



GRADUATES AND EMPLOYABILITY – A QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL

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Abstract: *Assessing the graduate's employability and the professional path became a very important tool for every university that is preoccupied with the professional insertion of its graduates into the labor market. In these circumstances, universities try to find solutions to collect information about the graduate's opinions about their qualification, competencies, and the way that studying at the university contributed to a good transition from school to the labor market. This research aimed to answer questions such as: What is the professional path of the graduates?; What are the characteristics of the transition from school to the labor market process?; What are the fields/sectors that graduates are employed in?; What are the main positive or negative aspects in assessing the elements that characterize the appreciation of the school's role in integrating into the labor market?; What are the future intentions of graduates regarding their professional goals? By trying to answer these questions, this research revealed a series of conclusions that highlighted that there are no significant differences in appreciating the professional path, referring to employability, entrepreneurship, time of first employment, the type of employment companies, and intentions regarding future employment.*

JEL classification: jel I21, jel I23.

Keywords: professional path, employability, entrepreneurship, labor market

1. Considerations regarding the concept of “employability”

Changes in the labor market, because of the new trends and economic challenges, are affecting more and more employability at different levels. The employability of university graduates is not easy to define, as definitions range from the ability to be employed (Abrantes, et al.,2022)



to a knowledge, soft skills, and other personal attributes mix (Aviso, et al.,2021) (Yorke,2006). The measurement of graduate employability is also challenging (Aviso, et al., 2021), although monitoring employment outcomes of graduates has become part of university assurance procedures in some of the European (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice,2016) and Asia-Pacific countries that have committed to work towards achieving improved graduate employability (Borah, et al.,2021) and even introduced institutional protocols to enhance achieving performance standards concerning graduate employability (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice,2016). In the absence of a generally agreed definition of employability (Cheng, et al.,2022), several methods of accountability and measurements have been adopted.

In 2012, the European Council, for example, proposed an indicator based on the percentage of graduates, between 20 and 34 years old, that are employed three years after graduation and set a target of at least 82% of them being employed by 2020 (Council of the European Union,2012). In 2015, higher education providers in the United Kingdom were assessed according to the percentage of their graduates gaining employment (Cheng, et al.,2022). Although these statistics and targets are useful, this type of measurement is both "crude and faulty", since it overlooks external factors that critically shape a person's employability, such as local socio-cultural and political factors that are out of the reach of higher education providers and it only considers the actual job acquisition, missing on the fact that employability scales graduate's potential to obtain and retain a job. Concerns have been raised that using only employment rate statistics as key indicators for employability will diminish the important role of knowledge creation in universities, pushing them to "become increasingly vocation-driven" (Cheng, et al.,2022). Other researchers (Gleeson, et al.,2022) (Pham,2021a) (Jackson & Bridgstock,2018) (Tomlinson,2017b) believe that measuring student success by employment outcomes is "fundamentally flawed" if it relies narrowly on full-time employment outcomes at a single point in time. They emphasize that the measurement of employability of graduates should not focus on short-term job achievements (Pham,2021b) and propose more nuanced indicators of success that take into account students' motivations and attitudes towards study and careers or the different ways in which they contribute to the economy and society through their professional achievements. The research starts from models based on the set of assets that students build at a personal level and how these relate to future employment prospects. For example, Tomlinson's



model (Tomlinson & Nghia,2020) (Tomlinson,2017a) encompasses five key capital resources: human capital, social capital, cultural capital, identity capital, and psychological capital which together, “inform and shape students” own relations to future employment, as well as other’s perceptions of their employability.

