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## **“I could become a stewardess”: Perceived benefits and shortcomings of being university graduates in the Romanian labor market.**

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### **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 are not aligned with their educational backgrounds, abilities, and experiences. Given a socio-constructivist paradigm, this study examined how participants perceived the importance and value of higher education mainly overeducated graduates working as customer support representatives (CSRs). Drawing from two years of ethnographical case study data analyzed thematically, the findings reveal the private and social benefits attributed to being university graduates. However, the results also show a contrasting unfolding scenario characterized by how CSRs increasingly lose their enthusiasm and motivation to remain productive at work. Some CSRs regretted, perceive 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 labor market and higher education, which aggravates employers' doubts about graduate employability.*

**Keywords:** Employability, customer support representatives, higher education, value, Romania

### **Introduction**

In recent years, subjects such as employability and skills coupled with education-job mismatch, knowledge-based economy, and precarious work have been growing and have attracted particular attention in socioeconomic and political debates (Nghia et al., 2022, Blanchflower, 2019). These considerations are vivid, as work and employment subjects have been crucial for many years,

given the multiple implications that work has propagated in the social and economic spheres (Tomlinson, 2013).

Social and economic debates on employment continue to construct higher educational institutions (HEI) as the main actors fulfilling the demand for a knowledge-based economy (Scurry et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2015). These discussions raise questions about employability, skills, and job-education mismatch, as significant

issues still warrant extensive sociological examination and careful consideration, particularly in Romania.

There has been much debate regarding the graduates' employability. The discourses are primarily divided into distinct categories: those that focus on the roles that policymakers, higher education management, employers, and young graduates could play in addressing the issue of employability and others that underline the required skills needed for a rapidly changing world of work. Debates have focused on the mismatches and unrealistic expectations between employees and employers. On the one hand, employers claim that recent graduates lack the necessary skills needed for available jobs (Cedefop, 2018). However, young graduates believe they qualify for employment. This study asserts that, despite the relatively low unemployment rates among university graduates in most EU countries, more needs to be done to support their career development during the challenging transition from university to the world of work and employment in Romania.

Many individuals consider universities to be valuable pursuits, particularly for the advanced skill sets they provide, which are often seen as a pathway for securing employment and reasonable compensation (Collini, 2012; Edgell et al., 2016). However, the reality that many graduates encounter upon entering the workforce, where these skills are underutilized and earnings remain low, raises doubts about the anticipated advantages of attending university (Caplan, 2018; Christie and Burke, 2020).

Tomlinson (2013) points out that education is a vital economic driver upon which national economic assets rest (p.11). The acquisition of knowledge and competencies not only has consequences on the economic realm, but also yields favorable outcomes in the domains of social, political, and health affairs (Tomlinson, 2012, 2017).

Numerous economic based studies derived on the pivotal work by Becker (1964) and Mincer (1974) confirmed that there are significant and positive rates of return (economic and social benefits) on investment in human capital (Pelinescu, 2015, 2017; Cismaş et al., 2020). Human capital not only plays a crucial role in economic growth (Kottaridi et al., 2019) but also natural, technological, and various capital resources (Boldeanu & Constantinescu, 2015). Furthermore, the trend towards a knowledge-based economy (KBE) has caused different people to expect opportunities for university graduates; however, some studies claim that KBE assumptions are uncertain and contradictory (Sennett, 2006; Marsh, 2011; Tomlinson, 2013).

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, the value of formal credentials declines (Wu and Hawkins, 2019; Caplan, 2018). We may wonder about the importance and benefits employees or employers attribute to Higher Education, as studies that focus on education-job misfit and the underutilization of tertiary graduates' knowledge and abilities in the Romanian labor market are limited. Moreover, matching and managing employees' skills with their right jobs remains a major issue to consider (Cedefop, 2018; EC, 2019).

This study sought to understand the importance and value of higher education. This study analyzes the transition from higher education to employment informed by young university graduates working in outsourced companies in Romania as customer support

representatives (CSRs). Its goal is to contribute to the sociological study of the university-to-work transition. The paper is structured as follows: The introduction section provides a detailed overview, explains the research rationale, and articulates the problem statement, methods, results, discussion, and concluding remarks.

## Review of literature

To the detriment of HEI, state actors (business owners) and policymakers have more power to regulate educational systems (Olssen and Peters, 2005). Unsurprisingly, there have been many arguments regarding graduates' employability (Vass, 2011). Although the roles of a highly knowledgeable and skilled workforce in ensuring a competent and stable economy are undoubted, it faces hindrance given the rapidly changing labor world.

The European Union embraced several HE reforms to address this issue. The Bologna declaration was initiated in 1999 and implemented in 2007 with the aim of establishing a standard three-level structure and a joint credit system called the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), mobility promotion, and employability (EC, 2009). Moreover, employability plays a central role in Europe's 2020 strategy in Education and Training 2020, and higher education modernization strategies (EC, 2011). Among the key objectives of the European 2020 Strategy is dedicated to employment, and the target is to reach an employment rate of 75% of the inhabitants in the age categories of 20 and 64 (EC, 2010). The mandatory requirements for EU employment, educational policy strategies, and human capital politics paved the way for a mass higher education strategy in EU countries. As a result, Romania experienced substantial growth in both enrolment and completion numbers (OECD, 2022).

