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The impact of career factors on students` professional insertion. What measures to be taken by the university?

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Abstract

One of the most important sources of anxiety for students is professional future. A solution to this is career counseling. In most cases, universities offer career counseling services for prospective students or focus on following their graduates` employability. Unfortunately approaches to career counseling and professional insertion research are two issues not related within the university. We shall present the data from a research on the impact of student`s career factors within Bucharest University of Economic Studies on the level of professional insertion and demonstrate that universities should invest in career counseling to grow the chances of insertion of their graduates.

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1. Introduction

One of the most important sources of anxiety for students is their professional future, the students showing concerns about the ability to get and keep a job. The basic reasons for this anxiety are internal and external factors perceived by the student and they act as a veritable obstacle or propelling and supportive factors regarding the career choice made.

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A solution to the needs of students regarding the choice for their professional future is career counseling. Career counseling comes to support the individual to make that decision, to assist him, to inform him, to favor an optimal relationship between individual desires and requirements of a profession.

Such services can be found in schools, universities, institutions conducting training, public employment services, job counseling, voluntary or community sector and the private sector.

In most cases, universities offer career counseling services for prospective students with emphasis on marketing information and their educational offer, and focus only a little on students already enrolled in the university.

Also, most universities follow their graduates employability as part of highlighting the quality of educational programs offered and as a necessary feedback for future adjustments. This is considered necessary to maintain the balance between academic preparation and the actual requirements of the labor market.

This approach stands in line with the European Commission's Strategy for Higher Education (2012), which mentions the need to reform university education so as to ensure equipping young people with the skills needed to develop employability and professional insertion.

Unfortunately approaches to career counseling and professional insertion research are two issues not related within the university, this being explained by the fact that the counseling services offered by university are not used to enhance students' employability chances.

Although the issue of the factors that influence career is relatively exhausted theme, representing already common knowledge, we believe that the impact of these factors on the level of professional insertion of students is an issue that has not yet been addressed.

Therefore, in this paper we shall present the data from a research on the impact of student's career factors within Bucharest University of Economic Studies on the level of professional insertion. The hypothesis from which we start is that a student, who knows what he wants, has a career plan outlined, has support from family and friends, has self confidence, and has a higher degree of professional insertion.

We believe that our research data indicate that to succeed, a student needs in addition to specialized academic preparation, mandatory basic counseling services to increase their chances of a good employability.

The paper concludes with a series of proposals for the university in terms of diversification of the counseling services, for a better assistance of students in their choosing and pursuing a career.

2. Theoretical foundation

Career counseling is "*the maximum compatibility between resources, requirements, aspirations and personal interests of an individual and real offer in the education, training and socio-professional integration domain*" (Științele educației. Dicționar Enciclopedic, pg. 211).

Career counseling consists in four specific activities (UNESCO, 2002, online, pg. 4): helping the individual to explore their interests, values, skills and personality; providing them with various resources so that they become more aware of available occupations; engaging clients/students in the decision making process so that they choose a career that best suits the interests, values, skills and personal style; and assisting clients so that they become active managers of their own careers (including transition from one career to another, from one role to another, and assisting students to become able to learn continuously to achieve lifelong professional development).

The knowledge in the career counseling field is advanced, but focuses strictly on the individual and his satisfaction from work. The importance of counseling for the society and economy of a country was, however outlined by a number of authors. Plant (1993, page 13) notes "*the importance of human resources as a core economic interest, where unemployment is a loss of human capital and economic value of counseling is assessed in these terms.*" (in I. Maaloe 1994, p.11). From this we can understand that investment in career counseling can lead to a better orientation of individual in labor market, to more realistic choices and to a better insertion in labor market.

Various career theories attempt to explain the career choices of the individual in relation to various internal and external factors, but the analysis should go beyond and highlight a hierarchy of these factors and priorities in individual career counseling, regardless of the method of making career counseling.

Next, we will look at some of these theories that highlight the most important factors in choosing a career.

