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Article

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Amfiteatru Economic Journal

Provided in Cooperation with:

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies

Suggested Citation: Plăiaș, Ioan; Pop, Ciprian-Marcel; Băbuț, Raluca; Dabija, Dan Cristian (2011) : Employers' Perception Of Competences Acquired Through Academic Marketing Training In Knowledge Based Economy, Amfiteatru Economic Journal, ISSN 2247-9104, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Vol. 13, Iss. 30, pp. 448-463

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/168729>

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EMPLOYERS' PERCEPTION OF COMPETENCES ACQUIRED THROUGH ACADEMIC MARKETING TRAINING IN KNOWLEDGE BASED ECONOMY

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Abstract

One of the current concerns of the academic environment in economics is highlighting the importance of competences that higher education graduates should display when they step across the threshold of the real economy. To this effect, the identification of those competences which are compatible with the needs of the real economy may serve as a solid basis for developing adequate curricula and obtaining remarkable educational outcomes reflected in the graduates' performance as entry level employees. It is undeniably true that the said competences must meet the standards set by the real economy or by the regulations of accreditation bodies. The process by which these standards are defined or identified requires a strong sense of coherence between the academic curriculum and the needs of employers, as basis for the graduates' comprehensive training in knowledge based economy.

In this context, we set to conduct an exploratory research by means of which we may emphasize how the corporate world perceive the marketing training received by the entry-level employees as graduates of professional higher education institutions, and how to adjust the curriculum to improve graduates employability. The survey was conducted by using the face-to-face questionnaire administration. Data were collected in the Transylvania counties during October 2010, as part of a field survey.

The employer's perception, as highlighted by the answers received from the surveyed corporate entities, gives us reasons to state that practical experience cannot be substituted for the academic training in knowledge based economy; it can, however, strengthen its fundamental role in establishing the guidelines of moral and professional conduct such as learning and the theoretical approach to some practical situations of the real economy. Moreover, we appreciate that a continuous correlation between the practical needs and the academic training is imperative.

Keywords: competences, academic curricula, marketing training, perception, graduates

JEL Classification: M1; M3; M31

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Introduction

Ever since the turn of the third millennium Romania's economy has been undergoing a profound transformation process focused primarily on extending the private property and developing a functional market economy. The changes in society and particularly the new approach to business management peculiar to the market economy have brought about the need for the business environment players to adopt a proper philosophy adjusted to the newly created context. Concurrent specific needs have been created on the labour market and, consequently, new requirements have been imposed concerning the competences acquired by graduates during their academic training. This context led to the official acceptance and recognition in Romania of the academic marketing training in the business management landscape in knowledge based economy.

According to the definition proposed by the Business Dictionary (2010), marketing represents the "management process through which goods and services move from concept to the customer. As a philosophy, it is based on thinking about the business in terms of customer needs and their satisfaction. As a practice, it consists in coordination of four elements called 4 P's: (1) identification, selection, and development of a product, (2) determination of its price, (3) selection of a distribution channel to reach the customer's place, and (4) development and implementation of a promotional strategy". A more concise definition has been provided by the American Marketing Association according to which "marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large" (AMA, 2009).

According to the above definitions, marketing is an activity characterised by versatility and an ever-increasing array of concrete actions (Pop and Vlădoi, 2009) by means of which it can be implemented. Therefore, in order to satisfy the demands of this versatile activity, the marketer should acquire a wide range of professional competences (Pelău, 2010; Vasiliu, 2009). In the context of this approach, the professional training as well as the personal development take high priority both for society and the marketing specialist in his/her struggle to attain highest performance and take greater satisfaction from the activities conducted. The job satisfaction puts people in a positive mood, which, in turn, has a strong bearing on the society's overall performance, and, at individual level, it acts as an accurate barometer of a person's professionalism (Ionică, Negoită, Petrescu and Ionică, 2009).

