

Developing Competencies  
in University Education:  
harmonizing with Secondary Education  
and the labor market, from a  
Social Psychology view of Education

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## Abstract

A three-fold research challenge, focused on the following general, interrelated questions, is undertaken in this study: (1) How does one develop competencies required in different university degrees in order to adequately function both as a person in society as well as in professional practice? (2) What role do Institutions of Higher Education, and the professionals who belong to them, play in helping future graduates to develop these competencies? and (3) what tensions arise as university graduates, institutions of higher or secondary education, businesspeople and other significant socialization agents strive to meet their own objectives, and how can these tensions be resolved? In order to clarify where to look and where to place our efforts in responding to these questions, we develop certain learning content and learning activities regarding clarification of job-related values/goals, regarding strategies that facilitate understanding the academic and professional profile of the different degrees and regarding active job search techniques, from a psychosocial perspective of education.

**Key words:** competency development, university education, job-related goals and values clarification; academic and professional profiles.

## Introduction to the Issues

*The opportunity, and educational and social relevance of the problem at hand*

Article III-209 of the European Constitution establishes that “The Union and the Member States, having in mind fundamental social rights such as those set out in the European Social Charter signed at Turin on 18 October 1961 and in the 1989 Community Charter of the Fundamental Social Rights of Workers, *shall have as their objectives the promotion of employment, improved living and working conditions, so as to make possible their harmonisation while the improvement is being maintained, proper social protection, dialogue between management and labour, the development of human resources with a view to lasting high employment*”.

One means to accomplish this, and to respond to a broad spectrum of demands that university graduates must face in the knowledge society now being constructed in Europe, consists precisely in studying and developing students’ Generic and Specific Competencies, both through preparation during their prior periods of education (e.g. Secondary Education) as well as during their university training. This in turn helps the University to meet one of its functions and obligations—labor placement of students.

On the other hand, within the context of growing concern for improving educational quality, and for adapting the University to social demands, the challenge to facilitate labor placement of university graduates is addressed by providing instruments to both the academic institutions and to the students in general for carrying out initiatives that enhance students’ access to employment.

Results drawn from the Technical Report by Guerra *et al.* (2005) indicate that one of the situations that may contribute to dropout and to low performance of university students in general is that there is a mismatch between the preparation received at non-university levels and that which is deemed necessary at University for completing the different study programs. The question is whether the students’ idea of University teaching and learning—the idea transmitted to them during Secondary Education—matches what university teaching staff believe, and whether their expectations regarding University and the world of work are misconceived. If students do not manage to discover, to deal with, to comprehend (or control)

the requirements involved in the tasks they are asked to perform, and how they are to cope within the University, they are likely to lose motivation and become dissatisfied with the university system and with themselves. Their self-awareness is also affected (“I am no good for this”), making their academic and even social integration within the University more difficult.

So it is that the University of Valladolid, along with others, has participated in a R&D Research Project from the Ministry of Science and Technology (BS02001-3150), called "Vocational Behavior and Vocational Counseling of University Students ", carried out over the course of four years (2001-2005), with researchers participating from 12 Spanish universities (Rivas *et al.*, 2005). Some of the results seem to show certain consequences from today's postindustrial and postmodern society, with increased uncertainty in the educational expectations of university students. In fact, while results show a high degree of satisfaction with regard to the university training they receive, they also show a great need for vocational and professional guidance, easily demonstrated by the problems mentioned in choosing one's major field of study (they don't know which major is best for them, they lack information on the characteristics of the different fields, they do not know what is important to take into account when making such decisions). This is also seen in that students use less-than-relevant criteria when choosing elective subjects (Ovejero & Lucas, in press).

At the same time, Personnel Selection Services consider it necessary to clarify professional needs and profiles based on Competencies such as are obtained in the research carried out and sponsored by the State Secretariat for Universities and Research, Ministry of Education and Science (EA2006-0086) (Ovejero *et al.*, 2006). In summary, socio-labor placement of university students is a contract or negotiation where both parties must require compensation. However, as in any negotiation, when the power is very unequally distributed between the two parties, or there is ignorance regarding the other party's objectives, it is difficult to reach a contract acceptable to both sides. Therefore, there needs to be greater interaction and cooperation between the different subsystems.

## **Theoretical foundations**

Vocational guidance is a professionalizing activity relevant throughout a person's lifetime, in continuous interaction with contexts. The psychosocial perspective from which we

approach knowledge applied to vocational guidance analyzes interactive processes which make up this social action, and the historic and cultural systems where this action is taking place. This critical, historical-cultural, psychosocial approach allows us to analyze the large problems of society, from neoliberal globalization to postmodernity itself, and how to address these from the educational system, from the educational community and from the social psychology of education in its contribution to vocational guidance and advising (Ovejero & Lucas, in press). We conceive knowledge acquisition this way from the procedures involved in discursive practice, as played out in personal and group interaction.

In today's society, it is well known that the counseling activity is usually more intense during the formative period of the educational system, and during those years where labor placement processes are under way, processes which are becoming more and more complex and diversified. This context requires vocational advising that considers in detail the psychosocial processes taking place in social-labor insertion, processes which to a large extent determine greater or lesser success: socio-labor insertion of young people requires analysis of the labor market situation and its evolution, a study of young people's perception of the educational and labor situation, and identifying new fields of employment (Feij, 1998; Feij et al., 1995; Lucas, 2000; Ovejero & Lucas, en prensa; Peiró & Silla, 2003).

