

## THE INCREASE OF GRADUATES' EMPLOYMENT: A 360° APPROACH

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**Abstract:** *In the current context of the dynamics and volatility of the global labor market, the employability of graduates of higher education is a key indicator of identifying the extent to which a university successfully fulfills its assumed mission - education. At the international level, the researchers have proposed different approaches to the concept of employability and have built different models to determine the components of the employability and the ways to increase it. The purpose of this paper is to present the most important models of employability and to introduce a new approach that extends the debates on this concept by involving all stakeholders - students, graduates, employers, university. The paper also identifies the role of the university in supporting the employability of the graduates and introduces a model of curricular development applied to reduce the gaps between the competences provided in the curriculum and those required on the labor market in order to increase the rapid insertion in the labor market of the graduates. The proposed model has been applied and validated within a project funded by the European Social Fund, generating significant results by redefining the practical competences and improving the practical training of the students from 8 degree programs.*

**Key words:** *employability, employability of graduates, model of employment, curriculum development model, 360 degree approach.*

**JEL Classification:** *A23, D01, I25.*

### 1. Introduction

The success of a higher education institution is determined by the extent to which it manages to successfully achieve the three components of its mission: education, research and the economic and social development of the community in which it operates. On the other hand, a university measures its success in the educational component of its mission through the success of its graduates. In the Romanian universities, the success of the graduates is given by the extent to which they managed to find a job in the first 6 months after graduation in the field in which they were trained. However, employability in higher education must be understood and addressed not only by measuring the number of those who have found a job at the 6-month interval after graduation, but must also be addressed by the correspondence between the skills and competences acquired by the graduate and those required on the labor market, respectively in terms of the extent to which the graduate uses the knowledge, skills and competencies gained in a "post acquired after graduation". Thus, the employability of the graduates of higher education has become an important debate at international level, both from the perspective of defining, but also from the perspective of measuring and developing models that establish a framework of measures, tools, strategies that will lead to increasing the insertion of graduates on the labor market by supporting their employability. For example, Hillage and Pollard (1998) quoted by Dacre Pool, Lorraine and Sewell, Peter John (2007, p. 2), suggest that: "In simple terms, employability is about being capable of getting and keeping fulfilling work. More comprehensively employability is the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment". They define the content of the concept of employability through the following main elements:1. the

"employment assets" of a person consisting of his knowledge, skills and attitudes; 2. "implementation" includes career management skills, including job search; 3. "presentation" refers to "skills for obtaining jobs", for example CV writing, interview techniques. Finally, Hillage and Pollard mention that the maximum use of "employment assets" is highly dependent on personal circumstances and external factors (for example, the current level of opportunity in the labor market). Therefore, the approach of employability must be complex, it goes beyond the qualities and characteristics of the graduate and the door involves all stakeholders - students, graduates, employers and the university.

In this context, the purpose of the present paper is to make an inventory of the most important models of employability presented in the international research, on the one hand, and to propose a new way of approaching this concept, starting from the experience generated within the project. *Integrated activities and measures to support students in the process of transition from school to the labor market in conditions of non-discrimination and social inclusion*, funded from the European Social Fund, on the other hand.

## **2. Models of employment: analysis of specialized literature**

The framework tools that allow students to become successful, "value-added" graduates are so-called employability models.

USEM model of employability (Yorke and Knight, 2004; Knight and Yorke, 2004) is probably the best known and respected model in this area. USEM is an acronym for four interrelated components of employability: understanding, aptitudes, efficacy beliefs. The authors suggest that behind the USEM model is: "an attempt to put thinking about employability on a more scientific basis, partly because of the need to appeal to academic staff on their own terms by referring to research evidence and theory" (Knight and Yorke, 2004, p. 37).

Knight and Yorke (2004) have provided a list of thirty-nine attributes that fall into three categories of personal qualities, core skills and process skills - Aspects of Employability (Yorke and Knight, 2004, p. 22) quoted by Ahmed Umar Rufai, Ab Rahim Bin Bakar, Abdullah Bin Mat Rashid (2015, p. 51).

