

# Training the career counselling workforce in Bulgaria: Introducing a bottom-up approach for bridging the gap between education and labour market

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## Introduction

Career and school counselling in the USA and Europe have for a long time long ago demonstrated the benefits and advantages they can bring ensure for pupils, students and employers. Helping individuals make good choices for their profession and life, makes counselling crucial fundamental in the knowledge society. The situation is still very different in emerging economies like Bulgaria. The lack of any stable traditions in delivering counselling services and the need to bridge the gap between education and the competitive labour market requirements are some of the main challenges of the day. There is a discrepancy between the theoretical knowledge students receive in the classroom and the skills needed in business. These are the main problems we face – the discrepancy between the theoretical knowledge students receive in the education system, and the skills the companies need (that are constantly developing).

In 2000, Bulgaria was still facing a high unemployment rate and big gap between the employers' needs and the skills of the workforce. Students lacked practical skills and information about career choice while awareness about career services was low and vaguely associated with the state job placement services for the unemployed. Some characteristics of the labour market in these years were the 'job-hoppers' (people who frequently jump from one job to another), hidden employment, low participation in lifelong learning, a low level of soft skills level and low productivity. So, there were many employers who were dissatisfied with the employees' skills of their employees, and many people were unhappy with their jobs. The time has come for career counselling!

## Developing a new career guidance system

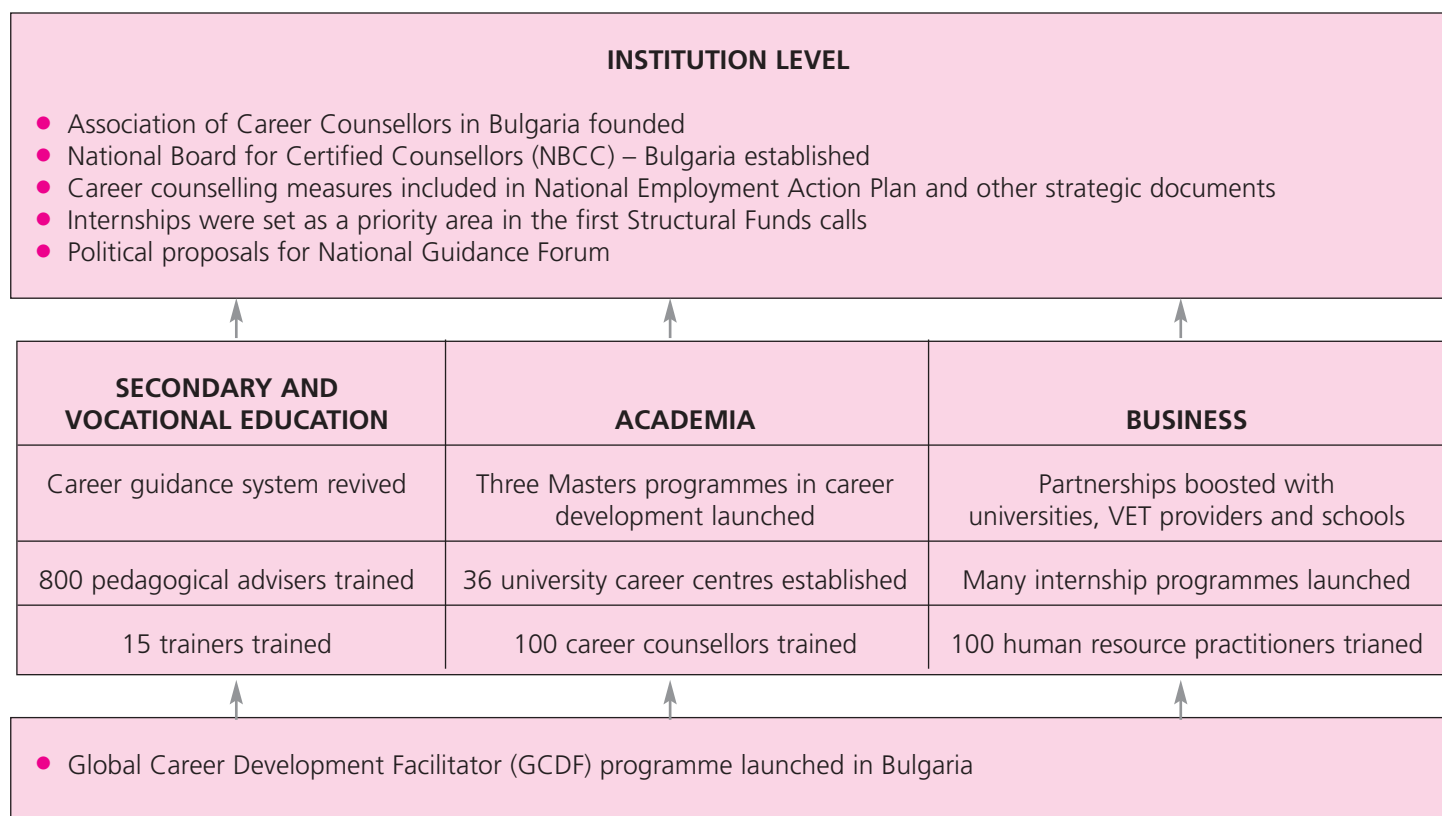
What about the career guidance system? Starting back in the 1970s, a national centralized career guidance system had been developed with career counselling centres established all over the country to support young people make career decisions. Many advisers were trained and a methodology was developed to support their work. As the transition started in the 1990s, this system was destroyed.

