Key Professional Competencies for Graduates in the Job Market: An Analysis of Employer Expectations in 2024

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DOI: **https://doi.org/10.29358/sceco.v0i40.596**
How to cite: **Timiras, L., Nichifor, B., Zaiţ, L., Rotilă, A., & Stângaciu, O. A. (2024). Key Professional Competencies for Graduates in the Job Market: An Analysis of Employer Expectations in 2024. *Studies and Scientific Researches. Economics Edition*, *40*. https://doi.org/10.29358/sceco.v0i40.596**
Received: **November 2024**
Accepted: **December 2024**

Abstract
This article presents some of the results of a study on the importance that employers attach to some of the professional competencies of university graduates, as well as on the level of satisfaction with graduates' competencies, respectively the need to improve them. The research was conducted at the level of a sample of 50 recruiters with reference to graduates of a higher education institution. The results of the research attest that for employers competencies such as: Teamwork, Specialized training – practical and theoretical, Communication Management of time, material resources and human resources, Critical and prospective thinking, Use of elements specific to digitization or information and communication technology are considered, on average, very important. It is also found that although they are satisfied or relatively satisfied with the competencies of graduates, employers consider it necessary for them to improve. This fact highlights the need for permanent improvement of employees' competencies as a way of adapting to the dynamics of the economic, social and technological environment in which organizations operate.

Keywords
employer; labour market; professional and transversal competencies; graduates; competencies; abilities.

Introduction

The globalization of markets has generated a fierce competitive phenomenon, with a strong negative impact on the sources of competitive advantages held by domestic companies, and not only. Basically, in the current competitive context, differentiation in the sphere of tangible components has become relatively difficult, informational and human capital turning into real sources of sustainable competitive advantages. It is therefore not difficult to understand why labor market representatives are looking for graduates who are well trained in the field, but also with multiple generic competencies, in different spheres of interest (communication, adaptation to the new, flexibility, teamwork, etc.).

The liberalization of the labor market, a direct effect of the globalization phenomenon, obviously raises numerous problems of integration and adaptation of new graduates on this outlet, the competition being extremely high. The representatives of the labor market demand and expect, from the graduates, numerous competencies in the theoretical and practical sphere, on the one hand, but also competencies, respectively basic competencies, in the sphere of personal development.

On the other hand, in the same context of liberalization, at the level of the labor market there is also an evident trend of labor mobility, the graduates of higher education of the last generations showing a high availability to change jobs, a phenomenon that seems to reach an average of at least 10 times during their working life. Thus, we can appreciate that higher education graduates have competencies and abilities that give them the opportunity to adapt to new contexts.

Literature review

The concept of competence has been the subject of numerous specialized studies, being defined in various ways, as follows: the collective learning process, usually associated with an organization, in the sphere of coordination of various production competencies and integrated technological flows (Hamel and Prahalad, 1994); the individual ability to perform, at a given moment, in a field (Boam and Sparrow, 1992; Le Deist and Winterton, 2005); a personal characteristic that is, in certain situations, correlated with job performance (Spencer and Spencer, 1993); competencies, abilities and attributes complementary to the specialization of the workforce that contribute strongly to the achievement of job performance (Mitchell, 2003); combined componentsand integrated knowledge, competencies and abilities (Kyndt and Baert, 2015); knowledge, competencies, abilities, values, and behaviors necessary to achieve a desired level of performance in an activity or field (Morris, Webb, Fu, and Singhal, 2013); a combination of cognitive abilities (technical knowledge and expertise in a field) and generic abilities or behavioral characteristics (principles, attitudes, values) that define an individual's personality (Hodges and Burchell, 2003).

In the literature and specialized practice (Male, 2010; Vucetic, 2017; Young and Chapman, 2010; Strijbos, Engles and Stuyven, 2015; Grosemans, Coertjens and Kyndt, 2017; Garcia-Alvarez et al, 2022; etc.) There is a tendency to delimit the individual competencies, necessary to access a job, into two main categories, as follows: the first category, called professional competencies, captures the knowledge and competencies specific to obtaining a job in a certain field; the second category, called generic, basic competencies, also known as transversal competencies, refers to social skillsand psychological, found in individual behavior at work.

