

## PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE IN ROMANIA: EXPLORING STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

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### Abstract

During professional practice stages students use the skills and knowledge previously acquired via formal classes, create networks, find mentors, enter into contact with citizens and their problems and obtain much needed professional experience, while simultaneously improving their theoretical knowledge and skills as a result of working side by side with practitioners in host organizations. As such, the main goal of this paper is to provide a general overview of professional practice in Romanian public administration education by looking at the undergraduate students' satisfaction regarding the practicum stage in different host institutions.

The data (N = 89) collected from undergraduate students in a public administration program allows us to explore: their satisfaction with different aspects of professional practice (ranging from resources to new knowledge acquired), the strengths and weaknesses of practicum, the perceived utility of such activities and potential improvement measures. Going further than a simple descriptive analysis, our data also shows that the perceived benefits of professional practice can be reduced to two latent classes of utilities/benefits: those related to the new skills and knowledge acquired and the interactions with practitioners and citizens.

**Keywords:** practicum, public administration education, curricula improvement, Romania, undergraduate students.

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## 1. Introduction

Universities and faculties/departments which offer public administration (PA from here on) programs often promote increasing the employability of graduates as a long term strategic goal, but most efforts (both practical and academic) focus on improving or updating the curricula, strategic partnerships, dual accreditation, new teaching methods, e-learning and so on, while ignoring the more hands-on approach, namely professional practice or practicum. The short term stages that students spend in public institutions, NGOs or other types of organizations in order to fulfill their diploma/graduation requirements are often looked on as an afterthought by students, professors, host institutions or educational management, thus minimizing the potential positive outcomes of these activities. By engaging directly in the activity of public organizations or NGOs students can effectively use the skills and knowledge acquired during formal classes, create networks, find mentors, enter into contact with citizens and their problems and obtain the much needed professional experience required to obtain a job, while simultaneously improving their theoretical knowledge and skills. Practicum in PA was also connected with improvements in policy analysis and general professional skills and the practicum experience can be used to assist students in decisions regarding their career, while the skills and competences obtained during the practicum also tend to have a transversal nature and apply in different professional fields (Sprague and Percy, 2014).

The aim of this exploratory research<sup>1</sup> is to provide a general overview of professional practice in Romanian PA education by looking at undergraduate students' experiences with different host institutions during the practicum stage. The following section offers a brief presentation of the practicum focusing on the potential benefits and the problems which might arise when introducing students in different work environments, while also trying to provide a more complex conceptual distinction between practicum and internship. The third section focusses on methodological issues such as the instrument (questionnaire) used for data collection, as well as the data collection process and key socio-demographics characteristics of the sample. The fourth section presents the empirical results and discussions on students' satisfaction regarding the practicum, the perceived utility of this process as well as strengths and weaknesses; the last subsection presents a factor analysis conducted to reduce the ten perceivable benefits of practicum to two latent dimensions/factors. Section 5 concludes and provides further policy recommendations.

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## 2. Practicum: definitions, potential benefits and problems

Although recent studies have focused on the transformation and reform of PA university education in Central and Eastern Europe (Staroňová and Gajduschek, 2016; Hințea, 2013), the Europeanization of PA teaching (Brans and Coenen, 2016), potential future strategies for PA schools (Hințea, 2013), the role of certain disciplines in the PA curricula (Ongaro, 2019) or how certain disciplines or topics should be taught (Engbers, 2016; Glennon, Hodgkinson and Knowles, 2019; Thom, 2019; Mallinson, 2018), the practicum in PA seems to be an under-researched topic. In general, the practicum refers to both: (a) the co-curricular experience and obligation of engaging in professional work supervised, coordinated and monitored by a practitioner (tutor) over a short period of time; and (b) the period and institutional/organizational setup (place) in which students can implement, use and test the knowledge, skills and aptitudes acquired during formal courses and seminars.

