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## Romanian employers' perception of distance education

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### Abstract

Distance education in Romania experienced in its early years of development a number of obstacles, mainly due to lack of public information on this form of higher education. To capture the way the employers appreciate the quality of studies and their recommendations for developing this form of education, we conducted a national research in May 2011. The research aimed at investigating the Romanian employers' opinions on distance learning and the establishment of the courses of action for a better correlation between distance education and the requirements of the labour market and the knowledge-based society. To find the employers' opinions, we carried out a national questionnaire-based survey, answered by a total of 825 employers. The results showed that the employers' priority is to increase the quality of this form of education, especially by emphasizing its practical aspects and links with the realities of the economy and the labour market. The main request of those who benefit or may directly benefit from distance learning programs (by employing its graduates) is to improve the quality of this form of education.

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### 1. Problem statement

Open and distance education is the new form of higher education that developed in Romania. Like many other emerging initiatives, this form of education has created many problems (regarding the organization, the used teaching methodology, evaluation, etc.).

Distance learning emerged and developed initially as a solution to the need for professional development of the employees and expanded over time, both as scope and as field of applicability. In Romania, this form of education has developed mainly as part of the offer of higher education, hence the development of our research aimed at the employers' perception of the graduates' level of training and behaviour at work.

When referring to the ability of getting hired, this is, for many people, just simply to find a job. In fact, this capability interests all economic fields and mainly students and graduates of higher education, including those of a distance learning form. To measure the higher education graduates' ability to get employed, we should establish whether or not the graduate will have a secure job. Hillage and Pollard's definition (1998 *apud* Doval, 2011, 141) shows that this ability to be hired reflects the ability to obtain and keep a job that is appropriate to their expectations and qualifications. Furthermore, the ability to get employed is the ability to get an initial job, keep it, and then to get

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new jobs if necessary. So, the ability to find a job depends on a graduate's / a person's knowledge, skills and attitudes, how they use them and how they present them to the prospective employers and, of course, the context (e.g. personal circumstances and the existing labour market).

The literature, according to Pool and Sewell (2007, *apud* Doval, 2011), identified four components of employability: 1) an individual's employment assets include its knowledge (i.e. what s/he knows), skills (what s/he does with what s/he knows) and attitudes (how s/he does); 2) career management, involving skills of career management, decision-making skills, job searching and strategic approach skills – adaptability to the developments of the labour market; 3) demonstration of employability, proved by submitting a CV, qualifications (both academic and professional), references, interview techniques, previous work experience; employability that depends on personal circumstances (caring responsibilities, disability, etc.) and on external factors (the number of jobs on the labour market, labour market regulation, the employers' rules of recruitment and their behaviour of recruitment).

## 2. Purpose of study

The research aimed at investigating the Romanian employers' opinions on distance learning and the establishment of the courses of action for a better correlation between distance education and the requirements of the labour market and the knowledge-based society. The set objectives were: identifying and cataloguing the needs of the beneficiaries of open and distance learning and education system; analyzing the employers' perception of the distance learning system; stating a set of conclusions and directions for action on continuous improvement of distance education. The hypotheses of our research were: 1. We expect that the most employers appreciate positively the distance learning system. 2. We expect that the employer does not consider the graduates' form education as the essential criterion for their employment. 3. We assume that employers consider graduates of distance learning as well prepared as those who attended daily courses or studied a partial-attendance form of education.

## 3. Methods

In order to investigate the employers' opinions, a national questionnaire-based survey was carried out. The survey was conducted in all Romanian counties in May 2011 by land travel operators. The questionnaire included items with pre-codified answers because they are practical both in terms of completion by respondents and of statistical management of the data obtained. An exception is the last question, formulated as an open question in order to collect as many suggestions as we could in order to optimize the distance learning system. We would like to mention that most items were operated in statistical variables with qualitative data, the nature of the questions allowing a limited number of items to be placed on a numerical scale. Therefore, the analysis procedures are those specific to qualitative variables, determining distributions of frequencies and of structures, and the association of some quantitative scales for the ranking cases.

The sample investigated consisted of a total of 825 legal representatives of the employers from Romania (companies, public institutions, NGOs etc.). To increase the representativeness of the sample, the organizations participating in the study were selected from all over Romania, each participating county receiving between 0.5% and 4.4%, while only 7.5% of the total questionnaires were applied in Bucharest.

The item regarding the type of organization has the first three places occupied by small size enterprises (30.90%), micro enterprises (23.20%) and middle size enterprises (15.30%). The remaining organizations: educational institutions, local government institutions and the decentralized type were represented by 9.20%, 5.70% and 1.20%.

As for the number of the employees of the surveyed organizations, the results show that 41% of them have less than 10 employees, 30.30% have up to 50 employees and 18.20% have between 51 and 250 legal employees. The organizations with a number of employees between 251 and 500 were represented in proportion of 4.40%, while 6.10% were represented by the companies with over 500 employees.

