

Students' Perception on Career in Romania and Portugal – a Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

The dynamics, the turbulence and the incertitude from the business environment significantly change the perception of the young on career, amplifying their motivation and interest for competence but also the preoccupation for a good knowledge of the opportunities and threats from the labour market. In this article we aim to identify the orientations of the students from the economic field in regards to their own career and to make a comparative analysis of the outcome of a quantitative research undertaken this year, in two economic universities from two states of the European Union facing similar economic and social phenomena. The conclusions of this study represent a solid base to initiate certain actions, with the help of which the university could significantly contribute to the career success of future graduates.

Keywords: business higher education, career, competences, human resources development, labour market.

JEL classification: A23, F22, F66, I23, J24, J28, M53.

Introduction

The educational models and the evolutions of the business environment strongly influence the people when choosing their own career.

The economic changes contribute, in a significant manner, to the configuration of the rational criteria on which the decisions regarding the career are based on. It would represent an error to ignore the subjective, emotional dimension of the human behaviors connected to its own career.

The importance and complexity of the career have been suggested by the investigation on its concept and evolution as well as the initiation of a comparative scientific measure regarding the current behavior of young students in the business field.

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1. Dynamics and actuality of the career concept

Our research begins from the close relationship between career and organisations, whether this carries on only inside one single organization, or implies changing them. Or, as we can notice, the scenery of the organizations has dramatically changed in the last 20-30 years, especially as a consequence of the global intensification of the competition and of the wide use of the new information and communication technologies (Guererro et al., 2004).

The internal modifications of the organizational structures can sustain or block the career evolutions. And we cannot ignore the fact that we are witnessing, for some times now, a strong flexibility and adjustment of them, re-dimensioning, restructuring, relocations of personnel, strong trends of flattening, with consequences regarding the enrichment of the content of activities or the outsourcing of non-essential activities (Johns, 1998). At the same time, people's perception on their own career is different. The diversity of opinions regarding the career makes difficult the unanimous acceptance of a single definition. Regarding us, we share the opinion according to which the career is an evolving ascension of professional activities and positions which a person reaches, as well as the attitudes, knowledge and competences developed in time (Johns, 1998) and we consider as extremely useful the distinction between internal/subjective career and the external/objective career (theory of Hall, quoted by Manolescu et al., 2004).

We also consider interesting the theoretical approaches which extend the career concept and allow its association with the pre-vocational and post-vocational functions. In this way, according to certain authors, the career is a succession of professions, duties and positions which a person has during the active period of life, including the pre-vocational (as those of pupils and students, which train for the active life) and post-vocational (retired which can have positions of substitutes, collaborators, etc.) functions (Butnaru et al., 1999). It covers and identifies different roles in which the individual is involved (pupil, employee, member of the community, parent, etc.), manner in which it acts within the family, school and society and the succession of stages through which it can pass in life (marriage, retirement, etc.), all considered as an undivided unitary whole (Jigău, 2001, 2006).

The contemporary approaches regarding the career are very pragmatic, oriented towards short term objectives and the employees follow closely the achievement of real steps in their career's evolution (Eby et al., 2006). These are dominant when we refer to the manner in which the young are relating to their own career. Their reasoning is frequently based on self-development guides and on many papers which have approached, during the last years, the career planning programs (Guererro et al., 2004; Greer, 2001).

Many authors have approached the theoretical aspects of career planning, specifying the sequence of stages to be followed in order to ensure the individual success. In this regard, we remember the recommendation to have a good self-knowledge but also the research regarding the profession; the career changing decisions and also to determine employment contacts, to know the labor market and then, finally to design one's career. (Manolescu et al., 2004).

Frequently, the theoretical approaches, but also the mental of the employees take into consideration the conditioning relationship between career and competence and it determines a continuous preoccupation for the accumulation of knowledge and formation of skills and attitudes which answer to the organization's demands.

The concept of competence knows a variety of definitions and a wide scale of sectors of application, being used both for the description of certain general organizational characteristics, and for the description of an individual. It is frequently associated with the notion of individual performance or organizational efficacy (Armstrong, 2003).

