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How Students Choose College in Croatia

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How Students Choose College in Croatia

By

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A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Science in Service Leadership and
Innovation

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the ways in which high school students in Croatia go through the process of making their college decision, and attempts to identify the key factors that influence their decision to choose a certain college. The study used focus group methodology to gain deeper understanding of the thought process students go through from the moment they start thinking about colleges, to the moment they make their final decision. The results of this research show that high school students in Croatia tend to start thinking more seriously about where they will continue their education in the third and, more often in their fourth (last) grade of high school. They are often not proactively searching for options, but relying on what they think they know and what they think they will be good at. In addition to that, there seems to be a lack of professional support in high schools, so students' are making their decisions based on their limited understanding on options and possibilities that they have. The research showed that parents play an important role in the process in most of the cases, either by supporting their children, or by questioning and directing them towards something they believe is a good choice.

The results of this research might be beneficial to high school administrators and advisors who would like to better understand their students, to colleges and universities in their efforts to attract new students, but also to the governmental agencies and ministries when trying to develop new education and employment strategies in Croatia.

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Introduction

Problem Statement

Choosing a college is a major decision in high school student's life and definitely not an easy one to make. At this young age, students have to think about their careers, about the job market and are still under a lot of different influences, primarily from their family and friends.

There are 129 institutions of higher education in Croatia today, 102 public institutions and 27 private educational institutions. Students have more than 500 study programs to choose from in the country and there are numerous options available to them outside of the country (Agency for Science and Higher Education, 2015). Access to information has never been easier than today but the overwhelming amount of information is adding to the stress and pressure of finding the best fit. Through this research, I would like to find out what are the key factors that influence a student to apply to a certain college and what are the primary sources of information that they are consulting when starting their college search. To which extent do prospective students look at objective and measurable factors and how strong is the influence of their friends and families?

Not having an official ranking system in Croatia, the lack of quality advising services in high schools and a non-existent government policies in terms of defining the needs of the employment market, makes it even harder for today's student to make the final decision. High schools in Croatia do not have a system in place that would help students choose the appropriate college and a study program that best fits their academic aptitude and interests, so students depend on the advice from their friends and family and the information available on the internet. It is questionable if the students are sufficiently informed about their college options before they make their decision and moreover, if they have full understanding of the future employment options after they graduate.

Determining the key influencing factors can be a starting point for changing communication and marketing strategy of higher education institutions in Croatia. Moreover, finding out more about the process of choosing college in Croatia would be beneficial for governmental agencies to develop strategies which would help students choose their future education options wisely.

Research questions

There are a couple of questions that this study is aiming to explore. The central research question of this study is:

How do students choose college in Croatia?

In order to better understand this process, the study tried to answer the following sub-questions:

When do high school students start thinking about their college option?

What are the most important factors students consider when choosing the college?

What influences their college decision the most?

Where do they look for information about colleges?

Methodology

In order to better understand how students in Croatia choose college, qualitative research method was used. The reason for choosing a qualitative approach is to gain better understanding of process of choosing the college in Croatia and to have more flexibility in asking the questions.

The researcher organized focus groups in Dubrovnik and Zagreb, with fifteen students in total. The groups consisted of freshmen students who enrolled into a college or a university in Croatia in the Academic Year 2015/2016.

Significance of the study

Motivation factors behind the enrollment decisions are important for colleges and universities in order to be able to form their recruitment, marketing and communication strategies in the adequate way. In the past, choices were limited for college-bound students and the sources of information were scarce. Today, in the information abundant world, where opportunities are almost endless, marketing in education has become a necessity.

In the massive and competitive higher education market today (Horrigan, 2007; Mount and Belanger, 2004), marketing strategies are crucial for attracting targeted groups of students to attend a particular college. Determining the key influencing factors can also be a starting point for changing communication and marketing strategy of colleges in Croatia.

Due to more students entering the higher education market and more choices that are available to them, colleges and universities will need to embrace the integrated marketing communication strategies in order to effectively and consistently position themselves to the target groups (Horrigan, 2007). In order to put a strategy in place, colleges and universities will have to research their target audience needs, aspirations and motives for pursuing a degree in higher education. This implies understanding the reasons, motivating factors and ways students make their college decision.

Literature Review

This literature review is intended as an overview of the existing literature on the factors that influence students' decision to enroll to a certain college and their importance when making the final choice.

For the purpose of conducting research on how students in Croatia make their decisions to enroll, past literature will help understand the main influencing factors found by previous

researchers. This literature review will focus on the work of international and Croatian authors on the topic of choosing a college and will touch upon the implications for marketing and recruitment departments. Most of the previous studies have been done in the USA, focusing on different colleges and universities and different groups of students but there are also some relevant ones dealing with colleges in other parts of the world. There is some literature on how students in Croatia choose colleges and study programs, but the existing literature does not explain the process of choosing college and sources of information students use during that process.

Historical background - USA

Choosing a college is a major decision in person's life and it is a complex decision today. There are a lot of parties involved in the process: students, parents, friends, teachers, college staff and faculty, government institutions and many more. A study by Kinzie et al. (2004) summarized the development and the changes in the process of choosing the college from the late 1940's to the late 1990's. With the accessibility of information and differences in socio-political surrounding, a lot has changed, but there are a lot of factors that stayed the same. Before the late 1940's there was less competition because less than 20% of high school students entered tertiary education and going to college was a norm for the upper class Caucasian students (Kinzie et al., 2004, p. 40). There was no need for formal counseling or marketing as there were not that many options available. Until the late 60s students were choosing colleges based on convenience (proximity to their homes), social background, and their parents preferences; so only in the late 60's, colleges started preparing brochures not only for the parents, but for the high school students as well (Kinzie et al., 2004). Lipsett and Smith (as cited in Kinzie et al., 2004) found that academic reputation of the college started playing a more important role in enrollment decision only in the mid 1950's. Kinzie et al. (2004) also found that the timing of when students started considering their college

options moved from end of their senior year in 40s to the spring of their senior year in the 90's. The reason behind that change lies in the fact that college became available to more students, the environment became more competitive and more choices are available to students today.