### **A. Personal qualities**

1. Malleable self theory: belief that attributes (e.g. intelligence) are not fixed and can be developed. 2. Self-awareness: awareness of own strengths and weaknesses, aims and values. 3. Self-confidence: confidence in dealing with the challenges in employment and life. 4. Independence: ability to work without supervision. 5. Emotional intelligence: sensitivity to others' emotions and the effects they can have. 6. Adaptability: ability to respond positively to changing circumstances and new challenges. 7. Stress tolerance: ability to retain effectiveness under pressure. 8. Initiative: ability to take action unprompted. 9. Willingness to learn: commitment to ongoing learning to meet the needs of employment and life. 10. Reflectiveness: the disposition to reflect evaluatively on the performance of oneself and others

### **B. Core skills**

11. Reading effectiveness: the recognition and retention of key points. 12. Numeracy: ability to use numbers at an appropriate level of accuracy. 13. Information retrieval: ability to access different information sources. 14. Language skills: possession of more than a single language. 15. Self-management: ability to work in an efficient and structured manner. 16. Critical analysis: ability to 'deconstruct' a problem or situation. 17. Creativity: ability to be original or inventive and to apply lateral thinking. 18. Listening: focused attention in which key points are recognized. 19. Written communication: clear reports, letters, etc., written specifically for the reader. 20. Oral presentations: clear and

confident presentation of information to a group. 21. Explaining: orally and in writing. 22. Global awareness: in terms of both cultures and economics

c. Process skills

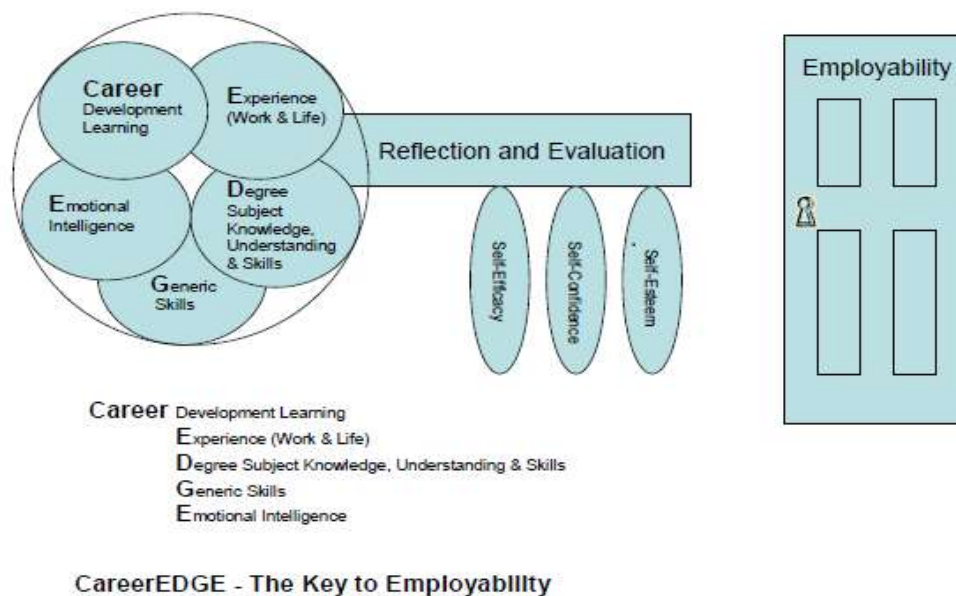
23. Computer literacy: ability to use a range of software. 24. Commercial awareness: understanding of business issues and priorities. 25. Political sensitivity: appreciates how organisations actually work and acts accordingly. 26. Ability to work cross-culturally: both within and beyond UK. 27. Ethical sensitivity: appreciates ethical aspects of employment and acts accordingly. 28. Prioritizing: ability to rank tasks according to importance. 29. Planning: setting of achievable goals and structuring action. 30. Applying subject understanding: use of disciplinary understanding from HE programme (e.g. marketing, finance, human resource mgmt. etc). 31. Acting morally: has a moral code and acts accordingly. 32. Coping with ambiguity and complexity: ability to handle ambiguous and complex situations. 33. Problem-solving: selection and use of appropriate methods to find solutions. 34. Influencing: convincing others of the validity of one's point of view. 35. Arguing for and/or justifying a point of view or a course of action. 36. Resolving conflict: both intra-personally and in relationships with others. 37. Decision making: choice of the best option from a range of alternatives. 38. Negotiating: discussion to achieve mutually satisfactory resolution of contentious issues. 39. Teamwork: can work constructively with others on a common task

Lorraine Dacre Pool (2007) designed and published the CareerEDGE model and then developed the Employment Development Profile. Both concepts have appeared in many publications and are used in many universities nationally and internationally. The CareerEDGE model provides the framework through which students take responsibility for developing their own employability, and for the stakeholders in higher education ways to support students in order to develop from well-trained and successful graduates. CareerEDGE stresses that it is essential for students to be given opportunities to reflect (reflective learning) and evaluate experiences, in order to develop higher levels of self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-esteem, the fundamental elements of employability.