From a technical perspective, the practicum can be defined, in general, as the period required in the school curriculum and limited in time in which the students 'work' in a particular institution or organization under the guidance and coordination of an employee of the institution (tutor/guardian), acquiring the status of a 'student apprentice'; a simpler definition refers to it as 'learning by doing' (Daresh, 1990). In most cases, during practice the student does not have the status of a permanent employee and is not paid for his work (which is often part-time). Also, considering his 'apprentice' status during the practicum, the student is not invested with all (or any) of the authority, responsibilities and powers detained by a formal/permanent employee, while his activity and work in the organization is limited and closely monitored, coordinated and supervised by an employee (which holds the status of tutor and is responsible for the activity of the student). Most often, different words and concepts are used interchangeably to encompass these experiences such as practicum, field experience, service learning, capstone experience, or internship although some authors argue that there is a difference between these concepts and what they actually entail for students (Ong'ondo and Jwan, 2009; Lim and Mustafa, 2013; Budgen and Gamroth, 2008; Frey, 2008). Furthermore, beside the titles of such educational endeavors, the actual activities might also differ between programs and institutions as 'there is less uniformity in pedagogy or the delivery of practical experience' (Garris, Madden and Rodgers, 2008, p. 992).

The main differences between practicum and internships are presented in Table 1, according to multiple dimensions.

It should be no longer a novelty for anyone in academia that the practicum is of crucial educational significance for students and an important component in their education, training and formation as specialists as most faculties and universities around the world, regardless of their specialization, include the practicum in their curriculum in different and various forms; incidentally, one of the prerequisites for the accreditation of an undergraduate program in Romania is the existence or integration of practicum in the program curriculum. The practicum is carried out under

**Table 1:** Practicum and internship – comparative analysis

<b>Dimension / aspect compared</b>	<b>Practicum</b>	<b>Internship</b>
Coordinating/ organizing institution	Higher education institution (HEI);	Host organization (HO);
Primary coordinator	Practicum professor/supervisor;	Internship tutor (from the HO);
Duration (length)	Established in the curricula; Usually between 60 and 120 hours (2 to 3 weeks); Part-time, flexible;	Variable, according to intern availability and HO requirements; Often between 1 and 3 months; Part or full time; Established by the HO/tutor;
Schedule		
Evaluation (of acquired competences)	By the HEI, practicum professor;	Self-evaluation; Internship tutor from the HO;
Formalization	High, often established by national (higher) education laws;	Reduced; According to HO preferences;
Official recognition of acquired competences (and ECTS credits)	Practicum is recognized, included in official transcripts; ECTS credits are provided/required for graduation; Practicum is included in official transcripts;	A certificate can be offered by HO; The certificate might not be recognized by third parties; The intern can choose the best fitted organization for his/her needs;
Positive aspects	Often recognized as experience; Institutionalized process;	Longer time periods leads to better integration and professional development; Can continue (the intern can be hired by the HO);
Possible improvements	Longer length which would allow both students and HO to accommodate with each other; The requirements of practicum are often decoupled from those of the work-environment, thus academia should reconsider them; Better tripartite communication (professor, student, tutor); Curricular or co-curricular activity;	Legal framework is unclear or it might be lacking; Lack of university involvement; No relationship with the official curricula; Are not correlated with practicum, thus they might not be recognized by universities (as a substitute for practicum); Extracurricular/independent;
Relation with the official curriculum	Curricular or co-curricular activity;	Extracurricular/independent;
Importance for the education process	Mandatory for graduation;	Voluntary;
Remuneration of students	Usually does not occur.	Possible (paid internship).

**Source:** Adapted after Adecco (2013, pp. 14-15)

the supervision of a professor, for a period of 2 to 4 weeks for an academic year, based on conventions of practicum with different host organizations and according to institutional requirements which can include: objectives, types of activities, students' documents and their evaluation (Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, undated). Similar developments, where practicum or other forms of practical education are required in the external accreditation process, can also be observed in the USA (Ahmed, 2015).

In general, the most important benefit of practicum is that students have the opportunity to put into practice (test) the knowledge acquired during theoretical courses and gain some hands-on experience in their field of specialization; namely, students have the opportunity to interact with professionals and to observe the real and practical activities entailed by a job in their area of specialization (Ferrer-Vinent and Sobel, 2011; Frey, 2008; Cameron-Jones and O'Hara, 1999; Scott, Gentry and Phillips, 2014; Nonis and Tan Sing Yee, 2011; McDonnough and Matkins, 2010; Macy, Squires and Barton, 2009; Ong'ondo and Jwan, 2009; Ralph, Walker and Wimmer, 2009; Spirito-Dalgin, Bruch and Barber, 2010; Grudnoff and Williams, 2010; Astika, 2014; Pacios, 2013). Furthermore, some studies (Goh *et al.*, 2009; Lain *et al.*, 2014) point out that the practicum contributes considerably to the development of students' confidence vis-a-vis their specialist or professional skills.

