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Perception of employers from the South West Oltenia Region on the competences acquired by students of social and humanistic specializations

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Abstract

According to the Bologna Process Implementation Report (prepared for the Bucharest Ministerial Conference, 2012), our country received positive marks for the indicators measuring the degree of implementation of the Bologna Process.

In the context of implementing this process and a permanent reform of university education in order to adapt education to the needs of the labor market, training students for future careers and active citizenship status, the question that arises is: The perception of employers about the competences assessment provided by the university education is positive?

In 2012, University of Craiova conducted a research, for identifying the perceptions of employers in the South-West Oltenia Region on the type of skills and competences acquired by students of seven social and humanistic specializations: History, International Relations and European Studies, Sociology, Pastoral Theology, Romanian Language, Communication and Public Relations, Social Work. We used the method of opinion survey, based on questionnaires filled in, at 102 public and private organizations in the region, chosen from adjacent areas of targeted specialties.

1. Introduction

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In the context of implementing the Bologna process and a permanent reform of education in order to adapt university education to the needs of the European labour market, training students to become active citizens, it requires more and more involvement of employers in the process of quality assurance.

It is specified in The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area that employers have an important role in this process and quality assurance processes must include elements of feedback coming from representatives from labour area, employers and of representative institutions (ENQA Report, 2009). Moreover, in many systems, the involvement of employers in this process has become an essential component of quality assurance.

At the same time, employability has always been one of the cornerstones of the Bologna Process. In this process, the main task of higher education is to equip graduates with the skills, knowledge and competences they will need in the future job and that employers require and also, higher education must ensure that people have increasingly more opportunities to maintain and renew skills throughout their professional life. (Working Group on Employability 2009).

Since the survey conducted by the Employability Working Group in late 2007 - early 2008, for the members of the Bologna Follow-up Group, it was noticed mainly an alarming aspect which is the fact that employers in 37 states consider that higher education does not provide sufficient practical concepts to students. This is also true for Romania, being clearly specified in the report made for our country (Short country survey on employability, Romania).

In Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education in 2009 it is highlighted the fact that higher education institutions should be in ever closer connection with governments, social partners and students, this allowing universities to be more open to the needs of employers (Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 2009).

During college, people are in the exploratory stage of the career development process as Donald Super mentions (Super, 1954; Super, 1954). At this stage, students should be helped to orient in career and professional advice or more intense contact with employers are items that any student should benefit from. John L. Holland (Holland, 1985) argues that the particular mode of formation of personality structure of an individual, his interest system outlines the direction of the vocational orientation, his career. This is another reason for which students need help to identify their interests in order to be professionally oriented and have professional satisfaction.

In the context of the above presented, there necessarily results the collaboration of higher education institutions with employers in two directions:

1. Surveying employers on identifying the skills, knowledge and competencies required from students on employment;
2. Making as many internships as possible for students.

If this collaboration is not enhanced, it is likely that universities do not provide students the competencies necessary to meet the needs of employers (Allen & de Weert, 2007).

This first direction is what led us to conduct, in 2012, at the University of Craiova a research in order to identify the perception of employers in the South - West Oltenia region on the types of skills acquired by students of seven specializations: History; International Relationships and European Studies; Sociology; Pastoral Theology; Romanian Language; Communication and Public Relations; Social Assistance.

2. Implementation degree of the Bologna Process for Romania

The latest report Bologna Process Implementation Report was prepared for the Bucharest Ministerial Conference held from 26th to 27th of April 2012 and shows the implementation degree of the Bologna Process until 2011 in 47 member states of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

According to the report, Romania had a considerable increase of the number of students in recent years (Bologna Process Implementation Report, 2012).

The report puts Romania in a favorable light, our country obtaining the highest level in five of the eight indicators that measure the implementation degree of the Bologna Process and the other three indicators falling in a reasonable position compared to the other evaluated states, thus:
1. Indicator number 1 - Stage of implementation of the first and second cycle. At least 90 % of the Romanian students attending the courses of the educational system in two cycles (two - cycle degree system) imposed by the Bologna system (Bologna Process Implementation Report, 2012).

2. Indicator number 2 - Access to the next cycle. In Romania the indicator is achieved at the highest level, all graduates of the first cycle are given access to the second cycle, and graduates of the second cycle are given access to the third cycle without encountering serious problems (Bologna Process Implementation Report, 2012).