CareerEDGE model of the employability of the graduates was introduced in 2007 and since then it has been extremely positive, both nationally and internationally. The original article (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007) published in *Education + Training* magazine, has been downloaded nearly 30,000 times, and the model has appeared in a number of other authors' publications (figure no. 1).

CareerEDGE model the model reproduces the basic elements of employability, respectively self-esteem, self-confidence, self-efficacy, elements that are built by reflecting and evaluating key elements that highlight the most important facets of "employability", respectively Career Development Learning-CDL experience-work and life, degree subject knowledge, skills and understanding, generic skills (including enterprise skills, emotional intelligence).

Career Development Learning-CDL in the context of higher education it has been described as being „the concern to help students acquire the knowledge, concepts, skills and attitudes that will equip them to manage their careers, that is, their permanent evolution in learning and work" (Watts, 2006, p. 2).



**Figure no. 1. CareerEDGE - The Key to Employability**

Source: Dacre Pool, L. and Sewell, P., 2007. The key to employability: developing a practical model of graduate employability. *Education + Training*, 49(4), pp. 277-289.

Experience (work and life) - work experience requested by employers and approved by most HR staff was one of the major points presented by Wilson Review of Business-University Collaboration (2012). Most universities have recognized this thinking and have dedicated staff to help students get involved with a form of work-related learning. Learning activities in connection with practical activities allow students to develop the professional skills expected by employers, but also to develop thinking about how the theory and knowledge gained through their undergraduate studies can be related to the real world.. They can thus incorporate real-life experiences into their studies.

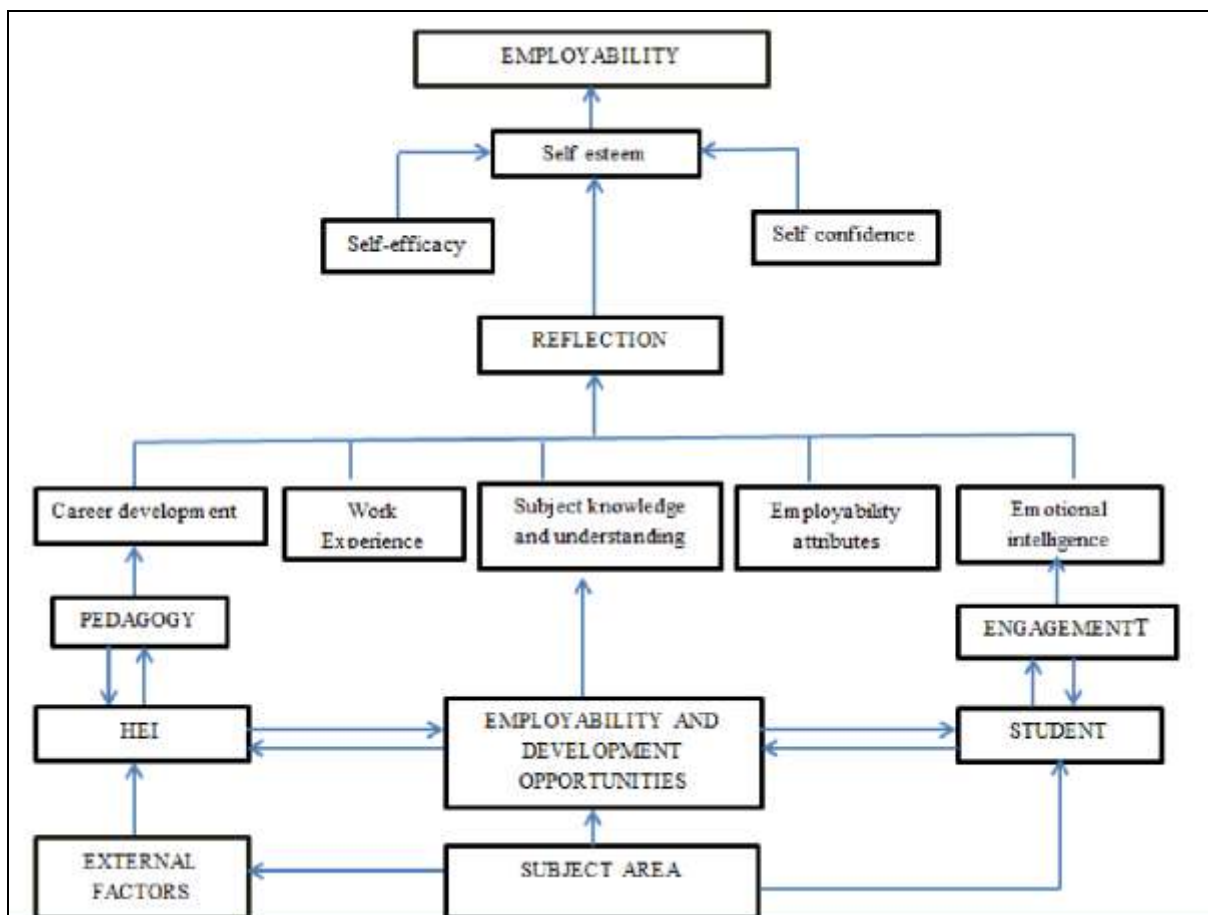
Degree subject knowledge, skills and understanding refer to the capabilities of the student.

