

Students' Perceptions of Traineeships in a Greek University: Incentives and Barriers

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Abstract Higher education work experience programs offer students the opportunity to connect the theoretical knowledge of academic studies with the workplace and the acquisition of professional experience. The purpose of this paper is to examine the perceptions of the students of a Greek university regarding Work Based Learning (WBL) with a special focus on traineeships. The paper investigates the students' expectations and conceptions of such a program, the incentives for participation, the difficulties they might encounter during the program and their sense of attainment once it is completed. The data for this study were collected through a survey, which was conducted with an online questionnaire and constituted a case study. The paper used descriptive statistics for the analysis of the data. Students consider traineeships as a form of WBL that is an essential element of their learning and acknowledge that it creates strong linkages between theory and practice. The incentives towards such programs concern mostly the development of hard and soft skills. The existence of many barriers and, most importantly, the lack of relevancy and the mismatches between the content of the academic studies and the work duties are highlighted.

Keywords Higher Education, University, Students, Work Based Learning, Traineeship, Perception, Greece

1. Introduction

1.1. Problem Statement

The discourse around employability suggests that universities should utilize Work Based Learning (WBL) to impart higher-level skills to students. The interplay between students, the university and the working environment is considered a crucial factor in increasing the relevance of higher education [1]. WBL is an opportunity for mainly undergraduate students to integrate work experience and labor market knowledge into their formal education in a university by participating in supervised work in real-world professional environments. However, sparse investigation of students' incentives, personal interest and contextualized experiences of WBL is known. Although WBL approaches are widespread in higher education institutions, an understanding of what makes them effective is limited [2]. There are thematic studies focusing on partnerships between universities and the labor market, as well as on the ways WBL has been integrated in formal education [3-6]. The works of Wallin, Nokelainen and Mikkonen [7] and Murtazin, Shvets and Piho [8] focus on an in-depth literature review regarding the ways experienced professionals develop their expertise in WBL in Higher Education. There are studies about students'

perception of WBL in Malaysia [9] and in Korea [10]. There is a lack of scientific research in Greece concerning students' perception of the practical experience and knowledge they expect to gain once a WBL program is completed.

The aim of this study is to examine the impact of students' expectations and perceptions of a specific WBL program, i.e. traineeships, the factors that motivate them to pursue a traineeship scheme and the ones that hinder them, the relevancy of the traineeship with the academic curriculum, the difficulties students encounter during such a scheme and their sense of attainment once it is completed. Firstly, the paper examines the perceptions related to the incentives and the potential hurdles of a traineeship program that were highlighted by all student participants, both those who have taken part in one and those who have not. Then, it focuses on students who had pursued a traineeship program in the past and analyzes their perceptions regarding its relevancy with the academic curriculum, and their sense of attainment after its completion. Finally, it attempts to draw conclusions about the expected benefits of such programs and the necessary improvements targeting their effectiveness.

1.2. Literature Review

The development of WBL is very important for all countries, but becomes more important in the case of countries, such as Greece, where high youth unemployment and difficulty in the transition from education and training to employment constitute constant deficiencies of the labor market. In Greece, young people confront a series of challenges that are predominantly related to their smooth social and economic integration. The challenge of their successful transition to the labor market is the most emblematic one, as they become more vulnerable than other groups due to the general shortage of jobs, the difficulty in accessing employment and the limited opportunities to acquire work experience. There has been much concern on the skills mismatch that can be observed between the actual competences of university graduates and the labor market expectations. Many undergraduate students of Greek universities lack essential "job market readiness", which in turn, contributes significantly to the increased number of unemployed graduates in the country. For many years, unemployment rates in Greece remain the highest in the European Union both in the case of young people under the age of 30 (2017: 35.6% vs. 13.2% of the EU average) and in the case of new higher education graduates of the same age group (2017: 35.2% vs. 8.5% of the EU average) [11]. At the same time, 25- to 64-year-old tertiary education graduates face the highest unemployment rate (17.2%) compared to the OECD member states (4.6%) [12]. In addition, signals from the labor market are intensifying with regard to the deterioration of skills mismatch and to the difficulty of

