Specialized Counseling Services for Linking Graduates and Students with Future Careers:
The Career Services Office Model

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Abstract: - The present paper focuses on the need in Higher Education for a counseling service that links students and graduates with organizations and enterprises. The structure and operation of the Career Services Office is described with an emphasis on counseling profession-orientated services for graduates. Specifically, we present the results of a two-year operation of the Career Services Office at TEI in Chalkida. It aims to help and support students and graduates approach their future career by providing information regarding the available choices. The present paper enhances the special features of an office like this and positively contributes to the general discussion about the viable continuing of its existence and operation.

Key-Words: - Career; Counseling Services; Higher Education; Students

1 Introduction
Growing rates of economic development are recorded in Greece during the last years. Nevertheless, this upward economic trend is not followed by increased employment rates. According to the National Resource Centre for Vocational Guidance the Greek job market is characterized by high rates of unemployment especially in youth and women. This fact could be improved if unrecorded employment was declared as regular employment and the produced products were included in the gross national product. Most recorded problems relate to lack of jobs and their associated features [8]. According to some other research studies of Athens University of Economics and Business
graduates deal with unemployment, part-time employment and employment in unrelated fields. This problem is sharpened because of the inequality of opportunities of various jobs.

In this unstable and uncertain occupational environment the operation of a Career Services Office (CSO) in Higher Education may become a significant effort to supply useful and qualitative services to graduates.

In the next section we describe the need for a CSO and the initial strategic goals of its operation within the Technological Educational Institute (TEI) in Chalkida. We set the initial planning and the results of CSO and finally, we draw some conclusions and make useful suggestions for future development of CSOs.

2 Need for Establishment of CSO and Initial Strategic Goals

It is well known that the length of studies is prolonged while many students do not complete their studies. The unemployment rate is a crucial factor of abandoning their studies. Simultaneously, many enterprises face difficulties with searching well educated and appropriate managers in “fragile” sectors [1,2,4] and this constrains them from functioning well and competitively. The purposes for searching skilled and well-educated employees relate to the urgent needs for technological and organizational modernization in production and administration systems [6,10].

Graduates are characterized by a lack of information for their probable career and the associating processes that may allow them to elaborate educational and occupational channels related to their interests and perspectives of job market. However, it is noticed a lack of graduates’ appropriate and continuous information about planning their future career [3].

All above reasons emerge a strong need for the establishment of a CSO that its aim is to help and support students and graduates approach their future career by providing information regarding:

- the undergraduate and postgraduate programs both in Greek and in foreign universities and of the prerequisites for being accepted in various universities,
- the announcements of scholarships and legacies concerning studies at home and abroad,
- the job market –either in local or national level—before he/ she begins the planning of his/her career,
- the employing organizations both in our country and abroad (profiles, organizational structure, activities, specialties they are interested in, and
- the help and support during the job-searching process as well as during the process of filling applications for postgraduate studies. This may include advice for the wording of a curriculum vitae, of a letter of recommendation, of an application form and of a covering letter, as well as for the presence at a job interview and the career planning.

Moreover, the CSO may develop useful cooperation with those organizations and enterprises that search for the students’ occupational incorporation in the job market. Also, the CSO works as a counseling service for the graduates in order they:

- analyze and develop their individual factors that compose their self-concept (interests, values, motives, skills etc.),
- examine, assess and classify that information which is related to the circumstances of the job market,
- incorporate educational and occupational information as well as that information that stems from self-observation for the purpose of taking decisions easier, and
- fulfill their educational and occupational plans.

3 Planning and Operation

Qualitative and direct provision of all above services accompanied by a set of actions such as:

- Development of a data base with students and graduates’ names according to the existing Code of Ethics
- development of a data base with local organizations. The national organizations are already recorded in larger data bases of universities and other TEI
- linking the CSO with other data bases regarding the post graduate studies in Greece or abroad, scholarships, training programs, research projects, jobs, job market trends, etc.
- continuous and update record of new jobs. Many research studies and projects of the National Resource Centre for Vocational Guidance have already been used
- establishment of a related library (e.g. curriculums)
- co-operation with the National Resource Centre for Vocational Guidance in Greece
• creation and maintenance of a web-page of the CSO.
The establishment and operation of the CSO was originally funded by the Operational Program for Education and Initial Vocational Training (EPEAEK).
Another field of action that interests the CSO and leads it to put significant efforts is the reinforcement of the development of entrepreneurship. Specifically it provides graduates with tools and information about a broad spectrum of business needs such as:
• European Funding Programs for Youth
• Public Funding Programs of support to youth entrepreneurship
• Counseling for preparation of a business step
• Information about similar enterprises abroad
• Reference of the possible risks and benefits

