SKILLS AND CHALLENGES ON THE LABOUR MARKET. A STUDY REGARDING THE ROMANIAN GRADUATES' PERCEPTION ON EMPLOYABILITY

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ABSTRACT

Employability is a central issue for contemporary society, whether we refer to graduates as employees-to-be, employers or higher education institutions, each with a range of expectations and offers. For higher education institutions, the number of employed graduates has become an important factor in assessing the quality of the education they provide. On an unstable labour market, which is marked by rapid change and is prone to fluctuations, graduates, from the position of jobseekers, need to make the most of their skills, develop and redefine them constantly in order to adapt to the new requirements. Having as a target group the graduates from "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău, Romania, the present paper tried to explore their perception upon the necessary skills for a job and the challenges they encountered on the labour market. The paper adopted the survey method, which employs the questionnaire as a research tool. The findings from this research reveal a strong correlation between the skills considered necessary by the graduates and the challenges they had to face once they started working. The conclusion is that adapting to the labour market requires a proactive attitude. The employees, being aware of the skills required, are the ones who must take the initiative for a change in order to improve their working conditions.

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1. Introduction

The specialized literature reveals that employers search for future employees who can make proof of adaptability, openness to teamwork and critical thinking (Dominguez, 2014; Ferrandez-Berrueco & Humpl, 2019; Harvey et al., 1997; Karzunina et al., 2020; Little, 2001). The skills that facilitate employability should be the ones that everyone needs to do their job. In other words, employees should have both personal and professional skills. In The Employability Challenge report issued by the UK Employment and Skills Development Committee (UKCES, 2009), four personal skills and three functional skills are mentioned as basic employability skills. The four personal skills are (1) personal management, (2) critical thinking and problem solving, (3) teamwork and (4) understanding of the organization, while the three functional skills are (1) effective use of computing techniques, (2) efficient use of language and (3) efficient use of IT.

The multiple definitions of the term employability prove the complexity of the phenomenon. In general, employability refers to the set of skills that allow a person to obtain or keep a job (De Cuyper et al., 2011; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007; Römgens et al., 2019; Lodi et al., 2020). In other words, it represents the possession of the skills required by the (future) employer (Sa and Serpa, 2018: 2). At the same time, according to Fugate et al. (2004: 14-15), employability is a form of proactive, work-specific adaptability that consists of three dimensions – professional identity, personal adaptability and the social and human capital of the employee or a psychosocial construction that embodies individual characteristics that favor adaptation as understanding and behavior, in fact building the employee-job interface. Therefore, employability is considered to include a number of traits that combine synergistically to help employees adapt effectively to the multitude of work-related changes taking place in today's economy (Fugate et al., 2004: 15). The three dimensions can be described as follows: professional identity refers to the way in which individuals define themselves in a certain work context and circumscribe the cognitive patterns that determine their

behavior; personal adaptability is the ability to adapt to new situations, which allows for career success, especially in situations where working conditions change; social and human capital is linked to the social networks of individuals and a number of factors that affect career development: age and education, work and training experience, emotional intelligence, and cognitive skills (ibid).

However, according to the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), employability is not just an individual issue, related to the employee, but rather a social construct, involving, in addition to employees, employers (who actually shape the concept of employability through the values, attitudes and skills they need for a particular job) and also education providers (schools or universities), whose duty is to prepare graduates for what the economy demands (Lowden et al., 2011).

Considering these three actors, Rothwell and Arnold (2007: 23–41) suggested an understanding of the concept of employability based on what they call interdependent qualities. Thus, employers appreciate in the potential employees not only their knowledge (academic performance and involvement in studies) and attitude (confidence in their skills, ambition), but also their positioning in relation to their university (their perception of the power of the university brand) and field of study (the reputation that the university has in its field of study; the status and credibility of a particular field of study) (Rahmat et al., 2012; Ristea et al., 2010; Thi, 2016; Weligamage, 2009). At the same time, it is important to position graduates in relation to the labour market (awareness of opportunities on the external labour market; perception of the market level; identification of the labour market correlated with the field of education) (Pardo-Garcia & Barac, 2020; Monteiro et al., 2019; Saunders & Zuzel, 2010).

2. Types of skills required on the labour market

The case of university graduates' skills is of central interest to the employers, which seek highly qualified people and to the institutions that train them in acquiring the appropriate skills required on the labour market.

Brown and Hesketh (2004) argue that skills can be divided into hard and soft categories. The validated skills and experience belong to the hard category, consisting

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of academic accreditations, work experience, as well as sports and musical achievements, for which evidence can be provided. Personal qualities and characteristics, including interpersonal skills, time management ability, appearance or how candidates behave during the job selection procedure are soft categories. The latter category seems to be of most interest to employers, so graduates should pay attention to how they can develop on the personal level. A study by Archer and Davison (2008) on employers' perceptions of graduates' entry on the labour market revealed the same conclusion: software skills, such as communication skills or teamwork, were better perceived than hard skills, such as, for example, technical skills or good qualifications. Following the idea that graduates should master soft skills for both performing and finding work, the Reboot Project (2019: 7) also underlines the need for a balance between soft and hard skills: "hard skills create the content and soft skills create the frames to deliver and perform the work." According to the findings of the same Reboot Project, soft skills such as positive attitude, resilience, communication, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving and management skills are among the most important for employers, who also seek for subject specific skills, IT-literacy and foreign languages as the most important hard skills in their (future) employees.

Sa and Serpa (2018: 3) highlight the role of general or transversal skills, that can be used in any situation or professional task. They are needed in all types of jobs and can be the basis for acquiring more specific or technical skills. They can be transferred from one job to another and include skills such as leadership, communication, problem solving, teamwork and creativity. As it can be noticed, the general or transversal skills correspond to the soft categories mentioned by Brown and Hesketh (2004). Sa and Serpa (2018) draw attention to the fact that these skills are also very relevant in one's career, in addition to the specific/professional or technical skills (Brown and Hesketh's (2004) hard skills) that are appropriate only in the professional environment for which they were developed and that higher education institutions should be able to further develop these skills in their students. Studies on graduates' employability underline the fact that, in order to raise their chances of being employed, the graduates should work on building these general skills. A report from a study conducted in the UK (Shivoro et al., 2018) regarding the skills expected from graduates on the labour market revealed

that among the skills the graduates lacked were precisely general skills such as communication skills, proficiency skills and eagerness.

A 2017 report published by The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) mentions three general sets of skills needed for potential employees to succeed on the labour market:

1. Technical, professional and discipline-specific knowledge and skills – technical skills refer, in this era, especially to employees' digital skills, while professional skills, specific to the discipline, reflect the theoretical and practical knowledge of the field of study.

2. General cognitive and information processing skills – these are general skills that refer to the ability of employees to understand, interpret, analyze and communicate complex information, but also to their ability to apply this information outside their workplace – in everyday life situations, for example, thus helping them to become effectively involved in both social and economic life and, at the same time, to adapt to a rapidly changing economy.

3. Social and emotional skills – refer to skills such as self-control or perseverance that help employees achieve their goals, but also skills such as respect, sociability or openness to others that help employees work better with others.

The soft skills mentioned by Brown and Hesketh and Sa and Serpa's general skills are further sub-classified in this report into cognitive skills and socio-emotional skills, respectively. These three general sets of skills match, in fact, the three dimensions identified by Fugate et al. (2004) which lead the way to employability. The technical, professional and discipline-specific knowledge and skills shape the professional identity of the employee; the general cognitive and information processing skills are linked to the dimension of personal adaptability, while the social and emotional skills craft the social and human capital of the employee.

The Reboot Project report (2019) speaks about Work 4.0 skills (problem solving, creativity, readiness for change, people dimension and teamwork) as the key for the graduates' entry on the labour market.

