

## TOURISM HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO ACTIVE LIFE. THE PRACTEAM PROJECT STUDY CASE

Anca DODESCU

University of Oradea, 410087, Romania  
adodescu@uoradea.ro

Ioana POP COHUȚ

University of Oradea, 410087, Romania  
ipop@uoradea.ro

### Abstract

*This article focuses on the impact of practice and internship stages in order to facilitate transition from school to active life for Tourism higher education graduates in Romania, in the case of the project entitled: "The practice of students in Economics. An inter-regional partnership on the labour market between universities and business environment" (PRACTeam), implemented in partnership by Faculties of Economics and Business Administration from: University of Oradea, West University of Timișoara and „Ștefan cel Mare” University of Suceava. The research carried out for this article is addressed to students, members of the PRACTeam project's target groups, enrolled in Economics of Commerce, Tourism and Services as common Bachelor specialization and, also, to students from different Master degree specializations in the field of Tourism from universities mentioned above. The article presents the literature analysis about transition from university to active life, research methodology and characteristics of respondents, then the main findings and concludes that the practice and internship stages developed in PRACTeam project have generated both improving the students' skills and abilities and their perception and attitude regarding work in Tourism.*

**Key words:** *Tourism higher education, transition from school to active life, PRACTeam project, youth employment, graduates employability in Tourism.*

**JEL Classification:** *J01, J08, J18, J21, J44, J64*

### I. INTRODUCTION

The present paper aims to analyze the transition from school to active life for Tourism higher education graduates in Romania. The paper is part of an extended research about the transition from school to active life of young economists, focusing on theoretical model of determinants of school to active life transition, student's expectations regarding practical training and possible solutions for emerging challenges in university curricula and pedagogical approaches in order to support the labour insertion of graduates in Economics and Business Administration in Romania and to encourage their potential entrepreneurship. The present paper is also related with a complementary part of above mentioned research related with the field of Tourism focusing on the practical training of students in Tourism as future entrepreneurs in the hospitality industry.

The framework of research is represented by the project entitled: "The practice of students in Economics. An inter-regional partnership on the labour market between universities and business environment" (PRACTeam), co-financed by the European Social Fund. The covering area of the project is formed by the North-West Region, West Region and North-East Region of Romania, being implemented by Faculties of Economics and Business Administration from University of Oradea, West University of Timișoara and "Ștefan cel Mare" University of Suceava, between 1.10.2010 to 30.09.2013. The project aims to promote partnership on the labour market between all actors involved in the practical training of students: students, teachers and staff from universities, employees from host organizations for practice stages with role of tutors, representatives of business environment and other representatives of the labour market from the counties involved: Bihor, Timiș and Suceava. The PRACTeam project addressed 3 target groups: undergraduate students (1620 students), Master students (810 students) and tutors for practice stages (486 employees from host organizations).

In this context, the present paper advocate for boosting practice and internship stages in order to facilitate transition from school to active life in the field of Tourism, the labour insertion of graduates in Tourism in Romania and to encourage their potential entrepreneurship in the hospitality industry. The research carried out for this paper is addressed to students, members of the PRACTeam project's target groups, enrolled in *Economics of Commerce, Tourism and Services* as common Bachelor specialization and, also, to students from different Master specializations in the field of Tourism from the 3 universities mentioned above.

## II. TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO ACTIVE LIFE AND HIGHER EDUCATION

The literature analysing the transition from school to active life is closely related with the literature analysing the labour market insertion (Tovatt, 2011; Bell and Blanckflower, 2011; Müller and Gangl, 2004; OECD, 2000, 1999). Transition from school to work represents the passing from the young man comprised in a form of tuition to an independent life when young people acquire an early experience of employability, even if they have done or not studies (Garcia, 2007 apud. Pirciog et al., 2010, OECD, 2000), while the insertion on the labour market is an indicator of transition to adulthood through independent living, marriage, the decision to have children and so on, determined by finding a job after graduation (Hill and Holzer, 2006; OECD, 1999). Practice stages, internship stages, practical training, work experience etc. - entitled and designed different within different educational models - are considered key factors in facilitating the transition from school to active life and labour insertion of graduates (Tovatt, 2011; Bell and Blanckflower, 2011; Hill and Holzer, 2006; Cardosa, 2004) and the "dual model" in which practice stages, internship stages, practical training, work experience etc. take place during studies is considered the success model for the youth insertion on the labour market (Müller and Gangl, 2004; van der Velden and Wolbers, 2003; Jensen and Westergård-Nielsen, 1987).

