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Get a life project: Dynamic career and entrepreneurship counselling for university students

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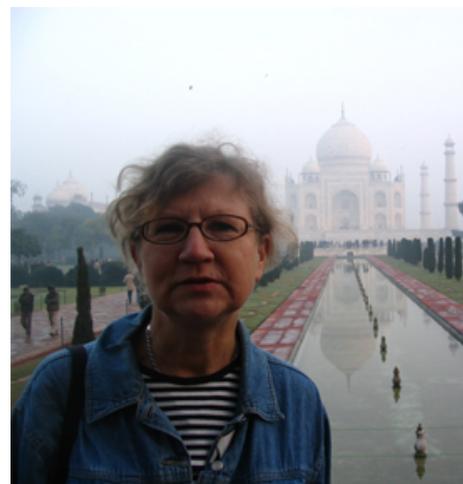
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Get a Life Project

Dynamic Career and Entrepreneurship Counselling for University Students



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Abstract

This paper is based on an ongoing project that aims to promote future-oriented thinking and pro-activity among university students. The students, as well as the career counsellors in universities, need tools for career planning in order to anticipate and assess the future direction of their work life and their role in society. This project provides a future-oriented simulation tool for students as well as guidance tools for counselling personnel. The scientific outcome of our studies and the project will be a pedagogical model, whilst the practical outcome will be a virtual handbook for career counsellors. The project also predicts some long-term future scenarios on the development and changes in working life. As a final product we develop an online simulation tool for students in the career-planning process.

Introduction

Today and even more in the future coping with work duties requires a self-directed approach to work. Employees are expected to make a commitment to work as if they were entrepreneurs within the company. Internal entrepreneurship calls for a responsible attitude towards work and its development as well as the willingness to use one's creativity, innovativeness and competence for the good of the employer. People need to commit to an entrepreneurial attitude because they must renew their competencies and skills again and again. As the working life is constantly changing, the one-off degree earned in one's youth no longer provides credible competence to last for the rest of the professional career.

The EU is strongly in favour of entrepreneurship, as it has defined entrepreneurship as one of the key competencies of life-long learning. In that context entrepreneurship refers to an individual's ability to turn ideas into action. It includes creativity, innovation and risk taking, as well as the ability to plan and manage projects in order to achieve objectives. According to this framework, entrepreneurship supports all citizens in everyday life at home and in society and helps employees gain awareness of the wider context of their work and capitalize on opportunities that arise. It also provides the foundation for special skills and knowledge that entrepreneurs need when starting a social or commercial enterprise. (Commission of the European Communities 2005, 18.)

The goal in entrepreneurship education and training at university level is not to make the students rush to become entrepreneurs, but rather to provide the students with tools that enable realistic self-evaluations. The students should also be trained to learn to recognize different opportunities around them. The aims set for student counsellors in entrepreneurship and career counselling relate to the following points: 1) Development of the students' pro-activeness and preparation to the future development in one's career planning, 2) The development of the methods and tools to prepare the students into their working life, 3) Increase an active and realistic attitude and support students' entrepreneurial behaviour.

In future, the question is whether the difference between successful performance in school and successful performance in business life can be discerned in time. Kupferberg (2003) emphasizes that creativity is more meaningful than competences. He believes that education and training are going to meet new challenges which are more than plain competences. Insight is an integral element of competence, bringing into play such characteristics as willpower, intuitive thinking, spirit and communication skills that impact on ability to manage practical problem solving situations. The ability to learn from experience is valued and taken as part of the broader learning process. (Munch and Jakobsen 2005). The focus in valuating learning results in future will be on individuality and fragmentation, the vision being an unlimited range of patchwork profiles that discard the holistic concept of competence. The primary concern in the world of work will be on broad-based education linked to a personality that exhibits strength, individual initiative, independence and the ability to reach analytically justified decisions. (Drexel 2003).

This paper is based on an ongoing project (Get a life –project) that aims to develop some tools to promote pro-activity and entrepreneurial spirit and skills among university students. The tools should be used by both the students and by their teachers or counsellors. The main target is to help the students to find out their own strengths and competencies in the future society and in future labor markets. Also the student counsellors should feel that pro-activity and entrepreneurial spirit is important, and that entrepreneurship is one possible opportunity to their students. The recourses, attitudes and skills of the teachers are the critical preconditions when enhancing entrepreneurial behaviour of the students. The student counsellors who have personal experiences at entrepreneurship have also the most positive attitudes towards entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship education.

