

# GRADUATES' PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THEIR COMPETENCES AFTER THE 1ST CYCLE OF STUDY

Cristinel CONSTANTIN<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *This paper focuses on a research conducted in order to find the graduates' perceptions regarding their competences after the 1st cycle of study. The main aim was to reveal some reasons of low satisfaction at the level of graduates as the main beneficiaries of the educational programs. The outcomes revealed a huge confusion of graduates regarding their competences as they are poorly connected to practical activities. In this respect, the higher education institutions have to better communicate with their students in order to find solutions to increase the customer satisfaction.*

**Key words:** *Bologna graduates, competences, marketing research.*

## 1 Introduction

One of the main challenges of the 21st century has been the increasing of quality in the educational system at all its levels, starting from the hypothesis that the quality of people that leave a certain educational level will have a high influence on the quality of the processes at a higher level. In spite of the various strategies proposed by national and supra-national forums, the progress was little in the field of quality in education.

The Bologna Process was an important step towards a common effort by European countries in increasing the quality in education, the main goal of this process being to harmonize the national education systems through a range of credits - such as in the ECTS system - as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility. The declaration of Bologna was signed by 29 countries that agreed to begin a wide reform process, which nowadays

gathers all 46 signatory countries to the Council of Europe's European Cultural Convention [1].

Our research joins these efforts trying to identify the graduates' perceptions about their specific competences gained after the 1<sup>st</sup> cycle study program.

## 2 Literature review

A review of the literature reveals that the relationships between universities and business companies have an increasing impact on the development of the graduates' competences. Furthermore, the competences that begin to take shape in school continue to develop within the companies the young graduates are to work in [2].

When we talk about competences and their relevance for the employers we should consider that there are specific skills needs defined by the labour category. At management level, these are rather

---

<sup>1</sup> Department of Marketing, Tourism and International Relations, *Transilvania* University of Braşov.

transversal skills hence managers often have an educational background in accountancy, marketing, law, economics etc. Nevertheless, managers are expected to possess the following skills and competences: computer skills, business and strategic planning, strategic alliances, management skills, management through visions and values, yield management, accounting, product development, innovation, human resource management, destination management, project management, management skills to cope with globalisation influences, change management, marketing and sales skills etc. [3].

At the level of different operations inside companies the employees should have especially professional competences that help people solve some specific problems of the departments they work in.

Starting from the above mentioned issues we can conclude that, in the new environment of changes in the higher education, the universities' management should focus on strategic marketing orientations in order to establish its strategic directions of development meant to ensure the achievement of the long-term objectives.

The objectives of higher-education should be also in accordance with the EU's strategies, one of these being "EUROPE 2020 - A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth". This one aims to help member states overcome the effect of economic crisis and to improve the level of employment, social cohesion and productivity. Europe 2020 sets out a vision of Europe's social market economy for the 21st century. According to this vision, there are three mutually reinforcing priorities [4]:

- I. **Smart growth:** developing an economy based on knowledge and innovation.

- 2 **Sustainable growth:** promoting a more resource efficient, greener and more competitive economy.

- 3 **Inclusive growth:** fostering a high-employment economy delivering social and territorial cohesion.

Taking into account the above mentioned strategy, another issue becomes very important in literature. This is about the dual mission of a university: education and research. Some authors talk about many academic scientists that eschew teaching in favour of research. Scientists in leadership positions at top-level universities - despite the university's publicly stated mission of education - direct more funding, awards and job security to outstanding researchers than to outstanding teachers. In this respect, the world of science must confront and resolve the named contradiction of values that tends to transform the research and teaching in a zero-sum game. These two activities have to be put together in the service of students and graduates in order to obtain a better value and quality of higher education [5].

Taking into consideration all the above mentioned, for every institution involved in higher education it is very important to develop proper strategies using the tools of strategic marketing. Such strategies should be based on solid researches of the customer needs and satisfaction, assessment of internal conditions and evaluation of the marketing environment trends.

### 3 Research objectives and methodology

Our research started from a problem identified at the level of students, who are quite confused regarding their status in comparison with the ones that graduated before the implementation of Bologna system. In this confusion they are also not aware of the importance of the master studies during the 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle. Starting from the above mentioned issues we have tried

to explain in depth the dimension of the research problem. The main objectives of our research were:

- A. To find opinions about Bologna system as compared to the previous system.
- B. To identify graduates' perceptions about the easiness to find a job after the first cycle.
- C. To find reasons of satisfaction and dissatisfaction according to the competences gained during the first cycle.

The research involved three focus groups that ranged between 8 and 10 graduates from three different study programs offered by Transilvania University of Brasov: marketing, tourism and international business.

The main limit of our research consists in the impossibility to generalize the results, the research method being of qualitative nature. In spite of this fact, the outcomes of the research offer guidance regarding the attitudes of a large part of the graduates from different study programs.

