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CLUTCH FOR YOUTH CAREERS: HOW NON-FORMAL EDUCATION SHAPES CAREER CHOICES?

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OBJECTIVE

Career decision-making among youth is a multifaceted process influenced by cognitive, emotional, social, and contextual factors. Classical theories, such as Parsons' trait-and-factor model, emphasize the importance of aligning individual attributes with occupational requirements. However, contemporary frameworks, such as those by Lent and Brown (2020), Gati and Kulcsár (2021) and Zhou et al. (2024), integrate psychological constructs like self-efficacy, adaptability, and proactive behavior to better capture the complexity of career-related choices in an era of frequent transitions. These models recognize the impact of uncertainty, risk perception, personal traits and decision-making strategies on career outcomes.

Simultaneously, educational theory has expanded to include non-formal learning as a critical complement to formal education. Defined by its intentional, skill-oriented, and flexible structure, non-formal education serves as a platform for acquiring competencies not typically covered in academic curricula. Empirical studies of Borožan et al., (2024) and Saveliev (2021) suggest that participation in non-formal education can enhance youth employability, foster leadership, and promote informed decision-making. Despite its growing relevance, the role of non-formal education in shaping youth career paths remains underrepresented in mainstream career development literature. This study draws on both career theory and educational models to explore how non-formal learning experiences influence young people's decisions and perceived readiness for the labor market.

More precisely, the study aims to investigate the relationship between youth participation in non-formal education and their career decision-making attitudes. The primary objective is to assess whether non-formal education serves as a significant factor in enhancing career risk taking, proactivity, flexibility and preferences in job searching, as well as need for social support during career choices among young individuals. By exploring attitudes, motivations, and experiences related to non-formal learning and choosing career pathways, the study seeks to identify how these activities influence young people's confidence in making career choices. Furthermore, the research aims to fill a gap in the literature by providing empirical evidence on the role of structured yet non-institutional learning in supporting successful school-to-work transitions. Ultimately, the study intends to offer actionable insights for educators, policymakers, and career counsellors to better support youth in navigating the evolving demands of the labor market.

METHODOLOGY

This research is part of broaden science project titled "Engagement in Academic Achievements and Extracurricular Activities as Predictors of Life Satisfaction among High School and University Students – SHINE" that was supported by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia. Research data were collected during regular university class hours in October and November 2024 using a multiple constructs online questionnaire. Data analysis was carried out using SPSS software version 29.0 where descriptive statistics and crosstabulations were employed to present demographic data, while Kruskal-Wallis tests were used to examine statistically significant differences in students' career-related attitudes based on their engagement in non-formal education. The study involved a sample of 673 university students, aged between 18 and 27, all residing in Serbia as shown in Table 1 with additional demographic characteristics of the research sample.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the research sample

Characteristics	N (%)
Gender	
Male	278 (41.3)
Female	395 (58.7)
Age	
18-20	594 (88.3)
21-23	71 (10.5)
24-27	8 (1.2)
Grade point average (GPA)	
5.00-6.50	117 (17.5)
6.50-8.50	310 (46.1)
8.50-10.00	245 (36.4)
Region of origin	
Belgrade Region	394 (58.5)
Vojvodina Region	37 (5.5)
Šumadija and Western Serbia	149 (22.1)
Southern and Eastern Serbia	87 (12.9)
Kosovo and Metohija	6 (1.0)
Attending non-formal education activities	
1 – Regularly	149 (22.1)
2 – Occasionally	311 (46.1)
3 – Rarely	168 (24.9)
4 – Never	45 (6.7)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analyzing the perceived importance of participation in non-formal education for youth career development, 51.2% of respondents reported that such activities are important or very important. In contrast, 14.9% of students indicated that these activities hold little or no importance for them. These findings are consistent with previous research by Bjelica et al. (2024), and Mihić & Bjelica (2024), which emphasized that increased engagement in extracurricular activities, which include also non-formal education, contributes positively to students' overall well-being and life satisfaction during their studies. Regarding participation rates, 68.2% of students reported that they were engaged in non-formal educational activities either occasionally or regularly, while only 6.7% stated that they have never participated in such programs. These results highlight the importance of promoting and expanding access to non-formal learning opportunities, as the skills and competencies acquired through these experiences are increasingly valued in the labor market and contribute to long-term individual outcomes, including knowledge development, employability, and mental well-being (Saveliev, 2021; Simac et al., 2021).

