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SUMMARY OF PHD THESIS

**Graduate Employability: A Qualitative Inquiry on
Overqualification among Young People in Romania**

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Introduction

In recent years, subjects such as employability and skills coupled with education-job mismatch, knowledge-based economy, and precarious work have been growing and have attracted particular attention in socioeconomic and political debates (Nghia et al., 2022, Blanchflower, 2019). These considerations are vivid, as work and employment subjects have been crucial for many years, given the multiple implications that work has propagated in social and economic spheres (Tracey, 2016; Tomlinson, 2013).

Romania's economic landscape has evolved into a diverse, service-oriented model. The service sector, a significant source of the country's employment, now stands at 51% (World Bank, 2023; ILO, 2023; NIS, 2023; EURES, 2023). Since Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007, a substantial number of corporations have chosen to outsource operations within the country or establish business operations in Romania (offshoring). This has led to a radical increase in job opportunities, particularly with the rise of multinational companies (MNCs) (Hummels et al., 2018; ILO, 2022; Tarlea, 2019). Service sector includes health and social assistance, education, public administration and business services. The services sector holds significant importance in terms of employment and, by extension, in the Romanian economy (National Institute of Statistics, 2022). The business service sector in Romania employs over 2% of the active workforce, as reported by the Association of Business Service Leaders in Romania in 2023.

Despite labor market improvements and low unemployment rates, the contemporary Romanian work world has experienced numerous fuzzy phenomena that have long hindered its functioning. The link between higher education and the job market appears to have diminished, as education-job mismatch among young graduates remains a major concern (Gavriliuță, 2020; World Bank, 2020). In addition to the rise in precarious jobs, both young university graduates and employers face challenges in finding suitable employment opportunities and workers (Zamfir, 2021; Preoteasa, 2018). Similarly, job requirements have changed over time due to innovations brought about by technological advances or globalization (Tarlea, 2019; World Bank, 2023).

There has been much debate regarding the employability of tertiary graduates. The discourses are primarily divided into distinct categories: those that focus on the roles that policymakers, higher education management, employers, and young graduates could play in addressing the issue of employability and others that underline the required skills needed for a rapidly changing world of work. Debates have focused on the mismatches and unrealistic

expectations between employees and employers. On the one hand, employers claim that recent graduates lack the necessary skills needed for available jobs (Walker et al., 2012; McKinsey, 2012; Cedefop, 2018). However, young graduates believe that they qualify for employment. This thesis asserts that, despite the relatively low unemployment rates among university graduates in most EU countries, more needs to be done to support their career development during the challenging transition from university to the world of work and employment in Romania.

The thesis seeks to understand how main social actors understand and interpret employability. It aims to explain the education-job mismatch as experienced by graduates, with a focus on the overqualification phenomenon. It analyzes the transition from higher education to employment informed by young university graduates working in outsourced company in Romania. Its goal is to contribute to the sociological study of the university-to-work transition. By relying on qualitative data on education-job mismatch and overqualification, I demonstrate that the (un)employment rate is no longer an accurate indicator of graduate employability.

Problem statement: university to work transition in Romania

This qualitative thesis examines the subjective experience of overqualification among young Romanian university graduates working in the business service sector of Romania. It uses a social constructionist perspective. Theory and research (Tomlinson and Holmes, 2017; Tholen, 2014; Allen and van der Velden, 2007) have established that the massification of higher education institutions, coupled with the spread of neoliberal political-economic policies, has led to the transformation of professional lives for many young people. This transformation can be attributed to various factors, including the shortage of job opportunities, the increasing use of technology and artificial intelligence in the workplace, and the rapid expansion of globalization through outsourcing (Tarlea, 2019; Surdea-Blaga, 2018; Edgell et al., 2016).

There are strong interlinks among employment systems, education, and business, and these systems are fundamental building blocks of numerous countries' socio-economies. In recent years, advances in technological transformation have led to a larger call for an educated and trained labor force (Broom et al., 2006; Tomlinson, 2013). By adhering to the knowledge-based economy (KBE) agenda, numerous countries have adopted neoliberal policies that involve investment in their human capital, except for a knowledgeable and skilled workforce. In the long run, nations presume a competitive advantage in their global economies. The KBE

philosophy still, and so far, has transformed the nature of both work and learning (Lauder et al., 2012; Livingstone & Guile, 2012).

