

Transition from higher education to the world of work

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ABSTRACT

The present thesis touches upon one of the “construction sites” of the relationship between higher education and the world of work, namely the transition from education to employment, as it is present in the case of Babes-Bolyai University students in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Seeing the student as a whole person whose learning takes place in the context of past experiences, present circumstances and future hopes and aspirations, the transition process is regarded in the context of the institutions’ approach towards students’ motivational background for opting to attend higher education programmes, their experiences during university years and the outcomes of the learning process in face of the labor market. Using quantitative data analysis and document analysis the findings of the thesis highlight the three main phases of the transition process on which higher education institutions need to focus in order to enhance their students’ employability and ease their transition process from higher education to the world. In the context of increased competition between universities for attracting and retaining students as well as the increased uncertainty regarding funding for higher education a comprehensive picture of the characteristics, needs and expectations of the student body and the institutional responses towards these needs is of crucial importance to any higher education institution.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
I. CHANGES AND REACTIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN EUROPE	2
I.1. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MASS HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE WORLD OF WORK	4
I.2. DRAWING THE BORDERLINES OF TRANSITION FROM HIGHER EDUCATION TO THE WORLD OF WORK	6
I.3. TRANSITION AS REGARDED IN THE ROMANIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM	11
II. GRASPING THE TRANSITION PROCESS	15
III. UBB STUDENTS' TRANSITION FROM HIGHER EDUCATION TO THE WORLD OF WORK	21
III.1. PRE-UNIVERSITY YEARS	21
III.2. BEING A STUDENT AT BABES-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY	25
III.3. POST-UNIVERSITY YEARS	29
IV. TENTATIVE FUTURE STEPS	34
CONCLUSION	38
REFERENCES	40
ANNEX 1	45
ANNEX 2. TABLE 1. THE UBB'S APPROACH TO THEIR PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS	46
ANNEX 2. TABLE 2. THE UBB'S APPROACH TO THEIR STUDENTS	47
ANNEX 2. TABLE 3. THE UBB'S APPROACH TO THEIR FORMER STUDENTS	48

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1	17
TABLE 2	22
TABLE 3	22
TABLE 4	23
TABLE 5	23
TABLE 6	25
TABLE 7	26
TABLE 8	27
TABLE 9	28
TABLE 10	30
TABLE 11	31
TABLE 12	32

INTRODUCTION

Although numerous books and articles are published yearly on the topic, higher education is still perceived (see Tight 2003, 3) as a relatively under-researched field. The complexity and non-static character of the higher education system provides for a variety of research topics worthwhile to engage in, and one of these would be to do research on the relationship between higher education and the world of work which has further room for improvement, as Teichler (2008a, 18) points out. One of the “construction sites” mentioned by him is: understanding and measuring the manner in which higher education “matters” for the world of work. Aiming to contribute to filling this gap, the thesis focuses on delimiting the transition process from higher education to the world of work as it is present in case of Babes-Bolyai University students. It will be argued that the transition process is composed of three main interrelated moments of the students’ life and that the role of the higher education institution is crucial in each phase of it. Depending on the impact the institutional policies have on the student in each phase, the university may attract the best students, can shape them with the best of its offering and then can contemplate their post-university life and use their individual success to increase its own institutional success.

The thesis begins by highlighting the relevant literature on the relationship between higher education and the world of work, and continues by defining students’ employability and the borderlines of the transition process from university to employment. The transition period is defined and analyzed through the indicators that shape the transition processes of students relative to their labor market outcomes a few years after graduation, as it is present in one of the most important universities in Romania: The Babes-Bolyai University (UBB) in Cluj-Napoca. Chapter two continues with describing the methodological aspects of the thesis, while the third chapter presents the snapshot of the UBB students’ experience before, during and after university years. The last chapters represent the logical summary and conclusion of the analysis and offers

possible future institutional routes formulated by the author for the UBB in order to improve students' transition process from higher education to the world of work, and so contribute to positive labor market outcomes.

I. CHANGES AND REACTIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN EUROPE

The recent interest in the issue of graduate employability is typically associated (Morley 2001, 131) with the high graduate unemployment rate in the 1990s, the call for economic competition among the developed nations and the desire of societies for economic return from investment in higher education. Participation rates in higher education have increased in all OECD countries in the past years (OECD 2008, 336). On average, a young person aged 15 in 2006 can expect to continue in formal education for about 6.7 years and in addition to these years they can also expect to hold a job for 6.2 of the 15 subsequent years, to be unemployed for a total of 0.8 years and to be out of the labor market (not employed, not in education and not looking for a job) for 1.3 years across OECD countries (*idem.*, 375). In this context of higher education expansion, the transition from higher education to work gains relevance because the new cohorts of recent graduates may encounter greater difficulties in finding a first 'good' job in comparison to the smoother transitions experienced by their fellow colleagues in the past; and also because the length of the transition period to gain a stable employment has direct effects on the returns to education and important consequences for skill accumulation (Salas-Velasco 2007, 334). Higher education graduates unemployed for a long time lose the human capital they acquired and since university education is a long and costly investment, it is crucial that policy-makers know the way in which higher education and labor market systems interact to shape the transition process (*idem.*, 335).

During the last decade, European Union policies have been concerned with linking higher education and the world of work through efforts for increasing the employability of graduates. With each Communiqué the notion of students' employability became more and more central to

the objectives of the Bologna Process. First it was associated with the new degree structure (Bologna Declaration 1999, 3), then with the promotion of the European dimension of higher education (Prague Communiqué 2001, 2; Berlin Communiqué 2003, 6) and in the Bergen Communiqué (2005, 2) a greater dialogue between Governments, institutions and social partners was argued for in order to increase the employability of graduates. In the London Communiqué (2007, 2) ministers underlined the importance of curricula reform leading to qualifications better suited both to the needs of the labor market and to further study, and emphasized that qualification frameworks should be designed so as to encourage greater mobility of students and teachers and to improve employability. In the most recent Communiqué at Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve in 2009 graduate employability was dedicated a separate part in the section *Learning for the future: higher education priorities for the decade to come*. In the context of the economic crisis and changing labor market conditions Ministers emphasized that “employability empowers the individual to fully seize the opportunities” (Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve 2009, 3) for this reason they stand for higher education institutions to cooperate with governments, government agencies and employers “to improve the provision, accessibility and quality of their careers and employment related guidance services to students and alumni” and they also “encourage work placements embedded in study programmes as well as on-the-job learning” (ibid.).

The emphasis of European Union policies on employability seen in the context of today’s rapid socio-economic transformations raise questions on the issue of the link between higher education and the world of work at national and local levels as well. This issue, with reference both to the promotion of graduates’ employability and to the changing role of the university in their life, is central to the arguments of the present thesis. In the subsequent pages the current debates in the relationship between higher education and the world of work will be highlighted, focusing on the employability of students and the factors that shape the transition process from higher education to the world of work.

1.1. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MASS HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE WORLD OF WORK

At the most basic level, the relationship between education and the world of work can be defined as a three-tiered relationship according to Fasih (2008, 11): “the determinants of education determine educational outcomes, which, in turn, determine the labor market outcomes of individuals”. Teichler (2008a, 7) delimits two basic functions of education with respect to the world of work: on the one hand a “qualifying function” of developing the necessary affective and cognitive capabilities useful to cope with job and other tasks; and on the other hand, a “status-distributive function”, because the level of education obtained has an effect on the person’s financial situation and societal status. But education is a necessary and not sufficient condition for an individual to enjoy good labor market outcomes. Although its basic functions are not disputed, education cannot prepare a person fully for the world of work due to the complexity of factors that shape graduate’s life and also because education serves broader functions than preparing for employment. So in addition to education, it is important to have a well operating economy (with macroeconomic stability) which assures good labor market opportunities for the skilled, an attractive investment climate, and efficient labor markets, among other factors (Fasih 2008, 49).

The relationship between higher education and the world of work is not new on the agenda; in the 1960s the effects of education and economic growth were discussed, in the 1970s and 1980s concerns of over-education or over-qualification were debated, and during the 1990s a mix of concerns about over-education in some areas and lack of competencies in other areas was high on the agenda in many countries (Teichler 2008a, 9). Regarding the current debates in the relationship between higher education and the world of work, Teichler (idem., 15) identifies four popular (pairs of) terms: “evaluation and accountability”; “knowledge society or knowledge economy”; “employability”; and “internationalization and globalization”. From these the most important is to develop young people’s employability in order to ensure their successful transition

to the labor market and access to career-oriented employment (OECD 1999, 24). This is crucial because if graduates have a “smooth transition” in terms of limited activities of search period and hardly any time span between graduation and the beginning of regular employment, hopefully in occupational categories matching the level and field of study, one infers that these graduates were employable” (Teichler 2004, 290).