1. Literature review

Consequently, the academic environment currently voices a particular concern over the competences that a student should acquire during his/her academic training in knowledge based economy. After graduation, the student should be able to perform all the activities pertaining to marketing in a professional way. This concern comes from the universities' interest in having an offering adjusted to the needs of the business environment, which is a criterion for competitiveness on the labour market, and the national, European and even international framework of qualifications in higher education. The objectives set by the European Union through the Bologna Declaration (June, 1999), Lisbon Summit (March 2000), Copenhagen Declaration (December 2002), Ministerial Conference in Berlin (September 2003), Ministerial Conference in Bergen (May 2005) and Ministerial Conference in London (May 2007) are to reform the higher education systems so that they

should become capable of providing offerings compliant with the needs of the contemporary society. The corresponding body in Romania which defines the qualifications in higher education is the National Agency for Qualifications in Higher Education and Partnership with the Social and Economic Environment (ACPART). This body set up the National Higher Education Qualifications Registry (RNCIS). The RNCIS' objective in terms of university curriculum optimisation in Romania relies heavily on extensive research for each particular specialization and the involvement of competent and motivated researchers. Settling this issue, however, is not as simple as it might seem on the surface in view of the fact that the interest in this topic is in an early stage in Romania (RNCIS, 2010).

The bright side of this endeavour is represented by the existence of extensive research already conducted and published in international specialised literature (Rositer, 2001; Aistrich, 2006; Rust, 2006; Ramocki, 2007; Jackson, 2009; Wellman, 2010). These studies deal mainly with competences that a student should acquire during his/her marketing training at university or the differences between the current academic supply and the demands the marketers are required to cope with (Sârbu, Ilie, Enache and Dumitriu, 2009). The curricula that the students are expected to follow during their university education are also subject to ongoing and heated debates among academics. The comments made about the congruence between the educational supply and the employers' needs were more often than not critical. In one of their study, Pfeffer and Fong (2002) suggest that the business administration faculties operate much like providers who screen and recruit customers to make use of their services whereas their educational supply features a lack of relationship with the real needs of the labour market. With even more caustic remarks, Mintzinberg and Gosting (2002) highlight that in faculties where business administration specialists are trained, incorrect or less substantiated concepts are inappropriately being taught to an audience unsuitable for with no interest whatsoever in the field of business administration.

The incongruities invoked between the academic marketing supply and the real needs of the corporate world have aroused, and continue to arouse, the interest of more and more researchers. Well-known specialists from around the world have approached, investigated, researched and debated for a long time these aspects (McKenna, 2002; Simkin, 2002; Brennan și Skaates, 2005; Stringfelloww, et al, 2006; Brownlie, et al, 2007; Munch, 2008; Jackson, 2009; Wellman, 2010). Their endeavors highlight the role that educators and trainers play in the academic training of the future marketers in a knowledge based economy. They also attempt to devise the most appropriate ways and means so that student training may be accomplished with more responsibility toward the society. All researchers share the opinion that a better compatibility between the academic supply and the needs of the business environment is a must and one of the main tasks of the marketing educators is to provide appropriate training to any individual who wishes to obtain a marketing qualification. The training necessary to apply for a job is obviously a legitimate, all-important objective of any marketing graduate. In the light of the literature reviewed we appreciate that in order to identify those competences that employers regard as the most relevant, the academics and the corporate world should carry out a common assessment of the nature and structure of the academic supply with a view to building up the optimal profile of competences demanded by employers. This undertaking would take the form of a balanced investigation and would provide accurate and valid information that might serve as the basis for designing comprehensive curricula in which the competences required by the marketing practice and those imparted in theory should be appropriately intermingled.

And, last but not least, the curricula would contribute to the development of professional competences.

