

QUALITY ANALYSIS OF PRACTICAL TRAINING IN VOCATIONAL AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION. CASE STUDY: ILFOV COUNTY, ROMANIA, ACADEMIC YEAR 2022-2023

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Abstract

In an environment characterized by change and diversity in the labour market, vocational and technical education is undergoing a significant transformation. Vocational and technical educational institutions are obligated to adopt approaches that align with reality when faced with challenges in a social environment where employment opportunities and the demand for specialized workforce are diversified. This article presents the results of a qualitative research conducted at the pre-university education level in Ilfov County, based on the questionnaire that was administered to 502 students enrolled in educational institutions in Ilfov County, at the following specializations: Tourism and public food, Economics, Environmental Protection, Agriculture, Mechanics, Electronics and Automation, Construction, Installations, and Public Works. The purpose of this research was to understand how educational institutions, affected by industry regulations, adapt to the requirements of the labour market and the needs of direct beneficiaries. The present research utilized an indirect survey through a questionnaire, as the advantages of this opinion-sampling tool include allowing subjects to think thoroughly before responding, reducing the disruptive influence of the surveyor, and minimizing errors in data recording and interpretation. The questionnaire was addressed to students in vocational and technical education with the aim of determining to what extent the respondents are satisfied with the practical training courses completed in the 2022-2023 school year. Conclusions were drawn from the answers recorded on the entire sample which can later be translated into measures to improve the quality of internships.

Key words: education, practice, traineeship

INTRODUCTION

Traineeship is the activity carried out by students following the curriculum plan, aiming to verify the practical applicability of the theoretical knowledge acquired within the framework of supervised practical training. Traineeship forms the foundation of a young person's future career, and in its absence, the beginning of a career is fraught with numerous obstacles and difficulties [2], [10]. The traineeship period represents a stage of improvement or acquisition of practical knowledge that a student undergoes in a factory, company, institution, etc. Through traineeships, students acquire the skills and abilities necessary for integration into the labour market, providing an extra chance for employment, as the practical training hours

serve to apply the theoretical knowledge accumulated during the school [4].

Traineeships prepare students attitudinally, aptitudinally, and emotionally to start their professional activity. Thus, the development of a set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that allow for the full development of each individual's personality, social integration, and entry into the labour market is considered the way education responds to contemporary challenges [5], [14]. On the other hand, traineeships provide a space for exploring the practitioner's abilities and possibilities. In this way, the student identifies their strengths as well as areas that require more attention, obtaining a much more accurate self-image. All this information provided by practical experience contributes to the consolidation of a strong sense of self-esteem [12], [15].

In this context, the purpose of this paper is to analyze the quality level of practical training courses held in pre-university education, from the perspective of the direct beneficiary - the student.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The practical training stages related to the specializations subject to the present research vary depending on the form of education, specialization, and class, as follows:

1. **High school education, technological profile**, four-year study duration: In the lower cycle of high school (9th and 10th grade), practical training extends over a period of 3 weeks, totalling 90 hours. In the upper cycle of high school, in the 11th grade, the duration of practical training stages can vary depending on the specialization, ranging between a period of 4 weeks, totalling 120 hours, or 5 weeks, totaling 150 hours. In the 12th grade, practical training stages span over 5 weeks, totaling 150 hours [6], [7].

2. **Vocational education and dual-system vocational school**, three-year study duration: In this form of education, we encounter weekly practical training and consolidated practical training stages. In the 9th grade, weekly practical training is 3 hours per week, and consolidated practical training stages span over five weeks, totaling 150 hours of practical preparation. In the 10th grade, weekly practical training is 12 hours per week, and consolidated practical training stages have a duration of 9 weeks, totaling 270 hours. In the 11th grade, there are 12 hours of weekly practical training, and consolidated practical training stages extend over a period of 10 weeks, totaling 300 hours [8]. Within Ilfov County, technological high schools offer various specializations such as Tourism and public food; Commerce; Economics; Environmental protection; Agriculture; Forestry; Mechanics; Electronics and automation; Healthcare; Wood product manufacturing; Aesthetics and hygiene of the human body; Textile and leather industry; Construction and public works. A particular case is represented by "Mihail Kogălniceanu" Theoretical High School in Snagov, where

both technological high school education and dual-system vocational school are provided, making it the only theoretical high school that offers technological education.