Among the most common forms of non-formal education reported by participants were online courses offering certification, volunteering in career-related domains, and attendance at networking events and professional conferences. A detailed breakdown of participation frequencies by type of non-formal education is presented in Figure 1.

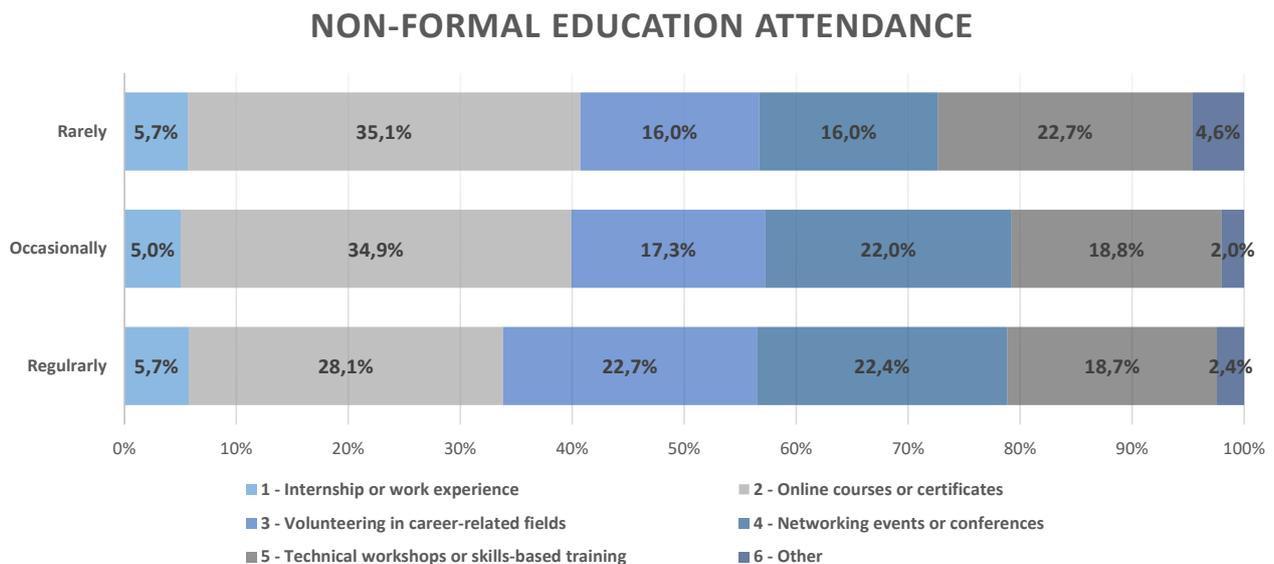


Figure 1: Breakdown of participation in non-formal education by type educational activity

In the second phase of the analysis, respondents' attitudes toward various aspects of youth career decision-making were examined based on a set of factors derived from the literature review. These are: **calc_risk** - Willingness to take risks to achieve career goals; **mentora_adv** - Seeking advice or mentorship when making important career decisions; **fear_uncert** - Fear of uncertainty in the process of making career-related decisions; **flex_job** - Flexibility in job searching and openness to various employment options; **job_sec** - Preference for job security over passion for a particular profession; **seek_opp** - Proactive behavior in seeking out career advancement opportunities. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each factor using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("Strongly disagree") to 5 ("Strongly agree").

