

HIGHER EDUCATION LEARNING OUTCOME AND ITS APLICABILITY ON THE LABOUR MARKET

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Abstract

The present study aims to assess the challenges faced by the Transylvanian Hungarian higher education system and to recommend possible solutions to efficiently overcome them. The higher education market has many players; there are several models which show the challenges of student enrolment and marketing, collaboration with the business environment, and the assessment methods of student's satisfaction. More attention should be paid to graduates' feedback on labour market experiences and there is also a need to integrate these feedbacks into future developments of universities.

Keywords: higher education, marketing, educational management, labor market, higher education marketing

JEL classification: I21, I23, M31

Introduction

As far as the democratic higher education policies are concerned we can say that in Romania they are neither homogenous or coherent, there are on-going development initiatives followed by quick retreats much like on the Romanian political scene as a whole (Mandel K., 2007). Ministers are often changed, and all of them including their advisers feel the urge to develop a new strategy and immediately apply it, meanwhile the previous strategies are just being implemented by someone else.

In the year 2014 there were 92 accredited higher education institutions registered in Romania, 56 of them are state universities and 37 of them are private, for a population of 21.33 million (2011-census). The aim of the present paper is to examine the situation of the Hungarian minority. It is important to know that they represent 6% of the total population in Romania, approximately 1.2 million people.

Material and Methods

Examining the available literature on the subject I mostly relied on Hungarian and English sources as I only found a handful of usable sources in Romanian.

We are aware of the internationalization process of higher education and its methods, there are international accreditations and other international higher education systems; there are also efforts and tendencies to converge the curricula of certain scientific fields. Internationalization manifests itself through teacher and student mobility programmes as well (OECD, 2012). The convergence and harmonisation can also be identified within EU initiatives, in order to increase mobility, reduce cultural differences and socio-economic disparities in The European Higher Education Space (European Commission, 2013).

The prerequisite of international competitiveness is the quality of local resources, where knowledge and service play a major role (Duga Zs., 2010).

The task of universities is to create scientific an innovative added value, not only within the borders of a country, but on an international level where it can achieve its true potential (Náray – Szabó G, 2011).

Universities' regional commitment and ambitions began to emerge in the last fifty years, mainly because universities are expected to operate within and for the benefit of the region. A university has many intrinsic layers of cooperation on which it can contribute to regional development, for example it can help to maintain and increase competitiveness of the region, it can attract investors, it can help with economic diversity as well as training the local labour force and it can also create new jobs. Regional development is also enhanced by universities' innovation activities, infrastructure development, collaboration with the business environment and consulting activities (Gál Z. – Zsibók Zs., 2013).

The influence universities can have on regional development is twofold: on the one hand, employees' and students' purchasing power is beneficial for the local economy; on the other hand, knowledge – economic, technical and technological – is transferred into the business environment (Florax R., 1992). Universities play a significant role in regional competitiveness, besides learning and teaching they create spin-off enterprises, train skilled workers, they channel scientific results into the region, they empower networking, collaboration between businesses, they allow for specific professional networks to develop (Duga Zs., 2016).

We can see a significant increase in the number of higher education institutions which brought a significant (economic) growth. We can observe a decline in the number of students enrolled in 2008, and this demographic decline might be caused by the legalisation of abortions in 1990.

A study by Andreé Sursock on the Romanian higher education published in 2014 reports that it is difficult for higher education institutions to create a long term strategy due to the volatile and ever-changing nature of the legal framework. The next

major challenge, closely related to former, is the unpredictability of the financing framework which again hinders long term planning. According to some researchers it is a somewhat irresponsible to finance so many universities in a period of demographic decline. The aforementioned study also highlights the fact that high school students are not sufficiently prepared for choosing a university major or a specific career. My personal teaching experiences and the results of the present study highly confirm this issue. High school students are not properly informed about certain career options, what a specific job or field of study means, and this entails that they are unaware of necessary competences required for a certain type of job. This way students' choice is not fully conscious or optimal, which shows in their academic progress and performance, (dropout rate is on the rise, lack of interest and helplessness after graduation) as well as in their performance on the job market. Sursock's study claims that universities, especially their libraries, are not up to standards and in addition the technical background of educations is also in need of further developments. Researchers say it is necessary to collaborate with foreign universities in order to get inspiration and ideas for modernisation. Furthermore there is a need for a change in perspective. Universities need to be supporting individual career paths, giving practical experience and pointing out trends instead of just giving factual, theoretical knowledge.

