



Academic Counselling as a Means for Developing Professional Competence of University Students

Asesoramiento académico como medio para desarrollo de competencia profesional de estudiantes universitarios

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Contents

- [1. Introduction](#)
 - [2. Methods](#)
 - [3. Results](#)
 - [4. Discussion](#)
 - [5. Conclusion](#)
- [References](#)

ABSTRACT:

The article provides a rationale for academic counselling as a means for developing university students' professional competence. The notion of 'academic counselling' is defined based on the theoretical analysis of pedagogical research studies, and academic counselling is proved to be a means for developing university students' professional competence. We generated the structural model of academic counselling to support university students, identified academic problems confronted by university students and determined the content of academic counselling. Furthermore, we analyzed the effectiveness of academic counselling based on specific and theoretically well-founded criteria. Finally, we set out guidelines on the effective use of the structural model of academic counselling as a means for developing university students' professional competence.

Keywords: use, academic counselling, means, development, professional competences, student, university.

RESUMEN:

El artículo proporciona bases para el asesoramiento académico como medio para desarrollar la competencia profesional de los estudiantes universitarios. La noción de "asesoramiento académico" se define con base en el análisis teórico de los estudios de investigación pedagógica, y se ha demostrado que el asesoramiento académico es un medio para desarrollar la competencia profesional de los estudiantes universitarios. Se generó el modelo estructural de asesoramiento académico para apoyar a los estudiantes universitarios, se identificaron los problemas académicos confrontados por los estudiantes universitarios y se determinó el contenido del asesoramiento académico. Además, analizamos la efectividad del asesoramiento académico basado en criterios específicos y teóricamente fundados. Por último, se establecen directrices sobre el uso eficaz del modelo estructural de asesoramiento académico como medio para el desarrollo de la competencia profesional de los estudiantes universitarios. Palabras clave: uso, asesoramiento académico, medios, desarrollo,

1. Introduction

Ongoing changes in higher education are underpinned by the objective shaping of the single European educational space and impose certain obligations on Kazakhstan in terms of university student training, which is to be put into practice keeping in mind a unified set of requirements and assistance in professionally developing future specialists throughout their lives. To attain these objectives, options for achieving the desired educational outcomes and for making personal and professional plans on their basis have been developed in higher education. This provides university students with an opportunity to devise their personal and professional development plans and to take a positive attitude to their future, which will further contribute to their development throughout their lives. At the same time, it was revealed that students are not always ready to determine their educational needs and possibilities and to plan their itinerary for goal achievement. As a result, when making and implementing their action plan, they are often faced with academic problems. Inability of students to address these problems on their own and lack of sufficient assistance from professors hinders the development of university students' professional competence. Consequently, the traditional student assistance programs are becoming inadequate in modern higher education, hence the need for a new, well thought-out organization of target-oriented assistance for university students. Academic counselling is what is needed to provide student with target-oriented assistance. It is the academic counsellor who helps students to solve academic problems during the learning process and to plan their professional competence itinerary, in other words, to benefit as much as possible from university education, which is of utmost importance in response to the ever-more-complicated curriculum and the current job market conditions. Consequently, studying academic counselling – the phenomenon that is completely new for higher education – is becoming highly relevant.

Many research studies reflected various aspects of guidance given to students on how to develop their professional experience at the university environment. A number of researchers - Omarov, Y.B., *et al.*, (2016); Utegenov, Y., *et al.*, (2014); Mirza, N.V. (2013); Brown-Rice, K.A., & Furr, S. (2013) – highlight the relation between university students' professional competence and academic guidance. The following researchers focused on academic counselling in higher education: Osborne, J. (2011); Nagwa Hassan Ali and Nahed Sharif Saud (2013); Bundy, A. (2010); Aljohrh Ibrahim Bubshait (2008). A number of researchers (Domiaty, S. I. (2011); Benton, S., *et al.*, (2003); Sakenov, D.Zh., *et al.*, (2012); Balushi, K., and Saeedi, A. (2008) consider various aspects of pedagogical counselling, but academic counselling in modern scholarship has not yet become the subject of separate research studies. Given that academic counselling is now practices in many universities in Kazakhstan, investigating the influence of academic counselling on the development of students' professional competence is more urgent than ever before.

Analysis of the results obtained from research on student assistance in modern higher education, on the development of higher education and on the requirements set by modern society for the development of the professional competence of students in their capacity as future specialists served to reveal the apparent contradiction between the possibility to use academic counselling as a means for developing university students' professional competence and absence of a theoretical framework for academic counselling in pedagogy. These contradictions let to define the goal of the present study consisting in the theoretical justification and development of the structure and content of the academic counselling process contributing to the development of university students' professional competence.