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However, numerous studies and reports also pinpoint the gap between the skills required by the employees and those taught in universities, a gap leading to challenges for graduates. That is why, the literature in the field emphasizes the need for a triangular relationship involving the employability skills of graduates, the strategies adopted by higher education institutions to develop these skills and the needs of employers (Cai, 2012: 13). On the one hand, students must understand that obtaining a degree must be accompanied by the improvement of relevant knowledge and skills if they want to succeed on the labour market, on the other hand, universities should prepare their students for careers by offering training programs that suit the needs of the market and the qualities of the graduates. Universities should engage in close interactions with employers and be part of employers' human resource selection networks. Employers should also be involved in decisions regarding the content of the curriculum, but also in the system of teaching and practical training of students by providing internships for students.

Mourshed et al. (2014), in a report about education to employment, revealed that the reason for the high unemployment rate among young Europeans has less to do with the low number of jobs and more to do with the lack of skills of potential employees in the terms required by employers. The report's conclusion, similar to other surveys, reports and studies on youth unemployment, is that the three actors that should develop a triangular relationship (potential employees, education providers and employers) still live in "parallel universes."

Therefore, first of all, better cooperation between employers and universities is needed, followed by better communication between these two actors and future employees. Universities should adapt their curricula to meet the needs of employers in terms of skills required on the labour market. The programs should reflect the employment needs of students, including the general skills and abilities required in the workplace. Course design (and the learning experience of students in general) should be articulated in line with labour market needs and be the consequence of a strong partnership with employers' organizations (Lowden et al., 2011). At the same time, by

conducting surveys among employers and students as potential employees, universities can provide a bridge of communication between them.

3. Graduates' perceptions on the skills required on the labour market

The graduates' perception regarding the most important skills they need in their jobs is also of practical importance. Brennan and Little (2010) present the findings of a study based on a survey applied to graduates from 11 countries, in which they were asked to indicate the extent to which nineteen skills were required in their current jobs. Broadly speaking, more than two-thirds of graduates responded that they use the following skills to a large extent in their current work: the ability to use time efficiently, the ability to perform well under pressure, mastering their own field or discipline, the ability to work productively with others, the ability to quickly acquire new knowledge, the ability to coordinate activities, the ability to clarify meaning to others, the ability to use computers and the Internet, the ability to write reports, notes or documents, the ability to come up with new ideas and solutions, analytical thinking, willingness to question one's own and others' ideas, ability to negotiate effectively, ability to mobilize the abilities of others, ability to present products, ideas or reports to the public, ability to assert authority, vigilance at new opportunities, knowledge of other fields or disciplines, ability to write and speak in a foreign language. The highest ranking skills were related to time management (the ability to use time efficiently), stress management (the ability to work well under pressure) and teamwork skills (the ability to work well with others, to coordinate activities and clarify the meaning for others). However, a quarter of graduates considered that they had deficiencies regarding the possession of the following skills: efficient use of time, assertion of authority, negotiation, mastery of their own discipline, presentation of products, ideas, or reports.

On the other hand, the result of some international reports (Jackson & Wilton, 2017; McKenzie et al., 2017; Graduate Careers Australia, 2016) reveal the fact that there are also graduates who do not seem to have a clear idea about the skills required by the future employers.

The possible gap between the skills that graduates possess and those required by employers is also discussed by Atfield and Purcell (2010), who cite the study by Stewart

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and Knowles (2000), presenting the list of skills required for almost any position, as formulated by the UK Department for Education and Employment, including: basic literacy and numeracy; the ability to work well with others; communication skills; self-motivation; ability to organize one's work; a basic ability to use IT and dedication and commitment, while problem-solving skills were later added by other authors. Students in the Futuretrack survey discussed in the article responded quite confidently in terms of written communication, spoken communication, and computer literacy, and with less confidence in computing skills and self-assurance. They also scored high on other skills, such as the ability to work in a team (46.8%) or leadership skills (38.9%). It is also interesting to note the top 5 most important skills that students consider employers look for when recruiting graduates: good work ethic, communication skills, teamwork, self-motivation and the ability to manage their own skills.

In order to improve the prospects of graduates on the Romanian labour market, as well as to increase the employment rate, the National Employment Strategy 2014-2020 proposes the application of integrated programs, either by providing jobs or by reintegrating into the educational system or participating in continuous vocational training to provide graduates with the professional and transversal skills required by employers. In order to continuously improve soft and hard skills, the National Employment Strategy 2014-2020 aims to "improve the quality and performance of education and training systems at all levels and increase participation in tertiary education or equivalent" (2014: 10). Cernușca et al. (2017) discuss the importance of the mission of the university environment and the modern teacher to develop educational strategies focusing on the importance and need to develop soft skills along with other job-specific skills to successfully help graduates adapt to the labour market. Traditional learning will need to be combined with modern teaching, learning and assessment methods and techniques in order to prepare highly skilled professionals ready to deal with the continuously evolving digital economy (Moolman, 2017).

Therefore, the specialized literature (Brabo, 2019; Gomery, 2019; Epure & Mihaeş, 2015; Ornellas et al., 2017; Støren & Aamodt, 2010) emphasizes the important role of a growing collaboration between universities, the business environment and professional

bodies, in order to adapt the skills acquired during university years to the current requirements and needs of the labour market.

4. Materials and Methods

The present research was conducted within the national project "Labour market integration – the vector of tertiary education", a project co-financed by the European Social Fund through the Human Capital Operational Program 2014-2020, Priority Axis 6 – "Education and skills", under POCU / 320/6/21 – "Measures to optimize higher education study offers to support employability". The aim of the project is to diversify and improve the educational programs of four accredited higher education centers ("Ștefan cel Mare" University of Suceava, University of Pitești, Western University of Timișoara and "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău), representative of three regions in Romania, in order to intensify the process of integration of students in tertiary and non-university tertiary education, in correlation with the labour market needs and demands.

The present research is part of the Professional Insertion Study carried out at the level of each partner university involved in the project, dedicated to evaluating the level of professional integration of the graduates of "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău within a time span of ten years (graduates from 2008-2018). The paper presents some of the major aspects of the study implemented at the level of the third partner of the project, namely, "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău, having as main objective the assessment of the graduates' perception of the skills required on the labour market.

The research hypothesis is that there is a correspondence between the perception of graduates towards the skills required on the labour market and what challenges they encountered on the labour market.

Taking into consideration not only the objectives of our research, but also the importance of the analyzed topic, we chose to use the survey method, which employs the questionnaire as a research tool. The questionnaire used, administered between December 1, 2019 and April 30, 2020 in Google Drive, aimed to cover all issues of

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utmost importance for monitoring the graduates' perception on the necessary skills for a job and the challenges they encountered on the labour market.

The sample group was represented by 304 bachelor studies graduates of "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău, who graduated between 2008-2018 from the five faculties of the university: the Faculty of Engineering, the Faculty of Letters, the Faculty of Sciences, the Faculty of Economics, and the Faculty of Movement, Sports and Health Sciences.

The sample group was selected using the databases from these five faculties, as well as the databases from the Department of Professional Counseling that exists in the university.

Most of the surveyed graduates were between 21 and 30 years old (70%), the rest being up to 54 years old. Regarding the distribution by gender, the majority of respondents were women – 75%, men being only 25%. Regarding the area of origin, 71% people came from urban areas and 29% people came from rural areas.

Also, most of the graduates were very good students, they obtained very high grades at the bachelor's exam (63% had the bachelor's exam grade between 9.00 and 10.00) and 45% of the graduates had the final grade between 9.00 and 10.00.

5. Results

Using as support the uniformed database with the answers provided by 304 respondents, the SPSS software generated a series of data reflecting the quantitative presentation of the answers. The qualitative analysis presented below will try to underline the findings related to the degree of correlation between the graduates' perception of the skills required and the challenges they had to face on the labour market.

