

PUPILS` AND STUDENTS` PERCEPTION ON CAREER AND CAREER SERVICES IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

This article aims to provide the interpretation of the results for two questionnaires applied on pupils and high-school graduates, on the one hand, and students, on the other hand. They explored their perceptions and needs in relation to the activities and programs organized by university career centres and also in relation to career and labour market. The analysis of career centres' activities from the perspective of their direct beneficiaries led to the optimization and reconsideration of these structures by suggesting new directions for action. Last but not least, the types of services offered by the counselling and vocational guidance centres at the level of pre-university education, as well as at the level of university education, especially in terms of their exploitation by the direct beneficiaries could produce changes in perception among decision makers, in public policy.

Key words: career, counselling, pupils, support services, students

Introduction

The need to analyse the students' perception on issues related to career and especially to support services from this category is the result of a personal initiative, for two reasons. On the one hand, as a consequence of the long experience of practitioner in career counselling at the Centre for Information, Guidance and Counselling of the University of Bucharest, I felt the need to obtain validation or invalidation of certain assumptions and work methods, based on scientific arguments. On the other hand, I have built a strategy which supports, at the institutional level, the need to professionalize the occupation of career counsellor and the need for correlation and modelling of the existing legislation, to meet the realities of 2015.

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This article is a partial interpretation of the questionnaires applied to pupils in their final high-school year, high-school graduates and students from several universities in Romania, within a comprehensive study entitled “Contribution of career counsellors to the students’ integration in community”. Our approach is based on the initiative of some specialists in career counselling, some student organizations and representatives of Human Resources departments of several reputable companies that have proposed the regulation of career counselling in academic education.

The two questionnaires applied to pupils and students are followed and completed in the extended research with two more: one is addressed to human resources specialists from the companies that recruit students and the other one is addressed to career counsellors and managers of academic career centres. The article complements, from the Romanian perspective, the interest shown in the specialised literature to concepts, perceptions and reasons that contribute to career choice. We note that our independently conducted research has generated conclusions quite similar to other studies (Brush et al, 2014; Choi et al., 2013; Deaconu et al., 2013; Kamran et al., 1997; Maree, 2009), related to the matters that constitute a serious concern in terms of perceptions about career. We shall further list the key issues identified:

- students’ misinformation or misperceptions on career and career counselling services;
- age-induced limitations in relation to career values;
- insecurity and psychological and social barriers in relation to career and labour market;
- the need for cooperation of all stakeholders: labour market representatives, counselling professionals, representatives of administrative and academic hierarchies leading universities, student associations and, especially, informed and conscious involvement of pupils and students in the career-decision processes.

Defining the national framework and the issues identified

Three years ago, based on personal initiative and with the support of Vlad Bog, director of human resources at Microsoft Romania, there was launched the idea of a Council for Education-Industry, enabling efficient communication between private companies and universities counselling centres, to the students’ benefit. The latter would be much better prepared in terms of skills and abilities for the first confrontation with the labour market. Following several meetings of the Education-Industry Council organized by AmCham (American Chamber in Romania) and the University of Bucharest, attended by numerous private companies, we have developed a series of

analyses concerning the relation student-university-private companies. The SWOT analysis facilitated the identification of several topics of discussion on the subject of this article, concerning:

- Volunteering, internship and work placements enacted or improperly enacted;
- Career counselling services and other support services for students insufficiently developed;
- Demographic changes influencing the mass of potential universities' students;
- Pupils' and students' knowledge in relation to the labour market;
- The emphasis on academic preparation and the neglecting of programmes focused on the development of transversal skills and abilities;
- The need for well-prepared students at the selection interview and for experiences in the early years of employment, in order to reduce recruitment time in companies open to graduates positions;
- Lack of programs and strategies needed to facilitate the transition of high school and college graduates to the labour market.

In this context, the two questionnaires that we intend to analyse in this article have become essential for the clarification of certain aspects of career and services from which pupils and students presently benefit in the Romanian educational system.

