CZU: 37.014:331.548-057.87

https://doi.org/10.59295/sum5(175)2024_04

CAREER GUIDANCE OF STUDENTS IN THE CONTEXT OF EDUCATIONAL POLICIES: FINDINGS AND PERSPECTIVES

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Career guidance for students is an essential process that helps them make informed decisions about their further education and career path. This process is influenced by a number of factors, including educational policies implemented at the international and national level. The fluctuations of the labor market justify the transfiguration of the career guidance and counseling process in the hierarchy of the education system. The elements of the career guidance process can be found in the practices of the pre-university education system, in order to assist teenagers in their career option. The conducted study highlights that career guidance is an important segment, reflected in educational policy documents, in which it is assigned an essential role in the personal and professional development of students.

Keywords: career, student career guidance, educational policy documents.

GHIDAREA ÎN CARIERĂ A ELEVILOR ÎN CONTEXTUL POLITICILOR EDUCAȚIONALE: CONSTATĂRI ȘI PERSPECTIVE

Ghidarea în carieră a elevilor este un proces esențial care îi ajută să ia decizii informate cu privire la educația lor ulterioară și la parcursul profesional. Acest proces este influențat de o serie de factori, inclusiv politicile educaționale implementate la nivel internațional și național. Fluctuațiile pieței muncii justifică trasfigurarea procesului de ghidare și consiliere în carieră în ierarhia sistemului de învățământ. Elementele procesului de ghidare în carieră se regăsesc în practicile sistemului de învățământ preuniversitar, în vederea asistării adolescenților în opțiunea de carieră. Studiul realizat evidențiază că ghidarea în carieră este un segment important, reflectat în documentele de politici educaționale, în care i se atribuie rolul esențial în dezvoltarea personală și profesională a elevilor.

Cuvinte-cheie: carieră, ghidare în carieră a elevilor, documente de politici educaționale.

Introduction

In a constantly changing world, career guidance is not a simple act of choosing a profession. It is a complex process that takes place throughout the individual's life, giving him the flexibility to adapt to the demands of the labor market, helping to clarify interests, values and skills.

Career guidance provides the individual with detailed information about various professions, tools to identify their strengths and develop skills relevant to their desired career, provides individualized support to facilitate decision-making and career planning. Career guidance is an important investment in the future of each individual. Through its multiple benefits, it contributes significantly to the personal and professional development of the individual, leading to increased career satisfaction and professional success. Career guidance places the emphasis on the person and the dynamics of their development, emphasizes not only the professional aspect, but also the educational one. Career education represents an educational intervention for the development, in advance, of the skills and abilities needed by young people for the development and management of their own career.

Approaching the problem: international and national level

Career guidance and counseling of human resources has become an indispensable component of the socio-economic development of countries since the beginning of the twentieth century. The importance of career guidance and counseling services was further emphasized in the first decades of the 21st century, century when the great challenges of the contemporary world, such as: globalization, technology and computerization imposed the need for continuous adaptation to the dynamically changing labor market.

According to the reports of the Council of the European Union of September 28, 2023, regarding the guidelines for the employment policies of the member states, several decisions were adopted: "The member states and the Union must make efforts to develop a coordinated strategy for the employment of work, in particular to promote a competent, skilled and adaptable workforce, as well as forward-looking labor markets capable of reacting to the evolution of the economy, with a view to achieving the objectives of full employment and social progress, of balanced economic growth, high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment established in Article 3 of the Treaty on the European Union...". "In order to strengthen economic and social progress, ..., to strengthen the industrial base of the Union and to achieve inclusive, competitive and resilient labor markets in the Union, Member States should address labor shortages and the lack of qualified personnel and promote quality education, future-oriented training, education and training and lifelong learning and reskilling, as well as effective active labor market policies and improved career opportunities, by strengthening links between the education system and the market work..." [11].

These are just some of the priority decisions stipulated in the September 2023 European Union Council Reports, which reinforce the usefulness and socio-economic necessity of career guidance and counseling services for the young generation, but also for adult human capital.