The transition process from higher education to the world of work is influenced by three structural factors: the structure of the workforce (which defines the palette of the available positions, the recruitment procedures), the structure and content of the higher education system (define the type and quality of knowledge obtained in higher education), and the national higher education policy (which shows how the state imagines its moderating role in the transition process) (Csata et al. 2006, 7; OECD 2000, 27). Policies targeting this transition domain typically combine interventions on both the supply and demand sides (OECD 1999, 23; Fasih 2008, 4). On the supply side, policies target the development of young people’s employability by focusing on curricula development, strengthening the links between education and work, study incentives, training and career counseling. While on the demand side, policies alter between wage-setting, jobs specifically created for recent graduates and other labor market arrangements. Without an integrated, multisectoral approach to educational policy, the links between non-labor policies and the labor market can result in a mismatch between education and the skills in demand (idem.). So as Brown and Hesketh (2004, 24) also argue, graduates’ employability cannot be defined solely in terms of individual skills or characteristics since it exists in two dimensions: the relative (depends on the laws of supply and demand within the market for jobs) and the absolute (the skills, knowledge, commitment and business acumen of graduates). Employability not only depends on whether one is able to fulfill the requirements of specific jobs, but also on how one stands relative to others within a hierarchy of job seekers. The determinants of this outcome can be found in the characteristics of the transition process which is shaped by the socio-biographic traits of the graduate, by the higher education received, by their engagement in other

extracurricular activities, and other influences. In the following an overview of the determinants of the transition process will be presented.

1.2. DRAWING THE BORDERLINES OF TRANSITION FROM HIGHER EDUCATION TO THE WORLD OF WORK

Although authors agree that higher education matters for the world of work, there is no clear-cut definition about the starting and ending points of the transition period between the two. In the following some definitions of the transition period will be discussed.

The World Bank offers a comprehensive definition:

School-to-work transition generally refers to the critical socio-economic life changing period between approximately 15 to 24 years of age – a period when young individuals develop and build skills, based on their initial education and training that helps them become productive members of the society. (www.worldbank.org)

This broad definition is narrowed by Müller and Gangl (2003, 1) who argue that the transition from school to work should be understood as “the period between the end of an individuals’ primary involvement in education or training and their stable settlement in a work position”. Other authors (Kerckhoff 2000; Wolbers 2003, 131) state that it is hard to define at what point this period really starts and when exactly it ends, because it cannot be considered a single event from full-time initial education to stable full-time employment. Often there is some gradual labor market entry during which young people combine their studies with work. So not only the pattern of insertion in the labor market is a complex and long process, but the transition is increasingly becoming more “blurred” (Salas-Velasco 2007, 351) and it is becoming more like “a multi-dimensional process, and not a single event at one point in time” (OECD 2000, 26). The transition from being a student to being a worker is now less sharp than it once was because, for different reasons, an increasing number of young people combine their studies with work for a period before entering the full-time labor market, either through formal arrangements such as apprenticeships and internships, or through part-time and summer jobs or by accepting volunteer

work. If institutional and funding arrangements make it possible for education to be more easily interspersed with work, the notion of the transition having a clear ending point becomes less meaningful (OECD 2000, 26-27).

In this line of thought Wolbers (2003, 136) distinguishes three double status positions: “young people who combine learning and working in the dual system (dual-system student), full-time students who have jobs (working student), and employed individuals who invest in training to advance their working career (studying worker)”. In his opinion by analyzing these three double status positions we can see how the pathways from school to work are organized in different institutional contexts. “Combining training and work represents an initial specific feature of the transition from school to work as it can occur to a much higher extent in this stage than in later periods” (Couppié and Mansuy 2003, 76).

Although the student body is increasingly diversified, the problem in most of the countries is that policies do not acknowledge these double status positions; instead they focus on the learning trajectories of the “traditional students” (i.e. 18-24 years old, recently finished high school, engaged in full-time studies, mostly finish their studies within the stipulated timeframe). These young people are efficient to the system because they are not subject to any corrective or supportive policy or intervention, at least not directly (Lindberg 2008, 381-382). This holds true even in a knowledge society in which acceptance of diversity is the norm and this is the case at Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca as we will see later.

If students are managing their learning and earning trajectories in parallel, rather than in sequence as in the past, this means new responsibilities on providers and the state to offer students enough information based on which they can make decisions for their optimal welfare (Robertson 2000, 88-89). Optimally, “the image of the student as a young undergraduate will change in favor of the student as citizen, engaged in higher education throughout adult life” (idem., 79-80) which also places the students at the centre of the university, not just as the object

of the university's attention in educational terms, but as the "principal architect of the institution's character" (idem., 92).

In a similar tone Scott (1995, 169) argues that the two most important features of mass higher education are fuzziness and permeability. The massification of higher education produced a shift in higher education policy from subject to students, the "growing presence of new students with less pronounced academic ambitions and more significantly the growing sense of student ownership of their academic programmes as a result of the introduction of modular schemes, credit systems and user-friendly assessment"(idem., 160-161). As the emphasis shifts from pre-determined pathways and single exit points to modularized and interconnected programmes, students can no longer expect to inhabit a predictable and ready-made world, but instead, must create opportunities for themselves, must construct more individualized routes through education and training systems. An important issue addressed in current studies on higher education is "how the system can help students to be more proactive and entrepreneurially-minded and, the potential consequences of individualized transition strategies vis-à-vis the system" (Lindberg 2008, 378). With the expansion of higher education, Prokou (2007, 392) argues, that it is increasingly important that higher education institutions "make students employable by cultivating their skills and by encouraging them to lifelong learning in order to be more flexible in the labor market". Information and guidance need to respond to more varied needs, and they must support regular personal career planning by all young people over increasingly expanded periods (OECD 2000, 117). Students should receive support in order to help them graduate successfully (Eurostudent 2008, 30).

Since the "factors influencing student choices will grow in scale and complexity...the cluster of education, employment and financial decisions will have to be put together to make the experience beneficial, students will plan their higher education from a much earlier age" (Robertson 2000, 80). Good information and efficient and equitable access to it will be important if young people's decisions on jobs and courses of study are to be based on informed choices. In

addition to information, young people need personal advice and guidance to clarify their interests and goals and to understand the opportunities and risks that they face in the labor market. Information and guidance are becoming more important as young people face more choices and more complex choices – among increasingly diverse education, training and employment options (OECD 2000, 116). “The complex relations between individually varying ways to make use of the higher education provisions and the skills and competences acquired in higher education should be discussed in close relation to the status of transition. In order for policies aimed at supporting initial transitions of youth to be effective, it is essential to recognize what influence the types of student careers (or transitions) play in the competition for jobs after graduation” (Lindberg 2008, 376).

“Tertiary education institutions have a critical role in supporting knowledge-driven economic growth strategies and the construction of democratic, socially cohesive societies” (Fasih 2008, 23). To successfully fulfill their educational, research, and informational functions in the twenty-first century, higher education institutions need to be able to respond effectively to changing education and training needs, adapt to a rapidly shifting tertiary education landscape, and adopt more flexible modes of organization and operation (idem.). Effective labor market feedback mechanisms, such as tracer surveys and regular consultations with employers and alumni, are indispensable for adjusting curricula to meet the changing needs of industry. There is no better linkage than when a new tertiary education institution is fully integrated into a regional development strategy (The World Bank 2002, 36).

To sum up, there is no consensus in the literature as to the borderlines of the transition process, but there are still some common aspects which need to be considered. For first, the transition process from education to the world of work takes place within a social, economic and educational context: the way that labor markets are organized, the nature and structure of education systems, the institutional relationships between the key actors (employers, higher education institutions and governments), and the national values and traditions. Secondly, this

transition is regarded as a process, mostly encompassing the nature of the pathways that young people pass through in their transition from student to working life, the ways in which work and education are increasingly combined, the length of the stay within each of these activities, and the frequency of change between them. And thirdly, the transition process results in outcomes as educational qualifications, employment, earnings or unemployment and inactivity, and these outcomes can be used as key criteria to judge the relative effectiveness of the transition (OECD 2000, 27).