The graduate labor market in Romania is currently experiencing numerous changes and challenges. On the one hand, there are more university graduates than graduate job opportunities (Eurostat, 2023; Isirabahenda, 2019). While the difference between graduates' supply and demand has led to increased competition among scarce graduate jobs in Romania (World Bank, 2020; Kretovics and Eckert, 2019), the capability of the Romanian labor market to absorb this size of graduates remains problematic (Pantea, 2019). On the flip side, issues of work readiness or employable graduates (Holmes, 2013; Clarke, 2018) and employability skills persist and challenge policymakers, labor, and main educational actors (Small et al., 2018).

Clarke (2017) argues that graduates are expected to conclude their studies with considerable levels of employability and work preparedness. However, employers often assert that they lack work-ready graduates with employability skills (McGuinness et al., 2017; Rose, 2017). Moreover, various studies have argued that HEIs are poorly prepared work-ready graduates (Cedefop, 2018; Caplan, 2018; Cynthia, 2015).

To some extent, Romania is prone to weak human capital and low-skilled workers (Pantea 2019; Tarlea, 2019). Recent data<sup>1</sup> show that Romania's human capital index score is 0.60, which is the lowest on average in the EU 0.75 (World Bank, 2020). The return on education is questionable despite Romania having the lowest share of employees with temporary contracts in the EU (1.2 %)

<sup>1</sup> This means that children born in Romania expects to be 60 percent as productive as adults as they could be if they received complete education and full health (World Bank, 2020).

(Eurostat, 2018). While income and employment rates depend on individual education levels, Blanchflower (2019) argues that a high employment rate is likely to hide the widespread phenomenon of underemployment.

Statistically, university graduates have a high employment rate, as recent data show that, in the ISCED 2011 category, Romanian university graduates are employed more than other people at the non-tertiary level (80.7% in 2019 and 76.4% in 2023), considering the age category from 15-29. Nevertheless, this percentage is lower than in previous years (82.5% in 2000 and 77.9% in 2009) (Eurostat, 2024). Despite having the most educated generation in Romanian history, the labor shortage in Romania pushed numerous young Romanian graduates to carry out jobs previously requiring lower qualifications and skill levels. Often, they find work outside of the commonly recognized graduate occupations and occupy a much more diverse range of jobs, such as customer support agents in call centers (Cedefop, 2017; Negrescu, 2018).

Inspired by human capital propositions (Becker, 1962), Romania has expanded HE enrolment and investment in education in recent years to develop a competitive economy capable of attracting and accommodating both high-paid and high-skilled employees (Ceptureanu & Ceptureanu, 2010). As a result, the number of young people who have graduated from HEI in Romania has increased rapidly (OECD, 2018). Higher educational attainment in Romania has doubled over the last decade, from 12.4 % in 2006 to 25.6 % in 2016. However, it is the lowest in the EU, and Romania has historically invested very little in education compared to other EU countries, that is, 3.2% of its GDP (Eurostat, 2022).

Higher education institutions in Romania have produced many graduates to meet their employability skills agenda. However, there is growing concern about the type of job graduates enter (Preoteasa, 2018; Pantea, 2021). Additionally, there are a significant number of under-employed young university graduates in the workforce (Melenciuc, 2018). The decline in manufacturing jobs has been accompanied by growth in the service sector, leading to an increase in marginal employment and underemployment. With the rapid shift towards a service-based economy in Romania, an increase in the service sector is positive for economic development (World Bank, 2020).

However, evidence indicates that the connection between higher education institutions and the labor market does not directly correlate with a decent career for young university graduates (Pantea, 2023). The rise in under-employment and uncertain careers is not solely a result of the decline in manufacturing jobs and growth in the service sector but is also influenced by broader societal and economic factors (Chivu et al., 2020; European Commission, 2023). Therefore, there is a need to fear the possibility of national deindustrialization. The importance of collaboration between policymakers, university educators, and researchers in higher education and employment cannot be overstated when finding solutions to these challenges. For some graduates, the under-employment issue persists for months, if not years, after graduation (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2017; Siivonen et al., 2023). While work and employment among university graduates are broadly acknowledged in the literature, there are few empirical studies on the labor world of under-employed workers in Romania.

Many authors acknowledge that young university graduates still face and experience a complex and uncertain transition from

university to work (Christie & Burke, 2020). Obtaining decent employment after graduation is more complicated for young people than adults (ILO, 2020; Pantea, 2019). Precarious work conditions characterize the current global labor world, (Standing, 2011; Kalleberg, 2011; Broadley et al., 2023). Romania is no exception to this. Various authors have echoed uncertain career prospects for young workers in this post-Fordist employment (Farrugia et al. 2018).

Romania's economic landscape has evolved into a diverse, service-oriented model. The service sector, a significant source of the country's employment, now stands at 51% (World Bank, 2023; EURES, 2023). Since Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007, a substantial number of corporations have chosen to outsource operations within the country or establish business operations in Romania (offshoring). This has led to a radical increase in job opportunities, particularly with the rise of multinational companies (MNCs) (ILO, 2022; Tarlea, 2019). The service sector includes health and social assistance, education, public administration and business services. The services sector holds significant importance in terms of employment and, by extension, in the Romanian economy (National Institute of Statistics, 2022). The business service sector in Romania employs over 2% of its active workforce, as reported by the Association of Business Service Leaders in Romania in 2023.

