FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO THE UNIVERSITY. TAKING THE FIRST STEP ON A CAREER PATH

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Abstract
The question received at least once by any child is: "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Translated into academic language, the question refers to the career you dream at and involves a path to get there. For today's young people, choosing the right career is a real milestone. With the ultimate goal in mind, you start making certain choices to gain, develop and improve certain skills. The first step towards the dream career is the choice of the university and, implicitly, of the study program that will allow you to develop the necessary skills, a choice that is influenced by many factors. This paper aims to identify the main factors that can influence the choice of a career path and to analyze how young people perceive the importance of education in choosing a career.

Key words*:* Education, skills, career, the factors that can influence the choice of a carrer

JEL Classification Codes : I23.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Career choice is a very important process for the evolution of the individual with a strong impact on his personality and behavior.

The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), in 1991, based on literature reviews, expert consultations and interviews with employees and their supervisors in 50 professional fields, has developed several categories of skills needed for young people to access to university studies and professional careers. Thus, they highlighted: basic skills (reading, writing, math, listening, speaking), personal qualities (responsibility, self-esteem, integrity, honesty), thinking skills (creativity, decision making, problem solving, reasoning and ability learning) and skills in the workplace (ability to allocate resources, interpersonal skills, ability to obtain and use information using technology).

Specialists (Fletcher et al., 2018; Lerman, 2013; Stone et al., 2012; Stringfield et al., 2017) believe that the preparation of young people for careers must provide them with the prerequisites to compete with current human resources in high-demand areas, with high qualifications and high salaries. Thus, Stone and Lewis (2012) define college and career preparation as the need to acquire basic academic knowledge, as well as the ability to use the technical skills needed to succeed in the job market. Other experts such as Conley (2010) Venezia et al. (2013) consider that the training of young people should focus on their ability to cope with the tests for participation in university courses.

Fletcher Jr. & Dumford (2021) studied aspects that characterize young people's preparation for college and careers in the context of the early 21st century (critical thinking and communication, applied learning, interpersonal skills). They pointed out that structuring the curriculum using problems, projects and team learning has led to improved students' problem-solving skills. In addition, on-the-job learning activities, especially during internships, help young people to learn to solve problems in the context of their chosen work environment. An important role should be given to the exercise of further integrating project writing into the curriculum in relation to the verbal presentation.

Given the complexity of the career choice process, it is necessary for universities to study how career-related decisions are made in order to think of tools to improve the provision of educational services. The understanding of how career decisions are made is highlighted in the literature through Gelatt's progressive decision-making model (1962). The model shows the decision-making process as a continuous activity that changes dynamically with the identification of additional information. Niles, Amundson, and Neault (2010) continued their research based on Gelatt's model and concluded that adolescents dynamically integrate the knowledge and experiences of others to develop an information base in their career decision-making process.

The specialized literature presents evidence related to the factors that influence career decision making (Niles, Amundson and Neault 2010, Bieri Buschor, Berweger, Keck Frei and Kappler, 2014, Nugent, G., Barker, B., Welch, G., Grandgenett, N., Wu, C., & Nelson, C. 2015; Kazi&Akhlaq, 2017, Mtemeri 2017; Rainey, Dancy, Mickelson, Stearns and Moller, 2019, Sharif, Ahmed, Sarwar, 2019) (figure 1).