The main problems during practicum refer to the organization of this activity: deficient (lack of) information provided to students on how certain tasks should be realized, lack of interest and involvement of tutors, the fact that students are not introduced to the organizations and familiarized with the organization (the induction process is missing, superficial or deficient), inappropriate treatment of students and lack of communication between employees and students, the absence of monitoring and a purely formal assessment of students (Pacios, 2013). Other issues identified in the literature range from reduced flexibility vis-a-vis the practicum schedule (students are often required to also attend regular/formal classes during their practicum stage), lack of adequate mentoring relationships, overwhelming, redundant and routine practicum tasks that are irrelevant for the specialization of students (Ralph, Walker and Wimmer, 2009) to the need for more communication and increased involvement from university staff (Nippak *et al.*, 2014).

Other problems refer to cultural, opinion and professional differences between tutors, professors and students; Astika (2014) notes that one of the hardest challenges of students during practicum is that, in certain situations, they must follow a particular pattern or thinking and acting which is required or suggested by the tutor of practice (reflecting his way of thinking, acting and doing) but which differs or contradicts the knowledge, way of thinking and even the organizational culture the student acquired during university courses. Narrowing the gap between the way of thinking and acting learned by students in classrooms and the way of thinking and acting required by tutors can only be achieved by implementing a mentoring relationship between the tutor and the student, a relationship that involves the discussion and analysis of both viewpoints.

Moreover, some authors (Leshem, 2012; Zanting, Verloop and Vermunt, 2001; Ligadu, 2012; Arshavskaya, 2016) argue that the existence of a mentoring relationship between the tutor and the student is a crucial factor in ensuring the success of such practices and, implicitly, in the professional development of students. One of the problems often signaled by students during practicum refers to the mentoring process, as some tutors are not able to establish a real mentoring relationship with students and to ensure the emotional and professional support necessary in the new environment, or to offer effective feedback to students (Akhtar, Majeed and Murtaza, 2013; Ferrer-Vinent and Sobel, 2011; Ralph, Walker and Wimmer, 2009).

### 3. Research methodology: instrument, data collection and sample

The data collection instrument (questionnaire) was designed by the authors and included a preamble and 14 other items (some of which had between 2 and 10 sub-items), formulated as open-ended and closed-ended questions. Table 2 briefly presents the questionnaire, focusing on the 14 items included and the answering possibilities offered to students (the introduction explained the aim of the study and assured all respondents of our complete confidentiality).

**Table 2:** Data collection instrument

Questionnaire item	Answering possibilities
I. Form / type of education	i. On site/daily ii. Distance learning a. Budgeted (scholarship) b. Tuition paying
II. Gender	1. Female 2. Male
III. Age (full years)	Open-ended
IV. Background (provenance)	i. Urban ii. Rural
V.a. Host organization during practicum V.b. Host bureau/department	Open-ended
VI. How satisfied are you, in general, with the practicum stage finalized?	
VII. How satisfied are you with the following aspects of the finalized practicum?	
VII.1. Material resources (office, desk, PC, etc.) at your disposal.	1. Totally dissatisfied
VII.2. How you were treated by public servants (in the office/institution) with whom you came in contact.	2. Dissatisfied
VII.3. How you were treated by the public official that oversaw and coordinated you during the practicum (the tutor).	3. Neither satisfied / nor dissatisfied
VII.4. The degree to which you have been involved in the activity of the institution.	4. Satisfied
VII.5. The relationship with the supervisor/professor of practicum from the faculty.	5. Totally satisfied
VII.6. The duration (length) of the practicum.	9. Do not known / no answer
VII.7. New knowledge gained during practicum.	
VII.8. Practical skills/abilities gained during practicum.	
VII.9. A better understanding of the functioning of PA.	
VIII. In your opinion, what are the main:	
VIII.a. Strengths of the practicum conducted?	Open-ended
VIII.b. Weaknesses of the practicum conducted?	

