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THE IMPACT OF GEOGRAPHY CURRICULA ON EMPLOYABILITY: A STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The number of graduates from universities or higher education institutions increased in the last 30 years in Europe, but not in the same pace as their absorption rates on the labor market in their fields of study. Understanding the paradigms in which higher institutions' work is important in relation to their structure, teaching staff, curriculum and opportunities for students. Our analysis focuses on the reasons why students choose a faculty of Geography and assesses their perception regarding the educational process and employability. The results emphasize as main motivation the passion for Geography, while the location in Bucharest plays an important role also. The results underlined that students felt that they should have been more involved in research activities or they should have been given the opportunity to work in part-time jobs during their studies. The findings of our paper correspond with the social and economic context as the youth who arrive in a big city, such as Bucharest, are more interested to find a job and produce an income, putting their studies on the second place. These aspects emphasize the need for creating a stronger connection between the higher education institution and the labour market actors and the need to adjust the curricula according to employers' requirements.

Keywords*: curricula, student perception, Geography, higher education, Romania*

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education is presently under a continuous debate between its public funding, international and national competition and information technologies reshaping the understanding of education (Erickson, 2012). Especially in the European space, contemporary policies and practices have influenced activities of the higher education domain (Erkkilä & Piironen, 2013) reclaiming mainly change in the curriculum structure and approach (Hökkä, Eteläpelto et al., 2010). Still, EU countries have considerable autonomy in the field (Faas, 2011). At the same time, in the European space, the implementation of the Bologna Declaration has fast forwarded the learning process, giving students less time to study and choose their topics of research (Wastl-Walter & Wintzer, 2012). The Bologna system has also influenced the social structure of students in universities leading to an underrepresentation of students from low social origins in higher education especially in the master programs (Neugebauer et al., 2016). Although the implementation of the Bologna system is seen as a globalization process in higher education systems, one of the main benefit is that it encourages the networking between students from different countries (Alimehmeti & Hysa, 2012). As a result, the structure of the curricula becomes more uniform at a continental level, giving the students the same background in front of employers.

Geography is a domain found at the border between Earth sciences and other sciences (King, 2001), increasingly demanded in many countries, and especially connected with the geographical and geospatial career fields (Arrowsmith et al., 2011). Therefore, the Geography curriculum should aim at a stronger relation with the other Earth sciences (King, 2001) and constantly monitor the satisfaction level of graduates for the education (Butt & Rehman, 2010; Castree, 2011; Worth, 2014). Geography should include in the curricula also aspects beyond the field of study itself – such as time management or environmentalism (Fernández-Manzanal et al., 2007) and be flexible and adaptive enough to respond to needed future changes (Erickson, 2012). In the modern world, where people can travel easily around the world, the demands of map application are higher due to the use of smartphones or other mobile devices. Therefore, the contribution of a young graduate with a background in Geography is highly requested by the labour market and researchers constantly try defining appropriate graduate attributes for geographers, the most common being spatial data analysis (Spronken-Smith et al., 2016).

The alignment of the curricula in the Geography departments of universities in order to satisfy these demands is required in order to ensure competitive human resources and directing Geography towards a more competency-based training given to students (Hodge, 2015). Students should be now able to put theory better into practice (Wall & Speake,

2012), giving them better attractiveness for the job market. Following the Bologna Declaration, it has become increasingly important to equip students with the relevant skills increasing their employability potential (Wall & Speake, 2012). This is relevant even if the concept of employability itself has many components, which go beyond the higher education itself, such as personal attributes and understanding (Arrowsmith et al., 2011). This is no different for the field of Geography, which should rise to the challenge of preparing its graduates' future (Spronken-Smith, 2013), although the relation between Geography and the job market can be under-researched by higher education institutions (Piróg, 2014). Recent developments have added to the practical skills aspects, such as personal development planning, opportunities for work experience or improved career guidance (Gedye et al., 2004).

The challenge in ensuring students' employability comes from the reduced support that public funding has given to higher education in the past decades (Erickson, 2012), requiring institutions to increasingly engage with other sectors to supplement the financial decline (Collyer, 2013). Higher education in Romania went through numerous changes following 1990 (Soós, 2003), in which reforms affected both the curricula, the procedure and even the staff of universities. The student distribution in higher education reveals a preference for engineering and economic sciences, with Geography being enlisted in the broader social and political domains (12.3%), for medicine (9.4%), human sciences (7.8%), mathematics and sciences (5.3%), all the other areas representing only 4% (Dimian et al., 2012).

