25.8	26.5	27.5
Portugal	27.7e	30.1	37.7	38.4
Romania	22.1	23.7	22.7	22.2
Slovakia	33.9	33.5	34.0	35.1
Finland	21.4	20.1	19.0	19.3
Sweden	24.8	22.8	23.7	24.1
The United Kingdom	19.6	21.1	21.0	20.7

Source: adapted from European Commission EUROSTAT

In the following we provide an illustration of the shares of unemployment according to the age:

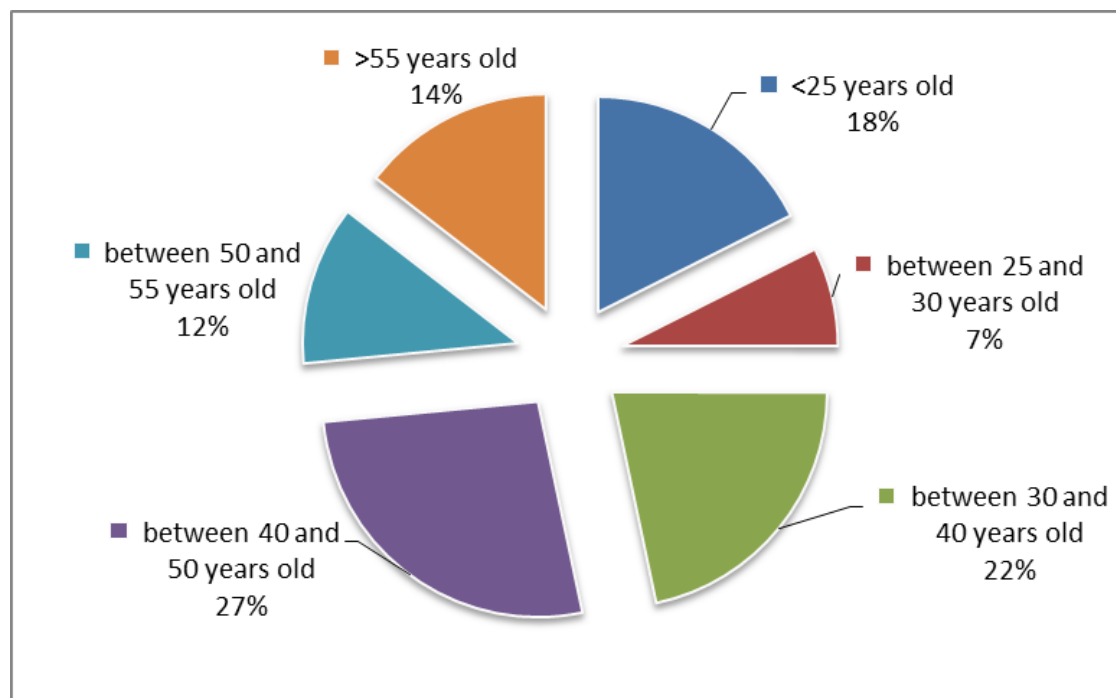


Figure 4. Repartition of the unemployed people according to the age

Source: adapted from the National Agency for Employment

The interest for the above mentioned repartition has multiple faces: on the one hand there is an image of the current situation and rapid intervention can be applied in the case of dangerous imbalances; on the other hand at the level of the society policies can be adopted and specific measures can be taken for each age category in order to reduce the unemployment. In all the situations the unemployment occurs, it is an undesired phenomenon. In Romania, maybe more than in other countries, the unemployment of people older than 40 raises cultural barriers, which make more difficult or even impossible the reinsertion on the labor market.

3. REACTIONS OF THE LABOR MARKET AT THE LEVEL OF EDUCATION

Globalization imposes a new positioning of the universities in the economic and social environment, in all the European Union countries, because the economic development of a nation is directly connected with the quality of its human capital (Tudorel, 2010). Within this political-economic-social-cultural space, the competitiveness rose as a consequence of the free circulation of the high qualified labor force.

In Romania in the last two decades higher education has undergone important changes, both quantitatively and qualitatively. A first modification was the emergence of the private universities. Thus, if in the 90s, in Romania there were only 48 (public) universities, in 2004 there were 148. Obviously, this process led to a quantitative increase, but this was not supported by a rise of the quality of education services. The table below provides an image of the evaluation of the quality of the education services of these universities from multiple perspectives: the professors, the students and the employers.

