

## Qualitative Survey of Graduate Practice — An Intervention for Young Unemployed Jobseekers in Slovakia<sup>\*</sup>

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**Abstract:** Active labour market policy interventions are widely used tool of a government against unemployment. One of the most frequently used intervention for young jobseekers in Slovakia is a Contribution for Graduate practice. This measure is intended for young unemployed jobseekers as a tool of gaining first contact with the open labour market and with potential employer and gaining first work experiences. In this paper we present a qualitative survey of Graduate practice that was made as an ex-post evaluation of this intervention by its participants in Slovakia. This evaluation of the intervention was carried out at the request of the European Commission not only in Slovakia but also in several countries of the European Union. The qualitative evaluation, as a part of this rigorous intervention evaluation, provides feedback from the real intervention participants and brings some suggestions to improve the parameters and conditions of Graduate practice intervention and its realization. These improvements are useful not only for participants themselves, for companies in which young graduates are employed but also for the state budget in the form of returned or saved invested funds because of better functioning of the intervention. Based on the results of this feedback from its real participants, some parameters, conditions and details of the Graduate practice intervention have been changed and added in Slovakia.

**Key words:** active labour market policy; interventions; evaluation; qualitative survey; graduate practice

**JEL codes:** J08, J64, J68

### 1. Introduction

Active labour market policy measures (ALMP) are one of the key instruments of the government in working with unemployment. However, these instruments are effective in decreasing unemployment rate only if they are sufficiently funded and effectively set up. If this is not true, the effect of ALMP is not sufficiently noticeable. The measures thus lose their effectiveness. Slovakia is an EU country that have for a long time one of the highest unemployment rates, as well as long-term unemployment rate (Stefanik, 2014).

Due to the huge financial resources which is Slovakia each year investing in ALMP instruments, it is necessary to carry out evaluations of their effectiveness. These evaluations are mainly carried out in the form of counterfactual evaluations to evaluate the effects of interventions on employability of jobseekers and their

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sustainability in the labour market. The aim of evaluations is also quantification of the financial impact of intervention of providing grants to unemployed jobseekers to the state budget. One aspect of the evaluation can be a qualitative evaluation of the effects of the intervention on the jobseeker himself. From the realized qualitative evaluation, it is possible to obtain feedback from the real participants of the intervention.

In this article we focus on one particular type of intervention within the ALMP in Slovakia. This intervention is very often provided as the Contribution for graduate practice (hereinafter Graduate practice). It is a measure implemented in accordance with § 51 of Act No. 5/2004 Coll and is intended for young unemployed jobseekers. Its main objective is to create the conditions for acquiring the relevant professional skills and practical experience that will be valuable and attractive for the potential employer of young graduates. The skills and work experience gained by completing this intervention will therefore ensure a higher employment rate for graduates. The intervention was designed in accordance with the assumption that less practical experience is a significant obstacle for graduates to enter the open labour market. The target group interventions are young people under 26 who have been registered in the database of jobseekers for at least 1 month. The tables below present intervention log of Graduate practice intervention. The Table 1 presents expected outputs of the intervention activity and the Table 2 presents the expected effects of the intervention.

**Table 1 Expected Outputs of the Graduate Practice Activities**

Activity	Output
practical or theoretical knowledge	gaining working experience gaining references for working experience
adaptation on work habits	gaining working habits
stand-alone solutions duties on time	gaining stand-alone solution duties
practice of oral or written communication knowledge in specific field	gaining contacts
training on machine or specific working process	trained graduate on machine or specific working process

Source: own elaboration.

**Table 2 Expected Outcomes of the Graduate Practice**

Outcomes of the treatment		
short-term	middle-term	long-term
gaining job at the employer who provides Graduate practice for jobseekers gaining employment on the open labour market due to Graduate practice (6 months after graduation practice)	sustaining in employment	decreasing of the unemployment rate reduction in government expenditure on passive labour market policy increasing GDP per capita

Source: own elaboration.

The Graduate practice is conducted for at least 3 months and not more than 6 months, without the possibility of extending it and performing it again, within 20 hours per week. The amount of the financial support is dependent on the subsistence minimum. In the period 2014 and 2015 included in this study, it was € 128.75 (Employment institute 2015). In the following years, this amount has risen, at € 129.66 from the third quarter of 2017 to the second quarter of 2018, and € 133.30 from the third quarter of 2018 to the second quarter of 2019 (Colsaf, 2017).

The aim of this article is to provide the results of the realized qualitative survey of graduate practice in Slovakia. The conclusions of such a qualitative feedback can be used to implement future labour market policies and to set intervention parameters. Effects of interventions can thus be improved, not only in financial terms and

in terms of return invested funds from the state budget, but also in terms of unemployed individuals themselves, for whom will be properly adjusted intervention more suitable and bring them better contact with the open labour market. That can be seen as the main contribution of this study.