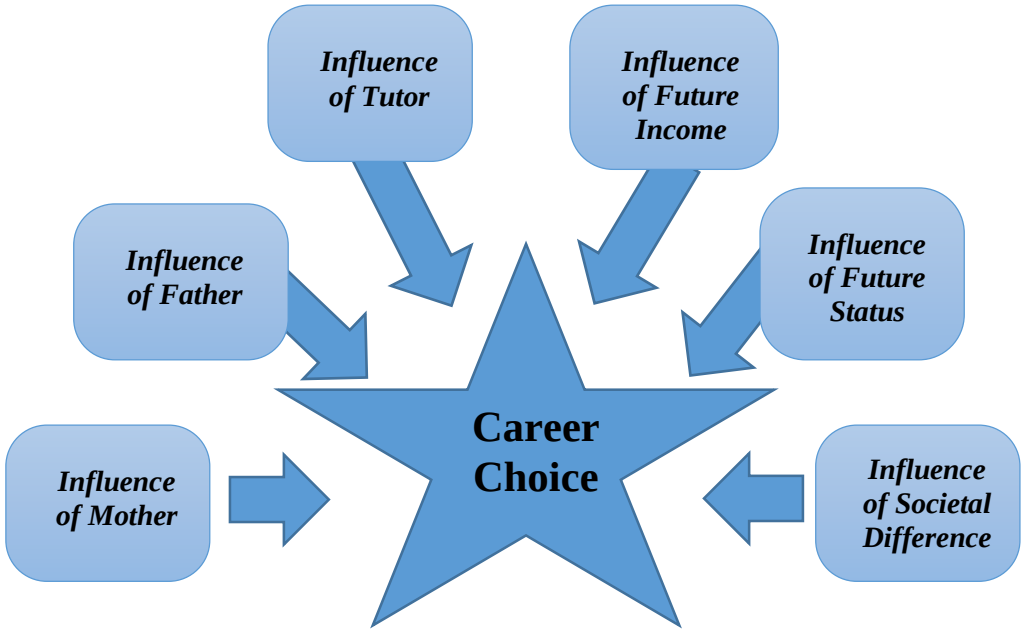

Figure 1 Factors influencing career decision making

Source: Nimra Sharif, Nawaz Ahmed, SamiUllah Sarwar, *Factors Influencing Career Choices*, IBT Journal of Business Studies Volume 15(1), 33-46, 2019, p. 36.

A 2017 study conducted by Kazi & Akhlaq that investigated the influence of demographic variables (gender, field of study, peer group, parental influence, parent education, parents 'income, media, and learning outcomes) on students' career choices highlighted several important aspects, respectively: the role of school counselors is minimal in the choice of career by young people; young people are influenced by their colleagues and the media in their career choices because they are impressive; teachers have an important role to play in motivating and influencing students'

careers; the work environment is also a factor that attracts students to a career; students were not influenced by their parents' profession or by the pressure they put on their children; girls are more inclined to the opinions of their colleagues in making career decisions.

The study conducted by Mtemeri (2017) on a sample of 1010 high school students and 20 experts in career guidance revealed that family members had an influence on the choice of career by students. The influence of fathers was assessed as stronger compared to other family members. The study also revealed that schools have had an impact on the choice of high school students' careers through career guidance actions through events such as school career daysThe geographical location of the schools was cited as quite influential in the career choices by the students. The study also showed that colleagues had an influence on the choice of students' careers through peer counseling and encouragement. The study by Abe, E.N & Chikoko, V (2020) on the factors influencing the career decisions of students in engineering and science programs showed that their families, personality and expectations played an influential role in making decisions in career, focusing on interpersonal factors, intrapersonal factors and waiting for career results.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of the research is to analyze the importance of higher education, from the perspective of students, in choosing a career by using information gathered from participating students in events organized at the university, events entitled "Career Days: access to higher education!" and organized within a project implemented by the University of Pitești financed from structural funds. The events were organized in order to facilitate interactions between pupils, students and employers to increase access to tertiary education. The general research group consisted of 150 students who were part of the target group of the project. The data collection was carried out using the survey, and the tool used in this regard was the face-to-face questionnaire applied between April - June 2020 and December 2020 - May 2021, periods during which 6 events were organized "Career Days: access to higher education! ". The measurement of the research variables was performed using nominal and interval scales, and the semantic differential and the Likert scale were used as the scaling method. The processing of the information obtained from the research was carried out with the help of the S.P.S.S. (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The relative frequencies and averages were used for the analysis and interpretation of the information, and the study of the existing correlations between the researched variables was performed with the help of contingency tables.

The **proposed objectives** are:

- Evaluating students' intentions to study at a certain university after graduating from high school;
- Identifying the main reasons behind the decision not to continue studies;
- Determining the extent to which high school students use certain sources of information to know the educational offer of a university;
- Determining the extent to which the diversity of existing curricula within a university is an important criterion for students' decision to enroll;
- Identifying the opportunities and factors that influence the decision to choose a university / faculty / specialization;
- Determining students' perceptions of the extent to which university studies can support them in securing a future job;
- Identifying the benefits of higher education in terms of employment opportunities;
- Identifying the skills considered necessary in the labor market;
- Determining the main factors that underlie the decision to choose a professional career.