Uncertainty is a feature of contemporary life, especially in work and employment (McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011; Farrugia, 2018; Heyes & Tomlinson, 2021; Cinque, 2016). Considering the labor market among young people, many young university graduates in Europe face complex university-work transitions (Christie, 2018; Tomlinson, 2016; Holmes, 2013). In general, the modern global economy strongly relies on HEI as the primary source that prepares university students, equipping them with knowledge, skills, and attributes deemed relevant to the knowledge-based economy (KBE) (Cowen 2013; Little, 2011; Tomlinson, 2013; Siivonen et al.2023). Subjects related to the knowledge-based economy frequently bring employability, skills and decent jobs (ILO 2018), and an increase in work precarity (Kalleberg, 2016; Rothstein, 2016; Pouliakas, 2012) to the top of the agenda. Existing studies have confirmed skill mismatch issues among numerous employees (Brunello and Wruuck, 2021; Cedefop, 2018; Edgell et al., 2016; Quintini, 2011; World Economic Forum, 2016).

Many governments have recently prioritized graduate employability and skills in the workplace (Lundgren-Resenterra & Kahn, 2020; Eichhorst, 2020). This is because the demand side is skeptical of both skills and work readiness, and often questions the employability of university graduates (Burke, 2016; Nghia et al., 2020). For instance, to obstruct this issue, the EU dedicated 2023, the year of skills, to enhance relevant skills and address skill shortages in the EU labor market. EU countries eagerly promote a mindset of reskilling and upskilling, helping people acquire the right skills for quality jobs (EU, 2023). The European year of skills is crucial, as the recent generations of university graduates have experienced a high rate of overqualification, and their education-job mismatch presents a significant challenge in the rapidly changing work world (Scurry & Blenkinsopp, 2011; Soldano, 2018; Christie, 2016).

Different call center-based studies worldwide have questioned extreme working conditions within this industry, tightly controlled with electronic surveillance, emotional labor, and uncertain career prospects (Korczynski et al., 1999; Taylor and Bain 1999; Callaghan and Thompson, 2001; Taylor et al. 2003; Lloyd et al. 2010). The conventional view of call center jobs was that they provided relatively low remuneration, demanded minimal skills, and were characterized by a high degree of authoritarianism and exploitation.

Higher education institutions in Romania have produced many graduates to meet the employability skills agenda. However, there is growing concern about the type of job graduates enter (Preoteasa, 2018; Pantea, 2021). Additionally, there are a significant number of under-employed young university graduates in the workforce (Melenciuc, 2018). The decline in

manufacturing jobs has been accompanied by growth in the service sector, leading to an increase in marginal employment and underemployment. With the rapid shift towards a service-based economy in Romania, an increase in the service sector is positive for economic development (World Bank, 2020).

However, evidence has indicated that the connection between higher education institutions and the labor market does not directly correlate with a decent career for young university graduates (Pantea, 2023). The rise in under-employment and uncertain careers is not solely a result of the decline in manufacturing jobs and growth in the service sector but is also influenced by broader societal and economic factors (Chivu et al., 2020; European Commission, 2023). Therefore, there is a solid need to fear possible national deindustrialization. The importance of collaboration among policymakers, university educators, and researchers in higher education and employment cannot be overstated when finding solutions to these challenges.

The graduate labor market in Romania is currently experiencing numerous changes and challenges. On the one hand, there are many university graduates compared to graduate job opportunities (Eurostat, 2023; Isirabahenda, 2019). While the difference between graduates' supply and demand has led to increased competition among scarce graduate jobs in Romania (World Bank, 2020; Kretovics and Eckert, 2019), the capability of the Romanian labor market to absorb this size of graduates remains problematic (Beaury et al., 2016; Pantea, 2019, Eurostat, 2023; EC, 2023). On the flip side, issues of work readiness or employable graduates (Holmes, 2013; Burke et al., 2016; Clarke, 2018) and employability skills (Felstead et al., 2016) persist and challenge policymakers, labor, and main educational actors (Small et al., 2018; Cedefop, 2018).

