



THE IMPACT OF EUROPEAN UNION FUNDED CAREER GUIDANCE AND CAREER COUNSELING PROGRAMS ON VOCATIONAL DECISION-MAKING CAPACITY AMONG STUDENTS

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Abstract

Nowadays, it is important for students to acquire academic skills, interpersonal relationship skills, and to engage themselves in lifelong learning if they want to become successful employees. This study aims to investigate the impact of career counseling and career guidance programs on the development of students' vocational decision-making process within the Faculty of Geography (N=108) and the Faculty of Sciences, Politics, Administration and Communication (N=72). Empirically, both programs which offered counseling in conducting activities, focused on approaching the cognitive processing of information (PCI, Peterson et al., 1996). As a result of calculating the t test for pair samples, i.e. the magnitude of the impact, the results demonstrated that both career guidance and career counseling programs had a strong impact on the vocational decision-making ability of the participants included in the study.

Keywords: students; career indecision; career development; vocational decision-making capacity; career and vocational guidance

Introduction

Adolescence is a critical moment in career development because at this time young people are put in specific decision-making situations regarding their educational and/or professional future. Within this framework, the ability to make informed, realistic decisions about their career is closely linked to two key parameters, namely the level of career adaptability and that of vocational identity

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(Savickas, 1985, 1997), which indicate an association of the two constructs, based on analyses of crossed trajectories (Negru-Subțirică, Pop, & Crocetti, 2015). Also, Negru-Subțirică, Pop, and Crocetti (2015) concluded in a longitudinal study that both constructs are dynamic and interdependent dimensions in the development of adolescent career.

Being a basic component in the vocational development of young people and implicitly in facilitating the transition from school to work environment, career adaptability includes within its framework both the training and the resources needed to solve the career challenges outlined from the perspective of four skills: concern, control, curiosity and trust (Negru-Subțirică, Pop, & Crocetti, 2015).

In turn, the development of vocational identity extends over a longer period of time (Skoricov & Vondracek, 2011), fact also supported by Karaš et al. (2014) in the case of Romanian adolescents. According to the model proposed by Porfeli et al. (2011), it is comprised of three dimensions: engagement, exploration and reconsideration of career commitment. The data provided by Negru-Subțirică, Pop, and Crocetti (2015) indicate that career adaptability is a good predictor regarding the adolescents' exploration and commitment. Also, both commitment and its reconsideration are predictors of the capacity to adapt in time to career opportunities, namely vocational flexibility is related to confidence in career decision-making and curiosity, a prerequisite for developing a lasting career (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006) in an extremely dynamic economic context. But to reach career maturity, adolescents need to be supported in making informed career decisions to successfully deal with some career development tasks (Savickas, 1999). Therefore, both personal and professional exploration, together with career planning, are basic components in the development of vocational behavior. However, young people often neglect the specific aspects of shaping the vocational profile. Thus, in a study of our own, we identified a low level of vocational maturity among adolescents, passive involvement in career decision-making, and limited exploratory action, with most of the young people being at the stage of self-knowledge and exploration of their interests, strengths and limits, taking uninformed career decisions regarding the professional field for which they opt (Crișan, Pavelea, & Ghimbuluț, 2015). Also, the lack of motivation regarding the exploration of career opportunities and implicitly of career decisions is a result more and more pronounced at the level of scientific literature (Boutin et al., 2009; Billett, 2009; Geurts & Meijers, 2009; Plane, 2009;

Crişan, Pavelea, & Ghimbuluţ, 2015), which determines the decision making of some rather random choices and, implicitly, the increase of dropout rate (Kuijpers, Meijers, & Gundy, 2011) or staff turnover.

Wall, Covell, and Macintyre (1999) are of the opinion that support for career development is extremely important for young people, and that parents, teachers and friends play a crucial role in the process of exploration and career planning. Rogers et al. (2008) found a direct relationship between the support from parents, teachers and friends and the process of exploration and career planning; while other researchers have found indirect relationships between different support groups and vocational behaviors (Lent, Brown, Schmidt et al., 2003; Lent, Brown, Nota et al., 2003). According to Rogers and Peter (2011), work experience plays an extremely important role in planning young people's careers. Thus, students exposed to real work experience develop career planning skills and effective development strategies, having the opportunity to engage in a constructive dialogue with the mentor / teacher on various career and labour market issues.