We shall further refer to how the specialised literature views guidance and career advice support services (Smith, 2012), values, beliefs and attitudes that influence the career development (Kent, 2004), the importance of career development of employees from the organizational perspective (Cushway, 1996), as well as studies carried out by the National Alliance of Student Organizations in Romania (Responsibility for Education, 2015) (Counselling Services and Career Guidance - Perspective ANOSR, 2015) on the precarious stage of development of the students' support services in terms of career choice. Also, the high academic dropout in the first year and the poor integration of students on the labour market, after obtaining their bachelor's degree in the studied field, the lack of consistency of career counselling measures and the lack of correlation of the academic curricula with the labour market requirements, are other results of the absence of adequate counselling services for pupils and students.

Hypotheses and objectives proposed

This article relies on the idea that by knowing the perceptions of pupils and students on careers and the support services offered in the centres for information, guidance and professional

counselling, we may propose measures, programmes and actions aimed at enhancing efficiency in this field. The accurate perception of the expectations to which we address, both in terms of educational and academic services, as well as compared with what awaits them in the light of future employers and the labour market, allows the proper assessment of career guidance and counselling services. This study allows us to outline some necessary recommendation bases for the justification of the need for professionalization and standardization of career services at the level of the educational system in Romania.

One of the hypotheses from which we started asserts that the access to good quality counselling services for pupils and students is a prerequisite for professional success. Another important aspect is related to the importance pupils and students attach to various types of activities subsumed to career counselling and guidance.

The purpose of this research is subsumed to the purpose undertaken in my doctoral research under the title: “The contribution of career counsellors to the students’ integration in the community”. As a result, the questionnaires applied to pupils, students, graduates, employers, career counsellors have proposed to give concrete answers to some questions related to career counselling. This article is an important part of a more extensive analysis, which has proposed to perform an updated radiography of the guidance and career counselling system at the university level, proposing solutions applied to the identified problems in order to improve the services of career counselling for a better integration of university graduates in the community.

As specific objectives of this research, I proposed: OS1. Determining how career counsellors (practitioners) from the centres of information, guidance and professional counselling at the university level meet the needs of the students from the perspective of the community integration as a result of the career counselling process. OS2. Analysis and investigation of the positive or negative influence the counselling process has on the pupils’ and students’ perceptions in relation to community integration; OS3. Determining the pupils’ and students’ degree of interest for certain types of services provided by the career counselling centres.

Methodology

The two surveys that I have used in the present research were completed by 466 students and 198 high school students and graduates. The structure of the questionnaire was fairly similar, pursuing the following issues:

- personal data (age, gender, background, high school profile);

- access to different types of services offered by the professional counselling centres (counselling and psychological assessment, vocational counselling, training, information and guidance, placement and counselling related to labour market);
- importance given to the counselling services;
- perception and relevance of some activities in relation to employment and success in career.

The two questionnaires were applied as follows: the questionnaire for pupils and high-school graduates in the period June 8th 2015-September 8th 2015; the questionnaire for students during the period June 9th 2015- August 25th 2015. The average time for filling in the questionnaires was 30 minutes. Each questionnaire comprised 17 questions; those covering issues related to access to career counselling and the importance given to such services, as well as to the relevance of some activities in relation to the work place have had between 15 and 20 predefined variables each. I also used 4 open questions in the questionnaire for pupils, in order to find out the five abilities or skills necessary for career success and their motivations. For students, I have devised a set of three questions (with 10-15 default choices) in order to grasp their perception on “successful career” and “work place motivation”.

Participants

The structure of the students-respondents group, from the perspective of personal data, is as follows: 52.15% aged 18-21 years old, 27.90% aged 22-23 years old, 12.88% aged 24-26 years old, 2.36% between the ages of 27-30 years old, and 4.72% older than 30. Out of these, 79.97% are female and 21.03% are male. For students and high school graduates we have the following distribution: 11.62% aged 16, 25.76% aged 17, 25.76% aged 18, 29.29 % with ages between 19-21 years old and 7.58% over the age of 21; 72.73% are female and 27.27% are male. In order to assess the perceptions of students and pupils on the investigated matters, we used a five steps Likert scale: “Extremely important”; “Very important”; “Neither important nor unimportant”; “Less important”; “Not at all important”.

