

Analysis of Experience of Designing the Professional Master Study Programme “Career Counselling” in Latvia

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Abstract

A person’s creativity is a natural, enduring process having a structure and manifestations of its own. Analysis of literature and empiric research leads to an opinion that the notion of creativity is closely connected with a person’s experience. This process is closely interlinked – creativity influences experience, in its turn, wide experience opens up a variety of possibilities for a creative vision of the environment and perception of the reality.

Interaction of experience and creativity form basis of a person’s tolerance towards changes and of flexible reasoning which are of special significance for representatives of communicative specialties, including teachers, lecturers, social workers.

Each person has his/her own personal worldview which is based on cognitive models and conduct developed through subjective experience. These models to a much greater extent than the reality determine how we interpret the world, react to it and make our personal conduct and experiences meaningful and how we teach. Thus we can assert that it is not the outer reality that restricts or, the other way round, encourages us, but the models about this reality formed inside us. By forming new links between cognition and conduct we get a lot more types of creative approach to perceiving the reality itself and teaching.

Key Words: Subjective Experience; Notion of Creativity; Empiric Research; Flexible Reasoning.

Description of the situation

Professional orientation and career counselling is one of the public services, which is necessary for people of any age, in different stages of their life both choosing a kind of education, studies or occupation and a place to manage and develop their career. It becomes part of a joint system “*a person - education – work*” that is created by career guidance of an individual, formal, non-formal and informal education as well as the labour market. In general this system should ensure assistance for both individuals who have not started their work life and who are looking for a job, or have already been employed. [3]

It has been defined by the tendencies of EU politics:

1. to strengthen career guidance activities in the sector of education in order to create circumstances for informed choice of further education, and to assist in promoting skills for their own career planning and managing in the future,
2. to accept the importance of career guidance activities during transition periods between education and labour market and vice versa,
3. with the help of qualitative career guidance activities, to assist in promoting social inclusion, social and gender equality and to contribute to the formation of a civil society.

These EU tendencies motivated to evaluate critically the possibilities of career development in Latvia and defined the necessity for career guidance development. Therefore the Ministry of Education in Latvia has included activities for expanding the support of career education implementation as one of the priorities in the guidelines of educational sector from 2006 - 2010.

Topicality of the problem

Career guidance has been created by several fields – career education, information and career counselling (see Picture No. 1).

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With the concept career guidance we understand a range of activities that enable individuals of any age and at any point in their lives (lifelong) to identify their capacities, competences and interests, skills and abilities and experience, to make meaningful decisions on choosing education and/or employment and to organize and manage their individual life cycles in education, employment and other fields, where these skills and experiences can be introduced and used. [2]

Picture No. 1

Career guidance

Career education	Information	Career counselling
Services	Elaboration of information	Career planning assistance
Courses	Dissemination of information	Evaluation of Occupational suitability
Programmes		Other activities: Work screening, Training for employability skills

Career guidance services have to enable people to understand their interests and ability as well as the labour market, to acquire and develop their career management skills. The necessity of this service has become especially topical after regaining state independence. The processes of political and economical changes in our state have created a reasoned necessity for lifelong education, thus career guidance has been constantly becoming more important among children, young people and adults.[7]

Already in September – October 2002, the inquiry conducted by the Professional Education and Further Education department of the Ministry of Education and Science has pointed out several reasons, why young people have difficulties to choose one direction for further education or training. As the main reasons can be mentioned:

- 1) not having a good knowledge of possible information resources or their inaccessibility,
- 2) not acquired self evaluation and career planning skills,
- 3) not always there are specialists available, who can give professional advice in career issues,
- 4) students at vocational education institutions do not possess sufficient information about the differences of the study process at a vocational school in comparison with a comprehensive school, they do not have possibilities to make certain about their occupational suitability.

As a result dropout rates of first year students from vocational secondary educational institutions is 17.58%, but from higher educational establishments – 12%.

