

## THE EU PROJECT CONNECT!: FROM THE REPORTS TO THE HIGHER EDUCATION COURSE

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### Abstract

Megatrends as globalization, digitization, demographic change, skills shortage, and the pandemic challenge the working lives of millions of people across the world. Organizations experience increasing pressure to become more and more sustainable and to remain competitive taking care of their employees at all levels of skills. At the same time, employees get mobile, search for attractive, stable, and future-oriented job opportunities, and need support to access labor offers all around Europe. The European Erasmus+ project CONNECT! ([connect-erasmus.eu](http://connect-erasmus.eu)) aims to connect career guidance and counselling (CGC) with human resources (HR) in enterprises, for developing and advancing higher education and training in practice. To develop the higher education course two main phases were followed. In the first phase, the involved partners (Italy, Germany, Netherlands, Greece, Austria, and Serbia) conducted an analysis of the national situation. In the second phase, 79 HR and 77 CGC counselors were involved to answer a qualitative survey about the perceptions and best career and life designing practices. The comparative analysis of the national results allowed to identify similarities and differences and identify the main issue to be targeted. The training consists of 5 units that last 4.5 hours each and cover the following topics: *The changing world of work, Innovative concepts, and development for company-based career work/HRM, Current theoretical and methodological approaches for counsellors and coaches in the company context, Connecting Guidance, Counselling and coaching for employees and the context of company-based career work, Changing in practice the organizations*. After the evaluation of 10 experts from diverse countries, it has been piloted with higher education students. This presentation will focus on the Italian adaptation and the results of the piloting that initially involved 38 university master students in psychology. Two ad-hoc questionnaires about expectations and self-efficacy beliefs and one questionnaire about learning were used to verify its efficacy. Strengths and weaknesses will be discussed.

**Keywords:** *Career counseling and guidance, HR, training program, higher education.*

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### 1. Introduction

The world of work, near to the actual pandemic challenges that invests the working life of millions of people across the world, includes other global trends such as the demographic change, the forthcoming digitization and individualization, the economic crisis, the global competition and the skills shortage (Balliester & Elsheikhi, 2018). The increasing pressure for organizations to find and keep talented employees at all levels of skills to be competitive is accompanied by the need to become higher and higher sustainable (Lent, 2018; Neault, 2000). At the same time employees get mobile, search for attractive, stable and future-oriented job opportunities and need support to access labour offers all around Europe.

In this context finding new ways for equipping professionals who oversee the career development of employees represents a challenge that has been collected by all the partners involved in The European Erasmus+ project CONNECT! ([connecterasmus.eu](http://connecterasmus.eu)). This project aims to connect career guidance and counselling (CGC) with human resources (HR) in enterprises thanks to the development of a curriculum for higher education and a training for practitioners. The development of the higher education course followed the two first phases of the project. In the first phase, the involved partners (Italy, Germany, Netherlands, Greece, Austria, and Serbia) conducted an analysis of the national situation. In the second phase, 79 HR and 77 CGC counselors were involved to answer a qualitative survey about the perceptions and best career and life designing practices. The comparative analysis of the national results allowed to identify similarities and differences and the main issues to be targeted as topic

of the curriculum. After the curriculum development it was evaluated by two experts from each country. Their positive evaluations were encouraging for the partners that after some minor improvements, started the piloting phase.

In this paper after the presentation of the curriculum developed, some data about the reactions of Italian students that benefit of it during one of their university course will be presented. More specifically we were interested in evaluating if at the end of the course students perceived their knowledge and their self-efficacy beliefs were increased. We were also interested in knowing students' opinions about the structure and the quality of the CONNECT curriculum and if they have suggestions to improve it. Finally, we wanted to have a more objective indicator of their learning that we tested with a final quiz.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. The CONNECT curriculum for higher education

The curriculum consists of 5 units. Each unit includes 3 learning sessions for a total of 15 sessions. In each unit, the first session describes theoretical approaches and synthesize the literature, the second one introduces methods and tools, and the third one focuses on practice. Each learning session last 90 minutes, that is 4 hours and 30 minutes for each unit and a total of 22.5 hours.