businesses in finding personnel with the appropriate expertise and experience so as to adapt to the work environment easily. This situation seems to hamper the transition of young people to employment further [13]. At the same time, there are forecasts for a significant increase in the supply of highly skilled jobs during the next years [14-19]. These forecasts highlight the need for the education systems to transform into more attractive and effective environments for organization and action in order to be able to offer the appropriate knowledge and skills. Such aims require targeted state initiatives that facilitate the integration of young people with high-level expertise into the labor market and the utilization of their valuable human capital. However, Greece continues to lack a comprehensive framework for WBL. Higher education work experience programs in the form of traineeships can exercise a particularly important role in enhancing youth transition from education to work.

A major challenge for WBL in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Greece is the lack of policy consistency at the national level, which makes it difficult to discern an overarching approach. WBL in the form of traineeships was firstly introduced in the Technological Education Institutions (TEIs) in 1983 under Article 24 of Law 1404. Traineeships were introduced as a compulsory course that was integrated in the curriculum. HEIs, unlike the Technological Education Institutions (TEIs), do not always integrate WBL as a compulsory course. Even in the same university, there are departments that define WBL in the form of traineeships as a compulsory course, others define it as optional and others may not have the option of WBL at all. Each HEI can develop and adopt its own model of a work experience program. There are differences between institutions or even between the departments of the same university regarding the schemes' procedures and characteristics (i.e. duration that can vary from 1 month to 6 months, student and supervisor obligations, ECTS awarded or not, existence of remuneration or not, source of remuneration etc.) applied in work based learning schemes. For instance, in the same university, there can be WBL programs that are awarded with ECTS and others that are not, WBL programs that are compensated and others that are not. When remuneration exists, it can come from four different sources (subsidy programs of NSRF, subsidy programs of Manpower, Employment Organization-OAED, student's academic institution, host company) [20]. Recently, the Technological Education Institutions (TEIs) experienced a change in their status and became part of the Greek Higher Education Institutions. The large number of HEIs along with the fact that each institution has the competence to implement a different work experience program for its students makes the attempt to draw some conclusions on the common characteristics of WBL more complicated and raises questions on the incentives and the barriers students have when participating in such programs.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Methodology

The study was conducted in the University of Macedonia, which is located in Thessaloniki, Greece. The University comprises eight academic departments that focus on two main scientific fields:

- a. Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts – 3 departments (European and International Studies, Educational and Social Policy, Music Science and Art);
- b. Economic Studies and Information Sciences – 5 departments (Economics, Balkan, Slavic and Oriental Studies, Business Administration, Accounting and Finance, Applied Informatics).

Utilizing a case study approach, the data for this study were collected through a survey that was addressed to undergraduate students of all the departments of the University. The originality of this study is that it is the first study conducted in a Greek University that attempts to analyze students' perceptions of the implemented WBL programs.

The authors promptly applied for permission to the Ethics Committee of the University for approval with respect to methodological and ethical issues, and the permission was granted by the Committee (64/30-07-2021). An online questionnaire was administered to students of the University. The survey was conducted during the period July-September 2021. Likert type scales were used for all items. After contacting the administration of the eight departments of the University, a link leading to the questionnaire was posted on "Students' Web", which is the platform that the administration uses to inform students regarding academic matters. Students responded voluntarily. A total of 311 completed questionnaires were recorded.

The following research questions guided the survey:

Research Question 1: What are the main incentives of students in order to participate in WBL?

Research Question 2: Based on students' perceptions, which are the expected benefits of WBL for students on a personal and a professional level?

Research Question 3: Which are the obstacles that students might face during a WBL program?

3. Results

3.1. Demographics

Out of the 311 students who responded 217 studied in departments focusing on Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts, whereas 94 of them study in the fields of Economic Studies and Information Sciences (Table 1). As regards the gender of the respondents, more women (69.5%) than men (30.5%) participated in the survey (Table 2).

