

THE PRACTEAM MODEL REGARDING SCHOOL TO ACTIVE LIFE TRANSITION. STUDENTS' EXPECTANCIES

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Abstract: *The project "Practical training of economist's students. Inter-regional partnership in the labor market between universities and the business environment" focuses on student's transition from school to labor market. Concretely, it tries to highlight the general role of practical training – specifically the field related practical training set as a mandatory discipline in the curriculum, by identifying possibilities of interventions from supervisors. Starting with literature review regarding determinants of school to active life transition, the present contribution discusses the outline of the practical training set as a mandatory discipline in the curriculum. Within PRACTeam project the practical training itself is accompanied with a series of supplementary services (aptitude testing, counseling, career guidance, mentoring by a trained tutor, granting financial aid, awarding excellence over contests and internships). It represents an active partnership on the labor market meant to address directly students' expectations regarding practical training, work, and entrepreneurship. At least two main benefits may be derived from the training and tutoring. First, as a dual type model of transition from school to active life, allowing students to become insiders in the labor market. Secondly, changes in supervisor' patterns of interactions and behavior/attitudes toward work and employees may also occur, which in turn may improve the work. A pretest-posttest non-experimental design was applied for the PRACTeam evaluation. Using administered questionnaires and focus group method to students before and after they completed their practical stages we examined their attitudes and behavior towards elements of the dual model of transition. The paper concludes that a dual type model of transition from school to active life - that implies the education and practice occur simultaneously, successfully meets students' expectancies and may be functional for improving permeability between professional and academic knowledge.*

Keywords: *transition from school to active life, youth insertion on labor market, practical training, PRACTeam model, youth unemployment, youth self-employment, youth entrepreneurship*

JEL classification: *J01, J08, J18, J21, J44, J64*

1. Introduction

Dramatically rising of youth unemployment and tougher conditions faced by youth in entering the labor market are major social and economic challenges of this decade across Europe (OECD, 2012). There are approximately five million unemployed youth (those under the age of 25) in the European Union (EU). The youth unemployment rate in the EU was 22.3% in November 2011 - more than double than unemployment rate - 9.8% (Eurostat, 2012; OECD Statistics, 2012). The highest youth unemployment rates (around 30%) were registered in the most affected by economic crisis EU Member States: Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain and Ireland (OECD, 2012) but, as OECD shows, the increase in youth unemployment was not much more than for adults in the context of recession (OECD, 2012). The problem of youth unemployment is chronic across Europe. Moreover, labor market integration of graduates is severely threatened by requesting work experience from employers. In this context, the general concern is for search "approaches that work" in helping young people to enter the labor market for their first job. Investigating the factors that can facilitate transition from school to active life or keys for success for youth insertion on labor market are research areas that intensified in recent years across the EU.

2. Theoretical model of determinants of school to active life transition

Practical training and work experience within different educational forms, are considered key factors in facilitating the transition from school to active life and labor insertion of graduates (Cardosa, 2004; Hill and Holzer, 2006; Tovatt, 2011; Bell and Blanckflower, 2011). Transition from school to active life is defined as the process of change from the life of a youngster included in an educational form to the independent life. Current approaches distinguish between *transitions from school to active life* from the *labor market insertion* as the first does not assume the completion of studies. It may take place within an educational process under the form of practical training (Garcia, 2007, apud. Pîrciog et al., 2010: p. 75). The latter reflects employment after graduation of studies (Hill and Holzer, 2006).

Nevertheless this distinction is sometimes unclear as the succession school-work does not necessarily follow the classical model: employment may alternate with periods of inactivity, periods of schooling and work may overlap or even be reversed. More, school-to-work transition is differentiated between countries based on the link between educational systems and labor market, the standardization of educational outcomes at national level, openness to choice through the educational path. This is largely known as the *dual model* in which education and practical training take place simultaneously, allowing the student to become an "insider" on the labor market during his or her studies. The educational system is more standardized and stratified having close links with business organizations; links that develop continuous offers of internship or jobs for graduates etc. This is the success model for the youth insertion on the labor market (Mickovska-Raleva, 2010; Van Der Velden and Wolbers, 2003; Ehlert and Cordier, 2002). Another "way-out" from the classical model is given by the *entrepreneurial experiences* and *self-employment* as professional integration and, as processes of transition from school to active life and/or insertion on the labor market. Consequently, this current model moves away from the classical one (continuous, linear and homogenous), as it is rather discontinuous, un-linear and un-homogenous.