The large expansion of tertiary education across OECD countries from last decades (OECD; 2013; Machin and McNally, 2007) determines an increasing concern in public debates about the "value" of tertiary education reflected in the probability of finding employment and, also, increasing interest in economic research about the correspondence between the choice of higher education made by individuals to the needs of the labour market in terms of: time for graduates to find first jobs, wages or earnings of graduates at first job, jobs matching to graduates qualifications or field of study, "over-education" or "under-education" of graduates (higher or lower qualifications than required by jobs offered), right type of graduate studies (general/academic or vocational), subject of degree etc. (Machin and McNally, 2007; Teichler, 2007; Mickovska-Raleva, 2010; Salas-Velasco, 2006; Cordier and Ehlert, 2002).

Also, the determinants of the transition from higher education to work and the difficulty of getting a first job varies across EU and depends on individual characteristics such as the field or level of studies or the socioeconomic background (Salas-Velasco, 2006).

In this context, a study regarding Romanian higher education (Voicu, Tufis and Voicu, 2010) highlights that the labour market integration of graduates in Romania takes an average of 4 months after graduation, economics graduates needing 3 months, placing them in the labour market is considered much faster than other areas. (Voicu, Tufis and Voicu, 2010, pp. 25-26). According to this study, there is no a natural connection between how employers define job descriptions and specializations promoted by Romanian higher education system and that employers demand is rarely directed towards a certain specialization. Usually, especially at first employment, for employers are important graduates practical experience rather than specialization, transversal skills rather than specific skills, wider fields of study rather than narrow specializations (Voicu, Tufis and Voicu, 2010, p. 3).

On the contrary, in the field of Tourism, all over the world, there is still major dissatisfaction with generic tourism degrees awarded by most tourism programs, moving from generic tourism degrees to specialized and functional degrees being considered main challenging task nowadays (Hsu, 2011). A possible explanation is that Tourism higher education has generally originated from different areas of study such us: economics, business administration, management, geography, history, foreign languages, even sport etc., which cause large differences in curricula impossible to reconcile without good collaboration and communication between tourism industry members and academics in the Tourism field (Hsu, 2011).

Our goal is to identify the most relevant aspects of the transition from school to active life from the perspective of the Romanian economic graduate in Tourism that has found a job and as a result successfully integrated into the labour market. Also, following the main aim of identifying the factors that may cause an easier transition from school to active life, we tried to identify the connection between students' practical stage carried out in the practical training conducted during the studies, the position held by them during practice and vacancies which graduates could occupy in the process of transition from school to active life.

## II. THE PRACTEAM PROJECT STUDY CASE

Given the importance of the link between school and the labour market in order to simplify the transition from school to active life, being concerned with identifying how a student can choose career paths in Tourism, we analyzed, in terms of practical skills and practice competencies, the impact on the insertion of young people on the labour market in the field of Tourism of the PRACTeam project.

From the perspective of the transition from school to active life, we consider that the overall objective of PRACTeam project - to develop practical work skills of Economics students during practical training and internship, conducted in inter-regional partnership on the labour market between universities and businesses to improve labour market economists insertion, and also some of the specific objectives such as: increasing employment of graduates of undergraduate degree programs and master's degree in Economics, the promotion and development of inter-regional partnership in the labour market between universities on the one hand, universities and businesses, on the other hand, to facilitate the transition from school to work of future economists in partnership development and promotion of practical training and internship programs for innovative organization, increasing business interest and responsibility for student practice through the development and promotion of staff training programs in host organizations acting as tutors - fit perfectly our research objective.

