

ADAPTATION OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS OF DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS TO THE CONDITIONS OF EDUCATION

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Abstract: There is little in the way of obstacle to attending university nowadays. The majority of institutions have significantly reduced the selection and admission criteria for studies or they have agreed to accepting applicants without entry examinations. This fact allows study at universities even for those students whose qualitative potential does not completely correlate with the profile requirements of university studies. There can be several causes for this condition. The present study is one of the outputs of a broader research dealing with the issues of adaptation of university students of different age groups to the conditions of education. In this connection it focuses on the area of motivating students to start university studies. We do not deal with the question of selecting a specific university. We are interested in what led the respondents to the decision to complete this level of education, especially in relation to their age, where we assumed differences of opinion.

Keywords: University Studies, Motivation, Age Differences

1 Introduction

We are currently witnesses to social changes which among other things reflect the change of attitude towards the issues of education. Quite a number of universities in connection to lower population grades open up the possibility of studying at tertiary level to practically everyone who is interested. The problem today is not to get to college, but to stay and continue with studies. The reasons for graduating from university as well as the reasons for giving up on studies can vary: right or wrong motivation, a number of unmanageable obstacles, either exaggerated or unfulfilled expectations.

Recent high school graduates meet at the university with other students who have several years of work and life experience. They differ not only in their view of the world and in the way they communicate but also in their approach to the responsibilities arising from their university education. They perceive their studies in other contexts; it has a different value for them; they show a different degree of embracing education and its necessity in relation to professional and life direction. For some of them university studies affect their lives so significantly that a large number of decisions are adapted to that and for others it becomes a tool for their self-realization. In any case these differences also affect universities themselves. These circumstances have come to our attention in order to address outlined issues from different perspectives and to evaluate them in relation to age differences.

1.1 Theoretical Background of Surveyed Issues

In recent years young people's thinking and decision-making in relation to university studies has been changing significantly. The decision to continue studying at tertiary level of education should be based on a clear vision of one's own future, of one's professional and social standing. However, the fact is that only a small number of recent high school graduates have such an idea. The majority of them do not systematically think about their careers or life paths (Ližbetinová, L., 2017). This is automatically reflected in the decision making to attend the university at several levels. Many of the graduates do not apply for college immediately after finishing high school but they spend their time in a casual job or by travelling until the final decision is made.

Others decide to start university with the intention that they will not complete it, or it is their second or third choice of what to do to begin their real lives. The university thus becomes a kind of "transfer station" until a final decision is made. Last but not least it becomes evident that the numbers grow of those who in

principle do not care what university they graduate from but their priority is to obtain a university degree.

All this has become possible due to the current situation at universities whereby most institutions have significantly reduced the criteria for selecting and admitting applicants to study and these have started to admit students without entrance exams. Students themselves have adapted to this situation and when choosing a university they take into consideration the most feasible path respectively the simplest acceptance conditions. The consequence is visible in the large number of study fields and so significant reduction in the quality of incoming students. Based on the previously mentioned status, the questions are as follows: To what extent does the applicant think about his/her future path before choosing a university? What criteria are important for him/her when choosing and finishing university education? What is the value of university studies for him/her? To what extent can he/she pragmatically judge his/her abilities and approach the choice of university in the context of self-realization? Is his/her idea of the completed field of study clear and realistic?

1.2 The Procedure and Methodology of the Research

The search for answers to the above stated questions became the starting point for our research. We focused on the issue of students of different age groups adapting to the conditions of higher education. We were particularly interested in the decision-making process in connection with the completion of university studies, the specific motives that led our respondents to such a step. Our aim was to find out whether there are differences of opinion between respondents of different age groups in relation to the above facts.

