

UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD PROFESSIONAL FUTURE. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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Purpose: The purpose of the article is to understand students' attitudes toward their professional future.

Methodology: Twelve qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with university students. A content analysis was performed using the thematic analysis method with QDA Miner Lite software. The article provides an opportunity to trace the use of qualitative methods in a research project. It points out the strengths and limitations of this approach, which is not typically used in research in management science or economics.

Findings: The research conducted indicates that in the context of career plans, respondents focus on three options: working as a salaried employee, running their own business and investing. Each of these is associated with different beliefs, emotions and actions. A full-time job is seen through the prism of security, but also fewer profits and demands than running one's own business. Business plans, often inspired by parents of entrepreneurs, co-occur with active preparation: taking additional courses or searching for guidance content on the Internet. Students also consider investments that will generate a passive income. They draw their knowledge on this subject mainly from online sources.

Research limitations: The findings of the qualitative study cannot be regarded as representative. The results of the research should be considered as a pilot study. Specifically, students' attitudes toward investing and passive income require further research.

Practical implications: Insights into the attitudes of people about to enter the labor market will allow organizations to tailor HR activities aimed at this group. Awareness that students are interested in investments and derive their knowledge on the subject from online sources may provide the stimulus for economic universities to include these issues more broadly in their curricula.

Originality/value: Analysis goes beyond students' professional plans. They were studied in relation to emotions and beliefs. The use of qualitative methods made it possible to explore new areas. The research revealed that for some students, the idea of investing and passive income is very attractive and is considered on equal footing with a full-time job or running one's own business.

Keywords: attitudes toward professional future, students, entrepreneurial intention.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

In recent years, researchers, managers and HR professionals have been noticing changes in young people's attitudes toward professional work (Gajda, 2017; Kukla, Nowacka, 2019; Żarczyńska-Dobiesz, Chomątowska, 2014). It is becoming increasingly common to hear about lower levels of motivation, high expectations or even resignation from work (Muster, 2020). How much truth is there in this narrative? Such situations are to occur especially among representatives of the younger generation, known as Generation Z, born after 1995. Indeed, one can see clear differences between the attitudes toward work of younger and older workers, which indicates a generational change (Kroenke, 2015). This issue is not only cognitively interesting but also has a practical dimension (Opalińska, 2018). This is because the change in employee attitudes requires a new approach to human resource management. Regardless of the motivation - cognitive or practical - it seems crucial to understand the attitudes of representatives of the younger generation towards their professional future. This is the goal of this article, which goes beyond declarations about career plans. It focuses on the attitudes of students, and therefore on their beliefs and emotions. This kind of approach allows a better understanding of this age category, which will soon begin to shape the landscape of the organization.

2. Transition to professional work

The moment of transition from school to professional work is extremely important both from the perspective of an individual and the entire labor market. Decision-making regarding one's professional future is often the subject of research and reflection. According to Linda Gottfredson's (1981) psychological theory of the development of career aspirations, people develop cognitive maps of the world of professions, which are beliefs about what work in particular professions is like, what kind of wages and lifestyle it entails, and what kind of predispositions it requires. By confronting this with beliefs about themselves (aptitudes, interests) and their career aspirations, young people decide what occupation they could work in. Similarly, David L. Blustein, Luanna E. Devenis, Barbara A. Kidney (1981) argue that decisions about one's professional future are closely related to processes of self-recognition and identity formation.

Entrepreneurial intentions are also relevant in the context of attitudes toward the future of work. Bird defines them as a state of mind that leads people to develop new business concepts (Bird, 1988). According to this author, entrepreneurial intentions are determined by self-efficacy, personality and family traditions. Similarly, J.M. Crant considers entrepreneurial

intentions as the desire to own one's business and the belief in the ability to realize it (Crant, 1996). McElwee and Al Riyami's research supports Bird's findings about the influence of family and entrepreneurial traditions on the probability of starting one's own business (McElwee, Al Riyami, 2003).

