The Work & Travel Program – Means of Training and Integrating Youth for Adult Life

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Abstract: The hereby paper presents the de Romanians have while travelling to the USA through the Work & Travel Program and its personal and professional benefits. For this we recruited 145 students who participated in this program filling in opinion questionnaires, in order to assess the following data: the advantages and disadvantages of the program, the issues young people faced while away and the added value of this experience. Approximately 70% of the interviewed students state that they signed up of the Work & Travel program in order to live the American Dream, being driven by curiosity and the desire to be financially independent, but also in order to perfect their English language skills. Among the advantages of the program, mentioned by over 50% of the respondents, we would like to mention the following: the experience they gained, developing their integration and socializing abilities in the new cultural, professional and social environment; the opportunity to travel and visit new places; and personal development. Regarding the disadvantages of the program, 70% of the students interviewed cannot see any weaknesses to it. The rest of the 30% are of the opinion that there are some disadvantages like the long distance from home, possible misunderstandings or disagreements with the employer and also certain health issues that might arise during the program. Among the above-mentioned added value items to the program, we noticed the following in the respondents' answers: the opportunity to get to know the American culture, to improve their English language skills, to travel and also to recover their initially made financial investment.

Keywords: *Social integration; Work & Travel Program; personal development; professional integration.*

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Theoretical premises

Social and professional integration

Social integration was approached from different perspectives and according to Sandu (1972) it represents a process through which social agents contribute to achieving the objectives and requirements of a certain structure (with their specific roles) through different means for a certain social group. According to Zamfir and Vlăsceanu (1993), social integration refers to the process of interaction between an individual and a group and their social environment, through which a functional balance of both parts is achieved. The person who goes through the integration process could be an individual, a group of individuals, an organization, etc. There are multiple types of integration, for example: social integration, professional integration, cultural or educational integration etc.

Social integration represents the interaction between the individual and the society through which a social balance is achieved. With the aid of socialization, the person develops skills of correctly performing the necessary statutes and roles needed for social integration. In order to be able to get integrated into a community, the person needs to acquire the norms, values, habits, and behaviors of a certain society, but also to be able to interact with other social actors from different groups, some with an important role to play in the social integration of the particular individual.

In contemporary society, in addition to social integration, professional integration of people has become more and more important and necessary. Professional integration is a long-term process, occurring during periods of a few weeks or a few months, in which the individual has the opportunity to gradually get to know and familiarize himself with the specifics of the work place, the new tasks and responsibilities, the specifics of the organizational culture etc. During this time, the individual has the opportunity to acquire the necessary professional skills to complete all duties required on the job.

Professional integration has psychological, sociological, pedagogical and organizational implications, therefore this process cannot be a mechanical or an automatic one, because employees are very different on a personality and behavioral level.

Therefore, we need these social and professional integration programs for individuals, with the purpose of reducing the psychological pressure they are put under and in order to facilitate the adaptation process

of each individual to the requirements of the community they are part of, but also to the requirements on the specific job.

Professional integration programs for youth (students)

In order to facilitate the professional integration of young adults on the job market, there are several programs designed to help them acquire experience and put into practice what they have learned through the educational process. We are talking about programs especially designed for students, like the Work & Travel, Erasmus, and Da Vinci programs. We must also take into consideration the practice stages called internships, which are offered to students by companies, especially in order to support the students in acquiring work experience.

Starting from the present reality of our contemporary society (no more borders – globalization), and the fact that just as Zhang (2012) states, “at present, the world is becoming a small “global village” and everyone in the world is becoming a “global citizen” (p.62), there are now different programs of social, cultural and professional integration programs for youth, both national and international.

More and more young people desire to study or to travel abroad for the simple reason of being curious, they desire to discover new cultures and lifestyles, as diverse as they come, to learn new things, basically in order to gain experience. One of the greatest advantages of travelling abroad is the various experiences which are in favor of acquiring specific values, without the restrictions imposed by a certain society. Living abroad determines an increase of probability in making one's own decisions regarding one's lifestyle.

