

STUDY ON THE PERCEPTION OF EMPLOYERS FROM PUBLIC AND PRIVATE AGRIBUSINESS ENVIRONMENT TO IDENTIFY THE MAIN REQUIREMENTS REGARDING SKILLS OF STUDENTS AND GRADUATES

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Abstract

The purpose of university education in Romania is to prepare specialists in their fields of study who, through the accumulated knowledge, can contribute to the development of society, the improvement of the way of life, innovation, research, and other aspects. These specialists, in addition to the theoretical and practical curricular knowledge that they acquire during the study program, also need other skills, knowledge, trainings, relationships in order to be prepared for integration into the labour market or to start an entrepreneurial path. In a society based on knowledge, the attitude, the competences and the abilities focused on a specific context have a decisive role. Moreover, employers follow very well-defined criteria in their recruitment process. This paper aims to analyse the perception of public and private employers regarding the evaluation criteria of University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine from Bucharest (USAMV from Bucharest) students and graduates. The Centre for Career Counselling and Guidance (CCOC) from USAMV Bucharest aims to acknowledge, study, clarify and implement the main requirements targeted by the employers regarding career orientation process. The research methodology involves an analysis of the specialized literature regarding the tendencies of skills needed for qualified personnel. The case study is composed of a questionnaire applied to commercial companies and institutions involved in an agribusiness field that contains 10 questions. The analysis of the resulting data was processed with the help of statistical methods, and the results obtained after their interpretation give us a clear picture of the HR criteria pursued by employers. We find that 80.4% of them consider theoretical knowledge to be important in the employment of graduates, 72.5% consider that specialized practice it is a must, 58.8% consider that graduates need internships and volunteer activities, but equally important are the digital skills that are underlined by 51% of company representatives. Also, 21.6% of the companies consider that the various personal development activities have an important role in the training of graduates. The challenges regarding a better integration on the labour market, the development of personal skills and their capitalization for added value in obtaining a job based both on generic and specific competences make the collaboration between universities and institutions in the field to be particularly important.

Key words: employers, requirements, skills, students, agribusiness

INTRODUCTION

As noted by the World Bank report (2002) the role of higher education in particular, is now more influential than ever in the construction of knowledge economies, in the creation of the intellectual capacity on which knowledge production and utilization depend and to the promotion of the lifelong-learning practices necessary for updating people's knowledge and skills [2].

The perceived demand for different skills has prompted policymakers to develop frameworks to ensure that educational

institutions deliver skills that will be able to meet labour market demands.

It is widely recognized that changes in the nature of work and the workplace in modern economy are transforming the types of knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for successful employment and work performance (OECD 2011) [13].

A different paradigm of skills is emerging and new skills are becoming important to employers and the labour market.

Grouping skills in four categories is used in literature: *cognitive skills* are usually acquired through formal education (skills such as

problem solving, critical thinking, ingenuity, creativity) which may be transferable to work situations; *generic skills* [3] that include things such as communication, team work which may be transferred into the work process; *technical skills* which refer to specific skills required to perform a targeted occupation or job; *soft skills* that are hard to conceptualize, define and are not as easily measured such as time management, emotional intelligence, leadership, critical thinking [12]. In the 21st century soft skills are called “applied” skills or “21st-century skills”. They are considered an important factor for achieving job position and life success. Two different studies, one conducted by Harvard University which notes that 80% of career achievements have been impacted by soft skills, while the second study conducted by Stanford Research Institute cojoined with Carnegie Mellon Foundation among the Fortune 500 CEOs certifies that their solid career in work is based 75% on soft skills and 25% on hard skills [15]. Thus, it becomes more obvious that high education institutions should aim to prepare qualified professionals but as well to improve and grow their personal abilities. According to Cambridge Dictionary “soft skills” represents people abilities to communicate with each other and work together. It is highlighted that soft skills are becoming more important in companies` recruitment decisions while the tags are workplace and HR [4]. Soft skills, such as friendliness and team work, and feature such as emotional intelligence have been highlighted as the skills that have the biggest importance in the current labour market [1, 7]. Human capital can be broadly defined as the stock of knowledge, skills and other personal characteristics embodied in people that helps them to be productive (OECD) [14].

From the perspective of labour supply, human capital theories refer to skills of persons as a specific form of assets in which individuals make investments and may capitalize on them. From this perspective, human capital includes not only tuition, but also a variety of work-related individual abilities and attributes [11, 16, 17].

