Professional Identity Construction in Higher Education: A Conceptual Framework of the Influencing Factors and Research Agenda

Alba Barbarà Molinero and Rosalía Cascón Pereira

Abstract—We assert here that there might be some factors that influence professional identity construction at the university/higher education stage. In accord, we propose a conceptual framework of intervening factors in professional identity construction at university from a literature review and preliminary data from a qualitative pilot study using focus groups. This model identifies several factors that might influence university students' professional identity construction and group them into categories. In turn, we describe how these factors might contribute in strengthening or weakening their professional identity. Finally, we discuss the implications of strengthening students' PI for the university, individuals and organizations and we provide a roadmap for future empirical work in this area.

Keywords—Professional Identity, Higher education, influencing factors.

I. INTRODUCTION

AS it is recognised, during their lives [1], [2], individuals construct their Professional Identity (PI), which is understood as the definition that an individual makes about him or herself in terms of the work he or she does [3], [4]. This construction is mediated by several factors that increase or decrease this identification with the profession.

Although there has been a burgeoning literature on PI construction in the organization and management field (e.g. Dannels [5]; Cohen-Scali [6]; Pratt et al. [7]) and this has been a traditional topic in some disciplines such as Psychology (e.g. Canrinus et al. [8]; Johnson et al. [9]; Marsico [10]), this interest has just shown recently in the higher education field, gaining salience in Higher Education studies over the last decade. Focusing on the mission of Universities and the contextual changes we can partly explain that increasing interest on the topic. Universities are defined as complex organizations, which develop their activity around three main objectives: to teach, to research and to transfer knowledge. Nowadays, in a changing socio-economic context, Universities are supposed to add competitiveness to their countries [11] through the production and transference of knowledge as well as the formation of new professionals that sooner will be part of the job market and the profession they are preparing for. It is known that a profession arises when an organized group has

Authors are with Department of Business Management, University Rovira I Virgili, Reus, Spain. (E-mail: alba.barbara@urv.cat and rosalia.cascon@urv.cat).

knowledge that has economic value when applied to problems. Because of their unique knowledge and skill sets, society grants professionals higher levels of prestige and autonomy than it grants non-professionals [12], [13], [7], this knowledge and skills have assumed to be provided by universities. In order to achieve those objectives, Universities has shown an increasing interest to introduce programs that develop practice-based pedagogical curricula that prepare graduates for the world of work [14], [15]. These practices, as Trade et al. [15] highlighted, contribute to individuals Professional Identity development.

By this means, to understand how students identify themselves as professionals, just as Lordly and MacLellan [16] in the case of dieticians said, can also help to design programs and develop supports to ensure that these young professionals are ready for entry-level practice. For this reason the aim of this article is to identify the factors that influence identity construction to achieve a deep understanding of the early professional identity of young adults. The resulting framework will allow us to analyse in future works which is the influence of each factor, especially in the University period. This knowledge would be useful to enhance PI from University, through specific programs, creating more prepared, productive, motivated and creative professionals, as well as, satisfied [8].

II. PURPOSE

Taking into account what we previously said and aiming to construct a conceptual framework of the reported factors that might influence PI construction, we conduct an interdisciplinary review which integrates knowledge from different disciplines. This conceptual framework is also crafted from the qualitative analysis of the data obtained through four focus groups conducted with 65 students of two degrees (Tourism and Geography) in order to identify other influencing factors not considered by previous literature. The resulting conceptual framework will be considered as the basis to establish the future research agenda in this area.

The guiding questions for this review are the following:

1. What factors influence Professional Identity construction just before and after entering university?

2. What are the research and practical implications for university and students from the identification of these factors?

III. METHODOLOGY

We have constructed the conceptual framework by using both primary data (focus groups) and secondary data (literature review).

