

Addressing employability through strategic decision-making – The experience of BBU

Paul Serban Agachi, Carmen Loredana Pop, Sonia Pavlenko, Camelia Moraru
Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Abstract:

Addressing employability has become a key aspect in universities' strategic management decisions regarding the increase in the quality and quantity of the insertion of graduates on the labour market. In this paper we would like to present a case study based on Babeş-Bolyai University's activity aimed at highlighting three fundamental steps of the strategic decision making process in relationship to employability, namely:

(i) the background informing the decisions (investigating the opinion and status of stakeholders – graduates and employers - , the status of the labour market, the employability of graduates, etc);

(ii) the decisions taken with the purpose of improving graduates' employability (setting up specialised centres, introducing new subjects in the curriculum, increasing the focus on practical skills, etc); and

(iii) examining the impact that these decisions had on the graduates.

The threefold perspective will take into account how universities, labour market and graduates (should) jointly shape higher education's landscape, offering further insight into the decision making process of an individual university, i.e. Babeş-Bolyai University.

Key words: competencies, employability, graduate insertion, labour market, strategic management

During the last decade, numerous studies and specific definitions regarding the HE institutions, graduates employability and graduates employment have been issued. For HE institutions it was a specific evolvement stemming from the interest oriented towards the graduates' employment expressed as a quantitative figure – the percentage of the graduates' insertion on the labour market to a more refined approach that started to take in consideration the competences that HE institutions have to developed at the level of its own graduates in order to increases and facilitate the insertion of graduates on the labour market. Nowadays the development of employability is a key aspect in HEIs' strategic decisions regarding the increase in the quality and quantity of labour market insertion of a HE institution graduates and a valuable source of information to assess the capacity of certain degrees to successfully and completely qualify students for a future career in a specific professional field. For a better practical use of the terms related to insertion on the labour market a common understanding of the concepts is requested among the relevant actors in the field. Students, teachers, policy makers at HE institutions level, as well as employers should have a comprehensive and common understanding of the factors that facilitate the graduates employment as well as of the factors that are relevant in a successful professional career. But this comprehensive and common

vision of the key factors is sometimes difficult to be achieved even at a theoretical level. Harvey (1997), based on a study on the opinion of the employers on graduates qualifications identified general competencies as being prevalent for employment in comparison with specific competencies, Adelman (2001) identifies IT knowledge and a Higher Education diploma as being the basic conditions of employment, while Noble (1999) considers that essential for employment is the capacity of the universities of forming transferable competencies and skills. Employability is often seen as a set of personal characteristics of the graduate, characteristics that can be developed during the educational and training process offered through a wide range of HE programs and that assure a better and more rapid and flexible insertion of the graduate on the labour market. One definition usually used in the current research is that proposed by the USEM model (Knight, Yorke, 2002) sustaining that employability is a “*set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefit themselves, the community and the economy*”. It means at individual level a mix of: **U – understanding** – capacity of understanding concepts, theories and specific problems of a certain field of science; **S – skills** – general and specific skills; **E – efficacy beliefs** – theories regarding the personal efficacy; **M – meta - cognitions** regarding learning, development, performance, general and specific. In today’s educational environment the term “employability” is wider use in relation to curricular adaptation in order to better educate graduates for a competitive labour market. But is it a general, common understanding at EU level of the challenges and solutions for a better insertion of students on the labour market, a labour market that itself is continuously shaped by the constant and dynamic effects of the globalization process?

Generally defined as the expression of what the student understands or could do after concluding successfully a module or a period of studies, the term *competences* implies a capacity of knowing and understanding specific information, theories and evolutions in a certain specific field, to apply theories to specific, different contexts, to be able to relate with people, understand and live together in different social and cultural context.

Taking into consideration this perspective of competence, and regarding the adequacy of the preparation of the graduates to cope with the labour market, a definition from the academic point of view and from the perspective of the needs expressed by the labour market was necessary to define the results of the HE teaching and learning process.