Following Law 288/2004, Romania joined the Declaration of Bologna regarding the structure of higher education and shifted to a cycle structure (bachelor, master, doctoral), making the system compatible to the European educational system (Ianoș et al., 2007), starting with the university year 2005-2006 for the bachelor and 2008-2009 for the master programme. In addition, the present framework allows students to take optional courses beyond the compulsory ones (Soós, 2003), the Romanian curriculum having hybrid structures characteristic of post-socialist countries in transformation (Bagoly-Simó, 2014). Autonomy in changing the curricula was allowed according to the competences of the academic staff, expressed in the Geography field in Romania mainly by their research grants and papers (Voiculescu, 2011). However, in practice, this student-centered philosophy is countered by the state bureaucracy (Soltys, 2014).

The Faculty of Geography in Bucharest is organized as an independent entity since 1990, but the history of geographic teaching at the University of Bucharest goes back to the beginning of the 20th century. Starting with 2005, the Faculty implemented the Bologna system, with bachelor, master and doctoral cycles. The number of students has been constantly increasing, from around 100 in 1990 to a peak of over 3,000 in 2005. Currently, the Faculty of Geography from the University of Bucharest has the following courses of study for the bachelor level: Geography,

Tourism, Cartography, Territorial Planning, Hydrology-Meteorology and Environmental Science. Between October 2015 and March 2016, we applied an online survey for students and alumni of the Faculty of Geography.

The objectives of our paper are: (i) to evaluate the main reasons for students choosing the Faculty of Geography from Bucharest; (ii) to assess their perception of the educational process and (iii) its relation with the job market.

METHODOLOGY

Procedure. Data collection was realized through a survey which used an online questionnaire, uploaded on an open-access platform (Google forms) and disseminated through social-media channels. The main reason for applying only online and anonymous questionnaires as other studies done in the institution (Osaci-Costache et al., 2017) is related to the ethical and power relationships which can derive from doing research with your own students (Worth, 2014), thus differentiating our research from other analyses of students' perceptions (Fernández-Manzanal et al., 2007), because we had no control over the sample selection. The structure of the questionnaire contains three main parts: the motivation for choosing the Faculty of Geography, qualitative assessment of the educational process in the Faculty and perceived relation with the job market. Similar to other studies (Worth, 2014) assessing students' perceptions, the questionnaire had both open and closed items, together with reflective sections on various scales.

Participants. We received a total number of 318 responses from both graduates and current students of the Faculty of Geography, and after their validation there were 309 valid recordings. Results were integrated in a statistical database and analysed using MyStat software. The gender ration was slightly unbalanced, with 86 men and 223 women, but that is representative to the Faculty of Geography in Bucharest, where women represent 65.15% at bachelor level and 68.63% at master level, and similar to other Faculties of Geography in Romania (Nicula et al., 2012; Vescan et al., 2014).

We recorded a balanced distribution of responses between courses of study (Table 1). By the year of their graduation (Figure 1), most responses come from generations that recently graduated (2015 and 2014, ages 20-23). We acknowledge the fact that such a sample size is not large enough to generate data which can be introduced in the administrative process as a reform of the educational process (Rutkowski & Rutkowski, 2010), but we consider it to be sufficient for the objectives of this paper.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents on courses of study

		No. of responses	Total no. of enlisted students
Bachelor students	Tourism	60	490
	Geography	57	298
	Environmental Science	78	224
	Territorial Planning	24	186
	Cartography	26	183
	Hydrology-Meteorology	11	166
	No longer existing	3	
Master students		*50*	*542*