Departing from the above-mentioned concerns which emphasize the need of a better coherence between the business administration educational supply and the labour market requirements, a need that has been underlined by authors from around the world, in the present study we set to investigate the Romanian employers' perception of competences acquired by native graduates through the academic marketing training in knowledge based economy (Niță and Agheorghies, 2010). Shedding light on various aspects related to the required competences that a marketing graduate might get contributes to designing adequate curricula and getting excellent, measurable results such as the graduates' performance as entry-level employees. Naturally, there must be an excellent match between these competences and the standards set by the real economy or by the regulations of accreditation bodies (Osoian, Nistor and Zaharie, 2010). The process to determine such standards requires strong connections between the academic curriculum and the needs of employers in terms of the graduates' qualification. As shown by Semeijn (2005), the ever-growing interest expressed by international researchers in this topic is generated by the fact that competences have shown to be stronger predictors for job allocation and follow-up training than traditional indicators such as field, grade-point average and BA/MA thesis results.

The specialized literature (Boshuizen, 2009) regards domain-specific competences as the baseline for developing expertise in a profession. Likewise, professional competences facilitate access to jobs (Heijke, Meng and Ris, 2003). The arguments supporting the importance of useful competences in obtaining and preserving a job may be approached from various angles. Thus, a study on the job performance among master graduates with expertise in the domain of business administration (Arts, Gijssels and Boshuizen, 2006) shows that they pay far more attention to information than graduate students regardless of whether the information is relevant or irrelevant. The same study reveals that the latter need at least eight years of work experience before they can accurately distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information.

In contrast, experts focused on structural features and patterns pay far more attention to strategic issues, and the competences of graduates are highly organized (Nivelstein et al., 2007), contributing to achieving high performance in domain-related issues (Feltovitch, Prietula and Ericsson, 2006). At the same time, they can retrieve these competences very quickly from memory, even under high stress conditions (Woods, et al, 2006). Although such findings are more difficult to measure, they ought to be taken into account in the curriculum design.

An individual's chances to get a job depend not only on the level of professional competences but also on how well he/she is able to combine them with the so-called transversal competences (ability to learn new things, attitude, communication, teamwork, adaptation to unpredictable situations). The specialized literature places this kind of competences, which are useful in many other contexts as well, in the category of key competences, academic competences, or key qualifications (Rychen & Salganik, 2001). Their general character comes from the possibility to use them on any particular job, regardless of the curriculum previously followed. They often constitute the baseline for selection of follow-up training. Even if, from a theoretical viewpoint, researchers have intense debates on the need to clearly delineate professional from transversal competences,

in reality the two kinds of competences cannot be acquired separately within a curriculum. Merrienboer and Kester (2008) argue that separating the acquisition of transversal and professional competences inhibits the transfer of what has been learned to practice. Consequently, as suggested by researchers, both kinds of competences should be learned simultaneously in a variety of authentic situations across the curriculum. Therefore, we state the opinion that in order for a student to acquire all competences there must be well-organized curricula whose purpose is to specifically promote competence acquisition and development of abilities and integrated professional attitudes.

2. Purpose of research

The purpose of this exploratory study has been to emphasize how the corporate world perceive the marketing training received by the entry-level employees as graduates of specialised higher education institutions, and how to improve the curriculum in order to increase graduates employability. In other words, the current research has the following objectives:

- how organizations perceive marketing orientation;
- how the corporate world perceive the marketing higher education and, more precisely, the extent to which the curriculum meets their needs;
- analysing the employers' perception of the level of professional marketing competences acquired by graduates from different universities;
- identifying the corporate world's perception of the amount, structure and quality of the professional competences acquired by graduates working in a company's marketing department;
- assessing the employers' perception of professional competences that marketing employees should possess;
- assessing the corporate world's perception of marketing employees' transversal competences.

3. Research methodology

Since the exploratory research focused on the corporate world's perception and evaluation of graduates (general manager, administrator or an organization's marketing representative), the survey was conducted by using the face-to-face questionnaire administration. Data collection was made in the Transylvania counties between October 8th and 28th, 2010, as part of a field survey. Due to the complex nature of the issues approached, data input was made by interviewers at the office of the investigated organizations. A total of 171 valid questionnaires were collected.

The purpose of the data processing, made with the help of the SPSS software, was to conduct an analysis of employers' average perception of the competences which their newly employed graduates should possess. To this effect, a number of sentences concerning transversal and professional competences which marketing higher education graduates should possess have been constructed according to the pattern of the technical literature.

