Chapter 8

The Contribution of Information Communication Technologies in Online Career Counseling:
Case Study of an Online Community Within Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Information communication technologies have undoubtedly affected the discipline of career counselling. Nevertheless, online career counselling remains a rather limited practice in Greece; therefore, the chapter attempts to contribute to the wider dialogue that has been addressed so far, by focusing on the design, implementation, and assessment of an online career counselling program for higher education students and graduates. The purpose of the study is to present the main parameters related to participants' learning experience, such as motivation, barriers to participation, as well as adopted strategies for overcoming these barriers during the online program. The researchers conducted 15 semi-structured interviews to collect data for summative assessment. The analysis of the data indicates that prior acknowledgement of learners' motivation, educator/career counsellor's role, the learning environment, the methods utilized, and the teaching material can maximize the effectiveness of equivalent programs, due to the fulfillment of their needs, goals, and expectations.

INTRODUCTION

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki is the largest University in Greece and one of the largest in Southeast Europe including 11 Faculties, 41 Schools and almost 74.000 students.[1] The Career Services Office delivers face to face and online counseling sessions, organizes various capacity building workshops as well as other activities related to personal and vocational growth (Career Days, CV and Cover Letter workshops, seminars for searching postgraduate programs, placements, grants). At the same time, Online Career Counseling is not a widely known, and therefore implemented, practice in Greece. As a result, research data concerning the dimensions, conditions, factors and outcomes of Online Career Counseling remain rather limited.

The above-mentioned framework formed the context as well as the need of the present research study. The researchers designed an online program for students and graduates of the Aristotle University, based on data which were collected in an earlier phase referring to specific needs, concerns and expectations. Afterwards, the program was adapted on the Google+ space in the form of an online community. The title of the program was "Prepare & Present Yourself: a personal branding approach", it lasted one month and included four thematic modules: a) Curriculum Vitae: Studies and Work, b) Postgraduate Studies, Grants and Cover Letter, c) Interview: Studies and Work and d) Job seeking techniques and Social Media management. Each week the researchers uploaded the corresponding material (articles, videos, templates) and set the activities that should be completed by the end of the week (writing the Curriculum Vitae, creating LinkedIn profile). At the same time, the researchers encouraged the community members to actively participate in the discussions developed in the forum, exchange ideas, share experiences and express their views and concerns. In the meantime, personal communication among participants and one of the researcher that is Career Counselor also took place via personal e-mails and Skype sessions. Personal communication was a redeeming feature for those who did not wish to share information openly and functioned also as a way of protecting participants' personal data, for instance, personal information included in the Curriculum Vitae and Cover Letter.

BACKGROUND

The study is grounded in four interdisciplinary fields; Lifelong Learning, Distance Learning, Instructional Design and Online Career Counseling. This section will briefly discuss dimensions of these disciplines, in order to form the framework of the present research.

The notion of Lifelong Learning can be approached as a twofold, because it reflects different epistemological and semantic background. On the one hand, Lifelong Learning is described as a process in which a person can learn new things, in new ways and for various reasons. Although this process seems to be an individual case, it is governed and guided by social or inter-subjective characteristics and factors that bring change both at the individual and the social level. On the other hand, Lifelong Learning seems to be outlined, in the post-modern era, through a variety of conceptual definitions, such as the empirical implementation of educational policy in western culture, the institutionalization of education throughout the life-span, as well as the perception that human life itself constitutes a learning journey (Karavakou, 2011).

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