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# Professional identity development in higher education: influencing factors

PID in higher education

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – In the last few years, the interest on professional identity development (PID) and the factors that influence PID has become central in higher education (HE) literature. However, the knowledge developed in this domain has focussed on a factor at a time and on a degree or discipline, thus being difficult to have a general picture of all the factors that influence the development of professional identity in HE. The purpose of this paper is to try to go further by proposing a systematic and integrative conceptual framework on the factors that influence PID of HE students.

**Design/methodology/approach** – To identify the influencing factors on PID the authors used primary and secondary data sources. In particular, the authors first conducted a thorough literature review to identify the influencing factors on PID already studied, and second the authors conducted a qualitative pilot study through four Focus Groups to identify new factors not acknowledged before.

**Findings** – The resulting integrative conceptual framework considers the following categories of influencing factors on PID: social experience, educational context, perceived congruence with the profession, demographic characteristics, professional image, professional experience, personal development and self-engagement.

**Research limitations/implications** – The proposed framework constitutes a roadmap for future research on career development and counselling to develop in order to enhance PID at university. Nonetheless, this proposed conceptual framework needs to be validated with empirical data.

**Originality/value** – This paper integrates all the existing knowledge on the influencing factors on PID from different disciplines by constructing a conceptual framework to be validated with further research.

**Keywords** Conceptual framework, Higher education students, Influencing factors, Professional identity development

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## Introduction

Individuals develop their professional identity (PI) during all their lives (Adams *et al.*, 2006). This process is influenced by several factors that make individuals to self-define in terms of one or another profession, or the work they do (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984) even long before they start working in a profession or occupation as part of the process of career development (Lent *et al.*, 1994). In fact, the stage at university has been recognised as an important period for the formation of a PI in individuals (Pratt *et al.*, 2006; Cohen-Scali, 2003).

This might explain in part why during the last two decades, the interest in PI issues in the Higher Education (HE) context has increased. This growing interest is also explained by the contextual changes universities are undergoing and their mission. In these days universities are expected to make their countries more competitive (Montero *et al.*, 2012) by producing and transferring knowledge, and training new professionals who will soon be part of the job market and the profession they are preparing for. Professions have been regarded as organised groups with a body of knowledge that have economic value when applied to problems (Macdonald, 1995). Because of their unique knowledge and skills, society grants professionals higher levels of prestige and autonomy than non-professionals (Larson, 1977; Pratt *et al.*, 2006). These skills and knowledge are assumed to be provided by universities, which, therefore are regarded as the institutions in charge of professional



development. Therefore, part of the universities' mission has become to help students to develop a PI. The current trend at universities of introducing practice-based pedagogical curricula to prepare graduates for the workplace (Reid *et al.*, 2008; Trede *et al.*, 2012) in order to contribute to the development of individuals' PI (Trede *et al.*, 2012) is an evidence of this.

From a career development perspective (Lent *et al.*, 1994), it's all the previous experiences that individuals have had, that make them to choose a particular professional path and develop their PI. However, existing research on PI in HE has not paid enough attention to individuals' previous experiences as important factors in the development of a PI. Moreover, the existing studies on the influencing factors on professional identity development (PID) have focussed on one or few factors at a time, and one particular discipline. Therefore, the aim of this study is to contribute to the extant knowledge of PID in HE by constructing an integrative conceptual framework of the factors that influence PID in multiple disciplines. To do so, an exhaustive literature review complemented with a qualitative exploratory study, are conducted.

### **PID at university**

PI has been conceptualised in different ways. For example, Schein (1978) defined PI as the relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role (Ibarra, 1999, p. 2). And, Van Maanen and Barley (1984) referred to this construct as the definition that an individual makes in terms of the work they do. Those definitions are endowed to a profession and to the workplace, so it seems from them that PI only develops in the working environment. Recently though, this idea has been challenged by theorists of identity such as Ashforth *et al.* (2008) who argue that identity is characterised by a changing and dynamic nature, since the identification with a particular group does not happen immediately, but consists in a dynamic and turbulent process that incorporates day-to-day activities with the whole life experiences full of disequilibrium, turning points, and continuities and discontinuities that provide stability but also entails change (Ashforth *et al.*, 2008, p. 339). In accord, some authors propose that this process of identification with a profession, PID, starts long before the incorporation to the workplace and is reflected in the degree choice (DC) by answering to the question of who I want to become (Clarke *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, the incorporation to the university is a key moment in the development of students' PIs (Lordly and MacLellan, 2012).