It was found that the experience of developed countries in the field of career guidance services is comprehensive through various practices that cover the vocational needs of the population of all age groups. Career guidance services are valued through various programs successfully implemented by social structures, such as:

1. Counseling programs in schools and universities: most EU member countries have career counseling programs implemented in schools and universities to support pupils and students in making decisions related to education/vocational training and careers;

2. Online platforms in vocational guidance: technological progress has launched possibilities for vocational self-exploration with the help of online platforms. These platforms help people discover their interests, skills and values in relation to career opportunities, but also possibilities of professional mobility in the context of the labor market globalization;

3. Vocational integration/reintegration programs for people with disabilities: for people with disabilities or who face difficulties in finding or keeping a job, there are special rehabilitation and vocational reintegration programs that provide support and resources to achieve their career goals.

Career guidance services are also offered by various centers and agencies:

- Specialized career guidance and counseling centers: in some countries, there are specialized organizations that provide career guidance and counseling services for young people, adults and people in professional transition/retraining. These organizations may offer services, such as skills assessments, individual counseling and vocational training programs (Canada, France, UK, Greece, Lithuania, etc.);

- *National Employment Agencies*: state structures empowered to ensure the implementation of state policy in the field of employment promotion, labor migration and mediation of unemployment situations. Within these structures, information and professional guidance services were also implemented for all categories of beneficiaries (USA, Great Britain, Germany, etc.).

Thus, we find that international practices in the field of career guidance services support the population in career issues. It is important to note that each country and community has its own needs and resources in this area, and career guidance and counseling practices and programs may vary accordingly.

At the national level, career guidance is an important segment, reflected in educational policy documents, in which it is assigned an essential role in the personal and professional development of students. The policy documents reflect concern for preparing students for future labour market challenges and promoting successful careers.

Thus, in the Education Code of the Republic Of Moldova it is stipulated that secondary education contributes to the formation of a free and creative personality by ensuring the development of students, skills, as well as by advising and guiding them in determining the optimal individual path to high school, secondary technical vocational or post-secondary technical vocational education. High school education ensures the development in students of the competences defined by the National Curriculum and advising them in choosing the individual educational or professional route to higher education or non-tertiary Post-Secondary Technical Vocational Education, depending on potential, vocation and performance. It is important to mention that in the **Education Code** [2], we find career guidance as a concern in the context of education achievement in the Republic of Moldova, where clarity is required with reference to the conceptual positions: the structure of the system of institutions and the human resources involved in the process. Thus, it becomes necessary to develop a Conception regarding career guidance.

At the national level, we attest to the existence of normative acts that represent a foundation in guiding students in their careers, including the **Concept on the orientation, training and professional training of human resources** [3] and the **Regulation on the professional orientation and psychological support of the population in career** [16] - related issues, in which it is stipulated that there is a need ,,to be developed and implemented special programs and activities for information, psychological support, orientation, training and professional integration of citizens in accordance with the individual peculiarities of personality, with the needs of the labor market and with the continuous socioeconomic changes, as well as measures to support economic agents for their participation in the implementation of the respective programs".

Document Quality standards for primary and general secondary education institutions from the perspective of the child-friendly school [17], Standard. 1.2. *The school communicates systematically and involves the family and the community in the decision-making process indicators*. 1.2.12. *Teachers involve community resource people in career guidance activities for children, including depending on local socio-economic specifics*, emphasize that teachers not only provide students with access to relevant career information, but also connect them with active members of their community. It can improve the relevance of education for students, giving them a broader perspective on future possibilities and building directions between the school and local work worlds, which need to be discussed with students in career guidance activities.

The reference framework of the National Curriculum [1], a document of educational policies, but also a document of theoretical, methodological and praxiological substantiation of the curricular system, provides for the curricular area Counseling and guidance, completed by the series of competencies, especially in terms of the competence to consciously choose the future area of professional activity for the purpose of self-realization, essential for the formation of a generation of young people ready to integrate successfully in the society and the labor market.