In addition to the rise in precarious jobs, both young university graduates and employers face challenges in finding suitable employment opportunities and workers (Zamfir, 2021; Preoteasa, 2018). Similarly, job requirements have changed over time due to innovations brought about by technological advances or globalization (Tarlea, 2019; World Bank, 2023). Despite labor market improvements and low unemployment rates, the contemporary Romanian work world has experienced numerous fuzzy phenomena that have long hindered its functioning. The link between higher education and the job market appears to have diminished, as education-job mismatch among young graduates remains a major concern (Gavriliuță, 2020; World Bank, 2020).

The advantages of higher education, both privately and socially, have grown over time, lending credibility to the human capital theory, which posits the productive value of education. This is evidenced by the higher average rates of return to schooling among university graduates, indicating that tertiary education is worthwhile (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 2018, Hîncea et al., 2022). Conversely, many studies have shown a parallel misconception regarding the purpose and value of Higher Education (Tomlinson, 2018; De Schepper et al., 2024). 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, 2023).

## Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach to investigate the perceived value of higher education (Creswell & Plano, 2018). Qualitative methods are appropriate for research describing people's subjective opinions, attitudes, beliefs, or experiences of things in the outer world. Hence, the decision to include free-text qualitative questions. The choice of a qualitative research method allows the researcher to collect in-depth information about the meanings participants assign to the value of higher education. I used a constructivist paradigm because constructivism considers knowledge a social construct resulting from exchanges and

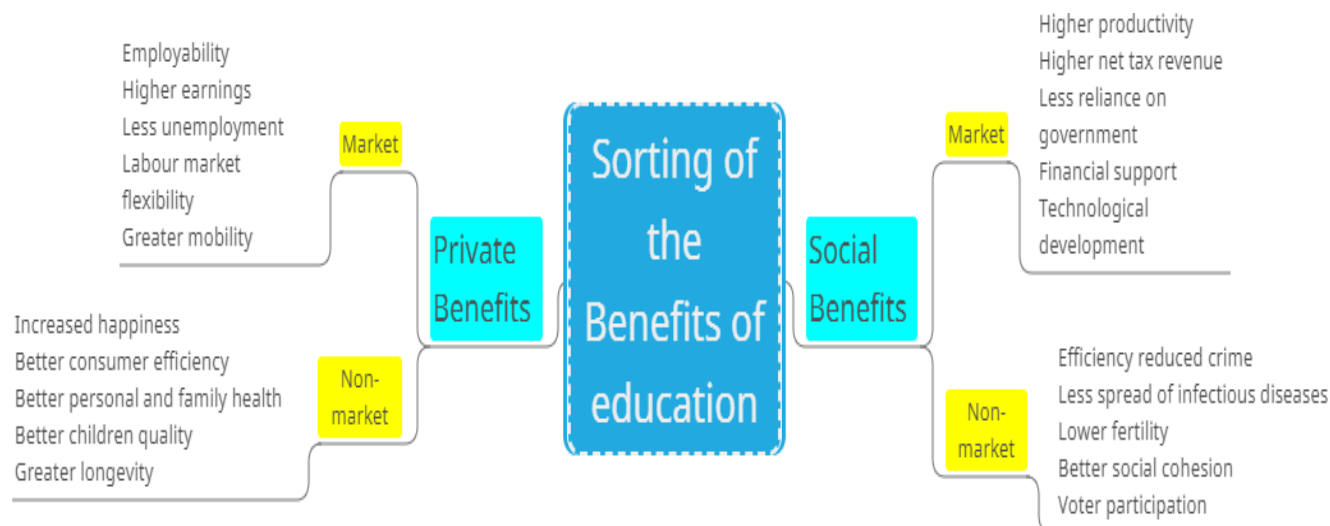


interactions between individuals and the settings within which they are formed (Mertens, 2015).

The core empirical research material that forms the basis of this study draws from ethnographical case study research carried out from September 2020 to September 2022, and extends for six months between January 2023 and June 2023 in Globalcorp, an outsourced company operating in the business service sector in Romania. The rationale behind this study determined the choice of an exploratory descriptive case study approach. An exploratory case study design was used because no single set of outcomes was

available. An exploratory case study was appropriate because I wanted an extensive and in-depth description of the social phenomena. I chose ethnography and a case study as they are the two most popular qualitative approaches. Additionally, both approaches have similar theoretical frameworks. Ethnographies can reveal the qualities of group experiences in a way that other research methods cannot (Emerson et al., 2011). Case studies tend to follow the characteristics of ethnography in terms of reality observations (Yin, 2008).

