

SOP HRD - AN APPROACH TO QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND A FACTOR OF INFLUENCE FOR ENSURING AN ASCENDING PROFESSIONAL CAREER PATH

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Abstract: In the present paper the authors address the importance of carrying out certain relevant internships by students and, at the same time, the influence that these internships have on the place where Romanian education system is situated on the map of the European competitive education systems. Because the student -perceived as a central section of the future evolution- must develop both in terms of personal and professional features, the authors approached aspects regarding the importance and the advantages brought out by the internships carried out by youths, since these often can represent the starting point for the future career of the graduates. The paper is, overall, a plea for projects co-financed through the European Social Fund and through the SOP HRD for ensuring the existence of public-private partnerships and for facilitating the emerge of first contact of the youth with the labor market. This article provides to readers the opportunity to create a picture regarding the role and importance of such projects in forming a competitive education system and, at the same time, a bright future through the influence exercised over students.

Key words: project, POSDRU, SOPHRD, training, quality, human resources, development;

Introduction

In the context in which higher education generates the specialists that will lead the EU integrated Romanian society and economy, in the near future, the achievement of a quality oriented behavior constitutes the vital element to ensure a prospering economy. The educational component has in this regard, a big importance, not only to ensure the quality of services, but to the integration of quality demand in the national culture.

The need of alignment to the process of globalization and the current socio-economic situation are making their mark on the importance needed to be given to education. In the global competition in the computerized economy, the quality and ingenuity of human resources are the main factors underlying the essential gaps between states [3]. Starting with Alfred Marshall's statement that "the most valuable of all capital is that invested in human beings" [7] the quality of human resources, in general, and educational resources, in particular, are considered decisive factors of overall economic growth.

These being said and taking into account the current context in which a clear tendency of educational market liberalization exists not just at a European level,

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but at a global level, a fierce international competition for human, financial and time resources can be observed. The recognition of graduates' qualifications on the labor market in order to insure the free movement of personnel in the European space, in the context of a knowledge based economy, and the rapid insertion of graduates on the labor market cannot be achieved unless a quality higher education is provided. Thus, in the following paper, the advantages brought through internships facilitated by The Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development are presented, specifically the "*Practica – primul pas pentru cariera ta*" (*Practical training – the first step to your career*) project.

Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOP HRD): catalyst for increasing quality of the Romanian higher education and influence factor for an ascending career in the professional life of youths

The quality of education in Romanian academic environment finalities aims anchored in the European context, paving the way to opportunities offered by the European knowledge society. Students and teachers need to understand the necessity of university studies, which involve continuous improvement of performance and as a first objective, continuous development of human resources. In this context, in the higher education, competitiveness and excellence must be balanced with the social cohesion and freedom of access and, through congruent actions and measures, the European higher education - which includes more than half of Europe's population - could lead to improving the life of the entire continent.

For this to be possible, it is absolutely necessary to increase competitiveness through the development of human capital in accordance to the requirements of the modern, flexible and inclusive labor market [1]. It is well known the fact that students can benefit from various programs through which they may travel and live abroad in order to carry out internships; among these we can mention Erasmus / Socrates, Leonardo da Vinci and Comenius programs, as well as other scholarships that can be obtained by bilateral agreement or through other organisms, excepting the Loans and Scholarships Agency. The purpose of the internships funded through these programs is a collective one - namely abilities and aptitudes' development in correlation to the requirements of the labor market.

Thus, the internships -seen as a whole- facilitate the first connection that students have with the business environment and with the organizational culture of the companies, giving them the chance to become familiar with the rigors and demands of a professional working environment [4]; moreover, an internship provides them the opportunity to apply knowledge acquired during their studies, while allowing the accumulation of experience and practical skills in a particular field.

The existence of the *Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013* facilitates the improvement of youths' skills and abilities through projects designed in order to ensure lifelong learning, thereby guaranteeing an ascendant career trend for all the beneficiaries of these projects.

As written in the document elaborated by the Government of Romania together with the Ministry of Labor, Family and Equal Opportunities in 2007, entitled „Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013” (SOP HRD), this program sets the priority axes and the major intervention areas of Romania in the human resources field in order to implement the EU financial assistance through the European Social Fund, within the frame of „Convergence” objective, for the programming period 2007-2013 [2].

