

Internship – tool for improving the employability of Economic Science graduates

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Abstract: *Romania's economy has undergone major changes as a result of various technological, economic and social factors, so that the labor market has undergone major changes too, which puts more acute the problem of youth employability. The article presents the results of a project to develop human resources financed by European Union funds aimed at improving the way students realize internship, the ultimate goal of implementation of the project being to accustom students with employers' demands and rigors of a job to thus contribute to increasing the employability of future graduates of economic studies. Internship results are presented by taking into account the students' opinions and some suggestions are made in order to improve this activity in the future.*

Key-words: *internship, employability, learning, competencies, business graduates*

1. Introduction

In the last decade, the Romanian economy has undergone major changes as a result of various technological, economic and social factors. Accession to the EU, the economic crisis of 2008, the trend of accelerated growth of Internet access and digital technologies, as well as frequent changes of tax legislation led to changes in the rate of economic development and, on this basis, the way to do business. Figure 1 shows the evolution of Romania's GDP compared with the EU, the graphic noticing a sharp decrease experienced by Romanian economy in the years following the crisis, when the growth rate of GDP recorded a low of -7.1% (vs. only -4.4% EU average). Only 2013 saw a significant increase in GDP of Romania (3.5% versus 0.2% the EU average), yet under the level recorded in the years before the crisis.

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Figure 1. GDP growth dynamic (2004-2015)

Following the dramatic changes of the business environment in the entire EU labor market has suffered and its major changes, there are problems of massive unemployment among young people, far superior to that of other age groups (see Fig. 2), which put more acute the issue of tertiary education graduates employability.

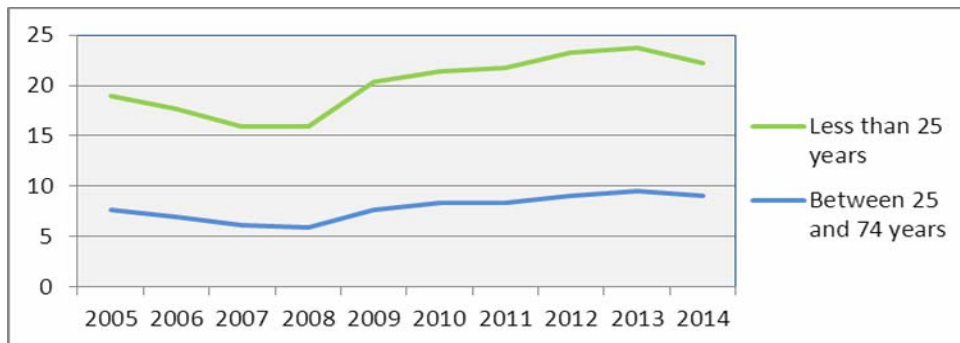


Figure 2. Unemployment rate by age at UE 28 level (2005-2014)

On the one hand, in this new economic context, graduates must possess new skills and competencies and be ready to assume responsibilities, and on the other hand employers are reluctant to hire entry-level graduates, because they say young people do not have the skills, competencies and motivation suitable for work.

Employability understanding mostly depends on the national and institutional contexts. A study developed by Andrews and Higson (2008) in four European countries (UK, Austria, Slovenia and Romania) regarding graduates employability revealed some interesting findings: business graduates are aware about the importance of having the ability to apply theoretical and conceptual knowledge they acquired to “real-life” business conditions, and also about the capacity to interact

with people with different backgrounds. The work experience gained via internships and placements was viewed as being valuable, too, but the forms of work-based learning programmes varied from country to country. Moreover, employers in all four countries declared that, beside professional competencies, prior work experience is valuable, as much as soft-skills when hiring a business graduate.

When discussing about business graduates competencies, a more recent study involving 92 employers of various Romanian companies (Deaconu et al., 2014) confirmed that employers are currently valuing transversal competencies (so-called ‘soft skills’), rather than professional ones. Accountability in completing tasks, the ability to learn quickly and adapt to various situations, job-related practical competencies, communication and interaction skills are some of the most valuable abilities in the eyes of employers.

2. Internships – a tool for improving the future graduates employability

Employability was mentioned in the Bologna Declaration (1998) as being a key characteristic of future graduates in a more harmonized EU higher education system. The importance of graduate employability is widely discussed in literature (Hesketh, 2000; Gibbs and Angelides, 2004) along with various tools and methods to improve it. Boud and Solomon (2001) stressed the importance of a new approach in education, via work-based learning in order to improve employability. Billett and Choy (2012) stated that “learning in the workplace is multimodal and complex, considering the socio-cultural nature and boundaries that influence learning in multiple ways”. Work-based learning (WBL) gave students the opportunity to discover new directions for further studies, for developing personal career and putting theory into practice. WBL are valuable to employers too, because they enable a company to test potential employees, and often contribute to reduced overhead costs related to the activities performed by interns.