In Romania, there are several programs dedicated to students through which they can study or work abroad, both in Europe and on other continents, programs especially designed to help young people to get to know themselves better, to mature and to acquire professional experience and knowledge etc. Two of the most popular programs among students are Work & Travel and Erasmus. Both of them are cultural exchange programs, both help with improving foreign languages, but also with widening horizons and the circle of friends all over the world. Both Work & Travel and Erasmus enrich a young person's experience, his life changing after each experience in one of these programs.

Both Work&Travel and Erasmus enrich the experience of a young adult, his or her life changing to a certain degree through the participation in one of these programs.

At an international level, Work&Travel is the most popular cultural exchange program with a strong educational and cultural feature (over 100.000 students applying annually), through which regular students / Master and PhD students, who attend day classes at a state or private accredited university, have the opportunity to go work and travel during their holiday for about 4 and a half months (out of which they have the right to work for 3 months) in the USA, Canada, Australia, China or throughout Europe (Great Britain, France, Greece, Spain); the most popular destination among students in the USA. (<http://www.worktravelusa.ro/ro/articles/despre-program>, accessed on 16.02.2017)

European community ActionS for the Mobility of University Students – ERASMUS is part of the educational community program (Lifelong Learning Program – LLP) and manages different activities designed for European cooperation in superior education. Through this program, we encourage the developing of the European dimension of university and post-university studies, the program covering all subjects and all areas of study.

We are talking about a new concept of higher education, which promotes young people's internationalized talents and intercultural competencies from different universities Zhang (2012), including teaching and learning objectives for students from other universities in Europe, distinct from those of their own countries, in order to exchange educational, cultural and life experiences.

The Erasmus program, is aimed both at teachers and students, and offers challenging experiences, enriching understanding perspectives of new cultures, and also the opportunity to improve linguistic competencies. Erasmus is an educational program, with the objectives of developing competencies and capacity for professional integration through offering professional training opportunities: free studies in a European university, for 3-10 months (an academic year), in one of the 33 Erasmus countries (Erasmus students do not pay education tuition in partnering universities), and have the opportunity to get to know a new educational system, new teaching and learning techniques, discover new cultures, develop intercultural communication skills, adapt to a new culture, expand knowledge and not least, gain advantages for future professional insertion, etc.

For students, the Erasmus program is a great chance to live a unique experience (in a partner European University abroad) and to also get validated for the particular study period.

Erasmus is part of the European Union program of life education, a program which also includes the following: the Leonardo da Vinci program (education and professional training), the Comenius program (school education) and the Grundtvig program (adult education). http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-12-785_ro.htm, accessed on 18.02.2017

Benefits of students' integration programs

Studies performed in this domain document the fact that national or international internships, in the origin country or abroad, can offer many benefits for all involved: students, education providers and employers.

For students, the internship program offers the opportunity to better understand the work market (Devine et al, 2007), to understand what are the practical requirements of the employers and to begin to adapt to them, to apply what they have learned in school, to test the practical possibilities to find a job in the real world, but also the possibility of suitability to the specifics of a particular job (Kapoor, 2000; Waryszak, 1999), to develop abilities and skills on the job (Barron, 1999; Barron & Maxwell, 1993; Casado, 1991; Emenheiser, Clayton, & Tas, 1997; Petrillose & Montgomery, 1998) and to make good choices for their careers (Brooks et al, 1995).

An internship is an excellent opportunity for students to acquire transferable competencies and specific and detailed knowledge, necessary for current jobs (Busby, 2003). Thus, after going through some internships, students can report developing competencies in different areas of expertise, including management, leadership, human resources, interpersonal communication, verbal and written communication, problem solving, team work, planning and decision making (Bell & Schmidt, 1996; LeBruto & Murray, 1994; McMullin, 1998; Tas, 1988).

Internships afford student training under both academic and practitioner supervision. This supervision allows students to gain interpersonal skills with industry workers and to potentially earn money while learning (Thiel & Hartley, 1997).