Career guidance can also be found in the High School Graduate Profile characterized by the general picture of the competences, knowledge and abilities that students should acquire at the end of the high school cycle. Career guidance for students is an essential process in helping them shape their graduate profile and make informed choices about their future careers.

In the context of students' career guidance, the development of the National Curriculum is a strategic direction to ensure the quality of education, and career guidance and orientation activities, as trans-disciplinary activities promoted within all school subjects by shifting the emphasis from knowledge formation to the formation of professional skills and competences, emphasize the applicability of the *Curricular area*: *Counseling and guidance*.

The analysis of the existing legal framework presents several policy documents containing provisions on career counseling and guidance. However, we attest to the lack of a coherent policy and mechanisms to implement the legal provisions, which would ensure students' effective access to Career counseling and guidance services and, subsequently, access to the labor market.

We highlight that the Career Guidance dimension is reflected in a number of school documents:

- National Curriculum for the *Personal Development* discipline – one of the five modules within the Curriculum is Personal Career Design and the Development of the Entrepreneurial Spirit, which emphasizes the understanding of professions from the perspective of the labor market, career planning and career decision-making, the development of the entrepreneurial spirit as an option career, etc. The competence units for this discipline aim at: identifying basic information about work, trades and professionals from different fields, as part of the mechanisms of knowledge and understanding of the real world; capitalizing on the opportunities offered by the school community for launching initiatives and personal development; appreciating the benefits of career planning based on informed decisions for personal development [6];

- *Methodical guides for teaching staff* in order to facilitate the teaching of the Personal Development discipline;

- *The best practices guide* regarding career guidance and counseling of students and young people with Special Educational needs (SEN) [13];

- The curriculum for the optional discipline *Career guidance* for grades VIII-IX, approved by the National Council for Curriculum (Order of the Ministry of Education and Research no. 917 of 25.07.2023), which guides students to choose either a profession, or a further educational path. This includes researching local job and education offerings, as well as lessons to develop life skills, for example, critical thinking, communication, teamwork and empathy [7];

- The curriculum for the optional discipline *Volunteering for Education* (X-XII), which has multiple and valuable formative values, generated at the confluence of education for volunteering and professional orientation towards the educational field [8];

- The optional course *Reading for career guidance*, aimed at motivating students regarding career guidance, familiarizing students with the spectrum of professions and occupations on the labor market in the Republic of Moldova and determining their own vocation through reading [9];

- The optional discipline *Economic and Entrepreneurial Education*, which provides activities for training the ability to understand and solve the problems that people face daily, facilitates decision-making in concrete economic situations [10].

These and other resources creatively capitalize on various contents on the dimension of career guidance, such as: Professions around me (my family), Professions of the community, Professions of the future, Economic sectors of the community, Domestic business, Professional interests, The path to success, Personal and professional relationships, The value of studies in building a career, Elaboration of CV, Cover letter, Job interview, etc.

The analysis of educational policy documents at the international, national and institutional level allowed us to find trends in the career guidance of students with special educational needs.

The need to develop the field of Career Guidance and increase access to vocational guidance services in order to achieve the right to work is set out in the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities (2010) [4]; the Strategy on the rights of persons with disabilities (2021-2030) [18], which aims to improve the lives of persons with disabilities in the next decade through the initiative Developing new skills for new jobs (pt.8), a prerequisite to access and succeed in the labor market.

While the Council of the European Union's directive on equal treatment in employment and employment [12] contributes significantly to promoting the equal rights of persons with disabilities in employment, including appropriate workplace arrangements, more needs to be done to ensure better labour market outcomes for people with special needs.

At the national level, the relevance of the professional orientation of persons with disabilities in order to access the free labor market is established in Law no. 60 of 30.03.2012 on social inclusion of persons with disabilities, which establishes, by art.40, general principles of the process of vocational guidance and training of persons with disabilities.

Actions aimed at ensuring access to professional guidance and orientation services are also reflected in the National Program for Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities for the years 2017-2022, which through objective 4 highlights the increase in employment rate of persons with disabilities, establishes the need to implement actions on providing guidance and training measures for persons with disabilities, based on individual needs, at least 60% of people with disabilities who have benefited from orientation, training and professional rehabilitation courses have been employed.

