

Revista de Cercetare si Interventie Sociala

ISSN: 1583-3410 (print), ISSN: 1584-5397 (electronic)

DIGITAL COUNSELING AND GUIDANCE OF STUDENTS – REAL AND EFFECTIVE SUPPORT DURING THE PANDEMIC PERIODS

Laura Emilia SERBĂNESCU, Oana Mariana CIUCHI

Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială, 2021, vol. 75, pp. 87-103

https://doi.org/10.33788/rcis.75.5

Published by: Expert Projects Publishing House



On behalf of: "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University, Department of Sociology and Social Work and HoltIS Association

Digital Counseling and Guidance of Students - Real and Effective Support During the Pandemic Periods

Laura Emilia SERBĂNESCU¹, Oana Mariana CIUCHI²

Abstract

This paper brings to the readers' attention the theoretical dimensions and emphasizes the practical dimensions of professional counseling and career guidance - an activity complementary to the vocational training activities, but imperative in the harmonious insertion of young people on the labor market, as revealed by presenting a good practice model. Thus, the research part of the paper reveals a high level of satisfaction / self-knowledge / relationship in the social environment, obtained by students, as a result of their participation in a professional counseling and career guidance program, conducted online. This is an aspect that leads us to conclude that career counseling activities, regardless of how they are carried out (onside / online, group / individual), have a defining importance for the further professional evolution of students / young people.

Keywords: career counseling and guidance, professional counseling, group counseling, individual counseling, social network.

Literature review

The concerns for defining and implementing the concept of career guidance and counseling are present and consistent in the literature and the current period comes with theoretical consolidations, new accents and practical results (Savickas, 1993; Schultheiss, 2003; Sampson *et al*, 2004; Guindon, M. H., & Richmond, 2005; Peterson, & Gonzalez, 2005). Thus, we find both in the theoretical and research areas of the field of counseling, as well as in the area of educational policies, the permanence of solid concerns and the revelation of consistent results, examples of good practices and new directions of action (Watkins Jr., & Savickas,

¹Polytechnic University of Bucharest, Bucharestm ROMANIA. E-mail: lauraeserbanescue@yahoo.com

² Polytechnic University of Bucharest, Bucharestm ROMANIA. E-mail: oanapsih@ vahoo.com

1990; Watts, 2005; Tien, 2007). In this context, we will further reproduce some theoretical frameworks of the afore-mentioned concept. According to the definition provided by the UNESCO (2000), the career guidance can be defined as the process by which an individual is assisted in discovering, accepting and properly using his own abilities, skills and interests in accordance with his aspirations and values (Crisan, Calin, & Oltean, 2015: 13). In a more recent approach, in 2008 the Glossary of Terms developed by the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN) brings to the fore the terms "career counseling" and "digital counseling and guidance".

The career counseling is the interaction between a person and a career / guidance counselor. It is also the individual or group process that aims at self-knowledge and self-understanding of each person, identifying a direction in their own life / work that will bring them satisfaction and meaning (Brown, & Ryan Krane, 2000). Once identified, the direction in life becomes essential in making decisions about learning, work and transition and also in modulating the person's response to changes in the work environment and the lifelong learning. The digital counseling and guidance is the counseling and guidance provided by ICT and may or may not include the direct interaction with a counselor. The term is often used to describe the provision of information or the use of self-assessment tools and exercises via the Internet (ELGPN. 2008: 16). Why are we interested in associating these two terms in this article? Because we went from the face-to-face counseling to the online counseling and we experienced and implemented both during the research proposed by our article.

The digital counseling and guidance covers the full range of counseling and guidance activities and services using all forms of ICT, including: (1) The Online counseling and guidance - Counseling and guidance provided by ICT, for example using a computer or similar electronic device (e.g. mobile phone). The term may include interaction via email, web chat, SMS or social networks (e.g. Facebook) with a specialist in counseling and guidance. The term is frequently used to describe the provision of information or the use of self-assessment tools and exercises via the Internet; (2) The telephone counseling and guidance - Providing telephone counseling and guidance services. The term may refer to a telephone conversation with a specialist in counseling and guidance or, less frequently, the provision of pre-recorded information. Similar services are currently provided via web chat, SMS and internet; (3) The internet counseling and guidance - Internet counseling and guidance activities using ICT. These may include providing information, using autonomously administered materials and tools, but also interactive activities such as participating in forums or discussion groups, e-mail or internet discussions with a counseling and guidance specialist.

