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Universities in the process of co-working with the labor market

Universidades en proceso de co-trabajo con el mercado laboral

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Abstract

The current research focuses on investigating several generations of graduates to observe the level of absorption of graduates in the labor market in the context of improvements in educational policies. A longitudinal research design was used, a panel study with a prospective design. The research method was a questionnaire-based social survey. The results show that there are significant generational differences regarding the level of assimilation in the labor market, the degree of employment in the field of studies, and the level of satisfaction of the participants. Gender differences were observed in the timing of participants' jobs. Also, labor market absorption is dependent on the field of study, despite educational policies.

Keywords: employability, employment status, professional insertion, tertiary education.

Introduction

Higher education has been widely accepted as having multiple roles for both the individual and society. According to the Ministry of Education from Romania (2019), there are four essential

Resumen

La investigación actual se centra en investigar varias generaciones de graduados para observar el nivel de absorción de los graduados en el mercado laboral en el contexto de mejoras en las políticas educativas. Se utilizó un diseño de investigación longitudinal, un estudio de panel con un diseño prospectivo. El método de investigación fue una encuesta social basada en cuestionarios. Los resultados muestran que existen diferencias generacionales significativas en cuanto al nivel de asimilación en el mercado laboral, el grado de empleo en el campo de los estudios y el nivel de satisfacción de los participantes. Se observaron diferencias de género en el momento de los trabajos de los participantes. Además, la absorción del mercado laboral depende del campo de estudio, a pesar de las políticas educativas.

Palabras clave: empleabilidad, situación laboral, inserción profesional, educación terciaria.

functions that higher education has: (1) education has significant implications for the economic prosperity of every individual, every community, and every nation; (2) cultural implications

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through which values and traditions are transmitted from generation to generation, are shaped to reflect cultural and economic developments and are anchored in contemporary social realities; (3) social role that offers each individual the opportunity to accumulate knowledge and ideas and develop the attitudes and skills necessary to become an informed and active citizen; and (4) personal development that enables learning throughout life as a vital direction in our contemporary society. Technologies and rapid developments have changed the business environment, and production processes, and increased competition at the local and global levels. Therefore, a well-educated workforce is crucial in today's competitive world.

At the macro level, some attempts to assess the graduate professional path may be highlighted. For instance, the European Union has implemented a study - Eurograduates - intending to try a unitary assessment of professional insertion. The study represents part of a wider project, which aims to create a single evaluation mechanism for European universities (Eurograduate, 2022).

In Romania, the purpose of university studies is in-depth learning, the development of expert-level skills in the field of study, as well as research and innovation in the field of study. University and postgraduate studies are built on the principle of interdisciplinarity and consider the dynamics of demand on the labor market at the regional and national level, based on medium and long-term development scenarios. In a dynamic labor market, universities offer adults the possibility to continuously develop in their professions or add skills that allow them to access new professions. Furthermore, the universities involve the economic sector in the individual support of the students for the integration into the work from the period of studies and thus achieve a good insertion in their active life.

Under these circumstances, the purpose of this study is to critically investigate if higher education from Romania meets the requirements of the labor market. It is important to highlight that Argos and Ezquerro (2014) consider that employability represents "a complex and polysemantic concept that includes different types of skills, and the graduates must display "proactive adaptability" which involves a good understanding of their future careers, good adaptability, and excellent communication skills (Asonitou, 2015).

Literature Review

The Importance of higher education for the global workforce

Higher education was described as any type of formal education done in a post-secondary institution of learning that results in acquiring a degree, diploma, or certificate of higher studies (Britannica, 2022). Related to the benefits of general education for their students, the four most important aspects were identified: (1) career preparation, (2) broader practical benefits, (3) personal development, and (4) pursuing a passion (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016). Furthermore, Daniel (2014) adds that the environment that surrounds these higher education institutions is becoming more complex, and at the same time, factors such as global economic, political, and social change pressure these institutions to equip their students properly so they can be relevant to the global job market. Higher education institutions are perceived, in general, as knowledge producers, promoters of innovation, supporters of entrepreneurial potential, leaders in the economy and civic societies, and most notably, knowledge pioneers (Bejinaru, 2017).