Generic skills (including enterprise skills) - generic skills, including creativity and innovation skills. Many of the generic skills listed by employers as essential to graduates, such as communication, teamwork, problem solving, digital literacy and more, including those sometimes classified as "enterprise skills" such as creativity and innovation, are also skills that help students make the most of their academic studies. As such, they can be developed within the university curriculum as a result of learning to make students aware. Thus, students can see how they develop their skills and competencies that employers are looking for and will be able to provide evidence to this effect.

Emotional intelligence - has a significant effect on relationships and well-being (Mayer, Roberts and Barsade, 2008). It is a desirable attribute for potential leaders (Walter, Cole and Humphrey, 2011). It refers to how people perceive, understand and manage emotion; The activities that help this type of development can be, and in many cases are already incorporated in the curriculum. Any activity that encourages students to work together, communicate effectively, negotiate with each other and reflect on their learning experiences can be used to develop Emotional intelligence (EI). Research has shown that it is possible for students to improve their Emotional intelligence ability (EI) along with confidence in this ability (Dacre Pool and Qualter, 2012).

Emotional Intelligence was defined by Coleman (1998) as “the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships”, and Jaeger (2003, p. 634) has indicated that emotional intelligence can be improved by teaching and learning in higher education and is positively correlated with academic achievements.

Another model identified in the literature is Model of Graduate Employability for Higher Education created by Ahmed Umar Rufai, Ab Rahim Bin Bakar, Abdullah Bin Mat Rashid (2015) and which takes into account the gap between the demands of employers and the preparation of graduates of higher studies. The model establishes the connection between higher education and the labor market. The components of this model (figure no. 2):



**Figure no. 2. Model of graduate employability skills for Higher Education**

Source: Ahmed Umar Rufai, Ab Rahim Bin Bakar, Abdullah Bin Mat Rashid, 2015. Developing a Sustainable Practical Model of Graduate Employability for Higher Education. *International Journal of Education & Literacy Studies*, 3(1), p. 47.

The "Key to Employability" model reproduced in The Pedagogy for Employability Group (2004, p. 5) provides a list derived from research carried out over the last twenty-five years and suggests that employers expect to find that the following generic skills have been developed in graduates: imagination/creativity, adaptability/flexibility, willingness to learn, independent working/autonomy, working in a team, ability to manage others, ability to work under pressure, good oral communication, communication in writing for varied

