Career Guidance in Schools from European and International Perspectives: Designing Transfer in Career Guidance Between Science and Practice
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Career Counselling in Pre-University Education Policy Analysis and the Development of Effective Practices in Albania: The Importance of Emotional Intelligence in Its Implementation

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Abstract

Context: In contemporary societies, career counselling and guidance in pre-university education is considered a key factor in helping young people develop their potential, make informed choices, and prepare for the dynamic labour market. This process involves identifying personal interests, exploring professions, and developing the necessary skills for life and career integration. In this context, the article aims to examine the impact of educational policies in Albania on career counselling by analysing the legal framework, institutional structure, and the effectiveness of measures undertaken by the Ministry of Education and relevant institutions.
Approach: The study is based on a mixed-methods approach that includes the analysis of scientific literature, a review of official documents and administrative guidelines, as well as in-depth interviews and focus groups with school leaders, teachers, and career coordinators across various schools. Through this process, the main innovations and challenges related to the implementation of career counselling have been identified, along with the impact of these measures on students' personal and professional development.
Findings: The findings of the study reveal that, despite recent efforts to institutionalize this service, there are significant shortcomings in its structure and functioning. In particular, the lack of specialized resources, continuous training for coordinators, and professional development support limits the overall effectiveness of career counselling. Furthermore, the study highlights a noticeable disconnect between the policies drafted and the realities on the ground, creating a gap between the intended goals and their practical implementation. An important aspect emphasized in this study is the role of emotional intelligence skills as an integral part of career counselling. Although school leaders and teachers consider these skills essential, current policy frameworks do not provide concrete guidelines for the development and assessment of emotional intelligence within the counselling process. Moreover, the

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selection of career coordinators is often based on subjective preferences rather than clearly defined professional criteria, which negatively affects the quality and sustainability of the services provided.
Conclusions: In conclusion, this article argues that enhancing career counselling in pre-university education requires a thorough reassessment of existing approaches and a sustained investment in the professional development of staff. This includes strengthening the training of career coordinators, improving educational resources, and ensuring ongoing institutional support to achieve a lasting and positive impact on students' development and their preparation for the challenges of the labour market.

Keywords

career counselling, professional orientation, pre-university education, personal development, emotional intelligence

1 Introduction

One of the greatest challenges facing the education system in Albania—and globally—is its effectiveness in responding to the needs of society. Schools are tasked with empowering students to shape their own future by developing key individual competencies such as critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, decision-making, collaboration, and teamwork. These skills are essential for building future careers that ensure success both for individuals and for the wider community (UNICEF, 2021).

Today, both the European Union's policy agenda and the academic community emphasize the concept of the "Youth Guarantee" as a vital component for shaping the future and delivering necessary services to young people (Meta, 2023). When examining the educational systems of developed Western countries, it becomes evident that particular importance is given to structured support in pre-university education. This support is designed to guide students toward future career paths that align with their abilities and interests, while also responding to the evolving demands of the labour market.

As part of the Youth Guarantee initiative, a pilot program has also been launched in Albania with the support of the European Union, aiming to facilitate the integration of young people into the labour market across all countries in the region (Meta, 2023). In alignment with a series of guidelines and initiatives promoted by the European Union, the Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports has approved Order No. 463, dated 30.08.2024. This policy introduces an innovative reform by establishing two new roles within schools: the Career Counselling Coordinator and the Quality Assurance Coordinator. This represents a significant qualitative step forward, offering renewed guarantees for educational quality and supporting the integration of youth into the labour market (ASCAP, 2024).

This newly established service in Albanian schools aims to address critical issues such as school dropout, unemployment, poverty, substance abuse, and poor quality of life. Career counselling for youth is a delicate and impactful process with long-term consequences on both individual and societal levels. Therefore, it is essential that career counselors are equipped with both personal and professional competencies in order to effectively guide young people toward informed decision-making and a more promising future.