Moreover, when it comes to higher education, De Moura Castro & Levy (2015) stated that it has for functions: (1) academic leadership, (2) professional development, (3) technological training and development, and (4) general higher education. One crucial role that higher education has is related to the constant need to change, update, and upgrade the curriculum to maintain relevance in the market (Gursoy et al., 2012). The same author stated that the curriculum can be split into three sub-elements that are crucial for both the students and the employers: (1) skills, (2) knowledge, and (3) values. Jack et al., (2017) argue that the most common problem of higher education is that it fails to deliver more than knowledge resulting in a lack of necessary skills and the main purpose of higher education institutions should be to fill the spaces between knowledge and practice. Even so, according to Gursoy et al., (2012), working experience is important but managerial skills are even more so. As an argument, Jack et al., (2017) added that although skills and experience are the most important, they are not the only features needed to succeed. Higher education institutions must constantly change and adapt to the needs of the market so they can deliver the best future employees, regardless of the industry (Katajavuori, Lindblom-Ylänne, & Hiroven, 2006; Alexakis & Jiang, 2019).

Hard skills and soft skills - an asset for future graduates

In the era of the 21st century, where career opportunities are present at every company's door, and in every industry, it is almost impossible for freshly graduated students to recognize and choose their career paths (Balcar, 2016). The first academic year should be the period when students experience industries according to their area of interest, while the following year should be the time when they can experiment with different ideas, applying the theoretical knowledge they received (Landry et al., 2011). Along with the development of the workforce, Gore et al., (2011) sustain that career paths have become more diverse and eminent since individuals make career decisions within an increasingly dynamic organizational societal, and global environment.

Specialized bodies such as the National Qualifications Authority (NQA) propose elements of national policies and strategies to better coordinate the occupational and training profiles (Ministry of Education, 2022b). At the European level, a European Skills, Competences, Qualifications, and Occupations (ESCO) body has been set up to bridge the gap between the world of education and training and the world of work, helping to reduce skills mismatches and support a better functioning labor market (European Commission, 2022).

Skills are divided into hard skills (technical skills that usually involve or are associated with using equipment, data, and software) and soft skills (Chell, Athayde, 2011). The second category comprises interpersonal skills which refer to the ability to interact with oneself, and interpersonal skills that relate to interacting with others around us (Laker, Powell, 2011). Experiential learning exercises in the form of internships, computer-assisted instructions, and live cases are the best methods to transfer generic or soft skills such as communication, writing, interpersonal skills, judgment, and analytical skills (Culpin, Scott, 2012). Soft skills have high value and potential but even so, the education systems focus far more on hard skills. Hard skills attached to a qualification are crucial for employability and success. Even so, Balcar (2016) studies have shown that both hard and soft skills translate equally into wages. His findings revealed that hard skills and soft skills prove productive only when used together. Weber & Crawford (2016) reported that even though many skills are important, personality comes first. Necessary to perform well at the workplace are self-awareness

and self-management capabilities that come from an intrinsic drive and motivation (Johnson et al., 2016).

More complex skills, such as decision-making, critical thinking, task planning, communication skills, and team management skills, are looked for in candidates or employees with the advancement in terms of occupied position on the hierarchical scale of a company (Chiang, Saw, 2018; Weber, Crawford, 2016). According to Merchante and Ortega (2012 cited in Sheehan et al., 2018), while studying the productivity leaks of different companies, one of the main sources identified was the differences between the education level required by the company versus the actual education level of employees. The same authors further stated that small and medium hospitality establishments are forced to hire underperforming employees due to a lack of alternatives which often leads to blockers in growth and expansion for the business and reduced quality products and services which translate directly into numerous negative effects on the overall performance of the business.