The concept of competence has appeared in the 1970s and it is connected to the transformations without precedent which took place in the world economy, in general, and especially, in the labor market, reaching a very high level during 1980-1990, at the same time with its expansion in the European countries (Van Beirendonck, 2004).

The globalization led to the increase in the intensity of the competition and showed that the safest way to handle this phenomenon is to create and consolidate competence (Armstrong, 2003).

In order to understand the concept of competence, it is useful to start from the point of view formulated by Boyatzis (1982), according to which the competence is an intrinsic characteristic of a person determined by a criterion considered decisive in obtaining the adequate and/or superior results when carrying on the position's duties, in a given context. Regarding the professional competence, the same author considers it is an intrinsic characteristic but can also be a motivation, a feature, an ability, an aspect of the person's image or of its social role, as well as the ensemble of knowledge which that person is using. This image was enriched by other theoretical approaches which identify the main features of the professional competence. The fact that it is defined in a standard professional situation it is relevant in a certain context, it is extremely correlated with the finality of that process/action; it presents evolutions in time; it represents an attribute of the person, not of its function of position; it must be recognized and validated by third parties, it has a residual character if applied and it is transferable through processes of professional formation, it constitutes an excellent support for understanding the concept but also for guiding the process of forming the competences (Peretti, 2006).

The model proposed by Réné (1997) approaches the professional competences in an organizational context. The author considers the professional competence as a dynamic characteristic of the individual, a capacity to immediately mobilize and combine the theoretical, procedural, experience, empirical, social and cognitive resources in order to resolve a unique situation, with professional character. Réné (quoted also by Beraud et al., 2001) identifies the native resources such as the will, effort and energy that an individual is willing to use in a given professional situation in order to produce competences; it defines the cognitive resources as being the perception, the attention, the memory assigned by an

individual to the language and to the intellectual processes which allow the connection of the elements, the data analysis and the conceptualization of the information having a professional character.

On the basis of the competence concept and according to it, some authors, (Martory, 2003) have defined the profession as the crossing between the main parameters of competence: The knowledge and the skills – defined both in absolute terms and in direct relationship with the organization and field of activity; The behaviors and the attitudes – adequate to the hierarchical level of the position; Capacity of evolution – compared to the technical demands of the profession and to the variations of the environment.

The theoretical approaches and the opinions of the practitioners explicitly connect and suggest the role of the education and teaching systems in the continuous formation and development of the components of competence. For this reason, in order to create homogenous premises of the evolutions of the education systems from the countries of the European Union the official framework for development and certification of the competences has been created, framework to which also Romania currently is reporting to (through the European Committee Program Education and Training, 2010).

In this context, the universities are directly interested to become and/or to remain a credible partner for the business environment, capable to offer adequate education and training services, to stimulate the pro-activity and motivation for career of its own students and to facilitate their rapid and efficient insertion on the labor market. These initiatives are even more justified in universities specialized in management and business.

2. Career development – case study – students' perception on career in Romania and Portugal

Benefiting from the long term partnership between University of Porto and The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, we launched, during May – October 2012, a research regarding the expectations of our students for their own career and, in the following pages we will present the first comparative results and will anticipate several proposals which in our opinion, can be easily and rapidly instrumented.

3.1 Methodology

In order to obtain the results we aimed at when starting our comparative research, we considered that population should be represented by all the students from the Romanian and Portuguese universities. However, taking into account (1) the significant differences among universities depending on specialization, size, organization and their public or private character, on the one hand, and (2) our limited possibilities of investigation, on the other hand, we decided to use a sample of students from two main universities of economics from Romania and Portugal (The Bucharest University of Economic Studies and University of Porto).

A questionnaire was distributed to 535 students and the response rate was very good (especially in Romania), as we received 252 filled-in questionnaires, out of which we validated 209 (107 from Romania, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, and 102 from Portugal, University of Porto).

3.2 Partial results

Our results led to the general conclusions that personal decision is the main factor to influence the career path, that students generally consider they should pursue a career abroad and that universities do have a major role in influencing students' career. There were some slight differences with respect to gender discrimination (perceived higher in Portugal) and to entrepreneurship seen as a career path (perceived higher in Romania).