Table 3. Evaluation of the quality of the higher education

Evaluation of the quality of the higher education (on a scale from 1 to 10)	Evaluators		
	Professors	Employers	Students
Private universities	5.3	5.9	3.8
State universities	8.0	7.3	4.9

Source: adapted from Păunescu, 2011

From the analysis of the previous data a contradictory image emerges: while the professors and the employers have a good perception as regards the quality of the higher education in Romania, the students' perceptions are less favorable. (Păunescu, 2011)

For a qualitative analysis of the Romanian students' profile we retained the information included in recent statistics, reflecting the distribution of the students according to the level of studies of the parent with the highest education (Păunescu, 2011).

Table 4. Repartition of students according to their parents' level of studies

Level of studies	Students
No school	0.1%
Graduate primary school	0.4%
Non-graduate secondary school	0.2%
Graduate secondary school	0.7%
Apprentice school	0.5%
Vocational school	6.1%
Graduate highschool	35.2%
Non-graduate highschool	2.3%
Post-secondary college	10.2%
Non-graduate faculty	1.8%
Graduate faculty	32.3%
Master's degree	8.0%
PhD degree	2.3%

Source: adapted from Păunescu, 2011

Distribution of population with the age between 25 and 64 years according to the highest level of studies reveals the fact that the majority is represented by persons with a medium education. (National Institute of Statistics, 2013)

Table 5. Structure of persons with the age between 25 and 64 according to the level of education, gender and life environment, in 2012

Total persons with the age between 25 and 64 years (thousands)	Total	Men	Women	Urban	Rural
	Level of education	12226	6070	6156	7214
	in % -				
Higher (university)	15.4	15.0	15.9	23.2	4.2
Medium (post-secondary college, highschool and vocational)	60.5	64.5	56.5	64.8	54.3
Low (secondary, primary and no school)	24.1	20.5	27.6	12.0	41.5

Source: adapted from the National Institute of Statistics

This information emphasizes that 60.5% of the total of active population in Romania has a medium level of education. As regards the gender distribution, the situation is more balanced, at least for the higher education: 15.0% for men and 15.9% for women. Yet, there are strong differences in the distribution of people according to their environment: in the case of the higher studies 23.2% are persons living in the urban area and 4.2% in the rural area. (Balteanu, 2013)

As concerns unemployment, its situation within the higher studies is given in the following figure:

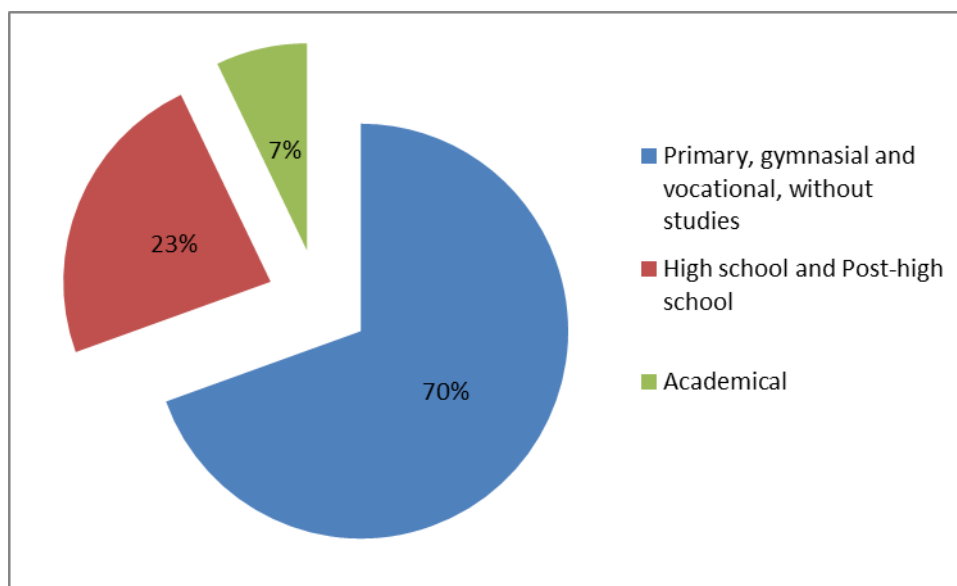


Figure 5. Structure of unemployed people according to education

We notice that unemployment strongly affects persons with low education (70% of the total number of unemployed people) and only incidentally those with higher studies (7%). Such percentages are normal, if we take into account the modernization of the world we live in and the type of abilities requested by companies.

