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THE FORMATIVE IMPACT OF THE CAREER PLAN ON THE
STUDENTS' PROFESSIONAL PATH

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Abstract

Acquiring theoretical knowledge and practical skills regarding career choice and management are essential objectives for young people who are in a position to express their career choices at various stages of their formation. In this respect, the development of skills to design effective career plans should begin in school, when the person has the ability to project their future professional role by integrating career in the broader aspect of life planning. Naturally, the development of realistic and effective career plans mainly relates to developing skills of planning learning, healthy habits and skills relevant to the career, but also to promote an objective self-image in order to achieve professional success. Through the programs that the school implements at various levels, students will have the opportunity to know the professional outcomes of different training routes, to acquire specific knowledge of professional occupations, to form a positive attitude in relation to the action of exploring educational and career opportunities, by using various sources of information. In this context, self-knowledge of personal skills and characteristics that might define a person's career path should be consistent with the values, attitudes and motivations that underlie their own choices and decisions regarding their career. For this reason, 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.

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1. Introduction

Career choice is a complex process, but sometimes treated lightly by young people who must develop educational and career options. Career decisions involve functions of thinking (such as problem solving and cognitive operations with information about occupations, employment, professional opportunities), affective components (determined by the pleasure of practicing a certain profession, the satisfaction to perform tasks appropriate for personal interests), motivational components (reflecting a person's self-activation to achieve career goals by relating to their needs, intentions, desires, trends, aspirations), interactions and reciprocal influences between personality traits and individual behavioural patterns (skill range, relationship capabilities, adapting to new situations, assuming certain roles in their personal and professional life etc.) (Jigău, 2006).

All these aspects require actionable steps that can be optimally supported and guided through career counselling activities. They will contribute to lifelong learning through cognitive restructuring in the subjects, by providing information and resources for them to be able to make decisions regarding career paths, highlighting realistic and functional attitudes and behaviours (Jigău, 2001).

The purpose of career guidance activities implies a dynamic connection between different areas of life in training: self-knowledge, educational and professional training, the development of skills and competences required in the professional field of interest, forming skills of personal and professional life planning, assuming specific roles for the particularities of different life events, assessment and regular reassessment of the personal formation route (Good et al., 1994).

Career orientation assumes an approach of maximum relevance in all education systems, regardless of country, representing a core of promoted educational policies, in relation to the specific formative finalities.

2. Problem Statement

In the purpose of career guidance, we propose various tests and examinations, selected according to the objectives pursued. A classification of the types of participant examinations in the career counselling process, guided by the goals pursued in this process, has been developed by Herr and Cramer:

- examinations with a discriminative finality, referring to the relationship between a person's qualities and performances and the values, interests or preferences for certain occupations. This involves determining the degree of compatibility with various professional areas in which those occupations are practiced.

- examinations with a predictive finality, allowing (according to the results of discriminative examinations) the anticipation of the level of development of an individual's potential, as well as the performance that could be achieved in terms of education, professional training and occupational mobility.

- examinations with a monitoring finality, relative to regularly collected sets of information regarding the level achieved in the subjects' educational and vocational preparation as well as the degree of maturity reached in order to make decisions in terms of career development, in conjunction with personal variables of a cognitive, axiological and aptitudinal nature.

- examinations with an evaluative finality on the interventions carried out in the direction of career counselling. These evaluations are aimed at measuring the level achieved in realizing the objectives of career counselling and guidance at an individual, institutional and social level, in terms of the results of various programs of information, educational and career counselling, career guidance, as well as carrying out internships in the subjects' occupational fields of interest etc. (Herr & Cramer, 1996).

All these types of examination allow the structuring of primary elements in each individual's career management.

In this formative and evaluative/self-evaluative context, in relation to the career, an elaboration of action plans is increasingly required, based on knowledge/self-knowledge, the awareness of personal qualities, skills, values and interests, the reflection on professional opportunities, setting career goals and planning approaches of personal and vocational development and training as career plans. Students (or any person in the process of career guidance), must acquire the skills to develop their own career plans, for both a short or medium term, as well as for a longer-term (usually up to five years), focusing on transversal values and skills (such as communication, critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, organization and planning, teamwork, lifelong learning etc.), which can be useful even under the conditions of the changing requirements of the labor market, given that jobs and career profiles are ever-changing (Hansen & Hansen, 2007).