3. Indicator number 3 - Implementation of the national qualifications frameworks. The Qualifications frameworks have been introduced since the 2001 - 2003 Agenda, but in 2005, in Bergen, it was adopted “an overarching qualifications framework” for EHEA and each state had to develop compatible skills consistent until 2010 (The European Higher Education Area - Achieving the Goals, 2005). According to the report, Romania is one of the few states that has successfully passed all the ten stages and ever since 2012, our country had a self - certified framework, compatible with “the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area” (Bologna Process Implementation Report, 2012).

4. Indicator number 4 - Stage of development of external quality assurance system. Romania meets this indicator at the highest level, with a country - wide quality assurance system fully functional (Bologna Process Implementation Report, 2012).

5. Indicator number 5 - Level of student participation in quality assurance. According to the Bologna system students should be involved in: external review teams, in the preparation of self - evaluation reports, in governance structures for QA, in decision - making processes for external reviews and the follow - up procedures. Unfortunately in this indicator Romania is next to the other four states, which fall on the second to last place (of five levels), Romanian students attending only two of the five levels of quality assurance (Bologna Process Implementation Report, 2012).

6. Indicator number 6 - Level of international participation in external quality assurance. This is another indicator in which our country has failed to reach an optimum level, ranking second to last (of five levels), being fulfilled only one of the four aspects required: agencies have members of ENQA or Listed on EQAR, international experts participate in governance of national QA bodies, international experts participate as members/observers in evaluation teams, international experts participate in follow - up procedures (Bologna Process Implementation Report, 2012).

7. Indicator number 7 - Stage of implementation of the Diploma Supplement. For this indicator, our country has a fairly good position, being at the level at which the supplement is issued freely, but often upon request in the EU / CoE / UNESCO form and in a foreign language (Bologna Process Implementation Report, 2012).

8. Indicator number 8 - Stage of implementation Credit Transfer and Accumulation of European System (ECTS). Romania has an excellent result also in this indicator, being one of the countries where “ECTS credits are allocated to all components of all HE programmes, enabling credit transfer and accumulation ECTS credits are demonstrably linked with learning outcomes” (Bologna Process Implementation Report, 2012).

Analyzing the ratings of “excellent performance” that Romania received, but also the rest of the indicators where our country obtained a satisfactory position, we can conclude that Romanian high education graduate students have the necessary skills required by the European organisms and are able to be received on the European labor market. Although the analysis of some official documents entitles us to conclude that, given the low rate of employability of students in the period immediately following the completion of higher education, a question arises: Is the perception of employers in the evaluation direction of competencies provided by higher education a positive one?

3. The research methodology

As for any sociological research rigorously underlain, the project we have conducted to develop this study, aimed at all key steps in such a research process: 1. Establishing the study problem (argument for choosing the theme), 2. Studying the specialized literature (research conceptual framework), 3. Formulating the working hypotheses, 4. Establishing research methods and techniques, 5. Determining the study population (sample choosing), 6. Data collecting, 7. Analyzing the research results, 8. Formulating the conclusions (Mihăilescu, 2003).
3.1. Argument for choosing the theme

In the context of the successful implementation of the Bologna process in our country, taking into account that employment has always been one of the cornerstones of the Bologna Process and the ministers responsible for higher education show that higher education institutions should be in a more closely connection with employers, we considered appropriate a research on identifying the employers’ perception on the skills acquired by students.

3.2. Research conceptual framework

In the conceptual register of this research we have highlighted various aspects:
- The reports and documents issued in the context of implementing the Bologna Process;
- The professional literature on career development and vocational interests.

3.3. The working hypotheses

The hypothesis which we start from is that employers give more importance to practical skills in detriment of the theoretical ones acquired by students, thus a research objective is to identify the importance of skills in recruiting students.

Another hypothesis which we start from is that higher education does not provide students with enough practical terms, thus an objective of the research is to identify the employers’ perception on the correspondence of skills and competences acquired in the study years of university course with the requirements of the labor market.

3.4. The research methodology

Because we chose as main objectives to study employers’ perception on the skills acquired by students in the socio - humanistic specializations, we considered appropriate to conduct a quantitative research, by applying a questionnaire that “allowed the examination of social facts through the traits numerically expressed” (Otovescu, 2009).

