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Life and professional plans of academic youth graduating in a pandemic

Plany życiowe i zawodowe młodzieży akademickiej kończącej studia w warunkach pandemii

Introduction to study

Everyone wants to create their own reality, sets themselves specific goals, puts them in time and strives to achieve them, setting the rules that will guide them in their actions (cf. Szewczuk, 1990, p. 210). A natural issue in creating life and professional plans is one's orientation towards the future. One's life plan includes an important, primary goal for an individual along with instrumental goals associated with it, taking on a very specific dimension (cf. Mądrycki, 2002, p. 130). Therefore, when analyzing one's plans, one should take into account their rich content, complexity, scope, time and effort put into their implementation, the variety of necessary activities depending on the field they concern, their degree of difficulty, flexibility, span over time, compliance with moral standards (cf. Uniewska, Ziętarski, 2013, p. 164). At the basis of all

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human plans are dreams, which are free ideas about life, the world and oneself. When constructing one's own plans, one analyzes them in terms of reality and possibilities, designs (programmes) one's future and sets chronologically the individual stages of action and the desired changes. Tadeusz Nowacki (2010) points out that not all dreams take the form of plans, because the vision of life shaped on their basis is spontaneous, and many dreams are not a fully conscious act.

While undertaking empirical research on the life and professional plans of university students, I was guided by the premise that contemporary social and professional life is significantly determined by socio-economic conditions; it undergoes dynamic changes and professional career becomes less predictable than in the past. Zygmunt Bauman noted that the time of equality of careers, guaranteeing the same type of career for people with the same capabilities and competences, has passed. Currently - as he claimed - there is talk not so much about pursuing specific professions, but rather undertaking projects. Each subsequent project is new and different from the previous ones, it requires competence and different creative solutions (Bauman, 2001, pp. 20-21). This is due to globalization processes, the development of new techniques and technologies, the IT revolution and recently new threats caused by the pandemic that has affected almost the entire world. These changes are often inevitable, but they give rise to a lot of uncertainty due to their unpredictability and an individual sense of threat, sometimes real, sometimes imaginary, i.e. resulting from one's sensitivity and imagination (cf. Bera 2017; Bera et al. 2022). These processes are accompanied by significant educational changes in the area of virtualization, the labor market and remote work, as well as models of shaping one's own professional career (Bright, 1994). As noted by Ewa Sarzyńska-Mazurek (2013), the changes taking place in the area of professional careers are visible in new career models, where great importance is attached to both external qualitative and subjective aspects. Linear careers decline, with „zig-zag” careers, portfolio careers, „borderless” careers, „kaleidoscopic” careers, being on the rise (cf. Sarzyńska-Mazurek, 2013, p. 13).

Academic youth starting their studies do not always have fully formed life and professional plans, and a vision of the future is sometimes associated with unrealistic expectations. For example, they may have chosen a trendy field of study, and it turned out that the future profession requires more dedication, is less attractive in many respects (work content, growth opportunities, social

prestige, gratifications being inadequate to the employer's requirements and the employee's expectations) (cf. Wierzejska, Karpenko, 2015, p. 7). Disappointed graduates will therefore look for another professional alternative, or reconcile with their previous choice. However, if they make the right choice, they will easily enter the labor market and pursue their life and professional plans.

Celina Timoszyk-Tomczyk (2003) points to various ways of developing a strategy for constructing one's own life and professional plans: a) a realistic strategy, based on knowing oneself, one's own strengths and weaknesses, adequate analysis of one's situation and observation of other people; b) a strategy of authority, consisting in referring to those who evoke one's respect and admiration, listening to their advice and guidance when one feels powerless or fails in making an attempt to work out an autonomous path to one's own growth; c) a strategy of coercion related to the exertion of pressure, e.g. by one's family, which enforces the shape of development goals, which in turn results in the lack of subjectivity; d) a wishful strategy that boils down to planning one's own future as a result of fantasies, often without foundation in one's personal resources and the lack of specific ways to fulfill one's exuberant fantasies. Here unrealistic dreams and wishes are mixed with reality; e) a waiting strategy, consisting in waiting for the events to unfold and only reacting to the already existing situation. It is based on the conviction that it is difficult to plan for the future in a dynamic and changing social and professional reality; f) a *carpe diem* strategy, which means „no vision of the future career”, and the mere pursuit of subsequent hedonistic goals, because the prose of life is more crucial than the effort of planning for the future (cf. Wierzejska and Karpenko, 2015, pp. 57–58).

