

PRECONDITIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT: ARE THE OUTCOMES OF THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS CLEAR?

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Abstract: Higher education is the most complex concept of preparing students for future professional orientation. In addition to the knowledge that is most directly related to a particular profession, modern business conditions require the development of numerous other knowledge skills and competencies that would support and contribute to the development of professional competencies. Work on the development of professional identity is a compounded process of development of numerous personal and, above all, social components of identity that will enable better use of acquired narrow professional competencies in the best possible way. The educational process implies a much broader approach than merely preparation for the profession, and it is necessary to provide conditions for formal and informal educational pathways that can improve the components of identity. In modern professional literature, attention is paid to the numerous factors of professional identity that are an integral part of the profession and whose presence gives greater quality to the possible execution of business tasks. Higher education has a serious task of forming the initial foundations of students' professional identity through new work methods and through the adoption of the value and importance of certain profession in organizations and society. Professional identity is not created by itself, it is formed by all participants in the teaching process, especially in higher education.

Key Words: professional identity, students, higher education

1. INTRODUCTION

Constant and accelerated changes in the business sphere also require changes in the educational process that requires harmonization with the requirements of reality, but also anticipation of future needs of both professionals and businesses.

Professional identity represents a state of mind that categorizes an individual as a member of a selected profession, and it develops over time. As it is understood in the literature, professional identity consists of knowledge of the profession and its philosophy, expertise required from the members of that profession, understanding of members' professional roles, attitudes towards the profession and oneself, engagement behaviors expected of its members, and interactions with other professionals. It encompasses not only the knowledge and skills required to perform a specific job but also the values, beliefs, and attitudes that define the profession, and how professionals view themselves within that context. Professional identity is a multifaceted and dynamic concept that evolves as an individual progresses through their career and gains new experiences and perspectives. It is constantly shaped and reshaped by one's experiences and interactions with others in the field, as well as changes in the industry and society. It is essential for individuals to continuously reflect on and develop their professional identity in order to be successful and fulfilled in their chosen profession.

Professional identity refers to a core set of beliefs, values, and assumptions about the distinctive characteristics of an individual's chosen profession that distinguishes it from other professions. The advantages of having a strong professional identity include ethical performances, promoted wellness, and increased awareness of roles and functions among individual counselors [1]. Professional identity can be described as a cognitive structure and as a social construct. Cognitive structures of professional identity construction in education, communication and social contexts. Studies that envisage professional identity as socially constructed, dominate in management, organizational sciences, medical tourism and neuroscience. The core topics of professional identity construction cover the blurring of professional stereotypes and reconstruction of multiple professional selves - merging public and private identities.

Professional identity is consisted of the following three components: agreement with counseling philosophy, beliefs that the counseling profession includes activities such as becoming licensed and certified, and professional engagement.

2. IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A large number of papers and theoretical concepts have been developed on the topic of professional identity. Akkerman and Meijer [2] elaborated that professional identity can be viewed as a simultaneously unitary and multiple, continuous and discontinuous, and individual and social phenomenon. Their studies have shown that a coherent and consistent sense of a professional self within professional identity can be maintained through a variety of individual and group participation and self-investment throughout a person's professional career. This means that a professional identity is not fixed, but rather it is a dynamic and ongoing process that evolves and adapts as a person's experiences, roles, and responsibilities change throughout their career. This understanding of professional identity highlights the importance of ongoing self-reflection and development, as well as active engagement with colleagues and peers in the field, in order to maintain a strong sense of professional self.

Continuing and expanding with the Akkerman and Meijer's framework, Hong and associates [3] explored dimensions of professional identity development regarding the unity of self, the way the social environment is negotiated, and the shifting or continuing pattern over time. These dimensions explain the process of becoming a professional in different social contexts, but still this process is not generalized. The process of becoming is interpreted by Hong as the construction, development, creation, or formation of professional identity. Irrespective of the use of these different concepts, they are all interlinked by the process of social construction, which is an essential component of the development of professional identity.