When students become part of the university, not all of them have the same degree of awareness of the role of their "chosen" profession. Noble *et al.* (2014) found that pharmacist students, at the point of entry at the Pharmacy degree, lacked a strong identification with the profession and that make them feel discontent. But as they progressed through their education, they learnt what it meant to be a pharmacist, and started to express ideas and beliefs about that. Also, Hallier and Summers (2011) regarding human resources management students, realized that university made them to validate or to reject the values, beliefs and aims of the profession. Certainly, universities are supposed to form new professionals that will be soon incorporated into the workplace (Montero *et al.*, 2012). Then, when students start at university they are exposed to the world views, theories, skills and languages embedded therein the profession, influencing their identity development. They begin to identify themselves as belonging within the community of those studying "their" subject. As time goes by, they begin to see themselves as a philosopher rather than someone studying philosophy (Trede *et al.*, 2012). Universities therefore play an important role in the process of PID and recent research has shown that the curricula structure and resultant learning experiences can be designed to support identity development (Noble *et al.*, 2014, p. 27).

However, the research developed on what factors influence on PID at university has been scattered, the existing research has analysed separately each of the factors that influence

PID (e.g. Adams *et al.*, 2006; Lordly and MacLellan, 2012; Shlomo *et al.*, 2012) and the ones that influence DC (e.g. Craik and Zaccaria, 2003; Agarwala, 2008; Taylor *et al.*, 2010), considering both constructs unrelated. And the factors considered as influential on DC were different in each research and, also the factors considered as influential on PID. For systematic knowledge to be developed in HE that supports career development and counselling practices, an integrative conceptual framework that integrates knowledge from different disciplines about the factors that influence PID is deemed as necessary. Hence we aim to develop that necessary conceptual framework as a basis to continue developing new measures to support identity development at university.

### Data sources for the identification of the influencing factors on PID

To decide in favour of one career instead of another is a difficult task influenced by many factors (Havighurst, 1972). For this reason, HE studies have been concerned about the identification of the factors that make students choose among different careers (e.g. Craik and Zaccaria, 2003; Agarwala, 2008; Taylor *et al.*, 2010). However, scarce consideration has been paid to the factors that influence PID, despite of its relationship with students' DC. On the one hand, students' PI has been acknowledged to be important in students' decision to study a particular degree (Clarke *et al.*, 2013). But also, on the other hand students' DC has been reported as an important influence on students' PID. Moreover, PID has been recognised to be shaped by different personal (Trede *et al.*, 2012; Noble *et al.*, 2014) and contextual factors (Clarke *et al.*, 2013). Not all individuals grow within the same contexts and are exposed to the same information about professions and, not all internalise this information and understand themselves in relation to their broader context in the same way (Postmes *et al.*, 2005). So, the different influences on the development of their PIs result on students with different notions about their future profession (Reid *et al.*, 2011). Those views of their future profession influence their present and future sense of professional engagement that is their sense of belonging with the group (Reid *et al.*, 2011) and their PID. Up to now, the literature has treated separately both groups of factors, the ones influencing on PID and the ones influencing students' DC, as if PID and the decision to study a particular degree were unconnected. This might be a consequence of the development of knowledge from different discipline traditions such as psychology, business management or education without a conversation among them that integrate the knowledge developed by them. That being the case, we consider necessary to integrate the knowledge from the different disciplines. So, in the literature review conducted to construct the conceptual framework, we contemplated both. The influencing factors on PID before the incorporation to the workplace, and the influencing factors on DC, in an attempt to integrate the knowledge. So, in our research was considered, on the one hand, that PID may determine DC, when students decide to choose a particular study programme basing on their PI. And, that DC may influence on PID, as so the factors that influence DC influence indirectly PID, when students choose a bachelor degree and once at the university they construct a specific sense of PID.

In the following sections we detail how we identify these factors from the literature review and from the four Focus Groups (FGs) conducted, respectively.