In order to achieve a quality guidance services in the European Union, the Council of EU has adopted in 2008 a resolution regarding improving the purpose of lifelong guidance throughout lifelong learning strategies [6].

One of the aspects considered in a growing trade globalisation and lengthening of period of active employment is that individuals need to adapt their skills in order to assure the safety of a career path. Another aspect refers to the increased mobility in education, training and in the labour market. The transitions` in citizens lives like from school to vocational education and training (VET), higher education or employment, from employment to unemployment is to be consider.

According to *Council Resolution on better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies*, Brussels, 21 November 2008, the state members of EU are invited to strengthen the role of lifelong guidance within national lifelong learning strategies in line with the Lisbon Strategy and with the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training. The Council of the European Union by prioritising the areas of application recommends to encourage, facilitate, develop and cooperate in the field of lifelong acquisition of career management skills, guidance services and provide guidance to the population. (pupils, university entrants, job-seekers, those in vocational training and those in employment) [5].

Taking into consideration the EU Council recommendations Romania regulates lifelong career counselling and guidance services through Romanian Government order no. 1.804/4.469/2012 [18]. The order sets the general, institutional and conceptual framework through which lifelong career counselling and guidance services are carried out. In addition to this order the Ministry of National Education from Romania issued the order no. 650 from 19 of November 2014 which states the framework methodology regarding the organization and operation of the centres of career counselling and guidance in the Romanian higher education system.

The order defines career counselling and guidance as a sum of all services and activities

which helps people of any age and at any moment of their existence to make choices in the sphere of education, training or work in order to manage their career. The services refer to counselling, guidance, reducing university dropout, facilitate the relationship between students and the labour market and increasing the employability of students in the fields of graduated studies. Furthermore, the activities cover educational, vocational, career, psychological counselling and evaluation. The aspect of labour market integration of students and graduates covers activities as preparing on employment portfolio, job interview simulations, companies' presentations, training sessions for the development of transversal skills of students, participation in alumni activities [8, 9, 10]. To be in harmony with acting legislation University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Bucharest (USAMV from Bucharest) issued Regulation on Organization and Operation of Centre for Counselling and Career Orientation (CCOC) [19]. The CCOC main mission is to provide employment opportunities, to facilitate and to consolidate the relationship between students and the labour market environment, through soft skills development, self-knowledge, self-image, adaptation, social integration, school success, acquisition of effective learning techniques.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research methods applied in this study are the analysis of specialised literature relating to the skills of students and graduates who can make the difference in successfully integrate into the labour market and a quantitative survey by applying a 10 question to the targeted group.

The target group was represented by commercial companies and institutions involved in the agribusiness field. The questionnaire was developed and completed online by the subjects.

It was applied between March and October 2022, and the number of respondents was 51.

The evaluative questions on which the study was based on were as follows:

Please indicate the form of financing of your company or institution. Please indicate the number of employees of your company. Please indicate the turn over achieved in 2021. Which of the following criteria do you consider to be important when a student/graduate of higher education (USAMV from Bucharest) is evaluated, with the purpose of hiring a specialist? What kind of services should benefit the students of USAMV from Bucharest, in order to integrate more easily into the labour market? How much do you rate a student/graduate on the way they have prepared their curriculum vitae? Currently, within your institution, do you have employees students/graduates from USAMV Bucharest? To what extent do you estimate that the skills and knowledge acquired during studies by USAMV Bucharest students /graduates match the job description requirements in your company? Would you be willing to conclude a partnership agreement with USAMV from Bucharest with purpose of improve student skills by offering internship programs and workshops within your company? What recommendations do you have for the Centre for Counselling and Career Orientation (CCOC) in order to increase employability among USAMV Bucharest students/graduates?

The questionnaire covered the following aspects:

-the mix of cognitive, generic, technical and soft skills;

-services and activities result for smoother integration in the labour market;

-specific workplace skills and abilities.

The assessment limits were given by:

-the collected information was both perception and technical level;

-the questionnaire was applied to commercial companies and institutions involved in the agribusiness field;

-data analysis was interpreted through descriptive statistical methods.

Characteristics of the respondents' group

43 small and medium size enterprises (SME's) and large enterprises, 2 non-governmental organisation (NGO), 6 public institutions. The data processing was done

using statistical methods and the results were presented in tables, graphs and throughout interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The current study was conducted with the assistance of a 10-question questionnaire and the data collected is related with the perception of public and private employers regarding the assessment criteria of USAMV Bucharest students and graduates from the perspective of the attributions, which have been empowered to CCOC by USAMV Bucharest Senate.