Questionnaire item	Answering possibilities
IX. What measures should be taken to improve practicum? IX.a. By host organizations IX.b. By the faculty department IX.c. By students	Open-ended
X. To what extent do you think that the activity performed during the practicum: X.1. Helps students acquire new knowledge? X.2. Helps students to practically apply the theoretical knowledge acquired in courses and seminars? X.3. Helps students to deepen/complete the theoretical knowledge acquired in courses and seminars? X.4. Helps students get used with the atmosphere and organizational culture (way of thinking) of public institutions? X.5. Helps students get into contact (communicate) with civil servants? X.6. Helps students get into contact (communicate) with citizens? X.7. Helps students to get in touch with the problems faced by governmental / public sector organizations? X.8. Helps students create a better image of the activity done by civil servants? X.9. Helps students create a better image of their future in PA? X.10. Helps students see how problems are solved in PA?	1. Not at all 2. A little / slightly 3. Neither / nor 4. A lot 5. Very much 6. I do not know / no answer
XI. To what extent are you satisfied by your activity during practicum?	1. Not at all
XII. To what extent are you satisfied by your personal involvement during practicum?	2. A little / slightly
XIII. To what extent do you think that participating in practicum helps build a career in PA?	3. Neither / nor
	4. A lot
XIV. To what extent do you think that the knowledge acquired from lectures and seminars is correlated with the practical aspects of PA?	5. Very much
	6. I do not know / no answer

**Source:** The authors

The questionnaire was applied to 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year BA (undergraduate) students in public administration from Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Department of Public Administration and Management. The data was collected in two stages (June and September 2014) after the students finalized the curriculum required practicum. The final sample consisted of 89 respondents, out of which: 51.7% were 1<sup>st</sup> year students and 48.3% were 2<sup>nd</sup> year students; 47.2% did not pay fees and 52.8% paid educational fees; 68.5% were on site/daily courses and 31.5% were in a form of distance learning; 80.9% were females; the average age was 22.15 years and 41.6% were from an urban environment (Table 3). Overall, the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample reflected those of students from PA programs (there are in general more women than male students, as in other social sciences educational fields).

The host organizations include both decentralized and deconcentrated public organizations: city/town halls, local and county councils, social security authorities, universities, governmental agencies, customs, local police, parliamentary offices and other public institutions (Table 3). However, although the curricula and requirements for practicum also accept NGOs as host institutions (students have full freedom to choose their host institution, as long as it is from the public sector or an NGO), none of the students opted for them.

**Table 3:** Main socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

Indicator	Results (frequency and valid percent)	
Year of study	1 <sup>st</sup> year: 46 (51.7%)	2 <sup>nd</sup> year: 43 (48.3%)
Form / type of education	i. On site/daily: 61 (68.5%) a. Budgeted (with scholarship): 42 (47.2%)	ii. Distance learning: 28 (31.5%) b. Tuition paying: 47 (52.8%)
Gender	Female: 72 (80.9%)	Male: 17 (19.1%)
Age (full years)	Average: 22.15	
Background (provenance)	Urban: 37 (41.6%)	Rural: 52 (58.6%)
Host organization during practicum	City (town) Hall: 70 (78.7%) County Council: 3 (3.4%) County pensions authority: 3 (3.4%) Babeş-Bolyai University: 3 (3.4%) Agency for payments and intervention in agriculture: 2 (2.2%) Local council: 2 (2.2%)	Other public institutions: 1 (1.1%) Parliamentary office: 1 (1.1%) Local police: 1 (1.1%) National health insurance authority: 1 (1.1%) Customs office: 1 (1.1%)

Source: The authors

## 4. Data analysis and discussion

### 4.1. Students' satisfaction regarding practicum and perceived benefits

In terms of overall student satisfaction regarding practicum (item VI of the questionnaire: 'How satisfied are you, in general, with the practicum stage finalized?'), the survey results hint to some potential worrisome developments as the general satisfaction of students regarding practicum is at a medium level (statistical average of 3.46 out of a maximum of 5). Although a percentage of almost 50% of students have a high degree of satisfaction and the percentage of those dissatisfied is relatively small (only 14.6% of respondents are totally dissatisfied or dissatisfied with the practicum) our opinion is that the overall trend is not a positive one. The fact that only about 50% of students are satisfied with practicum and a considerable number (37.08%) of respondents are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with these stages signals the existence of potential problems and deficiencies, at least from the perspective of students.