5.1. The graduates' perception of the skills required on the labour market

For the present article we grouped the items following the three general sets of skills needed for potential employees to succeed on the labour market suggested by the

2017 report published by OECD: technical and professional skills, general cognitive and information processing skills and social and emotional skills. The respondents had to assess, on a scale from 1 – not at all to 5 – to a very large extent, the necessity of a number of skills.

5.1.1. Technical and professional skills

The first skills the respondents had to rate were the professional skills specific to the job. More than half of the respondents - 54% - assessed the need for these skills as to a very large extent; 26% - to a large extent; 16% - to some extent; 3% - to a small extent; 1% - not at all. No matter the job chosen, the employee should master a series of fundamental skills (be they technical or linguistic). That is why, not surprisingly, the great majority of the respondents considered the need for such skills as (very) important.
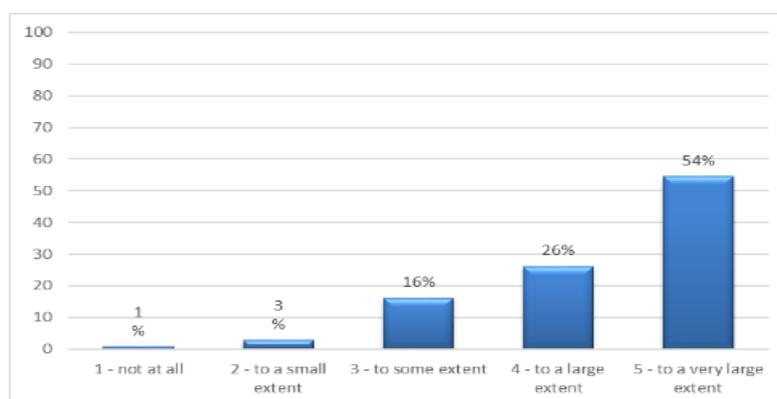
Figure 1. Professional skills specific to the job

Regarding the IT Skills, the interpretation of the data obtained by applying the questionnaire reveals that 41% of the respondents assessed the degree of necessity of these skills as to a very large extent and 33% - to a large extent.

Only a small number of the respondents consider these skills as less important: 16% - to some extent; 8% - to a small extent; 2% - not at all. For more than half of the respondents, IT skills are important and very important. The majority of the respondents are aware that, in this highly technological era, computer literacy is of utmost importance, as it can increase productivity, enabling employees to work better and faster. This finding is in accordance with that of The Employability Challenge Report

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(2009), which mentioned the efficient use of IT skills as one of the three basic functional skills that may lead to employability.
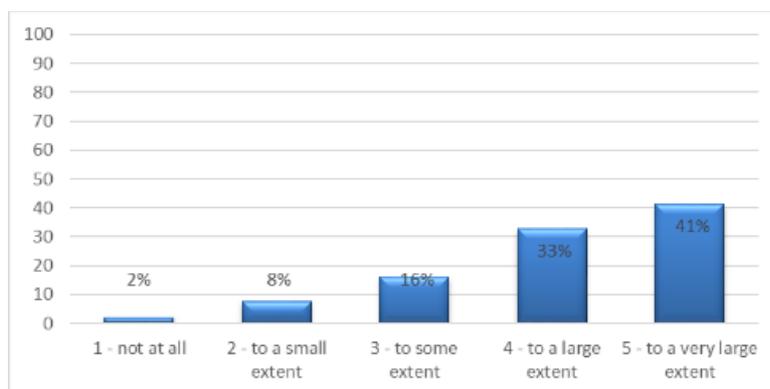

Figure 2. IT Skills

As far as Foreign languages are concerned, the interpretation of the data obtained by applying the questionnaire reveals the following: 47% of the respondents assessed the degree of need for these skills as to a very large extent and 20% - to a large extent. For more than half of the respondents, the ability to speak foreign languages is very important, as this adds value to their contribution in the workplace. This finding also supports what The Employability Challenge Report (2009) states, that the functional skill of the efficient use of languages is one of the basic employability skills. Quite a considerable percentage, however, assessed the skill of speaking foreign languages to a lesser extent: 21% - to some extent; 6% - to a small extent; 6% - not at all. A possible explanation for this result is the fact that the graduates expect to be employed in areas that do not require the mastery of any other language except the mother tongue.
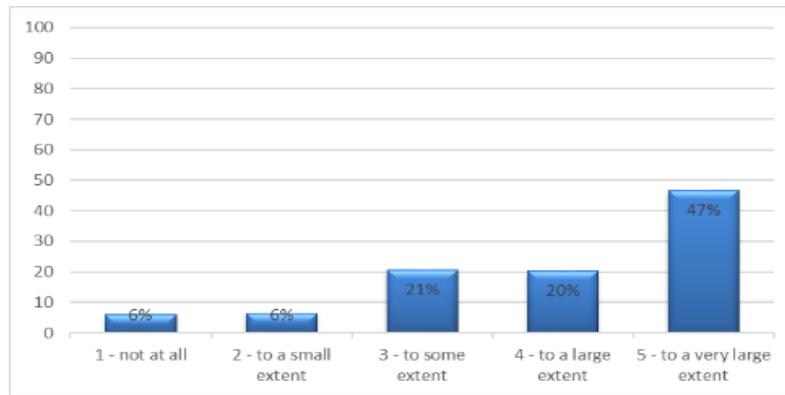
Figure 3. Foreign languages

Asked about Entrepreneurial skills, 27% of respondents rated the need for these skills as to a very large extent, a score equal to the percentage of those who rated these skills as necessary to some extent - 27%; 24% - to a large extent; 11% - to a small extent; 11% - not at all. The percentages are almost equal, a possible explanation being the fact that, even if all the respondents, irregardless of the faculty they graduated, had had a course in entrepreneurship, this skill may be considered important only for the business sector and rated accordingly only by the graduates from the faculties that have prepared them for such jobs.
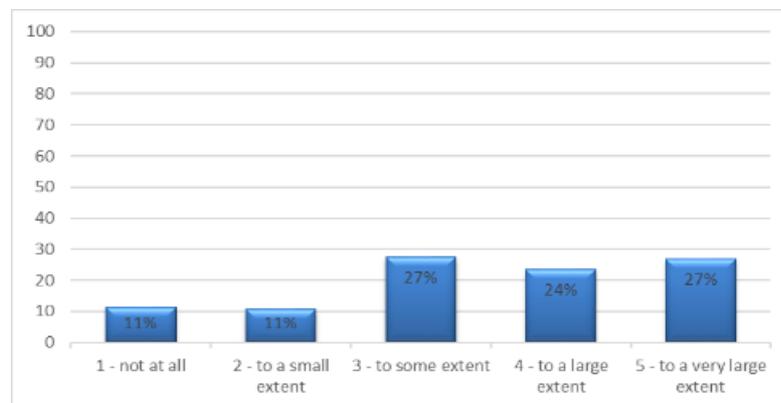
Figure 4. Entrepreneurial skills

5.1.2.   General cognitive and information processing skills

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Regarding the Effective communication skills, the interpretation of the data obtained by applying the questionnaire reveals that the great majority of the respondents - 70% - assessed the need for these skills to a very large extent and 17% - to a large extent. A small percentage of the respondents considered these skills as less important: 8% - to some extent; 4% - to a small extent; 1% - not at all. The respondents are aware of the need for effective communication skills (both verbal and written) as an essential means to allow both themselves and others to accurately and quickly understand information. This finding is in accordance with Archer and Davison's study (2008) which revealed that employers value more communication skills than technical skills.
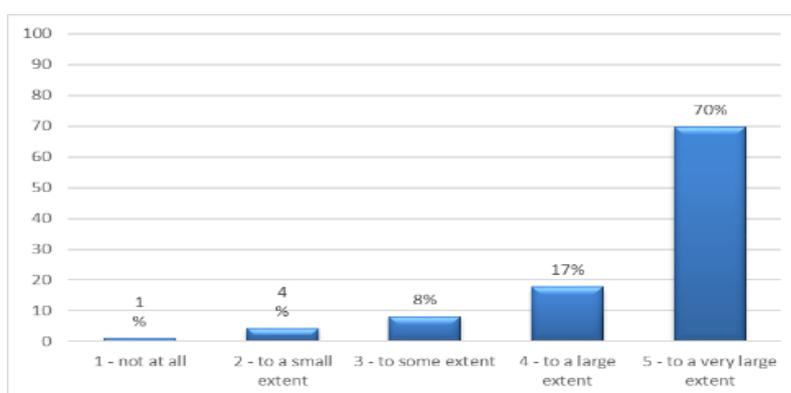
Figure 5. Effective communication skills