From a scientific literature point of view, career guidance and counseling services are not perceived as effective in many countries (Jayasinghe, 2001; Vidal et al., 2003; Watts, 2006; Adejmolola & Olufunmilayo, 2009; Maree, 2011; Gernetzky, 2012; Modiba, 2012), despite the fact that successful models such as those in Finland, Britain or the USA are being reported (Chireshe, 2012). In these conditions, adolescents have numerous limitations regarding their vocational profile (identifying interests, skills, competencies of their value system, personal expectations, etc.), leading to erroneous career decisions with no compatibility between the individual's vocational profile and the field towards which he/she orientates himself/herself.

Kuijpers, Meijers, and Gundy (2011) are of the opinion that career guidance activities carried out within the educational system should be based on a permanent dialogue with the student on concrete experiences, while emphasizing a critical reflection on what has been analyzed. The same authors believe that without such an approach, the methods and tools used for guidance tend to lose a lot of efficiency, with teenagers acquiring low level career skills. Moreover, there are voices which claim that traditional career guidance and counseling activities have become outdated in the current socio-economic context (Hughes & Karp, 2004; Richard, 2005). Within this framework, Kuijpers, Meijers, and Gundy (2011) recommend that career guidance activities

ought not to be focused on providing accurate information about their own person or the labour market, but on activities where young people are taught how and where to seek information, how to reflect on them and how to conceptualize them so that they make conscious, informed and argued choices about their own career, to be able to reflect on their own ambitions and personal motivations and to undertake actions and initiatives appropriate to their own career development (Geurts, 2003; Kuijpers & Meijers, 2009; Mittendorff, den Brok, & Beijgaard, 2011). Thus, it is recommended to focus all vocational guidance and counseling on five distinct career skills: reflection on motivational competences, labour market exploration, career orientation and networking (Kuijpers, Meijers, & Gundy, 2011).

Students' perceptions of their expectations regarding career guidance and counseling programs are not negligible. In such a study, the data showed that male respondents are more likely to appreciate activities through which they can better understand themselves, while women perceive as beneficial the activities that support their career decisions and their personal development plan (Crişan, Albulescu, & Oltean, 2017). Similar results have also been obtained by Bimrose and Barnes (2006); Bimrose (2008) in a study they conducted. Thus, the beneficiaries of the counseling programs considered these activities to be useful due to the specialized information they received, information on the labor market, details of the training courses, trainings, employment opportunities; activities that helped them focus and motivate themselves, helped them increase their self-confidence, self-awareness, and which gave them structured opportunities for reflection and debate.

Taking into account the diversity of the approaches identified in scientific literature regarding career guidance and counseling activities, we have proposed that, at the level of this study, we analyze the impact of two intervention programs focusing on guidance and counseling activities conducted through projects backed by European Union funds, with different approaches. The data will be analyzed from the perspective of developing skills to overcome difficulties in career decision-making.

Method

Working hypothesis

During research, we started from the following working hypothesis: career guidance and career counseling programs that combine both classical vocational counseling and active workplace exploration are significantly more effective than those that focus only on classical / traditional career guidance and counseling activities.

Short description of career guidance and career counseling programs

In the framework of the proposed career guidance and counseling activities, at the level of the EU funded projects, two programs with different approaches were proposed, starting from the aspects identified in scientific literature. Empirically, both programs for counseling in conducting activities focused on the cognitive processing of information (PCI, Peterson et al., 1996).

Program 1. Carried out within the Faculty of Geography. This program attempted to harmoniously combine traditional support activities for career guidance with an integrated approach to career counseling activities, where the labor-intensive and constructive dialogue factor had a significant weight, while emphasizing the student's reflection on the work experiences and the new information obtained about him and the work environment. In this context, career counselors, teachers and professionals / mentors from the work environment were involved. Career guidance and counseling activities took place during four sessions / meetings, interleaved with a one-month internship, as follows:

Activity 1. Designed as an activity for a group of 10 students guided by 2 career counselors during 2 hours. During this meeting the students received information about the way the program was carried out and the procedures needed for its realization. The tool used for evaluating interests and values for self-knowledge was presented so that it can be completed on-line by the participants at a later date.