Career plans are mainly focused on four steps: a. Self-knowledge (skills, weaknesses, vocational interests, personal values, occupational preferences etc.); b. information on professions, labor market orientation, the educational and professional level required by certain preferred occupations, skills necessary for practicing those occupations etc.); c. Decision-making (establishing optimal career choices in correspondence with personal characteristics and interests, analyzing the advantages and disadvantages for each option, the relationship between what the job can offer and personal desires/ideals, agreeing to establish a hierarchy of professions etc.); d. determining the steps required to achieve career goals, both in terms of education as well as practical training, in relation to the matters previously set out (Lent, 2013).

Results of a career plan will consist of developing a clear picture of the personal approaches one must achieve, step by step, for the exploration and capitalization of present and future options relative to educational and professional experiences desired or required by their favorite occupation. This information may also help clarify the present situation of a person, where in terms of satisfaction with their educational path and professional choice, allowing restructuring and reorientation if the person is not satisfied with the choices already made, or if they realize that their personal profile is not suitable for the previously chosen career path.

3. Research Questions

The questions which started the investigative approach were formulated as such:

1. Will providing vocational counseling programs, in different stages of the students' training, providing information on career choices (including activities of exploring educational and professional opportunities, through participation in personal or professional training courses, volunteering in areas of interest, job fairs etc.), increase the likelihood that young people complete their academic training with essential elements of career orientation, contributing to a successful insertion in the labor market?

2. Does making the correct connections between personality characteristics, self-image, information about occupations/specific occupational requirements and vocational interests contribute to decision making in choosing different career paths corresponding to the students' aspirations regarding their socio-professional integration?

3. To what extent does the students' ability to develop realistic career plans, connected to their own psychological and vocational profile, contribute to establishing an optimal professional path that combines professional skills, occupational interests and specialty training provided by academic courses?

4. Purpose of the Study

Closely related to the research questions mentioned above, the purpose of the study was for students to practice career planning and design in line with their vocational interests. This goal has involved the development of activities based on:

- knowledge of personal skills and characteristics;
- identifying the values, attitudes, motivations underlying personal choices/decisions regarding the career;
- investigating the factors influencing the decision regarding career, the possibilities to control them, the connection between personal qualities and orientation towards a particular profession;
- planning learning in order to achieve professional success;
- building the capacity to prepare a realistic career plan in relation to personal characteristics, aspirations and the specifics of the job desired;
- establishing the relevance of developing career plans in routing/rerouting the professional path and establishing alternatives in career decision-making, potential career paths, appropriate work roles and statuses.

5. Research Methods

Our research involved a group of 74 students from the Faculty of Geography, "Tourism Geography" specialization at the Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, of which 37 were in the first year of study and 37 in the second year of study. Of these, 23 are boys (11 in the first year and 14 in the second year) and 51 are girls (26 in the first year and 23 in the second year). The age of the subjects is between 19 and 26 years.

The counseling program conducted in order to determine the students' career path had the following components (the activities in paragraphs 1 and 2 were not points of analysis in this research):

1. The debut activity in vocational counseling: administering the Jackson Vocational Interest Survey (JVIS) developed by Douglas N. Jackson (2000), and validated in Romania by D & D Consultants Grup SRL. The questionnaire indicates the individual's preferences for certain styles of work, grouped into 11 major categories of interest, but does not accomplish an identification/analysis of the level of development of skills and competences required for the areas of interest, imposing other counseling activities necessary for the vocational decision-making process.

2. Individual or group vocational counseling activities, as well as carrying out internships appropriate both for the students' specialization as well as their vocational interests and practical skills, aimed at:

a) the analysis of the JVIS results and clarifying discussions;

b) transmitting additional information regarding the professions associated with the students' specialization and vocational interests;

c) initiating specific activities for career development (Curriculum Vitae development, searching for job information, personal or professional training, participation in voluntary activities, initiating discussions with people working in the students' profession of interest etc.);

d) evaluating the preparedness of students and their competences in carrying out professional activities specific to the chosen area of specialization.

3. Development of a career plan, with the following subcomponents:

a) establishing a hierarchy of three professions of interest;

b) a comparative analysis of the student's vocational profile and the three professions of interest, from the following perspectives:

- a personality characteristics - work tasks specific to the three professions;

- a skills / personal skills - skills / abilities required by the chosen professions;

- an underdeveloped skills - their relevance to the chosen professions;

- personal values - professional values specific to the three professions;

- a personal lifestyle - professional lifestyle specific to the three occupations;

- current skill level - level requested by the profession.

c) re-ranking the three professions of interest following the comparative analysis;

d) formulating career goals and short, medium and long term objectives by establishing strategies, deadlines, opportunities and difficulties anticipated;

e) evaluating existing career alternatives.