Through the action plan on the implementation of the new **Program for the development of inclusive education in the Republic of Moldova for 2024-2027** [14], the Government aims to achieve the specific objective no.1.2 ensuring the access of children/young people with SEN and/or disabilities in Technical Vocational Education Institutions by developing and implementing the methodological framework on inclusive education in TVEI and the financing mechanism, so that by 2027 the share of those included constitutes 3% of the total number of children/young people included at this level of Education.

An important role in the career guidance of children with SEN has institutions participating in the process of professional guidance of children/young people with disabilities. The Republican Center for Psycho-pedagogical assistance (RCPA), subordinated to MER; Psycho-pedagogical Assistance Services (PAS) are directly involved in the complex assessment of children for educational inclusion and professional orientation and the formulation of recommendations on school and vocational orientation. One of the goals of the psycho-pedagogical assistance provided through the Psycho-pedagogical Assistance Services is to ensure the school and professional orientation; in the pre-university education, professional orientation activities are also carried out within the resource centers on inclusive education (RCIE).

In general education institutions, tasks in the field of Career orientation and guidance are set for the school psychologist, in accordance with the Methodological Guidelines regarding the psychologist's activity in general education institutions, according to which one of the action areas refers to determining the interests, skills, students' skills for career orientation.

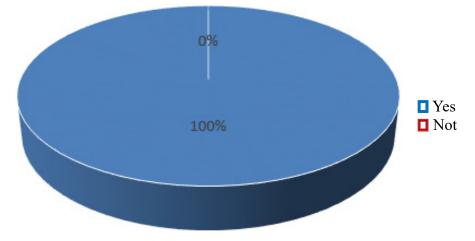
Within the technical vocational education (TVE), system the responsibility for discussing and approving the plan of vocational guidance activities lies with the Teaching Council. **The framework regulation for the organization and functioning of secondary technical vocational education institutions** [15] provides for the following tasks regarding professional orientation: planning and organizing professional guidance activities (which is the responsibility of the deputy director); organizing school and professional orientation; guiding students' careers (which is the responsibility of the psychologist); guidance activities (responsibility of each teacher).

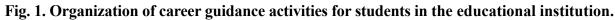
Data analysis and processing

In order to establish career guidance and counseling trends in school reality at all levels of education with various categories of beneficiaries, the managers of some general secondary education institutions, teaching staff, students were questioned.

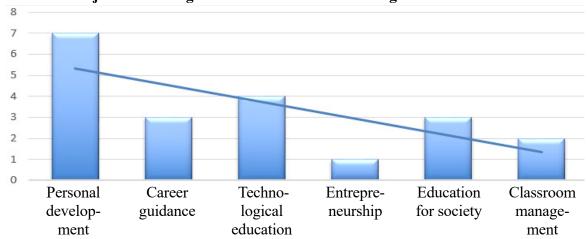
According to the answers provided by the managers, the following findings are outlined:

- Managerial staff (100%) claim that career guidance activities for students are organized in the educational institution they coordinate, they appreciate these activities as essential for the development of students, contributing to their professional training and preparation for future career choices (fig. 1);



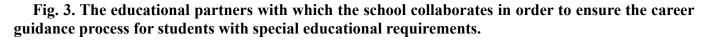


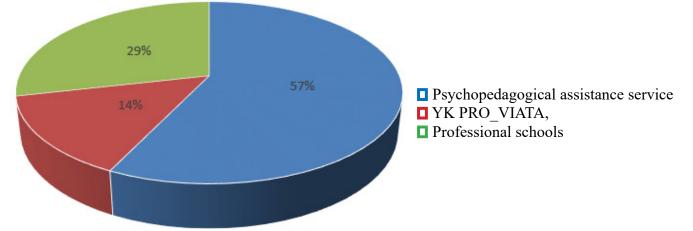
- Managerial staff state that the students' career guidance activities are carried out within the disciplines of: *personal development, career guidance, education for society, technological education, entrepreneurship, classroom management*. By including career guidance in subjects such as personal development, the managerial staff suggest that these activities are not only limited to career guidance, but also aim at the general development of students in terms of personal, social and technological skills, however, it is worth noting that *the limited number of proposed activities may not cover the full diversity of opportunities and careers available to students* (fig. 2);