The Romanian specialized literature ensures the definition of the concepts of counseling, counseling and career guidance in different representative works. We will stop for example at a recent approach of this type, at the example given by the Praxiological Dictionary of Pedagogy. Thus, career counseling is the process

of maximum compatibility between the resources, requirements, aspirations or personal interests of an individual and the real offer in the field of education, training and socio-professional integration (Cochran, 1997; Brown, 2007; Bocos, Radut-Taciu, & Stan, 2016).

Regarding the categories of counseling needs identified by the literature following studies and research, Dogar, Azeem, Majoka, Mehmood and Latif (2011) point out that among the five major categories of counseling needs that young people state (educational, vocational, emotional, social and behavioral needs), the vocational needs occupy the largest share, that is 45% (Collin, 2007; Crisan, Calin, & Oltean, 2015; Blustein, Schultheiss, & Flum, 2004). The contents of the career counseling, presented in the enumerative version (Dumitru, 2008, p. 206-212), can be summarized as follows: (1) the self-knowledge of the person (self-knowledge); (2) knowledge of the field of professions and occupations required by society; (3) career building;

When dealing with specifically to student counseling, Nicoleta Litoiu (2008: 10-85) identifies and details, using a complex range of examples and practical applications, the main areas of interest and action of counseling offered to students in career counseling and guidance centers operating in Romanian universities: (1) the self-knowledge, which involves the self-assessment of personality, skills and interests; (2) the search for a job, which involves identifying it and strategies for finding it; (3) the tools needed to search for a job: curriculum vitae, letter of intent, letter of acknowledgements, information on taking a job interview.

The context of educational policies in the field of student counseling

In higher education, the orientation and counseling activity is regulated by the Order of the Ministry of Education and Research no. 3235 / 10.02.2005 regarding the organization of the cycle of undergraduate university studies, which provides for the establishment in universities of career counseling and guidance centers (CCOC). In Romania there is a framework methodology regarding the organization and functioning of career counseling and guidance centers in the higher education system approved by Order no. 650 of November 19, 2014.

The CCOC's career counseling and guidance activity addresses: (1) Students of the higher education institution which they attend, regardless of the study program they attend or the form of education, including students included in mobility programs; (2) Students in the senior years of high school, through partnerships concluded with pre-university education units; (3) A particular university's graduates or the graduates of other universities.

CCOC's fundamental objective is to provide new employment opportunities for young people in the educational system through counseling and career guidance

activities aimed at: (1) The guidance and counseling of pupils / students so that they are able to optimally plan and manage their own educational path; (2) the reduction of university dropout caused by professional or career guidance reasons, as well as personal reasons or the adaptation to the university environment; (3) facilitating the relationship between students and the labor market, so that they know the real needs and challenges of the labor market; (4) increasing the employability of students in the graduated fields of study. The CCOC activity involves: (1) informing, guiding and advising high school senior year pupils / college students; (2) actions related to increasing the degree of insertion on the labor market of students and graduates; (3) informing and advising students on the educational and occupational routes available in the university curriculum, the system of transferable credits at university level, in accordance with the National Register of Qualifications in Higher Education and the National Qualifications Framework; (4) informing and advising students on the educational and occupational routes within higher education institutions, for higher education cycles.

Methodology

The micro-research was carried out within the Innovative Professors-Entrepreneurial Students Project, implemented by the POLITEHNICA University of Bucharest in partnership with the University of Pitești, during 2019-2021. The project aimed at developing the transversal competencies of college seniors in order to facilitate their proper insertion in the labor market. In this regard, within the project, the students participated in entrepreneurship, counseling and remedial activities.

Within the professional counseling and career guidance activity, carried out by CCOC UPB experts and professors from DFCDSSU UPB, the students from the target group benefited from two types of counseling services (group counseling and individual counseling). The group counseling activity consisted in the students going through 6 thematic modules: Self-knowledge, Labor market, Decision-making process, Career planning, Communication and teamwork, and Emotional management modules organized in 16 group counseling sessions during 3 hours. We mention the correlation of the above thematic modules and the areas of interest defined in the specialized literature, as well as of the educational policies in the field of career counseling.