The success of university graduates' life and professional plans and their transition to the labor market is therefore determined by the impact of social and economic factors (condition of the labor market, demand for specific specialists, level of innovativeness in the economy) and individual factors. Individual factors include, among others: the vision of one's own profession and functioning at work, expectations and values related to work, competences, predispositions, as well as strength of character and determination in pursuit of the chosen goal. These factors should be considered as interconnected, as they often condition and complement each other (cf. Piróg, 2013, pp. 133–134).

Study assumptions

Recognizing the relevance of the issue, the study goal was to determine the life and professional plans of academic youth on the verge of their transition to the labor market in the particular conditions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The study involved 582 final year students from academic centers in Poland representing various faculties and specialties. The study was carried out at the turn of 2021/22 in Lublin, Warsaw, Siedlce, Kraków, Radom, Kielce and Zielona Góra. Women accounted for 68.2% of respondents. 68.7% of the respondents graduated from social sciences and humanities. The remaining respondents (31.3%) are students of technical, logistics and management faculties. The study was carried out using a diagnostic survey carried out using the questionnaire technique. The questionnaire was compiled by educators from the H.S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University and adapted to Polish conditions. The analysis of the study material applied elements of descriptive and correlation statistics: Pearson's chi-square test and Spearman's rank correlation coefficient.

Analysis of the study results

The surveyed students were to specify their preferred life values and place of work in this system, as well as various aspects concerning the choice of a profession, its attractiveness, assessment of the chosen profession by people close to them, predispositions and factors determining life and professional success.

When arranging life values which are their personal aspirations (Table 1) from 1 to 14, the respondents created a hierarchy which shows that the pursuit of creating a happy family was ranked highest ($M=5.4$). In second place was the value of developing one's character ($M = 5.5$); in third place, having trusted and interesting friends ($M = 6.1$); and in fourth place was obtaining financial independence as a life value ($M = 6.3$). It turns out that a happy family was indicated as the most cherished value by 38.0% of the respondents. This value was more often indicated by women than men ($p<0.000$). Developing one's character is the highest value for 27.8% of students, having trusted and interesting friends for 14.4%, and gaining independence for 16.7% of respondents. On the other hand, developing one's character was more emphasized by men than women ($p<0.001$).

The following ranks are occupied by such life values of the surveyed students as: getting an interesting job ($M = 6.9$), becoming an intelligent person ($M = 7.0$), prosperous life without livelihood problems ($M = 7.2$) and becoming a decent, honest person ($M=7.4$). It should be noted that these values were indicated as the most important in one's life, i.e. in the first place, by: 12.5%; 8.1%; 18.7% and 16.2% of the respondents, respectively. These values were more often indicated by students from small towns than from large urban agglomerations ($p<0.014$) and by humanists more than students in other fields of study ($p<0.000$).

Next, there were life values related to developing and pursuing one's creative potential ($M=7.8$) and obtaining higher education ($M=8.0$). These values were indicated as the most important by 8.6% and 6.4% of the respondents, respectively. These preferences most often concerned people studying humanities and social sciences ($p<0.042$).

Table 1. *Hierarchy of life values of the surveyed academic youth (from 1 to 14)*

Life values	Descriptive statistics of the hierarchy of life values of the surveyed academic youth			
	Valid N	M	Median	Standard dev.
Create a happy family	579	5.4	4.0	4.252
Develop a strong character	580	6.1	5.0	3.907
Have trusted and interesting friends	579	5.5	5.0	3.548
Get financial independence	578	6.3	6.0	3.665
Get an interesting job	578	6.9	7.0	3.286
Become an intelligent person	579	7.0	7.0	3.464
Live in prosperity, without livelihood issues	579	7.2	7.0	4.028
Become a decent, honest person	579	7.4	7.0	3.964
Develop and pursue one's creative potential	577	7.8	8.0	3.706
Get a higher education	578	8.0	8.0	3.887
Achieve good physical form, be „in good shape”	578	8.2	9.0	3.844
Broaden one's worldview, develop one's erudition	579	8.8	9.0	3.595
Reach a high level of spiritual development	579	9.4	10.0	3.854
Reach a high status, gain relevance in society	577	10.6	12.0	3.740

Source: Authors' own research

At the bottom of the hierarchy were such values of the surveyed students as: achieving good physical development, being in „good shape” ($M = 8.2$), expanding one’s worldview, developing one’s erudition ($M = 8.8$), achieving high spiritual development ($M = 9.4$) and achieving a high status, gaining relevance in society ($M = 10.6$). It should be noted that these values were indicated by: 11.0%; 6.0%; 5.0% and 4.1% of respondents, respectively.