As far as Analytical and research skills are concerned, the interpretation of the data obtained by applying the questionnaire reveals that, again, the greatest number of the respondents - 47% - assessed the degree of necessity of these skills as to a very large extent and 30% - to a large extent. Those who consider their necessity as less important are limited in number: 14% - to some extent; 7% - to a small extent; 2% - not at all. For more than half of the respondents, analytical and research skills are important and very important, as they are key skills for understanding problems, finding solutions to solve them after analyzing the situation and making informed decisions about the actions to follow. This finding is consistent with that of Brennan and Little's study (2010), in which the graduates mentioned analytical thinking among the skills they used to a large extent in their current job.
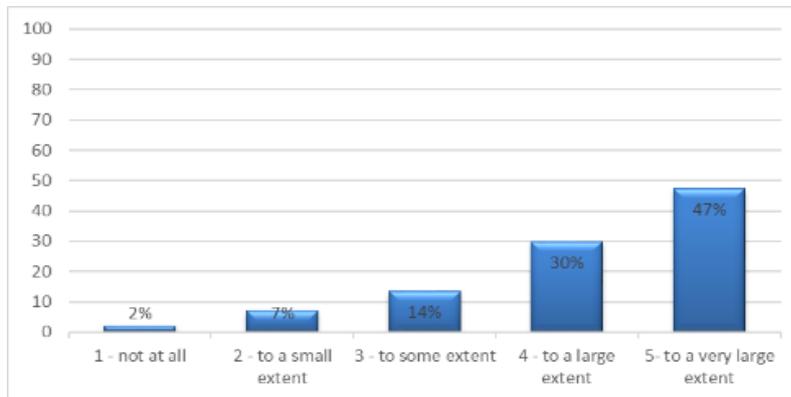
Figure 6. Analytical and research skills

The degree of need for Negotiation Skills is assessed by 42% of the respondents as to a very large extent and by 25% - to a large extent. For more than half of the respondents, negotiation skills are important and very important, as they can help not only in managing conflicts, but also in a good process of decision making as well as in effective teamwork. Quite a significant percentage, however, consider these skills as less important: 19% - to some extent; 8% - to a small extent; 7% - not at all.
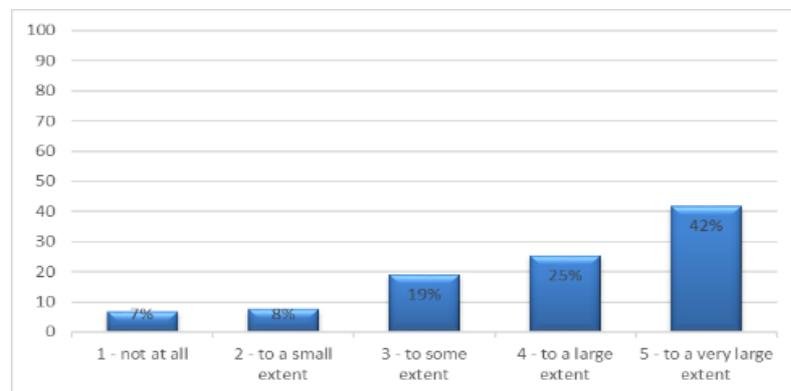
Figure 7. Negotiation Skills

Regarding Creativity and innovative thinking, the interpretation of the data obtained by applying the questionnaire reveals the following: 59% of the respondents assessed the degree of necessity of these skills as to a very large extent and 20% - to a large extent. A smaller percentage consider these skills as less important: 12% - to some extent; 6% - to a small extent; 3% - not at all. More than half of the respondents

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consider creativity and innovative thinking as very important skills, being aware of their role in finding unique solutions and solving problems. This finding is consistent with that of Brennan and Little's study (2010), in which the graduates mentioned the ability to come up with new ideas and solutions among the skills they used to a large extent in their current job.
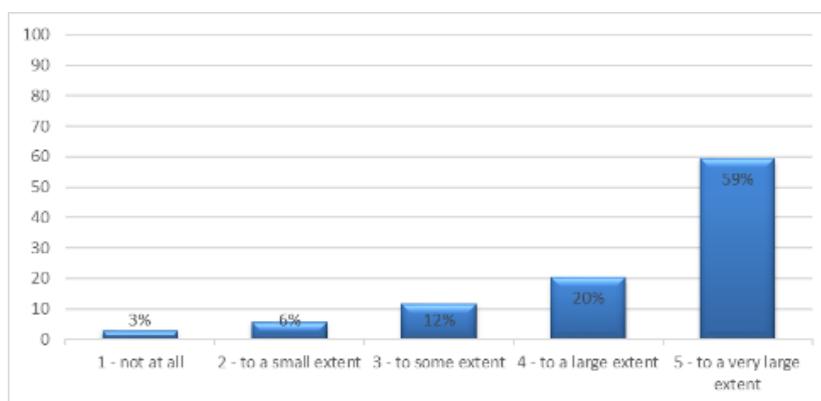
Figure 8. Creativity and innovative thinking

Asked about the Ability to solve complex problems, 52% of respondents assessed this ability as to a very large extent and 25% - to a large extent. A smaller percentage assessed it to a lesser extent: 16% - to some extent; 6% - to a small extent; 2% - not at all. For more than half of the respondents, problem solving skills are considered to be important and very important, as they also involve other skills, such as creativity, innovative thinking or determination.

This finding also supports what The Employability Challenge Report (2009) states, that the personal skill of problem solving is one of the basic employability skills.
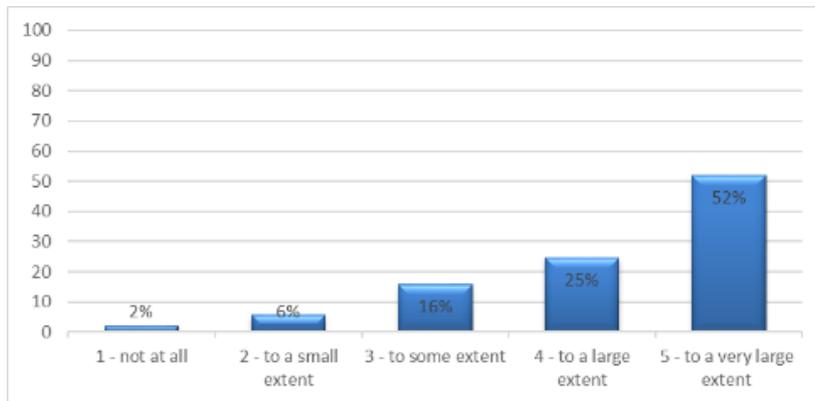
Figure 9. Ability to solve complex problems