Both Romanian and Portuguese respondents indicated that personal decision has an important or even a very important role in their career path. Table 1 shows some figures (number of respondents, females and males).

Table 1. Personal decision – role in a career path
(Comparative analysis Romania-Portugal, gender taken into account)

| | Very Important | | Important | | Of Little Importance | | Unimportant | | TOTAL | |
|-----------------|----------------|-------|-----------|-------|----------------------|------|-------------|------|------------|-------|
| Romania | 78 | F: 51 | 28 | F: 21 | 1 | F: 1 | 0 | F: 0 | 107 | F: 73 |
| | | M: 27 | | M: 7 | | M: 0 | | M: 0 | | M: 34 |
| Portugal | 51 | F: 31 | 47 | F: 26 | 3 | F: 0 | 1 | F: 0 | 102 | F: 57 |
| | | M: 20 | | M: 21 | | M: 3 | | M: 1 | | M: 45 |
| TOTAL | 129 | | 75 | | 4 | | 1 | | 209 | |

The interest for a career abroad seems to be high in both countries (table 2). Some of the respondents might have taken into account the current economic conditions. However, we tend to believe that one further explanation goes deep to the understanding of the idea of career. Even if most of the students consider their own decision is the most important for their career, they are inclined to consider they could do more in completely other conditions, including other countries (which is not necessarily to be true).

Table 2. Level of interest for a career abroad
(Comparative analysis Romania-Portugal)

| | Very High | | High | | Low | | TOTAL | |
|-----------------|-----------|--------|-----------|--------|-----------|--------|------------|---------|
| Romania | 48 | 44.86% | 38 | 35.51% | 21 | 19.63% | 107 | 100.00% |
| Portugal | 39 | 38.24% | 48 | 47.06% | 15 | 14.70% | 102 | 100.00% |
| TOTAL | 87 | | 86 | | 36 | | 209 | |

Students perception on gender discrimination was also interesting (table 3).

Table 3. Perception on gender discrimination
 (Comparative analysis Romania-Portugal)

| | YES | | NO | | TOTAL | |
|-----------------|-----|------------|----|------------|------------|------------|
| Romania | 41 | F: 35 | 66 | F: 38 | 107 | F: 73 |
| | | M: 6 | | M: 28 | | M: 34 |
| Portugal | 65 | F: 41 | 37 | F: 16 | 102 | F: 57 |
| | | M: 24 | | M: 21 | | M: 45 |
| TOTAL | | 106 | | 103 | | 209 |

As it can be seen, results from this small sample lead to the conclusion that in Portugal gender discrimination is perceived at a higher level, especially among women, who feel they have some disadvantages compared to men regarding their career, due to discrimination.

Although discrimination may exist or not as a real phenomenon, it is clear that there are some real differences between men and women with respect to attitudes and behavior, differences that need to be understood (Radu and Năstase, 2011).

Informally (not from our questionnaire, but as a result of discussions), some of the students talked also about a tendency towards positive discrimination of women (fewer than the ones that mentioned the negative phenomenon). We consider that for particular fields of activity both opinions are right, partly due to the real differences between men and women, partly because of a wrong understanding of HRD, by taking into account general characteristics and not individual ones.

Our questionnaire also explored the views regarding entrepreneurship. Results (expressed as percentages of Romanian students – total 100% and as percentages of Portuguese students – total 100%) can be seen in the following figure:

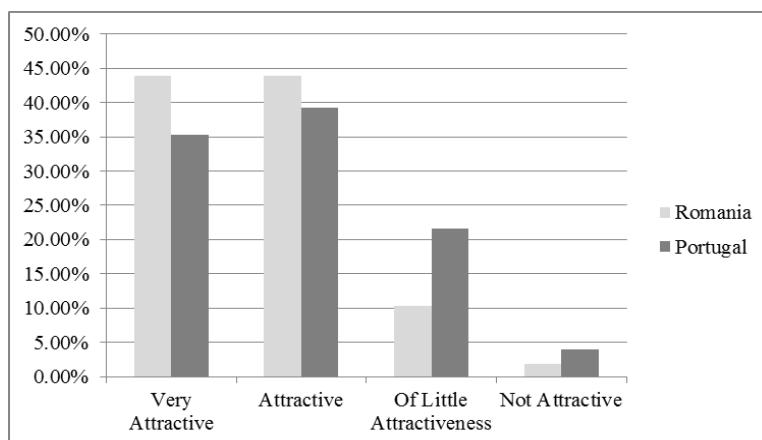


Figure 1. Entrepreneurship as a solution for the career path
 (Romania versus Portugal)

