

# The Voice of Employers – their Suggestions for Optimizing the Relationship between the University and the Labor Market

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## Abstract

*The university and the labour market can no longer be considered as separate entities because they are deeply interconnected, and their relationship is characterised by mutual influence. In order to ensure this relationship is functional and beneficial for all parties involved, it is highly important not only to listen to employers' voice (which is the initial step) but also to incorporate their feedback into institutional development strategies. Effective communication and collaboration between universities and the labour market must be continuously fostered to guarantee that graduates acquire the skills employers expect and that employers are satisfied with the training provided. This study aims to identify a set of effective solutions proposed by employers to enhance the quality of graduates' skills. In order to answer four research questions, data were collected and processed from a broader survey, conducted via a questionnaire with 153 employers from "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău (UBc) between July and September 2024. The gathered data were then compared and correlated with findings from a similar study conducted in the previous year, during the same months. The results obtained will help the substantiation of decision-making and action lines at the faculty and institutional levels aimed at improving graduates' skills in response to the dynamic and challenging demands of the labour market.*

## Keywords

skills, labor market, employers, university, solutions

## Introduction

The EU initiative “An Agenda for New Skills and Jobs: A European Contribution towards Full Employment” (European Commission, 2011) was part of the “Europe 2020 Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth”, one of its key goals being to ensure a 75% employment rate for men and women aged 20-64 by 2020. According to the Eurostat reports, the EU employment rate for this age group was 72.4% in 2020, decreasing from 73.1% in 2019 (Eurostat, 2022). Throughout 2020, the labour market was unprecedentedly and directly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. As a consequence, all but three of the EU Member States registered a decline in employment rates.

Four years later, most of the students who enrolled in Higher Education (HE) in 2020 have already graduated and applied for a job. Where are we now, in 2024, and what actions can we take? While Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) include graduate employability in their missions, it appears that having a degree is no longer sufficient to get employed. The role of HEIs remains crucial, but the context is increasingly complex and in a continuous transformation.

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In 2024, the job market displays a landscape that has changed significantly since 2023, being influenced by the generative AI and accelerated digitalization, by shifts in employers and employees' preferences, and also by emerging economic and social challenges (Faier, 2024). More and more organizations are increasingly seeking candidates with advanced digital competencies, offering higher salaries for expertise in AI, Data Analysis, and Cybernetics. Meanwhile, several sectors are facing economic stagnation, leading to a climate of uncertainty and to a decreasing demand for workers. Other sectors continue to grow but have increased their expectations regarding the applicants' qualifications.

Consequently, the collaboration between educational institutions and companies has emerged as the main trend in 2024. Moreover, according to the organizations surveyed by the World Economic Forum (HolonIQ, 2024), the top two barriers to business transformation are skill gaps in the local labor market (59.7%) and inability to attract talent (53.4%). This shows, once more, that the responsibility for enhancing graduate employability in HE is shared among different stakeholders – policy makers, HEIs (including all members of the academic community), and employers, each playing a different role. As Brown et al. (2003) claimed, “it is possible to be employable, but not in employment”.

The goal of the present study is to identify a set of effective solutions proposed by employers, aiming to improve the quality of the graduates' competencies. The context is specific to “Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacău (UBc), a mid-size, comprehensive university located in the North-East Development Region of Romania. The Regional Smart Specialization Strategy of North-East (ADR-NE, 2023) has adopted the Quadruple Helix Model as a collaborative framework involving key stakeholders in the socio-economic development ecosystem: economy, education, society, and government. Therefore, UBc has already established a practice of engaging its partners in projects and activities coordinated towards co-shaping strategies meant to increase the graduates' employability, in a mutually beneficial and transparent manner (Cojocariu et al., 2017, Cojocariu et al., 2024). Moreover, students' perspectives are consistently taken into account.

The structure of this paper is as follows: the next section reviews existing research on the topic of graduates' employment and employers' involvement to boost it. The research design of our study, its objective and research questions are detailed afterwards, followed by the results and their analysis. The paper concludes by highlighting the best practices to be replicated and opportunities identified for UBc to make the collaboration with employers more efficient.

## Literature review

The National Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB, 2021), a non-profit association of representing leaders in education and business across the UK, identified three major barriers limiting the impact of their collaboration on future skills. These can be observed in other European countries, as well: a lack of strategic focus in policymaking, practical challenges which restrict collaboration between universities and businesses, and a reduced scale of collaboration, due to the current policies. These result in significant coordination and communication efforts among the involved parties to create an impact.