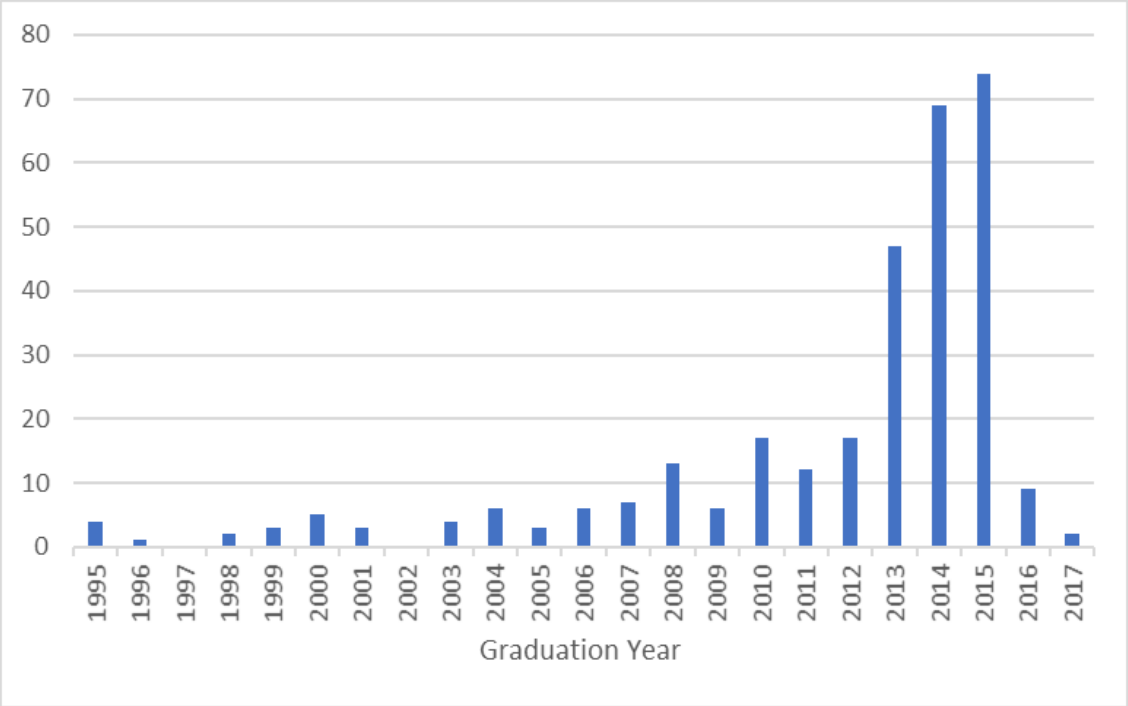

Fig. 1. Distribution of respondents by graduation year

The distribution of home residence reveals that 33% of the respondents come to the Faculty from Bucharest, followed by counties such as Prahova (10.03), Teleorman (6.80%) and Buzău (5.18%), all situated in the geographical proximity of Bucharest. Nine counties are not represented in the sample size. Regarding their present residence, 67.64% of the respondents are from Bucharest.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Motivation in choosing Geography

The main motivation for high-school students in choosing a Faculty of Geography (Table 2) was represented by reasons related mainly to the field of study as a scientific domain: their passion for Geography (38.79%), good performances in school (19.19%) or developing and improving their knowledge (10.91). This is untestable as the decisions about the educational training are highly influenced by topic-related interests they developed in the previous years (Baram-Tsabari et al., 2009) and passion for the field represents a main reason for Geography faculties in general (Buș, 2017). No significant difference is recorded between generations of students or age groups regarding the main motivation for choosing Geography, with passion for the field remaining the main reason for all generations from 1995 to 2017.

Table 2. Motivation for choosing the field of Geography

Motivation	Percent of respondents
Passion for Geography	38.79
Good in high-school at Geography	19.19
Find a job in the field after graduation	11.31
Developing and improving the knowledge in the field	10.91
Attracted by field activities	7.47
Recommendation from friends/relatives/teachers	6.87
Easy admission to the Faculty	2.42
I wanted to study in Bucharest	1.62
Tried other faculties but did not succeed	0.81
Other reasons	0.60

Only 11.31% of the respondents chose a Faculty of Geography due to its potential of leading them to a job in the field after graduation, with higher incidence for older generations. This can be explained by changes in employability policies following the economic crisis, as starting with 2010 public institutions only employed a small number of personnel and the activity of mapping/GIS companies was reduced in the same period. The performance in school in the field of Geography is an important criterion identified by other studies which found it to influence the decision by up to 94%, but the role of career opportunities is higher in other areas – over 50% (Gedye et al. 2004), although this percent decreases from

undergraduates to graduates. The main reason for choosing specifically the Faculty of Geography from Bucharest (Table 3) is represented by the fact that some consider it to be the best Faculty of Geography in Romania, information presented in the online media and forums, although no official document exists on this matter.

