MOTIVATIONAL PROJECTS FOR STUDENTS AT TRANSILVANIA UNIVERSITY OF BRAȘOV, ROMANIA

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Abstract

Transilvania University of Brașov (UTBv) is a state higher educational establishment located in the middle part of Romania and, considering its educational offer, scientific research and number of students, represents one of Romania’s largest universities, being the most representative university in the central part of the country. In the last years, the UTBv management team have tried to highlight the creativity and the innovative spirit of the students, releasing different internal project competitions for them. Furthermore, for several times, they have tried to involve the partners from the economic community to cooperate in such directions. Thus, project competitions, such as: We Create a Smart Campus, My Faculty, Together for Our University, My Diploma Project, 10 Ideas from 20,000 Students and so on, have led to a real positive and motivational challenge among the students and, after their implementation, they have offered real solutions for improving things within the university. Besides these projects, different other events which, meanwhile, have become traditional, such us: Students Meet Companies or the summer school – Transilvania Summer Event, managed in cooperation with different industrial partners, have achieved a perfect and appropriate dialog frame between the students and the representatives of these companies and, moreover, have increased the chances for the students to obtain a job in the field of their professional interest.

Keywords: Student, motivation, campus, project, industry.

1 INTRODUCTION

Motivation is a frequently encountered term, usually associated with the expansion policies of most companies, holdings and firms, but also of developed educational systems, such as schools and universities, in the last case the concept being focused on the very learning process. It can be said that people, in general, do not get born competitive, they become competitive through education and training, motivation playing a particular role in the process of generating the spirit of competition in people. Broadly speaking, motivation at work represents a set of energetic forces whose origin can be traced to the nature of the individuals, but also beyond this, in order to initiate a certain type of behavior and to determine its shape, direction, intensity and duration. [1]

Motivation can be approached both intrinsically and extrinsically. The intrinsic side of things accounts for what determines people to act as a result of their own initiative. It is, in other words, what makes them satisfied with and proud of working for a certain project or for a particular company, or of studying at a prestigious institution, etc. The extrinsic motivation, or indirect determination, is generated by sources exterior to the subject or to the nature of his/her activities. It can be suggested or imposed by other persons or by favorable or unfavorable circumstances. [2]

Big companies commonly use motivation policies for their personnel and consider that motivated employees are more productive. Lately, staff motivation has become a more and more serious concern with the companies because they observed that a motivated employee works more efficiently, is more creative and does not leave the company whenever a first better salary offer arises. Motivation is placed among the most important aspects when it comes to professional life of any person, its absence bringing losses to both the employer and the employee.

Taking the example of the companies and of the business community in general, most of the times success is generated by supporting some organizational components, such as: the quality and the motivation of the staff, the involvement of the personnel in taking some decisions and the acceptance of a participative type of management, the strength of the bond between the employer and the employee and the development of a feeling of belonging to the organization, as well as the type of communication within the company, etc.

Thus, following in the footsteps of the companies, some universities have started to approach motivational techniques addressed to both the employees, especially dedicated to the teaching staff,
and, most of all, to the students, taking into account that, if an educational establishment wants to attract and to secure the most talented students’ loyalty, they have to make their motivation a priority.

When a group of people live and work together for a longer period of time in a company, they share a set of values and opinions about the company’s life and about what is good and adequate for the progress and success of that organization. At the level of a university, discussions can revolve around both the group of the (non)teaching staff employed and the majoritarian group of the students. Both groups can contribute to generating and developing new models, either thinking or behavioral, in accordance with the experience amassed within the university or, respectively, with its strategic interests and objectives.

In what the category of the students is concerned, the motivational elements refer, in most of the cases, to the learning process, more precisely to how to make the students become more involved in the didactic activities. The main research-based strategies for motivating the students in this way, according to Nilson, are: “Become a role model for student interest, get to know your students, use examples freely, use a variety of student-active teaching activities, set realistic performance goals, place appropriate emphasis on testing and grading, be free with praise and constructive in criticism, give students as much control over their own education as possible and so on.” [3] But when choosing between internal and external factors of motivation, it has been argued very much along the time that the intrinsic type of motivation should be relied on as it gives better results and brings more satisfaction in the long term. However, the “motivation angel”, the famous metaphor used by teachers for so long when dealing with inspiring their students, is built, according to Harmer [4] “on the solid base of the extrinsic motivation” which afterwards supports the other very important factors of the intrinsic motivation. The former would constitute the wings of the beautiful representation of the Angel of the North, the remarkable 20-metre-high statue in the north-east of England, outside the city of Gateshead, belonging to Antony Gormley, which has been taken by teachers as a symbolic icon when sharing with their own students the process of building motivation in them, as “students need to play their part too” [4] in this process. In other words, each type of motivation plays its very important role when constructing someone’s inspirational engine, and even if sometimes one can become predominant, being activated more, it can be argued that in the nowadays society a combination of the two can bring positive results, the idea that “intrinsic and extrinsic motivation do not combine additively but rather interact” [5] being successfully put forward by Calder and Staw. And the project competitions envisioned and designed by the management team of UTBv, based on students and their ideas, written and developed by students for their own university, implemented by students and addressed to the students as end beneficiaries of their own projects dwell exactly on the combination of internal and external incentives that triggers the most complex psychological and pragmatic approach to motivation.

