

Challenges in the Career Decision Process for Teenagers from Disadvantaged Areas

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Abstract: The main scope of the paper is identifying some categories of challenges in career decision process for teenagers from disadvantaged areas. The study purposes are as follows: 1. identifying the decisive factors influencing the career decision and their power in students' choices; 2. establishing the information resources considered by the students as being useful in choosing their future career; 3. raising students' awareness of the connection between their school training / career decision and the pandemic context; 4. the impact of training sources and resources on the career decision acknowledged by the students; 5. identifying the students' position towards their future personal /professional development. The research was conducted by applying an online questionnaire to a group of 11th and 12th Grade students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The study results will outline how high school students in the target group shape their perception on choosing their future career (including the influence of the elements specific to the pandemic context) and what resources they use in determining their future career path. The collected data will be considered the basis for the improvement both of future counselling actions with young people from the same category of beneficiaries and of the methodological tools serving these purposes.

Keywords: *career orientation; decision making; disadvantaged students; labour market; COVID-19 period.*

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1. Career decision making process for the economically disadvantaged students – issues and challenges during the COVID-19

The impact of the current pandemic crisis is *global* (manifested in all countries, worldwide), *general* (affects the whole life of individuals and communities: how to live, work, learn, even die), but also *particular, specific* (each country, community, institution, family, person feels the impact in an individualised way (Gati & Kulcsár, 2021) and generates its own measures (according to the person's ability and consideration), amplified by and intensifying the insecurity and instability already existing on the labour market (Albion, 2000). Starting from this framework context, it can be seen that the pandemic has worsened numerous pre-pandemic disparities connected to the right to education, emphasising the inequalities related to access some education aspects and dimensions, implicitly vocational training and career decision issues, especially for the economically disadvantaged students (Bouznad & Ibourk, 2020; Buthelezi et al., 2009; Darmody et al., 2020; OECD, 2020; Office of Civil Rights, 2021; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020; The World Bank, 2021; UNESCO, 2020). It is equally true that for other young people, it has created the opportunity to continue the process of training/professional development from home, in a safe online environment, without interrupting their activity and without losing a period of active life (Chang, 2020). Moreover, the new generations of young people who have grown up with technology and its new applications can make the most of the online career counselling, which can help them cope with the difficulties of choosing a career 24/7, anywhere and anytime (Gati & Kulcsár, 2021). In a pandemic (especially!) or not, the career decision making process proves to be complex, dynamic, full of uncertainty and challenging (Gati & Kulcsár, 2021).

From a theoretical point of view, we started our approach from some basic statements, based on which we outlined the framework of our research:

1. The career decision making process proves to be a difficult (Joseph, 2012), winding process (Siti, 2020), which has become almost the most important and challenging one on the labour market (Kulcsar et al., 2020). It begins in adolescence, but it undergoes permanent resumes, specific restructurings (Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018; Albion & Fogarty, 2002), as the beneficiaries' age, training, experience, aspirations change (Gati & Kulcsár, 2021).

One of the fundamental causes of the difficulties in the career decision making process generally remains the lack of information (Albion &

Fogarty, 2002; Buthelezi et al., 2009; Kulcsar et al., 2020; Temple, 2009), which, according to some authors, can specifically be about: 1. qualification/specialisation/type of work, 2. necessary steps in this process, 3. about oneself, 4. about how to obtain the necessary additional information (Albion & Fogarty, 2002; Siti, 2020). According to other authors, the factors that obstruct this process form a much more complex system which includes at the same time deeper psychological aspects (students' beliefs/convictions (Albion & Fogarty, 2002; Arulmani et al., 2003; Buthelezi et al., 2009), personality factors (Abe & Chikoko, 2020; Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018; Albion & Fogarty, 2002; Borchert, 2002; Fizer, 2013; Gati & Kulcsár, 2021) , self-image/self-confidence) and educogenous environmental factors (parenting styles, eg.) (Kırdök & Harman, 2018). The personal values of the career choice maker (Abe & Chikoko, 2020; Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018; Batoool & Ghayas, 2020) and a set of two categories of input: about oneself and the labour world underlie this process (Borchert, 2002);

