

FOREIGN LANGUAGE COURSES FOR A BETTER INCLUSION IN THE LABOUR MARKET – PROFESSORS' PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to identify the perceptions of university professors regarding how universities respond to students' expectations and needs, for a better inclusion of such graduates in the labor market. In-depth interviews with representatives of the relevant stakeholders (teaching staff from the main fields of study analyzed (Letters, Foreign languages, Social Sciences etc.) were performed, based on a semi-structured interview guide.

The results identify the main changes in the evolution of students as a result of digitization, as well as means of adapting to changes in the labor market employed by teachers. The directions outlined as a result of the content analysis represent satisfactory elements in the employed research approach, and can also represent starting points for future studies, of either qualitative or quantitative nature.

Keywords: *consumer behaviour, qualitative research, semi-structured interview, language learning*

JEL Classification: D83, P36, P46, Z11

1. Introduction

The present qualitative research involves an interpretive but also naturalistic approach to a current issue, respectively the proper inclusion of university graduates in the labour market. So we want to understand, but also to interpret the phenomena as they are viewed by individuals [Smith, Denzin and Lincoln, (1994: p. 2)], in this case, college professors, who possess hands-on experience regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the university landscape in Romania. This type of research is based on the idea that people assign meanings, which are different from one person to another, to the world around them [Rogers et al., (2005)]. Based on the hypotheses already formulated (regarding the consequences of the involvement of people in the given situation), an interview guide was developed (in which the issues that will be addressed in the conversation focused on the subjective experience [Keshavarzi et al., (2019)] of the subjects' involvement in the given situation are fixed) which is to be applied the same subjects. What is important, in the case of this type of interview, is that the researcher has previously studied the experience lived by the subjects [Llopert et al., (2018)], selecting the aspects discussed, namely the identification of professors' perceptions regarding the

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way in which the universities respond to the expectations and needs of students through language courses, for their better inclusion in the labor market.

The semi-structured approach will be used, in which the moderator leads the discussion through a set of open-ended questions to direct the conversation towards achieving the pursued objectives.

From a national point of view, ARACIS (the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) carries out the institutional accreditation of universities, as well as of the study programs carried out, emphasizing the communication between the academic and the economic (beneficiary) environment in order to harmonize the skills developed on the duration of studies with those required by the labor market. That is why, in order to facilitate communication between all involved members, educational institutions have implemented CEPS (Study Program Evaluation Committees) which include: teaching staff, students and representatives of the economic environment. They have the role of keeping the study programs as close as possible to the needs of the market and to intuit its future development directions and to introduce them in time in the didactic process. Employer surveys are also organized annually for the level of satisfaction with regard to the training of young graduates [Mazerolle et al., (2015)] and proposals for improving the didactic process. At the end of their studies, the degree of satisfaction of the graduates with regard to the content of the study programs is measured, and the universities take this aspect into account in future accreditations.

Due to the fact that all sectors of activity are developing at an alert pace and due to the negative challenges that appear year after year (eg: economic crises, cyber or terrorist attacks, the COVID19 pandemic, etc.), the implementation of a flexible educational system must be considered, one that is visionary, adapted to new challenges and synchronized with the economic environment and technological advances.

2. Methods

The purpose of the study is to identify the perceptions of foreign language teachers in universities regarding how universities respond to the expectations and needs of students, for a better inclusion of them in the labor market.

2.1. Objectives

The specific objectives of the current study were stated as follows:

- Identifying language teachers' perceptions regarding the changes occurring on the labor market in Romania in 2022.
- Identifying the teachers' perception regarding the need to adapt the subjects taught in order to facilitate employment opportunities for students.
- Identifying the main changes in the evolution of students as a result of digitization.
- Identifying ways to adapt to changes in the labor market adopted by professors.

2.2. Research method

In-depth interviews with representatives of the relevant stakeholders (teaching staff from the main fields of study analyzed (Letters, Foreign languages, Social Sciences, Economic Sciences, etc.)

The discussions are based on a semi-structured interview guide. Number of participants: minimum 10 language professors, and the time needed to generate data: approx. 30-50 minutes. The sampling method used was the snowball method, through recommendations from other specialists.

The participants in the research are employed within the large university centers that offer study programs with specializations in researched fields, but not limited to them. For a more thorough analysis of the factors that influence the academic course of students and a better coverage of research needs, the participants are academics with more than 5 years of experience in higher education.