Table 3. Reasons for choosing the Faculty of Geography in Bucharest

Reason	Percent of respondents
Among the best Faculties of Geography in Romania	37.44
Geographical proximity	24.14
Curricula has attractive courses	12.32
Already had friends/relatives in Bucharest	11.08
Quality of teaching staff	9.11
I am a resident of Bucharest	1.97
Opportunities of Bucharest	1.72
Costs of the Faculty	0.99
Other	1.23

Other reasons directly connected with the Faculty are related to the attractiveness of curricula (representative for 12.32% of the respondents, though only 27% declared they studied the curricula before admission) or the quality of the teaching staff. The low importance of the curricula is different from findings in other studies where the content of the module subjects available added up to 69% (Gedye et al., 2004). Overall, geographic proximity represents the second reason for choosing the Faculty of Geography in Bucharest (24.14%). The geographical distribution of students (Figure 2) can also be explained by the concentration of the higher education institutions in the major cities, with Bucharest being the most important education centre (Mureșan & Gogu, 2012).

Other studies (Ianoș et al., 2007) have found that the educational offer of Bucharest (concentrating ~1/3 of students in Romania) induces disparities especially in the south and eastern parts of the country (where the largest pool of students for the Faculty of Geography is). The attraction of Bucharest in cases of counties with existing Faculties of Geography is represented by the low ranking these regional and local institutions have in the public's view. Our analysis of the respondents' initial and present residence revealed that, in many cases, they did not returned to their counties of origin after graduation and received a job there but remained in Bucharest (27% of them started working as students).

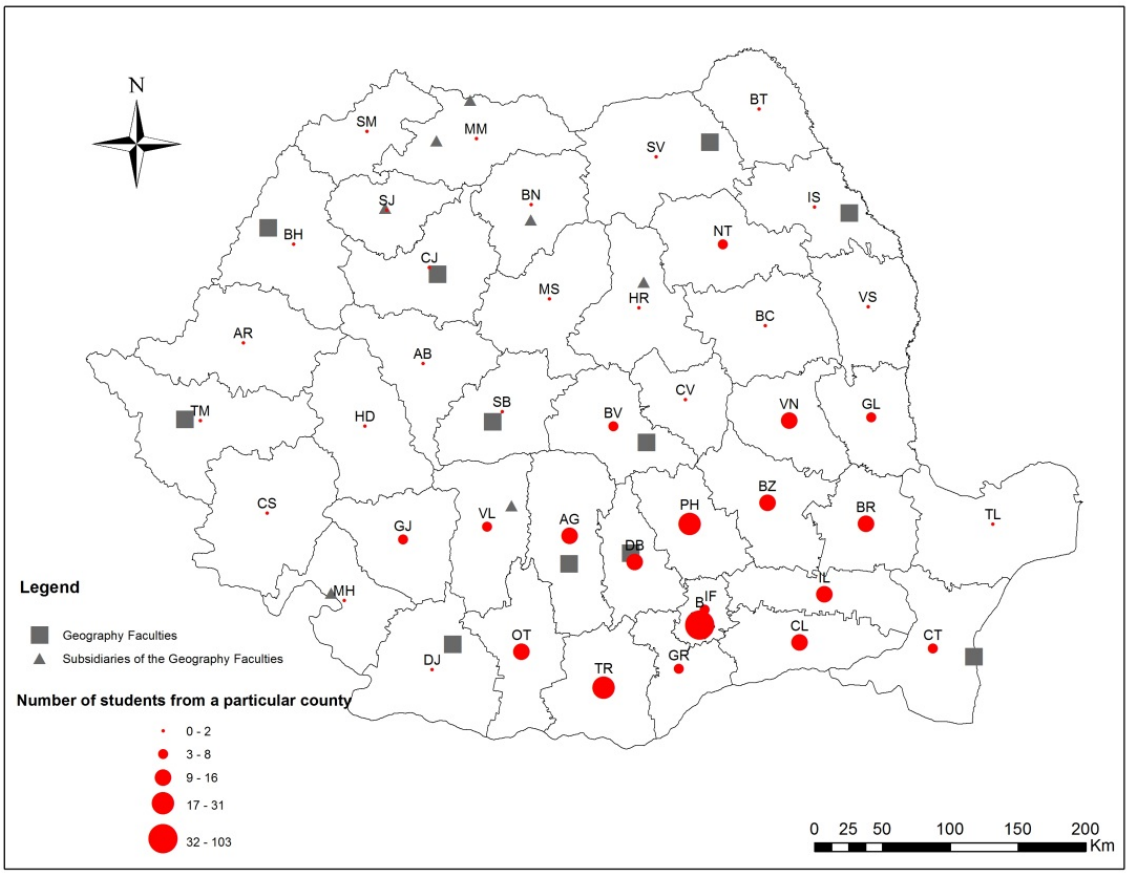

Fig. 2. Spatial distribution of respondents in relation to other Faculties of Geography in Romania