Zhang (2012), after a case study performed in 2010, regarding Chinese youth participating in internships in the US for example, through the Work&Travel program, says that all participating students acquired intercultural communication competencies, making real progress in learning English, especially listening and understanding skills. Also, all students involved acquired intercultural experience, they had fun and made many friends from different countries and the USA, they learned to respect

cultural diversity and they also learned valuable life lessons and increased their attention span on the job, they learned that it is not easy to make money, and at the same time they also learned how to be financially independent and they believe themselves to be much better prepared for life in general. The CVs of students who participated in the Work&Travel USA program are much richer in jobs and extracurricular activities, which definitely gives them a better hiring chance. It is also important the fact that the Chinese students say that the Work&Travel USA program helped them overcome cultural barriers, by acquiring intercultural understanding and making them aware that all their knowledge and experience from books regarding culture, economy, politics, industry, food and anything else related to the USA, are different than what they have experienced through travelling, living and actually working in that country.

According to Lucht (2012), for the young adults from Kazakhstan, the Work&Travel USA program brought many benefits, as: preparing them for the adult life, the opportunity to earn money, an increased self-esteem, the opportunity to become a better person, after all the intercultural experiences they have lived through.

Many students who went to America through the Work&Travel USA program appreciated it, with its advantages and disadvantages, as a unique experience for their entire life, one that actually changes a person (Zhang, 2012).

For education providers, internships improve their cooperation with employers on the job market, improve the profile of the higher education institutions, increase research opportunities and the collaboration with employers, and also increase their distinction and visibility (Coco, 2000; Divine et al., 2007; Gault et al., 2000; Weible, 2009; Weible & McClure, 2011) by increasing employment chances for future graduates (Bell & Schmidt, 1996; Walo, 1999).

Higher education institutions and governments should be wise and support international internship programs because they increase students' intercultural competencies and experiences and make them independent and confident people. „The opportunities are great. The experiences are life changing. The lessons learned last a lifetime” (Vandever, R. & Menefee, M.L., 2006, p.206). Vandever, R & Menefee, M.L. (2006, p.206), show that studying abroad and international internships must be integrated in university curricula. International internships take students out of their comfort zone and offer them new learning opportunities which increase their global education. Due to the experiences offered by international internships, students report acquiring rich life related knowledge within a

rather short period of time, a huge increase in self-confidence, understanding and communicating in different cultures, exploring new opportunities offered by the experience of living abroad, acquiring the ability of seeing themselves as foreigners, which offer them a whole new perspective in the ways they view and interact with others, by discovering the need for tolerance and empathy towards the vast diversity of individuals. With no exception, each student who returns from a study program abroad view the internship, the travelling and the culture as life-changing experiences.

Furthermore, higher education institutions and governments should explore the possibilities that new technologies can add to traditional internship programs, in particular with regard to improving computer skills and making the internship experience available to students engaged in distance learning.

For employers, internships allow them access to students (future employees), who are dedicated, motivated, enthusiastic and creative, who bring new ideas to the work place. At the same time, employers have the opportunity to identify the potential of new employees and to help in their training, as future employees or managers in different areas of expertise on the work market (Ju, Emenheiser, Clayton & Reynolds, 1998/99; Pauze, Johnson, & Miller, 1989; Petrillose & Montgomery, 1998).

„Furthermore, the organization may gain new perspectives or practices based on new technologies and techniques that the student interns transfer from their university experiences. Students can often offer new ideas (based on classroom exposure to new concepts or technologies) and new perspectives. Some internships result in ongoing joint research relationships between the company, the student, and the sponsoring university, and provide organizations with opportunities to influence curriculum design and content” (Schambach, Thomas P. & Dirks, Jim, 2002).

Some benefits of internships could last even after graduation. Studies show that students who were part of internships are steadier on the job at the beginning of their careers (Richards, 1984) and also experience a greater satisfaction on the job (Gault et al, 2000, Knouse & Fontenot, 2008; Taylor, 1988). Other studies show that internships can make students more ambitions (Pedro, 1984) and also make their transition from school onto the work market much easier (Paulson & Baker, 1999, Ross et al., 2006). Because of this, all students should be strongly encouraged to engage in an internship experience (Busby, 2003). Students are often motivated to look for internships which could ensure a permanent future job. Previous

research shows that these kinds of programs truly work (Callanan & Benzing, 2004; Knouse et al, 1999).