There are numerous other advantages of implementing WBL in higher education institutions (HEI), among the most valuable them being: increase of student persistence and HEI’s retention rate, providing students with extra knowledge and opportunities, better mutual understanding of students, graduates, HEI’s and employer’s needs, etc. A more diverse learning experience led to an increased ability to handle complex tasks more easily, to efficiency and effectiveness in meeting future job requirements. WBL students and graduate faster develop a positive attitude and interest in the profession, and are more able to adapt to market conditions.

In this respect, an internship project was developed in order to facilitate the transition of future business graduate from school to ‘real-life’ condition. The activities that students must achieve during faculty have primarily an educational, formative role, and secondly are designed to help easing the insertion of future

graduates on labor market in the domain they are prepared for. During faculty, students must assimilate theoretical knowledge and form various skills, but also must demonstrate the ability to recognize various contexts in which they can apply that knowledge and skills and, then, apply them in practice.

The main objective of the project has been the development of work-related competencies in order to facilitate the integration of future business graduate on a more dynamic and complex post-crisis labour market. The project aimed to create direct contacts between business students and potential employers for accustoming them to the rigors and demands of a future job. Also, the project create the opportunity for students to observe the way that managers and employees are achieving their goals by performing day-by-day activities and, correspondingly, to facilitate students the acquirement of various soft-skills such as: time management, accountability in completing tasks, improvement of verbal and non-verbal communication skills, team-work, understanding and applying rules and procedures related to a certain work place (job and health security). During their internship, students could better understand the ways they can use theoretical knowledge acquired during faculty and, at the same time, understand the ways, opportunities and limitations of putting their own ideas into practice for developing new businesses.

The main stages in implementing the internship project were the following:

- Suitable sites for student practice (host organization and their departments that correspond with the level of theoretical knowledge of students) were identified;
- Partnership agreements for internship have been concluded between project partners and host organizations;
- Documents were developed to assist in project internship, namely: the daily schedule of activities, “Internship” curricula, specifications for the students internship (student notebook), specifications for tutors and teachers responsible for the internship (tutor instructions manual), daily students assessment records forms (to get feedback from internship tutors), final student evaluation sheets (to get feedback from the internship teacher), satisfaction questionnaires targeting students internship;
- The participating students were selected to achieve practical work with the help of qualified persons (experts, organizers and target group operators);
- Groups of students were created to develop practical activities at host organizations considering establishing a flexible schedule, which also take into account their daily training program at the college; each group of students was assigned an internship tutor (a person employed in the host organization) and an internship responsible (a teacher competent in same study domain as the group of students);
- Practical activities were carried out by students, based on the guidelines and instructions given by tutors and teachers during time period of 90 hours,

according to the internship schedule and instructions included in the tutors' internship manual;

- Yielded feedback from tutors and internship teachers about the behavior and knowledge of students practitioners, and also about potential improvements of university curricula;
- Feedback was obtained from students regarding the appropriateness and usefulness of the conducted internship (satisfaction survey).

3. Study results

Internship participants (82 female students and 19 male students) were selected on a voluntary basis in specializations such as International Business (17 students), Trade, Tourism and Services (31 students) Finance and Banking (12 students), Marketing (5 students) and Management (36 students).

The selection criteria respect the principle of equal opportunities and non-discrimination on grounds of gender, religion, race, sexual orientation. The participation of female students was encouraged, in order to improve future employability of women in the labor market.

The questions were mainly related to the overall satisfaction of internship participants, the volume of information received, the internship duration, timing and utility, the actual impact on the readiness of the student in the field of study, tutors' and teachers' performance. A questionnaire consisting of 11 questions was designed, characterized by a high level of structuring. To measure the aspects mentioned above, different types of scales were used such as: semantic scale, numerical scale, Likert's scale and binary scale. The types of analysis performed were: univariate analysis and a bivariate analysis which considers the simultaneous analysis of two variables that are related to each other. (Constantin C., 2012)

Considering the volume of research subject population, it has opted for a full research and the questionnaire was applied to all 101 students who completed internship.

The responses obtained showed that: 94.60% of student respondents said they were satisfied or very satisfactory overall with the services they received during this project.