This article is divided into four main parts. The first part describes the introduction to solved problem of evaluation of active market labour policy interventions and describes the Graduate practice intervention. The second chapter highlight the review of this issue and also describes the methodology of implementation of qualitative evaluation of Graduate practice in Slovakia and the research questions and aims of these qualitative evaluation. The third part of the article presents the results of this qualitative evaluation. The last part, discussion and conclusions summarize the results of the qualitative survey and therefrom resulting proposals to improve the functioning and the effects of the evaluated intervention.

## 2. Literature Review

ALMP evaluations are carried out in all countries, not only the European Union but also in the world. In the EU itself, these evaluations are required and supported by the European Commission, as the EU provides considerable funding for their implementation. In recent years, evaluations of various ALMP tools in the EU have been carried out.

In the literature, the topic of interventions for (young) unemployed jobseekers is dealt with by several authors in different countries. Duranti et al. (2018) deals with the impact evaluation for target training activities financed by the European Social Fund and carried out in Italy. The aim of the study is to identify the effect of training courses on the chances of re-employment. Brown et al. (2018) focused on factors associated with return to work in welfare-to-work initiative UK's Work Programme. They analyzed the role of individual factors and external factors of clients engaging with the Work Programme. Pillon and Vives (2018) in their study focused on support for a return to work with unemployment contributions in France. The article shows how the managerial optimization of resources influence the initial objectives of the policy. The study of Kalvane (2016) deals with the impact of Public employment services on job search outcomes. The purpose of the study is the evaluation of efficiency of measures provided to jobseekers in Latvia, Estonia and Denmark. Lamonica et al. (2016) investigates the labour market outcomes of a sample of unemployed individuals attending regional vocational training programs in Italy. The study of Giltman et al. (2017) examines the impact of active and passive labour market policies on the number of registered unemployment in Russia. Laskova and Strode (2015) focused on the analysis of instructional theories relevant to jobseekers' education in Employment Support Programmes. Borland and Tseng (2007) in their study examines the impact of the Jobseeker Diary (JSD), a program designed to increase the job search effort of unemployed persons in Australia. O'Brien (2007) analyzed vocational rehabilitation programs for people aged over 50 years with a disability in Australia. Kelly and Galvin (2010) aimed their study at evaluation of the effectiveness of Psychosocial interventions (PSI) realized through training courses such as the Thorn programme for individuals with a serious mental health problem and their families. Golub-Victor and Dumas (2015) described physical therapist graduates' perceptions of a higher education early intervention (EI) training program on postgraduation employment and practice. Using the descriptive statistics and qualitative methods they evaluate the effects of the EI training program. In Slovakia, with the evaluation of ALMP for example dealt Barosova et al. (2012), Barosova (2013), Borik and Caban (2013), Harvan (2011), Lubyova and Stefanik et al. (2015, 2016), Stefanik (2014), Szitasiova (2015).

### 3. Methodology

In this paper, we focus on the qualitative aspects of the evaluation of the effects of intervention graduate practice, provided to unemployed young job seekers. Qualitative research was carried out through interviews by phone. There were 48 treated persons - participants of the Graduate Practice, who were asked for an interview. The database contained individuals from every of the 8 regions of Slovakia. Respondents were always three men and three women from every region. Finally were carried out 41 interviews with 23 women and 18 men from different regions of Slovakia. All respondents were real participants of the intervention Graduate practice in years 2012 to 2017, a period during which the rules for the granting of support through this intervention were uniformly set, unless a few small changes.

This qualitative part was incorporated in the evaluation because the evaluators wanted to outline even partial motivations, aspirations, real outputs and the results of the treated individuals. The main reason for this part of the research was verifying a theory about the change of traineeship. Centre of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of Slovakia (COLSaF) provided a database of 48 contacts for treated individuals who were asked for an interview. The database contained individuals from every region of the SR (i.e., 8 regions) and three individuals for men and women, in total 48 contacts.

#### 3.1 Research Questions of the Qualitative Survey of Graduate Practice

Prepared topics for interviews came from three basic parts. The questions from the qualitative survey below describe the research questions representing the expected theory of the change of the Graduate practice intervention.

##### 3.1.1 Activities of the Intervention

In the first section of the questions which were posed to our respondents, the aim was to uncover the motivation to take part in the intervention and identify activities which could lead to immediate service for the jobseeker and to increase his/her employability on the open labour market as an impact of the intervention. Our research hypothesis were, that that mostly jobseekers learn about their graduate practice through their Public Employment Services (PES) office. At the same time, we assumed that the majority of graduates are looking for an employer to carry out the practice by themselves to suit their field of study or the degree of education.