Thus, why is it that, with some limits, a university could not be viewed as a company and its students, or part of them, as its temporary employees? Why could excellent students not be more involved in solving and developing some, for example, campus-related administrative objectives/or activities? Why could this involvement and contribution, at the same time, not be fueled by a series of internal project competitions of the university, with direct addressability to the student? These questions become even more valid if the insufficient number of the employed administrative staff of a state university in Romania is considered, as well as its underpaid level of wages. Thus, different variants can be found by means of which the internal students of the universities should be attracted to administrative activities.

Moreover, the mission of each university, i.e. that of generating and transferring knowledge towards society, presupposes tracing and finding its own alumni on the labor market in job positions favorable and compatible to the profile graduated. In this way, the relationship and the interaction that the university develops with the economic community, as well as the flexibility and the adaptability this one should manifest towards companies and their needs, should be of utmost importance. The stimulation of the relation student-university-companies in a reciprocally beneficial way, both at a didactic level and at a research level, contribute, from this perspective, to the motivation of the student in what learning is concerned, and at the same time, to raising the interest of the high school graduates in some study programs less searched for at the moment.

This paper presents a series of actions taken by the management team of Transilvania University of Brașov, Romania, in order to motivate the most valuable students, on the one hand, so that some campus-related problems should be solved, and, on the other hand, to develop the relationship with the economic community and to improve students’ chances of entering the labor market, by accessing the domains they have prepared for.
2 STRUCTURES INVOLVED AND COURSES OF ACTION

At UTBv, the responsibility regarding the proper development of the majority of the activities involving and concerning students, with the exception of the didactic activities, lies with the Vice-Rector’s Office for Students and Liaison with the Economic Community. The Vice-Rector in charge with these activities manages 4 sub-structures (figure 1), respectively The Office for Liaison with the Economic Community, The Centre for Counselling and Career Orientation, The Entrepreneurial Student Society and The Alumni Office. Moreover, still at this level, what is also managed is the relationship with the legally constituted student associations within the university.

With the help of these structures, the Vice-Rector for Students designs and develops a series of projects addressed to the students, projects which mainly involve two directions, i.e. the involvement of the students in solving certain campus-related problems, and the collaboration with the economic community.

Many times, Transilvania University of Brașov, has solved a series of administrative problems specific to the student campus, regarding maintenance, technical and economic solutions, etc. by hiring specialized companies and spending substantial domestic funds. Unfortunately, it was not all the times that the results met the expectations, the solutions implemented being frequently very little in accordance with the real needs and desires of the university. However, under the exact same circumstances, we noticed that an alternative solution could be found, and that resided in involving some groups of students, belonging to different faculties, in dealing with the matters. But what was still to be considered was finding some solutions towards motivating them.

Maslow showed that self-accomplishment (self-actualization) is the human need to wholly fulfill his potential that is his need of personal progress. However, when primary needs are reached, the energy for superior needs may be released, that for achieving self-accomplishment [6]. It has been noticed that there is no inherent conflict between the idea of self-accomplishment and the increase in the organization’s efficiency of performances. If people are given the opportunity, they willingly place their own goals among those of the organization.

The self-accomplishment model is funded on the premise that people desire to get involved in the decisions which affect their activity in a direct manner. Thus, staff’s involvement and motivation may be obtained only by allowing them to participate in the decision-making process. Consequently, we considered these reasons to be completely applicable to our students, so that they should be effectively involved in solving specific campus-related problems [7].

A group is somehow difficult to be defined. It could probably be said that a group is formed by people who have a common goal [8]. Work in a group can affect the way in which individuals behave. In the case of students, the need to belong to a group tends to lead to a certain type of conformity in what the collective goals, needs and expectations are concerned, a fact which can contribute, in time, to changing individual behaviors. The group can be seen as an entity operating at two levels: at the level of the task allotted – tackling the main activity of the group and at the level of the social processes – aiming at satisfying the people’s need for acceptance, recognition and belonging [8].