Research hypotheses:

H1: Most respondents intend to study at a certain university after graduating from high school;

H2: Most respondents make extensive use of university websites to find out about a university's educational offer;

H3: Most respondents consider that the diversity of existing curricula within a university is an important criterion in terms of students' decision to enroll;

H4: Most respondents believe that university studies can greatly support them in finding a future job.

3. DISCUSSIONS

The relative frequencies and averages were used for the analysis and interpretation of the information, and the study of the existing correlations between the researched variables was performed with the help of contingency tables.

Regarding the first research objective, namely *the evaluation of the students' intentions to study at a certain university after graduating from high school*, the results obtained are presented in table 1:

Table 1 Respondents' intention to study at a university after graduating from high school

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	140	93.3	93.3	93.3
	No	10	6.7	6.7	100.0
	Total	150	100.0	100.0	

In conclusion, 93.3% of respondents intend to study at a certain university after graduating from high school.

It turns out that the H1 hypothesis is accepted, which means that most respondents intend to study at a certain university after graduating from high school.

The results of the research showed that among the main reasons behind the decision not to continue their studies are: (a) the desire to work in order to help their parents; (b) the desire to engage immediately; (c) lack of time to continue other studies; (d) lack of a decision on higher education.

Regarding the source of information used to find out details about the university's educational offer, students use the following (Table 2):

- ✓ Large extent - the official website (average obtained approx. 3.67),
- ✓ to a relative extent - Facebook page (average obtained 3.28); family, friends, acquaintances, etc. (average obtained 3.38); leaders, teachers, director (average obtained 3.35);
- ✓ to a lesser extent - directly from the university secretariat (average obtained 2.28).

Table 2 Source of information used to find out details about the university's educational offer

Statistics Information source		Official website	Facebook Page	Family, freinds etc.	Teachers, Directors etc.	Directly from the univeristy secreteriat
N	Valid	127	127	126	127	125
	Missing	23	23	24	23	25
	Mean	3.6693	3.2835	3.3810	3.3465	2.2800
	Median	4.0000	4.0000	4.0000	4.0000	2.0000
	Mode	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	1.00

It turns out that the H2 hypothesis is accepted, which means that most respondents make extensive use of university websites to find out about a university's educational offer.

According to the average obtained (4.12), the respondents consider as an important criterion in their decision to enroll in a university, the fact that within it there is a diverse range of study programs (Table 3).

Table 3 Diversity of existing study programs within the university

Statistics

N	Valid	150
	Missing	0
	Mean	4.1267
	Median	4.0000
	Mode	4.00

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Total disagreement	3	2.0	2.0	2.0
	Disagreement	2	1.3	1.3	3.3
	Indiferent	19	12.7	12.7	16.0
	Agreement	75	50.0	50.0	66.0
	Total agreement	51	34.0	34.0	100.0
	Total	150	100.0	100.0	

It turns out that the H3 hypothesis is accepted, which means that the majority of respondents consider that the diversity of existing curricula within a university is an important criterion in terms of students' decision to enroll.

Regarding the opportunities and factors that influence the decision to choose a university / faculty / specializations, most of the respondents consider that the opportunities that largely influence this decision are: (a) the possibilities for personal and professional development; (b) labor market trends, (c) vocation; (d) the possibilities for assertion; (e) the prestige of the university; (f) the supply of jobs in the vicinity of the university. Also, the following factors influence to a relative extent the decision regarding the choice of a university / faculty / specializations are: (a) family; (b) the group of friends; (c) teachers; (d) a desire to study in another city; (e) tuition fee; (f) state university; (g) online media (university websites, Facebook / Instagram pages), media (Figure 2, Table 4).