The formulation, development, and use of employability indicators can be challenging (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice,2016). However, measuring employability is important otherwise, it could be difficult to motivate stakeholders to consider why they should take action (Borah, et al.,2021). Since the graduates’ early career success, can be predictive of their long-term career success (Lo Presti, et al.,2021) a call for action is necessary, as the corpus of the literature shows that the effects of graduate unemployability range from poor economic development and psychological problems to social unrest in some countries (Mgaiwa,2021) (da Silva & Marcolani,2015) (Bilgiç & Yilmaz,2013) (Pervaiz, et al.,2012). Self-assessment employment destinations and early careers of higher education graduates tracking (European Commission,2022) are one of the usual surveying methods of graduates from higher education institutions, also called "alumni survey" or "follow-up survey" (Schomburg,2003).

2. Measuring employability in the tertiary system – a study case

2.1 Setting the scene

In Romania, small steps have been made toward measuring the employability of graduates. The European Commission’s report on “Structural Indicators on Graduate Employability in Europe – 2016”, focuses on five issues concerning: regular labor market forecasting, employers’ involvement in quality assurance, work placements for students, career guidance for students, and graduate tracking, revealed a very interesting overview. The report showed that in 23 education systems in the EU, labor market forecasting was being conducted regularly. Although in Romania this was done on an ad hoc basis, higher educational planning at the central level in Romania reported taking the forecast results into account in the settling up or accreditation process of new study programs and/ or in the adaption process of existing programs to the needs of the labor market. In terms of employers’ involvement in quality assurance procedures in higher education, the report has shown that in Romania employers were not involved in external quality assurance processes. As for requirements or incentives for student work placements, in Romania, these were applied to all higher education programs, showing a strong regulatory



approach in place. Career guidance services were available to all students within higher education, whilst external guidance services were available only to some students in Romania. The use of regular graduate tracking surveys indicator showed that graduate tracking surveys were conducted in nearly every European country. In Romania, it was mainly done on an ad hoc basis at the national and/ or regional level, but no systematic efforts were being made for using the information that was collected (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice,2016).

The university that makes the object of the present research is a comprehensive university that has more than 20000 students in 18 faculties, with 100 bachelor programs, 83 master study programs, and 21 Ph.D. programs.

According to the University's Strategic Plan, assuring the requested skills for graduates represents a major goal and, as a consequence, a system of measuring the professional itinerary of graduates was implemented.

2.2 Methodology

To evaluate the professional itinerary of the graduates, quantitative research was conducted. The research instrument is represented by a questionnaire, that was created in a specific way for bachelor, master, and Ph.D. study levels. The questionnaire is filled out one year after graduation; the respondents expressed their consent when filling out the questionnaire.

Research scope: Analysis of the occupational path of the graduates of Transilvania University in Braşov and the creation of a long-term monitoring system of the socio-professional insertion of the graduates.

Research objectives:

- Identifying the degree of employability (by evaluating the number of graduates in the labor field - employees or owners of their own commercial company -, unemployed graduates)
- Analyzing the transition process from school to the labor market (time of first employment, or the connection between job and school graduate)
- Identifying the types of employing organizations and the sectors/fields in which university graduates work (type of employing company – a company with private capital, public institution, foundation/association)
- Determining the future intentions of graduates regarding possible employment in Romania or abroad
- Socio-demographic characterization of the graduates

RESULTS

According to the collected data, the degree of employability between 2017 and 2021 shows the following:

1. Regarding **employability**, as Fig 1 shows, most of the bachelor level are employed. The percentages were between 75.98% (2017) to 79.15% (2021), with a maximum of 82.79% (2020). The unemployed graduates represent the next category, with percentages between 20.09% (2017) and 17.96% (2021), with a maximum of 25.88% (2018). The less-represented percentage refers to graduates that started their businesses - with a minimum of 2.76% (2019) and a maximum of 5.61% (2020).