#### *From the literature review: secondary data sources*

An "exhaustive search" (Hallinger, 2013) of the published papers was conducted through Scopus and WOK databases, from 1995 to 2015 considering multiple disciplines to identify the factors that influence PID before the incorporation to the workplace. The key terms used were divided into three groups:

- (1) "Professional identity sources" and "Professional identity factors".
  - (2) "Professional identity construction", "PID" and "Professional identity formation".
- Although some of these terms may seem interchangeable, there is a clear preference

among disciplines to use one instead of another. For instance, HE literature is more prone to use formation and development instead of construction, and business management literature tends to use construction instead of the other ones. As we wanted to integrate knowledge from different disciplines, we used all the terms in our search.

- (3) “Degree choice factors”. Keeping in mind the relationship between DC and PID, the influencing factors on DC were also considered.

The references of the identified articles were also screened in order to include other important sources no indexed within the two mentioned databases.

As a result, 281 articles were found. The ones that did not mention any influence on PID or DC in a students’ population were removed. For example, articles that compared PI in two different periods, or articles that focussed on the factors that influenced PID/DC decision in a non-students population or on a postgraduate students’ population were excluded. Finally, 13 studies remained, from which four focussed on the influencing factors on PID and nine focussed on the factors that affect DC (see Table I for the remaining articles). From this, it can be deduced that as a whole, there are few studies that focussed on the factors that influence PID, and so, scarce consideration has been given to this topic, in spite of the relevance that this has to achieve a better understanding about the process of PI development.

Once the articles were identified, each of them was carefully read to identify all the factors considered within. The identified factors were codified and gathered within one category (see data analysis/step 1). After that, a qualitative exploratory study was conducted to identify new factors not considered within the existing literature.

*From the exploratory qualitative study: primary data sources*

To identify new factors an exploratory qualitative study was conducted through FGs. FGs were chosen as the best data collection technique for the purpose of this research for three different reasons:

- (1) This technique provides a way of obtaining data relatively quickly from a large number of participants and is deemed appropriate to identify factors in an exploratory way (Wilkinson, 2004).
- (2) It allows respondents to react to and build upon the responses of other group members, creating a synergistic effect (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). Through this interaction among members, the identified factors could be confirmed or discussed, and new factors showed up through discussion.
- (3) This is a good technique to delve into the motivations of individuals (Lewis, 2001), as so the individuals’ DC and PI.

**Table I.**  
Number of articles  
by keyword

Keyword	No. articles
PI construction	74
PI formation	48
PI development	112
PI sources	1
PI factors	3
DC factors	6
Students career choice factors	37

The four FGs conducted took place into the classroom context. The FGs lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. After asking for permission, and making the students to sign a consent form, the authors recorded the FGs which were transcribed verbatim. A semi-structured protocol was used with five themes developed in open-ended questions (the protocol is available through request to the authors); these were modified during each wave of data collection to take advantage of the emerging themes (Spradley, 1979).

The conducted FGs intended to give answer to the following questions (see Table II for FGs' questions):

- How students perceive their PI?
- What influence their PI?
- Why students have chosen Tourism or Geography bachelors' degrees?
- What influenced their choice?

### Sample

A convenience sample method was used (Battaglia, 2008). So, students from two different bachelor degrees were chosen: Tourism and Geography. These degree were chosen for four reasons. First, Tourism is considered a new bachelor degree. Assuming that the knowledge and information about this profession that students could have is scarce, we select it in order to explore other factors not considered previously that affect PID. Second, most of the

Focussed on ...	Title	Authors	Year	Bachelor degree
PI	The link between vocational identity, study choice motivation and satisfaction with studies	Smitina	2010	Sciences
PI	Development of professional identity among social work students: contributing factors	Shlomo <i>et al.</i>	2012	Social work
PI	Investigating the factors influencing professional identity of first-year health and social care students	Adams, <i>et al.</i>	2006	Social care
PI	Dietetic students' identity and professional socialisation	Lordly and MacLellan	2012	Dietetics
DC	The career choice of first-year occupational therapy students: a follow-up study	Craik and Zaccaria	2003	Occupational therapy
DC	Factors influencing career choice of management students in India	Agarwala	2008	Business
DC	Psychometric study of a questionnaire for the assessment of factors associated with the choice of degrees and universities in the Spanish public system	Hervás <i>et al.</i>	2013	Various
DC	Factors influencing veterinary students' career choices and attitudes to animals	Serpell	2005	Veterinary
DC	Factors influencing students career choices among secondary school students in Kisumu Municipality, Kenya	Edwards and M.Quinter	2011	Various
DC	Factors influencing the choice of a university degree: the case of recreation, parks and tourism administration studies	Iglesias-Martinez <i>et al.</i>	2012	Tourism
DC	Factors influencing career choice among secondary school students: implications for career guidance	Ogowewo	2010	Various
DC	Understanding the motivation: a qualitative study of dental students' choice of professional career	Gallagher <i>et al.</i>	2007	Odontology
DC	A follow-up study of the factors shaping the career choice of library school students at the University of Alabama	Taylor <i>et al.</i>	2010	Librarians