On the other hand, the data regarding the general level of satisfaction emphasizes that the practicum entails both advantages and disadvantages for students and in order to better understand the positive and negative factors that influence and explain the levels of students' satisfaction regarding practicum we probed the perception of students regarding multiple aspects of the practicum program (items VII.1 to VII.9 of the questionnaire). The nine dimensions/sub-items included in this battery range from material resources (office/desk/PC), to the treatment received by the students (from other public servants or the tutor), their involvement in the activity of the organization, the relationship with the professor of practicum, the length of the practicum and new knowledge/skills acquired during this experience (Table 4).

According to the means (Table 4), students were most satisfied with their relationship with the tutor (4.27), their relationship with other public servants/employ-

ees from the host organization (4.13) and the relationship with the university professor/supervisor coordinating the practicum (3.98). All three aspects seem to share a common thread, as they relate to inter-personal relations. On the other side, students were less satisfied with the practical skills/abilities gained during practicum (3.06), the degree to which they have been involved in the activity of the institution (3.21) and the new knowledge gained during practicum (3.36). The three elements regarding which students seem to be less satisfied also share a common thread, generally referring to the lack of new knowledge/skills or practical abilities (in other words, they did not perceived any professional improvement/development as a result of the practicum).

**Table 4:** Students' satisfaction levels regarding the main aspects of the practicum program

How satisfied are you with the following aspects of the finalized practicum?	N Valid	Mean	Std. Dev.	Skewness	Kurtosis
VII.8. Practical skills/abilities gained during practicum.	89	3.06	.934	.058	-.758
VII.4. The degree to which you have been involved in the activity of the institution.	89	3.21	.885	.067	-.914
VII.7. New knowledge gained during practicum.	89	3.36	.956	-.066	-.674
VII.1. Material resources (office, desk, PC, etc.) at your disposal.	89	3.39	1.029	-.090	-.942
VII.6. The duration (length) of the practicum.	89	3.47	.813	.352	-.402
VII.9. A better understanding of the functioning of PA.	89	3.61	.874	-.492	.063
VII.5. The relationship with the advisor/professor of practicum from the faculty.	89	3.98	1.022	-.868	.244
VII.2. How you were treated by public servants (in the office/ institution) with whom you came in contact.	89	4.13	.907	-.927	.602
VII.3. How you were treated by the public official that oversaw and coordinated you during the practicum (the tutor).	89	4.27	.863	-1.316	1.928

**Source:** The authors

In the case of the perceived benefits (utility) of practicum (Table 5; items X.1. to X.10 of the questionnaire), the highest means were obtained for what we might consider soft skills, namely that practicum: helps students get into contact (communicate) with civil servants (4.11) and it helps students get used with the atmosphere and organizational culture (way of thinking) of public institutions (4.01). The results on the other side of the spectrum reflect the findings obtained for the previous satisfaction analysis (presented in Table 4), as students do not believe that the practicum: helps them apply the theoretical knowledge acquired in courses and seminars (3.12) or to deepen/complete the theoretical knowledge acquired in courses and seminars (3.16), which might signal an overall decoupling between formal education (the curricula) and practice (employee requirements and expectation) (Table 5).

**Table 5:** The perceived utility of practicum

To what extent do you think that the activity performed during the practicum helps students:	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Skewness	Kurtosis
	Valid				
X.2. ... practically apply the theoretical knowledge acquired in courses and seminars?	89	3.12	1.176	-.031	-.928
X.3. ... deepen/complete the theoretical knowledge acquired in courses and seminars?	89	3.16	1.107	-.010	-.781
X.7. ... get in touch with the problems faced by governmental organizations?	89	3.44	1.107	-.277	-.823
X.10. ... see how problems are solved in PA?	89	3.53	1.129	-.386	-.804
X.9. ... create a better image of their future in PA?	89	3.57	1.117	-.638	-.256
X.8. ... create a better image of the activity done by civil servants?	89	3.65	1.012	-.661	.089
X.6. ... get into contact (communicate) with citizens?	89	3.67	1.175	-.753	-.200
X.1. ... acquire new knowledge?	89	3.72	.953	-.773	.368
X.4. ... get used with the atmosphere and organizational culture (way of thinking) of public institutions?	89	4.01	.846	-.597	-.152
X.5. ... get into contact (communicate) with civil servants?	89	4.11	.790	-.487	-.443