In the context of establishing the state of emergency in Romania by the Decree of the President of Romania no. 195/16 March 2020, published in Part I of the Gazette no. 212/16 March 2020 and extended by the Decree no. 240/14 April 2020, published in Part I of the Official Gazette of Romania no. 311/14 April 2020 and after the installation of the national alert status, as measures for prevention and control of infections, in the context of the epidemiological situation generated by the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic, between March 2020 and May 2021, students

participated to group counseling activities and individual counseling activities carried out online, through the platform (https://pisa.upb.ro/elearning).

Given the unprecedented performance context of all activities and group counseling activities as well as the individual counseling activities were reorganized / structured according to the development in the online environment.

Moreover, the micro-research conducted between April and May 2021, which consisted in the application of a satisfaction questionnaire as a result of participating in counseling activities, was conducted online.

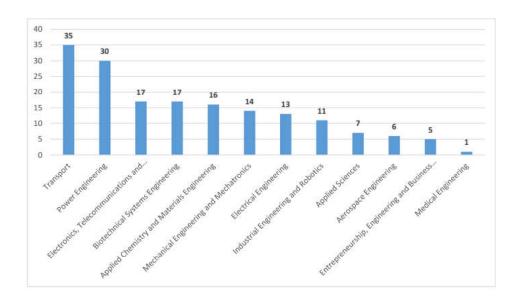
The satisfaction questionnaire is a tool of investigative technique regarding the qualitative assessment of the activities in which the beneficiaries of some services participated. It was built from closed questions and the respondents provided appropriate answers on Likert appreciation scales but also open items that gave the respondents the opportunity to express their opinions at the level of their own language development.

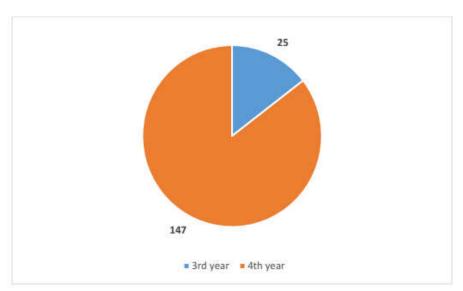
The monitoring process, focused upon the administered feedback questionnaire is focused on highlighting the results and progress made by students participating in counseling activities, from the perspective of clarifying the educational and professional path, developing key skills and abilities (communication and teamwork, relationships, the adoption of objective and constructive decisions, the planning of activities, the drafting of specific documents required on the labor market, etc.), including from the perspective of the satisfaction level registered by the participants in these activities.

The sample description

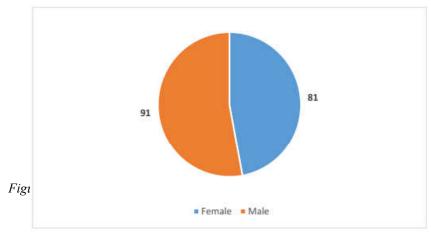
Of the 175 students participating in the period June 2020-May 2021, in the activities of professional counseling and career guidance, we registered a number of 172 students who responded to the feedback questionnaire.

They are / were senior students of the University POLITEHNICA of Bucharest, enrolled in undergraduate programs, within the following faculties: (1) The Faculty of Transport - 35 students standing for 20%; (2) The Faculty of Power Engineering - 30 students standing for 17%; (3) The Faculty of Electronics, Telecommunications and Information Technology / the Faculty of Biotechnical Systems Engineering - 17 students standing for 10%; (4) The Faculty of Applied Chemistry and Materials Engineering - 16 students, standing for 9%; (5) The Faculty of Mechanical Engineering and Mechatronics / the Faculty of Electrical Engineering - 14 students, standing for 8%; (6) The Faculty of Industrial Engineering and Robotics 11 students – standing for 6%; (7) The Faculty of Applied Sciences 7 students / the Faculty of Aerospace Engineering 6 students standing for 4%; (8) The Faculty of Entrepreneurship, Engineering and Business Management 5 students standing for 3%; (9) The Faculty of Medical Engineering 2 students, standing for 1% (Figure 1).