Thus we find ourselves before a multidimensional professional guidance process which encourages maturity in people's career plans. This refers to the extent to which a person, in comparison with his or her peers, adopts an attitude toward vocational decisions based on knowledge, reflection and planned assessment of the different alternatives. These constitute one's expectations, prior to analysis of one's values/goals, interests and skills, with personal and social conditioning factors to be included in such an analysis.

In summary, to fulfill the role assigned to Professional Guidance requires (1) delving into psychosocial processes and factors which are present in socio-labor placement and which, to a large extent, will contribute to greater success; in conjunction with (2) development of the person's vocational maturity. All this has greatest impact at the point of transition from the educational system to the labor market. The following factors are considered especially relevant (Lucas, 2006a, 2006b):

1) *Acquisition of relevant knowledge:* In Fiske and Taylor's (1991) study on social knowledge of reality, they defend that, in the actual formulation of inferences on the basis of certain knowledge, one can learn proper, correct ways to do so. So when students are deciding on which elective subject to choose, they should proceed as follows: gather all the relevant information for their decision; take a sampling of the information; decide what part of the information collected is valid for the inference; integrate all the information which was gathered and selected, and then carry out the inference itself. This theoretical approach contributes a key argument concerning vocational knowledge acquisition: such knowledge does not consist only of detecting, recognizing, recovering and comprehending information, but it also involves evaluating the information and formulating inferences on the basis of that evaluation—inferences that, moreover, are susceptible to teaching and learning. In this way, knowledge is less apt to being based on perceptive distortions and ambiguous attribution, as in stereotypes and prejudices, since one is more likely to make a certain decision which is more coherent with acquired relevant knowledge, using their critical sense, with a greater sense of planning, and more autonomously.

When persons perceive, we do not settle for the data which we have available, but through various processes we infer other data which are not at our disposal. Such a process of inference is basic, since it helps us to adjust the information to our values/goals, interests, ideas, attitudes and decisions, manifest in the form of concrete actions. Morales and Moya (1996) and Lucas and Carbonero (2002), indicate that there is abundant empirical evidence showing the relationship between the perception that people have of themselves, and their behaviors and attitudes; similarly, these authors state that the social identity of persons is related to their interests, aspirations, expectations, behaviors. A member of a discriminated group takes on the negative view of the group and develops a negative view of himself, it is probable that his professional aspirations become accommodated to that view. This is the process through which we as persons construct our plans, a process where we commit many errors and are considerably biased. Some of the more frequent biases are the following:

- *The bias of persevering in beliefs.* This consists of persisting in prior beliefs and ideas that we as persons have formed, despite information which argues that these prior ideas are not sustainable, and clinging to some explanation of why that belief could be true. In other words, it is difficult for us to dismantle a false belief once we have constructed an argument which serves as a support for maintaining that belief. One must

take into account that our thought patterns and our affections “dictate” to a large extent the knowledge of our possibilities. Can we avoid this bias and its consequences? Anderson (1982; Anderson & Sechler, 1986) demonstrated experimentally that, by trying to explain why a theory or belief contradictory to our own might be true, the bias of persevering in beliefs is reduced and even eliminated. Consequently, it would be a healthy exercise, with oneself or with others, to make an effort to explain why a belief different to our own might equally be true, or why some value, goal or objective different from what we initially maintain might be valid in the same degree as our own.

- *The overconfidence bias.* Persons have the tendency to overestimate that we are right to a greater extent than actually occurs.
- *The confirmation bias.* Persons tend to look for information which confirms their previous ideas, and not to take into consideration information which might contradict these. This can help us understand why experience alone does not lead to more realistic self-evaluation. People pay attention to what interests them, and later remember only part of what they paid attention to, also as a function of what they already care about.
- *The bias of “adaptive memory”.* When recalling, we complete vague fragments which are available in our memory with information that concurs with our current feelings and interests, adapting memories to our current knowledge and situation.

So then, what can be done through the guidance function, and as persons who face the task of making complex, important decisions continuously, in order to avoid these biases? It is necessary to become aware of the need to collect complete, relevant information related to decisions being made, in order to encourage more realistic perceptions; to compare and verify conclusions reached in order to determine validity of the information; separate facts from suppositions in order to determine the foundation, and separate the diverse aspects of what one is perceiving, for example: separate the external aspect of role fulfillment. Regarding this last educational strategy, Bueno and Segura (2000) question how poverty and deviant behavior, sensed or inferred from the external appearance of persons, influence toward discrimination of people of different races in a job search situation. They draw conclusions for a possi-

ble psycho-social intervention with ethnic minorities. It is fundamental to work with ethnic minorities, modifying habits and attitudes which for them seem perfectly normal, given their socialization experience, but which become avenues for rejection when they seek socio-labor integration. On the other hand, it is essential to strengthen positive experiences which belie ethnic stereotypes, and furthermore encourage these to become generalized through making such positive experiences widely known.

It is also worthwhile to listen to students' explanations for their successes and failures, taking Weiner's attributional theory (1986) as a reference. Causal attributions, as well one's knowledge of one's own ability (self-efficacy) to carry out one's plans, can interact in Competency Development. Therefore, educational measures applied to this area can be used to help avoid errors and biases in causal attributions which demotivate students in developing their competencies, in general, and in their motivation for quality, in particular (Lucas, 2006a; Lucas & Carbonero, 2002; Lucas, 1996-1999).