- in the context of the career guidance of students with SEN from the perspective of collaboration with educational partners in order to ensure the career guidance process of these students, school managers mention that they only interact with YK PRO_VIATA, PAS, professional schools, the results indicate the efforts of school managers to collaborate with educational partners to support career guidance for students with SEN, but at the same time recognize the need to expand and diversify these collaborations to ensure a wider range of opportunities and resources for these students (fig. 3);

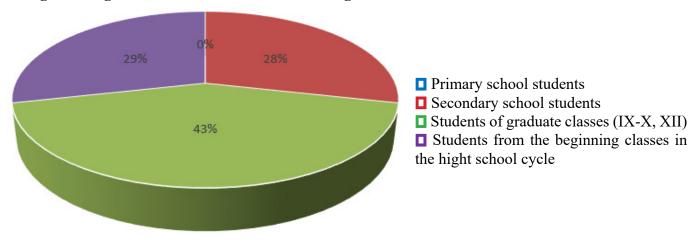


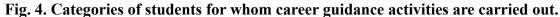


- 29% of students starting high school are involved in career guidance activities, 43% of graduate students, 28% of secondary school students and primary school students are not involved at all, these results show that a significant percentage of secondary school students and from the high school cycle are not involved in career guidance activities may suggest an opportunity to improve the strategies and resources available for these groups (fig. 4);

- the managerial staff claim that the difficulties they encounter in managing the career guidance process of students in the institution they lead are related to: *the lack of interest on the part of students, the indecision of students in choosing a profession, a modest number of hours and optional activities at this subject, lack of motivation, limited time for career guidance activities.*

The school managers have proposed recommendations for improving the career guidance process of students: mandatory inclusion of the discipline Career Guidance in the school curriculum; elaboration of a Guide /Magazine on promoting both intellectual and craft professions; distribution of more hours for career guidance of students; carrying out more career guidance activities; providing the institution with educational resources for students with special educational needs regarding career guidance.

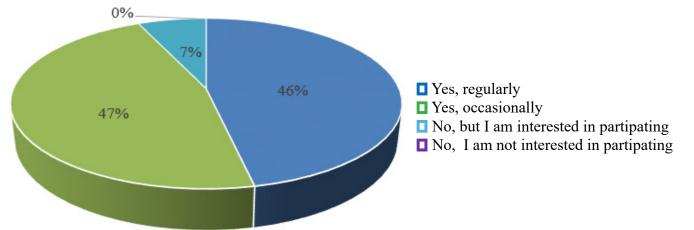




The analysis and interpretation of the answers provided by the teaching staff highlighted the following:

- 45% of teachers regularly participate in the organization and implementation of school career guidance activities for students, demonstrating a constant commitment and active involvement in the career guidance of students; 45% participate occasionally, only 6% of teachers do not participate regularly, about 4% who do not participate at all and do not show an explicit interest in participating. The high percentage (45%) of teachers who regularly participate in career guidance activities is significant, but there is also a part that requires additional support or motivation to get more actively involved;

Fig. 5. Participation of teaching staff in the organization/implementation of school career guidance activities for students.