To obtain the necessary research information, the questionnaire method was utilized. This method is often used in descriptive research. The research questionnaire is a technique and, accordingly, an investigative tool consisting of a set of logically and psychologically ordered written questions and possibly graphic images. Administered by survey operators or self-administered, it elicits responses from the respondents that are to be recorded in writing. It is noteworthy that the validity of the questionnaire survey method depends largely on factors such as the clarity of question formulation or phrasing, the proposed research sample, and its representativeness. When properly designed, questionnaires prove to be an efficient method of collecting a large amount of information about people's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, often accompanied by the use of other research techniques [13], [9].

In terms of how responses can be formulated, questions included in a questionnaire can be grouped into several categories [1], [3], [11]:

a) *Open-ended questions*: These are questions to which respondents can answer using their own words. They are often used in the exploratory stage of the survey, aiming to identify and describe a complete range of situations, behaviours, attitudes, etc., rather than determining their frequency (responses to these questions are often impossible or very difficult to code).

b) *Closed-ended questions*: These are questions that can only be answered with predetermined options and can be classified as dichotomous, multiple-choice, semantic, or hierarchically structured.

c) *Control questions*: These questions serve to verify whether the responses to other questions are correct or not, whether they are well-founded, or if they result from insufficient information.

d) *Filter questions*: These are questions depending on the received answers, and which are used either to eliminate subjects who are

not of interest from the survey or to remove unnecessary questions from the questionnaire. In creating the questionnaire, there were used both factual and opinion-based questions, which typically delve into an individual's inner thoughts, specifically opinions and subjective evaluations regarding the studied subject. Closed-ended questions were destined to maintain the rigour and validity of the research. Open-ended questions with short answers have been the criterion of completeness, referring to each participant's ability to choose a satisfactory response. The questions were introductory, transitional, and moderately abstract, aiming to avoid being overly demanding or tedious. The form and content of the questions, and the used language were investigation tools easily understandable and completed by the participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This research aimed to assess the satisfaction of respondents with the practical training stages undertaken during the academic year 2022-2023.

Through the questionnaire, students provided the requested data and expressed their opinions regarding the conditions of practical activities, the fulfilment of organizational aspects, the competencies gained through participation in practical training stages, and suggestions regarding evaluation methods.

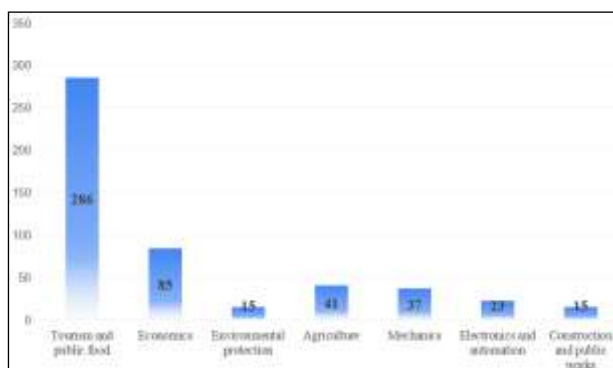


Fig. 1. Distribution of the respondents based on the enrolled specialization
 Source: Own contribution.

Table 1. Respondent distribution based on enrolled specialization

Educational Unit	Profile	No. of valid answers
Theoretical High School "Mihail Kogălniceanu", Snagov, Ilfov	Tourism and public food	91
Technical High School "Vintilă Brătianu", Dragomirești-Vale, Ilfov	Economics	6
	Environmental protection	15
	Agriculture	22
Technical High School "Nicoale Bălcescu", Voluntari, Ilfov	Tourism and public food	12
	Economics	12
Technical High School "Barbu Știrbey", Buftea, Ilfov	Tourism and public food	72
	Economics	44
Technical High School "Pamfil Șeicaru", Ciorogârla, Ilfov	Tourism and public food	15
	Economics	12
	Mechanics	16
	Electronics and automation	11
Technical High School "Doamna Chiajna", Roșu, Chiajna, Ilfov	Tourism and public food	59
	Electronics and automation	12
Technical High School "Cezar Nicolau", Brănești, Ilfov	Tourism and public food	37
	Economics	11
	Mechanics	21
	Construction, installations, and public works	15
	Agriculture	19
Total respondents		502

Source: Own contribution.