All these educational strategies are of interest for effective performance in the Counseling function, and are important because knowledge acquisition consists not only in detecting, recognizing, recovering and comprehending information, but it also involves integrating, evaluating and selecting information; encouraging knowledge which is less susceptible to being based on persons' perceptive biases, ambiguous attributions or on stereotypes. In this way we contribute toward attitude acquisition, which we now turn to more in depth.

2) *Acquisition of planning-oriented, autonomous, and enterprising attitudes.* The guidance task requires teaching students to combine and to establish relationships between valid, adequate sources of information. How? By seeking to present relevant, specific criteria in a clear way, helping students to control and manage information and to avoid attitudes of demotivation when faced with the complexity and volume of this information. If this task is not carried out, students will have difficulty in giving adequate consideration to the information, and will not be able to make mature decisions in a determined context, becoming paralyzed at the quantity of information they are receiving. This task, in turn, leads to the need to share and compare their combination of information, selected from the options available, with classmates and/or other significant socialization agents.

Beginning from this premise, and taking the main purpose of attitude measurement to be prediction of actions, what is involved in determining relationships between attitude and behavior? Even though there is not a direct link between the two, one can predict their relationship by taking into account theories which help to explain how to intervene:

- Behavior is conceived as the final product of a rational, deliberate decision-making process, a product which the person reaches after taking several sequential steps. Thus, once the need for making a decision arises, the next step would be to plan, weighing and assessing each option until one selects the optimal path for putting the decision into practice (the theory of “reasoned action” by Azjen and Fishbein, 1980).
- It is also very important to take into account during this entire process that people are to feel capable of carrying out their decision (the theory of “planned action” by Azjen, 1991).
- Information which is worked on sequentially with students makes it come more easily to mind, it catches their attention and influences their perceptions, facilitating attitude judgments coherent with such relevant information (“spontaneous processing model” by Fazio, 1993).
- Petty and Wegener (1997) focus on processes responsible for changes in attitude when one receives a message, as well as on the strength of attitudes resulting from such processes. These authors understand that when a message is received, it can be either analyzed rationally or processed almost automatically, in this case being guided by information not relevant to the topic. As persons we have two main strategies at our disposal for deciding whether or not to accept the message: central route or peripheral route. The central route is taken when information receivers dedicate time and effort to critically evaluating the content of the message. In other words, arguments presented are carefully analyzed, possible consequences of these arguments are evaluated, all of this is placed alongside prior knowledge about the attitude topic, and this knowledge is related to the arguments contained in the message. The peripheral route includes persuasion processes not based on relevant thinking about the problem; attitudes are based on criteria external to the message, such as the attractiveness of the in-

formation source, stereotypes associated with the attitude topic, or rewards associated with a particular attitudinal posture. From this we deduce that when knowledge is acquired, persons' attitudes depend on labored, intentional analysis of all the relevant information. Nonetheless, when knowledge acquisition is low, attitudes depend on a less exhaustive, less intentional analysis of the information, or of an exhaustive evaluation of less information.

- We must also take into account the relationship between stereotype and attitude (as postulated by the theoretical model of dissociation, revised by Morales and Moya, 1996). The most striking educational implication of this model is that persons' response toward a stereotyped group (as some academic or professional profile might be) is based on the stereotype, and therefore, is uniform in situations of daily interaction. Only when persons take time to analyze relevant information and are sufficiently motivated or interested, their personal attitude will prevail over the stereotype and will inhibit automatic responses that are otherwise produced.

We are thus generating attitudes that give place to congruent actions. Coherently with these theories, Stewart (1995) observes that when students are taught to divide the vocational task into subtasks, expectations for control and the tendency to take responsibility for one's own achievements are increased – meaning an adjustment in the level of aspirations. This way, as Stewart indicates, students are being taught to solve problems, to clarify and achieve objectives, with the resulting importance which this has for guiding attitudes and actions and persisting in these.

In summary, many theories highlight the importance of reviewing the process followed until a concrete decision is reached. Acquisition and development of a planning-oriented attitude in a decision requires development of cognitive and affective strategies of information assessment and integration, of evaluating implications of different options for the students, and of commitment to the choice about to be made. This information evaluation must be carried out individually and must also be shared with persons significant to the decision makers, or with persons who exercise some type of pressure at the time of choosing and committing oneself to the decision made (peer group, mothers and fathers, teachers, etc.).

This argument is of great importance since what most strongly predicts autonomous decision-making skills is the planning-oriented, autonomous attitude adopted toward this decision (Luzzo, 1994); likewise, what most strongly predicts maturity skills in vocational decision making are attitudes towards such decision making (Luzzo, 1995). From this we derive the importance of developing necessary competencies for this task. Coherently, tools proposed for guidance must facilitate learning to search for and use (handle) information, to read, to process information, to assess it, to interpret it critically, to integrate it, and to share it with significant socialization agents, in order to be able to make planned, autonomous, critically processed decisions.

Attitudes such as realistic, positive self-knowledge of one's values/goals, interests and competencies; interest in working and learning; the value assigned to work; relevant knowledge of the different study/vocational options and how to access these; motivation, availability and dedication to an active job search; a planning-oriented, autonomous, enterprising attitude in decision making—all these and others are necessary. It is essential to maintain relevant criteria in intervention, avoiding offering different opportunities to people in the acquisition of these attitudes as a function of their culture, or having some type of disability, or any other peripheral, non-relevant characteristic; this differentiation of opportunities would become a form of social distinction, a form of exclusion.