Overview of the professional insertion of recent graduates in the European Union

It has been widely accepted that Europe has been the epicenter of higher education providing high-quality students and graduates through famous universities and renowned institutions (Ye, 2022). In 2020, the UniRank database showed that in Europe there are 2725 officially recognized higher-education institutions of which 1922 are public and 777 are private. An interesting finding was that 97% of the top 200 universities in Europe are represented by public institutions demonstrating a high involvement of the governments. Moreover, according to Eurostat (2022), the European Union had 17.5 million tertiary education students divided as follows: 59.9% are represented by students studying for a bachelor's degree, 29.5% studying for a master's degree and 3.8% are studying for a doctoral degree.

Professional integration has been proven to be a challenging process that most people, especially young adults, must struggle to carry out on their own (Neagu, 2015). At the same time, the educational system frequently claims that its obligation toward the public ends as soon as students become graduates. On the other hand, employers, considered to be the main players in the labor market, are interested in recruiting and hiring qualified personnel yet, in most cases, they refuse to contribute to the professional and

personal development of those who apply for job opportunities. It is a certainty that the labor market consists of both people who offer their labor force and whom they ask for it (Maquera-Luque et al., 2021). In this labor context, Monteiro (2022) explains that the demand-supply imbalances associated with this specific market may be attributed to various factors, in addition to the conventional ones. Additional elements including institutional, social, demographic, and cultural ones could serve for a more thorough interpretation of such imbalances. Job placement is not only related to people's lives and aspirations but is considered a process that establishes clear directions in every job market with obvious consequences for a person's professional progression (García-Blanco and Cardenas Sempertegui, 2018).

The professional integration of recent graduates and the effective measures that could be adopted is a priority for all members of the European Union. A recent study conducted by Eurostat (2021) showed that the European Union had the highest employment rate (79.6%) among those who graduated with a tertiary education compared with previous years. According to this research, 36.6% of young Romanians, between the ages of 15 and 34, work in other fields than those for which they have trained. The skills mismatch is defined as the discrepancy between a person's current occupation and the qualification according to the degree. Of the 30 European countries analyzed, the best placed, with the lowest job mismatch rates, are Iceland, with 17%, and Switzerland, with 20% while at the end of the ranking, we can see Romania (36.6%), France (35.4%) and Slovakia (35%). The discrepancies between the design of the curricula provided by higher education institutions and the demands of employers can generate an impenetrable gap and can cause skills mismatch. This is one of the main reasons why universities are becoming concerned with the professional integration of graduates into the labor markets, designing institutional mechanisms to facilitate students' transition to the workforce (Silva et al., 2016).

Ensuring the correlation of the higher education system with the requirements of the labor market continues to be both a priority and a challenge for Romania in recent years, with many solutions being identified using European funds within the sectoral operational programs regarding education and training to integrate into the labor market (Ministry of Education, 2022a). One of the most important measures regarding the

correlation of university study programs with the requirements of the labor market is the promotion of entrepreneurial education (European Commission, 2022).

From the perspective of human capital, the national vision is to create a Romania with equal access to sustainable, quality employment, and an education system relevant to the labor market, stimulating lifelong learning. Considering these ambitious goals of the Romanian authorities through action bodies as well as the intentions of higher education institutions to deliver highly qualified human capital and prepared for the real needs of the labor market, through this study the authors aimed to investigate the indirect impact of educational policies on the level of employability, in the case of a comprehensive university.

Methodology

The authors chose a longitudinal research design, which involves measuring the investigated phenomenon in successive moments, from 2015 to 2021. The interest of the research is focused on how the employability rate evolved following the introduction of educational policies aimed at bringing the university educational offer closer to the labor market requirements. The panel study was based on a prospective model therefore, the information was collected from the moment the research started (2015), and in several later moments (2016-2021) continuously. Under these circumstances, the research method used was the questionnaire survey. The decision regarding choosing the appropriate research instrument was based on the aim of the research, in correlation with the need to capture the complexity of the research topic. For this article, one data collection instrument was considered, to gain a detailed understanding of the professional insertion of recent graduates in Romania.