#### 4. Findings and results

The analysis of the results show that the main criterion causing the employer to select a college graduate is ‘a graduate’s practical skills and knowledge acquired in college, tested prior to employment’, criterion chosen by respondents as a percentage of 65.5%. On the second place in the employers’ preferences it is ‘the level of education completed – i.e. Bachelor, Master’ – 26.4% of the choices. The criteria ‘friends or acquaintances’ recommendations’ and ‘the teaching staff’ recommendations’ were chosen in proportion of 5.1% and 1.5%. We should note that the form of education graduated – daily courses, partial attendance, distance education – matters to the employers in an insignificant percentage – only 1.6% of the respondents stated that this criterion is important in the staff’s selection process.

At the item on the presence in an organization/a business entity of the distance learning students a significant percentage of the employers, 42.10%, say that, at the time of our survey, they had employees who were students at this form of education, and 16.30% say that they had in the past this category of employees. At the item on the presence in the organization of distance education graduates, nearly half of the employers surveyed (47.4%) had, at the time of our survey, distance education graduates, and 16.30% say that they had in the past this category of employees.

The analysis of the item association: ‘the main criterion that leads to hiring a graduate’ vs. ‘type of organization’ shows a preference for the criterion ‘level of education completed’ at a rate of 48.8% of the employers from the public system, 22.5% of the NGOs and 20.9% of the companies. NGOs choose their employees based mainly on the criterion ‘practical skills and knowledge acquired in college and tested prior to employment’ 75.9%, companies prefer this criterion in percentage of 69.5%, and employers from the public sector – 47.5%. We should also note that the analysis of the item association: ‘the main criterion that leads to hiring a graduate’ vs. ‘the existence in the organization of employees who are distance learning students’ shows that the employers who currently have distance learning students choose their employees based on the criteria ‘practical skills and knowledge acquired in college, tested prior to employment’ – 59.5%, ‘level of education (Bachelor - Master)’ 33.8%. The business entities which do not have distance learning students prefer the criterion ‘practical skills and knowledge acquired in college, tested prior to employment’ at a rate of 71.7% and the level of education is important for 18.7% of the employers who do not have distance education students.

Relevant to our study is that all the employer categories consider the criterion ‘the form of education of the graduated study program – daily courses, partial-attendance or distance learning’ as being insignificant, the percentages: 1.7% for the organizations that do not have distance learning students and 2% for the employers who currently have students at this form of education. In relation to other employees who attended daily courses, 75.2% of the employers consider that the distance education graduates are as well trained as the others, 18% of the respondents say that they are well or even better trained. Only 6.8% of the respondents believe that those who completed their studies at distance education are less trained or less professional compared with other forms of education graduates.

In terms of the skills employers regard as absolutely necessary for a graduate of the open and distance learning form, the average grade given by the respondents placed on the first place strictly professional skills (on average, 4.04), followed at a short distance by skills of adaptation to frequent changes on the labour market (on average, 3.81) and on the third place, with a 3.57 average, problem solving and analytical skills. It should be noted that the employers consider all the above mentioned skills (strictly professional skills, problem solving and analytical skills, self-organization and communication skills, the ability to work in virtual teams, the ability to use a computer, skills of adaptation to frequent changes on the labour market) important to a prospective employee, the calculated average placing them at medium and higher qualifications, between 2.99 and 4.04 respectively. The interviewed employers state that they appreciate the effort and promote more, at a rate of 44.5%, those employees who completed a distance learning form, very much 17.5%, and little and very little only 5.2% of the subjects.

It is very significant for our study that almost half of the surveyed employers are willing to organize internships for students of the distance education form (47.9%), for 36.1% people the interest is medium, and for 16% the interest is small and very small.

The analysis of the item association: 'To what extent would you be willing to organize internships for students of distance education form?' vs. 'Type of organization' indicates that the organizations from the public system are the most interested in organizing internships (the choice 'very high' had 30%, the choice 'high' had 34.4%); on the second place are the NGOs and on the third the business entities. Taking into consideration the choice 'average' interest, there is a change in the hierarchy: the highest percentage goes to the NGOs, on the second place we find the business entities and on the third place the organizations from the public system. Also, the item regarding the organizations' openness to cooperation with the university in order to conduct a training program for students as future employees of that institution, the results show a great interest – 52%; 25.3% of the respondents are willing only little and very little to do this kind of collaboration. The analysis of the item association: 'Would you be willing to collaborate with the university (the distance learning department) in order to design a program to train students as future employees in your company?' vs. 'Type of organization' ranks, in terms of interest and openness to collaboration (the choice a lot and very much), the organizations from the public system on the first place (72.5%), the NGOs on the second place with 53.8%, and the business entities on the third place 46.6%.

