

“I could become stewardess”: Perceived declining value of higher education degree

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Research Domains

Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

Abstract

In recent decades, Romania has expanded its business service sector rapidly. With the rise of outsourced jobs, young university graduates are hired in positions that do not align with their educational background, abilities, and experience. Given a socio-constructivist paradigm, this study examined how overeducated graduates working as customer support representatives (CSRs) perceived the importance and value of higher education. Drawing from two years of ethnographical case-study data analysed thematically, and the findings reveal private and social benefits attributed to being university graduates. However, the results also show a contrasting unfolding scenario characterised by how CSRs increasingly lose their enthusiasm and motivation to remain productive, perceived alternative better options after a brief professional course, and a growing trend of unstable careers, thus diminishing the value of higher education. We conclude by revealing the weak link between the labour market and higher education, aggravating employers' doubts about graduate employability.

Full paper

Since joining the European Union in 2007, Romania has seen an increase in the number of jobs in the business service sector. Due to the rapid growth of the service industry, young university graduates are employed in outsourced occupations that do not match their educational background, skills, and experience (World Economic Forum, 2023; European Commission, 2023; Isirabahenda, 2022), leading to a prolonged period of overeducation during their transition from university to workforce. The number of overeducated university graduates in Romania has increased in recent years, indicating that the value of higher education has been declining thus far (World Bank, 2020; Eurostat, 2023).

The advantages of higher education, both private and social, have grown over time, lending credibility to human capital theory, which posits the productive value of education (Siivonen et al., 2023). Higher average rates of return to education among university graduates indicate that tertiary education is worthwhile (De Schepper et al., 2023). Accordingly, many workers perceive their higher education as a

waste of time or even useless. Available studies have shown a parallel misconception regarding the purpose and worth of higher education (Tomlinson, 2013; Roberts, 2017; Collini, 2012). Despite the declining value of university degrees, little is known about the perceived value and importance of higher education degrees in Romania's rapidly changing labour market.

Inspired by qualitative design, researchers seek to understand lived experiences in context and the meanings associated with these experiences, usually from participants' perspectives. This qualitative enquiry examined how overeducated graduates working as customer support representatives (CSRs) perceive the importance and value of higher education. We explicitly asked CSRs to comment on the usefulness and advantages of higher education by focusing on the world of work and employment. Drawing from two years of ethnographical case study, the data were analysed thematically. The findings revealed several categories that occurred in coded comments, and a set of two main themes emerged during data analysis: perceived private and social benefits of higher education.

CSRs reflect higher education values through their pathways to integrate the workforce. It is still reasonable to indicate that return rates on education investments can measure the value and benefits of being a higher education graduate (Oancea, 2017). Many CSRs believe that possessing a university degree places them in a good position for job opportunities, especially in big cities. In line with the geographical location of job opportunities, CSRs believed that university attainment opened crucial opportunities for mobility and an excellent reason to leave rural areas with scarce opportunities (Hințea et al., 2022). As many CSRs observed were from rural areas, their viewpoints demonstrated concerns about their professional future, particularly the fear of unemployment. In my opinion, it is also clear that CSRs confusion is not only due to contextual and social challenges, but also most often caused by a lack of social capital and professional networks vital in the contemporary labour market (Tomlinson & Holmes, 2017; Nghia et al., 2023). CSRs from rural areas experience complex transitions from school to work, which are marked by uncertainty and disorientation (Zamfil et al., 2020). Tomlinson (2023) noted that graduates experience transitional vagueness, role uncertainty, and identity incoherence in liminal conditions (Wyn et al., 2020). However, the results also show a contrasting unfolding scenario characterised by how CSRs increasingly lose their enthusiasm and motivation to remain productive, perceive alternative better options after a brief professional course, and a growing trend toward unstable careers, thus diminishing the value of higher education. Some CSRs felt that leaving Romania and finding work in other countries was the best option. Romania has seen a significant increase in outbound labour mobility since joining the EU in 2007, resulting in a loss of human capital. Migration to EU and OECD countries remains the most prevalent way for highly educated young graduates to make their higher education degrees worthwhile (Pantea, 2019). In addition to the apparent financial benefits, young university graduates are driven by the desire to gain practical experience and develop careers in their chosen sector. In this scenario, university degrees are viewed as vouchers for admission into jobs in developed countries (OECD, 2023). However, even outside Romania, many young graduates remain under-employed. We conclude by revealing the weak link between the labour market and higher education, which aggravates employers' doubts about graduate employability. This observation aligns with studies that argue that employers frequently express dissatisfaction with graduates' work readiness (Ng, 2022; Small et al., 2022).

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