As far as Critical Thinking is concerned, the interpretation of the data obtained by applying the questionnaire reveals the following: 48% of the respondents assessed it as to a very large extent and 25% - to a large extent. The other percentages are as follows: 15% - to some extent; 8% - to a small extent; 5% - not at all. More than half of the respondents consider critical thinking skills as important and very important, as they can add creativity to problem solving at the workplace. This finding is in accordance with that of The Employability Challenge Report (2009), which mentioned the critical thinking as one of the basic personal skills that may lead to employability.
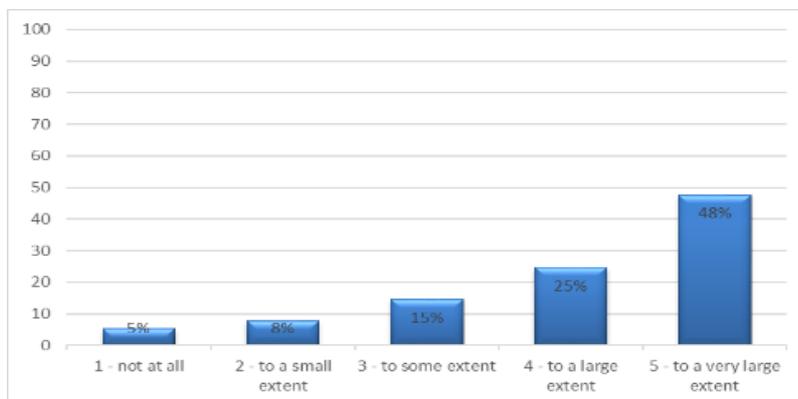
Figure 10. Critical Thinking

5.1.3.   Social and emotional skills

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Flexibility and prioritization are two other skills respondents had to assess. The interpretation of the data obtained by applying the questionnaire reveals the following: 50% of the respondents assessed them as to a very large extent and 35% - to a large extent. The percentage of the respondents that considered these skills as less significant is considerably smaller: 8% - to some extent; 6% - to a small extent; 2% - not at all. A great number of the respondents consider flexibility and prioritization as very important skills. Almost all the respondents understand that they need to show both willingness and adaptability to change according to the requirements of the job, as well as to master prioritization in order to achieve improved productivity and a better time management in the workplace.
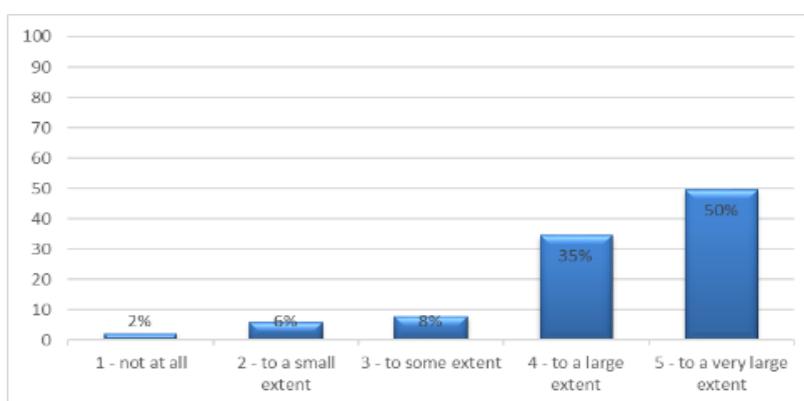
Figure 11. Flexibility and prioritization

Regarding Teamwork, the interpretation of the data obtained by applying the questionnaire reveals that more than half of the respondents - 56% - assessed it as to a very large extent and 23% - to a large extent, 13% - to some extent; 6% - to a small extent; 3% - to a very small extent. As it can be noticed, the ability to work in a team is considered to be a very important skill by more than half of the respondents.

They understand the different benefits that teamwork can bring in the workplace: collaboration, efficient work, motivation, creativity, etc. This finding is in accordance with Archer and Davison's study (2008) which revealed that employers value more soft skills such as teamwork than good qualifications, for example.
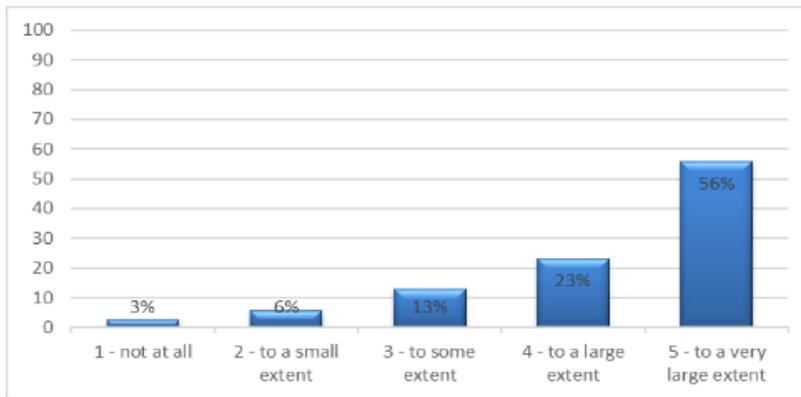
Figure 12. Teamwork

Asked about Competitiveness, two thirds of the respondents consider it important and very important: 37% of the respondents assessed it as to a very large extent and 31% - to a large extent. One third of the respondents regard it as less important: 19% - to some extent; 8% - to a small extent; 5% - not at all. The answers suggest that more than half of the respondents understand the implications fostered by a competitive environment in the workplace: harder work that leads to increased productivity.
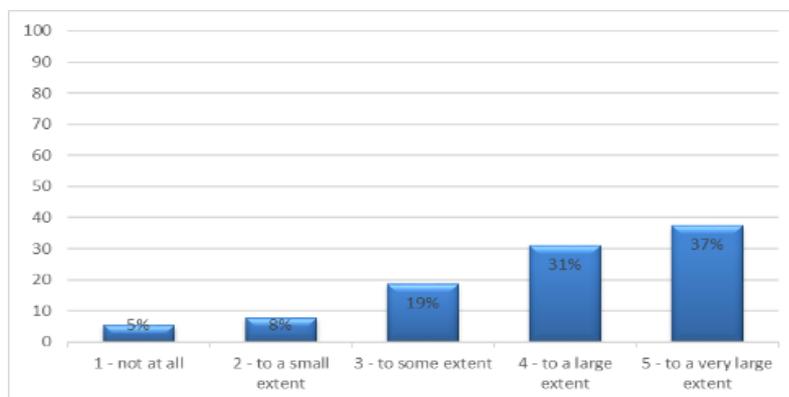
Figure 13. Competitiveness

The ability to Work with tight deadlines is assessed by 45% of the respondents as to a very large extent and by 30% - to a large extent. 15% - to some extent; 7% - to a small extent; 3% - not at all. The ability to work with tight deadlines is considered by more than half of the respondents to be a highly valuable skill. They seem to correctly understand the implication of the ability to handle deadline pressure. This finding is consistent with that of Brennan and Little's study (2010), in which the graduates

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mentioned the ability to work well under pressure among the skills they used to a large extent in their current job.
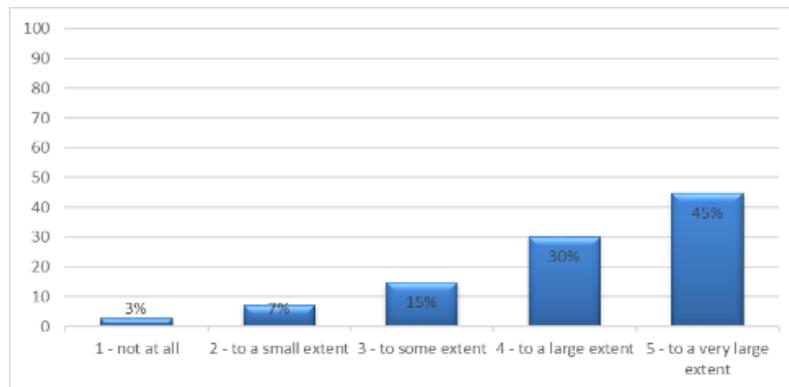

