

STUDENTS' CAREER MOTIVATION – A PILOT STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The present paper aims at investigating career motivation among students from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. This analysis is consistent with the effort of national and supranational institutions and Romanian universities to bridge academic curriculum and requirements of the labor market and to properly prepare students for the transition from university to active professional life. The outcomes presented resulted from the analysis conducted within the pilot study, which implies a smaller sample. In the first part of the paper some of the most important motivational theories are critically presented. Students' motivation is assessed by means of a questionnaire which evaluates three dimensions: factors which influence career choice, further professional development and motivational factors. The empirical results are relevant in order to ensure the sustainability of the larger study which will be conducted in the future, but also to adjust the offer of internship places according to students' needs and career expectations.

KEYWORDS: *motivation, students' career development, pilot study, Bucharest University of Economic Studies*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: *J24, J28, I29*

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions in Romania played in the last years a more and more important role in integrating students and graduates on the labour market. The universities' relevance is considered twofold (Haase, 2011): on the one hand because they regenerate the stock of students and researchers and, on the other hand because the universities contribute to economic development through the competent people they nurture. One of their objectives, fostered also by the access to European funding, consists in developing programs which facilitate the transition from academia to professional life. Within these projects institutional framework for internship is developed and the study of students' motivational factors, career preferences as well as professional options represents a main topic.

After analyzing some of the most known motivational theories the present paper presents the methodology and the outcome of a pilot study on career motivation of students from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. This preliminary research represents the starting point for the further study which will be conducted in form of a questionnaire based survey in the next months on a much larger students' sample. The objective of this study is to identify which are the motivational levers for economics students and to seek career counselling best practices.

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2. MOTIVATIONAL THEORIES

The professional career is determined by so many different factors. The motives a student choose a certain career choice can be classified into cognitive personal factors like self realisation, need of autonomy, social status, personal development or financial success, and contextual or environmental factors such as the social pressure, the families members' professional activities, the labour market or the economic environment (Haase, 2011). In order to understand the motives a person choose a certain career, it is also important to emphasize the general motivational factors. What makes us choose a domain, a certain company or even a workplace? What makes a student choose a certain professional career?

We will describe some of the most important motivational theories. One of the first theories about human motivation was developed by Taylor. Taylor (1911) considered that people worked especially for money. In his book, *The Principles of Scientific Management*, Taylor describes a management system in which management gives incentives for better work and the employees give their best effort.

The most famous and criticized theory of motivation is Maslow's hierarchy of needs. He believed that people are motivated to achieve certain types of needs. When one need is fulfilled, people seek to fulfil the next superior need, and so on. In his book, *A Theory of Motivation*, Maslow classifies individual needs in five categories: physiological needs, safety needs, belonging needs, esteem needs and self – actualization needs. Hersey, Blanchard and Johnson (2001) stated a very important thing about Maslow's needs: their succession shouldn't be rigidly respected. A person doesn't have to entirely satisfy a low need before passing to another higher need.

In 1969, Alderfer revise Maslow's theory and, as suggested by Robbins (1993), he more realistically describes the hierarchy of needs. In his ERG theory he suggested three categories of needs: needs of existence, needs of relatedness and needs of growth. He stated that when needs in a higher category were not met, individuals redouble their efforts invested in a lower category.

McClelland is also well known for his studies about high hierarchy needs. His intention wasn't to identify the needs succession but to explain the way they influence work behaviour. He identified three types of needs: the need for achievement, the need for affiliation and the need for power. His studies led to establishing profiles depending on the predominant need. People have different characteristics depending on their dominant motivator. Most of the critics regarding this theory are about the tool used to measure the individual needs of people: the Thematic Apperception Test, a test of imagination in which the person is presented a series of pictures. The score can be used in suggesting the type of job a person might be well suited.