4. RESEARCH REGARDING THE STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THEIR LABOR MARKET INSERTION

For carrying out this study we made a questionnaire-based survey on 430 respondents out of which 71% are not employed and 95% attended a form of higher education. We specify that initially our research aimed at collecting information from 500 students. Consequently, questionnaires were distributed, on paper or on e-mail, to 500 persons. We established a deadline for receiving the filled-in questionnaires and we got 430 questionnaires. We considered that the degree of answers of 86% was satisfying and we entered next the phase of processing the collected information.

We thought that many of the respondents can be influenced in their answers by their financial status, so we grouped the subjects according to the sources used for financing their current needs. We noticed that in the group we investigated the main financial support is provided by parents (52%), then come the scholarships and the personal savings (48%), the habit of some study loans not being popular in Romania.

The aim of this quantitative research is, as we mentioned from the beginning, to assess the students' opinions concerning the factors that influence their employment and the usefulness of their academic formation for the success on the labor market.

We used for these goals a questionnaire focused on multiple topics of interest: knowledge of labor market, of the employers' requirements, of the competencies obtained by the respondents within the educational programs they attend, of the prestige of the degree they will get or of their own career wishes. Also, we formulated six hypotheses that we checked on the basis of the received answers (*H1: students are interested in the evolution of the labor market; H2: students know and guide themselves according to the needs formulated by the employers; H3: students consider that the study programs provide the necessary competences for their labor market insertion; H4: students want to work during their studies; H5: students find difficultly a job exactly in their study field; H6: students have career models they follow*).

The survey took place between February and April 2014 and began with the distribution of 500 questionnaires to the students of certain programs of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. Out of the received results obtained from the answers, we retained the following aspects:

There are many students who have scarce and very scarce information about the labor market and who are concerned to anticipate its future evolution (48% scarce and 13% very scarce). Only 9% consider themselves experts of the labor market trends and make personal decision accordingly. It is also important that many respondents (46%) are not aware of the fields with shortage of labor force and do not take them into account as opportunities for their career. *H1 hypothesis – students are interested in the evolution of the labor market – is not confirmed.*

Out of the total number of surveyed students, 42% assert that they do not know the employers' requirements well enough; 9% say that their knowledge about this is very low and 2% are not at all aware of these exigencies. Almost half of the participants to our survey (49%) consider that the employers' requirements correspond to reality, while 33% think that these are not connected to the specificity of the job. Moreover, many respondents consider that the employers are not very willing to pay for the competencies they require (47% not very willing and 19% hardly willing). Almost ¼ are not informed about the employers' salary policies and do not guide their actions accordingly. *H2 hypothesis – students know and guide themselves according to the needs formulated by the employers – is not confirmed.*

10% of the respondents totally agree with the statement that the faculty they are attending provides the competencies necessary to a quick employment, 28% partially agree, while 49% consider that faculty contributes less or very less to the formation of these competencies. 13% of the students think that the faculty they are attending does not contribute at all to gaining the competencies that would help them to insert immediately on the labor market. However, according to their opinions, the frequency of the events that bring the representatives of the business environment into direct contact with students is medium (33%) or high (37%). Only 19% of the surveyed consider that the events are rare or inexistent. Yet, taking into account the most numerous opinions expressed by the respondents regarding the role of the faculty in the development of the competencies required by the business environment, we consider that *H3 hypothesis – students consider that the study programs provide the necessary competences for their labor market insertion – is not confirmed.*

The respondents actively search for jobs. Half of them have submitted their applications for a job in the last 6 month, a quarter in the last 12 month and almost a quarter did this the previous year. Many students (68%) state that the university staff encourages work during studies, while only 32% consider that the professors are against this. *H4 hypothesis – students want to work during their studies – is confirmed.*

The number of those who are optimistic about the labor market insertion is not very high: 51% out of the total consider that they chose a profession that will allow them to find a job easily at the end of the studies, while 49% are more skeptical. To support the respondents' optimism, the role of the degree is very important. From the point of view of the consideration the students have as regards the university and the degree, at declarative level the situation is the following: 68% out of the total consider that the active presence at classes is important and very important, while 32% think it is not enough important. Obtaining the degree is important for 92% of the surveyed and the search for a job during the studies is of interest for 73% of the students. Yet, 94% of the respondents consider that university allows them to gain key concepts for their profession. Most of them, 81%, consider that the success in the career can be obtained most surely within multinational companies, but there are also many students that plan an entrepreneurial career. The research demonstrates that, against some too easily generalized opinions, the young people do not think on a short term but, on the contrary, they plan their career on the basis of some models they appreciate (66% of the respondents consider useful having such a model). The factors involved in choosing the model are different. We retain though that most often the career models take into account *the experience* (39%), *the status* (30%) and the *salary package* (21%). *H5 hypothesis – students find difficultly a job exactly in their study field* – is not confirmed while *H6 hypothesis – students have career models they follow* – is confirmed.