Section A. In the first section of the questionnaire (questions 1 to 4), dichotomous and semi-open questions were employed, where students provided information regarding:

1. Age category (14 - 16 years; 17 - 19 years; 20 - 26 years)

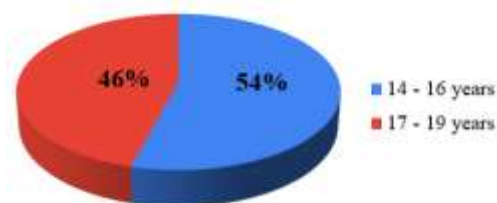


Fig. 2. Distribution of respondents by age groups
 Source: Own contribution.

2. Grade level (9th grade; 10th grade; 11th grade; 12th grade)

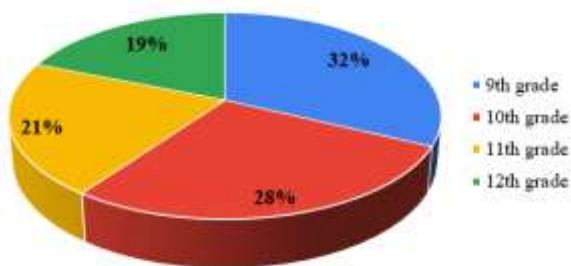


Fig. 3. Distribution of respondents by enrolled grade
 Source: Own contribution.

3. Origin environment (rural/urban)

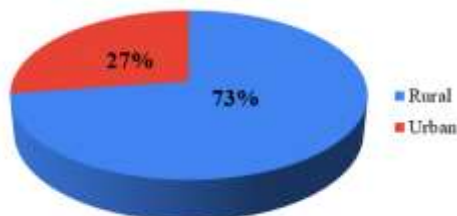


Fig. 4. Distribution of Respondents by Origin Environment
 Source: Own contribution.

4. The specialization in which they are enrolled

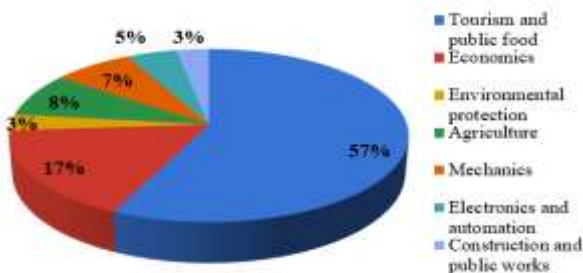


Fig. 5. Distribution of respondents by enrolled specialization
 Source: Own contribution.

Section B. In the second section of the questionnaire (questions 5 to 15), questions from the category of ranked response questions were formulated, requiring respondents to specify the order of priority given to the provided response options. In some classifications, questions aiming to capture attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of subjects are also included in this category, but we consider this scope to be too broad. The quality characteristics of practical training

stages were operationalized into several variables, each described by a series of questionnaire items. For each item, formulated as a statement, we asked each respondent to express their level of satisfaction on a scale with the following response options: (1) - totally unsatisfactory, (2) - unsatisfactory, (3) - average, (4) - good, and (5) - very good. To each response on this scale, we assigned a corresponding value (the numbers in parentheses). This coding corresponds to the logic that a higher agreement for the respective item indicates agreement or a closer alignment with the overall characteristic being pursued. In the following, we analyze each variable in accordance with the students' responses to questions and, based on these, the averages obtained.

5. Conditions of the Practical Training Activities:

- a) working conditions (space, atmosphere, etc.)
- b) to what extent was the equipment provided by the business operator suitable for carrying out practical training activities?
- c) evaluate the level of guidance provided by the mentor appointed by the hosting company.
- d) evaluate the level of intercollegiate collaboration during the practical training activities.

The conditions of the activities represent a variable constructed based on four items that refer to working conditions, the provided equipment, the guidance given by the mentor, and intercollegiate collaboration.

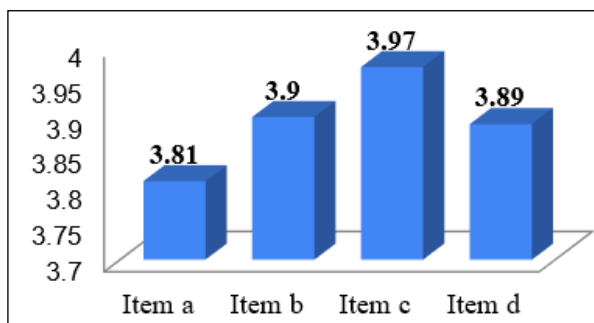


Fig. 6. The conditions for carrying out practical training activities
 Source: Own contribution.

Figure 6 shows the variable *conditions of conducting activities* records the highest

average satisfaction concerning the level of guidance provided by the mentor, while the lowest level of satisfaction is noted for working conditions (space and atmosphere).

