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HIGH SCHOOL VOCATIONAL COUNSELING ROLE IN LEVERAGING STUDENTS' PROFESSIONAL INCLINATIONS

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Abstract

The experience of many countries with a well-educated workforce highlights the important role of vocational counselling services for advantageous youth professional orientation. Researchers manifest in their turn, a growing interest to study the role of vocational counselling, from the perspective of increasing the efficiency of investment in education and strengthening the capacity of enterprises to meet the challenges of the knowledge economy.

In Romania, high school students have access to career guidance services, but there is little information on the extent to which they use or how useful they consider these services. Many times, there is a social conformism among high school graduates, which determines them to choose professions valued at a certain moment, without making a personal judgment.

The aim of this paper is to analyse, as a good practice, the role of high school graduate vocational counselling in developing professional skills, in order to help them make the right career decision. In order to monitor the high school students' opinions on the vocational guidance and their perceptions of the integration in the labour market, a market research study has been conducted. This is a survey conducted on a sample of 2,364 high school students in their final year of study (twelve grade). The research has shown that a reduced percentage of the interviewed high school students have knowledge about the vocational guidance activity. From those who have used these services, most of them were satisfied. The study also highlighted the fact that the most important criteria for getting a job are the skills acquired during studies.

Keywords: vocational counselling, professional skills, professional career, professional education.

JEL classification: I29, I20, J23.

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Introduction

On the national level, the economic and social dynamics recorded in last two decades have determined important changes in the Romanian education system. As the labour market is getting more complex and new qualifications are needed, high school students must take realistic decisions for their future career. Choosing a career is important in peoples' lives and should not be a random choice. Thus, high school students must be counselled and guided in this field. The best moment for the career development is during the high school years and especially, last year. It should be considered the increased interest of high school students in this subject and the need to adapt their expectations at the existing framework. This is also the period in which high school students have the psychological maturity required for a self-awareness approach. This process involves the knowledge of their own personality features, skills and limits, interests, values, beliefs, which are necessary in choosing a career.

The way in which the professional career is perceived nowadays, is influenced by certain factors such as: the emergence of new occupations, the flexible system of professional qualifications, the increase in labour migration and the development of new forms of employment.

The education in the career field aims to help young people develop knowledge and skills required for successful choices and to manage the transition from the study period to a job. Finding the proper place on the labour market is essential, but it is not an automatic process and the high school students must have the opportunity to reflect and analyse experiences and develop trust in their own skills.

Skill awareness and development are very important in the career choice. The education system at the high school and university level play an important role in shaping these.

In the future most young people will be obliged to reinvent their career in order to keep the pace with the fast changing labour market. They will have to face the complex challenges and find the best position in the job market given their skills and interests. Therefore, the role of vocational counselling is becoming more important for the development of young peoples' professional skills.

1. Review of the scientific literature regarding the vocational counselling for the professional skills development

There is a worldwide trend shifting from developed economies towards post industrial economies, called knowledge economies. This trend is shown by Săseanu (2005) highlighting that „in this framework, the only real source of power in the world will be the creation and diffusion of new knowledge, the driving force of world competition being the quality of labour”. The economic growth is based on highly qualified labour, which must have certain skills such as: functional excellence, leadership, integrative vision etc. In order to adapt to the new market conditions, the governments must take measures to develop education in general and especially tertiary education (Toma, 2011). This means a review of the universities' role in society, issue underlined by the European Union, through the Strategy Europe 2020. Three of the principles of this strategy refer to education and cooperation between universities and business environment (Șerbănică - Pantelică, 2011). The problem of higher education reform which focuses on offering young people the ability

to cover the society's present labour needs, was also discussed at other events (Plăiaș, Pop, Băbuș and Dabija, 2011) as Bologna Declaration (June, 1999), Lisbon Summit (March, 2000), Copenhagen Declaration (December, 2002), Ministerial Conference in Berlin (September, 2003), Ministerial Conference in Bergen (May, 2005) and Ministerial Conference in London (May, 2007).