**Figure 1: Classification of the benefits of education**



Source: Elaboration based on Munich and Psacharopoulos, 2018

In this study, 44 main social actors participated, of which 28 were female and 16 were male. Their age ranged from 20-25 (n=20), 26-35 (n=24) participants. Eighteen participants held managerial roles (three human resources, five managers, and ten team leaders), and 26 participants occupied entry-level positions as customer support representatives. Concerning their education level, the study had 24 participants with a bachelor's degree, 20 participants with a

Master's degree, and their educational backgrounds ranged from 8 participants graduated from formal and natural sciences, 12 participants graduated from professional and applied sciences domains, and 24 participants held backgrounds in the humanities and social science fields. The following is an overview of the interviewees (Table 1).

**Table 1: Demographic data of participants**

	Gender		Age categories		Ed.Level		Field studied		
	F	M	20-25	26-33	BA	MA	Professional and applied	Humanities and Social Sciences	Formal Sciences
<b>CSRs</b>	17	9	18	8	15	11	8	14	4
<b>TLs</b>	6	4	2	8	6	4	2	5	3
<b>Manager</b>	2	3	0	5	2	3	2	3	0
<b>HR</b>	3	0	0	3	1	2	0	2	1
<b>Total</b>	28	16	20	24	24	20	12	24	8

Source: Own elaboration based on primary, 2020-2024

All 44 interviews were transcribed in full and coded openly and, later, axially as well as selectively with regard to the dimensions of value of higher education. The findings to be explicated below have been elaborated in the course of complied with Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis. Thematic analysis (TA) is an approach for developing, analyzing, and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset that involves systematic data-coding processes to build themes. In this sense, themes are the

ultimate analytic purpose., TA offers a set of tools – concepts, techniques, practices, and guidelines to organize, interrogate, and interpret a dataset. However, these methods involve thinking and making choices regarding other aspects of the research project and process (Braun & Clarke, 2013). To highlight typical patterns, notable quotations were selected and described in detail in the results section. For brevity, not all insights have been presented comprehensively. To protect the participants' identities, their personal details were anonymized.

## Results

This study answered the research question of how participants perceive the importance and value of Higher Education. We explicitly asked the participants to comment on the usefulness and advantages of higher education. Several categories occurred in the coded comments, and a set of two main themes emerged during data analysis: perceived private and social benefits of higher education. These themes came from the commonalities and connections discovered both within and between the participant interviews and participatory observations.

### Perceived private benefits

It is still reasonable to suggest that the value and benefits of being a higher education graduate can be measured by the return rates on educational investments, especially tertiary education. However, this issue remains a subject of debate. For this reason, I begin by presenting the overall statements that CSRs perceive as the rate of return on higher education graduates through private non-monetary and financial values. This broader category refers to the overall positive statements that CSRs perceive as important to Higher Education throughout its epistemic, social, and financial value. For instance, numerous CSRs have asserted that higher education gives them the capacity to uncover their latent potential and enhance their sense of responsibility. They articulated these benefits as follows:

Before attending university, it was difficult for me to understand the world. However, the university provided me with a broader perspective, and, as a result, I have evolved into a mature man capable of living independently, seeking employment, and taking vacations without assistance. (Andrei, 24 years old-BA)

Similarly, Paul recognized that his time at university contributed to his personal growth and broadened his understanding of the world. In addition, he noted how he learned to be responsible and acquire of organizational skills which helped him find out who he is, but also allowed him to figure out what he wanted to be. He became well organized and responsible. (Paul, 24 years old-BA). The benefit of sense of obligation and learning to self-care is further highlighted by the following CSRs who mentioned how university experience helped them to leave their families behind and move to the big city:

The University made me more responsible because I came here alone; I left home at the age of eighteen to study here. However, moreover, I had to manage on my own, go to classes, as there was no one left to pull me or say Oana, do that, take care of that, and do not forget this. (Oana, 24 years old-BA)

Grigore echoed Oana's perspectives and emphasized the significance of higher education in promoting self-sufficiency during his relocation to a foreign country:

After obtaining bachelor's degree, I moved to Spain and found that I had to adjust and become self-sufficient. Over the course of one and a half years, I was pleased to realize that I had matured into a responsible adult. (Grigore, 26 years old-MA).

Grigore's comment underscores how moving to Spain helped him become a responsible young man. In addition to epistemic benefits, CSRs perceive university impacts on the university graduates' employability. Higher education (HE) institutions play a crucial

role in enhancing social interactions that are pertinent to the labor market. For example, this can be observed, by considering the following:

I have a strong understanding of teamwork, which I gained during my time at university. Therefore, it is important to learn and accomplish tasks as a team. Additionally, the communication skills I acquired during my university years have proven valuable in my current job. I can communicate well with customers and colleagues, as well as to summarize complex information presented by my manager in just 20 minutes. (Felicia, 26 years old-MA).

Andrei echoed Felicia regarding the benefits of collaboration attributed to higher education. Andrei emphasized the importance of effective time management, which can be applied to the workplace. He said:

Since enrolling in the university, it has been difficult to cope with my assignments independently, but I have learned to cooperate with my classmates. Attending the university taught me the importance of time management, and I am applying it to my current job. I have always proved that I have completed my job duties. By the end of each day, I ensured that everything was being taken care of. (Andrei, 24 years old-BA).

