

ERD 2016: Education, Reflection, Development, Fourth Edition

## The Relationship between Career Counselling, Professional Practice and Desirable Labour Market Integration

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### Abstract

<http://dx.doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2016.12.75>

In the current context of psychological, social, economic and spiritual interdependences that define the human personality, arises the need of effective collaboration and cooperation between educational factors and human resource management in companies and institutions for a common approach to the issue of career orientation and management. This type of collaboration and cooperation facilitates professional recruitment and selection as well as the students' socio-professional integration in terms of genuine economic and social efficiency.

Career preparation and career management do not start at work, but in educational institutions as a result of the activation and efficientization of specific educational valences. The development and implementation of programs of vocational guidance, with the help of counselors, has a strong relevance in the planning and designing of the career of future workers in the labor market. Thus, career orientation, career education and career counseling should play a key role in the educational policy and become essential components of the goals of education and the formative process.

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**Keywords:** Educational management; work experience; career education; career guidance; career counseling; career management.

### 1. Introduction

Society is in an accelerated process of evolution, largely due to the technical and scientific progress whose promoter, but also beneficiary, is man. In this context, the improvement of the adaptability of humans to new socio-economic realities gains a special importance as does the need for these changes

to be designed and managed for the purposes of maximizing the creative potential of the individual given that this is a real factor of progress.

This is the reason why higher education, through an appropriate educational management of informative and educational activities, should conduct an integration of basic knowledge in the field of the students' specialization, occupational psychology and counselling, aimed at structuring skills and attitudes necessary for correct orientation in career choices. The focus is increasingly more on personal development and assimilating strategies that determine optimal vocational integration. Work experience gained during the specialty studies will grant students the opportunity to know the professional outcomes of different training routes, to project their future professional role by fulfilling various social positions, to integrate career planning into the broader planning of life, to acquire specific knowledge of professional occupations as an attitude of opportunity exploration, using various sources of information. Last but not least, professional practice allows the exercise of optimal interpersonal relations capabilities as well as habits and skills relevant to the career, skills of planning learning, as well as those of promoting their own image in order to achieve professional success.

## **2. Problem statement**

The requirements for various professions and jobs are constantly evolving in order to increase the complexity of work tasks, volume and characteristics of knowledge, skills and abilities needed, while also increasing the need for independent decision making, more and more initiative, motivation and flexibility in the context of highlighting accomplished professional roles.

Thus, university curricula should contain elements of career training, focusing on two main directions:

- Career education - representing both information and educational intervention for the development of skills and abilities necessary for young people to develop their own career;
- Career counseling - essentially a psychological intervention, in order to develop a person's abilities such as solving various problems related to careers (indecision, anxiety over career, academic or professional dissatisfaction, compiling a career plan etc.).

These activities aim to develop and equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary for effective career management, in a flexible and largely unpredictable labor market, in a state of continuous external (number of various professions on the labor market and the changing relationship between them) and internal (changes in requirements of various professions) change of configuration).

Any option for a professional career involves issues such as: probing and decision making, professional reorientation, improvement, returning to the professional training system. Modern society requires lifelong learning, and it is therefore necessary to adapt to a continuous professional orientation (lifelong guidance) directly associated with lifelong learning. In this context, career education and career counseling will have a special role that can facilitate an effective vocational guidance, properly adapted to the individual's potential.

As Savickas (1999) stated, career guidance activities should aim to educate the youth towards independence and flexibility in five competency areas: knowledge of self; occupational information;

decision making; planning; problem solving. These skills enable them to exercise control over their own development and ensure flexibility in career management.

Herr and Cramer (after Oweini & Abdo, 1999) define career guidance as a systematic program which, by combining theoretical knowledge with practical experience, intends to facilitate personal development and career management. They point out that the term "career guidance" is an umbrella term that includes a wide range of activities including career counseling. School guidance precedes professional training, both being components of career orientation. School guidance focuses especially on those entering the new phases of initial school training; career guidance is addressed mainly to the students in the final stages of school at all levels, but also adults seeking a new job or wanting to change their current one, etc. Career counseling takes into account both aspects.

Meta-analyzes performed on the content of career guidance interventions (including those made by Spokane & Oliver, 1983 and Holland, Magoon & Spokane, 1981) identified a number of common elements:

1. exposure to occupational information;
2. the clarification of vocational aspirations;
3. providing integrative cognitive structures, aimed at organizing information about the own persona, occupations and the relationship between them;
4. social support or reinforcement in the exploration of their own persona or their educational and professional paths.

All these aspects were taken into account in a complex program of student formation at the Faculty of Geography, University Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca through the project "POSDRU / 161 / 2.1 / G / 137 753" - "GeoRoute - advice and formation of practical skills in order to integrate geography students in the labor market", part of the intervention domain called "the transition from school to work", aimed at correlating lifelong learning with the labor market.

Thus, career counseling interventions, along with additional professional practice experiences provided in the project were monitored in terms of efficiency regarding the clarification of the school route and the professional future of the students involved.

