

BETWEEN HOPE AND REALITY – THE ROLE OF ROMANIAN UNIVERSITIES IN THE STUDENT – EMPLOYER RELATIONSHIP

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Abstract:

Besides the light of knowledge, the academic environment can provide continuity and value to a society that strives to make its way through economic and social difficulties. Starting from the individual needs, the University can lay the sound basis for a harmonious development of all society's structures. This article is intended to present a realistic analysis of the characteristics of the relationship university-student-organisation in Romania. Also, we seek to identify the major measures that need to be developed and implemented within the Romanian Universities and organisations, with direct effect on qualitative education of young people and their smooth integration on the labor market.

Key words: University, student, employer, professional skills, cooperation.

Introduction

More than ever, the present time implies increased transformation efforts towards a more efficient organisation activity, towards re-thinking and development of a new structure for the business environment. It is a business environment where each component changes in search of balance, by dynamism and competitiveness. Not only the business environment changes, but also the entire society, through social unrest, mistrust, pessimism, restrictions, worries, and also the hope of a better social and economic environment.

There are various opinions and recommendations concerning the measures to be adopted for overcoming the present economic difficulties and ensuring continuity despite an unstable and sometimes turbulent environment. These are good recommendations, but difficult to implement for a person that lacks vision. We do not intend, in this article, to set directions that would definitely solve the difficulties of the Romanian organisations. It would be a waste of paper and ink, as there are thousands of articles of this kind. We

would only draw the attention on some potential *steps, that are specific to any beginning*, in view of developing a sustainable business environment. We refer here to the educational system, the particular characteristics of the Romanian academic environment, the involvement of the business environment into establishing an *educational value creation pattern*. We refer to the young people and the hope of this society and this economy.

1. Educational Marketing – how to conceive the young people’s development in accordance with their needs and society’s expectations

During the marketing courses, the student adopts the vision of the customer-oriented organisation. This is based on a thorough knowledge of marketing environment components and the development of specific activities adapted to customer needs, through favorable experience and value creation interactions. The creation of an organisational, market-oriented vision requires time and sustainable acceptance and implementation efforts.

Envisaging and occupying a position on the market is a complex process that depends, generally speaking, on the organisation strategy on the one hand, and its operationalization on the other hand. In both cases, the human resource represents one of the major influence factors of an organisation’s activity on the market, to the satisfaction of the final consumer. Irrespective of the field of activity, the human resource is one of most valuable goods of an organisation. The increase of economic competitiveness and productivity can be achieved by qualitative improvement of the human resources, knowledge and skills provided by the educational system.

Training and experience represent two of the characteristics that make the qualitative difference among the personnel of an organisation. Following the analysis of the two components, we have come to these conclusions: training represents the complex knowledge acquired by learning, that helps the individual act with full knowledge of the case, in a specific field; experience can be understood as a set of feelings and situations modeled by the training and structure of the individual, within a specific context. Both the learning process (which is also known as educational process) and the experience are long-term processes to which the employer may contribute or not at a certain point. This involvement becomes expensive for the organisation; it is not always a positive process, as it implies risks related to the quality of recruited individual and capitalisation of his services in time (the continuous search for a better paid job is one of the characteristics of the labor market, especially with regard to young people).

Training, seen as acquisition of knowledge in a specific field, is a long-term process which doesn’t trigger the involvement of the organisation. The educational system provides the opportunity of developing knowledge and skills in specific domains and profiles. The education goes from general to particular, and can continue with diploma licence, Master degree and PhD as accomplishments of the individual training.

The high standard training of an individual requires a deep understanding of the Romanian social reality and labor market from the educational institutions. The learning and training process continues beyond the educational system, in the business or institutional environment, during the entire lifetime, and determines various educational and training stages of the individual. It is to mention that a well structured educational

system, anchored into the reality of the national and international economy, represents a step forward in reducing inequality or social marginalisation of the individual.

The employee's experience is acquired in time, based on the individual's training and structure, and implies efforts from the organisation. The professional accomplishment of the individual (and also his accomplishment as a human being, issue that shall be approached later on, at a certain moment), is a long-term process that involves several stages, and integrated actions of the educational, business and/or institutional environment.

In view of increasing its efficiency, the organisation has to reconsider its relationship with the providers of labor force, which is a component of an organisation's marketing micro-environment. The relationship between the organisation on one hand and Universities, vocational schools, qualification and re-qualification agencies on the other hand can provide advantages to both sides, and also to the subject of the relationship – the student, pupil, individual under re-qualification process. The organisation may benefit from recruiting vocational young people, that are easy to train and integrate into the organisation's policy and market activity; this will determine an increase of customer satisfaction, organisation's productivity and efficiency. The training institution can get the advantage of an educational activity orientated toward the labor market needs and even more, the subsequent satisfaction of the student.

2. The role of higher education institution in difficult times

The role of the educational institutions goes beyond the creation of experts in specific fields; it aims at providing persons of character, and integrating them into the economic and social environment. A society that lacks such people is lost. Thus, training of an individual is a high complexity process that has further decisive implications, where the educational institution has to assume responsibility.