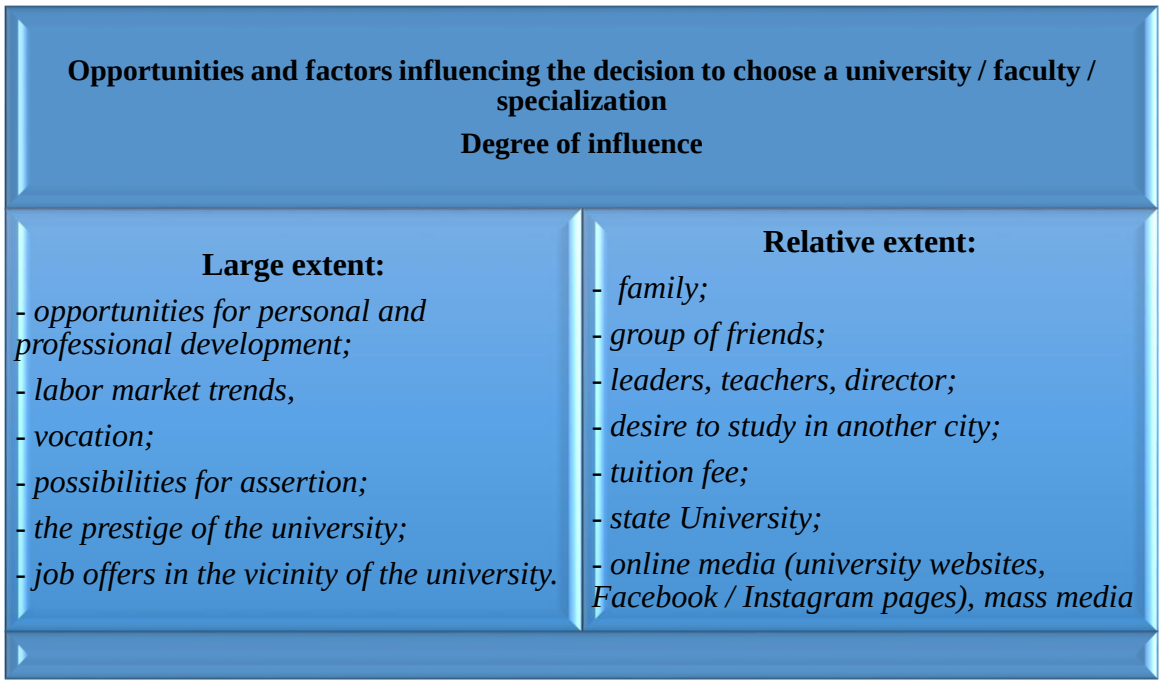

Figure 2 Opportunities and factors influencing the decision to choose a university / faculty / specialization

Table 4 Statistics on opportunities and factors influencing the decision to choose a university / faculty / specialization

Statistics Influencing factors		**Family**	**Friends**	**Leaders, teachers, director**	**A future professional career in the respective field**	**The desire to study in another city**	**University prestige**	**Possibilities for assertion**
N	Valid	147	146	146	150	147	147	148
	Missing	3	4	4	0	3	3	2
	Mean	3.4558	2.5205	2.9041	4.4800	3.2993	3.6939	3.7365
	Median	4.0000	2.0000	3.0000	5.0000	3.0000	4.0000	4.0000
	Mode	4.00	2.00	4.00	5.00	3.00	4.00	4.00
		Opportunities for personal and professional development	**Labor market trends**	**Vocation**	**Tuition fee**	**State university**	**Online media, mass media**	**The supply of jobs in the vicinity of the university**
N	Valid	148	147	147	148	147	147	147
	Missing	2	3	3	2	3	3	3
	Mean	4.3446	3.9932	4.0340	3.2027	3.3946	3.3605	3.7483
	Median	5.0000	4.0000	4.0000	3.0000	3.0000	3.0000	4.0000
	Mode	5.00	4.00	5.00	3.00	3.00	4.00	4.00

As a result of the statistical processing, it appears that the respondents consider that university studies can greatly support them in obtaining a job (average obtained - 4.45) (Table 5).

Table 5 Respondents' perception that university studies can support them in finding a future job

Statistics

N	Valid	147
	Missing	3
	Mean	4.4558
	Median	5.0000
	Mode	5.00

It turns out that the H4 hypothesis is accepted, which means that most respondents believe that university studies can greatly support them in getting a future job.