The authors' belief in the present thesis is that in order to comprehend the complexity of the transition process it is important to describe and understand the ways in which transition contexts and processes relate to transition outcomes, and transition indicators are a key tool in this task. But such a comprehensive research is beyond the scope of the present work; therefore, the paper focuses on a slice of the transition process: defining and analyzing the indicators that shape the transition processes of students relative to their labor market outcomes a few years after graduation through the lenses of one of the most important universities in Romania: The Babes-Bolyai University (UBB in the following). For this purpose a comprehensive picture of the UBB students' profile will be presented, starting with their socio-demographic characteristics and their pre-university life, then focusing on their university experience and finishing by analyzing their post-university life. It is argued in the following that the transition process from education to the world of work is in fact a gradual composition of all these elements in a person's life. The socio-demographic traits cannot be overlooked as they form one's social capital; the family background is a decisive factor in the students' motivation for opting for higher education studies and possibly the specialization as well. The student's decision to apply in one or another specialization is strongly related to their projected future employment (see Müller and Gangl 2003, 10). It is not a random decision, but one based on initial search about the institution and the specialization opted for; as McInnis (2002, 176) states students "generally know what they want from university, are reasonably certain about the nature of their commitment, and fairly

clear about what they expect university to do for them”. This search happens mostly via internet or using the available social connections. During the university years the attended institutions’ supply (in term of curricula, teachers, services offered to the students) and the students’ demand of the options offered shape their experience. And this experience after some time is translated to the world of work, when the graduate starts to actively contribute to the economy. The role of the higher education institution is crucial in each phase of the student’s life and depending on the impact the institutional policies actually have on the student in each phase, the niversity may attract the best students, can shape them with the best of its offering and then can contemplate their post-university life and use their individual success to increase its own institutional success. This process is detailed as it is present in the case of Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca in chapter 3, but first a general overview of the Romanian higher education landscape follows.

1.3. TRANSITION AS REGARDED IN THE ROMANIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

Under Martin Trow’s (1974, 7) classification, systems of higher education with graduate enrollment ratios (GER) of less than 15 percent were categorized as “elite”, systems between 16 and 50 percent were considered “mass”, while systems with over 50 percent were considered “universal”. As he states the rising rate of enrollment of an age grade has important meanings because as more students from an age cohort go to college or university each year, the meaning of college attendance changes – first from being a privilege to being a right, and then, as is increasingly true in the US, but also in most European countries (as Usher states in the recent UNESCO report 2009, 4), to being something close to an obligation. This also shifts the meaning and significance of the attendance in the tertiary sector, has enormous consequences for the student motivation and thus also for the curriculum and for the intellectual climate of these institutions; moreover increasingly for the management and administration of the institution as well.

The expansion of higher education started in Romania in the 1990s and since then we can experience an increase and to some extent diversification of the student body (for detailed data see Annex 1). Compared to the 1991-1992 school year, when 26.7% of the 19-23 (and over) years old of Romania's population was enrolled in higher education, in the 2006-2007 school year this percentage rose to 55.9% (Statistical Yearbook 2007, Table 8.1). So Romania passed the 50% borderline in 2006 now having a somewhat universal higher education. The most significant improvements in student body diversity have been in the gender, class and ethnic aspects, and while there are policies for students with disabilities to encourage their application (special places at application), sometimes the preparation of the university to provide them adequate support is lacking.

Students' transition from higher education to the world of work appears under 2.1 point of Romania's Human Resource Development Program. This topic has been touched upon by the Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation and by its subordinate centers, but mostly regarding secondary or vocational and not tertiary education. Following graduates' transition from higher education to the world of work has been and is mostly the duty of higher education institutions, either at university level, or at faculty level and sometimes it is done by the alumni organizations.

Ensuring better correlation between higher education and the labor market is part of the strategic priority of the "structural improvement of the higher education system" in Romania in the document titled: "Strategy for developing higher education in the period 2002-2010" (EC Eurybase 2006/07, 127).

For the better correlation between higher education and the labor market the following specific actions are envisioned (idem., 131):

- to correlate the specialization of studies with the occupation nomenclature;
- to monitor the labor market insertion of the graduates;
- to promote the concepts of entrepreneurial university and entrepreneurial initiative;
- to optimize the practical activities in the teaching-learning process;

- to orient higher education scientific research towards the current economic, social and cultural issues.

The National Agency for Qualifications in Higher Education and Partnership with Social-Economic Environment (ACPART), a public institution with legal personality subordinated to the Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation, was established in 2005 in order to elaborate the National Qualification Framework and to support opening of the higher education institutions to the society and economy. Among others its role is to support labor market research and facilitation of higher education graduates absorption into the labor market (idem., 143). In Zaharia's (2008, 28-29) opinion the national qualifications framework is the opportunity for a student-centered education, "it bridges the higher education system and its beneficiaries, the labor market and the learners and ensures transparency and visibility of the higher education provision".

At the higher education institutions level in order to support educational and vocational guidance of the students and to facilitate their insertion in the dynamic Romanian labor market, Departments for Career Advice and Employment Guidance were established at the beginning of the 1990s (idem., 142). These departments have the following attributions:

- to provide full information on the study programmes offered by the respective higher education institution;
- to offer career and employment advice;
- to ensure guidance to students willing to chose or change their vocational career;
- to encourage graduates to affiliate into graduates' associations meant to support higher education institutions and students' interests in the relationship with firms, cultural communities and administrative bodies, at local and national level as well;
- to carry out prognosis studies on the labor market, and provide information about companies needing and recruiting qualified personnel trained in higher education institutions;
- to provide counseling, and support for the vocational training of students by maintaining a close contact with economic units.

Regarding the Romanian context it is true what McInnis (2002, 175) states, that we are witnessing the emergence of “new patterns of student disengagement, and new forms of engagement, to which many institutions, and the system at large, have still not adjusted in much more than ad hoc way”. Changes in the higher education system are mostly due to Romania’s engagement in the Bologna Process. The objectives detailed in the Bologna documents, the institutional structure necessary to implement the changes are slowly being developed. The main gaps are visible in the academic discourse on the relationship between higher education and the world of work, on graduates’ employability and the institutions’ role in shaping the transition process of their students.

Apart from the international studies (OECD, UNESCO, Bologna Stocktaking, World Bank, Eurostudent, Eurobarometer, EUA) in which Romania is also a member, few (policy) documents are visible at national or local level. As Ivan et al. (2000, 153) state there is no evidence of using detailed data analyses for designing policies and for decision making, which is to some extent due to a continuance of old management practices, but also it is “a response to the frustration of a lack of timely and accurate data”. Changes in policy and development are promptly needed because “as students have more choices in the future, institutions will realize that student accountability is not an ethical issue, it is a basic requirement for market survival”.

Due to the situation at the national policymaking level the role of the higher education institutions is accentuated; they have the power to be innovative, to develop and implement policies at local level. UBB has successfully addressed new societal changes that come with changing circumstances. It is the first Romanian university to develop and implement since 1999 a tracer survey for its graduates. In the following pages of the thesis, after the detailed explanation of the analytical methods used, the focus will shift towards the Babes-Bolyai University and its practices regarding students’ employability and its institutional responses to enhance students’ transition from higher education to the world of work.

II. GRASPING THE TRANSITION PROCESS

As Teichler presents (2000, 29), most of the research which focuses on the transition from education to employment starts from the moment the student finished his/her studies and started to search for a job and ends with the permanent employment of the graduate. Other studies analyze the speed of transition and the frequency of unemployment and precarious employment over several years, or they examine whether the process of transition is facilitated by certain types of prior education and training. Some studies also claim that the transition process is facilitated by a close coupling of education and training to respective occupations, notably through the apprenticeship systems, whereas others consider market regulation as observed notably in the US as most promising because it facilitates adjustments at any type of career. As the OECD (1999) report points out, the setting of youth policy objectives is seldom based on empirical analysis, and systematic programme monitoring and evaluation is scarce. When evaluations are available, they usually take a restricted view of the possible impacts of the programmes. There is very little evidence of long-term effects of these programmes, or as to why the programmes do or do not work. Apart from this unfortunate situation there is an increased need to focus on the relationship between higher education and employment, research on the phenomena has further room for improvement (Teichler 2008a, 18; Salas-Velasco 2007, 351). Studies on transitions, especially in Europe, are not very numerous mostly because it is hard to find suitable databases which enable researchers to study the transition process from education to first job (apart from the CHEERS and JOURNEYMEN projects which allow transnational comparisons). In Teichler's (2008a, 18) point of view there are three "construction sites" where improvement is highly needed: more suitable notions of "match" between higher education and the world of work, more appropriate notions of professional "success"; improved measures of job requirements and of competences; more convincing strategies to measure the extents and the ways higher education "mater" for employment and work.