When choosing college in the US today, students are also influenced by college rankings (Ceja, 2001; Shaw, Kobrin, Packman, Sheryl and Schmidt 2009), which first appeared in 1983 in *America's Best Colleges by US News & World Report* (Kinzie et al., 2004, p 26.).

In their meta-analysis, Kinzie et al. (2004) found that the proximity to home, cost of attendance and parental influence remained important factors when choosing a college, even though the importance of those factors has somewhat changed and varies among different groups of students. This historical background shows that although times have changed radically and the ways students gather information are different today than they were 50 years ago, some factors, such as proximity to home, low cost, co-curricular life, influence of family and friends, remain important for students in search of a college (Kinzie et al., 2004, p 36.)

The literature shows that the process of choosing college in the US has changed throughout the years and we can assume it will continue to change in the years to come. Technological advancements offer new sources of information but the amount of options available is making the decision more complicated than ever.

Choosing College Today

Because of the very competitive higher education market, colleges and universities in the US today are very interested in finding out more about the reasons for choosing a certain college in order to market their institutions properly. Colleges need to have a clear understanding of this process to be able to respond to the current needs of the student population. Many studies have been conducted in this area in the US, from the ones investigating a particular institution's students

(Bers and Galowich, 2002; Burdett, 2013; Dolinsky, 2010) to the ones investigating different groups of students in terms of gender, nationality, socio- economic background etc. (Ceja, 2001; Cortes, 2012)

Different authors found different factors to be crucial for students choosing the college, but there are also a lot of similarities in their findings. Some of the factors which are mentioned more frequently include: tuition and scholarship/financial aid availability (Burdett, 2013; Kinzie et al., 2004; Lainjo, 2005), parental and family influence (Lainjo, 2005; Kinzie et al., 2004; Burdett, 2013; Bers and Galowich, 2002; Ceja, 2006; Cortes, 2012), academic quality of the institution/program (Lainjo, 2005; Briggs, 2006); vicinity to home (Kinzie et al., 2004; Briggs, 2006; Simões and Soares, 2010) and ranking/reputation (Burdett, 2013; Shaw, Kobrin, Packman, Sheryl and Schmidt 2009). The importance of the above mentioned influencing factors is different depending on the population that was a part of the research and the location of the research, but it is clear that those factors are to some extent relevant in all studies.

Information Resources and Marketing Implications

There is also the need to investigate different ways in which students (and their parents) look for information and what is their perception of the adequacy of information. This also helps colleges change their communication strategies in the way that best meets students' needs.

According to Kinzie et al. (2004) college bound high school students are influenced by high school counselors, admissions staff, traditional brochures and internet resources, campus visits and recruitment fairs. It is interesting to see that the Briggs (2006) found that information provided by the university was ranked as the tenth most important factor when choosing college (p.713). In this study, the results were not the same for students of different gender, in different fields of study and for the different universities that were a part of this research. However, when

asked about the importance of sources of information in the process of choosing the university students chose the university prospectus to be the most important source, followed by university's open days, word of mouth and universities' websites (Briggs, 2006, p.716). Briggs (2006) stated that 41% of the sample surveyed stated that the information they got from the university materials was inadequate in some way, either lacking information, or being too detailed on the information they were not interested in. (p.718). This shows that the quantity of information is less important than the quality, which also implies that the research in this area is crucial if colleges and universities wish to understand what students look for when they are making the final decision.

In terms of traditional (non- internet based information sources), Burdett (2013) found that the campus visits (formal and informal) were the strongest influencing factor, followed by the influence of high school counselors, campus over-night stays and college admissions counselors visits to high schools (p. 93).

The research by Burdett (2013) showed that students ranked traditional information sources as very influential more often than they did with the internet.-based resources. Contrary to that, Simões and Soares (2010) concluded that the results show the importance of the Internet as a key source of information for prospective students” (p. 384).

Since parents are listed as important influencers in many studies (Bers and Galowich, 2002; Ceja, 2006;Cortes, 2012; Kinzie et al, 2004) therefore, it is important for college marketing and recruitment departments to know how parents are looking for information about colleges and what are the factors that influence their opinion, which consequentially will influence their sons' of daughters' opinions. A study by Bers and Galowich (2002) showed that parents used two main sources of information when looking for colleges: college publications and personal contacts (p. 72). Other resources reported were “high school counselors, faculty and students” (Bers and Galowich, 2002, p. 73-74). This study also showed that mass media was not listed as an important

information resource for parents and that parents who assessed their child's academic abilities as high, were less involved in the process of finding the right college than parents who assessed their child's abilities as lower (Bers and Galowich, 2002). Factors that are important for parents when choosing a community college are primarily financial reasons, followed by college reputation and the importance of staying close to family and friends (Bers and Galowich, 2002, p. 73). The percentage of parents who stated that the final decision to attend a community college was entirely or mostly the students' was 46% and 51% stated that it was a decision they made together (p. 74). Even though this study talks about community colleges it can be compared to the public universities in Croatia that are free of charge for most of the students vs. private colleges that have significant tuition fees. This shows that, when trying to find out about how students look for colleges and how they make this final decision, there is a need to study both students and their parents in order to provide both target groups with sets of information relevant to them.

College bound students differ in the ways they choose colleges. Therefore, Chia (2011) developed a cluster analysis and divided students into three main categories based on how they ranked different college- related attributes: high expectation seekers, independent thinkers and rational decision makers. This cluster analysis showed that there is no unique way to present college to prospective students and that college needs to have a well-designed marketing mix in place in order to respond to the needs of various groups of prospective students.