Source: Own elaboration

**Table II.**  
Identified articles

studies analysing PID, have focussed on healthcare disciplines, considered as extreme cases as they represent traditional professions (Pratt *et al.*, 2006), so there is a need to consider other professional fields. Third, geography is a traditional profession, useful to validate the identified factors from the literature as well as to find new factors not considered because of the little importance given to this bachelor when analysing PID influences. And, fourth, the availability to the aforementioned samples given that were teaching qualitative methods in the two bachelor degrees (Table III).

Finally, our sample made up of 63 third-year university students (59 per cent women and 41 per cent men), tourism (*n* = 40) and geography (*n* = 23), divided in four FGs (see Table IV for the FGs distributions).

**Procedure to construct the conceptual framework**

The qualitative data from the FGs was analysed by using a qualitative interpretative analysis (Stokes and Urquhart, 2013). The underlying themes in relation to our objective – to identify the factors that influence students’ PI – were identified. These were the steps followed:

*Step 1. Creating prior coding categories: deductive category development*

We created prior categories about the influential factors on students’ PID and DC from the literature review. These factors were gathered in groups considering if these were related

Students perceptions of their PI	
Can you define yourself in professional terms using the following sentence? I am...	
Reasons for choosing their degrees	
Why did you choose this degree and not another one?	
Influence on their PI	
<i>Social experience</i>	
How do you think your friends/relatives would define your future profession?	
What image do you think society has of your profession? How does this affect you? (Does it make you feel more or less identified with this profession? Why?)	
<i>Educational experience</i>	
Which subject did you find easiest at school? How do you think this has affected your professional identity?	
<i>Perceived congruence with the profession</i>	
Can you see a similarity between the values associated with this profession and your own values?	
Has this influenced your professional identity?	
<i>Professional experience</i>	

**Table III.**  
Focus group questions  
example by theme

Have you had any work experience in the area that you are studying or in any other areas?
Has your perception of this degree changed as a result of these experiences? In what sense? Why?

**Table IV.**  
Focus group  
distribution

FG No.	Bachelor degree	Women	Men
1	Tourism	12	5
2	Tourism	10	1
3	Tourism	8	4
4	Geography	7	16

with individuals' intrinsic characteristics, social or educational context, as if it was a qualitative selective coding process. So, initial coding categories were created, and a definition associated to each of them, basing on the literature (Myring, 2000).

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*Step 2. Reviewing transcripts and adding new codes: deductive category application and inductive category creation*

After the step 1, four FGs were conducted. Once the FGs were transcribed, all the highlighted passages were coded using the existing codes, trying to confirm the created codes through the data (deductive). The passages that could not be categorised with the existing coding scheme were given another code (inductive) (Myring, 2000) (Table V).

The final codes represented the factors that influenced students' PID and included the ones identified in the literature and the ones identified through the conducted FGs. In Table VI the reader can find all the identified factors classified by the data source (FGs or literature review), and by their influence on PID, DC or both.

### Conceptual framework

As a result of the categories highlighted in Table VI, we constructed the following conceptual framework of the influencing factors on PID, DC or both. Each of the identified factors are described below and illustrated in the following diagram (see Figure 1). Also, in Table VII these factors has been gathered and the original reference provided.

#### *Social experience*

This category includes the following codes: family, friends, media and other social actors. From these social sources, individuals are provided with different forms of work representations that come from the knowledge, representations and attitudes communicated about it (Cohen-Scali, 2003). The provided information about a profession in the bosom of a family may influence youngsters' DC (Henning, 2001). Discussing career goals and aspirations with friends also may make some occupations more desirable than others (Levine and Hoffner, 2006), as well as the ideas communicated about the profession by the media (McAllister *et al.*, 2014). Basing on this, it is important to notice that the information gathered from these social sources can shape individuals' perceptions of work and make them to take a specific decision about their future profession.

