

Analysis of graduate tracking mechanisms at a European level

Sorin-Iulian MERLUȘCĂ¹

Abstract

The relevance of the university degree programmes is reflected in the employability of the graduates in the labour market. Hence monitoring the graduates' career path becomes an important indicator for the improvement of the education programmes and their constant harmonization with the labour market in terms of relevant current and future skills.

The article aims to analyse the dynamics of the graduates' monitoring tools at a European level, with a focus on the progress at a national level. The analysis stems from the Recommendation of the EU Council on tracking graduates, issued in 2017, and builds on the results of 2020-2022 studies in twenty-nine European countries.

Keywords: *graduate tracking, employability, quality assurance, educational policies, skills, labor market*

JEL classification: J01, J21, J44, I25

DOI: 10.24818/RMCI.2023.4.571

1. Introduction

Monitoring the career path of higher education graduates is a matter of interest at a European level for improving the quality of the education systems in the EU-member states in terms of relevance for the labor market and society. In order to develop uniform education policies to secure the graduates employability based on useful skills to the labor market, the Council of the European Union adopted the Recommendation on Tracking Graduates in 2017, with a projected adoption rate of 80% among EU member states by the end of 2024. The studies carried out by the Commission during 2020-2022 offer a reference framework for the analysis of the policies and practices of students' career tracking in Europe and Romania, respectively.

Continuing the Renewed Agenda for Higher Education and the New European Skills Agenda, the Recommendation on Tracking Graduates of 2017 includes the following guidelines:

1. put in place graduates career tracking systems that allow the collection of anonymized relevant statistic information from data bases on education, taxation, population and social security; develop longitudinal graduate surveys; the possibility

¹ Sorin-Iulian Merlușcă, University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Bucharest, Romania, sorin.merlusca@usamv.ro

for public authorities to link, on an anonymized basis, data from different sources, in order to build a composite picture of graduate outcomes;

2. collect socio-biographical and socio-economic information; information on education and training, information on employment or further education and training; relevance of information on employment or further education and training; career success;

3. secure a high, representative and continued response rate to longitudinal graduate surveys;

4. European cooperation and mutual learning among member states;

5. disseminate and exploit the results for strengthening the career guidance, update the curricula, improve skills matching to support competitiveness and innovation at local, regional and national level, and to resolve skills shortages; planning and forecasting the evolving employment, educational and social needs; contributing to policy development at both national and EU level

In 2018 an informal group of experts in graduates monitoring was created; the group included sixty-six members and followed 4 courses of action:

Table 1. Directions for graduates tracking

Task force 1	Options for comparative EU graduate data	Mandate: to analyse different options to structure the data collection in the higher education sector and in VET at the European level
Task force 2	Exchanging data on migrant graduates	Mandate: to identify the methodology for exchange information and track graduates across borders
Task force 3	Comparative analysis of national graduate tracking indicators	Mandate: to set up a registry of key academic, economic and social statistical indicators that are comparable and common for all countries.
Task force 4	Development of VET graduate tracking	Mandate: to focus on VET tracking taking into account the characteristics of the system

Source: Own contribution based on the information from the European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, *Towards a European graduate tracking mechanism: recommendations of the expert group: October 2018 - October 2020*, Publications Office, 2021, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/970793>

Over a period of two years (2018-2020) the group of experts laid the basis of cooperation and exchange of experience regarding graduates tracking and published a final report with recommendations for the Commission. Thus, in 2022, the European Commission created the European Network of Graduate Tracking to support the implementation of the recommendations and to promote mutual learning among participating countries based on the principle of co-creation.

In parallel with the analysis and research activity of the group of experts, between 2020 and 2022, the European Commission conducted pilot studies (EUROGRADUATE) in the EU and EEA countries regarding graduates tracking

and launched institutional capacity development actions to prepare administrative and coordinating teams for the implementation of European graduates tracking monitoring system.

In 2023 the Commission will review the status of implementing the Council's Recommendations. The aim is that 80% of the member states will have applied monitoring systems based on comparable data by the end of 2024, with full implementation by 2025.