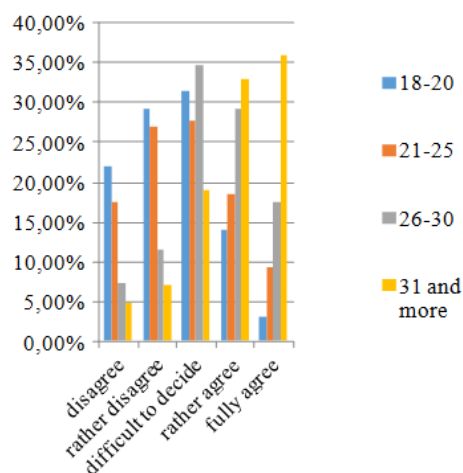
The research sample consisted of 1700 students from pedagogical faculties of various Slovak universities which were divided into four categories according to age. The delimitation of the individual categories was intentional to meet the needs of the investigation. The first category consisted of respondents aged 18-20 years. These were beginner students, fresh high school graduates and students of bachelor level. Most of them without any work experience and without experience related to university studies. The second group consisted of respondents aged 21-25, mostly master's degree students or possibly bachelor's degree students who for some reason entered the tertiary level of education little bit later. This group of respondents has slightly more study experiences and possibly work experiences compared to the previous group. The third group consisted of respondents aged 26-30 who started studying at university with a significant time gap since high school. These have certain work backgrounds but especially life experiences which move them into a different level of decision making than the respondents in the previous two groups. The last group consisted of respondents aged 31 and over. This group was the most diverse in age but not so different in opinion. The majority of the respondents share both work and life experiences (they have their jobs and family responsibilities).

The main research method was a questionnaire survey in which respondents answered seven questions where they could express their agreement or disagreement on a five-point scale (*disagree, rather disagree, difficult to decide, rather agree and agree*).

As part of our research survey we wanted to find out what led the respondents to the decision to attend their university studies. We were not primarily interested in the choice of university or field of study but the scope indicated reasons that led the respondents to enter this level of study. During the investigation it turned out that the field of study itself is a significant motivating factor. In the first question we asked our respondents to what extent the fulfilment of legislative conditions that do not allow them to perform certain professions without appropriate

education influenced their decision to take part in university studies. The results are shown in graph no. 1.

Graph no. 1 Fulfilment of Legislative Conditions for the Practice of Certain Profession

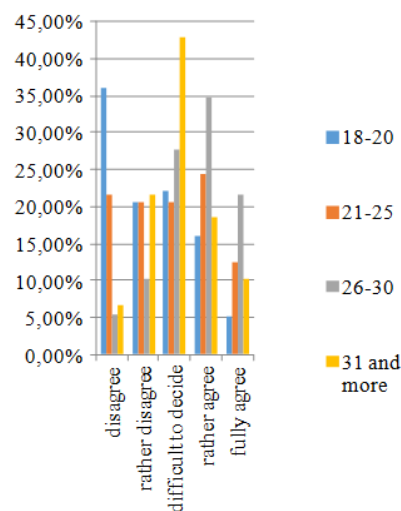


As we can see for students over the age of 31 this factor is crucial when deciding to complete a university education. As many as 36 % of them fully agreed with this statement and 32.94 % decided to rather agree with it. In fact almost 69 % expressed that meeting the legislative conditions is the main motivation for them in making decisions. We can state that we expected a similar result as the vast majority of students belonging to this age category are students of external form of studies, for whom the employer requires a legally defined qualification necessary for the performance of their profession.

This reality is also confirmed by the fact that similarly respondents in the age group 26-30 years also in large numbers (46.59 % in both options expressing agreement) expressed their agreement with the stated fact. Similarly as in the previous case even in this category a large part of the respondents are already employed or they are looking for a job which makes the fulfillment of these requirements among the motivating factors in the first place. On the other hand respondents from the other two categories who basically represent beginning students possibly bachelor's and master's degree students, clearly state that meeting the legislative conditions associated with the practice of the profession is not a priority for them in this stage of their studies. Probably because beginning students and bachelor's students still do not have a completely clear idea of their profession, despite entering a specific field of study. Most of them may not yet be aware of the importance of such decisions, which stems from a vague idea of their own future.

In the second question we asked our respondents to what extent the need to improve their theoretical knowledge and practical skills became a motive for applying to university studies. Results are shown in graph no. 2.