The questionnaire was applied on-line by e-mail transmission to more than 2000 students and over 1000 pupils (the e-mail addresses being taken from the databases of educational programs and projects, for example the Social European Fond projects and educational fairs) and via Facebook groups dedicated to universities, colleges and high schools of Romania.

Results

The access of pupils and students to counselling services

In terms of access to counselling services, the answers to the question: “Did you receive counselling services?” were: 56.06% of the pupils-respondents, answered positively and 43.94% responded negatively. For students, 47.64% of the responses were positive and 52.36% were negative. I calculated the total score in relation to the access to counselling services for pupils and students, and I applied the T-test for independent samples to compare the two groups in relation to the same continuous dependent variable. The difference between the high school pupils and graduates and the students was not statistically significant ($p = 0.852$).

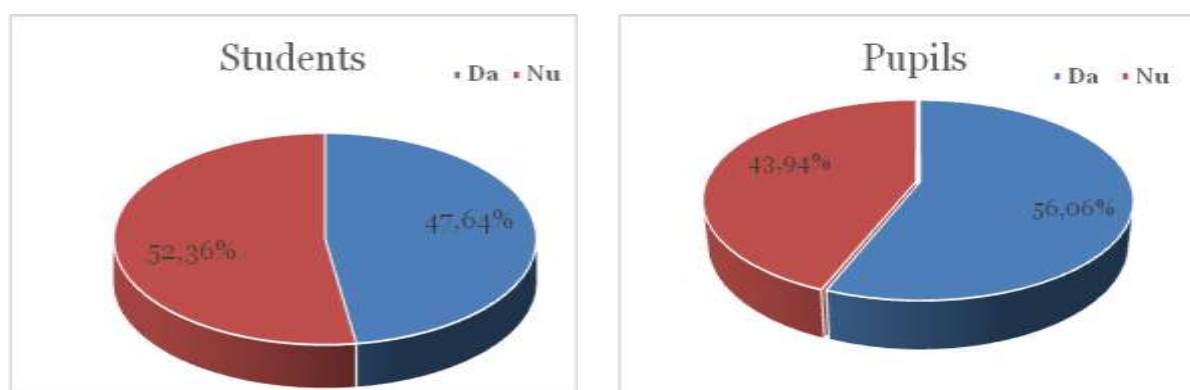


Figure 1. *The access of students and pupils to the counselling services*

The importance of career counselling services

In the practice of the counselling activity within a specialized department of the University of Bucharest, I often had the opportunity, following individual counselling sessions, a workshop or a training for pupils or students, to hear them react by saying: “I didn’t know how much I was missing it.” By applying the questionnaire, I wanted to check the value given by pupils and students to this type of activity. In the case of students, 38.41% of the respondents considered it as “Extremely important”, 50.21% as “Very important”, 7.94% had a neutral opinion; only 2.36% considered it “Less important” and 1.07% as “Not at all important”. Pupils and high-school graduates had approximately similar responses: 39.39% - “Extremely important”; 47.47% - “Very important”; 8.59% - “Neither important nor unimportant”; 3.03% - “Less important”; 1.52% - “Not at all important”. The nonparametric test Mann-Whitney, applicable if the dependent variable is measured in ordinal scale – in our case the variable “importance of career counselling” – highlights the absence of significant differences between students and pupils ($p = 0.949$).

