

# Opportunities and Difficulties in Conducting Internships in Higher Education from the Employers' Perspective

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**Abstract:** The university and the labor market are closely related, both in terms of formative function, but especially, nowadays, in terms of economic role. Academic curricula can no longer be conceived effectively and pragmatically, without consulting employers on the type and level of skills of graduate students and taking into consideration the current labor market demands. From this perspective, several aspects like organizing the internship, the content, the volume and the quality of the specialized practice are current issues on the agenda of the cooperation among institutions responsible for training future specialists. Our study aims to analyze the first results obtained at Vasile Alecsandri University of Bacau within the 2018 FDI Project CECIM - Efficient Communication and Educational Counselling for Integration on the Labor Market. In July 2018, a round table was organized at the university, on the subject "New Partnerships – New Opportunities for students"; more than 40 employers participated at this event. The discussions were conducted by applying a guided interview to the employers. The current study focusses on the employers' view regarding the best opportunities and the pressing difficulties that may occur during the internships and that may affect the students' professional practice. The data analysis of the 26 employers' point of view may represent, for the university, a chance to reorganize and restructure its approach to students' professional practice in collaboration with economic agents. The results reveal the reality of the current relation between the university and employers concerning students' professional practice and new possibilities for further collaboration.

**Keywords:** *education; professional competence; internship; employers; employability; labor market;*

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## **1. Internships – a current formative strategy to optimize the correspondence between university and labor market**

The university and the labor market represent two distinct but inseparable realities, both by their nature and, especially, by their results. In his study entitled *Employability in higher education: What it is - What it is not*, Yorke argues that the issue of the relationship between the two pillars is not new; as of 1963, the Robbins Report (Morris, 2006, 3) has formulated one of the goals of higher education in terms of providing a didactic process that would make students fit to play a role in the general division of labor.

Although both involve selecting, preparing and capitalizing on (in particular) young generations to produce surplus value, each performs these in a specific way. While the university assumes a more general formative role in training a specialist within a professional and cultural horizon, the labor market tends towards specialized, topical training through direct reporting to a specific field of activity and to a job involving a well-defined occupational profile, explicit competences and skills. From this perspective, the university is called upon to reconsider its mission, to give it a new meaning, which can no longer reside only within the temple of the classic humanist ideal. In the new approach, the university must become more pragmatic, innovative (European Commission, 2016) (not only in the field of research!), look for useful strategies to bring the labor market into the classroom (Tran, 2016). Moreover, Dearthoff, de Vit, Heyl, and Adams (2012) argue that the economic function of the university transgresses the local and regional level, aiming to build, at graduates, professional skills and training for a globalized competitive labor market. From this point of view, the university and the labor market are mutually supportive and complementary despite the differences and, sometimes, divergences between them. The link between them is highlighted by employability, and the level of the latter is the expression of the real degree of correspondence between them. A very successful systematization of these close relationships of interdependence can be traced in the analysis carried out by Ambepitiya (2016: 116) and the model elaborated by him.

A gradual and effective transition from school to the world of labor is crucial to increasing graduate integration chances, so that the main target of the Europe 2020 Employment Strategy of up to 75% may be achieved (Council of the European Union, 2014). At the same time, current data in the Romania Country Report 2018 highlight several problems at European level that seem to be a negative mark of the integration of graduates into the labor market and that also reflect the situation in our country: active labor

market policies (ALMPs) appear insufficient in scope and design; limited skill forecasting capacities could further affect labor supply; the involvement of social partners in policy making is very limited (European Commission, 2018b: 25-26). Against this background, another document of the same year, the Council Recommendation on the National Reform Program of Romania for 2018 which includes a Council Opinion on the Convergence Program of Romania for 2018 (European Commission, 2018a) reveals that, in our country, there are a series of phenomena that do not facilitate at all the graduates' transition to the labor market: the labor market has become more rigid; there is still a great potential for labor that remains unexploited; in 2017, little progress has been made in addressing the specific recommendation to strengthen activation policies; there has been little impact on the supply of relevant skills and support for transition to jobs; cooperation between public employment services, social and education service providers and external suppliers has remained limited. Under these circumstances, the Romania Country Report 2018 analyzes 4 “main challenges for the education system as a driver of growth in Romania” and the third one is that “the link of education to the labor market remains weak, despite recent measures” (European Commission, 2018b: 31).

### ***1.1. University and labor market***

The issues mentioned above are common problems of the relationship between the university and the labor market, manifested in all economies, both in central and western Europe, and elsewhere. Thus, Helyer and Lee (2014) argue that, in the UK, graduates cannot find jobs and it is the responsibility of universities to try to find ways to diminish this negative aspect. In this respect, the authors argue that overcoming this failure can only be achieved by a mutual step towards a connection between universities and the labor market representatives where universities should “foster formative ideas on how higher education institutions can support their students to develop the skills employers require, but also the importance of engaging employers fully in such activities, in order to maximize on positive outcomes” (Heyler & Lee, 2014: 2). The paradox underlying this requirement is that while the training of students for a position on the labor market is done in the university, only employers and firms can recognize and validate it. Hence some of the inconsistencies, the differences identified in their training (European Commission, 2016). At the same time, we should also consider the pressures that the labor market itself undergoes in a globalized competitive economy that generates increasing demands for employers, which is why graduates may perceive them as unreasonable and

in contradiction to the training offered in the university. All these support the essential character of the collaboration between the two poles and explain the impressive number of studies on this topic (Tran, 2016).