In the search of a theoretical model of determinants of school to active life, the founding theories are: the *human capital theory* (Becker, 1964), *job-competition model* (Thurow, 1975), *the job search theory* (McCall, 1970; Mortensen, 1970) and the *insider-outsider theory* (Linbeck and Snower, 1988).

Becker's *human capital theory* is the first approach in the economical thought regarding the behavior towards education and the implications of education on the labor market reflected over the salary differences between different educational levels (Becker, G., 1964). The author considers that "education and professional training are the most important investments in human capital" (p. 45). Nevertheless employers are not interested merely in the value of a diploma but also on the acquisition of "capacities and performances on the context of productive work". McCall's (1970) and Mortensen's (1970) *job search theory* as well as Thurow's (1975) *job-competition model* open the "Pandora's box" in the search of determinants of work insertion. The first determinant is the salary as job search behavior reveals it is an important criterion in accepting or rejecting a job (McCall, 1970; Mortensen, 1970). Next, analyses highlight the defensive importance of education and the level of compatibility of qualifications needed on the labor market and those provided by the educational system (Thurow, 1975).

These aspects are particularly relevant for youth as they are the most vulnerable to become unemployed. They are the end of the waiting line when jobs are scarce as employing new-comers increases the training costs for the company (Thurow, 1975). The *insider-outsider theory*, makes the distinction between employees and unemployed, and reveals that most youth graduating any form of education are outsiders competing with insiders with more experience (Linbeck & Snower, 1988). Other studies analyze the quality of jobs acquired by youth or the impact of different factors on unemployment among youth. For example macro-economic conditions, dimension of youth cohort, educational level, occupational structure, institutional arrangements shaping opportunities for new-comers on the labor market, occupational and educational policies (van der Velden & Wolbers, 2003).

We consider relevant for analyzing the determinants of school to active life transition also some recent studies. Reimer, Noelke, et al. (2008) explain cross-national patterns of labor market entry among students who drop out in 11 European countries. Reimer, Noelke & Alexander's (2008) analyzed the impact on occupational status of university graduates using data from 22 countries showing that differences in labor market opportunities for university graduates from different fields of study increase with the expansion of education at university level. Smyth & Banks (2012) identified the following key influences that shape the choices of young people: individual habitus, institutional habitus of the school (amount and type of guidance provided), personal agenda of each young, and how they evaluate alternatives. Authors explore how patterns of institutional differentiation in higher education systems are related to educational inequalities at the time of transition from higher education to work.

Starting with these, our analysis will try to highlight the general role of practical training – specifically the field related practical training set as a mandatory discipline in the curriculum. More, in this case, the practical training is conducted within a project that accompanies the practical training itself with a series of supplementary services (aptitude testing, counseling, career guidance, mentoring by a trained tutor, granting financial aid to all participants, stimulating education and professional integration by awarding excellence over contests, and internships etc). All these are

accomplished through an active partnership on the labor market for facilitating the *transition from school to active life* of economics' students from Bihor, Timisoara and Suceava counties (Romania) and responding to the students' expectations regarding practical training, work, and entrepreneurship.

3. Methodological design

Our endeavor is based on the experience of PRACTeam project: "Practical training of economist's students. Inter-regional partnership in the labor market between universities and the business environment", financed through European Social Fund - "Investing in People!" Contract no. POSDRU/90/2.1/S/64150. Within the project special emphasis was put on cooperation and collaboration between all actors involved in the practical training of students: students, teachers and representatives of the labor market. Consequently determining student's expectations regarding both the practical training and work (employed or self-employed) were the two aims of several research activities.