A. Literature Review

We conducted a multidisciplinary research, in order to identify the influencing factors on PI construction considered in previous literature. The initial search criterion was limited to articles published between 1990 and 2012, but while we were doing the review we also included articles before 1990 indicated as references from the articles of the primary search. In order to find the articles we used the databases Scopus and ISI web of knowledge.

The search terms used were 'Professional Identity', 'Professional Identification', 'Professional Identity Formation', 'Professional Identity Construction', 'Professional Identity Development', 'Professional Identity Sources', ' Professional Identity Factors'. Although, all these terms seem interchangeable, there is a clear preference, among disciplines, to use one or another term. For instance we looked for articles, which have at least "Professional Identity" term in the title. Using these search terms we wanted to find articles that let us identify the multiple factors that take part in the PI construction before and after entering university.

Once we did the search, after cleaning the results, we obtained a total of 742 articles. We excluded proceedings, books, books chapter and press articles, because there were huge amounts of material related to PI, and we needed to reduce to make it affordable to read. We also obviate non-English articles. Apart from that, we considered both empirical and theoretical articles. However, as we said we also screen the multiple articles references, and include the documents we thought could help to our research.

The selection from the resulting 742 articles was made taking into account the title and the abstract. We screened the multiple abstracts of the articles, and select the articles that we thought would be useful for our objective, because they were related with factors that influenced PI. We also excluded articles that were related with PI but did not talk about the topic specifically, as for example:

✓ Articles searching for a relation among the professional and the patient or client.
✓ Articles comparing one PI in two different historic periods.
✓ Articles related with diseases and disorders.
✓ Articles which were on the development of PI in professionals with different language or ethnic origin

Then, we read the articles and we identify the multiple factors that influence the identification with professions, the ones that did not provide information about those factors were excluded.

Since, we also screened articles references in order to find new papers and achieve a more accurate review, the number of papers finally considered was sixteen.

B. Pilot Study

In order to found other influencing factors, which have not been considered in the previous literature, we used the data obtained from four Focus Groups with 62 third year Caucasian students, of ages comprised among 20-50 years, of two different degrees -Tourism (T) and Geography (G)- of University Rovira i Virgili in Catalonia (Spain). The first focus group was integrated for 5 men and 12 women (T), the second one by 10 women and 1 man (T), the third one by 8 women and 4 men (T) and the fourth one 7 women and 16 men (G).

These Focus Groups were part of an exploratory study, and lasted between 60-90 minutes. We used a semi-structured protocol, with five bread themes developed in open-ended questions. The focus groups were performed at the university during a class about qualitative methodology as an example of this data collection method. These were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. We modified the focus group protocol taking into account the emerging themes during each Focus group. In the protocol there were questions about: (1) Students perception of their professional Identity; (2) Reasons for choosing the university degrees; (3) Influences on the choice (e.g. educational content, family, professional image, experience in a related field, among other); (4) Other influences not considered in the open-ended questions.

IV. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Although PI is developed during the whole life and there are several factors, during that period, that may have influence over this process, even making it change slightly or dramatically [1], [2], for the purpose of this work, we decided to focus only on the factors that have exerted influence on the construction of PI in the early stages. By this means, we considered the factors that influence the degree choice as well as the ones that lead students to validate or not their early professional identity during the years that last the degree in the University.

Therefore, drawing on the factors identified in the literature and the ones found through the Focus Groups, we develop a conceptual framework of influencing factors to enhance the understanding of students' PI construction.