Figure 14. Work with tight deadlines

Regarding the Ability to cope with physical exertion, the difference in the percentages is not very high. 29% of respondents assessed this ability as to a very large extent; 22% - to a large extent; 21% - to some extent; 13% - to a small extent; 15% - not at all. However, as it can be noticed, more than half of the respondents consider this ability as important and very important.
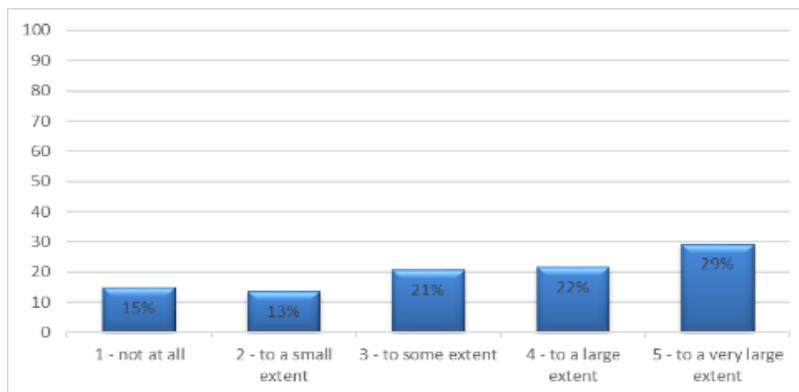
Figure 15. Ability to cope with physical exertion

As far as the Ability to cope with emotional challenges, the interpretation of the data obtained by applying the questionnaire reveals the following: 47% of respondents rated this ability as to a very large extent and 26% - to a large extent. The other assessments are as follows: 14% - to some extent; 9% - to a small extent; 4% - not at all. For more than half of the respondents the ability to cope with emotional challenges is important and very important, as it may help them better understand themselves and

their colleagues, with whom they can develop good relationships, thus creating a good working environment.
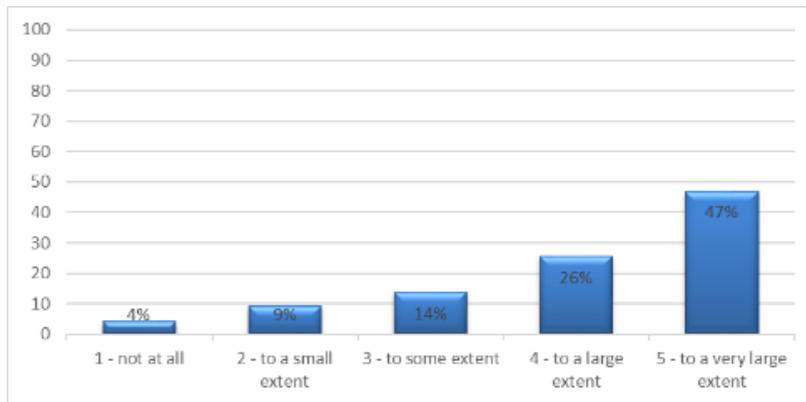

Figure 16. Ability to cope with emotional challenges

Regarding the Autonomy and the ability to take decisions, the interpretation of the data obtained by applying the questionnaire reveals the following: 52% of the respondents assessed the degree of necessity of these skills as to a very large extent and 27% - to a large extent. A smaller percentage assessed it to a lesser extent: 11% - to some extent; 6% - to a small extent; 4% - not at all.

More than half of the respondents consider the sense of responsibility for making decisions as important and very important. Autonomy can increase motivation at the workplace, while the ability to take decisions may enhance the self-esteem.
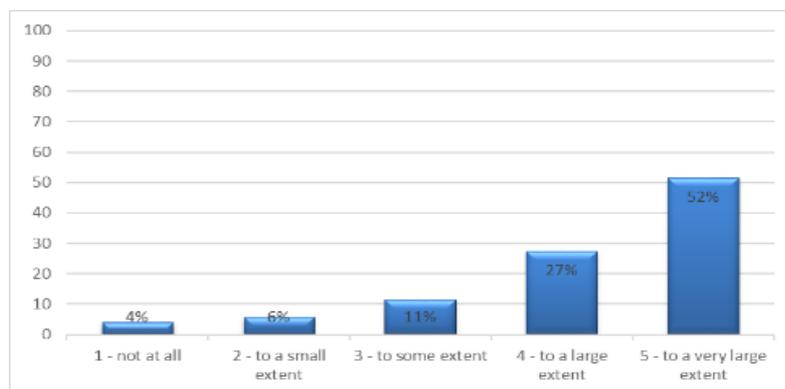

Figure 17. Autonomy and the ability to take decisions

As far as Stress resistance is concerned, the interpretation of the data obtained by applying the questionnaire reveals that 59% of the respondents assessed it to a very large extent and 24% - to a large extent. A smaller percentage rated it as less important: 11% - to some extent; 3% - to a small extent; 3% - not at all. More than half of the

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respondents consider stress resistance as very important. This finding is consistent with that of Brennan and Little's study (2010), in which the graduates mentioned stressed management among the skills they used to a large extent in their current job.
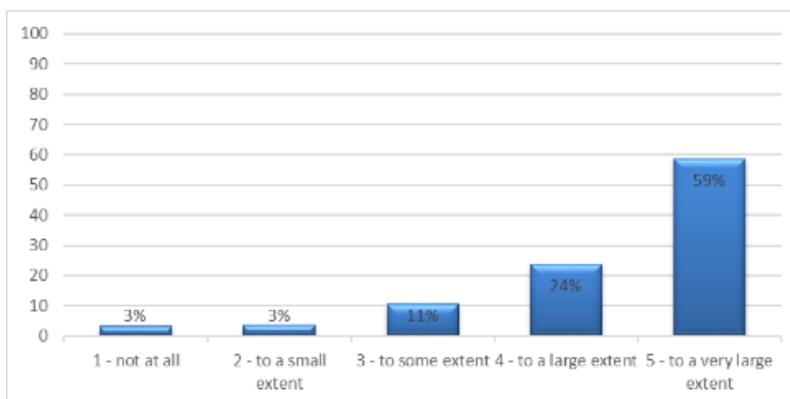

Figure 18. Stress resistance

Regarding Leadership skills, the interpretation of the data obtained by applying the questionnaire reveals the following: 41% of the respondents assessed the degree of need for these skills as to a very large extent and 28% - to a large extent; 15% - to some extent; 7% - to a small extent; 9% - not at all. For almost more than half of the respondents, leadership skills are very important, as they are lead to success at the workplace. However, the study conducted by Brennan and Little (2010) revealed that a quarter of the graduates taking part in their survey had deficiencies regarding the assertion of authority in their job.
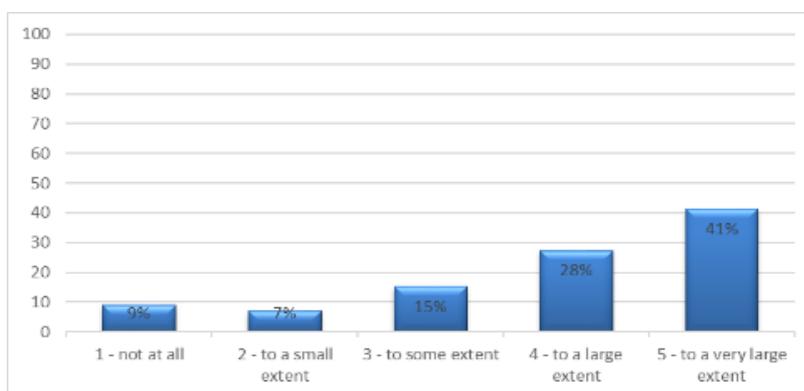

Figure 19. Leadership skills

5.2. The challenges the graduates had to face on the labour market

In analysing the items in the questionnaire regarding the challenges the graduates had to face on the labour market, we grouped them taking into account the same three general sets of skills needed for potential employees to succeed on the labour market suggested by the 2017 report published by OECD. The respondents had to assess, on a scale from 1 – to a very small extent to 5 - to a very large extent, the degree of difficulty of a number of aspects.

One question differs from the others, as it asks the respondents to assess, on a scale from 1 – not important at all to 4 – very important, the importance of the university training in preparing for the current/last job.