Entrepreneurial spirit asks for accepting uncertainty and a permanent search for innovation (Popescu and Drăghici, 2012), which is not a “natural” approach for all the people. As it can be seen from figure 1, entrepreneurship is more likely seen as a solution for the career path in Romania than in Portugal. We believe there are two main explanations for this. First, even if it is a riskier career path, it is more attractive in a country with a little lower economic conditions, especially as a result of many projects financed by the European Funds. Second, through informal discussions, we have discovered that generally Romanians tend to be more entrepreneurial as a general trait than Portuguese people are. Of course, this idea should be further explored in our future studies, as at this stage it is rather intuitive.

Nowadays it is clear that good quality knowledge and capabilities are compulsory in order to achieve success (Raşcă and Deaconu, 2012). However, it is not necessarily clear how universities do support their students’ career path. The general perceptions are presented in figure 2.

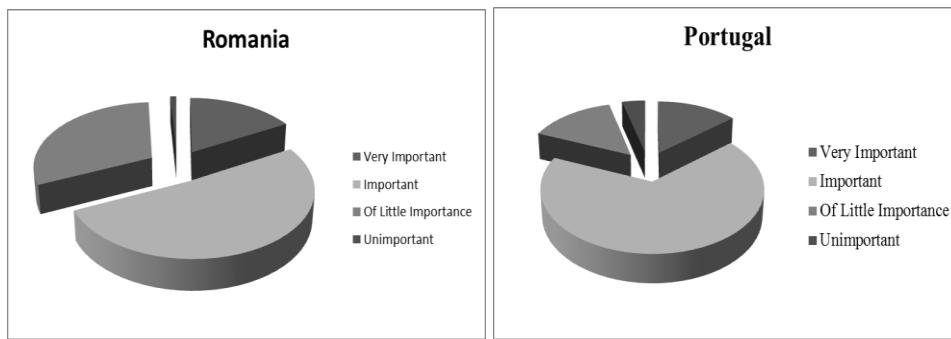


Figure 2. Importance of university support in career path
(Romania versus Portugal)

As it can be seen from figure 2, most of the students consider university support important or very important. In order to adapt to students’ needs and to the needs of the final customer of business higher education (companies), universities should focus more on achieving specific competences. There are many issues to be considered, and for sure one important element is that professors should adapt to current needs and use more teamwork than they presently do or use it differently (Radu, Grigore and Cătăneț, 2010). They should address more the use of information than the information by itself. Last but not least, it is also clear that students should be more educated towards a continuous self-development, as universities do offer support, but in the end it depends on them how they really use the support to their own benefit.

3. Conclusions and implications

Our research showed that career is generally a vague concept for students, both Romanian and Portuguese. When asked which are the best indicators for measuring career success, there were some whose only answer was salary, which proves a need for a better understanding of their own options in future, in order to be intrinsically motivated. However, the interest on the subject does exist, and some students even mentioned the need for mentoring in universities (especially Portuguese students made this suggestion).

The interest for a career abroad is quite high in both countries, partly due to the economic conditions, partly due to the natural tendency of human beings to believe that others have more interesting things to offer, which of course is not necessarily true.

The main differences between Romania and Portugal in terms of students' perception on career refer to the perception on discrimination (it seems that Portuguese women tend to consider themselves more discriminated than Romanian women do) and to entrepreneurship as a career path (Romanian students take more into consideration this possible career path than their colleagues from Portugal do).

Further research should explore more the main common characteristics and the main differences between the two general perceptions (Romanian and Portuguese) and should lead to a series of recommendations intended to increase the future performances of our students in their professional life.

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