

# **Student's risks to drop out and relation to Vocational Identity**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The current study is actual because approximately 20 % of first year students drop out from studies after the first year of studies. Research will help to better understand main reasons why students in Latvia universities left they studies as well as students needs in career education and relationship with vocational identity.

Theoretical approach is based on assumption that most difficulties in vocational decision making fall into one or more of following categories – problems of vocational identity, lack of information about jobs or some of external or internal career barriers.

The method of the research is My Vocational Situation (MVS, Holland, Daiger, Power, 1980). There are some extra questions included in Career Barriers scale and Information scale according to Latvia's situation. Snyder's Goals Scale (Hope Scale) is used to test the validity of My Vocational Situation questionnaire for Latvia's situation.

The results suggest that students, who were thinking to leave their study generally show lower Vocational Identity level. As more significant barriers to finish their studies students indicate personal motives, inadequate chosen study program and financial assumptions

The Cronbach alphas for scales of Vocational Identity indicate a sufficiently high internal reliability, but it is recommendable to made retesting of the MVS.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Representative data from OECD report (2008) shows significant amount of students who do not finish their scientific degree studies (OECD, 2008). On average in the 19 OECD countries for which data are available, some 31% of tertiary students fail to successfully complete a programme equivalent to this level of education. Completion rates differ widely among OECD countries; unfortunately data from Latvia were not included in OECD report. Some local reports from higher institutions of Latvia represent 20-25% students drop out from studies already after first study year. Currently amount of students in Latvia is influenced by demographic crisis and unstable economical situation therefore universities are interested to understand how to hold every student. The implications of high level of drop out student are clear: not only is there the wasted opportunity for personal development of the students, but also there is the significant loss of revenue to the institution. Any study that can help reduce this waste and despair is clearly justified.

The main reasons why students do not finish their studies in Latvian universities (in this case- Vidzeme University College) and if drop out factor is connected with lower vocational identity of these students will be analysed in this study.

#### **Drop out risks and students needs.**

Generally drop outs are defined as “students who leave the specified level without graduating from a first qualification at that level. The first qualification refers to any degree, regardless of the duration of study, obtained at the end of a programme that does not have a previous degree at the same level as a pre-requisite” (OECD, 2008). Tertiary level drop out and completion rates can be useful indicators of the internal efficiency of tertiary education systems and is included in regular survey of OECD.

Admittedly, not always dropping out is an indicator of failure from the perspective of the individual student- non-completion and delayed completion may have various consequences. We can interpret drop out as an ineffective use of resources as it raises the cost

of a tertiary degree and, in systems with limited capacities to enrol students, it may prevent (or delay) some students (with the qualifications to enter tertiary education) from starting their preferred programmes. It may also be detrimental to the quality of teaching and learning (OECD, 2008). It is understandably, that non-completion of studies sometimes could be not time lost or lower benefits for individuals- some students can successfully complete only some parts of a qualification, but do not finish the whole programme, some students could choose more appropriate study programme for them, also it does mean that the acquired skills and competencies are lost in study period. However, even if non-completion is not always associated only with negatives consequences, high drop out rates may indicate that the education system is not meeting students' needs (OECD, 2008)

Educational professionals indicate different reasons, why students may leave a tertiary programme (OECD, 2008):

- choosing the wrong subject or educational programme
- failing to meet the standards set by their educational institution, particularly in tertiary systems
- finding attractive employment before completing their programme
- finding that the educational programmes offered do not meet their expectations or their labour market needs
- it may also be that programmes take longer than the number of years for which students can justify being outside the labour market.

