

ON GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT RATES AT LUCIAN BLAGA UNIVERSITY OF SIBIU

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ABSTRACT: This essay examines the level of graduate employment at LBUS based on the data provided in the last university report (2010). In this context, it underscores the necessity and importance of devising, updating and improving the mechanism of the graduate tracking system at our university which has been insufficient and hardly reliable in the data it has so far managed to provide. The demand for additional indicators in the assessment of graduate employment, employability and employers' degree of satisfaction makes it imperative that LBUS create the right mechanism in place that will provide vitally important feedback on our graduates' work trajectory and will ultimately lead to a better graduate absorption on the labour market.

KEY WORDS: graduate, graduate-tracking system, employment, absorption

1. INTRODUCTION

Decision-making factors and stakeholders in Romanian Higher Education (HE) have all understood that in order for Romanian universities to achieve sustainable quality management of the education they provide, their major focus has to be not only on present quantitative quality control mechanisms, but also on future qualitative quality assurance and improvement processes across the entire spectrum of learning. An increasing demand for higher education in the past decade has caused an increase in student enrolment and graduate supply to the market, and hence a greater concern for sustainable quality assurance mechanisms has grown across the whole higher education sector. This growth includes curricula development, teaching and learning practices for new learning pathways and study modes, appropriate financial, quality management and resource allocation, and an increased focus to research products and deliverables.

2. THE 2010 LBUS REPORT

However, all these strategies can be effective only if pursued as part of an integrated approach which involves ongoing collaboration between researchers, teachers, student services departments, career counsellors, quality assurance and curricula development offices. In this context, the quality management programs at LBUS have been steadily focused on how student learning can be utilized to better respond to the demands of the newly emerging domestic and European labour markets, on improvement of our graduates' skills so as to meet employers' requirements, on strengthening of HE-graduate employment/employers links in Sibiu and region, on increased

assurance of the quality of learning and competencies provided by our university, on the provision of skills for lifelong learning, as well as on improvement of the employability rate among LBUS graduates.

The report identifies a series of causes preventing better national and local employment rates: lack of a feasible national foresight on the national economy needs, the impact of economic recession on overall employment of LBUS graduates, a decrease of academic quality standards, the lack of coherence in last decade's educational policies and a substantial decline in government funding and changes in resource allocation methods. As a result, a series of specific activities and procedures have been targeted at increasing our graduate employment rates over the last years: job fairs, counselling and career guidance workshops, practical sessions on "how to write a CV" and "how to be successful in a job interview", periodic meetings with hiring and graduate recruitment companies, company visits, simulated company work and activities, mock interviews, dedicated tutorials, etc. And yet, despite all these measures and joint efforts, the last university report (The Annual Report regarding the status of LBUS, 2010, Chapter 7, p.132. http://www.ulbsibiu.ro/ro/universitate/publ_interne/documente/raport_anual_privind_starea_ulbs.pdf) shows enough reason for concern about our graduates' potential to find work or career opportunities and (implicitly) a failure to adjust to the new demands of the labour market. In the following section, we will discuss the quantitative data provided in the report, and in the latter part of the essay, the focus will shift on the qualitative indicators reported.

Table 1. Showing LBUS graduate insertion on the labour market

Nr. Crt.	Faculty	Grads hired in the field	Hired in other fields
1.	Theology	53%	19%
2.	Letters and Arts	84.5%	
3.	Law	50-60%	
4.	Engineering	68%	
5.	Sciences	65%	35%
6.	Economic Studies		
7.	Medicine	63%	
8.	SALAPM	58%	24%
9.	SPRISE	66%	
10.	History	87%	9%
11.	Journalism	58%	

Note: Based on data provided by faculties. No data on the graduates of the Faculty of Economic Studies

If we look deeper into the overall image above (Table 1), we notice that the average graduate employment rate of LBUS, according to 2010 data provided in the table, is 65.75%. This figure includes no data from the Faculty of Economic Studies (information that would have improved the overall rate, due to the consistently high enrolments and high number of graduates of its programs on the one hand, and the high demand of financial officers and economists on the local and regional labour market, on the other).

In Table 2 below, individual faculty specialization details reveal that several programs are experiencing a fairly good

placement and employment of their graduates: Economic engineering (89%), Modern Applied Languages (92%), Theatrical Studies (90%) and Nursing (80%). A good many of them, about 60%, register average employment rates which makes the situation look less worrisome throughout the past years of economic recession. Likewise, among the most successful first degrees, History, Economic Engineering, Law and Acting remain, which shows a wide variation in occupational opportunities despite the fact that many of these programs tend to have fewer graduates.

Table 2. Showing LBUS graduate insertion on the labour market

Nr. Crt .	Faculty	Grads hired in the field	Hired in other fields	Observations
1.	Theology Pastoral 2008,9,10 Master Social Assistance Total faculty	33% 30% 72% 53%	19% 19% 19%	Priest, teacher, deacon, singer, monk Social assistance, teacher
2.	Letters and Arts - Limbă și literatură - Limbi moderne aplicate - Theatrical st, acting - Teatru-Cult Manag. - Communication sciences Total faculty	25% prof. 50% transl 85% total 60% trad. Interpr 20% in companies 92% total 90% actor 60% 85%	10 % 12%	Research, counselor, linguist, reviewer, public clerks Radu Stanca Theatre of Sibiu Librarian, documentarist
3.	Drept Total facultate	80%		Estimate value
4.	Engineering T C M Machines Tools Computers Electr-mechan. Economic engineering Textile Technologies TDDH Environ Prot. Eng Transp. Engineer Total faculty		88% 82% 75% 75% 89% 40% 74% 28% 64% 68%	
5.	Sciences Sciences Ecology/Environ.Prot. /Biology Psychology Sociol./Social Assist Sports Total faculty	63% 60% 57% 58% 87% 65%	37% 40% 43% 42% 13% 35%	
6.	Economic Studies Total faculty	65%		Estimate value
7.	Medicină General Medicine Dentistry	65% 59%		