Graph no. 2 The Necessity to Improve Theoretical Knowledge and Practical Skills



For respondents aged 18-20 this fact is clearly not a sufficient motive in the decision-making process. As many as 36 % of them did not agree at all that the need to improve their theoretical knowledge and practical skills should be a motivating factor for them to complete university studies. If we add to them 20.71 % of those who rather disagreed with the previous statement we have almost 57 % of respondents in this age category expressing disagreement. This is probably related to the aforementioned indisposition of a clear idea of one's own future and the related need for theoretical and practical preparation for the performance of a certain profession. This raises a number of relevant questions.

For instance: for how many of the respondents is enrolment in a specific field of study only a temporary solution (transfer station)? How many of them are studying at university with the knowledge that they will never pursue the profession they are studying for? How many of them are studying at the university just to get a diploma? Is the system of support for raising the level of education in the form in which we know it nowadays satisfactory? In the introduction the fact that most of the higher educational institutions have significantly reduced their selection and admission criteria. However this must subsequently be reflected in the quality of the candidates accepted and in their responsibility to fulfil the obligations arising from the requirements for higher education.

If we look at the results of respondents aged 21-25 mostly the students of full-time master's degree an observable balance in opinions could be perceived. Almost 37 % of them agree, or rather agree that the need to improve theoretical knowledge and practical skills is an important motive for them to complete university education.

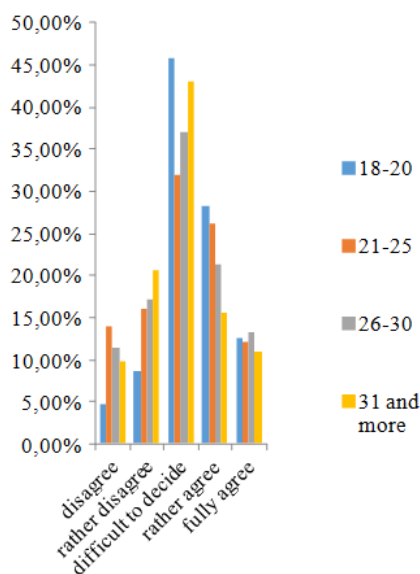
Last but not least we must not overlook the opinions of respondents aged 26-30. As many as 56.47 % of them agreed with the stated claim. Since only a small percentage of them are participants in the internal form of study we assume that as external students they are mostly at the beginning of their career without the necessary work experience; therefore, they believe that the university will thoroughly prepare them for the profession from a theoretical and practical point of view. There is a certain life experience in this group of respondents which may be the reason why the need to improve their theoretical knowledge and practical skills is of such great motivational importance to them.

On the contrary most respondents aged 31 and over have already come to an opinion that they already have acquired the necessary theoretical knowledge and practical skills so they have some doubts as to whether this fact is something that is crucial to their motivation.

In the third question we asked our respondents to what extent the long-term interest towards their dream job is motivating them to complete their university studies. The answers are shown in Graph No. 3. In this case we can state that we did not notice any significant differences in the answers of the respondents between the individual groups. We explain this by the fact that among beginning students possibly bachelor students exists a certain percentage of those who have a clear idea of their direction after graduating from university. On the other hand there are very many in the same group who did not record an opinion on this fact (45.88 %).

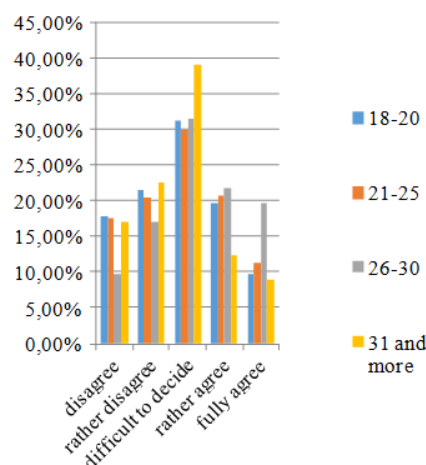
We registered a different response compared to the previous groups among respondents aged 31 and over. Among them disagreement answers prevail over positive ones in the ratio of 30.59 % to 26.35 %. This may not be a significant difference but to a certain extent it indicates the orientation of their motivation. There is a probability that respondents after several years spent in their jobs also have a lot of negative experiences which caused them to stop perceiving their job position as the one they always wanted to perform. In addition as many as 43.06 % of respondents in this group were unable to express opinion on this issue which in our point of view confirms the previous claim and also draws attention to the fact that most of them already have a job and attend university for other reasons.

