

THE MOTIVATION OF HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES IN SELECTING UNIVERSITY SPECIALIZATION

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Abstract

The educational market, like any other market, is dynamic and must consistently adapt to new conditions. Various factors influence how quickly educational programs respond to the demands of the labour market, including a country's legislation, institutional autonomy, academic freedom, program accreditation, and available financial and human resources, and university management policies. Additionally, it is essential to analyse client's demands in this market. High school graduates select fields of study or university programs based on different criteria. Recently, there has been increasing discussions about the relationship between the chosen field of study and the success of graduates in entering the labour market. This connection can be optimized if young people receive guidance and make informed study choices, allowing for better alignment with job market needs upon graduation. Based on these considerations, this study analyses the motivation of recent high school graduates in selecting university specializations, particularly those that are currently considered 'in trend', and the factors that influence their decisions regarding fields and specializations in higher education.

Keywords: *educational market, higher education, students.*

JEL Classification: *I20.*

1. Influences on the choice of university study program specializations

High School Students, even from the early years of their studies are encouraged by parents or teachers to express their preferences for university studies.

When faced with the choice of a university study program, whether in preparation for the Baccalaureate exam or University admission, the major challenge lies in the lack of decision- making elements such as maturity, motivation, understanding of personal strengths, delayed discovery of inclinations toward a specific field, and more. For a young person aged 15-16, it is much easier to rely on advice and allow their decision on a study program to be influenced by family members, friends, or social media, rather than discovering themselves and exploring their own abilities or competencies that could support their professional life after graduating from university.

In today's socio-economic context, continuing high school education with university studies has become a norm for the professional development of every

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young individual, even if they do not discover their aptitudes for a specific professional field in time.

According to a study published by iZidata and conducted by the Bucharest International School of Management, young people preparing for university admission choose their specialization in such a way that, once they graduate, they can find a job as quickly and easily as possible. Over 60% of respondents stated that having a job after university is a must. Furthermore, 58% dream of a well-paid job. This is likely one of the reasons high school graduates are drawn to faculties specializing in business administration, marketing, digital marketing, economics, finance, accounting, cybernetics, computer science, sociology, or literature [Laura Macavei, 2024].

In other words, today's young people want a real chance at employment, a well-paid job, and the possibility of maintaining an active social life during their university years.

2. The correlation between the chosen specialization and the graduates finding employment

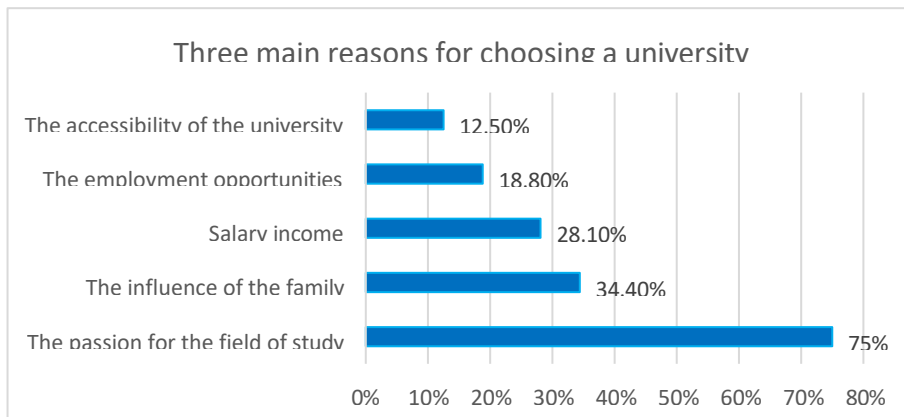
To identify the criteria for choosing a university, by students or graduates of bachelor's programs, and the determining factors in their decision, a sociological study was conducted using an online questionnaire.

The sample had a higher percentage of women (87.3%) and only 18.7% men, with ages ranging from 18 to 44 years old, the 18–24 age group having the highest representation (87.5%). Among the respondents, there were young people who chose the following options: Bioengineering Systems, Law, Medicine, History, and Tourism.