It is significant for the reflection on students' attitudes towards their professional future that they are mostly representatives of Generation Z (Tulgan, 2009). Individuals born after 1995 will soon begin or are already taking their first steps in the labor market. These are people growing up in a digital world, surrounded by new media that have accustomed them to deciding what they will do or consume and when. This makes them different from previous generations in attitudes, career aspirations, their expectations toward employers and the way they function at work. They are characterized by a high level of digital competence, which they are able to use in their careers (seeking knowledge, communicating, generating content, searching for jobs or working remotely). Their career plans are short term, and they highly value work-life balance (Żarczyńska-Dobiesz, Chomątowska, 2014).

Nowadays, the labor market is changing very fast, which certainly makes career decisions more difficult. A choice that seems good at the beginning of studies may turn out to be wrong after finishing them. Due to automation and artificial intelligence, some professions are becoming redundant, while others are transforming. This intensifies young people's dilemmas (Mouse-Strychalska, 2021). As a result, highly flexible career plans are being created, and their authors are ready to change them (Piorunek, 2016). In addition to linear careers, which follow a single profession and industry, non-linear, multi-directional careers are emerging (Yakimiuk, 2016). Many young people are changing their perspective on a particular profession and seeking new career directions for themselves.

The foregoing considerations lead to the conclusion that in order to understand people entering the labor market, it is not enough to ask about their career plans. A plan is understood as deliberate actions that are intended to lead to a set goal (Maslyk, 2005). In a changing environment, goals can change, as can the means of achieving them. In this context, it seems better to use the term "design," which differs from planning in its lower degree of certainty of purpose and actions (Piorunek, 2004). However, the latter also focuses only on planned activities. According to the author, it is worth taking into consideration beliefs and emotions as well. Only taking into account these three elements, which, after all, interact with each other, will give a complete picture of the situation. Therefore, it seems reasonable to base the research on the attitude construct, which consists of three components:

- behavioral, which determines actions and intentions of actions toward the attitude object,
- cognitive, which consists of knowledge and beliefs about the attitude object and
- emotional, which determines emotions toward the attitude object.

Previous research has tended to focus on declarations of career plans. Via a survey questionnaire, students answered questions about their plans to take up a career in a specific industry, whether or not in line with the field of study, in a specific place and about actions planned or taken to find a job (e.g., Stępińska et al., 2017). Factors of career plans have also been analyzed. For example, a study of economy students showed that when deciding on a professional future, the most important factors are an attractive salary, stability of employment, the possibility of promotion and a good atmosphere in the workplace (Kuźmicki, Borysiuk, 2021). In turn, surveys of medical students in Poland have addressed the issue of their plans to work abroad (Szostek et al., 2017; Ustymowicz, Bogusz, 2014).

The purpose of this article is to provide a deeper insight into students' career plans. After all, behind the declaration of concrete actions are thought patterns, beliefs shaped to a great extent by the world outside the academy, and emotions. It seems reasonable, therefore, to study all these issues in interconnection. Accordingly, the research problem posed is: What are students' attitudes toward their professional future?

3. Research methodology

The main objective of the research conducted was to answer the question: what attitudes towards the professional future do students display? Given that attitudes are a multidimensional construct, it was decided to use a qualitative approach (Frankfort-Nachmias, Nachmias, 2001). Qualitative research is not often used in the field of management science (Maison, 2010). However, they seem adequate when the goal is to gain insight into people's mindsets and motivations.

IDI (Individual In Depth Interview) were used. Such interviews, by design, resemble a natural conversation and are much less structured compared to questionnaire interviews. As a result, when starting a research, it is impossible to assume in advance what type of answers will be received. Moreover, the study can potentially open up new fields of exploration (Czakoń, 2009). In the project described above, the researcher entered the interview with a prepared list of issues. The form or order in which they appeared depended on the individual interview process. Twelve interviews were conducted, which ranged in duration from 22 to 83 minutes and were recorded with a voice recorder. Full-time students of the Faculty of Law and Economics at Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz took part in the study. Table 1 shows the participants in the study: their gender and field of study. Availability-based sampling was used - the interviews were conducted with students who responded to invitations placed at the University, on the website and sent via email. The data was collected between May and June 2023.

Table 1.*Structure of the student sample by selected characteristics*

Variable	Value	Quantity
Gender	Female	5
	Male	7
Field of study	Bachelor's administration	3
	Administration Master's degree	3
	Bachelor's economics	3
	Economics Master's degree	2
	Law in business	1

Source: own research.