2. Methods

The present study is based on the following methodological approaches. First of all, it is the

general systems approach used to examine academic counselling and, consequently, its model as a system working for the system and being part of the comprehensive system, which is the educational process at the university. We also adopted the individual and activity approach ensuring the unity of personal and activity component in the process of developing university students' professional competence, according to which the personality acts as a subject of its professional development. At the same time, the individual's professional development takes place in joint activity and communication, also implying the reflection of this aspect at the university students' academic counselling model. The theoretical basis of the research is the conceptual ideas revealing the essential features of information society; personality-oriented training, the main requirements of which are the focus on the individual's personality, subjectivity and freedom of choice; competence approach stating that professional competence constitutes the goal and outcome of the university graduate; multifunctional assistance to university students. In order to achieve the objective set, we adopted the combination of complementary methods, including theoretical research methods (analysis and synthesis of philosophical, psychological, pedagogical and methodological research studies relating to our research topic, comparison, generalization, systematization, modelling method); empirical methods (surveying, discussion, interviewing, testing, expert evaluation, analysis of pedagogical documents and of activity outcomes); experimental methods (pedagogical experiment); data processing methods (qualitative and quantitative analysis, ranking, mathematical processing of data obtained during research).

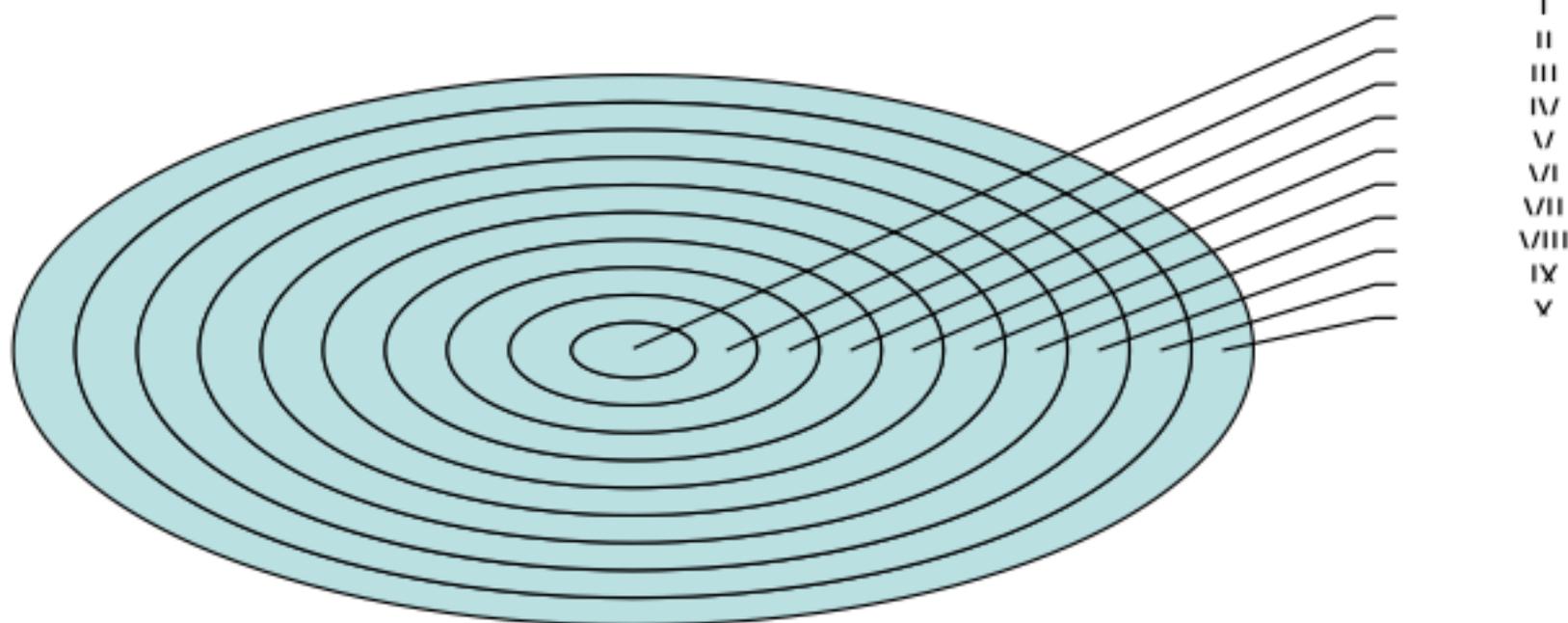
3. Results

Based on the theoretical analysis of available research studies, this article defines the development of university students' professional competence as an ongoing, dynamic process, which is associated with the development of professionally significant qualities underpinning the solution of complicated and unconventional professional problems and which is impossible without planning professional prospects. Our analysis made it possible to detect professional competences specified in the characteristics of the new cultural type of individuals (Sundburg, L. (2001); Hoffmann, T. (1999); Day, Ch. (1994), which is related to the individual's success in the rapidly changing world: activity, responsibility and initiative with respect to his or her education and, later, to his or her profession, independence in decision-making and problem-solving in educational and professional activities. In conformity with the conception of the competence approach, this study defines professional competence as a comprehensive description of an individual determining his or her ability to solve problems arising in real-life situations by using knowledge, professional and life experiences, values and inclinations. Development of professional competence is impossible without career path development presented in higher education by the arrangement and implementation of one's individual educational itinerary. Students' individual educational itineraries are represented as itineraries of their professional development in school (Bang, J. (2004); Henner, E.K. (2004) and are realized by solving perspective, strategic, tactic and operational tasks that are getting ever more complicated. Conditions are created in school to provide students with an opportunity to build their professional development pyramid on their own. Students achieve their goals by finding step-by-step solutions for educational problems while keeping in mind the desired level of their educational achievements places on top of the pyramid. In this situation, students are personally responsible for their education, which takes on a special significance for them, since their future professionalism depends on how responsible and thoughtfully students plan and realize their individual educational itinerary. Throughout their time in school, students are confronted with the need to address academic problems that come in the way of their professional development. What is meant by the university student's academic problem in this study is the subjective state of tension and frustration caused by objective obstacles arising during the student's development and realization of his or her individual educational itinerary. Our analysis of the students' assertions allows us to maintain that students are often unable to address their problems on their own, without assistance. In this regard, a need is felt for

