

Growth and self-determination attitudes in a group of Italian university students in Professional Education: an exploratory study

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ABSTRACT

Growing up means knowing how to be self-determined and to make conscious and responsible choices. Motivation, an essential element of self-determination, drives individuals towards autonomous actions that are consistent with their values. This is particularly relevant for young university students who are called to make decisive choices for their life and career projects facing different challenges. According to Deci and Ryan (1985), motivation can be intrinsic if interest is spontaneous, or extrinsic, based on external recognition; besides, those contexts that support intrinsic motivation can foster authentic choices and personal fulfilment. The authors also emphasized that everyone develops a specific motivational orientation, which can be autonomous, controlled or impersonal. Students with an autonomous style exhibit intrinsic motivation, proactivity and a strong internal locus of control, which promotes personal growth and effectiveness. Adulthood should be a desirable goal, but today many young people have a passive attitude towards growing up, perceiving it as a limitation rather than an achievement. To explore this phenomenon, the present study examines the motivational orientation of 93 students enrolled in the Professional Education degree program at three Italian university campuses. The survey, conducted between October 2024 and January 2025, includes the General Causality Orientations Scale (GCOS) questionnaire and a personal data sheet. Surprisingly, the results show that 95% of the students have an autonomous orientation style, 4% impersonal and 1% controlled. These data need to be discussed because they contrast with the passive attitude of young people towards their own growth, which is emphasized in literature and the press.

Keywords: autonomy; intrinsic motivation; professional development; self-determination theory; university students