3) *Preparation in generic competencies.* These competencies are necessary for persons in society and in different professions, and are enumerated in the center for studies at the European level (Teichler, 2000), as well as in the consensus reached in the Tuning Project: Educational Structures in Europe (González & Wagenaar, 2003), within the general framework of the convergence process toward a European Space for Higher Education: Problem solving; Decision making; Ability to manage information; Oral and written communication; Ability to analyze and synthesize; Teamwork; Interdisciplinary teamwork; Interpersonal relationship skills; Recognition of diversity and multi-culturality; Critical reasoning; Ethical commitment; Organization and planning skills; Autonomous learning; Leadership; Creativity; Knowledge of other cultures and customs; Initiative and enterprising spirit; Motivation for quality; Sensitivity to environmental issues. Another generic competency, common to and necessary for socio-labor placement in the different professions is that of an active job search (Lucas, 2006b).

These competencies are essential, affirms Castells (2001), since functional illiteracy gives rise to mechanisms of unemployment, poverty, and in summary, social exclusion. Society is based more and more on a minimal capacity to decodify language; functional illiteracy becomes an obstacle to socio-labor placement. Here it is appropriate to reflect on the need, both within the educational system and elsewhere, for vocational guidance and psychology which are open to a more creative concept of intelligence than the Intelligence Quotient, as pointed out by Ovejero (2004), Gardner (2001) and Goleman (1996). When personal aptitudes and abilities that define and select persons as intelligent are broadened, we also contribute toward creating and promoting such competencies.

4) *Preparation in specific competencies.* These can be acquired through training and work experience. A paradoxical situation relates to this factor, and affects many people: where persons discontinue their training in order to go to work, then find themselves poorly prepared, becoming less competitive “human capital” in a labor market which requires ever higher levels of knowledge and formal degrees.

5) *Other labor factors.* These include one’s current situation in relation to the job market, one’s self-awareness and personal evolution, knowledge of the opportunity search; one’s perception of the educational and labor situation; identification of New Fields of Employment.

6) *Other conditioning social factors.* These include family income, presence of illness, dependencies or disabilities, or another risk situation for exclusion.

All these factors which contribute to constructing the career development of persons and different groups will serve as a reference in Counseling Actions. From results obtained by Lucas (1996-1999); Lucas and Carbonero (2002, 2003); Ovejero and Lucas (in press), we can conclude that what is important for students is that, through the advisory function of different social agents, they are helped to acquire a realistic, positive knowledge of themselves and their possibilities (competencies, values-goals and interests) and that better knowledge acquisition of the current social, academic and professional environment is made available to them. The latter will be of great help to them when making certain decisions about their academic and professional activity which, in the long term, will be very valuable for their incorporation into work and for their vocational maturity over their lifetime.

Accordingly, in order to be able to introduce at University the teaching-learning model linked to the new European Space for Higher Education (ESHE), it is considered essential that students be trained in this direction in Secondary Education, making them responsible for their own learning. Toward this end, we elaborate on some of the strategies and techniques which can facilitate Knowledge of Professional and Academic Profiles from the different degree programs. Students will acquire this knowledge, in addition to detecting relevant information, recognizing it, processing, recovering and comprehending it, integrating it and evaluating it, making a selection from it and sharing it with significant socialization agents. Knowledge will be acquired regarding values/goals, regarding itineraries to follow for developing one's interests and generic and specific competencies, and about how to access the development of these itineraries and competencies also through incorporation into the job market.

## **Objectives**

The labor placement of university graduates is one of the essential concerns of educational institutions which seek to improve quality by strengthening their connection with societal demands.

There is a group of students who are quite sure of what they are doing, or more technically speaking, they have a high degree of definition to their career plan. Nonetheless, this is not the usual case, quite frequently the end of one's degree program concurs with a period of uncertainty when one does not know where to turn, whether because of ignorance of possible follow-on employment or training, or due to the ever accelerating changes in the work world.

A university student's training does not conclude with attaining a specific degree, but must be complemented with guidance for accessing the job market. With this purpose in mind, we seek to provide a response to these needs, sharing information which will encourage the transition from different degree programs into professional life.

This material is developed and conceived as a practical guide that illustrates and advises concerning basic questions related to labor placement of different university graduates.

Accordingly, the objective of facilitating labor placement of university students requires that they acquire realistic, positive knowledge of themselves and their possibilities (values/goals, interests and competencies); that they analyze the labor market situation and its evolution as related to the different degrees; that they carefully review ongoing study and labor options within their reach; that they identify New Fields of Employment and plan an active search for employment.

In the format of an Orientation Guide, students are to meet the following objectives:

1. Be able to outline and design a professional development plan, according to their level of preparation, competencies, interests, values and professional goals.
2. Know the various means of socio-labor placement, the most common channels for entering in contact with different job positions.
3. To assess and awaken the capacity for self-employment as another alternative and/or complementary channel for professional placement.

In order to facilitate achievement of these objectives, the following reference script provides structured content that is developed by exemplifying some of the Counseling Actions taken during University Education, harmonized with Secondary Education, with non-regulated educational settings and with the job market.