The corporate representatives have been asked to appreciate each sentence on a five-point Likert scale.

In order to accurately assess the corporate officers' perception of the surveyed phenomenon, great care has been exercised to ensure that they are properly categorized according to distinct age groups (young persons – under 30 years old, persons with average experience – between 35 and 50 years old, persons with long experience – over 50 years old). The research also took account of the officers' level of professional (marketing) education. Therefore, a distinction has been made between the corporate officers who attended part-time initial or ongoing training, Life Long Learning or other training courses developed by other organizations outside the higher education system and those who completed a bachelor's degree or a postgraduate degree.

Besides the age group, the classification of enterprises that made the object of the present study took also into account their annual turnover.

4. Sample characteristics

Departing from the premise that there are noticeable differences, in terms of objectives pursued, between the organizations' domains, the sample included production companies (25.1%), commercial enterprises (30.4%), financial services (9.4%), tourist services (5.3%), transport services (4.7%) and other services (25.1%). In terms of the company's start-up year, the sample reveals that most of the companies (82.4%) were established after 1989, 22.8% between 1990 and 1995, 18.1% between 1996 and 2000, 27.5% between 2001 and 2006 and 24% were set up after 2006. The companies included in the survey that were set up before 1989 represent a small percentage of 7.6%.

According to the annual turnover of the investigated organizations, the sample is fairly homogeneous, 21.6% of corporate officers reporting an annual turnover below 100.000 lei, 21.1% between 100.001 and 500.000 lei, 17% between 500.001 and 1.000.000 lei, 12.3% between 1.000.001 and 2.000.000 lei whereas the annual turnover of 28.1% of them exceeds 2.000.000 lei.

The corporate officers who took part in the survey are administrators (50.3%), general managers (30.4%), and people responsible for marketing (19.3%). At the same time, most of them are between 41 and 50 years old (33.9%), whereas 29.2% are between 31 and 40, 19,9% under 30 and 17% over 50 years old.

In terms of educational training, the majority of the officers from the companies included in the research completed a bachelor's degree (50.3%) or a postgraduate degree (39.8%) while very few of them graduated from high-school (5.2%) or completed an associate's degree (4.7%). The interviewees' level of marketing training was achieved through business higher education (40.4% of respondents) and part-time specialist courses (26.9%, herein included marketing qualification and vocational training courses, others than traditional higher education courses) whereas 32.7% of the interviewees have no marketing training at all.

5. Research findings

5.1 The impact of marketing orientation on the company's activity

In order to assess the corporate officers' viewpoint in connection with the impact of marketing orientation on the activity of an organization/company, the interviewees were asked to state on a five-point rating scale the extent to which they thought it was necessary for different departments of an organization to be influenced by the marketing thinking. Judging from the answers received, we notice (in Table no. 1) that the pervasive influence of the marketing thinking is conspicuously felt in the marketing department (4.68), the sales department (4.64) and the R&D department (4.09). Regarding the correlation with the level of education, one can notice that in every case the average assessment of those who attended part-time courses is higher than the average assessment of those without education. However, the situation is reversed in the case of the ones who completed full-time higher education, a fact that raises serious questions regarding the level of training and performance of marketing graduates during the last years. As to the supply department being imbued with the marketing thinking, a more favourable assessment was given by interviewees who graduated from part-time specialist courses (3.39) and those who lack any marketing training (3.34) as against corporate officers who completed full-time higher education.

