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“GRaduates Advancement and Development of University capacities in Albania”

Event title:	Assess Students and Companies Experience in Training Programs
Event date:	22-24 October, 2019
Event Venue:	University of Medicine Tirana
Event Address:	Faculty of Technical Medical Sciences, “Dibra” Street, (within the territory of University Hospital Center "Mother Teresa" in Tirana), 1st floor, Auditorium

MINUTES 12 - EVENT REPORT

Participants:

Agriculture University of Tirana	AUT-UBT
University of Tirana	UT
University of Arts, Tirana	UART
Polytechnic University of Tirana	PUT
University of Medicine Tirana	UMT
European University of Tirana	UET
POLIS University	U-POLIS
Catholic University "Our Lady of Good Counsel"	UNIZKM
Albanian University	AU
Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna	UNIBO
University of Siena	UNISI
Universitat de Barcelona	UB
ISCTE - Instituto Universitariò de Lisboa	ISCTE-IUL
Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Tirana	CCIT
Consorzio Inter-Universitario AlmaLaurea	ALMALAUREA
Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth	MESY

First day

The meeting at the University of Medicine was opened with the welcome speech of the Rector of the University Prof. Dr. Dr. Arben Gjata. After giving a presentation to the participants, he explained how much he appreciates the GRADUA project, not only in view of the opportunity that his university will provide for tracking of the graduates but also , the opportunity to contribute to the provision of professional internships. He emphasized that until now the possibility of providing professional practice was created by UMT's very good cooperation with the Ministry of Health, as well as with an Italian company in the field of pharmacy called "FIDIA", which enabled the sending of 4 students of excellence to Italy, to carry out professional practice. He emphasized that the Gradua project will also help to create a database that is missing at UMT that is going to help university management staff considering improve of the study programs.

Furthermore, the speech was taken by the Vice Rector of the UMT Prof. Dr. Alma Idrizi, who follows step by step the implementation of the project from its start-up phase. Thanking the cooperation with the coordinating institution, but also all the partners, she emphasized that the cooperation with private businesses in the field of medicine through their registration on the platform, would create new opportunities for the graduates of UMT University. These opportunities would be not only for their employment but also for their professional practice. Knowing that after graduating their students, it is another institution they are pursuing further because of the license they must obtain, the creation of the database through the GRADUA project will give them the opportunity to maintain contact with the graduates. She once again evaluated the cooperation with the Italian company "FIDIA", as well as the opportunity that this company has given to the students of excellence, to gain a professional internship abroad. Wishing her a successful implementation of the project, she passed the speech on to the MUT coordinator Mr. Ilir Alihmemeti.

Among the most important issues mentioned by him was the information on the importance of medical studies and the fact that their students are part of the study cycle of professional practice in public hospitals. He emphasized that the Albanian market is eager for their graduates, but that so far they have a lack of information in tracking their students. In this regard, their interest in implementing this project is very high, as it will enable them to track their employment not only domestically but also abroad. Once again thanking the participants he invited the project coordinator Mrs. Aurora Hoxha to take the speech.

In her speech, Mrs. Hoxha thanked all MUT staff for organizing the meeting as well as all participants for all their commitment. She further explained the importance of this meeting in terms of an analyse of the opportunities and challenges universities face in providing professional internships as well as the problems or cases of success of professional internships for students. Undoubtedly, the possibility of realizing professional internships is a bridge to the labor market. In this regard, she emphasized the importance of registering on the GRADUA platform, as this bridge can be successfully established between the Albanian universities and the business world.

On this regard, in the context of completing the project assignments, was conducted an analysis of the current situation regarding the professional internships of the students of the 9 Albanian partner universities in the project. She explained that during the period April-June 2019 third year Barchelor and 2nd year Masters students cycle a questionnaire "On the evaluation of satisfaction of the professional internships" was shared to them.

This questionnaire has been filled by over 1200 students from partner universities involved in the project. The answers given by them have enabled the universities to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses in the implementation of professional internships, the problems and dissatisfactions of students during their implementation.