In practice, it is about a double opening: of higher education institutions towards employers and of employers towards universities and students that may lead, together, to generating and capitalizing on meaningful work experience (Wilton, 2012). From this perspective, “students and employers can be taken as real clients in higher education” (Weligamage, 2009: 117).

At the same time, in a logically correct approach, Helyer and Lee (2014) argue that, in order to identify ways to increase the employability of graduates, the first step is to know the causes that maintain its low level. From their point of view, the most serious causes are: economic recession; unemployment among young people (much higher than 25 years ago); the aging of the population and the fact that a growing number of young people choose to study more, delaying the moment of entering the labor market. To this we could add causes specific to our country: the natural decline of the population; labor force migration to the external market; lack of jobs in certain insufficiently developed sectors of activity; significant gaps between the fields and levels of qualification required by the labor market and the flows of graduates offered by higher education; a certain slowness, rigidity in adapting higher education to the labor market in terms of content and training methodologies.

Seeking general solutions to increase the employability of higher education graduates, Helyer and Lee (2014) call for a paradigm shift in understanding the purpose of the university, in terms of results and how to produce them. Thus, the authors believe that universities should make use of more innovative, heuristic ways to build at graduates a creatively entrepreneurship spirit instead of providing them with fixed, algorithmic tools that may no longer be useful in a very close future. These pathways could make the university more appropriate to the demands of the labor market that “values, imagination, creativity and the ability to think outside the box” (Heyler & Lee, 2014: 3).

In a more concrete manner (Bilsland, Nagy, & Smith 2014; Tran, 2016; Weligamage, 2009) focus their analysis on regulating the relationship between the academic, theoretical, scientific dimension of students’ training and the occupational, practical and actional one. The idea of a package of measures for both partners is supported and, on this basis, there are arguments for a realistic and balanced set of 5 challenges for a university-enterprise collaboration. These can be systematized as follows: 1. balancing

the relationship between theoretical and practical training; 2. knowledge and understanding, by employers, of the academic curriculum; 3. “creating authentic case studies, role plays and scenarios that articulate the scope, nature and standard of required skills to students”; 4. development by universities “of a work integrated learning curriculum and assessment”; 5. identification, by both partners, of the best ways to provide students with quality time. These converge towards “mutual understanding of each other's practices in order to design appropriate programs and provide prompt support for students” (Tran, 2016: 65-66). Or, “universities need to focus their efforts on providing quality information and guidance to their students to ensure that they understand the skills or capabilities required by employers” (Li, Morgan, & Ding, 2008, as cited by Speight, Lackovic, & Cooker, 2012: 37).

On the other hand, European bodies stimulate and support, through periodic analyses, the openness between the university and the labor market. The report Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a new skills agenda for Europe, presented in Brussels on 10 June 2016 and subtitled Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness, mentions 10 key initiatives outlining an ambitious European strategy in the long run to ensure the training and integration of graduates on the labor market. Among these, we may mention at least those that highlight the direct link between the university and employers: 1. “More work-based learning and business-education partnerships; 2. More learning at the workplace; 3. More opportunities to validate non-formal and informal learning” (European Commission, 2016: 13).

Until recently, access to university education was the highest level of personal achievement in Romania. This idea is still valid among some of the students and especially among their parents. The traditional cultural model in Romanian society equals one's level of studies to success in life. We are currently seeing a change in perspective in the sense that education has begun to be an investment, and the investor expects a return on their investment (ROI) (Einstein, 2015). This happens after the realization that not every university specialization finds its place on the labor market or that some graduates have a lower chance of finding a job. Understanding this fact builds the awareness that the ROI (Einstein, 2015) becomes impossible or unrealistic. Translating from the paradigm - high level of education = a successful professional - to the pragmatic paradigm focused on ROI (Einstein, 2015) makes more and more students and parents want more

consistent and longer-lasting contact with the labor market and with possible jobs through internships (which is also something that employers want). The willingness of students and parents to increase, in the curriculum, the time spent on internships, to which we add the same demand from employers, causes a very strong pressure on universities that, despite university autonomy, cannot grow this time proportionally with the need. The constraint comes from the legislation in the field of education (Law no. 1/2011) and from the lack of teachers / tutors of practice as well as the insufficient financial resources needed to pay the specialists who ought to supervise this practice.

In the effort to identify ways to overcome these limits and ensure growth in its graduates' employability on the labor market, the Vasile Alecsandri University of Bacau, Romania, has undertaken a series of measures over the last year, such as: as of the 2017-2018 academic year, the compulsory discipline of Entrepreneurship education has been introduced in the academic curricula of all undergraduate study programs; the establishment of the Student Entrepreneurship Society (SAS) on 30 October 2017, an opportunity to reaffirm the institutional opening towards partnerships with the economic and social environment; running a number of projects based on national/international funds that involve collaboration with employers and offering counseling to increase graduates' integration into the labor market; the activities from the project Effective Communication and Educational Counseling for Integration on the Labor Market (CECIM, 2018); knowledge, self-knowledge, professional counseling activities to provide students with tools specific to labor market integration and future career development, conducted by specialists from the Professional Counseling Department (since 2005).

