DEVELOPING THE ICT SKILLS OF GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING PRACTITIONERS IN ROMANIA. ANALYSIS OF THE NATIONAL CONTEXT.

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Abstract: The article presents the results of the national context analysis related to the use of ICT in guidance and counselling, run within the context of the ICTSkills II project. The project was coordinated by Aster Bologna in partnership with 6 other organisations from 4 countries including the Institute of Education Sciences from Bucharest. The article points out the main strengths and weaknesses of the national guidance and counselling system in relation with the ICT training and practices of the practitioners.

Keywords: guidance and counselling, ICT skills, certification, e-practitioners, training programme.

I. THE NATIONAL GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING SYSTEM

1.1 Guidance providers and networks

The national system of institutions in charge with information, guidance and counselling in our country consists of the following public networks and services.

1.1.1 The Ministry of Education network

- Centre for Resources and Educational Assistance - an umbrella organisation for coordination of the activity of Centres for Psycho-pedagogical Assistance, Centres for Inclusive Education and Speech Impairment Centres. The target population consists of pupils from all levels of pre-university education (compulsory and post-compulsory, 1st to 12th grade), parents and teachers serving that particular territory.
- Centres for Information and Guidance addressed to the undergraduates and graduates in university centres in issues of interest for vocational decision-making, academic and professional mobility, recognition of credits and qualifications etc.
- Complex Expertise Commissions for the psycho-diagnosis and guidance of the students with special educational needs.
- Information and Consultancy Centres for Youth targeting the youth population aged 16-26.

1.1.2 The Ministry of Labour network

- The Centres for Information and Vocational Counselling are located in all counties and are coordinated by the National Agency for Employment. The target population consists of young graduates, people with unemployment status, adults seeking for occupational change etc.
- EURES - The national network of services was established (http://www.anofm.ro/eures). The National Agency for Employment (ANOFM) offers services of work mediation as a member of EURES. Partners of public services within the network are trade unions, private organizations and also different actors on the labour market. The European
Commission coordinates the network.

- During 2004-2008, the National Agency for Employment (ANOFM) established 8 pilot centres in the 8 Romanian regions through a national programme called “Services for people with special needs”. Within next years, the network should be extended to 42 centres, one in every county.

1.1.3 The Ministry of Health network

- The Educational and Vocational Guidance Medical Commissions and Prophylactic Medicine Centres deal with medical validation of the educational and vocational qualification of students at all pre-university levels. These bodies work in close cooperation with the National Institute for School Hygiene to elaborating the requisite and standards of healthy and safe environment to learners.
- Information and Consultancy Pilot Centres for Families dealing with information and consultancy in various domains (including vocational guidance) to families with social difficulties.

The National Resources Centre for Vocational Guidance - Euroguidance Romania (www.euroguidance.ise.ro) set up in April 1999 (Ministry’s Order No. 3703/29.04.1999) serves as link between the official sources of information (both European and national) and the beneficiaries of guidance and counselling activities (both individuals and organizations).

1.2 The professional profiles of the practitioners

The Classification of Occupations in Romania (COR) does not include the occupation of school counsellor. The school counsellors in the network of pre-university education are assimilated with the teaching staff. For the teaching occupation there are specific occupational standards developed.

The career counsellors in the higher education system are assimilated to the psychologist occupation. For this occupation there are no occupational standards.

For the practitioners in the network of employment services the situation is much clearer. Two occupations, per se, are listed in the COR: vocational guidance counsellor (cod 241208) and agent vocational guidance of the unemployed people (cod 342302). For both occupations CNFPA developed occupational standards: http://so.cnfpa.ro/so/.

1.3 Training routes available for the professionals

To become a counsellor in Romania it is compulsory to have a University Diploma in one of the following specialisation: pedagogy, psycho-pedagogy, psychology, sociology, social pedagogy, psycho-sociology, psycho-pedagogy, or philosophy-history 1978 – 1989 graduates.