In the conditions of the present Romanian economy, characterized by the development of the private sector, it becomes necessary to train high school, vocational schools graduates and student in the entrepreneurship field for acquiring the necessary skills and entrepreneurial values. Venesaar, Ling and Voolaid (2011) highlight the importance of the development of entrepreneurial thinking and of acquiring knowledge and skills for the development of entrepreneurial initiatives.

The following table shows the evolution of main indicators of companies from Romania in the period 2007-2011 (Table 1).

Table no. 1: Main indicators of companies from Romania

Indicators (Mil. Lei)	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Turnover	769905	954790	852424	900240	1001627
Gross investments	145879	143102	99048	91520	142796
Direct exports	78770	97727	92791	123241	147676

Source of data: The National Institute of Statistics - authors' compilation

As the private field in Romania has primarily developed, the vocational counselling becomes more important, so that young people, when they choose the educational path post-secondary school, to be guided towards those fields where they can have a maximum efficiency. The specialists show that an efficient school guidance help the graduates to be employed faster and more easily on the labour market, to become pro entrepreneurship and to develop businesses regardless of circumstances.

Theorists, researchers and practitioners have studied the role of vocational counselling for the development of young people professional skills, taking into account the changing trends on the labour market, the market complexities, and the young people's interests and skills.

Vocational counselling and professional education have their roots in the last 100 years (Herr, 2013). There were efforts long before the recent decades for guiding and educating people to find proper jobs using apprentice based learning and other specific methods (Gimpel, 1976).

In USA the lawyer and engineer, Frank Parsons, is considered the father of vocational counselling and professional education. He dedicated most of his life to counselling immigrants from the East Coast of USA, especially those from the Boston area. Parsons has worked towards offering a scientific base for assisting immigrants and others and towards developing efficient techniques for choosing relevant jobs for each person (Herr, 2013). He was an open critic of the public education system and supported educational reforms. He focused on the fact that pupils have not been trained to develop technical and professional

skills required on the labour market. Parsons has continued to criticize learning based only on books and advocated for pupils to be trained for engaging in actions using the acquired professional skills.

Vocational counselling represents the young people's training actions for choosing a profession taking into account the personality features of each person and the situation on the labour market and assistance for young people and adults in choosing their career and a proper job. For example, in Latvia the professional counselling is not very popular and the country is ranked third from the end of the European rankings on professional counselling services for young people (Veipa and Kozlovska, 2013). Thus, it is important to promote professional counselling services as they play an important role in the development of the modern society and in supplying quality employees.

In China theories regarding career guidance and vocational counselling were adopted, mainly from Europe and USA, especially after 1990. Nevertheless, the Tsinghua University in China, set up in 1916, established a professional guidance committee in 1923. This initiative is the start of the professional counselling in this country. In the last period, the fast economic development increased the importance of vocational counselling (Sun and Yuen, 2012). At national level new policies have been implemented and the number of professional training courses increased. At this moment in time there are many universities with vocational counselling centres.

2. Research objectives and methodology

The present quantitative research is survey based. For the field sampling a multistage random sampling method was adopted for reducing sampling errors.

The survey used the direct interview method based on a questionnaire, including 26 direct questions on a sample of 2,364 high school graduates in their last year of high school (12th grade) from national institutes. By using the multistage random sampling method, it was ensured a maximum error of only $\pm 2\%$. The sample was taken across 70 high schools from all counties.

The heterogeneity profiles of the high schools were taken into account for the research, as pupils from both humanities and technical specializations were interviewed. This offered a heterogeneous view on the researched topics.

The research aimed to obtain feedback on the use by high school students of vocational counselling services on the one hand, and on more general factors influencing high school graduates career choices, on the other hand. With this aim, information was collected regarding the following:

- The usage of school guidance and counselling services.
- The assessment of school guidance and counselling services.
- The perception on integration in the labour market.