Table 1. Respondents by academic field

Academic Field	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Economic Studies and Information Sciences	94	30.2
Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts	217	69.8
Total	311	100.0

Table 2. Respondents by gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Men	95	30.5
Women	216	69.5
Total	311	100.0

The students who responded to the online questionnaire were divided in two sub-groups, those who had not participated in a traineeship program before the survey (Group A=243 students) and those who had participated in such a program (Group B=68 students) (Table 3). This classification helped the researchers to approach the perceptions of the respondents towards WBL taking into consideration whether they had any personal involvement in and experience of a work experience program in the past or not.

Table 3. Respondents by participation in WBL

Participation in WBL	Frequency	Group
No	243	Group A
Yes	68	Group B
Total	311	

3.2. Research Findings

3.2.1. Types of Work Experience Programs Familiar to Students

The first two questions of the questionnaire aimed to reveal the degree of students' knowledge about the different work experience programs and the relevant informative events that are related to their professional development and are offered by the University.

Different types of work experience programs are offered by the university to its students. Many of them are organized within the framework of the Greek National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF) or the Erasmus+ program, while others result from the provisions of the academic curriculum or from initiatives undertaken by the teaching personnel.

More analytically, six different forms of work experience opportunities can be identified in the university. The students were asked to confirm their familiarization with each one of them. In general, according to the students' responses, the students who had already participated in a work experience program (Group B) seem to be better informed about all six different types of WBL than the ones

who had never participated in such a program before the survey (Table 4).

Table 4. Types of work experience programs known to students

Type of WBL	Group A	Group B
WBL under the Erasmus Program as part of the curriculum	57.6%	61.8%
WBL under the Erasmus Program not integrated in the curriculum	42.8%	45.6%
WBL under the National Strategic Reference Framework (ESPA)	39.9%	69.1%
WBL outside National Strategic Reference Framework (ESPA) with collaborating businesses	31.7%	36.8%
Mandatory WBL as part of the curriculum	29.2%	38.2%
WBL under the initiatives of academic teaching staff	24.3%	13.2%

The higher education traineeship program that is funded by the national authorities and the European Union through the National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF, translated as ESPA in Greek) was rightly expected to be the most well-known type of work experience programs. It provides positions in Greek businesses and offers remuneration to all student participants. 69.1% of the students who had participated in WBL (Group B) are familiar with it, in contrast to only 39.9% of the students who had not experienced such participation (Group A).

A very well-known type of WBL to the students of both Group A and Group B is the traineeship in businesses abroad that is organized under the Erasmus+ Program. The particular type of WBL can be either integrated in the curriculum or not. The traineeship that is integrated in the curriculum is more known to the students of both Groups (Group A: 57.6% - Group B: 61.8%) in comparison to the one that is not integrated in the curriculum (Group A: 42.8% - Group B: 45.6%).

A significantly smaller number of students appear informed about opportunities for traineeships offered by organizations collaborating with the university outside the aforementioned frameworks, such as the ones based on initiatives of individual businesses (Group A: 31.7% - Group B: 36.8%) or of the academic teaching staff (Group A: 24.3% - Group B: 13.2%). This can be attributed to the

fact that few businesses and even fewer members of the teaching personnel are involved in the development of such cooperation between the university and the world of work.

As regards the work experience programs that constitute part of the curriculum, around one third of the students of both groups (Group A: 29.2% - Group B: 38.2%) appear familiar with them due to their mandatory character for the completion of their studies.

3.2.2. Students' Participation in Career-Oriented Seminars

The students were asked whether they had attended short seminars at the university relating to their career development and labor market issues. Every year the University offers training seminars and events that cover various topics, such as the design of a curriculum vitae, the development of interpersonal and digital skills, the guidance for job seekers on ways to find a job, the participation in entrepreneurship, or organizes career days and meetings with businesspersons.