Activity 2. Conceived as a 1-to-1 individual activity, in which discussions were conducted on the evaluation report so that the student can have a better understanding of the results obtained. The counselor also analyzed, together with the student, other aspects related to his / her career orientation, such as: the

criteria by which he / she opted for the field of study, the factors underlying the career decision and the degree of information regarding his / her career.

Practical training: This was done under the guidance of a teacher and a practical mentor within the institution where the student was doing the activities. Throughout this activity, the students received observation sheets asking them to write various professional aspects: job-specific activities, skills and competences, professional values, context of work, etc. This information has been gathered both through discussions with the practical mentor and reflections on those found through direct contact with work experience.

Activity 3. Also conceived in the form of a group meeting of 10 students for 2 hours, under the guidance of a career counselor and two teachers. During this meeting there were talks on specific fields of study and career paths. Thus the students received information about the occupational profile of the professions, the necessary skills, the way in which they formed and developed, the need for specialists on the labor market, etc. After the talks, each student received a skill assessment grid for each specific study specialty, and then they would reflect on the content and self-assess.

Activity 4. Conceived as a two hour 1-to-1 individual activity, between a student and a career counselor. During this meeting, discussions were held on the different aspects of self-knowledge, especially those reflected by the student. On the basis of this data, the student received support to make a career decision, in order to later chart his/her personal development plan. The career decision was analyzed from the perspective of the student's vocational profile matching the occupational profile of the 2-3 options that the student wanted to analyze. The analysis was done from the perspective of the necessary skills, personal values versus professional values, personal lifestyle versus work style, qualification level. Also, the development plan included short, medium and long term SMART objectives.

Program 2. Running within FSPAC. This program focused mainly on self-knowledge activities, starting from the premise that the main difficulties in choosing a career start from the bottom. Lack of information about one's own person and the relationship between this information and exploring careers. So all activities were done by career counselors as follows:

Activity 1. An individual student-counselor activity, lasting 2 hours. During this meeting the student was informed about the procedures and applied two more tests, one about interests and one about personality.

Activity 2. Similar to the first meeting, the activity was 1: 1, during 2 hours, a meeting where the student received the report with the results obtained and discussed these results. Also, during this meeting, various issues related to career decision-making ability were discussed. In this framework, the main needs of the student's counseling have been outlined, such as skill development, personal values, lifestyle, strengths and weaknesses, ways to explore career opportunities, networking, personal marketing, being proposed various thematic workshops in the areas where he/she is lacking. In the end the student decides, based on subsequent self-reflection, in which of these workshops their participation should be prioritised.

Activity 3. Group activities with 10 students. In this activity a series of thematic workshops were carried out starting from the above mentioned themes. Students have been involved in exploring, analyzing and reflecting on their own person or life experiences.

Participants

The study was conducted on a sample of 180 students of Babeş-Bolyai University aged 18-40 years ($SD=6.63$). Of the total of 180 participants, 61 (33.9%) are male and 119 (66.1%) are female. Also, 108 participants are students at the Faculty of Geography, and 72 are students of the Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences. All participants in the study were direct beneficiaries of programs backed by European Union funds.