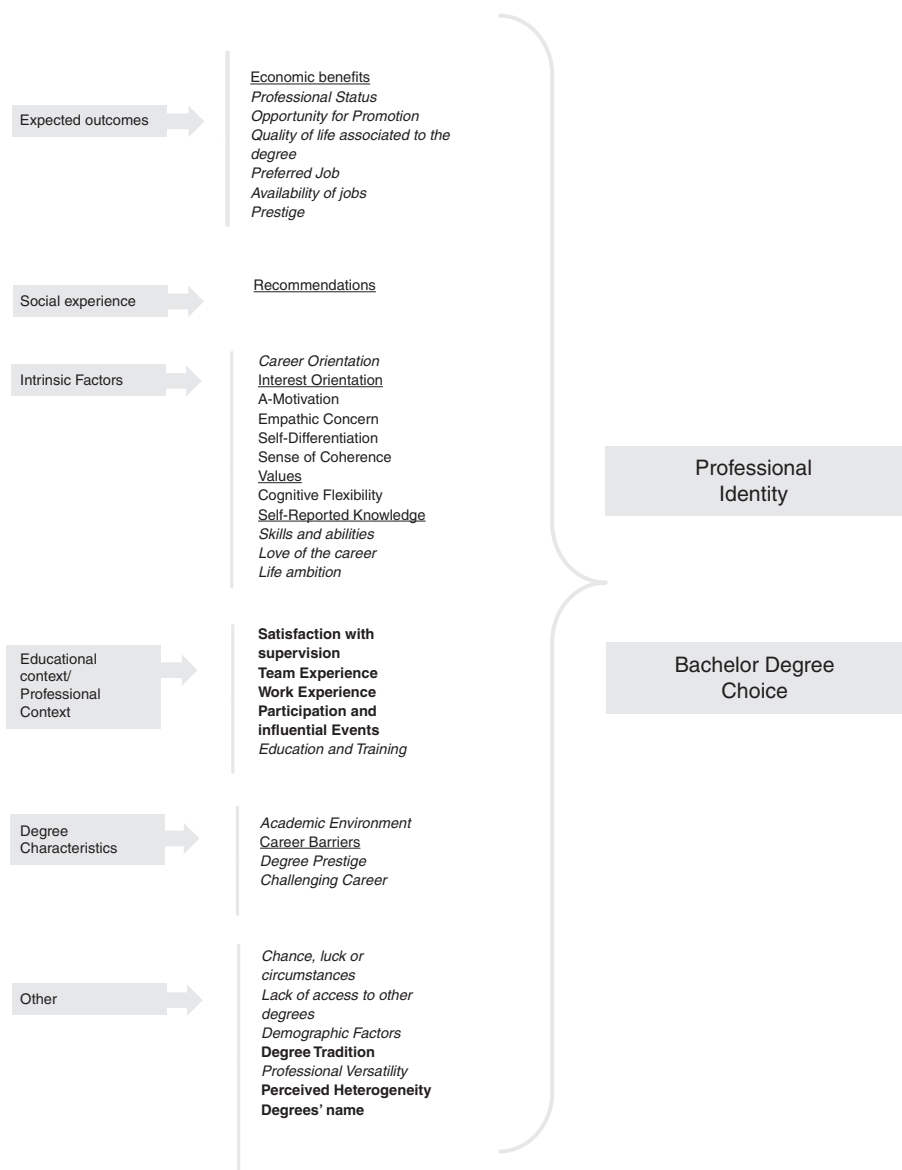
Category	Subcategory	Description
Degree characteristics	Degree tradition	Seniority of a degree
	Professional versatility	Professional options students have once finishing their studies
	Degrees' name	Facility to identify the professional with a specific name

**Table V.**  
Examples of  
inductive codes

Category	Subcategory	Description
Social experience	Family	Proximal familiar context
Educational experience	Subjects	Educational context, in particular the subjects students have studied
Profession social image	Prestige	Prestige associated to the profession

**Table VI.**  
Examples of  
deductive codes





**Figure 1.**  
Factors classification  
by category

**Notes:** Bold, professional identity factors; italics, bachelor degree factors; underlined, both factors

*Educational context/degree characteristics*

We referred to the educational context as all the previous experiences individuals have had during primary/secondary school and university, as an important influence on PID (e.g. Hallier and Summers, 2011; Cohen-Scali, 2003; Pierrakos *et al.*, 2009; Reid *et al.*, 2011). These include not only all the educational experiences through socialisation before university, but also the characteristics of the degree chosen (e.g. different professional paths or university courses). In our exploratory qualitative study, we found that the experiences