The meeting continued with the presentation of the findings of the questionnaire, by representatives of the 8 partner universities, excluding the University of the Arts, which emphasized that the professional practice for its students is not the same as all other students, due to the more specific curriculum studies that this university offers.

Among the most important findings of this study, which were discussed by university representatives, were:

In general, universities offer little opportunity for students to pursue professional internships, so the greatest contribution to finding them comes from the students themselves. This is especially true of public universities. This is also affected by the inexperience of career office staff, but not only because these offices have been operating in our educational institutions for a few years. On the other hand, some of the students have stated that they are unaware that there is a career office where they can head and know where is located. Meanwhile the opposite situation is observed in private universities, where career offices are well organized and assist their students in finding internships but also in realizing them. These universities also offer many professional internships for students within their premises, and even employment opportunities for them.

In this regard European colleagues suggested the necessity not only of the organization but also of the functioning of these offices. In their institutions, these offices are highly functional and contribute to provide professional practice opportunities. While AlmaLaureas representative Mrs. Enrico Dongiovanni, gave some concrete examples of the contribution that the platform they have developed and that is being implemented within the GRADUA project is a very important tool for creating employment opportunities and professional internships for students. At this point, he explained that the engagement of career office staff in using the platform as well as encouraging students to enroll will enable them to better perform their office duties. On the other hand, career office staff should be in constant collaboration with students to inform them about the business applications on this platform. No doubt this is needed at this first stage of platform operation.

Another issue highlighted by student responses was the lack of a university supervisor who follows students during professional practice, due to the very small student / lecturer ratio, but not only, to be mentioned the financial inability of universities.

In this regard, UNIBO Representative Ms. Laura Anderluci brought her experience from her university, where she explained that they make a job arrangement at the beginning of the academic year with all the staff in this field, to be close to the students as they begin their internships.

Another issue highlighted among the questionnaires was the length of time that professional internships needed to be realized and the delay of student salaries. Regarding the duration of the internship, the students generally agreed that it would take 3-6 months. Most Albanian HEIs have included within their study programs, both in the Bachelor and Master cycle a practical period lasting from one week to 3 months. However, no university offers a professional internship lasting more than 3 months.

Representatives of several Albanian HEIs spoke on this regard, who stated in principle that the maximum period the university can offer is up to 3 months. Beyond this period, are students' personal choices.

While regarding the payment possibilities from the businesses, the students stated that they were not paid. Only very few cases are cited by students who admit that the business has paid for them.

In this regard, the coordinator added that from a communication with the director of the career office at AUT, it has been informed that although there have been many discussions in this regard with the companies we cooperate with, this fact has been rejected by almost all businesses with the justification that they consume energy and knowledge to teach practitioners and do not benefit from them.

The morning session closed with these conclusions and discussions.

The afternoon session, during the first day of the activity continued with a presentation by the coordinator of the technical issues of project implementation such as student registration on the platform. In this regard she emphasized the very serious contribution made by Polis University and UNIZKM as well as the staff of the coordinating institution itself. On the other hand, the University of Tirana has shown no serious commitment in this regard. Asking for explanations for this incorrect commitment, informed that it is their obligation as one of the largest partner universities to fulfill the commitments as agreed in the partner agreement. Although no concrete response was received from UT representatives, it was promised that more work would be done in this regard.

Other technical issues discussed were related to the preparation of draft reports on the related database of students profile based on the database generated by the platform in order to be forwarded to European partners for comments on their improvement.

One of the financial issues raised by the coordinator was the delay in the financial documentation for the period until October 2019. She also informed that the first phase of auditing the documentation for the first 2 years of activity is expected in December and explained about the delays in the process of transferring funds to partners by the coordinating institution. These delays were linked to some legal changes in financial terms recently approved by the Ministry of Finance.

Second day

The second day of the activity, was focused on analysis of students' satisfaction and problems during their professional internships. The morning session was focused on the presentation from each university partner to one student who shared his experience.