One of the European projects launched in the last decade aimed to take a step forward in the harmonization process at EU level by making the EU degrees programmes more compatible and implicitly, their correspondent qualifications.

The TUNING¹ project proposed a model based on two types of competencies – general and specific. **General competencies include:** *instrumental competencies*: cognitive, methodological, technical and linguistic; *interpersonal competencies*: social skills, of social interaction and cooperation; *systemic competencies*: systemic approach. The representatives of universities and economic environment agreed upon generality and utility of these competencies for a successful insertion of graduates on the labour market. More than that, the representatives of the economic environment recommended the development/training of these competencies starting with the first year of study. **Specific competencies** are those belonging to each specific discipline and represent the level attained by the science and practice at the moment of their formation. Due to that, they are depending on the perception of the academic and economic environment representatives on the evolution of knowledge and the practice in the field and can be very different in different educational environment. The differentiation process, which represents on the other hand, the effect of the competence of the HE institutions or of the national system to flexibly adapt itself to the global challenges and to offer competitive programmes for a dynamic and challenging labour market is not targeted at EHEA level as a marker for the inability of HE national systems to cooperate towards harmonization of their offers but is seen as being an essential indicator for the EHEA healthy development as long as the differentiation process is maintained to an optimum that will allow a common understanding of specific competences and qualifications at EU level.

The initiatives at Babeş-Bolyai University (BBU) regarding the graduates' insertion on the labour market and the skills / domains that are perceived as most useful or not useful of the graduate curriculum in the working place started thirteen years ago. Starting with 1999, when the Center for Strategic Development and Management of Babeş-Bolyai University was established, several studies regarding the students and graduates of the university were conducted: forecast of the number of the BBU students, geographical area of recruitment of BBU students, employers' opinion regarding the BBU graduates' quality of overall training, labour market study. Several QA procedures linked to the process of teaching and learning have been applied – students are questioned regarding the quality of the courses.

The initiative has aimed to identify the link between the jobs and education and proposed several types of actions of diagnosis and intervention:

- A. Measure of the graduates insertion on the labour market;
- B. The employers' opinion regarding BBU's graduates
- C. Curricula adequacy and development
- D. Educational offer in cooperation and Joint Degrees.

¹ For more information on the TUNING project aims, structure and results see

The study on insertion on the labour market of BBU graduates started in February 1999. To interview the graduates we use a questionnaire with 39 items. The questionnaire is structured on 4 sections: the **first section** offers information about the respondent (age, sex, permanent address, civil status, parents' background and occupation); the **second section** refers to the graduate's traineeship offered by BBU (subjects insufficiently studied, subjects not studied but necessary); postgraduate courses (like master studies, doctoral studies, another undergraduate diploma or other courses); the **third section** refers to their working place (if they have had a job during their studies, how many jobs they have already had, their status on the labour market at the moment, how did they find their job, when did they have their first job, if they want to change their working place in the next period and if so why, about the organization they are working in – private/or not, about their job – if it corresponds to their field of study); the **fourth section** offers information about the reasons of graduates unemployment (why haven't they had a job yet, why they don't have a job at the moment).

There is no specific sampling procedure, as all graduates from a class are being targeted. The graduates are asked to fill in this questionnaire when they come to pick up their diploma. The response rate is 70%.

For measuring the degree of insertion, BBU developed the following criteria:

- percentage of the employability – how many graduates are employed after graduation (threshold accepted as minimum 70%)
- time interval between graduation and employment (max. 18 months)
- percentage of continuation of studies (threshold accepted as minimum 15%)

In the following section we assess the three criteria the university has chosen to describe the “employability” of its graduates.

Percentage of employment

Because most of graduates come to retrieve their diploma in an interval of 12 to 24 months from graduation, we will refer in what follows to the moment of 1.5 years (or 18 months) from graduation for all analysed classes.

