

THE PERCEIVED FUTURE EMPLOYABILITY OF EMPLOYED AND UNEMPLOYED STUDENTS FROM THE WEST UNIVERSITY OF TIMIȘ OARA IN 2023

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ABSTRACT: *The present study aims to identify the perceived future employability of the students enrolled at the West University of Timișoara in 2023, based on their personal characteristics. The sample consisted of 1442 valid answers of participants from 11 faculties.*

The methodological approach of the research is a quantitative one, the instrument used in the data collection process being an online questionnaire structured in six dimensions.

The main results indicate a positive level of agreement with the perceived future skills, advantages and achievements stipulated in the questionnaire for all categories of students. The statistical tests emphasize a tendency for the teenagers who are studying, volunteering, but who are not working or not yet active on the labor market to be more optimistic towards their professional future in comparison with the ones who are already employed.

Keywords: *perceived future employability; work readiness; university commitment; labor market;*

Introduction

Student employability is becoming a topic of real importance in the economic and educational space. Universities are trying to shape characters and create a workforce capable of withstanding the ever changing and flexible labor market, but also the demands of new jobs for which university programs are not up to date. If many studies are beginning to focus on how graduates manage to find a job after graduation, it is auspicious that the subject of study is also related to how students perceive their employability and the skills they want possess when they receive their graduation degrees, be they bachelor's or master's.

This study examines the perception of the students from the West University of Timișoara on the opportunities that the current studies will bring to their graduate lives, especially after the physical return to the classroom following a period of sad memory (pandemic) in which any chance of progress seemed unfeasible.

Theoretical framework

According to ILOSTAT (2021), around 17% of young Europeans do not find a job after graduation. In Europe in 2020, the percentage

of mismatch between the job and the field studied in the case of higher education graduates is 28.6%. In the case of 36% of university graduates in Europe, the skills formed during their studies do not correspond to the requirements of the workplace, even if they are active in the field studied (Eurostat, 2020). In an attempt to provide a broad definition of employability, Lee Harvey (2001) proposes categorizing it into different levels. In terms of job type, employability refers to securing any job or obtaining a job at the graduate level. These types of jobs may be referred to as "fulfilling work" or "career-oriented" positions. Depending on the timeframe, employability can be indicated by obtaining a job within a specific period after graduation or before specialized skills are required. From a recruitment and continuous learning perspective, professional integration can be assessed by the ability to demonstrate the desired skills during the recruitment process or while on the job. Additionally, it can be evaluated based on achievements leading up to graduation and the willingness to further develop within the company.

According to Andrew Rothwell, Steven Jewell, and Marie Hardie (2009), there is a national workforce view on employability tied

to government policy or national or industry' skills' objectives. This viewpoint stems from worries about how employment and work in the late 20th century were changing. Beyond workplace professional integration, there is the related field of employability within human resource management (HRM) and work psychology and a third type of careers that relate to the idea of employability (here, as in the ability of individuals to keep or obtain jobs) based on the skills and flexibility of staff acquired through employment, often promoted by employers as an alternative to job security (Rothwell, Jewell and Hardie, 2009).

Employability was examined by Storen, L.A., and Aamodt, P.O. (2010) as "the benefit and utility of the study program for career and work tasks". In this study, survey data based on graduates' views five to six years after graduation are used to quantify the value and utility of a college degree. Graduates' perceptions of their educational experience as a solid foundation for beginning and completing work responsibilities suggest that their future careers will be less susceptible to business cycles and regional variations in labor market circumstances than the unemployment rate or job mismatch.

Globally, the labor market and the higher education sector are increasingly prioritizing employability and work preparation. Work readiness, which is used interchangeably with employability, focuses on the individual's potential to obtain a desired job. Definitions of both concepts vary depending on context and the perspectives of decision makers and job seekers (Geera, Onen, 2019; Wakelin-Theron et al., 2019).