Our strategy, at Transilvania University of Brașov, is to develop student groups, mainly student teams, interested in solving some university campus-related problems. In what follows, there are presented only some aspects which have been and will still be considered for the initiation of some actions which aim at involving some groups or teams of students.

Figure 1. Schematic flow-chart of structures subordinated to the Vice-Rector for Students and Liaison with the Economic Community, at UTBv.
On the other hand, we have always targeted the interaction with the economic community. Brasov area is heavily industrialized and the interest of the investors to develop businesses becomes more and more prominent. Obviously enough, a main role is played here by the university, which is the main generating factor of qualified work force. That is why, the development of some projects addressing both the students and the economic community is extremely important. Furthermore, we concluded that a maximum of results can be obtained, the projects involving the relation with the economic community being also considered here, as long as solutions to motivate the students exist in real terms.

3 PROJECTS DEVELOPED AND IMPLEMENTED AND THEIR RESULTS

3.1 Campus-related projects

3.1.1 Developing student groups with an administrative role

Taking into account certain technical and maintenance problems which commonly occur within the campus of a university, problems formerly solved by UTBv by hiring paid specialized companies, a continuous preoccupation of ours was that of finding students willing to be part of specialized groups, by means of whose help to be able to solve some problems specific to the campus of UTBv. But what was the most significant element when we approached the idea of constituting the team was that of students’ motivation. For this, we relied on Maslow’s theory [6], which accounted for the different levels of human needs, and we started from emphasizing more on the inferior levels, namely the satisfaction of basic needs, such as food and shelter. But further on we passed to superior levels of needs and thus, the reasons which fueled our decision addressed the intrinsic motivation of the students, viewed as our team members already. At this stage, the very idea that a group’s member’s motivation resides in the joy of fruitfully fulfilling a task or in the sense of accomplishment provided by the engagement in a project and the achievement of efficacious results on their own represented the key to our successful attempt.

Thus, the solutions found to meet the basic needs resided in the fact that these students, members of the administrative groups, benefitted not only from free accommodation, in the case of their hostel hosting, and free meals at our university’s cafeteria, but also of a scholarships called: **Student – Campus Scholarship**, financed from domestic university funds and stipulated in the university’s internal scholarships regulations, thus offering them the possibility to be rewarded for their involvement, and thus, extrinsically motivated. Subsequently, the following main groups of students were created within Transilvania University of Brasov:

- **The IT Student Group**
  
  This group is formed of 7 students from the Electrical Engineering and Computer Science Faculty, supervised by the Head of the Information Technology Office, and has as its main mission the implementation of a series of maintenance activities for all IT devices belonging to the university, as well as the participation in the development of the Campus Wifi project within UTBv.

- **The Green Campus Student Group**
  
  This group, consisting of 6 students belonging to the Faculty of Silviculture and Forest Engineering, is expected not only to maintain the green spaces of UTBv’s Campus, but also to embellish them, offering solutions in this respect and also effectively contributing to landscaping.

- **The JobStud Group**
  
  This particular group is formed of 3 students with activities focused on maintaining the relationship with our partners from the economic community, aiming at promoting different events and activities organized by the companies, various collaboration projects initiated by the companies, the internships or work placements, or even vacant part-time or full-time jobs within the campus. The group is in direct contact with the structures subordinated to the Vice-Rector for Students and Liaison with the Economic Community and helps organizing different events initiated by this Vice-Rectorate.

- **The Colina Arena Group**
  
  The group consists of 3 students from the Faculty of Physical Education and Mountain Sports and has as a main target the maintenance of the football pitch Colina Arena, situated within the Colina Universitatii Complex, also participating in the planning of the sportive events on this pitch.
The Food and Beverage Group

One of the aspects also identified as problematic with the campus was related to the undermanned cafeterias, thus deriving the necessity to design internships for the undergraduates studying with the Food and Tourism Faculty in the two cafeterias of the university and to select from these students a permanent team of 9 persons to contribute to solving the specific problems in this field. The acronym of this team is F&B Student Team and its main characteristic is to get involved in and to considerably improve the kitchen and the cafeterias’ specific activities [7].

The Colina Parking Group

The raise in the number of personal cars around the area of the most important complex of the University, i.e. Colina Universitatii, presupposed the reorganization of the parking facilities in this zone. Consequently, a group of 4 students belonging to different technical universities was created to monitor the problems which may occur in this area, the problems ranging here from technical to administrative.