In order to achieve this objective, we based on a total of sixteen articles that focused at least in one influencing factor (e.g.Adams et al.[1]; Cohen-Scali [6]; Schepens et al. [17]; Loui [18]; Hallier & Summers [19]; Nyström [20]; Kaiser [21]; Weaver et al. [22]; Becker &Carper [23]; Hayes [24]; Lordly & MacLellan [16]). These studies were conducted among different professions (e.g. social health care [1] or engineers [25]). These sources are listed below, and in order to develop the conceptual framework we categorise the identified influences, which will be explained later, in the following groups according to its nature:

1. Role Models through Social Experience

✓ **Family** (e.g. Cohen-Scali [6], Schepens et al. [17], Loui [18], Pierrakos et al. [25], Levine&Hoffner [26], Henning [27], Adams et al. [1], Lordly & MacLellan [16])

✓ **Friends** (e.g. Cohen-Scali [6], Loui [18], Pierrakos et al. [25], Levine&Hoffner [26], Adams et al. [1], Lordly & MacLellan [16])

✓ **Media** (e.g. Cohen-Scali [6], Weaver et al. [22], Kaiser [21], Loui [18], Levine & Hoffner [26])

✓ **Other role models** (e.g. Adams et al. [1], Lordly & MacLellan [16])

2. Educational Experience

✓ **Previous educational experience** (e.g. Cohen-Scali [6], Hallier & Summers [19], Adams et al. [1], Pierrakos et al. [25], Levine&Hoffner [26])

✓ **Degree accessibility** -Financial considerations; Educational requirements; First option- (e.g. Hayes [24], Levine & Hoffner [26], Hallier & Summers [19])

✓ **Degree characteristics** -fit with previous expectations- (e.g. Hallier & Summers [19])

3. Congruence with the profession

✓ **Personality** (e.g. Schepens et al. [17], Pierrakos et al. [25])

✓ **Intellectual capacity** (e.g. Cohen-Scali [6], Henning [27])

✓ **Values** (e.g. Cohen-Scali [6], Pierrakos et al. [25])

4. Professional Interests (e.g. Cohen-Scali [6])

5. Demographic characteristics

✓ **Age** (e.g. Nyström [20])

✓ **Gender** (e.g. Cohen-Scali [6], Nyström [20], Adams et al. [1])

6. Professional Image

✓ **Social Status or profession prestige** (e.g. Cohen-Scali [6], Nyström [20], Levine & Hoffner [26])

✓ **Possibilities to have a future job** (e.g. Hallier & Summers [19], Pierrakos et al. [25], Henning [27])

7. Professional Experience

(e.g. Becker &Carper [23], Schepens et al. [17], Adams et al. [1], Pierrakos et al. [25], Levine&Hoffner [26], Lordly & MacLellan [16])

Apart from these influencing factors detected throughout the literature review, we also found other influencing factors through Focus Groups. These factors have been gathered under the same categories created to group the identified factors in the literature review.

TABLE I
FACTORS INFLUENCING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AT
UNIVERSITY IDENTIFIED FROM FOCUS GROUPS

Classification	Factor	Quotations
Degree characteristics	Degree tradition	It's so young this speciality, isn't it? Medicine has been around for a long time, hasn't it? Tourism is a twentieth-century discipline. So it is quite modern
	Professional versatility	It is quite a versatile degree. Thank God it is versatile so when you get tired of something you can do something else. On the other hand, though, you need constant training… which makes it difficult to identify with the profession
	Perceived heterogeneity among different universities	You can study in different cities (universities) and the degree may vary. Indeed, you don't study tourism, this degree is not centralized.
	Degree's name	Tourism indeed is a young degree … and depending on where you study, the program varies, for example, in Barcelona de degree course is focused on languages, in Valencia on art history and in Tarragona on Economics. This doesn't' happen in other degrees, for instance if you study law, the constitution is the same, if you are studying in Sevilla, Barcelona or Madrid. Tourism is a relatively new degree, and every university has taken a different model.

From these sources we identified several factors that influence students' PI construction at university, through their career choice. Following, we explained each of the identified influencing factors, no matter the source for its identification, in more detail. Moreover, we specify their influence through propositions to be explored in the following stage of our study.