2. National policies related to graduate tracking in Europe

The review of European documents, of Eurograduate studies published by the Commission in terms of national policies related to graduate tracking, reveals the following data:

➤ approximately two-thirds of the 31 countries reviewed (27 EU countries and the EEA-member countries) have a student tracking system. In Romania there are monitoring activities, but not necessarily at a system level.

➤ The countries where graduate tracking is a legal obligation have well-established monitoring systems. In about half of the countries, graduates tracking is both a legal obligation and a usual practice (AT, DE, DK, EE, ES, FI, FR, HU, IT, NL, PL, SE și UK). In one-third of the countries' graduates tracking is a well-established practice, though not a legal obligation (BG, <in higher education>, BE-NL, CZ, IE, LT, LU, NO and SK). In recent documents of educational policies, Romania has included the aim to turn graduate tracking monitoring into a practice and legal obligation.

➤ In general, graduates tracking is the responsibility of national and regional authorities in charge of monitoring higher education policies and VET. In countries where no measures at a system level have been identified, it was not possible to state which entity is responsible for graduate tracking.

➤ Ongoing reforms reveal an increasing use of administrative data as well as a combination of administrative data and surveys.

➤ The involvement and cooperation among key bodies, including policymakers and entities that hold data and methodological expertise are instrumental for the success of the monitoring. Such an approach implies the involvement of various ministries, agencies and national departments, including statistical offices and research centres.

3. Graduates tracking tools in Europe

In twenty-nine countries the EUROGRADUATE studies revealed 123 graduates tracking tools at a system level. The tools do not necessarily target all graduates and collect a wide range of data. However, the type of information collected and the level of detail vary considerably.

The characteristics of the monitoring tools are:

- The main variables collected relate to the status of the labor market, socio-biographic and socio-economic information, and lifelong education options.
 - Surveys are the main sources of satisfaction data regarding the quality of the programs and the relevance of the skills acquired;
 - A few tools collect analytical data regarding the graduates' background (migration, ethnicity, parents' level of education) and post-graduate studies that could be connected with administrative data;
 - Many tools employ unique identifiers for data collection;
 - Very few tools collect information on the social and civic activities of the graduates;
 - Only about one-third of the tools monitor the graduates more than twice to provide longitudinal data;
 - Many countries use both surveys and administrative data collecting for graduates tracking, as they complement each other in providing the necessary information;
 - About one-third of the tools are used to identify employment needs and support planning and the current curricula and strengthen career guidance;
 - Higher education institutions use a research methodology based on a quantitative survey usually administered online. Smaller universities tend to use analytical research, too, based on interviews and focus groups;
 - Most higher education institutions initiate the monitoring system only once, 18 months after the student's graduation.
 - The rate of response to the online survey varies between 30-70%
- Higher education institutions that employ several data-collecting methods have a higher rate of response, especially when they include a telephone survey.

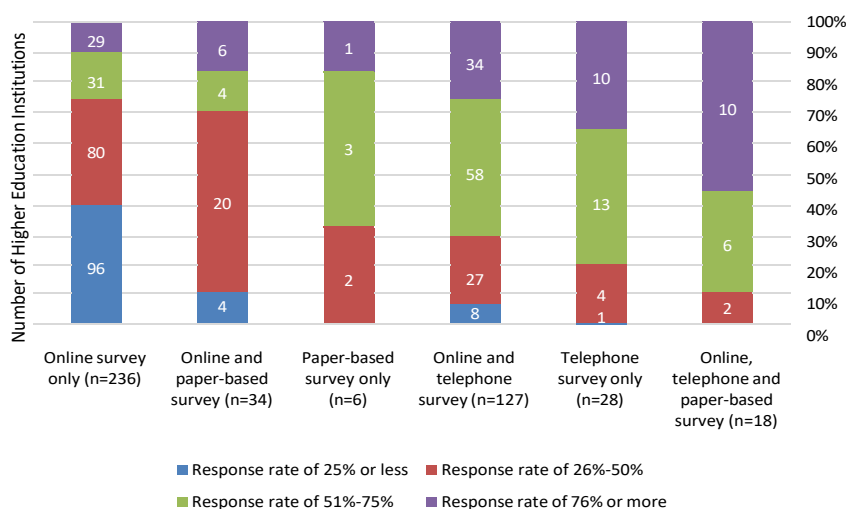


Figure 1. The rate of response depends on the research method employed
 Source: ICF graduate tracking higher education institution survey” (N=number of participants).
 The responses “I don’t know” and the items with no responses were not included in the analyses

4. Graduates tracking system in Romania

An internal study carried out by UEFISCDI – the Executive Unit for Financing Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation, which included 24 universities, revealed that very few of them (8.3%, that is two universities) have developed a graduate tracking methodology, while 33.3%, that is eight universities, employ operational procedures and 58.3% have no regulations or specific methodologies.