Based on the survey results (Table 5), the most popular seminar students had attended was about the design of a successful CV. Half of the respondents of both groups had attended such a seminar in order to improve their ability to write a concise resume (Group A: 44.4% - Group B: 51.5%). Similarly, seminars about entrepreneurship (Group A: 43.6% - Group B: 38.2%) and skills development (Group A: 33.7% - Group B: 39.7%) appear to be rather attractive. On the contrary, organized meetings with businesspersons are the least common event (Group A: 16.5% - Group B: 10.3%), allowing the assumption that the links of the academic world in the university with businesses and other labor market stakeholders are weak. The big difference between the two student groups regarding their participation in events about traineeships in Greece and abroad is an interesting finding. Only 17.3% of the students of Group A participated in such events compared to 41.2% of those of Group B. This fact indicates that a student who is determined to participate in a work experience program seeks to be regularly updated about the available opportunities in contrast with a student who is not interested in such programs. Therefore, it is very important for Universities to develop a WBL-friendly attitude to their students and lay the foundations of their students' hands-on interaction with the labor market.

Table 5. Students' participation in career-oriented events

	Group A	Group B
Training sessions for the design of a CV	44.4%	51.5%
Training session for entrepreneurship	43.6%	38.2%
Seminars for development of interpersonal and digital skills	33.7%	39.7%
Sessions for job seekers-ways to find a job	24.7%	23.5%
Career days-meetings with businesspersons	21.8%	25.0%
Sessions for work experience programs in Greece and abroad	17.3%	41.2%
Meetings with businesspersons	16.5%	10.3%

3.2.3. Incentives towards Participation in a Traineeship

The exploration of the main incentives of students to pursue a work experience program is an important part of the study and is associated to the first research question. The students were asked to express their opinion by defining their agreement to given statements that were allocated in a 5-level Likert scale ranging from 1-‘Not at all’ to 5-‘Very much’.

Concerning the incentives for students’ participation in a work experience program, Table 6 shows the averages of the Likert scale estimate (1-‘Not at all’ to 5-‘Very much’) along with the standard deviation for both Groups. There are commonalities between the two Groups, which indicate that there is a common understanding between the two groups concerning WBL. The acquisition of hard (job related) and soft (personality/life) skills is the most valued by students according to the responses of the survey participants. Students attribute great importance to the ability of such programs to help them develop a stronger and more competitive resume (Group A: 4.37 - Group B: 4.38), to acquire valuable professional skills for various work contexts (Group A: 4.30 - Group B: 4.22), to improve their professional prospects (Group A: 4.07 - Group B: 4.12), to undertake responsibilities at the workplace (Group A: 4.03 - Group B: 4.04), to master the work under the guidance of an experienced co-worker (Group A: 4.00 - Group B: 3.99), and to develop their life skills (Group A: 4.00 - Group B: 3.88).

It is well-evidenced that both groups share similar opinions about their incentives for work experience programs. The financial incentive, contrary to the research in the US and the rest of the EU [54], receives a relatively low value for both groups (Group A: 3.24 - Group B: 3.40). This could be explained by the fact that in the majority of such schemes in Greece a student receives approximately € 300 per month, while the average remuneration for an unskilled worker in the country is around € 650. Consequently, remuneration is not an appealing incentive to students, who focus on incentives that could render them more knowledgeable and efficient to the labor market.

In general, incentives related to career development are in the middle of the responses, while the incentive of remuneration receives a low value. Figure 1 illustrates the aforementioned categories for the incentives of the students to participate in WBL.

3.2.4. Barriers to Participation in a Traineeship

The third research question aspired to investigate the potential obstacles a WBL program may entail for students. The students were asked to express their opinion by defining their agreement to given statements that were allocated in a 5-level Likert scale ranging from 1-‘Strongly disagree’ to 5-‘Totally agree’. Table 7 presents the students’ average responses along with the standard deviation for both Groups.