M. Lowis and A. Castley (2008) analyzed drop out problem in high education institution and developed simple instrument to identify potential student low performance and withdrawal. It was based on a measure of students' early expectation of higher education, matched subsequently with their actual experience. The instrument design was based both on the concept of a psychological contract, taken from the field of employment relations, and Seven Principles of good undergraduate teaching from Chickering and Gamson (1991). These principles identified problems that influence academic performance of students:

- level of contact between students and staff
- reciprocity and co-operation among students
- active learning
- prompt feedback
- awareness of the time needed to be spent on the task
- high expectations
- respecting of diverse talents and ways of learning

Central to Tinto's model is the level of academic and social integration of students into university life, factors which, can help to predict students' propensity to drop out or continue their studies. These include students' actual and perceived performance, enjoyment of the subjects, identification with the student role, personal contact with academics, and numbers of friends (Tinto, 1987, Lowis, Castley, 2008)

Representatives from FEDORA reported, that concerns and needs of students with severe problems according their study were identified in three main areas: personal, career, and learning skills areas (FEDORA Congress, 2006, Informal reports from the European Forum for Student Guidance discussion groups).

Few researches related to student's needs and career areas are made in Latvia. A student needs survey with first year students at the University of Latvia (2001) found that a large proportion of students experience different psychological problems (depression, social problems, fears related to examinations, public speaking, underachievement etc). 48% of students would like to receive help in dealing with career uncertainty and anxiety over finding a job (Voitkane&Miezite, 2001). Similar findings were reported for Lithuanian students at Vilnius University (Balaisis, 2002). According to the 2005 survey of the Career Orientation Centre in Riga (<http://www.karjerascentrs.lv>) 54% of high school graduates express need for help to choose profession or study field. Findings from 2004 studies at the University of Latvia indicate that goal directedness is related to successful adjustment to university studies

and greater life satisfaction (Voitkane, 2004). Students of University of Latvia who chose their field of study through external influences (family, teacher, peers, etc) indicate a lack of competence related to academic demands, poor coping skills, and need for support regarding self-regulation (Voitkane, 2001, 2003, 2004). By questioning 140 students which took part in several Career centre activities results shows that it is important for students to improve their career selection skills, get new information about career and assess their career and education possibilities (Smitina, 2007).

Researches in Latvia's and Lithuania's universities have described rather similar adjustment problems as Gallagher (1992) about students needs. Gallagher indicated that approximately 20-50% of first years student express anxiety about future career fears from failure and lack of goal in their lives (Gallagher, 1992)

### **The development of Vocational Identity**

Thinking and comprehension about vocational identity has been shaped primarily by Erik H. Erikson theory of psychosexual development. His theory of life span development has strong implications on career development theories concepts and stages. Career researchers usually have focused their attention on the stage of identity formation on adolescences and youth period. The identity is defined as "a subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image. As a quality of unself-conscious living, this can be gloriously obvious in a young person who has found himself as he has found his communality. In him we see emerge a unique unification of what is irreversibly given--that is, body type and temperament, giftedness and vulnerability, infantile models and acquired ideals--with the open choices provided in available roles, occupational possibilities, values offered, mentors met, friendships made, and first sexual encounters." (Erikson, 1968) Identity is the structure for understanding who one is, a sense of personal control, free and will, a consistency, coherence, and harmony between values, beliefs, and commitment (Erikson, 1968) Crisis of identity comes when person have to choose themselves what to do in future. Occupational identity in Erikson view is the most central domain of identity formation (as well as religious and political identity). Occupational identity emerges to the individual in regard to values, beliefs, and commitment to work and help an adolescent find commitment to education, work and occupation.

Perhaps the most widely known career development theory is D.E. Super's career theory – Super emphasizes three main perspectives of vocational guidance: developmental perspective focusing on the life course of vocational behaviour in career development; phenomenological perspective emphasizing the role of self-concept in the development of an individual's career; contextual perspective bringing forward the importance of multiple social roles across the life span (Super, 1974). Super described period of adolescences as period of exploration (ages 14-24) when individuals attempt to understand themselves and find their in the world of life. The concept of *career maturity* (vocational maturity) is developed and elaborated in Super's career theory. Career maturity is described as the readiness of the individual to make career decisions. Super accepted the view that self-concept is central for understanding a person's behaviour and the occupational self-concept eventually is constellation of self-attributes that are vocationally relevant for the individual (Super, 1974) The individual's satisfaction from the work role is connected with successfully developed self-concepts. And the career choice and adjustment is a continuous process.