The interpretation of the data obtained for the item regarding the importance of the university training in preparing the graduates for the current/last job allowed us to highlight the following aspects: almost half of the respondents, 47%, consider university training very important; 33% - quite important; 16% - not very important; 4% - not important at all. The correlation between university training and the requirements of the current job is obvious and satisfying - 80% of respondents consider university training very important. This finding is inconsistent with that of Brennan and Little (2010), whose study revealed that a quarter of the graduates taking part in their survey did not feel very well prepared for the job by their previous training, having deficiencies regarding mastery of their own discipline.

5.2.1.   *Technical and professional challenges*

Regarding the difficulty of adapting to the workplace from the perspective of Learning new processes and procedures, the interpretation of the data obtained based on the answers revealed the following: 10% - to a very large extent; 18% - to a large extent; 30% of respondents appreciated this difficulty as to some extent; 18% - to a small extent; 24% - to a very small extent. Judging by the answers, we can say that learning new processes and procedures was not a big problem for half of the respondents, while for the other half it implied a certain degree of difficulty. This finding is partially consistent with that of Brennan and Little's study (2010), in which the graduates mentioned the ability to quickly acquire new knowledge among the skills they used to a large extent in their current job.

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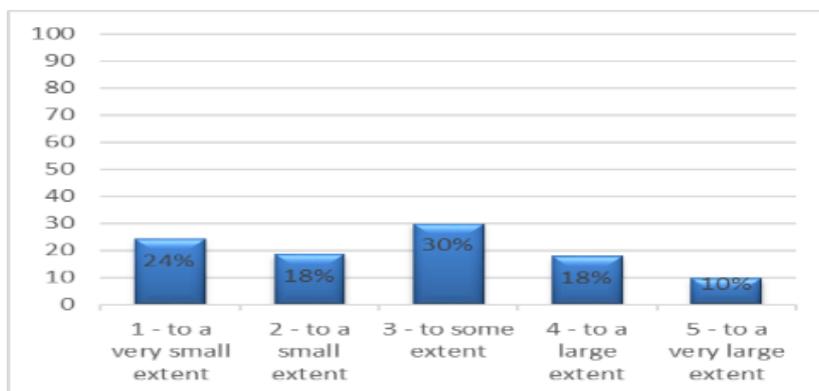
Figure 20. Learning new processes and procedures

Regarding the difficulty of adapting to the workplace from the perspective of Learning how to use new technologies and tools, the interpretation of the data obtained based on the answers revealed the following: 9% of respondents rated this difficulty as to a very large extent; 9% - to a large extent; 23% - to some extent; 28% - to a small extent; 31% - to a very small extent. Most of the answers rated this aspect as to a very small extent, suggesting that new technologies and tools are not a challenge for graduates. This finding is consistent with that of Brennan and Little's study (2010), in which the graduates mentioned the ability to use computer and the Internet among the skills they used to a large extent in their current job.
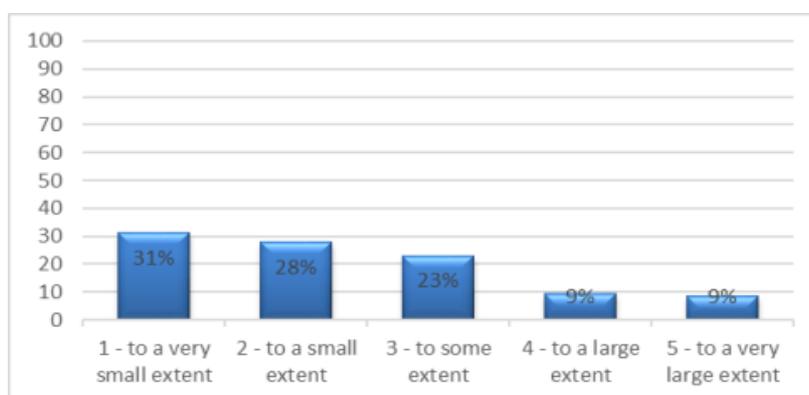

Figure 21. Learning how to use new technologies and tools

5.2.2.   General cognitive and information processing challenges

Regarding the difficulty of adapting to the workplace from the perspective of the aspect the large volume of new information, the interpretation of the data obtained based on the answers revealed the following: 12% of respondents appreciated this

difficulty as to a very large extent; 18% - to a large extent; 30% - to some extent; 21% - to a small extent; 19% - to a very small extent.
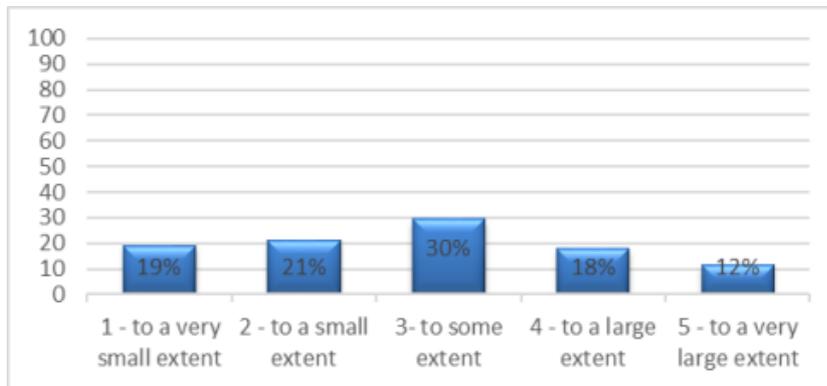

Figure 22. The large volume of new information

Regarding the difficulty of adapting to the workplace from the perspective of the difference between the skills obtained during university training and the requirements of the job, the interpretation of the data obtained based on the answers revealed that 13% of respondents appreciated this difficulty as to a very large extent; 14% - to a large extent; 36% - to some extent; 19% - to a small extent; 18% - to a very small extent. The difference between the skills obtained in university and the requirements of the job is not significant, which shows that the university succeeds in successfully preparing graduates in order to acquire the necessary skills to access a position in the field.
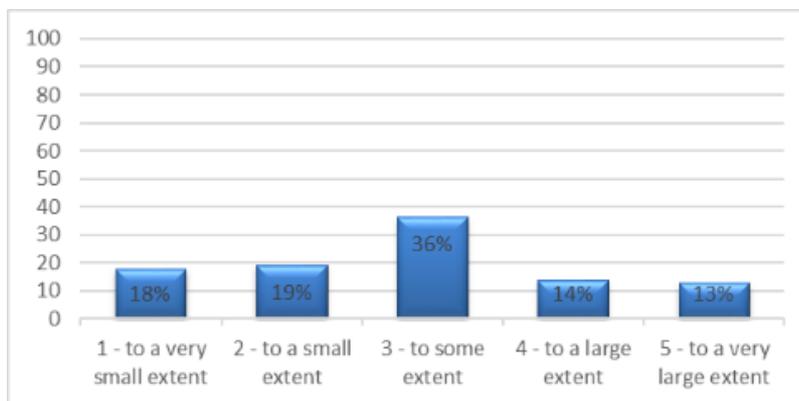

Figure 23. The difference between the skills obtained during university training and the requirements of the job

5.2.3.   *Social and emotional challenges*

Regarding the difficulty of adapting to the workplace from the perspective of the Accommodation with superiors and co-workers, the interpretation of the data obtained

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based on the answers revealed the following: 7% of respondents rated this difficulty as to a very large extent; 15% - to a large extent; 25% - to some extent; 20% - to a small extent; 33% - to a very small extent. Accommodation with superiors and co-workers is not difficult.
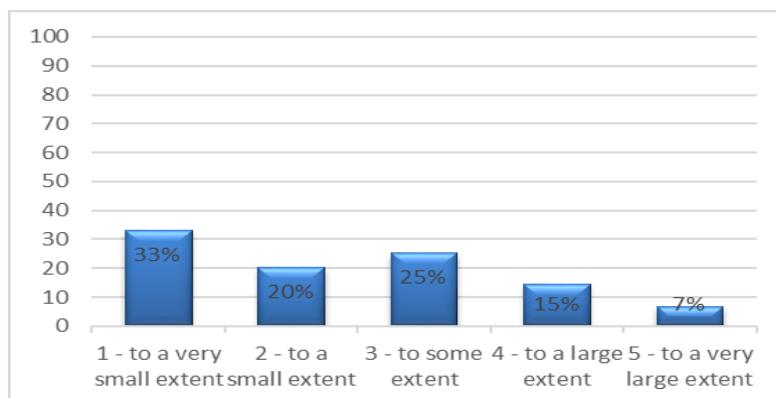