By exploring these elements, the research could provide valuable insights for optimizing educational pathways for high school graduates, ensuring that their choices align not only with personal interests but also with improved employability in a changing labour market.

According to the results from the online questionnaire, the top 3 reasons that influenced the choice of a university were: passion for the field of study (75%), family influence (34.4%), and potential salary earnings in the field of study (28.1%).

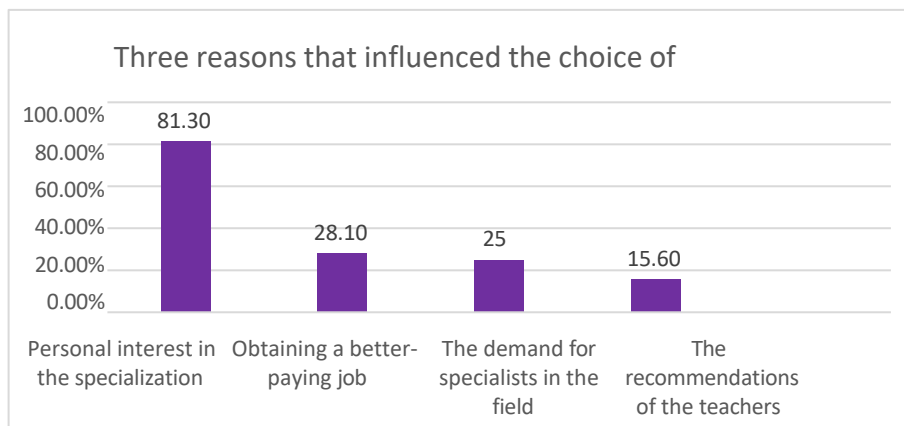
Figure 1. Three main reasons for choosing a university



Source: author

It is well known that the reputation of a university plays a significant role in shaping a graduate's career, but at the same time the student's professional persona is shaped by the specialization they graduate in. Thus, the present study attempted to analyse the criteria for choosing a specialization or a study program. Interest in further study of a specific field (81.3%), obtaining a better-paid job (28.1%), and the increased demand in the labour market for Subject Matter Experts (SME) within the chosen field (25%) were the top three reasons selected by the respondents of the study.

Figure 2. Three reasons that influenced the choice of specialization/program



Source: author

The correlation between the theoretical training provided during university and starting employment after graduation, indicates that only 17% of

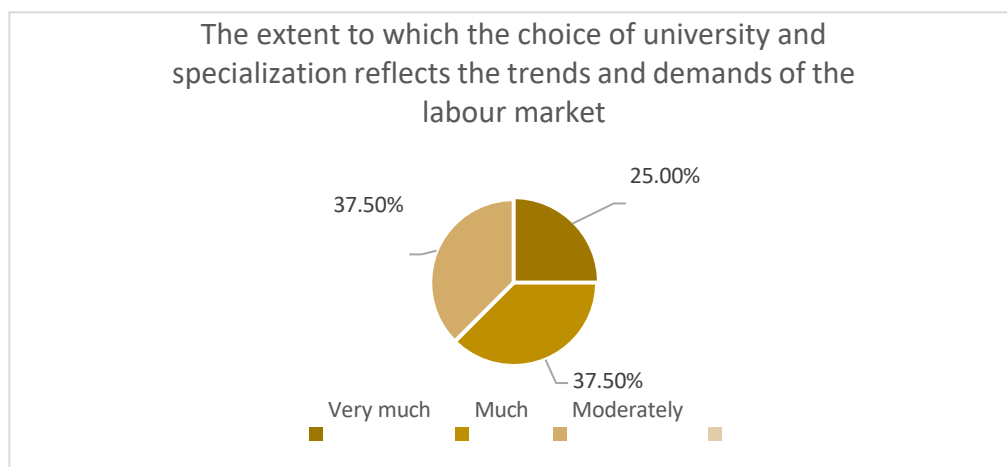
respondents consider themselves well-prepared to work in their field, 75% believe they are well-prepared but require practical experience, and only 9.4% stated that the theoretical training was insufficient.