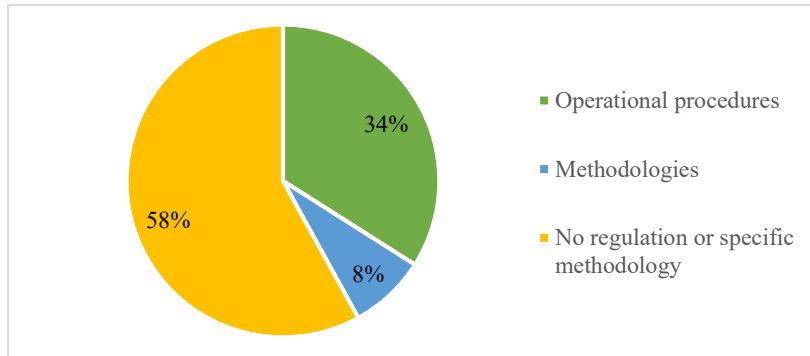


Figure 2. Institutional Analysis of the Graduates Tracking Documents

Source: Own contribution based on the information from the 2021 UEFISCDI Study on the employability of the Romanian graduates

According to 67% of the universities included in the survey, the responsibility to monitor the graduates' career path falls upon the Centre for counselling and career guidance. Other specific bodies follow the body for monitoring the graduates' professional path (National University of Music), the Regional Centre for comparative studies and social analysis (West University of Timișoara), etc.

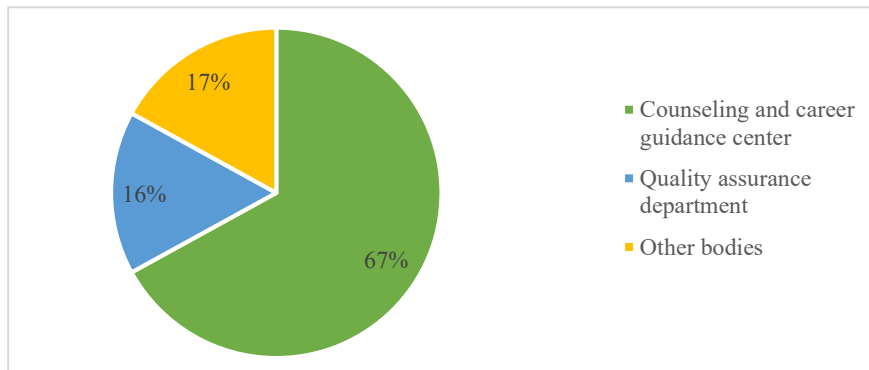


Figure 3. Entities designated to monitor the graduates' career path

Source: Own contribution based on the information from the 2021 UEFISCDI Study on the employability of the Romanian graduates

As for the monitoring tools, most universities included in the study apply a survey at the end of the education programme and prepare a report based on the results. 37.5% of the universities post the survey on their own platform, 25% send the survey by email, 25% apply the survey on paper and 4% contact the graduates by telephone. In most cases, universities offer several options to fill in the survey in order to collect as many answers as possible.

