



To study or not to study geography? The changing motivations behind choosing geography degree programmes by Polish students in the years 1995–2015

Danuta Piróg

Uniwersytet Pedagogiczny im Komisji Edukacji Narodowej w Krakowie, ul. Podchorążych 2, 30-084 Kraków, Poland



ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Choice
Geography studies
Motivations
Reasons
Recruitment
Students

ABSTRACT

The article presents results of research (N = 2173) on the reasons for choosing geography degree programmes as declared by geography students. The objective of the analysis was to examine the significance of specific motivations and to attempt to clarify the changes behind these motivations in the context of social and political transformations in Poland in the last twenty years.

The study identified a considerable change in the reasons why people decided to study geography. At the beginning of the 1990s it was prevalent among students to choose this subject for the sake of studying geography itself. This approach has been since replaced with more pragmatic reasoning. Students started to treat their degrees as an investment in their professional future. The main premises behind formulating this conclusion is a 2.5-fold decrease in interest in geography being the main reason for choosing this subject. On the other hand, the number of students who declared that the main reason for studying geography was the hope it would increase their chances on the labour market recorded a 19-fold increase. The analysis also shows that the range of expected professional destinations have expanded and that young people have a more personalised expectation towards their course curricula. Furthermore, the fact that certain reasons to study (for example avoiding compulsory military service among male students), which were given in the 1990s but were absent in later years, illustrates the impact of the political situation on education-related decisions.

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions face increasingly complex challenges, e.g. changing demand patterns, intensifying global competition, decline in funding and lower student numbers. These challenges apply also to geography degree courses which have suffered a shortage of candidates in many countries (Estaville et al., 2006; Hill et al., 2008; Kubiak et al., 2012; Park and Huynh, 2015; Sidaway and Johnston, 2007). Given this situation it is important to deepen our understanding of reasons behind choosing a given course of study (e.g. Simões and Soares, 2010; Tavares, 2017) seeing that motives behind human behaviour determine choices they make (Davies et al., 2016; Guay et al., 2010). Collecting data on students' declared reasons behind choosing their course of study has significant cognitive and practical implications. In terms of cognitive outcomes, such information gives a deeper insight into the subjects of education, i.e. students, in terms of their expectations, professional plans, life philosophy and attitude towards higher education. It may be an important element in assessing the situation of academia and its public perception (Arquero et al., 2009;

Grotkowska et al., 2015). In terms of practical applications, data on students' motivations to study a given subject allows for improved planning and more efficient implementation of potential new solutions related to curricula and organisation of university courses. Such solutions would be aimed at maintaining students' interest in a given subject at a satisfactory level when it comes to both the quantitative aspect reflected in the number of potential candidates and qualitative aspects reflected in candidates with good scores in secondary school leaving certificates (Drewes and Michael, 2006; Eidimtas and Juceviciene, 2014; Holmegaard et al., 2014; Maniu and Maniu, 2014).

The literature review indicates that motivations behind studying geography at university still remains a clearly under-researched topic (Solem et al., 2013; Trend, 2009). Existing publications within this area are related mainly to efficient student recruitment procedures and strategies (e.g.: Croot and Chalkley, 1999; Estaville et al., 2006; Hill et al., 2008) and examination of the motivations and career goals of geography graduate students in USA (Solem et al., 2013).

It is, therefore, necessary to conduct research aimed at identifying key motives behind choosing to study geography at university. As Emily

E-mail address: dbutryn@up.krakow.pl.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.06.013>

Received 5 May 2017; Received in revised form 13 June 2018; Accepted 15 June 2018

Available online 20 June 2018

0016-7185/ © 2018 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

R. Lai (2011) claims “contemporary motivation research tends to be organized around three questions: *Can I do this task? Do I want to do this task and why? What do I have to do to succeed in this task?*” (p. 6). Academic examinations of motivations that drive young people to choose a subject to study are based on looking for an answer to the second question, i.e.: *Do I want to do this task and why?* To answer this question one needs to perform an analysis that would be, on the one hand, framed in the context of theories of motivation and, on the other hand, take into account a young person’s social and economic circumstances. The first element helps define the types and origins of motives and the second allows for identification of factors that affect motivations and are partially responsible for the final choice (Piróg, 2017).

Motivation is made up of a range of expectations, worldviews, systems of values and interests. Due to a variety of factors that impact human motivation, the actions people take are driven by certain motivations that can be either rational or non-rational. They might be a result of individual perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes or all of the above (Lai, 2011). Researchers distinguish two types of motivations that drive an individual to take certain decisions, including educational decisions, i.e. external and internal. Internal motivation is an individual’s feeling that they need to develop. These motivations derive from one’s interests and hobbies and are related to a feeling of joy (Deci et al., 1999). External motivations are triggered by external stimuli that affect people and are linked with expectations of tangible rewards such as money, position, and privileges as well as intangible ones such as praise and verbal or non-verbal signs of recognition (Davies et al., 2016).