The first unit focus on *The Changing world of work*. It describes and explains the current and future challenges in the world of work. Similarities and differences in the methods used to determine changes in the world of work are discussed as well as their usefulness with special attention to the career counseling and support for employers.

The second unit focus on *Innovative concepts and development for company-based career work/HRM*. Relevant methods aiming at individualized learning, coaching and counselling methods are explained with special attention to corporate social responsibility as a driver in our society. Best practice in cooperation between human resource management in enterprises and professional career guidance and counselling are also exemplified.

The third unit focus on *Current theoretical and methodological approaches for counsellors and coaches in the company context*. The Career Construction Theory and the System Theory Framework were selected as main theoretical approaches to present related career counseling tools and practical examples in the context of organization.

The fourth unit, *Connecting Guidance, Counselling and coaching for employees and the context of company-based career work*, describes intersections of CGC within HRD. Examples of good and innovative practice within enterprises common in the two fields considering advantages and disadvantages are discussed. Attention is devoted to examples and practice of CGC within HRD with diverse groups of employers who experience vulnerabilities for several reasons such as disability or migration.

The fifth unit, *Changing in practice the organizations* presents the basic theoretical underpinnings of change management and organizational development and introduce examples and practices on how new forms of CGC can be implemented within organizations, as well as how the gained knowledge can be disseminated across the career community.

### 2.2. Teaching and learning methodological choices

From a pedagogical perspective the CONNECT course was developed referring to the principles of the Universal Design for Learning (La, Dyjur & Bair, 2018). This framework is used to design course activities and define learning environment with the aim of meet the wide heterogeneity of learners. For this reason, it is recognised for valuing diversity and participation of all. As reported by Cast (Center for Applied Special Technology), the nonprofit organization for education research and development that created the Universal Design for Learning framework in 1984, the UDL follows three principles.

*The Multiple means of Engagement*, suggests providing different opportunities for participants involvement since participants have different motivations to engage in learning. Accordingly interactive activities, group discussions, online discussion boards were included in the course. *The Multiple Means of Representation*, suggests providing learners various ways to access and engage with course materials and information. The goal is to support participants in using multiple representations. Accordingly, we integrated oral explanations with visual representations and videos and textual descriptions. *The Multiple Means of Action and Expression* encourages participants to demonstrate their learning through various forms (e.g., multimedia, concept maps, papers, projects). It involves finding, creating, using, and strategically organizing information (Executive functioning). Accordingly, students were offered several opportunities to realise interviews, poster summary, reports, ppt presentations.

Each session has a start that includes a recall of the previous session and the introduction of the new learning goal. In the central moment explanation, discussions and exercises are typically proposed.

At the end of each session a reflective activity and/or a multiple-choice questionnaire are suggested as closing moments. Moreover, to facilitate a deep learning of what proposed during the learning session, students are invited to complete some homework before the subsequent session.

### 2.3. Participants

As concern the Italian assessment of the curriculum, the pre-test assessment was completed by 38 university master students, the post-test by 15.

### 2.4. Procedure

The CONNECT curriculum was delivery as part of the 42 CFU course Managing diversity in the workplace between November and December 2021 for students who were attending the master course in Social, Work and Communication Psychology at the university of Padova, Italy. Due to the pandemic restrictions, lessons were provided in dual modality, with students both in presence and synchronous online. As concern this group of attendees, since many of them already had basic knowledge in career counseling and guidance and had the opportunity to discuss actual world of work challenges, more attention was devoted to the enterprise contents and to the issues of diversity to meet the expectation of the specificity of the course where the curriculum was included.

### 2.5. Measures

Four measures were developed to assess the learning and the impact of the curriculum on attendees:

*Knowledge about the CONNECT topics.* Five items were developed to assess level of knowledge students perceived about the five topics addressed by the curriculum. Likert scale range from 1 'no knowledge' to 5 'excellent knowledge'.

*Self-efficacy about the CONNECT topics.* Five items were developed to assess perceived self-efficacy beliefs about own's ability to use the competences developed in the five curriculum topics in the future work. Likert scale range from 1 'no self-efficacy beliefs' to 5 'excellent self-efficacy beliefs'.

*Evaluation of the CONNECT curriculum.* Eight questions assess students' opinions about the quality and structure of the units using a Likert scale ranging from 1 'not agree' to 5 'completely agree'. Two other qualitative questions evaluate what could be improved and what they liked more.