Another well known motivational theory is the Herzberg's Theory. He investigated the sources of professional satisfaction and dissatisfaction on accountants and engineers. He identified two types of factors. One category, motivational factors, induce satisfaction and motivation and can involve job content, job recognition, a succession planning, responsibilities etc. The other set of factors, the hygiene factors will not motivate but in their absence, they can lower motivation. They can refer to working conditions, remuneration, security, relationships with subordinates, policy.

A different motivational theory was formulated by John Adair (2006) and is named the theory of group personality and group needs. Adair considered that working groups resemble individuals because they share common needs. He emphasised three types of needs: two of them are properties of the group and are called *the need to accomplish common tasks* and *the need to be maintained as a cohesive social unity*, the third one refers to the sum of the *individual needs* of group members. In his model, Adair stated the strong link between these three types of needs and the fact that they influence one another for better or worse.

3. STUDY METHODOLOGY

The empirical part of this paper consists in a pilot study conducted among students from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies in the time period September-October 2014. The main goal of the study is to evaluate the career motivation and preferences among these students.

The pilot study represents the "mini-version" of a larger scale study, which involves the testing of a research tool (Polit et al., 2001; Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001) such as in our case a questionnaire. The *importance of pilot studies* is big, because they offer evidence related to the feasibility of a larger study and related to the instruments and methods use: are they appropriate, should be adjusted or changed, are the questions well understood or should be reformulated? Therefore, a pilot study is highly recommended for large quantitative researches which involve many resources in order to timely identify and correct possible errors which might bias the results.

The main research tool for our quantitative study is represented by a *questionnaire*. The questionnaire aims at evaluating different aspects of career motivation and development among students from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies and is divided into five main parts. In the first part of the questionnaire there are addressed various identification questions related to the age, gender, residence of respondents etc. Afterwards a couple of questions assess the work experience. The third part of the questionnaire is dedicated to questions related to factors which might influence the career choice. Next questions evaluate the directions for professional development of respondents, respectively the motivational factors which might exert an influence on their future career development. The questions are short and clearly formulated and aimed at arousing students' interest. Most of the questions are closed ended ones. The decision of the authors to base the study on this type of questions relies on evidence that the response rate and dropout rate are much smaller respectively much higher for open ended questions. Open ended questions are recommended mainly for brief, informal questionnaires for small groups which have to capture unsuspected information (Frery, 2014). In the present questionnaire at the end of some items is listed the answer "Other, namely...", which offers the respondents the possibility to express their opinion, if this is not identified among the offered options for answers. Among the closed ended questions can be mentioned ranking questions- where respondents have to rank several possible answers-, items which have to be graded by respondents on various scales, or items which have to be selected by respondents from several possible answers.

30 valid questionnaires were used in the present pilot study and the answering time was about 10 minutes. Within this phase of the study the questionnaires were distributed and collected just in physical form, on paper. An interview operator was present while the questionnaires were filled in and he could note various questions and observations addressed by respondents. This was considered important in this phase of the study in order to better observe the problems and misunderstandings of the items and to adjust them accordingly for the future, larger study on students' career motivation.

The data collected was evaluated using SPSS 19 and Microsoft Office Excel 2007. Several descriptive statistics and graphics resulted, the most important of them being presented in the next section of the paper.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

Within this section of the paper the most important results of the pilot study will be depicted, starting with the sample description, continuing with factors which influence career choice, development areas and motivational elements.

Most of the respondents are female (90%) aged 21-25 and their residence before studies was either Bucharest or other urban areas. Just 10% of the population comes from rural areas. Around 80% of the sample have a work experience below 5 years, 6.7% between 6-10 years and 13.3% have never worked (see Table 1).

