PROESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND CAREER COUNSELLING SERVICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: Choosing a career and going through all the necessary steps of training a young specialist represents a complex process that has a major impact in defining its professional future. Research suggest that this process not associated with external support often implies wrong choices of career, hesitations, abandonment, procrastination, poor professional performance, state of continuous discontent across the life span, including depression. Aiming to adapt career counseling services dedicated to students, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Psychology and Social Sciences of Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad has conducted in 2016 an ascertaining survey on 112 respondents, students in engineering, economics, informatics, design, educational sciences and psychology. The aim of this study was to identify students' motivation to participate in career counseling activities and their perceptions of the usefulness of proposed activities. The main conclusion we have drown after analyzing results and discussing them with our students is that they just do not look for counsellors or trainers that give them the answer to questions they may never encounter, they need mentors, coaches and tools that help them find the answers by themselves, at the time they need them.

Key words: career counselling, higher education, youth employment.

Career counselling

Choosing a career and going through all the necessary steps of training a young specialist represents a complex process that has a major impact in defining its professional future. Research suggest that this process not associated with external support often implies wrong choices of career, hesitations, abandonment, procrastination, poor professional performance, state of continuous discontent across the life span, including depression.

Choosing a career and preparing for it is not an irreversible process that cannot be changed, but the right career choice and that mechanisms to help develop all the skills necessary for the transition to the labor market may be the guarantee of a good investment of time and other resources in the education of a person. In this respect, the existence of counseling and career guidance services seems more than necessary for both individual benefits and society benefits as well. It is recognized that counseling and career guidance can help develop maximum vocational potential of youth in accordance with their aspirations and abilities, to reduce school dropout, the transition of young people between different levels of education, increased participation in education, development of social inclusion and equity in education or increasing employability by facilitating access to the labor market.

The two major paradigms for career interventions in the 21st century were vocational guidance and career education. While vocational guidance is focused on a psychology of fixed characteristics and types that can be objectified by tests and then matched to occupations that offer stable long tenure, career education is seen as a predictable trajectory of development tasks that can be empowered by assisting individuals in maturing attitudes and skills that prepare them to unfold careers in different organizations (Dughi, 2015). Matching the vocational guidance and career preparation through education may not adequately address the design life of the individuals' needs in the information society. The Chaos Theory of Careers (Pryor and Bright; 2011) provides an overview of the common models in career choice and guidance and presents the limitations of these theories in today's complex, ever changing and unpredictable world. The Chaos Theory of Careers (CTC) helps reduce clients' fears of failing by exploring the reasons behind their fears and increases clients' comfort with uncertainties by helping them reframe mistakes and failures as a necessary part of reality and an opportunity for learning (Balas Timar *et. al.,* 2015).

It is recognized that counselling and career guidance can contribute to the maximum development of the professional potential of people in accordance with their aspirations and abilities, reducing academic dropout, an optimal transition of young people between different educational levels, increasing participation in education, developing social inclusion and equity in education or increasing employability by facilitating direct access (Balas Timar *et. al.,* 2015).

Career counseling challenges in Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad

Aiming to adapt career counseling services dedicated to students, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Psychology and Social Sciences of Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad has conducted in 2016 an ascertaining survey on 112 respondents, students in engineering, economics, informatics, design, educational sciences and psychology.

The aim of this study was to identify students' motivation to participate in career counseling activities and their perceptions of the usefulness of proposed activities. Out of the total number of student respondents, 8,8% are first year students, 64,9% are second year students, 21,9% are third year students and 2,6% are forth year students. Regarding respondent gender, 36,8% are males and 54,4% are females. We have taken into account 5 age distributions, as following: 72,8% are aged between 19 and 24 years, 9,6% are aged between 25 and 29 years, 6,1% are aged between 30 and 34 years, 4,4% are aged between 35 and 39 years and 3,5% are aged between 40 and 50 years. As regarding respondents' previous professional experience, 64,9% have less than 5 years, 8,8% between 6 and 10 years and 5,3% more than 10 years.

Asked about their willingness to participation in future career counselling activities, youth agreed in 55,3%, disagreed in 14% and 30,7% are being undecided. This perspective is a balanced approach, perfectly reflecting the practical reality in dealing with offering career counselling services inside higher educational institutions. Regarding the fact that these services are standardized and freely offered by internal experts, as long as students conceptualize these activities as useful, practical and valuable, there is a high stake in making them as individualized as possible in order to match their wants and needs.