- regarding the resources used to guide students in identifying career options, 67% of teachers mostly use *online and digital resources* (videos, films, presentations, tests), without mentioning concrete examples of educational platforms; 33% of teachers use *traditional resources* (books, magazines, specialized textbooks, the teacher's personal development guide, didactic materials, student worksheets). The use of online and digital resources indicates an adaptation to current technologies, but also emphasizes the need for clear guidelines to help teachers select and use the most effective resources for students (fig. 6);

- only 57% of teachers state that they adapt career guidance activities and materials to meet the needs and abilities of students with special educational needs, among the examples provided by them can be mentioned: adapting the content and teaching methodologies to suit the needs students' specific needs, specific activities to help students with special needs explore the different career options available (reading texts, interactive games, use of pictures), use of relevant examples and practical activities (fig .7);

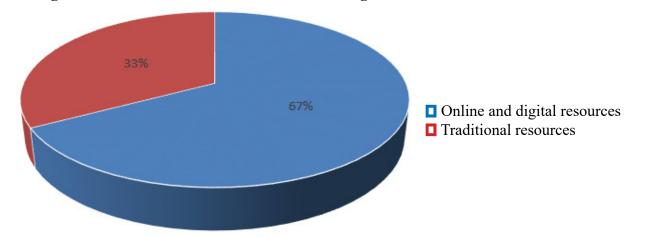


Fig. 7. Adapting career guidance activities and materials for students with special educational needs.

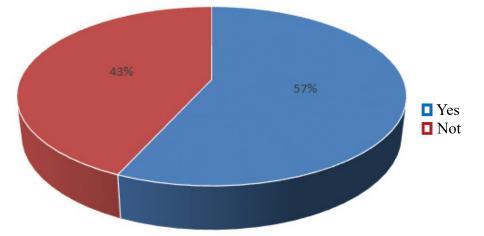
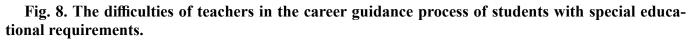
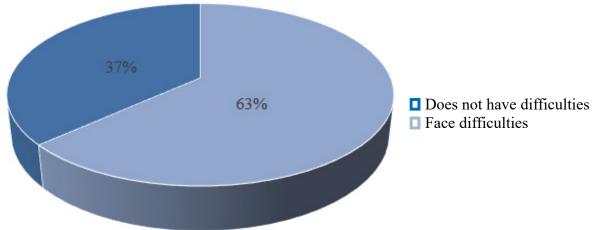


Fig. 6. Educational resources on student career guidance.

- 63% of teachers encounter difficulties in the career guidance process of students in the institution where they work, these being: the lack of didactic resources/materials and a relevant material base, the indifference and lack of interest of the students, the non-involvement of parents, the fear of make decisions on behalf of students, the lack of support staff and career guidance materials for students with SEN (fig. 8).





The teaching staff offered a wide range of proposals to improve the career guidance process for

students, including suggestions on establishing partnerships with businesses, developing support and didactic materials specific to career guidance, including for students with SEN, organizing trips and round tables with specialists in the field, visits to colleges and universities, the involvement of economic agents in guidance activities, the creation of a career guidance mechanism at the national level.

After processing the results of the questionnaire for students, we find that:

- 86% of students participated in educational activities in the field of personal development and career guidance, and 14% were not involved in any activity (fig. 9).

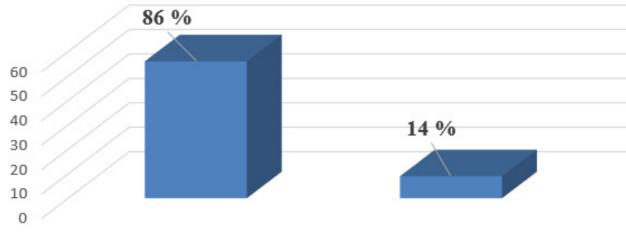


Fig. 9. Carrying out educational activities in the field of personal development and career guidance.

- these activities were mostly carried out by school teachers (55%), the head teacher (37%), the psychologist, NGO, National Employment Agency, etc.

- the disciplines in which teachers carry out career guidance activities are: Personal development (46%), Education for society (35%), the optional career guidance course (14%), but topics related to career guidance were also discussed in the Romanian Language and Classroom Management classes (fig. 10).