### **3. Research questions**

Through this study we sought to answer the following questions:

- Is it possible to contribute effectively to the students' professional skills training if, alongside specialized training, vocational counseling activities are added as well?
- If vocational counseling activities are initiated early, from the first year of study, in correspondence with carrying out professional training programs, will these help clarify the students' professional interests and identify their skillset? Could this prevent schooling "just for the sake of a diploma", considering the lack of interest and skills required in the field of the chosen specialization?
- Would the continuous complementarity between theoretical, practical and vocational counseling, within academic programs, ensure optimal employability of graduates in the labor market?

#### **4. Purpose of the study**

The study initially involved setting a research goal and premises, so as to follow a logical approach to obtaining relevant results.

The purpose of the study conducted was the discovery of the extent to which the activities of vocational counseling and internships in specialized institutions can contribute to the formation of the students' professional skills according to their interests and the specialized training provided by academics. These elements of training should contribute to developing a realistic career plan, adjusted to the profile of each student.

The premises of the study were the following:

- in higher education there is a low rate of professional practice so that students fail to efficiently form professional skills necessary for proper social integration;
- student participation in extra practice programs, provided through various ways (including European projects) can provide additional professional experience and a variety of learning situations;
- providing an appropriate vocational guidance, conducted in a timely manner, increases the likelihood that young people will benefit from counseling and guidance that will help them achieve successes in school and optimally insert themselves into the labor market, along with a consistent training in terms of theory and practice.

Following these steps, the study aimed to identify the skills available to students at the end of the project, as a result of the students' knowledge of their professional interests and their usage in the field of work. At the same time, the results can be the starting point for observations regarding the increasing employability of students that benefit from both professional counseling and more practical experience.

#### **5. Research methods**

As a basic research method we used the survey-based questionnaire, with the items aiming to highlight the readiness of the students in regards to performing specific tasks for a manager in the tourism domain and the development of key skills required for this occupation, reflected by:

- the capacity to coordinate and supervise the work of subordinates;
- the efficient management of the organization's funds;
- developing competitive tourism offers, after discussing with clients and other tourism operators;
- developing good collaboration relationships with representatives of travel agencies and other tourism operators;
- maintaining good relations with local bodies and organizations in order to function at maximum efficiency and profitability;
- the ability to apply general rules to specific problems;
- negotiation skills;
- the ability to work in a team;
- the ability to make decisions;
- the ability to coordinate the activity taking into account the needs of others;

- the ability to analyze information and evaluate alternatives in order to choose the best solutions;
- the ability to work effectively with information in order to formulate general rules or conclusions;
- the ability to communicate.

I need to mention that this self-assessment tool was administered following activities of vocational counseling (that also presented elements of informational counseling) and a specialized internship in tourism establishments.

Our research targeted a group of students from the Faculty of Geography, Tourism Geography specialization from the Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, composed of 74 students, 37 of which are in the first year of study and 37 in the second year of study. The age of the subjects is between 19-26 years. As far as sex differences go, the study was attended by 23 boys (11 1st year students and 14 2nd year students) and 51 girls (26 1st year students and 23 2nd year students). Of note is the fact that in general, the number of girls from this specialization is higher compared to the boys. Of the 74 students, 23 have indicated that they have previous professional experience in the specialization's field of work, although without ever being in the position of manager.

The study conducted was based on the results of a first of professional counseling (the results of which are not presented in this paper), in which we used JVIS, Jackson Vocational Interest Survey, developed by Douglas N. Jackson, used in the US and Canada and validated in Romania by D & D Consultants Grup SRL. This questionnaire is one of the most effective tools for measuring the vocational interests of students and adults, consisting of 289 items, structured as pairs of statements that describe various occupational activities, indicating the individual's preferences for certain styles of work grouped into 11 major categories of interest. However, JVIS does not perform an analysis of the level of development of the skills and competences necessary for the areas of interest and as such, students needed a series of other information, essential for the vocational decision-making process, such as: identifying personal skills, competences and personality traits that facilitate or hinder the proposed professional path etc. The results of the counseling activities were correlated with the students' theoretical and practical knowledge, with the students participating in professional internships in various tourism companies, based on their own choices.

## 6. Findings

For a more accurate illustration of the research conducted, I shall present a comparison between the responses of students in Years I and II in Table 1, regarding the managerial competencies obtained during the process of counseling and professional practice:

**Table 1.** Comparative presentation of data regarding the managerial competences of students in years I and II

Specific managerial competences in the tourism industry	Year I (nr. and %)			Year II (nr. and %)		
	Below Average	Average	Good and very good	Below Average	Average	Good and very good
The ability to coordinate and supervise the work of subordinates	3 (8,10%)	14(37,83%)	20(54,05%)	2(5,40%)	13(35,13%)	21(56,75%)
The ability to manage the institution's financial resources	8(21,62%)	13(35,13%)	16(43,24%)	8(21,62%)	8(21,62%)	21(56,75%)