Understanding the importance of gaining practical experience (internships, projects) in their chosen field to be more competitive in the labour market: 93.8% of respondents considered it important (59.4%) or very important (34.4%).

More than half of the respondents (53.1%) answered positively to the question of whether the university offers sufficient opportunities to connect with economic operators or to gain practical experience in their chosen field, while 31.3% felt that opportunities were limited.

"To what extent is the choice of university and specialization influenced by labour market trends and requirements?", to this question, 25% responded "to a large extent," and 37.5% "to a very large extent." The feedback can be explained by a limited perspective on the medium and long-term dynamics of the labour market.

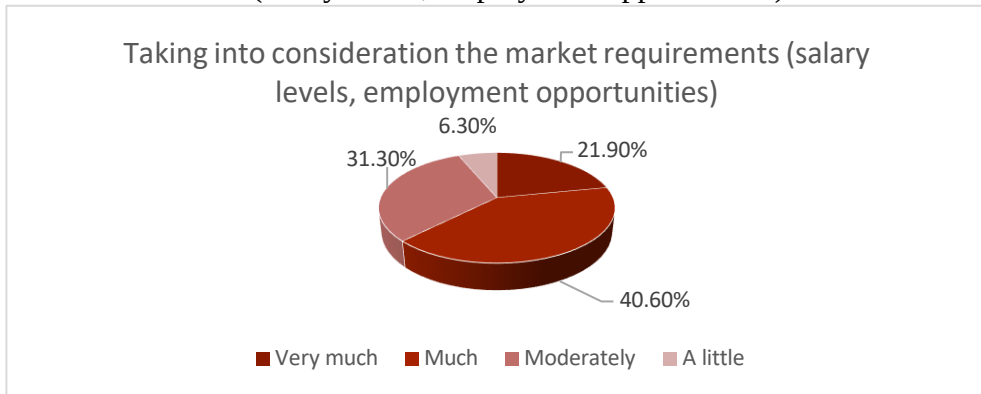
Figure 3. The extent to which the choice of university and specialization reflects the trends and demands of the labour market



Source: author

Taking into account labour market requirements, the salary level or employment opportunities are valued by the majority of respondents, ranging from moderate to very much, totalling 92.7%, while only 6.3% of respondents consider these factors as not worth taking into account.

Figure 4. Taking into consideration the market requirements (salary levels, employment opportunities)



Source: author

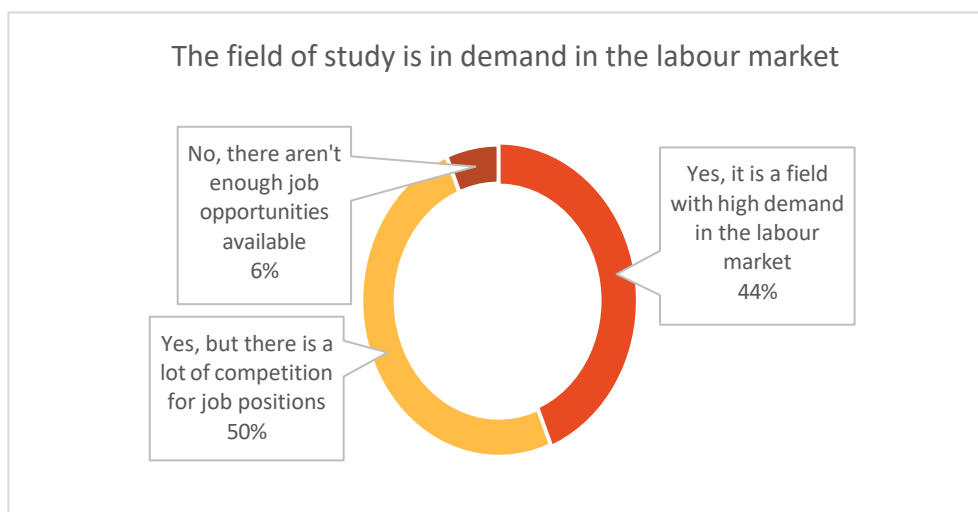
The support provided by the university in finding a job after graduation was rated as very good by 12.5% of respondents, good by 56.3%, moderate by 18.8%, and poor by only 9.4% of respondents.