Results and Discussion

One of the largest comprehensive universities in Romania, with a long tradition in tertiary education, having been established in 1948, was chosen as representative. It has 18 faculties covering all fundamental fields and offers 101 bachelor's programs, 79 master's, programs, and 19 doctoral study programs, benefiting approximately 20,000 students annually. The data collection procedure was as follows: a research instrument was constructed - a questionnaire that graduates completed one year after their graduation. This moment was not chosen by chance, but it was thoroughly

considered because, in Romania, a diploma is issued one year after graduation. When the former students came to collect their diplomas,

they were asked to fill out the questionnaire – the research tool decided.

Table 1.
Responses rate

Number of filled questionnaires*	Total/Year
Graduates 2021	14
Graduates 2020	705
Graduates 2019	1926
Graduates 2018	1217
Graduates 2017	1097
Graduates 2016	2743
Total	7702

*According to data collected until 10.03

Furthermore, for the study, the rights and obligations of each research participant were explained to those who agreed to participate in the survey. Moreover, any graduate that wanted to participate in the research completed an informed consent document from the beginning of the collection year (2016), as we can observe in Table 1. Responses rate. According to a specific procedure, the questionnaires were adapted to different levels of study – bachelor, master, and Ph.D.

Sociodemographic features of participants

To analyze the data collected through the questionnaires, the IBM SPSS Statistic Tool was used, and the results showed a total number of 7702 participants divided for all years researched. Under these circumstances, most participants (35,6%) completed the questionnaire in 2016 while the lowest number was registered in 2021 (0,2%) mainly because all data was collected until March 2023. The age range of the respondents was not divided into any groups, with each participant being asked to provide the age. According to the descriptive statistics, out of 7702 participants, the youngest involved was 21 years old while the oldest person was 69 years old, the mean being 26.68 years with a standard deviation of 6.024. Important to mention is that the highest number of participants involved in the study was 24 years of age (22,4%) which is justified because they completed the questionnaire when collecting their diplomas.

Regarding gender, the authors decided to run a chi-square goodness-of-fit test to identify if there are statistically significant differences in the percentages of females and males that decided to complete the questionnaire. According to the results, $\chi^2(1) = 224.05$, $p < .0005$ therefore,

women were more interested to complete the questionnaire than men one reason being the higher number of women graduates.

The research aims and objectives

The aim of the research consists in assessing some characteristics of the professional itinerary of graduates, by following them in time in a longitudinal way, to find out if there are differences regarding the professional pathways between the considered generations.

Research objectives are: to critically investigate the differences between generations regarding the level of absorption in the labor market; to examine the differences between generations regarding the degree of employment in the field of studies; to analyze the existing relationships between the level of student satisfaction with the graduate study program and the level of insertion; to inspect the existing relationships between the time of employment in the first job (during studies or after completion) and the gender of participants; to identify the level of absorption in the labor market according to the graduated faculties. For the study and in-depth analysis, five hypotheses were formulated to reveal the level of insertion of recent graduates from the university involved.

1. There are significant differences between generations regarding the level of assimilation in the labor market.
2. There are differences between generations regarding the level of insertion in the field of studies.
3. There is a relationship between the level of satisfaction of the students regarding the graduate study program and the level of insertion.

4. There are significant differences between gender regarding the time of employment in the first job (during studies or after completion);
5. There are differences between graduated faculties regarding the level of absorption in the labor market.

The study premises and analysis of results involve the presence of significant generational differences regarding the level of absorption in the labor market. The seven thousand seven hundred and two total respondents who have completed the questionnaire have answered five different sections of the survey, changing from answers with open answers, to score allocation and rating priorities to keep the engagement activities throughout the entire time, as well as to

fully complete a graduate profile and test the accuracy of the answers.

When testing the first hypothesis, a chi-square test was run to determine if there were differences between the graduation year and the status of graduates in the labor market. As we can see in Figure 1. The relationship between variables: Graduation year and Status on the labor market, there are differences between the analyzed generations regarding their status on the labor market. The main categories were employed, business ownership, and unemployed. There were no outliers in the data as assessed by inspection of a boxplot. Under these circumstances, there is a significant difference between the year of graduation and the status of graduates in the labor market, as the test demonstrated $\chi^2(10) = 45.04, p < 0.0005$.