Donald Super (1990), proposed "The archway model" or "segmented model of the career determinants" which includes personal factors (interests, values, needs, intelligence, special and general aptitudes) and situational

determinants such as peer group, school, family, community, society, labor market and economy. (see Fig.1). On the archway are presented other central elements: stages of development, the role of self-concept and in the center of the arch – Self, which unites all variables. The elements of this model are in a continuous interaction.

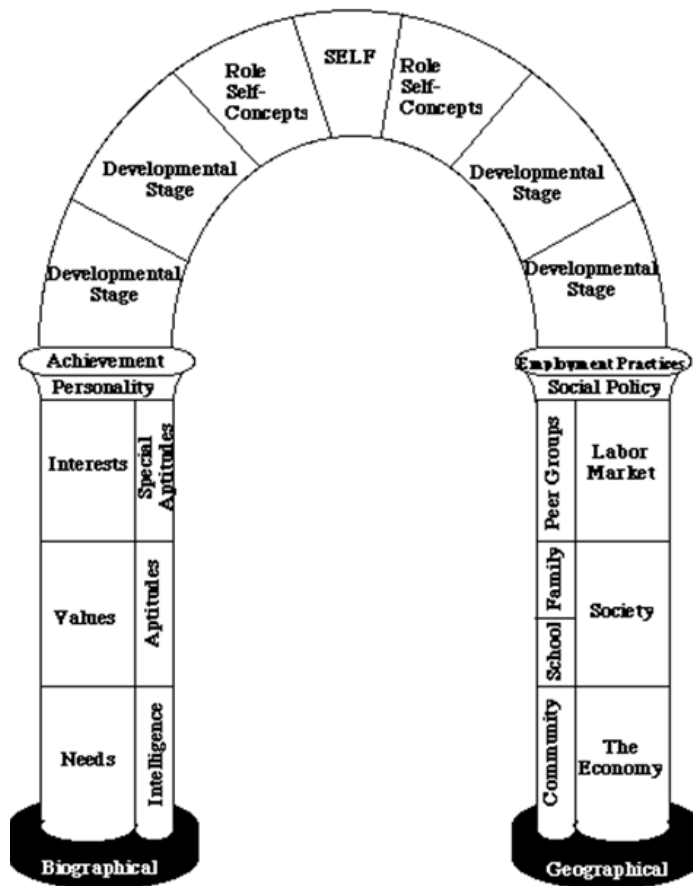


Fig. 1 Archway of Career Determinants. D. Super *(1990).

Savickas (2001), influenced by D. Super's theory proposed the theory of career construction which states that the individual builds his career by "imposing a meaning on their vocational behavior and on his occupational experiences" (Savickas 2005, 43). Savickas identifies internal and external factors that influence an individual's integration and occupational success. The "occupational success depends on the degree to which individuals find in their job roles, appropriate outputs to their prominent vocational characteristics and the satisfaction achieved by an individual at work is proportional to the degree to which they implement their self-concept, implementation of vocational self-concept involving a synthesis and compromise between individual and social factors" (in W. Patton,; M. McMahon, 2006c pag.62-64)

McMahon and Patton (2006) outline the importance of society, context and individual differences (gender, age, values, sexual orientation, abilities, disabilities, interests, physical attributes, skills, ethnicity, self-concept, personality, and health beliefs) on career choice. Elements such as geographical location, political decisions, historical trends, globalization, socioeconomic status, employment, indicates that these external factors can influence the choice, the pursuit and the development of a career.

We propose a theoretical model - "Personal Career Map" (Richiteanu-Năstase, 2011) which consists in the individual personal way to position himself in relation to all career factors (motivations, values, career plan, decision making, balance aspirations - expectation (beliefs on the self-efficiency, family and friends support, perceptions of social barriers), training needs) that can outline the following profiles: stable, undecided or unstable. The facets included in personal career map are internal representations of the individual on the essential factors in choosing and pursuing a career. These representations form an individual's personal career map, map that serves the role of organization of information, attitudes and values related to career. Therefore, personal career map has a global character, including cognitive, affective, motivational, values and attitudes aspects. We believe that this map is structured over time and is finalized with the employability of the individual. These facets will be characterized by one of the identified profiles: stable, undecided or unstable.