Access to different types of training

The participation to personal development trainings for pupils and students was quite low, from their perspective. Checking their actual access to such services, we obtained the results shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Different types of training, from the perspective of pupils/ students. Percentage results*

	Pupils (YES)	Students (YES)	Pupils (NO)	Students (NO)
CAREER COUNSELING Training	22,73%	23,82%	77,27%	76,18%
COMMUNICATION Training	35,86%	28,76%	64,14%	71,24%
PROJECT MANAGEMENT Training	23,23%	18,67%	76,77%	81,33%
TIME MANAGEMENT Training	25,76%	16,74%	74,24%	83,26%
PERSONAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT Training	23,23%	12,66%	76,77%	87,34%

Analysing the results obtained for the career counselling training, the personal development training in the field of communication and project management, we found that the results of the asymmetrical Lambda test are statistically largely similar ($p = 0.761$; $p = 0.070$; $p = 0.179$).

The results for the participation to time management trainings are statistically different, for students and pupils: 83.26% of students, compared to 74.24% of the pupils have never participated in such activities; of those who attended, pupils are advantaged, with a participation rate of 25.76%, compared to 16.74% for students. The specific results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 1. *Different types of training, from the pupils'/students' perspective*

			Status High school pupils and graduates	Students
Access to the time management training	No	N	147	388
		Percentage	74,2%	83,3%
		Residues	-1,0	0,6
	Yes	N	51	78
		Percentage	25,8%	16,7%
		Residues	2,0	-1,3

By applying the Lambda and Goodman and Kruskal tau tests, the values from Table 3 were obtained. I have considered the values of Goodman and Kruskal tau, due to the fact that the

residuals fall within the interval $[-2 \ 2]$, which shows the imbalance between the groups of respondents to the two questionnaires. I found a significant proportion of pupils participating in this type of training, compared with the number of students ($p = 0.007$):

Table 2. *Directional measures – TIME MANAGEMENT training*

Test	Value	Significance threshold
Lambda	000	.
Goodman and Kruskal tau	0,011	0,007

The same significant differences are visible in the case of the access to personal development trainings in relation to the resources management: 23.23% of the pupils had access to such services, compared with 12.66%, among students ($p = 0.001$). The results obtained are shown in Table 4 and Table 5.

Table 3. *The PERSONAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT Training, from the perspective of pupils/students (Crosstab)*

			Status High school pupils and graduates	Students
Access to personal resources management trainings	No	N	152	407
		Percentage	76,8%	87,3%
		Residues	-1,1	,7
	Yes	N	46	59
		Percentage	23,2%	12,7%
		Residues	2,6	-1,7

Table 4. *The PERSONAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT Training, from the perspective of pupils/students (Directional measures)*

Test	Value	Significance threshold
Lambda	000	.
Goodman and Kruskal tau	0,018	0,001

The access to counselling services and training, to mediation services and preparation for the labour market by establishing and tracking educational routes was investigated by applying the T-test to independent samples and calculating a total score for each component. In most cases, I found that there is a significant difference between the high-school pupils and students involved

in such activities. The specific results in relation to the types of services offered in the guidance and counselling centres are provided in detail in Tables 6-9.

The evaluated career counselling and training services are: career counselling (as a training activity) and the usual types of training activities for career centres in Romania. I found that high school pupils benefit from such services more than students ($p = 0.015$).

Table 5. *Independent Sample T-Test – Career counselling services and training*

Status	Average	T	Significance threshold
High-school pupils	7,86	2,439	0,015
Students	7,48		

The personal development training services for pupils and students were: training on career counselling, communication, project management, time management, personal resources management. We found that, in this case also, high-school pupils benefit from such services to the detriment of students ($p = 0.032$).

Table 6. *Independent Sample T-Test – Training services*

Status	Average	T	Significance threshold
High-school pupils	6,30	2,159	0,032
Students	6,00		

The information services concerned are: counselling for voluntary internships, online information on careers, information on educational routes; educational fairs; programs to promote access to educational offers. We note that a significantly higher number of pupils have access to the information services, compared to the number of students ($p < 0.001$).