SOP HRD is an important instrument in supporting the economic development and structural changes. Moreover, the investments in human capital will complement and will confer sustainability to the increase of productivity on a long term [2]. A highly qualified labor force, with a high level of education, having the capacity to respond to the new technologies and to the changing needs of markets, is essential for a competitive and dynamic economy. Romania will promote active labor market policies to increase the adaptability and flexicurity of labor force. It is envisaged to be reached a higher level of participation on the labor market, as a base for a competitive knowledge based economy.

The general objective of SOP HRD, as stated in „Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013” (SOP HRD) is the development of human capital and increasing competitiveness, by linking education and lifelong learning with the labor market and ensuring increased opportunities for future participation on a modern, flexible and inclusive labor market for 1,650,000 people [2]. The specific objectives [2] include:

- Promoting the quality of the initial and continuous education and training, promoting the entrepreneurial culture and improving quality and productivity at work, facilitating the young people and long term unemployed insertion in the labor market; developing a modern, flexible, inclusive labor market and promoting (re)insertion in the labor market of inactive people, including in rural areas etc

The priority axis of this programme addresses issues concerning both individuals and systems, as well as their development – reaching both the national and regional levels. The seven axes are:

- *Priority Axis 1* Education and training in support for growth and development of knowledge based society
- *Priority Axis 2* Linking life-long learning and labor market
- *Priority Axis 3* Increasing adaptability of workers and enterprises
- *Priority Axis 4* Modernization of Public Employment Service
- *Priority Axis 5* Promoting active employment measures
- *Priority Axis 6* Promoting social inclusion
- *Priority Axis 7* Technical assistance

Taking into account the fact that the approached project – „Practica- primul pas pentru cariera ta” (*Practical training – the first step for your career*) is related to the second priority axis, we chose this axe for detailing it. The overall objective of the priority axis „Linking lifelong learning and labor market” is to facilitate the access to education and to increase employability and educational attainment of human resources in a life cycle approach in the context of knowledge based society. As its specific objectives, there can be mentioned a better transition from school to the active life, an improved participation in second chance education with

the early school leaving (in particular for vulnerable groups) preventing, the increase of the qualification level of the employees etc. As main key-areas of intervention of this axis, we can mention 1) the transition from school to active life, 2) preventing and correcting early school leaving and 3) the access and participation in continuous vocational training (qualification and requalification).

Because of the fact that graduates, at their first insertion in the labor market, are confronted with difficulties to adapt to the job requirements, the solution provided by SOP HRD to this weakness consists in developing work based learning environments prior to graduation, provision of guiding and counseling, mentoring and coaching until the insertion as part of the process of transition from school to active life. These have been said, we consider that the projects carried out through the SOP HRD are generated by a necessity: to establish an efficient system of correlating students' competencies and qualifications with the specific requirements of the labor market.

Issues concerning the importance of carrying out internships during the academic cycle

In general context, the deployment of an internship is intended to complement and deepen the knowledge acquired during the years of study, to familiarize students with the mode of application -within the economic entities- of the assimilated theoretical knowledge and to form several new practical skills concerning the specific problems of businesses' initiation, development and management.

On one hand, we can say that the practice does not represent (in the current context) an option - but rather an obligation; we refer here not to the legal obligation, but to the moral one: on the one hand, the obligation of each institution of higher education to provide practical training in order to facilitate the transition from school to labor market, and on the other hand, the moral obligation of every student to be aware about the fact that, although the school has higher goals than the labor market does (given that it forms not only workers, but -primarily- personalities), the practical dimension of the learning process should not be neglected.

A relevant internship represents the combination of several factors that lead, ultimately, to the acquisition of skills and competencies - not only in terms of professional, but also in terms of social features, like leadership abilities (which are considered key elements in the development of any person or organization). More than that, carrying out an internship -given the fact that this represents the first tangency that the young has with the labor market- can contribute to personal development, to exceeding the limits and to increase the degree of trust regarding his/hers own forces.

Putting students in touch with the economic and business environment does nothing more than to test their personal possibilities of adaptation, encouraging them to face a new challenge - by giving them, at the same time, the possibility of complementing the theoretical knowledge with the practical skills specific to each field of study [4]. Furthermore, conducting an internship gives everyone the

opportunity to collect, centralize, organize, analyze and interpret the information needed for the elaboration of the diploma paper, by solving issues within the company.