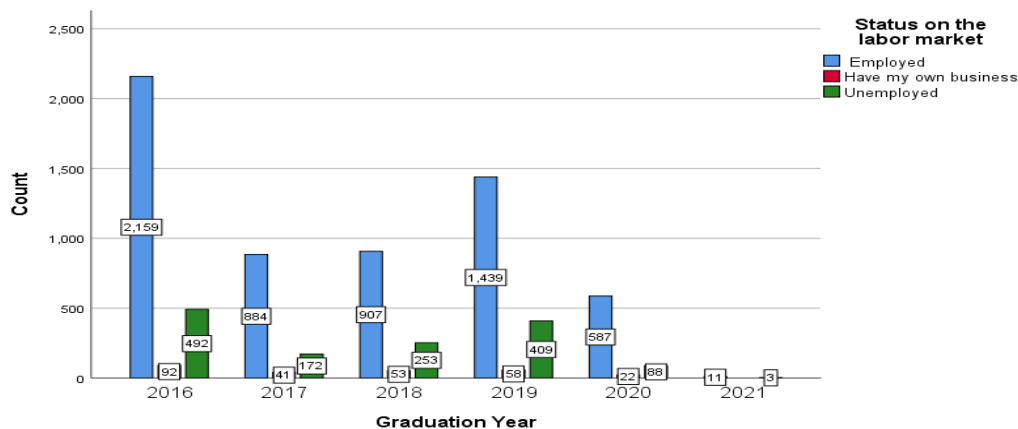


Figure 1. The relationship between variables: Graduation year and Status in the labor market

Furthermore, the researchers intended to investigate if there is a close relationship between the generations and their work field to fully understand if the widely known phenomenon, the skills mismatch was visible in the previous years. According to Eurostat (2021), only 36.6% of Romanian graduates are working in their field of studies but running a chi-square test has statistically shown that there is a significant difference between the graduation year and their work field, as the test demonstrated $\chi^2(5) = 24.88,$

$p < 0.0001$. As the figure displays (Figure 2. The relationship between variables: Graduation year and Employment in the field of studies), the highest number of graduates that are having a job according to their studies is from 2016. As the results showed, 2016 is the year with the greatest number of participants (2743 out of 7702) and the year when employability was at a high level. Interesting to observe is that the graduates of 2016 in comparison with other years are working in their field of study.

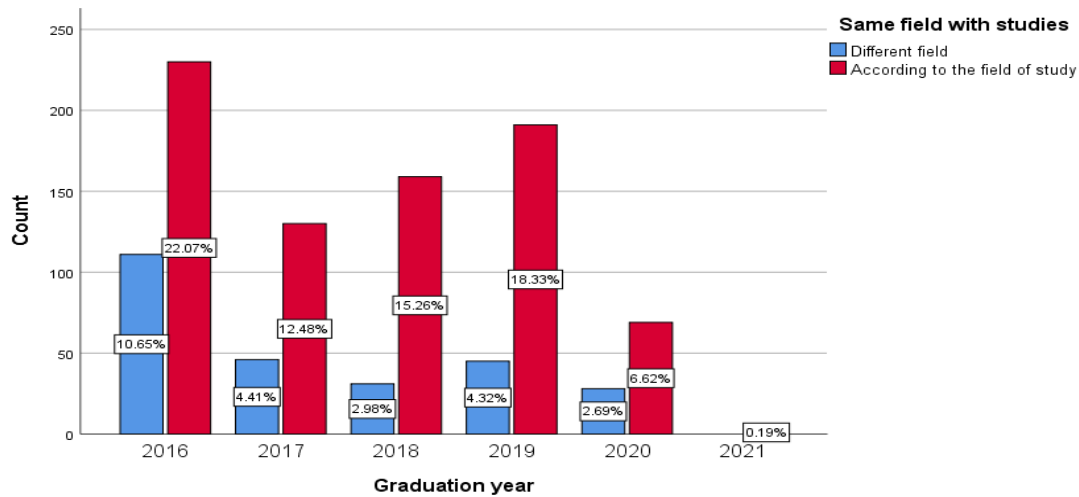


Figure 2. The relationship between variables: Graduation year and Employment in the field of studies

