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Factors influencing the choice of a university degree: the case of physical activity, recreation and sport tourism studies

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Abstract
The aim of this research is to analyse students´ expectations that have an influence on choosing Physical Activity, Recreation and Sport Tourism as an academic major. According to the analysis of this research on the reasons for choosing Fitness, Recreation and Sport Tourism studies at Sports University of Tirana, the conclusions reached show that among multiple factors, the expectations of having collaborative and situated learning experiences are one of the main reasons for choosing these studies, as well as the a lot of job opportunities that this degree offers. **Methods and subjects**. The final cohort involved in this study was comprised of 320 students, of whom 35.94% were women and 64.06% men. Almost half of the participants (48%) were aged between,18-20 and 39% were aged between, 21-22. This article explores the expectations that have driven students in their choice of a Leisure and Recreation academic major, considering that if the studies match the expectations of the students, the probability of success in the learning process will increase. With this conceptual framework in mind, the following research questions have been developed: 1.What are the student´s curriculum and job expectations for choosing RFST studies? 2. In which degree can situated and collaborative learning be found among those expectations? The third research

question refers to the level of rationality or emotionality that emerges in the expression of the expectations. **Results.** Over 92% of the participants were full-time students and 8% were part-time students. Participants are coming to follow studies in FPAR (36.67%), for fitness instructor, (25.14%) sport tourism guide, 13.12% rehabilitation sciences, (11.92%) touristic animator and (13.15%) other specialities. **Conclusions.** These aspects are essential for designing the curriculum and the outline of the courses of a Fitness, Recreation and Sport Tourism degree. Even though the limitations of a case study do not allow for generalization and direct transference, we do believe that future research could shed new light on necessary knowledge about this topic.

Keywords: learning process, conceptual framework, situated learning, designing curriculum distributed learning,

Introduction

This paper analyses the expectations of students at Faculty of Physical Activity and Recreation as part of Sports University of Tirana, Albania that lead them to choose Recreation, Fitness and Sport Tourism (RFST) studies. It is important that higher education institutions check the reasons why students choose an academic major and the students' level of satisfaction with the program. This information has important implications for recruitment of new students as well as for the retention of current students. In this article, we present this research, related to the students´ expectations for choosing recreation studies.

Expectations, influencing the decision of choosing an academic major, have been studied by several authors. However, there are less studies focused on the reasons for choosing a recreation, fitness and sport tourism major in research conducted at the Sports University of Tirana, concluded that personal and environmental factors are more important than the social and demographic ones.

The study was based on the hypothesis that the students´ expectations for choosing an academic major include assumptions about the learning process which are coincident with current theories about learning, (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). The selection of the Recreation degree as a case study is due to the similarities and

common features that it shares with the Physical Activity and Sports Science degree.

Situated and collaborative learning

The deepen on teaching and learning problems requires us to question in which way the student of the 21st century experiences the learning process. According to Umberto Eco (2004, p.7), given that youth are living a social context where knowledge is poorly valued by itself or as mean for success in life, the best answer they can be given about the value of knowledge is that:

The exercise of knowledge creates relations, continuity and emotional attachments. It introduces us to parents other than our biological ones… we don't just remember our own life but the lives of others (cited in Walker, 2006, p. 3).

The concept of learning community emphasizes three persistent characteristics in the perspectives, research and experiences conducted in both primary education and higher education (Jawitz, 2009).

- First, the reference of a learning community situated in real contexts, and in real workplaces. This can be seen in communities where day to day problems and more complex problems are faced, partially identified and with diffuse border lines (Roth, 1995; 1998).
- Second, participants collaborate with the achievement of a goal or with overcoming a challenge (Whitcomb et al., 2009).
- And third, the experience and knowledge function as part of the goods of that community (Lieberman & Pointer-Mace, 2008).

Thus, we highlight the importance of context in the understanding of the learning process, through participation in social communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and the relationship between knowledge and practice proposed there (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2011). The fact that this community participation takes place through authentic learning activities (Brown et al., 1989; Roth, 1995) increases the student disposition towards thinking and problem solving (Putnan & Borko, 2000).