The Bologna Process, specifically the Bergen Ministerial Conference (EHEA, 2005), emphasizes the significance of university graduates' employability, defining it as "the ability to secure and retain a job, as well as adaptability in the labor market." The Bucharest Communiqué (EHEA, 2012) provides recommendations for enhancing employability, stating that universities should ensure that graduates possess the necessary skills to enter the job market and continue developing new skills throughout their careers. The recent Ministerial Conference in Rome (EHEA, 2020),

held within the framework of the European Higher Education Area, highlights the need for substantial reforms in educational offerings to enhance student employability. These reforms should focus on innovative and flexible content delivery methods to meet the increasing demand for skills such as critical thinking, emotional intelligence, leadership, teamwork, problem-solving, and entrepreneurial mindset.

There is no universally agreed definition of graduate work readiness. However, it is commonly used to describe a combination of qualities that differ between HEIs (Keogh, Maguire, & O'Donoghue, 2015). In the context of higher education, employability refers to the strategies used by academic institutions to equip students with the skills needed to navigate post-graduate pursuits and secure employment (Bennett, 2019). The core concept of graduate employment readiness encompasses a set of similar attributes demonstrated by competent and adaptable courses that continue to learn even after entering the labor market.

The global adoption of graduate attributes as a means to enhance national competitiveness in the global economy has been widely acknowledged (Azevedo, Apfelthaler & Hurst, 2012). The challenge of improving the employability of graduating students has become increasingly significant, particularly due to a decrease in available graduate positions and a contraction in job markets (Jackson, 2014a). Findings from a 2013 survey conducted by ManpowerGroup, which involved almost over 40,000 employers across more than 40 countries, highlight the difficulties employers face in finding workers with the necessary skills (ManpowerGroup, 2013). In half of those countries, employers reported recruitment challenges for more than a quarter of job positions, attributing these difficulties to a lack of technical skills and a part of them even perceiving candidates as lacking any job-related skills (ManpowerGroup, 2013).

Studies coordinated by CEDEFOP (2023), so ten years later, also show the graduates do not possess the necessary set of professional skills when wanting to enter the workforce. However, faced with a lack of employability skills, the employer's role is crucial: firms can guide universities towards teaching the soft

skills they require. Even so, driving skills and competence development solely by employers cannot be a valid recommendation as they change their needs and focus more on training in current trends rather than long-term skills training (Maxwell et al., 2010).

Methodology

The objectives of this quantitative research reside in the identification of perceived future employability among Romanian higher education students, and the goal of the hypotheses is to find out if there are important differences in the responses given by the students which are currently working and the ones given by the unemployed students. The study focused on teenagers enrolled at the West University of Timișoara within the 11 component faculties. The probabilistic sample generated 1874 total responses of which 1442 complete. The period of data collection was October 2022 - June 2023 and the instrument consisted of an online questionnaire created in the QuestionPro platform and distributed on social networks.

The research tool used in the data collection process is the "Perceived Future Employability Scale for young adults" (Gunawan, Creed & Glendon, 2018). The Likert scale with 6 levels (1=total disagreement, 6=total agreement) developed by the authors includes 24 affirmations organized in 6 different dimensions:

1. Perception of the future social network: items related to how the students will be able to use their social connections in their career and for finding opportunities;
2. Perception of future professional experiences: items related to the ability to use the educational experience in the task solving and to the ability of receiving credit from employers;
3. Perception of future personal development: items related to the level of motivation, stress management and work ethics;
4. Perception of the anticipated reputation of educational institution: items related to the future advantages given by the prestige of the study programme and the institutional partnerships;
5. Perception of future labor market

knowledge: items related to hiring opportunities, the knowledge of the steps needed to access good jobs and be successful;

6. Perception of future skills: items related to the possession of skills required in the labor market and ability to obtain the desired jobs.

The final instrument included questions regarding the working status, the involvement in volunteering experiences, the faculty of origin, the year of studies and the gender of the respondents.

Results

This research is based on the answers of 1442 participants from the West University of Timișoara, the majority of them (92.85%) being Bachelor students, and 7.15% Master students. 38.86% of them were in the first years of studies, 35.39% in the second year, 19.57% in the third year and the rest in the fourth year of studies (only for the Faculty of Law).

When it comes to their inclusion on the labor market since they are students, 65.79% of the respondents did not have a job in the moment of participation to the study, and 34.21% were already employees.