- 81 female students, standing for 4/%
- 91 male students, standing for 53% (Figure 3)

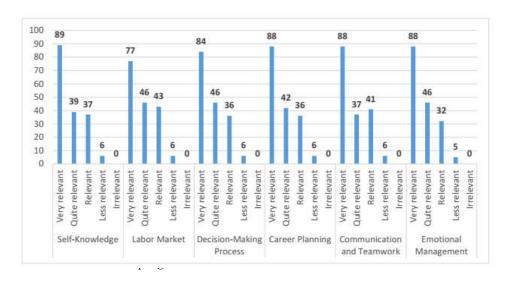


Results and discussions

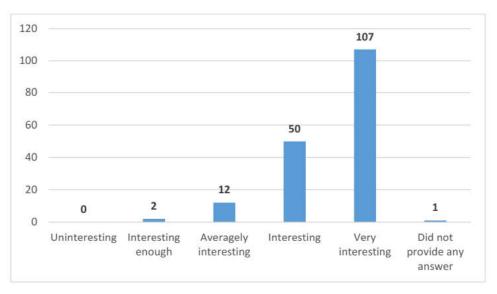
Regarding the relevance of the information / content received during the group counseling sessions / modules in relation to your personal and professional development, we found that:

- 165 students (96%) believed the information and contents of the group sessions for the Self-Knowledge Module, were: very relevant 89 students, quite relevant 39 students, relevant 37 students and only 6 students believed they were not very relevant;
- 166 students (96.5%) believed the information and contents of the group sessions for the *Labor Market Module* were: *very relevant* 77 students, *quite relevant* 46 students, *relevant* 43 students and only 6 students believed they were *not very relevant*.
- 166 students (96.5%) believed that the information and contents of the group sessions for the *Decision Making Module* were: *very relevant* 84 students, *quite relevant* 46 students, *relevant* 36 students and only 6 students believed they were *not very relevant*;
- 166 students (96.5%) believed that the information and contents of the group sessions for the Career Planning Module, were: very relevant 88 students, quite relevant 42 students, relevant 36 students and only 6 students believed they were not very relevant;
- 166 students (96.5%) believed that the information and contents of the group sessions for the Communication and Teamwork Module were: very relevant 88 students, quite relevant 37 students, relevant 41 students and only 6 students believed they were not very relevant;

166 students (96.5%) believed that the information and contents of the group sessions for the *Emotional Management Module* were: *very relevant*88 students, *quite relevant* - 46 students, *relevant* - 32 students and only
5 students believed they were *not very relevant* (*Figure 4*).



Concerning the extent to which the information received during the group counseling sessions / modules was believed to be interesting by the respondents, we had the following results: 107 of the respondents believed the information presented was very interesting, standing for 62.20%; 50 of the respondents believed the information presented was interesting, standing for 29.06%; 12 of the respondents believed the presented information was average, standing for 6.97% and 2 of the respondents believed the presented information was uninteresting, standing for 1.16% (Figure 5).



Concerning the usefulness of the topics addressed in the group counseling sessions / modules related to educational and professional development, the responding students appreciated as follows:

- 169 students (98.25%) believed that the information and contents of the group sessions for the Self-Knowledge Module were: very useful 103 students, quite useful 21 students, useful 45 students and only 3 students believed they were not very useful;
- 168 students (97.60%) believed that the information and contents of the group sessions for the *Labor Market Module* were: *very useful* 90 students, *quite useful* 22 students, *useful* 56 students and only 3 students believed they were *not very useful*;
- 168 students (97.60%) believed that the information and contents of the group sessions for the *Decision Making Module* were: *very useful* 107 students, *quite useful* 21 students, *useful* 40 students and only 3 students believed they were *less useful*;
- 170 students (98.83%) believed that the information and contents of the group sessions for the *Career Planning Module* were: *very useful* 107 students, *quite useful* 17 students, *useful* 46 students and only 2 students believed that they were *not very useful*;
- -169 students (98.25%) believed that the information and contents of the group sessions for the *Communication and Teamwork Module* were: *very useful* 102 students, *quite useful* 20 students, *useful* 47 students and only 2 students believed they were *less useful*;
- 165 students (95.93%) believed that the information and contents of the group sessions for the *Emotional Management Module* were: *very useful*

- 107 students, *quite useful* - 19 students, *useful* - 39 students and only 6 students believed that they were *not very useful* (*Figure 6*).