Research methodology

Our study focuses on the Work&Travel program and presents the experience of young Romanians who went to the USA through it, and also the personal and professional benefits they gained. The research tool we used was the opinion questionnaire. We put together two types of questionnaires: one for those who participated in the Work & Travel program, in order to assess how they viewed the whole experience and one for those who have not applied for this particular program. The questionnaire addressed to those who did not apply for this program was addressed to both 12th grade students (who cannot yet apply), and to students who did not apply, although they had this opportunity to do so. We wanted to put together a questionnaire addressed to those who did not take part in the Work & Travel program, because we wanted to find out the reasons why they would like to apply and why they have not done it yet.

Research results

Assessing the data from the questionnaires applied to those who had a Work & Travel USA experience

The first questionnaire was applied online and contained 18 questions of which 8 were closed questions, 2 were semi-closed, 3 were open questions and 5 were factual. This was addressed exclusively to students who took part in the Work & Travel USA program, interviewing 145 people, from which 79.3% (115 people) were females and 20.7% (30 people) were males.

Through this questionnaire we wanted to find out how Romanian students view the Work & Travel experience, what are the advantages / disadvantages of this program, what were the problems they encountered and what they have learned through this experience, what is the advice they would offer to those thinking about applying for this program and if they would like to repeat the experience.

- 68.3% of the respondents found out about the Work & Travel program from friends;
- The desire to live the American Dream, curiosity, the desire to be financially independent and the need to improve their English language

skills, are the main factors that determine Romanian students to sign up for the Work & Travel USA program;

- 41.3% of the respondents had all the information regarding the Work & Travel program before they applied with a specialized agency;

- 41.3% of the respondents stated that the Work & Travel agency they signed up with was a great help both before leaving and during the program;

- Most of the people we interviewed (37.9%) said that the job they had in the USA was exactly what the employers said it would be;

- 40.6% of the respondents stated that their parents encouraged them to take part in this program;

- 44.8% of the respondents stated that their expectations regarding this experience became reality just as they had imagined, while only 9% said their expectations have not been fulfilled;

- For almost 50% of the respondents, the main advantages of the Work & Travel USA program are the following: the experience acquired, developing integration and socialization abilities (most of them said that through this program they learned to integrate easier not only culturally but both professionally and socially), travelling and the amounts of money they earned, but also personal development (most said that due to this experience they became more mature, more positive and more empathic);

- 69.9% of the respondents said there are no disadvantages to the Work & Travel program, while those who said there are disadvantages mentioned the following as being the main ones: the long distance from home, possible health issues that might come up and possible misunderstandings or disagreements with the employer;

- Most respondents (26.2%) participated in the program 50% for „work” and 50% for „travel”, while the rest of them went more for „work” or more for „travel”;

- 50.3% of the respondents said that their greatest regret regarding this experience is that they have not signed up from their 1st year in university;

- Over 100 respondents managed to get to know the American culture through this program either well or to a great extent;

- 45.5% improved their English skills greatly;

- 42.7% managed to travel extensively;

- 57.9% of the respondents recovered their investment almost in its entirety;

- 82.8% of the respondents would like to repeat the Work & Travel experience at once.

Data processing regarding the possibility of applying for the Work & Travel program (addressed to those who would like to use such a program)

The second questionnaire was applied online and contained 17 questions, out of which 8 were closed questions, 2 semi-closed questions, 3 closed questions and 4 were factual. This was exclusively designed for 12th grade students, who have not applied for the Work & Travel program, and we interviewed 52 students, out of which 61.5% (32 people) were female and 38.5% (20 people) were male. Through this questionnaire we intended to find out what is the students' vision (of those who did not sign up for the program) regarding Work & Travel. Although the program is designed exclusively for the students registered with an accredited university, we also wanted to interview high-school students in order to see if they are familiar with this program, how they imagine it, if they know about Work & Travel agencies and if in the future they would like to apply for this program. Out of the results we drew, we would like to highlight the following:

- Most of the respondents (76.9%) found out about the Work & Travel program from other people who have applied, thus we must conclude that the specialized Work & Travel agencies do not do a good job in order to promote the program, but they rather count on „mouth to mouth” advertisement.