Important to our study are the results at the item regarding the improvement of communication between employers and universities that offer distance learning programs. Employers consider very relevant 'both parties' involvement in joint training programs dedicated to graduates' specialization' – 64.7% of the choices. The second place is taken by 'having an official curriculum for students' training to take place within a firm' – 45.8% of the responses, and on the third position it is 'Teaching staff's involvement in graduates' counselling' – 22.3%. In the context of the impact assessment of the distance learning process it should be appreciated the large share of administrators who would recommend the employees such programs – 83.4% a lot and very much, while only 3.6% of the respondents would recommend this type of training to their employees only in a low degree.

The analysis of the item association: 'To what extent would you recommend the employees to pursue distance learning programs?' vs. 'Type of organization' indicates that the organizations that would very powerfully recommend their employees this type of education are the NGOs and the organizations from the public system – 35% and the business entities at a rate of 23.1%. The choice I would recommend 'very powerfully' still ranks on the first place the non-governmental organizations – 60%, on the second place business entities with 57.9%, followed very closely on the third place by the organizations from the public sector with 55%. The correlation of the indicators regarding the staff's support given by the distance learning system i.e.: '1. the system allows them to learn at their own pace and in their available time, without affecting their work, combining education with work 2. the system provides useful practical applications at the workplace 3. the system allows the accumulation of the skills necessary on the labour market, 4. the system contributes to the employees' training in information and communication technology (based on the skills related to the general use of computers)' shows a Spearman correlation coefficient with a 0.15 value at a significance level  $p$  less than or equal to 0.01 ( $r = 0.15, p \leq .01$ ).

Correlating the four assessed dimensions, we found that all correlates positively and have significant values of the correlation coefficients. We would like to note the association of the views on the usefulness of practical training at work with those regarding the accumulation of the skills needed on the labour market  $r = 0.54, p < .01$  and the strong correlation between the 3rd and 4th opinion (3. the system allows the accumulation of the skills necessary on the labour market, 4. the system contributes to the employees' training in information and communication technology - based on the skills related to the general use of computers)'  $r = 0.48$  at a significance level 0.01. The analysis of the item association: 'Evaluate (by ticking on a 5 to 1 scale, 5 being the maximum) the support given to your staff (students, trainees) by the distance learning system' vs. 'Type of organization' shows that the employers in the public system were significantly more pleased with the first two indicators (1. the system allows them to learn at their own pace and in their available time, without affecting their work, combining education with work 2. the system provides useful practical applications at the workplace) than the other types of organizations, the average of the rating being of 4.8 for the first statement and 4.2 for the second. Setting up an online resource centre is attractive to employers too. They want information about the continuous training opportunities 53.3% and the facilities given by the state when a graduate is employed 45.5%.

The last question of the questionnaire was intended to collect the employers' opinions on improving distance education. Most commonly, employers suggest improving the conditions and methods of assessment (15.4%),



especially in terms of increasing the proportion of the evaluations regarding the practical skills required by the profession the students are being trained for. Moreover, the second category of views aims at aspects of practical training (14.6%) by suggesting ‘without unnecessary theory, more practice’, ‘training should take place in companies, not on paper’, etc. It follows (in the descending order of the obtained percentages): better communication with the teaching staff, in the sense of a closer cooperation with them, through actions such as tutoring and training supervision. Also, the development of information (courses, tests) on the e-learning platforms is mentioned by employers (at a rate of 9.4%), especially in regard to their suitability to the current realities of the professional practice. By reporting the results to the open question of the questionnaires for students and graduates, within the employers’ responses there was defined a separate category, ‘the adaptation to the distance learning programs to the requirements of the labour market and of the employers’ (7.3%); it captures a common problem of all forms of higher education in Romania. Also, 2.9% of the respondents explicitly requested the expansion of distance education in new specialization. Several categories of responses suggest that among the respondents there are also employers who are students or graduated from distance education (or are in close contact with them), because they looked at issues that are seized rather by direct participants to the education: development of a visual library (3.9%), better facilities (3.0), vocational counselling, career guidance, students’ counselling (2.7%), flexibility (2.7%), better communication from the faculty (2.4%), financial aspects (1.6%), motivating the meritorious students (1%), access to the e-learning platform (0.6%) and involvement in scientific programs (0.4%). Open and distance education is perceived positively by employers in Romania. Significantly, 93.2% of them consider that this form of education graduates are as well or even better trained professionals than those of other forms of education (Doval, 2011, pp. 91-102).

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The hypotheses of our research were confirmed. The impact of distance education is a positive one for the Romanian employers; they appreciate the open and distance education and offer useful suggestions for the development of this form of education. Priority for the employers is to increase the quality of this form of education, especially by emphasizing its practical aspects and the links with the realities of the economy and the labour market. For those who benefit or may directly benefit from distance learning programs (by employing graduates), it is a priority to improve the quality of this form of education, especially by emphasizing its practical aspects and links with the realities of the economy and the labour market. In this context one should notice that some employers have direct contacts with distance learning, which can facilitate the graduates’ insertion.

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