Studies on professional identity construction processes based on Marcia's «Identity Status Model» [4] and on the recent revisions to this model have analyzed identity processes at an intra-individual level. The latter considered identity statuses as results of motivational and cognitive processes that individuals put in place to meet their talent and their abilities. According to «Identity Status Model», which is one of the most influential theoretical models dealing with identity building processes in different domains, Marcia identified four identity statuses: identity diffusion, identity foreclosure, identity moratorium, and identity achievement. Marcia's theory of identity proposes that identity formation is a process that involves two behavioral indicators. The first indicator is research, which is characterized by actively seeking out and examining different identity options and considering different values, beliefs, and goals. The second indicator is commitment, which involves making a relatively firm choice in an important domain of identity and engaging in actions to actualize that choice. This means that individuals are actively exploring different options, but eventually they settle on one and make a commitment to it. This theory suggests that individuals go through a process of self-discovery and exploration, and that this process is ongoing and can change over time, it also implies that individuals are actively involved in creating their identities.

However, professional identity is a type of collective identity [5], and so it is also related to the intergroup processes of categorization, group identification, and social comparison. Professional identity describes both one's awareness of being a worker doing a specific job and one's identification with the groups and social categories to which one belongs by virtue of one's job. Interesting results of professional identity research [6] have shown that women can develop a professional identity differently from men, due to different experience in the career development process and prevailing basic perceptions that men are better suited than women, to meet the requirements of professional role in certain occupations. Such differences are of particular importance in male-dominated areas, where women often report lower levels of professional identity than men.

Building vocational skills, proving oneself, defining and achieving balance, assessing one's own competence, and applying learning are important experiences that contribute to professional identity development of students. Accordingly, undergraduate research experiences and work placements are examples of activities that encourage professional identity development [7]. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that individual career counseling, counselor support, exploration and clarification of values, and world of work information are key components of career choice interventions that predict career choice outcomes, including professional identity.

When it comes to professional identity, there are many open questions in entire education, including the higher education. Higher education in particular, is confronted with following issues and questions:

- whether students perceive (future) professional identity as an important aspect of their lives;
- to which extent are students clear about the elements of professional identity of the chosen profession;
- whether students identify shortcomings in the development of certain elements of the profession;
- whether students have developed segments of certain social components of professional identity;
- to which extent have the following components been developed that contribute to the construction of professional identity.

The basic components of professional identity are, above all, knowledge about the profession, knowledge about work and employment, understanding of the professional roles of employees with the same occupation, attitudes towards the profession and oneself, behaviors expected from members of the profession and interactions with other experts in the field.

An essential prerequisite for the development of a professional identity is a high level of personal identity. Working on self-awareness development, as well as on awareness of one's own values and interests, is the beginning of identity development. Likewise, the development of motives is of great importance. But not motives as an imitation

of other people's motives, copied from social networks and television programs, but genuine, existing and possible motives that reflect real needs.

Previous research of the professional identity of students have shown that satisfaction with the chosen study program and professional identity development are interconnected, in regard that when students are aware of their personal values, they are more successful in understanding the motives of their professional activities and integrate personal values with the values offered by the chosen profession more quickly and easily. The unification of these values contributes to the increase and development of their professional identity. Of course, professional choices are often wrong, influenced by the current dominant professions, or under the pressure of social and economic conditions and situations. In most countries, the choice of one's profession is directed in accordance with dominant abilities and tendencies, which greatly facilitates attachment to the profession. In conditions where the choice of profession is left to current trends that most often do not correspond to the real conditions on the labor market, work on professional identity is difficult, often impossible. Numerous studies have shown that the agreement between an individual's professional identity and the chosen profession is of great importance, because it affects satisfaction and efficiency at work. Students who have chosen their profession according to their own interests in a certain area, try to expand their knowledge in that field, and this affects the increase in the level of professional identity. Also, experiences show that students with a higher level of professional identity who are more satisfied with their own choices of study programs, lessons and lecturers, have fewer problems in mastering the teaching content and show much more engagement in the study process. The same applies to graduates, namely those who feel like they are professionally oriented and perceive their work as fulfilling and are highly motivated to stay in the professional field.