Tavares and Cardoso (2013) examined the process of choosing college to find out if college bound students can be perceived as rational consumers. According to the findings of their qualitative study, when deciding to go to college, students act as rational consumers, assessing the economic benefit of doing so, but when it comes to choosing the institution and the program of study, the level of rationality decreases (Tavares and Cardoso, 2013). Complexity of the reasons

students choose colleges for makes it even more important for colleges to analyze how students choose that particular college and adjust their communication strategy.

There are many ways in which students gather information about colleges today as sources of information are abundant. For college marketing and recruitment departments it is crucial to know what are the factors that drive students towards their respective colleges and where they are looking for information about studying opportunities, so they could adjust their communication strategies.

The reasons students choose a certain college and the ways in which they search for the institution where they will start their studies have changed throughout the time (Kinzie, 2004). Easy access to information through the internet and the possibility for colleges to move from the traditional media to the internet based communication channels has changed the marketing and recruitment strategies. Web sites play the role of the brochures and e-mail became a substitute for sending letters. With the development of the social media platforms, we are again facing a change in how students communicate and where they search for information. Burdett (2013) found that there was a shift between where students were looking for information in 2009 vs. 2011. While in 2009 students were primarily using college search websites, in 2011 social media websites were internet resource that they used more (Burdett, 2013, p. 111) . However, in the qualitative phase of his mixed method research Burdett (2013) found that students were still more influenced by the traditional information sources and external factors than internet resources (p. 113).

There are many ways in which students gather information about colleges today; sources of information are abundant. For college marketing and recruitment departments it is crucial to know what are the factors that drive students towards their respective colleges and where they are looking for information about studying opportunities, so they could adjust their communication strategies. In his research conducted in a mid-Atlantic university, Dolinsky (2010) used

sufficiency- importance model to find out what are the most important factors for students when choosing a college and then compared the results against perceived adequacy of information on the selected factors. This approach is useful for defining specific areas that need more attention in terms of communication strategies of certain college towards students of different gender, coming from different socio-economic environments, different regions etc. Finding out what are the most important factors for students in Croatia when they are choosing college might be a good starting point for higher education institutions in assessing the sufficiency of information presented in their brochures and in other channels of communication.

Analysis of the Croatian Higher Education Market

There are 129 institutions of higher education in Croatia today, 102 public institutions and 27 private educational institutions. Students have more than 500 study programs to choose from in the country and there are numerous options available to them outside of the country (Agency for Science and Higher Education, 2015). Private educational institutions that opened in the late 90s made the market more competitive and institutions are trying to attract students by using various recruitment, marketing and communication channels. However, public institutions still are the first choice of most of the students (Agency for Science and Higher Education, 2015) due to the long tradition of being the only institutions of higher education in Croatia. The oldest university in Croatia is the University of Zagreb which was founded in 1669 and now has more than 69,000 students („Kratok pregled“, 2008, p.12)

Even though employment and career possibilities are often mentioned as one of the important factors when choosing a college in both international and domestic literature (Nora and Cabrera, 1992; Kesic and Previsic, 1997), Croatian situation shows a discrepancy in that field. Namely, the number of students applying to study programs with very low graduate placement

rates (humanistic field) is high and hard to explain (Jokic and Ristic, 2014). Jokic and Ristic (2014) found that majority of students gravitate toward Zagreb, even though there are University centers offering desired study programs closer to their hometowns. Students from Zagreb rarely move to other cities in the country which implies there's a high level of centralization of education (Jokic and Ristic, 2014). The limitation of this study is that it only includes students who enroll to colleges and universities through the National Information System of Applications for Higher Education (<https://www.postani-student.hr/Ucilista/Default.aspx>) and it does not include students who enroll to private colleges directly, without using the System which slightly reduces the accuracy of results. However, the results of this study show that it is arguable if college-bound students in Croatia could be considered well inform customers, since they the number of students choosing majors that lead to low employability after graduation is still relatively high.

In her study, Potocnik (2008) analyzed the factors that influence the choice of the major among students enrolled at the University of Zagreb and found that 89,2% of students enrolled to a certain study program based on their interest in that field, 18,5% of students chose a study program due to an accident or not being able to enroll to a program of their first choice and 16,6% of students stated that the main reason for enrollment was the influence of their family or friends (p. 271). In this study by Potocnik (2008) students were also asked about their perceived chances of getting a job once their graduate and 62% of the sample answered that it is going to be easy, 19,8% said it's going to be hard, while 7,4% does not know and 10,8% is not sure. Another Croatian study (Kesic and Previsic, 1997) showed that there is a difference in factors that motivate students to enroll to economics related programs vs. students who enroll to electrical engineering programs. While students at the faculties of economics are primarily motivated by usefulness, students at electrical engineering programs are mainly motivated by hedonistic factors (enjoy the field of study). However, according to Obadic and Majic (2013) there is a growing unemployment rate

among those who graduated from different economics related programs in Croatia than among students graduating from engineering programs. This discrepancy confirms that reasons for choosing certain college are not always based on the real situation on the market which implies that students do not base their decision on the future employment probability.

Students who have concerns regarding their future employment opportunities mention corruption, poor economic situation in the country, administrative problems and too many students enrolled to programs in the field of low market demand (Potocnik, 2008, p. 279). This shows that while students are aware of the low employability in certain fields they are still deciding to select colleges that offer program in those areas.

Gaps in the Literature

Although there are numerous studies that explore how students choose colleges, in Croatia there is a gap in the literature in terms of relatively young private educational sector. In addition to that, the researcher has not found any research that shows how students use available resources and what is the influence of personal contact, admissions personnel and campus visits in Croatia. Therefore, additional studies in the private education sector are needed. The only research found on the factors influencing enrollment at a private higher education institution is the one done by Devcic and Prazic (2013) on the sample of Nikola Tesla Polytechnics students. As this institution is geographically dislocated from the country's capital, it attracts local students who value proximity and affordability above all, so the results are not applicable to all other private institutions in bigger cities in Croatia. However, the results might be applicable to the other colleges that are not in the country's capital.