3. THE MISSING PIECES

But let us look even closer into the qualitative data reported. The statistics are made based on data collected from faculties and the various faculties responded differently. Most often than not, they either did not have sufficient data to report or their focus was on different segments of students, or both. The report quotes a 5-7% percentage marginal error which does not look bad in itself, if the data collection had been homogeneous

and consistent in procedures followed. The truth is, however, despite the fact that the figures shown demonstrate the wide variation in occupational opportunities in the Sibiu region and beyond as well as a roughly 70% employment rate, we know nothing about LBUS 2010 graduates' satisfaction with the education received at our university, the role played by social competencies (affective and motivational) in their career trajectory, the structural and curricular diversity in our university study programs and their options, available demand

for specialized or/and general competencies, recent trends on the labour market, transition in employment and career, degree of job occupancy, our graduates' degree of adaptability and flexibility in their early career, transitory employment, success of job searches 3.5 years after graduation, aspirations of graduates and employment opportunities available to them, etc. None of this vitally important information on LBUS graduates is yet provided by faculties to better describe the status and rates of graduate unemployment (or underemployment) at local or regional levels, nor has this output yet produced any net effect in the form of an accurate, quick(er) scan on our institutional (in)effectiveness and (in)efficiency.

Incidence and duration are two major factors that characterize graduate (un)employment which can point to a clear direction for pro-active institutional measures. Most graduates are successful in finding a job only after some time, and once they have work experience in their chosen field, find subsequent jobs relatively easier. A good number of them have gone more than a year since graduation without finding work in their chosen field, and have had to rely on casual, out-of-their-specialization jobs, work in the service industry or any shorter-term job opportunities they could obtain. And this represents a devastating phenomenon in the lives of our graduates. Data claiming a 100% work placement record in the annual report tables (after how many years? in what degree programs, first, second?) being in full time work as it were, look wholly unreliable, if we look at the percentages provided by the Faculty of Sciences for its first-degree programs (Table 2), assumed to be evened up in the number of graduates hired in their field and those hired in other fields (?!?!). Who says if a good 87% are hired in their field (Sports and Physical Education), the remainder (13%) get hired in other fields, and if so, which are those? In fact, looking under the percentages reveals that the rest of the graduates were "assumed to be employed in other fields." But the reality makes neither good headlines nor good statistics. So who tells us what are the rest of them is doing? Who tells us how many of our graduates are doing further study, such as a PhD., how many are working part-time, how many are doing a combination of work and study, how many are unavailable for work (due to disability), how many are volunteering or working unpaid jobs, or, for that matter, how many of them are sitting depressed on a sofa all day, claiming unemployment benefits?

It is beyond doubt that such empirical data show (at best) a shallow institutional concern for improving graduate employment rates based on creating reliable feedback and surveys administered to graduates periodically through operational mechanisms in place. Most graduates attend our university for job or career-related reasons. Five years after graduation, the value of their LBUS education is clearly obvious for both beginning a career and career advancement. At the three- or five-year benchmark, graduates are likely to report increased wages and clearly many of them would recommend an LBUS education to others. This is what makes such graduate tracking mechanisms efficient in the long term and beneficial for the overall success of a higher education institution. As the author has argued elsewhere [2] about the necessity of approaching graduate employment and employability issues through a systematic and integrated approach, one needs to include all Romanian universities in a large-scale national strategic project. This has already been done in the "Graduates and the Labour Market", a project undertaken under the direction and expertise of University of Kassel (Germany) specialists, Harald Schomburg and Ulrich

Teichler, whose final results will be published by the end of this year.^[1] But the process of data collection should not be top-down but bottom-up. At an institutional level, a smaller-scale devised graduate survey must be run periodically, so as to track students' career paths and work trajectories and hence shape anew curricula adjustment and program development short- and long-term strategies. We at LBUS have adjusted our curricula, strengthened relationships with the Regional Labour Office, we are counselling our graduates, assist them in finding a job and we are maintaining as close a contact as possible with our graduates.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Unfortunately, this is not enough; we need to do a lot more in such times of economic uncertainty, substantial competence-work mismatches and considerable erosion of traditional jobs and work conditions. Alongside a new paradigm-shift in learning (characterized by passing from reproductive to problem-solving education and formative evaluation), our university must strive to create its own mechanisms able to help it survive in a very competitive environment with fast-paced changes. In this context, our university will be held ever more accountable in the future for the utility of education and research it provides for the benefit of economy and society. The establishment of the UNESCO Chair in Quality Management of Higher Education and Lifelong Learning at the Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu will contribute to the development and promotion of such an integrated system of research, training, information and documentation in the fields of graduate employment, lifelong learning and quality assurance and management. Under this broad perspective, interested extant academics and researchers from LBUS and European partnering institutions, students and faculty pursuing post-graduate studies and training, visiting professors, experts as well as guest speakers involved in the UNESCO Chair research and activities will help identify and address collectively the best solutions and practices to devise a local graduate tracking system, improve employment rates and increase employability skills among our graduates. In other words, the UNESCO Chair is expected to show the necessity that the links between higher education and the world of work be more clearly viewed as an interdisciplinary pattern of learning, socialization and coping with professional instead of field-specific knowledge.

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¹ <http://www.absolvent-univ.ro/home.aspx>