The purpose of this research is to grasp the UBB student's experience in the transition from higher education to the world of work, how these transition characteristics define the outcomes of the transition and what is the role of the university services in this process. The object of investigation is the transition process and the central research question is: what are the main factors that shape student's transition from education to the world of work in case of UBB and what is the role of the institution in the process?

In order to obtain empirical data for the research, from the methodologies Tight (2003, 8) identified as mostly practiced in higher education research, document analysis, primary and secondary data analysis and face to face interviews have been used. As the scene of research the UBB in Cluj-Napoca has been chosen, because of the author's previous experience as a student and also due to the connections at the university which made the entrance to the field easier. Besides the personal reasons, after Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca is the most popular city for university studies in Romania, attracting annually around 70.000 students (Statistical Yearbook – Romania 2007, 23) and UBB is considered a “Level 1” university, a role model for other higher education institutions (EUA 2001, 22).

Contemporary European research into the aspect of transition from higher education to the world of work is particularly associated with the name of Ulrich Teichler, in who's opinion graduate surveys are the most successful instrument for grasping the process of transition from higher education to the world of work because they provide room for combining a broad range of variables. Graduates can be asked to describe their career according to a range of aspects, and they can be asked to provide information about their biography, their learning prior to study, the ways they perceived and “handled” their higher educational environment and their values and motives. Therefore “graduate surveys are an instrument in allowing us to take into consideration many dimensions of professional success and many of its possible determinants” (Teichler 2008b, 301-302).

Having this line of thought as the starting point, the UBB Graduate Survey (N=22.892) database has been used to examine the transition process of UBB graduates and its outcomes: the speed and the smoothness of the transition, the motives of unemployment, students' view on the education received at the university and its usefulness for their present working life, and the socio-biographic characteristics that could correlate with these aspects. UBB is the first Romanian university to undertake graduates' labor market insertion survey (Pop and Mihăilă 2008, 493). Since 1999 graduates are asked to fill in a questionnaire when they go and pick up their diplomas or certificates of study. There is no sampling procedure, everyone is asked to complete the questionnaire before receiving the diploma.

TABLE 1

Categories of "Babeş-Bolyai University" student numbers according to the year of graduation.			
year of graduation	number of graduates who completed the questionnaire	last year students	graduates who completed the final examination (approximation)
1997	3101	3388	3116
1998	2444	3527	3174
1999	2626	3862	3475
2000	2508	4140	3519
2001	3000	4646	3949
2002	3877	6080	4864
2003	3559	6008	4806
2004	934	6861	5488
Total	N=22049	38512	32391

Source: UBB Graduate Survey, 2005

Regarding the above table it is evident that we cannot talk about an exhaustive research, but around two thirds of the students completed the questionnaire till March 2005. The reason behind not all the students completing the questionnaire is that not all of them choose to pick up their diploma after graduation so they do not have the opportunity to complete the questionnaire.

The data obtained from the graduate survey is complemented by the results of two other researches; one conducted in spring 2006 among the UBB students which is representative at the university level (N=574) and one conducted in August 2008 among the UBB Hungarian Graduates' Perception on Higher Education (N=375) which also touched upon aspects of

interest for the current topic. Information regarding the pre-university life of the UBB students, apart from the above mentioned survey data, is complemented by a national representative survey conducted in January-February 2007 on the senior Hungarian High School Students' Perception on Higher Education (N=1040). Data collection has been supervised by the author in all cases apart from the UBB Graduate Survey, since the author was member of the research coordinating team. Data analysis in all four cases was conducted by the author using the statistical programme SPSS. Initially the plan was to conduct a new thematic research among the UBB students and alumni, but since the institution does not have an updated database and tracking system of their (former) students, it would have been time consuming and difficult to try to reach the students and graduates and the plan was dropped.

Since the education of the students occurs in institutional setting it is of crucial importance to analyze the institutional aspects along with the study experiences of students. For this purpose document analysis of the official documents of the UBB was conducted in order to map out the policies and the strategies of the institution regarding students and their transition to the labor market.

The information gathered in these two ways was complemented by interviews with the pro-rector responsible for BA and MA studies at UBB and by the 2 student representatives at university level. Semi-structured, open-ended questions were used for the interviews. The purpose of this kind of questions is to explore the experience of those who are interviewed and discover how they understand and define their experience (Seidman 1998, 17). Through the open ended questions it is possible to get to know the details of the interviewee's experience while for the researcher it becomes possible to deeply explore the respondent's views, feelings and perspectives (idem., 70). This type of interviewing allowed to concentrate on the main themes of the research, but also gave the possibility to cover some additional and related topics when they arouse during the conversation. The interviews were conducted in Hungarian and Romanian language and later translated and transcribed by the author. The purpose was to examine how the

representatives talked about students, their needs, and the perceived role of the institution in the student's transition towards employment.

Teichler (2008b, 301-302) points out some of the limitations of the use of graduate surveys, most of which are applicable to the UBB database as well. Since the graduate survey provides the viewpoint of graduates and students only, researchers have to take into account that these might be biased – for this reason control questions were included in the interviews conducted to check the biasness of the data from the survey.

Teichler also points out that there may be methodological and procedural limitations as well, because those responding (usually a minority) might be systematically different than the majority, who didn't respond. This cannot be the case with the UBB graduate database used in this thesis since data is collected from almost everyone at the time when they are collecting their diplomas. Another important aspect is that often questionnaires are kept short and neglect key explanatory variables, or the models of analysis are too simple and thus contribute to misunderstandings as far as the causes of employment and work success are concerned – this is also the case here, since some important aspects have not been asked, and also the structure of the questionnaire changed over time, but overall the database contains valuable basic information about the transition process of UBB graduates. Another limitation of this database is that the collection of the data is not occurring in favorable ways, those graduates who go to pick up their diplomas find out on the spot that they are required to fill in these sheets, but no additional guidance is offered, no motivation is given as to what is the purpose of the questionnaire and the importance of the data received. Overall, the filling in of the questionnaire does not happen in appropriate circumstances and the data might present distortions due to these reasons.

Researchers in social sciences often have autobiographical roots (Seidman 1998, 26) and so is the case here which provides some of the strengths of the research. As an undergraduate and later graduate student at the UBB from 2002 till 2007 the author had critical thoughts about the university experience and the role of the institution in helping the future career, which later

complemented by the theoretical background on the topic gave the idea to focus on the *Alma Mater* and based on empirical data suggest further directions of improvement. The inside experience gained from studying at the Babes-Bolyai University provided significant knowledge about the actors and the dynamics present at the university and also made the entrance to the field easier. Not only could interview appointments be obtained easier than being an “outsider”, but the quality of the interviews, the openness of the interviewees was higher.

The quality of the analysis can be discussed in terms of dependability or trustworthiness and credibility. By presenting the choice of method and theory, the data collection and interpretation procedure the purpose was to create openness in the research process. As regards the dependability of the data material, the limitations of the databases have been discussed and fully acknowledged by the author.

III. UBB STUDENTS' TRANSITION FROM HIGHER EDUCATION TO THE WORLD OF WORK

The Romanian higher education system has evolved rapidly since the fall of communism with the number of institutions increasing from 48 in 1990 to 109 in 2009, and the overall number of students in the country exploding from 192,810 in 1990/1991 to 896,258 in 2007/2008. Babes-Bolyai University is part of a small group of so-called 'Level 1' universities in Romania, which can be considered models for other institutions across the country (EUA 2001, 22). UBB is one of the six public universities in Cluj, in 2007 63% of its funding came from the state and the rest from mainly tuition fees (around 22%), research activities (5%) and other income (10%) (UBB Budget 2007, 1). Together with all other universities in Romania, the UBB is in a transition process; has begun to introduce many of the essential reforms in time which ensures its place in the European Higher Education Area, but there are also a number of constraints regarding its operations and development. Since it is an important "Level 1" university in Romania which is seen as a role model for others to follow, its strategy and actions are of crucial importance to the development of the whole higher education arena of Romania. In the following a snapshot of the UBB student characteristics and experiences before, during and after university years will be provided. The summary of the findings after each subchapter will be presented in the form of a SWOT analysis on the institution's approach to students' transition from higher education to the world of work, based on which recommendations for improvement at university level will be formulated regarding the transition process of students from higher education to the world of work in the subsequent chapter.

