

Article

Service based learning – a bespoke tool to turn prospective students into better employees

Cristina Elena NICOLESCU¹ (Romania)

Teodora Ioana BIȚOIU¹ (Romania)

Claudia Elena MARINICĂ¹ (Romania)

Citation: Nicolescu C. E., Bițoiu T. I., Marinică C.E. (2023). Service based learning – a bespoke tool to turn prospective students into better employees. *Cross-Cultural Management Journal*, XXV, Issue (2/2023), 131-141.

Received: 26 October 2023

Revised: 07 December 2023

Published: 08 December 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the authors. Published by SEA Open Research.

This article is an open access article

distributed under the terms and

conditions of the Creative Commons

Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract: Universities play a fundamental role when it comes to professional life and for this purpose, they focus on innovative forms of pedagogy that stimulate the development of students' skills and their greater adaptability to the requirements of the labour market. The present paper is triggered by the importance and need to address the Service Based Learning (SBL) method in the field of administrative sciences as a link between student-centred pedagogies, promoting students' social responsibility and improving their insertion on the labour market specifically for the Romanian public administration that has the duty to satisfy the general interest established by law, by reporting on the impact of adopting a Government Decision which approved the operating of pre-university education units with pilot-status, experimental and application units. The paper highlights the fact that the institutionalization of the SBL method is necessary, being a present-day and appropriate approach as future generations of students seem to be favouring the experimental and applicative aspects in education, so SBL will become a good tool for organizational promotion meant to attract future candidates trained according to the newly launched educational approach.

Keywords: experiential learning; Service Based Learning; University promotion; public administration; labour market;

¹ Faculty of Public Administration, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania

The country of origin of each author is specified in parentheses

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to present the results of a preliminary analysis regarding the need and capacity of Romanian universities to adapt to the guide points of the new socioeconomic context that was quickly and radically shaped by the consequences of the economic and financial crisis triggered by global coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID 19) pandemic, having as a target the implementing of adapted mechanisms (curriculum, skills, methodologies, procedure rules, strategies, partnerships, etc.) to ensure the unequivocal alignment of their educational offer to the requirements of the labour market and at the same time to show increased resilience in times of increased uncertainty similar to the ones we witness at the moment.

From a methodological point of view, the analysis is mainly based on the historical and comparative method. A series of scientific, statistical and legal milestones covering the time period 2009-2023 were taken into account. Conclusions presented by specialized literature are compared and correlated and which concern the use of promotion as a tool of the marketing mix and strategy to increase the competitive advantage of Romanian universities, as well as the role and importance of Service Based Learning (SBL) as a continuing and binding element of HEIs' efforts for a better insertion on the labor market of the students they train. In this sense, a better understanding of the context was ensured by the presentation and interpretation of some statistical data regarding the insertion of young people on the labor market and the attendance level registered for universities in the period following the accession to the European Union (2007- 2023). The final conclusions are emphasized by referring to a major legislative change involving the Romanian education system, namely the approval of the establishment and the functioning of pre-university education units with the status of pilot, having experimental and application units (Government Decision no. 559/2020).

Service-Based Learning (SBL) is a dynamic educational approach that transcends traditional classroom boundaries by integrating community service with academic learning (Vinokur et. al, 2023, p. 3). At its core, SBL enhances and fructifies the interpersonal connections between students and the communities they serve, fostering meaningful interactions and collaborations for mutual benefit. SBL intersects with universities' focus on educational offerings, acquisition of skills, and insertion into the labor market in different key ways, such as providing students with opportunities to develop a wide range of transferable skills that are

highly valued in the labor market, allowing students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts, exposing them when engaging in service-based activities through university programs to professional environments and expectations, providing students with valuable networking opportunities, helping students to develop employability skills. The cross-section element of this comparative approach is made obvious when observing the universities focusing on the following three main points: *educational offer - acquired skills - insertion on the labour market*, the present article addressing the field of administrative sciences that must prepare future public administration employees with a vocation for the public office and devotion to the general interest as it is provided by law. For this reason, the analysis refers to the aspect of universities using one of the four tools of the marketing mix, namely promotion, to highlight the progress made by these institutions in their approach to solving this trilemma and their degree of adaptation to the new paradigm of online schools.

To demonstrate how SBL benefits universities in enhancing educational offerings, acquiring skills, and facilitating insertion into the labor market, a comprehensive approach utilizing various tools and methods were employed. So, the methodology used in the paper benefited from a multi-method, concurrent approach, in the sense that both qualitative and quantitative methods were used simultaneously to study the same phenomenon and the same data collection, being based on the analysis of documents reviews, official national documents research in the field or based on relevant information collected from national and international reference databases. This comprehensive approach allows us to reflect on the impact of SBL on enhancing educational offerings, acquiring skills, and facilitating insertion into the labor market and for a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted benefits of SBL for students, institutions, and society as a whole.