In summary, learning depends on the authentic participation in the community where knowledge is situated and distributed. *This model emphasizes the essential role of the human and social ecosystem, where the implication of each student in the development of his/her identity and within his/her own frame of learning is irreplaceable.* In this model, knowledge is not completely in the mind of the student, and learning is rather a consequence of participation in the activities of the community. It is inside the community, thus, where the student acquires the knowledge and the skills.

Fitness and Recreation studies participate in this paradigm reflecting real opportunities for applying the acquired knowledge through active learning and participative methodologies (Huber, 2008).

The foundation of the decision-making process.

All strategies of shared work are the ideal way for developing a professional identity throughout the first academic steps. The current expansion of cyberspace benefits the establishment of cooperative learning environments in working networks connected physically and virtually (Stiegler, 2012).

Daniel Kahneman (2011) defines a perspective of the decision-making process based on two types of thinking:

- fast thinking
- slow thinking.

Fast thinking is not based on demonstrable evidence, but rather it is intuitive thinking based on personal experience and, for that reason. The often appropriate intuitions of the experts are explained by the effect of prolonged practice and experience. This expert intuition is constituted by skills that have been automated through repetition.

If the intuitive thinking is not expert, it usually points to the presence of the easiest answer then it fails, and the person needs to make a turn to a more deliberate and elaborate thinking that requires concentration. Part of our research consists in analysing if the students use fast or slow thinking when making the decision about choosing their university studies and justifying their choice in the questionnaires.

Given that slow thinking is the one that can compare, relate cause and effect, and make deliberated choices between options, it would be the correct type of thinking to make this decision

Material and Methods

This article explores the expectations that have driven students in their choice of a Leisure and Recreation academic major, considering that if the studies match the expectations of the students, the probability of success in the learning process will increase.

With this conceptual framework in mind, the following research questions have been developed:

1. What are the student´s curriculum and job expectations for choosing RFST studies?

2. In which degree can situated and collaborative learning be found among those expectations?

The third research question refers to the level of rationality or emotionality that emerges in the expression of the expectations.

3. In which degree do the students´ expectations reflect a rational analysis or rather a more emotional motivation?

The sample of the study initially consisted of Physical Activity, Recreation and Sport Tourism accredited degree program, at Sports University of Tirana, Albania. A major is the main degree that the student studies at a university. It is the main core of their studies and the student will get a degree in that specific major (such as RFST).

Data was collected during the 2017 second semester, over a two week period, in all scheduled undergraduate courses. Students were informed about the study and their participation was voluntary. A total of 400 questionnaires were initially distributed equally in the all Bachelor students. All the questionnaires were returned and the results then analysed. Finally, 320 questionnaires were included in the study because they included all the information required.

Results and Discussion

Demographic codes

The final cohort involved in this study was comprised of 320 students, of whom 35.94% were women and 64.06% men. Almost half of the participants (48%) were aged between,18-20 and 39% were aged between, 21-22. The rest were older. Over 92% of the participants were full-time students and 8% were part-time students. Participants are coming to follow studies in FPAR (36.67%), for fitness instructor, (25.14%) sport tourism guide, 13.12% rehabilitation sciences, (11.92%) touristic animator and (13.15%) other specialities.

Fitness Instructor 117	36.67%
Sport Tourism Guide 80	25.14%
Rehabilitation Sciences 42	13.12%
Touristic Animator 38	11.92%
Other Specialities 43	13.15%
Total 320	**100%**

Figure 1. The different specialities.

Inferential codes

Students´ expectations. Research questions 1 and 2.

In table 1 the codes resulting from the analysis of the data are presented. The results are expressed in percentages of absolute frequencies.

Table 1. Expectations: inferential code map.

---***Inferential Codes***----------***%***----

1. Satisfaction with previous learning and professional experience..... 9.92%
2. Expectations in finding satisfaction in learning and in a future job. 29.12%

3. Expectations of a broad field of learning and also broad job opportunities. 22.86%
4. Expectations of situated learning and possibility of working outdoors/nature. 21.54%
5. Expectations of collaborative learning and working with people. 10.11%
6. Expectations of learning by doing and practical curriculum. 6.45%

Total 100%

Satisfaction in previous learning and professional experience.

Previous experience, either academic or professional, has been shown to be a source of information and motivation for choosing these studies. Three discriminatory nuances have emerged in this category:

- Satisfaction with previous learning and job experience.
- Dissatisfaction with experiences in other fields.
- Influenced by recommendations or the experience of others.