special assistance to be offered to students. It is academic counselling that helps university students to address their academic problems, being one of the compulsory elements of the student assistance system in modern higher education. Academic counselling is a variety of the student pedagogical counselling and, according to Balushi, K., Saeedi, A. (2008) and Osborne, J. (2011), among others, pedagogical counselling acts as a kind of guidance and, consequently, academic counselling is a kind of university student guidance. Therefore, academic counselling is a kind of student guidance that is a systematic interaction of the academic counsellor and students with a view to help address the learners' academic problems by contributing to the development and realization of the students' individual educational itinerary based on their career plans and expectations in life. The theoretical analysis outcomes suggest that guidance acts as a prerequisite for the development of students' professional competence during the learning process in school and, consequently, academic counselling promotes the development of university students' professional competence. Academic counselling offered to university students influences the formation of their professionally important qualities, fosters the development and realizations of their individual educational itineraries by making their subjective position relevant, by providing support, by increasing awareness about their success among students and by stimulating the reflection on educational activities while solving academic problems. The teacher/academic counsellor assumes a leading role in academic counselling. The academic counsellor's responsibilities are defined as follows: contributing to the development of students' professional competence by helping students to deal with academic problems; helping students develop the individual educational itinerary; establishing cooperation and partnership relations with colleagues within the university, expanding business contacts with representatives of other higher education institutions; developing functions of reflection and self-education echoing the counsellor's analysis of his or her activity and readiness for changes in professional activities based on the target-oriented, voluntary and independent acquisition of new professional knowledge and skills. While fulfilling the above-mentioned functions, the academic counsellor may act as an advisor, as a mentor, as a guide and as a lawyer. In this context, students work on developing their professional competence and on shaping professionally significant qualities (commitment, responsibility, independence and initiative) and specify their individual educational itineraries while following their academic curriculum. In modern higher education, the faculty show interest in student academic counselling (Aljohrh Ibrahim Bubshait (2008), because they are responsible for the students' educational outcomes and for creating the conditions for development of student's professional competence while in school. They have profound knowledge of the educational process and of the professional development of students. Sakenov, D.Zh., *et al.*, (2012); Balushi, K., and Saeedi, A. (2008) showed that students are more willing to turn to faculty members for advice. Providing additional information and methodological assistance to academic counsellors ensures greater effectiveness of academic counselling. Based on the systems, personality and activity approaches, the study presents a structural model of the student academic counselling process as a means to develop university students' professional competence (see Figure 1). Academic counselling includes a number of interrelated elements bringing about unity, which is of integrative nature and takes into account the goals of the comprehensive system, namely, the educational process in higher education aimed at developing the students' professional competence. The academic counselling structure refers to the counsellor-student interaction unrolling from the goal established by the academic counselling subjects to the outcome, and reflection on the latter enables the counsellor to set new academic counselling goals. Therefore, the systemically important component is the academic counselling goal, which is the assistance provided by the counsellor to the student in resolving their academic problems while developing their professional competence. On it depends the choice of forms, means and content of student academic counselling, based on academic counselling principles.