Table 6. Main incentives for students’ participation in a traineeship

	Group A		Group B	
	Average	STD	Average	STD
Enhance their CV with work experience	4.37	0.84	4.38	0.962
Acquire important professional skills that can be applied in various workplaces and jobs	4.3	0.784	4.22	0.96
Enhance their professional prospects	4.07	0.845	4.12	1
Learn to undertake responsibilities in the work environment	4.03	0.85	4.04	1.043
Learn the work better under the guidance of a professional co-worker	4	0.925	3.99	0.922
Develop their communication and social skills	4	0.858	3.88	0.939
Be better positioned in the job market after the completion of studies	3.98	1.064	3.88	1.153
Apply in practice the theoretical knowledge of their studies	3.9	0.954	3.72	1.17
Gain a better understanding of what they want to achieve in the future	3.88	0.959	3.91	0.91
Define whether they have made the proper career choice	3.84	1.021	3.96	1.071
Gain more confidence on their professional skills	3.82	0.917	3.96	0.953
Develop a professional network with professionals and employers	3.8	0.921	3.91	0.973
Adjust their personality to the work environment	3.75	0.97	3.38	1.037
Develop their team-working skills	3.59	0.972	3.54	1.014
Enhance their willingness for further learning	3.58	0.977	3.31	1.04
Receive additional ECTS in their diplomas	3.53	1.133	3.32	1.298
Expect their employer to hire them after the completion of the traineeship	3.29	1.06	3.74	1.18
Receive remuneration during the traineeship	3.24	1.28	3.4	1.426
Traineeship is mandatory in their curriculum	2.94	1.638	3.16	1.75
Create in the future their own company	2.72	0.981	2.81	1.055

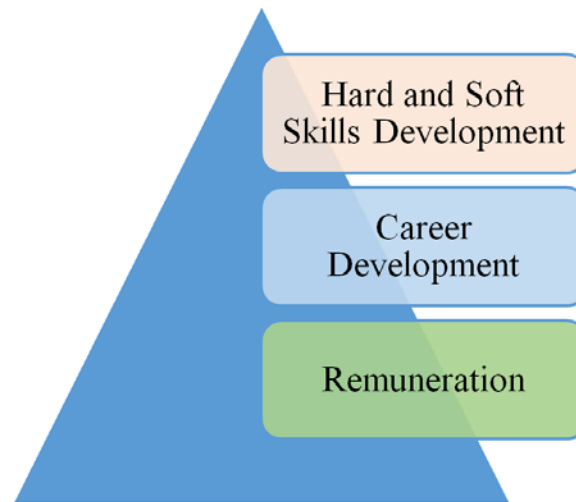


Figure 1. The most important incentives for a traineeship – Students' opinions

Table 7. Barriers to students' willingness to participate in a traineeship

	Group A		Group B	
	Average	STD	Average	STD
Students are assigned duties that are irrelevant to their studies and skills	3.94	1.007	3.82	1.132
Employers take advantage of the students in order not to hire full time employees	3.8	1.119	3.99	1.099
Remuneration is low	3.79	1.084	3.81	1.2
There is no proper supervision by the employer	3.67	0,983	3.43	1.238
The employer requests that students work additional hours	3.53	1.151	3.19	1.385
Available traineeship positions are not relevant with their studies	3.5	1.19	3.44	1.164
Future employers do not value the work experience gained in a traineeship	3.48	1.005	3.47	1.126
It is difficult for someone to enter a traineeship simultaneously with their studies	3.45	0.984	3.29	1.282
Students feel insecure about the level of skills that they possess for the job	3.43	1.027	3.5	1.178
Selection process is complicated	3.42	0.884	2.81	1.055
There will be difficulty in understanding the duties and culture of the company	3.1	0.953	2.63	0.991
Students worry that they will be discriminated or oppressed during their traineeship	3.04	1.116	3	1.27

All students agree that barriers exist to a certain extent, while the students of both groups appear to have similar perceptions of the challenges at the working environment. They gave emphasis on the fact that often the job duties assigned to them in the business environment are non-relevant to their studies (Group A: 3.94 - Group B: 3.82), while employers can take advantage of them by coercing them into accepting longer working hours (Group A: 3.53 - Group B: 3.19) and lower remuneration (Group A: 3.79 - Group B: 3.81). Moreover, the respondents pointed out that in many cases there is lack of proper supervision of student trainees by the employer or a mentor (Group A: 3.67 - Group B: 3.43), while they criticized businesses for exploiting student trainees by using them as cheap labor and as a replacement of regular workers (Group A: 3.80 - Group B: 3.99).