2. In our study, the term of 'career decision making process' is understood as "the process people go through when they search for viable career alternatives, comparing them, and then choosing one" (Gati & Asher, 2001, p. 7). In this approach, the following aspects are obvious: the individual has the decisive role in making the decision; the process involves making a choice between several alternatives; the choice would be the most in line with the individual self; the individual will give a personal connotation to the influences exerted on himself/herself during the process (Gati & Kulcsár, 2021);

3. The adolescence period is a time of the relevant decisions for the future, especially in a time of confusion in this contemporary part of the 21st century, including for the career (Mann et al., 2020). Most students face difficulties in career decision-making and feel the need to be supported by others in this respect, more than in the previous periods (Darmody et al., 2020; Kırdök & Harman, 2018);

4. Research has indicated that the student's socioeconomic status influences the career decision-making (Arulmani et al., 2003; Darmody et al., 2020);

5. Research shows that students who participate in counselling school activities over their studies can expect a positive evolution in their career decision and further professional development (Mann et al., 2020) without these effects being clearly confirmed every time.

We hereby present the main results of the theoretical analysis we conducted on the factors which significantly influence the career decision

making process in adolescence. The main categories of factors identified in this analysis and at which, subsequently, we also aimed in the ascertaining performed research are the following: 1. *human factors* (parents and family; teachers; generically, tutors; generically, mentors, colleagues, friends, career counsellors, public figure); 2. *information factors* (school, including online school; national portals; internet; television).

1. *Human factors*

In reviews about the career decision process, the most cited as frequent and relevant human factors are the following:

a. *parents and family* (Abe & Chikoko, 2020; Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018; Albion, 2000; Arulmani et al., 2003; Borchert, 2002; Buthelezi et al., 2009; Darmody et al., 2020; Edmonds, 2012; Fizer, 2013; Gati & Kulcsar, 2021; Germeijs & Verschueren, 2006; Grahl, 2021; Joseph, 2012; King et al., 2008; Kırdök & Harman, 2018; Mann et al., 2020; Mareş et al., 2021; Olmos-Gómez et al., 2021; Siti, 2020; Temple, 2009; Truong, 2018), but not always as a positive support, sometimes even as a source of conflict (Albion & Fogarty, 2002; Kulcsár et al., 2020);

b. *teachers* (Abe & Chikoko, 2020; Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018; Albion, 2000; Albion & Fogarty, 2002; Borchert, 2002; Darmody et al., 2020; Edmonds, 2012; Fizer, 2013; Germeijs & Verschueren, 2006; Joseph, 2012; Mareş et al., 2021; Olmos-Gómez et al., 2021; Temple, 2009);

c. *tutors* (Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018; Buthelezi et al., 2009);

d. *mentors* (Albion & Fogarty, 2002; Borchert, 2002; Edmonds, 2012; Fizer, 2013) (the most constant mentors are the teachers - King et al., 2008);

e. *peers* (Gati & Kulcsar, 2021) - from individual peers to the peer culture of the school or their peer social group, with a major influence (King et al., 2008);

f. *friends* (Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018; Borchert, 2002; Fizer, 2013; Gati & Kulcsar, 2021; Germeijs & Verschueren, 2006; Kırdök & Harman, 2018; Joseph, 2012; King et al., 2008; Temple, 2009; Truong, 2018);

g. *career counsellors* (Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018; Albion, 2000; Albion & Fogarty, 2002; Borchert, 2002; Edmonds, 2012; Fizer, 2013; Gati & Kulcsar, 2021; Joseph, 2012; King et al., 2008; Temple, 2009; Truong, 2018);

h. *public figure* (King et al., 2008)

Studies have shown that some students in economically disadvantaged areas are too addictive to outer influences and have less initiative in career decision making. It is suggested that overcoming this situation and increasing self-confidence might be found at the junction between the students' individual performance and their indirect learning

experience and persuasion given by parents and and tutors (Buthelezi et al., 2009);

Sometimes, the factor which slows them down or prevents them from making good career decisions is the lack of information. A crucial role is played by families, teachers, career counsellors and mentors in ensuring access to relevant and up-to-date resources (Albion & Fogarty, 2002).