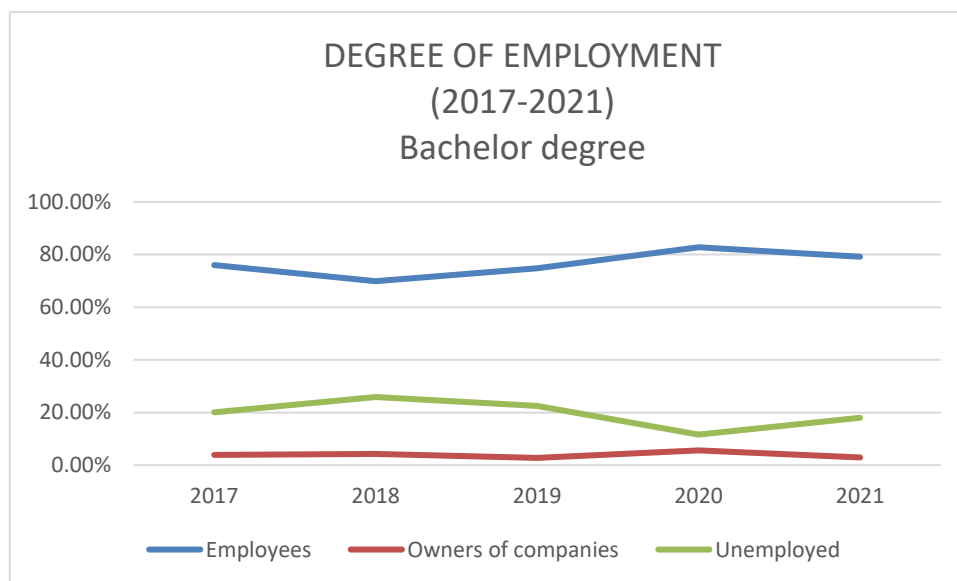


Fig 1 – Degree of employment – Bachelor’s degree (2017-2021)

At the master level, the situation is similar, as results from Fig 2. The percentages are different, as follows: the employment rate was between 85.79% (2019) to 94.16% (2021); the unemployment rate was between 2.92% (2021) to 13.22% (2019); the entrepreneurs were between 0.25% (2017) to 2.92% (2021).

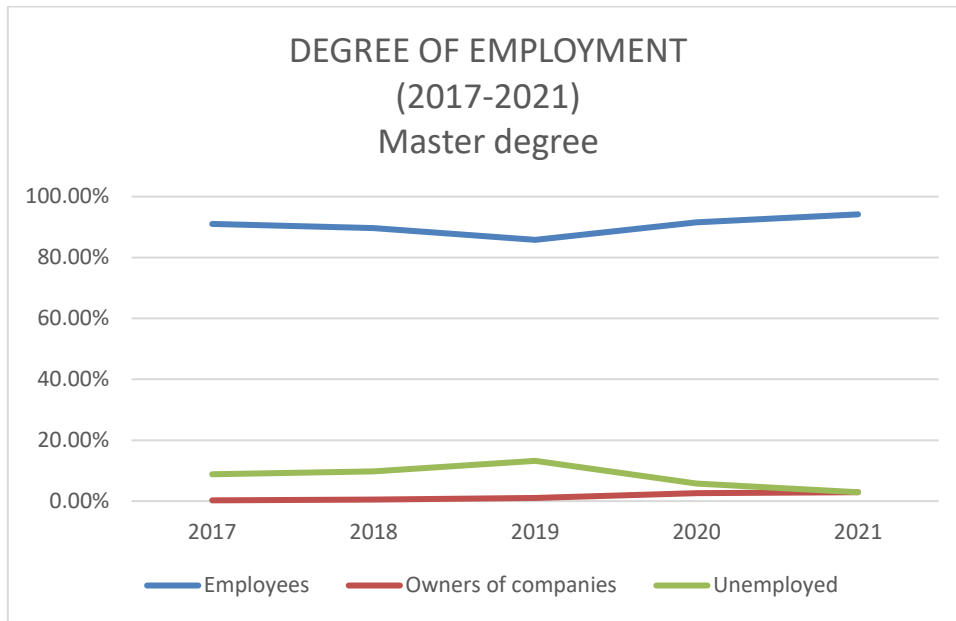


Fig 2 – Degree of employment – Master’s degree (2017-2021)

2. Regarding the time of **first employment**, a bachelor’s degree most of the graduates had their first jobs during their bachelor studies, with a minimum of 51.09% (2017) and a maximum of 69.63% (2021) (see Fig 3).