Table 7. *Independent Sample T-Test – Information services*

Status	Average	T	Significance threshold
High-school pupils	7,70	7,082	<0,001
Students	6,83		

For services related to the labour market (voluntary service, training courses, job placement, internships, mediation of the relation with the employers, company presentations and events such as Career Days, job fairs, entrepreneurship programs), we found out, logically, that the access was significantly favourable to students, reversing the ratio, to the detriment of high school pupils ($p < 0.001$).

Table 8. *Independent Sample T-Test – Services related to the labour market*

Status	Average	T	Significance threshold
High school pupils	7,36	22,640	<0,001
Students	10,34		

The importance of counselling services from the perspective of pupils and students

Specific types of counselling services offered by specialized centres in high schools and universities are: career counselling, psychological counselling, vocational counselling, educational counselling, psychological and skills assessment. The importance attached by respondents is seen in Table 10.

Table 9. *The importance of counselling services PUPIL/ STUDENTS*

	Extremely important	Very important	Neither important nor unimportant	Less important	Not at all important
Career counselling (PUPILS)	39,39%	47,47%	8,59%	3,03%	1,52%
Career counselling (STUDENTS)	38,41%	50,21%	7,94%	2,36%	1,07%
Psychological counselling (PUPILS)	29,29%	46,97%	18,18%	4,55%	1,01%
Psychological counselling (STUDENTS)	32,40%	45,92%	15,45%	5,15%	1,07%
Vocational counselling (PUPILS)	28,28%	43,43%	19,70%	7,07%	1,52%
Vocational counselling (STUDENTS)	31,76%	46,57%	16,74%	3,65%	1,29%
Educational counselling (PUPILS)	27,78%	50,51%	16,16%	5,05%	0,51%
Educational counselling (STUDENTS)	33,69%	49,57%	12,02%	3,65%	1,07%
Psychological and skills assessment (PUPILS)	31,31%	50,00%	14,65%	2,53%	1,52%
Psychological and skills assessment (STUDENTS)	39,27%	44,85%	11,37%	3,65%	0,86%

Table 10. *The importance of training services PUPILS/ STUDENTS*

	Extremely important	Very important	Neither important nor unimportant	Less important	Not at all important
CAREER COUNSELLING (PUPILS)	28,79%	47,47%	20,20%	2,02%	1,52%
PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELLING (STUDENTS)	33,91%	48,07%	13,52%	3,00%	1,50%
COMMUNICATION (PUPILS)	38,38%	41,92%	14,65%	3,54%	1,52%
COMMUNICATION (STUDENTS)	42,70%	42,70%	10,30%	3,43%	0,86%
PROJECT MANAGEMENT (PUPILS)	27,27%	41,41%	22,73%	7,58%	1,01%
PROJECT MANAGEMENT (STUDENTS)	32,83%	43,78%	18,24%	4,08%	1,07%
TIME MANAGEMENT (PUPILS)	32,83%	41,92%	17,17%	6,57%	1,52%
TIME MANAGEMENT (STUDENTS)	38,21%	38,41%	18,45%	3,65%	1,07%
PERSONAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT (PUPILS)	29,80%	41,92%	19,70%	7,58%	1,01%
PERSONAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT (STUDENTS)	33,43%	42,06%	17,81%	4,72%	1,07%

Table 11. *The importance of labour market mediation services PUPILS/ STUDENTS*

	Extremely important	Very important	Neither important nor unimportant	Less important	Not at all important
VOLUNTARY SERVICE (PUPILS)	15,66%	38,89%	33,84%	8,08%	3,54%
VOLUNTARY SERVICE (STUDENTS)	25,97%	42,49%	23,18%	7,30%	1,07%
TRAINING COURSES (PUPILS)	28,79%	51,52%	15,66%	1,52%	2,53%
TRAINING COURSES (STUDENTS)	39,06%	47,64%	10,52%	2,15%	0,64%
JOB PLACEMENT (PUPILS)	26,77%	41,92%	26,77%	4,04%	0,51%
JOB PLACEMENT (STUDENTS)	44,85%	40,34%	11,80%	1,29%	1,72%
INTERNSHIPS (PUPILS)	39,39%	41,41%	14,65%	4,04%	0,51%
INTERNSHIPS (STUDENTS)	57,30%	32,62%	7,73%	1,50%	0,86%
MEDIATION OF THE RELATION WITH THE EMPLOYERS (PUPILS)	23,23%	44,44%	26,26%	4,55%	1,52%