No matter how well-intentioned family members, friends, peers may be, they are not career counselling professionals though and cannot replace the specialised support provided by a career counsellor (Gati & Kulcsar, 2021; Truong, 2018).

2 . *sources and information resources* – the specialised literature most often refers to the following sources:

a. school - seen as an institution able to ensure equal access to correct information on career choice opportunities through periodic announcements, the activity of career counsellors, newsletters, flyers, classroom presentations (Borchert, 2002; Fizer, 2013; Darmody et al., 2020; Joseph, 2012; Mann et al., 2020; Mareş et al., 2021; Temple, 2009);

b. online school, the current form of ensuring formal education, as a reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic (Mareş et al., 2021) - cannot offer equal chances of career counselling, the online form rather divides – (Office of Civil Rights, 2021);

c. internet (*with an uncertain impact status, sometimes positive, sometimes negative*), online applications can sometimes be authentic support systems which provide the necessary information in a visual, interactive and attractive way, substantiating and facilitating career decision (Gati & Kulcsár, 2021);

d. national portals bringing together schools and employers (Joseph, 2012; Mann et al., 2020; Olmos-Gómez et al., 2021; Temple, 2009; Truong, 2018);

e. television - provided indirect information or impressions about different careers: sports, entertainment celebrities, historical personalities, public figures, successful people (King et al., 2008; Olmos-Gómez et al., 2021; Temple, 2009);

The sources and resources highlighted from a theoretical point of view above are present in the career decision making process for all students, but they are manifested in a specific way when we refer to disadvantaged students, where they can gain unexpected impact and significance, all the more in a pandemic period. Both the online school and the internet and television are useful sources of information for career decision making. Nevertheless, while the online school / school is a formal, organised environment, in which career counsellors can schedule and carry out specific

activities, the other two sources can generate contradictory effects, students must be guided in the process of selecting, analysing and understanding content accessed on these channels.

In this respect, the observation presented by Temple (2009, p. iv) remains extremely current, according to whom “Schools need to be more vigilant about their students’ needs”. They are often criticised for not preparing graduates for higher education. This does not necessarily mean that they do not provide them with the necessary information, but rather that they do not equip them with correct, useful techniques to valorise adequately, beneficially, realistically, the opportunities offered by the Internet and television as information resources for the career decision making process.

2. Research methodology

Research aim:

Identifying some categories of challenges in career decision process for teenagers from disadvantaged areas according to the following items:

- the relevant elements that become factors with the potential to influence the decision related to the future career of high school students from economically disadvantaged areas;
- the influence of the specific elements to the pandemic context on their career decision;
- the existence of a concern for connecting vocational training with a life characterised by achieving well-being.

Research Objectives:

- O1: identifying the decisive actors that influence the career decision and their influence on the students’ choices;
- O2: establishing the information resources appreciated by the students as useful in choosing the future career;
- O3: raising students’ awareness of the connection between their school learning/career decision and the pandemic context;
- O4: identifying the impact of training sources and resources on the career decision-making;
- O5: establishing the students position to the future of personal/professional development.

Research methodology

The specialised literature analysis was completed by an exploratory study based on a questionnaire. In terms of procedure, students filled out an online questionnaire administered between 1st October and 15th November 2021. The results of 107 questionnaires from the 150 students who made up the research group were returned, validated and accepted for analysis.

The research sample consisted of N = 107 economically disadvantaged 11th- and 12th- grade students from four high schools in Bacau, Vrancea and Neamt counties within the FDI Project entitled “Study at UBC! Learning and Training opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds” (STUDIA-UBc) CNFIS-FDI-2021-0279, Financed by the National Council for Financing Higher Education, Romania, carried out between May and December 2021. The distribution group is highlighted below according to three criteria: grade, origin area and age.