Methodology

Research design and approach

In this qualitative study, the researcher's goal was to explore the ways in which students in Croatia choose college. The goal of the research was to gain deep understanding of the college choice process and to better understand the whole process of choosing college. Sub questions that the researcher was looking to answer are:

When do high school students start thinking about their college options?

What are the most important factors students consider when choosing the college?

What influences their college decision the most?

Where do they look for information about colleges?

By using focus groups as the data collection method, the researcher explored different ways in which students think about their college options, before making the final decision.

Data Collection

Focus groups. Data was collected in the focus groups. Using focus groups to collect data allowed the researcher to hear about different ways in which students have gone through the process of choosing college and to better understand the underlying thought process behind their decisions. The reason for choosing focus groups as data collection method is that „the effect of collecting data from a group means people will react to each other's comments; they may disagree or they may reinforce what others say” (Connelly, 2015). Focus groups encourage interactions among participants where it is likely that they will question each other and discuss and explain their opinions, thus generating more valuable data for the researcher (Morgan, 1996). According to Denscombe (2014), focus groups “explore attitudes and perceptions, feelings and ideas about a

certain topic” (p 188). This way, it was possible to find out more from the participants and capture the differences in opinions and better understand the influencing factors behind their decisions

Participants. The population that was researched is Croatian freshmen students enrolled to Croatian colleges in the academic year 2015/2016. Focus groups consisted of a sample of Croatian freshmen students who enrolled to one of the Croatian public or private institutions of higher education immediately after graduating from high school. The researcher organized two focus groups with a total of fifteen participants. One focus group was organized in Zagreb (seven participants) and the other in Dubrovnik (eight participants), to ensure better geographical coverage. The potential pool of participants was contacted by phone and e-mail and selected from RIT Croatia's database of high school seniors collected in the Academic Year 2014/2015, who became freshmen in a Croatian college or a university in the Academic Year 2015/2016. Out of fifteen participants, nine were female students and six were male students. Five participants were currently enrolled to a private college, while nine study at a public university. The researcher used a non-probability sampling method in order to find out more about a topic that has not been thoroughly researched yet and to allow for the theories to emerge. Even though a representative sample would give more generalizable information, this kind of sampling was a good starting point for generating initial theories. According to Denscombe (2014), non- probability sampling can be justified in cases where it is very hard to achieve a random, representative sample, which is the case in this research (p. 33). All focus group participants were incentivized by a free pizza and refreshments after the sessions.

Procedure. Potential candidates for the focus group were contacted via e-mail in advance and followed up by phone later, with the detailed information on the time, place and the duration of the focus groups. Planning of the sessions was an important part of the process as it was important to ensure that the venue offered privacy and is relatively quiet (Denscombe, 2014, p

193). In accordance with the college, sessions were organized at RIT Croatia campuses in Zagreb and Dubrovnik, between January and April 2016. Both focus groups were facilitated by the same researcher to ensure consistency. At the start of each session, the researcher introduced herself by sharing some basic biographical information and explained her role in the research, making sure that participants understand her neutral role in the process. She also asked the participants to introduce themselves shortly. That was done in order to achieve a relaxed environment and to build a trusting and open atmosphere. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their role in it, as well as the researcher's reasons for the interest in the study. According to Denscombe (2014), it is important for the participants to know the reasons why the focus groups are being organized so that they freely express their thoughts and engage in discussions. Before the start of the session, the researcher asked the participants to verbally agree with participating in the focus groups and that they understand that what they say will be used as the research data. Since the sessions were to be audio recorded, participants were also asked to give verbal consent for audio recording. Even though the participants attended the session voluntarily, which implies that they agree with being a part of it, it is a good practice to ask for a formal consent (Denscombe, 2014, p 185). One additional person (RIT Croatia staff member) was present at each of the sessions to observe and take notes. The researcher started by asking general open ended questions related to the main topic of the research followed by other open-ended questions with the purpose to provoke additional thoughts on the topic. The list of the main questions that the researcher started with in the focus groups was prepared ahead, and can be found in Appendix A. Based on the group dynamics and the new topics that emerged from the interactions among participants, researcher asked some additional questions to better understand discussions and gain new insights. The sessions were conducted in Croatian language.

Role of the Researcher. In order for a reader to better understand the role of the researcher, in this paragraph, I will explain my background and experiences, which could have influenced this study. For almost 5 years now, I have been working at RIT Croatia, a private college in Croatia, as the Recruitment and Enrollment Manager. Working with incoming students and seeing how college decision is often hard for them to make, I became more and more interested in the whole process of choosing college. My experience was the main reason to start this research, as I wanted to find out when students start thinking about college and how they narrow down their choices before making the final decision. In addition to working at the college, I am also a graduate student in Service Leadership and Innovation program at RIT Croatia, so my experience of both working and studying at the college certainly makes me somewhat biased. However, given that I completed my undergraduate studies at the University of Zagreb, Faculty of Economics, I can understand both the perspective of students studying at a private college, and the perspective of students studying at the public university. I personally believe that students in Croatia in general, regardless of their choice to study at a private or public educational institution, make college decisions without being adequately informed and educated about future consequences of their decision. This belief comes from my personal experience in working with students applying to RIT Croatia. As the researcher, I attempted to maintain a neutral role towards participants and their choices in order to ensure that the results of the research are not influenced by my personal beliefs and experiences. In my role of the moderator of both focus groups, I attempted to “facilitate the group discussion, rather than lead the discussion” (Descombe, 2014, p 189.). Following the suggestions in the “Good Research Guide” (Descombe, 2014) I encouraged the group to discuss the topic and to share their open and honest opinion on it and attempted to maintain an atmosphere of trust by being non-judgmental and neutral. In order to reduce potential influence I could have on participants, I

explained my role and emphasized that the purpose is only to learn more about the process of choosing college without being inclined toward any of the possible findings.