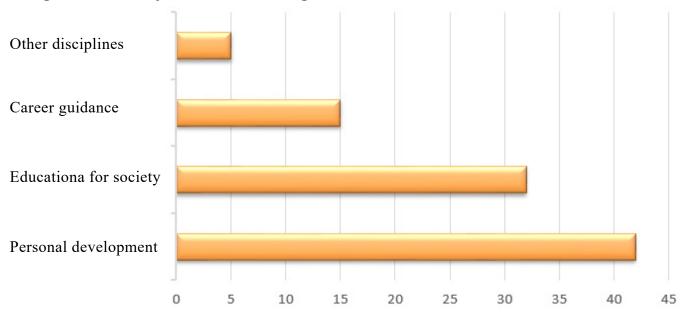


Fig. 10. School subjects in which career guidance activities are carried out.

- 35% of students were largely satisfied with the information provided in the field of career guidance by educational institutions, 54% - to an average extent, 9% - to a small extent and 2% not at all satisfied (fig. 11).

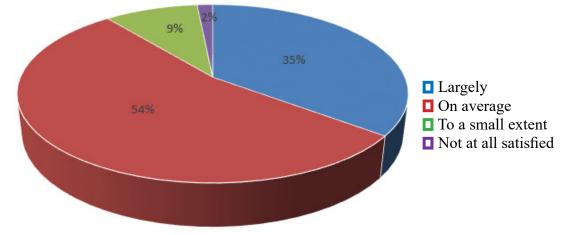


Fig. 11. Student feedback with reference to the dynamics of career guidance offered by the institution.

- Among the difficulties encountered by students in the career guidance process, we can list:

A. Teaching staff does not have sufficient training in the career guidance segment, often students having to find out about professional offers independently.

B. The way of organizing the career guidance activities was with a theoretical priority focus, content very difficult for the students to understand.

C. The strategies for organizing these activities were monotonous, boring, and routine.

D. Student uncertainty about career options.

- The activities in which the students were involved for the purpose of career guidance were carried out both in formal education, through lessons (project development), and outside the official school hours, through non-formal activities (round tables, information and guidance sessions conducted by various institutions and organizations, seminars and trainings, volunteer activities).

- 91% of the surveyed students consider the career guidance process important for their professional future, 5% do not find it relevant and the same percentage of students feel undecided (fig. 12).

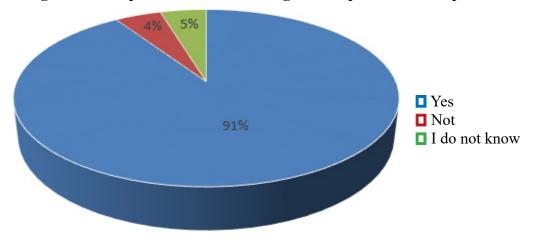


Fig. 12. The importance of the career guidance process for the professional future of students.

The students' recommendations regarding the improvement of the career guidance process offered by the educational institution relate to:

a) organizing a significant number of activities carried out both in the formal and non-formal framework regarding career guidance, in order to better understand career options (visits and trips to different enterprises, organizations, companies; inviting different specialists from various professional fields within educational institutions, etc.)

b) providing with relevant and current information resources on different professional fields on the labor market of the Republic of Moldova, correlated with the professions of the XXI century;

c) capitalizing on the modern didactic strategy in approaching the content regarding the career guidance process.

d) carrying out the career guidance process throughout the school years, not only at the end of secondary and high school;

e) the creation in schools of a Career Guidance Center for young people.

Conclusions

The policy documents reflect the concern to prepare students for the future challenges of the labor market and to promote successful careers. At the same time, it is necessary to strengthen career guidance services in order to respond to the needs and interests of students.

We note that although there is a strong commitment from teaching staff and recognition of the importance of career guidance, further efforts are needed to address existing challenges and maximize the effectiveness of career guidance activities. A more integrated approach, which includes continuous training for teaching staff, development of materials useful in guiding students, diversification and adaptation of activities to the needs of all students can contribute to improving the career guidance process and preparing students for the professional path.

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Notă: The article was made within the UNICEF Moldova Project LRPS-2023-9186991 Institutional Consultancy for developing a School Guide on Career Counselling.

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Presented on 01.04.2024