Table no. 1: Correlation between the level of professional education of the corporate officers and their perception of the marketing orientation influence on organizations

Marketing educational level	...department influenced by the marketing thinking					
	Supply...	Production...	R&D...	Sales...	Marketing ...	Finance and accounting ...
No education	3,34	3,27	3,91	4,63	4,64	3,16
Part-time courses	3,39	3,37	4,28	4,72	4,76	3,17
Full-time education	3,09	3,39	4,10	4,61	4,65	3,23
Total	3,25	3,35	4,09	4,64	4,68	3,19

5.2 Perception of the marketing higher education

In order to assess the corporate officers' perception of the marketing higher education and the extent to which the academic curriculum match the needs of employers, the latter were asked to express their degree of satisfaction with the professional competences of the newly hired employees who perform marketing activities. The vast majority of interviewees (64.3%) expressed their positive satisfaction with their new employees' level of competence. Of these, 10.5% expressed complete satisfaction and 53.8% only "partial" satisfaction. Only 10% of interviewees expressed their dissatisfaction with the competences of the new employees whereas 25.7% of them were unsure about this issue.

The comparative analysis of the answers received (as shown in Table no. 2) highlights that employers without a marketing background expressed a favourable average assessment of

the marketing competences acquired by new employees (3.71) whereas the employers who graduated from business universities hold a less favourable average opinion about the professional competences of the new employees (3.57). At the same time, managers and marketing officers aged 31-40 years provided a favourable average assessment of marketing competences (3.80) whereas those over 40 years tend to be more demanding in terms of the marketing competence of the new employees (3.55).

Table no. 2: The marketing competences of the new employees as it is perceived by interviewees according to their educational level and age group

Marketing educational level				Age group				
No education	Part-time courses	Full-time education	Total	under 30	31-40	41-50	over 50	Total
3,71	3,65	3,57	3,64	3,62	3,80	3,55	3,55	3,64

5.3 Level of marketing professional competences acquired by graduates

The assessment of perceptions about the level of competence acquired by graduates of various universities shows that most corporate officers (48.5%) do not believe that all graduates receive high quality training regardless of university. Only 18.8% of them believe the contrary, namely, that the graduates' educational level is identical no matter what university they graduated from.

Respondents generally perceive small differences in the training provided by universities but their answers vary slightly from one category to another. The average answers highlight the fact that a differentiated level of marketing knowledge is better perceived by employers with business higher education (2.29) or those who followed part-time marketing courses (2.57). Another factor that influences these perceptions is the age of interviewees. As shown in Table no. 3, the corporate officers under 30 years generally believe that the graduates' level of competence differs according to the university they come from (2.15) whereas the officers over 50 years tend to be less categorical on this issue (2.72).

Table no. 3: Perception of the educational level of graduates according to the corporate officers' educational background and age group

Marketing educational level				Age group				
No education	Part-time courses	Full-time education	Total	under 30	31-40	41-50	over 50	Total
2,70	2,57	2,29	2,50	2,15	2,78	2,34	2,72	2,50

5.4 Quality of graduates' professional competences

In order to assess the corporate officers' perception of the amount, content and quality of professional competences acquired by graduates working in marketing departments (Table no. 4), the interviewees were asked to express their agreement or disagreement over:

- new employees' level of theoretical training;
- new employees' level of practical/hands-on training;

- the degree to which graduates manage to adapt to the corporate culture of the organizations they work for.

Most interviewees (55%) believe that the new graduates possess a very good theoretical background after graduation whereas only 18.1% appreciate that the employees' level of theoretical competence is unsatisfactory. The opposite is true when it comes to the level of practical training of the new graduates. As Table 4 indicates, most interviewees (56.7%) are dissatisfied with the level of practical competence acquired by graduates during their academic study. 17.5% of interviewees believe that the level of practical competence acquired during academic study is satisfactory.

Table no. 4: The corporate officers' perception of the graduates' level of academic training

Level of agreement	Graduates' level of theoretical training		Graduates' level of practical training		Graduates easily learn the features of the organization	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Complete disagreement	7	4,1	45	26,3	3	1,8
Disagreement	24	14,0	52	30,4	14	8,2
Neutral	46	26,9	44	25,7	29	17,0
Agreement	73	42,7	24	14,0	98	57,3
Complete agreement	21	12,3	6	3,5	27	15,8
Total	171	100,0	171	100,0	171	100,0

The comparative analysis of the average answers received according to the interviewees' marketing training highlights that employers without a marketing background expressed a favourable average assessment of the marketing competences acquired by new employees (3.71) whereas the employers who graduated from business universities hold a less favourable average opinion about the competences of the new employees (3.57). At the same time, managers and marketing officers aged 31-40 years provided a favourable average assessment of marketing competences (3.80) whereas those over 40 years tend to be more demanding in terms of the marketing competences of the new employees (3.55).