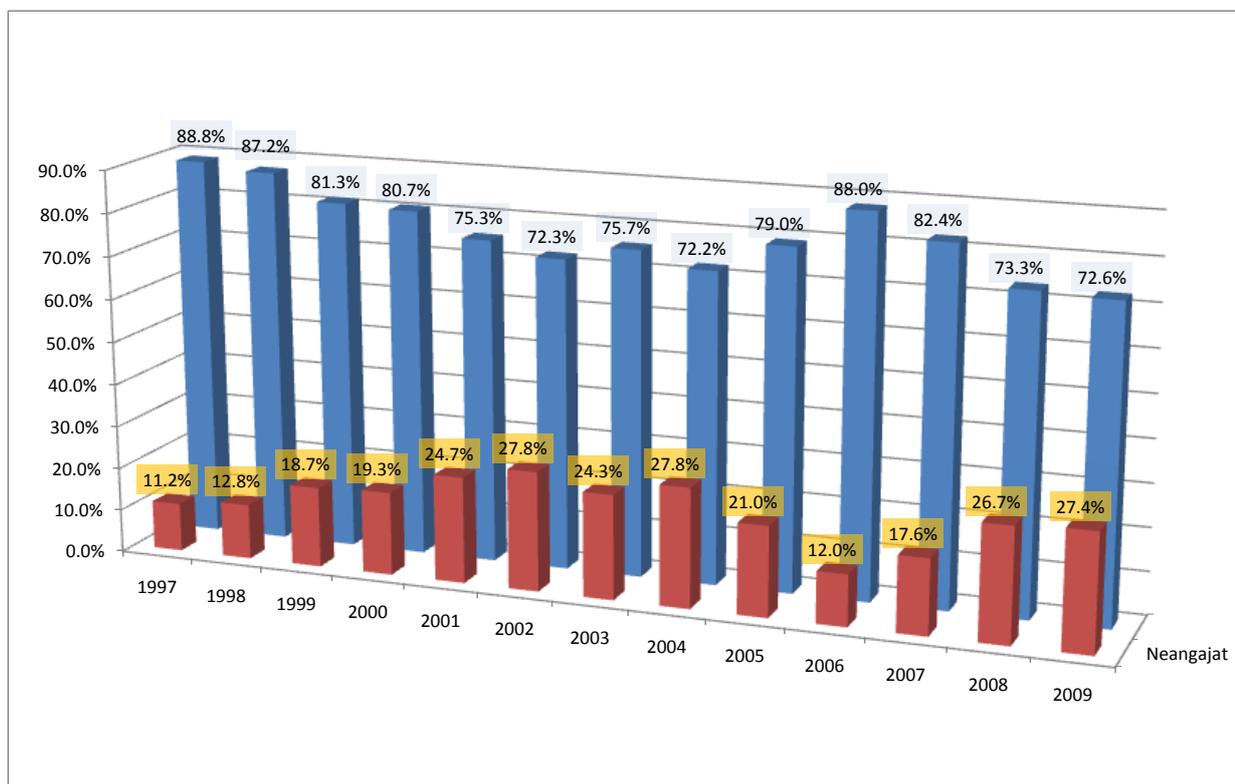


Figure 1 – Status of the BBU at the moment of raising the study certificates function of year of Graduation

The Figure 1 presents the status, by graduation series, of the graduates at the moment of collecting their diploma (hence at filling in the questionnaire). At the category “employed” the following categories were included: employed legally with employment contract, and employed on the “black market”; at the category “unemployed” were those registered as unemployed at the offices of unemployment and those “neither unemployed, nor employed”. We can notice a decrease in the percentage of employed students for the class graduating in 2008 and 2009, one of the possible causes for this being the socio-economic context. The majority of those employed are employed legally with an employment contract. In what concerns the type of the institution where they are employed, their distribution between state institutions and private institutions is variable. If for the first classes analysed the greater percentage was represented by the graduates hired in public institutions (71% for the 1997 graduation series), for the 2004 series almost half of the graduates were hired by private institutions (47%), and in the class of 2007 73% declared that they are hired by private institutions. Starting with the class of 2008, we notice a slight increase in the percentage of graduates hired by state institutions (37% for the 2008 class and 35% for the 2009 class).