Offering career counseling services in higher educational institutions represents the best context, mainly because youth career counselling refers to discover self-knowing and continuously update professional opportunities in both individual and collective settings. Group career counselling proves to be more effective inside HEIs due to the faster rate of professional opportunities exchange, learning from others shared experiences and freely discussing the good and the bad aspects of each professional dilemma encountered along the way.

Our questionnaire was focused mainly of identifying the current body of knowledge our students have related to specific employment competencies like: writing a CV (m=2,91), writing an intention letter, designing a career plan, interview, online job application, and using internet in finding a job. As depicted in Table 1 and Figure 1, students appreciate that their most developed employment ability refers to writing a CV and their least developed employment ability is designing a career plan (m=2,27). As we have discussed, designing a career plan represents a complex and dynamic employment competency, involving professional knowledge, self-assessment skills, labor market updates and most

importantly a flexible decision-making system, as it is no surprise that this competency has fallen on the least position, being rated by students as underdeveloped so far.

Table 1 - Item 3. Appreciate on a scale from 1 to 4 your knowledge and abilities referring to the following aspects related to career counselling:

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
Item3.1 – Writing a CV	114	1	4	2,91	,659
Item3.2 – Writing an intention letter	114	1	4	2,48	,865
Item3.3 – Designing a career plan	114	1	4	2,27	,924
Item3.4 – Interview	114	1	4	2,76	,855
Item3.5 – Online job application	112	1	4	2,53	,977
Item3.6 – Using internet in finding a job	114	1	4	2,85	,933
Valid N (listwise)	**112**				

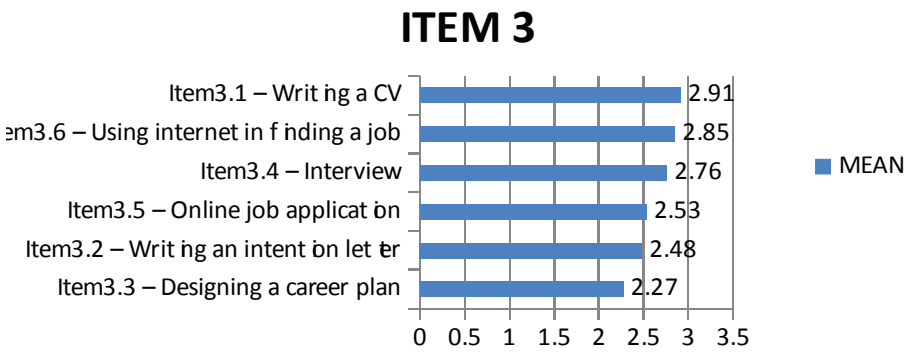

Figure 1 - Knowledge and abilities referring to the following aspects related to career counselling

Identifying the perceived utility of the following activities: meetings with employers, Job fairs, interests and abilities testing, information on writing a CV, career plan and intention letter, job interview simulation, Internships, information regarding job opportunities, organizational volunteering specific to a career development, is depicted in Table 2 and Figure 2.

Table 2 – Item 4. Appreciate on a scale from 1 to 4 the utility of the following activities in your career development:

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
Item4.1 – Meetings with employers	113	1	4	3,09	,902
Item4.2 – Job fairs	114	1	4	2,91	,946
Item4.3 – Interests and abilities testing	113	1	4	3,04	,812
Item4.4 – Information on writing a CV, career plan and intention letter	113	1	4	3,15	,899
Item4.5 – Job interview simulation	113	1	4	2,95	,971
Item4.6 – Internships	113	1	4	3,29	,831
Item4.7 – Information regarding job opportunities	114	1	4	3,32	,744
Item4.8 – Organizational volunteering	114	1	4	3,17	,940
Valid N (listwise)	109				

