

SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT, WORK VALUES AND STUDENTS' TRAINING FOR THE LABOR MARKET

Săveanu Tomina

University of Oradea – Research Center for Adult Education

Săveanu Sorana

University of Oradea – Research Center for Social Transformation

This paper reflects theoretical and empirical interrogations regarding concepts which gain interest in recent research in relation to school results and school-to-work transition of high education graduates: school-engagement, valorization of work, work ethics and school social capital. The initiative of such approach is linked to the identification of the obstacles and implicitly the mechanisms which facilitate an easier school-to-work transition of high education graduates of economic studies. In the current research we followed which are the motivations regarding work, and the measures of school engagement, identifying that students with higher academic engagement present greater interest in general criteria related to work and are less intrinsically motivated. The research findings in this area on the one hand confirm the importance of school-engagement for the students from tertiary education. On the other hand, it suggests, besides the mediated effect on school results on the successful insertion on the labor market, also a direct impact on their work engagement of these graduates. In addition to these aspects less visible and less studied, research in this field revealed other obstacles that occur in the successful integration of graduates in the workplace. It was found that both employers and young graduates' employees assigned increased importance for the success in the workplace to transversal skills that are considered less developed through tertiary educational system. In addition, experience at the workplace, the practical training and voluntary involvement in different actions can also be useful tools in preparing students for the labor market. The data, both qualitative and quantitative, analyzed in this paper were collected within the project "Practical training of economists students. Inter-regional partnership in the labor market between universities and the business environment". PRACTeam project is coordinated by University of Oradea - Faculty of Economic Studies, financed through European Social Fund - "Investing in People!" Contract no. POSDRU/90/2.1/S/64150.

Key words: school engagement, transition to labor market, young graduates, social capital

Argument

On the ground of socio-economic changes of the Romanian society, marked by profound negative effects of world economic crisis and continued by dramatic effects at the social system level, the study of school-to-work transition is a legitimate approach. The results of reform implementation in the educational system continue to affect the actions of social actors within the educational system and their approach regarding social development. The topic of school-to-work transition is approached from different theoretical perspectives. One may look to these matters in the light of social mobility theories regarding trends in the access to statuses of destination (see Boudon, 1974) or solely from the perspective of social policy effects in the educational fields (Quintiny et al, 2007).

Most national and international statistics show that graduates of tertiary education have better chances to find a job, differences between male and female are smaller for the higher educated and more, they find a job faster than those with upper secondary education (OECD 2010, ECEA 2012). These findings are confirmed also for Romania (Voicu et al, 2010) where several particularities can be revealed. Some of the particularities can be traced also to the work ethics or value attributed to work, motivations and attitudes related to work (Heintz 2005, Săveanu and Săveanu, 2011). Romania is among the countries that have to face the EU agenda such as Europe Strategy 2020 which aims at five major objectives transposed in the national objectives. Some of these objectives are related to reducing school-drop-out under 10%, and the rise up to 40% the

percentages of higher education graduates in the population of 30-34 years old (Strategia Europa 2020). More, the graduated studies should become a real indicator of rising student's employability (ECEA, 2012). In this regard, as shown in the following table, Romania registered a constant increase of investments and results of tertiary education, even though the insertion in labor force of people with higher education is still rather low.

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
school enrollment in tertiary education	32	38	42	46	52	56	62
expenditure per student in tertiary education (% of GDP per capita)		42	47	51	59	64	71
labor force with tertiary education (% from total labor force)	10	10	11	12	13	13	14

Table no. 1. *Evolution of tertiary education indicators in Romania*, own presentation based on World Bank data basis – accessed on <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator>

The preparation of students for the labor market assumes besides the acquisition of knowledge transmitted through university programs, the development of skills needed on the labor market, Universities are responsible with maintaining their student's engagement. The concept of school engagement was loaned from studies that focus mainly on high school level, but it currently gains ground in analysis regarding the higher education. The functionality of the concept is proved through the explicative models regarding the persistence of students in the system and the length of their educational careers. The educational system has a pyramidal structure, and those at the top – achieving higher education, are the survivors of several school transitions (Mare, 1981). The collectivity of students is restricted at each transition to a higher level and the decision to continue the school route is also a result of the individual level of engagement.