Regarding the benefits of higher education, most respondents noted the following benefits:

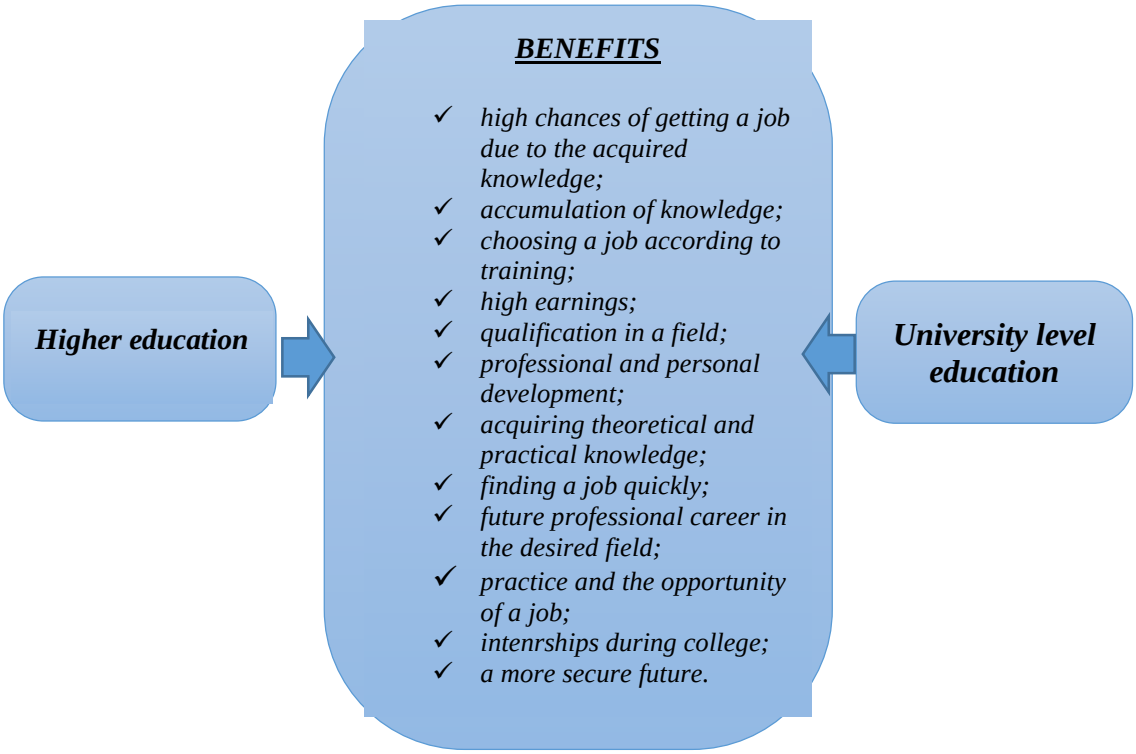

Figure 3 Benefits of higher education

According to the results of the research and the media obtained, the respondents consider the following skills needed in the labor market to be important: (a) taking responsibility for the performance of tasks; (b) effective business planning and organization; (c) promptness and efficient use of time; (c) ability to perform tasks; (c) the ability to learn quickly, to adapt; (d) orientation towards work results; (e) job-specific practical skills; (f) ability to work effectively in a team; (g) job-specific expertise; (h) communication and relationship skills with colleagues; (i) proactive attitude, initiative, new ideas and solutions; (j) digital skills; (k) ability to work under pressure; (l) competencies specific to the activity of the organization; (m) the ability to stimulate others; (n) ability to prepare documents, reports; (o) knowledge of foreign languages; (p) negotiation skills; (r) leadership skills; (s) Ability to analyze and question things; (t) general knowledge in other fields (Table 6).