Source: The authors

#### 4.2. Strengths and weaknesses

Another point of interest for our research was to identify the strengths and weaknesses of practicum, as observed by the students which went through this experience. It should be noted that due to the high number of open-ended responses which had to be analyzed, in order to ensure an adequate processing and interpretation, we transformed and then included each opinion in predetermined closed classes (clusters), according to the main idea transmitted by our respondents. Unfortunately, there were some answers which could not be assigned to any of our clusters, usually offered by one or two respondents, thus we did not consider it necessary to create new classes as these individual opinions lacked representativeness. We managed to include more than 90% of all expressed opinions (regarding both the strengths and weaknesses of practicum) in 5 classes of responses for strengths (Table 6) and 6 classes for weaknesses (Table 7). The percentage (%) from the second column of Tables 6 and 7 refers to how many answers fall in that particular class or cluster out of the total number of valid expressed answers.

**Table 6:** The main strengths of practicum

Class/cluster/category of answers	%
The treatment (attention) received by the student from employees of the host organization and the tutor (friendly behavior, interest, inclusion in informal activities).	27%
The opportunity to contact/interact with the organizational culture and the empirical aspects (day to day activity) of host organizations (public institutions).	24.5%
The opportunity to communicate and interact with different civil servants (not just the tutor) from host organizations with different professional backgrounds and domains of activity.	21.5%
The opportunity to use in practice the knowledge obtained during courses and seminars.	16.5%
The relationship with the practicum professor/supervisor from the university.	10.5%

Source: The authors

The main strengths of the practicum (Table 6) can be connected with the factors regarding which students expressed higher levels of satisfaction. The most important strengths of the practicum identified by students include soft aspects (the treatment received from other employees of the host organization and interactions with various specializations, interactions with organizations and their culture and the relationship with the supervisor), while only one class connects practicum with the rest or the curricula (the opportunity to use in practice the theoretical knowledge obtained during courses and seminars). However, the overall view is that the practicum does not generally help students apply the theoretical knowledge acquired in courses and seminars (see also Table 5 where this sub-item obtained the lowest mean).

The most important weaknesses or shortcomings of practicum identified by students during their experience refer to the lack of mentoring relationships (between the student and the tutor), the fact they were involved in too many simple and repetitive tasks and activities that were not relevant for their education or professional development and the reluctance of host organizations to involve them in core activities or in solving different problems faced by employees (Table 7).

**Table 7:** The main weaknesses of practicum

<b>Class/cluster/category of answers</b>	<b>%</b>
Lack of (or deficient) mentoring relationships between students and tutors.	26%
Involving students in too many simple and repetitive tasks and activities that were not relevant for their education or professional development.	24%
Organizational reluctance to truly involve students in core activities or in solving different problems faced by employees in their activity.	22%
Disparity between the theoretical knowledge acquired during courses and seminars and the tasks / activities/skills used, required and expected by practitioners (employers).	16 %
The short length of the practicum.	7%
There was no initial socialization process (to accommodate students with the host organizations and the work environment).	5%

**Source:** The authors

The negative aspects identified might diminish the positive aspects (benefits) practicum provides to students; furthermore, the low levels of student satisfaction regarding certain aspects of practicum can be explained by taking into consideration these weaknesses. The mediocre levels of satisfaction relative to the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, as well as the fact that this process did not lead to a better understanding of the functioning of PA (Table 4 and 5) can be explained by these weaknesses. The lack of real mentoring relationships, doubled by limited student involvement in the main activities of the host organization have negative repercussions both on the benefits of practicum and on the levels of student satisfaction (which in turn might further demotivate them).

Furthermore, the disparity between what students learn in classrooms and what actually happens in public institutions (or in the profession) can also reduce the benefits of practicum, students' motivation as well as lead to a negative perception of

possible employers vis-a-vis the capabilities of educational institutions. The lack of dedicated activities to accommodate students with host institutions (and host institutions with students) often generates a failed start (and lack of trust between them), further hindering any positive intentions during practicum.

### 4.3. Factor (reduction) analysis

Another aim of this research was to test if the 10 potential benefits of practicum included in the questionnaire (sub-items X.1. to X.10) can be grouped and then reduced to a smaller number of latent dimensions. We analyzed the multidimensional structure of the benefits of practicum through a principal component analysis (factor reduction analysis). In general, a factor analysis entails a statistical modeling based on the dimensional reduction of observable variables (such as the 10 sub-items regarding the benefits of practicum) to a smaller set of unobserved (latent) dimensions or factors. It should be noted that, in some cases, a factor analysis can be used to develop explanatory theoretical models which aim to identify and determine a number of latent (unobservable) factors required to better explain and clearly understand the relationship between existing observed (measured) variables; the analysis can thus be conducted without having to start from a theoretical structure of predetermined latent factors.

