

I'VE JUST GRADUATED. DO YOU WANT TO BE MY EMPLOYER? SKILLS MISMATCHES FOR TERTIARY GRADUATES

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Abstract: *This paper addresses the issue of educational contents and learning outcomes in higher education. This is an up-to-date subject, if we take into account the development of education systems and the European and national contexts in which this massification of education occurs. Europe 2020 strategy speaks of a smart economic development, which is only possible with efficient investments in education, research and innovation. Therefore, strategic objectives suppose the increase of the employment rate and the share of university graduates in the population aged 30-34 years. So far, Romania has a lot to recover in order to achieve these objectives. One of the main issues raised by the European Union aims the weak relationship between business and academia and the inconsistency between the professional training and the requirements found on the labour market. All are expressed by high unemployment rate recorded for higher education graduates. Our paper takes into account three essential pillars in training of human resources: universities as educational service providers, students, as main beneficiaries of these services and employers, who are able to assess the match between the skills acquired by graduates and those required in the socio-economic environment. Research objectives aim the descriptions of occupational standards available for two fields of study: Sociology and Social work, identification of the academic and professional careers of students who graduated the study programs from the two fields and the opinion of employers regarding their employees. Our research has three data sources. First of all it involves an analysis of the contents found in official descriptions of occupational standards, then we use the data obtained in an online survey with BA and MA graduates (N=113) and the data from a survey among employers of graduates from these study programs (N= 69 organizations, 113 graduates). This paper focuses on the analysis of competences transmitted within study programs, their correspondence in terms of occupational standards and employment of graduates. The main conclusion of our research indicate that it is recommended a closer and stronger relationship between the three entities involved in the organization of study programs (universities, students, employers), structuring the curriculum and establishing performance standards to assess the skills acquired during years of study. Educational contents and the descriptors of structural elements of professional skills must be constantly updated in this sense. Only in this way, there will be a real correspondence between university training and the demands of the labour market. Our research was conducted within SocioPlus project, Training, documentation and access services for students in BA and MA programs in sociology and social work, funded by the European Union - POSDRU/156/1.2/G/139751.*

Keywords: graduate students; employers; occupational standards; labour market; professional skills.

JEL classification: J24; J21; I21; I23.

1. Theoretical background. Knowledge and skills in higher education

The insertion of graduates on the labour market is a relevant indicator for measuring the quality of higher education, but can also outline the lacks in academic and professional training. Universities are well aware of their role in training human resources, being the main provider of qualified employees on the labour market. All educational policies talk about the inclusive character of educational systems and how well-trained human resources can ensure economic and social development (Council of the European Union, 2013; Burke, 2012). European Union enforces all member countries to increase the quality of human resources, by following the priorities outlined in Europe 2020 Strategy. Overall, the strategy aims to sustain an intelligent, inclusive and solid economic development through efficient investments in education, research and innovation (European Commission, 2010). Romania has to increase the employment rate up to 75% in population between 20-64 years old and the rate of high education graduates up to 40% in the population aged 30-34 years (European Commission, 2010). These targets seem to be hard to accomplish giving the fact that in 2013 the national unemployment rate of 4.3% regarding higher education graduates was the highest from 2002 (Eurostat, 2014). Much more, European Council still identifies skills mismatches for tertiary graduates and gaps regarding the relation between academia and employment area (European Commission, 2014).

The way in which academic training meets the needs of the employment market is a problem of a permanent adjustment of the curriculum, in order to provide graduates competences which could enhance their rate of employability (Sondergaard *et al.*, 2011; Sharma, 2015). Higher education learning outcomes are represented by competencies transmitted to graduates, seen as a set of knowledge, skills and abilities (Delamare Le Deist and Winterton, 2005; Rieckmann, 2012). Research shows that educational offer does not suit labour market demands, a mismatch that is perceived both by graduates and employers (Baciu and Lazăr, 2011; Lazányi, 2012). In this sense, the link between academia, graduates and labour market, the main three pillars that are able to create social and economic development, should be reinforced by increasing a transparent and relevant collaboration, considering the real demands on labour market (Roșca, Păunescu and Pârvan, 2010).

2. Empirical research

2.1. Description of the project

Our research and analyses were conducted on data and information obtained within SocioPlus project. The project aims to improve the study programs at bachelor level (BA) and master level (MA) in Sociology and Social Work by adjusting the educational offers according to the requirements posed by the labour market. In this regard, the main objective of the project is to develop the curricula of 4 study programs from University of Oradea, namely Sociology, Social Work, Social Services Management and Human Resources Management.

2.2. Methodological framework

Our research follows data obtained within three studies, which allows us to outline a wide image regarding the integration of students on labour market.