### ***1.2. The Concept of Internship and its Importance***

The specialized literature on internship issues has experienced a strong development over the past 30 years, an expression of the growing interest in this type of formative action. Einstein's (2015) analyses support this perspective, demonstrating how internship has evolved in the US from volunteering to (implicit or explicit) obligation: “from a voluntary learning experience to becoming what is perceived to be a mandatory step up the US career ladder” (Einstein, 2015: 471). In the view of the mentioned author, the internship is presented as a necessary step in the proactive assumption by parents and students of future professional development, a tool for experiential learning and collaboration, a necessary part of career development.

What is internship?

In 2013, while conducting their study, Guile and Lahiff (2013) declared that although the issue of internship has become particularly attractive in recent years, few studies have approached it systematically. In this respect, they make a clear distinction between three ways that can contribute to the professional training of students: internship, work experience and traineeship.

At the same time, it is possible to distinguish between a traditional and a contemporary perspective in understanding internships.

From a traditional perspective these are facilitating contexts in the process of knowing how an organization operates, how to apply in practice the theoretical elements learned during academic activity, an opportunity to become consistent with one's future job and its requirements.

From a contemporary perspective, internships represent important elements for students in the process of shaping their future professional choices, opportunities that offer the chance of training in professional niche areas, an opportunity to see if the organization keeps up with the demands of the contemporary world. Equally, a practice internship is an opportunity to showcase the creative and innovative potential in vivo, an opportunity to grasp the real (professional and general) skills that one needs as a future employee, an opportunity to build employability skills etc.

In the literature on internship, this concept is defined as "one working under supervision as part of a professional training", literally: "resident within a school" (Guile & Lahiff, 2013: 3). In attempting to respond to the same challenge to define internship, other authors call for multiple analyses: 1. internship is the effort to translate academic training into the real economic process (Wisch, 1988, as cited by Mercan, Aksu, Yildirim, & Bucak, 2015: 321); 2. internship refers to investing a period of time in practical learning activities, in any profession, in one or several departments, in order to enhance one's professional training; 3. internship is the process of knowing different sectors of activity, the first practical training where beneficiaries outline and develop their career plan (Demir, 2010, as cited by Mercan, Aksu, Yildirim, & Bucak, 2015: 321). It results that, from any perspective we may conduct the analysis, internship offers a valuable opportunity to learn at work, to acquire relevant professional experience before starting a career (Gateways to the Professions Collaborative Forum, 2011). All the more so as it comprises, during and upon completion of the internship, reflexive tasks that force the student to think about: the way in which the internship allowed the application of theoretical knowledge into practice; whether, how and to what extent the

internship has helped the student to develop professionally and personally; which are the non-achievements of the internship activity; what are the acquisitions made, the areas of progress compared to the pre-internship situation; on what exactly the student should further work.

What differentiates the approaches is not the concept itself, most often understood as a period of practical training for a future career but, especially, how the law regulates its realization in different education systems. From this point of view, we identified at least 2 diametrically opposed approaches: education systems where the law only recommends, suggests, supports the importance of internship but does not regulate it as mandatory (including in Romania); education systems where the law establishes, regulates and obliges graduates to undertake at least one internship (e.g. Germany, Switzerland, United States, Greece, UK) during their studies. We have identified a direct correlation between how the law regulates the issue of internship and its impact on employability and future career development.

Concluding and corroborating the multitude of approaches, surpassing the narrow-reducing and integrating the complex ones, Scholz, Steiner, and Hansmann (2004) appreciate that “an internship is an effective way to shape students’ professional identities, to experience environmental problems in complex real-world contexts, and to develop learning strategies that meet the demands of the labor market” (Scholtz, Steiner, & Hansmann, 2004: 27). Regardless of the perspective, there is no doubt about its importance. But in what exactly does its importance reside?

We offer a brief systematization of some of the most relevant arguments in favor of internships from the perspective of higher education. Their presentation will highlight them from a quadruple perspective: students, university, employers and the community as representing, in order of relevance, the most significant beneficiaries (Bilsland et al., 2014; Briggs & Daly, 2012; Einstein, 2015; Guile & Lahiff, 2013; Hergert, 2011; Helyer & Lee, 2014; Mercan et al., 2015; O’Leary, 2013; Scholz et al., 2004; Speight et al., 2012; Tran, 2016; Vairis, Loulakakis, & Petousis, 2014):

- internships provide students with the possibility to learn practically, through action, experience and collaboration; the authentic (not abstract or simulated!) context of translating the theoretical learning experience into the real action field is understood as relevant work experience;
- provide students with a minimal practical work experience before the actual employment, which is extremely useful both in training skills and facilitating a job;

- generate, for universities, the ability to adapt, reconsider, update curricula based on relevant feedback in action that is rapidly received, both from students and employers;
- create, for universities, the opportunity to incorporate internship experience into the academic curriculum and thus build, through transfer, learning opportunities in the content of the courses provided;
- internships provide companies with the ability to model the skills of graduates in line with the real needs of employers, the labor market;
- generate the possibility for employers to start the selection process of graduates even during the training process;
- provide students with the opportunity to be selected and employed part time and possibly full time during the studies/ immediately after graduation, shortening the period between graduation and employment;
- provide universities with the opportunity to improve their performance in the process of hiring graduates;
- generate benefits for the local, regional, national and international community, which will make better use of human resources;
- create the context for a real partnership between students/graduates, employers, university, community so that it may become a true win-win-win-win approach.