A. Role Models Through Social Experience

Students are exposed to several foci of social experiences, with family, friends, mass media, school, professionals and acquaintances. All of these foci imply to young adolescents different forms of work representations, because these sources communicate knowledge, representations and attitudes towards work, from their childhood [6]. The information gathered from these social influences may shape individuals' perceptions of work. For example, it is known that the existence of a traditional profession within a *family* sometimes makes adolescents take a decision about their future professions tied to what their relatives did [27]. To discuss career goals and aspirations with *friends* may provoke some desirability for some occupations [28], [26]. And the stereotyped conceptions about a profession shown on *media*, could make individuals to create a mental picture of professions and make this profession more or less desirable.

Proposition 1. Role models through social experience influence students' PI strength positively or negatively by confronting them to multiple work representations.

B. Educational Experience

Individuals' PI is developed through multiple environments (e.g. family or school). The educational context, influences PI

not only by a socialization process, but also by some degree characteristics.

By reviewing the literature and the data from the Focus Groups we found that the experiences individuals had during their period at Primary/ Secondary school (*previous educational experiences*) influenced in some way their decision to study the degree. We realised that to be good or not in some subjects (e.g. maths) made students to apply in some degrees instead of others.

We also noticed that the *degree accessibility* was an important benchmark when deciding what degree to do. For example, the **required mark** to enter in some degrees influenced on the decision to study one of the two degrees explored. Most of the students, in both degrees, indicated that they decided to study the degree because the required mark was five over then points, and they did not have the necessary mark to study what they really wanted to do.

As well as the accessibility of the degree, the *characteristics* of this were found important when deciding what degree to do and consequently their PI. Among these characteristics we found that the two degrees explored were very **heterogeneou**s in terms of both the subjects and the professional choices. But, that heterogeneity had an adverse effect over PI strength, because it made difficult the identification with a particular profession. Additionally, the **degrees' name** or the **professions' name** also influenced the identification with a particular profession. For example, we detected that tourism students sometimes do not felt identified with this profession because they felt the name was not serious (Tourism and Leisure) and also sometimes they felt difficult to find a particular name for the tourism professional, and that made them felt less identified with the profession.

Proposition 2 A. Previous educational experience in primary school affects PI strength by confronting students to specific information

Proposition 2 B. Previous educational experience in secondary school affects PI strength by confronting students to specific information

Proposition 2 C. Previous educational experience in university affects PI strength by confronting students to specific information.

Proposition 2 D. The degrees' required mark to enter university affect PI strength by influencing the degree choice.

Proposition 2 E. Second and third degree choices decrease PI strength.

Proposition 2 F. The degrees' name or professions' name affect PI strength by allowing them to identify with a professional image

Proposition 2 G. The degrees' cost affects PI strength by influencing the degree choice

Proposition 2 H. The degrees' heterogeneity in terms of both subjects and professional opportunities decrease PI strength

C. Congruence with the Profession and Professional Interests

The *values or beliefs* attached to the profession and the *perceived affinity* with them may influence on the degrees' decision, as the case of engineers noted by Pierrakos et al. [25] who found that some girls decided to do engineering because this would let them to work with and help people, or HRM students who compared their values and beliefs with the ones surrounding HRM profession and opt to choose a career that would allow the expression of their core values [19]. In both cases, they decide to find allegiance for one profession with congruent values with their own. Moreover, intellectual capacity -being good at something or having interests on some subjects- also helps individuals to decide their degree path. An example can be extracted from the research made by Pierrakos et al. [25] where a student said: "I originally chose engineering because I'm good at calculus". Also, in the Focus Groups, we found that some students decided to study the degree because they feel that they personality were congruent with the degree content.

Preposition 3 A. Perceived personality congruence enhances the identification with a profession.

Proposition 3 B. Perceived intellectual capacity or skills required in the degree enhances the identification with the profession

Proposition 3 C. Previous Professional Interests in congruence with the degree are related to PI strength.