We consider relevant the PRACTeam project model for facilitating the transition from university to active life due to the activities that support undergraduates and Master students complement the theoretical training through practical activities, on the one hand, and that, on the other hand, give support for identifying and finding a job in the field: the establishment of PRACTeam Centre - dispatch equipped with IT and an updated database that offers practical posts jobs available in the field; the annual PRACTeam Campaign as a presentation of opportunities for practice and internship stages; the annual PRACTeam Workshop which, with the participation of students and employers help to identify the practice training needs; the annual PRACTeam Training of tutors; the PRACTeam Module of counselling and career guidance for students in Economics and Business Administration; the PRACTeam support materials specially designed for practice stages, for tutors and for students, in order to create a direct link between theoretical training, practice and labour market; the annual PRACTeam practice and internship stages, the annual PRACTeam Gala and Contest of ideas etc.

The PRACTeam project created the framework to analyze to the impact of higher economic studies in the field of Tourism in the West, North-West and North-East Regions of Romania, the educational offer in Tourism in the university centres from Bihor, Timiș and Suceava. We identified the educational offer in Tourism, and the skills and qualifications that a young professional who chooses this route can acquire within the faculties from partner universities analyzed, namely: Faculty of Economics - University of Oradea, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration - University of the West of Timișoara, Faculty of Economics and Public Administration - University "Ștefan cel Mare", Suceava.

## III. RESEARCH METODOLOGY

In order to analyze the transition from school to active life for Tourism higher education graduates we have developed a methodology structured on two levels: 1. *the analysis of internal documents of the PRACTeam project regarding the practice stages in the field of Tourism as primary and secondary research data.* In this respect, we have identified the educational offer in Tourism as field of study within the faculties from partner universities analyzed: *Economics of Commerce, Tourism and Services* as common Bachelor specialization and different Master specializations, the skills and qualifications that students who choose this specializations can acquire, the number of undergraduate and Master students in the field of Tourism that were selected for PRACTeam practice stages, host organizations in the field of Tourism in which they held practice stages and internship stages, jobs typology offered by the host organizations for Tourism, number of PRACTeam students who have found a job in tourism after graduation etc.; 2. *The qualitative research about the impact of practice stages in Tourism higher education in facilitating the transition from school to active life* based on an *interview* applied to successful students in Tourism who were awarded in the PRACTeam project and who were employed in Tourism as result of PRACTeam practice and internship stages. The interview aimed to identify how practice and internship stages in Tourism led graduates to seek and be willing to work in Tourism, and how the activities of PRACTeam project undertaken have helped them to simplify the transition from school to active life. The interview has an open structure and is formed of 10 open-ended questions, focusing on the choosing of a career path in Tourism, how to acquire the necessary professional skills in Tourism, how practical training, achieved through PRACTeam practice and internship stages contributed to the current job in Tourism. The interview was applied to 45 graduates of the 3 universities examined.

#### IV. MAIN FINDINGS

The evolution of number of PRACTeam students in the field of Tourism between 2010-2013 is as follows:

- 2010-2011: 135 students, out of which: 90 -Bachelor, 45 – Master;
- 2011-2012: 125 students, out of which: 91 -Bachelor, 34 –Master;
- 2012-2013: 101 students, out of which: 79 -Bachelor, 22 –Master;
- Total: 361 students, out of which: 260 - Bachelor, 101 – Master.

As can be seen above, in the period 2010-2013 was a decrease in the number of students who have opted for practice stages in Tourism due to the declining interest of students both at Bachelor and Master level for this field of study.

The students were enrolled in *Economics of Commerce, Tourism and Services* – only Bachelor specialization in the Tourism field of study in Romanian economic higher education, and in different Master specializations organized by 3 faculties analyzed: *Economics and Business Administration in Tourism and Hospitality Industry; Company Management in Tourism and Services; Firm Management in Trade, Tourism and Services*.

Although analysis of the typology of host organizations where students have held practice and internship stages in Tourism has changed in each of the three years but includes, in principal: hotels, motels, hostels, travel agencies, restaurants, spa/ wellness centers, catering companies etc. the analysis also provided that jobs typology from host organizations in Tourism haven't made major changes.