UNIVERSITY EDUCATIONAL OFFER AND INSERTION ON THE LABOUR MARKET. FLASHBACK

In 2010, the critical research on the use of promotion as a marketing tool at the level of the Romanian university system consisting at that time of 87 universities (56 state higher education institutions and 31 accredited private higher education institutions) showed an extremely low percentage of universities (5.56% state and 10.71% private, respectively) that used institutionalized marketing

strategies and sociological surveys, for a better positioning on the educational market (defined as the ensemble formed by accredited universities, candidates for admission to universities and university students (students, master students, doctoral students) they served (Nicolescu, 2010, p. 7).

Thus, eight key initiatives were identified used by universities at that time to promote the educational offer (Nicolescu, 2010, p. 5): *the use of promotional materials* distributed in printed format; *promoting national or international certification* of the quality of educational services provided (e.g. the entity has a "high degree of trust" – a national rating certificate that confirms the fact that from an institutional point of view, Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS), there is a management that ensures the quality of study programs and that the academic standards for awarding graduation diplomas are respected (ARACIS, 2017, p. 45); *presentation of partnerships* concluded with similar educational institutions, research units or other bodies in the country and abroad in the respective fields of interest; *presentation of the resources* allocated to the good development of the entire educational process; *implementation of online and/or centralized admission* at the level of the entire university; *presentation of employment prospects and opportunities* after finalising studies and graduation; *institutionalization of strategies and sociological surveys*; *the use of the "priority average" admission criterion primarily* when choosing candidates for admission in the undergraduate university cycle. Admission using "priority average" criterion is based on a distribution of candidates in two stages as follows: 1) the candidates are ordered in descending order, according to the admission average; 2) the list is scrolled from the first to the last, each candidate being distributed in their turn. If there is a vacancy in the study program from the first option of the candidate in the registration form, then he will be assigned to it. If there is no vacancy, there is a new check for vacancies in the second option on the form, then in the third, etc. The candidate will thus be assigned to the first study program for which there are vacancies (in the order of preferences mentioned in the registration form). If there are no vacancies for any of the candidate's options, he will remain on the waiting list for the next phases of the current admission session and will be allocated according to future vacancies. Based on this criterion, point 1 will always be followed first and only later will point 2 be considered, regardless of the candidate's options.)

Regarding the predilection in using these initiatives, the state universities distinguished themselves by the interest shown to the promotion of the "priority average" admission criterion (66.67%), closely followed by the presentation of certifications held regarding the quality of educational services provided. On the other hand, online registration was used only in a very small percentage (7.41%). For the accredited private universities, the "priority average" and the concluded partnerships represented strong points in the institutional promotion (89.29%, respectively, 60.71%), the interest being shifted towards the presentation of the resources (financial, patrimonial, human, technological, etc.) held (92, 86%). (Nicolescu, 2010, p. 6). Online enrolment was also little exploited in the case of private education (10.71%), but private universities that used this method of enrolment were also those that had marketing strategies and institutionalized sociological research tools (10.71%) (Nicolescu, 2010, p. 6). It was judgement the universities did not emphasize in the institutional promotion the perspectives that the students had after graduation and, implicitly, their employment possibilities after graduation. These aspects that highlighted the connection of the educational offer and the skills of the graduates to the labour market were emphasised by an extremely low percentage of universities, only 25.9% of state universities and only 32.14% of accredited private universities.

These statistical data reveal that in 2010 the universities used an indoor and not an outdoor approach in their promotion/marketing policy, which was based on different components: 1) *the legal form in the case of state universities*; 2) *resources and flexibility in operation*, for accredited private universities.

In 2011, at a very short time after the entry into force of the National Education Law no.1/2011, which entered into force on 09.02.2011, the statistics concerning the promoting of university values and the image of universities certified a hypothesis outlined in the analysis conducted in 2010, namely that one of the factors that overwhelmingly influences (almost 100%) the candidate's decision to enrol in a university is represented by the legal form of the university, state or private, the candidate opting for one form or another depending on personal interests (Nen, Nicolescu and Rădulescu, 2014, p. 5). Highlighting the correlation between educational offer and labour market requirements, as well as teaching staff skills become important for candidates that apply for a master's programme (a weight average of 45-55%), where the criteria of admission and legal form of the university lose importance, maintaining a low level, 25-30%, and

35-40% respectively (Nen, Nicolescu and Rădulescu, 2014, p. 5). In other words, for students, the degree of bespoke between the educational offer, skills and the labour market become important when their access to the labour market is facilitated by completing the first cycle of studies and ending with obtaining the bachelor's degree.

National policies in the field of education have gradually coagulated the efforts of universities to promote their own educational offers. An example in this regard is the implementation in 2015 of the first official platform for the promotion of Romanian higher education at the global level, namely the government portal www.studyinromania.gov.ro.

The Study in Romania (SIR) platform is one of the results of the "Internationalization, equity and university management for quality higher education (IEMU)" project, carried out in the period 2014-2015 by the Executive Unit for the Financing of Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation (UEFISCDI), public institution subordinate to the Ministry of National Education. Starting from 2017, SIR supports in a unified way the participation of Romanian universities in international events to promote the educational offer, being "the most complete website with information about university study options in Romania" (Fiț et. al, 2021, p. 39).