6. The fulfilment of organizational aspects:

- (a). the traineeship period and daily schedule
- (b). the partners' activities met the students' expectations

(c). the partners' activities did not create problems in the program's implementation.

The fulfilment of organizational aspects is a variable based on three items constructed to reflect the importance of the traineeship dimension and daily schedule, as well as the integration of practising students into the daily activities of the practice partner operators.

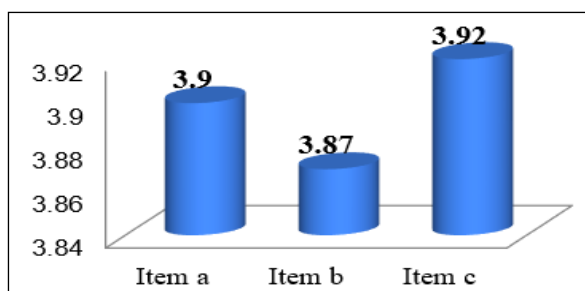


Fig. 7. The fulfilment of organizational aspects
 Source: Own contribution.

From the data presented in Figure 7, it can be observed that the partners' activities did not create problems in the implementation of the practical training stages, with this item obtaining the highest satisfaction average. Meanwhile, the item related to participants' expectations recorded the lowest satisfaction level.

7. Business operators met students' expectations regarding:

- (a). availability
- (b). cooperation
- (c).encouraging active participation in practice
- (d).flexibility/diversity of the proposed program
- (e). creating a suitable environment
- (f). communicativeness
- (g). adequate logistics.

Students' satisfaction with collaboration with business operators is a variable constructed based on seven items referring to availability, cooperation, encouragement, flexibility of the

program, environment, communicativeness, and logistics.

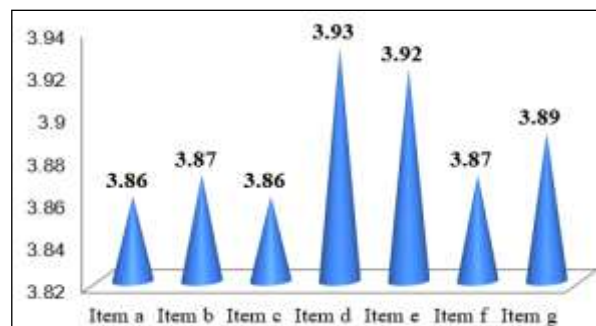


Fig. 8. Students' Satisfaction with Business Operators' Performance
 Source: Own contribution.

Analyzing the data presented in Figure 8, we observe that students' maximum satisfaction was recorded for the flexibility/diversity of the program, while the minimum satisfaction level was represented by the encouragement of active participation in practice.

8. To what extent does the students' traineeship contribute to:

- a. developing practical skills
- b. developing teamwork skills
- c. applying practical knowledge acquired
- d. increasing responsibility towards assigned tasks
- e.employability in the job market as a graduate

The contribution to the development of students' skills and work capacities is a variable that has been analyzed from the perspective of five items constructed based on the development of practical skills and teamwork skills, the practical application of theoretical knowledge, the increase in responsibility for practitioners, and their integration into the job market.

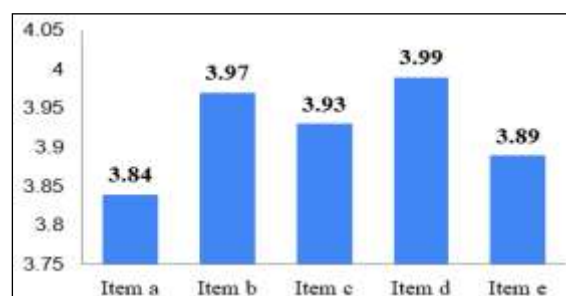


Fig. 9. Contribution of traineeships to the development of skills and work capacities
 Source: Own contribution.

From the data presented in Figure 9, it can be observed that the majority of respondents consider that traineeships contribute to an increase in responsibility towards assigned tasks, while a smaller number of respondents believe that they are less important for the development of practical skills.

9. To what extent do you believe that the training of students before the traineeship should include:

- a. a career counselling and guidance module
- b. basic elements of organizational communication, teamwork
- c. specialized training in the field of activity of the company/institution
- d. information about the organizational and decision-making structure of a company/institution
- e. concepts related to organizational culture and corporate social responsibility

Another studied variable is the importance of theoretical preparation before traineeships, which was constructed based on five items that draw respondents' attention to career counselling and guidance, elements of organizational communication, training in the field of activity of the business operator, receiving information about its organizational and decision-making structure, as well as concepts related to organizational culture.