Another significant shortcoming of universities according to the researchers is their inability to connect with their surroundings, and the lack of involvement in the local community. They should build working relationships with economic actors and public institutions if they want to face present challenges because this is the only way to educate students and give them proper knowledge. Fleacă et al. mentions the lack of widespread cooperation with foreign higher education institutions and economic players to be the most significant shortcomings of them all (Elena Fleacă et al., 2015). According to the 2017 OECD report Romania has the weakest synergy between the labour market and higher education.

The present paper used a mixed-method research methodology, applying both quantitative and qualitative methods. Focus-group discussions were conducted among undergraduate university students. Students are attending the two major universities which offer Hungarian language higher education. A total of 8 sessions were conducted, each lasting an average of 70 minutes. Data collection was conducted in one of the research labs of the Sapientia University in Miercurea Ciuc, between May and June 2017. Company managers were also contacted and semi-structured interviews were conducted with them. Two managers were chosen per ISCED fields. Conducting semi-structured interviews meant that managers were not asked specific questions, but they were given a topic of discussion with occasional guiding questions to keep them speaking about the topic.

As the quantitative method of data collection and analysis the questionnaire was chosen. The online questionnaire was distributed through popular social media. In-

struction to the questionnaire asked Hungarian nationality people living in Transylvania to fill in the questionnaire. The instruction also specified that subjects must have graduated university between 2005 and 2015 and are willing to contribute to the cohesion of universities and the labour market. This would help to obtain a clear picture of how they made use of the knowledge acquired during their university studies on the labour market. The questionnaire was forwarded to all Hungarian student organisations, youth organisations and alumni groups. Several respondents took the research topic very seriously and forwarded the questionnaire to their acquaintances and shared it through social media. In less than 2 months 379 responses came in, and only 4 had to be excluded because several questions remained unanswered. The remaining 375 were evaluated, and contained useful information. The present study is based on the following objectives: To examine if those who have already tried themselves on the labour market believe that the biggest shortcoming of higher education is the lack of practical training.

To see, when employers need to hire people they are looking for theoretical knowledge, do they consider it a priority or not.

Results

The most important part of the qualitative research methods consists of semi-structured interviews conducted with company managers. Subjects were chosen in such a way to make it possible to receive specific answers from each ISCED field. The present paper was inspired by a research study conducted by Manpower in 2013. In this study 35% of companies mention lack of talent, the main problem factor being lack of experience, as well as lack of hard and soft skills, and industry specific training.

During the interviews I sought to find out employers' opinions about fresh graduates' professional knowledge and professional skills. I was also interested in graduates' eventual deficiencies and their causes from the employers' perspective. Furthermore, company managers were asked to give their opinion about university education, to mention the positive and negative aspects and what would they recommend universities to do. The interview subjects were asked to recall and to share opinions they may have heard at partner meetings, professional forums on the topic as these opinions might also shed some light on the whole issue.

Due to length constraints, the present study focuses only on the most relevant answers. In the services field a hotel manager and a travel agency manager were asked to participate and share their opinion. Both interviews were very illuminating. As it turns out they hardly expect their employees to have any theoretical knowledge, all they need is a few basic indispensable skills: communication skills, especially for those who come in direct contact the costumers, they should be aware of current events in the world (in order to be able to have a conversation with the client), foreign language skills, as many languages as possible are desirable, they should be

open to development in their chosen field and should be able to look for and find relevant information. Computer skills were also mentioned as important to have. Despite what they said, they would only hire someone with a university degree, because they believe that people become more open, their teachers act as role models and hopefully what they learn will get them interested in certain topics. The hotel manager said that he meets undergraduate students (internships) and fresh graduates (job interviews) quite often and has come across different experiences. He can see that students possess a great deal of theoretical knowledge, they learned a lot and they want to apply it immediately which often leads to an erroneous approach towards problem solving and it won't yield desired results. He admitted that if it was necessary, he would gladly present some courses or topics at the university every month, telling about his experiences, so that students and teachers can continue the common work accordingly. Problem-solving and language skills are areas in need of further improvement, and draw their attention towards situations which help them become more open minded. „What happened in tourism 150 years ago is not relevant, we have new trends emerging daily, they should rather be able to follow them and prepare for them.” The manager of the travel agency describes his ideal employee as someone with excellent social skills, because you need to know what you can sell to whom. He listed the following abilities: situational awareness, adaptability, empathy, fast reaction ability, consistency, and showing interest. This respondent would reform the whole educational system starting from primary school because he feels there is something wrong. Children are not encouraged to have their own opinion, to think for themselves, not to mention older children. He believes that making children memorise information is outdated, nobody should receive anything as granted, we should not show them ready-to-use tools, but we show them methods and how to elaborate those, and we need to challenge them to become niftier. He met a lot of candidates who already had a fixed desire about what he deserves like the number of holidays, how much money he should get, he expected to work based on tried methods, but had no idea or plan on how to do his job more efficiently. The travel agency's manager believes that foreign experience is also important. Young people need to spend time outside their comfort zone, because language skills are important but it is also desirable to get to know different cultures in order to realize the specifics of our own. This conversation was very illuminating, everything he had to say was backed up by examples and it was clear that he talked about this with a lot of people and had a clear idea about what needs to change in the educational system. These are not extraordinarily complex concepts but teachers still need to pay more attention to these. Providing students with right solutions is possible, however leading them to find these solutions is even better, but obviously this method is more difficult and time consuming. Another interesting remark was that university cannot work wonders if curiosity, critical thinking had not been fostered previously, at lower educational levels.

