Students' Attitudes Towards Vocational Education in Albania and the Challenges of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed serious challenges to the Albanian education system, schools, universities, colleges, childcare, which all had to shut down to stop the spread of the virus. This led to adaptation and an instant introduction of online education while students, teachers and other stakeholders were not prepared for it. The Albanian Vocational Education and Training (VET) schools and institutions were the most affected by the difficulties of the system to adapt to online learning, because the VET students are more in need of practical knowledge and skills development. This article is intended to acquire knowledge about the basic concepts and theories of attitude: nature, definition, and importance, to explore the dimensionality of Albanian students' attitudes towards vocational education through literature review, qualitative research and social media research and the COVID-19 pandemic challenges. Research of theories to understand this concept and definitions of various scholars related to them in this article suggest some recommendations on how to improve the poor image and low reputation that vocational education has suffered in Albania. VET is not always preferred within the Albanian society and is often considered a second opportunity for low success-rate faculty students.

Keywords: vocational education; attitude theories; COVID-19 pandemic; Albanian students

1. Introduction

A well-known academic objective of any educational authority worldwide is to extend the optimistic attitudes towards universities, college topics, and so on. The significance of reaching the objectives inside an emotional field like attitudes, means to have an understanding of these attitudes and use that understanding to help students in their study choices and their future. The emotional and cognitive fields are connected with teaching and gaining knowledge on the methods. Consequently, new psychology and behavioral research will be required in the near future. Attitude it is able to be inferred from observable behaviours through measurement (Schwarz

Bohner, 2001). Vocational training is crucial, and its role in economic increase has been quite glaring in Albania. Vocational and technical education is as a minimum as vital as instructional education, or maybe more essential, particularly when the statistical figures from INSTAT (2015) imply higher unemployment numbers amongst college graduates than among their counterparts from vocational colleges or different technical colleges education.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many vocational institutions mostly in big cities like Tirana, Fier, Vlora, etc, to use online teaching methods, never used before, such as Google classroom and Zoom platforms. The pandemic and the online education brought evidence of existing social and digital inequality that deprived the most marginalized students who did not have access to the internet and the appropriate technology tools in obtaining theoretical and practical knowledge.

This article aims to show the basic concepts and theories of attitude: its nature, definition, and importance, to explore the dimensionality of Albanian students' attitudes towards vocational education and the role of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The objective of this article is to:

show the basic concepts and theories of attitude: its nature, definition, and importance;

explore the dimensionality of Albanian students' attitudes towards vocational education -through open ended question interviews and online social media research;

elaborate on the role of the COVID-19 pandemic;

suggestions for educator and policymaker in Albanian education system.

2. Research Methods

2.1 Methodology

The methodology used is descriptive research design which through literature review of journal, articles, previous studies, official report, documentations, etc,. Also and another sources of information of attitudes and students' attitudes towards vocational education was gain through official Facebook pages of ten schools in Tirana and Fier, during 2020 till March 2021. Together with qualitative research realized through open ended question interviews with students of 15 and 16 years old (N=15).

The hypothesis of the study is: "Albanian students have negative attitudes towards vocational education due to the environment factor such as poor image of vocational educations schools and prejudice around vocation education". Three research questions were raised as follow:

- What are the factors that determine the attitudes of students towards vocational education in Albania?

- Why 15 -16 years students old have negative attitudes towards vocational education?
- What are the reasons that have contributed to the poor image of vocational education in Albania?

2.2 Findings

2.2.1 Theoretical background

Thurstone (1931) linked attitude to thoughts and emotions in one of the earliest studies of attitude. When Allport (1935) described attitude as a form of learning that predisposes one to think, feel, and act in a determined way, he included the behavioral component. Also of theoretical significance for this paper is the Ajzen theory of planned behavior as a theory used to understand and predict behaviors, which posits that behaviors are immediately determined by behavioral intentions and under certain circumstances, perceived behavioral control. Ajzen states that behavioral intentions are determined by a combination of three factors: attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (2002). Our way on behaving towards different topics believes, issues, etc. is to determine what defines our attitude. The way we understand and feel when somebody is active or withdrawn, genuine, or untrustworthy, overwhelming, or easy-going; the way he or she restricts or favours online instruction, endorses or dislikes abortion, likes or loathes writing? Certainly, personality traits and attitudes are unquestionably subjective characteristics that can best be gathered from outside. The structure of attitudes as pointed out (Fabrigar, MacDonald & Wegener, 2005), to the complexity of knowledge, refers to the extent to which attitude-relevant information represents several distinct underlying dimensions (i.e., the extent to which information can be classified as pertaining to multiple categories; (Scott, 1969; Tetlock, 1989). The foremost imperative such prompts are the individual's conduct, verbal or non-verbal, and the setting in which the conduct happens (Ajzen, 1988 & Fabrigar, MacDonald & Wegener, 2005).