Data Analysis. Both focus groups were audio recorded and all interactions were transcribed by the researcher, using the notes taken during the sessions to clarify any unclear conversations. Immediately following the sessions, the researcher and the additional person who was present at the sessions outlined the main ideas that came up in discussions, based on their recollection (Bertrand, Brown and Ward, 1992) and having in mind the main and sub- research questions stated in this study. Once the sessions were transcribed, the researcher read the transcripts again and added some additional ideas found in the transcripts to add to the list created immediately after the sessions. This ensured that all the main topics are covered in the final analysis. The researcher also included comments about the atmosphere, gestures, body language of the participants as annotations (Descombe, 2014, p. 278). Researcher re-read the transcripts multiple times and looked for themes that were later manually coded, using different colors and symbols for each of the emerging themes. Before starting the coding process, the researcher identified themes which are likely to appear in the transcripts based on the existing literature and common sense and then added the themes that came in the process of collecting data as new and unexpected (Creswell, 2014, p. 198-199.). The second stage of the process was looking at the themes and creating categories, merging similar themes and creating sub- categories. In order to be able to re-create the process, the researcher took notes about new ideas and emerging themes in a separate document. This will allow future validation of the process. The final list of themes and subthemes is presented in Appendix B.

Validity of the Study. Basic validation of study “occurs throughout the steps in the process of research” (Creswell. 2014, p. 201.). Four additional strategies were used to ensure validity: member checking, presenting the negative or discrepant information, peer debriefing and

external auditor review (Creswell, 2014, p. 201-202.). Member checking was done after the initial coding stage, where the main themes were written in a short summary that was sent back to the focus group participants to check for accuracy and add comments to ensure validity of the findings. The second way of ensuring validity was to include all the information that is discrepant into the results so that the reader can understand and see possible sources of inconsistent answers among participants. Validation was also ensured through peer debriefing with the assistant who was present during the focus groups and who read the transcripts and asked additional questions which helped the researcher include all the main topics and themes into the final results. The entire project was also sent to an additional person (external auditor- research project mentor) to read the and review the entire process and to ask additional questions about it so that the researcher can find additional themes that were initially neglected or dismissed because of the researcher's bias or any other reason.

Reliability of the study. According to Descombe (2014, p. 298.), reliability implies that the “research reflects procedures and decisions that other researchers can ‘see’ and evaluate in terms of how far they constitute reputable procedures and reasonable decisions”.

In order to ensure reliability, the researcher documented all the steps of the data collection and analysis in order to ensure that the other researchers and readers can thoroughly understand all the steps and evaluate the process and the reasoning behind the conclusions that were made.

Limitations

One of the main limitations of this study is that is based solely on perceptions of students participating in the focus groups, so the results might not give a complete list of factors influencing students to enroll to a certain college. It would be beneficial that an additional quantitative research on this topic is conducted in the future. In addition to that, the focus groups consisted of students

who voluntarily participated in the study, thus creating a non- stratified, sample. In order to reduce sample bias and to be able to generalize the results of the study to the entire population, a stratified, random sample should be used. That sample should consist of proportional number of students of various income levels, from various regions in Croatia, with various socio-economic backgrounds etc. Since this is a small scale exploratory study, non-probability sample is justified (Denscombe, 2014, p. 33.)

Also, the size of the sample did not allow for more in-depth conclusions about the influence of demographics on process of choosing college. Another limitation to the study is the fact that the researcher is a full time employee of RIT Croatia, one of the Croatian colleges, and therefore might have an biased approach to the participants' comments and discussions.

Findings

In this section, the researcher summarized the information gathered in the focus groups based on the themes and subthemes that emerged as the most relevant ones in the process of data collection. As described in the methodology section, researcher first listed the themes that she thought will appear in the process of data collection, and after the focus groups were completed, she added new themes that emerged and also merged some themes into one.

Timeline of the process of choosing college

Early considerations. All of the students who participated in the research stated that they always knew they were going to continue their education after high school. They all stated they thought they knew what they are going to study when they were age 13-15. However, most of them changed their minds more than once by the time they were seniors in high school. Students stated that their early considerations included colleges that led to occupations that they found to

be attractive. Those include medicine related careers, being a pilot, firemen, lawyer (three students) but they later realized is not what they want to do. Some of the students' early considerations were influenced by movies and TV series, so three of the students wanted to study forensics at some point, and one wanted to study Turkish language because of the TV series that were popular at that time. Student # 13 tried to summarize this topic saying: "In the first grade of high school you think about the college in terms of courses that you like, and then in the third or fourth grade, you start to think about the employment opportunities, jobs that you might enjoy, and earnings of course."

Shortlist of colleges to apply for. Out of 15 participants in the focus groups, only two started exploring their options in a more structured way before their senior year in high school. All other students started with more serious explorations during the first semester of their senior year, when they were advised that they need to apply for colleges through the State Exam system. Two of the participants changed their mind about the study program and college of their choice in July, on the last possible day to confirm their final choices.

