

Guiding at risk youth through learning to work

CASE STUDY:

Guidance and counseling to fight early school leaving in Croatia; A success story?



CEDEFOP

European Centre for the Development
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INTRODUCTION¹

While probably not accurate, statistics give to Croatia the best ranking all over an enlarged Europe concerning early school leavers ratio. This article looks at the organization of the guidance and counseling system with reference to CEDEFOP report findings in order to understand how this organization may contribute to this successful output of the Croatian education system.

The article does not intend to describe the entire Croatian Guidance and Counseling system. It focuses on specific existing activities linked to support early school leavers and at risk populations and provides with recommendations to better look at transitions from school to work regardless of educational origin.

BACKGROUND

In Croatia, the concept of Vocational guidance and counseling is elaborated in the 30's of the 20th century. Initiated by the Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Trade of Zagreb (presently Chamber of Economy) with strong support of the University's Institute of Psychology, the first Vocational Counseling Centre was established in 1931 (nowadays the Chamber includes a department for Human potential development). At that period the regulations of the Centre clearly indicated a process based on physical/medical and psychological testing. Target groups were identified as young people faced with decision concerning their future occupation as well as adults who should be forced to change their occupations². This could be considered as an advanced vision of a life long vocational guidance model.

The regulations indicated the need for a partnership approach where the role of the vocational counselor was clearly differentiated from the professional psychologist. Article 20 of the 1931 regulations mentions as well the preeminent role of teachers expected to work together with the two above mentioned specialists.

Notwithstanding the political (r)evolution(s) during the last 70 years in the country, as of today this design and process still largely applies in Croatia. It is embedded in societal³ practice and considered as a right for each citizen⁴.

A STRATEGIC POLICY ISSUE

Following several reforms, activities of the vocational guidance and counseling centre above mentioned were transferred under the authority of first the Employment exchange and then to the Employment services. Presently the Croatian Employment Service (CES) manages this activity as part of its main duties as indicated in the Strategic plan for the period 2008-2011.

¹ Warm thanks go to Ms Efka Heder, Director of the (SEESEC) who helped identifying relevant Croatian experts, to Ms Mirjana Zecirevic, Head of Employment Preparation Department at the Croatian employment Services (CES) who kindly accepted to prepare the mission and has been of continuous support and to Zlatko Stic Director of the Vladimir Prelog Science School in Zagreb and his team who gave of their time during the hectic period of the school start. Special thanks to the team of CES who has participated to the expert mission, conveyed all relevant information and has accepted to be challenged as regards their professional experience.

² Article 3 of regulations of the vocational counseling centre.

³ 95% of pupils finishing basic schools coming for vocational guidance services come with at least one of their parents (CES survey)

On the basis of a tri-annual National Employment Action Plan issued by the Croatian Government, an annual Employment Incentive plan is prepared which guides the activities of the CES. This is in line with Croatian Government commitment to comply with Lisbon strategy priorities and the European Employment strategy and prepare for Croatia integration as EU Member state¹.

Vocational guidance is a transversal and comprehensive activity which concerns pupils and students as well as unemployed and employed people.

A clear mandate is given to CES to provide support to the educational system² through professional information, professional counseling and assistance to educationalists in schools.

Not only a project among other activities of the CES, life long vocational guidance is considered as a key stone of the architecture of the CES set of services. "Prevent social exclusion and identifying risk population at the early stage" is the motto of staff met. Other consideration heard was that "It is more cost effective to the entire society to provide adequate support to those of greater needs already at school rather than spending public money for unemployed citizens when adults".

With an announced 3.9% rate of early school leavers³ this places the country as a champion vis a vis European countries where the average is closed to 15% with the lowest (and best) rank of 4.3 % being with the closest European neighbor of Croatia, Slovenia (note: Eurostat considers that data for Croatia and Slovenia should be considered as extremely unreliable).⁴

Nevertheless it is worth considering that the holistic approach through close networking and commitment of other stakeholders responds to the expectations of the society and contribute largely to a smooth implementation of this preventative action. Not only limited to services tailored to jobseekers as many of Public Employment Services, CES includes intervention in vocational guidance and counseling as an integrated part of its responsibilities to prevent dropping out. Monitoring and evaluation of vocational guidance and counseling system is performed thanks to the existence of a set of Quality standards developed together with EU support (see below).

Ministry of Science, Education and Sport (MoSES) is a partner of the process described below. Nevertheless, as already related in an OECD-ETF review prepared in 2005 on Career Guidance policy⁵, the role of MoESS still remains weak as regards strategic vision for LLL while CES has already transformed the expert recommendations in clear strategic decisions. A recent action plan for guidance and counseling has been elaborated by MoSES but still needs to be implemented. Presently CES appears to having leadership and decision making for any action linked to the orientation and guidance of MoSES main customers. MoSES intervention in the process is let to individuals such as teachers and other staff in schools which integrate expert teams set-up by CES. The role of these actors is of highest importance as they are the interface with families and have the capacity to intervene at an early stage.