4. Establishing correlations between the career plan and the students' current vocational path in order to identify a possible need of professional reorientation.

Our research focused on monitoring the formative impact of career counseling interventions, particularly the development of a career plan, along with additional professional practice experiences, in order to establish the students' career path.

These aspects were considered in the context of a complex training program for students from the Faculty of Geography, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca by POSDRU/161/2.1/G/137 753, "GeoRoute - counseling and formation of practical skills in order to integrate geography students in the labor market ", part of the intervention component called " The transition from school to work ", aimed at correlating lifelong learning and the labor market.

6. Findings

The first step preceding the actual development of a career plan consisted in a comparative analysis of personality characteristics with the features and requests of the jobs mainly targeted by the students.

Table 01. Analysis of the correspondence between personal characteristics and the professional demands of desired careers

Items corresponding to personal analysis and professional demands	1st year (no. and %)		2nd year (no. and %)	
	Correspondent	Not correspondent	Correspondent	Not correspondent
Personality characteristics - work tasks required by the job	29 (78.37%)	8 (21.62%)	30 (81.08%)	7 (18.91%)
Personal abilities/skills - abilities/skills required by the job	21(56.75%)	16 (43.24%)	22 (59.45%)	15 (40.54%)
Deficient skills - their relevance in relation to the job	10 (27.02%)	27 (72.97%)	7 (18.91%)	30 (81.08%)
Personal values - professional values	16 (43.24%)	21 (56.75%)	19 (51.35%)	18 (48.64%)
Personal lifestyle - professional lifestyle	18 (48.64%)	19 (51.35%)	23 (62.16%)	14 (37.83%)
Current qualifications - qualifications requested by the job	6 (16.21%)	31 (83.78%)	14 (37.83%)	23 (62.16%)
Initial prioritization of career choices - reprioritization (after analyzing the above relationships)	18 (48.64%)	19 (51.35%)	26 (70.27%)	11 (29.72%)

Analysis of the data in Table 01 shows the fact that there is a positive correlation between personality characteristics and work tasks required by the students' preferred jobs (for 78.37% of first year students and 81.08% of 2nd year students). In a lesser degree, however, personal skills are among the competencies required by the desired professions, in the case of 56.75% of first year students and 59.45% of 2nd year students. From the perspective of the relevance of poor personal skills for the job, there appears to be a lower correlation between the two (which is a good thing), in the case of 27.02% of first year students and 18.91% of second year students. Regarding the correlation between personal and professional values for the desired jobs, most first year students expressed a lack of correlation (56.75%), while a slightly lower percentage of the second year students had the same problem (48.64%). This can be explained by the fact that students have not yet clarified their personal values that guide their lives, but also by the fact that does they do not completely know the guiding principles underlying the various professional activities. The situation is almost similar in the case of answers concerning the personal lifestyle - professional lifestyle correspondence, where 51.35% of first year students do not recognize the compatibility of the two aspects, same as 37.83% of second year students. The analysis of the present level of training/qualification and the skill levels requested by the job shows that the majority of students (83.78% first year students and 62.16% second year students) believe that there is a great distance between personal knowledge and skills and those required in the profession desired, aspect that can be explained by the fact that the formation stage of these students is still at the beginning. The students were requested to carry out an initial hierarchy of their professional options (by listing three occupations desired), then, after analyzing the relationships listed above, they were requested to rank them again, depending on compatibility. As such, the first year students' answers differed greatly from those of

second year students, where 51.35% of first year students changed the original hierarchy and a proportion of 29.72% of the second year students showed the same disparity. The explanation could be that second year students are more mature, with more professional experience, getting to know themselves better and shape their career path more objectively.