## **Development**

*What do I know about my values and work goals?*

### *a) Theoretical introduction to the activity*

In this society which we are building, we cannot, over the course of our lifetimes, uncritically accept the values, objectives and goals in our perception-interpretation of the reality we find ourselves immersed in. In accordance with this basic reference point, when it comes to acquiring knowledge of these values, objectives and goals, it is fundamental to offer criteria for analysis and reflection, with the support of existing inventories of Values and Goals. For such analysis and reflection on Values and Goals, we illustrate the following practice, where the contributions of Harrington and O'Shea (1993) are taken as a refer-

ence, as well as the list of work values and goals recorded by the *MOW International Research Team* (1987), indicating that both variables are useful for understanding why people work. Values identify the basic reasons why people work (e.g., status, prestige, income, serving society, personal fulfillment, interpersonal contacts, staying busy); while goals or objectives refer to the importance people give to certain aspects of work (that it be interesting, that skills and requirements match, variety, autonomy, opportunities to learn new things). Both are essential aspects for target persons to clarify with regard to what they consider worthwhile.

It is then necessary to place these target persons in a learning posture so that they understand what values and goals mean, that they group them together and establish relationships between them, outlining the advantages and drawbacks of these values, and finally, that the individual establish and explain the order of importance that each value/goal holds for him or her. By following this process of information elaboration, we encourage the student to construct a social representation about work which is less vulnerable to stereotypes or other errors or information biases, so that he or she adopts an autonomous attitude based on acquiring relevant, critically considered knowledge.

Individual reflections should also be shared and compared within the group. Working in a group stimulates vocational exploration, reinforces confidence (Hutchinson, Freeman & Quick, 1996) and positively influences attitude and vocational availability (Tepavac, 1991).

#### *b) Procedure*

##### *Student introduction*

In order to construct one's personal plan of studies and professional work, one must first distinguish what is considered to be most important, what is most highly valued or appreciated and why. Therefore, prioritized values and goals are going to influence the decision.

People, whether they be children, youth or adults, sometimes wonder what they would like to attain in life, what gives them the most satisfaction. This activity awakens that part of curiosity about what one expects out of life, in one's work, what gives the most satisfaction

academically and professionally; in other words, what values/goals are held by each person with regard to work.

c) *Objectives:*

- Progress in students' configuration of their own identity and in elaborating a well-adjusted, positive image of themselves and their vocational possibilities.
- Elaborate value criteria to serve as the basis for students to make personal decisions and critically analyze the world which surrounds them and its behavior.
- Identify the students' most satisfying work values and goals.
- *Concepts (knowing):*
  - Distinguish existing values/goals with regard to work.
  - Describe the most satisfying values/goals.
- *Procedures (know how):*
  - How to obtain and analyze information about values/goals.
  - How to elaborate and communicate information.
  - How to formulate one's own values and goals.
- *Attitudes (desire to know and to do):*
  - Self-analysis and acceptance.
  - Critical thinking and sense of responsibility regarding work values/goals.
  - Direct attention toward what students consider to be worthwhile.
- *Implementing the activity and methodology*

The activity you are about to do will allow you to reflect on what you hope for or what motivates you in your future studies and work.

Next, students are given individually the following Values Network, with the following instructions: Read the list of values which follows. Afterward, in small groups of six students, for the next 20 minutes, you will brainstorm about what each of these values means for each one of you, discussing them and writing down your thoughts (you must assign one person the

role of secretary, to take notes, and another person to coordinate the discussion); you can include other values that you consider to be important and which are not shown. Afterward, each small group shares with the larger group, while the teacher writes down your ideas on the board, and you can compare the different meanings assigned to each value. Next you can do an individual analysis of the advantages and drawbacks of these work values and goals, assigning each one a score from 1 to 12 according to their importance to you personally (see Figure 1).

List of work values/goals (Harrington O'Shea, 1993; MOW International Re- search Team, 1987).	What do these mean for you? Advan- tages and drawbacks for each one (Group work).	Rank in order from 1 to 12 according to the importance of each one to you person- ally (Individual work).
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Prestige</li> <li>2. Status</li> <li>3. Income</li> <li>4. Serving society</li> <li>5. Personal fulfillment</li> <li>6. Relationships with other people</li> <li>7. Staying busy</li> <li>8. Job stability</li> <li>9. Variety</li> <li>10. Autonomy</li> <li>11. Risk</li> <li>12. Opportunities to learn new things</li> </ol>		

**Figure 1. Student support guide: Understanding our values and goals**

Students are given a second Support Guide, a Summary-Sheet (see Figure 2).

The four most important values/goals for me are the following, because...

...

...

I reject the following values/goals because...

...

...

Therefore, I feel that for my academic and professional future, the following is what matters...

...

...

**Figure 2. Student support guide. Summary-Sheet.**

In the analysis that the target students carry out regarding their values/goals in the Guide, it is important to help them communicate a mature thought:

*\*“I feel that the following is what matters .....”;*

instead of

*\*“I don’t care about any of it”.*

Another Support Guide is distributed for the purpose of helping participants become familiar with these values/goals. An example of what each one means helps them to focus this exchange of evocations (see Figure 3).