Classification	Factors	Professional identity (PI) degree choice (DC)	Authors
Expected outcomes	Economic benefits	PI and DC	Smitina (2010), Agarwala (2008), Edwards and Quinter (2011), Ogowewo (2010), Gallagher <i>et al.</i> (2007), Taylor <i>et al.</i> (2010)
	Professional status	DC	Craik and Zaccaria (2003), Gallagher <i>et al.</i> (2007)
	Opportunity for promotion	DC	Craik and Zaccaria (2003), Agarwala (2008), Edwards and Quinter (2011)
	Quality of life associated to the degree	DC	Agarwala (2008)
	Preferred job	DC	Serpell (2005), Edwards and Quinter (2011), Iglesias-Martinez <i>et al.</i> (2012), Gallagher <i>et al.</i> (2007), Taylor <i>et al.</i> (2010)
Social experience	Availability of jobs	DC	Edwards and Quinter (2011), Iglesias-Martinez <i>et al.</i> (2012), Ogowewo (2010)
	Prestige	DC	Ogowewo (2010), Taylor <i>et al.</i> (2010)
	Recommendation (Family/peers)	PI and DC	Adams <i>et al.</i> (2006), Lordly and MacLellan (2012), Craik and Zaccaria (2003), Agarwala (2008), Hervás <i>et al.</i> (2013), Iglesias-Martinez <i>et al.</i> (2012), Keshian (2010), Taylor <i>et al.</i> (2010)
Intrinsic factors	Career orientation	DC	Agarwala (2008)
	Interest	PI and DC	Smitina (2010), Edwards and Quinter (2011), Ogowewo (2010)
	A-motivation	PI	Smitina (2010)
	Empathic concern	PI	Shlomo <i>et al.</i> (2012)
	Self-differentiation	PI	Shlomo <i>et al.</i> (2012)
	Sense of coherence	PI	Shlomo <i>et al.</i> (2012)
	Values (social/personal)	PI and DC	Shlomo <i>et al.</i> (2012), Craik and Zaccaria (2003), Agarwala (2008)
	Cognitive flexibility	PI	Adams <i>et al.</i> (2006)
	Self-reported knowledge	PI and DC	Adams <i>et al.</i> (2006), Agarwala (2008)
	Skills and abilities	DC	Agarwala (2008), Ogowewo (2010)
Educational context/ professional experience	Love of the career	DC	Agarwala (2008)
	Life ambition	DC	Ogowewo (2010)
	Satisfaction with supervision	PI	Shlomo <i>et al.</i> (2012)
	Team experience	PI	Adams <i>et al.</i> (2006)
	Work experience	PI	Adams <i>et al.</i> (2006)
	Participation and influential events	PI	Lordly and MacLellan (2012)
	Education and training	DC	Agarwala (2008), Edwards and Quinter (2011), Iglesias-Martinez <i>et al.</i> (2012), Keshian (2010)
	Academic environment	DC	Keshian (2010)
Degree characteristics	Career barriers	PI and DC	Smitina (2010), Agarwala (2008)
	Degree prestige	DC	Craik and Zaccaria (2003)
	Challenging career	DC	Ogowewo (2010)
Other	Chance, luck or circumstances	DC	Agarwala (2008)
	Lack of access to other degrees	DC	Agarwala (2008)
	Demographic factors	DC	Serpell (2005), Edwards and Quinter (2011)

Source: Own elaboration

**Table VII.**  
Factors identified as  
influences on  
professional identity  
and degree choice  
classification

that individuals had during their primary/secondary school influenced their DC. In particular, it was noticed that being good at some subjects made students to apply for some degrees and not for others. Some characteristics of the degree were also found to be important in the PID. Of these were found that heterogeneity in terms of both the subjects and the professional choices influenced PID. In particular, heterogeneity had an adverse effect on PID, because it made it difficult to develop an identification with a particular and unique image of the profession. Additionally, the professions' name also influenced the identification with a particular profession. In our case, it was detected that tourism students perceived the name of their bachelor degree as not serious (tourism and leisure) and they also felt that professionals in tourism did not have a special name (tourismologist), which made them feel less prone to develop an identification with the profession.