Thus, through -through the carried out internships- students are being helped to better understand the expectations and requirements of the business environment and how to use academic experience into practice. It is well known that -very often- there are major discrepancies between the knowledge and skills acquired by university graduates and requirements requested by the companies. An internship gives students the opportunity to interact with professionals from the field, to work in a competitive team and to gain knowledge regarding the actual dynamic of the organizational environment, to affirm and to obtain all necessary tools for facing the challenges that will arise after the moment of graduation [4]. Furthermore, the integration of students -for a limited period of time- in the different collectivities of a company represents, in most of the cases, the starting point for the graduate who decides to apply for a job. Shall be taken into account, also, that the statistics reveal that many organizations/firms/companies make job offers -firstly- to those who, as college students, were internal/ practitioners in the respective organizations.

Practical trainings converge towards the achievement of the core competencies of the profession chosen by the student and, from this point of view, if we refer to the learning outcomes, and to competences' forming, we could say that the role of internships and practical trainings is even more important than the role of the ordinary disciplines - in the sense that, during practical trainings, students have the opportunity to "pilot" somehow what they have learned, to apply their knowledge in a specific context and, thus, to make a "job shadowing" [4] about what they will do after graduation; actually, they form an overview about how their work would be within the profession they have opted for.

Thus, the practice stages/trainings/placements/internships help students not only to form their skills, but also to form a set of expectations about what will happen after graduation; after performing an internship, students will be able to develop professional attitudes, to internalize certain values in connection to the ethics, professional ethics and teamwork, to the integration into a collective of an institution.

If until now students and graduates have faced with difficulties due to the lack of connectivity and synchronization between academia and the private/ public sector (because of the fact that during university studies the emphasis is on theory, and students acquire information that they do not know how to adapt and apply them in everyday life), behold projects developed through SOP HRD meet students' needs and desires: it is only necessary for each of them to show seriousness, orientation to learning and improvement, openness and competitive spirit, and the results will not cease to appear.

Case study: the project „Practica – primul pas pentru cariera ta” (Practical training – the first step for your career)

The project „Practica – primul pas pentru cariera ta” represent a project co-funded by the European social Fund through the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013, whose beneficiary is the Regional Development Agency Bucharest-Ilfov. The project partners are represented by the Regional Development Agency Centre, by the "1 Decembrie 1918" University of Alba Iulia, by West Development Agency and by "Universitatea de Vest" of Timisoara [5]. The partnership between these five entities developed from the similarity and complementarity of the activities they conduct on the purpose of regional development and from their willingness to engage in joint projects regarding the development of labor skills for future graduates, in order to contribute to the regional development.

Being conducted over a period of 24 months, the "Practical training - the first step for your career" project is a multi-regional one, implemented in 12 different counties, including Bucharest Ilfov, Alba, Mures, Sibiu, Brasov, Harghita, Covasna, Timiș, Arad, Hunedoara and Caras-Severin.

Elaborated in concordance with the indicative operations of the first key-area of intervention of the second axis, *Transition from school to active life*, the project entitled *Practical training – the first step for your career* aims at supporting work based learning schemes/programmes for pupils and students, at supporting school/university/enterprise partnerships initiatives, at developing and providing guidance, counseling and coaching in support for transition from school to active life, at implementing actions for the monitoring of the insertion of graduates into labor market and at developing innovative actions in view of improving transition from school to working life, as is stated in the document entitled „Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013” [2].

The overall objective of the project is to foster and abet labor market insertion of 600 students in the situation of transition from school to active life from the regions of Bucharest-Ilfov, West and Centre, over a period of 24 months. In order to achieve the overall objective, was taken into account the achievement of several specific objectives [5], including:

- The development and improvement of guidance, counseling and information services for students in order to facilitate their transition from school to active life;
- The creation of premises for increasing the employability of the students after completing university studies;
- The promotion and development of partnerships between the academic and business/public sector through the development of internships;
- Monitoring the students' employability and their degree of participation at different internships.

Project's activities converge to the overall objective of the priority axis no. 2 "Linking lifelong learning and labor market " - namely increasing employability of persons enrolled in education and professional training, within the context of knowledge-based society.