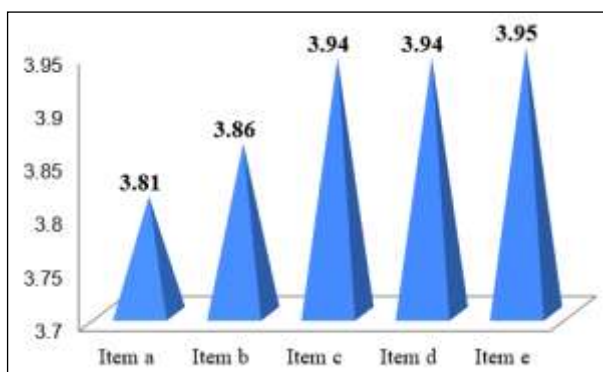


Fig. 10. The importance of theoretical preparation before traineeships
 Source: Own contribution.

Analyzing the information presented in Figure 10, we observe that the majority of respondents consider knowing concepts related to organizational culture and corporate social responsibility to be important.

10. To what extent do you consider the following methods appropriate for evaluating the traineeship period?

- a. ongoing evaluation by the practice supervisor designated by the company/institution.
- b. final evaluation based on the supervisor's characterization.
- c. combined evaluation, both ongoing and at the end of the traineeship, through the supervisor's characterization and grading of practical activities, projects, or other documentation completed in the company/institution.
- d. conducting evaluations through an online platform.

The evaluation of traineeship periods is another variable that has been subjected to this study, built based on four items, through which respondents are asked for their opinions regarding the best method for assessing traineeships.

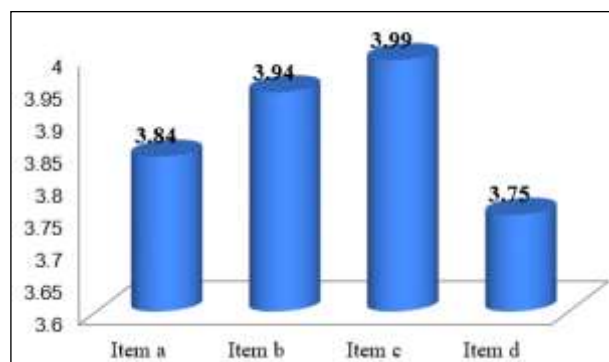


Fig. 11. Methods of evaluating traineeship periods
 Source: Own contribution.

From Figure 11, we observe that the majority of respondents consider the combined evaluation method, both ongoing and at the end of the traineeship, through the supervisor's characterization and grading of practical activities, projects, or other documentation completed in the company/institution, to be the best.

11. Rate the effectiveness of the following forms of communication between the traineeship supervisor and students?

- a. daily, through a student group coordinator
- b. telephone communication with all students, at their initiative
- c. daily participation in meetings held at the company's headquarters

d. constant communication through an online platform

Communication between the teaching staff responsible for traineeships and students is an important variable that has been brought to the attention of the respondents. It has been constructed based on four items referring to the types and means of communication that can be used for the successful implementation of traineeships.

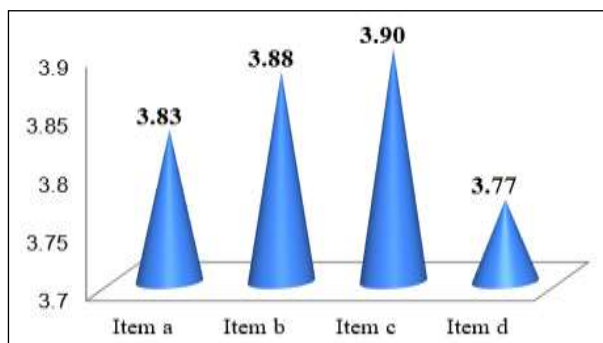


Fig. 12. Communication between the teaching staff responsible for traineeships and students
 Source: Own contribution.

Analyzing Figure 12, we observe that the majority of respondents consider an optimal communication method between the teaching staff and students to be the daily participation in meetings held at the headquarters of the practice partner company.

12. To what extent do you consider the following activities of the practice coordinator to be important?

- a. implementation of the ongoing and final evaluation process for students
- b. continuous communication with students and mentors
- c. ongoing monitoring of the traineeship to achieve its objectives
- d. preparation of internal reports for the educational institution's leadership

The activity of the educational coordinator of traineeships is another variable analyzed through this questionnaire. It is based on four items referring to the involvement of the educational coordinator in the evaluation process, continuous communication with students and mentors, ongoing monitoring of traineeships, and the preparation of reports regarding their progress.