In order to *identify students' expectations regarding practical training* we have developed a methodology describing both the instruments and the sample for each of the three years in which the methodology was implemented. In the first year we administered questionnaires to students which completed their practical training in all three Faculties as well as focus groups with candidates. The second wave of assessment was based on focus groups with three type of groups: PRACTeam graduates (students form both BA and MA level which have completed their practical training within the project), non-PRACTeam graduates (students form both BA and MA level which have completed their practical training outside the project), and candidates. In the last year we have conducted focus groups solely with candidates from both BA and MA level. There were 30 focus groups organized, with an average of 12 students from different educational programs.

More, in the second year the managerial team of the project initiated a research on the broad topic *Students' Transition from school to work*. The survey was 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 on-going thus the results presented in this paper is based on a preliminary data base consisting of 374 valid responses obtained from students from all partners in the project.

The analysis presented in this article is based on both these sources of data: the identification of expectancies regarding practical training and the survey.

4. Main findings and discussion

4.1. Students' expectations regarding practical training

The focus groups aimed at assessing the impact of the practical training. The results were grouped in the following dimensions that were considered relevant: best practices in terms of the practical training of students, the strengths and threats on the organization of practical training, and other problems in the development stages of the training program.

Most students reported positive experiences. When problems were mentioned students reported those problems were faced by "other fellow" detaching themselves from them. In this section we mention some examples that can be considered best practice models. As highlighted during the discussions, these detailed models could

be positive in terms of the companies as responsible business practice and as work attitudes of students in practice.

One of the first aspects that were appreciated by students represent the firm / company / institution. The interest, attention and time spent by tutors with their students were the cases where students were most satisfied. The best practices are considered the situations where students had the opportunity to visit different departments or offices interacting with more people from each company.

"we were involved in a multitude of activities, seen various accounting documents, managed documents and recorded all data in the program. From a practical standpoint, we made all kinds of trainings in effective production hall, [...]. Within 2 weeks of practice I can say that I made a lot of activities, from accounting stuff, script to actually work in practice." (Andrew, PRACTeam graduate).

In the same manner were assessed the instances where the student has actually worked with several employees of the firm learning from many people:

"I didn't work entirely with my tutor, but I have met other people ... and for questions and problems we could turn to tutor, but it was better, they actually took the time to show us everything." (Adriana, PRACTeam graduate)

Indirectly determined as a model of good practice where the situations where students were allowed to make real actions. Often they noted with regret that just watched how to do business (accounting data entry, inventory paperwork and process, performance of contracts, receiving guests at the hotel, credit dossiers and so on) without being allowed to actually contribute to the processes.

During discussions with graduate students no special references were made regarding how the university tutors fulfilled their duties. We believe that this is because no problems were encountered so no issue was mentioned in terms of their involvement. Tutors which constantly monitored the activity of their students were appreciated by their students.

During focus groups it was emphasized the importance of students' attitudes regarding practical training. Several models have emerged from these discussions are detailed in the next section.

This type of problem has occurred mainly in the discussion with students that conducted their practical training outside the project, working students, mostly realizing practical work at their job. However, personal experiences of these students have shown the importance of involving people, perseverance and insistence on tutoring. Three of the participants in this group obtained their job after a successful completion of practical training as undergraduate students:

"I've been practicing my license at ---, heritage department. After the first day they sent me home but I called and told that I had a number of hours to do practice...and only because I insisted they let me work." (Mirela, non-PRACTeam graduate)

In this sense, students must be active in education generally, and particularly in connection with practical work experience. Thus volunteering in an organization is viewed as a model of good practice among students as it provides the required job experience.

"Students miss huge opportunity because they are not involved. At least 2 hours to be ready to learn each day. Have time for their future, not only for coffee. You have to change something in order to be good." (Lavinia, non-PRACTeam graduate)

"For example at my working place, last year came a MA student from Moldova. She came as a volunteer, not paid the first two months, to learn the human resources. Now she is hired ... additionally was rewarded for the two months of volunteer work." (Laura, non-PRACTeam graduate)

Problems arising from student attitudes can be directly addressed by explanations provided by the practice managers and tutors regarding the importance and effect of the actions that they make.

One of the major risks, reported directly by one of the graduate students was related to departments in which they do practice activity - they have to be adequate to the student domain of knowledge.