The comparative analysis of the average answers received according to the interviewees' marketing training highlights that employers with business higher education expressed a favourable average assessment of the level of theoretical competence acquired by employees upon their graduation (3.51) whereas those with part-time marketing courses hold a less favourable average opinion about the level of practical competence acquired by employees upon graduation (2.17). At the same time, the average opinion of managers and marketing officers under 30 years was less favourable with regard to practical (2.03) and theoretical (3.18) competence, respectively (Table no. 5).

Table no. 5. Perception of the level of theoretical and practical training according to the corporate officers' educational level and age group

Training	Officers' level of marketing education				Age group				
	No Education	Part-time courses	Full-time education	Total	under 30	31-40	41-50	over 50	Total
Theoretical	3,38	3,46	3,51	3,45	3,18	3,56	3,43	3,62	3,45
Practical	2,54	2,17	2,39	2,38	2,03	2,54	2,43	2,41	2,38

Concerning the new employees' degree of adaptation to the corporate culture of the organization, most interviewees (73.1%) believe that the new employees are able to learn quickly and effectively the features of the company they work for whereas only 10% of interviewees believe that the new employees encounter difficulties during their adaptation process.

The comparative analysis of the average answers received highlights that managers and marketing officers who followed part-time marketing courses expressed a favourable average assessment of the new employees' ability to adapt to the organization characteristics (3.98). The same largely favourable appreciation (as presented in Table no. 6) was also expressed by interviewees aged 31-40 years (3.92) and over 50 years (3.86) whereas those under 30 years have a less favourable average appreciation of the new employees' adaptation capacity (3.50).

Table no. 6: Perception of corporate culture assimilation according to the officers' educational level and age group

Officers' level of marketing education				Age group				
No Education	Part-time courses	Full-time education	Total	under 30	31-40	41-50	over 50	Total
3,73	3,96	3,68	3,77	3,50	3,92	3,76	3,86	3,77

5.5 Perception of the level of expected professional competence

Employers' gradual assimilation of marketing competences contributed to an increased valorification of the role and importance of the marketing thinking at the level of all organizational departments. Exceptions were, however, signalled in the case of people over 50 years, likely because of their pre-1989 training when marketing was thought of as either a component of trade or a function of management. Naturally, then, their association of marketing with the sales activities is more frequent.

A similar concept is found with people without a marketing background, regardless of age. Concerning the quality of training received by employees in the marketing department, the interviewees generally express a positive opinion about the level of their competence. However, a less favourable appreciation was expressed over issues such as the insufficient practical training received during university classes or the quality differences between university curricula.

In terms of professional marketing competences, the correlation between the employers' expectations and the employees' performance is shaped according to the activities conducted. Thus, the practical training received during university courses is perceived differently in the case of pragmatic activities (procurement, sales, market exploration, and negotiations) versus somewhat abstract, less tangible activities (marketing plan, database

marketing, event marketing, management of the product range). The quality of the training provided by various universities is also perceived differently in terms of the competences acquired by graduates.

According to the importance-performance matrix in the figure below, we can emphasize that the graduates with marketing competences possess strengths the most important of which are the sales activity, the negotiation activity, the conception and implementation of marketing plans and developing and strengthening relationship with customers. At the same time, the main weakness highlighted by respondents is the ability to properly perceive the competitive environment of the organization and to advance realistic solutions for a better positioning of the organization.