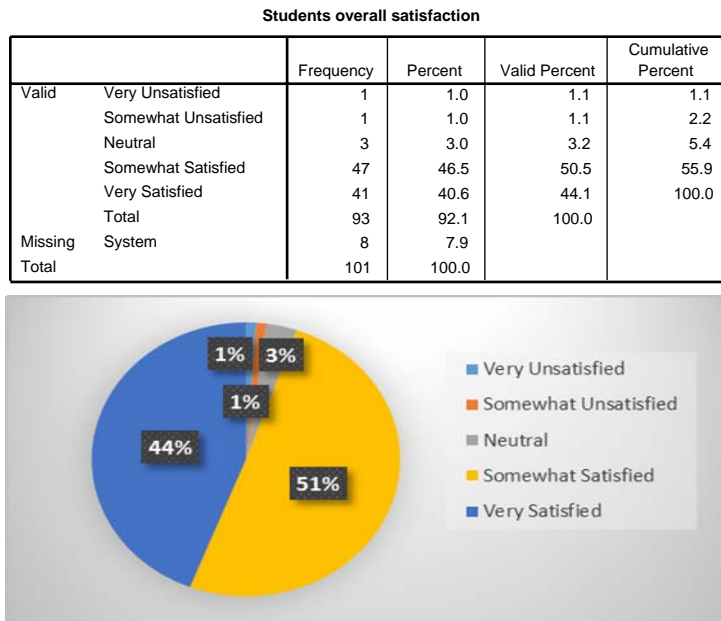


Figure 3. Students overall satisfaction

Students received information on: presentation of the host organization and how to apply for a position within the host organization; liaising with the host organization staff; management of the host organization (management system, functions and roles of managers and staff), host organization's operational flows, and monetary flows of the host organization (source of incomes and encashment, expenditures and payments destination).

The volume of information that students received was assessed as high or very high in proportion of 89.10% of respondent and the total duration of the internship was satisfactory or very satisfactory for 82.20% of respondents.

N	Valid	101
	Missing	0
Mean		4.28
Median		4.00
Mode		4

Satisfaction degree about the volume of information received

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	medium	11	10.9	10.9	10.9
	high	51	50.5	50.5	61.4
	very high	39	38.6	38.6	100.0
	Total	101	100.0	100.0	

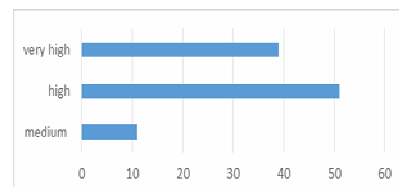


Figure 4. Satisfaction degree about the volume of information received

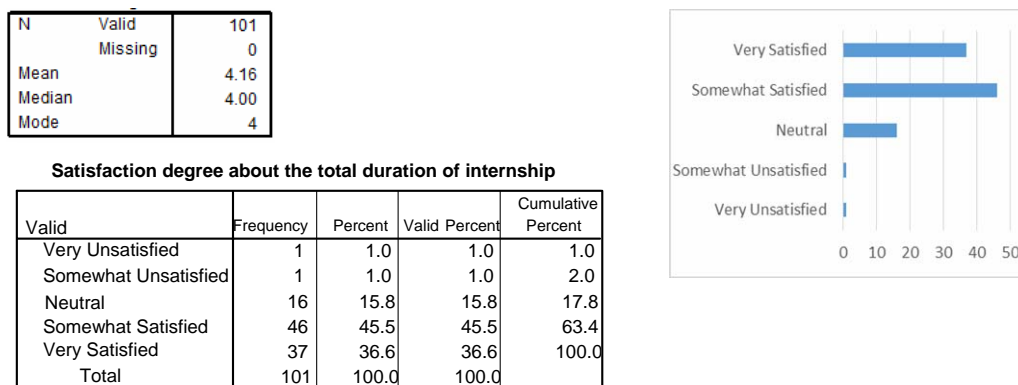
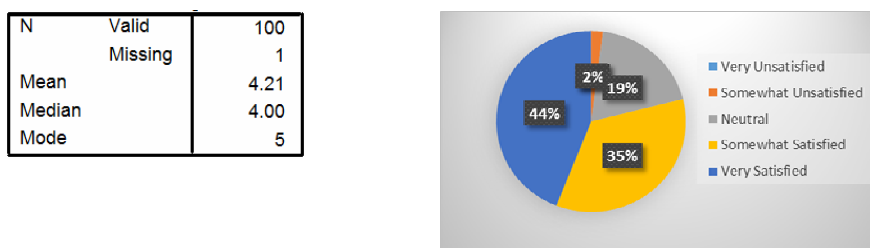


Figure 5. Satisfaction degree about the total duration of internship

The internship duration was stipulated in the agreement with host organisations to a total of 90 hours, but no more than 3 to 4 hours a day, to permit students to participate also to their daily scheduled courses.

The usefulness of the training received was satisfactory or very satisfactory for 79% of respondents. Students were trained how to apply for a job, how to present themselves in an interview, but also how to interact with staff when receive a task assignment, how to report about the completion of their duty and how to evaluate the work of themselves and of their colleagues.