To evaluate these hypotheses, during the interview the respondents were asked the following questions:

- Where did you learn about the intervention?
- Did you find an employer for Graduate practice on your own, or did PES assist you?
- How did you find the employer?
- Why did you decide to participate in the Graduate practice?
- Have you matched your graduated profession with the profession of the place where you performed Graduate practice?
- Did you do what was agreed upon with the employer in the agreement?
- Have you attended any training during Graduate practice?

##### 3.1.2 Immediate Outputs of the Intervention

The aim of these group of questions were to identify the provided services products that jobseekers carried out during their Graduate practice. We set the hypothesis that graduates were mostly expecting more from the intervention, but still managed to get in touch with employers. At the same time graduates evaluate Graduate practice done as successful in terms of gaining job skills.

Respondents answered the following questions:

- Have you met with your initial aspiration of Graduate practice?
- Which skills and knowledge have you gained during Graduate practice?
- Have you gained any contacts for other employers or references for any job?

### 3.1.3 Outcomes of the Intervention

The aim of this last group of questions was to identify the short-term and mid-term effects of Graduate practice. We assumed that the respondents rated Graduate Practice mostly positive and considered it successful. At the same time, we were expecting and hoping to present their own proposals to improve the functioning of this intervention.

In this group, respondents were asked the following three questions:

- Do you think your Graduate practice was successful? Why? Do you think that Graduate practice helped you to get a job?
- Which knowledge and skills have you used for your work?
- What would you change?

## 4. Results of Qualitative Survey

According to the answers to the qualitative survey, realized with the participants of the Graduate Practice, we have found the following facts.

One third of asked respondents had information about the intervention before this was offered by the PES office. In other words, one third of those treated applied for intervention without any impulse, they knew that they were eligible for the grant and they wanted to attend Graduate practice. The rest of the eligible jobseekers were informed about the intervention by the PES office and, afterwards, the interventions were offered as well. In this case, we confirmed the hypothesis that the graduates know about the intervention mainly from their PES office.

Regarding the places of Graduate practice realization, or employer with whom it was completed, most of the respondents answered that they chose their placing for Graduate practice from the list provided by the PES office and only about 2 jobseekers from 5 had selected a place for intervention before they applied at the PES office for intervention. These are the same jobseekers which stated that they knew about the intervention before the PES office informed them. So in this case, the hypothesis that graduates are looking for an employer to carry out the intervention mostly by their own was not confirmed.

Just one third of treated jobseekers answered that they would like to find a job through intervention, the rest of the respondents only wanted to gain some practical experience or deepen their skills.

All respondents admit that they really carried out work that was agreed upon in the agreement before they started Graduate practice. So all participants denied any abuse. But only in a few cases did jobseekers work in the field from which they graduated. Just about 10% of respondents admitted that they worked in a business matching the type and specialization of the education they had completed. This result could be related to the fact that jobseekers choose an employer to carry out the Graduate practice intervention from the list that gives them the PES office, they do not look for it themselves. If they were looking for the employer themselves, it is clear that such an employer would better match their focus of study and level of education.

Overall, as we supposed, most of the respondents were satisfied with the provided intervention. They are sure that they have met with the expectations of Graduate practice, even though these expectations were minimal and,

in most cases, they did not aspire to find a job and stay employed in the field in which they carried out Graduate practice. In this case, we did not confirm the hypothesis that the graduate practice did not meet the expectations of its participants, which we are happy about. The hypothesis that graduates are mostly satisfied with the intervention and considers it successful has been confirmed.

For the question focused on gained skills, most of the respondents answered directly that they learned to communicate with people, they gained some interpersonal skills in the working environment because that was their first experience in almost a real job without support of school, or schoolmates, and that is why they feel this “intermediate step” was important. A few of the asked respondents mentioned that although the area in which they worked provided some sort of course, training was provided to the participants only rarely. In those few cases, the trainings were focused on MS Excel, or Access, internal system, or work with a financial software. In most of the cases, graduates were working in public institutions; only about 10% of participants stated that they attended Graduate practice in the private sector or third sector.

Only about 1 treated individual from 10 stayed at the public institution where they worked during the Graduate practice. This institution was either PES office and subject of their activity was registration of jobseekers, or Social Insurance Agency, where they worked as administrators. Finally, those treated found other jobs and used those public institutions as waystations which helped them to gain references for other employers. Another identified benefit from Graduate practice was contacts and friendship created during the intervention. But none of the treated identified that through those contacts they would find a job.

About 20% of asked jobseekers wanted to go to Graduate practice just because they were waiting for another year to enroll to university.