1.1 Problem Statement

According to Nyamwange, Nyakan, and Ondima (2012), career counselling plays a critical role in the success of the learning process, particularly in enabling students to make informed decisions about their future. This essential component has been gradually introduced into

Albania's pre-university education system since 2013. However, practical experience has shown that the implementation of this new role faces numerous challenges. The lack of structured programs, insufficient resources related to higher education and labour market information, as well as limited training and ongoing support for teachers responsible for career counselling, represent some of the major barriers hindering its effective execution.

Moreover, the legal framework supporting this service remains ambiguous and often poorly aligned with the practical needs of teachers in the field. Within professional networks and the broader educational community, there is a noticeable lack of clear guidance on how to implement the Career Coordinator's Guide (MAS, 2024), leaving many teachers in a passive position toward a reform that demands clarity, resources, and concrete institutional support. It is precisely within this context that the need for this study emerged—with the aim of supporting teachers who often feel isolated when faced with vague directives within the Albanian education system.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to examine the relevant literature concerning the role of the career counsellor, to analyse the legal framework in Albania, and to provide a detailed review of the *Guidelines for the Career Counselling Coordinator in Pre-University Education*. The study aims to identify the innovations and challenges associated with the implementation of this role and to propose new directions for its improvement.

Study Objectives

- To explore the relevant literature concerning career counselling services in schools;
- To identify the strengths and weaknesses of the *Guidelines for the Career Counselling Coordinator*;
- To highlight the importance of emotional intelligence as an integral component of the professional development of the career counsellor;
- To explore the perceptions of teachers, career counsellors, and school leaders regarding the implementation of the guideline in school practice.

Research Questions

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the *Guidelines for the Career Counselling Coordinator*?
- Is emotional intelligence an important component in the professional development of the career counsellor?
- How do school principals, teachers, and career counsellors perceive the practical implementation of this guideline in schools?

2 Literature Review

Changes in the labour market, the rise of violence among adolescents and within communities, divorce, and various other social challenges significantly affect—and will continue to affect—the academic, social, and career trajectories of young people (Gysbers, 2004). Within the educational community, career counsellors play a critical role in assisting youth through structured counselling programs that address these pressing issues (Gysbers, 2004).

Adolescents tend to actively seek information when making career choices, and their level of school engagement and academic performance tends to increase when they are involved in

processes that support self-awareness and provide access to knowledge about the labour market (Kenny, Blustein, Haase, Jackson, & Perry, 2006; Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, Akos, & Rose, 2013; Perry, Liu, & Pabian, 2010).

Studies have shown that the proper and inclusive design of school counselling programs has a positive impact on achieving school objectives, particularly in terms of student outcomes **(**Wilkerson et al., 2013). Career counsellors play a key role in guiding students toward professional or academic pathways. Based on the American School Counsellor Association's National Model (ASCA, 2019)**,** school counsellors are encouraged to deliver comprehensive programs that aim to promote students' academic, social/emotional, and career development.

When counselling service programs are clearly defined and effectively implemented in schools, students tend to experience improvements in academic performance and achievement, enhanced social relationships, improved decision-making and problem-solving skills, as well as a better understanding of career pathways and post-secondary opportunities (Connecticut State Department of Education [CSDE], 2020); Yavuz, 2022).Brown and Trusty (2005) reported that the majority of educational institutions across various countries have adopted comprehensive career counselling programs as a model aimed at enhancing the academic, personal, social, emotional, and professional development of all students.

Western career counselling practices emphasize that the teacher serving in this role is expected to have a comprehensive understanding of each student, including their prior educational background, skills, interests, limitations, and future goals, in order to guide them along a career path tailored to their needs and potential (Yavuz, 2022).

As a result of the significance this service holds for both individual development and societal well-being, the Ministry of Education and Sports, within the framework of various initiatives and directives aligned with the European Union, issued Order No. 463, dated August 30, 2024. This order marked a significant reform through the introduction of two new roles in schools: the Career Counselling Coordinator and the Quality Assurance Coordinator. This initiative represents a qualitative step forward and a guarantee of improved educational standards, while also fostering the integration of young people into the labour market. To facilitate the implementation of this service, the Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education (ASCAP) has developed a practical guideline designed to support career counselling teachers in effectively applying this role. The guide aims to ensure a high-quality approach to fulfilling the responsibilities of the position by addressing students' academic, social, and emotional needs in preparation for their future.