To represent the social sciences, business and law fields, a business and financial consultancy company (having several employees with a degree in economy) and an advertising marketing and PR company were chosen. Interviews were conducted with the managers of the two companies. The two respondents from this field stated similar problems, namely that students need more practical courses and internships, which is rarely provided at universities. Economist and finance students have a hard time distinguishing between real world scenarios and what they had learned at university. The interview subject brought up a simple case in which he talked to a fresh graduate. He asked the student to analyse the environment of a company, the student was unsure what the task entailed, but if he asked about micro and macro-economic theories he was familiar with them. The conclusion was that students are unable to put in practice what they learn. The manager suggested the introduction of dual trainings. Every student should have a „company”, where he can go weekly and ask questions based on what he learned, and he should have a lot of practical task to complete at the company. Case studies were also considered useful by the manager, but even those are not enough to get closer to real world situations. Foreign and Romanian language skills are essential, and he said that new graduates have a lot of difficulties resulting from poor language skills. Students usually know the theory, are familiar with their profession; however they should strive to become more open and brave so that they can see the ways and methods to apply theories into practice and to be able to speak a foreign language, otherwise they won't be able to compete on the labour market. Universities have the responsibility to offer twice as many opportunities for practice compared to theoretical instruction. Voluntary workshops, business conferences and other programmes are useful substitutes, at these events it is possible to get complementary skills which are harder to come by at the university. The company was asked if they would be willing to participate as partners in the development and organisation of a dual educational programme. The answer was a yes, but he also admitted that this implies extra workload for his employees. It is a full time job to handle interns, to give them data, tasks but it's not impossible if there are enough companies involved in the pilot program.

The majority of respondents who filled in the questionnaire were women. This can be explained by the fact that according to the 2011 census 52% of Hungarians living in Romania are women, furthermore there are more women with higher education degrees in Romania compared to men. 10.6% of Hungarian women living in Romania have a university degree compared to only 9.8% of men (Veres V. – Attila P. Z., 2012, 2011 census). Obviously we need to take into account the fact that women tend to be more helpful and are more likely to share their opinion, so it is likely that this is also a reason why there are more women among the respondents. A significant majority of the sample is made up of people aged between 26 and 35 years. It is also nice to see that 63 respondents are younger than 25 and they have successfully found a job in their chosen fields; they represent close to 17 % of the sample. 76% of the

respondents had permanent residence in a city at the time of their graduation and 77.1% of them currently live in a city, there is no significant discrepancy here.

I was curious about how respondents would rank employers' requirements when they are looking to hire, in order to be able to compare them with the interviews conducted with managers (see qualitative section). As we can see in the figure above, most of the subjects marked good communication skills and ability to work in a team, while having a degree in the specific field, Romanian language skills and practical knowledge are also considered to be very important. Previous work experience – within the country or abroad –, English or other foreign language proficiency and theoretical knowledge were considered less important.