Some important lessons from the past were obvious:

1. **Sustainability** is crucial: it takes decades to establish a centralized career guidance system and only a year to ruin it.
2. **Support**: the system has to respond to the needs of business, academia, secondary education, students, institutions, the general public; and contribute to the commonwealth in order to be valued, supported and independent.
3. **Synergy**: the career services should help find the common concerns across point of multiple interests (business, education, public sector) and join together the efforts of all those counterparts engaged in with career counselling.
4. **Awareness**: the promotion of career services and advocacy for career system development is both necessary to develop a stable tradition of career services that will be popular among their beneficiaries and supported by the authorities.
5. **Professionalism**: career practitioners need recognised standards that will guarantee a good quality of services for the clients.

The Business Foundation for Education (BFE) - a legacy of the most successful USAID project in Bulgaria arranged with the USA - addressed these challenges by introducing a bottom-up approach that involved all the partners – schools, academia, businesses and institutions – in an effective cooperation working together in an effective way. Starting with small steps at a local level and celebrating each small success, this approach gained recognition for the career counselling and contributed to its institutionalization (Figure 1).

**g. 1.** Bottom-up approach for bridging the gap between education and the labour market



### Developing the career guidance workforce

In 2005, BFE introduced a career counselling training and certification programme: the Global Career Development Facilitator (GCDF). The award credential (<http://www.cce-global.org/credentials-offered/gcdfmain>) is owned by the National Board of Certified Counsellors and is recognised worldwide.

The GCDF programme is implemented in 40 countries in the world. The methodology provides a palette – *ok:palette* of competencies in a number of fields that are represented in the curricula as modules. The GCDF curricula in the various countries use a common theoretical background and country-specific information that is annually reviewed and updated annually. The modules are:

- Career development models
- Labour market information and Employability skills
- Assessment
- Helping skills
- Working with diverse groups
- Training clients
- Career development programme management and implementation

- Promotion of career services
- Technology in career guidance
- Ethical standards in counselling.

Specialized training for career counsellors in the country is provided by the Business Foundation for Education and JobTiger. The training isgs are tailored in order to address the specific needs and problems of the clients in different settings. Some additional modules or extra time is added to focus on some important topics in order to equip career specialists in the public and private sectors with a more specificadequate approach and experience. The 120-hour training is practice- oriented and includes interactive workshops, self-preparation of exercises and a case study. The certification also requires also 200 hours of related practical experience, adherence to ethical standards, continuing education and supervision.

ArmedOccupied with competences in these areas, practitioners with GCDF trainings can easily fit into a variety of career development settings, serving as career group facilitators, job search trainers, career resource centre coordinators, career coaches, career development case managers, intake interviewers, recruitment and placement specialists or workforce development personnel. Among the 1000 career specialists that have now been trained, there are 800 pedagogical advisers from secondary and vocational schools, 100 career counsellors from

university career centres and nearly 100 human resources specialists from business organizations, public institutions and the non-governmental sector.

The career practitioners in Bulgaria are university graduates and the majority of them have mainly humanitarian a background in the humanities – so this tends to be in (psychology, pedagogy, psychology and other social sciences,) although this is not a formal requirement obligation. So there is a large number of career counsellors graduates working as career counsellors have specialisms in economics, labour organization and human resources management, etc.

Inspired by their students' growing interest in career counselling on their students, several universities started offering specialized Masters programmes for career guidance counsellors. In 2005, the Pedagogical Faculty of Ruse University since initiated the first Masters Programme for career development in the country. In 2008, the Pedagogical Faculty of Sofia University (the biggest Bulgarian university) offered a renewed Masters programme on **Qualification and redirection of workforce** – You can replace the whole name with Human Resource Development – and a post-graduate qualification programme on 'Professional orientation guidance and career counselling'. A Masters Programme for career development is in the process of preparation in the biggest private university – the New Bulgarian University. The three universities are including the GCDF programme as a practical component in their courses, and provide graduates with the opportunity to receive an international certificate together with their diploma.