In many countries around the world, career counsellors typically hold academic training in psychology (at the bachelor's or master's level, or through other psychology-oriented programs). This educational background is considered essential, as career counsellors are expected to support students not only in their professional orientation but also in their social and emotional development. According to the most recent Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) survey (Cosma et al., 2023), approximately 33% of adolescents in Europe and Canada reported feeling nervous or irritable on a weekly basis during the years 2021–2022. Modern life, compounded by the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, has increased the vulnerability of children and young people to mental health challenges. One way to help them successfully navigate these difficulties is through the development of emotional intelligence—the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's emotions—which plays a key role in supporting clear and confident decision-making.

Emotional intelligence is a fundamental component in both the personal and professional development of individuals, and its role in pre-university education has been emphasized by numerous scholars and international institutions. Skills such as self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, self-motivation, and social competence are essential not only for success in the labour market but also for healthy interpersonal relationships.

According to Daniel Goleman, a leading authority on emotional intelligence, these skills are crucial for achieving success in life and career. In his seminal book *"Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ"* (1995), Goleman argues that emotional intelligence is as important as cognitive intelligence for personal and professional success.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has also underscored the importance of developing emotional and social skills in schools. In its report *"Skills for Health"* (2003), WHO recommends the integration of life skills education programs into school curricula—including self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and social skills—in order to promote students' mental health and overall well-being.

In the Albanian context, the Ministry of Education and Sports has taken steps to integrate the development of emotional and social skills into the national education system. The *Career Counselling Coordinator's Guideline* (2024) includes components related to the development of emotional intelligence, emphasizing the importance of these skills in guiding students toward career choices and in preparing them for the labour market.

3 Research Methodology

The aim of this study is to analyse the *Career Counselling Teacher's Guideline* by examining its strengths and limitations in supporting this newly established role within schools. To achieve this objective, an exploratory qualitative approach was adopted, which is particularly suitable when the goal is to gain an in-depth understanding of a complex phenomenon from the perspective of the involved actors (Creswell, 2013).

The study relied on the analysis of existing literature, official documents, and data collected through observations and semi-structured interviews, conducted in the form of focus groups with school principals, teachers, and career counsellors. A qualitative methodology was chosen because it enables a deep exploration of the guideline, taking into account how it is implemented in practice by the teachers who apply it daily in the school context (Merriam, 2009).

3.1 Participant Selection

The aim of this study is to analyse and evaluate the Career Counselling Guideline from the perspective of schools. For this reason, ***purposeful sampling*** was employed as an appropriate strategy in qualitative research, which seeks to select participants who are considered rich sources of information relevant to the research objective (Patton, 2002).

Only teachers who currently served as career counsellors in ten schools in Tirana were selected—four from basic education and six from secondary education. These participants were deeply familiar with the school context and the role of the career counsellor. Moreover, they were also enrolled in the professional master's program in career counselling, ensuring the inclusion of individuals with both practical experience and in-depth reflection on this role.

3.2 Interview Process and Research Ethics

The interviews were conducted at the premises of the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tirana. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided written informed consent. Audio recording was carried out only after obtaining their explicit approval, and anonymity and confidentiality were ensured throughout the research process. The interviews were semi-structured and guided by the central research question: **"How is the guideline being implemented in the actual school context?"**

Additional guiding questions included:

- Does the guideline contain concrete assessment tools or structured formats?
- Does the guideline take into account the existing human and infrastructural resources in your school?
- Is there any mechanism in place to evaluate your performance as a career counsellor?
- What are the main challenges you have encountered when using the guideline?
- Do you believe emotional intelligence plays a role in building trusting relationships with students?