Figure 1

Structural model of the student academic counselling process as a means for developing university students' professional competence.



Notes on the structural model of the student academic counselling process as a means for developing university students' professional competence:

1. Goal of student academic counselling: helping students to deal with their academic problems while developing their professional competence.
2. Student academic counselling as a means for developing university students' professional competence aims to achieve academic counselling goals.
3. Roles of the academic counsellor: helping student to develop their professional competence; devising students' individual educational itineraries; management; self-education and reflection.
4. Student. Student's activity to address academic problems standing in the way of his or her developing professional competence.
5. Academic counselling principles: priority of human values, voluntary involvement, flexibility, cooperation, individuality, relevance of the subject's position, equality of initiatives.
6. Academic counselling directions: 1. Adaptation of students at the university. 2. Self-organization of students in the educational process. 3. Independent work of students at the university's educational process. 4. Students' choice at the university's educational process. 5. Communication at the university.
7. Academic counselling forms: consultation, moderation, training, coaching.
8. Academic counselling means: personal contact, e-mail, forum, telephone.
9. Academic counselling outcomes.
10. Analysis of and reflections on academic counselling.

The content of university student counselling is reflected in the following directions of the academic counselor-student interaction: adaptation at the university, self-organization in the learning process at the university, independent work at the university, choice in the learning process at the university, communication at the university. Academic counselling uses such means of communication as personal contact, e-mail, forum, telephone, as well as the following academic counselling forms: training, coaching, moderation and consultation. We determined that academic counselling is of cyclical nature and consists of five stages based on the work on this or that academic problem: diagnostic (detection and registration of an academic problem), search (search for the causes of an academic problem), contractual (research into solution strategies, distribution of responsibility, development of the step-by-step plan of action to address an academic problem), activity-based (anticipation of possible consequences, implementation of the devised plan), and reflective (thinking about action taken). The start of one stage results from the preceding one and its end leads to the following one. By passing through these stages, the subjects pass from quantitative results to quality results, in other words, they are ready to resolve on their own academic problems hindering the development of their professional competence.

4. Discussion

Assessment of the effectiveness of the academic counselling process as a means for developing university students' professional competence is composed of the assessment of academic counselling itself and that of the development of university students' professional competence, namely, on the basis of the integrative criterion, including the criterion of fact, or the accomplishment of academic counselling fostering the development of students' professional competence (the criterion of process); knowledge and acceptance of academic counselling organization principles and methods by the subjects (criteria of result); the criterion of quality, or the students' ability to address academic problems independently (the criterion of process), the students' satisfaction with academic counselling and the dynamics of students' professional competence (criteria of result). This set of criteria and indicators was adopted during both the ascertaining experiment and the analytical stage of the experiment aimed at verifying the effectiveness of academic counselling services among the university students.

The following problems hindering the development of university students' professional competence were identified at the end of the ascertaining experiment: adaptation at the university (ignorance of the university's structure and of the specific features of the learning process at the university; ignorance of the opportunities available in the university environment); self-organization in the educational process (problems related to time management; unpreparedness to resolve problems arising during the learning process at the university); independent work at the university (problems associated with accomplishing various assignments and team work); choice in the educational process at the university (problems associated with devising one's individual educational itinerary, with determining professional and personal plans, with setting goals, determining strategies and selecting options); communication at the university. The study revealed that academic counselling services contribute to the development of university students' professional competence when directed at addressing the students' current academic problems. The following methods were applied during the ascertaining experiment to detect the extent to which students and university professors were ready to interact within the framework of academic counselling: surveying, method of expert evaluations, discussions, self-evaluation, professional skills' profile and testing. This diagnostics led to the following conclusions: professors were found to lack information about how to provide assistance to students in resolving academic problems (over 73%), which testified to the need to provide professors with appropriate training; students showed a high level of motivation for resolving academic problems during their studies at the university (positive motivation, aspiration for success, autonomy and responsibility for their education); the need was detected to assist students in addressing academic problems arising in the educational process among 91% of students (providing relevant information about the educational environment at the university, professors providing support to students in addressing their academic problems).