The field gathering of information was made with the help of the company Multi Consulting Group Braşov, the study coordinator being Brătucu Gabriel and required the use of 22 operators which were previously selected and trained for such an activity. The centralized questionnaires were checked on the telephone, in a percentage of 20%.

In order to ensure a proper representation of the sample and remove possible sampling and questionnaire errors, a „pilot study” was conducted by interviewing on a random base, 110 subjects (approximately 5% of the final sample).

After the questionnaires were distributed, the results were based on a sample of 2,364 subjects, of which 58.6% were females and 41.4% males.

3. Results and discussions

An important objective of the research was the identification of awareness about school and professional guidance and counselling among the final year high school students (12th grade).

The overall results, at the level of the used sample, show that the knowledge level of *school and professional guidance* is average, the score obtained (2.90 points) depending on the answers offered being close to level 3 of the scale – *in a certain degree*. Also, the information on *school and professional guidance* are known to a certain degree, the average at the sample level being 2.55 points.

The awareness options regarding the school and professional guidance are presented in Figure 1 below:

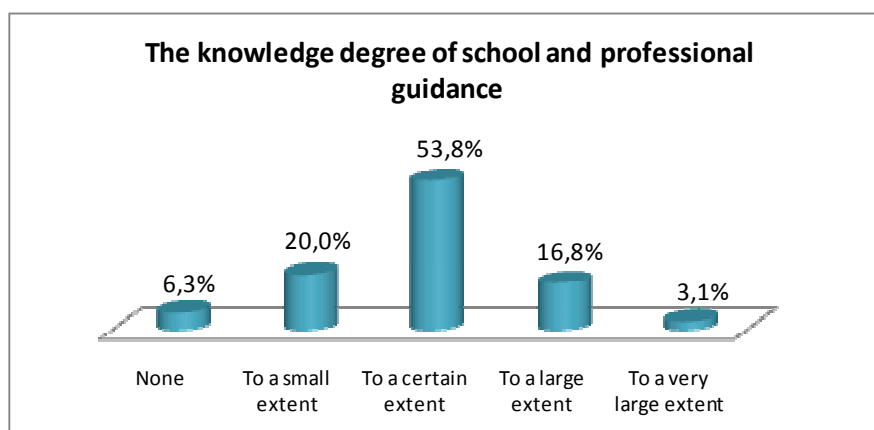


Figure no. 1: The knowledge degree of school and professional guidance

Source: authors' own research

The school and professional guidance notion is known to a certain degree by 53.8% of the final year high school students. The number of those who know this notion is lower in comparison with those who do not have the knowledge or have little information about school and professional guidance.

Respondents' answers regarding the awareness of the notions of school and professional counselling are summarized in Figure 2.

Only 1.8% of the respondents know to a high extent the concept of school and professional counselling. Most people know this concept to a certain degree- 44.6%, 28.6% stating that they only know to a small extent about this issue.