Table 1. Distribution of the research group

Grade	11 th	41%	12 th	59%		
Area	Rural	86%	urban	14%		
Age	16	12.3%	17	46.7%	18	41%

Research stages

1. September 2021 – target group identification;
2. 1st October – 15th November 2021 – data collection - 150 students from the target group of the project were invited to complete online our research questionnaire. The process of collecting the students’ responses involved multiple calls in order to speed up the process. Finally, a total of 107 questionnaires were collected;
3. 21st – 30th November 2021 – data analysis.

Students were explained that their participation in the elaboration process and electronic transmission of the completed questionnaires was voluntary and their lack of participation or the contents transmitted would not be followed by any repercussions. By completing and sending the questionnaires, students expressed their consent to use the data collected for the stated research. Also, all students under the age of 18 had the written consent of their tutors to participate in this research. The research met the

research requirements and ethics rules of “Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacau.

Research tool

For conducting the research, we created a questionnaire comprising a total of 26 closed items, a five-point Likert-type scale and a ranking item of the factors considered decisive in career guidance, grouped on the following *dimensions*, in accordance with the research objectives:

1. decisive traditional factors which contribute to career decision (parents and relatives, teachers and form teachers, peers and graduates; friends, public figures; counsellor pedagogues) - D1;

2. sources and information resources considered useful in career choice (school; online school, internet, television, friends) as well as their impact on career choice) - D2;

3. factors connected to the COVID-19 pandemic and their influence on career choice (COVID-19 pandemic, online school) - D3;

4. students’ position regarding their decisions on their future personal and professional development (D4).

The reliability analysis of the D1 - D4 dimensions has led to the following results:

Table 2. Alpha Cronbach results for the D1 - D4 dimensions

Dimensions analysed	D2	D3	D4
Alpha Cronbach	0.771	0.743	0.878

3. Findings and discussions

The results obtained for the analysis of the three dimensions (D2, D3, D4) showed that their values ranged between 0.7 and 0.9, which entitles us to say that we have a good consistency and make us further expand our investigation on a larger group of students.

We hereby present and analyse the results in accordance with the research objectives.

O1: identifying the decisive actors that influence the career decision and their influence on the students’ choices

In the case of the D1 results, we noticed a strong desire for self-determination of the disadvantaged students. They want to be autonomous as possible and to take responsibility on their professional

path decision. The results obtained from the analysis of this dimension can be analysed connected to D4 which reflects an optimistic outlook on the professional future. The distribution of the results related to the non-cognitive and non-academical factors, implicitly the emotional or self-determination factors (Hamzah et al., 2021; Van Herpen et al., 2017) materialised by the answers to the question *Who decides on my career?* revealed that, for the high school students, the leading role is played by their personal decisions with 94.4% of their answers, parents come on the second place accounting for 2.8% of their answers and the specialists in career guidance are on the third place with 1.9% and, on last place, in terms of career decision-making power over the teenagers from the subjects of our group, we found the teachers. The career decision self-responsibility desire can be correlated with high levels of self-esteem, which is (Hamzah et al., 2021), the predictor to have stronger career adaptability and an indicator of the ability to make the transition from highschool to university and to the labour market (Van Vianen et al., 2012).

O2: establishing the information resources appreciated by the students as useful in choosing their future career

Under the existing circumstances, one of the major challenges for students, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, is to identify and report on accurate and reliable sources of information. For example, the pandemic context has reduced the possibility for students to be able to do job shadowing, study and orientation visits to universities or to other training providers, and this situation is a unique fact for students and for the people involved in the career decision process.

The results for identifying the information resources appreciated as useful by our research group may seem surprising, but they reflect the subjects' pragmatic orientation and their need to obtain information about a future career from primary sources of information - people working in the field of interest / area where they would like to work are considered significant sources of information for 45.8% (N = 49) of the research group. We can find out again that the influence of their parents is significant in terms of providing information for shaping the career decision 32.7% (N = 35). Teachers return a percentage of 11.2% (N = 12) of the students' preferences, entrepreneurs or managers have 2.8% (N = 3); counsellors 1.9% (N = 2), friends 1.9% (N = 2), siblings 1.9% (N = 2), but also influencers 0.9% (N = 1) and 0.9% (N = 1) have as their source of information the sites specialising in information about career.