A short recruitment questionnaire was used for the selection of research participants, through which we ensure compliance with the conditions imposed by this methodology.

Due to the pandemic context, the interviews were conducted by phone and email, the respondents being asked to answer in as much detail as possible to the topics under discussion. The interviewers interacted with the respondents by phone before and after the transmission of the interview guide in order to clarify any misunderstandings in the guide and to discuss the answers. The recruitment questionnaire and the interview guide were pre-tested by administering them in order to identify possible misunderstandings of the text or redundant topics.

The data collection period was: April-July 2022. The data analysis was carried out by means of content analysis.

3. Results

Following the application of the interview guide in the months of February-April 2021, 21 in-depth interviews were collected, in which teaching staff from the University of Bucharest, the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures (2 respondents), Babes Bolyai University (1 respondent) participated, the University of Oradea (3 respondents), the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest (5 respondents), the University of Iasi (5 respondents), the Romanian-American University (4 respondents) and the University of Bucharest, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work (1 respondent).

To the question "Can you briefly describe to us how the subject(s) you teach prepare students to find a job more easily!" the majority of responses focused on the ideas that the subjects taught develop their "strategic thinking and analytical thinking skills", "the logical/structured thinking they will need in whatever type of job they will enter after graduation", "expanding their perspective" on the real needs on the market, or help them in "solving practical situations" or "the taught disciplines bring a considerable contribution to the preparation of students to find a job more easily, as the acquired knowledge is extremely useful in fields of activity frequently requested on the labor market", developing skills and competences specific to each specialization. "Both the theoretical notions taught and the practical ones aim at" the development of specific skills that are consistent with the European or international norms related to each specialization. The majority of respondents mentioned the importance of "skills acquired during studies, they are part of the essential skills that must be fulfilled today on the labor market: communication ability, adaptability to change, adaptability in inter-human relations, continuous improvement etc." There were also respondents who

went into detail on how the subjects help students gain easier access to the labor market, "Research, as it has a very high applicability and finds its place in any company or institution. Moreover, this discipline opens their eyes to making decisions based on clear information, not instinct.", but the essence is the same as presented by the other respondents, critical, structured thinking and opening perspectives would be the most important benefits for students. The importance of developing "analytical skills that are necessary for a wide range of jobs" was also mentioned.

As a conclusion, although from various humanities fields, the respondents aim, through the subjects taught, to develop skills and abilities that will help students find a job more easily in accordance with the specifics of the studies followed.

To the question about how "the analytical curriculum in the program you teach is adapted for students to find employment in their field of study?" the answers have as their central idea the fact that the Universities offer students "the theoretical foundation that they can then develop by developing practical skills in the labor market", "the analytical program is consistent with the requirements of the European labor market and the curricula of the other universities in Europe. It is annually adapted to the changes that occur in the field of specialization." or "taught disciplines are corroborated with the expectations of representatives of the epistemic community, professional associations and representative employers in the field". The grades are positive from all respondents regardless of the university they come from. The programs are "adapted for the students to obtain the necessary knowledge for employment in the field" of studies, or are personalized in such a way as to convey to the students not only theoretical notions but also "the appropriate language for presentations, the language of conferences and meetings, description of tables and graphs. Students assimilate not only structures, expressions and vocabulary in specific business situations, but also improve their intercultural understanding". More specifically, the program includes a large number of laboratory hours in which students learn practical skills specific to the field. The ease of searching for digital information gives a false sense of security to students when solving problems or exercises", or "the topics addressed in the discipline sheet follow the topics imposed by international conventions, without which the graduates cannot participate in the translator certification exam." Respondents from the Bucharest University believe that "The programs/course sheets are developed in line with the objectives of EU higher education institutions and recognized internationally. Statistically speaking, all graduates have the chance of an immediate job, according to their training" and the respondents from the Babes Bolyai have a similar view, "What the students learn in our class gives them the theoretical foundation that they can then develop through developing practical skills in the labor market. Beyond giving them tools, very restrictive applications, rather it creates for them a theoretical foundation on which they can explore the practice of the subject in areas of interest to them." However, a perspective worth taking into account, and analyzed in detail, is offered by the respondent from the University of Iasi, who believes that "The times when a college degree was enough for a successful career are long gone. For employment today, as important as the theoretical knowledge are the interest, the degree of involvement of the graduates and the experience they bring with them to the potential employer." Thus, in order to be successful on the labor market, it is no longer enough to attend a university's courses, no matter how adapted the curriculum is to the

requirements of the labor market, the degree of involvement of the graduates and the experience they bring is also of major importance. Therefore, at the program level, the strategy approached by the respondents is an adaptive one in such a way as to successfully meet the ever-evolving demands of the labor market.