A considerable number of participants reported to have previous experience in the field of fitness, recreation and sport tourism. The narratives include expressions of satisfaction with this previous experience, regardless of being academic or professional experience.

Also, for students that have had a previous positive experience in the field, the fact of pursuing a university degree in this field meant possibilities of getting more qualified jobs within the field. However, for some participants the choice was based on previous negative professional or academic experiences in other fields.

Within this category some narratives emerge pointing to the importance and influence of the experience of other peers, family, or even advisors´ recommendations according to their previous profile.

Expectations of finding satisfaction on learning and/or the future work.

This category presents the higher number of expressions, at 29.12%. It includes very emotional expressions of affection, where

there is frequently no precision or concretion of the reason or motivation. Considering that this is the most repeated category, we have quantified these three different nuances within the variable.

Table 2. Sub/codes expectations of finding satisfaction on learning and/or the future work.

2.1 The interesting and ludic nature of the studies and jobs	19.28%
2.2 Match specific professional expectations	53.62%
2.3 Match their personality	27.10%

A cohort of the participants express, with short and succinct expressive units, that the recreation professional field seems interesting and exciting. Even though they do not express a specific motive of interest, it is shown that they value the ludic nature of the curriculum activities:

Interesting, fun, healthy.

I thought it will be very interesting.

Most narratives within this category consider that the studies are adequate to their job expectations:

I want to be a tour leader so this is the right way to go.

Another group of students point out that they can picture themselves working in this field in the future because they think they will enjoy their work and they value this highly. In some of the sequences of meaning it is seen that they consider that their personality matches the profile of the field, although they do not formulate a rational explanation for this:

Something I could see myself doing.

I want to be able to enjoy my job and to earn good money.

I want to do what I love for the rest of my life.

Expectations of broad learning experiences and broad job opportunities

This category integrates the narratives of the participants where they emphasize the fact that this degree guarantees a future job in

different fields due to the broad learning opportunities that it offers. This category emerged as the fourth reason for choosing this major, being present in 22.86% of the narratives. In this regard, the diversity of areas, the interdisciplinary nature, and the possibility of different options and specialization in each of the options, motivates the student. In short, some students report as a reason the vast great variety of possibilities and options the recreation field has to offer as an academic major as well as a professional field:

Also one that would give me a variety of career choices and the possibility to switch careers smoothly later in life.

Broad major with many different types of fields you can explore.

The wide variety of involvement and opportunities.

Likewise, the different options for getting a job were valued by some students:

It has a lot of different areas to go into, not terribly hard to get a job.

Variety of jobs after graduation.

Expectations of situated learning and working outdoors/nature.

The students report that being in touch with nature in their future job is one of the main reasons for choosing this degree. This category is the second most common reason for choosing a Recreation major in this survey, being present in 21.54% of the answers.

Informants use words such as "I have fun", "I enjoy it", "I like it", emphasizing the most emotional side related to personal satisfaction. In their opinion, this field of studies provides with a unique opportunity for people to work in natural settings, to spend time outdoors, to know better the beauty of their country and to avoid a closed working environment, as reflected in the following narratives:

I like the outdoors more than I like being in an office, because I am a sport type.

I love the outdoors and want to pass that on to others.

I enjoy being outdoors and getting down with nature.

I have always been interested in the outdoors. So, to me a job in the outdoor Recreation field would be ideal and so I realise my dream.

Expectations of collaborative learning and working with people

It is also very common that people who decide to study a Recreation major are very people oriented. It is the third reason for choosing this major at 10.11%. It includes two discriminatory nuances:

Because it´s great to work with others.

I want to work with people and in a social environment.

Meet new people, (special foreigner) and share new experiences.

Moreover, students believe that this job is going to allow them to help other people and this causes gives them personal satisfaction:

Teaching and helping others.

I want to help people in fitness to get healthier, stronger and feel good.

It is a great field to serve others.