Compared to the period 2010-2011, nowadays "promotion and communication in the online environment, especially on social networks (social media), is gaining more and more importance" (Fiț et. al, 2021, p. 35). An important impetus in this direction was given by the COVID-19 pandemic, with social distancing rules influencing "the way of communication and promotion of all institutions, globally" (Fiț et. al, 2021, p. 35). Thus, in 2020 a percentage of 75% of state universities used the online admission system (Fiț et. al, 2021, p. 56).

A recent study on the promotion potential of Romanian state universities highlights that Romanian universities "have the same marketing tools at their disposal as universities in North America and Europe, but they do not use them in an integrated and unified manner" (Fiț et al, 2021, p. 91).

Currently, similar to the 2009-2010 period, the promotion/marketing policies implemented by the Romanian universities faced a series of problems and does not present a substantial consolidation. With reference to state universities, according to the most recent specialized studies, in 2020 almost half of these higher education institutions did not present coordinated and coherent marketing activities (Fiț et. al, 2021, p. 31). The deficiencies of university educational marketing will make it difficult to

overcome some problems reported in the specialized literature since 2011, accentuated by the context of the COVID 19 pandemic and which continue to affect the resilience of universities:

- *specific problems related to the cycle of undergraduate studies*, namely, the decrease in the quality level of the Bacalaureate exam (the results do not reflect the potential of the future students). The evolution of the results obtained in the bacalaureate exam for the period 2009-2023, shows for the year 2023 (the promotion that was affected by the pandemic in the 10th and 11th grades) a decrease compared to 2022 in the weight of the grades in the range 9-10, accompanied by an increase in grades in the range (6.5 - 8.5) (Figure 1).

- *specific problems related to the cycle of master's university studies* which mainly concern the inability to correlate the studied curriculum with the labour market offer and the diversity of the candidates' profile (the field of study in which they hold their bachelor's degree is different from the domain for their master's thesis) (Nen, Nicolescu and Rădulescu, 2014, p. 2).

These deficient aspects were also accentuated in the period 2011-2023 by the underfunding of the national education field below the annual threshold of 6% of GDP established by Article 8 of Law no. 1/2011 of national education, with its subsequent amendments and additions, normative act repealed however in 2023 by Law no. 199/2023 of higher education. Since the adoption of Law no. 1/2011, the granting of 6% of GDP for Education has been prorogued annually by various normative acts, the annual share of education expenditure in GDP with a minimum of 2.8% in the year and a maximum of 3.9% in 2011 (Figure 2).

This chronic underfunding has a negative impact on the HEI's ability to provide adequate educational infrastructure, as well as a top level in terms of innovation and excellence, as well as their competitiveness and attractiveness on the global stage.

ASPECTS OF STUDENT ENROLMENT IN ROMANIAN UNIVERSITIES FROM 2007 TO DATE

The analysis concerning students' insertion on the labour market must refer to two fundamental aspects, *employment*, a relevant field for identifying the main expectations of students and employers and *the degree of enrolment in university*. During 2014-2020, as an EU Member State, in order to implement the *Europe 2020 Strategy* (European Commission, 2010), Romania has assumed the following target by

2020 for education: the rate of early school drop-out of 11.3% and the ratio/percentage of population with higher education and ages between 30 and 34 (the group considered a vulnerable group from the perspective of the risk of poverty and social exclusion that was monitored in the framework of the Europe 2020 Strategy) years of 26.7%.

Regarding the employment rate in Romania for the period 2014-2018, there was a constant increase in the employed population (i.e. people between 20-64 years old) reaching in 2018 the value of (68.8%) approaching both of the Europe 2020 national target (70%), but also of the EU28 average for the year 2018 of this indicator (72.2%) (Eurostat, 2019, April 25).

The Europe 2020 target of EU28 for the employment rate of people aged 20 to 64 (%) was 75%. Through the introduction in 2017 of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan by the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council, the EU's 2030 target for this indicator was changed to 78%. In 2022, Romania recorded an employment rate below 70% (68.5%), one of the lowest in the EU (the EU27 average was 74.6%). The strong growth and the phasing out of pandemic restrictions led to a slight improvement of the labor market activity, reflected by the increase of the employment rate from 67.1% in 2021 to 68.5% in 2022 (DG ECFIN, 2023, p. 7).

The positive trend is also influenced by the increase of schooling, being known that education is generally correlated with the types of occupation and income obtained, so the higher the level of education, the more chances that graduates must build successful careers increase.