It is also noteworthy that students seem to be convinced that the work experience gained through WBL is not valued enough by employers as an advantage for future job seekers (Group A: 3.48 - Group B: 3.47). However, the respondents highlight the necessity for them to develop hard and soft skills through a traineeship (please see 4.3.3), even though they run the danger of the experience not being properly valued in the labor market in the future. This contradiction can be explained by the prevailing conditions in the Greek labor market, where employers do not perceive WBL experiences as real assets in a student's CV, although they usually offer trainee positions in their businesses.

The only considerable differentiations between the two groups concern the 'Selection process' (Group A: 3.42 - Group B: 2.81) and the 'Difficulty in understanding the

job duties and the company culture' (Group A: 3.10 - Group B: 2.63). These differences indicate that Group A students, due to their lack of previous WBL knowledge and experience, do not fully understand the selection processes that are followed by businesses in the case of work experience programs. Therefore, they consider them complicated to a higher degree than their Group B classmates, who are already familiar with such processes, and thus, do not consider them a serious constraint. In the same vein, Group A students fear that there will be a skills mismatch between the skills acquired during their studies and those required by businesses, while Group B students do not consider this possibility to be a significant barrier to them pursuing such an experience.

3.2.5. Benefits of Participation in a Traineeship

In order to delve into "Research Question 2: Based on students' perceptions, which are the expected benefits of WBL for students on a personal and a professional level?" an open question was placed at the end of the questionnaire, which aimed to offer participants the ability to express their opinion regarding WBL and its benefits more freely and thoroughly. By giving participants the opportunity to express their opinion and perceptions in an open text, additional information was acquired concerning issues relevant to the implementation of WBL. In total 23 participants responded to this question.

Twelve participants stated that WBL is a necessity, since it provides the opportunity to apply in practice the theoretical knowledge acquired during their studies. A student's indicative comment is cited below:

"Personally, I believe that the greatest benefit gained from a work experience program is the ability to work in a company, where I would not have the chance to work otherwise."

Another student stated that the duration of a work experience program is very important and implied that the 2-3 month period is not enough for someone to broaden his/her skills. The trainee is considered by coworkers to be simply at a "trial stage" and, therefore, is not always allowed to gain a full hands-on experience as regards the field of work and the company culture in such a limited framework. For this reason, the respondent underlines the need for such a program to last from 6 months to one year in order to fulfil its objectives.

Some respondents commented on the preparation and guidance students receive by both the university and the academic teaching staff, which they consider inefficient.

"In Greece traineeships are not taken seriously and do not yield the desired results in terms of the skills acquired by a student as the traineeship is not taken very seriously by companies. There may also be insufficient guidance from the academic departments. In addition, the traineeship opportunities, both in our country and abroad, are not many."

Another student stated that:

"The University of Macedonia does not adequately prepare / inform its students (in my experience and that of my fellow students) about traineeship issues. However, for those who are very interested, there is information available on the internet as well as at the Erasmus office, which is quite helpful. As in many related matters, the student is the one who is responsible to take all necessary actions on his own in order to find a decent job in the form of a traineeship. This is particularly unfortunate, as there are numerous technological means to bring the student closer to the services of the university, which are outdated, dysfunctional, tedious, and not displayed / used as they should be."

Although the majority of the respondents considered student traineeships to be an important dimension of their studies, their answers revealed that they adopt a critical stance towards their implementation in Greece. A decade ago, the "Atlas" system was established in Greece. It is a centralized online service, which facilitates the interconnection between businesses that offer traineeship positions, higher education institutions and students by operating a unique database of the available traineeship positions.¹ Atlas reinforces the links between students, potential employers and the academic institutions; however, it can be argued that students still find the procedure complicated. Students' learning experiences during a traineeship, the pre-placement activities, the selection processes and the provided assistance could all be further improved on the basis of their perceptions.

