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SCHOOL AND CAREER GUIDANCE IN PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN ROMANIA: CASE STUDIES FOR EIGHTH-GRADE STUDENTS

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***ABSTRACT**: Every year, extensive research is conducted across all Romanian counties on representative samples of eighth-grade students, focusing on their educational and career choices. These studies aim to refine counseling and guidance strategies for students, a process that also involves parents and reflects broader connections between education and the labor market. Effective academic and career guidance represents a key step toward aligning educational demand with academic supply and labor-market needs, while also reducing the risk of school or university dropout. This paper analyzes a selection of publicly available reports from these evaluations to identify regional and county-level particularities. It further examines two waves of career orientation research conducted in Hunedoara County in 2023 and 2024, tracking students' choices, the motivations behind them, their main sources of information, and the school-based activities that contribute to career guidance. The findings highlight the evolution of students' aspirations and reveal potential differences between cohorts, offering insights into the dynamics of educational and career orientation in Romanian pre-university education*

***Keywords:** career guidance; educational pathways; regional analysis; student aspirations; Romania.*

Introduction

Career guidance „refers to services and activities intended to assist individuals, of any age and at any point throughout their lives, to make educational, training, and occupational choices and to manage their careers (...) They include career information provision (in print, ICT-based and other forms), assessment and self-assessment tools, counseling interviews, career education programmes (to help individuals develop their self awareness, opportunity awareness, and career management skills), taster programmes (to sample options before choosing them), work search programmes, and transition services" (OECD, 2004. p. 10).

Career guidance is both a personal and a social gain: it supports individuals in evolving in the learning and work process, and it also contributes to making the labor market and social mobility more efficient (Krech, 2025).

Career guidance is a necessity for all ages, but it is even more important for young people (whether they are in the education system or in situations of risk). The gaps that appear at various levels of school preparation are also recognized, either through the non-use of available resources or through the neglect of the offers of existing study paths in accordance with the requirements of the labor market. In turn, even students who have dropped out of school must have career guidance. But such shortcomings are also found in non-university or university tertiary education, a situation that actually generates school dropout. These shortcomings have complex causes: lack of communication/coordination between stakeholders, the belief that career guidance should be punctual and not lifelong, lack of interest in feedback from labor market actors, lack of action regarding the training of trainers (in our case, specialized school counselors), lack of clear regulations regarding the tasks of career counselors, hence the lack of evaluation of trainers, etc.

In an OECD analysis (2021), "career readiness" is operationalized through a set of 11 indicators grouped into three essential dimensions that structure the way in which students develop their career guidance skills.

The first dimension, exploring the future, refers to exposing students to occupational information and models through career conversations with relevant adults, interactions with employees, participation in job fairs, job visits, or job shadowing activities, as well as practicing the skills needed to apply for a job.

The second dimension, experiencing the future, includes direct forms of familiarization with the world of work, such as volunteering and part-time employment, which provide concrete opportunities to test professional interests.

Finally, the dimension of reflecting on the future includes indicators related to the clarification of aspirations, coherence between educational and professional plans, motivation to follow a particular career, and recognition of the relevance of education for working life.

This tripartite framework proposed by the OECD (2021) describes a dynamic process through which young people explore, experiment, and clarify their professional directions, highlighting the link between exposure to the world of work, practical experiences, and the development of vocational reflection.

To make career guidance more efficient, the OECD (2004, pp.14-15) proposed, among other things, national surveys on education and career guidance programmes followed by consultations with all stakeholders for necessary adjustments; surveying student satisfaction with the education system and career guidance; surveying relevant stakeholders in the labour market to identify trends. It is also recommended that career guidance be carried out as much as possible by specialised school counsellors and not just by generalist school counsellors, psychologists or part-time teachers, etc. In this case, it is recommended to develop pilot career guidance courses involving specialised counsellors. It is also recommended to "conduct surveys on the educational and labour market destinations of school graduates" and that the results be broadly analysed at the local level and not only at the macro level.