The accreditation exam is done starting with 2004 school year, according with the new Guidance and Counselling Accreditation Curriculum. The graduates who want to become school counsellors at pre-university level should pass the national examination. It consists in written exams in guidance and counselling, according with the approved curriculum. The Guidance and Counselling Accreditation Curriculum is available only in Romanian language at: http://www.edu.ro/index.php/legaldocs/713

It is not compulsory to have a Master degree to become a school counsellor at preuniversity or at university level. Master degree studies in Guidance and Counselling are offered by the biggest public universities in Romania (Bucharest, Cluj, Timisoara, Iasi), but also by the private higher education institutions, as the University Titu Maiorescu Bucharest. Students can choose the CREDIS Department within the Bucharest University if they want to study Guidance and counselling at distance.

Teachers and professors (at university level) have to obtain 90 ECTS within 5 years, according with the accreditation methodology of the National Committee for Professional Development CNFP (www.cnfp.ro).

Therefore, teacher can choose between accredited courses at:

a. 42 Teacher Training Houses acting at county level as public institutions agreed by the Ministry of Education, in charge with the teacher training. Their training offer includes also Guidance and Counselling courses;
b. Private institutions such as such as Education 2000+ Centre, member of SOROS Open Network who have accredited courses in different areas, but also in Guidance and Counselling.

Professors at university level must follow post-university courses in psycho-pedagogy and obtaining 60 ECTS within 3 years in order to be allowed to teach in higher education institutions. Such courses are offered by the Departments for the Teachers Professional Development (DPPD) in almost every public and private university.

II. THE E-PRACTITIONER PROFILE AND TRAINING

2.1 The experience with e-guidance delivery

Although all counsellors have access to a computer and Internet connection at least in the ICT lab of his school, is not at all a common practice to deliver guidance services at a distance. We may talk of a vicious circle in the sense that the clients do not know about the possibility to contact the counsellor by e-mail, an on the other hand the counsellor does not promote enough this kind of communication side.

Some of the main ICT based tools for guidance include:

- The Guide to the World of Occupations (available online at: www.go.ise.ro) which includes a self-assessment tool for identifying own interests and aptitudes.
- The battery of tests for the assessment of cognitive aptitudes and personality traits it is the very recent tool developed by the professors in the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences in the city of Cluj (Romania) for the counsellors working both with young and adults. One round of training of the local multiplicators was organized for a proper understanding and use of this tool.

Databases created for general use in diagnosing and forecasting the vocational training profile of generations (educational network Educ2000, Electronic Agenda, PICC, EUROSTAGE, internal network of the National Agency for Employment, The Centre for the Development of the Vocational and Technical Education, National Observatory Romania):

- Inter-Options - Interests questionnaire;
- Assessment forms for individual and institutional activity of career guidance and counselling.
- PLOTEUS – the Portal for Learning Opportunities throughout Europe (www.ploteus.net).

2.2 Formal, informal and non-formal training for e-practitioners

The ICT training component in the initial training is limited to basics and do not imply any specific training in order to develop the needed ICT competences of the e-practitioner. The continuous training of the practitioners do not provide neither the required knowledge and skills to the practitioners. A very good start was represented by the training sessions that the practitioners run through the associated project.

Some training resources are available online which represent the results of different projects like EGA - www.guidanceforum.net and Ariadne - http://www.ariadneproject.org

The practitioners get accustomed with using the specific ICT tools on the job while developing specific professional needs due to the contact with the beneficiaries. Especially the young practitioners demonstrate obvious interest in the ICT guidance packages.

There are number of private companies providing free of charge initiation courses of web design, but not specifically in the field of guidance resources.
III. ICT SKILLS (ICT SKILLS FOR CAREER COUNSELLOR)

The revised map of competences developed in the ICTSkills II project is divided into two units, six elements and 28 sub-elements. The proposed training path based on this map consists of 30 training modules, where each module equates to 25 hours work and is rated at 30 ECTS credits (equivalent to half-a-year or 750 hours of study).