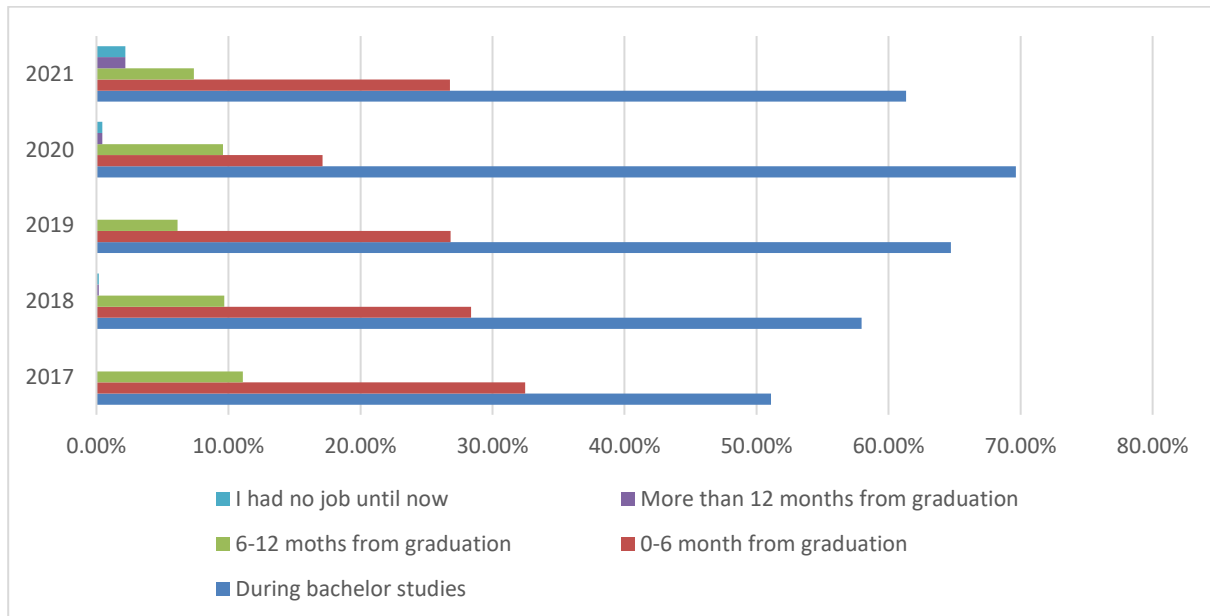


Fig 3 – Time of first employment – Bachelor’s degree (2017-2021)



The situation was similar at the master study programs, most of the graduates declared that they got their first job during their bachelor studies (see Fig 4).