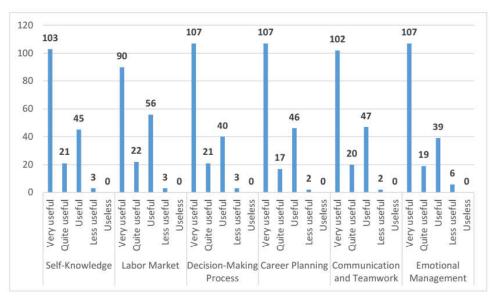


Figure 6. Graphic representation of students' assessments of the usefulness of the information received under the Career Counseling and Career Guidance program

Although the professional counseling and career guidance program was structured in a modular system, at one of the items of the questionnaire, students had to rate on a value scale from 1 to 5, the extent to which the succession of group counseling sessions facilitated their training. / developing / practicing / deepening the personal skills necessary for the socio-professional evolution. They provided the following answers: 90 of the students appreciated that to a very large extent, standing for 52.32%; 63 of the students believed that this was true to a large extent, standing for 36.62%; 13 of the students believed that this was true in the average level, standing for 7.55%; 6 of the students believed that this was true to a small extent, standing for 3.48% (Figure 7).

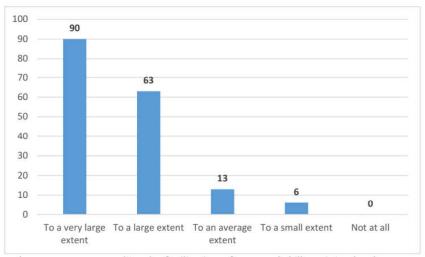


Figure 7. Students' assessments regarding the facilitation of personal skills training by the succession of sessions within the Professional Counseling and Career Guidance program

Concerning the need for professional counseling services in order to prepare students / graduates for access to the labor market, the 172 responding students rated as follows: 126 of the students rated this as very necessary, standing for 73.25%; 30 of the students rated this as necessary, standing for 17.44%; 15 of the students believed there was a medium level need for counseling services, standing for 8.72% and 1 student believed that the need for counseling services is very little, standing for 0.58% (Figure 8).

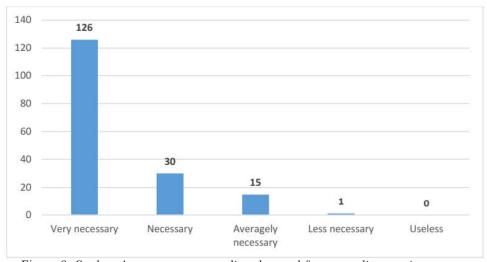


Figure 8. Students' assessments regarding the need for counseling services

In the open item: What major difficulties have you encountered in your personal and academic life during the last year, in a pandemic context, we received a variety of answers, which were grouped and included in the following thematic categories, as follows:

- 45 of the respondents to the questionnaire did not provide answers to this item, but this aspect did not indicate the lack of difficulties, but maybe even the difficulty to nominate them, standing for 26%;
- -34 of the respondents identified that *the lack of socialization / communication mediation* represents a difficulty in personal / academic life, standing for 19.76%;
- -26 of the respondents believed that the development of activities in the online environment was an important difficulty in their personal / academic life, standing for 15.11%;
- 24 of the respondents state that *they did not encounter difficulties* in their personal / academic life, standing for 13.95%;
- 23 of the respondents state that they encountered *personal difficulties* (anxiety / depression / boredom / overwork / decreased ability to focus / decreased motivation / lack of exercise, etc.), standing for 13.37%;
- 9 of the respondents believed that they had *difficulties in time management*, standing for 5.23%;
- 8 of the respondents believe the lack of jobs and the financial difficulties to be a difficulty, standing for 4.65% (*Figure 9*).

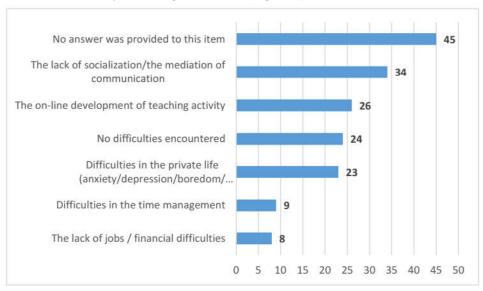


Figure 9. Main categories of problems faced by students in a pandemic context

A different item of the questionnaire aimed at identifying the level of utility (on a scale from 1 to 5) of individual counseling activities for personal and professional development, only from the perspective of students participating in this activity, which was not mandatory. Thus, out of the 39 students participating in the individual counseling activities and responding to the feedback questionnaire, we identified the following assessments: 34 students believed the counseling activities were very useful, standing for 87%; 4 students believed the counseling activities were useful, standing for 10%; 3 students believed that the individual counseling activities had an average level utility, standing for 1% (Figure 10).