3.1.2 Project Competitions

Another way of appealing to students’ motivation, but this more internally oriented, was by way of generating competitions based on projects developed and implemented by the students themselves, sometimes under the supervision of their professor, some other times, not. This represented a modality through which not only that real problems of university life have been approached and solved, but also skills were put into practice on the part of the students, theory meeting practice when brainstorming, planning, organizing, drafting, writing, calculating, designing, foreseeing and implementing ideas, under the form of real activities, manifestations or programs. Thus, the active list of project competitions which are currently running within our university and which are subsidized from the domestic funds of the university itself are, as follows:

We Create a Smart Campus

This project competition has been released relatively recently with UTBv and has a main purpose UTBv campus development through the implementation of some projects resulted both from the suggestions of the students, but also from those of the university’s management team, in collaboration with the students. Practically, each year, a number of maximum 10 such projects are funded by UTBv, 5 based on projects or ideas exclusively derived from students and 5 on topics suggested by the university. Some of the projects under current development address issues such as the computer technologization of the students’ accommodation procedures, as well as The Mirror of the Hostels, The Intelligent Cafeteria, First Aid at UTBv, The Virtual Tour of the University, etc. The university supports this kind of projects allotting 22000 euros for each, out of which, if the project is successfully implemented, the students from the team, who are in a number of minimum 3, will receive a scholarship of approximately 6000 euros, in total.

My Faculty

The project competition called My Faculty is released annually and targets those groups of students who, under the supervision of a professor, through the suggested project, can contribute to the improvements of the image, activities, teaching methodology and research processes of their own faculties. The competition stipulates that the suggestions come from the faculties themselves and the final financing addresses a maximum of 12 projects in a quantum of maximum 2500 euro each.

Together for our University

Student associations legally constituted with UTBv can also put forward their own projects within the program called Together for our University. Thus, on an annual basis, within the limit of 5 projects, UTBv supports the organization of certain manifestations and/or events, as well as marketing campaigns coordinated by these student associations with impact over our entire university.

My Diploma Project

Each year, UTBv finances 15 BA and BSc projects belonging to students from different faculties, as a result of an internal project competition. The students of each faculty who are interested in this competition can defend their original ideas before the management of the university to obtain financing for their diplomas, in order to see their theoretical part of their projects put into practice.
3.2 Projects developed together with the economic community

3.2.1 Students Meet Companies

The main projects developed together with the economic community have targeted the interaction between the students and the representatives of the companies. In this way, one of the already traditional events having reached its 8th edition this year, is *Students Meet Companies* (unitbv.afco.ro). This event reunites graduates and postgraduates of all BA and BSc or MA and MSc programs, who all have the possibility to defend in front of interested company representatives their graduation projects or master dissertations. Nevertheless, undergraduates of all these programs are also invited and welcomed, in order for them to apprehend the necessary skills for their own future project writing and defense in front of the interested representatives of the industries, in the years to come until graduation. The projects are displayed under the format of A1 posters, being printed according to a specific template by the organizers. In this way, by means of this exhibition, we aimed at a dialogue between the student and the representatives of the economic community, a dialogue which can be further enlarged upon in a specially dedicated room for this purpose, in case the economic partner wishes to hear more details about a certain project from the authors themselves.

Each edition of the event entangles joint organization, the parties involved being, on the one side, the university, and on the other side, a main economic partner. But besides this one, a series of other partners support the event alongside the university, altogether financially contributing to the awarding ceremony of the most valuable projects presented.

The event annually reunites, at the beginning of May, around 300 students from the 18 faculties of the university, their papers being distributed in one of the 10 sections which cover all the study fields offered by UTBv. Thus, the 10 sections of this conference, wherein the participants' papers are framed, are the following: *Section I* – Mechanical Engineering, Technological Engineering, *Section II* - Materials Science and Engineering, Product Design, Environment Engineering, Renewable Energy Sources, Mechatronics; *Section III* – Electrical Engineering, Electronics and Automation, Telecommunication, Information technology, Computers, Robotics; *Section IV* – Silviculture and Forest Engineering, Wood Engineering, Civil Engineering; *Section V* - Mathematics and informatics, *Section VI* - Economic Sciences and Business Administration, Food and Tourism; *Section VII* - Psychology and Education Sciences, Sociology and Communication, Law; *Section VIII* - Letters, Music; *Section IX* – Medicine, Medical engineering, Sports; *Section X* – Special section for all Ph.D. Students.