Fig. 13. Importance of the activity of the educational coordinator of the traineeships
 Source: Own contribution.

According to Figure 13, the majority of respondents consider the activity of the educational coordinator important for maintaining ongoing collaboration with students and practice mentors.

13. The relevance of the traineeship for professional training:

- a) the degree of alignment of the activities carried out with the recommended thematic
- b) to what extent the objectives/work tasks were clearly outlined and their achievement was monitored
- c) the degree of use of the knowledge acquired during theoretical training
- d) to what extent are you satisfied with the practical skills gained.

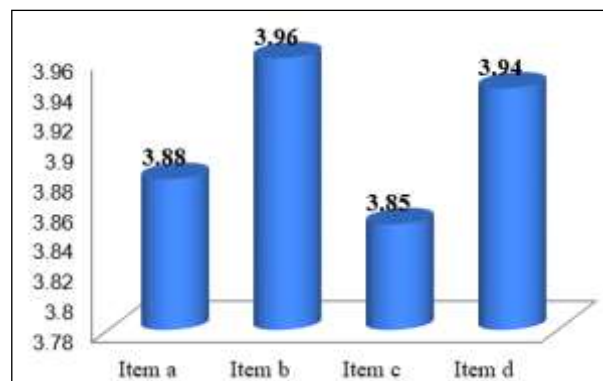


Fig. 14. The relevance of traineeships in the professional training of students
 Source: Own contribution.

Another studied variable is the relevance of traineeships in the professional training of students. This was based on four items that draw the attention of respondents to the correlation of activities with those provided by the curriculum, the clarity of outlined tasks and their monitoring, the applicability of theoretical knowledge, and the practical skills acquired.

In Figure 14, we observe that the majority of respondents consider it important to what extent the objectives/work tasks were clearly outlined and their achievement was monitored.

14. What do you consider to be the main attributes that the students' traineeship should have?

- a. Proper arrangement and equipping of spaces dedicated to traineeships.
- b. Ensuring continuous monitoring and feedback throughout the traineeships.
- c. Aligning the traineeship program content with the requirements of the job market.
- d. Providing students, teachers, and traineeship partners with access to digital tools to facilitate planning, implementation, and monitoring of activities/traineeships, communication among all involved parties, and involvement in organizing activities.

Considering the utility of traineeships, respondents have expressed their opinions regarding the main attributes that such practice activities should have. To identify these attributes, four items were constructed based on the conditions of traineeship implementation, continuous monitoring and feedback, alignment of content with labour market requirements, and providing access to digital tools for all involved parties to optimize the training activities.

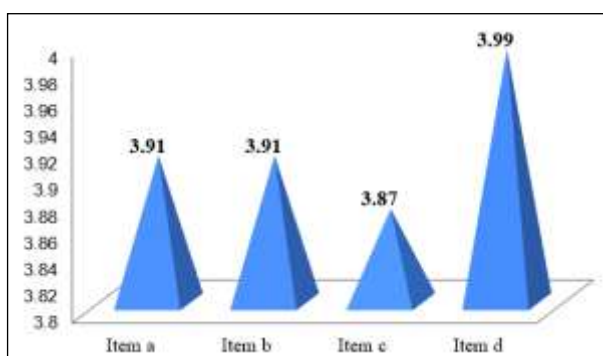


Fig. 15. Main attributes that traineeships should fulfill
 Source: Own contribution.

In Figure 15, we observe that the majority of respondents find it opportune for all involved parties to have access to digital tools that help optimize traineeships by facilitating the planning, implementation, and monitoring of activities.

15. What do you consider to be the main benefits for students participating in traineeships carried out within economic operators?

- a. the opportunity to become familiar with a work environment
- b. acquiring specific knowledge in the field of training
- c. developing practical skills specific to the field of activity
- d. the opportunity to learn/acquire skills directly from mentors/specialized personnel working in the field
- e. the opportunity to meet potential future employers
- f. developing communication skills, teamwork, and flexibility.

