

The role of international internships conducted during academic studies in development of entrepreneurial skills

Alina Simona TECĂU¹

Abstract: *This study presents the results of a qualitative marketing research conducted among students participating in intensive international practice internships organized in a SOPHRD project. Research objectives are focused on obtaining information on the extent to which participants from these internships have assimilated entrepreneurial skills necessary for employment job skills, adapting to a job, comparing individual professional targets with the real situation on labor market, development of the capacity to decide and act appropriately in relation to his own career, but also familiarity with European requirements of a prospective employer to ensure the prerequisites for participating in future university graduates on a modern and dynamic labor market.*

Key-words: *student, international internship practice, skills, labor market integration*

1. Introduction

Starting from the reality imposed to universities in Romania by Law 1/2010 of National Education, which is to organize departments, services, offices for counseling and guidance and from the need to support students in achieving internships according to their specialization, the launch of project proposals funded by HRD centered on counseling activities and professional practice, represents an opportunity for students to increase adaptability of the labor market and hence facilitate integration within it.

Such an approach had the project “Counseled student - excellent future employee” financed by the ESF through SOP HRD, unfolded during 2014 - 2015 by a nationwide partnership whose general objective is constituted by the development of students' capacity to decide and act accordingly in relation to their individual career to harmonize individual objectives with labor market requirements. Specifically, in addition to other activities, through the project it was tried to deepen

¹ Transilvania University of Braşov, alina.tecau@yahoo.com

student practice so as to contribute to reducing the discrepancy between the education and training system and labor market.

2. Literature review

In literature there are many authors who have deepened various aspects of the importance of internships performed during university studies.

In this respect, it is considered that the experience gained during internships with the counseling and career guidance activities are essential knowledge for students aimed at skills training and sustainable integration skills needed in the labor market. In the long term, they can lead to the development of human capital and increase its competitiveness fundamentals of a dynamic economy based on knowledge.

The importance of the higher education services is recognized in all national and international strategies for a sustainable development of the society. Following their dual mission, of education and development through research and innovation, the universities could enhance the economic and social development. The graduates with a high level of competence in their professional fields can also contribute to the improvement of quality management systems of the organizations they are going to work for. (Constantin, 2013)

Because in the last decades education became so important for the future development of the “Europe of Knowledge”, the decisional system gave it the right place in it. So, the main institutions involved in the education field are: The European Commission, the European Parliament (Committee of Culture and Education), Council of European Union (Education, Youth and Culture) and Committee of Regions (Commission for education, youth, culture and research) (Tescăşiu, 2014).

The Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Union, initiated on the 1st of January 2007, is one of the main instruments for encouraging student mobility and fostering co-operation between universities within the EU (Marinescu, 2008).

Romania has a system of Long Life Learning education similarly with the European countries systems, for example, in tourism (Foriş et al., 2015).

Choosing a career is important in peoples’ lives and should not be a random choice. The education in the career field aims to help young people develop knowledge and skills required for successful choices and to manage the transition from the study period to a job. (Brătucu et al., 2014)

There are different ways in which the practicum has been conceptualized, implemented and evaluated in higher education, findings indicate that the practicum is widely accepted as a valuable and successful component of education. (Ryan et al., 1996)

Organizing an internship involves ensuring the prerequisites for participation of future university graduates on a modern and dynamic labor market, through a professional decision, based on adequate vocational counseling, the development of a career plan with clear objectives which pursues acquisition and training of those skills and abilities necessary for sustainable integration in the labor market through practical training.

The objectives of student participation in international intensive internships include:

- employment of practical skills needed for a job;
- adapting to a job;
- comparing individual professional objectives with the real situation on labor market;
- development of capabilities to decide and act accordingly regarding their own careers.

2. Research regarding assessment of practicum courses conducted in Italy by students from Brasov

2.1. Context

Within the “Counseled student - excellent future employee” project, the activity of intensive international practicum included information visits, documentaries, presentations, discussions and examples of good practice on various organizations, institutions, companies, such as: University St. John from Vinovo, University of Torino, School of Business Administration, Employment Agency in San Secondo di Pinerolo, University of Gastronomic Sciences in Polenzzo, Fontanafredda, La Stampa newspaper, Hotel Diplomatic (Torino, Italy), WPWEB - Environment Park etc.

During the intensive-international practicum, the students analyzed and identified success stories on initiating and developing a business plan. After carrying out these internships, an evaluation of Brasov University student's satisfaction degree was performed through a qualitative marketing research group type discussions.

The main purpose of organizing this research is to find information on the effectiveness of training students in the intensive international practicum and the implications of this experience on the decision regarding their future career.

2.2. The research was focused on the following objectives:

- identifying the satisfaction of participating students on internship conducted in Italy;

- finding the elements of the program of activities carried out in the period of the intensive international internship that were best appreciated by students;
- identifying competences and skills acquired by students in these internships;
- determining the extent to which this experience has influenced the participating students view over integration in the labor market.

2.3. Research design:

In order to conduct this study, the focus group qualitative marketing research method was used, which involved extensive discussions with two groups of students who participated in intensive practicum courses in Italy, each consisting of 6 participants.

3. Study results

During the focus group, using open discussion and varying projective techniques, different aspects related to intensive-international practicum were raised.