A question referring to technological development "Referring strictly to your subject, with the increasing importance of the digital environment in our lives, what are the most important behavioral changes you have observed in your students, in the interaction with the theoretical notions and the materials offered!" receives very varied answers, determined by the nature of the subjects taught. Thus, from the respondents coming from philological fields, the unanimous answer is that "we did not notice any important changes in behavior" but one of the respondents also mentions the fact that students "if they do not show enough interest and do not work extra to overcome the shortcomings of the study through online meetings and they will not have an individual program of sustained training, they will, I think, have a more difficult career start, justified by the accumulated shortages". From the answers received from ASE teaching staff, the perception is a little different, "they are better informed with concrete situations in the market, working skills on different simulation platforms, much more practical thinking", the difference being made by the nature of the subjects taught, but and their approach, "teachers must adapt their way of working, to make the courses and seminars much more interactive, which also makes the student much more connected, because he knows that he is not listening to a monologue, but it will be a dialogue. In this period of online courses, the questions addressed to the students are much more frequent, to ask their opinion on a certain subject", apart from the way of approaching the subjects, a change in the actual behavior of the students is also observed, two respondents mentioning that "the students they don't learn the way I used to, maybe, learn when I was like them, but they are much more open to learning using devices, connecting with people in the practical world, being interested and curious to learn a lot many on his own about the subjects they are passionate about. The changes in their way of learning represent our challenge to speak to them "in their language" but also that there is a "decrease in concentration and an increase in individualism".

The vast majority of respondents highlight the positive effects on the learning process, since "the digital environment is the second home of today's student. In the interaction with the theoretical notions and the materials offered, the students concentrated better, became more motivated and curious", or "the attendance at the lectures and seminars, the punctuality of the students, the acquisition of knowledge and the ability to translate it into projects practice has improved considerably since education is also carried out online, through specialized educational software tools. The main change in students' behavior that we found as a result of the interaction with the theoretical notions and materials offered is related to their increased interest in teaching and research activity, highlighted by participation in specialized student scientific events, by publishing articles scientific journals in the university's specialized magazines", to perceptions that also surprise small shortcomings such as "students generally showed a positive behavior, realizing that technology should also be used for study, not just for fun. It was noted, however, a significant need for the development of digital skills" or "the opening of students in the didactic process, in the case of subjects where IT

equipment is used. Attention and the degree of absorption of the concepts taught in this case are higher, at the expense of those in which such facilities are not used."

Some of the respondents see and highlight the negative effects of the digital environment, which lead to the "refusal to read theoretical materials and preference for increasing the application part. They get tired faster, they become more vocal due to working on the computer, which affects their attention and behavior to some extent". But the same person also points out positive effects of digital interaction "to develop digital skills, to be more attentive, to read more, continuous improvement is more emphasized". Other opinions, with more negative implications, come from the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, which observes that the "availability of methods of photo-copying materials with the help of mobile phones decreases the availability of students to take notes in class, reducing their ability to understanding and retention of information." or from the Romanian-American University which surprises the lack of interest of students in studying physical materials "students have given up storing information on paper, they mainly focus on taking notes in digital format - students prefer going through video tutorials to the detriment of reading books".

The overall perception is a positive one, although there is an increase in the degree of fatigue, or difficulties in concentration, due to the interaction strictly through video platforms, or learning platforms, the influence of the digital environment in university life is a positive one, which has increased students' interest in the academia, as well as their involvement in carrying out specific projects and activities.

Respondents gave answers that varied according to the specialization of the study program in which the teachers teach. In the specializations, which emphasize practical teaching activities, the teachers answered that, due to the pandemic and the transition to online courses, the quality of education has decreased. In purely theoretical specializations, no significant changes in behavior are observed. Teachers are forced to adapt their teaching style and use the benefits of digitization in creating interactive teaching materials. Those who have succeeded in doing so are confident in the future of education under the influence of digitization. As a result of using the digital environment, students have developed new skills, they are in step with digitization and they are excited about it. There is also the other side of the coin, students' attention and concentration are low due to the bombardment of information from all fields. Sometimes it is desired to return to classical teaching, but with the preservation of the lessons learned during the online classes. The digital environment has generated visible behavioral changes, both good and bad. Students increasingly use the digital environment in the didactic process, but also for self-improvement; they use more and more "smart" equipment to achieve tasks and learning objectives.