The target group is represented by 600 students from -at least- three different universities from the region of Bucharest - Ilfov, Center and West, for whom the project proposes an unified goal, the project's activities being planned to develop based on the particularities of each region. In the two years of implementing the project, the students selected on the basis of their performance, but also in relation to the unfavorable situation of some of them (such as ethnic Roma students or students with disabilities, students aged 18 and older who are post-institutionalized or who come from rural areas) follow internships in various private/public national entities, in order to become successful integrated into the labor market. The project thus implies direct investment in the human resource that will represent the country's next professional resource [3]. The project is a multi-regional one, the 3 covered regions being selected by taking into account factors such as: the development of academic environment and the perspectives of vocational integration. The project supports local, regional and interregional cooperation following the development of universities' relations with the public and private entities from the project region.

Among the activities of the project [5], we mention:

- *Organizing a conference occasioned by the project launching;*
- *Creating regional databases with the potential employers of insertion* - has been identified the potential and willingness of the existing employers from each region, the database comprising a total number of approximately 600 potential receiving units for students and, at the same time, the relevant employers for the profile of the faculties included in the project;
 - *Creation and functioning of regional occupational resource centers for students (CRROS)*, activity within has been made an online portal which represents a matching tool between employees and students.
 - *The organization of information activities that target the insertion employers* - meetings were organized with approximately 100 employers / region / year; within these debates on the benefits of internships have been held and, at the same time, best practice models have been presented.
 - *The organization of information and counseling meetings for students* - such meetings were held in order to select the potential students to perform internships; the main objective of this action was to advice students in choosing the best option of internship - related to their field of study and with their aspirations.
 - *The organizing of the annual training sessions for company staff with the role of tutors for the practical training of students* - were trained an estimated 100 tutors/project.
 - *The organizing and development of the internships for students.*
 - *Conducting post-insertion regional studies* - the study will highlight the current status and the quality of insertion on the labor market of graduates and this process follows and will emphasize the trends of this process in the past two years, respectively estimations over the coming period.

- *Organizing a final award gala* - there will be presented best practice models, the study results and will be rewarded both students and employers who actively participated in the project.

On the occasion of this project, a total of 117 students of the economic specializations of "1 Decembrie 1918" University of Alba Iulia benefited from internships developed at European standards [5], as shown in Figure 1.

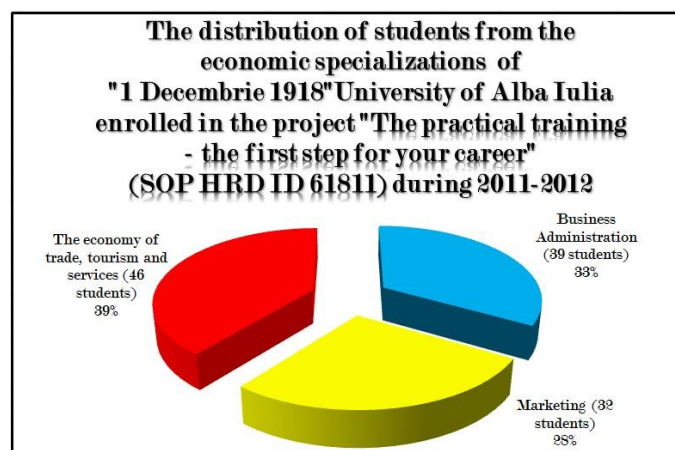


Figure 1. The distribution of students in the project based on their specialization

Source: conceived by the authors based on the internal data of the „1 Decembrie 1918” University of Alba Iulia, Romania

Among other results of the project -across the three regions- we mention: a total of 700 students informed about the benefits of internships/placements/ practical stages/trainings, 600 employers informed about the benefits (for the company) arising from offering internships to students, 100 tutors from different enterprises trained on methods to accompany the students during internships; 600 beneficiary students of internships carried out at distinct employers from the project regions, 300 employers and 300 college students - respondents to a survey conducted in each region of the project and three different post insertion regional studies on the trends of college graduates insertion on the labor market, as well as estimations over the coming period.