Our first analysis focused on describing professional qualifications, based on a comparative perspective of specific occupational standards and competences for each educational field. The description of qualifications, standards and skills were retrieved from

the National Register of Qualifications in Higher Education (RNCIS). Within the two educational fields – Sociology and Social Work, University of Oradea organises study programs at BA level (Sociology and Social Work) and MA level (Human Resources Management – HRM and Social Services Management - SSM). We point out the fact that at MA level, there is only one study program (HRM), organised in the field of Sociology, even if according to RNCIS, the occupational standards for this specialization are independently described. Our second study aimed at investigating graduates` degree of insertion on the labour market. Therefore, graduates` educational and professional paths were analysed. Data was collected using an online survey. The third study focused on capturing employers` perception about graduates` professional competences and skills. We included 69 public and private institutions from Bihor which employed people who graduated at least one of the 4 study programs. Data were obtained by using two research instruments: Institutional Sheet and Employee Sheet. The first Sheet was filled in once in each institution and the second Sheet was filled in for each employee in one institution who graduated Sociology or Social Work.

Our study poses some methodological boundaries therefore results cannot be extrapolated at regional or national level. The limits refer especially to the dimension of our samples. Online surveys are limited in terms of the control over the responses rate. Also the low number of employers included in the sample is explained through the fact that our research aimed at analysing only graduates who are employed in certain positions, specific to the field of their training.

2.3. Research objectives

Our paper focuses on three main aspects that refer to the training of graduates, as outputs from the educational systems and inputs on the labor market. Therefore our analysis follows both the description of student`s educational and professional profiles and the demands from employers.

1. As a first phase, in our study we looked at the formal descriptions of occupational standards available for the two fields of study. These standards clarify the link between professional and transversal competencies and possible occupations according COR (Classification of Occupations in Romania).
2. Secondly we turn to graduates. We aim to describe the academic and professional profile of students who graduated the programs from the two fields.
3. Our last objective follows the opinion of employers regarding their employees who are graduates of the two study programs.

3. Analysis and results

3.1. Description of qualifications in Sociology and Social Work

In the design and organization of study programs, academics have at hand a very useful tool that includes details about existing qualifications in different areas. The online system for recording and managing data (see www.rncis.ro) include relevant information about the educational offer, specific and transversal skills and the level descriptors related to them, minimum performance standards established for the assessment of competences acquired, possible occupations according to COR. The functionality of this system should provide clarification regarding the relationship between skills transmitted during academic training and jobs in which these skills are required. Subsequently, a proper analysis of the labour market would allow real evaluation of the number of jobs available (demand) in different fields. The system is indeed functional and according to OM 5703/2011 higher education institutions are required to enter information about the qualifications. At BA level, there is information about the main qualifications, instead at MA level, things are not so

clear. This is the case for the programs from our two fields of study. We note that, for the HRM program it is available the description of the qualification Human Resources at BA level, program that is also in sociology field.

For each qualification are provided six professional competences, each one with corresponding level descriptors - knowledge or skills - five of them in total. Therefore, each study program has a corresponding 30 specific competencies described. According to them, minimum standards of performance are described for each of the 6 competences. Our study focused on the analysis of them.

One skill, and therefore occupational standard, which is found in all study programs refers to the development and implementation of projects, plans for intervention, social diagnosis. To this one are added those related to counselling, professional and social integration. Then we can see the close relationship between occupational standards set for the BA level Social work program with SSM program. These programs involve the development of preventive services and support activities. Proposals for intervention measures in order to solve social problems are also found in the case of BA level Sociology program. Furthermore, regarding programs in sociology field, Sociology and HRM, they have in common management of database systems - using social indicators. We note that Human Resources program has specific skills that are not specified in the case of the other ones - training activities, working relations, recruitment and selection etc..

To summarize, we stress out the fact that such tools are extremely useful in organizing and analysing curricula developed by higher education institutions. Also we recommend to continuously update this information. All these should be made known for both students and socio-economic representatives.

3.2. Academic and professional profiles of graduates

In this section we present some results regarding the graduates from Sociology and Social work fields. First of all we look at their academic situations and then we describe their occupational status.

Our sample includes 113 graduates' students from University of Oradea. Their distribution according to field of training is at it follows:

Table 1: Distribution of graduates according to the level of training

Diplomas at BA level	N	%	Diplomas at MA level	N	%
another specialization	21	18.6	without MA degree	36	31.9
SOCIOLOGY	45	39.8	HRM	38	33.6
SOCIAL WORK	47	41.6	SSM	20	17.7
			another specialization	19	16.8
Total	113	100.0	Total	113	100.0

Source: authors' own analysis

As the data shows, there are only 36 BA level graduates who didn't continue their studies at the MA level. Regarding the other ones, most of the students who graduate from Sociology follow the HRM study program at the MA level, and those who graduate from Social work attend the SSM program. We may highlight also the number of students from Sociology which are trained in another specialization at the MA level.