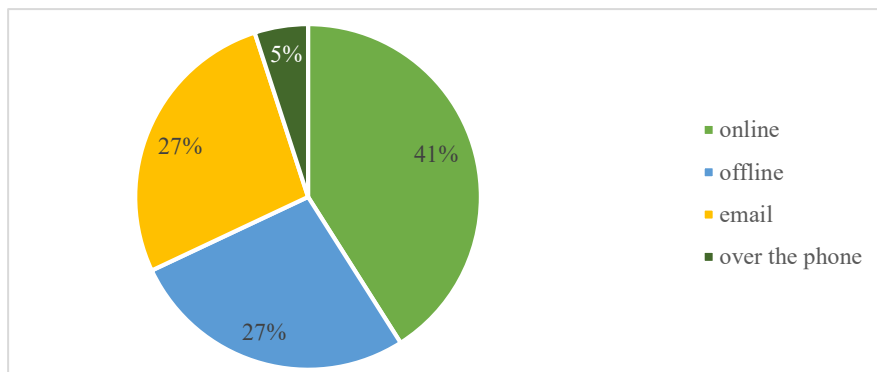


Figure 4. Monitoring Survey Distribution Options

Source: Own contribution based on the information from the 2021 EUFISCDI Study on the employability of the Romanian graduates

In Romania there is a genuine concern for a single monitoring system at a central level. Therefore, national and European funds have been allocated to identify, pilot and develop solutions. The project Quality in Higher Education: internationalization and data bases for the development of Romanian education – a project implemented by UEFISCDI in partnership with the Ministry of Education, financed by the Operational Programme Human Capital (POCU) – continued the studies focusing on students, graduates and labor market, for 2005, 2006 and 2010 graduates, carried out by UEFISCDI – the Executive Unit for Financing Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation. The programme developed a research tool – the National survey regarding the Employability of higher education graduates (CNAAIS), which was launched in November 2022, to be filled in by the 2016 and 2020 university graduates. The objective of the survey was to analyze the causes that influence employability, as well as the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on the graduates’ career path. The survey lays the basis for the preparation of a methodological framework relevant to the graduates tracking at a national level.

The EU financial support also aimed to develop a mechanism for monitoring the graduates’ insertion into the labor market. Thus, the objective of the POCU project titled ReCONNECT – Adapting to change –integrated forecasting, monitoring, evaluating mechanism for the labor market and education - was to match labor demand and supply by introducing new tools and mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating public policies and anticipating new skills. The project will be implemented in 2020-2023 by the National Agency for Employment in partnership with the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, the National Scientific Institute for

Labor and Social Protection (NSILSP), the National Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training Development (NCTVETD), Ministry of Education and the Executive Unit for Financing Higher Education, Scientific Research, Development and Innovation (EUFHESRDI).

The project aims to develop three mechanisms, on an IT platform, with an integrating role in supporting employment policies

1. a monitoring mechanism for the insertion of the graduates of the education and professional training programmes
2. a forecasting mechanism for the skills needs in the labor market
3. an evaluation and monitoring mechanism for the public policies regarding active measures and professional training.

The functioning of the three mechanisms, with the support of the target group, will secure the coherence and synergy between the education system and the adults' professional training, as well as the active employment measures and the labor market.

In relation to the actions of the EU Commission, Romania confirmed participation in the EUROGRADUATE study as of 2022, to collect comparable data among EU-member states concerning the graduates' insertion into the labor market. The national research was based on an online survey applied for the 2016/2017 and 2020/2021 graduates.

In Romania, within the Ministry of Education, graduates tracking is legally regulated by the following documents:

- Law of Education no 1/2011 with its subsequent amendments and additions;
- Order No.3714/2018 regarding the approval of the Regulation of the organization, functioning and operation of the Single Register of Universities in Romania, with its subsequent amendments;
- Order No 4504/2021 on the appointment of the Executive Unit for Financing Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation as the institution responsible for piloting the system for monitoring the employability of higher education graduates
- Order No.5241/2021 on the appointment of the Executive Unit for Financing Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation as the institution responsible for applying the pilot survey EUROGRADUATE 2022.
- Order No.3619/2022 approving the appointment of the Executive Unit for Financing Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation as the institution responsible for accessing the services of the Ministry of Finance via its own IT system PatrimVen.

5. Conclusions

The strategic objective of the EU Commission to connect the higher education system with the labor market dynamics at a European level will allow – based on comparable data among EU-member states – to underpin relevant measures

aimed to increase employability at a global level, thus contributing to the following objectives:



Figure 5. EU Commission Strategic Objectives regarding graduates tracking

Source: Own contribution based on the information from the European Commission (2020b)

Monitoring the career path of higher education graduates remains a dynamic topic both in terms of methodology and research tools and in terms of valorization of the data collected at a national and European level.

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