		Employees' performance	
		High	Low
Importance of a marketing competence	Major	<p><u>Strengths</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conception and implementation of marketing plans - Developing and strengthening relationship with customers - Sales and negotiation 	<p><u>Weaknesses</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analysis of the competitive environment
	Minor	<p><u>False strengths</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creating, testing and launching new products 	<p><u>By-factors</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Procurement - Market exploration

Figure no. 1: The importance-performance matrix of employees' competences

The positioning of the other competences may be explained through the corporate world's overall perception of the role and impact of marketing on the company's activity. Therefore, depending on the field of activity of an organisation, some officers are more inclined to curtail the role of various marketing-specific activities or put them, both at the functional and decision-making level, under the supervision of other departments. In this context, some marketing competences act as false strengths or even by-factors (in our case, creating, testing and launching new products as well as procurement and market exploration).

5.6 Perception of transversal competences acquired by employees

In order to assess the corporate world's viewpoint on the transversal competences that the marketing employees should possess, the interviewees were asked to state on a Lickert five-point rating scale their degree of (dis)agreement with respect to the following competences:

- the level of competence to work with computers and specialised software;
- the level of linguistic competence for at least one international language;
- transversal negotiation and persuasiveness competences;
- teamwork;
- well-developed powers of observation;
- high analysis/synthesis ability
- organizational abilities;
- ongoing willingness to learn and improve.

The analysis of the answers received concerning the above competences highlights that the average assessment is favourable for each of the eight categories of transversal competencies (over 3.63). We notice, however, that in the case of computer competences, the competence to speak at least one international language, teamwork, and the ongoing willingness to learn and improve the average assessment exceeds 4, which proves that most corporate representatives who took part in the interview stressed the need that new employees should acquire transversal competences. The lowest average assessment (3.63) is recorded for the high analysis/synthesis ability of employees who work in the marketing department, an ability which is primarily dependent on the individual attitude than the result of knowledge transmitted through academic curriculum.

A comparison of the average answers received according to the activity field shows that the product enterprises officers provide a favourable average assessment (Table no. 7) for the marketing employees' computer competences (4.30), competence to speak foreign languages (4.14), teamwork ability (4.16), and the analysis/synthesis ability (3.93). On the other hand, the tourist enterprise interviewees provide a favourable average assessment for computer competences (4.22) and a less favourable assessment for teamwork (3.89) and ongoing willingness to learn and improve (3.89).

Transport enterprise officers express an average favourable opinion about the competence to speak foreign languages (4.25), general communication and persuasiveness competences (4.25), teamwork (4.38) and excellent organizational skills (4.00) and a less favourable opinion about the computer competences (3.88) and the analysis/synthesis competences (3.38) of employees working in the marketing department. Officers in financial services enterprises hold a less favourable average opinion about the computer competences (3.94), the well-developed powers of observation (3.81) and the analysis/synthesis competences (3.44) of marketing employees. Finally, trade enterprise officers hold a favourable average opinion about the general communication and persuasiveness competences (4.04) and the ongoing willingness to learn and improve (4.33) but a less favourable opinion about computer competences (3.96) (Table no. 7)

Table no. 7: Employers' perception of graduates' transversal competences, according to fields of activity

		According to their transversal competences , the marketing employees ...			
		... display good computer literacy	... have a good command of at least one international language	... are good and persuasive negotiators	... possess developed abilities to work in a team
Field of activity	Production	4,30	4,14	4,02	4,16
	Tourism	4,22	4,11	4,00	3,89
	Transportation	3,88	4,25	4,25	4,38
	Financial	3,94	4,00	3,94	4,06
	Trade	3,96	3,98	4,04	4,12
	Others	4,05	3,95	3,72	3,86
	Total	4,08	4,04	3,95	4,06
		... possess well-developed powers of observation	... possess high analysis/synthesis ability	... display excellent organizational abilities	... are willing to learn and improve on a regular basis
	Production	4,00	3,93	3,77	4,16
	Tourism	3,89	3,67	3,78	3,89
	Transportation	4,00	3,38	4,00	4,25
	Financial	3,81	3,44	3,75	4,19
	Trade	3,96	3,58	3,87	4,33
	Others	3,77	3,51	3,72	4,09
Total	3,91	3,63	3,80	4,19	