Table 1. Sample characteristics

Indicators		Relative frequencies (%)
Gender	Male	10%
	Female	90%
Residence before studying	Bucharest	33.3%
	Urban area-big city	33.3%
	Urban area- medium/small city	23,3%
	Rural area	10%
Work experience	Under 1 year	40%
	1-5 years	40%
	6-10 years	6.7%
	11-20 years	0%
	Over 20 years	0%
	I have never had a job.	13.3%

Source: self illustration based on data from SPSS

In the next figure there are illustrated the main factors considered by students when choosing a career. They were asked to rank according to their importance five factors considered to play an important role when making some career decisions: family, faculty, friends, colleagues and teachers and socio-economic environment. According to their answers, faculty ranks first, followed by the socio-economic environment. On the third place we can find the family followed by colleagues and teachers. The opinion of friends is considered less important (3.06 out of 6). Considering the aforementioned results one could state that students rely rather on objective, pragmatic factors such as faculty and socio-economic conditions than on emotional factors such as advices from friends and family. We could therefore reason that their decisions when making career choices are rational and pragmatic rather than emotion based.

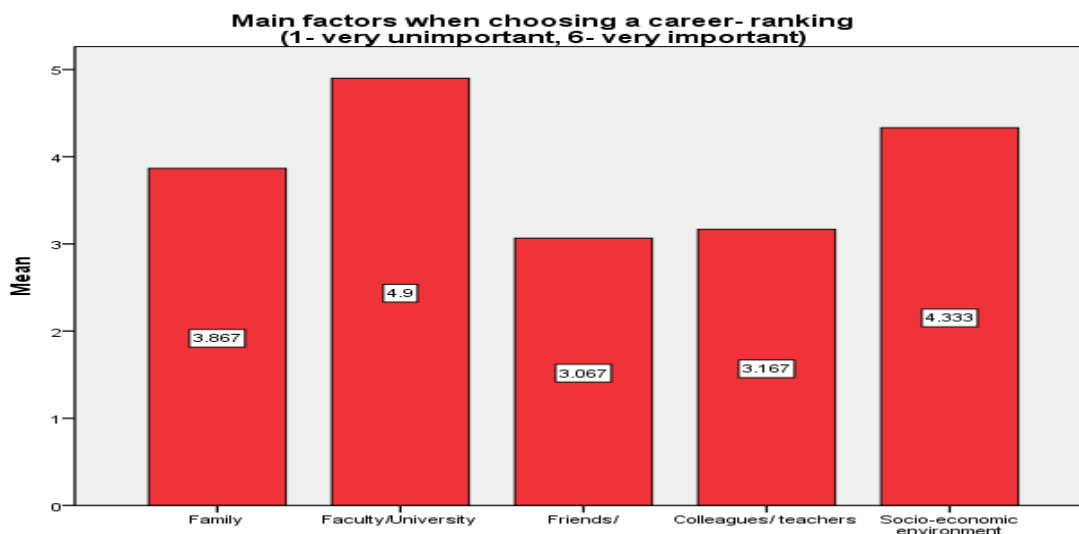


Figure 1. Main factors when choosing a career
Source: self illustration based on data from SPSS

It is not surprising that IT and communications, Finance, banking and insurance and Commerce can be encountered on top positions when asking about preferred sector of activity (see Figure 2). They offer in Romania some of the most attractive working and development conditions, salaries and an international environment. On the last places can be found Agriculture, Sports and Public Administration. This could be explained by the poor payments and less appealing development possibilities in Agriculture and Public sector, while Sport represents a quite niche sector, where very specialized knowledge and interests are prerequisites.