Eurostat statistics (2023, September 15 A) show that in the period 2007-2022 the percentage of the young people aged 25 to 34 years with university studies in Romania increased by 4pp in 2011 (22.5%) compared to 2007 (18.8), but, subsequently, it reached a ceiling value in 2022. Throughout this 16-year period, the value of the indicator was well below the EU27 average (from 2020), with the gap increasing since 2014 (Figure 3). In 2022, approximately 94% of them were employed, compared to nearly 81% of those with secondary education (high school, professional and post-high school education) and approximately 50% of those with at most secondary school education, the Employment Rate Indicator (25-54 years) depending on the level of education (Eurostat, 2023, December 15). However, progress is offset by the phenomenon of abandoning educational training and vocational training programs. In 2023, approximately 17,5% of young people aged 15-24 in Romania were Not in Education, Employment or

Training - NEET (figure 4), most of them leaving school early and occupying mainly unskilled jobs (figure 5). The main cause of school drop-out is the high costs needed to be allocated for further education (for transportation, food, clothes, stationery).

The fragile situation concerning the insertion of students on the labour market was severely affected by the health crisis generated by the SARS – CoV-2 pandemic which, according to official data, affected over one million people worldwide in less than three months in the first quarter of year 2020 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020, p. 4) in Romania generating a huge wave of unemployment. At the end of May 2020, the number of terminated or suspended employment contracts (technical unemployment) in the context of the coronavirus pandemic approaching one million of which 410.649 individual employment contracts terminated and 600.352 individual employment contracts suspended. (Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, 2020, May 25).

To increase their resilience, universities need to redesign their entire management system and place more emphasis on the outdoor approach not only in the marketing strategy, but in its entire functioning process, to increase stakeholder involvement in the educational process, to earn their trust and, implicitly, maintaining students' numbers and organizational resilience.

The transfer of activities in the virtual environment has accelerated academic competition especially by opening access to courses to non-traditional candidates in any corner of the world, a situation that in the usual classic format was difficult to imagine and plan. The new educational paradigm overturns the monopoly position sometimes held by some universities on the education market favoured by their geographical positioning; institutions that provide an educational offer in a field of specialization in which they have no competition thrive in the newly created competitive environment, the degree of trust given to the university leading to their repositioning.

SERVICE BASED LEARNING – INNOVATIVE TOOL FOR STRENGTHENING STUDENTS' EMPLOYMENT SKILLS IN THE 21ST CENTURY PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Universities play a key role in professional life, being at the forefront of identifying innovative forms of pedagogy that stimulate the development of

useful skills and abilities in students and their greater adaptability to the requirements of the labour market whose services have already been largely transferred to the online environment, thus respecting the principle of relevance based on which education meets the needs of personal and socio-economic development promoted by Law no. 199/2023 of higher education (art. 4 letter k).

The conclusions of the authors of the work presented at the 19th International Congress of the International Association on Public and Nonprofit Marketing 2019 (Léon, Spain) emphasised that a viable solution is the innovative SBL methodology, which for the university environment translates into *learning that actively involves students from a university in a wide range of activities and experiences involving the community and which, in addition, offers a real applicability of the knowledge taught and learned in the classroom in the community* (Cocoşatu, Nicolescu and Marinică, 2020, p. 4). Basically, SBL is an Experiential Learning model that combines university training with active public service, using students' critical and reflective thinking to examine the community in which they live and their civic responsibilities, organized by the faculty and to which transferable credits can be assigned (ECTS). Partnerships between universities and the community in the context of SBL (Cocoşatu, Nicolescu and Marinică, 2020, p. 4), that gives long-term benefits to all parties involved: the content of the disciplines is better explained and continuously improved, the community is involved in the educational process, and students, by engaging in *experimental activities involving the community (real situations)*, aligned and integrated into the *academic course*, consolidate their knowledge acquired in the course and develop *civic, social and team responsibility*, thus becoming factors meant to strengthen active citizenship.

Therefore, it is necessary to align with the new general trend of curriculum orientation, moving from *content orientation to learning orientation*, but *learning by doing*. Thus, the study programs must be more flexible, ensure the acquisition of the skills required by society and allow the active participation of the student in the learning process. For this purpose, SBL is all the more appropriate when we refer to the field of administrative sciences specific to the faculties of public administration (the name is generic, the profile faculties also have similar names such as *Law and public administration*, specializing in *public administration*) because it allows to ensure similar learning contexts with that of public administration in which future graduates will end up working, as it

is recommended in the publications in this field (Sánchez Pérez & al, 2015, p. 145).

The interest of future students for one field of studies or another, intuitively should follow the evolution of the labor market. The specialized literature highlighted the increase of "the interest of the registered candidates for the master university cycle, for attending specialty course that facilitate their insertion on the labor market" (Nen, Nicolescu and Rădulescu, 2014, p. 5), but with it matters if the graduation of the undergraduate cycle did not lead to the achievement of this objective.

The interest of the candidates for the field of administrative sciences had a roller coaster – like course following the evolution of the Romanian public administration reform process: top level between 2006 and 2008 when access to a management position was facilitated and even conditioned by obtaining a diploma in the field, low level determined by the position of “institutional orphan” in the field amid the 25% cut in public salaries in 2010 (the measure was approved by adopting Law no. 118/2010 on a series of measures necessary to restore the budgetary balance, with subsequent amendments and completions) followed by a ceiling level determined by the level of education presented above, and starting with 2020 was reborn against the background of stability in wages of public sector workers during the crisis triggered by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, this sector being among the few sectors that were not targeted by the application of the technical unemployment measure.