O3: raising students' awareness of the connection between their school learning/ career decision and the pandemic context

We can notice that the pandemic and the online school were felt as factors with a significant impact on the students' career decision. In addition, we can see the students' relatively high degree of indecision as a signal of the confusion generated by the COVID-19 context. The correlation between D2 and D3 highlight that there is a significant positive average correlation between these dimensions (the correlation index, $r = 0.307^{**}$; the significance threshold, $p < 0.01$) influence of the information factors being found significantly in the respondents' decision-making. Therefore, if D2 is subject to factors with significant influence, it will also have an impact on D3, and here we find out that a better information about career and confidence in the information sources are essential in the career decision articulated as the external contextual factors.

We have also found out from a separate analysis of the responses to D3 that the career decisions are heavily influenced by the online teaching and the pandemic context (29% of research group). Also, 14% of students felt the influence of the pandemic on career decision was just strong, while 24% felt that the online learning had a strong influence on their career decision. Therefore, it can be seen that the presence of career services should be flexible and with a high potential to adapt to the social / health contexts, without achieving this flexibility students (especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds) no matter how self-determined they may be, they are likely to be only partially informed and their image of the labour market might be abridged. Among the consequences of this fact, we can recall only the essential: academic drop-out, demotivation and loss of valuable human resources.

O4: identifying the impact of training sources and resources on the career decision-making

Following the analysis, the correlation between the training sources used during the COVID-19 period and the career decision factors is positive and with a significant average between the correlation index $r = 0.254$ and the significance threshold, $p = 0.008 < 0.01$). Therefore, there is a connection between the way teaching is approached in the present context and the personal factors which lead to influencing the decision regarding the choice of a further training path after highschool. This is confirmed also by the high scores for the items regarding the role of school included in this dimension of our research. The analysis of responses to each item of this dimension revealed the following distribution of responses:

Table 3. impact of training sources and resources on the career decision-making

	strongly agree	agree	Undecided	disagree	strongly disagree
Formal education	27.1%	24.3%	22.4%	15%	11.2%
Internet	7.5%	26.3%	28%	23%	15%
Tv	1.9%	4.7%	21.5%	31.8%	40.2%
Peers and friends	0%	4.7%	21.5%	35.5%	38.3%

According to the analysis of distribution of responses, we can notice that there is a high percentage of those who do not have a strong opinion related to the role of the sources of training on career decision. This leads us to believe that there is a significant number of disadvantaged students who need counselling and career guidance. Contrary to our expectations, our students consider that the influence of some factors such as the internet and media is reduced, which could be correlated with the values still persistent in the small communities, more focused on the local traditional as relationship between the world and an individual (Chvanova et al., 2021). In addition, from an axiological perspective, the result distribution highlights also a perspective of filtering the elements associated by the research group with the academic and professional training acquisitions of elements which are leisure forms for them. From this perspective, formal education represents for the youngsters from the disadvantaged area strong socio-pedagogical conditions for the professional and personal self-realisation (Chvanova et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2015).

O5: establishing the students' position towards their future personal/professional development

We have found that between D2 and D4 there is an insignificant negative correlation ($r = -0.032$; $p = 0.745 > 0.01$) and between D3 and D4, there was found an average significant positive correlation ($r = 0.311$; $p = 0.001$). These results highlight that D2, comprising predominantly traditional factors involved in the career decision, does not contribute to the significant influence on the relevant prospect towards the personal and professional future. On the other hand, the correlation between D3 and D4 underlines that the changes in the educational and training system during the pandemic

/ pandemic associated have contributed significantly to career decision making.

The results of this analysis are related to the fact that the teenagers from our research group considered the online activities and the new apps in the training process as opportunities for their future development. Thus, 43% strongly believe that the future gives them the opportunity to be creative, 35% strongly agree that they will be able to become successful as they have imagined and 34.6% strongly project themselves in the future as professional fulfilled people. The results indicate that for the students from the disadvantaged backgrounds, the COVID-19 context was not seen as an element with negative influences on the way in which they project their professional or personal future. We found out that, on the contrary, their perspective is an optimistic one, maybe slightly exalted or similar to that shown in other studies on the topic of career guidance in the COVID-19 context by those aspiring to work in research (Termini & Traver, 2020; Toppe et al., 2021).