III.1. PRE-UNIVERSITY YEARS

From the graduate database we can see that the majority of the UBB students are not originally from Cluj-Napoca but predominantly from other urban areas. 67.5% of them are

female; 77.3% are Romanians, 21.9% Hungarians, 0.4% German, 0.4% Roma and 0.2% are of other nationality. The student survey data shows (as visible in the Table 2) that 77.9% of the UBB students in 2006 were between 18-22 years old, 20.9% between 23 and 26 years and 1.2% were 27 or older.

TABLE 2

UBB students' age	
18-22 years	77.9%
23-26 years	20.9%
27 and more	1.2%

Source: UBB Students Survey, 2006.

This data points out that the vast majority of students attending UBB courses are among the so called “traditional students”, going to the university right after finishing high school, but the remaining 22.1% is also a significant percentage and should not be overlooked.

As Table 3 points out, 40% of the students come from families where the parents have higher education degrees, while those with parents with elementary or vocational education represent around 10% of the students. This data shows the

	Parents' highest education level	
	father (% , N=565)	mother (% , N=562)
8 classes or less	1.4	3.2
professional school	8.5	7.5
professional high school	16.5	11.4
high school	16.8	29.5
technical college	14.3	9.3
college	4.6	6.9
university	30.3	27.6
MA	4.4	2.1
PhD	3.2	2.5

Source: UBB Students Survey, 2006.

high social reproduction of students from intellectual families while the social mobility of students coming from lower education level families is low (Veres 2007, 31).

Corresponding to this, 26% of the students come from families where the father has an intellectual occupation, 20% are qualified workers, and 10% are leaders at their workplace at different levels. This stratification differs largely from the total population of Romania, where only 8.2% of people have intellectual and scientific occupations (Veres 2005, 117). This family background determines the student's social capital and consequently their future possibilities. From the student survey conducted among Hungarian students in 2008 it is visible that students' motivation for opting for university studies was influenced largely by their parents' status.

TABLE 4

Why did you opt for attending university studies?					
	very important	important	somewhat important	less important	not important
career-building	3.5	18.9	6.7	22.9	48.0
did not want to work	7.2	19.7	12.0	35.7	25.3
expectation of my parents	9.9	27.2	14.4	24.3	24.3
did not want to stay home	25.6	21.3	21.6	18.1	13.3
appealing student life	33.9	24.0	26.1	12.5	3.5
avoid unemployment	36.3	22.7	21.1	11.2	8.8
interested in the profession	48.8	17.1	27.5	5.1	1.6
my parents have diploma	53.9	11.5	20.8	7.5	6.4
wanted a diploma	55.7	16.8	21.1	5.3	1.1

Source: UBB Students Survey, 2006.

Analyzing the Table 4, it is visible that the mentality of students is in line with the characteristics and the rhetoric of the mass higher education in the country. It is a “must” to study and have a higher education diploma.

Although Mircea Miclea (2006, 106) states that UBB is more successful in the “consumer market” and can present little development in the “prestige” and “academic” labor market, among the students the university still enjoys high popularity; the prestige of the university is the second most important reason why they chose to study at UBB (as visible in the Table 5 below).

TABLE 5

Why did you choose to study at UBB?			
First reason		Second reason	
for the profession	54.1%	prestige of the university	21.1%
valuable diploma	10.7%	provides good job	18.7%

Source: UBB Graduates' Perception on Higher Education Survey, 2008.

Its past and structure gives UBB's distinctive multicultural character which attracts a variety of students. This advantage is clear, but it is also important to mention the discrepancy between the strong engagement of the university towards entrepreneurialism manifested first of all in its rhetoric (in press releases, in the speeches of the rector, in the image that projects of itself), and the effective changes and actions at the university level, which is a much slower process (see Salzburg Seminar Report 2008, 85).

To assess the university's prestige and the reasons behind students opting for studying at UBB, a deeper analysis would be necessary, but unfortunately the lack of data does not make any further analysis possible at the university level. At national level when students are asked about their information sources for choosing higher education institutions they state that the internet, their friends and the family are the most frequently used sources (see Kiss et al., 2008, 33).

From the SWOT analysis on the UBB's approach to their prospective students (see Annex 2. Table 1) it is visible that the institution is aware of the importance of the recruitment process, but limits itself to focus mainly on its quantity aspects (number of places available, amount of money needed to enroll and to complete the studies, final dates and duties of applicants). Almost no information is available about the quality aspects of the future study period (information is available since 2009 admission regarding the prospective courses available at each faculty, but there is no syllabi attached, no information about the outcome of the studies is presented) for high school graduates, as well as no information is available about the graduates, the alumni of the university/faculty/specialization and their career paths. Since the university does not provide any information to its prospective students regarding the students and the graduate experience, the students need to obtain the information from other sources (own or family's social network, friends and older UBB students, media, etc.). Since these other sources are not necessarily in line with the official UBB practice, the information may be distorted and consequently the decision of the student altered.

The visibility and the amount of information on the university's website as well as the (former) students' opinion about the university are of crucial importance for influencing the high school graduates to make informed decisions regarding their future student life at UBB and the university should improve its actions regarding this aspect.

III.2. BEING A STUDENT AT BABES-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY

After enrollment, students become integral part of the university life and it is highly important that universities regard the higher education experience of students in a comprehensive manner in order to be able to provide adequate responses to their expectations and needs. According to the UBB Self-Evaluation Report (2001, 122) “the entire activity on the Babes-Bolyai University revolves around the students as main beneficiaries of the educational programs offered by the university”.

According to the student survey, 64.1% of the students attending courses at UBB are fee paying. The students either live in the UBB dormitory (42.1%) or they are renting an apartment in town (36.32%). Some (16.8%) live with their parents, relatives or friends, while a relatively small percent have their own flat (3.51%).

TABLE 6

Students' class attendance. (N=375).	
10% of the classes	0.8%
30% of the classes	1.3%
50% of the classes	8.8%
70% of the classes	42.9%
90% of the classes	46.1%

Source: UBB Graduates' Perception on Higher Education Survey, 2008.

As visible in the Table 6, the majority of students are attending 70-90% of their courses which according to Astin's (1997, 204) definition

(“student time” is being regarded as one of the major resources since it is thought that there is a correlation between the hours spent for one activity and the outcome) reflects a high student involvement in UBB university life, and this way the amount of student learning and personal development is adequately high. Regarding their satisfaction with the attended courses UBB students show a low satisfaction (but high importance!) regarding the information available at the beginning of the semester on the forthcoming disciplines, and also on the practical aspects of the disciplines learned (Marcus 2008, 8).

It is surprising to see, that although the UBB admits and enrolls yearly around fifteen thousand students “the concept of student services has not made its way into institutional

cultures and practices” (Bateson 2008, 9). According to the UBB organizational plan the university focuses mainly on administrative tasks when relating to students: student academic administration, student welfare administration. The students’ satisfaction regarding facilities that could ease their learning process and experience at the university (e.g. photo-copying opportunities, counseling services, internship opportunities, tutorship, accommodation, and facilities offered to disabled students) score the lowest in the satisfaction matrix (Marcus 2008, 8).

TABLE 7

Students' knowledge of foreign languages (%). (N=570)					
	Mother tongue	Proficiency level	Advanced level	Beginner	Does not know at all
English	0.5	60.2	31.9	6.5	0.9
French	0.2	16.4	37.8	22.0	23.6
German	2.4	8.0	12.8	23.2	53.6
Spanish	0.2	5.0	12.0	29.4	53.3
Italian	0.0	4.1	12.2	27.8	55.9
Russian	0.0	1.3	0.6	3.1	95.0
Other language	11.2	2.6	4.5	4.1	77.5

Source: UBB Students Survey, 2006.

Regarding the foreign language knowledge the majority of students seem to know English on an advanced level (as the data shows in the Table 7 above). French Italian and Spanish are popular mostly among the Romanian students while a higher percentage of Hungarian students know German language. This data is important since the knowledge of foreign languages is considered an important aspect which enhances students’ employability.

According to their expenses students are in a special situation, they have a variety of expenses, but usually no stable income. The majority of students (91.1%) receive the necessary amount of money from their parents and 35.6% receive some kind of state scholarship, which shows the dependence of students from their families and the state. Still if we look at the percentage of students having an income out of their regular (12.9%) or occasional (28.7%) work, then we can conclude that the education at UBB has the characteristics of a mass education, with a significant percent of students having double status and trying to gain their independence from their families besides learning.