Considering these clarifications, we will present in this article the results of the survey of eighth-grade students from Hunedoara County, Romania, in two successive waves according to the 2023/2024 and 2024/2025 generations in a research that we consider useful and recommended to be mandatory in all counties of the country.

Methodology of the research

Research on career guidance falls within the dimension of exploring the future (OECD, 2024). The application of questionnaires to eighth-grade students in Hunedoara County had the following objectives:

- Identifying the school options of students after completing eighth grade;
- Presenting the distribution of school options of eighth-grade students;
- Identifying the reasons/criteria underlying the school options expressed by students;
- Identifying resource/support persons regarding career guidance, used by students;
- Highlighting the sources of information in career guidance, respectively, the activities offered within schools;
- Expressing personal needs for career guidance;
- Drawing up a career plan.

The structure of the two samples was as follows (Tab. 1):

Tab. 1. The structure of the two samples (two waves mode)

	2023-2024		2024-2025	
	No. of students enrolled	Respondents	No. of students enrolled	Respondents
Number of students	3044	2767	2889	2614
Gender				
Male		49%		51.5%
Female		51%		48.5%
Residence environment				
Urban		73%		71.6%
Rural		27%		28.4%
Intention to continue high school studies		85.83%		86.9%
Intention to continue professional/dual education		13.81%		12.8%
Intention to abandon		0.36%		0.3%

The questionnaires were completed using a Google Forms application in November 2023 and 2024. Students were coordinated by their teaching assistants. Participation in the research was voluntary, with due regard for the confidentiality of the socio-demographic data collected. Students were free to withdraw from the research at any time.

Results of the research

a. General developments

First, we considered it important to highlight the developments in students' choices of study paths over the last 10 years. The situation was as follows (Fig. 1):

From the data in the graph above, we observe in 2024 a significant decrease in the percentages allocated to the technological track, accompanied by slight increases in the weights of the other tracks. These developments occurred due to the fact that vocational/dual education is generally more connected to the demands of the labor market. On the other hand, the technological sector must face a general negative perception generated by the relevance of the study programs and the lower success rates in the Baccalaureate exam.

b. Comparisons between the 2023/2024 and 2024/2025 generations

For the comparative analysis of the educational and career options of the students, I preferred to test the following statistical hypotheses:

H1. There is a statistically significant association between the educational path desired by the students and their fathers' studies.

H2. There is a statistically significant association between the educational path chosen by the students and their residential environment.

We tested hypothesis H1 through an association analysis for both generations and obtained the following results (Tab. 2):

For the 2023/2024 generation, there is a statistically significant association between the desired educational path and the father's studies (Chi2=369, df=6, p=.000). If the father's studies

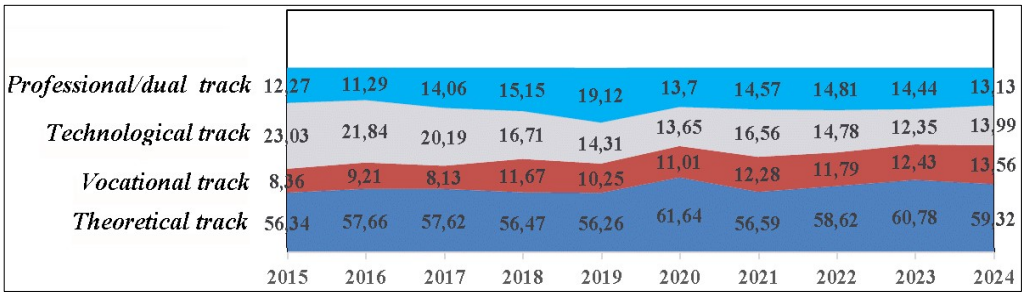

Fig. 1. Evolution of options by study tracks during 2015-2024

Table 2. Association analysis for the two generations (Father's study vs. School path choices)