Geographical proximity to Bucharest represented the main reason for choosing this Faculty by both generations of graduates before 2000 (52%) and age groups of over 35 years old (52%), explainable in part by the lower mobility offered by the transport network in that period. Another explanation can be related with the existing financial support (unofficial data account for a larger proportion of students – 75% coming from urban environments). Younger generations (18-25 age group – 38%) and recent graduates (2012-2015 generation – 39%) have both considered that this faculty is the best one in Romania as the main reason for choosing it. Another group of reasons is related more to the students' social network, regarding the presence of friends and relatives in Bucharest (11.08%) or the fact they did not want to leave the city in which they lived (1.97%).

Education process for employability

The approach of students to the curricula reveals the relative interest students have regarding this important component of the educational process. Out of the respondents, 8.09% took no interest in the curricula and 3.15% only observed it in their diploma supplement after graduation. Only 27.42% of them studied the curricula before the admission and 6.29% compared it to the curricula of other Faculties of Geography from Romania, and 46.29% of them studied it during their time as students to either choose their optional classes or foresee their schedule. It is only normal to question how the other students chose their optional classes as, in other studies, students are complaining about their reduced autonomy in selecting their own courses (Wastl-Walter & Wintzer, 2012). One explanation could be that individual students are influenced in choosing optionals by their ties in the larger web of connections with other more informed students (Bossche & Segers, 2013). Students' interest could be transferred in their involvement in the design of the curricula.

Several respondents found the curricula incomplete and took classes at other faculties (4.94%) or at other courses of study within the Faculty of Geography (3.82%). The percent is rather low, considering that the entire Romanian education system should accept that changes are to be made to the curricula, to teaching and application of knowledge after graduation (Voiculescu, 2011), but administrative procedures make it challenging for a student to attend classes of other Faculties, as the University of Bucharest does not present many opportunities for enlarging the curricula within and beyond the university as other institutions do. Furthermore, it is questionable if students have a post-graduation plan that would allow them to choose the best optional courses for building their career. In addition, most of the employers promote their own training stages for new employers, considering the academic training to be irrelevant for their needs. This existing gap between universities and the economic sector represents one of the best-known deficiencies of the education system, but not much has been done in overcoming it.

We have divided the main aspects related to the education process into 20 aspects presented in Table 4 and evaluated the perception of respondents whether they consider the respective aspect to be over-represented, sufficient or under-represented in their educational process. Students consider the memorization and reproduction of information to be the most over-represented aspect in the Faculty of Geography, with higher values for the elaboration of projects and fundamental knowledge of Geography. This distribution of aspects is indicative for a traditional education system with a knowledge-led curriculum and based on memorization of information without encouraging students' critical thinking (under-represented with 45.63%), although question asking is a basic requirement for the performance of scientific research and meaningful learning (Baram-Tsabari et al. 2009).

Table 4. Education process aspects in the Faculty of Geography

Aspect	Over-represented	Sufficient	Under-represented	No answer
Fundamental knowledge of Geography	23.30	64.72	11.97	0.00
Specific knowledge for the course of study	6.47	46.28	46.60	0.00
Field activities	3.24	37.54	58.58	0.65
Laboratory activities	4.21	45.63	53.40	0.97
Involvement in research activities	1.62	19.42	75.40	3.56
Presence of specialists in the field	1.29	24.60	68.93	5.18
Logical thinking	3.88	48.87	45.63	1.62
Memorization and reproduction	58.25	28.80	11.97	0.97
Project elaboration	33.01	54.05	12.62	0.32
Foreign languages	1.94	23.95	72.49	1.62
Management of activities	2.91	55.99	37.86	3.24
Writing techniques	4.21	52.75	40.45	2.59
Digital competences	6.80	33.66	58.58	0.97
Results presentation competences	2.91	48.54	44.01	4.53
Time management	4.85	33.98	55.99	5.18
Team work	7.77	66.02	25.57	0.65
Modern teaching techniques	3.88	41.75	53.07	1.29
Volunteering opportunities	4.21	41.10	50.16	4.53
Part-time jobs opportunities	0.32	6.80	87.70	5.18
Preparation for the job market	1.29	14.89	79.94	3.88