If one considers the type of relation a child develops with school one can look at this relation from the perspective of investment in school social capital. The results of this investment are found in measures of school engagement and attachment (Finn, 1993; Willms, 2003). Both can be associated to the feeling of belonging of the pupil or student to the school life. Both behavioral (class attendance, involvement in extracurricular activities, time allocated for homework) and emotional engagement (developing a feeling of belonging, positive orientation towards school, internalization of school values and norms) have a very important impact in school performance (Chapman, 2003; Libbey, 2004), therefore facilitating the transition to work.

Methodological framework

Our study is conducted within the project “*Practical training for economics students. An inter-regional partnership between universities and business sector (PRACTeam)*”. PRACTeam is implemented by University of Oradea in partnership with West University of Timisoara and University “Stefan cel Mare” from Suceava (POSDRU/90/2.1/S/64150) during 2011-2013. The project's goal is to facilitate students' school-to-work transition mainly by improving the quality of practical training provided within the BA and MA curricula. Additionally to this goal several services are offered primarily to students but also to the tutors from the companies and institutions where students run their practical training sessions. In this context, part of the management team of the project initiated a students' needs analysis during the first year of implementation, endeavor which was broadened in the second year with a survey regarding profiles of students and factors that facilitate school-to-work transition. Our analysis is based on some of these data, focusing mostly on exploring the relationship between attitudes and motivations towards work, school engagement and prospects of successful job seeking.

In the second year of implementation of the project the students' needs analysis was based on several focus groups conducted with three types of groups on each educational level, at each of the partner Universities. The first group consisted of students that finished their practical

training within the project, a second group that did their practical training in the classical manner, and a third group consisting of prospect students for the practical training sessions. There were a total of 21 focus groups organized. At each a mean of 12 students participated from different educational programs. In this paper we will refer solely to the aspects relevant to our aim, more information is available on project's web site.

The survey was initiated in the second year of the project and is addressed to the students which benefitted from the practical training. It is based on an on-line questionnaire composing in several topics from assessment of competences and interests related to work, psychological attitudes and values to aspects regarding social capital of students. The data collection is still ongoing thus the results presented in this paper is based on a preliminary data base consisting of 385 responses obtained from students from all partners in the project.

Analyses and results

In the following section we will present some results of our explorative analyses conducted on the available data collected through PRACTeam project. Our aim was to describe some of the dimension related to the integration of students in the labor market and their level of academic engagement.

Regarding students statuses on the labor market, data show that among students who are participant in the PRACTeam project, 94% are currently unemployed (266 students of 283). We have to emphasize that this value does not reflect the reality about the employment statuses of high education students, because one of the objective of the project is the increase of the number of students who are employed during or after the project end (consequently students selected in the projects were unemployed). Taking into account that the respondents are students involved in the first practice training organized in the project, we estimate that there is a higher percentage of students that are currently employed during their higher education studies. We obtained similar values regarding the percentage of students who own their own businesses. 96.5% (273 students) state that they do not have their own business. It is worth mentioning in this regard that the situation is somewhat different regarding their parents statuses. 88.7% of parents have their own business. There is a significant relationship between these two dimensions (Pearson Chi-Square =8.51, df =1, for $p = .004$, adj. residual = 2.9), showing that there is a higher chance for students to own their businesses if their parents own a business: 12.5% of students who own a business have parents who also have their own businesses, compared to 2.4% students who have business but their parents don't have their own business. This result suggests that entrepreneurship skills are mostly developed within the family.

According to economists students the most important skills for an efficient employee is a responsible behavior at the working place (mean value 4.69 on a 5 point scale) and the professional training (mean value 4.52). These values suggest that for the school-to-work transition and for a better integration on the labor market students give almost the same amount of importance to the transversal competences and for the information and skills that they acquire during their courses (specialized training). To argue this statement, data also revealed that on a four point scale, students appreciate their theoretical training as important on the labor market with a mean value of 3.23.