In certain cases, participants elaborated further on issues they considered important for their role and for the guideline as a supportive instrument.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data collected through the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006)**:**

1. Familiarisation with the data – Interview transcripts were read multiple times to understand their structure and content.
2. Generating initial codes – Meaningful units reflecting shared experiences, perceptions, and attitudes were identified.
3. Searching for themes – Similar codes were grouped into overarching representative themes.
4. Reviewing themes – Themes were checked for internal consistency and alignment with the original data.
5. Defining and naming themes – Each theme was clearly defined in relation to the research objectives.
6. Producing the report – The findings were integrated into the final analysis, supported by representative quotes from participants.

The analysis focused primarily on semantic themes but also took into account latent elements that reflected deeper dimensions of the career counsellors' experiences. In this way, the study contributes to unpacking the real-world implementation of the career counselling guidelines and to highlighting the role of emotional intelligence in pedagogical and advisory interactions.

Initially, all interviews were transcribed and carefully read multiple times to identify the main themes. For each theme, relevant code**s** were developed to organize key ideas in relation to the study's central question: *"How is the guideline being implemented in the school setting?"* This process was guided by the thematic analysis approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006), which includes transcription, initial coding, theme development, and the selection of representative quotations. Direct quotes from participants were then selected to meaningfully illustrate the themes identified.

4 Study Findings

Thematic analysis yielded five key themes that reflect the participants' perceptions and experiences regarding the implementation of career counselling in pre-university schools:

Misalignment Between the Guideline and School Reality

All participants agreed on the existence of a significant gap between the content of the Career Counselling Guideline and its actual implementation in school settings. Participants reported a lack of resources, training, tools, infrastructure, and appropriate conditions for effectively fulfilling the role of career counsellor.

"When you read it, you like it. But when it comes to implementation, it's very difficult. "I am just one teacher for 620 students. What can I possibly do? I can't even provide individual counselling." (P4, Career Counsellor, Albanian Language and Literature Teacher, Basic Education School)

"There are no designated hours; we negotiate them with colleagues or take over classes when other teachers are absent." (P7, Career Counsellor, English Teacher, Upper Secondary School)

"There are counsellors covering up to three schools who come only once a week—just to fill in paperwork." (P1, Mathematics Teacher, Basic Education School)

Ambiguity in the Selection and Role of Career Coordinators

Participants expressed concern regarding the lack of clear legal criteria for the selection of career coordinators. They highlighted that appointments are often made non-transparently and are not necessarily based on appropriate professional qualifications for the role.

"There is nothing clearly defined by law about what qualifications a career counsellor should have."
"There were three teachers in our school who met the criteria, but they chose me. I don't know what distinguished me." (P2, Career Counsellor, English Teacher, Basic Education School)

Lack of Monitoring and Implementation Flexibility

The guideline does not include mechanisms for monitoring or evaluating the work of career counsellors. Participants emphasized the absence of standards or criteria to assess performance.

"At the end of each term, I submit the plan and a report of the activities I have organized." "The principal has no idea; he only asks the students if the career counsellor has ever entered the classroom." (P6, Career Counsellor, History Teacher, Upper Secondary School)

Lack of Structured Information on Higher Education and the Labour Market

Another issue identified was the absence of concrete links between schools, universities, and the labour market. The guidance provided to students is minimal and often limited to recommendations to pursue vocational education.

"We have no concrete information. At best, we organize a visit or a conversation with parents." (P6, Career Counsellor, Geography Teacher, Upper Secondary School)

The Need for Personalized Counselling and the Integration of Emotional Intelligence

Participants emphasized the importance of developing emotional intelligence as a foundation for effective career guidance. It was noted that career advisors should possess the skills to support students in self-assessment, building self-confidence, and identifying their strengths and abilities.

