Improvement of the Quality of Counseling and Guidance Services in Romania by the Implementation of the European Project DAQOR

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Abstract: The issue of quality is currently on the top list of controversial debates at European level, regardless of the field of activity we refer to. Our study tackles the issues of increasing the quality of professional counseling/guidance in Romania, starting from the experiences recently acquired by the implementation of the European project DAQOR, a project which aims at transferring the AQOR indicators towards new users, achieving mutual knowledge and exchange of good practices in the field of guidance among partners in 5 European countries. The current situation of professional counseling/guidance in Romania, the stages gone through during the process of implementation of AQOR indicators, the guidelines and the difficulties encountered during the process are only a few aspects that we tried to outline in the current study.

Key-Words: counseling, guidance, quality, evaluation, standards, good practices, employment

1. Guidance - a major economic, social and human issue
We currently witness a change of the objectives within the policies of long-lasting education, which are related to the active policies of labour market and to the concept of long-term employment. Consequently, what is needed is to reorganize guidance services, which should be accessible not only to the youth who finish school, but also to all the citizens, throughout all the stages of their lives.

According to OCDE (2004), guidance corresponds to the services and activities addressed to the individuals of all ages, in order to help them make the right educational and professional decisions, as well as managing their professional evolution.

Situated at the interface between individual aspirations and social needs, professional orientation is generally considered to be a public asset, an advantage whose effects are felt not only by the direct beneficiary of orientation services, but also by his family, the company he works for, economy and society in general (as per OCDE, 2004, Cedefop, 2003); this type of reasoning lay at the core of the organization of some public services of guidance in most industrialized countries.

2. Counseling and guidance services in Romania - legislative background
In Romania, articles 350-355 of Law no.1/2011 – National Education Law – represent a late recognition of the importance of the services of professional counseling/guidance. According to this law, guidance and counseling cover the following types of activities:

a) getting information regarding the career, which refers to all the information needed in order to plan, get and keep a job;

b) education related to career, which is carried out in the educational institutions by means of the curricular area in “counseling and guidance”. Information regarding labour market is offered, abilities to make decisions in
education, training, work and life in general are developed, there are offered opportunities to try different roles in the life of the community or in the professional life, as well as instruments for career planning;

e) guidance, which helps people clarify their objectives and aspirations, understand their own educational profile, make well-informed decisions, be responsible for their own actions, manage their career and the transition process in different stages of their lives;

d) counselling regarding employment, which helps people clarify their immediate objectives regarding employment, learn about the abilities necessary for looking for and getting a job;

e) employment office, which represents the support given to people in order to help them get a job (Law no. 1/2011).

The informal body which operates as national reference point for ensuring quality in education and professional training is the National Group for Ensuring Quality in Education and Professional Training (GNAC) (as per art. 355. Law 1/2011). It has a partnership structure which ensures the representation of the main institutions with tasks and responsibilities at national level in the field of ensuring quality in professional training:

- the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sport;
- the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection;
- the Romanian Agency for Ensuring Quality in Pre-university Education;
- the National Council for Professional Training of Adults;
- the National Centre of Teacher Training in Pre-university Education;
- the National Centre of Development of Professional and Technical Education.

The advisory role of GNAC is expressed by activities of informing the main interested factors, support in the process of developing and using specific tools, carrying out experience exchanges between the training providers, drawing up points of view and recommendations regarding the quality in professional training (see http://www.tvet.ro).

3. The necessity of the activities of counseling and guidance - factors

Situated at the boundary between the policies in the education field or the professional training and those in the field of employment field, the policy in the field of orientation was considered for a long time a kind of poor relative of the two.

Many factors that go beyond the merely economic evolutions and which represent the result of the national and European policies account today for the vital importance of public action as regards orientation. Thus, the following factors contributed to the strategic character of policies in the field of guidance:
• the objective of increasing the level of qualification of labour force;
• constant rate of unemployment among the youth and the big number of young, unqualified unemployed;
• an increase in the number of high-school graduates, who need guidance in choosing the path they want to follow in higher education. The big rate of failure in the first two years of the bachelor studies emphasizes the need to strengthen the counselling services.