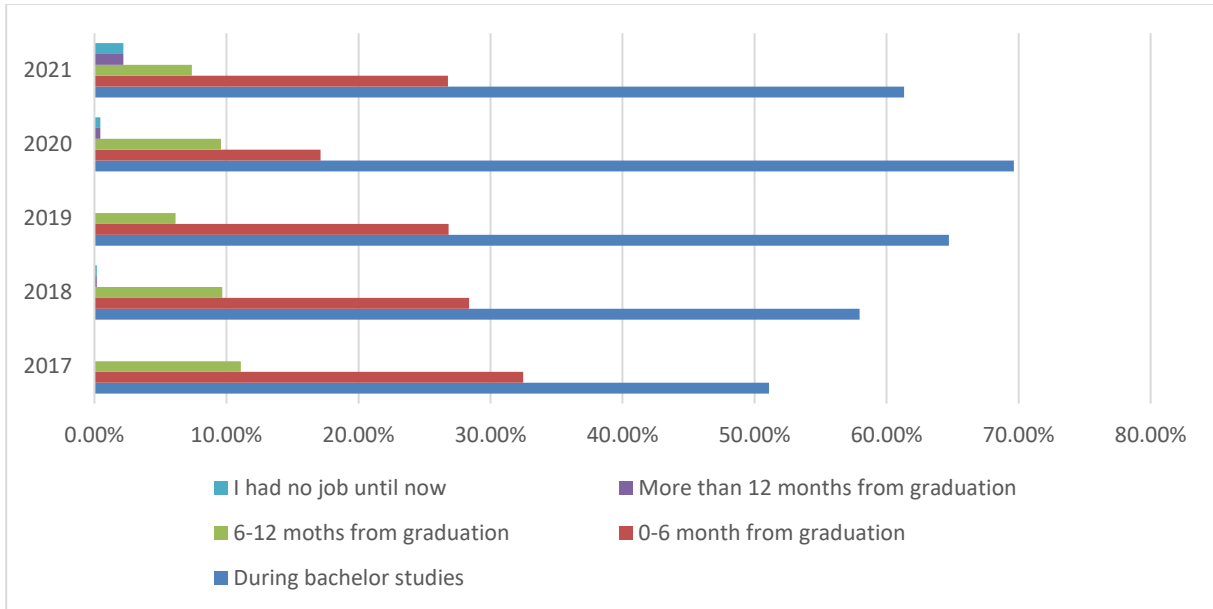


Fig 4 – Time of first employment – Master’s degree (2017-2021)

3. Graduates assessed in a large percentage their positive appreciation regarding their opinion about the way that studying at the university helped them to manage their job requests, both at the bachelor level, as well as the master level (see Fig 5 and Fig 6).

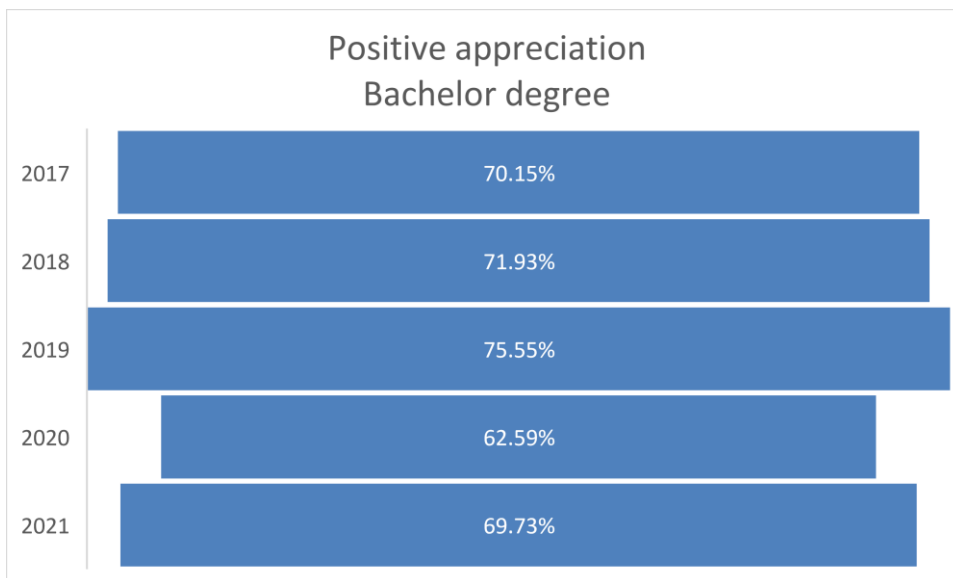


Fig 5 – Positive appreciation of the acquired competencies and job requests – Bachelor degree (2017-2021)