In a study published in 2013, Kottmann and de Weert highlight the opinions of labour market representatives on the competencies and competencies required of higher education graduates. The study presents the results obtained at the level of some developed European countries (Belgium, Great Britain, Finland, Germany, Denmark and Sweden), respectively the United States of America, revealing certain differences in the perspective of the competencies required by the representatives of the labor market within the two continents. If at the level of European countries, labor market representatives attach high importance to both categories of competencies (professional and generic/transversal), American employers consider basic competencies and general knowledge of the profile essential, insisting on the possibility of specialization in the workplace. For example, employers in European countries expect from graduates, in addition to a thorough training in the field graduated, also the possession of competencies such as analytical thinking, communication, time management, creativity and predisposition for lifelong learning. Similar conclusions were reached in a research carried out at the level of states closer to Romania from an economic perspective. A 2012 study by Pukelis and Pileicikiene found thatemployers in countries such as Poland, Lithuania, Hungary and Slovenia also attach high importance to competencies such as time management and the ability to work under pressure.

Defined as dynamic combinations of cognitive and meta-cognitive competencies, respectively interpersonal, intellectual and practical aptitude, which support the graduate in the process of adaptation to the workplace (Haselberger et al. 2012), generic/transversal competencies are considered to represent a real source of increasing employees' productivity at work (Garcia-Aracil, 2008), which is why employers attach high importance to them.

In fact, the high importance given to generic competencies, to the detriment of professional ones, by employers, has been mentionedsince the 1990s in numerous studies (Liston 1998, Maede and Andrews, 1995, Weisz, 1999).

Education is considered a key factor in the process of integrating individuals into the labor market, being known for its decisive involvement in preparing participants for future professional activity, by providing knowledge, competencies and abilities. The role of higher education institutions in preparing specialists for the labor market has been and still is an intensely debated topic in the specialized literature.

As previously specified, globalization and technological progress have imposed a utilitarian approach on education, thus resulting, as mentioned by Pukeis and Pileicikiene (2012), the transfer of competencies required by the labor market, in the sphere of formal education, offered by higher education institutions. Basically, as mentioned by Bennett (2018), Suleman (2018) and Bridgstock (2009), the competencies provided by higher education institutions give graduates competencies in the process of identifying professional opportunities, supporting the process of optimizing personal resources in the search for and/or maintaining the desired job, respectively they imprint on them traits of proactive behavior in the process of integration and adaptation to the labor market.

Temmerman (2019) is one of the authors who highlighted that employers want graduates who possess both theoretical knowledge and practical design competencies. Basically, employers want graduates who, beyond having a significant amount of theoretical knowledge, have a real know-how adapted to the practical context. Thus, higher education institutions are required to develop programs, such as dual education, which are responsible for developing competencies based on applied learning.

Numerous studies dedicated to highlighting the link between the competencies offered by the different higher education programmes and the expectations of labour market representatives (CHERI, 2002; HEFCE, 2003; Allen & van der Velden, 2009; Hemmer, 2011; Kottmann and de Weert's 2013) also mentions solutions for reducing the gap between the competencies offered by the academic environment and the competencies, aptitudes, capabilities required by the labor market. It is about the experience prior to the employment of graduates, operationalized through internship programs and increasing the importance of internship periods during studies, the involvement of labor market representatives when designing/rethinking the curricular content, respectively the large-scale involvement of future graduates in extra-curricular activities, correlated to the field of study, etc.

Obviously, there are authors who delimit the competencies that must be obtained after graduating from bachelor's studies from those that must come after graduating from master's programs. For example, Massimi et al. (2016) mention, following a study carried out at the level of master's graduates of a higher education institution in Italy, as the most important competencies assimilated by them, favorably appreciated by the representatives of the labor market, the following: high competencies in the field of leadership, competencies in the managerial sphere and optimal teamwork competencies. On the other hand, referring to bachelor's degree graduates, Zepeda (2015) mentions as optimal competencies the creation and development of the field of specialized knowledge, the development of critical thinking and competencies in innovative research.

Research methodology

During 2024, a direct research was carried out among 50 organizations, the objectives of the study being: to identify the importance attributed by employers to the different competencies expected from university graduates, their degree of satisfaction with the competencies of graduates, as well as their opinion on the need to improve those competencies.