The manner in which people make choices is anchored in the neo-classical economics developed by the Chicago School (Olssen and Peters, 2005) and the theory of rational choice. In this approach, decisions are taken based on a cost-benefit analysis (Eriksson, 2011). In line with these assumptions, during important moments in their lives, decisions on one’s further education are without a doubt an important moment; people usually make rational choices based on their knowledge of possible benefits, the probability to pursue their interests and life goals by choosing a specific educational pathway. Some researchers claim that contemporary man is “the economic man” who is more and more likely to take rational rather than emotional choices preceded by a sound assessment of how likely they are going to benefit an aspect of life they hold important (Thelin and Nedomysl, 2015). However, motivations behind educational choices are linked to three other theories, i.e. expectancy-value theory, intrinsic motivation theory and self-determination theory (Broussard and Garrison, 2004).

In Poland between the years 1995–2015 it was the transition from centrally controlled economy to free market economy that established a fundamental framework for a thorough change of circumstances in which young people made their educational choices. The economic and political transition that started here and in other countries of the former socialist bloc at the beginning of the 1990s brought a variety of changes to virtually every aspect of people’s lives – including the labour market and education. In the context of decisions whether to go to university, one of the key changes was that people started to believe that one’s prospects on the labour market were commensurate to their level of education. Currently the relationship between professional career and education is indisputable but this did not use to be the case in Poland and other countries of that region prior to the political transition (Giddens and Sutton, 2012; Makulska, 2012). For the group of young people who were driven by pragmatic reasons in their educational choices – in line with rational choice theory – university education became a way of adjusting to the changes on the labour market (Buchner-Jeziorska, 2011). However, it is worth noting that a university degree also regained its high cultural status and became a gateway to intellectual milieus and satisfying one’s intellectual development. Moreover, it was among parents’ aspirations for their children to hold an academic qualification, given that they were often denied the right to study freely during communism (Kobylarek, 2004).

A very high interest in attending higher education institutions and

an increase in aspirations regarding one’s professional future and social status resulted in an increasing number of candidates, including those who wanted to study geography. Reports from the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education on the number of students pursuing specific degree courses indicate that in the years between 1995 and 2005, geography was one of the most popular disciplines chosen by young people. It ranked among the top courses to study. By the beginning of the 20th century, geography came twentieth in this ranking list. In the academic year 2003/2004, it came thirtieth and one year later it did not even make the top 30. At the peak of its popularity, the number of candidates competing for one place on the course ranged between 7 and 8 people. The last year with such a high result was 2005 (7.8 people per place). In the years to come, the number of young people who wanted to study geography at university went gradually down.¹ Currently, an interest in geography as a discipline of study has experienced a drop which has been exacerbated by a demographic decline (Tracz and Hibszer, 2013). Since 2010, the number of universities which struggle to reach minimum recruitment levels has been on the increase. This even applies to prestigious universities established hundreds of years ago (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2014, 2012, 2010). At the majority of universities which have geography courses on offer, the admission process is no longer a selection of candidates. It is becoming common practice for the application procedure to accept all candidates as long as they meet, at a minimum the admission criteria.

Consequently, the above raises a question of motives behind choosing to study geography by young people both at the time when the popularity of this course was at its highest and during the enrolment drop as well as reasons for the possible changes in the structure of motivations. The present paper strives to answer this question in relation to geography students in Poland.

2. Objective and methodology

Taking into account the presented premises, the aim of the paper is to analyse motives behind choosing to study geography in Poland in the last two decades and attempt to examine the reasons behind these changes in the context of social and economic transformations.

To achieve this goal, we tried to answer the following two questions:

1. Which motives drove young people to choose to study geography in specific years?
2. What were the reasons behind the motives declared by the young people to make them choose geography in the analysed period?

Analysis of changes in the structure of the reasons behind studying geography in the last two decades gives a better insight into young people’s expectations towards their degree programme and, to some extent, towards higher education in general. Putting these expectations within the framework of social and economic changes that the participating students have experienced allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the possible differences in reasons for students deciding to study in a particular field. The conclusions drawn from the analysis constitute a backdrop for reflection on a possible revamp of curricula and marketing actions that universities may want to undertake in order to attract more candidates to study geography. Existing literature illustrates that, given the current situation of this discipline in many countries, concern for maintaining recruitment numbers at satisfactory levels is as important as conducting innovative academic research (Johnston, 2005).

Tracking the changes in motives over a period of 20 years required the use of two research methods, i.e. examination of literature on the topic from past years and an own survey to complement the picture and

¹ In 2006–6.7 candidates per one place, in 2008–3.1 per one place.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7353397>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7353397>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)