1. Prestige (Recognition for personal and professional achievements).
2. Status (Social and economic position).
3. Income (Making money through work; satisfaction from earnings, the more the better, not necessarily as a means for surviving).
4. Serving society (Supporting and helping people and groups).
5. Personal fulfillment (Becoming what I am capable of and I like; developing my own potential in work).
6. Relationships with other people (Being in contact with others, working with a group, waiting on others, depending largely on others).
7. Staying busy (Performing any kind of activity, having something to do, it doesn’t matter what it is).
8. Job stability (Security, both in terms of financial security as well as having a job that is not subject to lay-offs).
9. Variety (Performing very different functions and tasks at work, not repetitive ones).
10. Autonomy (Being able to participate in decisions, having independence within my position).
11. Risk (Work that involves taking big risks, either physical ones or other types).
12. Opportunities to learn new things (The job allows me to use my imagination, creativity, find alternative solutions)

**Figure 3. Support Guide**

- *Support resources:*
  - Support Guide for students. Understanding our values and goals.
  - Support Guide for students. Summary-sheet.
  - Support Guide for instructors or homeroom teachers.
  - Paper, pen, chalkboard.
  
- *Activity evaluation notes:*
  - Students' degree of awareness of their own values and goals.
  - Reasoning which students follow in establishing their priorities.
  - Is the meaning of work conceived only in terms of motivating elements in the work setting, or do other values and objectives related to the task content also motivate them?
  - How do they organize themselves to perform the group work? This criterion is only for students who perform the activity in class.
  
- *Reflections that students carry out through this activity:*

This activity has been applied in different educational and community contexts with different groups, including implementation at university (Lucas, 2006a). Through the discourse analysis performed on the argument repertory of these diverse target persons, following the teachings of Iñiguez (2003), one observes how persons handle these conversations, how they define priorities in their work values and goals, and what meaning they give to these. A common denominator is observed in that there are important changes which the target persons undergo regarding the value they give to work after the reflection and the group discussion. Over the course of the activity the target persons present many perceptive biases, stereotypes and prejudices, while assigning meaning to the different values and goals. Likewise, instructors and homeroom teachers value this activity positively when they observe contradictions in the students as they express what matters to them. At first they tend to indicate especially those values which are most accessible in their mind: a good salary, stability, staying busy and status; students confuse prestige with status and consider acquiring prestige in work performance to be a disadvantage, meaning the adoption of a superior attitude, with the negative consequences that this knowledge involves in developing motivation for quality and in ethical commitment. At first, it seems other values are secondary. These values also enter into conflict with certain work experiences that the target persons have had or are willing to

have. Likewise, in the search for opposites while giving their narratives, certain polarities become apparent, either implicitly or explicitly (for example, dependence vs. autonomy). Results support the relevance of space and time dedicated to reflection and to sharing these values and objectives about their future as active adults, since it encourages the students to have a clearer, more autonomous order of priorities and greater motivation for quality in work and for ethical commitment.

This has been applied over four years within the Youthstart Community Initiative (Lucas, 1996-1999), a program aimed at encouraging socio-labor integration of youth between 16 and 20 years of age who do not have sufficient training for getting a job; with youth who are not attending school and are not graduates of Secondary Education, or they have significant social and cultural gaps; with youth from difficult socio-economic situations, with frustrating experiences in the school setting and at risk for social exclusion; also within Secondary Education, in conjunction with the Doctoral Thesis by Lucas (Lucas & Carbonero, 2002); within university education as a content item and learning activity for different degree programs (Lucas, 2006a), and in research projects such as that of Sanpedro (2005), among others.

### *Knowledge of academic and professional itineraries of university graduates*

#### *a) Objectives*

The need to create mechanisms for joint collaboration becomes apparent, as we have indicated, whether between the area of guidance and the labor market, or among teachers from different disciplines, especially between University Education and Secondary Education. Some of the objectives and content items found in the Initiatives implemented as part of the teaching task are oriented in this direction, in order to construct the following competencies in university students:

1. Study the academic and professional options, competencies and itineraries of students in degree programs from Social Education, Work Sciences and Labor Relations, over the course of one's university program.
2. Analyze the role played by different generic and specific competencies in different areas of study and work, in different class subjects, and their relationships to functions and tasks to be performed in different professional settings, in careers of persons with degrees in Social Education, Work Sciences and Labor Relations.

3. Encourage better knowledge acquisition about the current social, academic and professional environment, a great help for attenuating academic failure and for making certain academic decisions which, in the long term, will also be highly valuable for their transition to the work world.

In this way, achieving these objectives will allow Universities to adjust educational content and offer the right specializations, whether through elective subjects or through post-graduate specialization courses, not to mention internships, especially those outside the university, which are more suitable for facilitating proper labor placement in the future.

*b) Implementing the activity*

The Application was carried out within the framework of the R&D Project BS02001-3150 from the Ministry of Science and Technology, entitled, "Vocational Behavior and Vocational Counseling in University Students", implemented over four years (2001-2005), and evaluated between the months of February and March, 2005. Researchers from the respective universities headed up the effort, after having properly trained Research Collaborators and prepared the individualized action in terms of student interviews. The collaborators' high degree of motivation towards this experience of evaluating their own vocational behavior was noteworthy, as well as how this motivation spread to students from other degree programs, who they themselves contributed as a source of data. It can be inferred from the procedure followed that this modality of intervention was effective for the objectives of this phase, though costly due to the Seminar Training Plan which was followed.