MEDIATION OF THE RELATION WITH THE EMPLOYERS (STUDENTS)	34,55%	44,64%	15,45%	4,08%	1,29%
COMPANIES PRESENTATIONS/CAREER DAYS (PUPILS)	21,72%	42,93%	26,26%	7,07%	2,02%
COMPANIES PRESENTATIONS/CAREER DAYS (STUDENTS)	26,29%	45,92%	20,60%	4,51%	2,58%
JOB FAIRS (PUPILS)	25,25%	48,48%	19,70%	5,05%	1,52%
JOB FAIRS (STUDENTS)	31,55%	46,78%	17,60%	2,15%	1,93%
ENTREPRENEURSHIP PROGRAMS (PUPILS)	17,17%	43,43%	28,79%	8,59%	2,02%
ENTREPRENEURSHIP PROGRAMS (STUDENTS)	20,82%	47,64%	22,96%	6,44%	2,15%

As we can see, there are no relevant differences between high school pupils and students as it concerns the importance given to the counselling and training services in relation to career development ($p = 0.144$; $p = 0.058$). Things change, when the mediation services are evaluated in relation to the labour market.

Table 12. *Independent Sample T-Test – The importance of services related to the labour market*

Status	Average	T	Significance threshold
High-school pupils	27,22	-13,092	<0,001
Students	32,55		

Perceptions do not differ, as we can notice, in comparison with other cases (Danziger & Eden, 2007). The way in which the reference to the labour market mediation services changes, as in this quoted article, is interrelated to the accumulation of information and experience and to the maturity of respondents.

Conclusions

The interpretation of the results obtained from the analysis of the primary data obtained by applying the questionnaires generated the following conclusions:

- Career counsellors (practitioners) from guidance and counselling centres failed to respond adequately to the needs and interest of pupils and students;

- The perception of pupils and students on the modality in which the counselling process influences positively the community integration and, especially, the labour market integration is strongly positive;
- Students' interests and needs in relation to the career counselling services are particularly large and insufficiently satisfied with the current level of career development centres;
- Although the importance given to the different types of counselling services is extremely high (the sum of ranking “Extremely important” and “very important” varying between 70-85%), the pupils` and students` access to career counselling services is still insufficient, compared to their needs (depending on the type of services, from 10 to 25%).
- The diversification of career counselling services, both at pre-university and academic level, is necessary; the lack of some component, from the panel of services, likely to be offered by the counselling and guidance centres, leads to the insufficient coverage of the services needed by pupils and students.
- From the ratio of high scores for the pupils' and students' need for counselling and the low scores for the access to these services there emerges the need to improve and increase the capacity of career centres to provide specialized career counselling services. The efficiency of the current career services can be enlarged by enhancing appropriate measures combining the development of infrastructure and well-trained human resources to achieve a consistent level of coherence and efficiency.
- The provision of high quality career counselling services, as well as the active presence of counsellors in high schools and universities, in front of pupils and students could naturally solve an issue the system of counselling services in Romania is facing: the high distrust of the direct beneficiaries with respect to the concerned services.
- From another perspective, the diversity of services offered by counselling centres is a positive fact for the impact on beneficiaries and it could lead to a favourable positioning in relation to the decision factors that influence public policy makers. The services provided by specialized career centres are appreciated both by pupils and students, as extremely important or important for the future integration in the community and on the labour market. Their valuing and the growing demand for these types of services will lead inevitably to the adaptation and correlation of the offered services from the institutional decision makers.

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