Career researcher Holland J. possesses secure *vocational identity* as "clear and stable picture of one's goals, interests, personality, and talents" (Holland, Daiger, Power, 1980), contributes to appropriate vocational decision-making and confidence in one's ability to make career-related decisions. Failure to form a stable vocational identity often results in career indecision (Holland, 1980). Concept of vocational identity we can use regard already to high school and college students, not only to professionals. Some of career researchers hold a view that developing a vocational identity is a learning process, which confronts the post-modern

individual with seven challenges: to draw upon personal feelings; to differentiate self from others; to develop a personal narrative; to represent experience in one's own terms; to focus a point of view; to build an inner life; to relate all to one's own purposes (Law B.; Meijers F.; Wijers G, 2002)

*Professional identity* is defined as a dynamic concept of oneself as already a professional. Three dimensions are synthesized in professional identity: perceived present (who am I as a professional?); reconstructed past (how did I become the professional I am?); and anticipated future (who should I be and who would I like to be?) (Mc.Adams, 1998, Krabi, 2008). Professional identity gives self-confidence, the feeling of acting in responsible manner, and enables one to be aware of one's limitations, possibilities, and potential (Reybold, 2003, Krabi, 2008).

Obviously, there are different terms and meanings of identity in career and educational theories (career maturity, professional identity, vocational identity, occupational identity). It is understood that the forming of identity always was a cornerstone in all career development theories. At this period of life young people establish their life's goals, choose future profession and field of studies and expand effort in order to reach their goals (Voitkane, 2004).

Although it is generally accepted that adolescence and early adulthood are the periods of life in which identity is in primary developmental task, it is also clear that in the vocational domain, identity development does not stop there. R.Sharf (Sharf, 2006) mentioned, that in early youth identity is only forming, career skills are acquired and different career paths are tried. Therefore uncertainty and doubts about chosen career and study program is natural process of every individual. Changing externals (for example, economical situation or situation in family) or internal thoughts, individuals can develop new vocational identities. Despite of what it is clear that the task of vocational identity formation should never be considered finished once and for all, most of psychologist have emphasize that adolescents need to clarify their vocational (or occupational) identity and develop a future orientation to be successful in their work and educational life (Super, 1974; Blustein, 2006).

### **Purpose of study and research questions**

It is very important to develop and improve career guidance system in higher education institutions of Latvia as well as to analyse student's needs and eliminate high level of drop out students. And researches in this area are relevant and significant

The present study was designed to identify the most important reasons underlying the students' thinking or decision about leaving their studies and to assess the connection with vocational identity and goal setting skills. The study also is adaptation for the My Vocational Identity questionnaire in Latvia's situation.

In order to investigate the connection between the drop out risk and some of career needs, the following research questions were addressed in this study

- What are the most important reasons why students want to leave their studies?
- Is there a relationship between the students' thoughts or decision of leaving their studies and level of Vocational Identity?
- Is there a relationship between of Vocational Identity level and measures of pathway and agenda of setting goals?
- That kind of career information is most important for students?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The study was conducted with 120 students (81 females, 37 males) age 18 to 24 from 4 study program (Communication and Public Relations-41 students, Information Technologies- 26 students, Political Science- 32 students, Tourism Organization and Management- 19 students)

at the Vidzeme University College. Gender distribution was proportionate to that within the student body of the Vidzeme University College, in which approximately two thirds of the students are female and one third male.

### **Procedure**

At the beginning of March, 2009, the students were provided with package of questionnaires in their classes- part of the students filled out the questionnaires in the classrooms, but some of them- out at home. Follow up testing is planned in May.