Role of parents

Fourteen out of fifteen participants stated they felt they had the support of their parents. Student #10 stated that he got a very direct instruction from his mother not to study what he ended up studying. Student #9, who initially wanted to become a fireman, was advised by his parents not to do it, but to apply for study programs related to maritime affairs, as they did not support his decision. Students' responses about the role of the parents can be summarized in four different categories:

- a) Supportive of anything that student chooses, not many questions asked (5 students)
- b) Supportive, but questioning students ideas in order to help them make their own decision (5 students)

- c) Supportive with some directedness towards what parents thought might be the best choice for their children (3 students)
- d) Not supporting students initial interest, directing them into another field of study (2 students)

Eight students were only mentioning their mothers when asked about their parents' role in the process, 2 students were mentioning only their fathers, while four students were mentioning both parents equally. According to the responses gathered from the students, parents were mostly asking them questions about the following topics:

- a) Do they meet the enrollment requirements
- b) Cost of study
- c) Job opportunities upon graduation

During the discussion on the role of the parents in the process of choosing college and making the final decision, student #1 said: "I think my mom knew what's good for me all the time. She never pressured me, but she knew. Moms always know." Three other students agreed with her saying that their parents know them better than they know themselves. Student #4 said that her parents asked her questions that helped her think about the college options in a good way, but also that their attitudes towards certain aspects of it made her make the choice she's not perfectly happy with.

Role of the high school teachers and administrative staff

Out of fifteen participants, only three stated that high school teachers tried to help them in their decision process. All three students said that it was a teacher who was not charged with that duty, but wanted to provide support on a personal level. All other students stated that they only received technical information about the application deadlines and mandatory State Exams needed

for applying for colleges, but no advising in terms of choice of college or career path. Students unanimously agreed that high schools do not offer adequate advising but also felt that their teachers were not informed enough to help them with their decisions. Students #2, #3 and #6 thought that high school teachers play a role in terms of making students like or dislike a certain field of study, but agreed that this can lead students to choose a certain college based on the wrong criteria (liking or disliking of a professor or their way of teaching).

Nine students stated that their school had an official state exam coordinator, but that this person was only informing them about the technical details of the application process and enrollment. Student #10 said that the state exam coordinator even gave them some wrong information about the technical details of the process.

Role of friends

Even though the researcher thought this will be an important theme, it turned out that none of the students felt their friends had a big role in the process of choosing college. All of them agreed that they did talk to their friends about their options but did not think their friends' choices influenced them. Student #14 made an additional comment saying that, even though she wasn't influenced by her friends' choices, she is happy that some of them chose the same college as she did. Most of the other students agreed with her.

Role of professional career and college counselors

Out of all participants, only two students went through a professional counseling process. Student #1 said she went to a private counseling agency that tested her abilities and skills, but she thought that wasn't helpful. In her words: "They simply told me that, based on my results, I could be successful in any of the colleges I was applying for, but they never told me what would be the

best fit for me in terms of my personality and future career options. I left the counseling without any additional benefit from it". Student #6 visited Croatian Employment Service that offers free counseling for seniors in high school, and he also did not feel that was helpful. Student said that they did not have relevant information about colleges and that he felt he knew more than the counselor did. Five participants said that they didn't even know counseling was available and three said that they didn't think they needed it. Student #8 made a comment that he would not ask for counseling at the Croatian Employment Service because he didn't think it's a serious organization.

Gathering information about colleges

In terms of gathering relevant information about college options, students all agreed they were looking for some additional information, but the level of their engagement was different. Some actively approached the process, but most of them had started to look for additional information after being prompted by their parents, high school administrators or by college presentations. Ways in which students were gathering information could be divided in two main categories: active and passive information gathering.

Family, friends, other students. All participants agreed that they mostly relied on the conversations with people around them. Parents, and siblings in some cases, were the primary source of information for them, followed by their friends who were also exploring college options or were already students. Referral played a bigger role for four students, and others were more actively looking for more information outside of their circle of family and friends.

Official State Exam Website. Since the official state exam system lists all of the colleges and study programs in the country, all participants referred to that website at the beginning of their senior year. Some of the students said that from there, they went to websites of the colleges they

were interested in. Everyone found this website to be informative, but mostly in the sense of eliminating those study programs for which they don't meet the requirements, and getting acquainted with all available study programs.

Official college websites. Eleven participants said that they went to certain colleges' websites to find out more about the tuition, requirements, and programs. All of those students agreed that college websites are too complicated and not easy to navigate, especially when it comes to public colleges.

Online Forums. Six participants mentioned that they were looking into forums to find out more about certain colleges and student experiences. They agreed that, even though there was a lot to read about, they were not confident that people writing those comments were reliable source of information.

Facebook. Some students mentioned that they went to colleges' Facebook pages to see if there is anything interesting there. None of them were looking for specific pieces of information there, but just wanted to explore. Two students said they saw ads for a private college on Facebook and came to its Facebook page by simply following the link.

Google. Eleven students used Google search to find out more about a certain college, and two students *googled* the words related to areas of their career interest (management and international relations). One student commented that Google is a starting point to everything, so it would be almost impossible not to use it while making a decision.

Visits to college. Only students who applied for the private colleges visited the colleges they were interested in before making the final decision. Students who were only applying to public colleges stated that they never really thought about that as a possibility. Those who visited private colleges said that they were invited to do so, either as a part of admissions process, or just in order to meet other students, visit the classes and meet the admissions personnel. One of the students

who visited a private college of her choice, later decided to visit a public college that she listed as one of her choices, but did not have an opportunity to talk to someone there, so she only walked around to see what it looked like. Students who visited colleges were all very much influenced by the atmosphere at the college and said that it was much easier and faster for them to get the answers to their questions in person than in any other way.

Presentations of colleges in high schools. When talking to students about how they gathered information about colleges, seven students said that their high schools hosted college presentations during their senior year in high school. However, only two students remembered having a public college deliver a presentation, while others said it was only the private ones who visited their schools. Students who attended presentations agreed that it was a good way for them to learn more, and three students said that a certain presentation made them further explore that particular college. Student #14 made a comment that “listening to someone talk about a college or a study program in person helps you a lot, because you find out more than just facts about the college- you hear about the experiences, opportunities and other things that you can’t find on the web.”

College fairs. Some students (three) visited the local college fairs organized by the cities they lived in. Two out of three students said they went there because the visit to the fairs was organized by their school, and only one student visited the fairs in order to find out more about his options. None of those students found fairs to be very helpful.