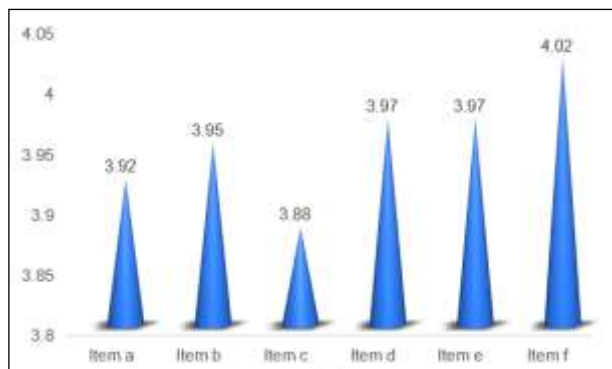


Fig. 16. Benefits that the traineeships offer to students
 Source: Own contribution.

Regarding the benefits that traineeships offer to students, respondents have expressed their opinions on the six items related to becoming familiar with the work environment, acquiring specific knowledge, developing specific skills, the opportunity to learn from specialists, meeting potential employers, and developing communication, teamwork, and flexibility skills.

From Figure 16, we observe that the majority of respondents consider the main benefit obtained through completing a traineeship to be the development of communication skills, teamwork, and flexibility.

Section C. In the third section of the questionnaire, dichotomous and semi-open questions (from 16 to 19) were formulated regarding the number of hours of practical and theoretical training, the optimal size of the traineeship, the intention to be employed in

the studied field, and the job offers received. Students responded by choosing from the provided options.

16. In your opinion, do you think there should be more hours of practical training or theory in the acquired specialization?

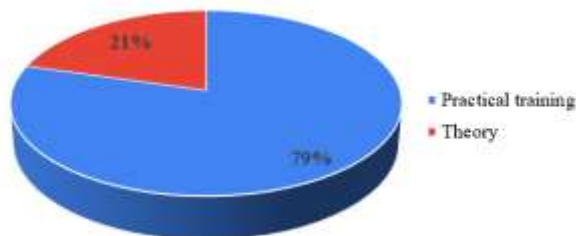


Fig. 17. Respondents' opinions on practical and theoretical training

Source: Own contribution

17. What period do you think is optimal for carrying out a traineeship?

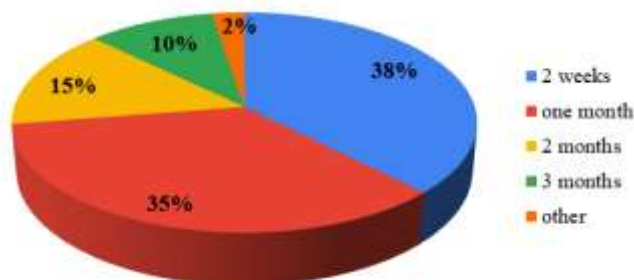


Fig. 18. Respondents' opinions regarding the duration of traineeships

Source: Own contribution.

18. After completing the study program, do you intend to work in the field you are studying?

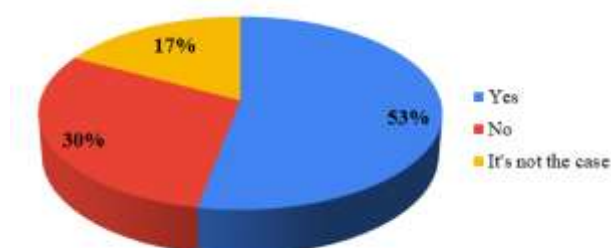


Fig. 19. Respondents' opinions regarding the intention to work in the field they are studying

Source: Own contribution.

19. Have you received job offers from the traineeship partners?

In the fourth section of the questionnaire, open-ended questions (from 20 to 23) were formulated, allowing students to respond

using their own words. These questions are used in the exploratory stage of the survey, aiming to identify and describe a complete range of situations, behaviors, attitudes, etc., rather than determining their frequency (responses to these questions are either impossible or very difficult to code).

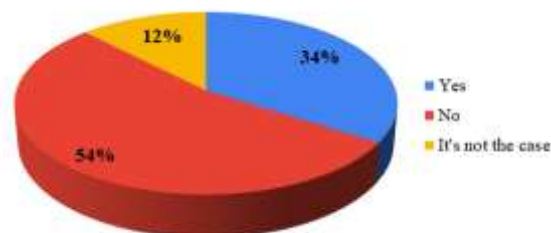


Fig. 20. Respondents' opinions regarding job offers

Source: Own contribution.

20. List 5 positive aspects of the traineeship, in descending order of importance

In response to this question, the predominant answers referred to: Teamwork development, acquiring new skills, adaptation in the workplace, implementation and enhancement of work skills, customer communication, developing the ability to work under pressure, preparation in the studied field, interacting with specialists in the field, and employment opportunities.