4 Operation and Results
The CSO made its debut at TEI in Chalkida in 2005.
It is framed by specific manpower such as:
• one graduate of a University (as the head of the CSO),
• two graduates of TEI (as administrators of the data bases),
• one graduate responsible for the computers network, the maintenance of the data bases and design of the web-page and
• one graduate responsible for providing counseling services to students.
The last person is responsible for a variety of acts:
• the educational and occupational information in order to help individuals to familiarize with specific educational and occupational environments
• the development of self-concept with an upper goal of tracking the special features of his/her personality, talents and ambitions
• the facilitation and support of the process of taking decisions of crucial importance for his/her mature educational and occupational choices. The taking decisions process follows the process of setting individual goals, collecting information, evaluating the alternatives and final selection of best solution.
Help from the Occupational-Orientation Consultant was provided either individually or in groups. An external consultant, experienced in European programs, undertook the management of the project.
The CSO functioned as a complementary service and participated in European programs. Analytically, the project of the library provided information on the creation of electronic material which relates to CSO actions. Very closed connection of the CSO with local enterprises promoted graduates and students with multiple opportunities for jobs and gain of practical experience. Thus, the CSO was connected with the practical experience.
Numerous women and men benefited from the operation of the CSOs. Specifically, 6.100 men and 6.000 women accepted the intervention of a CSO either in their post-graduate studies or help them find a job. A slight increase was recorded in 2006, namely 6.150 men and 6.045 women benefited from a CSO. Data of graduates’ names and enterprises operated in Viotia was collected and stored and two data bases were created: the first one included all European programs and the second one announcements of public sector. The CSO in Chalkida recorded the graduates’ professional rights.
Four seminars took place in TEI during 2005 and 2006 with the following topics:
• Career Days
• Post-graduate Studied in Greece or abroad
• Wording of a Curriculum Vitae and preparation for the presence at a job interview
• European programs e.g. Erasmus, Socrates & Leonardo da Vinci.
The web-page of the CSO was created in order to inform the students and graduates about post-graduate studies in Greece and abroad, various seminars, and new jobs in the country (http://www.career.teihal.gr). Equally important is the availability of this web-page in English in order to cover the needs of foreign students.
Data bases refresh continuously with new students and graduates’ names and new jobs offered by enterprises and organizations. Special emphasis is given on ethic issues. The principles of an ethic code run the creation of all data bases as well as the operation of the CSO. They include:
• Specification of the mission of the CSO (that is provision of information about post-graduate studies and employment opportunities and clarification of not being a job-centre).
• Definition of the organizational structure of the CSO.
• Definition of the Ethics Committee of the CSO.
• Definition of its counseling role only if it is asked to.
• Clarification of its own rights as they stem from its operation.
• Clarification of its own obligations regarding the announcement of all information it has about employment opportunities.
The operation and contribution of the CSO is considered very important for these two years. Many students were provided with a variety of services:

- Data bases were formed either in electronic or conventional format.
- Brochures and announcements were published.
- A CVs bank was formed.
- Career Days have been set up during which students had the opportunity to get in touch with employing organizations.
- Seminars for occupational guidance took place.

The CSO links the scientific community of Higher Education with productivity. Our future plans include developing collaboration with similar services offices of all universities in Greece and the formation of a Networking in order to provide useful services from distance (establishment of e-government practices in the field of education and training) for students and graduates.

Moreover, the practice experience should be upgraded through the CSOs due to the fact that while students practice the acquired knowledge and skills in public or private sector, they suddenly become aware of the daily occupational practice. They become aware of the limits of the job market in terms of the wages as well as the functions of institutions. An almost complete awareness of their responsibilities and roles as future employees contributes to their displaying mature and sensible attitude and motivate them to develop either individual or collaborative skills. CSOs should establish regular communication with the scientific community as well as job market in order they track the emerged needs of all those who are involved. It would, also, be useful to achieve a co-operation with the Graduates Associations. There are some countries in which special support is provided to the CSO by Graduate Association of specific university. The latter is strongly connected with the associated university (e.g. funding from the university, employment in the university, participation in a steering committee etc.).

To utilize all available probabilities of co-operation and creativity in the new job, graduates should have the opportunity to meet other graduates from other fields during their practical experience [5,9]. For example, the possibility of meeting graduates of different fields in a program of natural resources management (e.g. chemists, economists, environmentalists, oceanographer etc.) during their practical experience, it would be a unique chance of meeting various interests under an inter-disciplinary approach of the common problems which search for common accepted solutions [7].

5 Conclusions and Future Acts
The CSO in Chalkida has been established two academic years ago and assists students and graduates in informing them on matters concerning their career. Also, it provides them with counseling services in terms of their post-graduate studies, scholarships in Greece and abroad, advice for the wording of their curriculum vitae and preparation for their presence at a job interview. Analytically, its counseling role includes the essential intervention in matters arisen concerning:

- Information (What information do I need? Where could I take them? How can I reach them? How can I utilize them?)
- Making Decisions (What direction would be the best for me? Why do I find it difficult to take a decision? Which factors influence my decisions?)
- Self-Knowledge (What are my skills, inclinations, interests, etc.? How can I improve my learning and occupational skills? How confident am I that I can attain my goals?)
- Techniques of Finding a Satisfying Job (How should I write my Curriculum Vitae? How should I prepare myself for my presence in an interview? How do I search for a job?)
- Educational Needs and Difficulties (Do I face difficulties with my studies? What are they? How do I face the pressure I feel during the exams? How can I organize my study time? What do I like to do in my free time?)

The CSO in Chalkida participated in 18 exhibitions/seminars which were organized by other CSOs. Finally, fourteen brochures were published related to the links between students and productive institutions.

Three studies were conducted by external collaborators and they concerned:

- specialization in the Greek job market (April 2007)
- special requests in job market of Evia, Viotia and Attica (May 2007)
- perspectives of specific jobs and methods of defining the special features of jobs (July 2007)

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Finally, we propose the following acts in order all above take place:

- A plan of improvement of practical experience (by upgrading or utilizing the existing infrastructure, the manpower and the mechanisms of the institute).
- The reinforcement of those mechanisms which are responsible for pinpointing appropriate jobs for practical experience.
- The establishment of a mechanism for continuous evaluation and improvement of practical experience program.

References