If in the class of 1997, 91.7% of the questioned graduates declared they are employed in a position which corresponded to their initial education, in the 2009 series only half of them were employed according to their fields of study. This phenomenon can be explained by:

- Early employment (moment of employment shifted from "after graduation" to "during the period of study"; because of this early employment the graduates can not find a job in their field of study).
- Disagreement between the demand and offer of the labour force/market;
- Diversification of the better paid jobs which makes possible the employment using the general, transferable competencies.

Time interval between graduation and employment

The accurate measurement of this interval started in 2005 when this question was formulated and the measurement unit is the calendar month.

In what concerns the time interval between graduation and employment, the majority of the questioned graduates declare that they have found a job within the first 6 months from graduation. The percentages vary from one year to another; thus, for the classes of 2005 and 2006 44% of the respondents found a job within the first 6 months, while for the other classes the percentage is increased: 2007 - 80%, 2008 - 73%, 2009 - 86%.

Continuation of studies

In the questionnaire used, in the category "continuation of studies" the following alternatives were included: master, doctorate, post university/qualification studies, other faculty (undergraduate studies).

Relative to the margins of the interval, between the series 1997 and 2009, an increase of continuators of studies of 20% was observed.

From the factual analysis, one may observe:

- an increase of the percentage of the graduates continuing their studies;
- an increase of the graduates employed in the private sector; this could be interpreted as a shift of learning paradigm - from application to practice.
- mass-media is the main vector of transmission of the information concerning the job market.

The conclusions concerning the way our graduates are accepted on the labour market should be used either in marketing of the university, (if the scores are good), but mostly in improving the rate of employability and the quality of the employers. The way in which the university can achieve

these goals is influencing, improving, updating the curricula in order to give the appropriate competencies and skills.

Competencies

There are some questions meant to capture the opinion of the graduates on the quality of overall training they receive during the studies. Once they get a job, they can appreciate if they have the abilities needed, if they have the knowledge demanded, or if they have the basic skills to learn the new things required of them. The graduates' answers are presented in Figure 4.