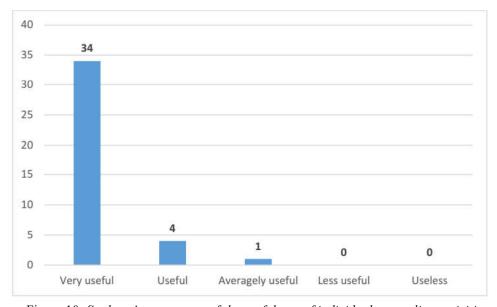


Figure 10. Students' assessments of the usefulness of individual counseling activities

The item that measured on a scale of 1 to 5, the degree of satisfaction with the participation in the counseling activities, organized and carried out within the project Innovative Professors-Entrepreneurial Students, collected feedbacks from respondents, as follows: 129 students were very satisfied, standing for 75%; 33 students were satisfied, standing for 19.18%; 9 students expressed an average level of satisfaction, standing for 5.23% and 1 student was slightly satisfied, standing for 0.58% (Figure 11).

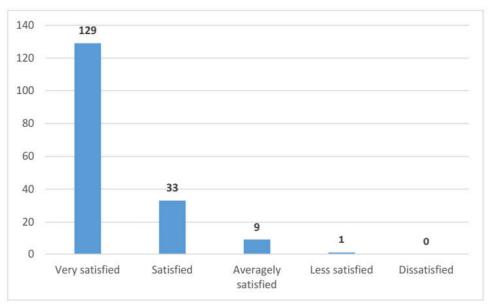


Figure 11. Students' appreciations regarding the degree of satisfaction with the Professional Counseling and Career Guidance program

In the open item, which asked respondents to specify the most important benefit as a result of participating in counseling activities, we received a variety of responses that were grouped into the following thematic categories: 42 students stated benefits in the category of personal development, standing for 24.41%; 38 of the students stated various benefits that could not be included in any category, standing for 22.09%; 31 of the students presented the self-knowledge as a benefit, standing for 18.02%; 27 students stated they had benefits in the professional development category, standing for 15.69%; 17 students believed that the learning of new information was a benefit, standing for 10%; 12 students stated they had benefits in the relations field, standing for 6.97% and 5 students stated they had benefits from the perspective of developing communication skills, standing for 2.90% (Figure 12).

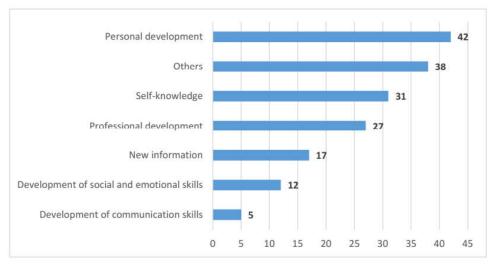


Figure 12. Main categories of benefits as a result of participation in counseling activities

Conclusion

The professional counseling and career guidance activities, carried out within the project Innovative Professors-Entrepreneurial Students, during March 2020-May 2021 were adapted with professionalism and mastery to the online environment, thus ensuring their continuity as well as emotional and technical support to the participating students during the pandemic. In this series students enrolled in undergraduate study programs, as well as senior students from 12 of the 16 faculties within the structure of the POLITEHNICA University of Bucharest participated in counseling activities. Although it is a public higher education institution with a mission to train specialists mainly for the technical field, through extracurricular activities (educational projects / fairs, job fairs, etc.), it provides students with the necessary psycho-social training for their appropriate social insertion.

The professional counseling and career guidance program was structured in 6 thematic modules of great interest to students, with a total duration of 48 hours completed by completing the 16 group counseling sessions, with content and information believed by the beneficiaries to be very relevant / interesting and useful for personal and professional development and whose succession has facilitated the formation / deepening / exercise of the targeted competencies / abilities. At the same time, the individual counseling activities in which students had the opportunity to participate were extremely well received by them.