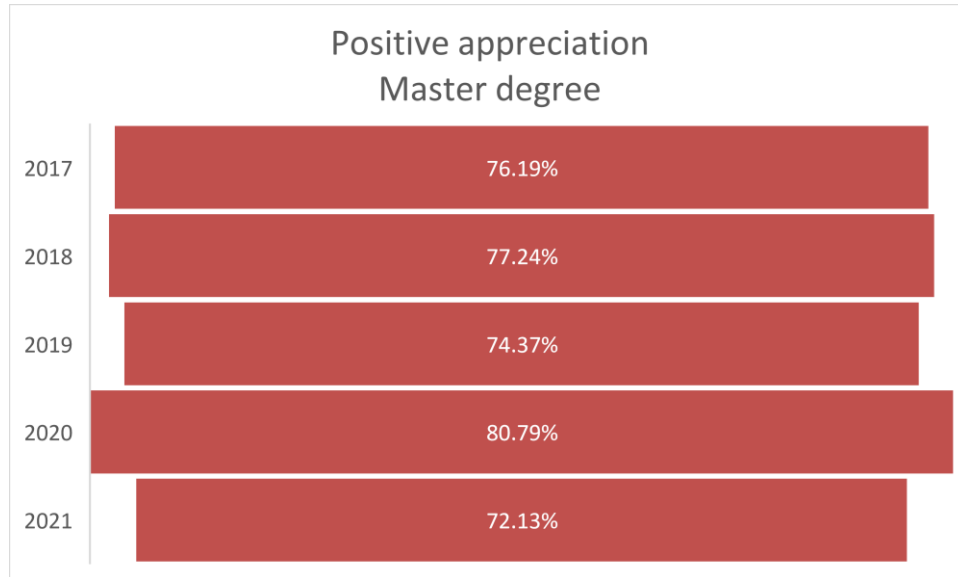


Fig 6 – Positive appreciation of the acquired competencies and job requests – Master degree (2017-2021)

4. Regarding the **type of employing company**, most of the bachelor graduates are employed by private companies, with an increasing trend, while the percentage of graduates working in public organizations decreased in the analyzed time (see Fig 7).

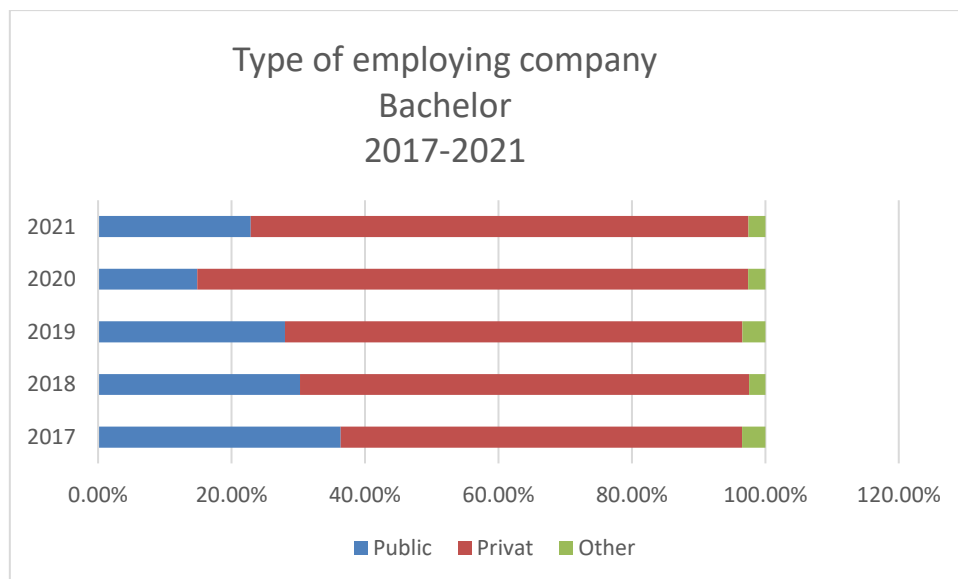


Fig 7 – Type of employing company – Bachelor's degree (2017-2021)



On a contrary, the master’s degree, situation reveals that the percentage of graduates Employed in the private sector decreased, in balance with the increase of the graduates from the public sector (see Fig 8).