#### *Professional experience*

The students from the FGs, who had previous professional experiences, described them as having influenced their PID. In line with this evidence Adams *et al.* (2006) reported that students with previous professional experiences may develop a stronger PI than students without.

#### *Perceived congruence with the profession*

Two examples arise from Pierrakos *et al.* (2009) and Hallier and Summers (2011) studies. In the first case, it is shown that some girls chose engineering because this would let them help people. In the second one, human resources management students chose that path because this would allow them to express their core values. In both cases, they decided to pledge allegiance to a profession with values that were congruent with their own. But, not only the congruence in terms of values and beliefs is important when talking about professional congruence but also students' perceived self-efficacy and students' perceived fit with the profession. Finally, the perceived intellectual capacity – the perception of being good at something or having an interest in some subjects – also helps individuals to decide their DC. And we used an example from the Pierrakos *et al.* (2009) research where a student said: "I originally chose engineering because I'm good at calculus". Likewise, in the FGs we confirmed that some students decided to study the degree because they felt that their personalities were congruent with the degree content.

#### *Personal development and self-engagement*

On the one hand, according to Britt *et al.* (2007), self-engagement is defined as a feeling of responsibility for and commitment to a performance domain so that performance matters to the individual (Wefald and Downey, 2009). On the other hand, personal development is defined as the unfolding growth, evolution, expansion and maturation of the individual self (Kauffmann, 1992). Students' achievement of competences related with a community of practice such as a profession is the mark of their personal development (Wenger, 1998). This acquisition is related with PID since students engage in a socialisation process for work which is understood as the acquisition of attitudes, values and cognitive capacities before work (Cohen-Scali, 2003). According to this, we found that part of the students from the FGs highlighted that one of the reasons that have lead them to choose tourism was the social abilities that this degree is supposed to provide in a professional area. Having in mind that most of these students tend to define themselves as outspoken people, we can see how they become engaged with these degrees (PID) by expecting to work face-to-face with costumers and learn how to interact with them.

#### *Demographic characteristics*

Gender is considered a key element when talking about the professional choice (Lin, 2013). In general, Cohen-Scali (2003) noted that there are some professions that have strong gender

stereotypes and some people decide not to do a degree because it is not conceived for a woman or for a man. Therefore, gender influence individuals' PID by making them not to engage with a profession linked with their opposite gender.

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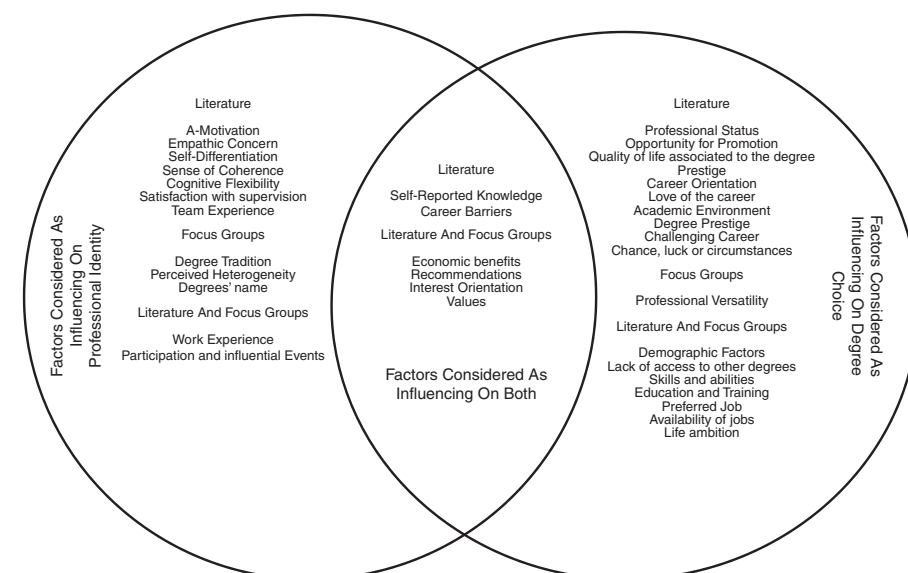
### *Expected outcomes (professional image)*

The blurriness in the definition of some professions makes difficult to find a particular image, which in turn affects PID (Hallier and Summers, 2011). Nowadays, new professions have shown up dividing the professions in two groups: traditional professions (e.g. medicine), completely established and recognised by society; and new professions (e.g. tourism and leisure) characterised by the uncertainties about their roles, status and impact (Evetts, 2003). The latter make more difficult to construct a homogeneous professional image and, therefore, it becomes more difficult to develop an identification with them. Strongly related with the professional image, there is the financial/job security that influences students' DC and PID. In accord, Henning's (2001) study reveals that some engineering students choose this professional path because of the future job security that has associated. Students in Henning's research thought that their DC would allow them to enter employment sooner than if they had chosen another degree.