Variables	n	School path choices			χ^2	df	p
		Abandon	Professional/dual education	High school			
Father's study Up to 8th grade	340	6	137	197	369	6	0.000
Professional education	369	1	85	283			
High school/Post high school	1122	2	114	1006			
University	778	0	14	764			
Total	2609	9	350	2250			
Father's study Up to 8th grade	337	2	134	201	311	6	0.000
Professional education	350	2	63	285			
High school/Post high school	1129	4	115	1010			
University	800	1	22	777			
Total	2616	42	334	2273			

are on the university level, 98% of the students want to continue high school. If the father's education is high school/post-high school, 89% of respondents will continue to high school. If the father's studies are at the professional education level or 8 grades, the percentages of students who will continue to high school decrease (76% and 57%). For the 2024/2025 generation, there is a statistically significant association between the desired educational path and the father's studies (Chi2=311, df=6, p=.000). If the father's studies are on the university level, 97% of the students want to continue to high school. If the father's studies are high school/post-high school, 89.5% of the respondents will continue to high school. If the father's education is at the vocational education level or 8th grade, the percentage of students who will continue to high school decreases further (81% and 59%).

The analysis was relatively similar for the two waves of the research, practically confirming the increased influence of the father's studies regarding the continuation of studies. In both cases, the intensity of the association was average (Phi=.376 and Phi=.345). The father's studies continue to be a significant indicator in career orientation. This fact can be complemented along the way by identifying career options in fields close to the father's or differentiated. The hypothesis is confirmed.

We tested hypothesis H2 through the same association analysis for both generations and obtained the following results (Tab. 3):

Tab. 3. Association analysis for the two generations (Residence environment vs. School path choices)

Variables	n	School path choices			χ^2	df	p
		Abandon	Professional/dual education	High school			
Residence environment Rural	749	3	143	603	24.2	2	0.000
Urban	2018	7	239	1772			
Total	2767	10	382	2375			
Residence environment Rural	742	5	123	614	17	2	0.000
Urban	1874	4	211	1659			
Total	2616	9	334	2273			

For the 2023/2024 generation there is a significant statistical association between school path choices and residential area (Chi2=24.2, df=2, p=.000). Students from urban areas want to continue with high school studies to a greater extent than those from rural areas (88% versus 80%), and those from rural areas are more attracted to vocational/dual education (19% versus 12%).

For the 2024/2025 generation there is a significant statistical association between school history and residential area (Chi2=17, df=2, p=.000). Students from urban areas want to continue with high school studies to a greater extent than those from rural areas (89% versus 82%), and those from rural areas are more attracted to vocational/dual education (17% versus 11%).

The differences between urban and rural students are constant after the two research waves. An additional analysis is required, focused primarily on students with potential from rural areas who will not attend high school for socio-economic reasons and who could be supported (the "Scholarships for the Future" programs, etc.).

c. Sources of career counselling

Asked to designate which people/groups of people are the main advisors in terms of career guidance, we obtained the following graphic situation (Fig. 2).

It can be seen in the graph above that the family remains the main source of school and career counseling/guidance: for both generations, the percentages are particularly high (over 80%). Friends are the second source (with over 40%), followed by those who declare that they make the decision themselves. We observe the growing role of school counselors (from 14% to 24%), which may emphasize the need for school counselors to be professionalized in the direction of career guidance. School counselors can be a good resource since they are called upon in many other personal problems, thus possessing an important capital of trust. In connection with this situation, I also proposed the need to establish an additional