One dimension to understanding the competency which students need to feel knowledgeable of what they do and learn relates close to attitude. This feeling will drive their choices and options toward vocational and training education.

The more they feel competent the more they will challenge themselves. This article can be summarized into two essential recommendations, or entomb, to be specific: a) that attitude (particularly its emotional measurement) is essentially a portion of competency and, b) that attitude and competency display certain comparable components, since both belong to the three measurements of human behavior and are assessed through its execution, based on the proof of the activity taken (Sabatés, L. A., & Capdevila, J. M. 2010). The two suggestions show contrasts and similitudes in their thought of attitudes and competencies. Sabatés, L. A., & Capdevila, J. M. also suggest that the definitions of competency decrease attitude to values or feelings within the

shape of –knowing how to be||, a fact that negates the current, triadic concept within the larger part of the writing on attitude (2010). The authors also specify that the concepts of competency and attitude are identified in parallel, and some of the elements relating to the origin, development, and application of both attitude and competencies are clarified. Numerous scholars and researchers have attempted as well to understand and explain attitude through literature review and different types of methodology but still, many human behavioral attitudes stay unanswered.

2.2.2 Main sources of attitude formation

Social sciences researchers, but mostly social psychologists, they all have an understanding that all three most important resources of the attitude formation which are as follow: direct experience with the object and situations, express and implicit getting to know from others, and personality development. For example, in case of some negative experiences, people establish hostile attitudes towards that specific issue. Alternatively, whilst we are triumphant or maintain an effective role in a situation, we establish a favourable attitude (Hallorah, 1967). There is a going debate of scholars who thinks attitudes have a genetic basis. Preston & De Waal (2002) found attitudes activating a certain branch of the motor cortex, which in turn supports certain behaviors. This suggests that our attitude plans us for activity, and is in memory-related with other pertinent feelings, convictions, and behaviors. A common topic related to attitudes are the prejudices. Like all the other attitudes, prejudices as feelings are regularly gotten gradually and over a time outline. To understand how children learn his ethnic and racial attitudes we emphasise. Diane Maluso, F (n.d) explanation that among the number of theories about the origins of prejudice, “social learning theory suggests that prejudice is learned in the same way other attitudes and values are learned, primarily through association, reinforcement and modelling.” Through the messages they receive in the world around them, “children may learn to associate a particular ethnic group with poverty, crime, violence and other bad things.” Subsequently, the same is applicable for the Albanian students when it comes to forming their attitudes towards vocational and training education.

Prejudice for this kind of education: as a result of little information about vocational schools, there is a huge bias for this sector in the Albanian society (Sela, E. 2016). Most parents consider vocational education as unfit and prefer for their children to study at Universities, for such fields as finance, law, accounting, medicine, etc (Sela, E. 2016). Even so, these negative attitudes are not unfounded. Mostly vocational and training institutions in Albania have difficulties to offer an appealing environment since they do not have the essential assets both tools and teacher specializations. The COVID- 19 pandemic has enforced this negative attitude towards and poor image of vocational and training schools. The online social media research through the official Facebook pages of ten schools in Tirana and Fier during 2020 till March 2021, revealed that business closures such as hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, etc, had a negative

attitude and impact on prospects employment for that part of vocational students who study in hospitality and tourism. Also, the lack of operational distance-learning platforms and educational resources has decline the quality of skills development. One of the most imported theory related to attitudes structure and formation is the cognitive dissonance theory. This theory recommends that we endeavour for consistency between our attitude and our activities and when the two don't coordinate, we may frame a unused attitude to coincide with our past activities. (Petty, R. E., & Cacioppo, J. T, 1981). A large number of studies on attitudes have been conducted and you can access mostly of them online. In my humble opinion these studies need to be updated within almost two years into the COVID-19 pandemic. This new reality has changed considerably the human and students attitude- behavioural towards education and especially towards vocational and training education