The study's conclusions suggest several directions: successful sector-specific initiatives should be expanded to a national level, in solutions that embed the necessary skills into higher education; policy initiatives should empower universities and employers to maximize their joint contribution to developing skills; governments should find ways to align existing systems to meet future skill demands, and best practices should be scaled-up for the benefit of economic growth.

A study conducted in Spain (Ferrández-Berruero et al., 2021) reported the following forms of collaboration between HEIs and the labor market. These include on-demand training (especially when big companies demand customized study programs); confederations of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) which typically involve a private HEI to address sector-specific needs; SMEs supporting curriculum development, sometimes taking part in the study program delivery and student assessment; SMEs offering traineeships to provide targeted learning outcomes or only general work experience; SMEs engaging with HEIs to bring real-world experience into the classroom. The motivations, benefits, and impacts for companies are closely related to the effect of these collaborations in an essential manner. Such partnerships often lead to innovation and modernization of the company processes. In turn, HEIs are supported in their endeavor to provide graduates who are ready to enter the labor market while building up their reputation as a milestone in employment.

The 2022 QS Global Employer Survey led by Quacquarelli Symonds (2022) was performed on 26,742 respondents and focused on three pertinent topics: what employers seek in graduates, the impact of AI as a disruptive force, altering the graduate employment market, and how HEIs can prepare students for this evolving landscape. The analysis led to the following two broad conclusions. First of all, HEIs must be very flexible – an objective which includes various aspects. Secondly, HEIs need to collaborate closely with employers on the ground.

The survey presents several suggestions open to debate, including aligning market demand with employee desire through a flexible curriculum, developing platforms for lifelong learning and upskilling by HEIs; governmental involvement in defining policies to support multiple partnerships to deliver an upskilled workforce; enhancing public-private and private-private partnerships in service of tertiary education. Although AI is transforming job roles and processes, the need for creativity skills in the workforce will remain and even increase.

The collective volume edited by Broadley et al. (2023) gathers an impressive amount of research on graduate employability from more than 20 countries. The authors agree that employability implies a graduate's capability "to function productively in a complex, interconnected and continually evolving world" and that this outcome requires viewing employability from the perspectives of students, teachers, and the communities beyond academia.

Consequently, the content reflects the opinions and voices of stakeholders from various communities, sectors, political and cultural areas. Each chapter showcases knowledge, examples, or best practices, all confirming that the approaches must be appropriate to particular circumstances. A balanced perspective is essential: while many students seem to develop their skills through subjects of personal interest, many professions rely on a body of knowledge as their foundation. Employability matters, but so do health and mental well-being. Therefore, HEIs and employers need to work together rather than leaving employability to market forces.

A study of Archer (Huseth, 2023), a company providing organizational development, marketing, enrolment, and retention strategy for universities in the USA, points that a successful collaborations between universities and employers start with a deep understanding of the market: being aware of which industries and niches are growing or declining, which study programs students are focused on at a certain moment, and which degrees or educational qualifications are best suited for various employers - all these are important when creating efficient partnerships for both HEIs and economic actors. Traineeships and internships, tuition reimbursement for existing employees, work-study agreements, and sponsored projects or research labs are suggested as types of partnerships between HEIs and employers. Previous experience indicates that collaborations driven by job market demands, from local to global level, are found to have the best outcomes.

Scheuring and Thompson (2024) point out that supporting students to develop life skills valued by employers is essential for enhancing graduate employability. Research conducted with graduate recruiters in the UK found that experiential learning by means of team-based business simulation has an overwhelmingly positive influence on students' self-assessed life skill development as well as their expertise in course-specific subjects.

Research around the world offers numerous insights and ideas which can inspire career services in HEIs to enhance graduate employment, with the final goal of enabling more graduates to accede and successfully perform in high-skilled professions, while reducing unemployment rates. The following sections outline a research initiative conducted at UBC, inviting employers to share their perspectives on graduate employability.

## **Methodology**

**1. Objective:** identifying a set of effective solutions suggested by employers for enhancing graduates' skills.

**2. Research questions (RQ):**

*RQ1* – Can employers provide general recommendations for improving the training process of graduates in line with the needs of the local and regional labor market?

*RQ2* – Can employers suggest specific improvements to the academic curriculum based on the demands of the local and regional labor market?

*RQ3* – Is there at least one fundamental area for enhancing graduates' preparation where collaboration between the university and the labor market can make a significant impact?

