

MAKING PROGRESS IN SCHOOL-TO-WORK TRANSITION

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Abstract

As a result of the focus group type meetings held both with academics and employers, on the one hand, and with students, on the other hand, we have developed a training program based on cooperative learning, which aims at increasing young people's integration into the labor market and at meeting this market's needs.

The program is a complex one and is extended for the whole period of university training. The objectives of the program are: confirm the students' career plans, applying theoretical knowledge in real situations through professional practice and strengthen the work-related skills. The proposed program has two components: one focusing on theoretical training (in the academic field, but also in the institutions where the practical activity is taking place) and one focusing on the practical training, both running in parallel. The program offers students the opportunity to acquire new knowledge and skills related to career objectives, to develop relational and communication abilities, problem solving abilities, to learn how work is organized and how people behave at work and to understand the different roles and interests of managers and employees.

We intend with this program to foster the cooperation between the academic field and employers in order to establish more clearly the educational content according to the demands of the labor market.

Key words: student's career plans, cooperative learning, theoretical knowledge and work-related skills

With today's economic conditions, job access by young university graduates is a challenge. More and more jobs are not posted for job-offer because they are blocked, other jobs are restructured and the unemployment rate is increasing. The job competition is fierce, leading to the need to increase the quality of education process by combining theory with practice, so the graduates have assimilated those skills necessary for the labor market integration in concordance with the requirements of the employers.

According to the employers' view, (research conducted in 2008 in Bihor County, on a sample of 29 employers from rural areas and 631 from urban areas), the tendency is to increase the number of employers with high education, on the one hand, because the number of students and graduates is also increasing, and on the other hand, because jobs are more complex, requiring higher qualifications, training being a quality resource of professional life (Chișea F., Ștefănescu F., 2008).

So, one of the biggest challenges for higher education is to connect the assimilation of basic theoretical knowledge with the learning of competences regarding different jobs.

Also, in the research mentioned above, 86% of employers consider the professional training of graduates from University of Oradea as good, or very good. However, regarding their poor training, the technical and special competences are mentioned by 43% of employers (*fig. 1*) (Hatos A., Chișea F., 2008).

The general idea that emerges from these statements is that the basic school training needs to gradually be completed with training for entering labor market, from the specific view regarding the professional and occupational training that prepares students for occupying different jobs, and more generally, regarding the large number of students that is justified by the value of employment in the labor market (Grubb, 1998).

Such an approach can be achieved through better alignment of university curricula to labor market requirements.

Furthermore, one of the goals of the programs elaborated by the European Union refers to the effective investment in human resources, which is an essential component of the Lisbon strategy (Progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training - Indicators and benchmarks, 2008). Two of the main objectives of this strategy focus on the employability and the development of key competences for lifelong learning. These suggests: identification and definition of key competences necessary for personal development, active citizenship, social cohesion and employability in a knowledge oriented society, support for member states in their action to ensure key skills of young people to meet the labor market requirements and develop a joint framework for future actions at the Community level both for the "Education and Training 2010" Work Programme and for the educational and training programs of the European Union.

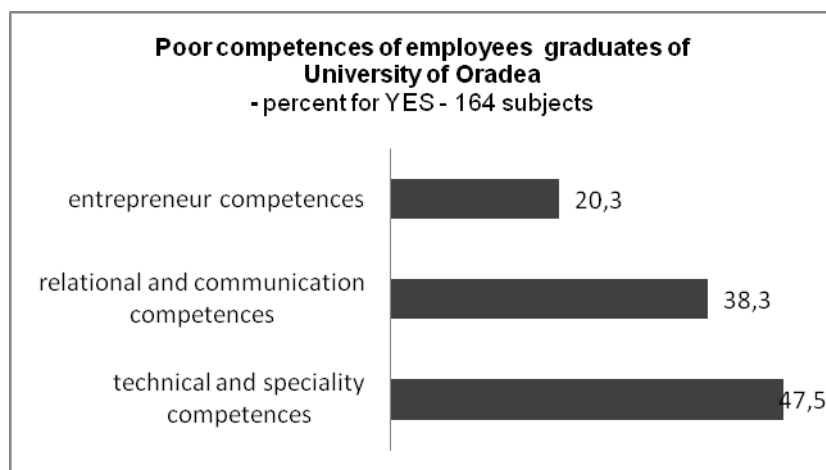


Figure 1 **Poor competences evaluated by the employers**

Preparing young people for the labor market is a key goal and the skills acquired through theoretical training from the university system needs to be completed with work related skills that are developed through practical training of students.