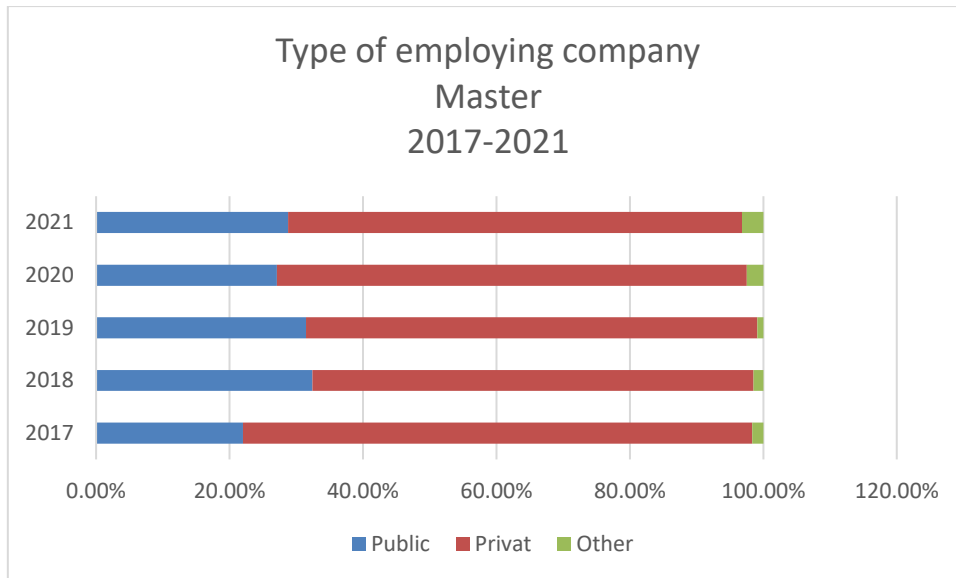


Fig 8 – Type of employing company – Master’s degree (2017-2021)

5. **Graduates’ intention of future possible employment** revealed in a relatively constant way the preference for the Romanian labor market, both, bachelor graduates, as well as master graduates were more interested in finding a job in Romania (see Fig 9 and Fig 10).

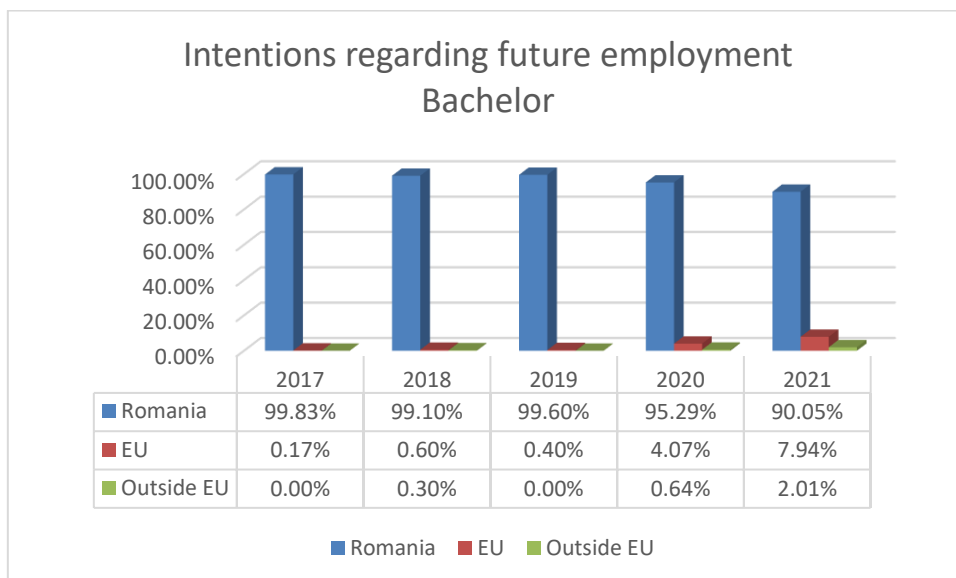


Fig 9 – Intentions regarding future employment – Bachelor’s degree (2017-2021)