*RQ4* – Can employers highlight a set of effective proposals for improving the training of graduates that could be incorporated into the measure plan within the faculty and institutional strategies?

### 3. Research methodology

**a. Type of research** - The research conducted is exploratory and aims to improve the relationship between the university and the labor market, focusing on the training and skill development required by employers of UBc graduates. The research method employed is a questionnaire. The data presented are part of two larger researches carried out in the academic years 2022-2023 and 2023-2024, respectively, which used questionnaires distributed to UBc employers. For this study, only the employers' responses to an open-ended question were selected for qualitative analysis, specifically:

1. Questionnaire assessing employers' satisfaction with the skills demonstrated by UBc graduates in public or private organizations and institutions (2023-2024) (Item 15 - What actions do you think UBc should take, in collaboration with labor market representatives to ensure a higher professional training of its graduates?)

2. Questionnaire to identify employers' needs for enhancing the employment of UBc graduates (2022-2023) (Item 11 - What measures do you believe should be implemented to improve collaboration with the university in providing training programs?)

**b. Research Procedure:** The questionnaires were sent to employers during each of the two academic years mentioned in three successive rounds (July, August, September). The completion of the questionnaire was conducted online using Google Forms, based on an invitation sent via email to participate in the research. Given that the research involved human subjects, ethical approval and professional deontology clearance were obtained from our university, and participation in the study was voluntary, with the research methodology adhering to ethical standards as approved by the Research Ethics Committee of UBc.

**c. The research group** was represented by a convenience sample with the number of respondents from the two studies being relatively similar, as follows:

- Group 1 included a number of 50 respondents from UBc employers (2023-2024) - out of the total of 153 *employers* contacted, resulting in a response rate of 32.68%;
- Group 2 comprised 65 respondents from UBc employers (2022-2023) – out of the total of 177 *employers* contacted, representing a response rate of 36.72%.

### d. Research Stages:

1. Establishing the purpose and problems of the research – July 2024
2. Elaboration and validation of the questionnaire – July 2024
3. Distribution of the questionnaire – July to September 2024
4. Presentation, analysis and interpretation of the results – September 2024

## Results

The data gathered from the responses to the two items in the questionnaires were analyzed, compared and correlated. Our goal was to identify a wide range of valuable suggestions from employers for optimizing the training of UBc graduates, facilitating their integration into academic decision-making and curricular and extracurricular practices. The collected data will be presented and analyzed in relation to each research question.

Regarding *RQ1* – *Can employers provide general recommendations for improving the training process of graduates in line with the needs of the local and regional labor market?*, we believe the data allows us to respond *affirmatively*. We found that employers are highly interested in developing and implementing general solutions, viewing themselves as agents of positive change in preparing future graduates.

Regarding *RQ2* - *Can employers suggest specific improvements to the academic curriculum based on the demands of the local and regional labor market?* - we have found a multitude of realistic ideas that are well-grounded in the practices of their respective fields. Thus, we believe the answer to this research question is also affirmative. This is supported by evidence from employer proposals, which we have organized into various subcategories:

2.a. Courses – organized for both beginners and experienced professionals, delivered by employers as well as the university, along with other activities (e.g., course extensions, mentoring, and defining topics for study completion) that contribute to lifelong learning (Harvey, L., 2000);

2.b. Teaching Strategies – modern, interactive, and collaborative, based on the use of new learning technologies and team-teaching methods.

Regarding RQ3 – Is there at least one fundamental area for enhancing graduates' preparation where collaboration between the university and the labor market can make a significant impact? our findings indicate that there is, particularly in the area of specialized training. For several years, there has been a consistent call from both employers and universities for an increase in the number of hours dedicated to specialized training, a more tailored traineeship curriculum that aligns with the field of study, and more proactive involvement from those designing and managing students' practical training, ensuring it meets the needs of companies. Employers also expect students to partner with them in specialized training in order to address some of their business challenges.

Referring to RQ4 – Can employers highlight a set of effective proposals for improving the training of graduates that could be incorporated into the measure plan within the faculty and institutional strategies? the answer is also affirmative. We can examine this issue from two perspectives: first, all the previous suggestions represent viable proposals that should be incorporated into measures aimed at strengthening the relationship between the university and the labor market, focusing on enhancing the skills of UBc graduates. Second, we have identified additional recommendations from employers related to our topic of interest.