Also we have to mention the fact that in a roundtable session on issues regarding students training for labor market organized for the International Conference "Romania's European Union Integration: New Challenges" (*Development of partnership between economic high education system and business environment*) organized in 2007 by the Faculty of Economic Sciences, we concluded that the practical training of students may be the key element of the university training. This is primarily because the practical activity gives students greater flexibility in a system where accreditation and approval of training programs do not facilitate the easy adjustment to labor market requirements.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

In the attempt to develop a complex design for a school-to-work transition programme, we started with the implication of the main actors involved in the field. We decided to organize two focus-groups, one attended by representatives of higher education institutions (4 Faculties from University of Oradea: The Faculty of Social-Humanistic Sciences, The Faculty of Economic Sciences, The Faculty of Environmental Protection and The Faculty of Visual Arts) and of employers (4 employers) and other with students in final years from the 4 faculties (8 representatives from students).

The tasks of the participants at the meetings were first to identify the problems associated with the integration of higher education graduates in the labor market and specialized practical training and

secondly to find solutions for developing and implementing a comprehensive training program, a theoretical and practical program to ensure students' assimilation of skills and competences required to meet the requirements of a possible job. In order to assist participants in group meetings to achieve the second task, we started from the analysis model "School-to-Work program implemented in LaGuardia Community College, New York (Grubb W.N, Badway N., 1998). The model aims to explain different career interests, through educational content applicability to real situations and develop skills consistent with the work.

Group interviews were held in a hall of Faculty of Humanities, University of Oradea and were moderated by the authors of this paper, respecting traditional methodology of this research method.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of the results of such focus group meeting held with the student representatives highlighted the major problems faced by graduates of higher education in accessing employment, lack of labor market which offers training to fold the professional graduates, but that graduates are considered "unprepared" to fill a job, they are charging a very large distance between graduate, employer and job requirements for employment. Another problem identified is that related to the negative image that the media have presented higher education, categorized as "the factory of the unemployed" (NA, female, 21 years, the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences). The general perception among students is that it is not enough to have a good education, to have good results in school while studying, "the fact that one does not have support" disadvantages in the competition for filling up a job (PI Men, 22, Faculty of Economics). On the other hand, believes

that students do not know where to get information on job offers on the market. When asked to what extent have studied bids and tried to find a job, the vast majority of participants in the meeting followed the availability of jobs compatible with running education program, in terms of time and resources invested. I refer in this respect to the specific "summer jobs", which do not require completion of special studies, but which are approved by students, with participation in courses, want to have a source of income. The main feature of these jobs is hiring short time, thus not subject to study. Regarding the availability of jobs that involve a lengthy career, students appreciate that the labor market is characterized by a lack of information on offer. One of the reasons that assessment is that students focus-group participants have initiated steps to access a job appropriate to their professional training.

Regarding the practical training, one of the problems identified by participants in group meetings is that the time spent by representatives of employers for training of students is limited due to work tasks and that they have access to much of the data and information being operated. Another obstacle raised by students, is on routine tasks assigned to them in practical work (photocopying, filing etc.) Tasks that do not contribute to assimilate knowledge and acquire skills necessary for employment in the employment field their specialty. This type of activity leads to disengagement and develop a passive attitude in taking responsibility and making decisions.

The analysis of the practical discussions with tutors from the schools and potential employers have shown a relative distance between the two sectors: education and employment. First potential employers consider that often students are not sufficiently prepared to successfully meet business activities, sometimes even in theory, on the other teachers say that certain information can be acquired only through active, practical at work. Thus, the practical training of students is the interface between the two sectors, an area where practical units can actively involve representatives of the organizational unit level of practice activities considered important for future employment. In other words, in the discussion group to discuss the advisability of establishing training programs better adapted to the concrete realities of business.

Another issue discussed was how to organize practice and students now work for the same opposition that stands between the two sectors: the first representatives of companies believe that most students are disinterested and do all of this activity to finish as quickly as possible,

with minimum effort and guardians of practice says that often students are given tasks superficial, we can not really speak of "learning environments for students. Moreover, it discussed the issue of finding open institutions to receive and manage students in practice, especially in private institutions. A possible solution in this direction was the formulation of joint programs, so that the representatives should be held accountable practice units to coordinate student activities within the institution of origin. Specifically this can be done by involving them in formulating development plans and job descriptions practice of students so that all these elements are consistent and uniform. Consider important to highlight discussions on "student disinterest" on it has been claimed as the cause of problems, both in management practice and the integration into employment after graduation. One of the solutions identified, we suggest for implementation in the future, is organizing a career, guidance and how a better strategy for the practical training will be followed by students. Should be emphasized that the primary responsibility of the student to prepare for labor market integration, as when be responsible and accountable practice alone. A good knowledge of responsibilities, practical training plan that you should follow, can increase student involvement in activity. The seriousness of involvement can be fostered through good career advice, but also the transparency of the activities promoted among students: awards for best action, getting recommendations for employment of teachers and representatives from units of practice, selecting the most well prepared and motivated students for traineeships extended (internship) in the country or even abroad.