The research was carried out through investigation, the information being collected through self-registration. The sample of employers 46+34+6 included in the research was heterogeneous from the perspective of the activity carried out by them (industry, commerce, health, education, social services, public administration, sports activities, information technology, advertising, real estate services, etc.), the form of ownership (private – 46% and public – 54%) and the size expressed by the number of employees (46% of organizations - less than 50 employees, 34% - between 51 and 100 employees, 6% - between 101 and 500 employees and 14% - over 500 employees).

The data analysis was carried out with the help of the SPSS variant 26 program. The evaluation of qualitative variables (importance attributed to different competencies, level of satisfaction with those competencies, opinion on the need to improve competencies) was carried out with the help of the Semantic Differential. The data analysis was mainly carried out with the help of average scores, the One Way Anova test, the Pearson coefficient.

We used the Cronbach Alpha Coefficient to check the internal consistency of the evaluated items. Thus, for all the 3 variables considered: 1. the importance attributed by employers to the different competencies of the graduates, 2. the degree of satisfaction with the competencies of the graduates and 3. the opinion regarding the need to improve the competencies, the Alpha Cronbach coefficients exceeded the value 0.9 (respectively: 0.933, 0.966, 0.992) which indicates the very good consistency of the items describing all 3 variables considered.

Research results

The assessment **of the importance attributed by employers to the different competencies expected from** graduates was assessed with a 5-level scale (from 5 - very important, to 1 - very unimportant).

It can be seen from table no. 1 that the most important competencies (with values close to the maximum level of the scale – 5) are*: teamwork, specialized practical training, communication, theoretical specialized training* and *time management*. The least important competence among those assessed, but still with an average value exceeding level 4 (important) is *entrepreneurship*.

Table no. 1. The importance attributed by the researched organizations to the different competencies expected of university graduates

Competence	Average score rated on a scale of 5 (very important) to 1 (very unimportant)
Teamwork	4.8000
Specialized training (practical)	4.7600
Communicate	4.7600
Specialized training (theoretical)	4.7400
Time management	4.7200
Critical thinking	4.6800
Forward-Looking Thinking	4.6400
Material Resource Management	4.6400
Use of digitalisation or information and communication technology elements	4.6200
Human Resource Management	4.5200
Financial Resource Management	4.5000
Professional use of foreign languages	4.4600
Entrepreneurship	4.3800

Source: own processing

Confirming the high levels of the averages (above the value of 4) for all the competencies analyzed, in figure no. 1, the agglomeration of the terms towards the high values of the series can be observed. For all the analyzed competencies, it is found that the median value is equal to the maximum value of the series (at least 50% of the organizations gave the maximum level – 5, to the importance of the evaluated competencies), and in the case of the first 4 competencies that recorded the highest average values (*teamwork, specialized practical training, communication, theoretical* specialized training), all 3 quartiles were equal to the maximum value of 5 (minimum 75% of the organizations gave a grade of 5 to the importance of the competencies assessed).

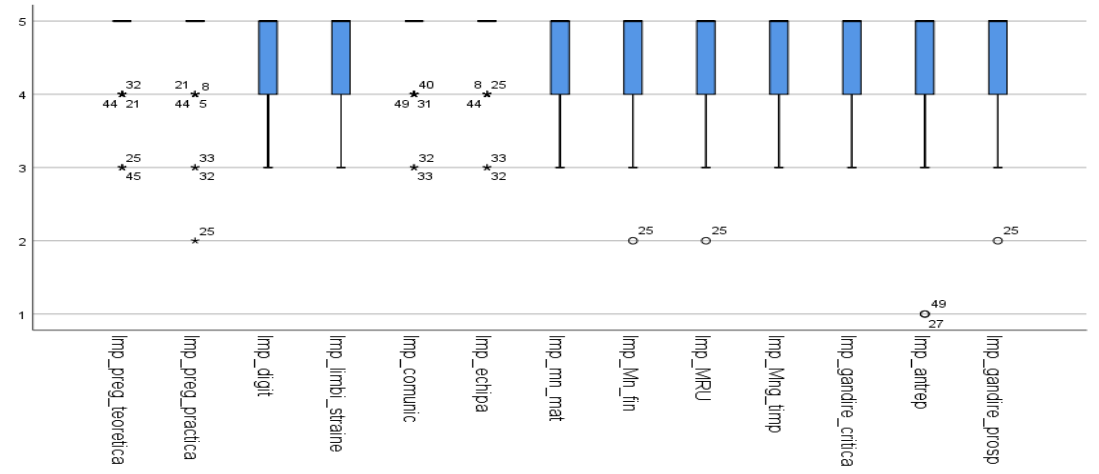

Figure no. 1. Boxplot of the importance attributed by the researched organizations to the different competencies, evaluated on a scale from 5 (very important) to 1 (very unimportant)