In conclusion, internship may be a didactic strategy with a major role in providing a solid foundation for a future career (Bilsland et al., 2014).

Studies conducted in this direction highlight, in most cases, the fact that students value the internship at a higher level, the acquisitions offered by it and the opportunities provided by participating in them (Hergert, 2011). Among these we mention: “the importance of teaching students how to apply the knowledge and concepts they have acquired through previous coursework; internships as a means for securing eventual permanent employment; internships can make students more ambitious; help ease the transition from school to work; greater job stability in their early careers; higher job satisfaction” (Hergert, 2011: 9-12). Such studies were also carried out in Romania. One of them (Băltescu, 2016) indicates that the 107 students participating in the study appreciated, following the practical training, the following aspects: increasing the quantity and quality of the acquired knowledge; the friendships they had built; identifying opportunities for finding jobs; financial benefits; acquisitions in the area of self-knowledge.

### ***1.3. Employability and employers' perspective on it***

The concept of employability is a multifaceted, controversial concept (Rayner & Papakonstantinou, 2015), whose content has been redefined as

studies discussing it have evolved. Many authors have defined it as a personal skill “to carry out work” (Ambepitiya, 2016: 116) or as the ability to get a job immediately after graduation (Einstein, 2015). In British studies published after 2010, for example, employability is a system of skill and abilities, namely “the skills almost everyone needs to do almost any job. They are the skills that must be present to enable an individual to use the more specific knowledge and technical skills that their particular workplaces will require” (Lowden, Hall, Elliot, & Lewin, 2011: 6). Similar approaches outline the concept from two complementary points of view, which gradually expand beyond understanding employability only as a suite of skills and abilities that evolve, by being merged and integrated, to comprise understanding it as a genuine competence that may bring added value not only to the possessor:

- “A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy” (Yorke, 2006);

- “Employability is more than about developing attributes, techniques or experience just to enable a student to get a job, or to progress within a current career. It is about learning and the emphasis is less on ‘employ’ and more on ‘ability’. In essence, the emphasis is on developing critical, reflective abilities, with a view to empowering and enhancing the learner” (Harvey, 2003, as cited by Pegg, Waldo, Hendy-Isaac, & Lawton, 2012: 4).

As can be seen from the latter approach, employability evolves towards an extremely complex, nuanced competence that is highly important for the connection between the university and the labor market. Its importance and impact have become more and more acknowledged and led to the emergence of a true Pedagogy for employability (Pegg et al., 2012). Synthetically, the proper understanding of employability involves three theoretical perspectives: Human Capital Theory, Actor Theory and Career Anchor Theory (Ambepitiya, 2016).

Specialty studies show that the issue of employability of higher education graduates has become a subject of research of utmost importance and scope over the last 25 years (Helyer & Lee, 2014; Lowden et al., 2011; Rayner & Papakonstantinou, 2015). This correlates with the serious situation of the current low level of graduate employability (Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya, 2015; Dani, 2016; Husain, Mokhtar, Ahmad, & Mustapha, 2010), especially immediately after completing their studies. This is relatively paradoxical, given that, although there is a high

level of unemployment among graduates of higher education, employers have difficulty finding people with suitable competences. Unfortunately, this reality also means a great waste of human and financial capital.

This trend is also visible in the field of educational policy in Romania, as shown by a simple analysis of reports. For example, in the annual public report - 2014 The State of Higher Education, funding and improvement measures (UEFISCFI, 2015), the issue of employability is not discussed at all. In the similar document of the following year, the annual public report - 2015 The State of Higher Education, funding and improvement measures (UEFISCFI, 2016), there is an analysis of the employability situation in the first 6 months since graduation, in the fundamental field of study (UEFISCFI, 2016: 61) and a subchapter on the socio-professional insertion of graduates – middle and long-term trends (UEFISCFI, 2016: 62-66).

According to this report, the data show a degree of employability after the first 6 months in the field corresponding to the study program between a minimum of 19.5% for the social sciences and a maximum of 41.5% for the biomedical sciences. Even if we add the data that highlight the employability of graduates in fields other than those corresponding to the study program they have completed (a minimum of 5.10% for biomedical sciences and maximum of 13.60% for social sciences), the overall level of employability remains rather small (UEFISCFI, 2016: 61).

As the results of these studies began to accumulate, it has become increasingly clear that universities must explicitly include the employability skills component (Pegg et al., 2012; Rayner & Papakonstantinou, 2015) in the academic curriculum (in terms of goals and activities) including a mandatory period of work experience as part of the curriculum in any study program (Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya, 2015; Ambepitiya, 2016; European Commission, 2010).

It will expand and complement the career guidance activities already carried out by the counseling departments: drafting CVs, presentation of job offers, preparing to participate in an interview for employment (European Commission, 2016, Helyer & Lee, 2014). In this way, the transfer of know-how can be more flexible and efficient, integrating the three essential vectors of the two learning environments (academic and business): people, processes and technology (Deckenbrunnen, 2008).