Regarding the relationship between salary levels and the completed specialization, 21.9% believe that the specialization has a major impact on salary levels, while 68.8% consider that, although it is important, it has less impact, compared to factors such as experience or company's location.

When it comes to employment plans in their field of study, 50% want to work in the field they studied, 12.5% are seeking employment in a different field, and 25% plan to go further with their studies through master's or doctoral programs and are not yet decided.

6% of respondents stated they chose a field of study despite the lack of sufficient employment opportunities in that area on the labour market, 44% believe they chose a field with high demand in the labour market, and 50% acknowledge choosing a sought-after field but with increased competition in the job market.

Figure 5. The field of study is in demand in the labour market



Source: author

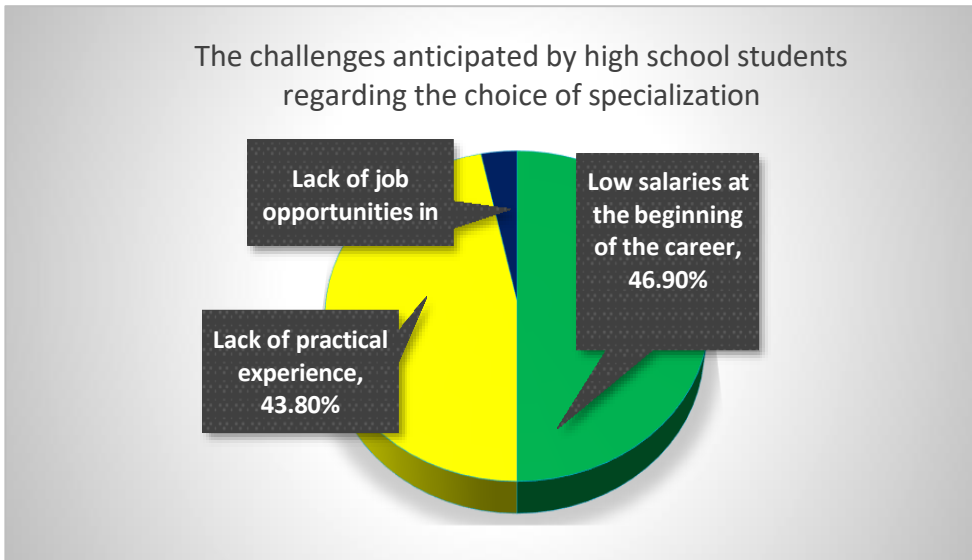
Among the main challenges anticipated by high school students regarding the choice of specialization were the reduced number of job opportunities (9.3%), not enough practical experience upon graduation (43.8%), and the low starting salary at the beginning of their career (46.9%).

Reduced job opportunities may be linked to the perception that, in certain fields, there are not enough available positions or that there is significant competition for the ones that exist. High school students may be aware of labour market fluctuations and the fact that some fields of study might provide theoretical preparation without automatically guaranteeing immediate employment. This reflects a general uncertainty about the balance between supply and demand in the labour market.

Acknowledging not having enough practical experience upon graduation indicates that young people understand that, while they gain theoretical knowledge during their studies, it is often difficult to acquire sufficient practical experience, which is essential for employment. High school students may see this as a major obstacle, given that the employers require practical experience when recruiting new graduates.