Another important issue is related to practice time, especially for firms and accounting departments.

"Yes for those in accounting, July is not the best time of the year, the end of the quarter, it's crazy ... and April and normally that firms do not have the time, and we stand after hours ... no time and explain to others how thing works in the firm."(Mirela, a non-PRACTeam graduate student).

In the discussion of non-PRACTeam graduates they drew attention to a potential risk in terms of practical training: due to the short duration and the fact that it is often only the presentation of the company / firm and some related action, the image created is " beautiful ", and fails to capture the complexity of the type of problems handled every day.

"Yes I've heard, some colleagues were to one firm--- but they showed only that everything goes well ... no company showed them problems."(Monica, non-PRACTeam graduate)

Consequently we believe that learning by doing is an important approach for the practical training. It is important to note also that practical training should also go beyond the required curricula and students should get involved, voluntarily or part time in different organizations.

4.2. Students' expectations and attitudes regarding work – draft 1

The attitudes regarding work were analyzed through the on-line survey conducted with students, PRACTeam graduates, from all three Universities. In this section we present the analysis of some of the questions revealing the importance attributed to work and dimensions valued in work by students.

Regarding the first aspect, it is interesting to note that students have the same responses as generally Romanians. In a percentage of 54% students consider work as a very important aspect of life, below family which is highly valued by 91% of students. At national level in average 56% Romanians consider work as important, while family is important for 86% (Comsa, 2009). A comparison between students' responses and the national findings reveal that the hierarchy of areas of life is the same for the two groups, yet the percentages differ. Table no. 1 describes the answers of students.

Table no. 1. Importance of different areas of life

Areas of life	Very important	important	Less important	Nat at all important
Family	91,40%	8,00%	0,00%	0,50%
Work	54,30%	44,10%	1,10%	0,50%
Religion	31,30%	41,70%	19,50%	7,50%
Friends and acquaintances	22,50%	67,60%	9,40%	0,50%
Free time	19,00%	67,60%	11,80%	1,60%
Politics	1,10%	9,40%	48,90%	40,60%

Regarding the second dimensions analyzed, students consider that it is most important that jobs are fit to their capacities – 70%, that it allows learning new skills – 70%, and that it promotes achieving something – 67%, as shown in Table 2. At national level, the most important feature of a job (95% of respondents considering it very important) referred to “good pay”, followed by security (85%), people treated equally and working with pleasant people (both last dimensions with 79%).

Table no. 2. Importance of different job characteristics

Which of the following aspects do you consider important regarding a job?	Very important	Important	Little important	Not at all important
	%	%	%	%
Meeting abilities	71,66	26,20	2,14	0,00
Learning new skills	70,32	25,40	4,28	0,00
Achieving something	67,38	31,02	1,34	0,27
Job security	63,90	32,35	3,48	0,27
Pleasant people	60,43	36,63	2,94	0,00
People treated equally	59,89	33,42	5,08	1,60
Family friendly	54,81	32,09	11,23	1,87
Interesting job	51,07	45,72	3,21	0,00
Good pay	39,04	58,56	2,41	0,00
Use initiative	32,62	57,75	9,63	0,00
Have a say	25,40	62,03	12,03	0,53
Good hours	25,13	60,43	14,17	0,27
Responsible job	24,87	62,57	12,03	0,53
Meeting people	19,79	55,35	21,93	2,94
Useful for society	17,91	47,59	29,95	4,55
Generous holidays	9,09	39,57	46,52	4,81
Not too much pressure	5,08	33,42	54,01	7,49

The way people see work gives significant insight regarding a given society. Students' responses show a tendency towards valorization of work. Work is viewed mostly as a place where one can express their skills, people who do not work become lazy, its humiliating to receive money without work, work is a duty towards society, and work must come first even if it means less free time.