D. Demographic Characteristics

Some stereotypes are based in demographic characteristics such as gender and ethnicity. During the Focus Groups we saw that the fact to live in a particular town/ city/ country influences the identification with a profession. Some of Tourism students were doing this degree because of the huge amount of touristic places in Catalonia. And also some of Geography students feel allegiance with the Geographer profession because they live in a specific town. We also found that most of the students decide to study these degrees because their parents did the same and now they are working in these fields.

Proposition 4 A. Gender may affect the PI created by choosing one particular degree attending its congruence with one's sex.

Proposition 4 B. Geographical proximity may affect the PI created by choosing degrees which are closer to one's hometown.

Proposition 4 C. Parents profession may enhance the PI created by being confronted to specific professional information.

E. Professional Image

Individuals will be more likely to feel attached to professions with more prestige and that can give them a future financial security. In fact, Henning [27] found that a vast array of engineers choose that career because of the security of the job. These engineers thought that through choosing that path

they would be incorporated into the market sooner than if they would have chosen another degree. We also found that the low status associated to some degrees as Tourism or Geography makes students be more identified with these and differentiate positively their group in front of other groups. They also feel that the degree they are studying will make them have more chances once in the workplace, because of the versatility that we previously exposed.

Proposition 5 A. Higher status and prestige of the profession strengthen the identification with this.

Proposition 5 B. The more possibilities to have a job after graduation the stronger the identification with the profession.

F. Professional Experience

Professional experience not only occurs during the degree or just after finishing it, but also before deciding what degree to do. Students who may develop a higher level of PI than someone without that experience [1]. Also, we found in our research that some Tourism and Geography students decide to study these degrees after having some professional experiences as receptionist or meteorologist for example. And, also some students before be enrolled to these degrees have had work experiences which have made them reaffirm their previous PI.

Proposition 6. Individuals with previous work experiences have been confronted to specific information that can make them to develop a stronger PI.
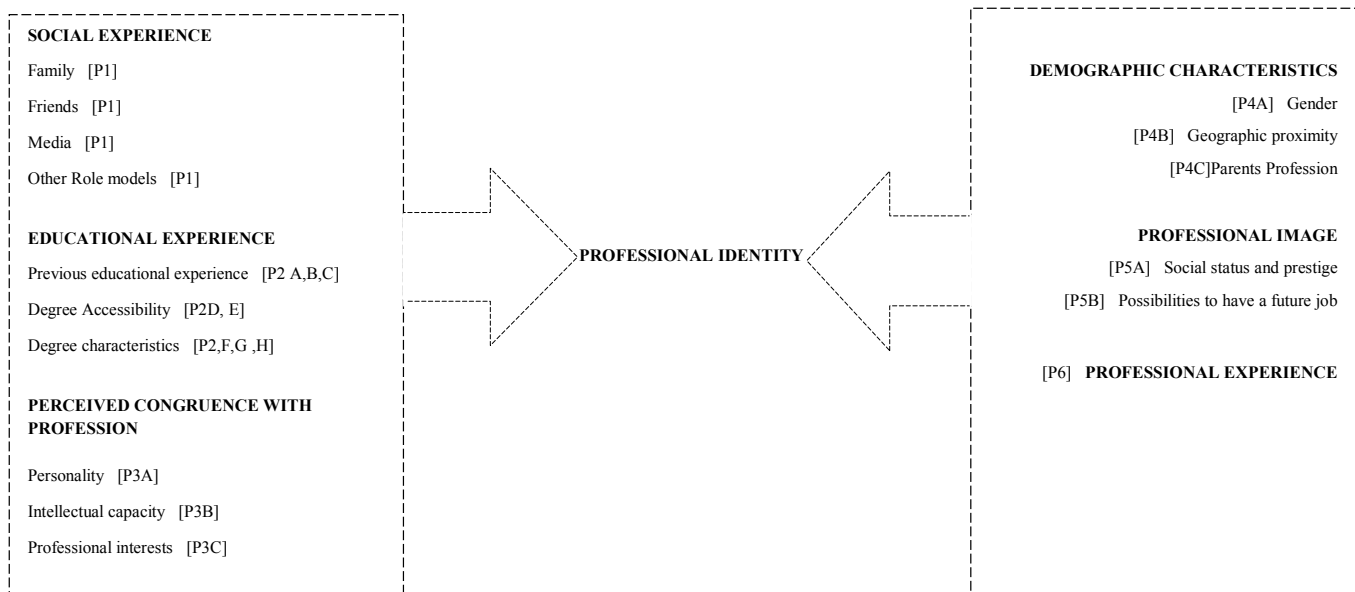