Moreover, the research focuses on observing if there are associations between the graduation year and the level of satisfaction of the graduates. To constantly improve the curricula to successfully match the industry requirements, most universities recognize the importance of self-actualization following the dynamic, globalized labor market. Therefore, the analysis was conducted, and the results showed that 80% of all respondents stated that, regardless of the graduation year, they are satisfied to a large extent or totally with the knowledge received

throughout their program of study (Figure 3. The relationship between variables: Graduation year and the degree of satisfaction). Analysis of the results obtained shows that there are significant differences between generations, as the test demonstrated $\chi^2(20) = 33.68, p < 0.05$. Analyzing the data obtained, we observe a progressive increase between the years 2016-2019, which explains the impact of educational policies adopted both at a national and local level at the university under investigation.

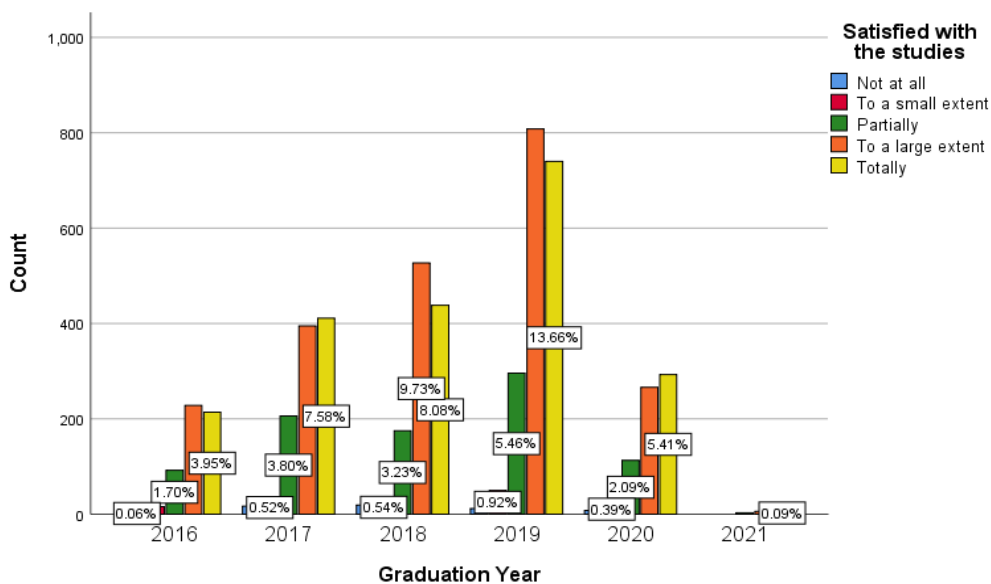


Figure 3. The relationship between variables: Graduation year and the degree of satisfaction

For the fourth hypothesis, the researchers aimed to investigate if gender had influenced their time of employment in the first job respondents. The analysis demonstrated that 66% of all

respondents managed to have their first job during their undergraduate studies.

The results confirmed what Guroy et. al (2012) stated highlighting the idea that working

experience is important but managerial skills are even more so, according to and as a logical extension to be successful at the point of graduation, the students must have a firm grasp of both operational and managerial skills. At the same time, it is important to mention that, according to the analysis researchers performed ($\chi^2(5) = 13.006, p < .0005$), women who graduated from the investigated university managed to successfully obtain their first job

during their undergraduate studies same as the men graduates, therefore, there is a clear association between gender and the period when respondents decided to apply for a first job (Figure 4. The relationship between variables: Gender of participants and the moment of the first job). The results contradict Eurostat (2021) which stated that even though there are more females than men who graduate, men are more inclined to be absorbed in the labor market.