To learn general opinion of the students about what the practicum course meant to them, the spontaneous words association technique was used. In this sense, the subjects were asked to indicate first impression / opinion / feeling that comes to mind when you think of your experience during the practicum in Italy. From the centralization of responses it can be observed that during this exercise, the students had only positive reviews, some superlative like “was more than perfect”, “was extraordinary,” “it was a wonderful experience”. Some of the subjects had motivated their answers, saying about the experience: “I had the opportunity to visit a foreign country” (for some of them it was the first visit out of the country), “I learned interesting things about the country, how it develops, about the labor market in the respective area “, pointing out that while “I learned a lot about us “,” we learned to evaluate ourselves in relation to labor market requirements “,” this experience has opened new visions “, “I learned as a future entrepreneur which are the key points of a business, how you start, how you develop and how to resist the market”, one of the participants in the discussion felt the need to synthesize the experience felt using the statement: “I agree with he said another colleague participating in an internship in an interview: I learned how to dream with my feet down to earth “.

Regarding the level of integration of the activities within the project (involving counseling and practice) into the personal needs on orientation in career, subjects were asked to give this matter a scale from 1 to 10. Most of the subjects, respectively 10 persons were awarded maximum points and two subjects had given 9 points.

The subjects claimed that the project activities have been a real support in planning their professional career, initial advising being “welcomed” but also

“useful” helping “including in the achievement of the business plan” that had to be drawn during internship in Italy. They say that the tasks outlined during the internship course were clear, were properly delivered, they being supported by tutors in their achievement.

Also, subjects in the internship believes that learning was easy, as it successfully combined theory with practice, tutors making permanent correlations between theoretical knowledge acquired by students in college courses and practice.

At the same time, subjects were satisfied because in practical training they have acquired useful knowledge that they could not accumulate in the theoretical courses.

To identify practical skills acquired by students the completing the sentence technique was used, subjects were asked to continue saying “As a result of participating in an intensive international internship” by listing three of knowledge, skills acquired they consider essential. Among the answers given by them are found: “I have more confidence in me”, “I noticed a change for the better,” “I interact better with others,” “I’m better arguing my opinions” “I am more optimistic” “I feel better prepared,” “I intend to evolve further”, “I respect the efforts of others”, “I emanate trust and confidence”, “I am motivated about of my career”, “I know where to get informed”, “I learned to have an overview”, “I make decisions more responsibility”, “In general, I feel more confident”, “I listen to the advices from more informed people”, “I hold a larger volume of practical knowledge”, “I want to get involved in new projects”, “I am prepared for the labor market “.

As can be seen, the practical skills, competencies, attitudes which students claim that they have acquired as a result of participating in an international practicum can be grouped into a few general categories, such as organizational skills, communication, teamwork, planning.

In this context, we can specify that subjects consider methods of training very good and adapted to the level of the participants, in this respect the practice handbooks being considered very useful tools by allowing them to make different notes as they make observations or learn new things, which they can access later.

On the effectiveness of the method of training used in the internship, subjects considered it has been a very effective method, workshops were very well structured, teamwork being appreciated and the fact that there was involvement from both sides, tutors constantly waiting for feedback from the participants, presentations and concrete examples and, in general, because the practice has been linked to the learned theory so assimilating information was much better.

Subjects believe that a concrete outcome as a result of participating in this internship is a close connection between colleagues, being more united and permanently collaborating. According to subjects, these changes reflected the acquisition of skills that are very important because by changing attitude and vision

represents a change at personal level, which in time will lead to changes at the professional level.

To find out to what extent would recommend to other students attending an intensive international practicum, participants were asked to imagine that they talk with a colleague, whom recount their experience of internship in Italy. Subjects were very open, and expressed their views frankly and as a conclusion, we can say that most have appreciated the stage overall, thanks to the opportunity to make contact with the businesses, to learn the know-how of successful international companies, to work together, to know many entrepreneurs who shared their experiences, who presented examples of best practice, but also negative examples that are not to be followed, socialize with other students, including ones from other cities and other faculties that have remained on friendly terms and that can start up a business together, also getting to know tutors with very good experience.

Also, subjects considers that the information they currently hold, acquired during internship, is a solid basis to develop their entrepreneurial skills, in their professional planning and for identifying opportunities to integrate the labor market.

To find out what participating in international intensive practicum meant for subjects, they were asked to complete the following sentence: "Participation in internship intensive practice in Italy meant..." Expressions found most frequently among subjects' responses are "an opportunity for professionally and personal development", "valuable and interesting experience", "knowledge and evolution", but also "an opportunity to learn to make successful business plans and learning by best practice international examples".

As a general view of what was discussed in the two focus groups, the subjects said that they remember with pleasure the international intensive practicum in Italy and were bent on thinking in starting enterprises and collaboration with their colleagues, while expressing willingness to participate in other such internships.

4. Conclusions

All the students said they were extremely pleased with participation in these intensive international internships, appreciating this activity as "a unique opportunity to learn new information about economic activity, the organization of companies / firms from another European country", "an unforgettable experience that definitely will help them in their future careers".

The participants appreciated the way the entire organization of this activity which was centered to provide them the best environment to accumulate as much information as necessary for future careers. Students were motivated to participate in this internship because they lack the practical experience.

For most of the participants this activity was the first visit outside the country and this was also a highly motivating factor. The opportunity to meet colleagues

from other universities, to interact and compete with them was a highly appreciated opportunity. The visits to various companies, during which there was outlined the organization and a part of their marketing strategies were unveiled was by far the most appreciated activity.

Also, the business plans contest organized on teams during this practicum stage was designated one of the favorite activities. The team of students from Brasov, participating in the second international practicum, won the contest of business ideas organized by the partner from Italy and the members of this team were extremely proud for this achievement.

As a conclusion, we can say that such initiatives involving activities of counseling and career guidance, as well as international practice are welcomed to students, their purpose being to promote education, training and developing individual skills on a personal, social and occupational level, having as priorities the harmonious person development, increasing competitiveness on the labor market and sustainable development of society as a whole.

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