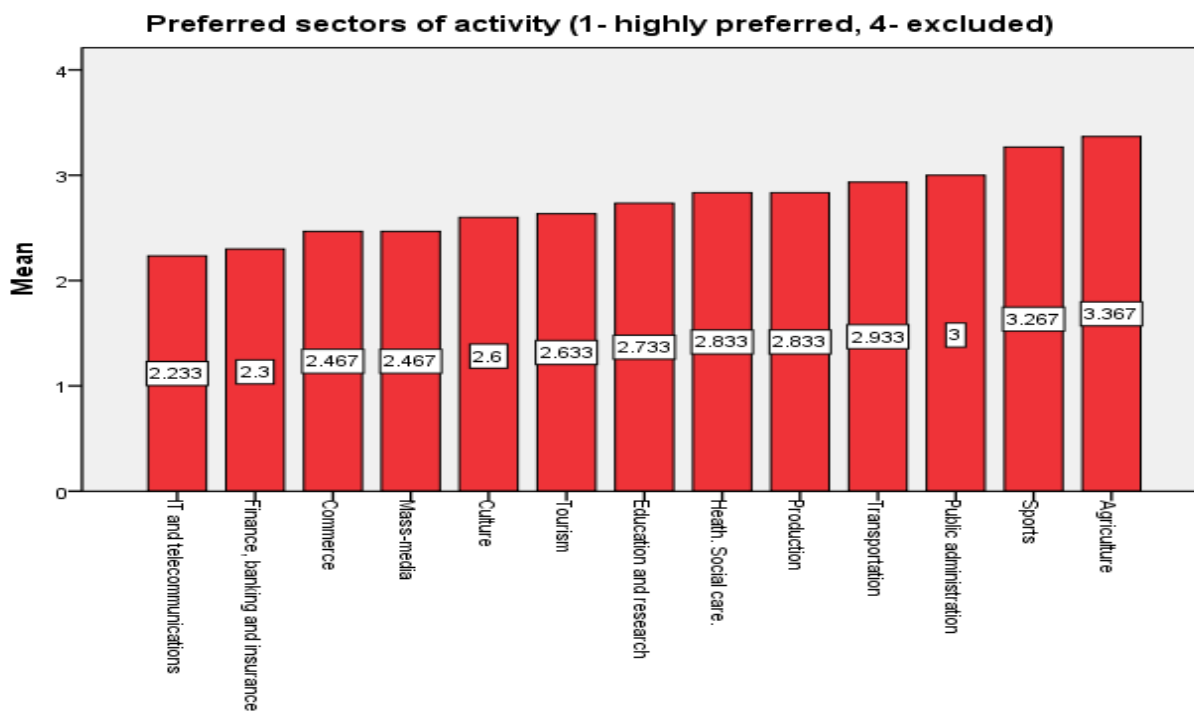


Figure 2. Preferred sectors of activity
 Source: self illustration based on data from SPSS

Regarding the type of organizations students would like to work mainly in multinational organizations, followed by small and middle sized companies. Many of them show also entrepreneurial intensions and want to set up their own business. Just a small share of the inquired students would like to work in universities, NGOs and public institutions at national level (see next Figure). It can be established a direct relation between their preferences regarding the type of organizations and the sector of activity: everything what is connected with the public sector is not in the top preferences. This calls for the attention of decision makers in Romania and asks for the increase of the attractiveness level of this sector: if the public sector is unable to attract competitive employees this will be reflected accordingly in the quality of the services provided and consequently in the business environment also.