These distributions are similar to other studies (Gedye et al., 2004), where research skills or critical interpretations are considered to be essential for a higher education in the field and for transforming the approach of geographical concepts towards an approach of geographical skills (Bourke & Carter, 2016). The high importance given to theoretical knowledge in the Faculty could actually represent a barrier (Lam et al., 2013) in the development of careers. This is related also with the under-representation perceived for modern techniques of teaching (53.07%), field (58.58%) and laboratory activities (53.40%). It seems that students understand the relevance of these skills in relation to their future employment (Wall & Speake, 2012) as many of them hope to have a career in institutions related to their field of study (Treby et al., 2006).

It is important for the employability of students that they have identified as the most under-represented aspects in the Faculty the part-time jobs opportunities (87.70%) and the preparation for the job market (79.94%) or their involvement in research activities (75.40%). Therefore, respondents do not perceive the Faculty as offering them during their studying years a strong connection with the job market and opportunities for improving their employability rate. Volunteering opportunities can be also increased as NGOs can be very effective in providing the needed experience for students (Turnock, 2004) and, starting with 2016, the Faculty will develop a system for giving 2-3 credits to students involved in volunteering activities relevant for their field of study.

In addition, respondents feel the need for a more active presence of activities which are not specific to Geography, but to a higher education system with competences which can easily translate to other domains, such as digital competences, foreign languages, time management or writing techniques. Out of the respondents, 58.58% continued or want to continue their studies at the Faculty of Geography, 16.83% changed their field of study or Faculty, 16.50% have not decided yet what they are going to do and only 8.09% have stopped their training at bachelor level.

We have also researched the best and worst perceived courses by course of study (Table 5) and found them to follow the same pattern, with good reviews given to technical courses that appeal to modern techniques and the use of computers, such as GIS (found in the best three courses in 5 out of 6 courses of study) or Cartography, and the worst reviews for courses such as Human or Economic Geography or Geology. Courses in IT, GIS and foreign languages were found to be very relevant or relevant by one in seven working graduates in other studies (Piróg, 2014) and sustained by the high digital competences and use of internet found by other studies (Dulamă et al., 2015) to be characterizing Geography students. Students and alumni only remember part of the course title and, often, different classes are confounded. Being an open question, we have found respondents to rarely give the exact title of the course (mostly correct when it was a one-word title or acronym) with longer titles being often miswritten, and the most frequent confusions refered to the titles of courses which were part of the Psychology-Pedagogy teaching module. Some of these results could be also misleading, as the perception can be influenced more by the degree in which the lecturer is passionate, enthusiastic and can bring the course to life with good presentation skills or even anecdotes (Revell & Wainwright, 2009).

Table 5. Best and worst perceived course content by courses of study

Specialization	Best-perceived courses		Worst-perceived courses	
	Name	***Percent***	***Name***	***Percent***
Geography	GIS	37.70	Geology	14.75
	Cartography	21.31	Remote-sensing	13.11
	Topography	16.39	Biogeography	9.83
Tourism	Tourism Geography	29.82	Hydrology	26.31
	Economy	21.05	Geology	24.56
	Foreign Language	17.54	Soil Science	21.05
Cartography	GIS	66.66	Climatology	40.74
	Cartography	59.25	Economic Geography	33.33
	Remote-sensing	25.92	Human Geography	22.22
Territorial Planning	GIS	37.50	Human Geography	25.00
	Spatial Planning	33.33	Biogeography	20.83
	Cartography	20.83	Cultural Geography	12.50
Hydrology-Meteorology	Hydrology	63.63	Economic Geography	27.27
	GIS	54.54	Biogeography	18.12
	Meteorology	54.54	Cartography	18.12
Environmental Science	GIS	48.71	Geology	12.82
	Env. Geography	25.64	Remote-sensing	12.82
	Env. Impact	15.38	Physical Geography	12.82

Note: responses considering "all" and "none of the courses" to be good or bad are not included in this statistic.