Respondents' satisfaction with their current jobs also seemed to be important for the present research, therefore subjects were asked to assess their rate of satisfaction with their current jobs. The table below shows the list of criteria along which respondents had to assess their jobs and the mean value of their ratings, where the maximum value (completely satisfied) was 6.

assessment criteria	mean
individual achievement	4.99
work environment/atmosphere	4.58
professional challenge	4.57
job security	4.52
appreciation	4.47
position	4.32
possibilities for professional development	4.32
applicability of acquired knowledge	3.94
income	3.9

Table 1: Current job satisfaction

Source: own elaboration

It is interesting to see that individual achievement got the highest score, this is the criteria that respondents are most satisfied with, but they also appreciate the good work environment and professional challenge at their workplace. Income received the lowest scores. As far as the present research is concerned, the applicability of acquired knowledge has a mean of 3.94. Only 86 persons stated that they can absolutely make use of their previously acquired knowledge, while 33 people say they cannot apply their knowledge at all in their current position, 29 people answered that they rather cannot, 94 subjects said they cannot make much use of what they had learned and finally, 65 respondents claimed to make a little use of their previously acquired knowledge. It seems an interesting result taking into consideration

the fact that presumably all respondents are working in their field of study. The next question, the study aimed to find answers to, is whom respondents blame for their eventual professional shortcomings. The answers are the following:

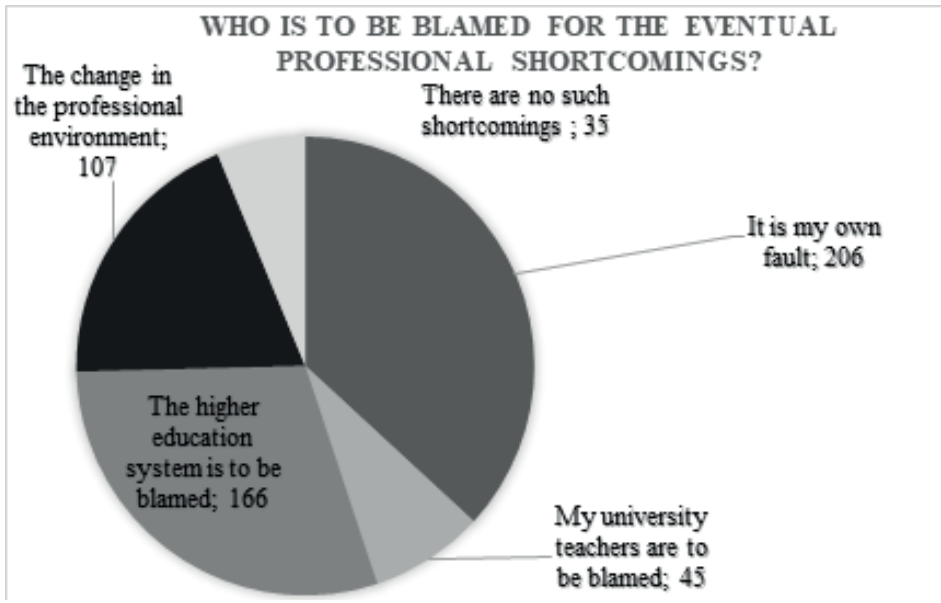


Figure 1: Who is to be blamed for the eventual professional shortcomings?

Source: own elaboration

Most of the respondents blame themselves for their shortcomings, so they claim it is their own fault; however there is a significant number of responses blaming the system, 166 to be more specific. 107 people blame the changes in the professional environment, 45 respondents blame their teachers and 35 believe they have no such shortcomings.

Crosstab data analysis was used in order to investigate the opinions of university graduates from different field of studies regarding the usefulness of knowledge they acquired during their studies. Pearson Chi-Square result of 99.4% confirms that there is a correlation between the two variables, and based on the adjusted residual it can be stated that students who graduated in arts and humanities (36.8%) believe that the knowledge acquired during the university years is completely indispensable. Social sciences, business and law graduates (27%) believe that knowledge acquired during university is indispensable to a lesser degree. Only 16.9% of university graduates majoring in natural sciences, mathematics and IT think that the knowledge acquired at university is completely indispensable. Significant differences were found among the specific fields of study regarding the degree to which current positions

and field of studies can be related. It is clear that education (5,57), healthcare (5,15) and zoology (6) have the highest mean value, these are those professions in the case of which according to previous conceptions there is a need for a strong relation between the position and what they learned at university. In the case of services the connections are harder to establish (3,25-mean), a possible explanation is that there are many different types of positions available and for this reason the average conformity is lower.