The discussion generated upon a certain poster can lead, in some cases, either to further research on the part of the student within the premises of a certain company, or to a reorientation of the student towards more tangent topics interesting for a company, or even to the hiring of the student directly by the company interested. Regarding the students who get hired immediately, besides the specific features concerning their training in the specialized field, their success usually consists of elements of general background knowledge, as well, as the employers’ expectations are also connected to aspects such as a person's overall conduct, interest, receptivity and knowledge acquiring capacity, communication skills, adaptability and socializing skills, behavior within a team, and way of addressing. At the same time, employers look for graduates with logical thinking, who can turn into good organizers, able to approach activities from a cost-efficiency point of view, i.e. reached goal at a low coat, who know to plan these activities, meet deadlines and are in a constant quest for self-improvement [7].

The awarding ceremony at AFCO is performed in a festive atmosphere, in the evening, the designated jury being formed of professors of the university, students and companies' representatives. The prizes are divided according to the official sections, in a proportionate number to that of the papers. On the occasion of each edition, alongside the regular prizes, a special AFCO grand prize is awarded, as well, and the companies can also separately select and reward some papers, in their fields of interest. Each AFCO edition ends, every year, with an exceptional evening show whose guest star has always been a famous music personality, representative for the young generation, in Romania.

Along the time, according to the statistics, over 25% of the participants in AFCO have been hired due to their active and real involvement in this event, and almost 12% have pursued a further study career with UTBv.

3.2.2 Transilvania Summer Event

At the beginning of each summer holiday, more precisely at the start of July, for 4 days, the Vice-Rectorate for Students and Liaison with the Economic Community organizes, together with different economic partners, the summer school called *Transilvania Summer Event* (TSE). The event reunites
about 45 students from various faculties of Transilvania University of Brasov and approaches, each year, a certain topic. The summer school takes place outside Brasov, in a very special environment, and combines activities on the topic tackled with relaxation and fun activities. What is specific to this school is the fact the lecturers who teach or suggest, deliver and implement the teaching activities here come from companies, institutions, etc depending on the topic approached. What we have noticed along the time was the fact that, in particular contexts, a certain topic, either more general, or more specific, or technical, approached within the university by the syllabus of a certain subject matter is viewed in a slightly different manner than within companies. That is why, from time to time, the immersion of some specialists on the part of the employers in the student population of our university is more that beneficial for our students, as it either clarifies certain problems, or brings school and practice to a common denominator. Hence the existence of this summer school.

4 CONCLUSIONS

All of the above-mentioned projects, at a macro-management level, aim at addressing one of the most challenging concerns in today’s academic teaching world, that of motivation. There are different instances according to which students can be divided in terms of initial motivation, when they get enrolled with the study programs of a faculty: students either completely lack motivation altogether and join university life out of external reasons or bring in a lot of motivational input which they tend to lose on the way, out of different types of factors. In both cases, the mission of the teachers is to deal with motivation, either under the form of generating it, or under the form of maintaining and boosting it. In either case, the task is difficult and complex, as it requires a lot of creativity, modern and attractive means of teaching and assessing, as well as a great deal of psychological knowledge in order to activate the most appropriate type of motivation, making use of the most appealing instruments.

Thus, as stated before, the target of the Vice-Rectorate for Students and Liaison with the Economic Community is to offer solutions at a three-fold level: first, students must be attracted by all means and motivated to participate in stimulating activities both for their personal development and for their professional profile; second, the university can be helped from within, making use of its own specialized human resource, which consists not only in the teaching staff and administrative personnel, but also in the huge body of students, who can contribute a lot to the growth of its welfare; and third, the relationship with the economic community must be enhanced, the dialogue between the university and the representatives of the companies, as well as the direct meeting of the students with these ones having become a must in today’s competitive world, this communication being a two-way mutually beneficial process.

To this end, the solutions offered by the management team of UTBv to the students are focused on motivation, in an attempt to cultivate student awareness regarding the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits that an active participation in university life can bring to them. Consequently, the students are encouraged to be from initiators of projects, members in them, to managers of their own ventures, controllers of their own activity, as well as primary beneficiaries of both their well-managed resources and of their projects’ outcomes, in terms of facilities or services. Therefore, externally, after being catered for their basic needs, they are recompensated with material rewards, and internally, they come to understand, appreciate and value the results of their own work, after having applied themselves to motivating tasks, which, at all levels, fulfil their personal ambitions, feelings and drives, as well as their professional endeavors, even before they start their real careers.

REFERENCES