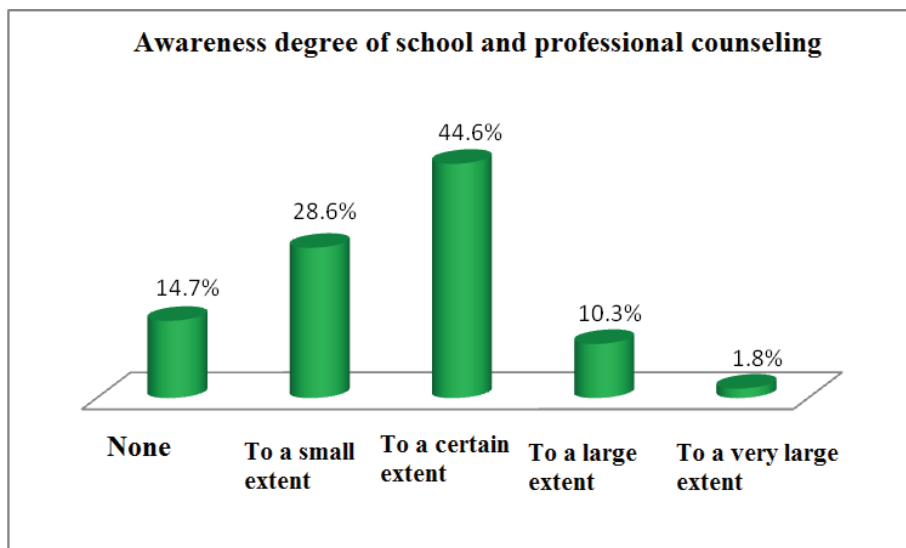


Figure no. 2: Awareness degree of school and professional counselling

Source: Adapted from Multi Consulting Group, Study coordinated by Brătuțu Gabriel

Analysing data by towns, it was noticed that, for each town, the highest values were recorded for the first levels of the scale used („At all”, „To a small extent”, „To some extent”), meaning that the high school students are not familiar with the concepts of school and professional guidance and counselling.

Among high school students who declared to have knowledge to a large or very large extent about these concepts, most were from Constanta, Bucharest, Craiova and Sibiu.

More than half of the interviewed high school students (55%) stated that they need school and professional guidance and counselling for choosing a career path. 34.2% of the final year high school students responded negatively to this question, and 10.9% have chosen not to give an answer about this issue. Among those who would like to have school and professional guidance most are females, come from the urban area and attend high schools in Bucharest, Suceava, Craiova and Arad.

66.8% (1,578 persons) of the interviewed persons have mentioned that in their high school there is a Centre of Pedagogical Assistance where students can be guided in taking decisions regarding school and professional guidance, while 25.2% do not know about the existence of such a centre in their educational institution.

Among the 1,578 high school students, only 266 (namely 16.9%) have contacted this centre to be helped in making decisions regarding the school path, school and professional guidance, most of them coming from Brasov, Bucharest, Buzau, Constanta, Sfântu Gheorghe (Covasna), Zalău.

Career counselling regarding choosing the relevant study area was the situation most approached for counselling, being requested by 28.7% of the interviewed high school students. The Centres for Pedagogical Assistance were used by 26% of high school students

for career counselling regarding the choice of the future profession, while 25.6% of the high school students wanted to apply self-development techniques. Information about the labour market, CV and cover letter preparation, and psychological counselling were ranked last, being considered less important for the counselling activities (Figure 3).

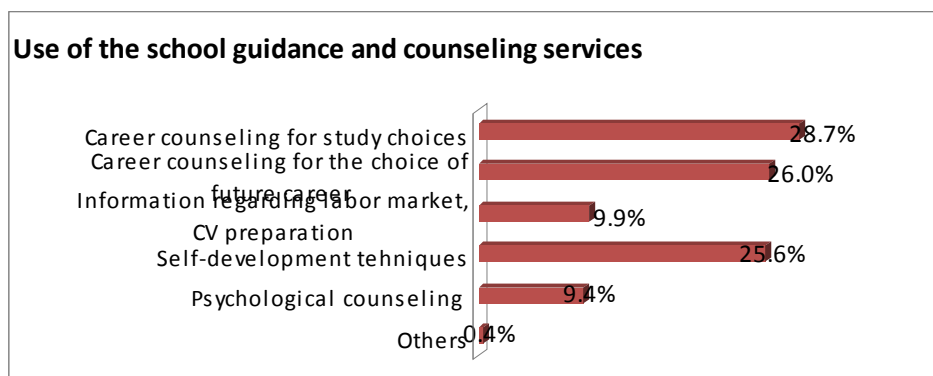


Figure no. 3: Use of the school guidance and counselling services

Source: authors' own research

While correlating data with information regarding high schools specializations it was noticed that those who have used the guidance and counselling centres for self-development techniques are mainly high school students studying sciences or humanities. For career counselling regarding choice of studies, 40.9% are science high school students and 31.4% study humanities. Psychological counselling was required by high school students from technical and science specializations. Those who asked for counselling for choosing future profession are mainly high school students studying sciences and humanities. Final year high school students were asked about the satisfaction degree of the professional counselling and guidance services used. The average calculated score taking into account the answers offered were close to level 4 of the scale used, showing that they were satisfied.