The double status can refer to students attending two or more programs in parallel as well. 10.3% of the UBB students are in this situation of attending either another undergraduate program or studying at master level, 2.5% of them have already completed another undergraduate program. While 87.2% of the students are “traditional student”, if we add up all the possible double status positions of a UBB student, then we can see that a significant number of them are either studying or working or studying for the second degree or planning to do so. This means that the percentage of the “traditional student” category is shrinking and the number of non-traditional students, with all kinds of special needs, is increasing.

TABLE 8

Subjective economic situation of the UBB students (%). (N = 571)	
Not enough for the daily needs	5.95
Enough only for the daily needs	25.92
Enough for a decent life, but not for more expensive things	37.30
Can afford to buy more expensive things, but with difficulties	25.57
Can afford to buy everything without difficulties	5.25

Source: UBB Students Survey, 2006.

On a subjective scale of considering their needs and living expenses, students argue that they can afford to buy the necessary things, some easily, others with sacrifices, but the majority considers that they are able to finish their studies without major financial difficulties. On a scale from 1 to 10 the students situate themselves in the upper middle part, the majority (72.1%) choosing positions 5, 6, and 7.

Regarding their future plans the majority of the UBB students plan to continue their studies at a master level, 28.3% at master and then at doctoral level, 1.5% at doctoral level and 8% wish to obtain a new specialization at another undergraduate program after finishing the current one. This last data represents those students who are (for some reason) not completely satisfied by their current studies; they do not consider it enough and wish to obtain more knowledge. Only 6.7% of the students project that their highest educational level will remain the BA studies.

TABLE 9

Students' future plans (%).	
finish education, obtain a profession	33.2
owe a private property	17.9
employment	7.2
establish own firm	6.3
form a family	6.7

Source: UBB Students Survey, 2006.

about leaving the country and they have concrete plans.

It is also important to mention that before the Bologna process UBB students used to have the opportunity to study in short term courses as well. These courses were predominantly outside of the main campus in Cluj-Napoca, in other cities mostly in Transylvania. From the graduate survey it is visible that 9% of the students opted for the short term higher education and it was more preferred by the girls, 9.1% of them choosing this type of education while only 6.3% of the boys opted for it; this can be mostly explained by the palette of specializations available (which are predominantly chosen by females), most of them studying psychology or geography. Regarding their ethnic diversity we can see that 14.1% of the Hungarian students are opting for short time programmes, which is partly due to the fact that most of the programmes are organized in Transylvanian towns, home for a significant number of ethnic Hungarians. From those who finished the long-term higher education program, 23% studied economic science while the second most preferred was languages (9.9%). While mathematics, physics, history and philosophy are preferred by both genders almost in equal proportion, there is a clear preference for sports by the boys while the girls opt for languages and socio-human subjects. It is also worth mentioning that the popularity of these short courses increased over the years; while in 1997 their percent was 1.1, in 2004 they represented 13.6% of the UBB graduates.

From the SWOT analysis on the UBB's approach to their students (see Annex 2. Table 2) it is visible that the institution focuses mainly on the learning aspects of the student experience and it is neglecting all other aspects. The rector acknowledges that a "competitive university cannot

In the next 5 years of their life, students plan to finish their studies, to find a job and then to form a family. Traveling and emigration is also part of their plans; 41.1% of the students confess that they have thought

exist without the continuous criticism, oriented towards solution, expressed by students” (Marga 2005, 447). The university prorectors’ report (Marcus 2008, 465-468) shows that he is aware and committed to improving the student services (mostly the administrative services, but also the tutorial programme and the carrier counseling) at the institution, but the lack of appropriate funding impedes the implementation of his ideas. The other important aspect is the increasing number of non-traditional students, who are enrolled as full time students, but they do not participate in class activities as such. The diversified needs of the students are not tackled at university level or at faculty level even though student engagement is a decisive factor for persistence and success in higher education. The tutors are meant to solve the problems of students but as the student satisfaction survey pointed out there is an increased dissatisfaction with the program, although its importance is placed high (Marcus 2008, 466). Since the students seem to be mostly satisfied with the curricula and the formal education offered at UBB, and they show an increased dissatisfaction with the services provided, the author’s suggestion is that the university should focus more on developing the student services (career office, the tutor program, photocopying, traineeship, accommodation in dormitories, medical services, and facilities for disabled students) in order to enhance student retention and increase their graduate’s employability. As it was shown earlier, information and guidance need to respond to more varied needs of the student body and this needs to be done from the first moments of a student’s university life, guidance for first year students is formative regarding both academic and personal issues.

III.3. POST-UNIVERSITY YEARS

The third important aspect in the UBB graduates’ transition from higher education to the world of work is their experience after graduation and for this the main focus of this subchapter is on their post-graduation years, their status in the labor market, the length of the search period

for finding a job, the relevance of their former studies for the job, their satisfaction with the job and their future (job)plans.

After finishing their studies $\frac{3}{4}$ of the UBB graduates (79.3%) were on the labor market either employed (fulltime or part-time) with an employment contract (74.6%), or with special contracts (2.9%), or as illegal workers (1.7%). Observing the data in a time-scale we can see that the number of graduates with some kind of employment contract has decreased during the years (from 88.3% in 1997 to 66.0% in 2004), while the number of registered unemployed and those neither employed, nor unemployed increased.

TABLE 10

		The graduates' status in the world of work (%)					
		Employed with employment contract	Employed with special contract	Illegal worker	Registered unemployed	Neither employed nor unemployed	Total
Year of graduation	1997	85.5	2.8	0.5	1.8	9.4	100
	1998	84.2	2.7	0.8	2.0	10.3	100
	1999	77.2	3.3	1.7	2.3	15.4	100
	2000	76.1	3.3	2.0	2.7	15.9	100
	2001	71.3	2.5	1.8	3.1	21.3	100
	2002	67.0	2.9	2.2	2.5	25.5	100
	2003	69.6	3.0	2.3	2.2	22.9	100
	2004	62.4	3.6	3.5	2.1	28.5	100
Average		74,6	2,9	1,7	2,4	18.4	100

Source: UBB Graduate Survey, 2005.

From Table 10 it is visible that almost one fifth (19.1%) of the UBB students at the moment of picking up their diploma are studying at some higher education institution: 29.2% are doing their doctoral studies, 14.1% are attending master programmes, 18.8% are studying for another undergraduate degree and 37.9% opted for other programmes. It is also worth mentioning that 65.6% of those students who are studying at the moment of picking up their diploma are also employed with some employment contract. It is visible that UBB students still in the education and training system can be expected to respond to labor market difficulties by extending their own educational careers in order to counter the threat of unemployment when entering the world of work (see Müller and Gangl 2003, 8).

The majority of UBB graduates are able to find a job within 2-3 months from graduation, 85% within 6 months after graduation. It is important to mention that on average 80% of the graduates state that their job corresponds to their specialization, but if we regard the data according to the year of graduation, we can see that the number of those who were able to find jobs corresponding to their specialization decreased by 22.7% (see Table 11 below).

TABLE 11

The job held corresponds to the specialization studied? (%)			
		the job corresponds to the specialization	the job does not correspond to the specialization
year of graduation	1997	91.6	8.4
	1998	90.4	9.6
	1999	87.9	12.1
	2000	79.5	20.5
	2001	75.4	24.6
	2002	72.2	27.8
	2003	70.1	29.9
	2004	68.8	31.2
Average		80.0	20.0

Source: UBB Graduate Survey, 2005.

This decline can be regarded as due to the increasing mismatch between education and the world of work. Although 87.3% of the graduates state that they are employed on a post which requires higher education, the mismatch is still significant and especially among those graduates who are working in the private sector. This mismatch is also sharper among those graduates who completed the short term undergraduate courses at UBB (an average of 81.1% of the UBB long term higher education programme graduates state that their job corresponds to their studies, while only 66.8% of the short term higher education programme graduates state this) and these graduates are also underrepresented in the ‘employed with some kind of job contract’ (69.7% compared to 78.2%) category and overrepresented in the ‘registered unemployed’ (4.0% compared to 2.2%) category compared to their fellow graduates.

Regarding satisfaction with their jobs, the majority of graduates (61.7%) say that they do not have intentions of changing their workplace and from those who wish to change their job place

the monetary reward is the most important motivation (50.6% state that the cause is the small amount of money they are receiving).

The graduates' opinion about the education and services they received during the years spent at the university varies; 18.7% of the graduates are completely satisfied by the specialization they attended, half (54.1%) of the graduates state that the specialization they chose provides somewhat an adequate professional background for the world of work, while 27.2% consider that it helped them a little or not at all.