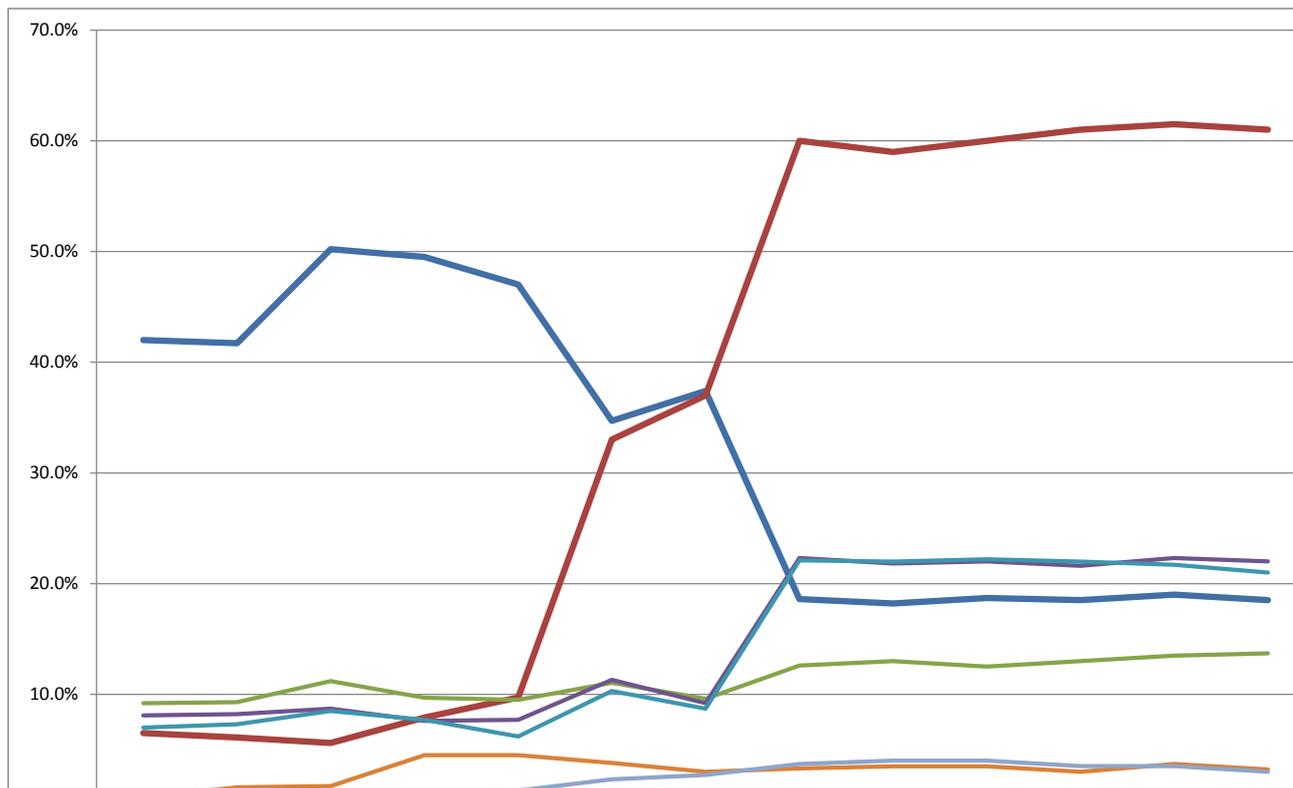


Figure 4 – Disciplines considered insufficiently studied

Notation: P1 – disciplines in specialty
 P2 – practice
 P3 – disciplines of the pedagogic module
 P4 – foreign languages
 P5 – computers
 P6 – socio-humanities

It can be observed that the series graduating in 1997 stresses more the disciplines of specialty; the situation is reversed for the series 2004 which stresses more the practical exercise. The situation can be explained by the increase of the private sector which is interested more in what the employees can do using a theoretical basis and less in what theoretical knowledge they have without putting it in practice. Thus, from the first level of competencies “to know and understand” the stress commutes on the second level of “to know and act”. One can also observe the increase of the percentage of those declaring the insufficient knowledge in the computer use and foreign languages. These two last categories are part of transferable skills. The employers in the private sector (the increase was up to 50%) are keen on an immediate application of knowledge of their employees. These observations are confirmed by the employers. In 2002, the Center for Strategic Development

and Management elaborated the study “Opinion of the employers regarding the quality of overall training of the BBU graduates”. The employers, that asked about what they consider is lacking in the quality of overall training of the BBU graduates, stated in a proportion of 84.3% that the practical abilities and practical training is suffering.

Coming back to the study concerning the opinion of the graduates, the questionnaire contains the question “what other disciplines not studied during the university you feel could be useful in your professional career?”. The answers of the subjects are presented in Figure 5.