Table no. 3. Attitudes towards work

Do you agree with the following statement?	agree	Not agree nor disagree	disagree
One must have a job to express one's skills.	81.02	16.31	2.67
People who do not work become lazy	67.92	23.26	8.82
Its humiliating to receive money without work	48.94	38.77	12.29
Work is a duty towards society	40.37	42.51	17.11
Work must come first even if it means less free time.	37.43	37.43	25.13

4.3. Students' and entrepreneurship

Since 1989 Romania has experienced significant changes in social and economic. Given the lack of entrepreneurial tradition, youngster's decision to set up a new business is determined in parallel by a number of contextual factors. Academic environment can and should take into account important social impact it can have to support entrepreneurship among young students. "Given that entrepreneurship is one of the most important guidelines towards economic health and prosperity perspective, the development of a true middle strata of society, the theme of entrepreneurship in young people is of particular importance to social responsibility of universities and educational system generally beyond the economic implications and mentality that attracts" (Boarescu, 2011).

Entrepreneurial approach has specific characteristics of young students resulting from a number of factors such as educational level, family entrepreneurship tradition, and charge level with responsibilities. Duties arising from the quality of student and the multiple roles assumed daily make entrepreneurship task more difficult than in the case of young people without academic commitments. Economic environment during the crisis is competitive and does not provide any exemption. Against this background there are many failures, which can be a major risk factor and a demotivating factor in the medium or long term. These aspects should be taken into account by any research aimed at student entrepreneurs. In academia is, more than ever, a need to stimulate the appetite for entrepreneurship and find suitable methods to support legally additional facilities for youth.

Existence of positive models of entrepreneurial activity is, as shown in our research (PRACTeam project) an important determinant of personal choice to engage in entrepreneurial activities.

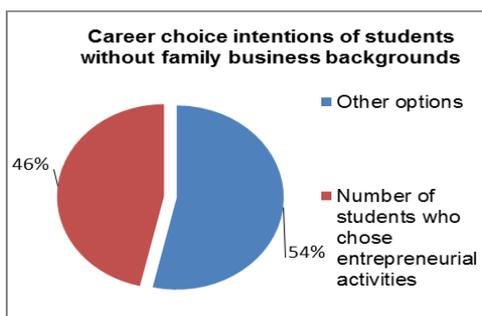


Figure no. 1. Career choice of students without family business backgrounds

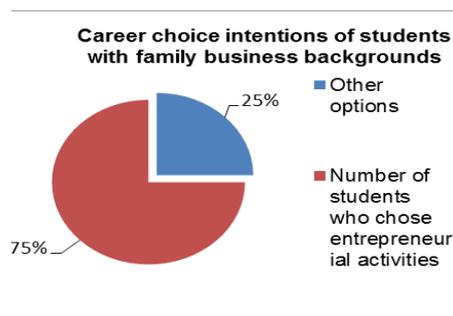


Figure no. 2. Career choice of students with family business backgrounds

From statistical perspective it can be seen that the percentage of students who are determined to engage in a business and from families engaged in various entrepreneurial activities or links with business is one third higher than the percentage of students who want to do business without have a tradition of entrepreneurship in family of origin. The existence of a mentoring model appears as a significant factor for the availability to start a business. In this context it is clear that the University should play a role not only in the theoretical training of students, but

should enable them to enter as often in contact with successful entrepreneurial models.

5. Concluding remarks and future perspectives

Synthetically we can say that our analysis shows that PRACTeam model – as a *dual type model of transition from school to active life* - that implies the education and practice occur simultaneously, allowing students to become insiders in the labor market even during studies and education has very close links with business organizations, successfully meet students' expectancies. At least two main benefits may be derived from our model of practical training. First, it allows students to become insiders in the labor market. Secondly, changes in supervisor' patterns of interactions and behavior towards work and employees may also occur, improving the quality of work. The broad scope of education and practice may be functional in reducing unemployment rate as well as for improving permeability between professional and academic knowledge.

We will continue to monitor *graduates, practice tutors and managers of host organizations expectancies* in order to identify the needs for practice stages for students in Economic Sciences of the Bihor, Timis and Suceava counties and to evaluate de impact of PRACTeam model labour market partnership (survey of the structured questionnaire applied to graduates which has benefited practice and internship stages through PRACTeam project, survey of the structured questionnaire applied to PRACTeam practice tutors, and open structured interview applied to managers of PRACTeam practice host organizations).

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