Statistically, university graduates have a high employment rate, as recent data show that, in the ISCED 2011 category, Romanian university graduates are employed more than other people at the non-tertiary level (80.7% in 2019 and 76.4% in 2023), considering the age category from 15-29. Nevertheless, this percentage is lower than that of previous years (82.5% in 2000 and 77.9% in 2009) (Eurostat, 2024). Despite having the most educated generation in Romanian history, the labor shortage in Romania pushed numerous young Romanian graduates to carry out jobs previously requiring lower qualifications and skill levels. Often, they find work outside of the commonly recognized graduate occupations and occupy a much more diverse range of jobs, such as customer support agents in call centers (Florea and Oprean, 2010; Yen, 2012; Vedder, Denhart, and Robe, 2013; Dragotă & Mitrică, 2004; Cedefop 2017; EC, 2017; Melenciuc, 2018; Negrescu, 2018; Word Bank, 2018, 2020).

Underemployment among university graduates has grown over the last three decades (Kler et al., 2018; ILO, 2013; Pisica, 2015). For some graduates, the under-employment issue persists for months, if not years, after graduation (Schmitt and Boushey, 2012, Boltanski and Chiapello, 2017; Siivonen et al., 2023). While work and employment among university graduates are broadly acknowledged in the literature, there are few empirical studies on the labor world of under-employed workers in Romania.

When highly educated and skilled employees occupy jobs usually held by less educated workers and take job positions under lower terms of employment than traditionally considered typical, the value of formal credentials declines (Tomlinson, 2016; Wu and Hawkins, 2019; Caplan, 2018). We may wonder about the importance and benefits employees or employers attribute to Higher Education, as studies that focus on education-job misfit and the underutilization of tertiary graduates' knowledge and abilities in the Romanian labor market are limited. Moreover, matching and managing employees' skills with their right jobs is still a big issue to consider (Cedefop, 2018; EC, 2019).

Many authors generally acknowledge that young university graduates still face and experience a complex and uncertain transition from university to work (Angelescu et al., 2007; Bruke et al., 2017; Christie & Burke, 2020; UNESCO, 2014). Obtaining decent employment after graduation is more complicated for young people than adults (ILO, 2020; Caroleo and Pastore, 2009; Pantea, 2019).

There are precarious work conditions that characterize the current global labor world, (Standing, 2011; Arnold and Bongiovi, 2013; Kalleberg, 2011; Vedder et al., 2013; Dragotă & Mitrică, 2004; Broadley et al., 2023). Romania is no exception Various authors echoed uncertain career prospects for young workers in this post-Fordist employment (Farrugia et al. 2018) in what Arthur & Rousseau (1996) termed 'boundaryless,' or Mirvis & Hall (1996) 'protean,' career trajectories.

Research rationale

This thesis explores graduate employability and overqualification phenomena among young people in Romania. This research is focused on graduates working in call centers, Romanian university graduates are among the employees working in the BPO and SSC, and this industry currently has a talent pool of thousands of graduates. Two essential aspects explain the relevance of this study: First, Romania maintains a relatively low general unemployment rate among European countries; however, many young people continue to experience

unemployment and under-employment (EURES, 2023; Delaney et al., 2020). Equally important, the mismatch between education and jobs remains a public and socioeconomic issue (McGuinness & Whelan, 2018; Scurry et al., 2020; Tomlinson et al., 2022). To the best of our knowledge, the lived experiences of underemployed young graduates working in customer support centers or call centers in Romania have not yet been explored. There is a noticeable current, and the future of outsourcing jobs is underexplored, whereas in some countries, outsourced jobs are closing and relocating to the new cheapest area. Again, with the rapidly changing labor market marked by the use of artificial intelligence and automation, little is known about the quality of outsourced jobs and the lived experiences of underemployed/overqualified Romanian graduates working in BPO/SSC companies.

Second, employability, skills, and the link between higher education and the labor market are current and relevant phenomena in the EU. Additionally, many precarious jobs, disguised as decent employment, dominate the EU service sector, and Romania is no exception (Wiernik & Kostal, 2019). Despite their significance, these topics have not been addressed appropriately in the literature, particularly in Romania. Some studies have mainly analyzed the graduate labor market with an economic lens in the EU, guided by demand-side perceptions, and with a positivist paradigm. Researching post-university life and labor market lived experiences solely through a positivist lens can be misleading. The current study approached these phenomena with social constructivism; that is, the constructivist lens attempts to identify the lived experiences or beliefs of social actors.