The jobs offered for practice and internship stages were:

- 2010-2011: front office manager, receptionist, waiter, tour desk, ticket agent, project manager assistant, marketing manager assistant, restaurant manager assistant, booking agent, costing and rates agent, hotel facilities and services promoter, spa and treatment room promoter, head of restaurant, event manager, basic treatment and wellness centre chief, reservations agent, ticketing agent, travel agent etc.;
- 2011-2012: hotel receptionist, concierge worker, accommodation responsible, travel agent, tour operator, tourist transport agent, domestic tourist assistance agent, business travel agent, assistant manager, front office manager, reception supervisor, restaurant manager, housekeeping manager, ticket agent, travel agent, travel agent, booking agent, prices and rates agent, hotel facilities and services promoter, spa treatment promoter, head of restaurant room, event manager, front office manager, basic treatment and wellness centre chief etc.;
- 2012-2013: front office manager, restaurant manager, reception supervisor, hotel receptionist, concierge worker, accommodation responsible, assistant manager, housekeeping manager, head of restaurant room, travel agents coordinator, hotel receptionist, waiter, prices and tariffs agent, chief restaurant, front office manager, event manager, booking agent, ticketing agent etc.

The number of PRACTeam students who received an internship stage in host organizations in which they held compulsory practice stages in the field of Tourism between 2010 and 2013 is as follows:

- 2010-2011: 7 students;
- 2011-2012: 3 students;
- 2012-2013: 1 student;
- Total: 11 students.

As can be seen above, in the period 2010-2013 was a decrease also in the number of PRACTeam students who receive an internship stage in Tourism caused by the fall in interest of host organizations. Thus, host organizations offering internship stages were hotels, and travel agents, between 2010 and 2012, and jobs offered for internship were: sales assistant, assistant manager, receptionist, travel agent, ticketing agent. In 2013, only restaurants offered internship stages for PRACTeam student's jobs as follows: head of restaurant room, waiter/bartender.

The analysis of the number of PRACTeam students who have found a job in Tourism after graduation shows that only 5 students (1.38%) that benefited by practical training (compulsory practice stages and granted internship stages) are now employee in Tourism. The main reason is the fact that 72.02% of all PRACTeam students are in the final year of study, and their current concern is graduation not finding a job.

2. The interview was applied to 45 graduates, out of which 30 Bachelor students (10 from each university) in *Economics of Commerce, Tourism and Services*, and 15 Master students (5 from each university) in *Economics and Business Administration in Tourism and Hospitality Industry; Company Management in Tourism and Services; Firm Management in Trade, Tourism and Services*, who were hired in the first 8 months from graduation in Tourism.

The interview aimed to identify the impact of practice and internship stages in Tourism in order to simplify the transition from school to active life was applied to graduates who benefited from the PRACTeam project activities during 2011 – 2012 and found a job as a result of practice stages.

The students from Bachelor and Master in Tourism interviewed were aged between 22 - 26 years (81.15%) and between 27-29 years (18.85%), are female in proportion of 85.16%, while 14.84% are men. The most important result is that over 60% of the graduates in Tourism interviewed have found a job in Tourism even in companies that have been operating practice and internship stages, or within the firm where they have developed the practice or internship stages, or as a result of the fact that they were recommended by practice tutors or trusted employees.

The respondents have completed practice and internship stages within hotels, motels, hostels, spa, wellness, catering companies, travel agencies etc. through PRACTeam project. The positions occupied by respondents within practice and internship stages were very diverse: assistant manager, head of room restaurant, sales agent, travel agent; front office manager, ticketing agent, receptionist, reception manager, restaurant manager, human resources manager in tourism etc.

To identify the role of theoretical and practical training acquired through university curricula in Tourism, graduates interviewed were asked about the usefulness of the information acquired during studies. They declared that they have acquired the skills necessary to obtain current employment in Tourism by: university curricula, disciplines that they have come up at the time of practice and internship stages (78.14%), through direct contact with experts in the field (60.12%), education in the family - at least one of the parents has his own business in the field (5.5%), by other means: participation and organization of projects in tourism, events and workshops, trainings etc. (2.2%).