Graph no. 3 Long-term Interest in the Job, which I Always Wanted to Perform



By the fourth question (Graph no. 4) we wanted to find out what percentage of respondents attends university education without a prior idea of their future employment. Most respondents expressed indecisive to dissenting attitude in the case of respondents aged 18-20, 21-25 and 31 and over.

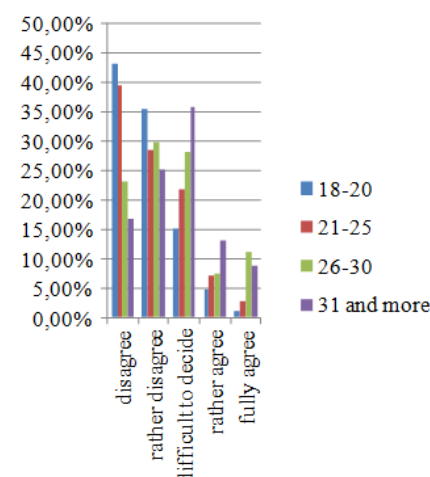
Graph no. 4 Completing the University Education without a Prior Idea of Employment



The exception were respondents aged 26-30 years. Among them 41.64% of respondents said (these are the questionnaire options I agree and rather agree) that they started attending university without a prior idea of their future employment. It turned out that the majority of them were high school graduates who started attending university in the past but for various reasons had terminated their studies or never started attending university.

The previous or current social situation (personal intentions) has led to the decision to enroll in university (some of them repeatedly) and complete their studies regardless of the relevant connection to their current or future employment. During personal interviews for a job one of the questions from the employer is regarding completed education. While graduating from university is undoubtedly an advantage often for the performance of the profession a university education is certainly not necessary. That is why these respondents do not care so much about the university from which they receive their education. In the fifth question we asked the respondents to what extent the change of employment was a motive for them to complete university studies. The answers are shown in graph no. 5.

Graph no. 5 Change of Employment (for various reasons)

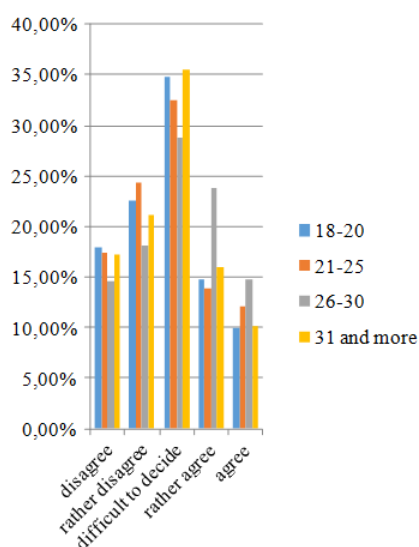


We expected that in the case of respondents aged 18-20 and 21-25, high rates would appear in the items *I disagree* and *rather disagree*. In most cases these are bachelor's and master's degree students mostly in internal study form which means that their contact with the field of work and experience with the labour market are minimal.

Most of them have so far not been confronted with the search for a job or possibly a change of job in any direction. We were more interested in the reactions of the remaining two groups of respondents on this topic. It turned out that even in their case this fact was not a motive for graduating from university. Even in the case of several respondents aged 31 and over (13.18%) it was more about a change in job classification rather than a complete change of employment. Only in the case of 11.29% of respondents aged 26-30 years was the real reason for attending university found to be a change of employment. All those who chose this option had the opportunity of a promised job position but in all cases with a requirement for a university degree.

In the sixth question we were interested in the extent to which a university education among other things has now become a trend issue and was a motivating factor for respondents to graduate from university. The answers are shown in graph no. 6.