From the 266 respondents who ranked the school counselling and guidance services, most declared to be satisfied (149 nominations) or very satisfied (34 nominations) with quality of the services (Table 2). The alternatives „Totally dissatisfied” or „Dissatisfied” were chosen by 3.4% of the respondents (9 options for each alternative).

Table no. 2: The satisfaction degree of high school students regarding the professional counselling and guidance services used

Satisfaction degree	Absolute frequencies	Relative frequencies
Totally dissatisfied	9	3,4%
Dissatisfied	9	3,4%
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	65	24,4%
Satisfied	149	56,0%
Very satisfied	34	12,8%
Total	266	100%

Source: authors' own research

Analysing the satisfaction degree of counselling offered by pedagogical assistance centres, it was noticed that high school students are satisfied with all types of counselling services used.

Another aspect of the research identified the knowledge of the final year high school students regarding the labour market. They were asked if they know what job they will practice after graduation. Most of the respondents- 1,513 subjects, namely 64.1% answered affirmatively to this question, which means that they have already taken a decision about the occupation they will have after graduation (Figure 4).

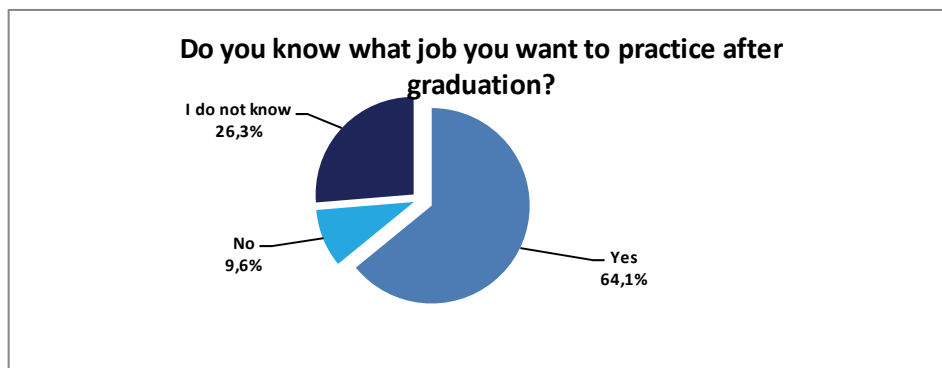


Figure no. 4: Identifying high school students' options regarding the job desired

Source: authors' own research

Only 9.6% of the interviewed pupils do not know what job they will practice after graduation. The percentage of undecided pupils is 26.3%. Among them, most are coming from humanities, sciences and technical specializations.

Most of the pupils who have already chosen a job have stated that their job is demanded on the labour market (87.6% from 1,513 nominations). Only 3.2% consider that the job they want to practice after graduation is not in demand. 1,850 interviewed high school students (33%) consider that the most important aspect for obtaining a job is linked to *skills acquired during studies*.

For obtaining a job, *work experience* in the related field is highly regarded (1,672 nominations, namely 29.8%), followed by *proper training for contests, interviews* (998 nominations representing 17.8%). Personal relationships are drivers for 820 pupils (14.7%), while *consistent tracking of job advertisements* are important for 213 high school students (3.8%) (Table 3).