According to the objectives and goals which guided this study, a tool was defined which structures content in the following reference script, beginning with previously acquired knowledge about priority needs for constructing competency development and attenuating academic failure, studied previously (Guerra *et al.*, 2005; Rivas *et al.*, 2005). In the following Initiatives, we seek to analyze this knowledge more deeply and adapt it to our objectives:

- Initially, we performed a Study of the Academic and Professional Profile of each of the degree programs: Social Education, Work Sciences and Labor Relations. This was distributed to the target students and served as a reference so that, in the structuring carried out for each of the objectives and topic content areas, the knowl-

edge acquisition through objectives and content can be related to their functionality in professional settings to which they have access, as well as to the objectives and content of other class subjects. The relevance of this Study is as follows:

1) Usefulness for achieving the objectives of class subjects included in the degree programs of Social Education, Labor Relations and Work Sciences.

2) Usefulness in actions that inform and guide Secondary students as well as new and continuing university students, on the part of the Managing Team at the Universities where the Study was carried out, as well as on the part of information and guidance services available to university students (e.g. Training and Employment Service of the University General Foundation, etc.).

- Later, we drew up a Dossier which was distributed to the students in the format of a Guide, for application in the following:

1) The 5<sup>th</sup> Conference on Education 2006: “Education’s response to Social Challenges”, organized by the School of Education at Palencia and held on May 17-19, with the lecture: “Academic and professional itineraries for the Bachelor’s Degree in Social Education”.

2) Conference on Opportunities for Labor Placement of Graduates in Work Sciences and Labor Relations. Held in Palencia and organized by the School of Work Sciences in collaboration with the Department of Business Organization, Commercialization and Market Research, March 7, 2006, with the lecture: “Academic and professional itineraries for the Bachelor’s Degree in Social Education”.

3) Reference material for developing research sponsored by the State Secretariat of Universities and Research, Ministry of Education and Science (EA2006-0086) (Ovejero *et al.*, 2006).

Students learn to find and use (handle) information, to read, to process that information, assess it, interpret it critically, integrate it, so that afterward they can make decisions in an autonomous, planned fashion, and share them with significant socialization agents. For this purpose we elaborated a Guide regarding the Professional and Academic Profile for the

degree programs in Social Education, Work Sciences and Labor Relations, material aimed to help students not only detect information about themselves, but also to acknowledge it, manage it, recover and comprehend it, integrate it, evaluate it and make a selection from it, processing information through the different interest channels indicated (see Figure 4).



ACADEMIC THREAD		PROFESSIONAL THREAD	
<b>Introduction to the degree program</b>	Description/objectives, areas of work, how to attain the degree	<b>Labor market</b>	Occupational observatory Competencies, functions, tasks and work settings Occupational prospects
<b>Relevant characteristics from the degree programs and post-graduate studies. Research.</b>	Objectives, content and structure of studies for the degree programs and Doctorate. Research Groups.	<b>Sources of information</b>	Public employment Private employment Self-employment
<b>Continuation of studies</b>	Bridge programs Other degrees		
<b>Complementary training</b>	Postgraduate courses Language training		
<b>Resources</b>	Scholarships and aid Associations		



**FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF INTEREST AND INFORMATION SOURCES**

**Figure 4: Professional and academic profile of each of the degree programs: Social Education, Work Sciences, and Labor Relations: Generic and Specific Competencies**

*c) Activity evaluation notes*

In accordance with the objectives and content defined, and following the teaching of Castillo (2003), we find:

- A high rate of continuity in class attendance.
- Improved performance in class subjects.
- A very positive perception both on the part of students as well as on the part of the Managing Team from the Universities, regarding the importance and usefulness of these tools for performance and for motivating students in their studies.

- High interest in the content: a large number of students participated in the modules organized in the respective Conferences. Students requested to continue on longer than assigned in order to develop the Module in the 5<sup>th</sup> Conference on Education.
- Increased student attendance, not only while carrying out their studies, but also after finishing their university degree program.

According to results obtained, and in line with De Miguel *et al.* (2003), it is noted that evaluating the practitioners' degree of satisfaction with university training, from their practical point of view, can be carried out beginning with the learning process, its planning and development, and the suitability of the training profile of the degree program. Likewise, in accordance with De la Fuente *et al.* (2004), the teacher, the student or the practitioner can quickly define competencies in terms of proposed learning content and learning activities designed for constructing them.

In summary, people will have adequate prospects for employment if what they offer as employees coincides with and responds to the characteristics of that employment; they will then be prepared to continue to the next phase, getting into contact with employment through a Job Search Agenda.

### *Techniques for Job Search*

#### *a) Introduction and objectives*

Closely related to the prior objective of understanding different options and itineraries to be followed by taking into account relevant information, we now underscore the importance of students being training in how to access different options, in other words, in practicing job search techniques. Once realistic, positive self-knowledge is acquired, along with knowledge of the possible options as well as factors which shape the job market, one is in a position to begin planning the next stage of transition to life in the workplace: the active employment search.

Looking for work, then, is **active** labor, that is, it is work in itself. If one adopts a passive attitude toward the challenge of implementing one's professional plan, it may never be attained. This active search requires motivation, since effort is required to carry it out, along

with time and know how—even if one has the support of placement services or programs—the only differences are that possibilities for success increase and that the anxiety level associated with job search situations is lessened (Alconada, 2003).