Most of the students said that they were looking for additional information about the colleges they were interested in, and not exploring college options in general. They mostly collected information about programs offered, tuition fees and acceptance criteria. Only three participants said that they were looking for lists of courses and syllabi at the website of colleges they were interested in.

Decision factors

Field of study. When asked about what their considerations were when they were making their final decisions, students agreed that the most important thing for them was that they are interested in a particular field of study. Some of them knew which field of study was definitely not an option for them, so students # 3, #5, #6 and #7 said that they eliminated all natural sciences immediately because they were not good in that field. Student #13 said: “I always knew I wanted to travel a lot and meet new people. I connected the dots and realized that tourism related study would be a good fit for me.” Three students (student #8, #9 and #10) said that their choice of high school (vocational high school) partially determined where they can and can’t study after graduating. Those three students said that they never gave it much thought and that they just continued in the logical way. The researcher asked them if they ever questioned the premise that it was their only option and student #8 said that he in fact wanted to go to the Fire-fighting School, but his parents did not support the idea so he never applied. Three students were considering options in different fields of study that were not related to one another. Student #1 was considering architecture, computer science and law, student #2 was considering business school and kinesiology, and student #11 was debating between medical and business school. Other students’ choices were mostly related to the similar fields of study. Six students knew which college they will chose, but were indecisive between the degree programs they will apply for. Six students were choosing colleges that were in the same scientific fields, but in different disciplines (e.g. law and economy, mechanical and naval engineering etc.).

In general, when they first started thinking about their college options, students had some ideas about where they can get admitted and about what they were (or they were not) interested in. They also based their consideration on the success they had in certain classes in high school.

After that, students continued narrowing down their options based on some additional criteria until they made the final decision.

Employment options and future earnings. All of the participants in this study agreed that employment options were an important part of their considerations during the decision process. Student #2 said: “Being able to earn money after I graduate was one of the most important factors in the decision. It’s not that I want to be able to buy an expensive yacht, but I want to have a decent living.” Student #1 agreed with that, but added that this wasn’t the most important part of the decision since she wanted to have a job she will like. According to students #8, #9, #10 and #12, potential salary level was something that influenced their decision a lot.

Student #4 said that her parents were the ones who prompted her to think about future earnings, and she said: “I wasn’t really thinking about that, but when they started mentioning it, I realized that I should think about that more. Of course, I still wanted to study something that I liked.” Student #3 commented on that saying that all of her options were in the fields that don’t really offer high salary opportunities, but it was important to her that there are plenty of jobs available in that field, so she wouldn’t end up being unemployed. Students #6 and #7 agreed with her, as they also thought that variety of employment opportunities was more important than the actual salary level. Students #1, #5, #15, and #7 agreed that if you pick a field of study that you will like, and if you become good in what you do, job opportunities will always present themselves. A phrase “decent life” occurred in the discussions a couple of times, and students reflected on the current unemployment situation in Croatia, saying that they would not like to be a part of the unemployment rate statistics. For most of the participants, being able to work outside of Croatia someday was an important factor as well.

Location of the college. Students had expressed different opinions on the importance of the location of the college they will be attending. While for some of them, it was important to stay

in the city where they were living (all of those are students coming from Croatia's capital, Zagreb), some were specifically interested in moving away from their hometown (all of those were students coming from smaller cities). Those students who did move away from home to study (5 participants in the study) were happy with their decision to do so. Out of those five students, 4 moved from a smaller to a bigger city, and only one moved from a bigger to a smaller city. Reasons for moving away from home included: quality of education, bigger city, lack of parental control, and becoming more independent. Out of all students who were a part of focus groups, only three seriously considered studying outside of the country. Seven students said that it sounds like a good idea, but they never thought it would be possible for them, so they didn't look for any options abroad. Five students explicitly said that they wouldn't move to another country yet. Out of three students who were considering options abroad, two gave up on that due to the financial aspect of that decision and one was not allowed to do that because of her parents' attitude towards her life away from them. In this discussion, students made comments on the fact that in Croatia, people live with their parents longer than they should, and how that's a traditional way of doing things in this country. Student #11 said: "If I don't like it there, I can always come back home. That's easy."

Quality and reputation of the college. Most of the students had no specific comments on this topic, and only a couple of them made comments related to the perception of private colleges with employers, connecting that to the quality of the programs delivered. Their comments were mostly related about the perception of the quality, and quality in terms of graduates' employment rates, and they all stated that they are not aware of any official rankings available in Croatia.

Finances. Students who were planning on studying on public colleges in their home town did not think about finances when making their decision, since public education is free (or with very low tuition rates). Students who were considering options outside of their home town all had

finance related conversations with their parents and compared the costs of living at home and in another city. A special attention was given to finances by those students who were thinking of private education options, or were exploring the possibility to study outside of the country (or both). All students who opted for the private educational institutions (5 students) said that they thought of this as an investment, as they believed it would give them better employment opportunities in the future. One of the students said that he was making a decision between a private college in his home town and a public college in another city, and him and his family decided that the cost of living in another city is going to exceed the cost of paying for the private college tuition, so he opted for the private one in the end. Student # 15 said that when she first heard of the private college she liked, she thought the tuition was too high for her parents, so at first she didn't even mention that idea to them. Later on, when she talked to her parents, she was surprised that they in fact were fully supportive of the idea and had the funds to pay for the tuition. Another student commented on that, saying that he also had no idea if his parents would be able to finance his studies in another city, but he realized that even though they were not financially strong, education was on the top of the list of their priorities, so they were willing to take a loan in case he finds something that he really likes.

Discussion

The purpose of this exploratory study was to find out more about how students in Croatia go through the process of choosing a college. In addition to that, the researcher wanted to find out when students start thinking about colleges, what are the most important factors influencing their decision, who are the most important people influencing their decision and where do they look for information about their options. The researcher conducted two focus groups, one in Dubrovnik

and one in Zagreb, with a total of fifteen participants who are currently freshmen at one of the private or public colleges in Croatia.

