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My master field was not in line with reality: Insights from Customer Support Employees about Graduate Employability

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Research Domains

Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

Abstract

This study sought to understand and analyse the graduate employability phenomenon within debates about the transition from university to work. Underemployed young graduates discussed career prospects and engagement with non-graduate job levels at work, revealing contrasting narratives of education-job mismatch and the value of some university degrees. We synthesise insights from work and employment studies with findings from scholarship on graduate employability and the careers of young university graduates to explain these distinct narratives. A qualitative analysis of two years of ethnographical data with customer support representatives (CSRs) in entry-level roles reveals overeducation status, de-skilled with weakened dignity at work. Also, high work pressure, unattainable work-based targets, and uncertain careers within multinational companies in Romania are new norms. These findings challenge assumptions about the skills needed for a knowledge-based economy, the transformative power of university credentials, and the employability of graduates in a rapidly changing world of work.

Full paper

Post-university life, especially the phase related to employment for young graduates, has become one of the most crucial stages that

attracted policymakers, researchers in academia, and corporate owners (Pantea, 2019; Lavric et al., 2019; Badescu et al., 2019; ILO, 2020). The graduate labor market in Romania is currently experiencing numerous changes and challenges. On the one hand, many university graduates are available compared to graduate job opportunities (Wu and Hawkins, 2019; Gonis, 2019). While the difference between graduates' supply and demand has led to increased competition among scarce graduate jobs in Romania (World Bank, 2020, UNESCO, 2015; Kretovics and Eckert, 2019), the capability of the Romanian labor market to absorb this number of graduates remains problematic (Beaury et al. 2016; Pantea, 2019). On the flip side, issues of work-readiness or employable graduates (Burke et al., 2016; Clarke, 2017) and employability skills (Felstead et al., 2016) persist and challenge policymakers, labor, and significant educational actors (Small, Shacklock and Marchant, 2018; Cedefop, 2018). Despite having the most educated generation in Romanian history, the country's labour shortage pushed numerous young Romanian graduates to carry out jobs that required lower qualifications and skills. Often, they find work outside the commonly recognised graduate occupations and occupy a much more diverse range of jobs, such as customer support agents in the call centres, among others (Melenciuc, 2018; Negrescu, 2018; Word Bank, 2020). Available data shows that the underemployment among university graduates has grown in the last three decades (Kler et al., 2018; Pisica, 2015). Numerous graduates are not working as much as they want or are in jobs that are way below their qualifications (World Bank, 2020). Matching and managing employees' skills with the right jobs is still a big issue (Cedefop, 2018; EC, 2019). Various authors echoed uncertain career prospects for young workers in this post-Fordist employment (Farrugia et al. 2018) in what Arthur & Rousseau (1996) termed boundary-less or protean career trajectories.

Moreover, young university graduates are more likely to experience over-education. This phenomenon triggers negative work-related well-being, and overeducated employees bear adverse health, mental, and physical consequences (Erdogan et al., 2009). To get decent employment after graduation, young people navigate more complicated paths than adults (ILO, 2020; Caroleo and Pastore, 2009; Pantea, 2019). When highly-educated and skilled employees occupy jobs usually held by less-educated workers and take job

positions under lower terms of employment than traditionally considered typical, there is a declining value of formal credentials (Tomlinson, 2016; Wu and Hawkins; 2019, Caplan, 2018). We may wonder about the importance and benefits of university higher education that employees or employers attribute to HE. Despite the complex issues young graduates face, there has been little scholarly interest in graduates' post-university life in Romania. This study aims to understand and analyse the graduate employability phenomenon. Underemployed young graduates discussed career prospects and engagement with non-graduate job levels at work, revealing contrasting narratives of education-job mismatch and the value of some university degrees.

The researcher used participatory observation and unstructured interviews to capture daily work-related activities that employees experienced. Research findings not only confirm previous studies done in customer service work but reveal unmatched and unused workers' education and skills, limited work autonomy, and little work motivation. Likewise, this entry-level job requires theoretically high education but uses mostly soft skills, purposively ignoring other abilities and knowledge. The results show the use of daily technological and physical work control to closely monitor employees' work activities from labour organisation to execution and were designed to reduce labour costs. CSRs face work pressures enacted by employers seeking to maximise production and profits and customers who expect quality services. To some CSRs, attending HE rationales is far from their employment purpose, as mainly stipulated in the skills plan (Keep and Mayhew, 2004; Sennett, 2006; Marsh, 2011). Many CSRs were sceptical to the return of university investment. Unexpectedly, few CSRs consider their university credentials beneficial despite their precarious work situations. Again, CSRs revealed that are replaceable and multinational companies offer limited internal jobs mobility, little professional, and personal development. These findings challenge assumptions about the skills needed for a knowledge-based economy, the transformative power of university credentials, and the employability of graduates in a rapidly changing world of work. Results from the ongoing inquiry firmly redirect attention to how social and political contestations over decent jobs for youths, education-job mismatch issues, and the shape of precarious employment.

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