#### **4 Research outcomes**

The data collected from graduates using the focus-group research method were processed using the content analysis. This one helped us to concentrate the variety of opinions into some major answers regarding the research objectives.

First of all, we found the graduates of the first cycle, in present students in master programs, are unhappy with the new Bologna system, being convinced that the old system was better. They perceive the curriculum as being very general, with few specialty courses that were not enough deepened. They are also unsatisfied that it is necessary to follow master studies in order to complete a university degree. Another weak point was considered the gap between the theory and real work activities, being necessary to include more

hours of practical activities in the curriculum.

Talking about the graduates' perspective to find a job after finishing the first cycle, many of the respondents consider that they are not enough prepared for a job, the employers asking often for previous experience. The respondents feel also a threat from the graduates of certain faculties with private ownership, graduates who are considered to have a lower level of competences. In spite of this fact, they sustain that the employers do not make the difference between these two types of graduates. We can see here a contradiction in opinions because they assert that the employers have high requirements from candidates but, on the other hand these ones accept whatever graduate which has a diploma. This is a strong reason for deepening this issue in the following researches.

Trying to find some associations between the graduates' opinions, we applied a statistical analysis known as the homogeneity analysis (or HOMALS). Also known as the Multiple Correspondence Analysis this method makes complicated multivariate data accessible by displaying their main regularities in pictures such as scatterplots [6].

It provides an easily interpreted perceptual map that jointly shows the relationship between the categorical variables, which is not available through the traditional method of using Chi-Squares on a bi-variate level of analysis [7]. Homogeneity analysis is primarily considered a technique for categorical variables. It reveals the relations between the categories of a variable and the objects (individual data). The main purpose is to provide a low-dimensional visualization in which categories and objects are located in such a way that each category is the centroid of all objects that score on the category [8].

The Homals function optimizes a weighted least-squares criterion and the optimal graph layout is computed by an alternating least squares algorithm [9].

In a strict sense, homogeneity analysis is used for the analysis of categorical data with a particular loss function and a particular algorithm for finding the optimal solution. What the technique accomplishes is to scale the N objects (map them into a low dimensional Euclidean space) in such a way that objects with similar profiles are close together, while objects with different profiles are relatively far apart [10]. The emphasis of the method is on the geometrical aspects of the problem. For this reason, homogeneity analysis is very popular in economic and social research, as far as it reveals important associations

between the categories of several variables. Nevertheless, taking into consideration the closeness between the categories, we can identify only some associations between the entities that belong to the same group but not a cause-effect relationship. In this respect, the results should be interpreted with prudence in order to avoid unwarranted conclusions. For our data set we used HOMALS function provided by SPSS system.

The variables used in the homogeneity analysis were: the appreciations regarding programs' curriculum; the opinions regarding the most useful courses; the appreciations regarding the competences gained by graduates; and the attitudes about their own employability.