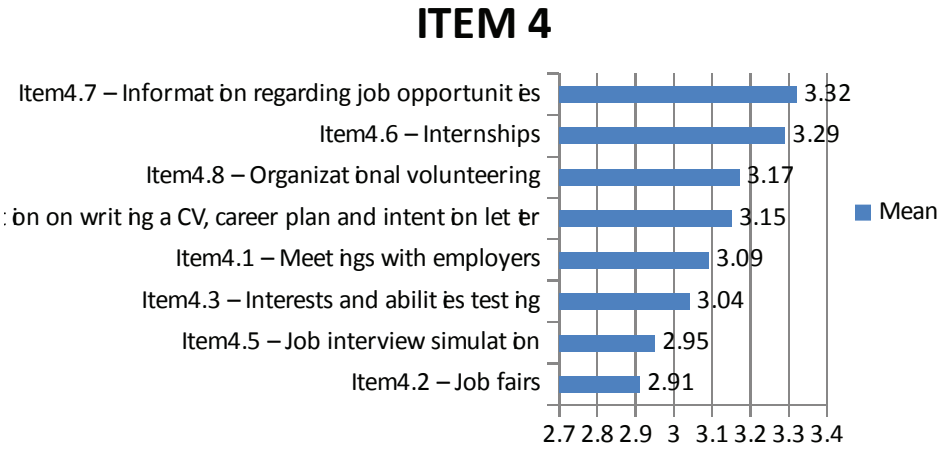

Figure 2 - The utility of the 6 activities in students' career development

Students consider receiving information regarding job opportunities as the most useful activity that they would like to attend to in the process of career development. On the second position we can find willingness to participate in organized Internships, and on the third position students rate organizational volunteering. These activities actively involve students into learning the practical aspects of their chosen profession leaving them the opportunity to decide by themselves if they are suited or not for that specific job. On the last position we can find participation in job simulations and job fairs, activities that students do not perceive as meaningful, mainly due to the fact that want to be directly involved in finding opportunities and actual information about vacancies.

After we have seen the general opinion, we were interested in finding any significant differences between female and male students regarding the usefulness of participating in meeting with employers (Item 4.1), results being depicted in Table 3.

Table 3 – Statistical differences between female and male students regarding the usefulness of meeting with employers

Group Statistics

	Gen	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Item 4.1	1 - masculine	41	3,27	,807	,126
	2 - feminine	62	2,89	,960	,122

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff.	Lower	Upper
Item4.1	Equal variances assumed	1,310	,255	2,098	101	,038	,381	,182	,021	,742
	Equal variances not assumed			2,174	95,21	,032	,381	,175	,033	,729

As we can see, after applying the t test, for testing the significant difference between female and male students means, we have obtained a t coefficient of t = 2,098, significant at a $p < 0,05$. Male students (m=3,27) consider meetings with employers more useful than female students (m=2,89). Related to these results, we consider male students more willing to participate in direct discussions than female students.

Next, we were interested in finding any significant differences between age groups regarding the usefulness of receiving information regarding job opportunities (Item 4.7), results being depicted in Table 4. After applying the Anova test, for testing the significant difference between the 5 age groups categories, we have obtained a F coefficient of F = 2,708, significant at a $p < 0,34$. The age category of students that are the most interested in receiving job related information is above 40 (m=3,75), which represents an almost paradoxical result, as we have expected that the younger the students are, the more likely they would evaluate as useful this kind of information.

Table 4 – Statistical differences between students age groups regarding the usefulness of receiving information about job opportunities

Descriptives

Item 4.7	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Min.	Max.
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
1 – 19-24 years	83	3,33	,683	,075	3,18	3,47	1	4
2 – 25-29 years	11	3,64	,505	,152	3,30	3,98	3	4
3 – 30-34 years	7	2,71	1,254	,474	1,55	3,87	1	4
4 – 35-39 years	5	2,80	1,095	,490	1,44	4,16	1	4
5 – 40-50 years	4	3,75	,500	,250	2,95	4,55	3	4
Total	110	3,31	,751	,072	3,17	3,45	1	4

ANOVA

Item 4.7	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	5,750	4	1,438	2,708	,034
Within Groups	55,741	105	,531		
Total	61,491	109			

Then, we were interested in finding any significant differences between categories of previous professional experience regarding the usefulness of receiving information about job opportunities (Item 4.7), results being depicted in Table 5. After applying the Anova test, for testing the significant difference between the 3 categories of previous professional experience, we have obtained a F coefficient of F = 3,992, significant at a $p < 0,22$. The previous professional experience category of students that are the most interested in receiving job related information is between 6 and 10 years (m=3,70) followed by bellow 3 years (m=3,32) and on the last position over 10 years (m=2,67). Thus the middle experience segment is the most likely to appreciate as useful receiving information about job offerings. We might interpret this as a more passive job searching behavior coming from this segment of previous professional experience, the less experimented and the experts having a more active behavior in searching for job

opportunities, not settling for just receiving information, but individually searching for jobs that match their professional profile.

