The link between vocational identity, study choice motivation and satisfaction with studies

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Abstract

The study explores the link between student’s vocational identity, motivation for their study choice, satisfaction with different aspects of studies and thoughts of leaving their studies.

The following instruments were administered: 1) Questionnaire on satisfaction with different aspects of study process and student’s future 2) My Vocational Situation (MVS, Holland, Daiger, Power, 1980); 3) Questionnaire of motivation for study choice. The study was conducted with 120 students at the Vidzeme’s University of Applied Sciences in Latvia. The results show the correlation between the high level of student’s vocational identity, intrinsic motivation for study choice and higher satisfaction with university, teachers, chosen study programme and also the perception of fewer barriers in continuing their education.

Keywords: Vocational/professional identity, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, a-motivation.

Introduction

The decision making for youth regarding the future education choice after secondary school can be determined by various factors – external economic conditions (demand for the occupation in labour market and possible salary), prestige of the occupation and its social status, as well as how well the youth understand themselves and are aware of their abilities and talents, and what interests and abilities have developed before.

Representative data from OECD report (2008) demonstrate significant amount of students (~31%) who do not finish their scientific degree studies. One of significant reasons why students may leave a tertiary programme, educational professionals (OECD, 2008) indicate student’s choice of the wrong educational programme. Although data from Latvia were not included in OECD reports, some local reports from higher institutions of Latvia show 20-35% students drop out already after their first year of study.

As most career theories express the view that the occupational identity starts to form in the teenage years, it is natural that youth with stronger occupational self awareness should be able to chose their future education more purposefully and be more satisfied with their chosen studies. However, the ability of the new student to manage their study process is also more connected with other factors e.g. successful adaptation of study process, better academic preparation, academic and social involvement in their study process (Tinto, 1975). Still, it is the more developed vocational identity that may be a basis for student’s deeper interest in their chosen field of study, more investment and involvement as well as fewer subjectively perceived barriers in their study process.

This study investigates the role of vocational identity in the study choice process and also in the process of adjustment and satisfaction with studies.
1. Concept of Vocational/Professional identity.

Career researchers usually have focused their attention regarding the stages of identity formation on adolescence and youth period. Obviously, there are different terms and meanings of identity in career and educational theories-career maturity, professional identity, vocational identity, occupational identity. The concept on vocational or occupational identity has been shaped primarily by E. H. Erikson theory of life span development and has strong implications on career development theories, concepts, and stages. Identity is defined as the structure for understanding that one has a sense of personal control, free will and consistency, coherence, and harmony among values, beliefs, and commitment (Erikson, 1968). According to Erikson, occupational identity is the most central domain of identity formation demonstrating individual’s values, beliefs, and commitment to work and help an adolescent to find commitment to education, work and occupation.

Career researcher J.Holland described secure vocational identity as “clear and stable picture of one’s goals, interests, personality, and talents” (Holland, Daiger, Power, 1980) that contributes to appropriate vocational decision-making and confidence in one’s ability to make career-related decisions. (Holland, 1980). Some of career researchers believe that the development of vocational identity is a learning process that confronts the individual with seven challenges: to be aware of personal feelings; to differentiate self from others; to develop a personal narrative; to represent experience in one’s own terms; to focus a personal and professional goals; to build an inner life; to relate to one’s own purposes (Law B.; Meijers F.; Wijers G, 2002). The concept of career maturity (vocational maturity) is developed and elaborated by the career development theorist D.E.Super (Super, 1974). Career maturity is described as a readiness of the individual to make career decisions. D.E.Super accepted the view that self-concept is the main factor for understanding a person’s behaviour and the occupational self-concept is the central term of self-attributes that are vocationally relevant for the individual (Super, 1974).

Some authors looks at the vocational identity not only in relation to the decision making regarding future occupation but also as the sense of belonging to certain occupation and awareness of one’s own abilities and professionalism. Concept of professional identity is defined as a dynamic concept of oneself as a professional already and has three dimensions: perceived present (who am I as a professional?); anticipated future (who should I be and who would I like to be?); and reconstructed past (how did I become the professional I am?) (Mc.Adams, 1998; Krabi, 2008). Professional identity gives self-confidence, the sense of acting in a responsible manner, and enables one to be aware of one’s limitations, abilities, and potential (Reybold, 2003, Krabi, 2008).