CSRs reflect higher education values through their pathways to integrate the workforce. Many CSRs believe that possessing a university degree places them in a good position for job opportunities, especially in big cities. See, for example, Anca's view: My university degrees have significantly enhanced my job prospects, providing me with the flexibility to pursue various job opportunities (Ana, 28 years old-MA). Lavinia, on the other hand, highlights a different perspective by explaining that the university prepared him for a specific career: My education has prepared me completely for a professional career, although I have not yet entered the field. Nonetheless, I actively sought job opportunities in the social work sector. (Lavinia, 23 years old-BA). Numerous CSRs have confirmed the relevance of university roles to graduate work readiness:

I began working part-time at a restaurant in the evening while I was enrolled in the university. Although this job was not related to my field of management, I had the opportunity to apply my theoretical knowledge and develop my entrepreneurial skills. I learned what to expect when I started working, and how to adapt to different situations. (Sofia, 25 years old-BA).

Many CSRs anticipate challenges in finding employment without university studies, although some remain confident in their ability to secure jobs. Despite this, we remarked some hesitations in their views likely due to their education-job mismatch: I could get a job here (Cluj) even if I did not go to university, but it was supposed to be much more challenging. I mean, I might not have the opportunity to get a CSR job easily. (Anca, 28 years old-MA). Interestingly, some CSRs hold the conviction of maintaining the same job responsibilities they possess presently: I could have stayed in Brasov, my hometown, and possibly secured a job at a contact center. Fortunately, very few individuals possess English language skills comparable to those of mines. (Mihai, 24 years old-BA). Expressively, some believe that, without a university degree, there is always an alternate choice after completing a professional

course. See, for instance, Monica, who believed that she would have been stewardess:

I am certain that without a university, I could become a stewardess. After a three-month course, I will be equipped with everything I need to know, and the course costs roughly 1500 euros, you are guaranteed to receive the job at the end. (Monica, 24 years old-BA).

However, CSR perceptions are ambiguous. Paula remarked that she would have been more immersed in her own thoughts and unaware of the larger events unfolding. (Paula, 23 years old-BA). Sofia agreed with Paula, as her quote depicted ambiguous paths in the future: I would definitely not have joined my current company. I could have made different choices, and my life would have taken a different path. (Sofia, 25 years old-BA). Paula's skepticism originated not only from her age, but also from her childhood in a small village where she lived with her grandparents. Her phobia was aggravated by the fact that she had no contact with her parents, who had moved to the United States when she was seven years old, and was raised by grandparents with a low education and social background. Equally important, Sofia, who is also from the countryside, sees a university degree as a game changer in her life.

In line with the geographical location of job opportunities, CSRs believed that university attainment opened a crucial opportunity for mobility and an excellent reason to leave rural areas with scarce opportunities:

If I had not gone to university, I would likely have stayed home since I would not have had a reason to come to the Cluj, which would have been a more regrettable situation. I am from a rural area, and we have limited job prospects. (Lucian, 23 years old-BA).

When asked about the implications of not completing university-level education, the CSRs generally agreed with Lucian's perspective that they would not have the opportunity to work in large urban areas. They said they would probably stick to rural areas: I likely would not be in Cluj at present; instead, I might be at home and work at a store, possibly as a countryside person. (Anca, 26 years old-MA). Luisa shared that rural living is a feasible alternative. She highlights the limited availability of job opportunities in these places and concurs with this sentiment:

I believe I would have remained in my hometown Oradea, residing at home and holding a basic occupation. There are limited opportunities and activities available in the area, and I may be performing simple and unpaid family tasks. (Luisa, 24 years old-BA).

Luisa's quote demonstrates how CSRs from rural areas were concerned about their professional future, particularly the fear of unemployment.

Some CSRs felt that leaving Romania and finding work in other countries was the best option. They described it as follows: I would not have stayed in Romania without a university degree. Honestly, I would have left. I always intend to leave and work with my friends in Sweden. They worked in an English-speaking setting. (Andrei, 24 years old—BA). Mihai echoed Andrei, claiming that working abroad was nothing new. He said:

*I would have continued working as an auto mechanic in France. I used to work there during vacations or when I had free time. My father had a vehicle repair business in*

*France, and I have been working there since I was 16 (Mihai, 24 years old—BA).*

Mihai reflects on their own experience of working abroad. Even if he used to work there with the assistance of his father, he felt confident about managing alone, which shows a sense of responsibility and requires dedication. In addition to the apparent financial benefits, young university graduates' migration purposes are driven by the desire to gain practical experience and develop careers in different sectors. However, even outside Romania, many young graduates still need to overcome their underemployment.

## Perceived social benefits

This section discusses the perceived societal benefits of CSRs beyond earnings and the labor market. Many studies have measured the returns on higher education, particularly private benefits, in terms of enhanced lifelong earnings or productivity and claimed that higher levels of education lead to more favorable job opportunities compared to individuals with lower levels of education. Overall, the findings show that most perceived social benefits of higher education are at the micro and meso levels, and include becoming familiar with psychosocial needs, quality of life, recognition of their influence on others, and participation in social and environmental causes. For instance, Tom shares social benefits throughout his journey to develop friendships, community engagement, and global connections:

**Me:** What benefits do you consider universities to have so far?

**Tom:** I had no idea that, at a certain point in my life, I would develop friendships and the nature of the community in which I would engage before I came to university.