Participants in focus groups contributed to the process of tracing the outline to develop a program of theoretical and practical, to assist students to facilitate the transition from education to employment and support employers, by the way preparing students to meet job requirements.

The program is a complex one, extending throughout the years of study and has as its objectives: confirmation of career plans for students, the knowledge in theoretical application in real situations through professional practice and enhance work related skills. The proposed program has two components: one of theoretical (in universities, but also at practice sites) and one practical application, both developing in parallel. It offers students the opportunity to acquire new knowledge and skills related to the objectives for career, improve their networking skills, communication and problem solving, in order to learn how work is organized and how people

behave at work working to understand the different roles and interests of managers and employees.

The developed program involves contracts of collaboration between human resources and forming the employers of the institution. These contracts are updated at the beginning of each academic year, and include details of duties and responsibilities of parties involved in the process and practical information on program curriculum. Detailing curriculum covered by a contract avoid overlapping of activities within an institution / organizations and plotting routine tasks, whose results in terms of knowledge and skills developed similar, do not appear to be effective.

The appointment of a coordinator responsible for managing expert practical activities which are assigned students and a supervisor from the Faculty of practice represents a substantial part of the program developed.

As regards scheduled to run during practice season, the program involves activities both during school semesters and during the following summer session. This design time is needed because students during classes may carry out the practice on average 4 hours per week, and after the exam session semester II may be involved at practice they are assigned several hours a day, several consecutive days.

During practical training the supervisor from the institution monitors field activities, taking contact with experts from institutions that host coordinators of practical training. Final grading of students is of note given ordinates of experts proposed by the host institutions. In this respect shall ensure transparency of the scoring and fair assessment of student work.

Another component of the program is the career guidance and counseling, which involves preparing students for personal promotion. This aspect involves the initiation of such activities: carrying out a curriculum vitae, a letter of intent, preparation for participation in a selection interview, inter organization communication, ways of identifying the supply of jobs. These are an essential starting point in accessing employment by young university graduates.

As a synthesis of those specified above, the proposed program involves following the next steps: selection of practical activities supervisors within the faculties and establish their responsibilities; identification by higher education institutions of possible units that can host the specialty practice and create a database with them; contact practice units and present the practice program; request by the practical units to establish expert coordinators responsible with the specialty practice; create a database with students; develop

work instruments for students (practice guidelines, practice notebooks, observation sheets etc.); develop job description sheets for students; establish collaboration agreements between educational institutions and practice units; theoretical training (with focus on learning through cooperation) of the target group (students) within the faculties for the participation to the practice training sessions; student's participation to practice sessions during each semester (2,3 or 4 hours/week, according to the curricula) and the following period after the end of the second semester, first and second year of study (an average of 60 hours); establish periodical meetings with the practice supervisor within the educational units for students to present their activities; identify possible problems occurred at the practice place; planning future activities; monitor student's activities; develop career guidance activities through the whole training period; establish the evaluation activities for each semester.

CONCLUSIONS

The main conclusion of this study is that the practical training of students, with a career guidance carried out systematically, contributes primarily to better prepare future graduates for successful integration into the labor market. Practical training activities are those closest to the labor market and economic environment of academia, as two areas where interests can be expressed most directly. Universities increased attention to this training, being open to solve all problems. In this respect we mention that two of the faculties involved in this research were initiated, applied for funding and received funding for specific projects aimed at improving their students' practical training.

Following this analysis, we first recommend the unitary organization of the practical training, adapted to each specialization. We consider that completing the practical training with training through career guidance and counseling modules for job searching is essential in this context.

We believe that the University of Oradea offers comprehensive training programs to students, paying attention especially in recent years the practical training of students. However some problems were identified that require resolution: Practical training sessions must be better adapted to the specificities of each specialization and even to each position; It is necessary to better prepare the students for these internships to increase their involvement and their attitude toward responsibilities; It is important to boost performance in practical training of students through contests, recommendations, completing

the internship; The organization of career guidance modules complements practical training, preparing students for searching and obtaining a job.

Generally, we believe that the dialogue of the kind initiated in this study, between education institutions, prospective employers and students contribute substantially to an integrated local development.

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