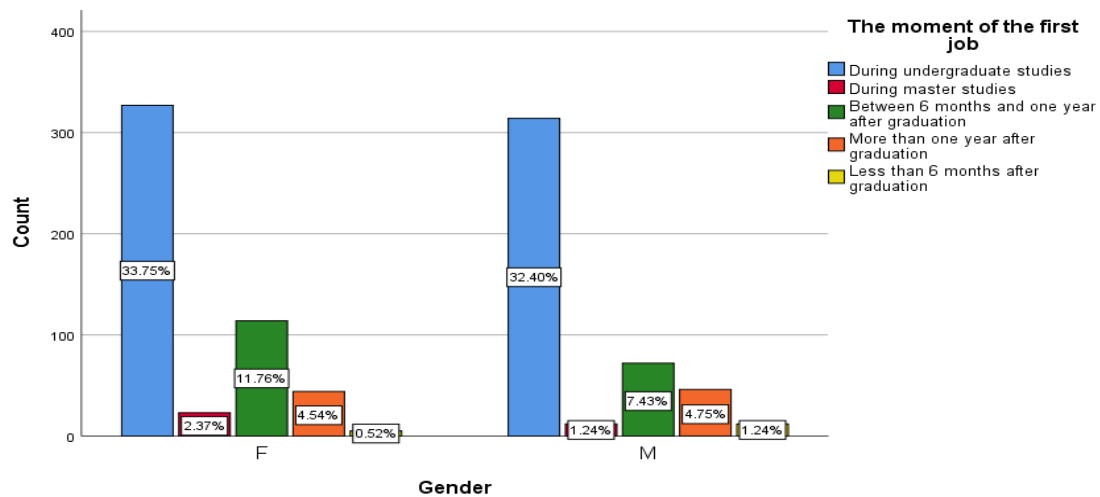


Figure 4. The relationship between variables: Gender of participants and the moment of the first job

When investigating whether there are possible associations between the type of faculty students graduated from and the level of absorption into the labor market, the results showed that those graduates who completed their studies at a faculty with higher applicability also have a higher insertion rate (Figure 5). The relationship between variables: Faculties and Employment status).

This confirms what Eurostat (2021) stated regarding the low integration of students who graduate from applied science faculties. Pearson χ^2 test results for the association of variables

indicate that Employment Status differs according to the faculty graduated, as the test demonstrated $\chi^2(36) = 424.26, p < 0.0001$. Those who complete educational programs such as Economics and Business Administration, Medicine, Food, and Tourism have a better chance of being absorbed into the labor market. Those who complete highly specialized degree programs such as Wood Industry, Materials Science, and Engineering have the lowest chances. Most entrepreneurs come from Economics Business Administration and Mechanical Engineering.

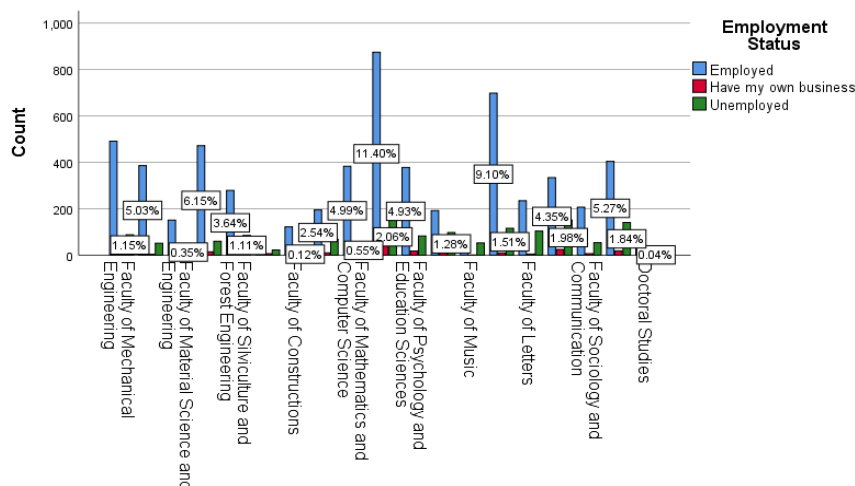


Figure 5. The relationship between variables: Faculties and Employment Status

Conclusions

This research investigated the indirect impact of educational policies on the level of employment in the case of a comprehensive university. In carrying out the research, essential aspects resulting from strategies and operational plans starting from 2016 were considered, analyzing the strategic objectives aimed at promoting an educational system based on a good transition from school to the labor market.