The changes occurred on labour force market – a decrease in the stability degree of jobs and professional qualifications, an increase in the request of managing by the employee of his own competences and knowledge, with a view to increasing the adaptability degree at the workplace and developing individual rights, the high level of personalising professional paths and competences – all these have turned career orientation in the key element which helps identifying and building up the career plan at all ages.

The increasing importance of orientation is also proved by:
• quality request on the part of the clients, including the level of public services;
• increasing request on the part of the parents for information regarding training and orientation courses for their children, these being considered a guarantee of entering the labour market;
• the existence of a large number of people who face specific difficulties of professional development (youth in distress, disabled people etc.), for whom the efficiency of orientation services represents a major step towards employment.

All the above-mentioned issues prove that career orientation represents today a public policy which must address the whole active population – irrespective of age or status (see http://lesrapports.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/BRP/104000030/0000.pdf).

4. Quality indicators in counseling/guidance. Norms or guiding lines?

At the beginning of 2000, the issue of the quality of guidance was a constant topic in most of specialty reports of the European Commission, reports which highlight especially the difference between the objectives of public action and organisation of services put into practice in order to be carried out.

In the field of orientation, quality is described and measured depending on guiding lines or norms which are either for clients, public in general, or they deal with the issue of the quality of information provided by means of the services of counselling and professional orientation.

In some countries, quality standards for career orientation are checked based on the performance or qualification indicators and are, in general, fairly comprehensive. They include: representation, publicity, feedback systems and the procedures of ensuring quality (Rivis, V., Sadler, J., 1991).

The difference can be made among:
• standards referring to means and process on the one hand, and performance standards on the other hand;
• standards based on the client’s point of view versus standards determined by the need to take on responsibility;
• self-evaluation standards versus standards which are externally evaluated;
• general guiding lines versus specific and quantifiable norms;

Some standards and guiding lines are conceived by a professional association of councillors, others represent the result of a national council, as part of a process of wider counselling, which includes social partners, governmental associations, beneficiaries etc. (Plant, P., 2001).

Paradoxically, whereas decentralisation is a key principle of public policy in many countries, the need of some guiding lines or of some common
quality standards at central level is increasing (Fretwell, D.H., Plant, P., 2001). In this complex situation, it seems necessary to make the difference between standards (which are usually specific, rigid orientations, which imply specific checking procedures and which stipulate sanction when not obeyed) on the one hand and the guiding lines (which are less rigid, more general, and their non-observance does not lead to economic sanctions or other types of penalties) on the other hand (Plant, P., 2001).

In Romania the interest in this direction has been quite recent, and the counseling and guidance services are slightly represented. This triggers the imperative need of transferring experience and good practices.

5. Increasing the quality of counseling services in Romania by DAQOR partnership

In this context, the improvement of the quality of guidance services represented the core around which there were conceived and carried out the activities of the European project Leonardo da Vinci – DAQOR, a project which has 6 partners (PRAO - Lyon, Bretagne-Sud - Lorient University, Orientation a 12 - Bruxelles, COSP – Verona, Gerenalitat de Catalunya - Figueres, Petroleum-Gas University - Ploiesti) from 5 countries (France, Belgium, Italy, Spain and Romania).

Carried out between 2009 and 2011, the DAQOR project had as a starting point the results of two other European projects (DROA and AQOR), and the guide of AQOR quality indicators respectively (see http://www.prao.org). The participation of some DAQOR partners in previous European projects with similar topics, as well as their wide expertise in the field of counseling/guidance, represented the basis necessary for the development of a strong and efficient network of counseling/orientation.

The main objectives of the project aimed at: transferring AQOR quality indicators towards new partners; achieving mutual knowledge and exchange of good practices; supporting partners in the process of self-evaluation of the professional orientation system; examining the relevance and the modalities of putting into practice a European System of ensuring quality guidance; drawing up a textbook of acquiring AQOR quality (Rousselin-Legrand, D., 2011).