### **Instruments**

The following instruments were administered: Questionnaire about studies and student's future plans, My Vocational Situation (MVS, Holland, Daiger, Power, 1980), Adult Dispositional Hope Scale (The Goals Scale, Snyder C.R, 1991).

In Questionnaire about studies and student's future plans students are asked to evaluate different aspects in their study process (including lecturer work, studies organizational process, technical supply, psychological climate in school and class, career activities in school) . Students also is asked to answer if they are ever thought to leave their studies (or already decided it) and that could be the motives for them to leave the studies

*My Vocational Situation* (MVS, Holland, Daiger, Power, 1980) measures vocational identity and perceived career development barriers. The Vocational Identity scale is composed of eighteen true-false items and measures extent to which one has "a clear and stable pictures of one's goals, interests, and talents" (Holland, Johnston and Asama, 1993, p1). *The Vocational Identity* (V.I) subscale is the most psychometrically stable and frequently used portion of the MVS and has a high degree of internal consistency for all samples.

*The Occupational Information* (OI) scale of the MVS measures the respondent's need for occupational information. According Latvia's situation 6 additional informational questions were included in this scale. The *Barriers scale* consists of four perceived external obstacles to a chosen occupational goal. One additional question was included in this scale. All MVS subscales have a normative data, but the development of local norms is recommended by authors of the method. The questionnaire was translated into Latvian according to requirements provided by the International Test Committee (van de Vijver& Hambleton, 1996).

*Adult Dispositional Hope Scale* (The Goals Scale, Snyder C.R, 1991) was used to measure a two-factor cognitive construct, that involves 1) Pathways, an individual's ability to set goals and devise multiple plans to reach them, and 2) Agency, an individual's inner determination to implement these plans and overcome obstacles to the goals. Questionnaire contains 12 items answered on a 8-point Likert scale from „strongly disagree” to „strongly agree”. Four items are included for each of the agency and pathways factors and four items are filler items. Scores for both the agency and pathways variables could range from four to 16. ADHS was translated in Latvian and Cronback alpha for Pathway scale was 0.76; Agency scale- 0.80, ADHS 0.66 (Voitkane, Miežite, 2002).

## **RESULTS**

In response to questions about possibility to leave their studies, 34 percent of all student stated that they are thinking about leaving their studies often or very often (26% of students stated what they are thinking about leaving their studies, 19% of students stated what they are already decided it). This group of students were named as high risk drop-out student group.

All programs has similar amount of students with high risk to drop out: 28,6 % students were from Communication and Public Relations (CPR) programme, 27,4% of Political Science (PS) programme; 25% of IT programme and 19% students were in Tourism Organization and Management (TOV) programme. Demographic analysis show, that if student is older then his risk to drop out is lower, women more often stated high risk to drop-out (76,5%) than man (23,5%).

Table 1 shows 5 most significant reasons to leave their studies:

Table 1. *Most significant reasons to leave the studies*

Reasons	High risk group (N=35)		All students (N=118)	
	N	%	N	%
Have no interest in this study programme	11	32.4	14	11.9
Personal reasons	7	20.6	14	11.9
Studies was not as expected	6	17.6	7	5.9
Not sure about perspective of profession	6	17.6	8	6.8
Economical reasons	5	14.7	17	14.4
Lack of academical skills	4	11.8	11	9.3

Table 2 shows scores of MVS components of high and low risk drop-out groups. For best illustration there is also the normative data of MVS test (but these not a local norms for Latvia). The Cronbach alpha (KR) for the three scales also are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 *MVS scales for High and Low risk to drop out groups students.*

MVS scales	High risk group (N=34)	SD	Low risk group (N=84)	SD	t-test	Mann-Whitney Test	Normative data (for College Students, 1980)	KR
Vocational Identity (VI)	6.8235	3.66	9.4286	3.44	3.651**	846.5**	11.25	.727
Occupational Info (OI)	2.79	2.1	3.13	2.57	0.676	1350.50	2.39	.726
Barriers (B)	1.97	2.611	3.57	1.021	3.469**	785.500**	3.35	.690