Graph no. 6 Currently University Education is a Trend



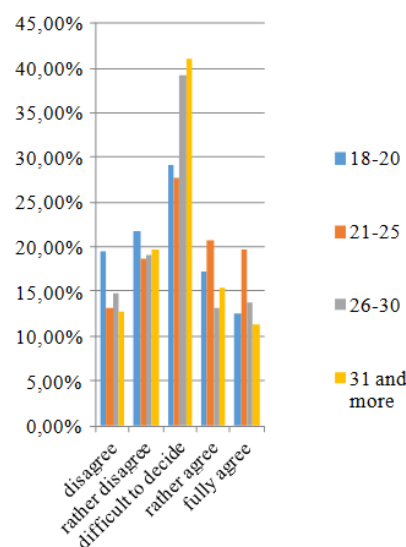
Similarly as in question no. 4 even in this case the fact was the most motivating for respondents aged 26-30 years. Of them 38.58% (amount of responses *I agree* and *rather agree*), expressed that in reality this was the strongest motive for them when deciding whether to enter a university or not, while the focus of the university or field of study was not relevant. The highest level of disagreement was declared by respondents aged 21-25 (41.64% of the answers *I disagree* and *rather disagree*), which could indicate the beginnings of a change in attitude regarding the importance of university education. After the experience from previous studies they begin to realize more clearly what the completion of a specific field of study will bring them in connection with the performance of related professions.

In the seventh question we asked the respondents to what extent the possibility of traveling abroad more easily played a role for them when deciding whether to apply for university studies. The results are shown in graph no. 7.

Universities currently try to develop cooperation with foreign universities and possibly institutions mainly through cooperation on scientific research projects, internships or through study or study-lecture stays of students and teachers. This provides students with a large number of opportunities to get acquainted not only with the academic environment at universities abroad but also with the culture of the student environment or with the culture of a specific country. In addition regardless of university affiliation student status allows you to take advantage of various programmes that make it easier to travel or work abroad. These are all reasons that led us to assume

that this fact would have a strong motivating effect to graduate from university (at least for respondents under 30).

Graph no. 7 Opportunity to Get Abroad more Easily (to study, to work)



However, our investigation has clearly shown that this is not the case. As in most cases in answering this question the majority of respondents were not able to take an attitude in terms of agreement or disagreement. Respondents aged 21-25 turned out to be the least hesitant and we can also state that agreement (40.47% of all answers *I agree* and *rather agree*) quite convincingly outweighed disagreement (31.77% of all answers *I disagree* and *rather disagree*). In our opinion this is linked to experience gained in previous years of study. Many of them have already used mentioned advantages and therefore in their further study they perceive this possibility as a significant motivating factor. On the other hand the respondents aged 18-20 by whom the disagreement (41.18%) significantly prevails over agreement (29.65%) have not yet discovered all the possibilities and benefits that university education provides.

The remaining two groups of respondents reacted to the question almost identically and presented a neutral and more negative attitude which also has a logical explanation. As we have already stated several times most of these respondents within these two groups are external students with jobs. This does not allow them to enjoy all the benefits of university student status. In addition some programmes focus exclusively on in-house students and participation in them is sometimes limited by age. In any case most respondents over the age of 30 do not even consider applying for study stays or work or travel programmes abroad. With the given question we ended our research investigations focused on determining the degree of action of selected motivational stimuli influencing respondents in deciding to complete university studies.

2 Conclusion

As part of the research focus we investigated whether there are significant differences of opinion in relation to motivation in relation to university studies with respect to different age groups of respondents. Finally we summarize the most interesting findings: For almost 69% of respondents over the age of 31 (mostly external students) the legislative conditions associated with the performance of the profession is crucial when deciding to complete a university degree. Almost 57% of respondents aged 18-20 (mostly internal bachelor's students) do not agree that the need to improve theoretical knowledge and practical skills would be a motivating factor for them to complete university studies.

More than 41% of respondents aged 26-30 (mostly external students) started attending university without a previous idea of their future job and more than 38% of them started attending as having a university degree is currently a trend.

More than 40% of respondents aged 21-25 (mostly internal master's students) are aware of the benefits of university studies in relation to travel, job opportunities or studying abroad. In the end we must state that we expected a number of findings from the research survey but there were also some that really surprised us. We are aware that we have not completely covered the issue and it will be necessary to carry out further systematic and more detailed research.

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