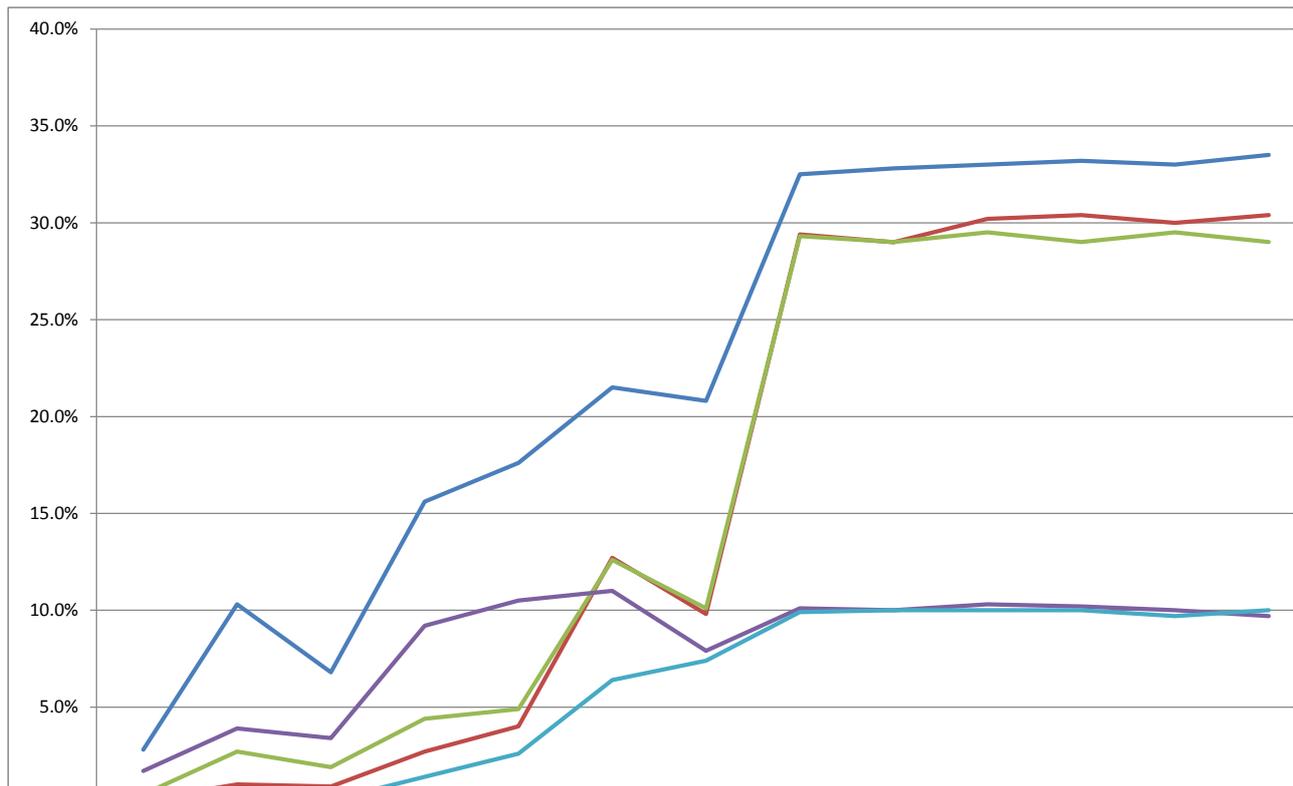


Figure 5 - Disciplines considered as necessary and not studied during the college

Notation: Z1 – disciplines in specialty
 Z2 – foreign languages
 Z3 – computer use
 Z4 – socio-humanities
 Z5 - others

This may be explained by the fact the curricula of specialty is not sufficiently updated to the realities in the field and other disciplines of specialty should be studied. A far greater demand is expressed for computer use and foreign languages. In the category of socio-humanities, the disciplines not studied or the insufficient approach in communication, team work, management is mentioned. These belong to the category of transferable skills.

Considering the disciplines regarded by the graduates questioned as insufficiently studied, we can observe that the practical exercise is on the first place, followed by IT skills and foreign languages.

And increasing demand can be observed for disciplines like: communication, teamwork, management, management of pupil's classes, negotiation, etc.

Following the studies and investigations carried out, in the BBU, actions were taken on different levels in order to increase the employability:

Internal construction

The policies and strategies adopted by the BBU administration are supported by other studies and research, regarding the internal and the external environment of the university as well.