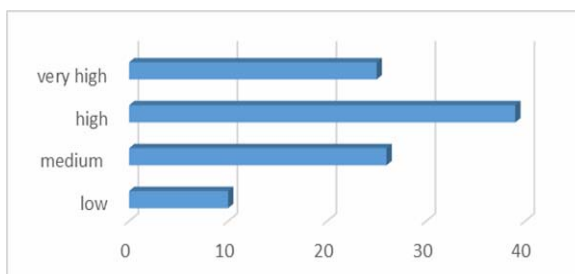
Usefulness of training received

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid				
Somewhat Unsatisfied	2	2.0	2.0	2.0
Neutral	19	18.8	19.0	21.0
Somewhat Satisfied	35	34.7	35.0	56.0
Very Satisfied	44	43.6	44.0	100.0
Total	100	99.0	100.0	
Missing	88	1	1.0	
Total	101	100.0		

Figure 6. Usefulness of training received

Students appreciate that the skills they acquired and developed allow them to better integrate and use the theoretical knowledge they already possess, and, as a result, the actual impact of the training was assessed as high or very high by 64% of the respondents.

N	Valid	100
	Missing	1
Mean		3.79
Median		4.00
Mode		4



Readiness impact in the field of study

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	low	10	9.9	10.0	10.0
	medium	26	25.7	26.0	36.0
	high	39	38.6	39.0	75.0
	very high	25	24.8	25.0	100.0
	Total	100	99.0	100.0	
Missing	88	1	1.0		
Total		101	100.0		

Figure 7. Readiness impact in the field of study

Professionalism of tutors and teachers was rated as high or very high by 98% and 96% of respondent, respectively. The tutors that trained the students were persons that were assigned by managers from host organisations, based on criteria such as work experience, communication skills and personal desire to work with students.

Tutors expertise

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	very low	1	1.0	1.0	1.0
	medium	1	1.0	1.0	2.0
	high	22	21.8	21.8	23.8
	very high	77	76.2	76.2	100.0
	Total	101	100.0	100.0	

Tutors expertise

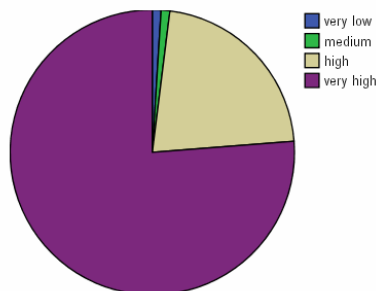


Figure 8. Tutors expertise

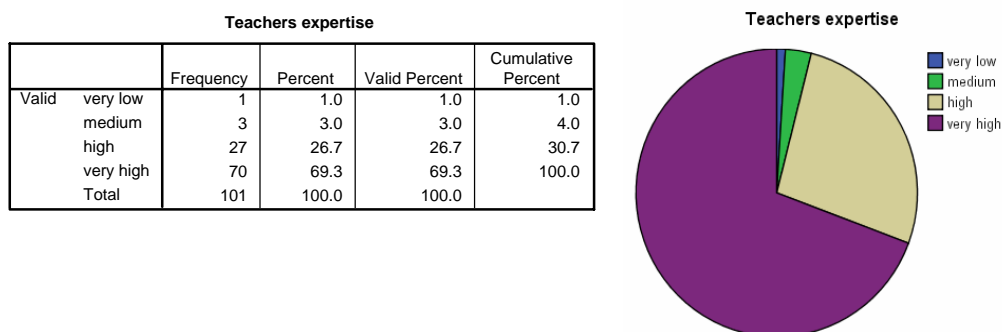


Figure 9. Teachers' expertise

The teachers accompanied students on a daily basis, gave them information about internship activities and how students can use proper theoretical knowledge to perform activities that have been assigned by the tutors. Also, the teachers gave students feedback on daily practical activities carried out and at the end of internship conducted an evaluation of individual skills and knowledge acquired by each student.

4. Conclusions

The responses obtained showed that almost all participating students said they were satisfied or very satisfactory with the internship that they took part in. We appreciate that this very positive result is the expression of a carefully planned set of activities and training experiences offered to students, but also a result of the variety of information that they received about the host organisations, combined with the staff readiness to explain, show and help students in performing the assigned tasks.

Some students signalled, however, that the internship was very time demanding, because they have to attend classes and internship in the same day, but others suggested that 90 hours are not enough in order to acquire all necessary skills for a future job. Also, the students offered some feed-back regarding the future host internship organizations characteristics. To improve the future internship stages, more large or medium sized companies should be selected, based on the reason that they have a large number of different positions so that students better understand the specific content of various jobs, the work specialization and the specific knowledge and skills required. Likewise, they said is advisable that every company should have a tutor to supervise students and help them better understand specific requirements of each job. It is also suggested a development of teaching materials for a better adaptation to companies' field activities, but also to the curricula that students follow.

All opinions expressed by students in answering the open question about future internship improvement were systematized and offered to universities with the aim to include them in university curricula and be used to develop internships that contribute to better insertion labor market of the future business graduates.

5. Acknowledgements

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