**Me:** what do you mean?

**Tom:** I had a dropout mindset, since no one believed I would stick with my studies and graduate from university. Ultimately, I have adopted behaviors and attitudes that are regarded as highly intelligent, and because of multicultural events and projects, I have friends all over the world. In other words, I have become a global citizen.

(Discussion with Tom 26 years old—MA, a CSR in break, recorded in fieldwork journal)

CSRs expressed their involvement in particular non-governmental organizations that have a significant influence on society, aligning with Tom's perspective on intercultural contexts. Vlad, one of the CSRs, discussed how his university experience familiarized him with Romanian politics and sparked his interest in matters concerning societal injustice.

My university experience has greatly influenced my perspective on politics both in Romania and globally. I have compelling arguments about globalization, corruption, poor governance, social injustice, and public health. My community trusts me and admires me for my intelligence. I have convinced numerous community members to be vaccinated against COVID-19 and have organized events and volunteer projects for teenagers. (Vlad, 25 years old—BA).

Perceived social advantages linked to attending university are commonly expressed in relation to personal growth and development, particularly in the context of transitioning into adulthood. To illustrate, Ana shared her pre-university experiences and recounted her own story of independently overcoming challenges related to renting, without relying on her parents' assistance:

During my study period at the Babes-Bolyai University, I witnessed how difficult it was to rent. I had no idea how to own an apartment in a large city. Over time, I can say that I have matured enough to take mortgage loans. I received aid from my parents, who were speechless when I mentioned the idea, and I am about to pay off my mortgage and no longer have to worry about rent. (Ana, 27 years old—MA)

Ana's quotes show signs of maturity in terms of ownership; that is, where she calls her home. Taking long-term initiatives and decisions to take mortgage loans highlights social benefits, likely due to educational externalities from others, including those of prior generations. In this sense, her parents are well-educated people in their mid-fifties living in rural areas, but with little assistance, they manage to see Ana owning an apartment and no more worry about renting.

#### **Sense of uncertainty surrounding the critical role of higher education**

While the outcomes of this investigation reveal that CSR narratives convey a predominantly favorable perception of personal and societal advantages, several CSRs expressed dissatisfaction and were full of confusion regarding the constructive function of higher education. A few CSRs argued that the time spent at university was not productive, with some CSRs, such as Ciprian, stating that I did not learn much from the university. I know honestly that this was a waste of time. I would have gone in another direction, and was still okay. (Ciprian, 23 years old-BA). Similarly, Patricia emphasized the significance of the mobility experience she had, as evidenced by her remarks:

The university did not significantly transform me. While I did not acquire French proficiency as much as I did in high school, my time in China was more influential in shaping my perspective. In contrast, the university system has altered my viewpoint (Patricia, 24 years old-BA).

Ciprian unequivocally rejected the importance of the Higher Education (HE) system and declared it a missed opportunity. Similarly, Robert, the manager, blamed HE and narrated this as follows:

Universities only prepare students to do more schooling and never put it into practice; however, some people are more inclined towards the academic environment. However, universities should prepare people for life and an authentic world, more than just the educational environment. (Robert, 34 years old-Male, Mid-level Manager).

While CSRs expressed concerns regarding the need for work readiness, some participants reported that numerous employers underestimated their abilities, regardless of their efforts to enhance their knowledge, skills, and experiences, and obtain university credentials. Despite having a university degree, expected to lead to

a bright future in post-university life, employers value more experience than a university degree and often view university education as a smooth process (Andrei, 24 years old-BA). Additionally, the CSRs mentioned the devaluation of Higher Education (HE) degrees:

Employers typically do not hold university graduates in high regard, because their degrees are widely available and relatively easy to obtain. Students can attend classes a several times a year, take exams, and hope to receive passing grades. After three years of study, they obtained their university degree (Jessica, 23 years old-BA).

Employers have also voiced concerns regarding the capabilities of recent graduates. Many graduates obtain university degrees each academic year, and some employers have reported that the abilities of recent graduates are questionable compared to those of previous university graduates:

Many graduates cannot obtain the practical knowledge that is crucial for success in the workforce. In Romania, degrees awarded by universities have become worthless due to the absence of esteemed learning opportunities. Job candidates are less competent than those in previous years (Dana, 42 years old-MA, Senior HR).

Dana's statement highlights the uncertainty surrounding the competencies of contemporary graduates, mainly for two primary reasons. First, the relevance of these studies in guaranteeing efficiency in the workplace needs to be investigated. Second, employers perceive universities and graduates as failing to enhance the skills required to navigate a rapidly evolving professional landscape.

I noticed the declining value of higher education in CSR narratives regarding the negative accounts of CSR roles. Our results illustrate the likely negative image of CSR roles. CSRs are considered unsuccessful by backline employees and friends:

My friends working in the IT sector often joke and refer to me as a loser because I am CSR. They laugh at me and question my university credentials. Some advise me to undertake coding courses in my future career (Stefania, 25 years old-BA).