The ICT Skills map

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit 1: Use ICT to deliver guidance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1: Use ICT media and software in the guidance process to meet clients’ information needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.1.1: Select and use visual, audio and text-based information</td>
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<td>1.1.2: Make visual, audio and text-based information for clients</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.1.3: Enable clients to select and use visual, audio and text-based information for themselves</td>
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<td>1.1.4: Enable clients to create visual, audio and text-based information</td>
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<td>1.1.5: Share information with other partners in clients’ networks of support</td>
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<td>1.2: Use ICT media and software in the guidance process to meet clients’ experiential learning needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.2.1: Select and use ICT media and software that will give your clients access to virtual and simulated career experiences and situations</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.2.2: Create experiential learning activities and simulations for your clients using ICT</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.2.3: Enable clients to access virtual and simulated career experiences and situations using ICT media and software</td>
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<td>1.3: Use ICT media and software in the guidance process to meet clients’ constructivist learning needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.3.1: Select and use ICT media and software to assist clients in structuring and managing their career thinking and development</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.3.2: Create activities and resources using ICT media and software that will assist clients in structuring and managing their career thinking and development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.3: Enable clients to use ICT media and software to assist them in structuring and managing their career thinking and development</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.4: Use ICT media and software in the guidance process to meet clients’ communication needs</td>
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<td>1.4.1: Select and use ICT media and software for establishing and maintaining client communications</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.4.2: Create activities and resources using ICT media and software for establishing and maintaining client communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.3: Enable clients to use ICT media and software to establish and maintain communications with you and others who can help them in their careers</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.4.4: Select appropriate channels for communicating and consulting with others who can support the client in the guidance process</td>
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<th>Unit 2: Develop and manage the use of ICT in guidance</th>
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<tr>
<td>2.1: Develop your use of ICT-related guidance solutions</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.1.1: Use ICT media and software in different combinations to achieve guidance objectives</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.1.2: Integrate ICT and face-to-face approaches, where appropriate, to ensure an effective guidance process for clients</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.1.3: Identify the training and support needs of clients to enable their use of ICT in</td>
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3.1 Results of the survey

We can identify a few obstacles hindering the training programs in the field:
- There are no fora in charge with the accreditation of all the counsellors in the education field that should take into account the standard professional profile. In these circumstances, the profile could only get an optional status.
- In Romania, there is not a clear distinction between the practitioners using ICT/providing services through ICT from those who do not.
- There is no consistent initial training in ICT of the practitioners, therefore it would be difficult to establish a profile of the e-practitioner.
- The higher institutions are not very open to include in their initial training offer the conclusions and results of the ICTSkills 2 project.
- The risk that the training provision for the practitioners remains behind to the rapid development of the new technology.
- The existent professional association of psychologists could resist the recognition and implementation of a tool that has been produced and experimented by other-than-psychologists, whereas there is a fair share of educators (teachers, social workers, sociologists) working as guidance counsellors though unaffiliated to a professional entity.
- The centralized control of the initial training pathway remains a serious limitation of the Romanian education system.

Obstacles preventing the guidance practitioners from gaining e-guidance skills:
- Lack of accredited programs in Romania that focus on specialized IT training in guidance;
- Lack of other organized ways of developing the ICT skills (knowledge transfer between the practitioners);
- Traditional professional and occupational standards that do not include IT as a mandatory skill for guidance practitioners;
- Centralized framework for staff assessment in education (self-assessment tools bare no formal recognition);
- Very permissive legal framework where there is no compulsory training in ICT, there are no quality standards for using ICT in counselling;
- In some cases even the lack of equipment (printers, Internet connection or easy access to computer).