In these presentations the first speech was taken by a student who had completed her Bachelor studies at AUT. She had completed a professional internship at a business company found by her. She said that in general the business was ready to teach, but was often reluctant to work on completing the paperwork, this also due to their financial importance.

However, she explained that she was very pleased, having learned a lot and had seen the work in practical terms. Recently she emphasized that the staff of the Career Office had come to her needs as she had often taken trainings informing her with a career guide.

The presentation continued with the representative of the University of Tirana. She studied at the Faculty of Social Sciences. The practice was conducted in a public institution. She emphasized that the practice had come to her aid, as she had received much theoretical information during the course of her studies. Among other things, she explained that the practice had been without payment and lasted three months, although she did not appreciate that it had been sufficient for her.

Further the representatives from UMT and Polis brought their experiences in their professional internships outside Albania, exactly in Italy and Portugal. These internships were facilitated by the career office and lecturers. They appreciated that these internships helped not only to improve their professional careers but also improve their language skills. Following these internships they emphasized that they had the opportunity to work in private institutions. The UMT student explained that she had identified many differences in the practice performed during the study cycle at QSUT and Italy both in terms of staff readiness and the conditions for performing the internships.

Further, presentations of representatives of other universities continued.

After that, a focus group was organized with a group of students and companies that took part to traineeship programmes. In order to allow the best management of the focus group, the students were organized in two separate focus groups. The discussion between them was moderated by the coordinator that often asked them to understand the experience from both sides and this collecting useful insights for enhancing the training programs.

The Director of Human Resources of the Cement Factory in Fushekruje. Mrs Elma Zeneli was the first person that started the speech explaining that often she is faced with students who do not know what they want, so they are not clear about their business requirements. She also explained that many times they are not even ready to do the jobs you are claiming to be outside of their profession such as photocopying or documenting. But on the other hand she emphasized that there are also very correct students not only in fulfilling the tasks assigned to them but also in respecting the schedule.

Regarding the recruitment methods, she explained that one of the ways is to select students who have completed professional internships in their premises. Another option is to post notices online on the official business website, though this procedure has not always been very successful, and she personally has contacted to some universities to create a collaboration with them, but until now nothing concrete was done.

On the other hand, she emphasized that GRADUA Platform is a missing instrument in the Albanian market that will greatly assist the recruiters in recruiting staff. During her speech she announced to present students that in the coming weeks she will launch some internships in the platform (for 2 vacancies), inviting them to apply for them.

After her speech, a student from the Polytechnic University said that it is true that we are often unclear about the work we are looking to do, but on the other hand we do not always accept to do work that is not within our study field, so all the students have the right to do what is best for them during professional internships on the businesses premises.

Further on, the discussion continued between the business representatives and the students, regarding the needs and expectations of the two actors in terms of solving the problems of performing professional internships.

Third day

The third day of the meeting was focused on discussing the results of the focus group with the students and companies. The findings and conclusions of this meeting but also of the questionnaires filled by students, will be summarised in a final report “ The Best Practices on Internships” that will be published on the webside of the project.

Among the most important conclusions discussed:

- Organized internships can incorporate more active involvements of experts or academic staff, who through and in cooperation with students who are part of internships, can assist companies (to improve management).
- Business representatives claimed that students are generally correct when they engage in a company, but the time of professional practice is not always enough to successfully complete this process.
- Business representatives stressed that offering these opportunities to students can be considered an investment not only for them, but also for the company itself, moreover referring to the qualification of employees required in the construction field. On the other hand, they acknowledged that establishing links to enable professional practices to be implemented required commitment and time for the company's staff. So the companies are ready to support any alternative, platform that would allow less commitment and cost, and more quality and professionalism to provide human resources.
- The majority of students search for an internship, one month before the internship period starts. Indeed, it is assumed that the more in advance is searched for an internship opportunity, the more chances students will have to find it.
- Students agreed that internship served as an opportunity to have a job offer. This, internships are an important gate to get into the employment market.
- Regarding the duration of the internship, the students generally agreed that it would take 3-6 months.