The economic difficulties bring new challenges to the academic environment. In general, on a dynamic market characterised by economic and social problems, the major part of population will be in difficulty, but the young graduates will be affected the most. The fact is that many answers they search for are beyond the academic environment, deeply anchored into the more or less visible realities of the Romanian social and economic life. The system of values may be modified in *difficult times*, and the same may happen with young people's behavior and aspirations.

In the context of responsibility assumption, the training institution has to create and implement a sound training system that would train the young people up to the expert level and connect them to the reality of the social and economic environment. Within the higher education institutions there are career orientation centers, whose role are to facilitate the competence-based interaction between the student / postgraduate student and the organisation. The curricula are adapted to the specific markets; they provide practical training workshops, where the student gets into contact with the reality of the environment that he would like to work in. Also, there are various EU financed programs which have in view the identification and development of the necessary framework, in order to concertize the actions of the educational environment and organisational employer. However, the process is quite critical in Romania.

3. The relationship university – organisation; two partners with different ways

In the academic environment there are many situations showing that the relationship with the business environment is still timid. Within the Universities, there are rather few programs where the student or the Master degree student can get in touch with the business or institutional environment. There may be only a few large organisations, with a well defined staff policy, that develop such programs in cooperation with some higher education institutions. Nevertheless, the attempt to identify solutions for a better interaction of the two environments may easily lead to failure. The causes could be the lack of academic organisation in this respect, the expectations of invitees who lectured in front of the students, the expectations of their organisations, or simply the targeted public – the student, his interest for these meetings or the feed-back provided to the organisation, although there are common interests.

The student's training for the labor market is a complex process that requires the Universities to know the complex reality of the labor market, by domains and profiles. The real expert in the business environment is the organisation itself. It would be interesting to know how many educational programs, university plans and analytical programs have been issued in Romania with the collaboration of the business environment. Thus, we can understand why there are differences between the University and business environment representatives. The University staff complain about the non-involvement of the business environment, while the latter complains about the results of the educational system.

Not long ago, one of the projects intended to create a standard for the qualifications of a marketing graduate, attracted famous Romanian University centers. The projects include all licence study profiles and shall continue probably with the Master and PhD studies. The purpose of the meeting was the creation of a partnership that would comprise the actors of the educational market and the labor market, in order to debate the qualifications required from a marketing graduate. Finally, a grid was elaborated, comprising six professional competences and their description. As mentioned before, the debate's framework was supposed to bring together educational institutions and specialised organisations, in order to create a standard concerning a marketing graduate's competences. It was surprising to find out that the labor market was represented at the meeting by a single person. The conclusion is clear: the business environment's interest in the future worker's competences is very low. Under these conditions, we wonder whether three years of student's training, three years of financial effort made by the community or the student's family, of re-thinking and adaptation of the University curricula, will lead to the competences required by the organisation's needs on the market. The answer will come in a few years, from the labor market directly. And unfortunately this will have a negative effect on work productivity, public and private financial resources.

Table 1. Percentage of employers having difficulty filling jobs, due to manpower's lack of skills (%)

	2010	2009	2008
Poland	51	48	49
Romania	36	62	73
Austria	35	28	44

Switzerland	35	36	36
Italy	31	26	18
Hungary	30	-	-
Germany	29	35	34
Greece	29	37	47
Belgium	27	19	26
France	23	18	31
Czech Republic	19	17	37
Sweden	18	29	39
Netherlands	17	19	15
South Africa	16	35	38
Spain	15	8	27
Norway	11	19	40
United Kingdom	9	11	12
Ireland	4	5	14

Source: 2010 Talent Shortage Survey Results, Manpower

The weak cooperation between Universities and labor market representatives, and the lack of vision of both parties may be the answer to the imbalances on the Romanian labor market. According to the survey „2010 Talent Shortage Survey Results” carried out by Manpower, Romania occupies, in 2010 the 13th place at world level, out of 36 countries surveyed (along with Costa Rica and Guatemala), and the 2nd place in the region Europe/Middle East/Africa (EMEA), regarding the recruitment of the adequate/qualified manpower for the jobs offered by employers. As compared to 2009, when it ranked the first, Romania has dropped 26 percent, which shows a positive evolution of labor market characteristics in the last year. Despite this favorable evolution, Romania occupies an undesirable 2nd place among the 17 European countries surveyed. According to the same survey, the jobs most difficult to fill in are: Engineers, Skilled Trade, Sales Representative, Management/ Executives, Production Operators, Laborers, IT Staff, Restaurants & Hotel Staff, Accounting & Finance Staff.

4. The evolution of the Romanian educational environment by principles, continuity and value

As our field of competence is marketing, the approaches in this article may sometimes come from this field. But, as an orientation of the modern organisations, marketing is not or shouldn't be anymore an activity belonging strictly to the marketing department. The marketing vision should include the entire organisation, as each employee represents a ***wheel in the value- providing mechanism to the final consumer.***

We have seen that the business environment has a rather low involvement into the development of the educational system and manpower training. Therefore, we will analyse below some measures that the Universities should assume in order to provide valuable graduates on the labor market. Although sometimes the approach is reduced to the marketing profile, which is the profile of the authors, it can be extended easily to other profiles.