"The career counsellor should help the student to know themselves and develop self-confidence, but we receive no training for this." (P9, Career Counsellor, French Language Teacher, Upper Secondary School)

"The counsellor themselves must possess emotional intelligence in order to transmit it to the student." (P10, Career Counsellor, Civic Education Teacher, Upper Secondary School)

5 Discussion

Overall, this study provides a valuable contribution to understanding the current state of the career counsellor's role within Albania's pre-university education system, highlighting the main challenges and difficulties encountered in practice, while also offering insight into areas where policy interventions are needed. The findings emphasize that several aspects of the official guideline require revision to enhance its applicability and effectiveness. More precisely, the study reveals a significant disconnect between the content of the guideline and the actual conditions in schools, a lack of clear criteria for the selection and professional profile of career coordinators, the absence of systematic monitoring and performance evaluation mechanisms, limited access to structured information regarding higher education and labour market opportunities, and a pressing need for personalized counselling approaches that integrate emotional intelligence. These dimensions illustrate the complexity of implementing career counselling as a meaningful support service and underscore the importance of strategic improvements in both institutional policy and practice.

The findings of this study reveal a significant discrepancy between the conceptual content of the career counselling guideline and the actual possibilities for its implementation in pre-university schools in Albania. Although the document is developed in alignment with contemporary literature and international models of career guidance (Watts & Sultana, 2004; OECD, 2021), it fails to account for structural challenges such as the lack of human resources, inadequate infrastructure, insufficient specialized training, and the weak connection between schools and the labour market. This observation is consistent with the international literature, which emphasizes that effective implementation of career guidance policies requires systematic investment in counsellor training, institutional support, and clear role definitions for the relevant actors (Sultana, 2012; Hooley et al., 2015). In contrast, well-designed but practically unimplementable policies can have the opposite effect, increase institutional confusion and leave students without meaningful support during a critical period of their development (OECD, 2021; Plant, 2001). This highlights the need for a reassessment of current policies and their adaptation to the Albanian context, as well as for strengthening inter-institutional cooperation between schools, educational authorities, and the labour market sector.

Previous studies have shown that the absence of a clear legal procedure for the selection of career guidance coordinators is a widespread issue. The OECD emphasizes the importance of clear criteria and professional standards for career counsellors, including relevant experience and specialized training (OECD, 2021). Systematic international studies have pointed out that without a substantive legal framework, even formal requirements—such as "five years of experience"—remain too general and, in practice, fail to ensure an objective and merit-based selection process (Lam & Hui, 2010; Hooley et al., 2015).

Moreover, previous literature emphasizes that transparency and accountability are essential elements in the management of career counselling services; their absence increases the risk of favouritism and undermines the credibility of the process (Plant, 2001; OECD, 2004). When these arguments are combined with the findings of this study, it becomes evident that selection processes lacking unified professional criteria fail to contribute to the development of career guidance as a credible and high-quality service for students.

This study highlights the absence of a clearly defined system for monitoring and evaluating the role of the career counsellor, which constitutes a significant barrier to the effective functioning of this service. In the absence of clear guidelines on how to assess performance, institutional leaders appear uncertain in directing the role of the counsellor, while the counsellors themselves face difficulties in organizing and reporting their work.

International literature supports this concern by emphasizing that unclear evaluation frameworks hinder the identification of minimum quality standards and achievement indicators in career guidance services (Plant, 2001; OECD, 2004; Sultana, 2012). Without measurable criteria and structured indicators, it is not possible to determine whether career counsellors are effectively fulfilling their roles or to identify the areas that require intervention or improvement (Hooley et al., 2015).

In this context, Gysbers (2004) emphasizes that merely expressing concern for accountability is insufficient. He argues that to ensure quality and effectiveness, it is essential to establish concrete structures and clear processes that support genuine accountability and reinforce the professional role of career counsellors. According to him, the absence of such mechanisms renders the demand for accountability abstract and ineffective in practice. This highlights the need to develop an integrated and functional evaluation system, so that the role of the career counsellor does not remain symbolic but has a tangible impact on youth career orientation.

The lack of coherent and integrated policies connecting pre-university education with higher education and the labour market represents a significant obstacle to the meaningful development of the career counsellor's role. To enable young individuals to make informed and strategic decisions that foster their personal growth and contribute to societal well-being, it is imperative that educational policies provide career counsellors with reliable, structured, and regularly updated information on labour market trends, higher education opportunities, and collaborative frameworks with the business sector (Watts & Sultana, 2004).