These behavioral changes are due to: technological advancement, interaction with the digital environment from an early age, students' attraction to the digital environment and its applications. Noticed changes in the way homework is prepared - "students prefer to access information directly from the Internet, without passing it through their own filter. The reason would be convenience, and the fact that this is how they were taught to do throughout middle school/high school". Students are aware that checking their activities and results is made difficult by the online teaching system and take advantage of this aspect.

Behavioral changes on students' future employability are perceived by all respondents as having an important influence. The majority answered that the influence would be negative, but there were teachers who said that these changes led to the desire of students to become entrepreneurs or freelancers. Digitization will transform the way of working, so more and more home or remote jobs will appear, which is a good thing for the new generation, which wants to have as much flexibility as possible in its schedule and can work in or with other countries, because they speak several languages.

An important change that will help students easily find a new job throughout their life is that students have a flexible mindset, adaptable and looking for new challenges, they are willing to learn things quickly and continuously us to get/keep a job. Students have every chance to succeed as long as they are motivated and engaged. There were also respondents who were reserved in drawing a conclusion, as there are too many variables to take into account for predicting the chances of employment.

To the question "To what extent do you use up-to-the-minute information from the market, from potential jobs, in your courses/information?" a difference in approach can be seen between the professors from the faculties with a philological profile and those from other profiles. Respondents from the economic field, on the other hand, "use market information to show students what they use the theoretical elements discussed", in proportions varying between 40% and 70% and also "where they can make the connection between companies and a student who is looking for a place of practice/work in the field, I will do it". But there are also answers according to which "The subject sheet is updated annually, taking into account the news in the field" or "Annual accreditation requires us to update our subject sheets according to the requirements imposed by the ministry". However, there is an increased interest of the respondents, regardless of the field of specialization, in harmonizing the information provided to students with the latest information from the market. The central idea is that "students are aware of what is happening in the business environment, become proactive and familiarize themselves with terminology specific to various contexts, therefore the course plan includes cutting-edge information to achieve and maintain a quality university education". There is a high interest in "the development of new methods and results in the fields of interest, the identification of new research directions, based on the dynamics of the evolution of the field".

The question "How often do you update the materials offered to students?" What are the innovative teaching/learning methods you apply in the classroom to be able to increase students' receptivity to the importance of the theoretical concepts taught?" the reasons for updating the materials consisting of "changing the research examples as well as the reading texts, depending on how they worked" or "for the attractiveness of the course and the responsiveness of the students, I try to provide real-life examples, concrete cases from companies, examples of good practices", such as educational videos, role-playing games, debates and translations based on topical content that evokes, for example, the effect of the economic crisis on many companies, business communication, education, etc." Two of the respondents referred to international norms that regulate this activity. As for the innovative teaching methods, they are customized according to the specifics of the studies from "the most important textbooks used in the most prestigious universities", "modern examples of practical applications have been introduced", "as innovative methods I always rely on dialogue,

exchange of roles (role-play) on topics of general interest, but also on specialized topics.", "modern methods give priority to training / put student training before training; , on the development of capacities and skills.", "the use of the video projector, the problematization method, the expository method" or "the use of various teaching - learning - assessment strategies, such as conversation, explanation, exposition, directed observation, assessment during the semester, such as and modern methods of presentation." "Practical-methodical films" were also exemplified. Feedback and inter-relationship', 'techniques, exercises in the training area to actively involve students in our discussions' or 'stimulating thinking and guiding students to choose the themes they want to develop in the projects'. As can be seen, there is an increased interest in practicing innovative methods of teaching and capturing students' attention.

"What do you think should be done in the near future to increase the chances of students engaging in the field of study?" From the answers of the interviewees, the following directions of action were taken to help fulfill the requirement, such as adapting study plans to the new socio-economic conditions and raising standards and requirements, the permanent involvement of students in daily educational activities that develop their skills practical, permanent relationship between the business environment and universities, the understanding and adaptation of teaching staff to the new generations and their expectations. The importance of emphasizing relations through joint activities of universities with companies from various fields, viable and long-lasting partnerships, the complete readjustment of the high school curriculum, so that students enter the university with a much more useful body of knowledge, the increase in demand to the specific subjects, counseling and permanent motivation of students or emphasizing relations through joint activities of universities with companies in various fields, viable and long-lasting partnerships.