For several years, the Romanian education has been going through a continuous process of structure and content adaptation to the requirements of the European education system. At the same time, the University staff has the role to implement this new educational strategy through various teaching methods, and raise the professional performance quality level.

One of the deficiencies of the Romanian educational system is the lack of dynamism. Before and after the EU accession, Romania made great efforts to comply with the EU standards in all fields, including education. However, the educational system cannot evolve and change without the evolution of the human resource involved in the process. Thus, the adaptation continues at various rates, depending on profiles and fields of activity. On the other hand, the experience of the past years revealed that the labor market and the market needs evolve much faster than the adaptation of the educational system. This phenomenon creates discrepancies and requires time and adjustments, in the same way as the formation of the balance price on a market. Thus, it is to be noticed that there are numerous graduates working in a different field as their educational profile. They had to make vocational reorientation efforts in order to occupy the available positions on the market at that moment; despite the society and family efforts for completion of some studies that are now part of the individual's general culture.

Among all components involved into the evolution of the educational system, it seems that the student adapted best to these changes; therefore, there are higher demands concerning quality of the teaching process. The students prefer interactive courses, where the theory is explained with examples from the Romanian market; and the new educational methods are regarded as elements that improve the educational process quality. The student-professor communication evolves by including new, up-to-date communication means, particularly online tools. These evolution elements cannot be overlooked, as the final goal of the University is the student's satisfaction. All the issues discussed in this article are meant to help the University achieve this goal.

The practical skills development by the student in the respective profile should be organised in accordance with the needs transmitted by the business environment. It is necessary to develop integrated, modern University study programs, that are constantly updated to the labor market requirements, in the context of the knowledge-based society. Also, the educational process has to be compliant with the specialised vocational and occupational standards at European and international levels.

The academic environment should identify the optimum methods for developing the cooperation with the business environment. These efforts may result in the development of training bases, parallel development of research/studies, elaboration of study programs and curricula in cooperation with the business environment, elaboration of teaching materials, etc.

Training of the future economists includes the development of partnerships between Universities or Faculties and the business environment, in view of developing joint training programs-JTP. These bases JTPs are intended for internship, where the student gets into contact with the reality of his educational profile. The organisations can be involved in supporting the academic performance through financing student projects, merit grants, job proposals for remarkable students, establishment of laboratories/centers for student's needs and capitalisation of knowledge by practical activities that are specific to the marketing domain.

We have shown that the measures concerning the University-business environment cooperation include the initiation of joint applicative research projects. In this respect, the main problem is the financial support of the research. Here are the alternatives: encourage the companies to seek collaboration with the University for financial reasons, as the tariffs are lower than the specialised companies' prices; performance of direct research, that could be published partially in the University's magazine, in view of awakening the interest of the business environment etc..

According to the EACEA¹² survey, New Skills for New Jobs Policy initiatives in the field of education: Short overview of the current situation in Europe, published in December 2010, in Romania, at the end of 2010 there were three projects aimed at monitoring the school-to-work transition of young people. One of these projects focuses on the school-to-work transition of 20 000 university graduates and is being implemented by a central government authority (the Executive Unit for Financing Higher Education and University Scientific Research). The other two projects are being implemented by local authorities (county school inspectorates) and they focus on initial VET¹³ graduates (5 350 VET graduates). According to the same survey, at present, "virtually all European countries are developing their National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs). The aim of these frameworks is to enable employers, learners and the general public to understand the full range of qualifications existing within a country, to clarify how they relate to one another and show how the different types of qualifications can contribute to improving the skills of the workforce". As shown previously, Romania is also making efforts for NQF development.

One of the objectives directly related to the academic performance is the University staff training. The development of partnerships such as business environment – educational institution may include the objective of the young University staff practical training. Thus, it will be possible to ensure a correct understanding of the Romanian business environment and the methods for design, development and implementation of marketing tools in Romania. Also, meetings (workshop type) can be organized with the company representatives of a specific profile, in view of collecting proposals for the elaboration of teaching materials, which is essential for connecting theory to practice.

5. Conclusions

Besides the educational and training role, the Universities have to assume also the role of counsellor and career guide of the student on the labor market. Thus, career counselling centers exist or should be established within Universities, that should guide the student, taking into account his acquired skills, his personality and the market opportunities. Counselling and interaction with students or graduates can be facilitated by online communication tools, such as the web site. This tool can help the students become aware and communicate with the business environment, within integrated communication strategies.

¹² EACEA - Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, European Commission

¹³ VET - Vocational education and training, for more detail see: <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=MEMO/08/736&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

Communication with the graduates is a component of the value providing process, that shouldn't be overlooked by Universities. No surveys have been published regarding the career of the higher education graduate in Romania; each University needs to find its own methods to communicate and obtain feedback from its graduates. In this respect, it is important to establish associations of graduates.

The Universities have to increase their efforts of providing value to the target public, the student, and the social and economic environment. Besides the assurance of a high quality education, the University must represent an active stability and cooperation factor on the labor market. The University has to make available and provide valid information and skills, that the graduate can successfully use within the organisations.

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