*CONNECT learning.* Ten multiple choice questions were developed to assess the learning of students at the end of the program.

## 3. Results

As concern level of knowledge and the self-efficacy beliefs, means comparison using t test for independent sample shows some significant differences (Table 1). Students clearly perceive an improvement in their knowledge about the topics offered by the curriculum. Self-efficacy beliefs increased as concern corporate social responsibility.

Table 1. Comparison between the means at pre- and post-test.

	Pretest		Posttest		p
	M	SD	M	SD	
Level of knowledge about the megatrends in the world of work and their impact on people life	2.58	.758	3.20	.775	.014
Level of knowledge about corporate social responsibility	2.32	.933	3.47	.060	.001
Level of knowledge about career counseling and guidance	2.71	.694	3.53	.743	.001
Level of knowledge about methodologies to supporting career development of employers into organizations	2.45	.724	3.40	.828	.001
Level of knowledge about innovative modalities to promote organizational development	2.45	.724	3.47	.915	.001
Self-efficacy beliefs in your abilities to use innovative modalities to promote organizational development	3.73	.871	3.80	.676	ns
Self-efficacy beliefs about your abilities in managing corporate social responsibility issues	3.46	.960	4.07	.884	.037
Self-efficacy beliefs about your abilities in career counseling and guidance	3.51	.901	3.80	.561	ns
Self-efficacy beliefs about your abilities in managing issues related to the megatrends in the world of work and their impact on people life	3.70	.939	4.07	.799	ns
Self-efficacy beliefs about your abilities in supporting career development of employers into organizations	3.68	.884	3.93	.594	ns

As concerns the evaluation of the quality and structure of the program, results are reported in Table 2 and show most of the score range between 4 and 5.

Table 2. Evaluation of the structure and quality of the CONNECT program.

	M	SD
“The units built upon each other and formed an integrated whole”	4.00	.612
“The units were well structured”	3.60	.737
“The learning materials used supported my learning progress”	4.29	.849
“I was able to enhance existing and acquire new knowledge in this course”	4.44	.512
“I expect the knowledge and skills acquired in this course to be of practical use in my future professional work”	4.50	.730
“The results of the European project Connect! have been integrated in a relevant way and made the course more interesting.”	4.00	.603
“Lecturers managed to deliver the course within the announced timeframe”	4.06	.680
“Overall, I am happy with the course”	3.94	.827

As concern the open questions, suggestions about the improvements refer mainly to make clearer the link among the diverse sessions (n=2), more space for exercises and for LGBTQ+ issues (n=1). As concern what they liked more, reflections concern mainly the space that was given to practice and interactive exercise after theory (n=5), the unit 2 on social corporate responsibility (n=2), the attention to people with vulnerability for diverse reasons (n=3).

Of the 15 students who answered the final multiple-choice questionnaire about the contents of the 5 units, 2 (13.3%) students answered correctly to 7 questions, 6 (40.0%) to 8 questions, 4 (26.7%) to 9 and 3 (20%) to all 10.

#### 4. Conclusion

The curriculum CONNECT was developed for offering university students the opportunity to learn and reflect on the need of innovating the field of HRM and CGC connecting them. Exploring new ways of working and collaborating as future professionals with a special focus on career development of employers in the context of enterprises was at the center of the proposal. The first implementation of this curriculum with Italian students shows promising. Students clearly perceived their knowledge related to the content provided increased. This perception is supported by the results of the multiple-choice questionnaire: almost 90% of the students who answered scored higher than 80%. The impact on self-efficacy beliefs increased only as concern the corporate social responsibility topic. This could be due to the fact that it involved students felt very involved in it as reported in the open questions.

In general students provided positive comments on the structure and the quality of the course. They are also aware that the pandemic situation negatively impacted the course delivery, with some students in class and other following by home: discussion was more complex as well as work group. The fluidity of the lesson itself was also impacted sometimes by technical issues and others by needs of students that should be addressed at home or in class. A higher participation in the last sessions of the curriculum is one of the aspects that we should pay more attention especially if this pandemic situation should continue. The need to make more evident the link across the topics also emerged as future need.

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