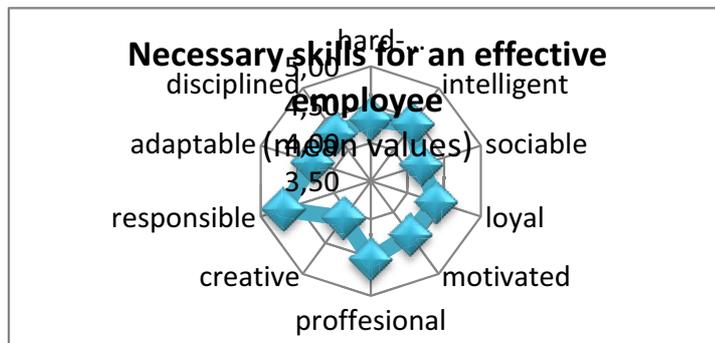


Fig. 1. Mean values for the skills requested on the labor market

The graphic presented below reveals differences between what students consider important for them and what university training actually offers. High education attainment is considered important for the development of students (professional and personal), but data suggests that students, at least economists students, are not fully satisfied with the training they receive during their college studies. Therefore the mean value recorded for the importance of professional training attributed for themselves is 3.63, significantly higher compared to what university offers for their training (mean value 3.06; significant for $t=13.71$, $p=.000$). The significance test for personal development reveals similar results (mean value 3.61 importance for themselves, compared to 3.09 men for what University offers, for $p=.000$).

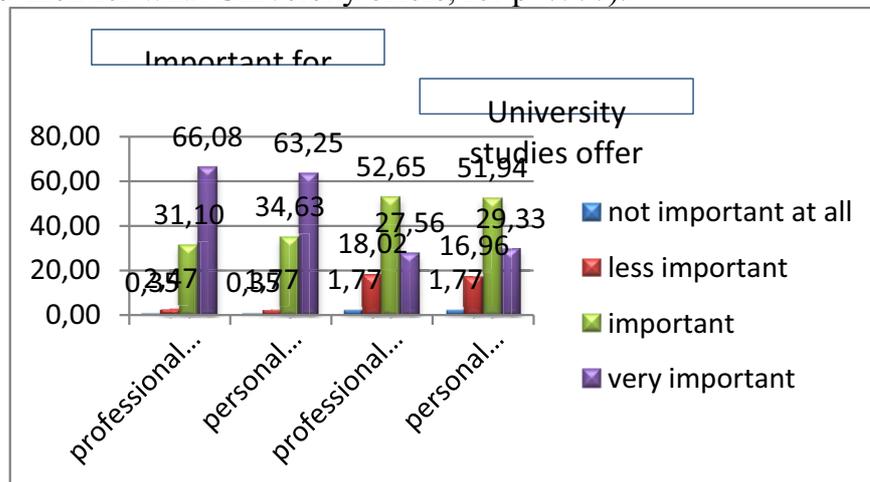


Fig. 2. Importance given to personal and professional training and the contribution of University studies to personal and professional training

Taking these results into account, we now turn to the topic regarding students' attitudes toward work. We used a 17 items scale where students had to assess the importance/value given to different aspects regarding work.