Get a Life -project is mainly funded by the European Social Fund (ESF). In addition each of the business partners finances the project themselves. The project is carried out during 1.9.2008–31.12.2011 and there are five Finnish universities involved: University of Turku/Finland Futures Research Centre (coordinator), HAAGA-HELIA University of Applied Sciences, HAMK University of Applied Sciences, Laurea University of Applied Sciences, and Career Services of the University of Turku.

Targets of the Paper

Student counsellors are often left on their own – each making their own experiments, including various topics in counselling, and finding ways of teaching entrepreneurship too. Of course, we usually ask feedback from the students but do the students really know how to find their career path and the entrepreneurship. With this paper we aim to find some answers and some advice how to renew our training programmes and counselling models from the career path and entrepreneurship point of view. The focus in this paper is on the following problem areas:

1. What kind of career and entrepreneurship counselling university students need and want? (Inquiry for university students).
2. What is an effective way of teaching career path and entrepreneurship? (Focus-group discussions with study counsellors, career counsellors and teachers).
3. Which are the core competences and attitudes that a student counsellor should have? (DACUM analysis with study counsellors).

The results of above mentioned studies are interpreted from the point of view of enhancing the entrepreneurial and active behaviour of university students.

Framework for the Paper

The framework of this paper lies on the theories dealing with the general competence and attitudes and expertise of student counsellors, the theories and practices in entrepreneurship education and on the career theories. As the aim of our project is to develop some tools to promote pro-activity and entrepreneurial spirit and skills among university students, the concepts of entrepreneurship, entrepreneurship education and entrepreneurial behaviour are in central position at our project.

Entrepreneurial people are described on many ways using many definitions, but the most common terms that are used when describing them are: Entrepreneurial orientation, entrepreneurial behaviour, entrepreneurial drive and entrepreneurial spirit. According to Lumpkin and Dess (1996, 137) the key dimensions that characterize entrepreneurial orientation include: A propensity to act autonomously, a willingness to innovate, a willingness to take risks, a tendency to be aggressive toward competitors and acting proactively relative to marketplace opportunities. Florin, Karri and Rossiter (2007) have found that the preference for innovation, non-conformity, proactive disposition, self-efficacy, and achievement motivation promote entrepreneurial behaviour. Entrepreneurial drive means pro-activeness, innovativeness, willingness to take risk and enlarge business (Chirico, 2007a, 58; Chirico, 2007b, 142). Westerholm (2007, 126) found out that perseverance and pro-activity are the most important

competences for small entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurial spirit is widely used in articles and everyday language but we have not found any exact definition of it. The concepts of entrepreneurial spirit and entrepreneurial drive are used as synonyms in our studies. Entrepreneurial spirit arises from positive self-esteem and entrepreneurial attitudes. People grow to entrepreneurship in a long learning process that starts already in childhood. Becoming an entrepreneur depends on entrepreneurial spirit, on attitudes, skills and motivation.

According to Römer-Paakanen and Pekkala (2008) growing to entrepreneurship could be understood as a triangulation process of socialization, education and experiences. The process develops in different environments or systems - in family (family system), in school (education system) and in free-time activities and hobbies (informal and non-formal systems). Counselling, coaching and mentoring form a supporting system and they are the catalysts in this process. Counselling focuses on an individual, and it produces self-directive actions. Its aim is to highlight competent learning and self-management.

In this paper the study counsellors' expertise and career development are divided into cognitive, affective and psychomotor competences and attitudes. The inspiration for the concept was derived from Bloom's taxonomy (1956). The theoretical framework of this paper is based on Brousseau's (Brousseau, Driver, Eneroth and Larsson 1996, 56) pluralistic career concept model which has four career concepts: linear career, expert career, spiral career and transitory career. Takanen-Körperich (2008, 156) found two more alternatives to Brousseau's pluralistic career concept. She named them parallel career concept and explorative career concept. In the parallel career concept a person can at the same time be active in several fields. In the explorative career a person can by change find a quite different kind of working life and environment than the educational studies would indicate.

In career counselling we should take into account that nowadays the career seldom is linear but more like parallel or explorative. In practise at our university we use so called method of personal career planning. It is a solution focused method that helps students realize and set personal employment and self-development goals. The students write their own personal career plans in two stages in a guided and interactive process. The first plan is written at the beginning of the studies. The second is written after 1,5 – 2 years of studying. Writing the plan is guided by a set of questions concerning career planning and self-development. The written plans are evaluated and commented by the career counsellor. In addition, the student has also the opportunity to have a face-to-face discussion with the career counsellor. The students can utilize different individual career counselling services and instruments in writing their plans, such as the Career planning degree course and the customized career planning website. (Lampikoski and Römer-Paakkanen, 2004.)