Table 2: Graduates' level of training and specialization

		MA level			
		without MA	HRM	SSM	other
BA level	other	0	20	1	0
	SOCIOLOGY	17	12	0	16
	SOCIAL WORK	19	6	19	3

Source: authors' own analysis

Graduates of the programs covered in the research have less than two bachelor's or master degrees. In other words, few have followed other bachelor or master programs, compared to those analysed. Instead, in the case of life-long-learning training degrees we obtained higher mean values (above 1.60), especially in the case of graduates of Sociology (1.96) and those with other MA degree (2.63).

In the case of BA graduates, the response rates are largely focused on recent promotions. Social workers are concentrated in the promotions from 2008-2014, but Sociologists are distributed in earlier promotions (2001-2014). Regarding MA graduates, those from HRM are distributed relatively homogeneously in promotions from 2007-2014, and those from SSM are from recent promotions (2012-2014). We have to stress out that different promotions received different curricula and also there are some students who have graduated before Bologna.

The evaluation of BA study programs, in terms of training, skills offered and academic reputation, indicate differences between the two fields. Social work graduates say in a greater extent that the study program is geared towards a specific professional training and that the skills are known by most of the employers. Instead, Sociology graduates believe that the study program provides in a lesser extent appropriate training for a specific occupation. Moreover, they stated that employers are not very well informed about the skills offered within the study program.

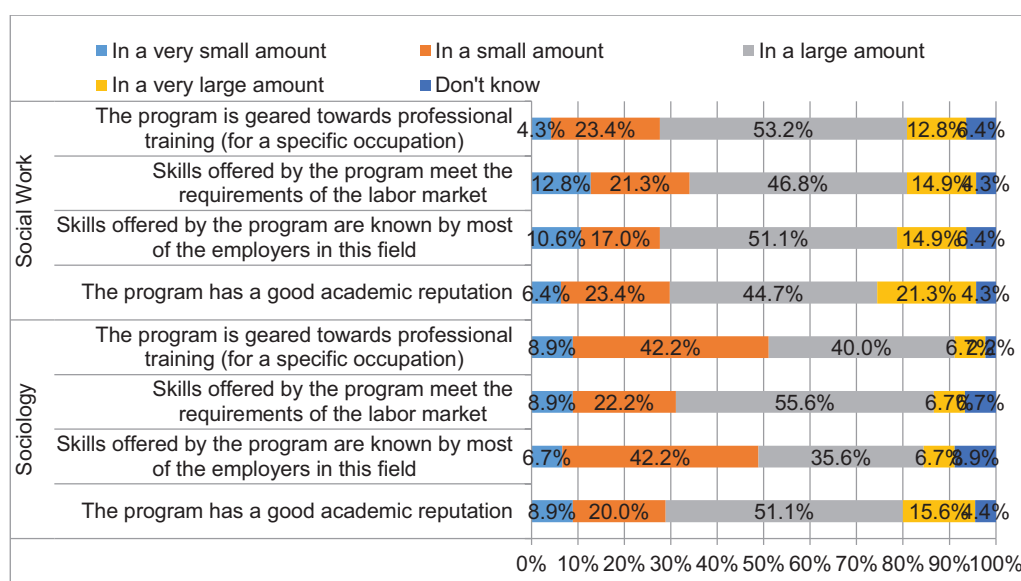


Figure 1: BA graduates opinion about graduated programs at BA level

Source: Source: authors' own analysis

The analyses regarding the MA graduated programs show also some differences. Compared to SSM graduates, those who obtained a HRM diploma consider in a smaller amount that the program addresses training for a specific occupation. Anyways, graduates from both programs appreciate the good reputation of them.

We asked our graduates if they consider that the skills and knowledge obtained through the MA programs represent a supplement of those acquired at the BA level. Most of them appreciate that the MA training provided deepened knowledge and skills. 26% of HRM graduates and 35% of SSM graduates state that MA training supplemented the BA training only in a small or very small amount.

Most graduates (over 76%) have previous professional experience, with at least one job so

far. Graduates of Sociology and Social work had an average number between 2.6 and 3.3 jobs until now. If we look at the numbers referring to the jobs obtained after graduation, than we can highlight the fact that most of them had at least one job before completing their university studies. The mean values for the number of jobs after completing their BA studies are between 1.3 and 2.5, and for completing their MA studies, values are between 1.3 and 1.4. Values are higher in the case of Sociology graduates. But this is because we registered older promotions, so the probability for them to have more jobs until now is higher.