An essential step in qualitative research is the analysis of the collected material. Usually it is textual material to which content analysis is applied (Babbie, 2008). It should not be regarded as a homogeneous and closed set of guidelines. The researcher has many possible approaches at his disposal. In the study described here, a thematic analysis was used to isolate and interpret the main themes that recur in the respondents' statements. The guidelines described by Virginia Brown and Victoria Clarke (Brown, Clarke, 2006) were applied. Analyses were carried out in the free program QDA Miner Lite v3.0. Transcription of the interview recordings was carried out using Word. The resulting text required numerous corrections of spelling errors. The texts were then imported into the mentioned QDA Miner Lite program. This program streamlines the researcher's work, but does not replace it. It is the researcher who makes all decisions regarding meaning analysis, coding and interpretation.

In the first step, the content of the respondents' statements was analyzed for recurring meanings and patterns. On this basis, the original codes were created, which were then assigned to the relevant parts of the statements. During the coding process, new codes appeared or the existing ones were renamed. This is a common situation in this type of analysis. This is because coding is a process that aims to make the set of content assigned to a single code homogeneous, and the code itself meaningful in terms of answering the research problem. Therefore, the next emerging content can change the characteristics of its category, otherwise a code. It is also permissible to change the coding of a given passage if the researcher deems it necessary. Likewise, in the case of the study described above, the coding process required going back to previously analyzed text passages and reinterpreting them. The next step was to group related codes into themes. Themes should include codes and fragments of statements that relate to a particular aspect relevant to the research problem. At this stage, too, it was necessary to reanalyze the text, changing the themes initially adopted, sometimes changing the codes or coding. According to the thematic analysis guidelines, these are all decisions made by the researcher.

4. Findings

During the in-depth interviews, students spoke about their career plans, related thoughts, emotions and their preparations. One of the themes identified during the analysis was the goal they are aiming for (Tab. 2). In each statement, there was content indicating values that are attractive enough to be a motivator for actions in the professional sphere. The codes forming this theme were, in order of frequency of appearance: financial security, own apartment/home, professional success, ability to help parents, travel the world, comfortable life, a lot of money. The predominant themes are related to the need of security: financial and physical, which is provided by having one's own apartment or house. The vision of professional success and having a lot of money is also motivating. Some respondents spoke of money as a means to an end, but for others it was an end in itself. The opportunity to explore the world is also an attractive prospect. For some students, it is important that the achievement of career plans will allow them to support their parents if they need it. This code co-occurred with another - representing a feeling of support from parents during studies.

Table 2.

Themes identified during content analysis with their corresponding codes

Theme	Codes in order of frequency of occurrence
Goal	financial security own apartment/home professional success ability to help parents exploring the world comfortable life a lot of money
A full-time employment	security planned profession/industry plan B lack of competence needed to run a business
Running a business	profits higher than on the full-time position business idea gaining the knowledge needed to run a business freedom to decide for yourself fear of responsibility interest-related idea flexible working hours locational independence why I don't plan a full-time position first
Investing	searching for content on the Internet about investing emotions landlord I invest Stock market investments in precious metals saving in order to invest later

Cont. table 2.

Professional experience	work while studying work before studies helping parents on the farm, helping in the family business running one's own business in order to achieve financial security in order to realize dreams why I don't work in order to gain experience
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Source: own research.

Career plans and attitudes towards future professional work can be considered as a pathway to the goal outlined above. Three themes emerged in this area: full-time employment, running one's own business and investing. In the sample analysed, the largest group of respondents plans to work as an employee. This is of course not data that can be considered representative of the entire student population, but it is worth exploring the thinking patterns, motivations and emotions behind such a decision. The plan to work on a full-time basis is closely linked to a sense of security. It is understood by students in several ways: stable, predictable income, defined responsibilities, security in case of illness. It is worth mentioning that Ukrainian students perceive a full-time job as an element that will make it easier for them to obtain Polish citizenship. In most statements, career plans were concretised to selected professions or industries that were related to the field of study. For students, such a choice was so obvious that they did not justify it additionally. Some of the young respondents had a plan in case their first choice failed - a job in another, usually related profession, more easily achievable in their opinion. Plans for full-time work co-occur with the intention to continue their studies at master's or postgraduate level. This is particularly noticeable in the case of those undecided on a particular profession or industry. Interestingly, in several statements, plans to work as a salaried employee were accompanied by a statement about the lack of soft skills needed to run one's own business (leadership skills, courage). As if their authors assumed that running their own business was a better option and made excuses for not doing so.