According to Grant and Greene (2001) the purposes of personal career planning method are to

- Help a student to set concrete and inspiring goals and objectives
- Help a student to clarify his/her plans
- Help a student to make an action plan

- Help a student to seize opportunities
- Help a student to utilize his or her potential
- Help a student to find and realize his or her mission
- Increase a student’s motivation
- Increase a student’s determination
- Help a student to make relevant and useful choices concerning studies and work placements
- Help a student to find his/her ideal work faster.

By supporting and promoting student’s career planning we help him or her to learn a career planning process. The objective of the process, from the student’s point of view, is to enter into a career path and to realize his or her career vision. The process has its basis on personal experiences of the student. As the time goes on, the student makes career plan 1 and 2, and evaluates and reflects his or her values, interests, needs, skills, goals, objectives and visions. He or she needs versatile and flexible guidance along the process. Some of the students need individual counselling and some want to participate in career planning classes. Several students will benefit from the information of the customized career www-pages. The students will get actual know-how, experience and skills by studying, by work projects, by work placements etc.

Accordingly, students move day by day towards deeper understanding of their career goals, career options and career vision. The final result is the personal career plan and the understanding of the importance of an on-going career planning in the future. (Lampikoski and Römer-Paakkanen, 2004.)

Methodology and Results of the Different Studies

The research approach is both quantitative and qualitative. Before starting the project we made several studies or inquiries to get a wider view of the student counselling process. First we made a quantitative inquiry, so that the students can consider their experience and their need of career or entrepreneurship counselling. Of course when asking the students what kind of study or career counselling they would like to have, some of the students would like to have “personal trainer”-type counselling and some say that they do not need any counselling at all. Naturally personal trainers are not economically realistic, but by asking students opinion we get valuable information and some hints or tips how to arrange study and career counselling so that the students feel it really helps them. According to the survey it appeared that that only few students had used the services of career counselling. Even so, they consider the career counselling very important as they search for their right field and tasks. Career counselling as a concept has a different meaning for different students. Many of the students think that the word “career” refers to the working life after their studies. The students do not see the career planning as a continuum, as a lifelong project. To them career planning was a tool to receive the first work placement.

We also collected data by using a Finnish adaptation of the Canadian DACUM (Developing A Curriculum) model (Westerholm, 2007). The DACUM, which is used to analyze the contents of the requirements of various occupations, provided a tool for the

precise determination and recording of the knowledge, skills and attitudes required in various occupations and it relates to either curriculum planning or human resources administration. The practical work of gathering the data in the DACUM sessions is performed by a facilitator and a recorder.

The practicality of the DACUM model functioned as a method for collecting empirical data consisting of a group of student counsellors. The student counsellors were given an opportunity to express their views in small focus groups of peer entrepreneurship teachers. Consensus opinions formulated by the groups were then meticulously documented. By this DACUM analysis we wanted to find answer to the following research question: Which are the core competences and attitudes that a student counselor should have and which elements do above mentioned core competences and attitudes consist of? The results expose the very core of student counsellors' competence and attitudes by determining what study counsellors feel they must be able to do when counselling the students.

The study counsellors told us what are the most important tasks in their work (the core targets are listed in the left column), and what kind of core competencies they need when aiming to reach these targets. For instance when the study counsellors want to support the students to advance in their studies, they should follow up how they augment their study credits. This study indicates that the student counselling is holistic, when all forms of the counselling should work together in a concerted effort. The students should know whom to contact, if they need counselling, personal career counselling, counselling referring to work placement and employment, referring to international student exchange, referring to guidance in their thesis as well as entrepreneurship counselling – taking health-related points into account. The career is a comprehensive growth process.

The main data was collected by focus group interviews of student counsellors, career counsellors and teachers. The data received from the focus group interviews is based upon the interviewees' own experiences and opinions. Discussing and conversing in a group, not alone with the interviewer, might be more convenient for some of us and it might pull the silent interviewees into the conversation. The conversation in a focus group interview might be more spontaneous than in a theme-based interview with one person. The focus group interviews took place in May, 2009, and there were six interviewees were present.