After the graduation from BA programs, 64% of those from Sociology declare that they found a job related to their field of training and 47% of Social workers sustain this, but they've got involved in voluntary activities in a higher proportion.

Getting their first job after graduating, involved special support provided by family, friends and other acquaintances. Another way for finding their first job implied the direct contact of employers for available jobs. None of the graduates have benefited from services offered by career guidance departments from universities. 24% of Social work graduates and 29% of those from Sociology were contacted directly by an employee.

Over 80% of graduates are currently employed. Most of them have employment contracts of indefinite period, holding executive positions. Regarding the type of organizations where graduates are employed, we find differences between the fields of study. Social workers are more oriented towards public institutions and the NGO sector, and sociologists are more frequently employed in the private sector. Regarding the two MA programs, percentages do not show important differences. However, we noticed higher values recorded for those who own companies.

The analysis of the types of positions occupied by graduates, show the following results: sociologists are found in positions such as assistant manager, teacher, researcher, financial consultant, human resources consultant, manager; social workers are found in positions such as social worker, teacher, coordinator, inspector, assistant manager, sales consultant; HRM graduates work in positions such as administrator, human resources analyst, manager, inspector, teacher and SSM graduates are social workers, inspectors, coordinators, teachers.

3.3. Employers' perception about their employees

In order to give a wide image of graduates' integration on the labour market, we analyzed the opinion of employers regarding their employees. Our sample included 69 organizations from both public and private sector, from Bihor County. The majority are public institutions, followed by NGOs.

Table 3: Type of organization (N)

Private company (SRL, SA)	16
Public institution funded from the budget	22
Public institution with mixed funding (from the budget or other sources)	9
Public institution funded from its own revenues	2
NGO or foundation	20

Source: authors' own analysis

A total of 113 Employee Sheets were filled in. Data shows that the number of BA graduates, both in Sociology and Social Work (78), evaluated in our research is higher than that of MA graduates (58). We must take into account the overlapping of diplomas, namely the sociologists who also have HRM diplomas or social workers who own SSM diplomas.

Table 4: Total number of evaluated employees

	BA		MA
with BA in Sociology	42	with MA in HRM	40
with BA in Social Work	36	with MA in SSM	18
Total BA	78	Total MA	58
TOTAL NUMBER OF GRADUATES: 146			

Source: authors' own analysis

Most employees who graduated in Sociology at BA level are employed on positions like pre-university teaching professor, counsellor on social issues, sociologist, inspector, coordinator in various fields. The great majority of Social Work graduates is employed as social assistant, counsellor on social issues or inspector. Very few are occupying other positions which do not presume specialized training in Social Work like executive director or teacher. At MA level, the situation of HRM graduates is as follows: the majority is employed on positions as counsellor or social worker counsellor, followed by social workers, administrator and professor. Very few are holding positions like sociologist or human resource specialist. Unlike HRM graduates, SSM graduates are integrated on labour market more according to their specialization: social workers, social worker counsellors and inspectors.

Our research shows that integration on labour market depends on the BA degrees; for both fields, most of the graduates obtained their BA diplomas before their engagement on labour market (over 70%). On the opposite side, the majority of MA graduates obtained their degrees after employment (over 75%), which outlines the fact that MA diplomas are important rather for job promotions.

The fact that both BA and MA graduates needed requalification or extra-training courses could suggest that competences and skills obtained by them during university study programs are not considered sufficient by employers in accomplishing professional tasks. Over 70% of graduates for each level of studies have attended training or specialization courses after employment. In what regards qualification or requalification courses, the percentages of BA and MA graduates are lower: HRM – 21%, Social Work – 11%.

Using the special competences lists available in RNCIS for all study programs included in our research, we asked the employers from the sample to assess their employees according to the skills considered to be important in order to accomplish the working tasks. We used a four point scale where 1 is for *Not at all important* and 4 is *Very important*. We shortened the list by compressing some of the skills that were related to each other, taking into account the degree of coverage of those skills by each study program. The final list included 26 items.

The analysis for all study programs showed that some specific skills are seen as important for all graduates: *Identification of specific needs of target groups, cases monitoring and assessing the improvement of problems*, and the *Professional counselling and social integration*. On the other hand, communication skills are also considered to be important for all study programs: the *Social communication*, the *Analysis and assessment of the processes of personal, group and mass communication*, the *Communication with beneficiaries and other stakeholders*.