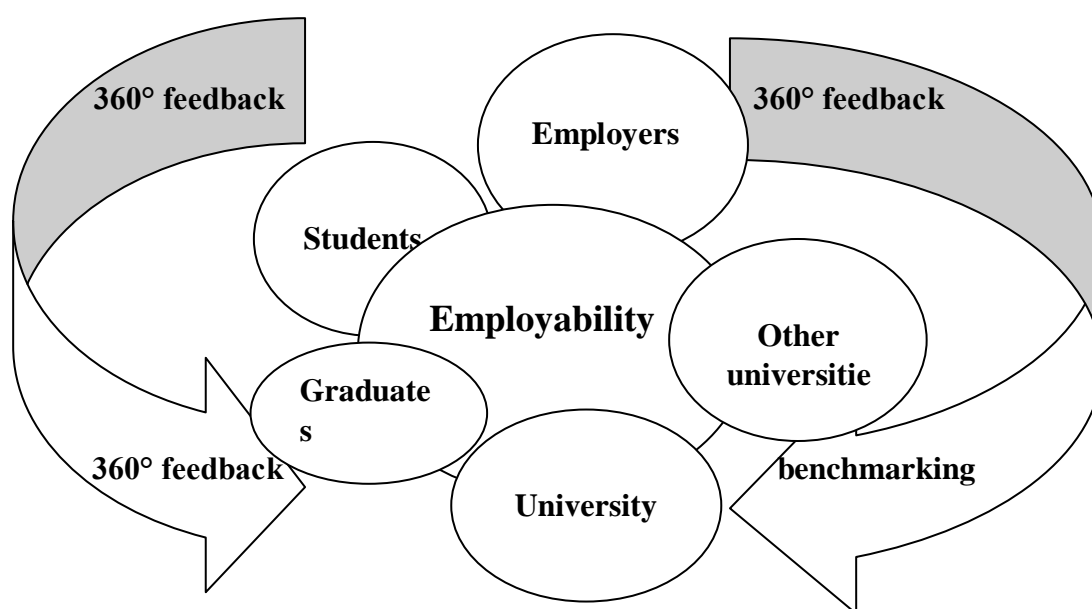
purposes/audiences, numeracy, attention to detail, time management, assumption of responsibility and for making decisions, planning, coordinating and organising ability, ability to use new technologies (not included in the list above but mentioned in many others and an important element). The starting point for the "Key to Employability" model was the theoretical DOTS model (Law and Watts 1977), which consists of:

- "Planned experiences designed to facilitate development:
- Decision learning - decision making skills;
- Awareness of the opportunity - knowing the existing job opportunity and the imposed requirements;
- Transitional learning - including job search and self-presentation skills;
- Self awareness - in terms of interests, abilities, values, etc."(Watts, 2006, pp. 9-10).

All the models identified and presented were based on the identification of those competences, skills and qualities that the graduate of higher studies must possess in order to integrate quickly into the labor market. In general, researchers have adopted different approaches to make this identification.

### 3. Development of a model to increase graduates' employment based on 360° feedback

Starting from the premise that the employability of the graduates represents a concern not only of the future employee, but also of the institution that trains it, respectively of the future employer, the development of a model of employability must integrate all the stakeholders (figure no. 3).



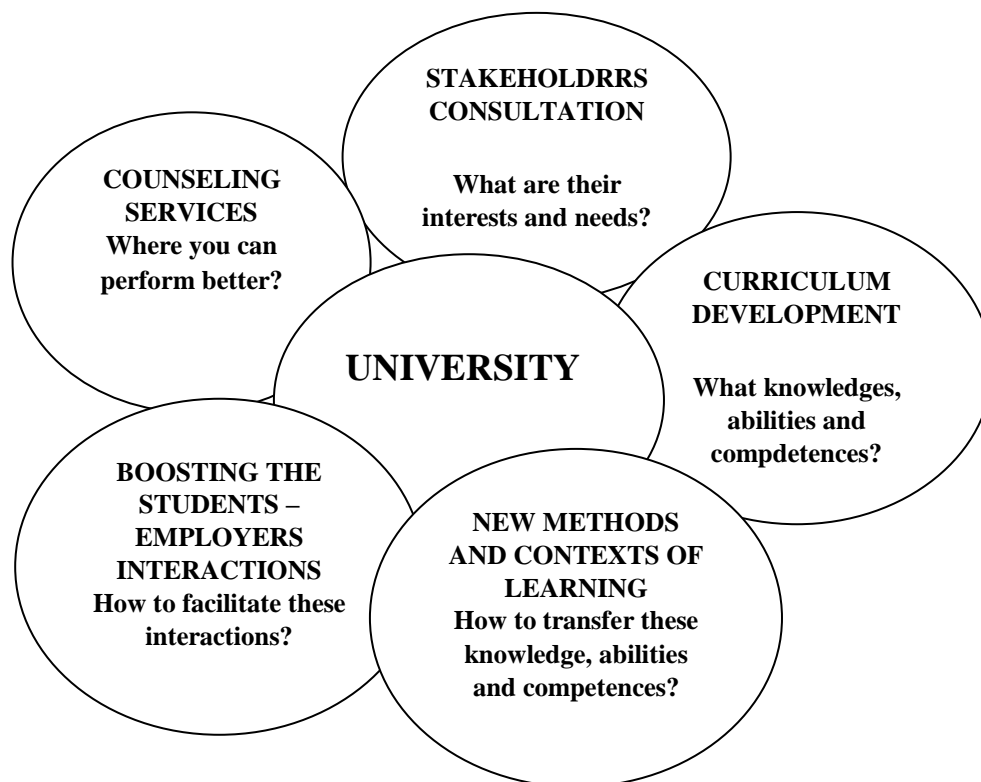
**Figure no. 3. Groups interested in supporting employability**

