

The learning motives of business students and postponement

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Abstract

This paper examines the motives of students' program and specialization choice on the example of business students in TalTech, Estonia. The program applies postponement strategy – students choose between five specializations of more direct vocational relevance during their second year. This study aims to distinguish extrinsic and intrinsic motivation factors of students who have weighed their specialization choice for longer from students who have made that decision in an earlier phase.

The findings suggest that the level of intrinsic learning motivation is not significantly different between the two groups. However, an earlier decision indicates that the student is more specialization-driven, whereas the postponement approach is connected to a generalist / entrepreneurial profile. This proposes that when a programme targets cross-functional skills and entrepreneurial spirit development, the postponement strategy is recommended as a motivational tool. To a degree, postponement brings about benefits and being undecided should not be treated as a weakness.

Keywords: *Business school; undergraduate studies; career choice motives, learning motivation, postponement, intrinsic motivation.*

1. Introduction

Student learning motivation and motives of career choices are not only diverse in a static moment but also possibly significantly changing over time, both before starting college as well as during undergraduate years. Therefore, on a personal level, there is a lot on the stake if one needs to make this decision in relative haste somewhere around the final stages of secondary education. Luckily, in modern business education, this risk is often lowered by program design that expects students to do multiple step-by-step choices instead, for example starting a broad-based business program initially, then choosing a specialization branch and later as well as alongside facing a wide pool of elective courses or modules. Learning business in this way builds a T-shaped profile: a sum of a birds-eye view augmented with deeper, often more functional and specialization-specific competences. In such configuration, it often makes sense to decouple the specialization choice from the initial choice of starting university studies. Simply put, such postponement allows additional first year experiences to drive students towards a more enriched perspective to allow more meaningful choices as well as build confidence.

Motivation has received considerable attention over the past two decades. Central to this debate is self-determination theory, which differentiates between two types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2020). While there is a plethora of factors that can possibly impact the student learning motivation and principal career choices, they can be broadly viewed in the same framework, defined by whether the factor is mostly controlled by some external power or actor that applies pressure through punishments and rewards, or is instead coming from inside the person and is more carried by the enjoyment of the process rather than any desired outcome. In the context of career choice motives, some factors are connected to principal expectations to outcomes, such as the perceived value of competences, range of accessible jobs, wages, lifestyle, reputation, or even having proved oneself to the society. Such points are relatively common themes in the marketing communication of business schools aimed at prospective students. Rather more intrinsic would be factors such as a program matching with personal interests, hobbies, personal development goals and even with character traits.

Ideally, one could expect the freshman year to boost both extrinsic as well as intrinsic motivation of students, which would result in a more analytical decision. However, for a section of students, the postponement opportunity is irrelevant altogether as they have already committed in their hearts to a specialization earlier, some even before entering the program. This by itself would suggest a higher degree of intrinsic motivation. However, it can also be viewed as a potential risk in hindsight. Our study observes the perceived motives of program and specialization choice of business students as perceived amidst their studies, contrasting the “predetermined” and “postponed” student segments. The aim of the study is to understand the differences in motives of choosing a career and to evaluate the favor or disfavor of postponing the specialization decision. The paper includes some brief comments on

motivation aspects relevant for business student career choice. We then present the methodology of our study and limitations. The findings allow debate on the preferable model of student choice from the viewpoint of program management.

2. Literature review

According to the self-determination theory, amotivation (lack of competence and value, nonrelevance) and intrinsic motivation (interest, enjoyment, satisfaction) are the two ends of a spectrum. In between resides extrinsic motivation consisting of four regulatory styles: external regulation (external rewards or punishments), introjection (approval from others and self), identification (personal importance, valuing, goals) and integration (consistency of identifications) (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

The activity is intrinsically motivated when it's purposeful, creates interest and provides satisfaction (Laran & Janiszewski, 2011; Wasserman & Wasserman, 2020). According to self-determination theory, autonomy, competence and relatedness are needed to satisfy persons' basic needs and create the environment for personal growth and integration (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Extrinsic motivation is characteristic of a situation when the activity itself is less important than its social or material consequences (Fischer et al., 2019). The stronger the extrinsic motivation, the smaller the effort undertaken (Ryan & Deci, 2000). People can, however, have simultaneously multiple motivations for their actions (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Students' study and career motivation can be also studied in the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation framework (Kornijenko, 2022; Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018). Extrinsic motivation is related to more shallow study methods, while intrinsic motivation is characteristic more of a deep study (Lucas & Meyer, 2005). The former is driven by external factors necessary to get the grade or fulfil the exam requirements, while the latter leads to understanding the study content, engaging actively and critically with it, in order to solve problems and implement new ideas, and find associations with existing knowledge (Duff & McKinstry, 2007). Study motivation is not fixed, but can change over time, influenced by the person, situation and important others (Boström & Bostedt, 2020).