Another topic in the area of career plans is running one's own business. This decision is often accompanied by the belief that the profits from such a venture are higher than from a salaried employment. This is an assumption presented by students as self-evident. Other positive features attributed to running a business are the freedom to decide for oneself, flexible working hours and locational independence. On the other hand, there are also statements in this context indicating fear of responsibility and failure. Most of those declaring plans to start a business already have a precise idea for it. In a few cases, the idea is related to the students' hobbies and interests - it appeared spontaneously during the realisation of their passion, not related to their field of study or professional preparation. Planning one's own business coexists with acquiring the knowledge and competences needed to run it. This refers to activities undertaken on one's own, outside of studies, e.g.: attending courses and trainings, reading business manuals, searching for guidance content on the Internet. There was also a strategy of taking up a full-time job in order to gain experience and accumulate funds,

which will later be used in one's own business. Interestingly, the majority of respondents planning to run a business mentioned the influence of their parents - entrepreneurs - on this decision.

The area of investing emerged alongside career plans involving employment or running a business. These issues were not evoked in any way by the researcher. Their appearance suggests that the idea of passive income is popular among students and treated on a par with earning money through a full-time job or being an entrepreneur. There were individuals who declared that they were investing, or had plans to do so, e.g. in the stock market. However, interest in this topic appeared much more frequently in the statements of respondents. This interest is manifested by following content on the Internet on various forms of investment: the stock market, real estate and bullion. Most often, these are videos on YouTube. Both those who invest and those who think about it identify it with strong emotions - the fear of loss, the exciting vision of profit, the need to temper emotions.

The final theme that emerged was work experience. Half of the sample interviewed are those who combine their studies with work. Students are employed in a wide variety of industries and occupations, only in selected cases related to their field of study. Similarly, there is no pattern in terms of working hours or what type of contract they work under. In a few cases, students have obtained their current employment by engaging in additional projects offered to them by the University. The area of work experience also includes work undertaken before the start of the studies, helping out in a family business or on a farm, and the interesting example of earning money by playing a computer game in which virtual money is gained that can be resold to other players. There is also the experience of someone running their own innovative and profitable business. Students are motivated to work by the need for financial security, saving money to pursue their dreams and gaining experience - both in life and at work. It is noteworthy that the narratives of respondents who did not work during their studies include explanations why they could not do so. From this, it can be concluded that working during studies is seen by them as a standard they should follow.

5. Summary

During Three themes emerged in the context of career plans. Working as an employee is seen through the prism of security, but also less profit and demands than running one's own business. Such plans tend to be concretised to the chosen profession, and those less concrete co-occur with plans for further studies. In contrast, students planning a business, often with the inspiration of their parents, prepare for this, mainly by searching for specific content on the Internet. Besides working as an employee and running their own business, students are also considering investments that will bring them a passive income. This is a way of earning, placed

on a par with the previous two and seen as complementary to them. This vision appears to be as attractive as it is exciting. Students draw their knowledge of the subject mainly from online sources.

Qualitative methods proved to be useful for investigating such complex and nuanced constructs as attitudes. They have made it possible to analyse both beliefs and ways of thinking about different forms of work and investment, the emotions associated with them and behaviours, both current and planned. The advantage of content analysis of in-depth interviews is that it allows one to grasp the context of a statement, which significantly influences its interpretation. This was the case of students justifying why they do not intend to start a business or work during their studies. The context suggests that these situations are regarded as a certain standard that students think is expected from them. The value of a qualitative approach is also that the researcher may discover knowledge that they did not expect. This is particularly important when exploring new or rapidly changing areas of reality, and may provide a trigger for further research. In particular, it seems that students' attitudes towards investing and passive income are worth further observation. In addition, the findings of the qualitative research can become the basis for hypothesis formation to be verified in representative quantitative research.

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