The expected hindrances to prevent the practitioners adopting the use of the self-assessment tool and of the e-portfolio in their work:
- Overloading with tools being unnecessary for accreditation;
• No perspective of having the self-assessment resolution and the portfolio recognized by local/central authorities when the holder aims a job/sector transfer;
• Lack of basic skills in handling the IT equipment and no immediate training available;
• Inexistence of a link between the counsellor and the client, there is no portal enabling the client to contact a counsellor for an interview, (self) assessment.

The identified barriers preventing the training institutions to provide training focused on gaining the ICT skills from the proposed map: insufficient trained personnel, policy framework and perspectives, capability on location (space design, cost of new equipment, etc.), the necessity to accreditate the program at the National Centre for Adult Vocational Training.

The identified solutions for overcoming the barriers at national level include:
• recognition of prior learning for the guidance personnel with ICT expertise, and incentives for them to train their peers and stay in the system, acquire new positions;
• lobby by professional associations, united by what they do and not by their background;
• empowering and encouraging the communities to fund-raise and bring together creative energies, giving them a sense of pride and ownership over the results of such kind at the local level;
• running a national training program in using ICT as a medium for practitioners supported from the budget;
• training with international experts of the national trainers.

**ICT Skills 1 and ICT Skills 2: feed-back from the interviews**

ICT Skills-1 was developed with the help of and for the practitioners in vocational guidance. While being involved in several project phases, they have found useful the conceptual structure proposed by the map of competences.

The group selected for the experimental training in Romania were school practitioners, and in this capacity fulfilling a middle management role at the local level. They use the map of competences for making a statement about the scope of their work in relation to the comprehensive educational interventions, defining the prerequisite knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to perform at high quality standards.

The training module lead to the creation and maintenance of a discussion forum under the competence „Information management“ (AIOSP) that is valid to date; the forum is used by the guidance practitioners in the district of Bucharest who have became part of the originally trained team (June 2005). By our knowledge, further forums have been created and applied in the work of practitioners with their respective target groups.

Beyond the group of practitioners involved, we have no evidence of mainstreaming in using the results. So, further dissemination activities are welcome. Another reason for the under-use of the results is the general rare use of ICT in counselling; most of the guidance and counselling activities limit themselves to face-to-face group counselling as well as to classes under curricular area Guidance and Counselling.

The results could be make more visible (inter)national wide by:
• cascading the training from international level to national and local one;
• expanding the range of benefits to organizing the professional life of the guidance practitioners at the larger regional and national level. According the map of competences, different people can master different elements of competences. The impact on the system could be enhanced by introducing the competence training in the initial education of guidance practitioners (currently the training in using ICT is insufficient, as for using in counselling is totally missing). But, altering the university curricula could be a difficult process, it is more realistic to work towards the introduction of the map of competence in the continuous training offer;
• taking into account in the accreditation of guidance counsellors of a fair distribution of competences in a guidance team or individual that is submitting a request for accreditation. The map of competences could serve as an overall framework for evaluation;
more dissemination through: developing websites especially designed for special target
groups (pupils, parents, disadvantaged persons), publishing a handbook/brochure with the
map of competencies and the training contents in each national language.

The proposed map of ICT competencies for the guidance practitioners is considered
comprehensive, but it could be improved by:
- allowing freedom to stress certain competences, according to the needs and features of the
  local context where guidance professionals perform. The map should be made available to
  policy makers and training providers, as well as the current results by practitioners, who
  have used it;
- updating the competences in accordance with the demands of the present (web 2 tools);
- by ongoing validation on practitioners at international level;
- new techniques may be included, but also it is very important to provide training on both
  the technical side and the method of relevant use in guidance and counselling.

Appropriateness of the competences description
Most of the practitioners find the descriptions clear. The taxonomy used in developing the map
of competences is coherent with the agreed pedagogical requirements for a teaching design in our
country; both aim at identifying and integrating cognitive, affective and attitude components.

The Romanian counsellors in schools are teachers, therefore expected to apply and be
evaluated against standardized tools, irrespectively of the subject matter; guidance and counselling is
part of the core curriculum.