Source: own processing

In order to assess the existence of differences in the importance attributed to graduates' competencies by categories of employers according to criteria such as form of ownership, field of activity, size expressed by the number of employees), we used the Anova (One-Way-Anova) test.

Thus, at the level of employers by categories by form of ownership, there were significant differences ($\alpha<0.05$) in terms of the importance attributed to the competencies: *Use of elements specific to digitization or information and communication technology* and *Entrepreneurship* (Table no. 2), in both situations there were higher average values in the case of public organizations (Table no. 3).

Table no. 2. Competencies that registered significant differences in terms of the importance assigned, by categories of employers according to the form of ownership, according to the One Way Anova test

Competence	F	Sig.
Use of digitalisation or information and communication technology elements	4,898	0,032
Entrepreneurship	5,145	0,028

Source: own processing

Table no. 3. The average importance attributed to the different competencies expected from graduates, by categories of employers according to the form of ownership

Form of ownership	Competence	
	Use of digitalisation or information and communication technology elements	Entrepreneurship
Private	4.4348	4.0870
Public	4.7778	4.6296

Source: own processing

Also, by field of activity, it is found that there are significant differences ($\alpha<0.05$) in terms of the importance attributed to the following competencies: *Use of elements specific to digitization or information and communication technology, Communication, Teamwork, Human resources management, Critical thinking, Prospective thinking* (Table no. 4).

Referring to the competence *Use of elements specific to digitization or information and communication technology*, it is found that it is given an increased importance in: education and research, activities in the field of sports, public administrationand social assistance. Communication competence is assessed with increased importance in: activities in the field of sport, education and research, public administration and social work. *Teamwork* was assessed as more important in the following areas: public administration and social assistance, sports activities, education and research and industry, and *Human Resources Management*, in: education and research, sports activities, public administration and social work. *Critical* thinking was rated as more important in: public administration and social work and sports activities, and *Prospective thinking* in: sports activities, education and research and public administration andsocial work.

Table no. 4. Competencies that registered significant differences in terms of the importance assigned, by categories of employers by field of activity, according to the One Way Anova test

Competencies	F	Sig.
Use of digitalisation or information and communication technology elements	2,905	0,018
Communicate	3,499	0,007
Teamwork	4,016	0,003
Human Resource Management	2,313	0,051
Critical thinking	2,430	0,041
Forward-Looking Thinking	2,541	0,034

Source: own processing

Table no. 5. The average importance attributed to the different competencies by category of employers by field of activity

Competence	Field of activity

	Industry	Trade	Public administration and social assistance	Education and research	Nursing	Activities in the field of sport	Other services (financial-banking, real estate, IT)
Use of digitalisation or information and communication technology elements	4.6250	4.0000	4.7500	4.8571	4.0000	4.7778	4.6667
Communicate	4.6250	3.5000	4.7500	4.9286	4.7143	5.0000	4.6667
Teamwork	4.7500	3.5000	5.0000	4.9286	4.7143	5.0000	4.6667
Human Resource Management	4.5000	4.0000	4.7500	4.8571	4.0000	4.7778	4.0000
Critical thinking	4.5000	4.0000	5.0000	4.7143	4.7143	5.0000	4.3333
Forward-Looking Thinking	4.6250	3.5000	4.7500	4.7857	4.2857	5.0000	4.5000

Source: own processing

The research also aimed to assess the degree of satisfaction of employers with the competencies of employed graduates (graduates of a higher education institution), as well as the extent to which they consider that these competencies need improvement. The results of the study showed, on the one hand, that employers were on average satisfied with the different competencies of the graduates, and, on the other hand, that they consider it appropriate for those competencies to be improved. (Tables no. 6 and 9).