Table 1. Description of the sample of participants

Gender	Faculty	N	Mean	SD	% of Total N
masculine	Geography	51	83.01	53.8	28,3%
	FSPAC	10	128.6	62	5.6%
	Total	61	90.4	57.2	33.9%
feminine	Geography	57	69.2	53.7	31.7%
	FSPAC	62	120	54.5	34.4%
	Total	119	95.7	59.6	66.1%
Total	Geography	108	75.7	53.9	60.0%
	FSPAC	72	121.1	55.2	40.0%
	Total	180	93.9	58.7	100.0%

Measures

Career Decison Difficulties Questionnaire CDDQ (Gati, Krausz, & Osipow, 1996). The questionnaire evaluates the difficulties in career decision from the perspective of three coordinates: lack of training, lack of information

and inconsistency of information. The questionnaire includes 34 items grouped into 10 sub-scales corresponding to the 10 sources of career indecision ((1) lack of motivation; (2) overall indecision, (3) dysfunctional beliefs, (4) lack of information on the stages of a career decision; (5) lack of information about one's own person, (6) lack of information related to trades / occupations, (7) ways of obtaining additional information, (8) non-trustworthy information, (9) internal conflicts, (10) external conflicts). Additionally, this questionnaire includes three more items: one item requiring participants to indicate whether they did or did not make a decision on their future career, one item that evaluates the level of confidence the person has in rapport with the decision they took and the last item measures the difficulty level of the career decision.

The items in this questionnaire are quoted on a Likert scale of 1-9 where 1 represents "Strongly disagree" and 9 "Strongly agree."

Gati et al. (1996) reported α Cronbach coefficients of internal consistency of .95 for the whole questionnaire and .70, .93, .91 for the three categories of difficulty, the Israeli population. On the American population, the same authors obtained the α Cronbach coefficient of internal consistency of .95 for the whole questionnaire and of .63, .95, .89 for the three subscales. In general, the internal consistency coefficients have very good values, the studies proving the value of a Cronbach coefficient of over 80 (Gati, Osipow, & Krausz, 1996; Osipow & Gati, 1998; Gati, Osipow, Krausz, & Saka, 2000). Coefficients obtained from the test-retest fidelity check were .67, .74, .72. For the 3 major categories of difficulty and .80 for the whole questionnaire for the Israeli sample.

In order to be applicable to the sample of participants, the questionnaire was translated from English into Romanian by three teachers who worked independently and the discrepancies between the three versions were discussed until a consensus was reached. Subsequently the questionnaire was reversed by two bilingual translators independently from each of the Romanian language into English. The versions obtained were identical to the original ones.

Procedure

In this study we aimed to investigate the impact of the two career counseling programs on the development of the skills that underpin career decision-making among students and implicitly which approach is more effective for young students. In this respect, we opted for an ABA research project. Thus, at the initial stage of the implementation of the two counseling programs, all

students were asked to complete the CDDQ in order to determine the level of career indecision. From a design perspective, this research phase included the first test time (T1), and (T2) to be done after the implementation of the two distinct counseling programs, when students were reapplied the CDDQ in order to identify potential changes.

To determine the impact and implicit effectiveness of the two programs, we chose the following statistical analyses: the t test for pair samples and the magnitude of the effect.

Results

Table 2. Descriptive analysis and Pearson correlation coefficients for the measured variables

Variables	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Gender	1,66 (0,47)	-									
Faculty	1,40 (0,49)	.34*	-								
Lack of motivation	3,98 (1,81)	-.25	-.19	-							
General indecisiveness	6 (1,87)	.18**	.08	-.02	-						
Dysfunctional beliefs	5,54 (1,44)	-.08	-.18**	.11	.13	-					
The stages of the CDM process	5,44 (1,65)	.15**	.23*	-	.31*	-.17**	-				
Self	5,69 (1,78)	.13	.13	.12	.23*	-.09	.48*	-			
Occupations	6 (1,65)	.12	.15**	-.04	.11	-.07	.33*	.40*	-		
Ways of obtaining additional inform.	5,47 (1,98)	.02	.03	.06	.03	-.008	.14	.32*	.40*	-	
Internal conflicts	4,94 (1,6)	-.05	-.07	.26*	.07	-.06	.08	.19*	.04	.12	-
External conflicts	4,11 (2,28)	-.19*	-.27*	.22*	.14	.14*	.01	.04	.03	.05	.30*

Note: * Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); ** Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Analyzing the results in Table 2, it is noted that there are statistically significant differences between: general and gender indecision ($r_{(178)}=.18$, $p<.05$). Students are more indecisive in choosing a career that is compatible with their abilities, values and skills. There is also a statistically significant negative correlation between dysfunctional beliefs and specialization ($r_{(178)}=-.18$, $p<.05$). Dysfunctional beliefs have a negative impact on the students of the Faculty of