The analyses results indicate statistically significant differences between the four respondent groups in career-related attitudes and behaviors, as it is presented in Table 2. Specifically, the Kruskal–Wallis test reveals significant differences in factors: *calc_risks*, *fear_uncert*, *flex_jobs*, *job_sec*, and *seek_opp*, with all p-values below 0.001. In contrast, no significant difference was found in perceptions of factor named *mentor_adv*, as indicated by a non-significant p-value ($p = 0.296$). Students who regularly or occasionally attend non-formal education consistently are risk-taking and have proactive behaviour in seeking career opportunities. However, they do not fear uncertainty during career decision-making and seeks professions that are their passion. Youths that rarely or never attend non-formal education displayed more risk-averse and security-oriented attitudes, highlighting distinct psychological profiles.

Table 2: Analysis of youth career decision attitudes in relation to non-formal education attendance

Attending non-formal education activities		<i>calc_risks</i>	<i>mentor_adv</i>	<i>fear_uncert</i>	<i>flex_jobs</i>	<i>job_sec</i>	<i>seek_opp</i>
1 – Regularly	Mean	4.31	3.62	2.44	4.01	2.40	4.12
	N	149	149	149	149	149	149
	Std. Dev.	.837	1.050	1.067	1.040	1.190	.965
2 – Occasionally	Mean	4.05	3.52	2.69	3.83	2.80	3.79
	N	311	311	311	311	311	311
	Std. Dev.	.831	.986	1.042	.807	1.110	.896
3 – Rarely	Mean	3.86	3.65	2.93	3.48	2.95	3.44
	N	168	168	168	168	168	168
	Std. Dev.	.854	1.067	1.064	.985	1.088	1.054
4 – Never	Mean	3.89	3.40	3.27	3.58	3.29	3.80
	N	45	45	45	45	45	45
	Std. Dev.	.714	1.250	1.304	1.055	1.141	1.014
Total	Mean	4.05	3.57	2.73	3.77	2.78	3.78
	N	673	673	673	673	673	673
	Std. Dev.	.844	1.040	1.092	.944	1.148	.987
Kruskal-Wallis Test		27.986	3.698	29.010	31.748	30.838	37.912
df		3	3	3	3	3	3
Asymp. Sig.		<0.001	0.296	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001

Presented findings suggest that students who participate in non-formal education activities have a higher likelihood of achieving early career success compared to those who do not engage in such activities. Specifically, students who regularly or occasionally attend non-formal education programs reported expectation of securing their first job within less than three months after graduation. This aligns with previous studies indicating that contemporary employers increasingly value practical skills and competencies gained through non-formal learning, alongside traditional academic qualifications (Saveliev, 2021). Furthermore, respondents with greater involvement in non-formal education showed to have higher academic performance than their peers who do not pursue these opportunities.

Although some scholars have raised concerns about the potential undermining of the role of formal education, embracing non-formal education within the higher education system may offer substantial benefits and enhance its outcomes (Surova et al., 2024). This could include offering short learning cycles, skill-based trainings and lifelong learning programs in physical or online format thereby improving the utilization of institutional resources, using opportunities and contributing to the economic sustainability of higher education institutions (Coates, 2013; Stanimirovic et al., 2022). These insights underscore the growing relevance of non-formal education in shaping students' employability, supporting academic achievement, and enhancing institutional innovation in response to changing labor market demands.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that non-formal education has a significant impact on youth career attitudes. Students engaged in non-formal learning activities tend to show greater proactivity, lower fear of uncertainty, and a stronger inclination to pursue careers aligned with their interests. While formal higher education remains the cornerstone of professional development, its limited practical scope highlights the growing value of non-formal learning. Higher education institutions may view this trend as a challenge, but it also presents a strategic opportunity. By actively participating in the design of non-formal programs aligned with labor market needs, universities can enhance the relevance of their offerings and better utilize institutional capacities. In this context, non-formal education should not be seen as a competitor, but rather as an innovative complementary asset that strengthens graduate employability and supports long-term students career success.

Keywords: *youth, career choices, non-formal education, higher education, educational innovation*

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