Thus, in terms **of the level of satisfaction with the different competencies of the graduates**, the surveyed organisations declared themselves satisfied with the graduates, the average scores being between the levels of 4.62 (a value that is close to 5 – to a very large extent) and 4.04 (to a large extent) (table no. 6), for almost all the competencies assessed (except *for the professional use of foreign languages*), the individual values being between 3 (*somewhat satisfied*) and 5 (*very much satisfied*) and 75% of the individual values being between 4 (largely *satisfied*) and 5. (Figure no. 2).

There were significant differences ($\alpha<0.05$) in terms of employers' level of satisfaction with graduates' competencies exclusively by category according to the form of ownership, in terms of competencies: *Communication, Financial Resources Management, Critical Thinking, Entrepreneurship, in* all cases employers in the private sector proving to be less satisfied with the students compared to those in the public sector, with the specification that the average values did not show dissatisfaction with any of the competencies even at the level of private organizations. (Tables no. 7 and 8).

Table no. 6. The level of satisfaction of the surveyed organizations in relation to different competencies of graduates, evaluated on a scale from 5 (to a very large extent) to 1 (to a very small extent)

Competence	Average level of satisfaction
Specialized training (theoretical)	4.6200
Teamwork	4.5400
Material Resource Management	4.4200
Communicate	4.4200
Time management	4.3800
Financial Resource Management	4.3400
Specialized training (practical)	4.3200
Human Resource Management	4.3200
Use of digitalisation or information and communication technology elements	4.2800
Critical thinking	4.2600
Forward-Looking Thinking	4.2400
Entrepreneurship	4.1250
Professional use of foreign languages	4.0400

Source: own processing

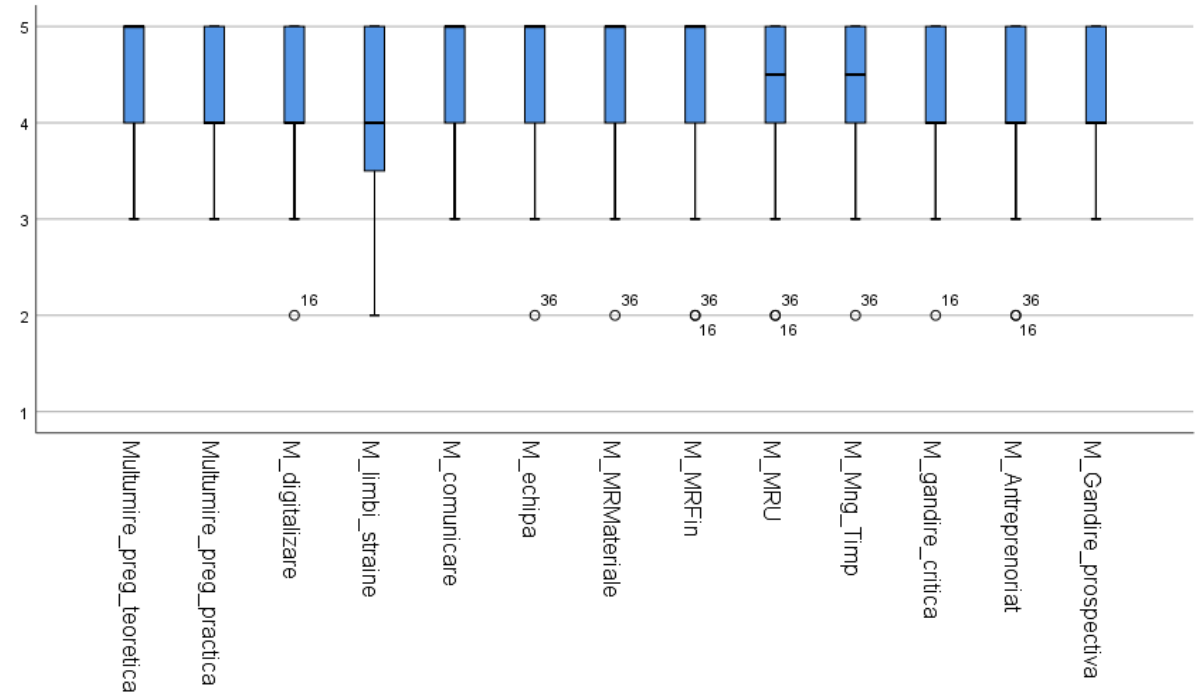

Figure no. 2. Boxplot of the level of satisfaction of the surveyed organizations with the different competencies of the graduates, evaluated on a scale from 5 (to a very large extent) to 1 (to a very small extent)
Source: own processing