The relation of the best and worst perceived courses with the curricula (Table 6) has been assessed from the perspective of their role as being fundamental, specialization and complementary components in the higher education given to students. It is interesting that most of the worst perceived courses (63.61%) come from the category of fundamental courses. We found cases in which the best-perceive courses come from the category of specialization/course of study (56.37% for Tourism or 40.35% for Territorial Planning).

Other studies have also found that nearly half of all geographers made no use of any skills acquired during their course of study (Piróg, 2014). Although they are highly appreciated by them in the above answers, students do not perceive field activities as part of the curricula. Only the students majoring in the Geography course of study mention them in this category.

Table 6. Best and worst perceived courses by their role in the curricula

Course of study	Best-perceived courses*			Worst-perceived courses*		
	F	S	C	F	S	C
Geography	51.65	8.60	39.73	44.44	29.91	25.64
Tourism	19.46	56.37	24.16	66.18	10.79	23.02
Cartography	44.73	36.84	18.42	72.83	11.11	16.04
Territorial Planning	38.59	40.35	21.05	59.00	23.10	17.90
Hydrology-Meteorology	66.66	4.16	29.16	80.00	6.66	13.33
Environmental Science	53.33	32.77	13.88	59.23	6.92	33.84
TOTAL	**45.74**	**29.85**	**24.40**	**63.61**	**14.75**	**21.63**

*Note: * F – Fundamental, S – Specialization, C – Complementary.*

Responses considering "all" and "none of the courses" to be good or bad are not included in this statistic.

This type of distribution (fundamental, specialization/course of study and complementary courses) are provisions of existing regulations, which require a minimum of 35% specialization courses (different from other study programmes) and 10% complementary courses (with the specification that faculties should select them from other science domains for increasing the employability potential of students and diversifying their options of continuing their master education). These courses could allow the development beyond the field of Geography, by promoting interactions, interconnections, and implications with other sciences (Oberle et al., 2016) or differentiating learning activities (Hill et al., 2016).

Relation with the job market

Regarding the situation of having a job during their time as a student, 43.69% of the respondents have never worked in this period, 44.01% worked with intermittences and 12.30% had a job for the entire period of being a student. The curricula is perceived as being important (Table 7) for the future job of respondents by 41.75% of them, and extremely important by 14.24%. The weak connection between the curricula and the job market can also have an explanation in the dynamic character of the higher education in Romania, whereas change always occurs and alternatives have to be rapidly devised (Light & Phinnemore, 1998). Besides curricula changes, universities should also target the competences and skills of their students, as well as the infrastructure and research capacity (Mureșan & Gogu, 2012).

Table 7. Contribution of curricula to the future job

Contribution	Percent of respondents
Extremely important	14.24
Important	41.75
Indifferent	14.56
Not important	19.42
Useless	10.03

Job fields in which the students or alumni of the Faculty of Geography are engaged have a very high diversity. A percent of 31.72% is jobs in fields, which are related to their academic preparation and curricula. In other studies, there is also a poor connection between the degree in Geography and the search of a job – 11.5% relevant and 23% somewhat relevant (Piróg, 2014). The most frequent are jobs as teaching Geography – 10.03%, tourism – 9.06%, scientific research – 5.50% with smaller proportion occupied by jobs in mapping services, environmental consultancy and protection, territorial planning, hydrology, meteorology, etc. There are also students and alumni working in fields with no connection to the Faculty or curricula they followed. They represent 27.01% of the total respondents; the most frequent fields of work being sales, IT, freelancers, trade, communications, banking, marketing, etc. Finally, 42.07% of the respondents are not working or are currently students.

CONCLUSIONS

The main reasons students have to chose the Faculty of Geography in Bucharest are related to geographic proximity and the perception of the institution as being the best in Romania. However, their opinion about the educational process reveals strong preferences towards replacing traditional forms with others, which are more interactive and increase their employability potential. A characteristic of the Romania system is that curricula adjustments to better respond to market requirements are needed. Approximately one third of alumni are involved in fields related to their academic training, but this is also due to the large number of geography graduates in Romania in relation with their absorption rate on the job market. Our study does not have an objective of changing the policies in the field, but evidencing a well-known process, which should be accounted in the decision-making process. For a better relevance and understanding of the phenomena, the study should be expanded, both in the sample size in other institutions in Romania, but also reaching out to other actors directly involved in the employability of Geography students.

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