The duration of the internship performed by students was of two weeks. The students were able to choose between the suggested practice stages; furthermore, it was necessary for them to prepare their "practice file" according to a specific theme for each field of study. Thus, they have conducted the documentation in the chosen patrimonial units, receiving -from the supervisor- support and clarifications on the aspects of elaborating it. Each student worked individually with specific data for the unit within he/she carried out the internship; this was finalized with the compiling of the practice file [5] - which resulted in considerable results, as it can be seen in Figure no. 2.

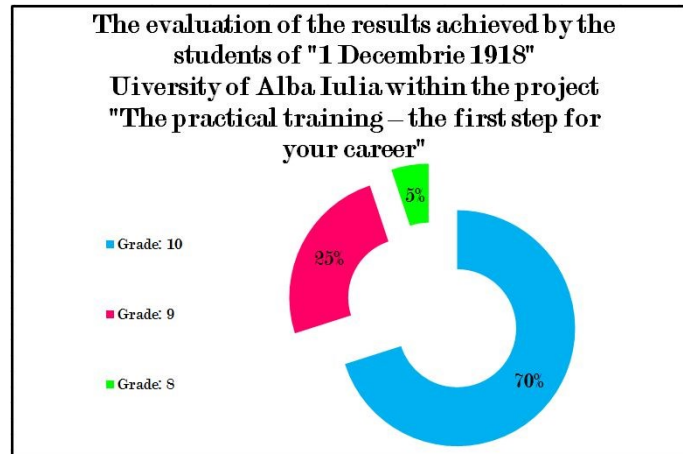


Figure 2. The evaluation of students who participated in the training program within the project

Source: conceived by the authors based on the internal data of the „1 Decembrie 1918” University of Alba Iulia, Romania

Is thus demonstrated the interest and effort made by the students involved in the internship to acquire skills and competencies required to facilitate their access to on the labor market. However, the degree of interest shown for the project - both from employers and from the participating students' point of view- , as well as the degree of interest shown by other interested bodies demonstrates the need for such projects, given the fact that these facilitate the transition from school to labor market.

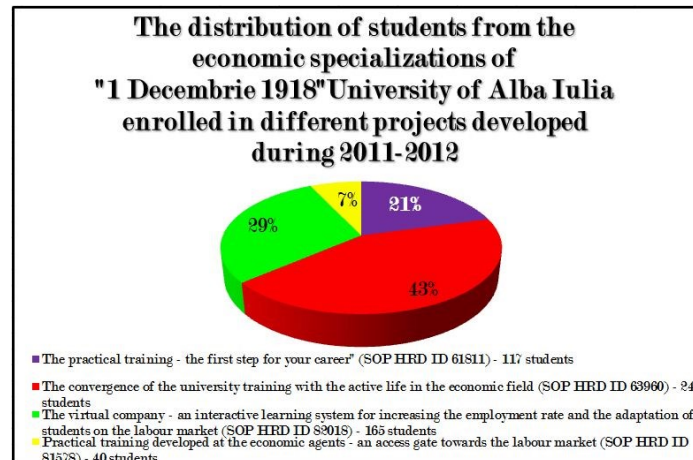


Figure 3. The distribution of students enrolled in the projects of „1 Decembrie 1918” University of Alba Iulia

Source: conceived by the authors based on the internal data of the „1 Decembrie 1918” University of Alba Iulia, Romania

Moreover, most of the students who were part of the target groups of different projects that "1 Decembrie 1918" University of Alba Iulia elaborated over time (Fig. 3) were satisfied with the quality of the services they benefited from, the placements/practical trainings/internships carried out providing them the opportunity to interact with the business environment, to apply their theoretical knowledge acquired during the years of study, to improve their communication skills and to learn new things - accumulating, in this way, practical experience [5]. The lack of practical experience of the students -after graduating- creates, as first effect, the transfer of a part of the practical training responsibility to the first employer, regardless of its availability and possibilities [1]. In this sense, the approached project contributed -through providing training for the members of the target group- to the increase of the efficiency of the education system, but also to a growth of the economy (through the entry of graduated personnel in the labor market and through studies that are closely related to the market needs). Thereby, contributing to the process of professional maturation of young students by grounding their theoretical knowledge acquired and by applying them in practice, the "Practica – primul pas pentru cariera ta" meets the desires and needs of youth, facilitating the transition from school to the labor market through its actions.