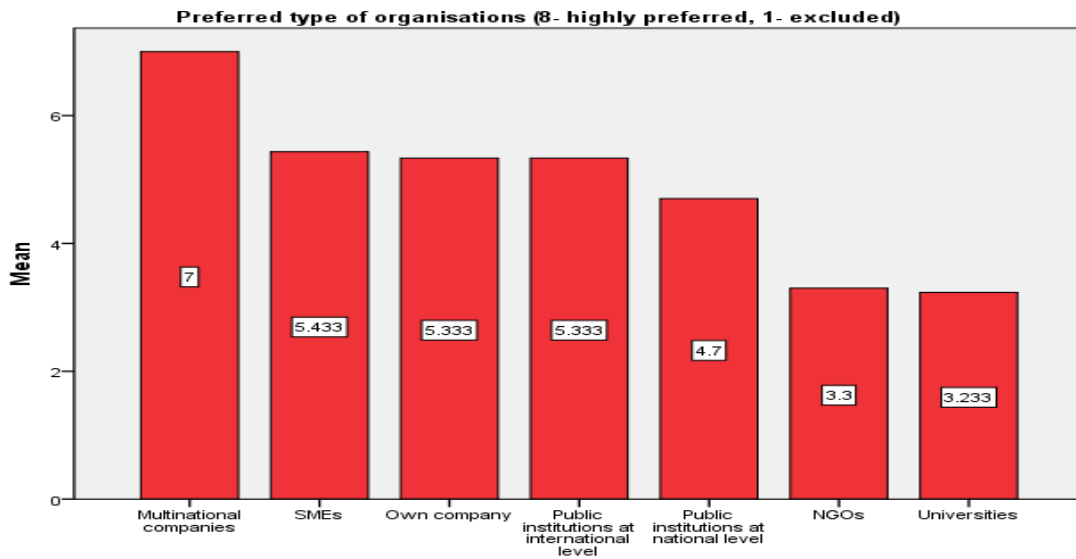


Figure 3. Preferred types of organizations

Source: self illustration based on data from SPSS

The following figure reveals the factors which motivate students from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies to engage in a certain domain and to achieve good working results. Job satisfaction is the most important factor, followed by promotion and learning opportunities. These results show that at the beginning of their career students are idealistic and focus to develop a career by obtaining satisfaction in the same time. Still some hygiene factors such as salary level and job security should not be underestimated. Factors such as job autonomy, job flexibility and relations at the working place do not play a major role at the beginning of career. This can be also due to the relatively small work experience, which does not offer them the possibility to understand and appreciate these factors in a correct way. The table with the motivational factors would probably look differently if the target group consisted of more mature people, who accumulated more experience.

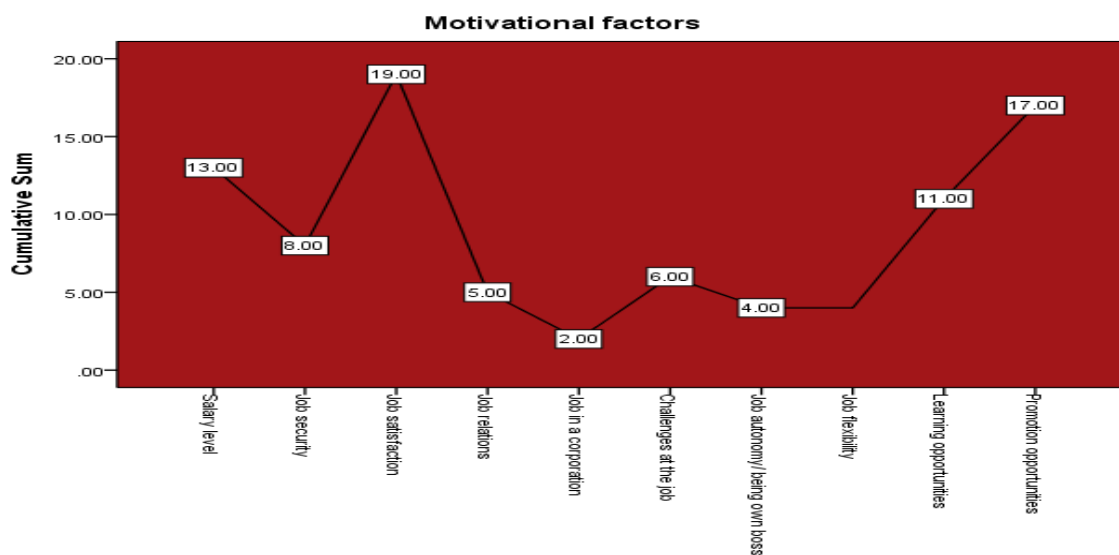


Figure 4. Motivational factors

Source: self illustration based on data from SPSS

The next graphic presents some interesting results regarding the future decision that students would make if they received a large amount of money (see next Figure). The answer given by most of the respondents (60%) is that they would invest in a business. This answer is consistent with some previous results, when many students stated that a feasible option for their career is to set up their own business. Some questions were addressed as control questions, to check if respondents are constant and reliable regarding their answers. The second largest share of respondents would recognize their need for security – would buy a house (16.67%)-, while just 6.67%, respectively 3.33% would invest in their education or deposit the money at a bank.