The questionnaire included questions autonomous from the research models. Out of these we retain especially those regarding the internships. The received answers allowed us to reveal aspects useful for our research. For all the surveyed, the presence of the internships in the university study programs is essential and, consequently, the appreciations of the students are very favorable. The students' opinions were more nuanced as regards the suitable duration (50% consider that the minimum duration should be a month, while 28% would appreciate an internship longer than a month).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Based on those who, interested in the labor market issues, approached this subject and expressed pertinent, explicative and clarifying viewpoints, and capitalizing some of the conclusions of our quantitative research carried out this year on 430 de students in a Romanian university that trains students for business, we will formulate some answers to our initial question: *how to improve the labor market insertion of graduates in Romania?* We admit the fact that, for reasons with scientific ground, we cannot generalize our conclusions to the whole Romanian academic space. However, we are sure that many of those interested in this subject will manage, based on this study, to implement proper measures so that their university should amplify its role in integrating the students in the business environment.

We anticipate that more and more employers of Romania keep themselves updated and search for good practices. That is why it might be useful to know the results published in the Quality Barometer 2009. These show that the employers select graduates according to three main factors: *the prestige of the graduated university*, *the work history* (labor experience) and *the candidates' capacity « to sell themselves »* during the job interview. (Quality Barometer, 2009). During the selection process, besides the candidates' specialization it is necessary to investigate if they have: *capacity of organization* – 97% of employers consider this aspect to be very important, but only 51% of them are satisfied and very satisfied with the way graduates comply with this exigency; *team work capacity* – 96% of employers consider it very important, but only 59% of them are satisfied and very satisfied; *competencies of communication* – 96% of employers find them very important, but only 58% are satisfied and very satisfied; *punctuality* – 93% find it very important but only 68% of employers are satisfied with the graduates' behavior from this viewpoint; *morality* – 90% find it very important while 65% of employers are satisfied and very satisfied. (Paunescu, 2011).

The concern of the universities to offer the young people a set of professional and behavioral competencies to comply with the employers' requirements is natural and covers various forms. It is right that the professors' perceptions as concerns the needs of the market do not always match the realities of the market. Thus, while the professors and the students consider that 68%, respectively 66% of the university classes approach aspects necessary for the future job, 50% of employers state that after recruitment they organize training courses within their own organization because they are not satisfied with the graduates' level of competence. (Stanciu, 2012). Even as concerns the training of the young people there are different viewpoints of those who discuss this subject: 1/3 consider that students should attend universities, 1/3 believe that training is the students' responsibility and less than 1/3 agree that the companies should assume this task. (Stanciu, 2012)

Almost unanimously, employers consider that what the graduates lack is a practical view, a capacity of adaptation, an understanding of the processes, that is why a work experience is extremely useful. (Manole, 2013). Consequently, we analyzed the way the internship is stipulated in the university curricula, how it takes place today and how it could be organized to enhance the graduates' chances to find a job. It is very useful that this should be longer, better prepared, coordinated and monitored unitarily by the university representatives together with the company representative, should be assessed by mixed commissions formed of the university representatives, should be accepted by employers as a helpful and valuable practical experience. All the above mentioned moments are essential for the success of an internship. However, we consider that the preparatory phase is decisive for the creation of the premises of success or, on the contrary, it can lead to a regrettable failure.

Apparently, the increase of the internship quality should remain an exclusive objective of the universities. Yet, such a view is completely wrong. Like in business, the success is most likely when there are partnerships, when different interests are harmonized, when we consider our responsibilities beyond our own fence, when we believe in education and invest in it (not only money, but also intelligence, creativity, enthusiasm, trust and morality).

Nevertheless, universities should not limit to the reform of the internships. To comply with the employers' exigencies (more and more numerous, higher and more urgent), to consolidate the academic prestige, to support each university in its confrontation with the competitors, to raise the young people's degree of satisfaction and their motivation to build competencies to use for the success in their career, to motivate the professors intrinsically and for any other reasons, universities should reinvent themselves. This statement should not disconcert, but, on the contrary, should invite to reflection as regards the objectives of a university, the content of the study programs, the teaching methods, the modalities of evaluation, the type of professor-student relations, the competencies of the staff. And because these topics of reflection are valid for many universities all over the world and because the urgency of their approach is high, innovative solutions will inevitably be found.

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