The educational experiment tested academic counselling services among university students and implemented the structural model of academic counselling among university students as a means to develop their professional competence, according to which the students spent sufficient time in face-to-face interaction with faculty members in an attempt to address their academic problems. At the same time, a special service (represented by the University's Human Resources Centre during the experiment) provided professors with guidance and relevant information. In accordance with the devised plan, the academic counsellor met students to keep track of achievements, to reflect upon and analyze academic problems, to make the necessary adjustments to the proposed professional development itinerary. To resolve their academic problems, students could contact their academic counsellor by email, by phone, by leaving a message on the forum or by appointment. When a number of students had similar academic problems, the academic counselor held group meetings when interaction was organized in accordance with the academic problem solution techniques. Upon completion of their joint work, the students' newly acquired skills were evaluated by having some students' work on the

solution of the problem, while others acted as experts. Three groups of students were formed by the end of the educational experiment: 51% of students were actively interacting with their academic counsellor, 31% used the academic counsellor's services from time to time, and 18% did not use academic counselling services.

Another diagnostic research on the student was carried out during the analytical experiment according to the criteria and indicators established during the ascertaining experiment. A comparative analysis of the data obtained for the criterion of fact during the ascertaining and analytical experiments revealed that academic counselling was implemented according to the designed structure, content and techniques and aimed to solve the students' academic problems, and at the same time the students were aware of and accepted academic counselling organization principles and methods. The experiment produced the following results in terms of the criterion of quality. As to the students' ability to address their academic problems independently, the number of students with a distinct motivation to solve their academic problems increased by 33% to 35% in the first two groups and by 11% in the third group. The number of students dealing with their academic problems independently - in other words, these students detected and realized their academic problems on their own, reflected on the possible causes that led to this problem, devised the strategies and the step-by-step plan to solve them and summarized the outcomes of their activity - increased by 23% and by 21% in the first and second groups respectively. Changes registered in the third group were insignificant. Analysis of the reflection upon the activity outcomes showed a positive trend: 37% and 29% of students in the first and second groups respectively, and only 13% of students in the third group had a high level of reflexivity. What distinguished students in the first two groups from those in the third one was the fact that they learned to address independently academic problems hindering the development of their professional competence. There was a positive trend on the students' satisfaction with academic counselling services, i.e. the students were satisfied with the timeliness in terms of assistance, the availability of options and their interaction with the academic counsellor during counselling sessions. The following criteria were used to assess the dynamics of university students' professional competence: professional competence, professionally significant qualities, career path development. The students from the first two groups made significant progress (increase by 13%) in reaching a systematic solution of situational tasks, according to the data on the students' addressing professional tasks while studying pedagogical disciplines and receiving ongoing hands-on teacher training, presented as situational tasks assigned to them by professors (games, discussions, essay writing, project work and presentations, portfolios). Analysis of data relating to professionally significant qualities (commitment, initiative, responsibility and independence) and to career path development produced the following results: students in the first and second groups showed a positive trend (increase by 41% and 31% respectively), the third group showed no significant changes. Students in the first two groups started to be actively engaged in the educational process and adopted responsible attitude towards their education, reflected in their choice of highly effective methods to manage their time, in class preparation (in group and individually), in individual career path development based on their professional and personal plans, in their conscious choice of courses and study programs and in their subsequent reflection on their university studies. The number of students who turned to the academic counsellor for assistance on their own initiative increased by 67% by the end of the experiment.

5. Conclusion

The study undertaken produced the following results:

- elaboration of the notion of "academic counselling" from the perspective of the personality and activity-based approach;
- expansion of scientific knowledge about academic counselling as a means for developing university students' professional competence;
- detection and justification of the structural components of academic counselling and their

interactions;

- identification of a number of academic problems arising during the development and implementation of one's individual educational itinerary;
 - development of content of academic counselling services offered to university students, detected in various directions of the academic counsellor-student interaction and implemented in the course of the activities done by the academic counsellor and students with a view to resolve academic problems;
 - definition and explanation of criteria for the effectiveness of academic counselling services (criterion of fact and criterion of quality)
 - development of student academic counselling techniques;
 - development and testing of modular programs and of training materials for students, teachers/academic counsellors and academic counselling organizers. Research shows new prospective directions for the study of the discussed problem: study of the interaction between faculty academic counsellors and the special academic counselling service; and research on the specificities of academic counselling services offered to different categories of students (gifted and high-risk students).
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[Índice]

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