The following points were raised to be taken into consideration in the holistic career and entrepreneurship counselling for university students:

- Counselling in setting up the personal goals
- Supporting students' independent thinking from the beginning of their studies
- Assisting students analyzing themselves
- Assisting students to comprehend the meaning of the professional growth
- Counselling how to manage one's own life
- Assisting students to put up their lives based on past, present and future

The following points were raised to be taken into consideration in work placement and career counselling:

- To help students learn to present their personality and skills
- Student counsellors, teachers and the representatives of the employers support and guide students' learning by doing processes during their practical training periods. Work placement periods also help students to realize the connection between the two ways of learning and the connection between theoretic studies and the practical work
- Counselling does not aim to build a new society, but it will help students become the citizens who are able to build a new society
- Student counselling, guiding during different courses, career planning and career counselling, and work placement establish an unbreakable process which aims to support a student in making up his or her own path

According to our informants the employers of work placements need tools for counselling: counselling should be convenient and useful for the students. Besides, the employers should have it possible to receive information of the students working in the companies, and the employers in their position should be able to submit the student with the company's needs and supplies.

Summary of the Results: Dynamic Model for Counselling

Preliminary results of this project show that a distinct line should be drawn between how the student counsellor should meet the student, to be interested in students' everyday life and how to teach entrepreneurial attitude and behaviour in the career path. The student counsellor must comprehend the concept and totality of the business along with the distinctive characteristics of each sector, i.e. they must possess a cognitive knowledge of business activities. Affective and psychomotor competence and attitudes are now highlighted in the expertise of student counsellors alongside the traditionally emphasised cognitive competence and attitudes.

We acknowledge that there are different students with different needs in different stages of studying and therefore also in career and entrepreneurship counselling there are some key principles that should be taken account: 1) It should be holistic (i.e. it takes into account a student's whole situation in life), 2) It should be individual and student-oriented, and 3) It should be flexible and versatile.

According to our studies a student counsellor should:

- Understand both career and entrepreneurship as a holistic phenomenon. A student counsellor should also work like an entrepreneur being creative, dynamic, risk-taking, and initiative oriented, hard-working, responsible and action motivated
- Possess a positive attitude towards entrepreneurship. That means appreciating market economy, business life, business, enterprises, entrepreneurs and work
- Understand entrepreneurship as a phenomenon giving it a holistic meaning. This approach means developing knowledge, skills and attitudes

needed in business life and improving students to manage their own career lives

- Adopt modern learning paradigms. He or she should encourage students to the entrepreneurship and use methods appropriate for transferring entrepreneurial knowledge, skills and attitudes. Such appropriate methods activate students, favor student-orientation and emphasize social interaction.

The scientific outcome of our studies and the project is a pedagogical model: We can talk about a dynamic model for counselling which takes account on that the students life has at least three different dimensions: Education and studies (study counselling), work life and career (career counselling and entrepreneurship counselling), and one's own life (family, hobbies, experiences). This model also lies on Erikson's (2003) three principles of entrepreneurial learning: We learn from our experience, we can learn from events (such as studied successes and failures of others – and here these other entrepreneurs, who may always remain strangers, are acting as indirect mentors), and networking and learning directly from the experiences of others who may be acting as mentors or coaches. The dynamic model for counselling is presented in figure 1.