Although it is generally accepted that adolescence and early adulthood are the periods of life in which overall identity is in primary developmental task, it is also clear that in the vocational domain, identity development does not stop in this period. R.Sharf (Sharf, 2006) mentioned that during early youth vocational/occupational identity is only in its forming stages, career skills are acquired and different career paths are tried. Therefore the uncertainly and doubts about chosen career and study program is a natural process for every individual. Changing external conditions (e.g. economic or family situation) or internal thoughts, individuals can develop new vocational identities. Despite the fact that it is clear that the task of vocational identity formation should never be considered finished once and for all, most of psychologists have emphasized that adolescents need to clarify their vocational (or occupational) identity and be future oriented in order to succeed in their work and educational life (Super, 1974; Blustein, 2006).
Choice of education and profession

The choice of career/profession is one of the most significant decisions that youth face upon completion of secondary education. There are several internal and external (cognitive and emotional) factors that influence the process of choosing one's career path. Vocational decision-making is related to successful professional self-determination that includes wholesome psychic and personal development, formation of one's motivational behaviour, developed interests, talents and competencies as well as high sense of self-awareness and maturity (Klimov, 1988). Moreover, awareness of the scope of existing professional fields and ability to make conscientious and responsible decisions are important prerequisites to successful vocational decision-making (Holland, 1980).

Studies conducted in Latvia regarding youths' vocational decision-making and their process of choosing career path (NVA, 2007, 2008) show that these decisions may not always necessarily be based on internal motivation like interests, talents and professional suitability. Different external factors such as the prestige of the occupation, its social status and possible salary more often play predominant role in this decision making process. The curriculum of secondary education rarely has the necessary time allocated to discuss the choice of profession at length. Additionally, many Latvian secondary schools do not have career centres or do not offer consultations that would help with the decisions regarding further education.

Unsuitable choice of the course can affect process of one's further education, for example his/her academic achievement and/or success of adaptation to study process. 2008 OECD report (OECD, 2008) that analysed reasons behind unfinished tertiary programmes and university drop outs, named wrong choice of the course that students did not have any interest in or no skills/competencies as one of the most significant reason for unfinished studies.

According to the study of psychologists of Latvian University (Voitkane, Miezite, Rascevska, Vanags, 2006) that was based on E.L.Deci and R.M.Ryan (Deci, Ryan, 1985) theory of self-determination about intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in the process of education/study, there are 3 main factors affecting study choice motivation:

1) Interest orientation – factor that focuses on the student's interest in particular course/programme/subject, opportunities/possibilities to influence social processes and to help people;

2) Career orientation – factor that focuses on career, reward/salary and employment opportunities as well as social status of the particular profession;

3) External influence – different external factors like recommendations/opinions of family, teachers, and friends.
In the case of intrinsic motivation, behaviour is determined by one's interest in particular activity and his or her internal desire to achieve set goals. On the other hand, behaviour driven by extrinsic motivation aims to satisfy external demands. This kind of behaviour focuses on external stimulation and it can show certain identification with the external goals. Intrinsic motivation is particularly important to successful vocation decision-making, studies and achievement of professional goals. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation theory was significantly augmented by R.J. Vallerand's academic motivation theory (Vallerand, 1997). Additionally to intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, Vallerand recognized importance of a-motivation—this was used to describe when a student could not name reasons/his or her motives for studying or these reasons and motives were unclear and diffused.

However the study of Latvian psychologist’s not look at the cases when student could not name his or her motives for studying or motives were not clear (student could be characterised by having a-motivation) and also did not elaborate further on how the study choice motivation influenced further study process.

The purpose of this study is to explore the link between professional identity, study choice motivation and satisfaction with studies.

**Method**

The study was conducted with 120 students (81 females, 37 males) aged 18 to 24 from 4 study programmes at the Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences in Latvia.