Regarding the realization of the structure and requirements of the discipline sheet, if we discuss with representatives of the business environment and/or public institutions, from the answers received, we deduce that the realization of the discipline sheet is done only through a limited consultation of the business environment. The realization of the discipline sheet is corroborated with the expectations of professional associations and representative employers in the field, through a permanent dialogue and various joint projects, as well as by making available software products, tutorials and up-to-date teaching materials.

Regarding the "future skills and abilities that students must develop, especially in order to increase their chances of employment in the studied field" the respondents had similar visions, the ideas going on the development of soft skills, creativity and communication being a point of convergence in the answers analyzed "creativity, dedication, personal example - everything for personal physical performance and for those around us" or "seriousness in approaching work and knowing how to communicate", "assertive communication, time management, leadership, emotional intelligence", "communication skills, decision-making and relevant analysis of a situation", "strategic thinking, communication skills, analytical thinking", one respondent mentioned, in addition to the above, "computer skills to use the calculation technique ". There were respondents who, however, emphasized the importance of developing the student's technical capabilities by increasing the "ability to collect and critically analyze information, to effectively communicate results, by developing skills

in the use of computing technologies, those related to of fundamental and specialized notions". The conclusion was drawn by one of the respondents who stated that "employers mainly focus on 3 basic criteria: professional skills, previous experience and attitude. In the university training of students, in the didactic and research process, the first criterion (professional skills) is improved, practical activities contribute to the second criterion (previous experience), and successes in the two previous criteria lead to the adoption of to the graduate of a positive, open, fair attitude towards work, colleagues and employers".

The last question in the study is one related to internships, "And in conclusion, how important are internships in university curricula for increasing the employability of students upon completion of their studies?" Have you ever supported this discipline? How does it relate to what you teach? If it were up to you, how would you see this activity carried out to bring maximum benefit to the students?" through this we wanted to find out the respondents' perception of the importance and way of organizing student internships. Their importance is unanimously recognized as follows: "I believe that internships are extremely important for the subsequent employment process of students, because they give them a first idea of what is required in the market and what awaits them in the labor market.", "For a vocational faculty, internships are a priority", "They are essential and their coordination by a teacher, together with a person from the company, is the effective option for a practice that ensures the learning of practical things, not the performance of meaningless actions for the student. " or "Yes it is very important, it is mandatory that the practical activities carried out are in accordance with the student's specialization". Along with the answers to this question came suggestions regarding their organization and/or improvement "Increasing business-university collaborations; Ensuring practice places for all students; Grades awarded to students based on demonstrating mastery of the concrete practical aspects they faced during the internships.". Another suggestion worth taking into account is stated by one of the respondents who come from the economic field and who believes that the practice "should be carried out annually, at the end of the semester to check the level of practical, not just theoretical, knowledge of the students".

4. Conclusion

The pandemic context had an impact on the implementation of internships, and two of the respondents noticed this aspect, "Internships "without practice", i.e. only "watching", have, in my opinion, almost zero effect. Practice, I think, is important especially if it was "performed", individually, by the student, doing, not just watching" or "In the conditions of an online education it is difficult to address the issue." An idea that summarizes the ideas circulated is that "Internships form students' skills and abilities, but they are important because they prepare future employees for an easier integration into the labor market. It is important to support and guide students in practical research activities that give them an idea of what it means to have a job that requires scientific, not just applied, research activity".

On whether the respondents conduct research/feedback data collection among students with the aim of identifying the extent to which they covered their needs and expectations, regarding the subject/subjects taught, a general conclusion is that feedback data collection is done among students, through periodic evaluations and

quizzes, through the organization of sessions and conferences; based on this data, the teaching system and the content of the courses organized later are adapted.

In conclusion, the qualitative study highlights a multitude of perspectives, which bring clarifications regarding the issues addressed. The ideas expressed within each theme addressed reflect the concerns of the educational system, concerns marked by the sudden transition to online teaching, evaluation, and communication activities between all parties involved. The directions outlined as a result of the content analysis represent satisfactory elements of the approach to the research objectives, at the same time they can also represent starting points for future studies, of a qualitative and quantitative nature.

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