¹ Strategic plan of the CES for the period 2008-2011, articles 1.2.1, 1.2.2, 1.2.3, 1.2.4

² Strategic plan of the CES for the period 2008-2011, article 1.5.3: Services to educational system

³ "Namely, there are very few young people who leave school to work after primary school. Most of them have some type of work related disadvantage and consider themselves unable to work". ETF study "transition from school to work: Internships and first entry to the Labour Market in Croatia" October 2009 p 35

⁴ Data on "Population and Social conditions, Labour force survey":

http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/employment_unemployment_ifs/data/database

⁵ Career Guidance Policy review, Croatia, OECD, External expert recommendations, June 2005.

VOCATIONAL GUIDANCE, A COORDINATED STEP BY STEP APPROACH

Vocational guidance at educational level is provided through a step by step approach. Once a year a Vocational intentions Survey is carried out with final year pupils and students of primary and secondary schools. Under the leadership of CES professionals, expert teams are set-up in each primary and secondary educational institution (CES vocational guidance counselor, in connection with experts from school, including psychologist and social pedagogue) in order to analyse the outcomes of the survey and identify priority groups who may require special attention. Support to those groups takes several forms (vocational guidance information and counseling, self assessment, etc) according to the identified degree of needs.

The more frequent activity consists to inform pupils and students about planning of further professional development. Local and regional CES offices are in charge to organize information sessions first by groups and then directed to individuals and families which require a more in-depth support. Regional job fairs are organized on a yearly basis within which activities are organized for special groups. During workshops information is provided by counselors who present the alternative educational programs, describe occupation and inform on possibilities for employment.¹ At a second stage, vocational counseling is provided to those looking for a more in depth information concerning abilities to perform specific occupations, or chose another education path. Vocational counseling is conducted by psychologists from CES and may be performed individually or through group activity.

A large number of tools are offered to CES young customers to help better identifying personal interest and potential occupational profile. Among favorite tools, a computerized assisting software installed in each centre, called "my choice", presents more than 300 occupations and provides information about education and employment opportunities in Croatia. The tool which is up-dated on a yearly basis allows performing a self-evaluation of interests and guides the customer towards possible options fitting best its own interest. Reference to a counselor all along the process is possible upon request. In addition a web-site provides information on vacancies on a daily basis.

TAILOR MADE MEDIATION AND REMEDIATION WITH AN EARLY FOCUS ON AT-RISK POPULATION

A key feature in Croatian approach is the individualization process aiming at providing tailor-made services for those at risk (dropping out, health and social problems, addiction, etc). In this particular case expert team opinion is looked at in a written form. Educational, psychological, medical and social aspects are analysed by the team. In case of particularly severe risks, remediation process is envisaged this may require a re-orientation or an enrolment in specialized school or training programs.

This approach concerns two target groups which will be treated through an individualization process, those with disability and those at risk of dropping out. Already at primary school, when a pupil is identified with chronicle disease which may limit his/her occupational choice, or having severe health or mental disability, written opinion and advice is prepared by the expert team led by the CES vocational guidance counselors and submitted to the educational committee at county level. A proposal for the most appropriate secondary school program and or/occupation is then delivered to the

¹ More than 131.000 copies of different kind of brochures, leaflets and other material (i.e. CDs) have been distributed in 2008.

family and the relevant institution. According to legislation, this document will enable the entrance to the recommended program.

As concerns young students identified at risk in secondary schools and in centers for social welfare (drop out or at risk of being socially excluded) in addition to individual counseling by a mediation counselor, intense vocational guidance service is delivered. This includes detailed assessment of competences with support of an interdisciplinary and specialized vocational guidance expert team led by CES mediation counselor. In order to facilitate a smooth transition from school to work support solutions for those under 17 will be looked at within the formal education options. For those above 17, entrance into labour market will be looked at with preparatory steps through adult education options.

Additionally, in each regional CES office, mediation counselors are specialized to provide specific support for disabled unemployed persons in coherence with the National strategy for equal possibilities of disabled persons for the period 2007-2015. Special programs target ROMA population in line with the national action plan called: Decade of Roma inclusion 2005-2015 (multicountry initiative).

Cooperation with Chambers of craft is historically important and mainly consists to promote the occupations needed in the labour market.

Several initiatives have been launched with NGOs and other stakeholders which aim to improve the quality of life of young people and prevent social exclusion.¹

The case of Vladimir Prelog Science School in Zagreb (Prirodoslovna skola Vladimira Preloga)

Vladimir Prelog Science School is the unique secondary science school in Zagreb with mostly 1000 students registered on a yearly basis. The school offers a range of curricula in chemistry, geology and ecology together with a high school of Science.

The school has a very limited number of drop outs and according to school principal, in 10 years time only 2 real cases of students for which no solution was found, are registered. In line with tradition of Croatia to look at students problems at an early stage, a mechanism is in place which put together an expert team which predominantly is constituted of teachers and psychologist acting in the school. Upon request the school principal, subject teachers and other specialists may intervene. While talking about secondary school an important feature is the close communication process established between the team and the families which allows detecting and initiate remediation at the earlier possible stage.