It is certain that this pragmatic update and pragmatic orientation of the academic strategy towards labor market requirements (Wilton, 2012) could only be made appropriate by a partnership with employers, called to contribute significantly to identifying the skills needed in future labor

markets (Rayner & Papakonstantinou, 2015). In this way, universities can both identify their skills needs at the sectoral level and jointly create a favorable training environment for graduates in order to increase their employability.

One of the basic causes of low employment is the existence of a mismatch between the competences of the academic environment and those demanded by the world of jobs (Ambepitiya, 2016; Dani, 2016; Pegg et al., 2012). Therefore, regulatory and matching levers are needed (Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya, 2015).

The most often suggested ways of ensuring higher employability are systematized by Pegg, Waldock, Hendy-Isaac, and Lawton (2012) according to three directions: 1. Learning, teaching and assessment; 2. Work experience; 3. Building an institutional culture that promotes employability. Specifically, within these there are identified: placements / internships and work experience; teamwork projects realized either within the theoretical activity of the university or during the specialized practice in firms (Lowden et al., 2011; Pegg et al., 2012); including practical experiences in academic activities; transforming academic activities from the perspective of employers' needs (European Commission, 2010); meeting of students / graduates with employers at job fairs; debates and joint analyses that clearly highlight the demands of future jobs; capitalizing on communication between students and employers through new digital means of communication (Deckenbrunnen, 2008).

What / how do employers think when it comes to employability?

- Employers appreciate that “developing the employment skills of a graduate is a vital need and is recognized all over the world” (Ambepitiya, 2016: 120);

- Generally, employers target, in the selection and reclassification process, two categories of graduates' acquisitions: those related to specialized training and those related to their personal development. The criteria based on which they operate at the time of selection, when there is appropriate specialized training of several candidates, are those of soft skills;

- Some employers consider that graduates are equipped, upon completion of their studies, neither with “adequate general employability skills”, nor with “the key employability skills that make them ready for the world of work” (Macey, 2013: 1-3). That is why they need to complete their specialized acquisitions with employability skills (Weligamage, 2009);

- For this reason, they have been calling on universities for the last decade to make long-term lists of “desired graduate attributes” (Rayner & Papakonstantinou, 2015: 101), such as: communication, critical thinking and

problem solving, as well as the decisive ability to transfer these attributes from the academic world to the world of jobs, namely the development and application of knowledge in work contexts (Rayner & Papakonstantinou, 2015);

- On this basis, it is necessary that the curriculum design from the perspective of increasing the employability of future graduates should use evidence-based approaches that better inform stakeholders (universities, students and employers) of the most demanded and well-appreciated skills of graduates (Rayner & Papakonstantinou, 2015);

- Studies in the field (Rayner & Papakonstantinou, 2015; Weligamage, 2009; Wilton, 2012;) highlight, through such systematizations, various minimal sets of requirements that companies seek when they hire graduates, desirable sets of acquisitions: generic qualities – written and oral communication, problem solving, critical thinking; interpersonal skills - teamwork, flexibility / adaptability, self-confidence and independence / planning and organization (Rayner & Papakonstantinou, 2015); communication, motivation, independence, analysis, confidence and problem solving (Wilton, 2012); “knowledge skills , thinking skills, personal skills, personal attributes, practical skills” (Weligamage, 2009: 117); “communication skills, interpersonal skills and team work, problem solving, analytic, critical and reflective ability, willingness to learn and continue learning, flexibility and adaptability, risk-taking and self-skills and these attributes are often independent of the degree subject”;

- One of the basic employers' requirements is the existence of a period of practical activity, a minimum work experience prior to the employment interview (Ambepitiya, 2016), obtained through curricular or extracurricular activities, which can be provided by professional training periods in different companies, volunteer activities, traineeship.

It can be concluded that, according to many studies on the subject, the academic knowledge component is no longer enough to ensure a present and (especially) future employment. It must be completed with at least three other categories of competences: soft, practical and technical (Ambepitiya, 2016).

#### ***1.4. CECIM – a possible tool for connecting HE and the labor market***

To optimally correlate the educational offer with the demands of the labor market, the university should have as a starting point a good knowledge of the demands and needs of the socio-economic environment. Achieving this goal calls for the university to become a more flexible, open system capable of achieving a high level of integration with the economic,

social and cultural environment and respond effectively to the challenges of today's society for smart, economic, sustainable and inclusive growth. Developing mechanisms to identify and anticipate labor market needs and trends, as well as defining professional profiles of graduates are relevant aspects that are strategic objectives of the university.

The project Effective Communication and Educational Counseling for Integration on the Labor Market (CNFIS-FDI-2018-0223), conducted by Vasile Alecsandri University in Bacau in July-December 2018, aims to create, from this perspective, the current context of collaboration between the university and the economic and social environment. In this way, all stakeholders - students, employers, teachers, counselors can work together and collaborate to develop two essential psychological vectors of future graduate professional competence: adaptability and responsibility (both considered extremely important to ensure good absorption of graduates on the labor market, their rapid adaptation to specific job requirements).

In this respect, one of the activities of the project aimed at meetings with employers in the North-East region of Romania in order to establish partnerships for the organization of internships for students, but also to outline a common strategy that would meet the expectations of employers, the current needs of the labor market and the professional training of graduates. In this context, within the CECIM project there was organized on July 13, 2018, a roundtable called New partnerships - new opportunities for students, attended by more than 40 employers' representatives. The meeting was conceived under the sign of constructive dialogue and effective communication and aimed to consolidate the relationship between students and employers by creating contexts that allow for a correspondence between students' skills and employers' expectations.