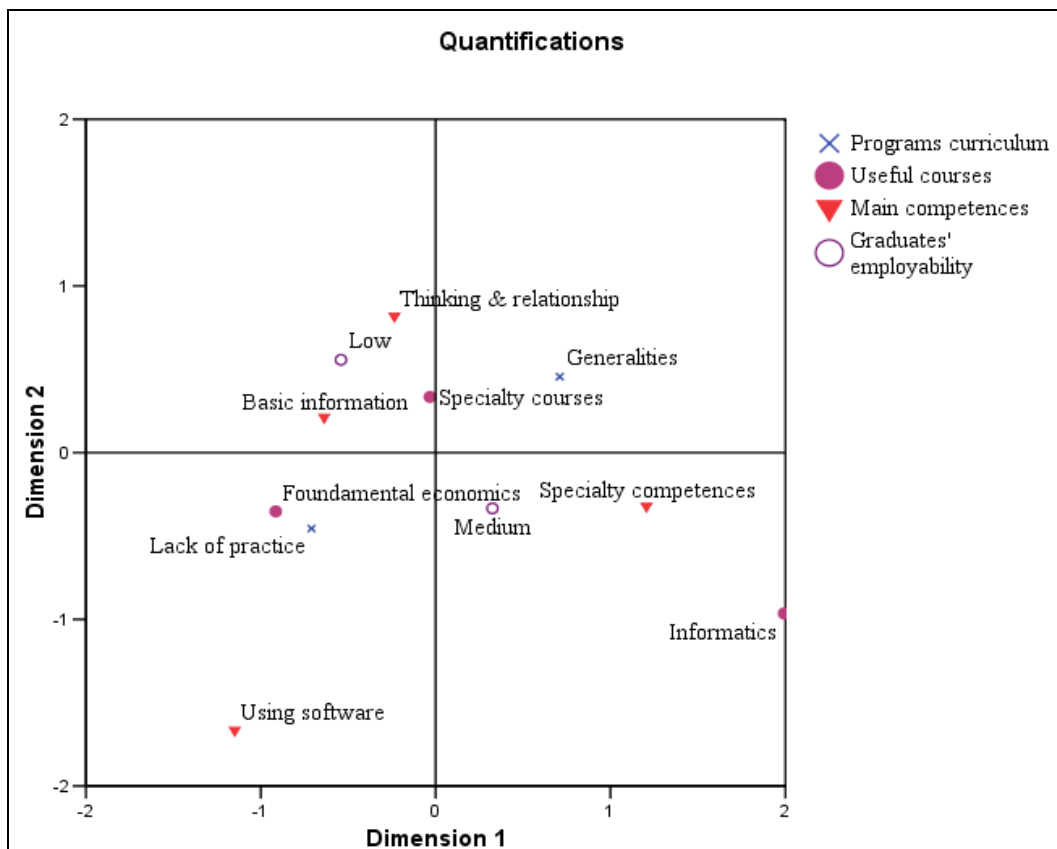


Fig. 1. Homogeneity analysis between the graduates' opinions

The results presented in figure 1 show us a group of graduates that consider that they have a low employability, their main competences being the possibility to operate with basic information and also thinking & relationships abilities. They consider that the study programs contain mainly generalities and the most useful courses are the specialty ones. Another group of graduates consider that they have a medium employability and specialty competences. They appreciate the specialty courses and fundamental economics as being the most useful, but the study programs are characterised mainly by a lack of practice. Nobody considers that he or she has a high employability. There are also some outliers that consider the informatics as being useful and they have also gained competences in using software.

Making a vertical evaluation in the content analysis, we found that there are differences between two major groups of respondents. The graduates with good academic results are generally satisfied with their competences and part of them considered that they did not meet problems to find a good job. On the other hand, graduates with a lower participation to workshops, tutorials, seminars and computer practical activities have certain kinds of dissatisfaction regarding their competences, considering that the courses are not well focused on the students' needs.

## 5 Conclusions

Taking into account the results of our research, we can conclude that: it is necessary to take into consideration the graduates' attitudes regarding their own competences in order to increase the quality in the higher education institutions.

First of all, the outcomes of the research revealed us a poor understanding of Bologna system's philosophy by the

graduates that could generate confusions and reasons of dissatisfaction. These misunderstandings are due mainly to a poor communication between the faculty and its customers.

On the other hand, more applicative activities are needed in the teaching process that could establish a better relationship between theory and its practical application.

In this respect good starting point could be a higher cooperation between universities and companies in order to involve students in practical activities, to organise seminars with the participation of specialists from companies etc. In this manner, every part could be better informed about the expectations of the other part and the curriculum of the study programs may be improved.

Our researches have also limits due to the fact that the samples used are not representative but they gave us some directions to be followed. In this respect, the management of every faculty should put in practice the tools of strategic marketing that can help them to design a marketing plan for the future development of the institution with a high focus on students' needs.

Taking into account the above mentioned issues, we consider that the results of our research have implications both for researchers, academics, quality assessors and practitioners, being a good starting point for the improvement of the educational process.

## References

1. De Leeuw J., Mair, P.: *Gifi Methods for Optimal Scaling in R: The Package homals*. In: *Journal of Statistical Software* 31 (2009), No.4, p. 1-21. See [10].

2. Michailidis, G. & de Leeuw, J.: *The Gifi System of Descriptive Multivariate Analysis*. In: *Statistical Science* 13 (1998), No.4, p. 307–336. See [6].
3. Michailidis, G. & de Leeuw, J.: *Homogeneity analysis using absolute deviations*. In: *Computational Statistics & Data Analysis* 48 (2005), p. 587 – 603. See [9]
4. Schimmel, K. & Nicholls, J.: *Segmentation Based On Media Consumption: A Better Way To Plan Integrated Marketing Communications Media*. In: *The Journal of Applied Business Research* 21 (2005), No. 2, p. 23-36. See [7].
5. Van Eck, N. J. & Waltman, L.: *Applying Ideas from Homogeneity Analysis to Visualize Similarity Data*. Presented in the conference CARME 2007, Rotterdam. See [8].
6. Simion, C., Zaharia, S. E., et. al.: *Continuing training to improve the managerial competences – a labour market requirement*. In: *UNiversite dans la Societe UNISO 2007*, Bucureşti, Niculescu Publishing House, 2007. See [2].
7. Savkar, V., Lokere, J.: *Time to Decide: The Ambivalence of the World of Science Toward Education. Nature Education-position paper*. Nature Publishing Group, USA, 2010. See [5].
8. European Quality Assurance Register: *Annual Report-EQAR 2009*. See [1]
9. European Commission, DG Enterprise: *Improving training in order to upgrade skills in the tourism industry*. Final report of Working Group B. Brussels, 2001. See: [3]
10. European Commission – *EUROPE 2020. A European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth*. Available at: [ec.europa.eu/europe2020](http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020). Accessed: 03-03-2011. See [4].