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Factors Influencing School-Leavers Decision to Enrol in Higher Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to reveal the stages of school-leavers decision to enrol in higher education by emphasizing the influencing factors. The study focuses on the factors determining school-leavers’ decision in choosing higher education studies. It is important to remark that decision maker realise the real career needs in life, in accordance with the developed values and attitudes. The analysis of literature reveals four factors which are further categorized into twelve sub factors: educational factors (in the family: style of education; at school: recommendations of teachers and career counselors), information factors (open days, exhibitions, the mass media), economic factors (study fees, career prospects), other factors (geographical location, ratings, personal skills and demography).

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1. Introduction

To many school-leavers the collection of information on studies becomes a real challenge. Family members of the immediate environment, classmates, and teachers add to this process. Some of them help in making a decision, while others criticize it. Parents establish favorable conditions, teachers consult. However, every school-leaver makes his own individual choice on selection, comparison, and evaluation of the benefit of the life career concerning a specific study program. So these topicalities have been emphasized by researchers in different countries: in the United States of America Chapman (1981), Hossler & Gallagher (1987), Paulsen, (1990), Australia James (2000), Belgium Germeijs & Verschueren (2007) and others (Cosser & Du Toit, 2002a; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Hoyt, Brown, & BJL, 2003; Letawsky, Schneider, Pedersen, & Palmer, 2003; Beggs, Bantham, & Taylor, 2008; Simões & Soares, 2010). The choice of studies is defined as a multi-phase process during which a school-leaver pursue for further education after high school. Counselors participating in the school-leavers choice assist in

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structuring of the information on the higher education institution, provide help to parents in understanding their role in inspiration and motivation of the children by forming their expectations (McDonough, 2005). However, it is unclear, whether the decision of the school-leaver depends on separate factors? What groups of factors can be distinguished? Do these groups of factors depend on existing cultural, social values or on the admission system?

The aim of this article is to disclose the peculiarities of school-leaver’s decision-making by highlighting influencing factors. Research method used in this paper is analysis of scientific literature. Firstly, the school-leaver’s decision making process has provided a theoretical basis together with the social learning theory; further on the paper presents the factors influencing this process.


Deciding on further studies is defined by Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper (1998), Brennan (2001), Băcilă, Dorel, & Alexandra-Maria (2006), Shankle (2009), Kusumawati (2010) as a complex and multi-phase process. Some authors (Brown, Varley, Pal 2009, Kusumawati, 2010) presenting the school-leavers’ choice of studies base on Schiffman and Kanuk (2007), Kotler and Keller (2009) classic models of a consumer’s decision-making. This paper is based on Hossler and Galagher (1998) choice of studies model that includes four stages: need identification, information search, evaluation of alternatives, and choice. Therefore, the factors affecting the school-leavers’ decisions will be researched in the context of the four stages.

Every person is constantly affected by a complex totality of social relations. A number of authors in various fields of science (psychology, sociology, economics) emphasize why the school-leaver views the studies as an investment into the future, what expectations drive the school-leaver to choose studies granting status in the society, what is the impact of the environment.

Krumboltz (1990) stresses, that social learning theory of career decision making shows how people make career decisions choosing from many available alternatives. It shows why career decisions are different, why people tend to modify the direction of their career in different stages of their development. The author (ibid) distinguishes four factors influencing the career decision making. Those are: genetic heritage and special skills, environment conditions and events, learning experiences, attitude towards work and task performing abilities (Mitchell, 1990).

It is not easy to understand the pupil’s decision-making process because it process encompasses plenty of factors which affect the school-leaver at one time. This paper will present groups of factors affecting the school-leaver’s choice of studies.

3. Factors Influencing the Process of Decision-Making

The need identification. Hossler et al. (1998), Moogan and Baron (2003) emphasize that need recognition takes place in the initial stage of any decision making. The need recognition for pupils may emerge upon realization that secondary education is not sufficient and university education is required for career purposes in life (Pope & Fermin, 2003).

Cosser and Du Toit (2002b) state that choosing a higher education institution may start in the ninth grade and end upon the student signing a contract for enrolling in a certain higher education institution. Garma and Moy (2003), Al-Fattal (2010), summarized that the choosing person may be encouraged by various internal or external factors. When an individual evaluates and understands the conformity of positive or negative factors to his wishes and interests need for study choice are formed.

Hossler et al. (1998), Moogan and Baron (2003), Ceja (2006), Al-Yousef (2009), Wong and Liu (2010) show that influencing factors in this stage are mostly related to development of the teenager and his intention to continue education. This need is usually determined by personal, cultural circumstances, as well as family and environment conditions.

The attitudes and opinions of a person formed by the family environment condition the school-leaver’s decision to enter an institution of higher education. Ceja (2006) claim that the biggest influence on the decision is made by
the family status, elder siblings and school experience. Bers and Galowich (2002) remark that parental discussions in the families encourage the pupil to pursue higher level of education, it gets even stronger in senior classes. The research (Horn, Chen & Adelman, 1998) have proved that educational role of parents have a very strong positive affect on post-secondary education, stronger than socio-economic status of the family or personal skills. Children with higher level of educational encouragement from their parents have bigger trust in the information provided by parents, and children with lower educational encouragement from the family primarily trust their teachers at school and counselors (Galotti et al., 2006).