Geography on the career decision making process as compared to the students at FSPAC. Instead, statistically significant positive correlations can be observed between the lack of information related to the decision-making process and: gender ($r_{(178)}=.15$, $p<.05$); specialization ($r_{(178)}=.23$, $p<.01$) and general indecision ($r_{(178)}=.31$, $p<.01$); between lack of self-information and general indecision ($r_{(178)}=.23$, $p<.01$); between lack of information related to oneself and lack of information related to decision-making ($r_{(178)}=.48$, $p<.01$). The lack of information related to occupations correlates positively with the specialization ($r_{(178)}=.15$, $p<.05$), with the lack of information related to the decision-making process ($r_{(178)}=.33$, $p<.01$); with the lack of information related to itself ($r_{(178)}=.40$, $p<.01$). It seems that students have encountered difficulties in their careers due to lack of information on the decision-making process. Also, the lack of information related to the decision-making process influences the choice of a specialization in university education. Concerning the difficulties in obtaining the information, these correlate positively only with the lack of information related to the self ($r_{(178)}=.32$, $p<.01$) and the lack of information related to occupations ($r_{(178)}=.40$, $p<.01$). Internal conflicts correlate positively with lack of motivation ($r_{(178)}=.26$, $p<.01$) and lack of self-information ($r_{(178)}=.19$, $p<.01$).

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics and t-test results measured variables

Faculty	Outcome	Pretest		Posttest		N	t	df
		M	SD	M	SD			
Faculty of Geography	Lack of motivation	4.26	1.8	2.48	1.5	108	9.31*	107
	Dysfunctional beliefs	5.75	1.37	5.18	1.63	108	2.72*	107
	Lack of the stages of the CDM process	5.13	1.66	2.72	1.24	108	13.7*	107
	Lack of the information about self	5.49	1.88	2.60	1.40	108	15*	107
	Lack of the information about occupations	5.82	1.76	3.34	1.58	108	13.37*	107
	Lack of the ways of obtaining additional information	5.42	2.13	2.50	1.43	108	13.53*	107
	Internal conflicts	5	1.73	2.93	1.95	108	10.82*	107
	External conflicts	4.61	2.29	2.15	1.28	108	9.75*	107
	Lack of motivation	3.55	1.77	1.78	1	72	7.48*	71
	Lack of the stages of the CDM process	5.22	1.5	4.76	1.44	72	1.74	71
Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences	Lack of the stages of the CDM process	5.91	1.54	2.57	1.21	72	16.5*	71
	Lack of the information about self	6	1.59	2.40	1.34	72	19.48*	71
	Lack of the information about occupations	6.34	1.42	3.47	1.52	72	12.69*	71

Note: * $p<.01$

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics and t-test results measured variables - *continued*

Faculty	Outcome	Pretest		Posttest		N	t	df
		M	SD	M	SD			
	Lack of the ways of obtaining additional information	5.54	1.74	2.53	1.33	72	13.20*	71
	Internal conflicts	4.81	1.31	2.55	1.17	72	10.9*	71
	External conflicts	3.35	2.07	1.91	1.06	72	5.19*	71