Table no. 7. Competencies that registered significant differences in terms of the level of satisfaction, by categories of employers according to the form of ownership, according to the One Way Anova test

Competence	F	Sig.
Communicate	4,108	0,048
Financial Resource Management	6,099	0,017
Critical thinking	7,946	0,007
Entrepreneurship	4,312	0,043

Source: own processing

Table no. 8. The average level of satisfaction of the surveyed organizations with the different competencies of the graduates, by category by form of ownership

Form of ownership	Competence			
	Communicate	Financial Resource Management	Critical thinking	Entrepreneurship
Private	4.2174	4.0435	3.9565	3.8571
Public	4.5926	4.5926	4.5185	4.3333

Source: own processing

On the other hand, the average scores indicating **the extent to which employers consider it necessary to improve competencies** are in the range of 3.67 – 4.02, where level 4 on the scale signifies the need to improve "to some extent". On average, the competencies considered to require a higher level of improvement are: the *use of elements specific to digitalisation or information and communication technology, the professional use of foreign languages* and *specialised (practical) training.* (Table no. 9).

By categories of employers, there are significant differences (α<0.05) only in terms of the opinion on the need to improve the competence *Specialized training (practical),* employers in the state sector feeling to a lesser extent the need to improve this competence. (Tables no. 10 and 11)

Table no. 9. The opinion of the surveyed organizations in relation to the need to improve the different competencies, evaluated on a scale from 6 (to a very large extent) to 1 (not at all)

Competencies	Average opinion of the organizations surveyed in relation to the need to improve different competencies
Use of digitalisation or information and communication technology elements	4.0204
Professional use of foreign languages	3.9792
Specialized training (practical)	3.9792
Time management	3.8163
Entrepreneurship	3.8125
Communicate	3.7959
Forward-Looking Thinking	3.7959
Critical thinking	3.7755
Financial Resource Management	3.7551
Teamwork	3.7347
Material Resource Management	3.7347
Specialized training (theoretical)	3.6735
Human Resource Management	3.6735

Source: own processing

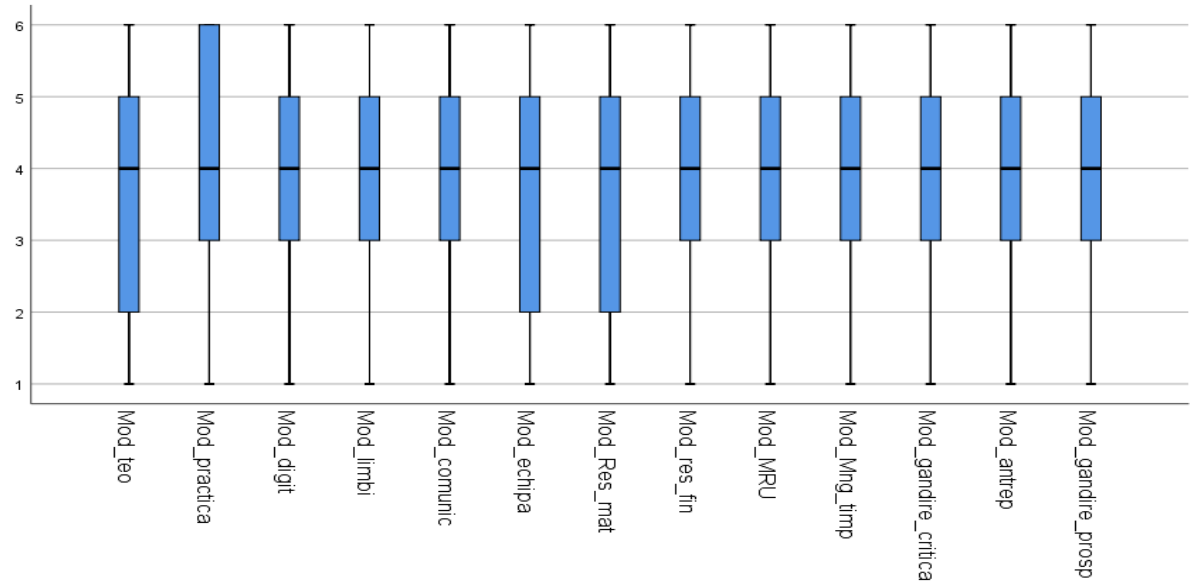

Figure no. 3. Boxplot of the opinion of the researched organizations in relation to the need to improve the competencies of graduates, evaluated on a scale from 6 (very much) to 1 (not at all)