The majority of the students selected (62.11%) reported that they usually involve in volunteering projects or activities, and when it comes to their gender, 66.62% of the students are females, when 33.38% are males, thing which correlates to the general gender distribution of the students from the chosen institution for the research.

The results reported in this paper are concentrated on the possible differences between the students which are employed and the ones which are unemployed regarding the variables which show the most positive perceptions in the six dimensions of the instrument:

For the perception of the future social network, the biggest level of agreement ($M=4.75/6$) is shown in the case of the fourth variable (Table 1.1). There are no statistically significant differences ($U=232177, p=.89 > 0.05$) between the employed and unemployed participants (Table 1.2).

<i>Table 1.1 - Descriptive statistics for the perception of the future social network</i>	N		Mean
	Valid	Missing	
...I will be able to draw on the network I have developed to succeed at my work.	1442	0	4.41
...I will have built up a social network that will help me do well in my job.	1442	0	4.14
...I will have developed a network of contacts who can help identify potential work opportunities.	1442	0	4.41
...I will know how to network with people who can help me find work in my chosen career.	1442	0	4.75

<i>Table 1.2 Mann Whitney U Ranks and Test Statistics</i>	Are you currently working (are you employed)?		Mean Rank	Mann-Whitney U
	N			
...I will know how to network with people who can help me find work in my chosen career.	Yes	492	722.59	U=232177, p=.89
	No	950	719.41	
	Total	1442		

Regarding the perception of future professional experiences, the participants were more optimistic (M=4.66/6) about the achievement of the required practical skills (Table 2.1). The responses based on the employment rate (Table 2.2) were similar for

In the case of the anticipated reputation of educational institution, the subjects show a bigger level of agreement (M=4.38/6) for the utility of this reputation in finding jobs, as shown in Table 4.1. The Mann-Whitney U Test indicates that all the responses were statistically

<i>Table 2.1 Descriptive statistics for the perception of future professional experiences</i>	N		Mean
	Valid	Missing	
...I will have had relevant work experience applying the knowledge acquired in my studies.	1442	0	4.33
...future employers will be impressed with the relevant work experience I have accumulated.	1442	0	4.07
...future employers will be satisfied with the work experiences I have gained.	1442	0	4.20
...I will be able to show future employers that I have the required practical skills and academic experience they require.	1442	0	4.66

<i>Table 2.2 Mann Whitney U Ranks and Test Statistics</i>	Are you currently working (are you employed)?		Mean Rank	Mann-Whitney U
	N			
...I will be able to show future employers that I have the required practical skills and academic experience they require.	Yes	492	727.59	U=229722, p=.63
	No	950	716.82	
	Total	1442		

this variable, where $U=229722, p=.63 > 0.05$.

The third dimension presents the highest level of agreement (M=5.14/6) for the future strong work ethic of the students (Table 3.1). No significant statistical differences ($U=230736, p=.73 > 0.05$) were registered between the ones who work and the ones who do not work (Table 3.2).

homogeneous for both employment statuses, with $U=228331, p=.50 > 0.05$ (Table 4.2).

The perception of future labor market knowledge that students previewed presents similar means (Table 5.1), still the variable they agreed with the most being the fourth one (M=4.69/6).

The non-parametric test (Table 5.2) did not show differences that are statistically significant

<i>Table 3.1. Descriptive statistics for the perception of future personal development</i>	N		Mean
	Valid	Missing	
... my experiences will show that I have developed resilience and do not give up easily.	1442	0	4.69
... prospective employers will see from what I have achieved that I am well motivated.	1442	0	4.88
... prospective employers will be able to see that I have clear goals for myself.	1442	0	4.85
...my record will show that I have a strong work ethic.	1442	0	5.14

<i>Table 3.2. Mann-Whitney U Ranks and Test Statistics</i>		Are you currently working (are you employed)?	N	Mean Rank	Mann-Whitney U
...prospective employers will see from what I have achieved that I am well motivated.	Yes	492	715.48	U=230736, p=.73	
	No	950	723.11		
	Total	1442			