Thus, graduates, current employees, said in a proportion of 89.5% that the first option in searching a job was the position or job that they have occupied in the practical training or within the internship stage, and they are more confident that they can offer employers the skills and competencies, after previously effective job specific activities conducted in companies with similar activities, activities they enjoyed, were able to achieve or have easily learned, were within easy collectively and managed to successfully complete specific tasks. We mention here that within the PRACTeam project, the students were assigned to practice and internship stages in accordance to the skill testing and counseling after training, which results in a fair allocation of available organizations based on students' specialization and individual personal skills. In fact, the vast majority, 62.2% (28 graduates) did not have to go through periods of interviews and searches to identify a job because they have been recruited by the company where they developed the practice or internship stage, the proportion of those that have been hired within the same company where they took the practical and internship stage being higher (75% - 21 graduates of the 28 employees at the same company) than of those who developed only the practice stage within the company.

The surveyed graduates currently occupy positions in Tourism such as: travel agents (44.44%), assistant manager (11.11%), assistant housekeeping manager (8.89%), head room restaurant (6.67%), travel - ticketing consultant (6.67%), receptionist (13.34%), front desk supervisor (4.44%), restaurant manager (4.44%).

The results obtained allow us to highlight the importance of theoretical training and practical experience as well, and also allows us to state that the interest of universities in introducing partnership agreements with operators in areas where they provide training must be stimulated by similar projects that encourage labour market partnership, that would help simplify the transition from school to active life for graduates and facilitate a high insertion on the labour market with a direct correlation between theoretical and practical training and finding a job in accordance with the training.

In order to choose a professional path in Tourism, graduates recommended: to increase the number of hours of practice in the university curricula with a better balancing between the hours of theoretical and practical work and the conduct of practical activities in the last year of study, offering extra-curricular activities in Tourism; involvement in volunteer teams supported by teachers in touristic events, organizing visits to tourism fairs, visiting the most important hotels and guesthouses in the area to see how to organize and conduct a business etc.

Regarding the impact of the PRACTeam project on finding a job, interviewed graduates considered very important for them: the activity of individual counselling and aptitude testing for choosing a career path, the drawing of a career plan, the assignment to a specific company for practice stage, the exposure to real work situations, the encouragement to take part in extracurricular activities - e.g. workshop, campaign, gala, contest, internship, networking etc., the direct contact with a trained person designated for practice stage purpose – the tutor of practice within the company, the direct and consistent link with practice mentor – the professor specialized in Tourism which continuously monitored students' activity, information and materials specially created for the student and tutor: career counselling guide, practice stage guide, manual for tutor etc., constant feedback to student beneficiaries etc.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of internal documents of the PRACTeam project on the Tourism practice and internship stages and the qualitative research conducted about the impact of practice stages in Tourism higher education in facilitating the transition from school to active life lead us to the following *conclusions*:

- The total number of PRACTeam project students analyzed that benefited from practice and internship stages in the field of Tourism is 361;
- Local organizations in which PRACTeam project students analyzed held practice and internship stages are: hotels, motels, hostels, travel agencies, restaurants, spa/wellness centers, catering companies;
- Typology of job positions offered by the host organizations practice and internship stages in Tourism are: assistant manager, head of room restaurant, sales agent, travel agent, front office manager, ticketing agent, receptionist, reception manager, restaurant manager, events manager, human resources manager in tourism, assistant project manager, assistant marketing manager, waiter, tour desk, booking agent, hotel facilities and services promoter, spa and treatment room promoter, basic treatment and wellness centre chief etc.;
- The number of PRACTeam project beneficiaries who have found a job in Tourism after graduation is 5;
- The practice and internship stages and related activities developed in the PRACTeam project have improved students' practical skills and eased the adjustment to the actual requirements of the labour market, an also improved the transition from school to active life, students' perception and their attitude regarding work in Tourism;

Young people interviewed became aware of the importance of theoretical and practical training and of the fact that they need to choose a professional path in the first years of study. The practice and internship stages helped them be aware of the knowledge they have acquired through the theoretical study and, especially, what they can offer on the labour market, they acknowledged the support available to them for professional counseling, the importance of a benefiting from a network in the field of training, directly related to the labour market.

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