By 2006, over 150 GCDF counsellors specialists had gained the GCDF award. been certified. Since the number of accredited counsellors and the popularity of the GCDF programme was growing grew in the business sector, public administration and universities, the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science (MES) recognised that the programme offered as a good opportunity to build capacity for career guidance services in the schools. In 2006, the BFE signed an agreement with the MES' National Pedagogical Centre of the MES, and prepared developed 15 trainers methodologists within under the GCDF credential programme. By the autumn of 2008 these methodologist trainers had cascaded the training to 800 pedagogical advisers throughout the country to provide career services in vocational and secondary schools. It is planned that another 2000 would be trained as GCDF counsellors by the end of 2009.

There are many challenges for the future related to skills and The training and skills development of the career professionals in Bulgaria face many challenges in the future. In first place to ensure the quality and quantity of services in order to meet the developing needs of the

clients. There are still many people from vulnerable groups and those living in the countryside who do not have access to career services. Currently, career services are focused predominantly on young people and the unemployed. Since the financial crisis has started to impact reflect on the markets, career services for employed people and those in transition seem to be inadequate and insufficient.

Career education and guidance as a whole are not integrated into the school curricula except for several lessons on career and professional vocational guidance **orientation** for which the pedagogical advisors and class teachers are responsible. Students in vocational schools undertake go through a compulsory work experience in industry production practice (60 hours for those in the 11th grade and 90 hours for those in the 12th grade) that usually takes place as a work shadowing experience or – sometimes as an entrepreneurship experience in student enterprises. Three career centres have been established recently in vocational schools to help school graduates choose further career pathways. Career counsellors in vocational guidance centres will need a more in-depth knowledge of the new occupations, academic programmes and the recognition of informal learning.

In 2008, three pilot school Career Clubs were founded as a BFE project aimed at making school more attractive to children. The initiative includes career classes, an internship fair, a carnival of professions, quizzes and contests on career topics, and school-to-business visits, etc. Project management and implementation is quite a new task for the career advisers at school: they need which provides them with new tools for designing and funding their services, but it seems that many of them lack experience and skills to deal with this part of their role.

In several offices of the state Employment Agency, individual counselling and group guidance sessions are sometimes organized to familiarise make children familiar with various occupations. There are multimedia and other materials are available to pupils. However, they need to be updated and enriched as the professions develop.

The number of University career staff is insufficient unable to handle the process of individual counselling, as the number of counselors is quite small - usually there is only one counsellor for over 1000 students and sometimes a number of non-specialist-expert volunteers. In order to deal with this impediment the career counsellors use career seminars to provide increase clients' awareness informed client on the one hand, and on the other to train career assistants. But meanwhile as they reduce their individual counselling practice and lose related skills, new types of challenges and technologies arise so this leads the counsellors into a vicious circle of not knowing which skills and competencies they need to prioritise.. Using ICT and assessment tools is either overlooked or extremely exaggerated, but the truth is career counsellors need to

raise their skills and knowledges abouton both.

Thus the GCDF programme promoted the development of the career counsellor's profession in Bulgaria. An Association of career consultants has been established in 2007 to develop work for the development of the capacity of the professional community of career consultants. The Association's most important tasks are increased recognition and institutionalization of the profession, the development elaboration of an ethical code for career of the consultants, and to provide providing high quality services for all the needy clients. The National Board of Certified Counsellors in Bulgaria (NBCC Bulgaria) shares the same goals and supports the practising professionals to maintain their competencies and skills through different trainings and projects. The establishment of a system for providing professional career services should have a longer-term impact through the improved deployment of for the successful professional realization of the human resources and on economy development.

## Conclusion

The introduction of the GCDF programme and training of career practitioners in Bulgaria triggered a cascade of efforts in several directions but with a single goal of bringing together education and the labour market. More than 1000 counsellors have been trained under the GCDF program to provide career services in all types of settings for thousands of clients. A Career guidance system has been established in secondary and vocational schools to help young people chose a career. The network of 36 universities career centres in 12 towns links students with employers. GCDF accredited certified human resource practitioners are involved in career guidance and counselling for socially responsible restructuring and for growing strategies and policies to support ,. for human resource development and business growth.

Several years ago career counselling whas been vaguely associated with the job placement services for unemployed people, provided by the National Employment Agency. Now, as a result of the BFE initiatives, career counselling is a rapidly growing profession in Bulgaria with an established professional organization and a national credentialing entity awarding body. It is highly valuedevaluated in the community for its contribution tovalue for lifelong learning, and in many strategic documents it is identified as a key factor measure in supporting economic development. Yes :). The developmentelaboration of sustainable policy has started with the Road Map of career guidance policy. The EU's Structural Funds also emphasised the importance of professional orientation career guidance. ,for of strengthening the linkages between industry and academia and its role infor economic growth and competitiveand workforce development. (you can skip it)

The most important challenges for the career counsellors in Bulgaria in the next years will be to respond to the high expectations and needs of the Bulgarian society and citizens. We believe that building the career guidance system we are not building not an Ivory Tower or as Shopping Mall, but a Cathedral that everyone can enter in the important moments in their life and receive the support and inspiration they need.