\*\* p< .01

Using t-test and Mann-Whitney test differences between both groups were significant (p<.01) in Vocational Identity and Barriers scales. Mean scores for Vocational Identity and Barriers scales were lower for high risk student's group. Differences between groups in Occupational Info Scale were not significant. The Cronbach alphas for the first two factors (VI, OI) indicate a sufficiently high internal reliability (.727; .726). The third factor, Barriers, understandably is weaker. The authors of questionnaire have pointed, that lower reliability of Barrier (B) scale (and OI scale as well) indicate that they more resemble check lists than scales (Holland, Daiger, Power, 1980). Based on this conclusion, some additional questions for author purpose were included in OI and B scales in this study.

Positive answers to questions in OI and B scales are presented in Table 3

Table 3 *Needs for Occupational Information and perceived Barriers for students of Vidzeme University College*

OI	All students (N=118)			High risk group (N=35)			Low risk group (N=35)		
	N	%	Rank	N	%	Rank	N	%	Rank
<b>I need the following information:</b>									
how to find a job in my chosen career	80	67.8	7	21	61.8	9	59	70.2	6
what kinds of people enter different occupations	64	54.2	9	24	70.6	8	40	47.6	10
more information about employment opportunities	94	79.7	2	28	82.4	1	66	78.6	2
how to get the necessary praxis in my chosen career	91	77.1	3	28	82.4	2	63	75.0	3
about career activities in my school (ad)	60	50.8	10	13	38.2	10	47	56.0	9
about career skills development(ad)	87	73.7	4	27	79.4	3	60	71.4	5
about professional aptitude (ad)	85	72.0	5	24	70.6	7	61	72.6	4
about future educational possibilities(ad)	96	81.4	1	27	79.4	4	69	82.1	1
what is specific traits of my chosen professions(ad)	77	65.3	8	23	67.6	6	54	64.3	8
how to set a target in my career (ad)	84	71.2	10	26	76.5	5	58	69.0	7
<b>B</b>									
<b>I have the following difficulties:</b>									
I am uncertain about my ability to finish the necessary education	37	31.4	4	20	58.8	1	17	20.2	3
I don't have the money to follow my first choice	55	46.6	1	16	47.1	3	39	46.4	1
I lack the special talents to follow my first choice	39	33.1	3	12	35.3	4	27	32.1	4
an influential person in my life does not approve of my vocational choice	11	9.3	5	4	11.8	5	7	8.3	5
I lack the time's management skills to cope with my studies (ad)	48	40.7	2	18	52.9	2	30	35.7	2

ad- additional questions

The data presented in Table 3 shown clearly that absolute majority of almost all students need additional information about different aspects of career and education. The most important information for high risk drop out students is information about employment opportunities (82.4%), necessary praxis (82.4%), career skills development (79.4%) and future educational possibilities (79.4%). Future education, praxis and employment opportunities interest also other students (82.1%, 75% and 78.6). High risk students have more interest about what kind of people enter different professions (70.6%) while other students have not so much interest about this question (47.6%), but these group of students have more interest about career activities in school (56%) than high risk student group (38.2%)

Results form Barrier scale shows that main perceived barrier for high risk student group is uncertainty about ability to finish education (58.8%), low time management skills (52.9%), economical circumstances (47.1%). Lack of money (46.4%) and lack of talents (32.1) are similarly evaluated for both groups. Time management skills (35.7%) and ability to finish education (20.2%) also influence other students but generally these factors are rated noticeably lower.

For examination of VI scale convergent validity, Adult Dispositional Hope Scale (The Goals Scale, Snyder C.R, 1991) was used (Table 4).