Some of them are as follows: student number prognosis (2001), geographical area of student recruitment (2001), employer's opinion about BBU graduates (2002), labour market study (2004), BBU and the interaction with the environment (2003), strategic planning for applying the Bologna Program (2005), modalities for the specific practice exercise (2005), evaluation of the courses by the students (study carried out since 2001).

But the BBU's attention dedicated to the employability of its graduates is older:

- beginning with 1997 the Placement, Expertise and Consultancy Service (PECS) was founded, a service that built its database with employers and vacancies that was promoted among students, offering services like personnel selection for employers as well;
- later on, this service was integrated in the new department created in 1999 – Center for Strategic and Managerial Development (CSMD) that has the following tasks and responsibilities: preparing analysis, studies, reports and forecasts; implementing strategic management in the university; preparing tutorial and consultancy documents for all the university's departments; organizing trainings and courses for university personnel; quality assurance in the university;
- the Centre for Professional Orientation (CPO) was founded in 2001, centre that addressed to high school graduates, students and BBU graduates too;
- in 2002 CPO was transformed into Centre for Psychological Consultancy and Professional Orientation "EXPERT" – this centre hosts 12 specialized psychologists. EXPERT Centre offers students and graduates the following types of services: psychological counselling, career counselling, professional training, entrepreneurial counselling;
- in 2004 CSMD was transformed into the Centre for University Development (CUD) with the following responsibilities: ensuring background documentation, analysis, expertise, evaluation of situations for BBU's Academic Council; conceptual preparation of strategy, policy and university development regulation proposals; evaluation of the implementation of the strategies in different areas, proposed by the Academic Council, determined by its priorities; preparation of studies, documentation and project proposals; document and brochure editing; cooperation with similar centres and institutes in the country and from foreign countries;

- the Career Centre was founded in 2005 and it organizes job shops, meetings with firms, offer presentations, job mediation.

Curricular adequacy and change

Focusing the educational approach on the development of professional skills needed in order to enter the labour market lead to curricular change in accordance with the international evolution (for example, the evolution of the linguistic policies on European level, which were analyzed by the Alpha and Lingua language centres of the university, centres that proposed important amendments) and the suggestions made by the graduates related to the disciplines that they consider important after being hired, with a role in facilitating insertion on the labour market and further professional development. Especially three curricular changes of this period were major, important and relevant from the perspective of increasing the employability of BBU graduates:

foreign languages – increasing the percentage of foreign languages as separate disciplines, conditioning the entrance in the final degree examination, application for masters and doctoral studies to a standard level of language skills and increasing the number of disciplines available in foreign languages at graduate and undergraduate levels, increasing the number of specializations in mother tongue within the framework of the Hungarian and German study lines.

ITC disciplines – increasing the number of disciplines related to computer use regarding the formation of general skills and specific computer user skills in scientific/pedagogical fields as well.

introducing disciplines that favour the formation of instrumental skills².

Measures have been taken on 3 levels: institutional construction, curricular adequacy and Joint Degrees.

These directions were covered by the measures taken at BBU. Thus, in 2006 each faculty was endowed with a computer room; likewise, all university extensions have computer rooms and internet connection. Considering foreign languages, a decision was made in order to make compulsory studying of two foreign languages and disciplines developing computer skills were introduced at each specialization. In order to form those skills that are considered by students (and employers) inexistent, some faculties either introduced separate disciplines or included them within the objectives of already existent subjects. For example, the Faculty of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering introduced a communication course, or at the Faculty of European Studies there is a Career management course being taught.

Conclusions

² See the TUNING Model

Institutional construction through well-informed decision making is fundamental for ensuring a high degree of employability of graduates. Furthermore, BBU's example also illustrates the ability of the institution to learn, change and develop based on what could be also termed "feedback" from all interested stakeholders. The strategic management processes used by BBU also help the university dynamically adapt to an ever-changing environment (be it social, economical or otherwise) and be pro-active in training its students and developing in them the skills required for the would-be job market.