Purposeful career research and career education activities are already necessary at the elementary level; they have to continue at secondary level and, conversing into new quality, also at colleges and higher educational establishments.[1] Thus, with the concept *career education* we can understand planned provision of activities, courses and programmes within education and training institutions that support students to acquire and develop skills to adapt their interests, abilities and possibilities, to identify their career education needs for planning and managing their career development and to obtain knowledge and understanding about the labour market, its link with education, as well as about lifelong career planning and development. Nowadays we can notice several developmental tendencies in the field of career education in Latvia; however, some of them limit career development. For example, transmitted direct experience of previous generations in choosing education and career. Children follow their parents' career or they know only the occupations they have come across in their nearby environment. Since we do not have a career counsellor at schools at this moment, young people do not obtain extensive information about occupations, they do not explore their interests, capacity of abilities and they do not look for an occupation according to their abilities and interests.

There is also a tendency in Latvia that a rapid inflow of students is observable in so called "popular specialities", for example, lawyers, psychologists, social workers. As a result it creates an

imbalance between offer and demand. Now we have a situation, for example, that people having a psychology teacher qualification, can not find a job, because there is no demand for such kind of specialists at schools. Psychology teachers acknowledge that initially they did not even know what kind of duties they would really have. The first thing they had noticed was a word “psychologist” and next a person takes desired for existent. Social workers have a similar situation. People can acquire this occupation right after they have graduated a secondary school and do not know the specificity of the occupation. Returning from practice, where they work in social care institutions for elderly people or with homeless people, the vision often changes (so it is important to have a career counsellor also in higher educational establishments, who could help students to find the most suitable study programme and do not allow “to get lost” in a crisis situation). So, now we not always can react to such cases, but we have to develop the system of career counselling and also have to prepare specialists.

Career education activities help people to develop themselves - that is, to understand themselves, develop self-awareness, evaluate own experience, achievements, personal traits, strong and weak points. They help: 1) to understand changes in education, studies and employment, and how these changes influence career development, 2) to investigate different careers and possibilities to develop them with the help of studies, work and free time activities, 3) to compare and adjust personal achievements and qualities (especially skills and competences) with the achievements necessary for specific further career, education, studies. In the process of education people get to know up-to-date information resources, methods of searching information and they prepare themselves for transition from studies to work life or further studies. Though we have to acknowledge that in Latvia there still is not developed and established system of working out materials and creating a basis of information that exists in other West European countries.

Still one of the obstructive factors in solving the problem is the following – a question about preparedness quality of employees and methodological support for introducing the career education programme into the sector of education has not been solved so far. As the main reason for insufficient amount of professionally prepared employees at educational institutions, we can mention the fact that so far none of higher educational establishments in Latvia has offered study programmes neither for acquiring career counsellor qualification nor for its professional improvement. According to the conceptual approach, it is important to plan practical activities for working out career education programmes and introducing them into the educational institutions of different level and kind, to prepare necessary employees qualitatively, and to ensure informative and methodological resources for the introduction of the programme. Therefore we considered that it is necessary to begin a complex introduction of career education programmes in educational institutions (possibly together), and the first precondition for that - creating a system of preparing qualified specialists during 2 – 3 years. In Latvia it is being done in two ways: ensuring short professional development courses for teachers/ vocational guidance practitioners at schools and a parallel start of new specialists within higher education system.

Solution to the problem

Education of qualified career counsellors was started within the frame of the project of Social Fund National Programme of the Ministry of Education and Science 3.2.7.1. “Development and implementation of courses and modules for the training of school teachers/ vocational guidance practitioners, development of a higher education study programme for the guidance and career counsellors; fostering the implementation of vocational/ career guidance provisions and careers education in the education sector”. [4] One of the most significant activities of the project was development of the Occupational standard and a study programme for career counsellors.