4. Discussion

According to the findings of our research, higher education work experience programs offer students the opportunity to connect the theoretical knowledge of the academic studies with the actual workplace and to acquire valuable professional experience. The fact that a work experience program constitutes a unique opportunity for a young person to spend a period of time in an organization and to acquire specific competences required by the labor market has been repeatedly highlighted by the EU and various stakeholders [21-25]. By participating in a WBL program, the student respondents appear to recognize the opportunity to complement their traditional learning with better knowledge and understanding of the working environment, to improve their professional competences and to develop their life skills. Furthermore, by identifying the specific requirements of the labor market they are able to redefine their long-term learning strategy. These findings coincide with those of other studies, such as those conducted by Crebert et al. [57], O'Connor and Bodicoat [60], D'Abate et al. [26], Morem [28], Raelin [29], Martin and Wilkerson [27] and Varghese et al. [30]. The student respondents believe that a workplace experience helps

¹ More information can be found at the ATLAS official website: <https://atlas.grnet.gr/>

them to maximize the learning outcomes of their studies and to improve their academic performance together with their work-related capabilities. Thus, they enhance their resume and gain significant advantages for the recruitment processes in the future, as it is also evidenced by Gault et al. [31], Gault et al. [32], Hutchinson et al. [33], Knouse et al. [34], Rigsby et al. [35] and Zimmerman [37].

Universities offer formally structured education, which is usually delivered by the academic tutors, whereas a WBL program promotes informal or incidental learning as stated in the analyses of Brennan and Little [38], Hughes [39] and Johnson [40]. In addition, academic lectures are usually uniform for all students, whereas the learning context in WBL differs for each student [40]. According to Trotskovy and Sabag [42], a WBL opportunity offers students the possibility to understand the differences between “traditional learning process in the academic environment and real-design process in the industrial environment”, a finding that often appears in other studies [43] as it is evident in the study presented in this paper. The fact that work experience programs constitute a unique opportunity for students to come into contact with networks of social or economic actors, which could give new momentum to their career prospects, is of great importance for the student respondents of our study and is in accordance with other studies [44, 45]. Work experience programs facilitate the interaction between these groups in order to establish their multilevel communication and flexible collaboration on issues related to the students' professional transition. Nevertheless, the students who participated in the survey do not attribute the same preference to such a prospect compared to the acquisition of hard and soft skills, which seems to constitute their maximum priority.

5. Conclusions

Greater effectiveness in the improvement of academic curricula, the confrontation of skills mismatches and the development of expertise is able to support the education systems in order to respond to the global socioeconomic changes with success [46-48, 44, 49, 50, 32, 33, 51, 35, 52-56].

Work based learning programs can be an important study component for the enhancement of professional learning acquired in academic settings, while at the same time they develop the workplace skills of students [56]. This paper attempted to offer an insight to the perceptions of university students regarding the traineeship opportunities offered to them by universities. Both the respondents who had participated in a work experience program and those who had not gave answers, which demonstrated a good understanding of the rationale of WBL and the existence of common perceptions regarding its potential benefits and barriers, as well as of the initiatives undertaken by the university and academics in

order to strengthen student participation.

The attainment of a traineeship's goals, however, largely depends on the perceptions of the students regarding the possibility of participating in a WBL program, as well as the opportunities that are offered by universities, which are formulated mostly during their studies. The latter depends on initiatives undertaken by the various career and work experience offices, the participation of employers or other stakeholders in the academic life, as well as on the initiatives and personal assistance offered by the academic teaching staff of each university. In the absence of the aforementioned, the perceptions of the students tend to be negative or hesitant, since they feel that WBL cannot offer any added value to their professional development.

The absence of systematic data collection in Greece concerning students' perceptions of WBL, has offered little opportunity to policy makers or to the responsible academic teaching staff to implement rectifications to the existing schemes of WBL in Greece, which would enhance both the employability, as well as the development of the skills and the competences of students. This paper analyzed the data from questionnaires completed by 311 university students, which is considered an appropriate sample size, although there has been similar research that used smaller samples [57-60] without hindering the representativeness of the sample and the generalizations in the university setting. Therefore, the particular research could serve as a basis for future research.

As this study is only based on the students' perceptions, future studies can include responses from academic and business supervisors. A study on the work-related skills and guidance students gained during a WBL program and how these experiences relate to students' academic studies could be useful too. While this study identified some areas for improvement, future research is necessary to examine other areas and factors that contribute to the better use and coordination of existing policy tools (i.e. Atlas, Erasmus+ programs for WBL) in Greece.

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