As was established, four out of ten surveyed students (40.0%) declare that they already have defined career plans on the verge of graduation, but they still have doubts about making a concrete decision. These are most often students of humanities ($p < 0.040$). Only every third respondent (32.0%) has a clearly defined vision of their own professional path. They have made their choice and are going to carry out their plan. The group is dominated by students of technical, logistics and management studies ($p < 0.017$). On the other hand, every fifth surveyed student (19.9%) admits that they have no specific career plans yet, although they think about it from time to time. In turn, every fourteenth respondent (7.1%) does not even think about it, recognizing that they still have time for that.

In the opinion of every second student (50.0%), the choice of further professional development or a specific job will be determined by one’s own preferences, the implementation of one’s main interests and fascinations. Every third respondent (33.7%) indicates that they take into account the level of remuneration when deciding about their professional future. For every fifth respondent (20.0%) it is important to have a high probability of obtaining employment in a given profession in accordance with one’s education. The prestige of the profession (4.8% of responses), advice or guidance from parents (3.1%) and friends (4.6%) would play a negligible role. On the other hand, 7.7% of the respondents declare that they do not yet know what the decisive factor in choosing a particular profession would be.

Nearly 3/4 of the respondents (70.9%) declare a serious decision, supported by arguments or at least serious enough regarding the choice of a particular profession. On the other hand, 12.0% of respondents indicate that the decision is final and irreversible. The remaining students (17.1%) claim that they do not treat this issue too seriously, since a lot can change in their lives and professional plans.

Students acquire information about employment opportunities and occupations from various sources. Most often, these are their own observations

of the labor market and changes in employment (35.1% of responses), information from the media (newspapers, radio, television) (22.2%), news from friends, acquaintances and peers (19.1%), from parents or relatives (16.5%), from lecturers (12.4%), from random conversations (12.0%), from Internet advertising (10.3%) and in literature and movies (6.7%). Thus, in the opinion of the respondents, the possibility of employing graduates and the choice of a specific profession is determined primarily by their individual observation and analysis of the labor market and the possibility of choosing an adequate path of professional development, as well as other available sources. Most often, this information comes from many available sources.

Every second surveyed student (50.0%) believes that they have a sufficiently high level of knowledge about their potential future profession obtained from people working in the field, but without their own practical experience. This opinion is mainly expressed by students of humanities and social sciences ($p < 0.020$). More than every sixth respondent (17.5%) states that they have a lot of knowledge about their profession because they have experience from practical work in the field. However, more than every fourth respondent (23.4%) admits that they have very little knowledge based mainly on textbooks and possibly the media, and every eleventh respondent (9.1%) says that they have little knowledge about the future profession, based on the opinions of other people.

What the surveyed academic youth are particularly looking for in their future profession is pursuing one's interests, predispositions and abilities (41.1% of responses), as well as the possibility of becoming an independent and self-reliant person (21.3%) and an independent and creative nature of work (16.0%). The subjective nature of functioning in the work environment is clearly emphasized. These values are more important for students of humanities than for others ($p < 0.006$). Much fewer responses were given to such categories as: the prestige of a profession (13.7%), the possibility of gaining a high status and social position (10.3%) or the possibility of confirming one's own worth (6.4%).

According to the surveyed students, they have the greatest predispositions to work directly with people: pedagogical, social work, services (28.7%), then organizational and administrative work (22.7%), then standard work with a clearly defined scope of tasks (14.1%) or creative and scientific work (12.5%). Responses concerning such work as: production work, own business

activity, artistic creation, management of large teams of people came out quite insignificant, ranging from 2.7% to 4.2%.

Academic youth want their future work to be dominated by a style that allows them to show initiative, demonstrate knowledge and skills (26.1% of responses) as well as work in partnership with a group (24.2% of responses). Every sixth respondent would like to work independently, in isolation, without anyone's interference (15.8% of responses) or lead, organize, manage (15.5%). For every ninth respondent (10.9%), the optimal situation would be a job in which they function as a subordinate, performing specific tasks, while every eleventh respondent (9.3%) wants to be an „idea generator” or „analyst”, but not an administrator. Every fourteenth student (7.7%) states that they have not thought about what style of work would suit them best.