<i>Table 4.1. Descriptive statistics for the perception of the anticipated reputation of educational institution</i>	N		Mean
	Valid	Missing	
...I will have an advantage as future employers will be more likely to recruit graduates from my institution than from other institutions.	1442	0	4.20
...the reputation of my educational institution will be a significant asset to me in job seeking.	1442	0	4.38
...I will have a lot of work opportunities open to me because my teaching institution has strong partnerships with many potential employers.	1442	0	4.31
...I will be in demand because graduates from my institution are well prepared for work roles that are in high demand.	1442	0	4.30

<i>Table 4.2. Mann-Whitney U Ranks and Test Statistics</i>		Are you currently working (are you employed)?	N	Mean Rank	Mann-Whitney U
...the reputation of my educational institution will be a significant asset to me in job seeking.	Yes	492	710.59	U=228331, p=.50	
	No	950	725.64		
	Total	1442			

<i>Table 5.1. Descriptive statistics for the perception of the future labor market knowledge</i>	N		Mean
	Valid	Missing	
...I will have developed a good understanding of the variety of work opportunities available to me.	1442	0	4.62
...I will know the steps I need to take to do well in my chosen career.	1442	0	4.42
...I will have developed the ability to find out about job opportunities in my chosen field.	1442	0	4.63
...I will be up-to-date with occupational trends in my chosen field.	1442	0	4.69

<i>Table 5.2. Mann-Whitney U Ranks and Test Statistics</i>		Are you currently working (are you employed)?	N	Mean Rank	Mann-Whitney U
...I will be up-to-date with occupational trends in my chosen field.	Yes	492	708.49	U=227299, p=.41	
	No	950	726.73		
	Total	1442			

(U=227299, p=.41>0.05). In the case of the dimension based on the perception of future skills, the achievement of the reasoning and problem solving ones was the variable that the participants declared being more agree with

(Table 6.1), with a mean of 4.65 out of 6.

Table 6.2 shows that the results were not significantly different for the students who are unemployed in comparison with those who are employed.

<i>Table 6.1. Descriptive statistics for the perception of the future skills</i>	N		Mean
	Valid	Missing	
...I will have gained the knowledge required to get the job I want.	1442	0	4.60
...I will have the relevant skills for the occupation I choose.	1442	0	4.62
...future employers will see that I will have learned the right discipline specific/technical skills and knowledge that they want.	1442	0	4.62
...I will have developed the reasoning and problem-solving skills that future employers often require.	1442	0	4.65

<i>Table 6.2. Mann-Whitney U Ranks and Test Statistics</i>		Are you currently working (are you employed)?	N	Mean Rank	Mann-Whitney U
...I will have developed the reasoning and problem-solving skills that future employers often require.	Yes	492	715.03	U=230518, p=.71	
	No	950	723.34		
	Total	1442			

Conclusions and discussions

This study based on the responses of 1442 students from the West University of Timișoara shows how the young generation predicts its own professional success strongly related to the competences accumulated during superior studies.

Two important characteristics of the participants are that even if the majority of WUT students are unemployed, they are engaged in volunteering programmes and activities in a very big percentage.

The majority of the respondents agree that they will have a good future social network, the results being higher (even if not significantly) for the employed ones. The same thing is happening in the case of the perception of future professional experiences, especially regarding the possession of practical skills and academic experience the employers require.

For the perception of future personal development, there is a tendency that unemployed students are more optimistic than the ones who already entered the labor market, most probably because the employed respondents realised on site what they lack.

A similar result is indicated in the case of the anticipated reputation of educational institution, where the non-working students tend to have a more positive opinion about their university and a less realistic set of expectations from their study programmes.

Regarding the perception of future labor market knowledge, the participants which had the biggest level of agreement with the variables of this dimension were the ones that are unemployed, especially when it comes to the optimism of being up-to-date with occupational trends in their chosen field. The perception of future skills is the same for WUT students, and even if the differences are not statistically significant in this dimension neither, the employment rate shows a higher level of optimism in achieving the skills the employers require in the responses of the non-working students.

The general findings indicate, for all the dimensions, that WUT students positioned themselves between a partial agreement and agreement on the Likert scale, result that emphasizes a moderate to big level of trust in the educational institution and the perceived future employability after graduation, for all categories of students.

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