Evaluating the experience of other West European countries in the field of career guidance, we are convinced that it is preferable to design a professional master study programme in Latvia; thus the studies have been developed on the basis of acquired higher education. Since there was no such occupation in Latvia - career counsellor before, but there was a demand for that, we considered that it is useful to involve several higher educational establishments in order to prepare such kind of

specialists. Therefore in the process of designing master programme experts from six higher educational establishments were involved, forming a work group of 14 people. The project foresaw to implementing the designed programme in at least 3 higher educational establishments in Latvia, but now we have started to implement it in 5 higher educational establishments in Latvia. Thus, all the regions of Latvia have been covered, giving an opportunity for all potential students to study closer to their place of living. Implementing a unified programme there exists a possibility for student exchange and university lecturers` rotation in the frame of the programme.

The goal of the professional master study programme is to ensure an opportunity to acquire competences corresponding with nowadays demand, which allows performing professionally the duties of a career counsellor in educational institutions, State Employment agency, municipalities, social care institutions and consulting offices as well as to be responsible for selection of the personnel in enterprises.

The Professional Master`s degree in the science of education and the qualification “career counsellor” have been conferred after successful graduation from the programme.

It has been implemented as full time (2 years) and part time (2, 5 years) studies. Designing the entrance terms, there were two aspects of great importance:

1) to have basic knowledge in pedagogy and psychology, so we admit people with the 2nd level professional higher teacher education, a bachelor`s degree in the science of education, a bachelor degree of social sciences in psychology or a qualification in psychology,

2) to make it possible for those people who have already been performing this consulting work, for example, at career guidance centres. Therefore the entrance terms foresee admitting people with other academic or 2nd level professional higher education and 2 year work experience in the field of human resources counselling.

The basis of the study programme is the Occupational standard of *a career counsellor*. In the process of its elaboration, the work group was formed in which employers were also included. The main emphasis was put on knowledge, skills and abilities necessary for a career counsellor, defining which of them are necessary in the level of percept, which in the level of understanding or application. After it had been discussed and evaluated, *a career counsellor* was included into united Occupation classification, thus giving an opportunity to implement this occupation in the labour market of Latvia. Especially significant was the implementation of this occupation is for schools, releasing duties of class tutors and introducing a qualitative system of career education, as well as for higher educational establishments, where a career counsellor ensures extensive aid for students in both understanding the occupation and counselling about work opportunities etc.

After elaborating the Occupational standard, the study program was designed gradually. Since we did not have such an occupation in Latvia (career counselling was carried out in the frame of other occupations) and we also did not have the study programme that prepares such specialists, we had to consider the evaluation of many-sided experience of foreign countries and the network formation with higher educational establishments from other countries that implement similar programmes (particularly Lithuania, Estonia, Finland, Sweden and Denmark) as an especially successful stage in designing the programme. This gave us an opportunity to compare our elaborated variants with those approved into practice as well as it motivated us to think over the issues we had not foreseen initially, for example, about creating a philosophical basis for the programme, that fundamentally determines the content orientation of every study course and developmental tendencies of the programme. Acquiring experience was really useful in elaborating the competencies of a career counsellor. They were matched with the International Competencies for Educational and Vocational Guidance Practitioners (Final Report to the General Assembly of the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance 4.Sptember, 2003).

The content of the study courses of the programme was created in order to develop competences necessary for a career counsellor. In their turn they are in accordance with the Occupational standard. As one more important document that determined the specific character of designing the programme, should be mentioned, the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG) Ethical Standards, that was approved by the IAEVG General

Assembly, Stockholm, Sweden, August 8, 1995. [5]. The elaboration of the programme was based on the regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers of Latvia and on the second level, professional higher education at state standard. As a result, the volume of the programme is 80 CRP or 120 ECTS. 26 CRP are foreseen for practice. The programme is composed by 4 modules, which include study courses that complement each other. Every module is concluded by an integrated exam. The system of modules foresees an opportunity that separate modules can be used as content of the courses for improving the qualification of practicing counsellors.