The information gathered indicates the type of financing form the target group benefits.

It results that 84% of the respondents rely on private budget, 12% on public budget, 4% both on private and public budget (Table 1).

Table 1. Type of financing

No. of Employers	Type of financing	%
43	private	84%
6	public budget	12%
2	private & public budget	4%

Source: own processing.

For 35 commercial enterprises we have the requested data. For 8 enterprises the data is not eloquent as they are part of offshore companies, groups or not available to the public. From a total of 14,356 employees, 12,553 are enrolled in *large enterprises*, 1,506 in *medium-sized enterprises*, 259 in *small enterprises* and 38 in *micro enterprises*. For public institutions and NGO's the financial data are not relevant to this study because of the source of financing (Figure 1).

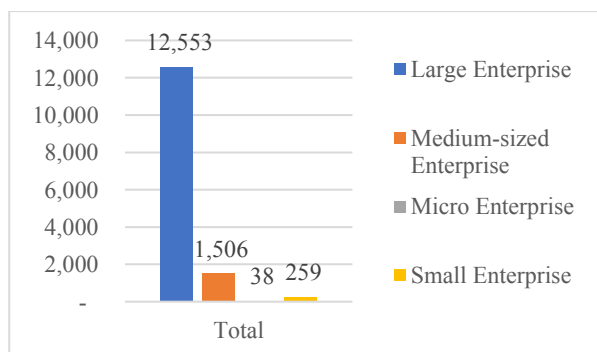


Fig. 1. No. of employees by enterprise size (2021)
 Source: own processing.

In Figure 2 we note that from the total number of 14,356 employees, 87% are represented by *large enterprises*, 11% in *medium-sized enterprises*, 259 in *small enterprises* and 38 in *micro enterprises*.

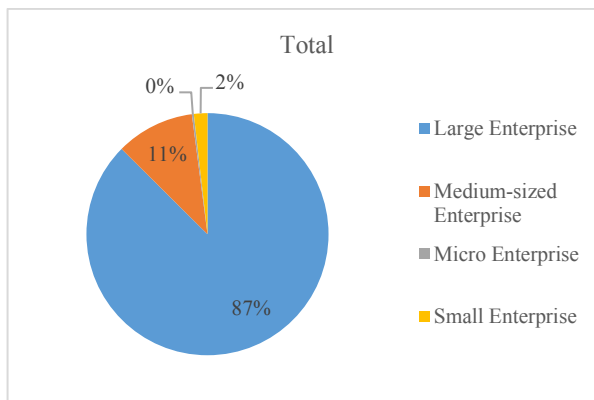


Fig. 2. Share of no. of employees by enterprise size (2021)

Source: own processing.

The third indicator is 2021 turnover. We find a total turnover for *large enterprises* of 5,405,259 thousand Ron which represents 80% of total turnover of 6,757,153 thousand Ron.

Medium-sized enterprises share is 1,079,711 thousand Ron representing 16% of the total, while small enterprises share is 241,348 thousand meaning 4% and micro enterprises represents 0.46% with 30,834 thousand Ron (Figure 3).

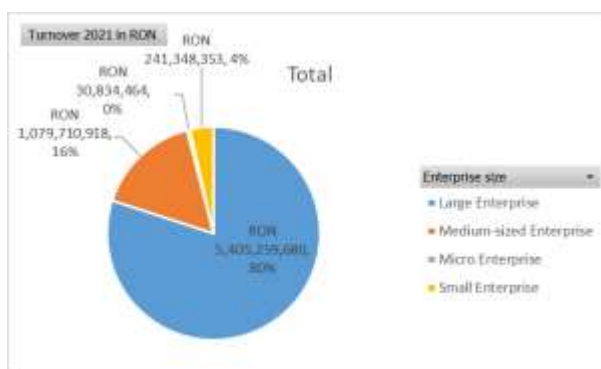


Fig. 3. Share of turnover by enterprise size in 2021 (thousand Ron)

Source: own processing.

For questions 4 to 10, all the answers of enterprises and institutions were taken into consideration. (51 respondents)

Question no. 4: *Which of the following criteria do you consider to be important when*

a student/graduate of higher education (USAMV from Bucharest) is evaluated, with the purpose of hiring a specialist? It is a question with a multiple-choice answer.