Figure 24. Accommodation with superiors and co-workers

Regarding the difficulty of adapting to the workplace from the perspective of the Adapting to the culture of the organization, the interpretation of the data obtained based on the answers revealed that 6% of respondents appreciated this difficulty as to a very large extent; 13% - to a large extent; 27% - to some extent; 25% - to a small extent; 29% - to a very small extent.
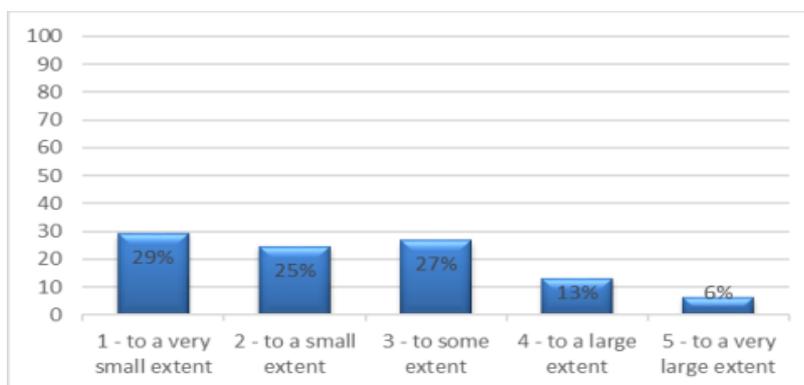

Figure 25. Adapting to the culture of the organization

Regarding the difficulty of adapting to the workplace from the perspective of Lack of confidence in my abilities and skills, the interpretation of the data obtained based on the answers revealed the following: 8% of respondents rated this difficulty as to a very large extent; 12% - to a large extent; 27% - to some extent; 19% - to a small extent; 34% - to a very small extent. We notice a high degree of confidence in their own

abilities and skills, which is an advantage in the workplace. This finding does not support the previous research of Stewart and Knowles (2000), cited by Atfield and Purcell (2010), where students responded with less confidence in the matter concerning self-assurance.
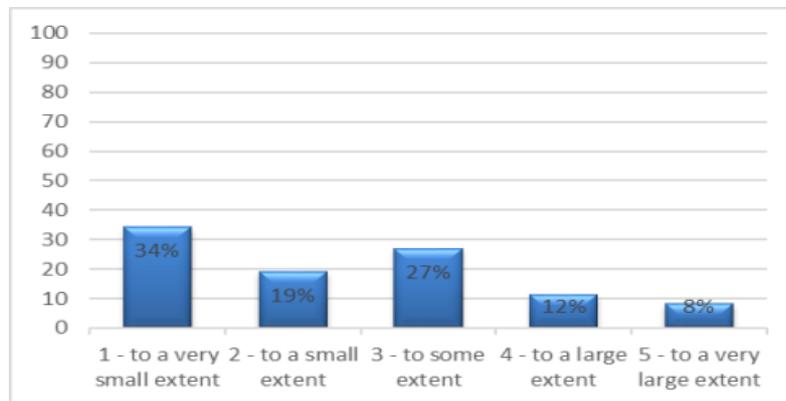

Figure 26. Lack of confidence in my abilities and skills

6. Discussion

Regarding the graduates' perception of the skills required on the labour market, the findings revealed that for the technical and professional skills, the graduates consider mastering foreign languages as being the most important skill (47%), followed by It skills (41%). The least important are, in their opinion, the entrepreneurial skills (27%). The Romanian graduates' perception upon these hard skills is consistent with the results presented in the Reboot Project (2019), where there had been identified three skills areas as being essential for employment: language skills, IT skills and (sector)-specific skills. The fact that graduates ranked foreign languages as being of the highest importance can find its explanation first of all in their being accustomed to studying foreign languages since early childhood up to university years.

Another reason for this ranking may be the fact that many Romanian graduates intend to find work abroad, thus knowing at least one foreign language becoming a key condition for employment. Students are also aware that, in these ever-changing times, a good mastery of new technologies is also essential for employment. A possible explanation for the low ranking of entrepreneurial skills may be the graduates' perception on these skills as highly sector-specific and, hence, needed in just some fields of activity, such is the business sector, for example. However, this is not valid just for the Romanian context. In the "European Semester Thematic Factsheet. Skills for the Labor Market" (2017) it is highlighted the idea that "entrepreneurial skills are still quite low among the EU population." (p. 4)

For the general cognitive and informative processing skills, the graduates consider mastering effective communication skills as being the most important (70%), followed by creativity and innovative thinking (59%) and the ability to solve complex problems (52%). The least important are, in their opinion, the negotiation skills (42%). These soft skills are again in line with Work 4.0 skills mentioned in the Reboot Project (2019: 62), where communication skills are the most important ones out of those linked to people dimension, followed by critical thinking skills and problem solving skills from those linked to problem-solving dimension. Since communication skills are ranked the highest, it is rather surprising to notice that negotiation skills (which imply, in their turn, communication skills) are ranked the lowest. A possible explanation could be, again, the Romanian graduates' perception of these skills as sector-specific, thus required only in some fields of activity.

As far as the social and emotional skills are concerned, the graduates consider stress resistance as the most important skill (59%), followed by teamwork (56%) and autonomy and ability to take decisions (52%). The least important is, in their opinion, the ability to cope with physical exertion (29%).

Judging by the graduates' answers regarding the challenges they had to face on the labour market, it can be noticed that technical and professional challenges were not a big problem for them. Only a small percentage of the respondents ranked the items in this category as to a very large extent (Learning new processes and procedures – 11% and Learning how to use new technologies and tools – 9%), suggesting that neither the new processes and procedures, nor the new technologies and tools constituted a big challenge for the majority of graduates. This is also the case for the second group of challenges, the general cognitive and information processing ones. Only 12% of the respondents appreciated the large volume of information at the workplace as very difficult and only 13% of the graduates appreciated the gap between the skills obtained during university training and the requirements of the job as to a very large extent. The social and emotional challenges are also small, the graduates demonstrating:

- *Self-confidence (only 8% of the respondents rated the lack of confidence in their abilities and skills as a difficulty to a very large extent);*

- *Flexibility (only 7% of the respondents rated the accommodation with superiors and co-workers as a difficulty to a very large extent);*

- *Adaptability (only 6% of the respondents rated their adapting to the culture of the organization as a difficulty to a very large extent).*

7. Conclusions

The fact that the great majority of the respondents (80%) consider the need for professional skills specific to the job as (very) important explains why the technical and professional challenges they encountered on the labour market were not considered as (very) difficult by more than half of the respondents. They expected such challenges and they prepared accordingly. At the same time, their university training played an essential part in preparing for the job: 80% consider the educational training as (very) important, while almost half of the graduates consider that the university successfully prepared them in order to acquire the necessary skills to access a position in the field. At the level of the socio-emotional dimension, the graduates' high ranking of such skills as teamwork and autonomy and ability to take decisions explains the high degree of confidence in their own abilities and skills once on the labour market. The results are consistent with other studies (Atfield and Purcell, 2010; Stewart and Knowles, 2000; Ornellas et al., 2017), which also speak about communication skills, teamwork and self-motivation as the most important skills that students consider employers look for. In conclusion, the hypothesis of our research has been verified: there is a correspondence between the perception of graduates towards the skills required and the challenges they encountered on the labour market.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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