## Discussion

Regarding RQ1 – Some proposals of employers include:

- Regular meetings between the university, students, and employers *to gain real-time insights into market needs.*
- Increasing the university's visibility in the community by organizing more public events *thinking of activities which would appreciate the engagement of students and volunteers in the community and for the community;*
- Carefully designed educational offers which can equip students with the skills needed for current labor market.
- Supporting students' adaptation and involvement, with a focus on developing key competencies.
- Initiating collaboration on project design and implementation, which is considered useful for establishing and maintaining ongoing partnerships between UBc and companies.
- Ensuring consistent communication between the university and employers, particularly regarding the hiring and recommendation of students or graduates for job opportunities.
- Implementing volunteer programs that allow students to assist beneficiaries or faculty with various tasks, helping them develop general competencies and soft skills.
- There should be ongoing communication between the university and employers, particularly regarding the hiring and recommendations of students or graduates for job placements.
- Volunteer programs should be implemented in which students assist beneficiaries or teachers with various tasks, helping them develop their general competencies and soft skills (Kellevezir & Çakır, 2020; Harvey, L., 2000).
- The university should provide students with consistent and meaningful contact with the labor market starting from their first year.

Additionally, we find it noteworthy that we have identified suggestions from employers that extend beyond academic management. For instance, *employers could offer scholarships to deserving students and consider them for employment upon graduation.* Students are also encouraged to be more engaged, dedicated, and creative in *participating in projects and activities that are both unique and practical, conducted both at the university and especially in the community or at employer sites.* This aligns with several trends in the labor market for 2024 (Global Labour Market Trends in 2024).

Regarding RQ2 – some proposals of employers include:

- The university could offer *professional development courses or a postgraduate program for beginners* to help them better adapt to job requirements.
- It should design and implement as *many training courses* as possible that align with economic needs, incorporating new technologies and methods, catering to both *beginners* in the profession and for *those who already have professional experience* (senior employees)
- Students should be encouraged to continually enhance their skills and *specialize in a field through courses and various alternative or complementary programs* beyond the university curriculum.
- A series of specialized courses, competitions, and projects should be developed in partnership, providing top students with potential job offers at their conclusion.

- It would be beneficial to establish *a model for mentoring and supervision tailored to the specializations of each faculty*, ensuring that students are both familiar with and guided regarding future job requirements.
- Companies should be involved in selecting bachelor's and dissertation topics, with topics constructed around concrete case studies provided by businesses and public institutions.
- New technologies and contemporary teaching methods should be used as extensively as possible in teaching and training, with students receiving both theoretical and practical information about advanced machinery and state-of-the-art technologies.
- Teaching activities should also take place in non-formal settings, extending beyond the university to include environments like museums, laboratories, factories, and hospitals, making the profession more appealing and relevant to real-world applications.
- In order to keep up with the technological advancements, the university should equip its laboratories with cutting-edge technology, ensuring the spaces resemble those found in industry.
- There should be collaboration between teachers and employers in the educational process, organising workshops where specific case presentations occur, showcasing real-world challenges faced by professionals in particular fields.
- Employers should be invited to participate in the courses to present their companies and its specific and discuss about the students' concerns and also possible job opportunities available to students and graduates.

Regarding RQ3, some of insights of employers are:

- It is necessary to increase the share of practical training in graduates' education (including practical and laboratory activities);
- We should collaborate to organize as many practical activities as possible and facilitate the traineeship process;
- A significant number of volunteer and practical activities should be implemented, allowing students to apply theoretical knowledge and overcome their apprehension about the unknown;
- Students should be provided with many hours of practical experience and the option to undertake additional hours in their chosen specialty;
- There should be ongoing and clear communication to students about training needs from both the university and employers during traineeships;
- Students should be engaged in addressing challenges identified by companies through internship or volunteer activities.

Referring to RQ4, we have identified recommendations from employers related to our topic of interest, which are presented below:

- Developing partnerships with relevant stakeholders to invite specialists to discuss various topics of interest;
- Encouraging the university to collaborate with potential employers, possibly for the development of training programs aligned with their required skills;
- Regularly organizing meetings between the university and business representatives to explore effective collaboration strategies;
- Conducting professional counselling activities in partnership with companies, ensuring that future graduates understand employer expectations, the real requirements of their target jobs, and how to effectively present themselves throughout the hiring process. This solution has been successfully implemented in other academic contexts (Universities improving graduate employment. Case studies, 2023).
- Organizing career fairs with the participation of graduates and employers with available positions;
- Sustaining the practice of having a dedicated contact person to ensure ongoing communication with the university;
- Arranging company visit sessions starting in the first year of study to help students become familiar with the specifics of various industries;
- Conducting workshops and volunteer activities during the first two years of study to engage students and graduates in field-specific activities.