Fig. 1 Conceptual framework

V. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

After reviewing the literature we found that there are limited studies that gather the multiple factors that influence PI construction. Taking this into account, we have tried to identify these factors by doing an interdisciplinary review of the articles focusing on PI factors. Furthermore, aiming to identify more influencing factors not reported on the articles reviewed, we conducted four focus groups with students of Tourism and Geography degrees. The data obtained allowed us to identify five additional influencing factors (Table I). We classified all these factors in seven different categories (Role models through social experience, Educational Experience, Congruence with the profession, Professional Interests, Professional Image, Demographic characteristics and Professional Experience)

To identify which factors influence on PI construction could help us to understand what the bases are for students'

definition about themselves as professionals, especially in the University period. This understanding can be useful when designing programs and developing supports to ensure that these are ready for entry-level practice [16]. Enhancing PI from University, through specific actions, can create more productive, motivated and creative professionals, as well as, satisfied [8], and prepared students.

Our literature review shows that most of the papers analysed focused only in one specific discipline and only took into account some factors. We also realised that although most of the papers were exploratory studies that looked for understanding, a small portion only focused on determining which factors indeed affect PI construction. In this context, we think that future research should focus the attention on exploring what factors influence the PI and if we want to develop a thorough understanding of PI construction before and during the university period, more integrative and

comprehensive research should develop which takes into account all the different factors that might influence PI construction before and during the university stage. Also, it would be interesting to pay attention to what particular knowledge about the profession is communicated to young people, and from which source this information is gathered. This can contribute both to a better understanding of anticipatory socialization process and to interventions that might facilitate this process. For example, this information can assist in the development of training programs. Finally, to compare how students construct their PI once at university among different degrees, and to find out why some students decide to switch their degrees, would help Universities to adapt their training programs in order to prepare the future professionals and, also, to avoid the degrees' switch and their associated costs.

REFERENCES

[1] Adams, K., Hean, S., Sturgis, P., & Clark, J. M. (2006). Investigating the factors influencing Professional Identity of first-year health and social care students. Learning in Health and Social Care, 5(2), 55-68.

[2] Dobrow, S. R., & Higgins, M. C. (2005). Developmental networks and Professional Identity: A longitudinal study. *Career Development International, 10*(6), 567-583.

[3] Mael, F., & Ashforth, B. E. (1992). Alumni and their alma mater: A partial test of the reformulated model of organisational identification. *Journal of Organisational Behavior, 13*(2), 103-123.

[4] Van Maanen, J., &Barley, S. R. (1984). Occupational communities: Culture and control in organisations.*Research in Organisational Behavior, 6*, 287.

[5] Dannels, D. P. (2000).Learning to be professional: Technical classroom discourse, practice, and Professional Identity construction. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication, 14*(1), 5-37.

[6] Cohen-Scali, V. (2003). The influence of family, social, and work socialization on the construction of Professional Identity of young adults. *Journal of Career Development, 29*(4), 237-249.

[7] Pratt, M. G., Rockmann, K. W., & Kaufmann, J. B. (2006).Constructing Professional Identity: The role of work and identity learning cycles in the customization of identity among medical residents. *Academy of Management Journal, 49*(2), 235-262.