Other skills needed by guidance counsellors include:
- collaborative skills;
- (self)assessment skills;
- problem solving skills;
- synthesis skills;
- effective writing communication skills;
- effective time management skills;
- in the context of information explosion on the Internet the focus should be on
  effectiveness in the information management;
- access search engines and find relevant information;
- moderate online courses on career counselling;
- use of new technology in counselling (like Ipod nano, clickers);
- skills for developing resources for different target groups;
- ability to access wider information and take a wider international (European) vision than
  the national one, beyond the national-local one, when giving advice and guidance;
- they should keep the general ability to adapt their work to the needs/requests of the clients,
  to be flexible, open minded and always informed.

ICT Skills 2 Implementation
Necessary measures needed to assure a good impact and the mainstreaming the results.

Visibility is one of the important steps, the practitioners have been involved from the very
beginning in the development process, not delivering them readymade outputs to apply.
Communication with and lobby around the policy makers and training providers for integration of the
ICT module in the initial training of guidance counsellors in universities.

To train the local authorities in ICT for raising the awareness about the benefits of online
presence for visibility, access to resources, communication, cost management.

Obstacles preventing the guidance practitioners from gaining e-guidance skills:
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Assuring a higher trans-sectorial and multilevel applicability of the map of competencies

Even in Romania the National Classification of Occupations does not refer to counsellor using ICT, all the practitioners use it (in a blended approach) in a certain amount, but not all the competencies are useful for every counsellor.

Experts in policy and training from all sectors interested could work out a comprehensive version of competences, to include definition of competence, to indicate items of knowledge, skills and attitudes that are specific. It would be useful to break down the competence elements in:

- compulsory and;
- desirable.

Or:

- Basic skills (minimal level) to be acquired by all practitioners during the initial training, whatever the field of occupation.
- Different training pathways (maximal level) for preuniversity, higher education, or employment.

The expected hindrances to prevent the practitioners adopting the use of the self-assessment tool and of the e-portfolio in their work are:

- Overloading with tools being unnecessary for accreditation;
- Assessing the skills that are only partially needed in counselling;
- No perspective of having the self-assessment resolution and the portfolio recognized by local/central authorities when the holder aims a job/sector transfer;
- Lack of basic skills in handling the IT equipment and no immediate training available;
- Inexistence of a link between the counsellor and the client, there is no portal enabling the client to contact a counsellor for an interview, (self-assessment).

Including the training modules in the initial or continuous training. All respondents pointed out that both are desirable.

- Initial training the initiative should materialize in including it in the ‘titularisation’ examination or in the standard for accreditation.
- Continuing training – the results would show sooner and be absorbed easier.

The benefits for schools of having IT-skilled staff in guidance is visible in the various groups of clients reached (employed parents), the means of exchanges (forums, blogs, email communication) the nature and level of user motivation.

Rethinking and developing the initial and continuous training. The experts’ answers swing from positive ones to partial:

- Yes, because it offers a flexible and comprehensive model for integrating responses to the modern challenges in profession posed by the alternative learning environments, the need for social networking, diversified communication with beneficiaries and providers, it helps to identify the strong but also the weak points to work on.
- Partial, if it is not correlated with other legal initiatives at national level.

Regarding the practitioners’ training needs (on using ICT as a resource or as a medium) the survey indicated that ways are needed, experts from different levels and sectors see things differently, there is no unitary vision regarding training in ICT as medium or resource.

Taking into account the results of the study a number of solutions are proposed for overcoming the barriers at national level, namely: Recognition of prior learning for the guidance personnel with ICT expertise, and incentives for them to train their peers and stay in the system, acquire new positions; Lobby by professional associations, united by what they do and not by their background; Empowering and encouraging the communities to fund-raise and bring together creative energies, giving them a sense of pride and ownership over the results of such kind at the local level; Running a national training program in using ICT as a medium for practitioners supported from the budget; Training with international experts of the national trainers.
References