Organization of the thesis

This thesis is comprised of five parts. Part one consists of an introduction and a general overview of the thesis. Part two is a review of the literature. The chapters in this section set the scene for this qualitative inquiry, introduce various concepts, provide a theoretical framework, and review the previous research. It also situates this thesis within graduate employment in a Romanian context. Part three presents the research methodology, with chapters discussing the research objectives and questions, research approach and design, methods for data collection, and strategies for data analysis. Informed by the research questions and objectives, it also provides validity, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations and briefly describes the context and description of the case study. The part four synthesizes the findings and interpretations. This is followed by part five that focuses on drawing conclusions and presenting considerations, with an emphasis on discussing the significance and implications of the

findings based on the research objectives, emphasizing their practical implications. This highlights the primary contributions of the study, acknowledges the limitations of the research, and suggests recommendations for future research. This thesis also contains references encompassing all sources consulted, such as books, scientific journal articles, webpages, and conference proceedings. The final segment of the thesis includes annexes that provide a detailed account of the national and international conferences attended and contributed to, along with interview guidelines, research question mapping, analysis strategy, and main themes.

Research Methodology

This study employs a constructivist paradigm (Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2015) and qualitative research approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to explore the understudied topics of graduate employability and overqualification. The researcher's ontological position aligns with relativism (Tashakkori et al., 2021; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), while their epistemological position is subjectivism (Creswell and Poth, 2017). Positionality is established by considering the research subject, participants, and context and is shaped by various characteristics such as gender, race, personal experiences, and values (Holmes, 2020).

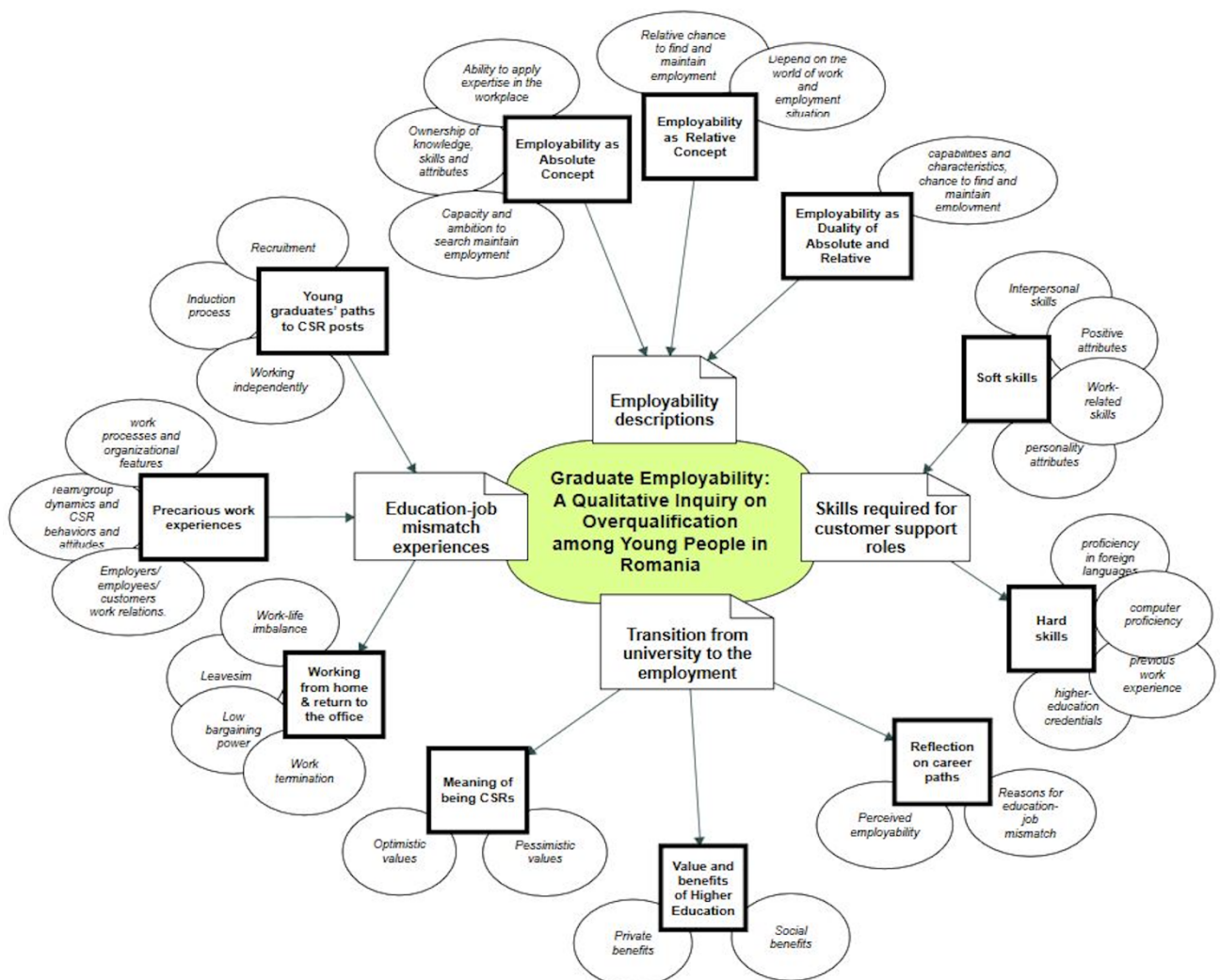
The researcher used an inductive methodology to gain deeper insights into these phenomena without testing pre-existing hypotheses. The study targeted a particular group of approximately 50 participants, including employees, employers, and higher education counselors, and data were collected until saturation was reached. This research is positioned within the constructionist paradigm, emphasizing the importance of human interaction in the formation of social reality (Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2015). An ethnographic case study design was adopted using participatory observation and semi-structured interviews to capture the meanings of daily work activities experienced by customer support representative employees in the Business Services Sector in Romania.