2.2.3 Vocational education in Albania and the students' attitudes toward vocational education.

Findings has shown that in Albania operates forty-one institutions of vocational training. Most are concentrated especially in populated urban areas; (Tirana, Dures, Shkodra, Vlora, Elbasan, Korca, and so on.). In current years, the vocational education and training in Albania, has long undergone adjustments inside the structure and content, to enhance it and its technique with the market requirements. The main purpose of vocational schooling policy is to reduce the level of unemployment, way to a prime qualification of students inside the labour market. Interventions in vocational training are accomplished with the ultimate purpose of finding solutions to some problematic situations. Compared to other European countries, Albania features a decrease in percentage of young students holding a diploma issued by using vocational studies (Ministry of Education and Science, 2009). On the other hand, research has shown that vocational education in Albania faces many problems, which influence students' attitudes toward vocational education. The data show that there are substantial differences in the area of infrastructure, teaching tools, additionally in the professional degree of instructors and instructors of professional practice (Ministry of Education and Science., &Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, 2012).

Even though a considerable part of professional experts is supported with training inside the framework of the implementation of numerous initiatives, the qualifications of specialist teachers stay a problem for lots of schools. Raw material shortages and deficiencies are found out with problems, which are not at the extent of software necessities.

The cultural issue in Albania also has implied a well-known tendency towards a mixed image within the society towards vocational education. Students' attitudes are influenced by the recognition of the worthiness of vocational or academic training, the results are indicative that at the same time when vocational education is appearing to be worthy and provide many opportunities for those attending it, subject

like design, hospitality and tourism, ICT are the more requested branches of studies for the students. This likeability is closely related to job and travel opportunities and good economic incomes. This study takes also into consideration the unexpected closure of a huge majority of vocational institutions, because countrywide lockdowns announced in many countries, significantly disrupted the continuity of VET. While distance learning alternatives have been explored and exploited to have some positive extent, they could not replace the first-class of face-to-face training, mainly given the great emphasis of VET on work-based studying and acquisition of skills development. The impact of the crisis is anticipated to head past the physical lockdown period, as both families and vocational institutions may additionally find themselves in economically weaker situations than earlier and not able to make certain the continuity of training activities.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the primary inference of this literature review study, open ended questions and social media research is that the general attitudes towards vocational education in Albania are mixed, weighting more on the negative, and it has been affected by a poor image of vocational education in the society. New factors along with the classic ones such as friends, parents, community, family's socioeconomic status need to be taken into consideration, too. The digital era we are living into has shown the importance and the growing role of social media. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, etc. are very popular among students. Such platforms might determine students' behaviours, attitudes, vocational and training education preferences, etc. For example, ICT programmes are mostly liked and selected due to better image and proximity that students have with technology and the long hours they spend during the day with technology. More in-depth studies for the social media role should follow. Please take into consideration that the conclusions are limited due to the COVID-19 pandemic measures.

4. Suggestions

One of the key pillars for the policymakers is to increase the attraction of the Albanian VET system, as traditionally it has been considered as a side door into higher education for low achievers coming from basic education (UNDP Albania, 2020).

Policy maker should take into consideration students' requests and needs for more updated and better programs.

There is a need to establish an affiliation of VET administrators. The primary purpose of the affiliation is to trade statistics and stories, to advise government and private zone establishments, and to take part in the preparation of secondary rules and rules concerning the whole VET sector. It can also connect with similar organizations in different countries for statistics exchange and also for the trade and transfer of studies.

Exploration of models and practices of different nations can boom motivation and insight. The contemporary exercise or having a look at trips is useful for members to benefit from suggestions and collecting of ideas. For institutional learning, it is, nevertheless, not always the only technique. Consequently, it is miles endorsed to combine such trips with other forms of mastering, as an example of peer gaining knowledge (UNDP Albania, 2020).

The motivation of students, teachers, and executives: With the sudden need to adapt to new teaching methodologies and to ensure communication with students thru virtual approaches or systems, and the multiplied messages and questions from students in any respect hours, the transition has reportedly no longer be smooth (International Labour Office., & United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., & World Bank, 2021).

Regardless of the difficult circumstances and negative consequences of the COVID-19 crisis highlighting this deficiency, it should be noted that, in some cases, the crisis has accelerated the already underway shift toward digitalization of education centres and programs, while also emphasizing the importance of developing digital competencies within the VET framework.

In my opinion, it is important to increase the recruitment and training of additional teachers and trainers, because the study shows that many pedagogical staff have stated shortages of virtual competencies needed to supply distance learning.

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