We chose the method of applying questionnaires because the purpose of the investigation was to create an image on competences of students, from the employers’ point of view.

3.5. Determining the study population

The used investigation technique was the questionnaire, addressed to a sample of 102 public and private organizations in the region, selected from the adjacent areas of the targeted specialties. The research is not of barometer - type, aiming at explaining and understanding some phenomena.

3.6. Data collecting

Data collecting among employers was made applying questionnaires during the period September - December 2012.

3.7. The research results

In this section we will present the key results of the survey “Knowing the employers’ perception in the South - West Oltenia region on the skills acquired by students of the socio - humanistic specializations” conducted during September - December 2012.

- Question no.1: To what extent are there important the following skills in recruiting high education graduates?

Regarding the importance of skills that high education graduates should possess, the response variants that have accumulated the highest percentages in the options To great extent and Largely were Teamwork and Skills specific to the activity sector with 86.2 % and 85.3 %, followed by the Ability of analysis and problems solving, Adaptation and action in new situations and Planning and organization skills, all three with 77.5 %. The following variants in this ranking were Communication skills (76.4 %), the Ability to use the PC (58.9 %), Foreign languages (57.8 %) and Decision making (55.7 %).

To what extent are there important the following skills in recruiting high education graduates?
3.7.1. Specialization - History

Over 80 percent of the respondents in this study believe that students from the specialization History have an appropriate theoretical background, so 42.9 % opted for To great extent and 40% to Largely. At the same time, 11.4 % of respondents believe that this specialization’s students do not have a theoretical training correlated with labor market requirements.

When it comes to the practical training of students, 62.9 % of the representatives of the institutions included in the sample believes that graduates from the specialization History are prepared from a practical point of view To a great extent and largely. However, 20 percent of respondents believe that students of this specialization are prepared To a small extent.

A percent 11.4 % of those surveyed consider however that these students have a poor practical training, opting for the variant To a very small extent.

3.7.2. Specialization - International Relations and European Studies

A percentage of 64.3 % of representatives of institutions / companies comprised in the sample believe that the theoretical training of students from International relations correspond to the requirements of the labor market, 50 percent opting for the variant To great extent, and 14.3 % of respondents for Largely.

However, 21.4 % of the respondents believe that the students of these qualifications are not well prepared theoretically to satisfy current requirements of the labor market, choosing the variants To a very small extent (14.3 %) and To a small extent (7.1 %).

Asked if the practical skills and competencies acquired by students from International relations and European studies in the study years correspond with the actual requirements of the labor market, 57.2% of respondents believe that they do To great extent and Largely. However, 21.4 % of respondents believe that practical skills and competencies acquired are To a small extent relevant to current needs. Also 7.1 % opted for the variant To a very small extent.

3.7.3. Specialization - Sociology

Regarding the skills and theoretical knowledge acquired by students in the specialization Sociology, 80.9 % of respondents are declared satisfied, opting for the variants Largely (42.8 %) and To great extent (38.1 %). Also 9.5
percent of the respondents consider that the theoretical skills acquired by students in this specialization are to a small extent relevant for the current requirements of the labor market and 4.8% of the respondents opted for the variant To a very small extent.

The practical skills and competencies acquired by sociology students of the University of Craiova are perceived by the respondents of this study as 80.9% corresponding to the current requirements of the labor market, while 9.5% consider these skills appropriate to a small extent. However, 4.8% of respondents consider those skills and competencies to be relevant to a very small extent with the requirements of the labor market.

3.7.4. Specialization - Social Work

A percentage of 78% of respondents believe that social work students are well prepared theoretically, opting for the variants Largely (44.4%) and To great extent (33.3%). Meanwhile, 11.1% of respondents consider the theoretical training of those students as being to a small extent relevant to the requirements of the labor market, while 5.6% chose the variant To a very small extent.

Ask if the practical skills acquired by students from social work meet the current requirements of the labor market, 66.6% of respondents opted for the variants To great extent and Largely. However, 22.2% said that those practical skills and competences correspond to a small extent with what is currently required and the variant To a very small extent gathered 5.6 percent.