According to Iacovou et al. (2011), there are five main work attributes: promotion potential, type of work (interesting, challenging), safety at work, remuneration and co-workers. In terms of youths' career motivation, Akosah-Twumasi et al. (2018) have found the extrinsic factors to include financial remuneration, job security, professional prestige and job accessibility; and the intrinsic factors to consist of personal interests, self-efficacy, outcome expectations and professional development opportunities. For business students, their career is mainly related to three factors: earning money for personal needs, self-fulfillment and growth, and making one's dreams come true (Frankowska et al. 2015). In choosing business as a field of study, the strongest motives are personal interests, but also compatibility with one's lifestyle and talents (Loorits, 2022).

In addition to internal and external motivators, family members, teachers and peers can impact youth's career decision-making. According to Polenova et al. (2018), students indicated parental influence on a specific career choice. Moreover, Akosah-Twumasi et al. (2018) reported that interpersonal factors and emergent bicultural influence play a role in career choice and that parental influences can be significant in collectivist cultural settings.

3. Research methods

The study employed quantitative research design. Data was collected from undergraduate business students of TalTech, Estonia with an online survey in early 2022. The Business program is characterized as a broad foundation to business, where students choose between five specializations on their second year: finance, entrepreneurship and management, logistics and supply chain, accounting and business intelligence, and marketing. Still, roughly $\frac{2}{3}$ of the program is shared across specialization branches. The questions had roots in previous studies on study and career motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2020; Akosah-Twumasi et al. 2018). The survey included demographic profile, evaluation of motives for students' initial choice of a program and of their specialization, and the time of the latter choice. The choice motives were evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale [strongly disagree; strongly agree]. The timing of the decision provided choice between five options, which were later condensed into two categories: "predetermined" (choice made before studies or during the first semester), and "postponed" (from second semester up until the last moment on the third).

The study population was a cohort of 2020 intake with 113 students. 69 responses were received (61%), 75% female, average age 21. Two respondents were excluded due to incompleteness. The response rates were comparable across gender and across specializations – the data is representative of both genders and we could not identify any major sample bias (other than the most typical "lowly motivated subjects might not respond"). Data was analysed with Spearman's and Wilcoxon correlation analysis and linear regression, conducted by SPSS v.28.

4. Results

The survey was firstly validated with exploratory factor analysis, yielding three factors: intrinsic, extrinsic and interpersonal. Table 1 demonstrates factor loadings exceeding 0.4 (Hair et al., 2009). Cronbach's alpha shows the internal consistency of the study. The reliability estimates of scaled items ranged [0.63 to 0.82]. Table 1 includes 13 motives, while eight others in the original survey were omitted, following the result of factor analysis. This paper could not fit some of auxiliary and more specific data, but the authors are willing to share it on demand. Table 2 indicates the means of the three motivational factors (extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation, interpersonal factor), according to the independent sample Mann-Whitney test.

Table 1. Mean and standard deviation of the scale items.

	Mean	SD	Factor loading	Cronbach's Alpha
Intrinsic factor				
I am interested in the topic area	4.19	1.02	0.886	0.824
I aim to develop my entrepreneurial skills	3.88	0.90	0.794	
I aim to be a part of social and business network	3.96	1.02	0.765	
I can combine my future job with my hobby	3.54	1.11	0.699	
My vision is to become an entrepreneur	3.37	1.22	0.637	
The curriculum is attractive and suitable for me	4.51	0.59	0.563	
Extrinsic factor				
The university and program are modern and practical	4.49	0.59	0.781	0.633
I think TalTech School of Business and Governance offers the best business education in Estonia	4.01	0.79	0.687	
Graduating the program is a way to prove my worth to the society	3.45	0.99	0.633	
The program has positive public reputation	3.67	0.94	0.615	
Ability to make money	3.88	0.90	0.415	
Interpersonal factor				
Parents	2.45	1.26	0.835	0.706
Friends and peers	2.33	1.15	0.783	

Source: authors' calculations

Surprisingly, most motives did not vary between predetermined and postponed groups. Seemingly slightly, but statistically insignificantly, the postponed group leaned towards a stronger motive of broad career perspective, whereas the predetermined group was more motivated by “relevant specialization available”, which suggests that the predetermined group have a slight leaning towards seeing themselves as specialists, while generalism appeals to the postponed group, as they were also, on average, more inspired by entrepreneurship. This also contributes to why overall intrinsic motivation is slightly higher in the postponed group. It can be seen as modest positive feedback to the faculty – arguably the entire learning process is now more meaningful.