Therefore, compared to other fields of study, the field of administrative sciences is currently in a particular situation where the institutionalization of SBL would be the corner stone of all initiatives limited to this type of experiential learning already included by the public administration faculties under the *bachelor's degrees, dissertations, group projects or research projects, leading to the strengthening of the link between the faculty and the community*, but which were not introduced in the subject curriculum to enhance the learning experience of students, who continue to prove a weak involvement in community issues; thus the learning experience clearly requires improvement.

The current context is also favourable for piloting an SBL methodology for university teachers focused on administrative sciences, as the Government approved the normative act allowing the operation, starting with the 2020- academic year, in the pre-university education system of educational institutions with pilot status, and experimental and application units (Government Decision no. 559/2020, normative act currently in force). This

development has been expected for almost ten years, constituting in fact the implementation of Article 26 of the former National Education Law (Law no. 1/2011) which stipulated that "the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports may establish, by Government decision, the operation of pilot, experimental and application units in the pre-university education system". From the perspective of teaching and learning, the novelty introduced is found in the curricular architecture which will be different from the national one being drawn at the level of each pilot school and consisting of a curriculum offered by the school, consisting of common core and curriculum chosen by students from the school's offer, which relates better to the personalities, aspirations, needs and concerns of the students (according to the Government Decision no. 559/2020).

Among the many advantages conferred by Government Decision no. 559/2020, we consider that the main change brought by the normative act is found in the following statement contained in its substantiation note: "*Educational units with pilot status, experimental and application units will apply curricular architectures different from the current framework plans in the classroom, with the specific role of testing directly in schools the impact of systemic changes*".

Therefore, the long-term impact pursued by the governors is a systemic one that will soon determine the rethinking of university educational offers by introducing content that is adapted and relevant for the future professional path of the candidates, some of them will be educated on a special curricular mosaic and become *more active, better anchored to European values and economic and social conditions, with a solid civic and democratic culture*.

We anticipate that universities with an outdoor approach and institutionalized SBL will be in the top of the preferences of the students who will focus on institutions that provide educational services with a logic similar to that in which they were trained at the pre-university level, that of experiential learning. For this reason, we are convinced that the public administration faculties that already have a rich experience in the application of the SBL mechanisms (we exemplify to support this statement that the specialized university practice is provided in the curricula with the status of academic discipline with ECTS credits, the faculties concluding for the development of practical activities partnerships with national and local authorities and institutions, students conducting practice classes in an institutionalized setting.) will widen their pool of candidates.

Therefore, in the new context, the institutionalization of the SBL teaching and learning method becomes even more current and appropriate as future generations of students will be more oriented towards experimental and applicative education, but at the same time, SBL will become a good tool for organizational bespoke promotion in order to attract future candidates prepared through the new education model launched.

CONCLUSIONS

The comparative analysis presented in the paper captures the interdependence between the main factors influencing the university system in Romania and the repositioning mechanisms used by Romanian universities to strengthen their institutions for the period 2009-2023 by referring to bespoke skills and abilities acquired by students so to answer the demand of the labour market deeply weakened by the COVID-19 pandemic, the socio-economic consequences of which we are still feeling.

We underline that ten years ago Romanian universities showed a lack of their functionality in the virtual environment and a low interest in transforming pedagogical activities into e-learning / blended-learning or with the help of SBL, a situation especially valid for state universities that had a hard time adapting their educational offer to the evolution of the Romanian society and all the more regarding the evolution of the socio-economic context specific to the European Union to which it is anchored. This indoor behaviour of universities was mainly fuelled by the main factor that counted in the choice of the future students in accordance with their interests: the legal form of the university, state or private. In view of this determinant, to which the geographical positioning was added (and/or the organization of specializations for which the universities did not have competition), for a long time these institutions had known quite well the profile of their candidates. The profound structural changes on the Romanian labour market generated mainly by free movement in the European Union have pushed higher education institutions to modernize, being confronted by an undeniable statistical reality: the high degree of school drop-out and poor insertion of students in the labour market. And as it results from the analysis, the universities that manage to better position themselves in the education market are those that, through an outdoor approach, quickly make the transition to active pedagogical approaches that integrate community services into learning processes and also contribute to the development of

the civic and social responsibility of the students, but also better integrate the students on the labour market, the Service based Learning methodology being distinguished in this respect. Moreover, in the new logic of the pre-university curricular architecture inclined more towards experiential learning with the approval of the new pilot schools in 2020, the analysis anticipates that the universities oriented towards institutionalizing the SBL methodology will be the ones that will be found in the top of the preferences of future candidates, thus becoming more resilient in conditions of high uncertainty.