The accurately identification of the categories of problems faced by students in the context of the pandemic, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, as well as

the demarcation of the main categories of benefits they had as a result of the professional counseling and guidance program points out that, although students are in the age of majority with well-defined life options, they still need activities to develop their communication and psycho-relationship skills / abilities, as well as specialized support in their own career guidance, in relation to the requirements of the labor market and the extremely complex and dynamic social life.

Recommendations

Thus, the program of professional counseling and career guidance could be resumed at the level of the educational institution, adapted to several age categories and multiplied at the level of the educational system.

The need to organize and carry out group / individual counseling activities within the pre-university / higher education institutions in order to provide psychopedagogical assistance and career guidance services to students is required as a grievance, at the level of the national strategy / educational policy and effective practice.

References

- Blustein, D.L., Schultheiss, D. E. P., & Flum, H. (2004). Toward a relational perspective of the psychology of careers and working: A social constructionist analysis. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 64(3), 423-440. DOI: 10.1016/j.jvb.2003.12.008.
- Bocos, M.D, Radut-Taciu, R., & Stan, C. (2016). *Dicționar praxiologic de pedagogie*, vol I, Pitești: Paralela 45.
- Brown, D. (2007). *Career information, career counseling, and career development* (9th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Allyn & Bacon.
- Brown, S. D., & Ryan Krane, N. E. (2000). Four (or five) sessions and a cloud of dust: Old assumptions and new observations about career counseling. In: S. D. Brown & R. W. Lent (Eds.), *Handbook of couseling psychology* (3rd ed., pp. 740-766). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Cochran, L. (1997). Career counseling: A narrative approach. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Collin, A. (2007). Contributions and challenges to vocational psychology from other disciplines: examples from narrative and narratology. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, 7(3), 159-167. DOI: 10.1007/s10775-007-9122-8.
- Crisan, C., Calin, A., & Oltean, A. (2015). Ghid de bune practici privind consilierea și orientarea profesională, stagiile de practică și întreprinderile simulate, Cluj-Napoca: Accent.
- Dogar, A.H., Azeem, M., Majoka, M.I., Mehmood, A., & Latif, S. (2011). *British Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 1(2), 108-124.
- Dumitru, I. (2008). Consilierea psihopedagogică, baze teoretice și sugestii practice, Iasi: Polirom.

- ELGPN. (2008). *Policy development in lifelong counseling and guidance: Glossary*, European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (retrived on: http://www.elgpn.eu/publications/browse-by-language/english/elgpn-tools-no.-2-llg-glossary/)
- EURYDICE (2019). Consiliere și orientare în învățământul superior. *Retrived on:* https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/guidance-and-counselling-higher-education-56 ro.
- Guindon, M.H., & Richmond, L.J. (2005). Practice and Research in Career Counseling and Development-2004. *Career Development Quarterly*, 54(2), 90-137. DOI: 10.1002/j.2161-0045.2005.tb00145.x.
- Litoiu, N. (ed.). (2008). Consilierea și orientarea în carieră Ghid pentru studenți și absolvenți, Bucuresti: Politehnica Press.
- Peterson, N., & Gonzalez, R. C. (2005). The role of work in people's lives: Applied career counseling and vocational psychology (2nd ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson Brooks/Cole.
- Sampson, J.P., Reardon, R.C., Peterson, G.W., & Lenz, J.G. (2004). *Career counseling & services: A cognitive information processing approach*. Belmont, CA: Thomson Brooks/Cole.
- Savickas, M. (1993). Career counseling in the postmodern era. *Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy: An International Quarterly*, 7(3), 205-215.
- Schultheiss, D.E.P. (2003). A relational approach to career counseling: Theoretical integration and practical application. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 81(3), 301-310. DOI: 10.1002/j.1556-6678.2003.tb00257.x
- Tien, H.-L. S. (2007). Practice and research in career counseling and development-2006. *Career Development Quarterly*, 56(2), 98- 140. DOI: 10.1002/j.2161-0045.2007. tb00025.x.
- Watkins Jr, C. E., & Savickas, M. (1990). Psychodynamic career counseling. In: W.
 B. Walsh & S. H. Osipow (Eds.), Career counseling. Contemporary topics in vocational psychology (pp. 79-116). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Watts, A.G. (2005). Career guidance policy: An international review. *Career Development Quarterly*, 54(1), 66-76. DOI: 10.1002/j.2161-0045.2005.tb00142.x.