Table 1. Personal career map profiles.

Profile type	Motivation for career choice	Values	Career plan	Career Making	Decision	Expectations (balance aspirations-expectations)	Training (continuing education)
Stable	Predominant Intrinsic or extrinsic, type identified	Pro work	Exists, flexible	-Decided and comfortable on career decision -Analyses the actions' consequences	and	-Self-efficiency beliefs: above average -Family and friends support: above average -Opportunities and social barriers perceptions : average, low -Work related perceptions: average -Perception on career development: average	-Capacity to self-analyze on training needs
Undecided	Predominant extrinsic: incorporated adjustment or external adjustment	Other values	Doesn't have one	-Undecided and uncomfortable on career decision -Analyses the actions' consequences	and	-Self-efficiency beliefs: average, low -Family and friends support: above average -Opportunities and social barriers perceptions : above average -Work related perceptions: high-idealist, low-pessimist -Perception on career development: high-idealist, low-pessimist	-Capacity to self-analyze on training needs
Unstable	Predominant extrinsic: incorporated adjustment or external adjustment	Other values	Doesn't have one	-Undecided and comfortable on career decision - Incapable of predict the consequences	and	-Self-efficiency beliefs: average, low -Family and friends support: above average -Opportunities and social barriers perceptions : above average -Work related perceptions: high-idealist, low-pessimist -Perception on career development: high-idealist, low-pessimist	-Unable to analyze training needs

Most investigations on career factors aimed to reveal their relevance to the individual's career choice, but to see the usefulness of counseling, from a socio-economic perspective, we should investigate whether there is a correlation between these factors and the degree of employability.

In May 2006, the European Commission sent the communication "*Delivering on the Modernization Agenda for Universities: Education, Research and Innovation*", regarding the necessity to increase the role of universities, through their education, research and innovation activities to achieve the Lisbon targets and to promote the society and economy of knowledge in Europe.

Similarly, the Europe 2020 Strategy proposes as priority topics: building growth for an inclusive economy by promoting an economy with a high rate of employment, able to ensure economic, social and territorial cohesion with the objective of increasing the employment rate of the population aged between 20 and 64 years to 75%.

In this context, one of the main directions of investigation of the efficiency of the education system aims to identify the process of transition from school to work, i.e. assessing the insertion of graduates on the labor market.

Investigating the transition process is been made difficult by the replacement of classical transition model, in which school and work is succeeding, with a model of "dual" transition, which school and work overlaps in certain periods of time. Assessing the transition from school to work through Labor Force Survey, Eurostat broadens the concept, referring to the transition of graduates to first "significant" job, which means a job occupied after graduation, for at least 6 months and that requires at least 20 hours of work per week. Moreover, other specialists raise in discussion the matching between graduate's qualifications and their occupations (skill mismatch) as an indicator of the transition from school to work.

3. Research design, results and discussion

A survey method was used based on questionnaire, questionnaire conducted among third-year students, graduate and master students of first year and second year master, sample stratified by year of study, the Bucharest University of Economic Studies faculties so that we had a representative sample of 100 students (3 years of study, year 3 year master I, master year 2). The questionnaire was applied in two separate stages with an interval of one year, in the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 university years.

The main objective of the research was to investigate the correlation between personal career map (PCM) and the level of professional insertion. The starting hypothesis was that a student with a stable PCM will have a better professional insertion (higher levels of professional insertion).

In the questionnaire applied to the students we have included a number of dimensions targeting professional insertion:

- Time interval between graduation and employment;
- Insertion during studies;
- Efficiency of study programs: working in the studied specialization, the knowledge gained in college in relation to job requirements, the knowledge gained in college in relation to career development;
- Level of insertion in postgraduate and master programs.