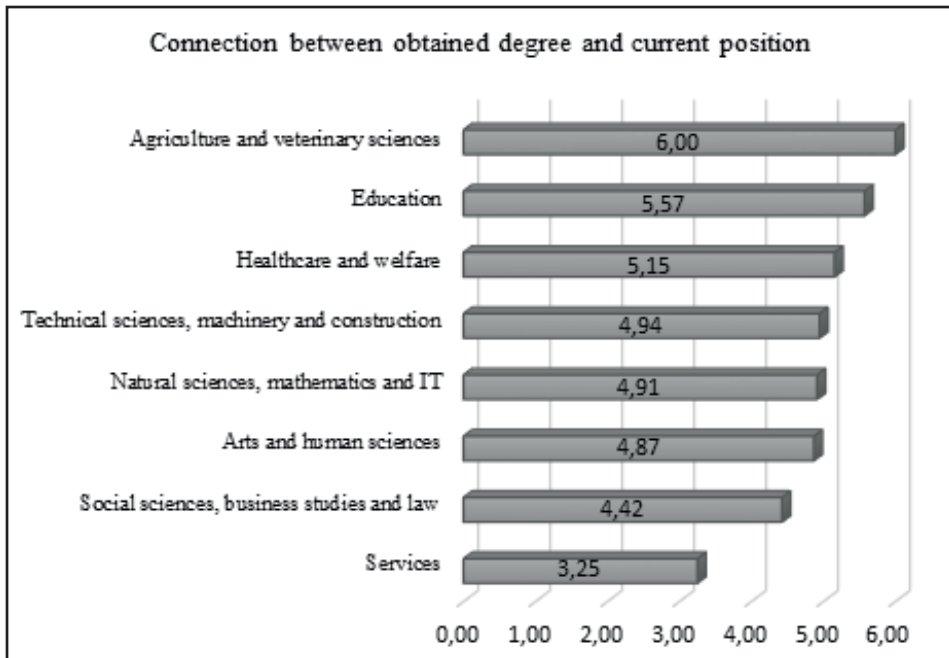


Figure 2: Connection between obtained degree and current position

Source: own elaboration

Based on the answers we can conclude that universities need to rethink what they teach within each field, and they should focus on the practical side which can be put into practice immediately. Involving institutions, companies and professionals is vital in order to provide competitive knowledge using practice oriented tasks which enhance students' competitiveness on the labour market.

Conclusions

The presupposition presented at the beginning of the study have been confirmed, those who have some experience on the labour market think that the greatest challenge of higher education is to provide sufficient practical experience. The results of the study show that all three segments (undergraduate students, graduate students, managers) agree that university education fails to provide means to put theory into practice and universities should offer more possibilities where students can apply what they learned, students need to be put in situations where they can use what they learned during the courses.

The qualitative research proved that, employers would choose practical skills over theory, which is secondary when hiring. It is more important for candidates to be able to efficiently apply what they learned.

Entrepreneurs, managers don't really mention any lack of theoretical knowledge of graduate students or something that universities failed to teach. Instead, they mostly miss suitability, experience, communication skills and problem solving skills. In each field there was a clear consensus among the employers. Students need to be put in real world situations more often. There is a need for close collaboration with future employers and universities need to provide possibilities for students to gain more experience. The subjects and their business partners said that they are open to collaboration with universities and teachers in order to enable graduates to gain experience which they can later use on the labour market. The employers admit that it is hard to find qualified staff that can live up to their expectations, and they must do their part in helping a younger generation prepare for life after graduation.

The study revealed that universities need a real competitive edge and real successes to be able to differentiate themselves, paired with effective marketing communications. In order to have real success and competitive performance we need a continuous feedback system. The feedback – and this is the main conclusion of the study – needs to come from those who successfully found a job in their respective fields. Feedback together with the input of employers would enable the development of up-to-date, adjusted curricula in short period of time. The core curriculum and the list of basic subjects is governed by law, however there are no regulations concerning other subjects. It is the individual responsibility of teachers to teach useful and applicable skills, recommended by those who are already successful in their field. For this to work a continuous, annually repeated survey is necessary and a supportive, stimulating environment for teachers in which they are willing to update parts of the curriculum (learning materials) so that they meet present standards and expectations. Another vital ingredient of success is cooperation between teachers, cohesion and complementarity between subjects. In order for a university to achieve all of the above there is a need for a cooperating team which can harmonise subjects and organise the previously mentioned mentor programme. In this way it will be possible

to educate students who are competitive on the international labour market, ready to face the challenges of the future. We often read in scientific publications and we also hear it during lectures that there is a need for greater involvement of higher education institutions in the region. Unfortunately, we never hear any specifics on how to achieve this. I believe this step could be also taken if we maintained close relationships with actors and agencies in the labour market and if their feed-back were to be incorporated into the educational structure.

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