The factor analysis conducted on the ten benefits of practicum (sub-items X.1. to X.10) reveals the existence of a multidimensional structure vis-a-vis the benefits of practicum, a structure composed from two large sets of benefits (latent benefit classes/factors). Initially, the Kaiser-Meyer Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity were used to examine the appropriateness of a factor analysis as these two procedures indicate if the data is suitable for structure detection (Table 8). The approximate Chi-square is 473.985 (with 45 degrees of freedom) and is significant at a 0.00 level of statistical significance. The KMO statistic of 0.864 is also large (greater than the minimum recommended threshold of 0.70), thus the factor analysis can be considered an appropriate technique for further analysis of the data in order to identify possible latent dimensions (Table 8).

**Table 8:** KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.864
	Approx. Chi-Square	473.985
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Df	45
	Sig.	.000

**Source:** The authors

In order to extract the latent components, we also need to verify if Eigenvalues (which refer to the variances of the factors) are greater than or at least equal to 1 (Table 9). The percentage of variance represents the percent of the total variance accounted by each factor and the cumulative percentage gives the cumulative percentage of

variance account by the present and the proceeding factors. Based on the Eigenvalues presented in Table 9 we extracted two factors (latent dimensions) which cumulatively explain (before and after the rotation) 63.861% of the total variance of the initial 10 variables: Factor 1 accounts for 36.143% of the variance and Factor 2 accounts for 27.71% of the variance (Table 9, last column, after the rotation). We used Varimax rotation with Kaiser Normalization (the Varimax rotation tries to maximize the variance of each of the factor).

**Table 9:** Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	5.378	53.782	53.782	5.378	53.782	53.782	3.614	36.143	36.143
2	1.008	10.079	63.861	1.008	10.079	63.861	2.772	27.718	63.861
3	.897	8.974	72.835						
4	.590	5.901	78.736						
5	.567	5.666	84.403						
6	.449	4.490	88.893						
7	.385	3.851	92.744						
8	.336	3.357	96.102						
9	.225	2.248	98.350						
10	.165	1.650	100.000						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

**Source:** The authors

Based on the Varimax Rotation with Kaiser Normalization, using Eigenvalues greater than (or at least equal to) 1, we have extracted 2 factors (latent dimensions). Each factor is composed of the variables that have a factor loading greater than 0.6 (we suppressed all variables that had factor loadings under this threshold) (Table 10). As such, 8 of the 10 initial observable variables (benefits of practicum for students) were reduced and then grouped into 2 factors (latent dimensions). The Rotated Component Matrix (Table 10) represents the rotated factor loadings (correlations between the observable variables – practicum benefits – and the extracted factors – latent dimensions).

The first identified factor includes five of the original variables (X.1. Helps students acquire new knowledge; X.2. Helps students to practically apply the theoretical knowledge acquired in courses and seminars; X.3. Helps students to deepen/complete the theoretical knowledge acquired in courses and seminars; X.8. Helps students create a better image of the activity done by civil servants; and X.9. Helps students create a better image of their future in PA). The second factor only includes three of the initial variables (X.5. Helps students get into contact (communicate) with civil servants; X.6. Helps students get into contact (communicate) with citizens and X.7. Helps stu-

**Table 10: Rotated Component Matrix<sup>a</sup>**

Observable variables – benefits of practicum	Component	
	1	2
X.1. Helps students acquire new knowledge	.706	
X.2. Helps students to practically apply the theoretical knowledge acquired in courses and seminars	.821	
X.3. Helps students to deepen/complete the theoretical knowledge acquired in courses and seminars	.825	
X.5. Helps students get into contact (communicate) with civil servants		.809
X.6. Helps students get into contact (communicate) with citizens		.863
X.7. Helps students to get in touch with the problems faced by governmental organizations		.613
X.8. Helps students create a better image of the activity done by civil servants	.676	
X.9. Helps students create a better image of their future in PA	.775	

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

a. Rotation converged in 3 iterations.