Some of the findings were consistent with the previously written literature on that topic, while the discrepancies mostly show when comparing literature related to the process of choosing college in Croatia and in the US. One of the factors that this study showed as very important is parents' influence on students, which is consistent to the findings of Lainjo (2005) Kinzie et al. (2004), Burdett (2013), Bers and Galowich (2002), to name a few. Another aspect that the researcher found to be important to Croatian students participating in this research is their field of interest, which is in line with the findings of Potocnik (2008). Participants' responses show that the employment options are one of things that students are particularly interested in when thinking about colleges, which supports the work of Potocnik (2008), Nora and Cabrera (1992), Kesic and Previsic (1997). Even though participants talked about the importance of employment options in the future, this study still can't confirm that students are sufficiently informed about that factor to be able to make an informed choice.

Another factor that influences students' decision process is the financial aspect of enrolling into a certain college. That can be seen in their responses about looking for options in other countries, or even in cities other than their hometowns. Based on their responses, we can also conclude that some of the students and their parents are still not ready to consider paying for college, as all public colleges are still free of charge or charging very low tuition rates.

An interesting thing that came out of this research, and one that should be further researched, is that students' don't feel they are getting sufficient and adequate counseling, so most of the information they gather comes from their immediate family and friends and online sources of information. Students expressed their dissatisfaction with colleges' websites, counseling services (both in high schools and outside of them) and, based on their responses, a conclusion can

be made that they are making their decisions mostly based on what they think they are good at and what they find to be an appealing profession. The role of their parents seems to be important, but it is not always clear if they are influencing students in a positive (supporting) or a negative (directing) way.

While international literature shows that rankings and quality fall into the top influencing factors (Burdett, 2013; Shaw, Kobrin, Packman, Sheryl and Schmidt 2009), this study showed that Croatian students involved in the research have not really given that aspect much thought. This was an expected outcome, since Croatia does not rank universities in a systematic way, nor is there a way to compare the outcomes students have from studying at a certain college. Based on this finding, recommendation can be made for another research related to this particular topic. This would surely allow students and their parents to make better choice and also build a foundation for proper student advising.

Even though most of the participants never visited the colleges they were applying for, those few who did were heavily influenced by it. Since only private colleges seem to offer that possibility to students, it is hard to conclude what the actual strength of this factor really is. However, personal contact with the college was something that students found to be very helpful and informative.

As seen in the previous research by Jokic and Ristic (2014), students are not highly motivated to leave their hometown, except in cases of moving to a bigger city. According to the students who were a part of this research, parents are not open for the possibility of children moving away of home if not necessary, and even students themselves have not considered that as an option in a lot of cases. Vicinity to home is a factor that was important to most of the participants, which is in line with the findings of Briggs (2006) and Simões and Soares (2010).

This research found that some of the most important factors for students in Croatia choosing college are interest in the field of study, employment and career possibilities, finances and location. Parents are the ones who influence students the most, while high school administrations and teachers only seems to have a marginal role, often only related to technical aspects of the decision (requirements, deadlines, application process). Students use internet as the primary source of information, while discussing their options and sharing information with their friends and families.

By better understanding the process of choosing college, educational institutions and governmental agencies can explore the ways in which they can provide students with more counseling opportunities, thus reducing the number of students who drop out of college, transfer to other college because it wasn't the right fit and even reduce the youth unemployment rate in the long term, by making the information more available to the students.

Recommendations for Future Research

Since this study only included a limited number of students and used a non- probability sample that does not accurately represent the entire population, future research should include more diverse group of students and a sample that would more accurately represent the population. It would be interesting to find out how different socio-economic and demographic factors influence the process of choosing college, which was something that was not possible to conclude from this research, due to its limitations that were described in the Limitation section. Based on the findings of this exploratory research, a new quantitative research should be done with the purpose of quantifying and correlating certain students' attributes to the factors that influence their enrollment decision.

Another possible research that would be a good follow up on this one, is to further explore the information channels students use in the process of choosing college and to find out where are the potential information gaps between what students want to find out, and what they are presented with.

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Appendix A**Focus group questions**

1. When did you start thinking about colleges you will be applying for?
 - a) What prompted you to start thinking about it then?
2. Was there anyone who told you that it's time to start thinking about the colleges?
 - a) What was the role of your parents in the process?
 - b) What was the role of your friends in the process?
 - c) What was the role of your teachers in the process?
- 4) How did you decide what you will apply for?
- 5) Were you considering study programs in the similar field or more different ones (e.g. architecture and business, business and medicine?)
- 6) What influenced your decision making process (e.g. financial aspect, location of the university/college, referrals from friends/family, expectations...)
- 7) Where did you look for more information about your college options? (Visits, brochures, web sites..)
- 8) What did you think you needed to know to make your final decision? What kind of information were you looking for?
- 9) What do you think influenced your final decision the most?
- 10) If you were doing any research on the Internet, what key words were you using?

Appendix B

List of Themes and Sub-themes

Theme	Sub-theme
First considerations - timing	1 st and 2 nd grade of high school
	3 rd and 4 th grade high school
Shortlist of colleges – timing	1 st and 2 nd grade of high school
	3 rd grade of high school
	4 th grade of high school
Parents' role	Supportive
	Questioning decision
	Directing
	Not supporting
	Mother
	Father
	Both
High school teachers and administrative staff	Support from teachers
	Official state exam coordinator
	No support
Role of friends	

Theme	Sub-theme
Role of professional career and college counselors	
Gathering information about colleges	Family, friends
	Official State Exam website
	College websites
	Forums, Facebook, Google
	Visits to colleges
	School presentations
	Fairs
Decision factors	Field of study
	Employment options
	Future earnings
	Location
	Quality and reputation
	Finances