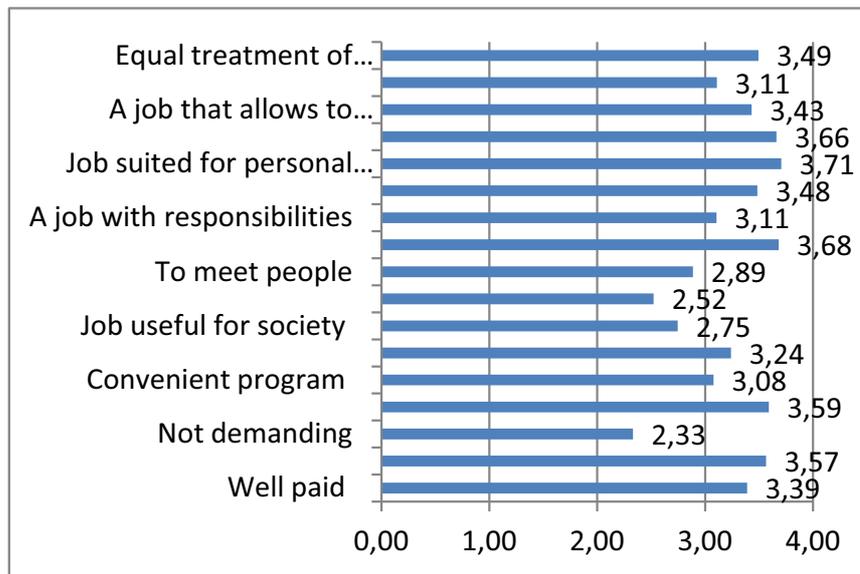


Fig. 3. Mean values recorded for items for valorization of work scale

Due to some measurement errors, for the factor analysis we excluded 4 items (work with nice people, job security, job suited for personal capacities, equal treatment of employees). We show below the results of the factor analysis. As it can be seen, there are two factors, one that refers to general motivation, extrinsic motivations related to work, and one that refers to a more personal motivation, an intrinsic one, that includes items referring to a more comfortable working place: job well paid, with many days off, with convenient program and not demanding for hard work (Comşa, 2009).

Table 2. Results of factor analysis - Rotated Component Matrix (method Varimax)

	Factor 1 Intrinsic	Factor 2 Extrinsic	Factor 3
Well paid	-0.071	0.582	-0.163
Not demanding	-0.042	0.758	0.213
Convenient program	0.115	0.723	0.008
Possibility for initiative	0.668	0.024	0.086
Job useful for society	0.509	0.173	0.213
More days off	0.060	0.729	0.095
To meet people	0.684	0.126	-0.131
A job where you feel you can do something	0.699	-0.002	0.031
A job with responsibilities	0.718	-0.125	-0.035
A job that is interesting	0.700	0.017	-0.089
A job that allows to learn new things and skills	0.609	-0.120	0.301
A job that allows to combine work with family life	0.070	0.088	0.896
To have a say in important decisions	0.642	0.035	0.309

Further, we analyzed the levels of academic engagement of economist students. We used a five items scale: *I can learn when there are other interesting things to do, I can finish my papers requested for courses or seminars, I can learn for an exam, I can concentrate to pay attention to classes, I can participate to courses and seminars* (1- not at all, 4 - in very much amount).

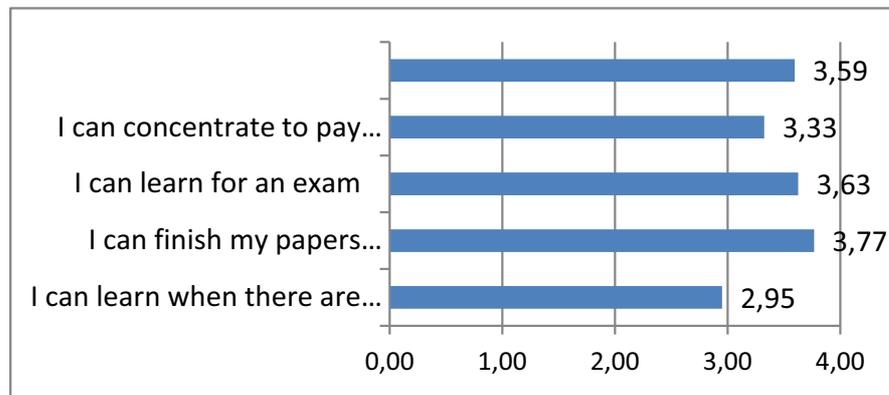


Fig. 4. Mean values recorded for items from engagement scale

The validity of the scale is proven (Cronbach Alpha above .70), therefore we summed the items into one measure; higher value of the scale means higher level of student's engagement. We reached some interesting results regarding the relationship between the level of school engagement of students and the value attributed to work. According to our data, there is a high positive correlation between the levels of engagement and an extrinsic motivation for work, and a high negative correlation between the levels of engagement and an intrinsic motivation for work. These results suggest that for more engaged students work is more important and less engaged students are interested more in factual characteristic of their job: payment, days off etc.. Therefore academic engagement represents a first step toward labor market integration. Other analyses revealed also a positive correlation between the value attributed to work (general valorization) and the importance given to theoretical training during university studies for an effective integration on the labor market (Pearson Correlation = .185 significant for 0.01 level).