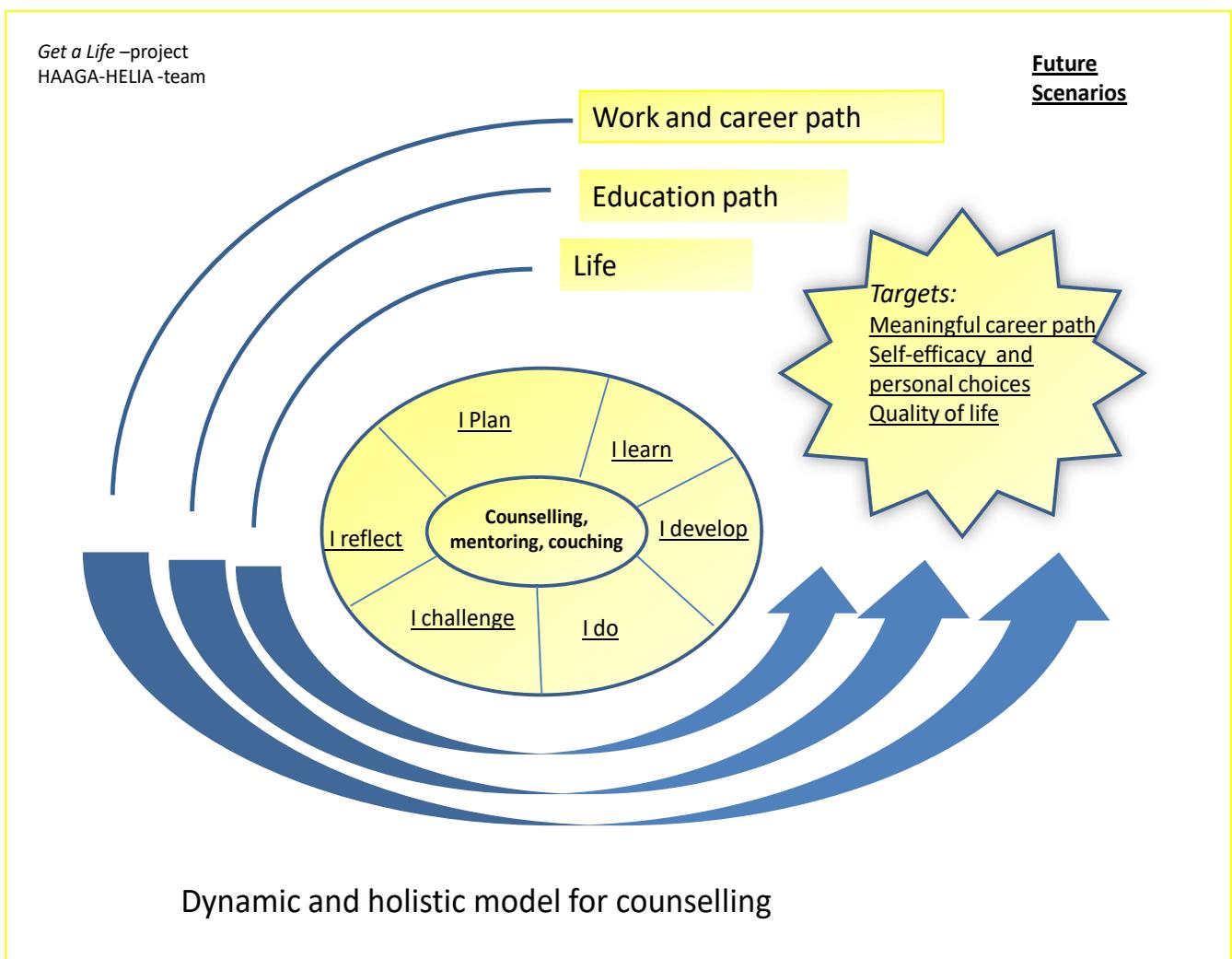


Figure 1: Dynamic model for counselling

The targets of dynamic model for counselling are to help university students to realize that they themselves can influence their future. The dynamic model takes account that life has several dimensions that are intertwined and all the dimensions

together develop our competencies and skills. The model aims to help the students to foresee the future and to be pro-active. There is no right answer or decision but the aim is also to train the students to challenge the troubles and learn from the mistakes. Dynamic career planning model means that by learning, developing, doing, challenging, reflecting and planning we can build our future so that we have a meaningful career path and can make our own choices – and this brings us the quality of life.

The practical outcome will be a virtual handbook for career counsellors. The handbook deeply describes the theory and background of the dynamic model for counselling. The handbook is targeted to the counsellors but also to those students who want better to understand the future career demands.

Conclusions and Some Practical Implications

An essential prerequisite for career path and entrepreneurship education is that the teachers and career or entrepreneurship counsellors are skilled and enthusiastic in the field. Both the previous studies and literature and our studies indicate that the career and entrepreneurship counselling services should be versatile, flexible and accessible to all students.

Our experiences and studies show that career and entrepreneurship education process in a school environment or in higher education is not a linear process. Rather, it is more like a spiral process in which the different levels of career and entrepreneurship education are more inter-dependent and co-existing.

The results of this study can be implemented when planning and developing the training programmes and curriculum from career and entrepreneurship point of view. Up-to-date and factually correct information along with positive attitudes towards entrepreneurship are prerequisites in helping young people to create their career and become entrepreneurs. It is vital that students get familiar with the entire process, knowing how to set up an enterprise, design a business plan and making it grow and succeed, but above all they must know what it means on a personal level and what kind of opportunity this career choice can offer them and their families. Risks should also be charted and understood, but as the objective is to encourage people to adopt the attitude and the field, entrepreneurship should be offered as a positive opportunity and challenge.

The scientific outcome of our studies and the project will be a pedagogical model, whilst the practical outcome will be a virtual handbook for career counsellors. The project also predicts some long-term future scenarios on the development and changes in working life. As a final product we develop an online simulation tool for students in the career-planning process. The simulation is designed to complement the existing guidance material and tools.

With the simulation tool the students can safely map and test future scenarios and create various future paths for themselves. Career counsellors will be able to utilize the simulation in their counselling sessions with the pedagogical model developed in this project. The simulation tool is going to have built-in guidance elements and references so that the students will also be able to use it independently.

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