From this perspective, our paper highlighted the importance of SBL for the field of administrative sciences that prepares the future human resource of the Romanian public administration and of the European Union institutions, an area in which specific SBL mechanisms are already applied. The faculties of public administration thus demonstrate a proactive attitude regarding societal challenges, being well equipped in terms of tackling the interdependence of curricular offer-acquired skills-labour market. Moreover, this is also the reason why we conclude that SBL is the bespoke tool for a modern education of students who are to be integrated in the labour market of the 21st Century.

REFERENCE LIST

- [1] Cocoşatu, M., Nicolescu, C.E., Marinică, C.E., (2022). Some perspectives on Service - Based Learning. IAPNM 2020. XIX International Congress on Public and Nonprofit Marketing in Sustainability: New Challenges for Marketing and Socioeconomic Development. International Association on Public and NonProfit Marketing. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6893197>
- [2] European Commission, (2010). Europe 2020: A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth: Communication from the commission. Publications Office of the European Union
- [3] Eurostat (2019, April 25), Europe 2020 employment indicators. Employment rate of people aged 20 to 64 in the EU reached a new peak at 73.2% in 2018. 13 Member States already achieved their 2020 targets, available at <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/9747515/3-25042019-AP-EN.pdf/b226fab2-566d-4dad-a830-a22b9fa5c251?t=1556108890000>
- [4] Eurostat (2023, September 15 A), Population by educational attainment level, sex and age (%), https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/edat_lfs_9903__custom_9914002/default/table, https://doi.org/10.2908/EDAT_LFS_9903
- [5] Eurostat (2023, September 15 B), Young people neither in employment nor in education and training by sex, age and educational attainment level (NEET rates), https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/edat_lfse_21__custom_9915086/default/table, https://doi.org/10.2908/EDAT_LFSE_21
- [6] Eurostat (2023, September 19), Participation rate of young people in education and training by sex, age and labour status, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/edat_lfse_18__custom_9914796/default/table https://doi.org/10.2908/EDAT_LFSE_18
- [7] Eurostat (2023, November 9). General government expenditure by function (COFOG). https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/gov_10a_exp__custom_9912780/default/table https://doi.org/10.2908/GOV_10A_EXP
- [8] Eurostat (2023, December 15), Employment by educational attainment level - annual data, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/lfsi_educ_a__custom_9914373/default/table https://doi.org/10.2908/LFSI_EDUC_A
- [9] DG ECFIN (2023)- The European Commission's Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs, European Economy Institutional Papers, Institutional paper 247, 2023 Country Report: Romania, June 2023, doi:10.2765/34357
- [10] Fiț, C. R., Geantă, I., Cheregi, B.-F., Panțir, C.A., Hâj, C.M., (2021). Studiu de marketing privind potențialul de promovare a universităților românești [Marketing study on the potential of promoting Romanian universities], Retrieved from http://pocuiintl.uefiscdi.ro/images/Rezultate/A22_RT10_Studiu_de_marketing.pdf
- [11] Government Decision no. 559/2020 on the operation of pre-university education units with the status of pilot, experimental and application units, Monitorul Oficial, 635
- [12] Law no. 1/2011 of national education Monitorul Oficial, 18 with subsequent amendments and completions
- [13] Law no. 118/2020 on some measures necessary to restore the budgetary balance, as subsequently amended and supplemented, Monitorul Oficial, 441
- [14] Law no. 199/2023 of higher education, Monitorul Oficial, 614

- [15] Ministry of Education. (2023 July 3), *Information regarding the results recorded in the first session of the national baccalaureate exam 2023 (before appeals)* [Press release], Retrieved from https://www.edu.ro/comunicat_presa_56_rezultate_bacalaureat_2023_inainte_de_contestatii
- [16] Ministry of Labor and Social Protection. (2020, May 25). *The status of the suspended / terminated individual employment contracts, on May 25, 2020* [Press release.]. Retrieved from <http://mmuncii.ro/j33/index.php/ro/comunicare/comunicare-de-presa/5959-situatia-contractelor-%20individual-estate-suspended-slowly-to-date%20of%2025%20May%202020>
- [17] Nen, M., Nicolescu, C., & Rădulescu, C. (2014). University Promotion–Key Factor Of The Use Of Marketing Strategies, In The Context Of Improving The Romanian Higher Education. Case Study, ”In Balkan Region Conference on Engineering and Business Education (vol. 1(1), DOI: 10.2478/cplbu-2014-0114
- [18] Nicolescu, C. E. (2010). University promotion–key factor of the adaptability, competitiveness and performance of the higher education service. *Academic Public Administration Studies*, 32, <https://econpapers.repec.org/paper/nsuapasro/32.htm>
- [19] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2020). *Territorial Impact of VOCID-19: Managing the Crisis at All Levels of Government*. Retrieved from <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/impacto-territorial-de-%20on-covid-19%20administrator-to-crisis-en-todos-losniveles-of-Gobierno--7d27f7d9/>
- [20] Vinokur, E., Yomtovian, A., Itzhakov, G., Shalev Marom, M., & Baron, L. (2023). Social-Based Learning and Leadership (SBL): Theory Development and a Qualitative Case Study. *Sustainability*, 15(22), <https://doi.org/10.3390/su152215800>
- [21] Sánchez Pérez, J., Ortega Pérez, N., Trigueros Martínez, L.A., Alcázar Campos, A., (2015). *Cómo comunicar y ser competente: habilidades comunicativas y competencias profesionales y académicas*. Barcelona: Atelier Libros