Participant observations and semi-structured interviews were supplemented by information from various sources, such as written documents, corporate events, and site observations. Participant observation, a highly effective method for understanding complex social settings, ranges from observation to participation. The researcher engaged in full participant observation as a covert observer, working at a Shared-Service Center to gain first-hand experience of the underemployment issue among recent young graduates. Data were recorded through field notes, audio recordings, and photographic records.

Summary of findings, interpretations and concluding remarks

In recent years, the impact of multinational companies outsourced in Romania on employment is noticeable because they hire numerous young university graduates in jobs traditionally held by middle- and less-educated employees in their entry- and middle-level positions. Uncertain careers have become the norm for many young graduates, and some studies question the value of higher education in the unstable world of work and employment. Despite evidence showing complex and many hindrances in post-university life for young university graduates, more is needed to know about graduate employability and how young university graduates in Romania experience education-job mismatch.

This study used reflective thematic analysis to interpret and extract meaning from two-year ethnographical case study data collected via participant observation and unstructured and semi-structured interviews. Below a combined theme, categories and codes emerged from data analysis:



This study explores and examines the concept of employability from the perspectives of various social actors, revealing three main themes: the absolute facet, the relative aspect, and a combination of both. Employability is linked to an individual's ability to secure and maintain employment, with specific skills, personal qualities, and resources playing crucial roles. Participants emphasized the importance of absolute (skills and personal qualities) and relative (competition among graduates and non-graduates) dimensions of employability.

This study also investigates the skills required for customer support representative (CSR) positions, focusing on soft skills over hard skills. Two themes were the primary results of the second objective of this inquiry: soft and hard skills. Participants indicated various soft skills, such as interpersonal skills, a positive attitude, personality traits, or job-related abilities, as skills required to satisfy CSR duties. Their hard skills also marked their comments. Hard skills include proficiency in foreign languages, computer proficiency, previous work experience, and higher-education credentials. This study argues that soft skills are preferred to hard skills.

Additionally, this study explores the precarious work experiences of customer service representatives (CSRs), focusing on their work processes, organizational features, team dynamics, behaviors, and attitudes. CSRs face challenges, such as adhering to collection strategies, extensive use of technology, lack of autonomy and creativity, deskilling, and uncertainty in work organization and execution. This study highlights issues, such as inadequate training, ambiguous duties, and discrepancies between advertised job descriptions and actual responsibilities. These factors contribute to decreased work commitment, heavy workloads, and limited opportunities for professional and personal development, potentially leading to uncertain career prospects. Collaboration among CSRs often leads to misunderstandings owing to an unwell-elaborated job distribution. Emotional labor is a significant aspect of CSRs' work, as they suppress genuine emotions to meet employer expectations, often seeking support from colleagues and rarely from supervisors. CSRs also face difficulties dealing with customers, including miscommunication, mistrust, and verbal abuse. High levels of work pressure, such as constant performance monitoring, emotional labor, and unattainable work targets, result in conflicts between CSRs and supervisors, leading to a phenomenon known as "quite quitting." Overqualified CSRs exhibit opposing behaviors and attitudes, including work avoidance, withdrawal, and sabotage of work procedures. This study highlights the impact of high workloads, unattainable work targets, emotional labor, talent mismanagement, unfulfilled work expectations, and work-life imbalance on CSRs' uncertain careers and high turnover.