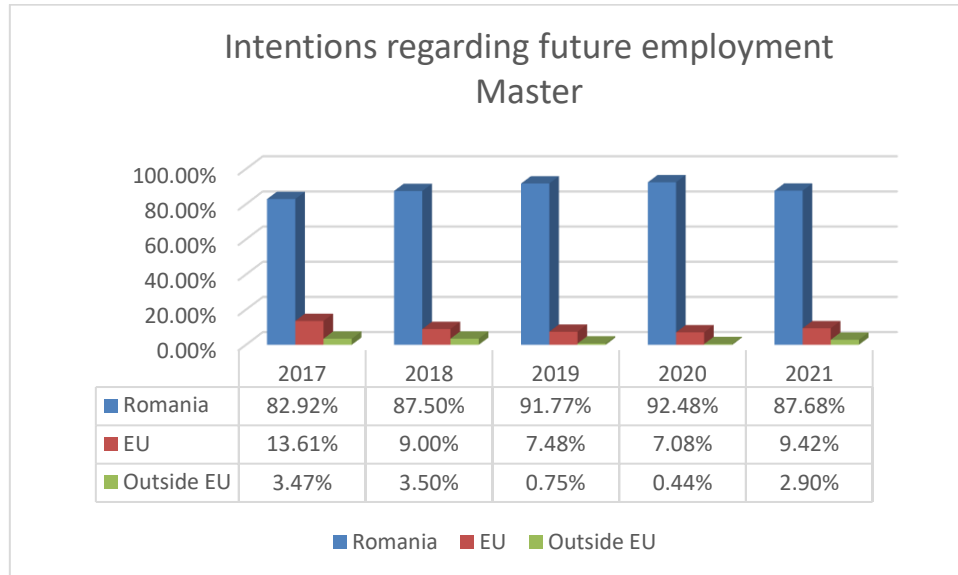


Fig 10 – Intentions regarding future employment – Master’s degree (2017-2021)

CONCLUSIONS

Assessing the degree of employability became a very important goal for universities. In recent years, the dynamics of the labor market have particularly demanded the universities - as labor force providers -, which led to the increase of concern to ensure the quantitative and qualitative needs of the labor force. Also, the European and global context generated a special specificity, which determined the universities to act not only as local and national labor force suppliers but also as global labor force suppliers.

This research revealed the following conclusions:

- Most of the graduates are employed, both at the bachelor's and the master's level, and in the last 5 years, the employability rate has been increasing both for the bachelor's degree and for the master's degree
- Entrepreneurship represents a materialization of the graduates' professional career, but at significantly lower values compared to the employment solution. Regarding the percentage evolution of entrepreneurial graduates, the trend is decreasing, and the percentages are significantly lower for the master's degree than for the bachelor's degree
- For both bachelor's and master's graduates, the first job was during their studies



- There is a significant positive assessment of the graduates regarding the connection between the completed study program and the job. However, a diminution of this opinion can be highlighted for bachelor's degree graduates
- The largest percentage of graduates, work in the private sector, but the percentage of employees in the public sector is increasing
- The vast majority of graduates from both study cycles expressed their future intention to work in Romania

These conclusions can be used for implementing the right strategies to adopt the professional offers of the university to ensure a good professional insertion of its graduates on the labor market.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST AND PLAGIARISM: The authors declare no conflict of interest or plagiarism.

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