Table no. 3: Driving factors for obtaining a job

Driving factors	Absolute frequencies	Relative frequencies
Skills acquired during studies	1850	33,0%
Experience in the field	1672	29,8%
Relevant training at contests, interviews	998	17,8%
Personal relationships	820	14,7%

Driving factors	Absolute frequencies	Relative frequencies
Consistent tracking of job advertisements	213	3,8%
Other	28	0,5%
I do not know	22	0,4%
Total	5603	100%

Source: authors' own research

Conclusions and recommendations

The participants in the survey agree that school plays an important role in a person's training, and the education system is one of the most important sources of acquiring necessary the skills for a professional career.

Among the final year high school students the number of those who know the concept of school and professional guidance is lower in comparison to those who think that they do not have knowledge about school and professional guidance. Most of them (53.8%) are stating that they know the concept to a certain extent. More than half of the interviewed pupils (55%) mentioned that they need school and professional counselling for choosing their career path. It is shown the positive influence of high school students vocational counselling on their educational and vocational training, elements in compliance with conclusions of previous research (Borders and Drury, 1992, Hughey et al., 1993, Gysbers and Laplan, 2001, Watts, 2001).

Among the high school interviewed students, 66.8% mentioned that there is a Centre for Pedagogical Assistance in their high school, where they can be guided in decisions regarding school and professional guidance. Among them only 16.9% have contacted this centre for making decisions regarding the school path, school and professional guidance, most of them coming from Brasov, Bucharest, Buzau, Constanta, Sfântu Gheorghe (Covasna), Zalău.

Career counselling regarding the choice of studies and future career are requested by the final years high school students from the guidance and counselling centres used. High school students who have used these centres declared to be satisfied with the professional counselling and guidance services.

Most of the high school students have mentioned that they know what job they will practice after graduation, meaning that they have already taken a decision for the occupation after graduation. Most of them consider that the profession chosen is demanded on the labour market. In this framework it is highlighted the interdependence between the role of career counselling, choice of profession and general economic evolution, conclusion revealed by Plant (2004).

The view among high school students about obtaining a job is linked to the importance of skills acquired during studies, work experience in the field, and proper training for contests and interviews. In the same field, Frey et al., (2014) have validated the critical role of skills acquired during studies in order to avoid school dropout and professional failure. Also, personal relationships are drivers only for 14.2% of the respondents, while the consistent tracking of job advertisements are important for 213 high school students.

For the high school students attending this survey parents, professors or representatives of education institutions had an important role in establishing their educational path. Only 2.2% of the high school students have mentioned that high school psychologist / counsellor in school and professional guidance guided them in choosing the school path, while the percentage recorded among university students is only 1.6%.

The research has captured the intentions of future high school graduates regarding the educational path, showing the high interest for following faculty studies immediately after graduation and the low interest for post-secondary schools. The high school students should be advised about the advantages and disadvantages of a faculty in comparison with a post-secondary school. After graduation most of the future graduates intend to continue the educational path, so that 90% of the interviewed persons want to attend a university, while 7% intend to attend the courses or a post-secondary school.

54.9% of the interviewed high school students want to continue studies after graduation and get a job at the same time. One third of the interviewed persons want to continue their studies after high school, while the search of a job in a foreign country is an alternative for 3.9% of the respondents.

The study quantified the high school students' perceptions regarding the advantages of graduating from a faculty, so that obtaining a higher specialization is the most important aspect of ending university studies, having a high number of nominations. Also, getting a job easier and acquiring higher education levels are important aspects of college graduation.

The final year high school students included in the sample are in the age group 16-23 years and represent: 34,5% sciences, 32,1% humanities, and 22,2% study in the technical schools, with 71,9% coming from the urban area.

We afford to state the following recommendation after carrying the research- the improvement of high school students vocational counselling for developing their professional skills might be achieved through a better cooperation between high schools, universities and the business environment, as part of the strategy of attracting and developing high qualified human resources, which is a key element for countries to achieve competitiveness at global level.

Contemporary studies and analyses show the importance of vocational counselling for the right and efficient guidance of high school students and university students, as the role of education in the business field has become a priority of efficient educational systems from all over the world.

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