The dialogue between university representatives and employers focused on the development of personal skills, not just professional ones, the correlation of seminar and laboratory practices with workplace practice within organizations, employers' involvement in graduate exams to recruit the best graduates, organizing competitions on practical professional subjects.

This first meeting was continued by 5 other workshops attended by employers, depending on the profile and study programs of the five faculties from Vasile Alecsandri University of Bacau, in order to establish the common points that employers have, but also to highlight differences according to the field of activity. Such approaches are a good opportunity for knowing and representing the various interests and expectations of all

those involved in the functioning and development of the partnership between the university and the labor market (Tran, 2016).

## **2. Research methodology**

**2.1. Purpose of the study:** to identify employers' opinion on the possibility of organizing and capitalizing on internships for students from Vasile Alecsandri University of Bacau (UVAB)

### **2.2. Hypotheses (H) and objectives (O)**

H1: Employers are reluctant to organize and capitalize on internships for UVAB students.

- O1: identifying employers' opinion on the possibility of organizing and capitalizing on internships for UVAB students;
- O2: analysis of the arguments supporting the opinion of the employers;

H2: Employers overestimate their own difficulties in organizing and capitalizing on internships for UVAB students in the companies they represent.

- O3: identifying the main three categories of inconveniences that could make it more difficult to carry out internships;
- O4: analysis of the difficulties highlighted by employers;

H3: Employers overestimate their own advantages of organizing and capitalizing on internships for UVAB students.

- O5: identifying the main three categories of benefits that companies / organizations might have in conducting internships;
- O6: analysis of the benefits highlighted by employers.

### **2.3. Research methods**

The main method of research was the focus group. Discussions were conducted by the career counselors involved in the project, based on a semi-structured interview guide. The data were recorded based on the participants' agreement. The data were transcribed, systematized and presented by highlighting the frequency of responses (N=number of responses) and for in vivo texts there was reference in the text to the number of the participant whose response was presented (P11, the 11<sup>th</sup> participant in the focus group).

From these, only the data obtained in the following 4 questions were selected and presented in this paper:

1. Do you think your company / organization could organize internships for university students? Yes, No.
2. Please give arguments for your answer.
3. What do you think are the three main categories of inconveniences that could make it more difficult to run internships?
4. What do you think are the three main advantages that your company / organization might have from running internships?

The relationship between these and the endpoints of our study, as outlined in 2.2. of this paper is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** The relationship between hypotheses, objectives and questions

Hypothesis	Objectives	Question
I1	O1, O2	1, 2
I2	O3, O4	3
I3	O5, O6	4

#### **2.4. Research sample**

The research sample consisted of 26 employers participating in the round table organized under the generic New Partnership - New Opportunities for Students in the CNFIS-FDI2018-0223 Project, Effective Communication and Educational Counseling for Integration on the Labor Market (CECIM, 2018), on 13 July 2018.

The research sample included employers in the fields of engineering, economics, philology, science, motion sciences, sports and health, in line with the specificities of the faculties from the UVAB structure. Given the small number of research participants, the study did not aim to correlate the data obtained from employers with their fields of activity, but only to release their generic opinion on the possibility of organizing and capitalizing on internships for UVAB students.

### **3. Results and discussions**

To achieve O1: identifying employers' opinion on the possibility of organizing and capitalizing on internships for UVAB students, there was analyzed the data obtained under question 1, namely: Do you think your company / organization could organize internships for UVAB students? with two variants of answer: Yes, No.

The results indicate the positive fact that most of them (N=25 respondents out of the total of N=26, 1 non-answer) believe that the company / organization they represent could organize internships for our university students. These data reveal the maximum openness that labor market representatives have towards organizing such training opportunities for students.

To achieve O2: analysis of the arguments supporting the opinion of the employers, there were synthesized the data obtained in question 2, namely: Please give arguments for your answer. Of the total respondents (N=25) only a part (N=20) of the employers' representatives managed to provide us with the requested arguments. Their systematization gives us the following categories of reasons:

- the desire to collaborate with the university to consolidate this relationship, but also the students' knowledge of the specific work and responsibilities within an organization (N=16);
- the need to recruit future employees (N=4) (e.g.: P10: ... *we can initiate the recruitment process among practitioners*);
- facilitating the adaptation of students to the requirements of their future job (N=3);
- the possibility, after a short period of accommodation, to propose the financing of the internship for students also because they need staff (P1, P11 assert that the practice covers, albeit partially, the need for staff) (N=2 employers).

Corroborating the data collected at this level, we can conclude that employers participating in the study show maximum availability for the organization of student internships. These are, in their view, opportunities to build / enhance the image / prestige of the organization by associating with the university image. However, they can also meet their own training needs in line with the company's demands and open the gateway to a future selection and recruitment process for future employees from the internships (with a positive impact on the company, as well as the employability of graduates).

Based on the data obtained in this first step in the research, we find that H1: Employers are reluctant to organize and capitalize on internships for UVAB students has been invalidated. The opinions that employers are not involved in the preparation of an internship offer, are reluctant to do so, that they are not interested in working with the university and that the two categories of training institutions do not collaborate are not supported by facts.