The concern about low starting salaries at the beginning of a career is justified, as early-career wages are a significant concern, especially in the context of rising living costs. Young people may worry that they will not be able to earn enough to secure a decent living standard. Additionally, in certain fields, starting salaries may be lower than in others, which could influence high school student's decision when choosing a specialization, especially if they prioritize immediate financial stability.

Figure 6. The challenges anticipated by high school students regarding the choice of specialization



Source: author

These fears can indeed be real factors of uncertainty for many young people who must make important educational and professional decisions.

More than half of the respondents, 53.1%, believe that the rapid evolution of technologies and the labour market will bring significant changes to the future of their field of study, while remaining attractive. This option suggests that the majority of high school students are aware of the impact of technological transformations on the labour market and the fields in which they study. However, they consider that, although there will be significant changes (automation, artificial intelligence, digitalization, etc.), those fields will remain attractive. The reason is that technology often brings new opportunities for already existing professions or creates new fields, and these high school students believe that their adaptability and ability to learn will be essential to remain competitive.

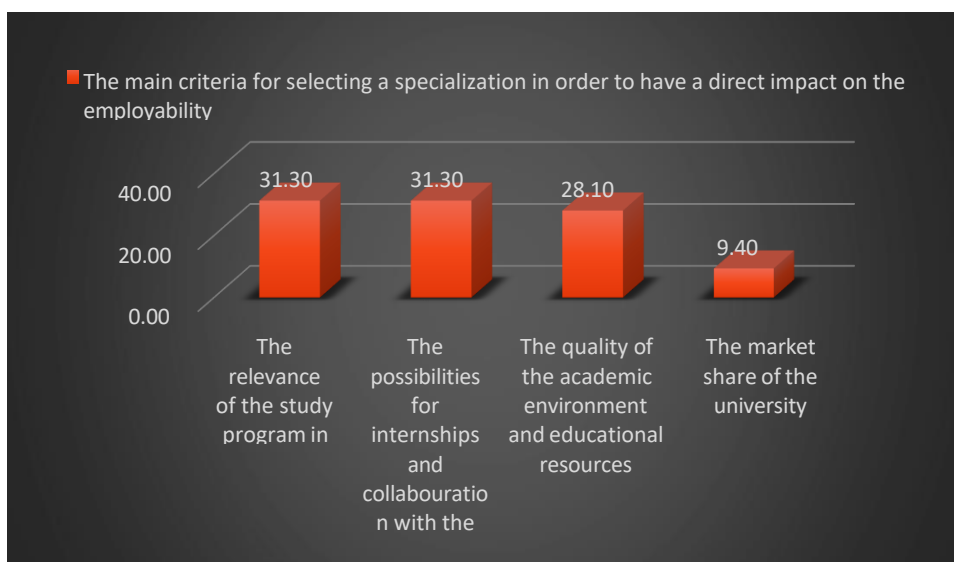
28.1% believe that it will bring more employment and development opportunities, perceiving technological evolution as an opportunity rather than a threat. Many consider that technological progress will generate new industries, products, and services that will require a higher number of qualified employees. It can also be considered that certain fields, such as IT, digital technology, or scientific research, will benefit from continuous development, creating new job opportunities for young people in these areas.

The rapid evolution of technologies and the labour market will reduce the jobs available in the future field, according to 12.5% of respondents. These are

more concerned about the effects of automation and artificial intelligence on jobs. They consider that many jobs will disappear as technology advances, especially in repetitive fields or those that can be automated. For example, traditional industries or certain jobs in sectors such as production or transport could be affected by new technologies, which would lead to a reduction in the number of available jobs.

The main criteria for selecting a specialization with a direct impact on the employability of its graduates are as follows: for 31.3%, the relevance of the study program in the labour market is essential, and for another 31.3%, it is the collaboration with the business environment and the completion of internships during studies. For 28.1%, it is the quality of the academic environment and educational resources, and for only 9.4%, it is the strength of the university's brand in the market.