The following statement shows a few distinct accounts of dissatisfaction and indignity among CSRs: Honestly, this is a position I am not particularly proud to hold. I usually refrain from informing those close to me of my current employment status (Ilie, 25 years old-BA). Similarly, the uncertain future of CSR positions marked some participants' narratives: Being a CSR may prevent all future employment opportunities and ruin your career (Matei, 24 years old-BA). There were instances in which CSRs were purposefully portrayed as low-skilled, unsuccessful, and stressed workers who were heavily controlled and underpaid:

Some colleagues from the upstairs floor perceive us as noisy floors or loud employees because of our customer call activities, believing that we dedicate more time to less productive tasks than they do. (Anca, 26 years old-MA).

Unlike quotes showing positive pay, some CSRs have argued about their financial hardships. Petru's quote shows financial issues agitating most CSRs: I am the only one among my friends who can barely afford a good vacation. (Petru, 24 years old-BA). Similarly,



this CSR echoed the financial issue and revealed her back up to challenge it:

The truth is that with this CSR job, I cannot handle paying my rent alone, and expenses in this city are high. Temporarily, I look for a part-time freelancer job. (Iustina, 24 years old-BA).

The results also revealed that numerous CSRs still seek financial assistance from family members:

My parents know that I am a multinational company employee and fail to understand why I keep asking them for monthly financial help as if I am still a university student. They are unaware that I am working at a customer support center. (Oana, 24 years old-BA).

Despite working in pleasant environments, CSRs endure intolerable employment-related stress. Iustina expressed her dissatisfaction and asserted that a career in a CSR company was not a field of interest. She stated:

Despite having good computers, offices, and recreational facilities, I feel stressed by the excessive work. Consequently, I lost hope for this job and its benefits. Given my current experience, it seems reasonable to conclude that a career in CSR is not something I aspire to do (Iustina, 24 years old-BA).

Iustina's quote emphasizes the importance of good facilities, that employers use to attract young graduates who may lack experience. However, this heavy workload has caused many customer service representatives to lose faith in the job and its benefits. As a result, some have reconsidered their career aspirations in the customer service field.

## Discussion

When I asked CSRs to share their thoughts on the benefits and values of having a university degree, CSRs' responses highlighted two primary themes: private and social benefits. Private benefits include personal growth, enhanced responsibility, improved organizational skills, self-sufficiency, employability, knowledge acquisition, and discovery of hidden potential. This result aligns with human capital theory, which posits that increased knowledge and capacity enhance organizational assets, and studies that link education with productivity (Vera-Toscano et al., 2017). Social benefits include development of friendships, community engagement, global connections, and participation in social activities. This finding supports prior research indicating that a solid network of friends and contacts can help with job opportunities and valuable connections with employers (Tomlinson, 2017). The findings suggest that higher education fosters personal growth and productivity and extends to non-economic outcomes, such as health, social engagement, and network building. These results concur with those of Winters (2018), who noted that higher education values encompass more than productivity, and Martin (2018), who included non-economic outcomes such as health and social engagement.

CSRs hold strong views on the return to education. The advantages of higher education on returns (finance) have grown over time, lending credibility to the human capital theory, which posits the productive value of education. This is evidenced by higher average rates of return to schooling among university graduates, indicating that tertiary education is worthwhile (Zgreaban, 2013). Oancea et

al. (2017) provided specific insights into the return on investment in education in Romania. Their findings reveal that, while bachelor's and master's degrees positively impact income, the return on investment for a doctorate degree is lower than that for a master's degree. Furthermore, this study highlights the influence of the field of study on return on investment, with fields such as medicine, economics, and law offering the highest returns. However, the claims of increased lifetime earnings due to people with HE levels are arguable, as university graduates might remain underemployed.

The ethnographic results show that CSRs believe that their university experience has prepared them for the workforce by fostering collaboration, effective time management, and job readiness. Interestingly, the results revealed positive attitudes among CSRs who claimed to be resilient in the severe graduate labor market. This resilience is a testament to the value of higher education and the strength it instills in CSRs. However, not all CSRs view higher education positively, with some expressing dissatisfaction and confusion regarding its constructive functions. Romanian higher education institutions are commonly regarded as responsible for generating graduates who are readily employable and, in the process, meet the demands of the job market. Employers have also raised concerns about recent graduates' capabilities, questioning their studies' relevance in ensuring workplace efficiency and their ability to navigate the evolving professional landscape. This result echoes the evidence that casts doubt on the validity of the human capital view of the relationship between education and productivity (De Schepper et al., 2024). According to Gavriluta (2020), the challenges of employability and entrepreneurship development persist in Romania's current unstable labor market.

Additionally, there is a prevailing misunderstanding regarding the role of higher education institutions and universities and ambiguity regarding the value of university credentials in the Romanian labor market. Moreover, employers perceive secondary and tertiary education curricula as excessively theoretical and need more emphasis on the practical implementation of information and problem solving (EC, 2023).

Some CSRs consider leaving Romania to work abroad as a viable option to gain practical experience and develop their careers, despite the challenges they may face. This result echoes Gavriluta's (2020) study, which indicated that highly trained and highly skilled graduates prefer well-paid professions abroad because the labor market in Romania is not appealing to them. It provides them with neither material nor symbolic satisfaction, nor genuine possibilities to develop and capitalize on their potential.