LIST OF FIGURES

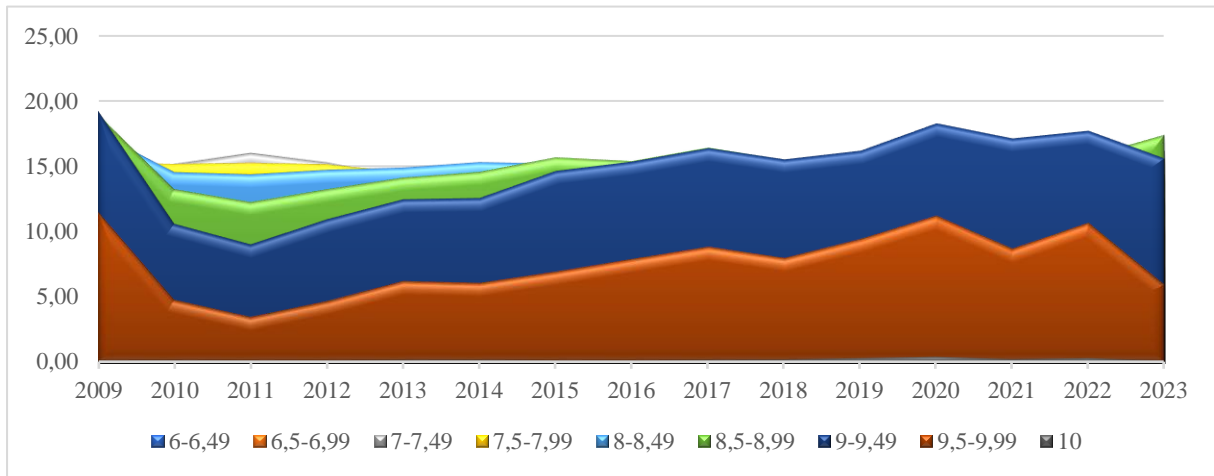


Figure 1. The evolution of the grades of the baccalaureate exam organized in Romania (2009-2023)
 Elaboration of authors. Source: Ministry of Education (2023, July 3)

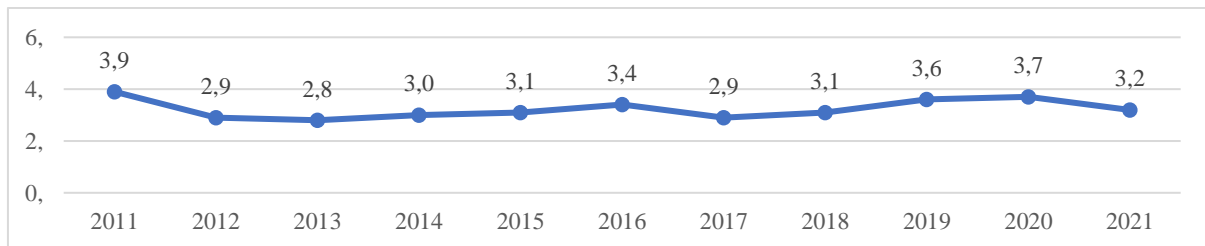


Figure 2. General government expenditure on „education”, total (% of GDP) in Romania (2011-2022)
 Elaboration of authors. Source: Eurostat, 2023, November 9 [gov_10a_exp]

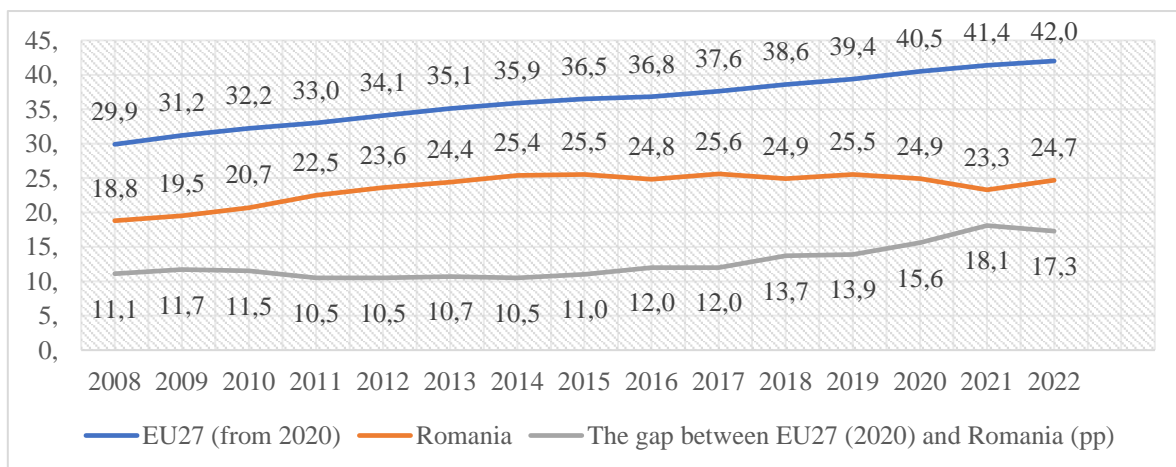


Figure 3. The % of young people aged 25 to 34 with university studies in the EU27 (from 2020) and Romania (2008-2022)
 Elaboration of authors. Source: Eurostat (2023, September 15 A) [edat_lfs_9903]