Source: own processing

Table no. 10. Competencies that registered significant differences from the perspective of the organizations' opinion in relation to the need for improvement, by categories by form of ownership, according to the One Way Anova test

Competencies	Property

	F	Sig.
Specialized training (practical)	5,079	0,029

Source: own processing

Analysing the data in Figure 3, we find that for all competencies, employers' opinion ranged from 1 (*does not require improvement*) to 6 (*very much needs to be* improved), despite the level of satisfaction for all competencies, which exceeded level 3 (*somewhat satisfied*) (except for the competence *Use of foreign* languages for professional purposes), which suggests that there would be no link between the current level of satisfactionwith a particular competence and the desire for it to be improved. To test this hypothesis, we used the Pearson coefficient, its values attesting to the non-existence of links between employers' level of satisfaction with a certain competence and their opinion regarding the need to improve it; values which, although negative (specific to an inverse link between variables), are too low to be able to indicate the existence of any correlation. (Table no. 12)

Table no. 11. The average opinion of the surveyed organizations in relation to the need to improve competencies, evaluated on a scale from 6 (to a very large extent) to 1 (not at all), by categories of employers, according to the form of ownership

Form of ownership	Competence
	Specialized training (practical)
Private	4.5455
Public	3.5000

Source: own processing

Table no. 12. The link between employers' level of satisfaction with a particular competence and their opinion on the need to improve it

Competence	Values of the Person coefficients
Specialized training (theoretical)	-0.142
Specialized training (practical)	-0.227
Use of digitalisation or information and communication technology elements	-0.112
Professional use of foreign languages	-0.246
Communicate	-0.212
Teamwork	-0.252
Material Resource Management	-0.202
Financial Resource Management	-0.263
Human Resource Management	-0.255
Time management	-0.119
Critical thinking	-0.200
Forward-Looking Thinking	-0.099
Entrepreneurship	-0.096

Source: own processing

In the context of what has been presented, namely the satisfaction shown by employers towards the competencies of graduates corroborated with their opinion on the need to improve them, it is evident the need for continuous development of the competencies held, respectively of lifelong learning which represents a means of adapting to economic and technological changes, of supporting personal progressand, implicitly, of the competitiveness of organizations.

Conclusions

In 2024, a survey was organized at the level of a sample of 50 organizations that highlighted that the following competencies expected from university graduates (*Teamwork, Specialized training (practical), Communication, Specialized training (theoretical), Time management, Critical thinking, Prospective thinking, Management of material resources, Use of elements specific to digitization or information technologyand*

communications, Human Resource Management, Financial Resource Management, Professional Use of Foreign Languages, Entrepreneurship), which have been subject to the investigation, are considered very important or important.

Also assessing the degree of satisfaction of employers with the competencies of the graduates employed, as well as the extent to which they consider that these competencies need improvement, it was observed, on the one hand, that employers showed, on average, their satisfaction with all the competencies of the graduates listed above, and, on the other hand, the fact that they consider those competencies need to be improved. This fact highlights the need felt by employers to permanently improve employees' competencies (even if they are satisfied with them), lifelong learning, as a means of adapting to the changes imposed by the dynamic environment in which organizations operate.

The main limitation of the present study refers to the small size of the researched sample, as well as to the limited information regarding the level of satisfaction and the opinion regarding the need to improve the competencies of the graduates of a single higher education institution in Romania, in which case from this point of view the research presents the characteristics of an exploratory study. On the other hand, the results of the study can be constituted as hypotheses for larger research (larger samples of organizations, with reference to graduates of several universities), representative at regional, national level, etc.

Note: the research was carried out within the project CNFIS-FDI-2024-F-0499 - ***Investigation of the professional career path of the graduates of the "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău – an essential component of the institutional strategic approach – ABSOLV UBc.***

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