There is significant evidence of a skill mismatch in the Romanian labor market. Skill shortage has been documented in several sectors. Institutional shortcomings in the Romanian education system coupled with emigration patterns have led to an insufficient number of highly skilled workers available to sustain the pace of growth (EC, 2019). The study conducted by Botezat et al. (2024) emphasizes that pursuing a different subject of study in college compared to the one completed in high school raises the likelihood of experiencing a skill mismatch in the first job obtained after graduation. Being overqualified in initial employment increases the likelihood of becoming excessively overqualified five years later. Young Romanian graduates must contend with their employability, which is deemed not to be at the level of the rapidly changing



world of outsourcing; on the other hand, they constantly interact and cope with the education-job mismatch (Zamfir et al., 2020).

The results of this study provide strong support for pessimistic views on CSR roles, as CSRs face uncertain careers and diminish value of higher education. Our observations, which align with Lloyd's (2013) and McFadden's (2015) results, predict that CSR roles would continue to move towards greater routines, division of labor, and target-driven processes as an efficient, cost-effective strategy rather than a quality-driven process. The CSRs' expectations were not in line with the reality of the outsourced working culture, where employees take their careers into their own hands regarding professional and personal development. CSRs face limited job mobility and enduring stress owing to heavy workloads and low pay. These results align with those of previous observational studies, that found that working in CSR roles is challenging (Deery et al., 2010). The stress, burnout, and exhaustion demonstrated in the study by Lloyd (2013) indicate that the demands of call center work negatively affect the individuals required to perform affective tasks. These results corroborate the ideas of Wegge et al. (2010), who suggest a distance between what CSRs say and how they feel. This phenomenon is known as emotional dissonance.

## Conclusion

The present paper explored the perceived value of higher education and, discussed the meaning that participants attribute to higher education based on their work status mainly CSRs. The results indicate that private and social benefits characterize the perceived usefulness and advantages of higher education. The perceived private benefits of higher education include personal growth, enhanced responsibility, self-sufficiency, and employability. The CSRs believed that university degrees provided better job opportunities, especially in large cities, and facilitated their mobility from rural areas with limited prospects. They noted that their education-job mismatch situation pushed some CSRs to migrate to different developed countries, and they partially recognized the role of higher education in their work integration. Social benefits included the development of friendships, community engagement, global connections, and involvement in social causes.

However, some CSRs expressed dissatisfaction with the higher education system, considering it unproductive because of a lack of practical skills or missed opportunities because of uncertain returns. A few CSRs argued that the time spent at the university was not productive, with some emphasizing the significance of their mobility experiences. Similarly, some CSRs voiced their dissatisfaction with the purpose of higher education (HE) and pointed out a lack of readiness in the job market after graduation. Some statements revealed a lack of self-confidence, and their futures were uncertain upon completing university studies. CSRs emphasized the difficulty of transitioning from university to workforce. Many graduates obtain university degrees each academic year, and some employers have reported that the abilities of recent graduates are questionable compared to previous university graduates. In addition to a lack of work readiness, some CSRs reported that numerous employers underestimated their abilities regardless of their efforts to enhance their knowledge, skills, experience, and complete tertiary levels.

In addition, since the CSRs examined here are overqualified because they work in positions below their study and skills level

and in mismatched domain, university degree devaluation was a topic of concern for some of the participants. However, the declining value of the higher education assumption is based on a small study group, within business service sector and therefore requires further verification in different sectors. The generalizability of the findings presented in this thesis is restricted to the specific context of outsourced business process outsourcing (BPO) and shared service center (SSC) models, with a particular focus on customer support roles in Romania. While this paper focuses on an issue that is not entirely new in developed countries, it is relevant these days in Romania, manifested in the graduate employability phenomenon and the common education-job mismatch.

I contributed by shedding light on the perceived value of higher education in contemporary outsourced jobs. Critiques of the higher education system's failure to adequately prepare students for the job market are well documented. Employers globally assert that universities should adjust their curricula to align with the evolving needs of the job market, prioritizing practical skills over theoretical knowledge. The rapidly changing skill set demanded by the labor market presents a challenge for universities to keep up with this pace. Collaborative efforts between industries and universities are essential to ensure that young graduates possess the skills necessary for their successful careers. This collaboration would yield significant impacts at the individual, organizational, and national levels of Romania. This ethnographical study recognized that universities are already trying to adapt their curricula to meet the changing needs of the job market. However, our results prove the possibility that universities may not fully address the rapidly changing skills required in the labor market because of the conflicting interests from demand-supply sides likely the older generation maintained their communist feelings and working strategies, and new generations embraced the neoliberal agenda. The lack of a common goal continues to hinder the prosperity of many young people and victims of such inflexibility. Collaboration between industries and universities will not be as effective as expected in the near future, potentially leading to the generation of young people in precarious conditions, without the necessary skills for successful careers.

In Romania, the sociology of work and employment is likely to receive increased academic attention because of various unexplained aspects of the education-job mismatch phenomenon, as uncertainty regarding career prospects and precarious work is increasing concerns for numerous employees and remains prevalent among university graduates employed as CSRs. This underscores the ongoing need for future sociological qualitative studies to shed light on and explain the complex challenges young university graduates face during their transition from academia to the professional world and the declining value of higher education credentials.

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