Consequently, several implemented projects were considered, which allowed the improvement of the transition process from the university to the labor market under different aspects: optimizing the professional path by developing collaboration with the economic environment; improving communication between universities, students, graduates, and companies by combining classic and modern communication tools; integrating the approach to the problems of the professional route – skills, orientation, and involvement.

There is an obvious connection between the level of insertion and the practical skills graduates obtained through their first job during the undergraduate program that enabled them to better blend theoretical knowledge with practical ones. It is essential for any university to constantly stimulate students to apply for jobs during their studies so they can apply all theoretical knowledge in various professional environments. Apart from this, students can discover more about their field of study and at the same time, they can establish quality networks that will eventually turn into different opportunities.

The hypotheses of the study have been confirmed, so we can affirm that there are differences between generations in the level of assimilation into the labor market, many of which are due to the change in university education policies in favor of the graduate, to ensure the highest degree of employability. One of the educational policies supported and developed has been the maintenance of close relations with the economic environment, enhanced by the creation of multiple internship opportunities and part-time student employment. The findings of our study show that those who participate in internships or are employed during their studies are more likely to find a job after graduation. Our findings are consistent with other studies (Nunley et al., 2016; Baert et al., 2021).

There were also notable differences between generations in terms of employment in the professional field of study completed. The level of satisfaction of the graduates showed a visible progression, both from year to year and within the categories referring to their employability status (unemployed, employed, self-employed). Interesting to note is the high proportion of research participants who have been engaged since the time of their studies, the results highlighting the existence of gender differences in this regard, with female representatives engaging at a higher rate compared to male students. This finding contradicts recent studies that highlight that being a woman and especially completing social science studies is a risk factor (Monteiro, 2020).

However, educational policies aimed at facilitating labor market integration do not act in the same way for all fields of study. The results obtained in this research show that there are fields where labor market take-up is lower than in others. Thus, the highest employment rates were presented by the graduates of the faculties of economics and business administration (874 graduates were employed), faculty of medicine (698 employed graduates), and those with the lowest employment were the graduates of the faculty of furniture design and wood engineering (79 employed graduates) and Civil Engineering (122 employed graduates).

One of the limitations of the study is represented by the fact that the results cannot be extrapolated to the entire Romanian graduate population. As the data are self-reported, they may also be biased by factors such as social desirability. Another limitation was the large number of incomplete questionnaires completed. This limitation was reduced to some extent by not including in the study those participants who did not provide sufficient data. Also, the data collected for the 2021 generation is not conclusive, as not enough data was collected and the process is still ongoing.

As a final appreciation, the process of transition from university to the labor market is continuously improved, as the labor market is a very dynamic one – due to specific causes and, also, to unexpected causes – and the university tries to adapt to its changes. This process might be considered a difficult one, as the process of adaptation is most of the time harder to realize in real-time with the labor market changes.

The study has both theoretical implications, as it establishes some aspects that might become components of insertion general assessment – employment status, employment in the fields of study, degree of satisfaction -, as well as practical implications, by carrying out an analysis that goes from the macro level – a general level and without focusing on issues related to each educational institution in particular – to a micro level (the university) - allowing the analysis to be framed in the national and European context.

Following the interpretation of these results, we consider it necessary that the skills offerings that universities provide to future graduates include more transversal competencies as well as an increased focus on the contexts for putting competencies into practice. This will allow students not only to test their theoretical

knowledge but also to adapt their knowledge to the socio-economic reality.

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