The school-leaver's need for further studies is formed by school culture and climate, as well as internal sources (Hossler et al. 1998), Moogan et al. (2003). Authors distinguish groups of peers, teachers, career consultants and parents influencing decisions of young people to choose studies in higher education.

We might say that educational factors influence the school-leaver in the stage of the demand for studying. These factors have a specific aim to educate and are most evident in the family or school environment.

**Information search.** Cosser and Du Toit (2002) state that many pupils start searching for information about the planned studies several years before entering the studies. In this stage the pupils start considering various possibilities of studies in a higher education (HE) institution. The searching stage includes accumulation of necessary information and assimilation by making a list of possible HE institutions. However, Hossler et al. (1998) note, that school-leavers solely imagine the direction when collecting the information about planned studies and a certain institution, and the direction changes depending on the new information obtained.

Yamamoto (2006), Barber, Dodd, and Kolyesnikova (2009) distinguish two types of information search process: internal and external search. Internal search takes place when the user is trying to retrieve the information from his long term memory. It is the information from searches performed by the person in the past and from personal experience. Majority of users mostly use internal information as the initial and primary source.

Experience in searching for information in the past could make correct choices easier. However, if the school-leaver does not have any previous experience and is choosing his studies for the first time, he usually engages into the field of external search where the field is too big (in external sources of information) and is not able to distinguish the useful information (Whiteside & Mentz, 2003). There are the following types of external sources of information Strauss (1998), Perna (2006), Al-Yousef (2009): personal sources – such as friends, family, other relatives, career planning counsellors, reference groups and public opinion leaders; independent sources – such as user groups, governmental institutions and mass media.

Information search takes the longest time in the entire decision making process. Final choice is evaluated depending on available sources of information. At this stage, the most informational factors occur with a goal by various means (media, handouts, workshops and presentations) and methods (expert consultations, other communications) to convey information. When collecting useful information for decision making in the stage of information search, the school-leavers are also forming and evaluating alternatives.

**Formation and evaluation of alternatives.** According to Hossler et al. (1998), depending on the abilities of the pupil, it is determined in the alternative evaluation stage whether each alternative conforms to purposes and consequences of the decision.

The number of alternatives may vary from two to infinity. The number of alternatives determines the complexity of the decision. Another characteristic of the alternatives of the decision is how clearly formulated they are in the beginning of decision making process. Alternatives of some decisions are obvious, while the origin of others is immediately clear.

Alternative choices of studies are based on an obvious benefit to the school-leaver (Germeijjs & Verschueren 2006): the comparisons are made not only concerning the prospects in the future (Moogan, 2003), but also physical distance from a living place to the university (Whiteside and Mentz, 2003; Drewes, Michael 2006), the popularity of the institutions (Osoro et al., 2000; Hoyt et al., 2003), fees of studying (Saichaie, 2011).

In this stage a school-leaver with specific career goals evaluates the offers of the universities and financial support.

**Choice.** Choice is defined in research literature as deciding to select one or more institutions and enrolling in the certain study program, as well as a university. According to the system of admission to university applications are
usually accepted in the period from October to April. Hossler et al. (1998) states that, half of the applicants submit their applications on the 7th week within the period from November to January. One of 10 school-leavers makes a decision on further studies before starting the last grade at school. The final decision concerning particular studies depends on the time spent on collection of information about the future studies and possible alternatives.

Many professional counsellors, such as career consultants, teachers, representatives of colleges, members of admissions committees, consult and advise the prospective students in the process of searching and choosing. Johnson, Stewart and Eberly (1991) remark that the majority of pupils need these counsellors in the 11th and 12th grades the most.

In summary of the school-leaver’s choice of studies process four categories of influencing factors have been distinguished: educational factors (in the family: style of education; at school: recommendations of teachers and career counselors), information factors (open days, exhibitions, the mass media), economic factors (study fees, career prospects), other factors (geographical location of a higher education institution and ratings, personal skills and demography).

**Figure 1. The Process of Study Choice**

4. Conclusions

The analysis of scientific literature revealed that the school-leaver’s choice of studies can be defined by four successive stages: need identification, information search, evaluation of alternatives, and choice. Each of these stages encompasses significant and future-oriented processes of career planning.

It should be noted that in every stage the school-leaver faces different factors affecting the choice of studies. The factors can be categorized into four groups:

a) influence of educational factors manifests in the course of education that takes place in the family or school (formation of values, education, discussion and conversations, after-school activities, particular subjects);

b) information factors reach the school-leaver from internal and external sources. Search and processing of specific information requires acquired skills;

c) economic factors encompass actual subsistence of a future student, directly affect low income families;

d) other factors that influence the school-leaver’s decision depend on his/her peers, professions of parents, social class etc.
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