In addition to professional knowledge and technical competences, many personal characteristics are also necessary for professional identity development. Many of these can be learned and acquired during the education process. That is why the way, in which the developmental segments are conceived during the acquisition of knowledge and the process of memorization, is essential. If there are no clear methodologically defined and purposefully designed programs for imparting knowledge and defining precise outcomes, the possibility of unsatisfied, unmotivated and ineffective students, and later employees, is created. Good and efficient ways of working, focused on the individual, on personal development and on the adoption of values that determine behaviors can provide so much more, than the the Bologna Declaration and the Bologna process, which showed its numerous weaknesses, especially when it comes to professional identity development.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The educational process implies quality and continuous preparations for defining and further development of professional identity of students. In addition to narrow professional knowledge, skills, abilities and competencies, the development of components of professional identity that would contribute to it, is necessary. Enriching the educational process with the contents of the development of components of student identity in general, and above all the professional identity of students, will contribute to better business adjustment, more successful business and higher quality of life.

Professional identity development also includes working on improvement the University syllabi in the direction of unifying knowledge and skills with a clearly defined goal, defining which components of professional identity are neglected in the educational process, and establishing to which degree the following components of professional identity have been developed and in which way.

All participants in the educational process would have to notice the direction of defining the professional identity of the chosen profession. Also, it would be important to determine which factors do not contribute to the development of professional identity in the education process in order to minimize their influence.

It is not possible to view any aspect of identity, including professional identity, in a limited or one-sided way. A new, very important field of the develop professional identity is necessary to develop an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the problem of professional identity [8].

What is more important than the advancements in technology and artificial intelligence in the development of software for learning and memory assistance, is the systematic and long-term focus on developing awareness of reality and self-awareness. Self-awareness involves understanding oneself on an emotional, physical and cognitive level, as well as the ability to realistically evaluate one's abilities, with a sense of self-confidence and self-respect. Self-esteem encompasses a set of characteristics related to self-evaluation of moral values, where individuals judge themselves to be responsible and good. It also includes evaluating one's own choices, whether the person is ambitious, independent in decision-making, unique in their personality, well-organized and balanced, and competent in performing specific tasks. Self-esteem is a value dimension that, in a positive individual aspect, leads to self-confidence. The emotional and cognitive component of self-confidence is linked to motivation, which is evaluated through the expectation of positive outcomes from independent activities. Development should also include value frameworks and an individual's belief in their own ability to successfully complete tasks.

In the context of where Chat GPT3 represents reality and the future, it is crucial to invest more knowledge and effort into ways of further developing students, in order to make the acquisition and application of knowledge as seamless as possible, and to convert those achievements into new value. Such an outcome requires significant

investment in authentic teaching staff and their comprehensive development. Managing and sharing knowledge in this way will enhance the meaning of professionalism across various fields. The changes currently happening in the job market will not diminish the importance of professionalism, but rather will increase it.

The exchange and transfer of different approaches to professional identity and opportunities for the development of various components of identity, such as psychological, technical, sociological, economic, and others, is of great importance. This can be done by providing students with a variety of learning experiences, such as internships, job shadowing, and networking opportunities, which will allow them to explore different aspects of their professional identity and develop a more comprehensive understanding of their chosen field. Additionally, it is important that the development of professional identity aligns with the European matrix of professional occupations, which is a framework that defines and classifies different occupations and the knowledge, skills, and competencies required for each. This will ensure that students are prepared for the demands of the current job market and that they have the necessary skills and qualifications to succeed in their chosen profession.

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ZAHVALNICA

Autorka Leposava Grubić-Nešić se zahvaljuje na podršci u okviru projekta Departmana za industrijsko inženjerstvo i menadžment Fakulteta tehničkih nauka, pod naslovom „Implementacija rezultata naučno-istraživačkog rada u oblasti Industrijskog inženjerstva i menadžmenta u nastavne procese DIIM sa ciljem njihovog kontinuiranog unapređenja”.