The ability to develop a competitive offer on the tourism market	4(10,81%)	5(13,51%)	28(75,67%)	3(8,10%)	6(16,21%)	28(75,67%)
The ability to collaborate with other tourism agencies	4(10,81%)	9(24,32%)	24(64,86%)	3(8,10%)	3(8,10%)	31(83,78%)
The ability to work with local organizations in order to function under optimal conditions	9(24,32%)	9(24,32%)	19(51,35%)	4(10,81%)	11(29,72%)	21(56,75%)
The ability to apply general rules to specific problems	3(8,10%)	15(40,54%)	19(51,35%)	4(10,81%)	11(29,72%)	22(59,45%)
The ability to negotiate	6(16,21%)	11(29,72%)	20(54,05%)	3(8,10%)	8(21,62%)	26(70,27%)
The ability to work in a team	0 (0%)	3(8,10%)	34(91,89%)	3(8,10%)	7(18,91%)	32(86,48%)
The ability to make decisions	3(8,10%)	4(10,81%)	30(81,08%)	2(5,40%)	7(18,91%)	28(75,67%)
The ability to coordinate activities taking into account the needs of others	2(5,40%)	5(13,51%)	29(78,37%)	2(5,40%)	7(18,91%)	29(78,37%)
The ability to analyze information and evaluate alternatives in order to choose the best solutions;	6(16,21%)	8(21,62%)	23(62,16%)	3(8,10%)	12(32,43%)	23(62,16%)
The ability to work efficiently with information in order to formulate general rules or conclusions	5(13,51%)	10(27,02%)	21(56,75%)	1(2,70%)	9(24,32%)	27(72,97%)
The ability to communicate	4(10,81%)	7(18,91%)	27(72,97%)	1(2,70%)	7(18,91%)	29(78,37%)

The questionnaire applied to the batch of students demonstrated the following: the most strongly highlighted skill of both first year and second year students is the ability to work in a team, rated as good and very good by 91.89% of first year students and 86.48% of second year students. An explanation for this may be the students' training in the classroom and seminar, in which teamwork is present to a high extent. Next, the ability to collaborate with other tourism agencies is rated as good or very good by 83.78% of second year students, but only mentioned by 24.32% of first year students, which may bring into question the contribution of a more consistent academic training that leads to the formation of specific professional skills. Another competency assessed as largely present is the ability to make decisions, mentioned by 81.08% of first year students and 75.67% of second year students. Meanwhile, 78.37% of students (both first and second year) point out that they have good and very good abilities of coordinating activities while taking into account the needs of others, as well as the ability to communicate (72.97% of first year students and 78.37% of second year students), which is a very important aspect in the activity of a tourism agency manager.

In terms of underrepresented skills, first place is the ability to manage the institution's financial resources, mentioned by 21.62% of students, both years I and II. This is easily explained, because neither theoretical nor practical training focuses on the managerial financial component and students of the Geography of Tourism specialization are generally inclined toward humanities and not exact sciences, therefore, a richer work experience is required to train this ability. Another below average competence is the ability to work with local organizations in order to function under optimal conditions, stated by 10.81% of second year students and 24.32% of first year students, fact that can also be explained by the lack of information and experience regarding the ability to establish professional relationships with other institutions and local organizations that can support the operations

of a tourism agency, aspect that only indirectly mentioned in the academic curriculum. First year students also mentioned two other skills that they believe are developed below average - the ability to negotiate and the ability to analyze information and evaluate alternatives in order to choose the best solution, with 16.21% of students reinforcing these ideas. This could be because of a lower theoretical and practical preparation level, lower than that of their second year colleagues, although some of them don't have very good scores either.

An interesting aspect that can be observed from the analysis of the students' responses is that most students are headed upward in terms of the level of training of specific professional skills, with a greater number of students at good and very good levels, which designates a positive development in the formation of targeted skills.

## 7. Conclusions

When the formation process of professional competences is properly prepared and conducted, focusing on a balanced theoretical and practical approach, students can benefit from an optimal transition from education to labor market integration. The quality of the results of the training experienced by students with the help of career counseling activities and professional internships must be assessed by considering their personal needs and the tangible impact in professional and personal life (Savickas, 2005). Thus, supporting career counseling activities brings several benefits: knowledge of self, of vocational interests, of seeking support in situations of professional indecision, access to different possible future jobs, relative to the study specialization, the acquisition of communication skills, control of emotions, networking, setting clear objectives etc. It is necessary, however, for these activities to be well integrated into the structure of training programs, by developing an integrative theory of transition from school to work (Worthington and Juntunen, 1997), in which they can be involved as advisers, teachers, students, representatives of economic institutions etc. (Cf. Hansen, 1999).

Values, attitudes and motivations influence their own choices / decisions regarding their careers. For this reason, students should be given the opportunity to engage in professional activities which can clarify career options, can enable them to know themselves in terms of their own skills that are required to work a job that corresponds to their desire of achievement on the work market, to have mentors who can offer support and guidance in correspondence with their vocational interests.

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