#### **4.1 Suggested Proposals for Changes of the Intervention from Graduates**

The last question of the questionnaire we wanted the graduates to make their suggestions to improve the functioning of intervention. However, they are those who have actually taken part in it, who had to go through the whole process of administration before participating it and who can “from the other side” evaluate its functioning, strengths and weaknesses.

The most frequent remark of interviewed jobseekers who attended Graduate practice was that the grant paid for this intervention is based on living wage what is not sufficient motivation for participation in this ALMP program. This is the most important identified barrier for wider use of this ALMP measure.

Another frequent proposal is about the treatment period. On average 3 asked graduates from 10 states that 6 months is not long enough to show what they know, to present their real potential even though they have just 4 hours per day and they depend on the decisions of their tutor who cares about them. The tutor mostly has in the mornings some urgent work and, only after he has finished what he must to finish, then he can care about graduates. The respondents are sure that longer working days and increased grant during Graduate practice would also increase their chances in employment.

Treated jobseekers also identify the need to gain “something tangible” through Graduate practice, some recommendation or certificate that they could use for a future job interviews, which could increase their chances of getting a job. Treated jobseekers would like to declare their interest in getting a job and increase their chances of working interviews with such a document. The Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, for which an evaluation of this intervention was carried out, which included a qualitative assessment in this paper, based on this respondent's request, put into practice the granting of a certificate for completing the Graduate practice intervention.

Graduates also suggested that Graduate practice should be better fitted to the type of education or working positions which are attractive for graduates. It is possible to expect that a higher involvement of subjects from the private sector would also increase the efficiency of the intervention. There should be prepared a motivation intervention also for firms and organizations that offer Graduate practice implementation. Graduate practice could also be more extensive if the company providing it was given a financial contribution to its implementation. This suggestion was also by The Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic turned into reality. Based on the results of the qualitative evaluation described in this paper, companies in Slovakia, that offer a Graduate practice for young unemployed jobseekers also receive an intervention grant to create such a work place.

The last type of comment from respondents was about administration whilst applying for intervention. Some data should be electronically exchanged between PES offices in case that Graduate practice is to be carried out in another city than where the jobseeker is registered. In this case, we must agree with the respondents and also suggest that the administrative process should be simplified, electronized and accelerated.

## 5. Conclusions

From the conclusions resulting from the qualitative evaluation of the Graduate Practice by its participants, we could formulate several recommendations for improving the functioning of this intervention, increasing its attractiveness for the participants, for the companies that would provide it and also for increasing its effects on the employability of the jobseekers.

- 1) The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the SR should begin to carry out regular surveys of active labour market policy measures. COLSaF could distribute forms to all participants after the provided intervention. Every participant should evaluate the entire process of the intervention and all activities related to it, from its formal handling to the actual implementation. Information obtained from these surveys would be a unique source of valuable data. There should be simple questions focused on the topics in the qualitative research carried out in this paper. And the form should contain an open space for the statements of participants. The information should be electronically recorded and there should be prepared a modus operandi for analyses which should be provided to the policy makers and experts for methodology. Additionally, it would be welcome to analyze difficulties which appeared during the activities of the intervention or in the sustaining period after the intervention. It is important to emphasize that very valuable information and lessons could be provided through analysis of the reasons for why the intervention failed in some cases, so did not bring the desired effect.
- 2) In the performed survey, only about 10 % of program participants admitted that they worked in the company which fit with the specialization of the education they had completed. Most of the participants carried out their Graduate practice in public sector organizations, mainly in public offices, education, health or social organizations. The rest of the participants carried out their Graduate practice in private companies with a slightly higher propensity to be placed on the labour market with greater sustainability in the impact period after the intervention finished. COLSaF should therefore actively search for companies and organizations that would be a better match for the participant's profession. Graduates should have experience in the branch in which they studied and graduated. That would be ensured through transparent and clear categorization.

- 3) Four-hours working time appears to be insufficient according to the multiple opinions of the program participants. They claim that the working time was insufficient to manifest their capabilities. The policy maker could start a programme with a prolongation of working days.
- 4) Participants identified the need to upgrade the intervention to a more serious level. Treated jobseekers would be more likely to seriously make an effort to gain the chance of a job by preparing as much as possible.
- 5) Overall, we can conclude that this qualitative evaluation has shown several sites of evaluated intervention, as well as several proposals to improve its functioning and its effects. Some of the intervention participants' proposals have already been put into practice by the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Family. Another suggestions could be used to build future active labour market policies to achieve better functioning of the interventions not only for its participants, but also for the companies where the graduates work and finally also for the state budget, which provides funding for the implementation of active labor market policy measures in Slovakia..

### **Authors Contributions**

The authors listed have made a substantial, direct and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

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### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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