To achieve O3: identifying the main three categories of inconveniences that could make it more difficult to carry out internships, there were systematized the data obtained for question 3, namely: What do you think are the three main inconveniences that could make it more difficult to carry out internships?

The employers' perspective was highlighted by the analysis of the 45 answers provided (N=20) by the total number of employers present in the focus group (N=26, 6 non-answers). The distribution of answers highlights the following difficulties:

- the low level of motivation, i.e. the low degree of students' interest in internships (N=6);
- students do not show a level of seriousness high enough to correspond to the expectations of employers (N=3) (*students take production internships as a joke*);
- the traditionalist attitude of the employers' representatives, underlining the reluctance of some of them to be open to novelty (P26) (N=2);
- the difficulty of employers to accept that students are still in training and that they lack some theoretical knowledge and skills to cope with demands or exigencies from the place of internships (N=2). In this context, some employers are aware that it is important, in the relationship with students, *to accept that nobody is perfect* (P26);
- non-observance of the practice schedule and the exigencies established in the internship plan (N=2) (*constant presence of the students*, P13, *observance of the established internship plan*, P15);
- the long distance to which the place of internship is located, the extra travelling costs generated by the need to get to the premises of the companies (N=2) (*the company's headquarters is close to the periphery of the city*, P16);
- insufficient theoretical training of some students, lack of knowledge whose application in practice is required (N=2);
- theoretical training of students not updated to the novelties of the field (lack of novelty elements in students' training, P23) (N=1);
- difficulties related to students' ability to identify and solve problems (P1) (N=1);
- students have an alternative job to support themselves and pay for their studies (N=1);
- *customer data confidentiality* may limit access to some of the company's activities (P6) (N=1);

- *too many students* present at the internship at the same time (P16) (N=1);
- the period in which the *internship is planned - the internship is planned predominantly at the beginning of summer* (P16), when economic units are overloaded with orders (N=1);
- limits of student behavior (insufficient attention in carrying out tasks, lack of patience, non-observance of instructions, etc.) (N=1).

The systematization of the collected data allows us to identify the opinion of the employers present in the study on the first three categories of inconveniences affecting the organization and conduct of the internships as follows:

1. student-related inconveniences (low motivation, interest, low level of seriousness, non-observance of the timetable and schedule, insufficient theoretical training, insufficiently formed skills, inappropriate conduct (N=15);
2. employer-related inconveniences (inappropriate attitudes of employers towards students, lack of patience and trust) (N=4);
3. university-related inconveniences (slow and unsystematic updating of the curriculum, organization of practice (large number of students in the group, the period of the internship) (N=3);

To achieve O4: the analysis of the difficulties highlighted by the employers, there was conducted a qualitative analysis of all the categories of answers presented above.

Our first finding is that, according to employers, the most serious difficulties do not belong to the companies they represent, but to students (N=15). On the one hand, these data support those obtained in the first part of the research, indicating the willingness and openness of employers to get involved in internships. On the other hand, the reported difficulties related to their own activity (N=4) and the university (N=3) are very few. The share of these categories of difficulty shows that employers consider that companies and the university, even together (N=7), are not the main factors generating difficulties, somewhat leaving more than half the weight of these difficulties on the shoulders of students. By default, their overcoming does not come within the maximum responsibility of companies and universities, but also of students.

The second finding addresses the nature of the difficulties identified. Thus, in order of their relevance, they are of the following types:

1. motivational: lack of interest, willingness to receive significant financial rewards, lack of willingness to learn, lack of motivation for work, etc.;

2. attitudinal: insufficient involvement, low consistency, lack of seriousness;

3. organizational (at system and institutional level): organizational and educational policies: legislation on the organization of internships, organization of students into large groups / subgroups, structure of the academic year, assignment of a practice coordinator for many students, rigidity in modifying / updating curricula, the amount of study fees;

4. cognitive-action: low problem-solving capacity, insufficiently developed skills to work with knowledge, poor connection to the latest discoveries / technologies;

5. environmental factors: the distance to which the economic agent's headquarters is located, etc.

From this perspective, we can refer, in conclusion, to the emphasis of employers' representatives on psycho-pedagogical (1, 2, 4), organizational (3) and environmental (5) difficulties.

From the corroboration of the data obtained and analyzed under question 3 it can be established that H2: Employers overestimate their own difficulties in organizing and capitalizing on internships for UVAB students in the companies they represent has been invalidated. The views that employers do not get involved in developing an internship offer because they are confronted with numerous and enormous difficulties in this process at the level of the firms in which they operate is not supported by facts. These data confirm the results obtained in the first part of the research, indicating the lack of obstacles that can act on the labor market and that could diminish the involvement of employers in providing a real offer of internships.

To achieve O5: identifying the main three categories of benefits that companies / organizations might have in conducting internships, there were systematized the data obtained for question 4, namely: What do you think are the three main advantages that the company / your organization would draw from running internships?