This study also explores the experiences of customer service representatives (CSRs) adapting to work-from-home (WFH) during the COVID-19 pandemic, their return to office, and the termination of their work contracts. CSRs face challenges such as fear, insecure working conditions, work-life imbalance, and emotional stress during WFH. They experienced leaveism, overwork, and lack of autonomy. Upon returning to office, CSRs faced low bargaining power and inflexible working arrangements, indicating a precarious career. The termination of work contracts elicited negative feelings and positive mindsets among CSRs. Some expressed disappointment and unfairness, while others saw opportunities for future employment. This study highlights the complexity of CSRs in outsourced jobs and their expectations for talent management and decent careers.

This study examines education-job mismatch and employability perceptions among customer service representatives (CSRs) in Romania. CSRs attribute this mismatch to a disparity between university offerings and labor market demands, scarcity of job opportunities, oversupply of graduates, lack of cooperation among key labor actors, and favoritism in securing jobs. Despite the challenges transitioning from university to workforce, CSRs hold a positive view of their skills, work readiness, and adaptability. This study reveals that upward mobility is uncommon, with some CSRs transitioning horizontally to disputes or cash app management roles. CSRs believe that their abilities and external factors influence their employability, and that they possess valuable soft skills. However, they face issues such as a lack of career guidance, underestimation of their abilities by employers, and concerns about devaluing university degrees.

This qualitative study examines the experiences and perceptions of customer service representatives (CSRs) in Romania regarding their roles, the transition from higher education to work, and the perceived benefits of holding a university degree. CSRs expressed mixed feelings about their positions, acknowledging the social, psychological, and cultural benefits of facing uncertain careers and employment-related stressors. The perceived usefulness and advantages of graduating from higher education were categorized into private and social benefits. CSRs believed that higher education enhanced their personal growth, responsibility, and organizational skills, and provided opportunities for mobility and leaving rural areas. However, some CSRs expressed dissatisfaction and confusion regarding the constructive role of higher education, and employers raised concerns about the capabilities of recent graduates compared with previous ones.

These findings contribute to our understanding of graduate employability and the education-job mismatch phenomenon. They also discuss how the main social actors hold

contrasting views on their employability interpretation and how soft skills are preferred to hard skills. This study shows how CSRs' working conditions entail deskilling, as they have limited autonomy in work planning and task execution. This study also highlights high workloads, unattainable work targets, emotional labor, talent mismanagement, unfulfilled work expectations, and work-life imbalance, and how these causal mechanisms lead to CSRs' uncertain careers and high turnover rates. This study also highlights the private and social values attributed to higher education, and the contrasting perceived benefits of CSR.

This study makes three significant contributions to the literature on graduate employability and overqualification in Romania. First, it sheds light on the skills required in contemporary outsourced jobs and the importance of soft skills. Second, it focuses on outsourcing companies in Romania that hire overqualified young university graduates for entry-level positions, particularly customer service representatives. This study contributes to the sociology of work and employment by examining young graduates in a country that has not typically been explored. Finally, the ethnographic approach and investigation of overqualification, employability, skills, and precarious jobs increased the study's originality. This study findings may attract the interest of the main social actors in Romania regarding these concepts.

This qualitative study faced challenges related to the data collection methods. Under the pretext of the GDPR, participants in managerial positions avoided discussing certain phenomena related to the mismatch between education and workplace. Furthermore, it is essential to note that an ethnographic study is not only time-consuming, but also requires significant psychosocial and financial resources. This emphasizes the study's financial constraints due to limited access to resources. The generalizability of these findings is limited to a specific context. Future research should explore their applicability to other industry contexts, as each BPO/SSC is unique and the findings of an ethnographic study may not apply to other contexts. The focus of this study on young university graduates from a particular industry may not accurately represent the overall employability landscape of Romania. Future research should examine the obstacles that hinder the development of education-work matching strategies that enable young graduates to utilize their knowledge and skills and consider strategies to improve graduate employability and prevent brain drain.

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