[8] Canrinus, E., Helms-Lorenz, M., Beijaard, D., Buitink, J., &Hofman, A. (2012).*Self-efficacy, job satisfaction, motivation and commitment: Exploring the relationships between indicators of teachers' Professional Identity.*Netherlands:Springer.

[9] Johnson, M. D., Morgeson, F. P., Ilgen, D. R., Meyer, C. J., & Lloyd, J. W. (2006). Multiple professional identities: Examining differences in identification across work-related targets. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 91*(2), 498-506.

[10] Marsico, G. (2012). The double uncertainty: Trajectories and Professional Identity in changing contexts. *Culture and Psychology, 18*(1), 121-132.

[11] Montero, D. P., Aracil, A. G., & Martínez, E. C. (2012). Current missions of public universities: A sociological perspective. [Misiones actuales de las universidades públicas: Una perspectiva sociológica] *Arbor, 188*(753), 171-192.

[12] Carr-Saunders, A. & Wilson, P. (1993). *The professions*. Oxford, UK: Claredon Press.

[13] Larson, M. (1977). *The rise of professionalism: A sociological analysis.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

[14] Reid, A., Dahlgren, L. O., Petocz, P., & Dahlgren, M. A. (2008).Identity and engagement for professional formation. *Studies in Higher Education, 33*(6), 729-742.

[15] Trede, F., Macklin, R., & Bridges, D. (2012). Professional identity development: A review of the higher education literature. *Studies in Higher Education, 37*(3), 365-384.

[16] Lordly, D., & MacLellan, D. (2012). Dietetic students' identity and professional socialization: In preparation for practice. *Canadian Journal of Dietetic Practice and Research, 73*(1), 7-13.

[17] Schepens, A., Aelterman, A., &Vlerick, P. (2009). Student teachers' Professional Identity formation: Between being born as a teacher and becoming one. *Educational Studies, 35*(4), 361-378.

[18] Loui, M. C. (2005). Ethics and the development of professional identities of engineering students. *Journal of Engineering Education, 94*(4), 383-390.

[19] Hallier, J., &Summers, J. (2011). Dilemmas and outcomes of Professional Identity construction among students of human resource management. *Human Resource Management Journal, 21*(2), 204-219.

[20] Nystrom, S. (2009). The dynamics of Professional Identity formation: Graduates' transitions from higher education to working life. *Vocations and Learning, 2*(1), 1-18.

[21] Kaiser, R. (2002). Fixing identity by denying uniqueness: An analysis of Professional Identity in medicine. *Journal of Medical Humanities, 23*(2), 95-105.

[22] Weaver, R., Peters, K., Koch, J., & Wilson, I. (2011). 'Part of the team': Professional Identity and social exclusivity in medical students. *Medical Education, 45*(12), 1220-1.

[23] Becker, H. S., &Carper, J. W. (1956).The development of identification with an occupation. *American Journal of Sociology, 61*(4), pp. 289-298.

[24] Hayes, J. (1969). Occupational choice and the perception of occupational roles. *Occupational Psychology, 43*(1), 15-22.

[25] Pierrakos, O., Beam, T. K., Constantz, J., Johri, A., & Anderson, R. (2009). On the development of a Professional Identity: Engineering persistersvs engineering switchers. *Proceedings - Frontiers in Education Conference, FIE.*

[26] Levine, K. J., & Hoffner, C. A. (2006). Adolescents' conceptions of work: What is learned from different sources during anticipatory socialization? *Journal of Adolescent Research, 21*(6), 647-669.

[27] Henning, S. O. (2001). Professional Identity as learning processes in life histories. *Journal of Workplace Learning, 13*(7), 290-298.

[28] Jablin, F. M. (2000). Organisational entry, assimilation, and disengagement/exit. In F. M. Jablin, & L. L. Putman (Eds.), *The new handbook of organisational communication* (pp. 711) Thousand Oaks, CA.