4. Conclusions

The results of this study support other similar findings and allow conclusions to be drawn for future career counselling practices with economically disadvantaged students (Darmody et al., 2020; King et al., 2008; Temple, 2009). In the context of the COVID19 pandemic, such studies can generate context-specific results.

The way in which the students in the target group became involved in our study and answered to the proposed questionnaire confirms the idea that a well-founded career decision should be best made during the last two years of high school (Germeijs & Verschueren, 2006). Especially since there are studies (Temple, 2009) which show that there are students who do not know at the end of high school where they want to go after graduation.

The data collected with the questionnaire and presented in section 3 allow us to consider that we have succeeded in achieving the proposed purpose of the research, in that we have identified some categories of challenges in career decision process for teenagers from disadvantaged areas. These correlate with the objectives of our study, as we shall further demonstrate.

From the perspective of the analysis of the decisive actors which influence the career decision and their impact on the students' choices - O1 - the results obtained highlight the orientation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds towards the desire to make career decisions as independently as

possible. This trend can be explained by factors such as: relatively restricted access to career information and guidance resources; low educational level of parents; relatively limited career prospects offered by teachers; differences in career choices between students, on the one hand, and teachers and parents, on the other hand.

According to the analysis of information resources useful in career decisions - O2 - we can appreciate that the students in the research group have a perspective focused on pragmatism and practicality. Direct information from practitioners reflects the need of most students from disadvantaged backgrounds to be very connected to the specific elements of the current labour market reality. Career information sources likely to provide information of a general nature or traditional and formal information sources (e.g. teachers) do not seem to be preferred by a representative number of our research subjects. The data previously presented show that the first three sources of information considered the most reliable are represented, in order of relevance, by the following: people working in the field of interest / area where they would like to work; parents; teachers.

Regarding the perspective of raising students' awareness of the connection between their school learning/career decision and the pandemic context - O3 - the data obtained confirm the hypothesis according to which the factors generated by the pandemic context directly influenced the career directions and hindered the career decision-making of the students in the research group. This highlights the importance of training students in critical thinking skills as well as critical and proactive selection of information to be used in their future career decisions. Furthermore, they support the need to increase and diversify career counselling approaches (even if online) for this category of students. These should better meet the needs emerging from the pandemic context, but also from the perspective of the increasing transfer of some work activities to the online environment.

In terms of identifying the impact of training sources and resources on the career decision-making - O4 - we were relatively surprised to find that although school is seen as a primary factor in the career choice process, some factors such as the internet and media are seen as having little influence.

From the perspective of establishing the students' position towards their future personal/ professional development - O5 - the data highlights an optimistic approach of the respondents, who, although sometimes undecided in their career choice, still see in the online school and in the new technologies and devices used in this context a series of opportunities which,

at times, they overestimate, such as: to be more creative, to achieve everything they set out to do, to develop personally and professionally. We appreciate that some of the answers illustrate the students' lack of maturity, or a certain amount of insufficient knowledge or understanding of the economic and social context, or insufficient knowledge of the self. This makes it all the more necessary to provide career counselling for these students.

All in all, the main categories of challenges in career decision process for teenagers from disadvantaged areas identified by our study are in line with the studies on the topic and refer to how career counselling services can contribute to, respectively: 1. the stimulation of a personal autonomy based on knowledge, on rational mechanisms and well-structured and formed processes (capacity of selection, adaptation, decision making, application); 2. identifying, selecting and exploiting at a high level of consistency the sources and resources underpinning career decision making (Joseph, 2012; Siti, 2020); 3. the development and management by the university of proactive career counselling services (Arulmani et al., 2003; Joseph, 2012) to which economically disadvantaged high school students can have access right from the beginning of their high school studies - not only in their final years, organised in a hybrid way (both face-to-face and online), in a systematic programme, but also upon request.

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