It should be highlighted that nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of the surveyed students (72.3%) state that their personal life and professional plans are fully accepted by those close to them, who also promise support in the pursuit of these plans or generally have a positive attitude towards them. Students from large urban centers can rely on this support more than those from small towns or rural residents ($p < 0.004$). On the other hand, every sixth respondent (17.2%) is met with a neutral attitude of those close to him: they are not too happy with their plans, but they do not negate them either. Every tenth respondent (10.2%) admits that their relatives not only do not accept their life and professional plans, but strongly suggest their own options. It should also be noted that sometimes the relatives of the surveyed students do not accept their life choices, but do not oppose them either (2.2%) or show indifference, although they are aware of said plans (2.6%). It turns out that in a few cases (0.9%) at home no one knows about their life and professional plans.

It turns out that $\frac{2}{3}$ of the surveyed students (61.3%) claim that their success in life and the successful implementation of plans will be determined primarily by their own personal resources, including strong character and abilities. This belief is more often expressed by men than women ($p < 0.001$). Nearly every fourth respondent (22.7%) points out that nowadays what matters are relations with the „right people”, and therefore non-substantive issues, i.e. the so-called connections. Every sixth respondent (17.5%) points to the role of specialist education in creating one's personal and professional success. According to 7.7%, success is determined primarily by one's good fortune, prosperity and sheer „luck”. On the other hand, 5.8% of respondents

indicate a coincidence. And every tenth respondent (10.3%) does not know what the factor determining success in life and professional career may be.

Summary

In summary, it can be concluded that the system of life values of the surveyed academic youth does not differ significantly from the traditional hierarchy of values preferred in Polish society (cf. e.g. Szymański, 1998; Baraniak, 2008; Nowosad, 2016; Wosik-Kawala, Sarzyńska-Mazurek, 2017). The pro-family orientation is dominant, as is concern for one's personal development and gaining financial independence. This is to be fostered by doing interesting work, one's intellectual potential, prosperous life and internal moral order. Worldview, spiritual and prestige values become the least important.

It turns out that, while on the verge of transition to the labor market, around $\frac{3}{4}$ of the surveyed students have more or less defined career plans. Most often they also made their decisions. Their choice of a professional path is mainly the pursuit of their own interests, passions and hobbies. To some, the situation on the labor market is also important. Their recognition of the situation related to future employment is primarily due to their own observation of the labor market, and to a lesser extent, to information from the media or from friends, acquaintances or peers. Therefore, the vast majority of them have a sufficiently high level of knowledge about their potential occupation (about the content of the job, the employer's expectations, possibilities of their own professional growth). For their part, they rely on the possibility of pursuing their own interests, their own predispositions and abilities as well as subjective functioning in their professional environment. They prefer working with people in education, social services, organizational and administrative activities. Economic activity or human resources management is rather beyond their interests. Thus, they prefer broadly understood social services, not productive activities. Their life and professional plans are usually accepted by those closest to them. They are positive that their professional success and the successful pursuit of their plans will be determined primarily by their personal resources and determination in action. Unfortunately, a significant number of respondents believe that it is difficult to pursue their professional plans in the current situation without the so-called connections.

The obtained results indicate that life and professional plans reflect the current social and economic situation and little knowledge about the choice of future profession by young people choosing a particular field of study. In the course of studies, it becomes advisable to intensify activities in the field of career counseling carried out in the course of program classes as well as by career offices operating in various academic centers.

Abstract: The aim of the article is to present the life and professional plans of university students graduating in the conditions of a pandemic and virtualization of the education process. Social and economic conditions, the demand for various professions and specializations on the labor market are becoming an important determinant of creating their own future by university graduates preparing for transition to the labor market. The presented data are the result of empirical research conducted in numerous and diverse academic environments and in various fields of study. The formulated conclusions may serve not only the process of academic education, but also to build individual professional development paths for people graduating from higher education.

Keywords: academic youth, life and professional plans, conditions of the pandemic

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie planów życiowych i zawodowych młodzieży akademickiej kończącej studia w warunkach pandemii i wirtualizacji procesu kształcenia. Warunki społeczne i ekonomiczne, zapotrzebowanie na różne zawody i specjalności na rynku pracy stają się istotnym wyznacznikiem kreowania własnej przyszłości przez absolwentów studiów wyższych przygotowujących się do tranzykcji na rynek pracy. Przedstawione dane stanowią rezultat przeprowadzonych badań empirycznych w licznych i zróżnicowanych środowiskach akademickich oraz na różnych kierunkach studiów. Sformułowane konkluzje służyć mogą nie tylko procesowi kształcenia akademickiego ale także budowania indywidualnych ścieżek rozwoju zawodowego osób kończących studia wyższe.

Słowa kluczowe: młodzież akademicka, plany życiowe i zawodowe, warunki pandemii

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