In the frame of the project, the experts elaborated the descriptions of study courses as well as worked out the content of study courses revealing the theses of lectures, independent studies, the content of seminars and designing basic materials for university lecturers and questions for tests and exams. Thus methodological material has been created that gives the basic items to each lecturer involved in the implementation of the programme, and determines additional material necessary for acquiring a career counsellor occupation.

Table No. 1

Modules of the study programme and the study courses

Modules and the study courses	CRP
I module Career Theories	10
Theories of Career Development	
Communication Theories in Counselling	
Management of Career Services	
Practice I	
II module Social Environment and Labour Market	16
Life Cycles of a Person	
Labour Market and Employment	
Social integration and Intercultural Aspects	
Organizational Culture	
Legislation within Career Guidance	
Professional Ethics of a Career Counsellor	
Practice II	
III module Methodology of Professional Work	22 CRP
Theory and Methodology of Counselling I	
Theory and Methodology of Counselling II	
Job Search Process	
Information Technologies within Career Counselling	
Practice III	
IV module Research Activities	32 CRP
Practice IV	
Master Theses	
Total	80 CRP

Performed analysis during the process of designing the programme motivated to conclude that the elaborated methodological materials are necessary for implementation of the study programme because:

- 1) lecturers who join the programme implementation can have no necessary knowledge about job specifics of a career counsellor, for example, often confusing it with psychological counselling,
- 2) the elaborated content corresponds with Occupational standard and competences of a career counsellor,
- 3) it reveals in general and allows to survey all study courses, thus excluding the doubling of the content and let it to be realised gradually.

As a result of collaboration of the experts from 6 higher educational establishments, the licensing documents for the study programme “Career counsellor” have been developed and the Ministry of Education and Science of Latvia has issued the license for 5 higher educational establishments that allows us to implement this study programme.

Evaluation of the study programme

Evaluating the professional master study programme “Career Counsellor” we can say that it corresponds with one of the main priorities determined in EU Memorandum of Lifelong Learning, that is, to develop services of career guidance for students in the sector of secondary vocational and higher education. Also in the latest documents “Communication from the Commission – Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality” and “High Level Task Force on Skills and Mobility” there has been emphasized the significance of availability of information and career guidance services to motivate a person to further education. [3]

The programme created takes into consideration one of the EU Lisbon strategy goals – to create an open environment that foresees extending an approach to lifelong education and studies, giving information, advice and focusing on educational and training opportunities. Also there has been respected the Draft Resolution of the Council and of the representatives of the Member States meeting within the Council on Strengthening Policies, Systems and Practices in the field of Guidance throughout life in Europe, accepted on 18th May, 2004.[8]

Career guidance and counselling activities in the sector of education has a specific role within these documents. The task of these activities is to ensure for everybody, possibly at an earlier age, assistance in choosing a direction of further education and career, to ensure acquisition of basic skills for self assessment and one’s own education and career management. Thus, developing the study programme, we considered it important to have accessible career guidance and counselling services during so called transition stages: moving from one stage of education to the next, from one kind of education to the next, from education to labour market, returning to labour market after voluntary or non-voluntary break, when the changes in the labour market occur etc. Effective system of career guidance and counselling facilitates include social inclusion, social equity and active citizenship.

We believe that a career counsellor will be competent to: 1) assist clients to understand and assess their personal characteristics, abilities and skills; 2) assist clients to compare and balance their skills and abilities with the competencies necessary for a chosen career direction; 3) assist clients to identify their needs and distinguish the differences between their wishes and opportunities; 4) assist clients to understand changes in education, employment and evaluate the impact of these factors on their career development; 5) inform, counsel and educate clients on career development issues; 6) help clients to acquire skills to find and select the necessary information about education and employment opportunities; 7) carry out research and methodological activities.

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