In the counseling sequence proposing the elaboration of a career plan, we registered the following results, illustrated in Table 02:

Table 02. Analysis of the elements presented in the career plan

Elements of career plan development	1st year (no. and %)		2nd year (no. and %)	
	Accomplished	Not accomplished	Accomplished	Not accomplished
Indication of career purpose	29(78.37%)	8(21.62%)	32(86.48%)	5(13.51%)
Identification of short-term objectives	28(75.67%)	9(24.32%)	29(78.37%)	8(21.62%)
Identification of medium-term objectives	21(56.75%)	16(43.24%)	27(72.97%)	10(27.02%)
Identification of long-term goals	16(43.24%)	21(56.75%)	18(48.64%)	19(51.35%)
Establishing a strategy to achieve the objectives	22(59.45%)	15(40.54%)	25(67.56%)	12(32.43%)
Recognizing opportunities	17(45.94%)	20(54.05%)	19(51.35%)	18(48.64%)
Anticipating difficulties	20(54.05%)	17(45.94%)	24(64.86%)	13(35.13%)
Identifying career alternatives	13(35.13%)	24(64.86%)	22(59.45%)	15(40.54%)

Most students were able to formulate their career goal, at a rate of 78.37% (first year) and 86.48% (second year). In identifying short, medium and long term career goals, there has been an increased difficulty as students had to formulate more remote objectives, which shows that they do not yet have the skills for long term orientation towards activities and efforts aimed at career development, but can be helped to succeed by means of career counseling activities. Setting the strategy for achieving their goals was more difficult to accomplish, but most students have identified key issues that can lead them towards success (59.45% for first year students and 67.56% second year students). The recognition of opportunities in achieving career goals appears to present some difficulty, with quite significant percentages of students that do not know how to identify them (54.05% first year students and 48.64% second year students). Anticipating difficulties in achieving the career goal records slightly increased percentages (54.05% first year students and 64.86% second year students), but it reflects the need for students to better know what can be easy or difficult in their chosen professional route. Regarding career alternatives, students showed a lack of ease in identifying them, especially for first year students (64.86%), but also in the case of 40.54% of second year students. This demonstrates the fact that the professional path of each student is more oriented towards a certain direction, and if there are no recorded successes in reaching objectives, reorientation can become difficult in the absence of support from the school and especially from a counselor.

The assembly of counseling activities carried out within the project "GeoRoute - GeoRoute - counseling and formation of practical skills in order to integrate geography students in the labor market", illustrated the fact that there are students who require professional reorientation because there is a large

discrepancy between vocational interests, their competences and the profile of the occupations for which they are preparing in the field of Geography. Basically, these results emphasize the need to consider the students' need for career counseling to begin as early as their formation. For the same reasons, the extension of the process of career counseling for students was found to be necessary during all the time spent for academic preparation and professional training through practical activities.

7. Conclusion

Involving students in counselling activities that may clarify their career options as well as exercising the development of career plans, can highlight vocational interests, skills and competences, an forming a capacity to design and plot a personal professional route, in relation to their desire of achievement on the labour market, by practicing an activity corresponding with their vocational profile. Self-knowledge, specialized training and the students' initial practical experience provide the possibility of career planning and to the extent that these are complemented by activities of career counselling and possibly mentoring, clarify the image of roles and statuses that must be met in different jobs and facilitates the decision-making process regarding possible professional paths.

The decision making process in terms of career choice is complex, requiring taking into consideration the entire context of a person's life, referring to the activities, roles and responsibilities fulfilled not only in a progressional plan, family expectations or financial limitations. Thus, we agree with the view of authors K.M. Perrone, L.K. Webb și R.H. Blalock, who argue that the role of career counsellors is to help subjects identify and clarify their values, skills, interests, motivations and priorities underlying their career options (Perrone, Webb & Blalock, 2005). This aspect should be taken into account even more, as Romanian students know many limitations in career choice, due to the difficult access to certain levels or types of educational institutions, insufficient financial resources to assist with training, family responsibilities etc. For this reason, the role of career counsellors is to help subjects identify and clarify their personal values, skills, interests, motivations and priorities underlying their career options (Perrone, Webb & Blalock, 2005). At the same time, the mission of counsellors is to facilitate the subjects' shaping of their career identity, the extent to which they demonstrate clarity regarding their future interests and aspirations, their value systems, their potential to achieve proposed objectives in the career plan, establishing appropriate actionable steps to achieve these goals etc. From this perspective, supporting young people in the process of professional training to develop their own career plans objectively, can be an effective approach in choosing and developing an optimal career path. Regularly exploring the professional environment, as well as conducting research on the labour market and their own career will allow people to always remain active and prepared to make choices appropriate to their vocational interests (Hansen & Hansen, 2007). These will be supported in the activities of lifelong learning, enabling them to develop their ability to cope with change and to adapt to professional roles that are in a continuous dynamic and to maintain a permanent balance between analytical thinking and creative thinking, in order to optimally and originally solve problems that they're faced with in achieving objectives.

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