In the case of Sociology graduates, employers consider it is important that they know how to analyze and manage data and social indicators, and also to develop proposals in order to solve social problems that they identified. For Social work graduates, employers consider it is important to know and use specific intervention methods in dealing with beneficiaries, and develop prevention services.

Competences assessed as important in the case of SSM graduates overlap somewhat with those assessed as fundamental for social work programs. Therefore it is important for graduates to know the methods of intervention and direct work with social services

beneficiaries and the development and implementation of prevention activities. Employers believe that HRM graduates should have skills regarding career counselling and communication.

To identify the key indicators of our scale on specific skills transmitted within the study programs, we used factor analysis with Varimax rotation method (KMO 0.92). Factor analysis indicates four scores (total variance explained 28,7% first score, 15.6% second one, 15% and 13% last two). The four scores are the following: the score regarding Social work (SW)/SSM skills. It includes 13 items, such as: *Implement interventions to reduce social risks; Develop services and prevention activities and support for beneficiaries; Counselling and specialized intervention methods; Evaluation and monitoring of social services* etc.. The score regarding HR skills (5 items): *Identification, analysis and solving problems in organizations; Database management with personnel records; Organizing training programs; Managing working relationships; Recruitment, selection, evaluation and promotion of employees*. A score regarding specific competences considered to be important in the case of all social-sciences graduates (3 items) – *Counselling & communication*. The fourth score refers to specific skills for Sociology graduates (5 items) – *SOC: Design of sociological research; Management of social data; Use of procedures and software for social indicators; Diagnosis of social problems*.

The analysis of values obtained for each scores registered for each study program show interesting results regarding the appreciation of the importance and coverage of skills offered in the academic training of graduates in different fields. The mean values of each score obtained for the four study programs stresses out the fact that for any field of specialization employers seek specific competences and skills. The figure below shows that there is a difference between the two fields of study: sociology and social work. Therefore, employers consider that Sociology graduates should have specific skills corresponding to the field that they had graduated from in order to accomplish their working tasks and almost no skills corresponding to Social Work field. On the other hand, for graduates from Social Work, employers appreciate obviously specific skills from the field, but also consider to be important some skills specific to Sociology field. Moreover, counselling and communication skills are considered by employers to be more important for Social Work graduates than for Sociology or HRM graduates. Data shows that these skills present similar values for both HRM and Sociology graduates.

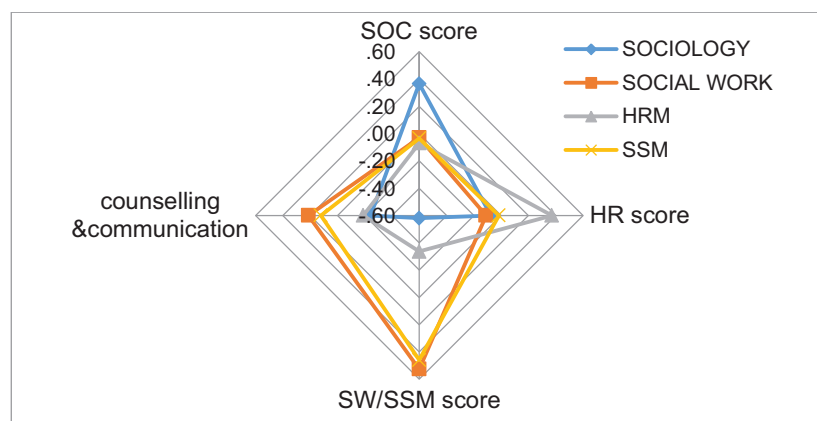


Figure 2: Mean values for competence scores, values for each study programs

4. Concluding remarks

Our research uses three data sources. We consider them as the main pillars in terms of the preparation of educational offer and presentation and analysis of the demand. We have

on the one hand, providers of educational services, on the other hand employers, and in between students and graduates. In order for the relationship between them to be functional, the information found at each level should be consistent. Therefore, if we talk in terms of skills that students need to acquire during their university training, it is important that these skills are matched with the labour market. From better cooperation between education providers, employers, employees and students everyone would benefit.

We looked in our research at study programs from two fields: Sociology and Social work. For these programs there is available relevant information regarding specific skills and standards for the assessment of these skills. Also we questioned our graduates and they said that programs they graduated from are known by employers. Most graduates are employed in jobs where they can use the knowledge and skills acquired during the years of study. On the other hand, employers believe that skills acquired by the students are important and they mark the consistency of relevant skills corresponding to each BA and MA programs.

To summarize, we recommend a stronger and better relationship between all parts involved in education (inputs and outputs), and more quality and updated information regarding the available qualifications.

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