Source: the authors

However, we appreciate the fact that the university is the catalyst for employability through the role it plays in its development, such as (figure no. 4):

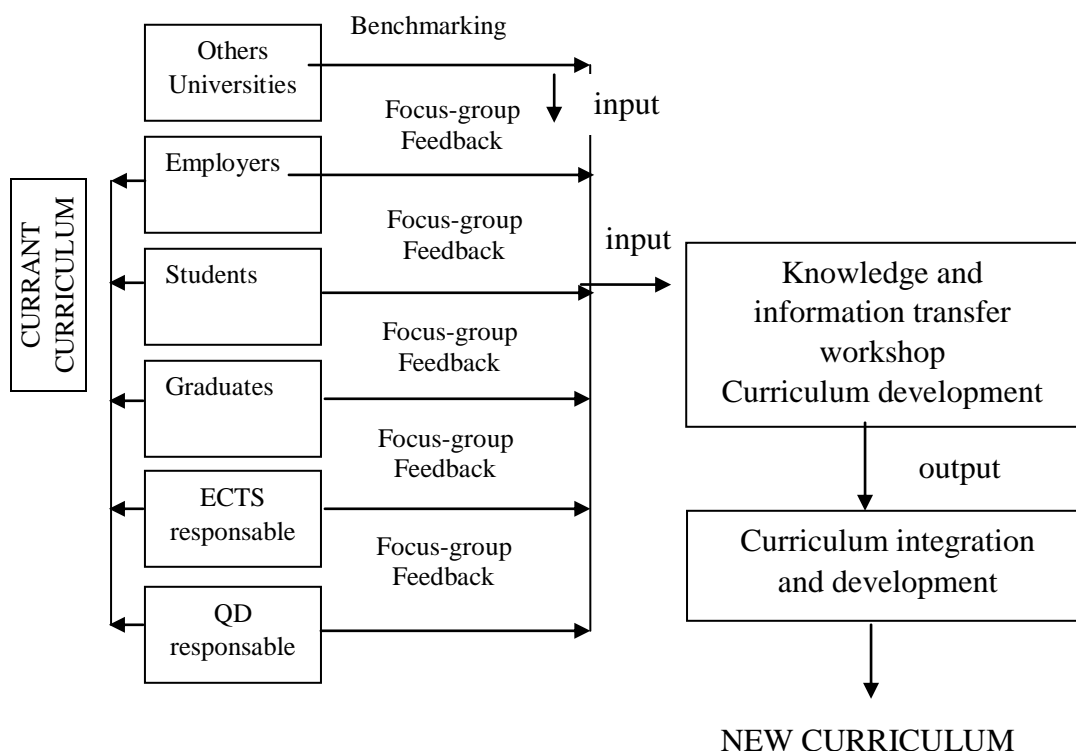
1. Development of consultation mechanisms to identify the set of knowledge, skills and competences that ensure high employability in the field of studies, with the involvement of all interested groups;

2. Develop a curriculum that ensures the provision of that set of knowledge, skills and competences with the consultation of interested groups;
3. Developing new methods and experiential learning contexts to support the provision of the set of knowledge, skills and competencies that ensure employability with the involvement of all interested groups;
4. Developing interaction contexts between students/graduates and employers;
5. Providing career counseling services to assist the student/graduate in approaching the career and choosing a way to integrate into the labor market in accordance with personal interests, qualities and values.