The answers provided have allowed for several advantages to be highlighted, namely:

1. The internship represents an opportunity in the recruitment and selection process of future employees (N=8). Thus, the internship is a *way of developing the company by attracting workforce* (P1), *makes it possible to select candidates for job vacancies* (P6) or to *set up a database of prospective employees* (P17);

2. The internship has the advantage of training students according to company requirements, *preparing employees from an early stage* (P4) (N=6);

3. Knowledge of the organizational culture, environment and organization and operation regulations of the company (N = 6). *New employees will already be familiar with the organization profile* (P11), *with the work environment* (P24). Employers consider that this reduces the adaptation period at the workplace as well as the resignation rate; the accommodation period will be shorter upon completion of studies (P10);

4. The predictive nature of the internships to identify the possible problems faced by companies in relation to the human resource (N=2), *identification of the problems of future employees* (P17), *the possibility of confronting unpredictability* (P7) in terms of the behavior and expectations of future employees;

5. Collaborating with the university brings companies other advantages such as: *creativity and innovation* (P26), *promoting the company* (P5), but also *increasing visibility* (P5), *finding new talents* (P12), etc.

To achieve O6: analysis of the benefits highlighted by employers, there was conducted a qualitative analysis of all the categories of answers presented above. The corroboration of the data we have obtained allows us to assert that for the representatives of the employers participating in the study there are two main categories of advantages that result from organizing internships for students, namely:

1. Advantages related to efficiency, increasing the quality of future human resources training (1-4);

2. Advantages related to image, increasing the visibility of companies providing internships for students (5).

From the combined analysis of the data obtained and interpreted for question 4, it can be established that H3: Employers overestimate their own advantages of organizing and capitalizing on internships for UVAB students has been invalidated. Employers have a fair, balanced, realistic picture of the benefits that the organization of internships has for the firms they represent.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Based on the data gathered through the representatives of the business environment present in the focus group, it can be appreciated that the purpose of our study has been achieved, namely identifying the employers' opinion regarding the possibility of organizing and capitalizing on internships for the students of Vasile Alecsandri University of Bacau.

Even though all the three hypotheses were invalidated, we were able to get to know the point of view of the company representatives participating in the study, namely:

1. Employers are not reluctant to organize internships for students, but, on the contrary, their availability is maximal in this respect;

2. Employers do not overestimate their own difficulties in organizing and capitalizing on internships for UVAB students in their companies, and they consider that the main categories of psycho-pedagogical difficulties that are significant are related to students;

3. Despite the highlighted difficulties, internships are an appreciated and desirable formative strategy for all those involved;

4. Employers do not overestimate their own advantages in organizing and capitalizing on internships for students in the companies they represent, and they are realistically convinced that there are two advantages: to increase the quality of future human resources training and to increase company visibility.

Extremely interesting for our study are other categories of data that could be deduced from the qualitative analysis of the answers given by employers along different components:

- Expectations of company representatives towards prospective employees: the latter should have theoretical knowledge, show openness for professional and personal development, be open to training opportunities (P26);

- Highlighting the importance of the vocational component, the passion, and the fact that performance comes from hard work. P11 specified that the process of training future employees implies *tutorship from an experienced employee who guides the training of the future specialist*, and thus the vocation and the talent of the specialist may be exploited;

- The analysis of elements related to the attitudinal, aptitude and value component was emphasized by the importance of the development of soft skills, attitudes such as openness and interest in professional training and values such as fairness, respect for others, etc.;

- Unrealistic expectations of students: wage levels far outweigh the employers' possibilities and their expertise as beginners, asking for payment in advance, requesting exaggerated flexibility of the work schedule, etc.

Studies conducted on the same topic, either from the perspective of students or employers (Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya, 2015; Băltescu, 2016; Dani, 2016; Husain et al., 2010; Lowden et al., 2011; Rayner & Papakonstantinou, 2015) highlight components of employability skills that have been invoked and reconfirmed by employers present in our study. For example, the data provided by Rayner & Papakonstantinou (2015), which refers to the first two skills that are valued by employers (1. ability to apply knowledge relevant to the discipline; 2.

develop knowledge relevant to the position) are also found in the first places and in the category of expectations of employers' representatives who participated in our focus group.

The data presented by us is in line with some of the findings in the Global Employment Trends for Youth 2017: Paths to a better working future (ILO, 2017) and Global Employment Trends for Youth 2013 - A Generation at Risk (ILO, 2013) that highlights some of the current but, above all, future trends in the relationship between young people and the labor market. Among these we mention:

- it remains a certain fact that the transition to the labor market “is critical in a young person’s life and could have long-term socio-economic effects” (ILO, 2017: 27);

- employers play an essential role “in skills development and in offering youth a meaningful exposure to the world of work, for instance, by providing quality apprenticeship schemes” (ILO, 2017: 81);

- new technologies are reshaping jobs, and that change is happening rapidly, adding to existing challenges in the labor market. It remains uncertain if there will be enough decent employment opportunities for the 25.6 million more young persons in the labor market between 2017 and 2030. Achieving the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) & vision of full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for youth, will be a major challenge unless demand for work increases along with skills and productivity;

- High-quality education and training improve the employability of workers, and thus contribute to low unemployment (ILO, 2013, 2017).

Even more prevailing is the idea that high-quality education of graduates can no longer be considered outside the university's collaboration with employers. Their voice must be constantly and seriously heard and must argue for the same quality standard as the academic requirements. From this perspective, employers should come up with more structured current proposals to communicate openly and constructively with the university. This, in turn, would have more openness and flexibility in including useful suggestions in its curricula. Thus, this cooperation would result in a win-win situation for all the actors involved, for a more comprehensive training of graduates that would include employability skills.

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