We find that 41 (80.4%) of the respondents consider theoretical knowledge important as being on in first place, 37 (72.5%) specialized practice as 2nd place, 30 (58.8%) internship and volunteering activities as 3rd, 26 (51%) digital competences as 4th, 11 (21.6%) self-improvement courses as 5th. A notable result comes from 3rd place with almost 60% of the respondent choice. The internships and volunteering activities are very likely to improve and develop students' soft skills (Figure 4).

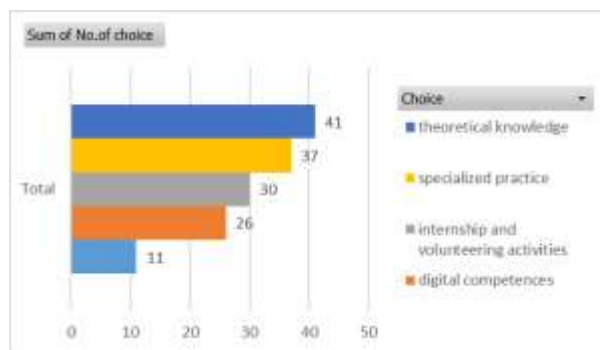


Fig. 4. Specialist hiring criteria choice
 Source: own processing.

Question no. 5: *What kind of services should benefit of the students of USAMV from Bucharest, in order to integrate more easily into the labour market?* It is a question with multiple choice answer.

From the answers collected 36 (70.6%) of respondents suggested counselling and career guidance services, 27 (52.9%) employability workshop, 18 (35.3) improvement courses and 12 (23.5%) vocational counselling. The answers received show that different type of services should be provided (Figure 5).

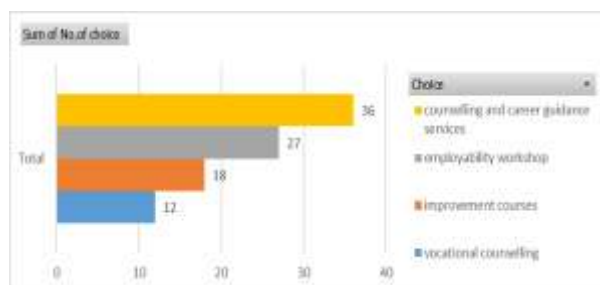


Fig. 5. Type of services to provide
 Source: own processing.

To question no. 6 which refers to how much the enterprise/institution rate a student/graduate way of preparing their curriculum vitae from 51 respondents, 30 consider important, 19 very important and 2 it is not relevant. We note a determined result regarding the preparation of curriculum vitae as Figure 6 is showing below.

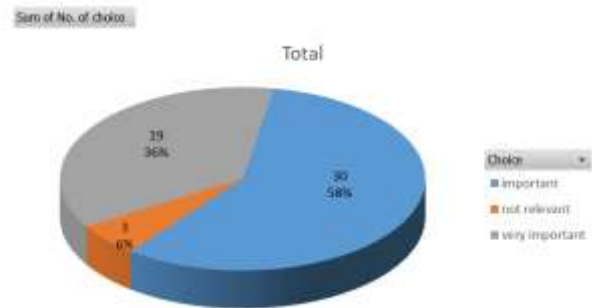


Fig. 6. Curriculum vitae preparation importance
 Source: own processing.

Question no. 7: *Currently, within your institution, do you have employees students/graduates from USAMV Bucharest?*

33 (64.7%) of the respondents currently have USAMV from Bucharest graduates employed, 6 (11.8%) students and 12 (23.5%) neither of them employed. We note that the percentage of both graduated and students employed in the target group companies represents a total 76.5% (Figure 7).

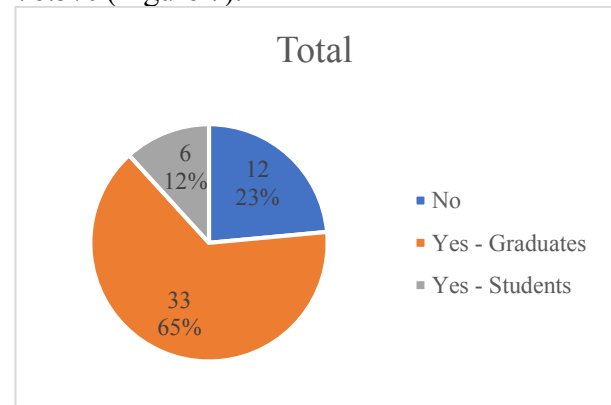


Fig. 7. Students/graduates employed by respondents
 Source: own processing.