3.7.5. Specialization - Pastoral Theology

Ask if the theoretical skills and competencies acquired in the study years by Pastoral Theology students correspond with the requirements of the labor market, 68.2% of respondents chose the variant To great extent, 29.5% chose the variant Largely and the variant To a small extent gathered only 2.3 percent.

A percentage of 90.9% of the respondents of this study believes that pastoral theology students have practical skills appropriate to the requirements of the labor market, the respondents opting for the variants Largely (47.7%) and To great extent (43, 2%). However, 6.8 percent chose the variant To a small extent.

3.7.6. Specialization – Romanian Language

A percentage of 79.5% of respondents believe that students from the Romanian Language specialization are well prepared Largely and To great extent from the theoretical point of view, only 2.3 percent of respondents chose for this question the variant To a small extent.

Regarding the practical training of students from this specialization in respect to the current requirements of the labor market, 72.7% of respondents believe they correspond Largely and To great extent. At the same time, 4.5 percent believe that the skills and competencies acquired by students correspond to a small extent with the current requirements of the labor market and the variant To a very small extent gathered 2.3%.

3.7.7. Specialization - Communication and public relations

In a proportion of 86.6% the respondents believe that the students from the specialization Communication and Public Relations are prepared accordingly to meet the needs of the labor theoretically, opting for the variants To great extent (46.6%) and Largely (40%). However, 6.7% of respondents chose for this question the variant To a very small extent.

Regarding the practical training of students, 46.6% of respondents believe that this training meets Largely and To a great extent the current requirements of the labor market. At the same time, 40% of respondents believe that the students in this specialization are trained to a small extent compared with the current requirements of the labor market, while 6.7% of respondents chose To a very small extent.

Table 1. Question no. 2: In your opinion, to what extent do you consider that the skills and competencies acquired in study years correspond to the current requirements of labor market? -Theoretical part-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specialization</th>
<th>To great extent</th>
<th>Largely extent</th>
<th>To a small extent</th>
<th>To a very small extent</th>
<th>I Don't know/ I cannot appreciate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Relations and European Studies</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>42.8%</td>
<td>38.1%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pastoral Theology 68,2% 29,5% 2,3% - -
Romanian Language 56,8% 22,7% 2,3% - 18,2%
Communication and public relations 46,6% 40% - 6,7% 6,7%
Social Work 44,4% 33,3% 11,1% 5,6% 5,6%

Table 2. Question no. 3: In your opinion, to what extent do you consider that the skills and competencies acquired in study years correspond to the current requirements of labor market? -Practical part.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specialization</th>
<th>To great extent</th>
<th>Largely extent</th>
<th>To a small extent</th>
<th>To a very small extent</th>
<th>I Don't know/ I cannot appreciate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>54,3%</td>
<td>8,6%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>11,4%</td>
<td>5,7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Relations and European Studies</td>
<td>35,8%</td>
<td>21,4%</td>
<td>21,4%</td>
<td>7,1%</td>
<td>14,3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>47,5%</td>
<td>33,4%</td>
<td>9,5%</td>
<td>4,8%</td>
<td>4,8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastoral Theology</td>
<td>47,7%</td>
<td>43,2%</td>
<td>6,8%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2,3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romanian Language</td>
<td>45,4%</td>
<td>27,3%</td>
<td>4,5%</td>
<td>2,3%</td>
<td>20,5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication and public relations</td>
<td>33,3%</td>
<td>13,3%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>6,7%</td>
<td>6,7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>33,3%</td>
<td>33,3%</td>
<td>22,2%</td>
<td>5,6%</td>
<td>5,6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. The research conclusions

Both hypotheses which we started from were confirmed by research carried, thus we managed to notice the tendency of employers to give more importance to the gained practical skills at the expense of the theoretical ones gathered by students and the fact that they consider that higher education does not provide sufficient practical terms to students. Following the results collected we managed to establish a hierarchy of necessary skills in the recruitment process and observe the employers’ perception on the correspondence of skills and competences acquired in the study years of university course with requirements of the labor market. According to data collected, it is observed that, in the employers’ perception, the specializations History, Sociology, Social work, Pastoral theology and Romanian language, have a positive state regarding the contribution of graduating a specialization to the development of skills and competencies needed by students / graduates at the place of work; and the specializations International relations and European Studies as well as Communication and public relations have a moderate condition in this direction.

References