TABLE 12

	To what extent did the specialization attended help you in... (%)			
	to a great extent	somewhat	a little	not at all
adequate professional background	18.7	54.1	24.5	2.7
professional ties	18.9	35.2	33.9	12.0
finding a job	23.5	40.0	25.9	10.7
being self-supportive	40.5	36.8	17.9	4.8
further studying	41.9	43.7	12.3	2.1

Source: UBB Graduates' Perception on Higher Education Survey, 2008.

Graduates are more pleased by the way the specialization developed their self-supportive abilities and helped their further studying. Regarding the preparation for the job market, 23.5% of the students consider that the specialization helped them to find a job to a great extent, 40% consider that to some extent it was helpful, 25.9% that a little and 10.7% not at all (see Table 12).

The graduate survey results show that while in 1997 students laid more stress on the disciplines of specialty, the situation reversed for the 2004 series, which lay more stress on the practical sides of learning. From the first level of competencies "to know and understand" the emphasis is put on the second level of "to know and act" (Pop and Mihăilă 2008, 494).

Overall, the profile of UBB graduates after completing their studies shows that to a great extent they were able to find jobs quickly and corresponding to their specialization. The mismatch between education and the labor market increased in the past years and the graduates' satisfaction rate with their studies also points out the gaps in the education received vis-à-vis the labor market. The most problematic categories were the short term programme graduates, who

encountered problems in finding jobs corresponding to their specialization and also jobs with employment contracts. Since these graduates finished 3 years of undergraduate studies which in the new Bologna System corresponds to the BA studies, one important question can be raised: what happens to the Bologna BA students? Will they encounter the same difficulties as the short term higher education programme graduates did? Unfortunately, there is no significant data about the Bologna undergraduates and their employment statistics at Babes-Bolyai University since the first graduates finished their studies only in 2008 and their diplomas are not ready yet, so they didn't have the chance to complete the questionnaire.

From the SWOT analysis on the UBB's approach to their former students (see Annex 2. Table 3) it is visible that the institution is tracking its graduates since 1999, but problems can be signaled regarding the data collection and the questionnaire. More in-depth analysis would be beneficial for the institution, but for this the questionnaire and the data collection method need to be redesigned. The UBB is seemingly not acknowledging the fact that the status of its students shifts from being "customers" of the higher education institution to being providers of services for the university. Not only information about graduates' labor market insertion and post-university years is an important feed-back for the institution regarding its learning and services outcome, but the former students of the organization can also contribute to the recruitment process of the university by advertising the study opportunities of the institution, can (help to) contribute financially in the functioning of the institution and can increase the institutions' prestige by their individual success.

IV. TENTATIVE FUTURE STEPS

The UBBs strengths are its resources and capabilities that can be used as a basis for developing a competitive advantage vis-à-vis other higher education institutions in society. Its policies at the planning level, its prestige and reputation among other stakeholders at national and international level, its position in the “consumer market” provides its attractiveness for the students facing decisions regarding their university life. In the following, based on the analysis presented in the former chapter, policy recommendations are formulated in three main categories grouped according to the target population: informed decision-making for high-school students, student retention, and graduate tracing. The premise is that guidance and support are needed at every stage in a student’s career: at entry, during study, between courses and at the end of a study programme in order to enhance their employability.

INFORMED DECISION-MAKING about the studies at UBB is difficult at the present moment because limited information is available for recent high-school graduates. The importance of an informed decision-making regarding university studies lies in the fact that the highest percentage of university drop-outs are due to misinformation about the specialization and study options. So in order to improve its student statistics and to ease the decision-making of its prospective students UBB should devote more focus to its recruitment strategy and process. Some suggestions include:

- development of the admission website and brochure – short description of the specializations with special focus on the employability outcome of the students, course syllabi, contact information in case of further questions regarding studies (teacher, alumni and student);
- strategy for the recruitment tour – focus on attracting new students (e.g. older students who live a financially independent life and expect a certain life-style and learning style

during their study period), but also need to think about their needs and how the university can cope with satisfying those;

- develop the alumni network – former graduates not only can increase the prestige of the university, but can also help in advertising its study options, in fundraising and in traineeship opportunities;
- strengthen its ties with high-schools – take measures to actively encourage potential students at school level to continue their education in higher education; one way of doing this is to send university delegates into schools. During each faculty’s recruitment tour this is to some extent provided, since the delegates offer information and advice to prospective students on the curricula and the opportunities at the specific faculty – the problem with these tours is that they mainly focus on the big schools of the major cities in Romania, from where the majority of students is recruited yearly, and leave aside the smaller schools, vocational schools and rural areas.
- project a clear message of what is offered to students and what is expected of them.
- comprehensive surveys on perspective students is needed in order to find out students’ motivation, expectations and needs from the university as well as the relative position the UBB takes in comparison to other higher education institutions.

Overall, since educational decisions exhibit a prospective element to the extent that individual investments in education will be based on expectations about future rewards in terms of labor market and other outcomes, informed decision-making at the time of entry into higher education and choosing a specialization is of crucial importance and UBB should pay more focus on this aspect.

The prestige and position although important for its perspective students, after enrolling in the university **STUDENT RETENTION** is also crucial. It has been shown that participation in classes and in extracurricular activities enhances students’ employability skills. Information and

guidance need to respond to more varied needs of the student body and this needs to be done from the first moments of a student's university life, guidance for first year students is formative regarding both academic and personal issues. Overall the authors' view is, that it is not sufficient just to provide access to higher education, but students need to be supported during their studies to enable successful graduation and for this reason the suggestions for improvement are the following:

- more emphasis on the student services with special focus on the first year students' tutorial program and also on services that facilitate the learning outcome of students: photocopying, library, internet usage on campus, etc.
- develop the career office where informed guidance regarding employment opportunities is available and also advertise the opportunity so that students can benefit from it. Career-counseling centers are important because they assist students in making informed decisions and avoiding dead ends in the educational labyrinth and the traps of qualifications that are losing value. In other words, career-counseling centers help students to fully exploit the opportunities created by the higher education institutions; they keep tight relationships with the socio-economic environment, organize job fairs for the graduates, and prepare students regarding the job seeking and interview participation.
- make possible different learning paths for the diversified student body (especially for students who need to work besides studying and for disabled students). The nontraditional student is offered participation in higher education, but not parity in opportunity to obtain qualifications of the same value and this needs to be changed.
- assure curricular adequacy and flexibility to adapt to the changing needs of the world of work.
- involve various stakeholders in the planning of the education process of students to increase their employability.

- adequate, updated database and periodical surveys of students are crucial to have an informed picture on the student profile, their needs and expectations in order to be able to provide adequate policy response to these; studies are needed especially regarding the double status student positions and dropouts.

AFTER GRADUATION the status of UBB students shifts from being “customers” of the higher education institution to being providers of services for the university at least in the three very important aspects mentioned earlier. In line with these the following improvements are needed at UBB:

- adequate, updated database of graduates in order to have a clear picture of students’ post-university years and to be able to make use of the social connections if needed.
- comprehensive graduate survey to have an adequate feedback on graduates’ opinion about the university experience and its value in their future life in order to adjust policy options accordingly.
- develop the alumni network in order to “use” of the personal and professional connections of the former UBB students for advertising, recruitment, internships and employment purposes.

Overall the university needs to focus more on knowing and developing accordingly its student body from the moment a youngster is thinking about applying to UBB, throughout university years and after graduation. An institution of higher education which tries to attract and develop students’ loyalty must be aware of students’ expectations, their perception of the institution, their level of satisfaction and their view on the competing institutions as well. The identification of the factors generating student satisfaction/dissatisfaction represents the starting point for further performances both on the level of quantity and of quality. Curricula development, strategic management and informed, fact-based decision-making are of crucial importance for higher education institutions to maintain a competitive advantage in the knowledge society.

CONCLUSION

The present thesis was an attempt to describe the Babes-Bolyai University students' learning biography from entrance into a higher education system, their experience during studies, and finally their exit from the higher education system. These three "moments" in a student's biography are believed to be by the author of crucial importance when talking about student experience and graduate employability. The transition process of UBB graduates has been defined and analyzed according to these three moments of student experience and the purpose was to highlight the characteristics of each phase and to point out crucial policy options that could enhance the student experience at UBB, the graduates' employability and the overall student statistics of the university. Since higher education institutions promote graduate employability through the skills that are being developed in courses and also through the possibilities they offer in the use of counseling services the UBB should focus more on developing its student services in order to provide a more adequate student experience and to improve the employability of its students.