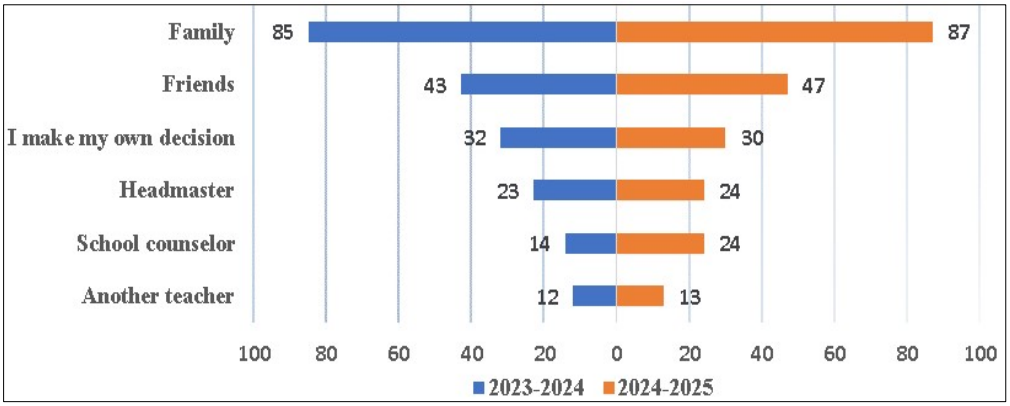

Fig. 2. People with career counselor roles (%)

administrative position, that of career counselor (who may have a range of action over several schools/high schools) and who would deal exclusively with this field (Krech, 2025).

What has been mentioned so far is also confirmed by the students' statements regarding the academic/career guidance activities they consider significant. These activities are shown in the following graph (Fig. 3):

Students practically created a typology of activities considered significant for school and career guidance/orientation. We observe the trust given by students to the specific activities imposed by school counselors.

Conclusions

A new OECD report (2025) offers a broad perspective on how adolescents construct their professional expectations, highlighting several critical directions for analyzing education-work transitions. Despite the rapid transformations of the economy and the emergence of new occupational roles, young people's aspirations remain concentrated in a small number of high-status professions, being strongly influenced by the socio-economic context. This trend shows that, although educational aspirations are increasing overall, many students encounter difficulties in realistically interpreting professional opportunities. In this context, any career guidance initiative can be clarifying.

If we follow the OECD recommendations, we consider that the professionalization of school counselors in terms of career guidance becomes an obligation. Such a project will be implemented at the level of Romania in the immediate future, Project PEO COC-Transformational practices in career counseling and guidance (ConsEDU) 2025-2029. Among the results sought: a unified methodological framework for career counseling at the national level, piloting and expanding a European whole school approach model, training 2,500 counselors, 2,500 principals, 500 teachers, modern infrastructure for COC (providing 2,500 schools with standardized kits and tools and creating the National Career Counseling and Guidance Platform).

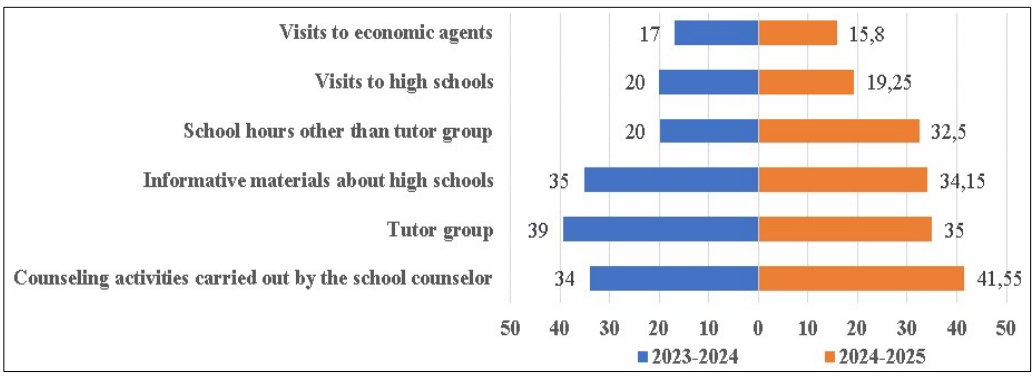

Fig. 3. Significant activities in career guidance

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