**Figure no. 4. The role of the university in supporting the employability of graduates**  
Source: the authors

In this context “360° feedback” is a method that was developed and implemented within the project *Integrated activities and measures to support students in the process of transition from school to the labor market in conditions of non-discrimination and social inclusion*, funded from the European Social Fund, for consulting all interested groups internal and external to the university for the development of the practical component of the curricular offers that will lead to a better correlation of the skills and competences formed with those required on the labor market and, thus, to a much faster insertion of the future graduates. The model was developed and applied to improve the practical training of the students by conducting the internships provided for in the curriculum. This development process was approached according to the transformation process as follows (figure no. 5):



**Figure no. 5. Curriculum development model for increasing employability**

Source: the authors

The input within the curricular development process was ensured by two methods: benchmarking analysis and focus group development. Thus, the input of knowledge and information within the process was ensured by involving all groups interested in employability. On the other hand, it was aimed to identify good practices at national and international level regarding the set of professional and transversal competences developed through internships, aspects of curriculum and discipline contents, respectively models of partnership and collaboration with the socio-economic environment. for conducting internships, etc. The documentation, in order to identify the best practices, was done in the online environment and by contacting directly the selected universities as benchmarking references for collecting the data and information necessary to carry out the analysis (educational plans, methodologies and regulations regarding the development of the specialized practice, partnerships and modalities. for the implementation of students at a potential workplace etc.). Following the analysis, a final report was drawn up, which represented an input in the development of focus groups but also in the activity of integration and curricular development. Focus groups were conducted on field of study based on the discussion guide and structured questionnaires were used to collect data and information from employers, students, graduates, ECTS leaders of the targeted study programs, as well as the managers of the Center for Management Quality and University Programs. The working support tools, consultation and feedback collection (interview guide, structured questionnaires) were developed based on the benchmarking analysis report and the current curriculum of each study program considered. Thus, the practical and transversal competences, methods of providing the competences, the way of organizing the specialized practice, as well as other aspects were viewed and analyzed at 360°, which allowed to identify the existing gaps between the current curriculum and the



market requirements so that the conditions of the graduates' employability are ensured. Within each focus-group (study program) the following participated: minimum 10 economic agents in the field, minimum 5 students from the target group representing the study program, 2 graduates of the study program, 1 ECTS manager, minimum 1 responsible for the quality of education within the applicant university). For each focus group, a final report was drafted, which represented an input into the curricular integration and development activity. Also, for the transfer of the results, workshops were held with the persons designated for curricular development at the level of the selected study programs. Each person in charge of curricular development, redefined the set of professional competences related to the specialized practice in correlation with the educational plans, identified and established the correlations between the redefined professional competences and the contents related to the specialized practice, respectively the number of hours allocated on contents that lead to their development at the study program level.

#### 4. Conclusions

In this paper, the employability is approached as a quick and directly productive integration to a job compatible with the graduated field of study. The speed of integration in the labor market, as well as the ability of the graduate to put into practice in the particular context of a job and of a certain company. Thus, we appreciate that a comprehensive approach to the concept must bring into play the role of each party. The models presented in international research as tools for increasing employability are focused largely on identifying a set of skills, competencies and characteristics of the graduate that lead to its rapid integration into the labor market. This paper emphasizes that beyond the personal capacity of the graduate, there are a number of methods by which the university, together with the partners in the socio-economic environment, identifies and provides the set of skills that make the graduate immediately productive, on one hand, respectively support the graduate to choose that job where he can perform and achieve professional success, on the other hand. In this context, in order to support employability, universities must develop consultation mechanisms to identify the set of knowledge, skills and competencies required in the labor market, develop a curriculum that ensures the provision of that set of knowledge, skills and competences, develop new methods and experiential learning contexts that support the provision of the skills set, develop contexts of interaction between students / graduates and employers and not least help the student / graduate in approaching the career and choosing a way to integrate into the labor market in accordance with the interests, personal qualities and values. "360 ° Feedback" is a method that was developed and implemented within the project *Integrated activities and measures to support students in the process of transition from school to the labor market in conditions of non-discrimination and social inclusion*, funded from the European Social Fund. The model can be extended to be applied for the design of the entire curriculum related to a study program.

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