To the questionnaire answered 13 boys and 87 girls, at all university specialization. Their distribution by level of studies was as follows: 28, third year students, Undergraduate, 45 Master, first year and 27 Master, second year.

One year after the first applied questionnaire on employment, 54 of 100 are employed (31 employed during college, 12 students from 1-3 months after graduation, 7 students from 3-6 months after graduation, one student at 6-12 months after graduation and 3 students from more than 1 year after graduation).

Of the employed respondents, 26 have a good employability (above average responses to all 4 questions on employment), 20 have an average employability and 8 have a weak employability (according to our classification).

Using statistical methods was calculated every facet correlation of personal career map with the professional insertion (see facets described above).

From the personal career map facets analyzed we can see that there is a strong correlation with the degree of *support of friends*, a good correlation with the *existence of a career plan* and a *realistic perception of the labor market* and a weak correlation with level of comfort with his / her decision.

Surveyed students estimate that counseling activities help them in large and very large extent to:

- Know themselves better;
- Increase self-esteem;
- Increase motivation for employment in the labor market and to adopt a positive attitude towards work;
- Strengthen skills for jobsearching;
- Boosting the capacity of designing and planning their careers;
- Identify professional alternatives.

They stress the need for both individual and group counseling, in which should be provided the following services: testing the skills and professional interests, professional assistance in identifying professional opportunities, acquiring knowledge on personal marketing elements (techniques of writing "Letter of Intent", "Curriculum Vitae", presentation for a job interview).

This data reveals some very important aspects for counseling programs:

- Designing activities for career counseling, which combines the group counseling methods with individual ones (student needs friendssupport, but issues related to their comfort with his decision and effective planning requires the support of a counselor);
- Thinking of different activities of direct and indirect contact with the labor market (Job fairs, visits to different companies, professional practice activities, internships and coaching, meetings with professionals, conferences, so on);
- Delivering career counseling sessions closer to the students, in the university.

4. What measures to be taken by the university?

The above data shows that employment and career counseling are two aspects to be seen and designed jointly by universities. Then we propose several approaches to rethink the process of students' counseling, graduates insertion:

- Studying professional insertion of graduates that shall indicate the effectiveness of the proposed educational programs and the extent to which students of an university are trained / advised to adapt more quickly and with higher satisfaction;
- The development of courses and workshops for first-year students (about: adapting to student life, knowledge of educational opportunities offered on campus) and other for those approaching graduation (about: writing a resume, making a career plan). Some of them can be "*open courses*" (free, organized by the university in partnership with NGOs, institutions and other organization) other optional activities (possible included in the curriculum);
- Offering various counseling services: individual or group activities on career topics suggested by students, occasional group activities offered by teachers or invited experts, conferences so on;
- Periodical testing of students career needs;
- Organizing practice programs based on a partnership between university and other organizations;
- Counseling and guidance of students throughout the practice;
- Delivering responsibility to teachers to act as a coach/mentor. Joseph A. Johnston (1994) talks about the need to exist in the faculty resource persons acting as mentors. The author argues the need for training them. These teachers have different experiences and relevant knowledge related to employment opportunities based on academic subjects taught, have credibility in the help it offers to career planning. Academic teachers may be part in the beginning of a group of "advisors" in a counseling and guidance center within the university. They can evaluate and suggest useful services for students, educational and professional paths, can be themselves role models, can be mentors for students.

An analysis of the courses and workshops conducted in the Romanian universities reveals a different trend compared to the services offered outside. Counseling services are offered by NGOs (students and youth), by human resources companies. Universities (outside faculties) don't have included in their curricular offer a course on career issues and doesn't offer any workshops on the subject. The only support for universities (sometimes) is that of providing location (rooms) to conduct these courses and workshops.

We highlight the importance of Romanian universities to recognize the positive effects of career counseling services and to strengthen the efforts to multiplication by building partnerships with the labor market (formal internship programs, coaching, mentoring).

We consider that is desirable the transformation of university in an initiator and promoter of career counseling services and in a responsible partner in relationship with labor market.

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