**Instruments**

The following instruments were administered in the study:

1) *My Vocational Situation* (MVS, Holland, Daiger, Power, 1980) measures vocational identity and perceived career development barriers. Three subscales are used in the instrument: The Vocational Identity scale is composed of eighteen true-false items and measures extend to which one has “a clear and defined picture of one’s goals, interests, and talents” (Holland, Daiger and Power, 1980, p1). The Occupational Information (OI) scale of the MVS measures the respondent’s need for occupational information. 6 additional informational questions were included in this scale to assess the situation specifically for Latvia. The Barriers scale (B) consists of four perceived external obstacles to a chosen occupational goal. One additional question was included in this scale. The questionnaire was translated into Latvian according to requirements provided by the International Test Committee (van de Vivjer & Hambelton, 1996), Cronbach alpha coefficient is calculated for each scale- VI scale (α=0.72), OI scale (α=0.72), B scale (α=0.69) (Smitina, 2009)

2) Questionnaire on satisfaction with studies and student’s future plans evaluates student’s satisfaction with different aspects in their study process.

3) Questionnaire of Motivation for Study Program Choice was based on previously made questionnaires of study motivation choice and consists of 14 items, marked on a 5-point Likert scale and containing five subscales: 1) Interest orientation (interest in chosen area, study programme (α=0.75), 2) Career orientation (future possibilities, salary, prestige of profession (α=0.67); 3) A-motivation (α=0.74); 4) Recommendation from others (α=0.42); 5) Economical reasons (α=0.3).
Results and Discussion

In Table 1 significant positive correlation coefficients were observed between the level of Vocational Identity scale and Interest Orientation factor, and significant negative correlations were found between the level of Vocational Identity scale and the A-motivation factor. Significant relationship was found between the Vocational Identity and the lower scale of Occupational Information. Also significant correlation appeared between the lower Career Barriers Scale and the Career Orientation factor. However, no significant relationships emerged between the level of Vocational Identity and other motives of study choice.

![Table 1. Correlations between Vocational Identity and Study Choice Motivation](image)

Table 2 demonstrates statistically significant correlations obtained between the Vocational Identity scale and the satisfaction with the study process in University, chosen study program, teachers and previous perception regarding chosen field. The intercorellation between the satisfaction with university, study program, teachers and lower Career Barrier scale derived

![Table 2. The Correlations between Vocational Identity and Satisfaction with Studies](image)

This study adds on previously done researches regarding importance of professional identity in the planning of the professional life of a youth. The theoretical academic a-motivation model of Vallerand (1973) emphasizes the role of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in the study process. Current research verifies that these types of motivation as well as a-motivation can be used in study choice motivation. The study confirms that youth with stronger occupational self confidence more often base their choice of study/programme on the interest about the particular study/programme/subject (extrinsic motivation) – self awareness and desire to develop their carrier in line with their
interests, skills, and competencies. Correlation between interest orientation/factor and career orientation/factor (career, reward/salary and employment opportunities) can suggest that youth with deeper interest in their chosen programme/course have preference to develop their career, earn salary and see career future prospective in the chosen field. Correlation can also be reversed – youth who have chosen their studies because of their interest in particular area tend to expand their knowledge in this area and this consequently improves their level of professional identity. Students with higher level of professional identity are more satisfied with their university, study programme/curriculum, lecturers, they tend to have more accurate previous perceptions regarding chosen field, and they are inclined to fewer perceived barriers in their further study process. The weaker professional identity, the more often student is not able to name definite motives for his or her choice of study programme or choice of study programme is at random (a-motivation). Moreover, those whose study programme choice is at random (a-motivation) tend to perceive higher barriers and difficulties in their further study process. Also studies in Latvia prove that almost half of the first year respondents show uncertainty when it comes to their career (48%) and also different social problems (Voitkane, Miezite, 2003, 2005).

This study actualises the role of career education in decision of further education and occupation already in school curriculum as well as helps to explain high rate of university drop outs in Latvia. These results add on the author's previous studies (Smitina, 2009) that prove that students with more distinct a-motivation and lower Vocational Identity tend to think about dropping out of their studies or have already made the decision to abandon studies. It is possible that if a person has made the study choice based on different external reasons/motives, he or she does not feel professional belonging to the profession he or she has chosen, consequently subjective study barriers are perceived to be higher and process of study seems to be more complicated and difficult.

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