Note: * p<.01

The results of the t sample test for students in the Geography faculty showed that: the first pair obtained a $t_{(107)}=9.31$, $p<.01$; the second one $t_{(107)}=2.72$, $p<.01$; the third one $t_{(107)}=13.7$, $p<.01$; the fourth pair a $t_{(107)}=15$, $p<.01$; the fifth pair obtained a $t_{(107)}=13.37$, $p<.01$; the sixth one $t_{(107)}=13.53$, $p<.01$; the penultimate pair obtained a $t_{(107)}=10.82$, $p<.01$ and the last pair a $t_{(107)}=9.75$, $p<.01$. As t is significant for all 9 pairs, it follows that there is a significant difference between the two pretest-posttest conditions. By calculating the effect size for the 9 pairs, we obtained for the first pair a $d=0.9$, for the second one $d=0.26$, for the third one $d=1.36$, for the fourth pair a $d=1.45$, for the fifth $d=1.29$, for the sixth pair a $d=1.30$, for the penultimate pair a $d=1.04$ and for the last pair a $d=0.94$, which means according to Cohen's criteria (1988) that Program 1 career guidance and counseling had a very strong effect on the reduction of career indecision among the students participating in the study at the Geography faculty. In addition, following the calculation of the t-test for student samples from FSPAC, it was noted that for the first pair a $t_{(71)}=7.48$, $p<.01$ was obtained, for the second pair a statistically insignificant $t_{(71)}=1.74$, $p<.08$, for the third pair a $t_{(71)}=16.5$, $p<.01$ was obtained for the fourth pair $t_{(71)}=19.48$, $p<.01$, $t_{(71)}=12.69$, $p<.01$, the sixth pair a $t_{(71)}=13.20$, $p<.01$ for the penultimate pair $t_{(71)}=10.9$, $p<.01$ and for the last pair un $t_{(71)}=5.19$, $p<.01$. In order to observe the effect of the FSPAC students' counseling program, the magnitude of the effect was calculated. After calculating the effect size for the 9 pairs, a $d=0.88$ was obtained for the first pair, for the third pair a $d=1.95$, for the fourth pair a $d=2.3$, for the fifth pair a $d=1.50$, for the the sixth pair a $d=1.56$, for the penultimate pair a $d=1.29$ and for the last pair a $d=0.61$. Thus, according to Cohen's criteria (1988), the second program for career guidance and counseling developed for students at FSPAC with the aim of reducing the level of career indecision had a stronger effect. In conclusion, the study hypothesis is confirmed.

Discussions

Taking into account the results obtained, it is noted that both counseling programs had positive effects on the development of career decision skills, eliminating a number of factors that blocked this, but the strongest impact was Program 1 for career guidance and counseling. These results somewhat confirm the existing literature data and argue that new trends in Vocational Counseling should focus on youth reflection, on the information received and implicitly on work experiences (Rogers et al., 2011, Kuijpers, Meijers, & Gundy, 2011), traditional activities being obsolete and inefficient in the present socio-economic context (Hughes & Karp, 2004; Richard, 2005). This latter aspect cannot be confirmed by the results of the 2nd Career Guidance and Counseling Program, where even if the data is not as significant as the results of Program 1, we cannot fail to see that they have also shown their effectiveness to a large extent.

The data obtained also allows us to draw a series of other conclusions, some of them resonant in the practice of vocational counseling. As the results indicate that females are more indecisive in their career, this is determined by two essential aspects: on the one hand insufficient information about themselves and, on the other hand, lack of information regarding the decision-making process. In conjunction with the results of our study, Gadassi et al. (2015) concluded in their study that girls faced difficulties in the concept of self and identity, also reporting high levels of anxiety and depression in the career decision making process. Similarly to the data presented at the level of scientific literature (Geurt & Meijers, 2009; Plane, 2009) and the results obtained by us, we indicate a lack of motivation in adolescents in making career decisions, and we believe that it is determined in part by internal conflicts, and on the other hand by the lack of information about one's own person. Analyzing the results obtained, we note that most of the students enrolled in the study indicate the greatest difficulties in the process of self-knowledge. In this direction, we consider the importance of personal development activities and, implicitly, the integrated approach at the level of the curriculum and / or university curriculum, of the career guidance activities that help the pupil / student discover and at the same time explore and implement newly acquired information. Therefore, career guidance and counseling activities should not be based solely on providing information about either person, work environment, decision-making process, etc., but the pupil / student should be directed to discover this information, so that then they are able

to make well-informed choices, which implicitly lead to the development of the vocational flexibility that is so necessary in the context of extremely dynamic work.

A future direction of research would be to introduce activities into counseling programs with the goal to eliminate dysfunctional beliefs related to career decision making. Most of the time, these dysfunctional beliefs can prevent adolescents from taking a rational career decision, increasing their level of either anxiety or career indecision, just as the results of our study have shown.

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