Table 5 – Statistical differences between categories of previous professional experience regarding the usefulness of receiving information about job opportunities

Descriptives

Item 4.7	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Min.	Max.
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
1 – below 5 years	74	3,32	,664	,077	3,17	3,48	1	4
2 – between 6 and 10 years	10	3,70	,483	,153	3,35	4,05	3	4
3 – over 10 years	6	2,67	1,366	,558	1,23	4,10	1	4
Total	90	3,32	,732	,077	3,17	3,48	1	4

ANOVA

Item 4.7	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4,006	2	2,003	3,992	,022
Within Groups	43,650	87	,502		
Total	47,656	89			

Then, we were interested in finding any significant differences between *1st, 2nd,3rd and 4th* year students regarding the usefulness of participating in job interview (Item 3.4), results being depicted in Table 6. After applying the Anova test, for testing the significant difference between the 4 categories of students, we have obtained a F coefficient of F = 4,216, significant at a p < 0,007. Results show that last year students are the most interested in participating in job interviews (m=3,33), then the 3rd year students (m=3,16), followed by 2nd year students (m=2,68) and lastly the 1st year students (m=2,20). We could say that last year students are more interested in participating in job interview then the first year

students, which represents a normal progression, regarding the fact that last year students are more focused on finding a job.

Table 6 – Statistical differences between 1st, 2nd,3rd and 4th year students regarding the usefulness of participating in job interviews

Descriptives

		N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Min.	Max.
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Item 3.4	**1**	10	2,20	1,033	,327	1,46	2,94	1	4
	2	74	2,68	,813	,094	2,49	2,86	1	4
	3	25	3,16	,746	,149	2,85	3,47	2	4
	4	3	3,33	1,155	,667	,46	6,20	2	4
	Total	112	2,76	,862	,081	2,60	2,92	1	4

ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Item3.4 – Interview	Between Groups	8,648	3	2,883	4,216	,007
	Within Groups	73,843	108	,684		
	Total	82,491	111			

Conclusions and discussion

In order to succeed in their careers, youth must develop a myriad of skills. The development of career management skills should begin in early childhood and continue throughout adolescence, youth and none of the less adulthood, becoming a lifelong learning process.

Career orientation should also become a continuous process (lifelong guidance) to accompany lifelong learning. This approach is more than necessary in today's career management, much more common than a few decades ago, as phenomena as professional reorientation, back to training system, unemployment reoccur with a higher frequency.

Regarding the specific results we have come upon when questioning our students regarding the perceived usefulness of career opportunities information and services, and their own perceived employment skills:

1. Students appreciate that their most developed employment ability refers to writing a CV and their least developed employment ability is designing a career plan (m=2,27). Designing a career plan represents a complex and dynamic employment competency, involving professional knowledge, self-assessment skills, labor market updates and most importantly a flexible decision-making system, as it is no surprise that this competency has fallen on the least position, being rated by students as underdeveloped so far.

2. Students consider receiving information regarding job opportunities as the most useful activity that they would like to attend to in the process of career development, then willingness to participate in organized Internships, and organizational volunteering, and on the last position we can find participation in job simulations and job fairs, activities that students do not perceive as meaningful, mainly due to the fact that want to be directly involved in finding opportunities and actual information about vacancies.

3. Male students (m=3,27) consider meetings with employers more useful than female students (m=2,89).

4. The age category of students that are the most interested in receiving job related information is above 40 (m=3,75), which represents an almost paradoxical result, as we have expected that the younger the students are, the more likely they would evaluate as useful this kind of information.

5. The previous professional experience category of students that are the most interested in receiving job related information is between 6 and 10 years (m=3,70) followed by bellow 3 years (m=3,32) and on the last position over 10 years (m=2,67). Thus the middle experience segment is the most likely to appreciate as useful receiving information about job offerings.

6. The last year students are the most interested in participating in job interviews (m=3,33), then the 3rd year students (m=3,16), followed by 2nd year students (m=2,68) and lastly the 1st year students (m=2,20).

The main conclusion we have drown after analyzing results and discussing them with our students is that they just do not look for counsellors or trainers that give them the answer to questions they may never encounter, they need mentors, coaches and tools that help them find the answers by themselves, at the time they need them.

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