**Source:** The authors

dents to get in touch with the problems faced by governmental organizations). Two of our initial variables (namely, X.10. Helps students see how problems are solved in PA and X.4. Helps students get used with the atmosphere and organizational culture (way of thinking) of public institutions) were not loaded on any factor (as their factor loadings were below 0.55). The Factor Analysis has thus identified two core reduced factors (latent dimensions) regarding the benefits of practicum for students which can be categorized as:

- Factor 1 – Educational/professional benefits: related to educational skills and knowledge (new skills and knowledge acquired, the practical application of theoretical knowledge) and professional attributes (creating a better understanding of what professionals in their field do and their future in the domain); and
- Factor 2 – Networking benefits: related to their interactions with public institutions (practitioners and citizens, being in contact with the problems faced by PA).

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

Considering that only around 50% of students are satisfied with practicum and a considerable part of our respondents (37.08%) are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with their most recent practicum experience, it seems that at least from the perspective of students, considerable improvements are still possible in regard to these activities. The most important shortcomings of practicum identified by students during their experience refer to the lack of mentoring relationships between students and tutors, the fact they were involved in too many simple and repetitive tasks and activities (that were not considered relevant for their education or professional development) and the reluctance of host organizations to involve them in core activities or in solving different problems faced by the employees. The lack of real mentoring relationships between tutors and students, doubled by limited student involvement

**Table 11:** Possible measures to improve practicum

<b>What measures should be taken to improve practicum?</b>	
<b>By host organizations</b>	<b>By students</b>
More interest toward students, better explanations of tasks;	Should organize and distribute students to host organizations;
Should include students in more complex and diverse activities;	Should be willing to learn and get involved in all activities;
Should try to retain students (as interns or volunteers);	Should pay more attention to tutors and other employees;
Should create specialized practicum bureaus/offices;	Should be more patient and maintain realistic expectations;
Partnerships with universities;	Engage in activities more diligently and be more vocal;
Employees should be more willing to share their workload and be more open to students;	Treat practicum like a job;
Exceptional tutors should be motivated/recompensed;	Have a proactive/positive attitude and insist to be more involved in the activities of the organization;
Tutors should be able to allocate more time to students, to clarify tasks and procedures and offer more information/explanations;	Ask tutors/employees more explanations when necessary;
Activities should be planned in advance (for each student);	Students should inform themselves on the activity/profile of a host organization before the start of the practicum;
Creating workspaces for students (desks, PCs, printers, etc.);	Should actually do the practicum (use this opportunity);
Employees should be less suspicious/reticent;	Have better (and more) theoretical knowledge (to apply in practicum);
To offer some form or remuneration for (the best) students;	Could complete practicum with internships and by volunteering;
More transparency.	Refuse (when possible) tasks that are not suitable for them;
	Manifest their dissatisfaction.

**Source:** The authors

in the core activities of the host organization can have negative repercussions both on the benefits of practicum and on levels of student satisfaction (which in turn might further demotivate them). The absence of activities dedicated to accommodate students with host institutions (and host institutions with students) often generates a failed start (and lack of trust between them), further hindering any positive intentions during practicum.

An important issue, especially for practitioners (faculty members tasked with coordinating practicum as well as university decision-makers), consists in the measures that can be adopted in order to improve and develop the practicum. Based on the open answers received from respondents we propose the following three sets of recommendations which can be implemented by host organizations, educational institutions and even by students themselves.

Most of the aforementioned recommendations (especially those related to host organizations and university departments which organize practicum) can be implemented by creating and maintaining an institutionalized relationship (something akin to a strategic partnership) which would improve communication and trust between educational institutions and host organizations. Based on this partnership and better communication, academic institutions could also improve their curricula, reduce the gap between theoretical knowledge and practice (which will in turn improve the practicum experience) and manage to allocate students during professional practice to organizations that both need them (to reduce the workload) and can properly use this volunteer workforce. University decision makers should also take into consideration the fact that host organizations already face a plethora of problems that require their attention and resources (see, for example, Țiclău, Moldovan and Hințea, 2018; Bostan *et al.*, 2018; Moldovan, 2016) and design practice according to the needs of host organizations and not the other way around (always expecting host organizations to adapt to university needs). Some recommendations (especially which require the allocation of financial resources by host organizations or universities) are currently less feasible (as neither have the additional financial resources required), but a formalized partnership and better communication (which do not necessarily require additional resources) would go a long way in addressing the limits and shortcomings of practicum and increase its overall performance, further leading to better prepared and more employable graduates.

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