Expectations of learning by doing and a practical and applicative curriculum

This reason is reported by 6.45% of the participants. They consider this degree attractive because the curriculum emphasizes the activity of the apprentice: learning by doing (Dewey, 1963). The applicability and the signification on contents are among the dimensions offered in the curriculum. These dimensions are added to a particularity, especially appealing to students: the different possibilities for options and courses that allow the student to elaborate a personal academic career path. According to the students' opinions, these dimensions allow specific scenarios that will contribute, no doubt about it, to apply what is learnt in the degree in a future job. These hands on experiences are, thus, very appealing to students, making the learning process enjoyable and increasing the relationship between theory and practice, and as consequence, favouring authentic learning:

Personally enjoy hands on.
Because I like to work with hands on learning.

Third research question: Rationality and emotionality level in the expression of expectations

As to the third research question, the narratives show that the expectations of the students that motivated their choice reflect a more emotional rather than rational assessment. A high number of the narratives (64.34%) express a large degree of emotionality, and can be identified with the concept of fast thinking of Kahneman (2011). Only 35.66% of the narratives could be identified with slow thinking, which involves more rational choices, with a higher sense of cause and effect or a planning vision.

A majority of the participants have used words such as "love", "like", "want" or "enjoy" or others such as "passionate", "life", or "happy", in their expressions emphasizing an emotional and affective dimension (see figure 2).

According to Mirsafian and Mohamadinejad (2012), sport and leisure scenarios are contexts where people lose their inhibitions about emotional reactions.

Love	13.72 %
Like	24.21 %
Want	27.17 %
Enjoy	14.26 %
Other	20.64 %

Figure 2. Content-word analysis.

The structure resulting from the analysis of the terms reinforces the *emotional character* and the importance of the dispositions and attitudes compared to more *rational analysis*, reasoning and planning. On the other hand, the wording of the narratives makes the *most affective and emotional expectations and motivation more pronounced*:

I love camping life.

I want to be able to enjoy my job and the connection with nature.

It is more freedom to enjoy work, I don't feel forced.

Life enhancement and work and life balance are topics of importance for me.

Arguments of cause and effect, logical analysis of the possibilities of the career, or assessments implying planning, are barely expressed in the narratives, as happens in the following example:

I chose Recreation and Tourism because it is what I need to complete for what I want to do when I Graduate.

Conclusions

The purpose of this research has been achieved. The narratives of the participants show that the choice of a Recreation Faculty is based on factors such as the broad job opportunities that this field offers, even though many of these jobs are part-time jobs. The job offers for positions exceeds the demand, which means that the possibilities of getting a job are optimal. The motivation of the availability of job positions is linked to the consideration that these learning experiences and working tasks match their personality.

The second motivation for their choice (21.54%) is working in a natural setting. Within the narratives that are more specific about their motivations, there emerges the assessment of the learning experiences done in real professional settings, natural environments, camping's, where learning is more authentic and there are more chances of transference. In this respect, the combination of the narratives of category 3 about the desire of situated learning in a natural setting (22.86%), the narratives of category 6 about learning by doing (6.45%), and category 5 about learning and working with people (10.11%), would result in a high percentage (29.12%) of narratives that value situated learning experiences that involve a high degree of problem-solving learning in cooperation communities.

Finally, previous experiences, although at a lower degree, have an impact on the motivations for the choice. We can conclude that

the findings of this study evidence a concordance between the expectations and the characteristics of what would be authentic and effective learning according to the most current perspectives of the educational scientific community (Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

Likewise, in the form and content of the motivations expressed by the informants, we can conclude that in the decision making process the *emotional level is highly predominant.* We are beings driven by affection, dispositions and attitudes. *Rational logical thinking influences less on decisions than what we think*.

According to the results of this research, a university degree should offer:

- A broad, rich and varied curriculum, that answers to the different demands of the students and allows ample working opportunities (Ladson-Billings, 2004).
- Situated learning in authentic and real settings, where learning environments allow a real application of theoretical knowledge into practice. This learning has to integrate an intensive study where the student can reflect about practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2011).
- Collaborative and distributive learning that allows the development of team work and coordination competences, in the classroom as well as in the digital networks, simulating how they will be required to work in the workplace (Darling-Hammond, 1996).
- A learning process that integrates the cognitive and emotional aspects of the mind, based on the neurological findings of this decade and the last theories about the mind and brain (Koch, 2012; Leher, 2012).

These aspects are essential for designing the curriculum and the outline of the courses of a Fitness, Recreation and Sport Tourism degree. Even though the limitations of a case study do not allow for generalization and direct transference, we do believe that future research could shed new light on necessary knowledge about this topic.

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