- 40.4% of the respondents have thought about signing up in the Work & Travel program;

- The main reasons for which Work & Travel is such a popular program among Romanian students are the following: easy access to the USA, it offers the opportunity to visit the most attractive tourist destinations in the world and also to earn significant amounts of money;

- An attractive job offer and a good price for the program are factors that might determine those who have never applied for this program to do so;

- 38.5% of the respondents don't know Work & Travel agencies;

- Only 11.5% of the respondents are of the opinion that the specialized Work & Travel agencies are visible and widely promote offers. This is a very low percentage, which highlights again the fact that these agencies should invest more in advertising;

- In proportion of 36.5% the expectations of those who participated in this program, became a reality to a great extent, according to those who know them;
- In the opinion of those who haven't yet participated in this program, the main advantages of Work & Travel are: the amounts of money they can earn and the travelling they can do at the end of the program;
- The main disadvantage of the program, in the perception of those who have not participated yet, is the long distance from home.

Conclusions

According to the study we have done, by analyzing and comparing the results obtained after applying the 2 questionnaires, the one designed for the students who participated in the Work & Travel program, and the one applied to the students who have not participated in the program yet, we came to the following conclusions:

- The 3 main factors that determine students to sign up for the Work & Travel USA program are the following: the desire to live the American Dream, curiosity and the desire to be financially independent;
- In the perspective of the students who signed up, the main advantages of the Work & Travel program are the following: travelling and the amounts of money earned, personal development and the gained experience;
- 68.9% of those who applied for the program say that there are no disadvantages;
- 44.8% of the students who applied for the Work & Travel program said that their expectations became reality to a great extent;
- 41.3% of the students who went to the USA said that the role of the Work & Travel agency is very important;
- Most of the respondents from both sample groups (68.3% of those who applied for the program and 76.9% of those who have not participated in the program) found out about the Work & Travel program from friends or people who have signed up before;
- In the perspective of those who haven't participated in the program yet, the main advantages of the Work & Travel program are the travels and the amount of money earned;
- Most of those who have not participated in the program (51.9%) said that the main disadvantage of Work & Travel is the long distance from home;

- An attractive job offer and the good price of the program are the main factors that would motivate those who have not signed up yet, to do so;

- Those who have not participated in the program think that the Work & Travel agencies are not visible enough and that they do not promote their offers as they should, while those who signed up for the program are of the opinion that the specialized agencies are doing their job very well and are extremely professional. Based on this information, we conclude that there is an issue of advertisement with these agencies. Therefore, we believe they should promote advertisement campaigns among those who have no information regarding the program and those who have not decided to participate in such a program yet;

- In the perspective of the Work & Travel program consultants, most young people who sign up for the program and go to the USA do not face any serious issues, but only some small adaptation issues. Actually, all these little inconveniences are only natural, due to the numerous differences between the Romanian and the American cultures, which require a certain period of adaptation.

Our study confirms the results of other studies performed abroad and previously presented, but also the hypothesis we started out with, highlighting the benefits of international internship for the participating students.

Thus, most students who participated in the Work & Travel experience stated the fact that it was an extremely beneficial one both for their personal and professional development, as 82.8% of the respondents would repeat the experience with no reservations. Most of those we interviewed came back more mature, more capable to adapt to new cultural contexts and situations and more confident. The Work & Travel program has many positive aspects (becoming more mature, personal development, improving communication skills in English, improving socialization abilities and social integration capabilities, earning money, travelling etc.), but it also has less pleasant aspects, as the long distance from home, the hard work, the high cost of the program, the possibility that they might not adapt to the American culture and lifestyle, but fortunately, the percentage of negative aspects is incomparably lower than the positive ones.

Therefore, we can state that during a historical stage, deeply marked by globalization and multiculturalism, when universities are challenged to identify new methods of educating students with international visions and intercultural competencies, an international internship represents a viable

way to make this happen. The experience acquired throughout these internships are translated into developing efficient intercultural communication competencies, which teach students to appreciate different ideas and different ways of life, to appreciate the need for tolerance and empathy towards human diversity, to share limited resources with the rest of the world and to celebrate diversity, going beyond cultural barriers. There are studies that conform the things mentioned above and they should be heard at a governmental level all over the world and there should be more international internships programs which could be integrated in the curricula of all universities, because they increase international and intercultural competencies and experiences for students, helping them become independent and confident people.

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