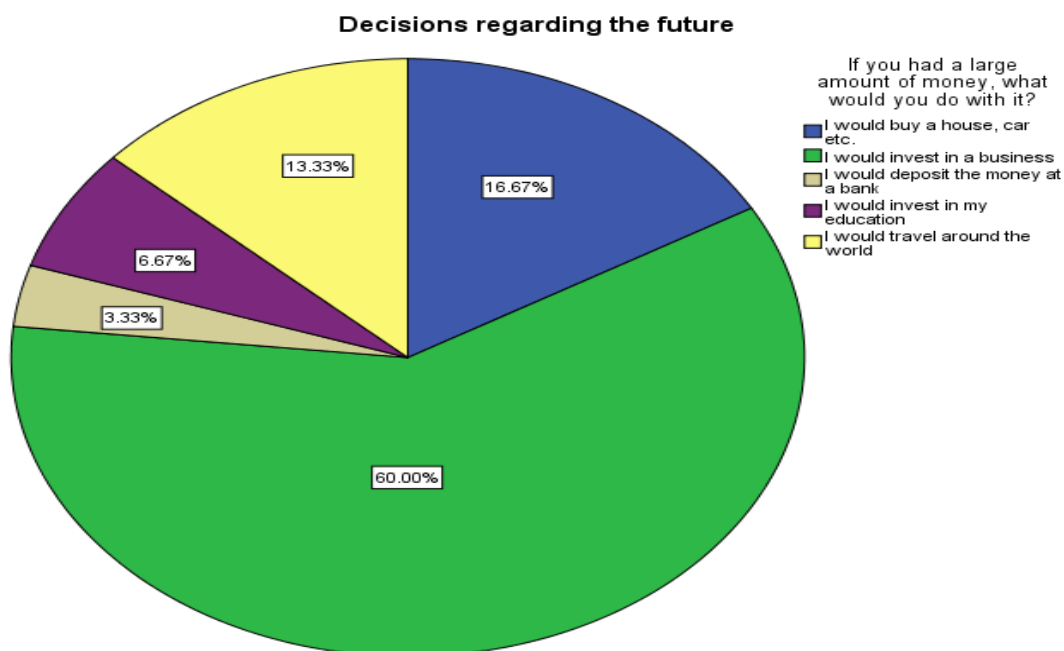


Figure 5. Decisions regarding the future

Source: self illustration based on data from SPSS

5. CONCLUSIONS

The students' motivational factors in choosing a professional career can influence the way universities prepare and plan their curricula. Knowing these career levers the faculties can increase the number of development programs and develop career counseling strategies to enhance students' self-efficacy in several aspects of career decision making.

Despite their importance many pilot studies are not reported because journals tend to accept papers which present statistically significant results. We consider statistical significance important but in the same time methodological issues and lessons learned during the pilot phase could help other researchers to save time and other important resources within their studies and should be shared within the scientific community. The importance of pilot studies should not be underestimated and their outcome underreported. Often publications which highlight results of pilot studies focus just on one single element or they often just justify the research methodology (Muoio et al., 1995; Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). We consider that full reports of pilot studies are also relevant and the lessons learned should be specifically emphasized. Quantitative studies might be time and money consuming and lessons learned from other pilot studies could be very helpful.

By conducting the pilot study the questionnaire was tested and the research methodology was confirmed. One important learned lesson refers to the form of the closed ended questions: we used

different scales and answering option on purpose in order to break the routine and keep the respondent alert and vigilant. This proved to be a good approach, as all the distributed questionnaires were completely answered.

The results obtained offered also some interesting hints related to future researches: a longitudinal analysis would be interesting in order to analyze how the perspective of the students, who are at the beginning of their career change over the years. Also some correlations with certain macroeconomic indicators could reveal interesting results.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This paper was co-financed from the European Social Fund, through the Sectorial Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013, project number POSDRU/161/2.1/G/137915 "Internship in the field of Human Resources for students- PREUS", coordinator The Bucharest University of Economic Studies.

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