Summary

The internship programs offer students the possibility to acquire certain skills in their field of interest, to learn new things and to apply the theoretical knowledge acquired throughout their study years, thus perfecting their professional training due to the offered advantages: interaction with professionals in their field, the possibility to participate in theoretical and practical trainings, working with competitive teams as well as results orientation.

The importance and attractiveness of such a training stage consists in the assimilation and development of certain applied professional skills, as teamwork or project management, the chance to earn real working experience and finally the chance to obtain a permanent job in the desired field. The gained experience over such a stage is very important, especially in the present context in which work experience is a *sine-qua-non* for employment [4].

Through the conducted POSDRU projects students are offered the possibility of a direct contact with the labor market, in terms of existing opportunities and specific requirements. Thus, all these have an important role in the increase of graduates' insertion on the labor market, partnerships linked through programs co-financed by The European Social Fund, offering numerous opportunities to graduates to prove what they are capable of. Furthermore, not few are the times in which the students and organizations/institutions involved in such projects have continued collaborating even after the end of the practical training, many of the direct beneficiaries becoming employees at the entities in which they carried out their internship.

Within the context in which the actors involved in the proper management of the "Practica – primul pas pentru cariera ta" project -as well as in the other projects implemented until now- have affirmed the importance of practical training/internships, the need to expand the placement programs and to involve a larger number of employers and companies (which fulfill the requirements of students), as well as the necessity of a greater media coverage concerning youth opportunities through this kind of projects, the need for developing such projects in the future is confirmed.

These have been said, we consider that -through the projects implemented within the SOP HRD the increase of economic competitiveness is facilitated - by promoting the development and efficient use of human resources in connection with the labor market, as a whole-.

Reverences

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SOP HRD – PODEJŚCIE JAKOŚCIOWE W SZKOLNICTWIE WYŻSZYM I WSPÓLCZYNNIK WPLYWAJĄCY NA ROZWÓJ ŚCIEŻKI KARIERY

Streszczenie: Autorzy prezentowanego artykułu uwypuklają znaczenie podejmowania przez nich praktyk o dość dużym znaczeniu, z jednoczesnym ich wpływem na miejsce, w jakim znajduje się edukacja rumuńska na mapie Europy, wśród konkurujących ze sobą systemów edukacji. Z uwagi na to że, student – postrzegany jako jednostka centralna przyszłego rozwoju – musi się rozwijać zarówno pod względem cech osobowościowych jak i zawodowych, autorzy niniejszego artykułu, przybliżyli aspekty związane ze znaczeniem i korzyściami, jakie przynoszą praktyki podejmowane przez studentów, a które mogą reprezentować punkt wyjścia do ich przyszłej kariery zawodowej. Niniejszy artykuł jest, ogólnie mówiąc, przedstawieniem projektów finansowanych przez Europejski Fundusz Społeczny oraz program SOP HRD, które zapewniają partnerstwo publiczno-prywatne a także ułatwiają pierwszy kontakt młodego pracownika z rynkiem pracy. Artykuł ten dostarcza czytelnikom, możliwość stworzenia obrazu w odniesieniu do roli i znaczenia takich projektów w tworzeniu konkurencyjnego systemu edukacji, a w tym samym czasie, uzyskanie lepszego obrazu przyszłości poprzez wpływ praktyk, podejmowanych przez studentów.

SOP HRD -

高等教育中的一個因素的影響，以確保一個上升的職業生涯路徑的質量方針

摘要：在本文中筆者針對開展一些有關學生實習的重要性，並在同一時間，這些實習的地方位於羅馬尼亞教育系統在地圖上的歐洲競爭力的教育系統的影響。因為學生視為未來的中央部分的進化必須發展無論是在個人和專業的功能，筆者走近方面的重要性和青少年開展實習帶來的優勢，因為這些往往可以代表的畢業生未來的職業生涯的起點。紙張，總體而言，呼籲通過歐洲社會基金和通過SOP確保公共和私營部門夥伴關係的存在，並促進與勞動力市場出現第一次接觸的青年人力資源開發的項目共同資助。這篇文章提供給讀者的機會創建一個圖片等項目，形成競爭性的教育體系中的作用和重要性，並在同一時間，一個光明的未來通過行使對學生的影響。