The literature emphasizes that effective career counselling cannot operate in a vacuum; it requires an integrated system linking education, employment, and the private sector. Career coordinators must be equipped with the appropriate resources, tools, and professional networks to provide meaningful and evidence-based guidance (Sultana, 2012). Only through such a systemic approach can young people be directed toward careers that align with their potential and labour market demands, ultimately contributing not only to their personal development but also to the long-term benefit of society as a whole.

Contemporary literature on professional success in the 21st century clearly indicates that emotional intelligence represents one of the key competencies that supports both personal and professional development. Goleman (1995), one of the most prominent authors in this field, emphasizes that emotional intelligence can be learned and cultivated, significantly contributing to the development of self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and interpersonal skills—elements essential for success in both personal life and the workplace.

In this context, the role of the career counsellor should not be limited to providing information about educational or occupational choices. Rather, it should actively incorporate the components of emotional intelligence into the counselling process. The support that counsellors offer in terms of self-assessment, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and

developing emotional awareness is crucial in empowering young people to make informed career decisions (Bar-On, 2006; Elias et al., 1997).

Moreover, achieving these objectives requires that the career counsellor have dedicated time for individual work with students, to better understand their needs and to create a supportive environment that facilitates emotional and social growth. The integration of emotional intelligence into career counselling services aligns with the broader goals of contemporary education, which aim to develop conscious and capable citizens who are equipped to face the challenges of an ever-changing labour market (OECD, 2018).

The findings of this study clearly indicate that the role of the career counsellor requires a thorough reassessment of existing approaches and a long-term investment in professional development. Among the priority actions emphasized are the strengthening of training programs for career coordinators, the improvement of educational resources, and the provision of ongoing institutional support. These elements are essential for creating a sustainable and positive impact on student development, effectively preparing them to face the challenges of an ever-evolving labour market.

6 Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Future

This study employs a qualitative approach through document analysis and focus groups with teachers selected as career counsellors. As such, their perceptions are individual and may be influenced by factors such as professional background, personal awareness, or fear due to their institutional position. Previous research has shown that focus group findings may lack the provocativeness needed to generate generalizable conclusions (Vicsek, 2010). Therefore, the results should not be generalized to other schools without further studies that also include students as integral participants in the career counselling process.

Moreover, although the teachers involved in the study were from schools in the capital, the situation in other institutions—particularly in peripheral or rural areas—may differ significantly. This aligns with findings in the literature that identify institutional context as a key factor in interpreting results (Payne & Williams, 2005). Accordingly, future research should expand to include a larger and more diverse sample in order to make the findings more transferable across the Albanian education system.

7 Conclusions

The *Career Counselling Guide* is a document that, although it theoretically outlines the role of the career counsellor in a clear and structured manner, fails to reflect the concrete realities of Albanian schools and does not take into account the cultural and infrastructural context of pre-university education. Efforts to implement it often result in formal compliance, where teachers assigned to this role complete the required documentation merely to fulfill legal obligations, without having the capacity to effectively and meaningfully carry out this function (Watts & Fretwell, 2004).

This clearly highlights a significant mismatch between the formulated policies and actual educational practice, creating a visible gap between the documented objectives and their real implementation in schools (OECD, 2021). One of the main challenges remains the lack of specialized resources and continuous training for career coordinators, which significantly limits the effectiveness of this service (Gysbers, 2004).

Moreover, the absence of a clear system for monitoring and evaluating the performance of career counsellors makes it impossible to measure their impact or make informed decisions for improvement (Sultana, 2009; Gysbers, 2004). These shortcomings underscore the need to revise the current approach and establish a structured, integrated, and cohesive system for career counselling in pre-university education.
Only through such a system can young people be successfully guided toward the labour market

in alignment with their individual skills and potential, thereby contributing to the sustainable development of society—not only in economic terms, but also socially and psychologically (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2020.ILO, 2020; Goleman, 1998).

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