Table 3. Correlation between school engagement and value of work

		General motivation	Intrinsic motivation
engagement	Pearson Correlation	.340(**)	-.205(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.001
	N	283	283

** significant for 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Conclusions and further developments

As stated in the beginning of this paper our research is a preliminary testing of broader hypothesis. These hypotheses refer to the relationship between school engagement, attitudes regarding work and transition from school-to-work of graduates of higher education. The intention is to look at individual level factors that facilitate or, on the contrary obstruct, a successful accession to jobs. We consider successful transition a graduate that finds a job in a short period upon completion of studies and that jobs requires the skills and competences the graduate acquired in his/her training.

The main conclusion of this preliminary investigation is that students with a higher level of school-engagement are also the ones interested more on general motivations when looking for a job. This implies that better students are the ones that are more realistically setting their criteria when evaluating a "good working place". Starting with this initial finding we will further investigate the relation of school-engagement with school-to-work transition. As mentioned in the methodological part the data presented here are derived from the first wave of data collection from a longitudinal survey that will reflect also when/if our graduates got employed. We will expect that engaged students will acquire a job in their field faster than the ones less engaged. This relation will be also mediated by school results, as we expect that more engaged students

will have better results – a dimension that will be included in the future waves of data collection. Additionally we will investigate the relation of school engagement of students with their decision of getting involved in extracurricular activities as well as voluntary work related to their field of study. The effect of these types of activities will be also measured regarding the job acquisition.

References

- Boudon, R., (1974), *Education, Opportunity, and Social Inequality; Changing Prospects in Western Society*. New York, Wiley; translated from French (1973): *L'Inégalité des chances*, Paris, A. Colin.
- Chapman, B., (2003), *Submission to the Crossroads Inquiry: Australian Parliament*, Centre for Economic Policy; Research Discussion Paper, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University.
- Comşa, M., (2009), *Etica muncii*. în NEWSLETTER. Valorile românilor. Nr. 4, ICCV Grupul românesc pentru studiul valorilor sociale, retrived March 15 2011 from http://www.iccv.ro/valori/newsletter/newsletter4.etica_muncii.pdf
- Education, Audio-visual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), (2012), *Key Data on Education in Europe 2012*, retrived March 12 2012 from http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/key_data_series/134EN.pdf
- Finn, J. D., (1993), *School engagement and student at-risk*, National Center for Education Statistics, Washington research report NCES-93-470.
- Heintz, M., (2005), *Etica muncii la românii de azi*, Bucureşti, Editura Curtea Veche.
- Libbey, H. P. (2004), Measuring Student Relationship to School: Attachment, Bonding, Connectedness and Engagement, *Journal of School Health*, vol. 74, issue 7, pp. 274-283.
- Mare, R.D., (1981), Change and Stability in Educational Stratification, in *American Sociological Review*, vol. 46, issue 1, pp. 72-87.
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2010, *Education at glance 2010. OECD Indicators*, accessed on-line at <http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/tertiary-education.aspx> in 20.03.2012
- Săveanu T., Săveanu S., (2011), Do we really hate our jobs? Determinants of Job Satisfaction in Romania, in *Analele Universităţii din Oradea – secţiunea Ştiinţe Economice TOM XX*, nr. II, Editura Universităţii din Oradea, pp. 723-729.
- Strategia Europa 2020, available on-line at http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/europe-2020-in-a-nutshell/targets/index_ro.htm
- Voicu, B., Tufis, C., Voicu, M., (2010), *Absolventii recenti de învăţământ superior şi integrarea lor pe piaţa muncii. Un raport către ACPART*, Bucureşti, România.
- Willms, J. D., (2003), *Student engagement at school. A sense of belonging and participation. Results from PISA 2000*, OECD 2003.
- World Bank indexes accesed on <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator> on 17.05.2012