In the following reference script there is a basic description of each of the specific job search techniques, and guidelines to help facilitate attainment of these objectives, according to the review by Lucas (2006b).

*b) Active job search plan: selecting employment openings*

One's studies are over, or are nearing completion, and the idea of going to work appears. The next question to ask is this: How to initiate the Job Search Plan as an integral part of my overall professional plan? According to Sánchez García (2004), we must take into account that the Search Plan is a sub-project within each person's larger Professional Plan. As such, it requires planning of immediate objectives, strategies to be following, time needed and resources to be applied.

*c) Developing follow-up strategies: Job Search Agenda*

The Agenda system should be adapted by each person; different types of records can be maintained. In any case, the system should provide for recording and facilitating aspects such as: planning tasks to be carried out and the time needed; contacts to be maintained, results and follow-on tasks; contact information and addresses of interest.

Here we see an example of follow through in the job search process. With the next exercise we seek to get people into the habit of following an organized search. A calendar is put into place regarding what will be done each day of the week. It is effective to record activities so that the search can be organized on a Follow-up Record (see Figures 5 and 6).

<b>NAME OF JOB POSITION</b>	<b>REF.</b>	<b>N°.</b>	<b>SOURCE WHERE FOUND.</b> <b>DATE.</b>
e.g.: Business Consulting Agency	A. A.	1	Advertisement 03-18-2007
<b>DATE-MEANS OF SENDING LETTER AND RESUMÉ</b>		<b>DATE OF REPLY</b>	
3-30-2007 Post		Adequate 4-2-2007	
<b>DATE OF POSSIBLE INTERVIEW (OR OTHER TESTING, ETC.)</b>		<b>RESULTS OF INTERVIEW (OR OTHER TESTING, ETC.) , RESPONSES TO CHALLENGES FORMLATED</b>	
4-26-2007		Second interview pending, etc.	

**Figure 5. Follow-up record.**

<b>Weekplan from ___ to ___, 2007</b>	<b>Objectives</b>	<b>Activities to perform</b>	<b>Monday...</b> <b>Tuesday...</b> <b>Wednesday...</b> <b>Thursday...</b> <b>Friday...</b> <b>Saturday...</b> <b>Sunday...</b>
<b>Record of contacts</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Business</b>	<b>Source</b>
<b>Contact</b>			
<b>Confirmation</b>		<b>Response</b>	
<b>Possible date</b>		<b>Results from the selection process. What have I contributed and learned? ...</b>	
<b>Alternatives</b>		<b>Suggestions for improvement</b>	

**Figure 6. Job Search Agenda**

As complementary support material, and as modeling for the counseling process, it is a good idea to offer real-life examples of why it is important to carry out a planned job search, to know the sources for searching; to know how businesses select employees; how to make potential employers aware of who you are, that is, to present one’s petition for employment.

The following are recommended techniques for presenting one's employment petition: Employment Application, Letter of Presentation, Curriculum Vitae; Selection Interviews (material elaborated by Lucas, 2006b, updating Ballesteros *et al.*, 2001; Lucas & de los Mozos, 2000; Sánchez García, 2004, among others). The purpose of all this is to motivate the target individuals toward an active job search, to reduce their anxiety in these situations, and to provide know how regarding job search techniques and strategies.

## **Discussion**

The development of persons' vocational maturity depends to a large extent on adequate, satisfactory prior socialization, a socialization which in turn depends largely on schooling at different educational levels, and especially during University Education. At this level we propose the objective of designing tools from within the Vocational Guidance function which facilitate acquiring relevant knowledge of values/goals, of available itineraries to be followed for developing one's interests and generic and specific competencies, of how to gain access for realization of these itineraries and competencies, in order to thus facilitate inclusion in the labor market. As García-Moltalvo and Peiró (2001, p. 28) rightly indicate: "labor placement processes have very important consequences for young people, since they determine in part their professional career, their opportunities for personal development and their psychological well being".

Consequently, learning content and activities are developed for clarification of labor values/goals, and for strategies that encourage knowledge of the academic and professional profile of different degree programs, from a Social Psychology perspective of education. The Social Psychology approach to applying knowledge to vocational guidance and counseling analyzes interactive processes that make up social action and the historic and cultural systems in which this action takes place.

Thus, taking prior research results as our starting point, we seek to further analyze how to facilitate development of competencies within the different degree programs. Competencies are developed within three interconnected axes: from within University Education itself, harmonized and coordinated with Secondary Education, and with the later socio-labor performance of the university graduates. The following factors are especially worthy of consid-

eration (Lucas, 2006b): acquisition of relevant knowledge and of planning-oriented, autonomous, enterprising attitudes; training in generic and specific competencies; and other labor-related factors and social conditions.

In summary, the most adequate strategy for facilitating students' professional development is made up of phases:

- Definition of professional values and objectives/goals, interests and competencies.
- Knowledge of relevant information.
- Elaboration of an Active Job Search Plan.
- Implementation of planned activities
- Evaluation of results and suggestions for how to improve regarding weak areas which were observed.
- Ongoing training in these strategies and job search techniques.

It is hoped that this contributes in a small way toward that much larger task of improving the knowledge base from which students develop their professional competencies, in a society that we anticipate to be increasingly competitive. From this research commitment within the area of teaching, we reinforce the guidance function inherent to the whole of the Educational System, encouraging the exchange of experiences, and together facing new challenges posed by the European Space for Higher Education (ESHE).

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