A monitoring system is in place which refers to the yearly agenda of the school cycle. Student cases are examined during class assemblies which meet twice a trimester. Students who get at least two negative marks (both as regards grading and behavior) are invited together with their parents to meet together with the class master teacher, the psychologist and the School principal to look for remediation alternatives. In the best case a tailor made program is organized to provide the students with ad-hoc support. In case of failure as regards vocational engagement a second step consists to

¹ « Bonsai » Youth opportunities for employment in Croatia, with Economic Institute of maribor and HRD Centre, “GTZ project : LM oriented VET”, “Social reintegration of drug addicts” with social welfare centers, Ricochet: “Support and build capacity of young and longterm unemployed women” with Proni center for social education; “Yippee-mobilizing, empowering and upgrading skills of young” in cooperation with the Town of Pleternica, “Be active, engage yourself – improving the possibilities of risk group” with Polytechnic “Lavoslav Ružička”.

recommend a new career choice. This step may require the intervention of vocational guidance expert from CES. The student is then directed in another school fitting better to his profile or through adult learning education where more chance of success according to its capacities and interest can be offered. If the problems appear to be more about psychology or even requiring special medical attention (i.e drug addict) a special deal is passed with the Polyclinic for youth which together with the school psychologist initiates a dedicated programme of support to the students, in full agreement of the families which are consulted and informed all along the process.

In fact the Polyclinic and the school have historical links with some doctors and experts regularly coming for lectures. Conclusion: The case of the school may not fit all Croatian secondary schools situation. In the present case it seems that crucial attention from a team of mixed experts with the involvement of parents and students contribute to a limited amount of failure from students in their aspirations. It is worth notice that while speaking about secondary education, relationship built by the school with parents and families is reported as being still very strong.

As indicated above the absence of a clear strategy for guidance and counseling from the MoSES makes each school heavily dependant of the school teams and limit the exchange of good practices among schools.

THE ROLE OF EC SUPPORT

Through several European programs, projects have supported Croatian efforts to reinforce the legal and strategic framework for guidance and counseling in line with EU policies. CARDS 2001 contributed to establish the first draft for a strategy for vocational guidance in CES, and to develop Quality Standards for vocational guidance and selection in CES. Through CARDS 2003 project was elaborated aiming at supporting decentralization and reorganization of the CES and a strategic plan for the CES. The overall objective of the PHARE programme 2005 “Active Employment Measures for groups threatened by social exclusion” was to promote economic and social cohesion through better vocational integration and development of stakeholders capacity.

The forthcoming IPA project ”CES services for clients: Improving Lifelong Career guidance and ICT support” will include several activities aiming at reinforcing vocational guidance capacities of CES such as: setting up a national forum in vocational guidance and counseling, drafting of a new legislation, establishing 7 pilot career guidance centers in Croatia. IPA 2010-2011 will include the setting-up of an e-counseling initiative.

DISCUSSION

Considering the high unemployment rate of the young age-groups (15-24) which raises 17.8% for male and 27.2% for female in 2008 (average for 15-64 age group being respectively 7.2% and 10.4% (CBS, Labour Force Survey 2000-2008), which does not dramatically differ from other EU countries, the transition from school to work in Croatia particularly for female group still remains a problem not solved by the successful method to support those at risk. Considerable efforts should be maintained and even reinforced to ease transition from school to work with an adaptation of curricula by the MoSES and contribution of enterprises to accompany young entrants.

CONCLUSIONS

Several elements converge with those identified in the present CEDEFOP report to value the idea that preventative measures put in place through the Croatian guidance and counseling system largely contribute to the low rate of early school leaving from the educational system. Extra curricula resources allocated to primary and secondary schools through presence of psychologists, social pedagogue, etc together with the coordination process guided by CES may be considered as key elements to look as early as possible together with families to remediation activities. This is a real strength of the Croatian educational system which should not be discussed by policy makers as it proves to be essential both for the society as a whole and the individuals requiring special attention.

Nevertheless efforts need to be pursued by MoSES to align educational outcomes with demand of the labour market. More is needed to involve young people as resource individuals in the design of policies and approaches together with more options being offered by the education system to familiarize students with the world of work.

Reinforcing staff capacities at MoSES together with CES in a more transparent legislative and operational framework is a crucial issue. Recommendations from OECD-ETF report should be looked at again as to set-up adequate post graduate higher diploma in Career guidance and counseling

Among possible fields of improvement at CES one can mention the need for a better monitoring and evaluation system of school leavers' population regardless of their educational origin. While this is largely depending of information provided by MoSES, CES should look to build as part of its Quality Assurance system, qualitative and quantitative indicators to measure achievements of the entire population which has gone through its remediation process. This would allow reinforcing and confirming if the shaping of the activities is the most relevant and contribute to the sustainability of the project. This step should look as well to integrate feedback from users.

Development of new tools to reach young generation should be looked at. A CES-MoSES taskforce made of junior and senior staff could look at reactive options which comply with "computerized" generation and demonstrate institutional capacity to adapt/precede customers needs and habits.