## Conclusions

Many universities are focused on strengthening their relationships with local employers to establish genuine partnerships (Universities improving graduate employment. Case studies, 2023).

The findings from our exploratory study are mainly relevant to the micro level of the academic system, though some of the suggested aspects may be applicable to several universities in Romania and beyond. In summary, these findings indicate that:

1. Although employers are often busy and face numerous challenges within their companies or institutions, they still care about training the next generation of graduates and actively participate in this process. Recognizing that effective student preparation requires their involvement, employers strive to make their voices heard and propose realistic and practical solutions to enhance the relationship between universities and the labor market.

2. They are interested in collaboration for making the academic curriculum more flexible and adaptable to align with emerging labor market trends, and they wish to have the opportunity to suggest extensions or updates to the curriculum, as highlighted in specialized studies (Reilly, 2021).

3. In terms of actions, employers are eager to collaborate with universities through partnerships, joint projects, internships, workshops, volunteering, and scholarships, aligning with global efforts to enhance graduate employment (Universities improving graduate employment. Case studies, 2023; Reilly, 2021).

4. Beyond financial support (such as scholarships) and organizational aspects (such as internships), employers seek to engage meaningfully in the teaching process. They want to work closely with professors within the academic environment to collaboratively develop the skills of future graduates, as competencies are a crucial focus for both academic training and employer evaluation (Kellevezir & Çakır, 2020).

5. Recognizing that formal education alone is insufficient, employers are willing to engage alongside academic representatives, students, and their teachers in non-formal learning settings. This approach can enhance the attractiveness of training and provide valuable insights, practical skills, and a joy for learning—an idea explored in specialized studies as “integral learning within a wider responsive context” (Harvey, L., 2000, p. 11).

6. Specialized practice remains a critical aspect of training and is particularly open to improvement. The twenty-first century introduces new perspectives on skills and training, highlighting a tension with traditional education by asserting that “The new world of work is about skills, not necessarily degrees” (Weingarten, 2021, p. 6). Conversely, employers argue that “the possession of a degree signals that an individual possesses the necessary capabilities” (Lauder & Mayhew, 2020). It is essential for universities and the labor market to collaboratively identify the necessary skills and determine how to address them.

7. Universities should develop strategies to better align their curricula and training methods with labor market demands. This alignment should focus not only on professional training but also on developing the soft skills that employers deem essential.

Future studies should explore the perspectives of students and graduates, followed by a comparative analysis of these viewpoints, which will also benefit academic management.

Recent studies examining the relationship between universities and their preparation for the labor market have revealed a gap over the past 20 years between the skills developed in higher education and those demanded by employers (Weingarten, 2021). These studies also suggest potential solutions through national and institutional policies, as well as programs focused on “work-integrated learning, future skills development, job retraining, and upskilling” (Weingarten, 2021, p. 8).

Despite the insights gained from our research, several limitations should be noted: a relatively small number of respondents, reliance on a single survey item for data analysis, a solely qualitative approach, and the low institutional relevance of the findings. Nevertheless, our research serves as a case study that any academic institution can use to gather and employ employer feedback. This approach can be expanded to reveal common challenges and solutions on a national scale, potentially informing new policy developments. Approximately 25 years ago, this concept was described in the literature as “one aspect of the New Realities of higher education: the employer-higher education interface” (Harvey, L., 2000, p. 3).

When it comes to the relationship between universities and the labour market, it is a journey in which “employers should be much more involved in the design of higher education and delivery, helping to foster the talent they want” (Universities improving graduate employment. Case studies, 2023, p. 35). In the triangle of students, professors, and employers, each member is equally important, and none can exist without the others. Additionally, institutional, local, and national decision-makers, as well as private funders or other stakeholder categories, contribute to this dynamic: “the institution can benefit from their different perspectives and insights, which can contribute to its ongoing improvement” (Naveed, 2023, p. 1).

Therefore, the best approach to preparing graduates for entering the labor market is a holistic one, where all actors are involved and consulted, and all voices are heard. This way, the role and value of each participant are recognized, as well as the mutual benefits that can arise from this collaboration.

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