Figure.7. The main criteria for selecting a specialization in order to have a direct impact on the employability of its graduates



Source: author

Among the main improvements considered necessary to better support the absorption of graduates into the labour market, respondents highlighted the following: increasing internship and practical training opportunities (12.5%), closer collaboration with employers to facilitate faster integration of graduates (50%), improving the acquisition of transversal skills such as communication and teamwork (15.6%), and developing courses that reflect the current demands of the labour market (21.9%).

For high school students, when choosing a field of study that will ensure immediate employability after graduation, it is important to consider several factors that influence the labour market. Based on this study, several conclusions can be drawn:

- **Researching the labour market and its demands**

High school students need to gather information about fields with high demand for workers and low unemployment rates. Some areas with significant potential include IT, healthcare, engineering, digital marketing, the construction industry, and sustainability-related fields.

Additionally, it is important to monitor trends and technological developments, as certain industries may experience significant growth (e.g., emerging technologies such as AI, block chain, IoT), while others a reduced activity.

- **Choosing a Field with a Combination of Theory and Practice**

In many cases, employers prefer candidates with practical experience, even for entry-level positions. High school students should choose specializations that offer opportunities to gain practical experience during their studies, such as internships, collaborative projects, or courses that include practical applications.

Additionally, fields such as information technology, engineering, or healthcare can provide practical learning opportunities that help facilitate a smoother transition into the labour market.

- **Focusing on Transferable Skills**

Choosing a specialization that develops transferable skills (communication, problem-solving, teamwork, digital skills) will help high school students adapt quickly to various job roles. For example, programming skills, digital marketing, project management, or even financial competencies can be applied across multiple fields.

Soft skills, such as critical thinking and adaptability, are increasingly valued by employers and are essential for navigating the ever-changing professional world.

- **Choosing a Growing Field or One with a Workforce Shortage**

High school students should choose fields where there is high demand for professionals and a shortage of qualified specialists. Examples of fields with a workforce shortage include IT (programmers, software developers, cyber security specialists), healthcare (nurses, doctors), and various technical trades (electricians, welders).

Additionally, fields related to sustainability and green energy (environmental specialists, ecological engineers) are expanding due to new global policies and the growing need to protect the environment.

- **Continuous learning and obtaining additional certifications**

High school students should choose a specialization that allows them to continue their education and obtain certifications or licenses valued by employers. For example, in the IT field, certifications from major companies (such as Google, Microsoft, Cisco) are a considerable advantage.

Additionally, online courses and supplementary training can help young people acquire new relevant skills, significantly improving their chances of immediate employment.

- **Searching for a mentor or professional guide**

It is essential for high school students to seek mentors or professionals in their desired field, who can provide them with information about industry requirements, guide them in choosing a specialization, and offer advice on how to build a successful career.

Participation in professional events, career fairs, or educational counselling sessions can help high school students better understand how to leverage their studies and increase their employability.

- **Flexibility and openness to new fields**

High school students need to be aware that the labour market is constantly changing, and fields that are popular now may undergo rapid shifts due to emerging technologies. Flexibility and a willingness to engage in continuous learning will be essential for maintaining employability.

Additionally, it may be useful to remain open to interdisciplinary fields that combine multiple skills and can offer a wide range of job opportunities (e.g., digital marketing with data science, biotechnology with engineering).

Conclusions

In conclusion, the main factors influencing the decision of high school graduates in choosing a university and specialization are: personal interests and abilities - aligning individual passions and skills with potential career paths; labour market trends - student's awareness of fields with demand and growth potential in the job market; financial considerations - the influence of tuition costs and potential salaries; social influences - the role of family, peers and social expectations in shaping decisions.

High school students aiming for immediate employability should choose specializations that combine labour market demands, technological trends, and the future needs of the economy. It is important for them to focus on developing relevant skills, prepare in advance for the challenges of the job market, and be willing to engage in continuous learning, thus adapting to its rapid changes.

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