For all partners, the participation in this project followed as a result of the necessity to set a series of common evaluation criteria of the quality of the services of counseling/guidance which should lead to their improvement. Thus, there were formulated expectations which refer to: improving working tools; identification of new modalities of organisation of the activity which should lead to its efficiency; the possibility of organising some similar structures in the field of orientation.

Throughout the project, each partner institution had the task of transferring its practices regarding professional orientation. In the case of Petroleum-Gas University and COSP, silent partners were also involved, such as: representatives of patronages, syndicates (COSP), representatives of schools, of the public services of counseling/professional orientation, of NGOs with activity in the field (Petroleum-Gas University).

5.1 Stages gone through in the process of implementation of AQOR indicators

The attempt to implement the AQOR indicators in the system of counseling/guidance in Romania required going through the following stages:

- watching and analysing the practices in the field of guidance;
- thinking of the possibilities of improving the guidance services;
- implementation of some measures which should lead to increasing the quality of these services. This stage involves going through additional stages, such as: selecting only the AQOR indicators which are representative at regional level;
formulating some suggestions or improvement; adhering to the new standards.
- assessing the necessity of drawing up a referential regarding the quality of the services of counseling/guidance and establishing its structure;
- proposing the text of the referential.

5.2 Action directions

Our interest has been especially in communication, in the knowledge of the project; in the analysis of the modalities of implementation of the indicators at regional level; in the activation of the groups where the experience transfer occurred.

Regarding the transfer of good practices at regional level, we considered:
- presenting the AQOR project;
- organising debates on those indicators considered to be important relative to the experience of each partner;
- carrying out the transfer of good practices among partners;
- identifying some self-assessment methods;
- applying corrective measures.

Making use of the professionals and their expertise represented a priority in the process of acquiring the indicators. The existence of some knowledge in the field of assessment, formulating some objectives of development and progress, the possibility to establish contacts, exchanges and to create networks of professionals represented the grounds that facilitated this project.

5.3 Difficulties encountered and possible solutions

Lack of confidence in the assessment process, fear expressed regarding the possible consequences of some external evaluations represented difficulties encountered by all the partners. To these, we can add:
- little experience regarding the evaluation of the quality of guidance services;
- shortage of resources, restricting access to them because of financial issues;
- changes caused by the reform in the field of public policies;
- the difficulty in making the professionals in the field of counseling/guidance take part voluntarily in this process of acquiring the indicators.

Creating a background of confidence and confidentiality on the one hand, taking time to discuss with professionals with a view to explaining the project, the use of indicators and the possible advantages obtained as a result of their implementation on the other hand, are only a few of the solutions that we formulated in order to overcome the difficulties.

6. Conclusions

Considering the fact that in Romania drawing up some policies in the field of life-long professional orientation – policies which should contribute to increasing the educational level of the population, to a better access of the youth to labour market and to ensuring the professional path – is still at the beginning, the DAQOR project was a real challenge, a reason for all the professional in the field to make efforts to increase the quality of the services provided.

There were outlined the following priorities:
- building up some counseling networks at the level of local public institutions (school institutions, centres of psychopedagogical support, town halls, employment offices) which should bring together psychologists, sociologists, housemasters, welfare workers, networks by means of which the clients should benefit from integrated services. In this respect, an increase in the expertise level of the professionals is a must;
- providing continuity of public policies between the actions related to guidance, training and employment support; in this respect, reconciling school and jobs is a fundamental element in order to build up a long-life orientation process. In other
words, the quality of the services of professional training and their overlapping the demands of the labour market must be improved. It is also necessary to set a common diagnosis at national level which should focus on the relation between the training offer on the one hand and the employers’ demand on the other hand;

- outlining a system of quality evaluation based on the AQOR indicators, but adapted to Romanian reality, in which the stress should be laid on self-assessment, on encouraging individual responsibility, on the development of some corrective measures as a result of a personal impulse.

As a result of these needs, within DAQOR project there was drawn up the Manual of giving support to the users of AQOR project. The objective of this manual is giving support to the professionals in the field of guidance who wish to acquire and apply the AQOR project, offering a better understanding and awareness of the evaluation process developed within this project and also the possibility of adapting it to the historic, methodological and experimental context.

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