Conclusions

The findings show that respondents have a fairly positive opinion about the marketing employees' level of training for both transversal and professional competences in knowledge based economy. The managers and officers of the interviewed companies made little use (reversed correlation), on the downstream market, of their employees' marketing training as well as other competences pertaining to their individual and professional development. This vision may be interpreted in light of the nature of competences, particularly the self-development competencies. The competences are highly dependent on the human nature and the knowledge acquired by employees from other sources such as experience, learned behaviour, non-academic training courses, personal competences or participation in team-building.

At the same time, the reversed correlation (peculiar to the downstream marketing competences) may be explained in the context of a strong influence of practical experience on some professional competences. In harmony with the answers received from the surveyed corporate entities, we appreciate that practical experience cannot be substituted for the academic training in a knowledge based economy. Practical experience may actually contribute to developing the employers' moral conduct in the marketing departments as well as the formation of specific professional competencies such as learning and the theoretical approach to some practical situations of the real economy. It is obvious, however, that a better correlation between the practical needs and the academic training is imperative.

The surveying of the corporate world reveals some contradictory perceptions and attitudes. We have in mind here the high weight of positive perceptions of various issues related to the academic marketing training of graduates and their capacity to integrate successfully in the real economy within a short time frame. On the other hand, there are negative perceptions for which the current marketing training bears the burden of guilt. A correction of this perception among employers is deemed necessary, in our opinion. To the extent that these perceptions are realistic, they ought to stand as the base line in the curriculum adjustment process, thus contributing to the remedy of the shortcomings exposed by the corporate world. For instance, the research revealed that 18.1% of respondents believe that graduates do not possess in-depth theoretical training; 27% of respondents are neutral to the issue whereas 55% believe that graduates possess comprehensive theoretical training. On the other hand, a reversed situation is signalled when it comes to practical training: 56.7% of respondents believe that graduates do not possess practical training, 25.7% are neutral and 17.5% believe that graduates do possess practical training.

Unfortunately, the findings also indicate that sometimes the company officers are inadequately trained or appear to be not very willing to absorb marketing graduates and fully benefit from their competences as developed by the marketing higher education. As the research indicates, the corporate officers are only willing to recruit marketing specialists after these have gained some experience whereas junior employees are slightly being pushed aside.

Research limitations and future implications

The analysis of the answers received also revealed that a considerable number of surveyed managers and company officers failed to accurately assess the level professional competence of the marketing graduates employed by their organization. Moreover, they were not able to precisely define the role and place that each marketing graduate should hold within the organization. In order to overcome this deficiency, we believe that a follow-up survey should only focus on those organizations that feature qualified personnel, capable to assess the abilities of a marketing graduate and his/her competences in particular. And, last but not least, a follow-up research is highly advisable where new details could be included as useful instruments for the academic environment in adjusting the training directions and methodology in compliance with the requirements of the corporate world.

Since the educational system must be closely connected with the labour market characteristics, the business administration academic training should be concerned with revising or amending the curriculum and the method of transferring competences in order to match them with the students' needs and career aspirations. That is why we believe it is important to develop an optimal combination between transversal and professional competences.

In addition, the academic environment should design curricula in which the two kinds of competences are properly and harmoniously integrated and correlated with the real needs of employers. Today it would be naïve to expect from a university to produce fully competent practitioners for all kinds of organizations and the entire array of competences. However, in the future it will be useful for higher education to focus primarily on transmitting the competences required by employers. Therefore, we hold the opinion that it is in our best interest and within our power to ponder more deeply over the employers' real needs that should be properly addressed by the academic curriculum.

Acknowledgement

This paper highlights some of the findings obtained through the implementation of the project "*Research and development of a complex, multidisciplinary and interactive platform for the improvement of the marketing educational system through interconnection between the Romanian academic environment and labour market, in the context of sustainable development*", financed by MECT through CNMP, Domain DC 9, project code 92-103/2008.

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