The data showed that the postponed group is slightly more motivated by wages. It can be interpreted that the students more driven by future wages would indeed postpone their decision, as such direct pragmatism would allow a more calculated decision. However, for both groups, it was a secondary motif. The overall extrinsic component was slightly lower in postponed group because of such pattern of other extrinsic elements. Between the two groups, one difference was in the interpersonal factor - the influence of parents and friends had played a stronger role in the predetermined group and less so in the postponed. This was expected, but the overall low position of interpersonal factor alongside other elements was a bit surprising. Still, this is in line with previous studies (Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018), considering high level of individualism in local cultural context.

Table 2. Differences in the mean scores for choice motives.

Factor	Career decision	Mean	Mean difference	p-value
Extrinsic	Predetermined group	3.88	0.15	0.292
	Postponed choice group	3.73		
Intrinsic	Predetermined group	3.84	-0.06	0.766
	Postponed choice group	3.90		
Interpersonal	Predetermined group	2.61	0.52*	0.084
	Postponed choice group	2.09		

Note: * significant difference at the 0.1 level.

Source: authors' calculations

Table 3 provides the results of the correlation analysis. There is a strong positive correlation between intrinsic and extrinsic factors for a “predetermined” group of students (choice made before or during the first semester), which is not the case for postponed group. Furthermore, there is negative correlation between intrinsic and interpersonal factors for postponed group.

Table 3. Spearman’s correlation for career decision-making and motivation factors.

		Intrinsic factor	Extrinsic factor	Interpersonal factor
Postponed choice group	Intrinsic	1		
	Extrinsic	0.077	1	
	Interpersonal	-.382**	0.037	1
Predetermined group	Intrinsic	1		
	Extrinsic	.559***	1	
	Interpersonal	0.101	0.218	1

Note: *** correlation is significant at the 0.01 level; ** correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

Source: authors' calculations

Furthermore, it appears worthwhile to mention that the learning motives were rather similar across specialization options. The data indicated minor differences for local reasons (such as certain specializations having higher reputation perhaps because of visibility of local faculty activities). In addition, the motifs of societal contribution and being attracted by rapid development of the area applies to logistics students more than for other branches, but still the overall role of these motifs is secondary. In comparing the specialization choice with the timing aspect, there was only one significant finding – the share of marketing students in the

predetermined group stood out from the overall sample. We speculate it is a result of various local education landscape reasons, as different specializations have different supply patterns.

Not only were the motives of choice similar across specializations, but also various other specializations were showing to be still rather close “in competition” in terms of their overall attractiveness. While we had assumed that giving students time to weigh their options makes it a clear choice for most, the data indicated that for most students, there is at least one other option almost similarly favorable. While it is positive in the sense that all options are seen worthy to be considered (suggesting there are no major local quality bottlenecks) it is also a sign that students (at least on their second year of studies) are still diverse mostly in similar ways between specializations. Even though many colleagues in academia might feel that there are clearly “students better-suited for marketing” and others for finance or accounting, the individual choices of students seem mostly to disregard such stereotypes.

5. Discussion and conclusion

One possible conclusion is that postponement does not significantly boost overall motivation because locally our faculty is not good enough. Still, fortunately, there is no significant motivational decline, suggesting we are at least managing to avoid student discouragement. As the average scores of more favorable motives (from faculty viewpoint) appear moderate-to-high, they don't indicate a major alarm. Postponement as a motivational strategy appears a sound suggestion for business programs. Even if not significantly impacting student motivation, it appears relevant as supporting student satisfaction. Ideally it could also boost both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. We still recommend business programs to increase the number of elective courses as well as other ways of meaningful choices. This wouldn't be even mainly for vocational reasons (such as to better cater for the direct needs of labor market), but for expecting the students to further practice self-reflection based decision-making, which we see as a key foundation of modern entrepreneurship competence.

In conclusion, a balanced mix of student motivation appears most desirable. If intrinsic motivation is lacking, the student might be treating the effort input as qualifier – just enough to cross a certain threshold. Extrinsic motivation should not be treated as a substitute for intrinsic, rather than complementary. One aim of the faculty would be to ensure that students would continuously develop a stronger perception of relevance of each and every topic area. Coupling that with practicing ongoing self-evaluation would be a way to create a machine that further refines the elements of relevance towards the level of individual identification. Finally, we propose that a driving force of this machine ought to be curiosity, the role of which is sometimes underestimated in faculty teaching practice. A teacher should never give up aiming to spark and fuel student curiosity with aims to develop this into a habit. This might be perhaps even more important than any formulated learning outcome of a program.

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