Question no.8: *To what extent do you estimate that the skills and knowledge acquired during studies by USAMV Bucharest students /graduates match the job description requirements in your company?*

22 (45.8%) of respondents consider that the skills/knowledge fits well, 18 (37.5%) matches to a great extent, 6 (12.5%) not sufficient and 2 (4.1%) cannot tell. 3 of the answers were invalidated as for choosing multiple variants. We note that over 83% of the 48 that validated on answer found the skills as a match. The key figures are represented in Figure 8.

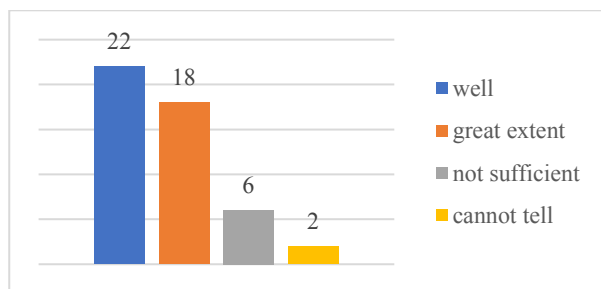


Fig. 8. Skill/knowledge match with job description
 Source: own processing.

Question no. 9: *Would you be willing to conclude a partnership agreement with USAMV from Bucharest with purpose of improve student skills by offering internship programs and workshops within your company?* The question intends to conclude if enterprises are willing to participate to the student self-improvement and moreover through the internship programs their intent regarding self-growing specialised personnel. We note that 43 (84.3%) of the respondents answered affirmatively while 9 (17.6%) said no (Figure 9).

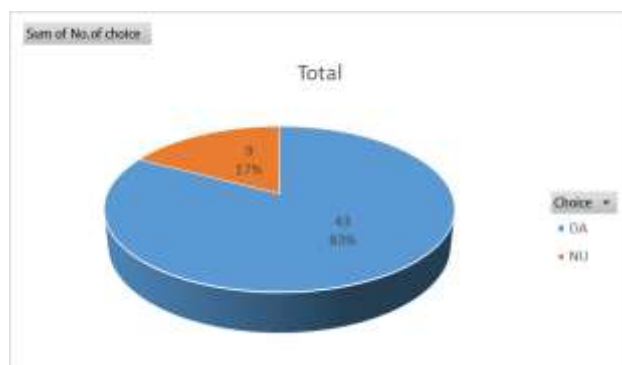


Fig. 9. Partnership with USAMVB option
 Source: own processing.

Question no. 10: *What recommendations do you have for the Centre for Counselling and Career Orientation (CCOC) in order to increase employability among USAMV*

Bucharest students/graduates? This is an open question and it was addressed in order that the enterprises representants to mark their point of view with aspects that is capital for the students self-development. To summarize the most important aspects raised by respondents: the experience accumulated during workshops, volunteering activities, internships contribute to the assembly of a student profile which will be attractive for the employer; guidance to short-term courses that help professional development; organising periodic meetings between students and employers representatives; developing students skill; identifying opportunities for their personal and professional development; increasing the degree of visibility of the parties: students and employers.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the specialized literature in conjunction with the legislation in the field, to which the present study is added, shows that in a global, dynamic market in perpetual change, the adaptability is one of the major aspects that can influence a better integration on the labour market, a consolidation as continuous development in career and implicitly the increase of self-respect and confidence. The results show that, in addition to the specialized curriculum, students and graduates must also possess the so-called essential soft skills in order for them to be integrated into a system of knowledge accumulation throughout life. All these soft skills as knowledge will contribute to a dynamism of learning and will create a causal link between theoretical knowledge and its application in order to bring added value to society. These are acquired and developed following experiences that are targeted for this aspect. The companies in the field make a special effort to ensure that these skills are included in the curriculum vitae of the student/graduate. Moreover, the companies show a great openness in concluding lasting and sustainable partnerships with the precise aim of improving students' skills and in this way facilitating their inclusion on the labour market. Throughout the study, we show that

both employers, commercial companies, public institutions or NGOs and specially created university organizations have the common purpose to increase their visibility in order to identify new opportunities for the personal development of students.

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