21. How do you think the traineeship process can be improved?

Regarding improving the traineeship process, respondents have suggested: improving the delivery of specific field-related knowledge, enhancing communication among students, instructors, and traineeship supervisors, and increasing or introducing new material incentives.

22. What content would you like to be introduced during the traineeships?

In the respondents' opinion, the majority of suggestions regarding desired content revolve around the development of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) skills by involving practising students in the administrative and economic activities of the traineeship partner and providing a more detailed involvement in the production workflow.

23. What other methods of evaluating the practical training (excluding the options mentioned in point 10) do you consider to be effective?

From the perspective of evaluating the practical training, the majority of respondents expressed satisfaction with the presented evaluation methods and advocated for the use of combined evaluation methods, both throughout and at the end of the traineeship. This involves the characterization by the supervisor and grading of practical activities, projects, or other documentation completed in the company/institution. This evaluation method is considered relevant because the instructor and traineeship supervisor assess the student by considering the entire activity conducted during the programme, rather than relying solely on a final exam, which may be influenced by various cognitive, interpersonal, biological, or social factors.

CONCLUSIONS

The questionnaire addressed to students in vocational and technical education served as a stage of summative evaluation and aimed to capture an initial situation at the level of Ilfov County. This initial situation is described by nine variables considered essential: the conditions of the activities, how organizational aspects were fulfilled, students' satisfaction with collaboration with businesses, contribution to the development of skills and working capacities, the importance of theoretical preparation before traineeships, evaluation of these programmes, communication between the teacher responsible for the traineeships and students, the activity of the coordinating teacher, the relevance of traineeships in the professional training of students. Each of these variables was operationalized through 3-7 items, statements for which the respondent was asked to agree on a Likert-type scale with five pre-established responses (totally unsatisfactory, unsatisfactory, neutral, good, very good), each receiving a numeric code. In total, there were 40 such items, along with four open-ended questions, four items about respondent data (age, qualification level,

origin, and specialization), four items about the size of traineeships and the intention to work in the studied field, and 10 items regarding the main benefits and attributes that an traineeship should bring.

This initiative aimed to assess the extent to which respondents are satisfied with the traineeship programmes undertaken during the school year 2022-2023. From the responses recorded across the entire sample, several conclusions can be drawn, which can later be translated into measures to improve the quality of the traineeships:

✓ The majority of respondents believe that to be better prepared for the workforce, the time spent in host organizations should be increased. However, the duration of such training activities is one of the few variables/aspects that cannot be modified through this project, as the time allocated for traineeships is determined by the curriculum. Nevertheless, we can recommend decision-makers to consider increasing the minimum duration that students spend in professional traineeships during their studies. We believe that this change would better prepare students to find employment and fulfil their professional duties;

✓ To a large extent, students express satisfaction with the activities in which they participated and their involvement in them, as well as with the relationships established with their supervisor and the responsible teacher. Additionally, trainees appreciated how they were treated by the employees they came into contact with, how they were supervised or coordinated by their mentor during the traineeship, and the fact that through these traineeships, they gained a better understanding of the economic and production processes of the practice partners;

✓ Considering the competencies/skills that respondents wish to develop during the traineeship, we recommend mentors to focus on competencies/skills that tend to have a cross-cutting nature and to avoid or limit, as much as possible, those with a highly specific character. Additionally, mentors should emphasize activities and tasks that can ensure personal development and enhance employability;

✓ This study has also highlighted that the majority of students are not motivated to maintain connections with the businesses where they completed their traineeships, which can be considered problematic. The purpose of traineeships should be more complex than simply spending a predetermined period in host organizations; traineeships should establish a connection between students and organizations, a connection that can then be leveraged (directly or indirectly) for the integration of graduates into the labour market. For students, traineeships should be an opportunity to engage with the labour market, organizations, and professionals in the field, laying the foundation for informal networks that can be used to find employment after graduation.

The main measures that host businesses can take to improve traineeships include paying more attention to students, developing action plans for traineeship, better organizing/planning activities, providing more detailed/clear tasks, and offering a more diverse range of activities for trainees.

The primary suggestions that can be given to student trainees to enhance their practical preparation involve increasing their involvement and interest in activities during traineeships, taking responsibility for completing assigned tasks within set deadlines and gaining information about the specific nature of the business activities of the host company before starting the traineeship.

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