



Eye on the future A SCCT-based analysis of Finnish student activists' perceptions and expectations of their employment after college



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ABSTRACT

Students place great expectations on their future employment as they wish that their long-term studies lead to great careers. The study leaned on social cognitive career theory (SCCT). Finnish student activists participated by writing narratives ($N=48$), and 12 were also interviewed. The purpose was to analyze what kinds of perceptions the student activists had about themselves as future employees. This qualitative study had a narrative research approach. Participation in student activism supported the students' sense of self-efficacy, created positive outcome expectations, and influenced their career-related goal setting. The study shows how important it is to acknowledge the employment skills provided in organizational activities and to support students' confidence in their future employment opportunities in today's challenging employment situation.

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1. Introduction

In Finland, university education has been respected and secured students' employment after graduation. However, current economic developments have set new pressures on college education through the increasing efficiency demands. At the same time, unemployment among graduates of higher education has increased in Finland (Taulu, 2015). The rapidly changing society and economy require flexibility from university education, too. In light of the unemployment statistics, a university degree no longer guarantees employment in Finland (see, e.g., Taulu, 2015). How does this fact influence not only career opportunities but also college students' career expectations?

In 2012, a Finnish college student barometer studied students' future-related expectations and work in addition to studies (Mikkonen, Saari, & Vieno, 2013). Students graduating in specific professions were more confident about their future than students in more general fields in higher education. The researchers studied the students' general optimism about the future and not just expectations about employment. Optimism was also influenced by a feeling of studying in the wrong field (Mikkonen et al., 2013), but similarly important was students' trust in their own resources. Albert Bandura (1994) calls this feature "self-efficacy." Self-efficacy means one's belief in one's capability to influence one's future. Strong self-efficacy is connected with well-being because it strengthens proactivity and an optimistic attitude toward conquering challenges and adversities instead of just reacting to them (Bandura, 1994; see also Maddux, 2002).

Finnish universities have student organizations focusing on various themes, such as numerous study program and department-specific organizations; hobby, culture, and recreational organizations, campus organizations; international

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study organizations; sports and sport club organizations; political and societal organizations; and religious organizations. In addition, each university has a students' union that must be formed according to the *Universities Act* (46§). Their task is to promote students' societal, social, and mental aspirations, as well as their studies and position in society. The students' unions must participate in the university's educational task by preparing students for active, aware, and critical citizenship (*Universities Act*; see also *Ansala, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2015b*). College studies and student activism provide students with abundant opportunities to interact with each other in formal and informal contexts. It has been noted that organizational activities and student activism provide new perspectives, increase practical skills and know-how, and provide educative challenges—all these can turn into expertise that students can benefit from later in their lives (*Brown, 2004a*; see also *Mau, 2000*).

Furthermore, participation in organizational activities and volunteer work during studies predicts and promotes life-long activism (*Van Dyke & Dickson, 2013*; see also *Benn, 2000; Flanagan & Levine, 2010*). People who participate in activism at some point in their lives are more likely to be more active later on and tend to seek jobs and occupational fields in which they can maintain their influence opportunities, such as education and social work but also other fields in which organizations pursue changes (*Van Dyke & Dickson, 2013*). This finding was supported by studies among 1960s student radicals: Students who participated in representation were also active later in their lives (see *Hoge & Ankney, 1982*).

This study focused on university student activists' narratives. The purpose was to find out what they tell about their expectations for themselves as future workers and their employment opportunities especially when their orientation to student activism is considered. The student activists described their stories by writing and in interviews. Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) was used to analyze their expectations and self-efficacy beliefs.

2. Theoretical background

SCCT is based on Albert Bandura's work with social cognitive theory (*Bandura, 1986*; see also *Lent et al., 2000; Lent et al., 2002*). SCCT considers personal characteristics called *personal agency* a factor in career decision-making (*Albert & Luzzo, 1999*). Personal agency refers to a person's ability to direct his or her action toward goals (*Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006*), while self-efficacy means merely a person's belief about how he or she can perform in particular tasks (*Bandura, 1995; Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006*)—therefore, self-efficacy affects people's personal agency. Personal agency consists of internal and external factors that influence decision-making by either constraining or enhancing it (see also *Albert & Luzzo, 1999*).

SCCT recognizes three social cognitive factors influence career decision-making: self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal setting (*Albert & Luzzo, 1999, pp. 431–432; Lent et al., 2002*). According to *Bandura (1986)*, self-efficacy can be defined as follows: “efficacy involves a generative capability in which cognitive, social, and behavioral subskills must be organized into integrated courses of action to serve innumerable purposes” (p. 391). Self-efficacy consists of four dimensions that (*Albert and Luzzo (1999, p. 432)* considered the basis of a person's self-belief. They are performance accomplishments, vicarious learning, verbal persuasion, and physiological arousal. *Zimmerman (2000)* continued the same categorization by noticing that these cognitive beliefs are influenced by various experiences of enactive attainment, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological states. Of these four foundations of self-efficacy, the most influential is *enactive experiences* because they are based on personal experiences of self-fulfillment. *Vicarious experiences* emerge when observing role models or other important people with whom one compares oneself. The influence of *verbal persuasion* depends on the person and his or her credibility. In these situations, one does not experience or witness an event by oneself but is convinced by other people. *Physiological state* as the basis of self-efficacy refers to situations in which one experiences physical reactions (e.g., negative states such as stress) that can be interpreted as inability or incapability (*Zimmerman, 2000*).

During college studies, self-efficacy can influence a student's learning and motivation to seek academic success (*Zimmerman, 2000*). Academic success, on the other hand, can determine one's employment and career. Self-efficacy and individual outcome expectations are crucial personal factors that influence one's career (*Lent et al., 2002*). The various dimensions of self-efficacy together form one's belief in one's competence and capability: “Can I do this?” (*Lent et al., 2002, p. 262*).

Outcome expectations refer to the believed consequences of one's own actions, and for this reason, they also act as a motivator for behavior (*Albert & Luzzo, 1999*). Outcome expectations provide the answer to the question, “If I do this, what will happen?” (*Lent et al., 2002, p. 262*). Outcome expectations can be viewed, for example, from self-evaluative, social, or physical perspectives (*Albert & Luzzo, 1999*). They ignite the motivation to act in a certain way. Learning experiences from previous actions also determine outcome expectations to some extent: what kinds of outcomes one's previous acts have produced, what kinds of consequences others' actions have resulted in, and what kinds of emotions or physical reactions have followed from certain activities (e.g., feelings of well-being and pleasure; *Lent et al., 2002*).

The third main element of SCCT is goal setting. From an individual student's point of view, goal setting can be considered a manifestation of his or her self-regulation and ability to achieve desired goals: “Goals may be defined as the determination to engage in a particular behavior or activity or to effect a particular future outcome” (*Albert & Luzzo, 1999, p. 432*). Thus, goal setting directs people's action in a certain way and can function as a sort of guide and organizer of one's behavior. Successful goal setting can provide one with the sense of self-empowerment and support the development of personal agency (*Lent et al., 2002*).

Self-efficacy and outcome expectations form the framework for personal interests that lead to acts that help achieve one's goals. An interest, therefore, can result in execution of some act that contributes to the achievement of a desired goal or the

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