Table 6 Skills needed in the labor market

Statistics Necessary skills		**Taking responsibility in carrying out tasks**	**Efficient planning and organization of the activity**	**Promptness and efficient use of time**	**Ability to perform tasks**	**Ability to learn quickly, to adapt**	**Orientation to get results in work**	**Job-specific practical skills**
N	Valid	150	150	150	150	150	150	150
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Mean	4.4800	4.4600	4.3800	4.3800	4.4400	4.3200	4.1533
	Median	5.0000	5.0000	4.0000	4.0000	5.0000	4.5000	4.0000
	Mode	5.00	5.00	4.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	4.00
		Ability to work effectively in a team	**Job-specific expertise**	**Communication and relationship skills with colleagues**	**Proactive attitude, initiative, new ideas and solutions**	**Digital competences**	**Ability to work under pressure**	**Competencies specific to the activity of the organization**
N	Valid	150	150	150	150	150	150	150
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Mean	4.2867	4.2800	4.2600	4.2133	3.9267	4.0000	4.0267
	Median	4.0000	4.0000	4.0000	4.0000	4.0000	4.0000	4.0000
	Mode	5.00	4.00	5.00	5.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
		Ability to stimulate the others	**Ability to prepare documents, reports**	**Knowledge of foreign languages**	**Negotiation skills**	**Leadership skills**	**Ability to analyze and question things**	**General knowledge in other fields**
N	Valid	150	150	149	150	150	150	150
	Missing	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
	Mean	4.0733	4.0600	4.3423	4.1867	4.2800	4.1800	3.9800
	Median	4.0000	4.0000	5.0000	4.0000	4.0000	4.0000	4.0000
	Mode	4.00	4.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	4.00	5.00

Statistical processing and analysis show that the decision to choose a career is influenced by a number of factors, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7 Factors underlying the decision to choose a professional career

Statistics Factors		**Field of activity**	**Material earnings - salary, bonuses, bonuses, meal vouchers, etc.**	**Service car & telephone**	**Working environment and conditions**	**The team you will be part of**	**The prestige of the company**	**Labor market requirements (professions sought now and in the future)**
N	Valid	150	150	149	149	148	150	147
	Missing	0	0	1	1	2	0	3
	Mean	4.3067	4.3933	3.5369	4.3289	3.9932	3.9467	4.2653
	Median	4.0000	5.0000	4.0000	4.0000	4.0000	4.0000	4.0000
	Mode	5.00	5.00	3.00	5.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
		The activity carried out should bring the feeling of satisfaction and fulfillment	**Security and the future of the profession on the labor market**	**The passion to work in a certain field**	**Family (parents and family traditions), friends**	**Social trends ("fashionable", "prospective and prestigious" professions)**	**The existence of a balance between profession and personal life**	**Possibility to put into practice the skills and abilities acquired during university studies**
N	Valid	150	150	150	149	149	150	150

	Missing	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
	Mean	4.4533	4.4800	4.3467	3.9600	3.5168	4.2667	4.3000
	Median	5.0000	5.0000	5.0000	4.0000	4.0000	4.0000	4.0000
	Mode	5.00	5.00	5.00	4.00	4.00	5.00	5.00
		Possibility to promote in that field	**Values and motivations (material benefits, prestige, independence, security of tomorrow)**	**Skills and abilities (negotiation, communication, IT skills, initiative, teamwork, organization, creativity, knowledge of foreign languages)**				
N	Valid	149	150	150				
	Missing	1	0	0				
	Mean	4.4966	4.2667	4.2333				
	Median	5.0000	4.0000	4.0000				
	Mode	5.00	5.00	4.00[a]				

4. CONCLUSIONS

As a result of the processing, analysis and interpretation of the information obtained, the quantitative research conducted among students showed that most respondents intend to study at a particular university after graduating from high school, considering that the diversity of existing curricula within a university is an important criterion in their decision to enroll. The main source of information when it comes to the educational offer of universities has turned out to be the official websites.

Also, most respondents perceive university studies as proving to be largely a support in obtaining a future job. Undoubtedly, there is a strong direct correlation between education and career, with education enabling each student to acquire and develop the ability to realize their potential. An essential aspect to consider in choosing a college specialization is the interest of the future student in the chosen field.

The approach to the career decision-making process shows diverse perspectives and experiences. Following the evaluation of the factors influencing the choice of the faculty, our study reveals that the possibilities for personal and professional development, vocation, job offer in the vicinity of the university appear as important elements. The study also shows that young people are influential, being influenced in their family decisions, by the group of friends, as well as by the way the institution is presented in the media (university websites, Facebook / Instagram pages), mass media). Leaders, teachers, principals are also seen as motivating and inspiring factors in this process.

In conclusion, pursuing a program of study at a university is a particularly important factor in increasing the chances of employment; in access to a future professional career in the desired field; in the possibility of obtaining high earnings, all as a result of acquiring theoretical and practical knowledge. By understanding students' perspectives on career decision-making, institutions can help them make decisions that reflect their values and experiences.

Acknowledgement

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