As Clark Kerr (1991, 306-307) pointed out, "response is something that must be done in reaction to a given situation" while "reform starts out with a set of values and aims in order to achieve improvements through innovation". The analysis provided by the author in the present thesis offers the chance to review the practices of one of the most important higher education institutions in Romania, the Babes-Bolyai University and its effectiveness in providing students' transition from higher education to the world of work. This analysis may help other Romanian and foreign higher education institutions to adapt to changing environments (response) and also to improve their provisions and performance (reform). But it needs to be kept in mind that the transition from education to working life is a complex and multifaceted policy development and implementation puzzle. Like the puzzle, things do not work in isolation, but in combination with one another. Solving it is a matter both of getting the right pieces on the table and of putting

them together correctly. But the number of pieces, their shape and how they fit together vary. The context of the transition process and the nature of the pathways determine the possible outcomes, consequently there can be no single answer to the question of what is effective, nor to questions about what higher education institutions should do when the puzzle is not working properly and needs to be improved. The key ingredients of transition frameworks that have been outlined above will work in different ways and in different combinations in different circumstances.

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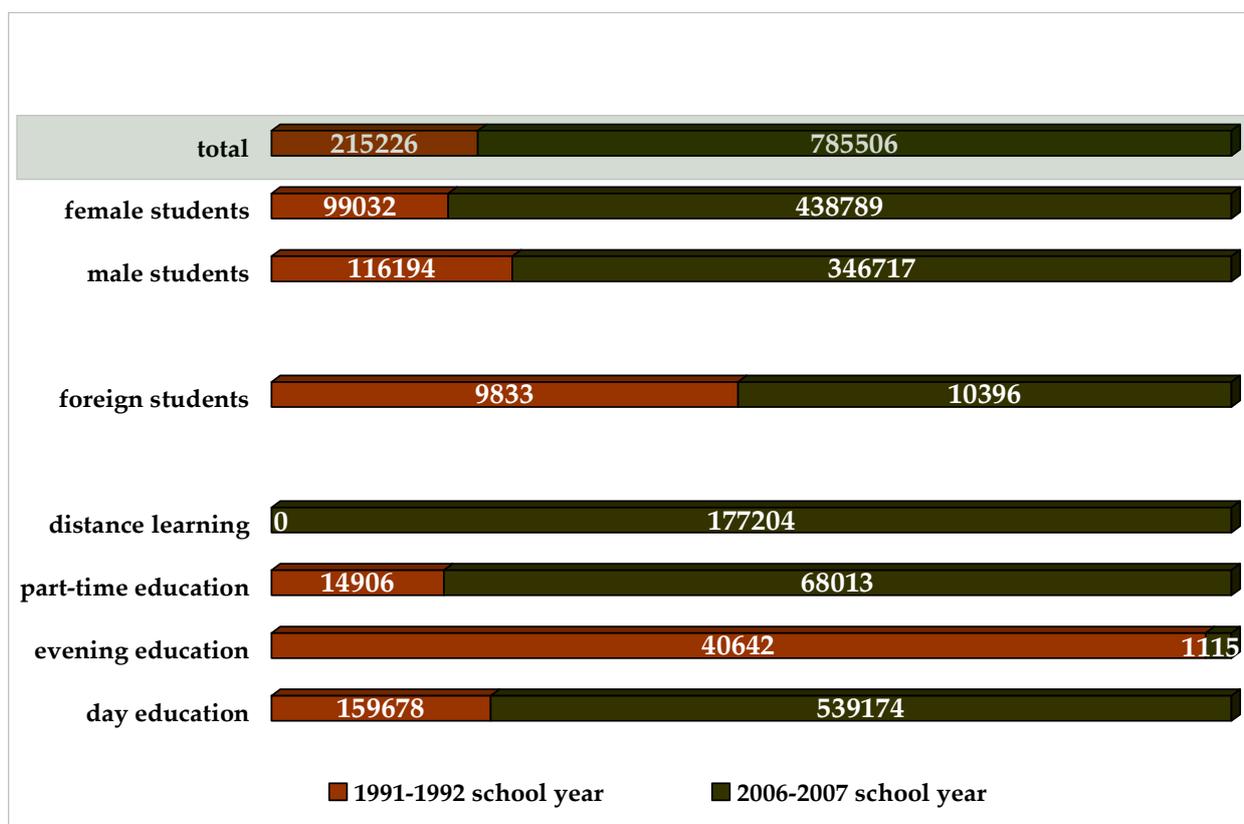
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ANNEX 1



Change in student numbers in the higher education institutions in Romania

Source: *Statistical Yearbook of Romania – 2007, Chapter on Education.*

ANNEX 2. TABLE 1. THE UBB’S APPROACH TO THEIR PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ admissions website ▪ recruitment tour ▪ prestige and university brand ▪ good position of the university in the “consumer market” ▪ registered alumni organization ▪ family background of students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ no studies regarding prospective students ▪ no policies regarding special, non-traditional students (and their needs) in fulltime education programmes ▪ alumni organization not functioning ▪ not aware of the student profile ▪ no student recruitment strategy ▪ lack of effective communication
<p>S</p>	<p>W</p>
<p>O</p>	<p>T</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ programs to better inform the educational system (both teachers and students) about the new trends on the labor market ▪ Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation policy change ▪ strategic development projects that enhance the on-going transformation process in the Romanian higher education (Improving Quality Management at system and institutional level, Developing an operational system of qualifications, Single Intake Register) ▪ projects of NGOs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ lack of financial resources ▪ lack of competent human resources ▪ instability in the Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation policies ▪ change in population age-structure ▪ new channels of distribution ▪ geographic distance ▪ changing tastes and priorities of students

ANNEX 2. TABLE 2. THE UBB’S APPROACH TO THEIR STUDENTS

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ family background of students ▪ tutor program ▪ internship program ▪ Career Center ▪ Student satisfaction survey ▪ Foreign language and ICT classes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ lack of comprehensive studies regarding students ▪ low student satisfaction regarding university services ▪ inefficient tutor program and internship program ▪ Career Center – the opportunity for individual orientation and counseling for finding a proper job is not known/advertised/opted for ▪ No policies regarding special, non-traditional students in full-time educational programmes ▪ not aware of the student profile ▪ lack of effective communication
<p>S</p>	<p>W</p>
<p>O</p>	<p>T</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ programs to better inform the educational system (both teachers and students) about the new trends on the labor market ▪ Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation policy change ▪ strategic development projects that enhance the on-going transformation process in the Romanian higher education (Improving Quality Management at system and institutional level, Developing an operational system of qualifications, Single Intake Register) ▪ NGOs projects ▪ work shadowing ▪ scholarship programs in which companies select students and sponsor them during school period, preparing them for being employed after graduation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ lack of financial resources ▪ lack of competent human resources ▪ instability in the Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation policies ▪ change in population age-structure ▪ new channels of distribution ▪ geographic distance ▪ changing tastes, needs and priorities of students ▪ double status positions

ANNEX 2. TABLE 3. THE UBB’S APPROACH TO THEIR FORMER STUDENTS

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the graduates’ theoretical knowledge and language skills ▪ graduate tracking survey since 1999, figure of employment 80% ▪ alumni organization ▪ Career Center ▪ graduates’ positive feedback regarding learning outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ lack of comprehensive studies regarding graduates transition from higher education to the world of work ▪ graduates’ specialized practical knowledge is lacking ▪ data gathering and data analysis opportunities are not used to the full, the reports are not published and although it is stated that the findings are considered and policy is formulated accordingly, this is not visible ▪ alumni organization not functioning ▪ Career Center – the opportunity for individual orientation and counseling for finding a proper job is not known/advertised/opted for ▪ lack of effective communication
<p>S</p>	<p>W</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">O</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ informative programs to better inform the educational system (both teachers and students) about the new trends on the labor market ▪ systematic research of the employers’ request of competencies for their available jobs through interviews with employers and surveys of the labor market ▪ Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation policy change ▪ strategic development projects that enhance the on-going transformation process in the Romanian higher education (Improving Quality Management at system and institutional level, Developing an operational system of qualifications, Single Intake Register) ▪ projects of NGOs ▪ work shadowing ▪ scholarship programs in which companies select students and sponsor them during school period, preparing them for being employed after graduation 	<p style="text-align: center;">T</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ lack of financial resources ▪ lack of competent human resources ▪ instability in the Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation policies ▪ change in population age-structure ▪ new channels of distribution ▪ geographic distance ▪ changing tastes, needs and priorities of students ▪ double status positions