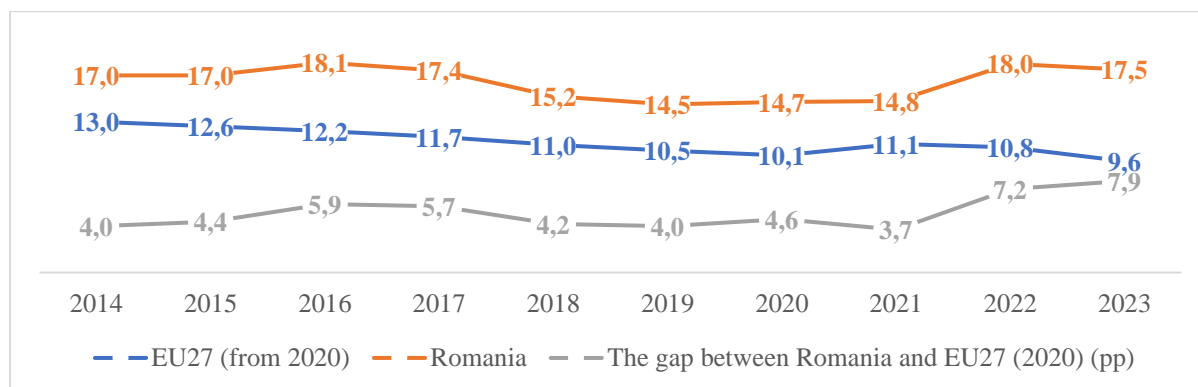


Figure 4. **Percentage of NEET young people aged 15-24 (2014-2023)**
Elaboration of authors. Source: Eurostat (2023, September 19) [edat_lfse_18]

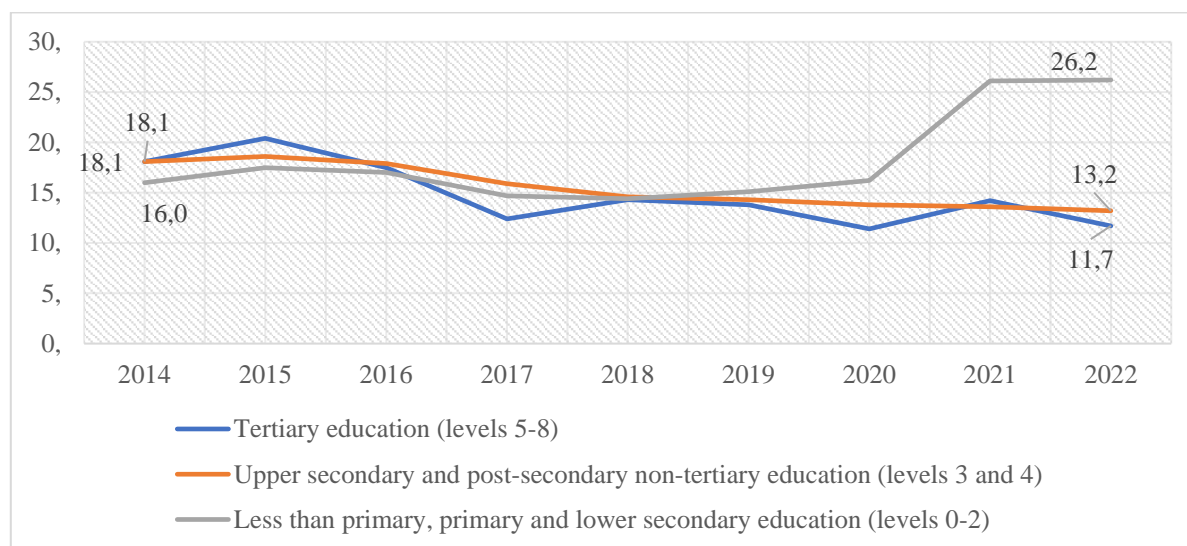


Figure 5. **Percentage of NEET young people (15-24 years old) in Romania, according to their level of education (2014-2022)**

Elaboration of authors. Source: Eurostat (2023, September 15 B) [edat_lfse_21]

[*] The Paper is elaborated within the *Project Service Based Learning – innovative tool for strengthening the skills of employment of students*, in the Public Administration of the 21st Century, won in the competition for grants - Researchers in Training - National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA) / Faculty of Public Administration 2019, implementation period 2019-2024. Contracting Authority: SNSPA.