Table 4 *Correlations between Vocational Identity and the Adult Dispositional Hope Scale(ADHS)*

Vocational Identity	Components of ADHS			
		Pathways	Agency	Hope
Pearson Correlation		.318**	.068	.230*
Sig (2-tailed)		.000	.463	.012
N		118	118	118

\*\* p< .01

\* p< .05

The results show middle correlations between results of VI and Hope scale of ADHS and high correlation with Pathway scale, but there is not correlation with Agency scale. Since the Pathway scale measures individual's ability to set goals and devise multiple plans to reach them, so it is the most important scale for correlative measure with VI.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Drop out students is serious problem in higher education and researches in this area could help to recognize students needs more accurately and prevent big amount of drop out students. This study confirmed that students from first study courses of Vidzeme University College who already decided to leave their studies is about 19% - this is current proportion in Latvia's higher institutions. Also students who were often thought about interrupting studies (overall 34%) were included in high risk group of leaving studies. However, students with such decision not always really leave their studies. From other side this is quite significant number and university must pay attention to student needs (according OECD, 2008).

As most significant reasons to leave the studies students are mentioned personal reasons, having no interest in chosen study program and disappointment in studies. These results confirms, that students who drop out from studies, not always have enough information about chosen study programme and profession, and probably, they have not clear view on one's skills, talents, interests and goals.

Results from Barriers scale of MVS confirm these results- main difficulties in study process for high risk student group is uncertainty about ability to finish school, time management skills and also lack of money. According to the 2001 survey of Student Needs at the University of Latvia, students from first courses of study really experience difficulties in areas related to study competences, self-regulation, self-confidences, anxieties regarding career opportunities and the choice of relevant study programs (Voitkane, Miežite, 2001). Some previous studies pointed what risk factor also is social integration of student and contact problem with staff (Tinto, 1987) but in this study these factors were not actual.

This study confirms that students with higher risk to interrupt their studies have significantly lower Vocational Identity level. These findings are consistent with the main developmental and career theories, that occupational identity (or career maturity) help an adolescent find commitment to education, work and occupation (Erikson, 1968) and is the readiness of the individual to make appropriate career decisions (Super, 1974).

Study show that information regarding employability and career area is actual theme for all students. Students would like to get more information in their studies about praxis in chosen career, employment possibilities and future education. These needs could be connected with



actual economical situation in Latvia, with high unemployment level, but also confirm thoughts of career specialists, what semi-vocational and non-vocational course's (such communication sciences and political sciences) students could share responsibility with career services regard careers education, individual guidance and job placement (Watts, 2005). Probably, the career activities in Vidzeme University College could be more observable.

Two factors of MVS- Vocational Identity and Informational scales have high internal consistency. Original method (Holland, Daiger and Power, 1980) has similar, but not identical scale reliabilities data- scale's reliabilities are a bit higher (KR for VI .89 and OI .79), but Barriers scale is much lower (KR= .45). These differences could be connected with additional questions of this study, but also could indicate more carrier barriers of Latvia's students.

The study confirms relationship between Vocational Identity level and measures of pathway of setting goals. Goal directedness is connected with active and more motivated behaviour (Sheldon, Kasser, 1998). Similarly, Concept of Vocational Identity also include motivated career decision and target setting. This research indicates that students who better understands and assess their interests, talents and skills are more effective also in other areas.

The tested validity of the MVS scales appears to be useful for further researches in field of career guidance, as well as for adaptation of questionnaire for counselling process in Career centres in Latvia. However, verification of validity of MVS questionnaire should be continued, it is necessary to made retesting with MVS, and find correlations with other similar tests.

There are several limitations to this study. The study is based on self-report measures of thoughts or decisions of leaving studies, but these answers could be subjective. Probably, there are some more students with lot of academical problems, who don't point, that they want to leave a school but they could be more real candidate to drop out from school. Also more gender-balanced sample is needed to assess the generalizability of the findings.

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