### Conclusions and implications

The purpose of this study was to identify the factors that influence on PID, and to construct an integrative and systematic conceptual framework as a result. To identify the factors, a multidisciplinary literature review was carried out and it was complemented with an exploratory qualitative study through FGs with tourism and geography students in order to identify new factors.

From this study, both theoretical contributions and practical implications arise. First, the main theoretical contribution is the resulting conceptual framework (see Figure 2). As exposed, literature in HE has failed to integrate systematically the knowledge about all the factors that may influence on PID. So, the resulting conceptual framework considering both groups of factors, the ones that influence on PID and the ones that



**Figure 2.**  
Conceptual framework  
of influencing factors

influence on DC, aims to be a new contribution to the literature in which the previous experiences to the workplace were considered as relevant factors on PID. This conceptual framework pretends to be a roadmap for future research to test and validate the influence of the identified factors.

Second, concerning the practical implications, it is important to highlight that students' perception about a profession can be modified in line with the different pedagogical approaches and arrangements of the university and the views of the discipline that are exposed in it (Reid *et al.*, 2011). So, the developed conceptual framework can be used by universities to analyse what factors they can intervene on (for instance, on the degree characteristics through the design of educational programmes, or on the information provided to the social actors, or on the image of the profession created) to increase students' PI, making sure that they are ready for the entry-level practice (Lordly and MacLellan, 2012) and, for addressing vocational orientation in a more focussed way to adapt career choice to their PIs. Since the development of a strong PI early in students' career, has been associated with a successful transition to the workplace, higher motivation of the beginner practitioner and higher confidence in their role (Islam, 2008), enhancing students' PID through intervening on the identified factors from the university, not only benefit HE by affecting achievement variables (Seabi and Payne, 2012) such as individuals' effective learning (Bjerregaard *et al.*, 2016), or decreasing the dropout rate, academic failure, and the number of degree switches, but may also create more productive, intrinsically motivated, creative, satisfied and better-prepared professionals and future workers (Canrinus *et al.*, 2012).

But, how this can be achieved by using the constructed conceptual framework? In particular, universities can enhance PID through the intervention on some of the identified influencing factors as we expose in the following lines:

- Professional image. Universities can include in their curricula professional practices from the first academic year, helping students to acquire an appropriate image of their future profession and, to develop a realistic PI. A coherent professional image that helps PID can be also achieved by introducing different activities such as in-vitro activities, such as reading magazines and journals related to the professional area (Glaser-Segura *et al.*, 2010) or by inviting recognised professionals in the field to give some seminars.
- Perceived congruence with the profession. Students should be informed about the reality of the profession. After this, students need to increase their knowledge about themselves, in order to establish a connection between the chosen profession and their inner values and beliefs. Therefore, universities should introduce activities of career counselling aimed to increase these students' self-knowledge and the knowledge about the profession, to strengthen the ties they feel they have within that profession. If after that students do not feel any attachment or identification with the chosen path, counsellors should reorient them to another bachelor degree more congruent with the student.

The conceptual framework also helps set the basis for the university recruitment strategies that is to influence on students' PID before the incorporation to university. Students decide to choose one instead of another path basing on several factors that we identified in this research. This factors are useful to universities to know what influences students', so they can allocate more resources to the recruitment process trying to enhance, from the very first moment, students' PI – e.g. making campuses or courses before the incorporation to the university – and making this transition from high school to university easier. But before doing that it is important for universities to evaluate which factors influence the most students from different degrees, and then intervene on this with the strategies we exposed in the former lines.

Finally, from a theoretical perspective, our research shows that most of the studies focussed just on one specific discipline and, only on some factors. Aside, most of them were exploratory. Basing on that, we think it is time to take a step further and to conduct future research that proceeds into an explanatory stage to test our crafted conceptual framework and systematically study what particular factors influence PI and how they do so before and during the university period. Our conceptual framework has been designed to be the first step in this process.

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### Further reading

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