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A MOTIVÁCIÓ, PÁLYASZOCIALIZÁCIÓ ÉS A SZAKMAI IDENTITÁS JELENTŐSÉGE A REKREÁCIÓS SZAKEMBERKÉPZÉSBEN
MOTIVATION, PROFESSIONAL SOCIALIZATION AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY IN RECREATION EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Recreation and leisure professionals play a vital role in promoting health-oriented lifestyles through physical activity, balanced nutrition, and mental well-being. Achieving these aims requires strong intrinsic motivation, commitment, and a clear professional identity. To sustain the profession, understanding students' motivations and socialization is essential. This qualitative study examined factors shaping professional identity and persistence through interviews with nine Hungarian program leaders (N = 9). Results show that students are motivated mainly by sport experience, health values, and social engagement. Professional identity is strengthened by role-model educators, practice-based learning, and supportive institutions. Reinforcing motivation and socialization is crucial for persistence and professional retention, contributing to the prestige and sustainability of the recreation and leisure profession.

KEYWORDS

intrinsic motivation, professional socialization, professional identity and commitment, career persistence, recreation education

INTRODUCTION

The training of recreation professionals is fundamentally shaped by societal demands and labor market requirements. As Ábrahám (2008) and Kovács (2015) note, its significance lies in the capacity to respond to contemporary civilizational challenges while simultaneously aligning with international trends and respecting local specificities. In Hungary, the origins of recreation education can be traced to the 1970s, when health education and sport emerged as central priorities. At that time, socio-cultural, tourism-related, and sport recreation constituted the main directions, with the latter assuming dominance. The first independent recreation programs were launched in the late 1980s, drawing heavily on international models such as the American and Canadian *Park & Recreation Management* programs. The introduction of the Bologna framework subsequently broadened the field, extending its scope to health promotion, sport, tourism, management, and a wide range of leisure activities (Gáldi, 2011; Kovács, 2015).

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Today, several Hungarian universities offer bachelor's and master's programs in recreation, supplemented by specialized postgraduate pathways such as Outdoor Program Design and Recreation and Leisure Organization. This trajectory reflects the field's dynamic and multifaceted character: as recreation evolves, so too must its professional training. A central pedagogical challenge, therefore, is to equip students with the competencies, knowledge, dispositions, and autonomy that enable sustained motivation—both in keeping pace with shifting trends and in mobilizing diverse groups for active leisure engagement in the face of modern societal challenges.

Despite its relevance, research on the motivations of recreation students in Hungary remains limited, especially given the profession's constrained employment prospects, modest social prestige, and relatively weak labor market positioning (Lacza, 2010; Magyar, 2018; Kós, Bognár & Herpainé Lakó, 2021; Patakiné Bősz & Magyar, 2024). Investigating students' motivational orientations, as well as their transformations during the course of study, offers valuable insights into processes of career orientation and potential causes of attrition.

Understanding these motivations is of dual importance. For educators, it allows for the targeted development of professional competencies and supports the consolidation of both personal and professional identities. For students, intrinsic and autonomous motivations—such as a commitment to healthy lifestyles, helping others, or building communities—are likely to foster long-term engagement with the field and a more authentic representation of its values. By contrast, extrinsically motivated students, driven by external pressures (e.g., degree prestige) or uncertainty, face a greater risk of disengagement or career abandonment.

Knowledge of student motivations also enables refinement of curricula, teaching methodologies, and support mechanisms. A motivated student community not only achieves stronger academic outcomes but also develops into more creative, collaborative, and innovative professionals. Moreover, motivation itself provides feedback on program effectiveness: if it fails to develop or strengthen during training, this signals the need to revise professional practices or enhance career socialization elements.

In sum, the future of the recreation profession hinges upon understanding students' motivational orientations. The quality of training, the prestige of the field, and the societal impact of health promotion initiatives are all contingent on the level of commitment and purposeful engagement with which graduates enter the profession.

LITERATURE REVIEW

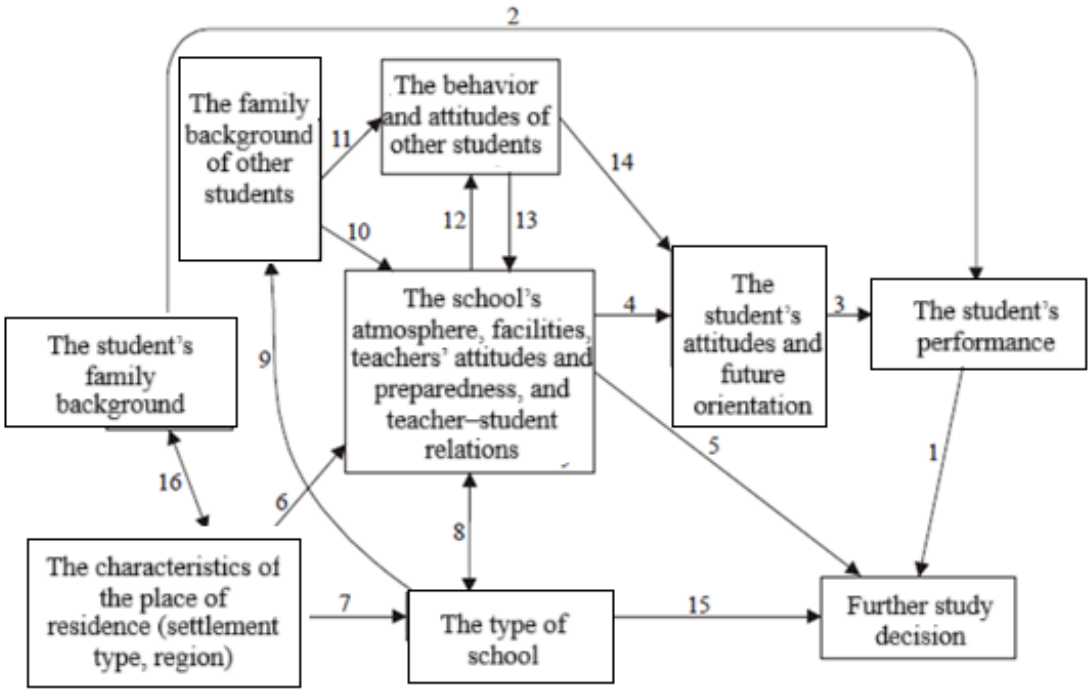
Motivational Studies in the Context of Career Choice: The Role of Education and the University Environment

The effectiveness of recreation professional training is closely tied to the adaptability of educational institutions to changing labor market demands, as well as to students' individual needs and social circumstances. The mission of higher education extends beyond the transmission of

theoretical knowledge to encompass practical preparation and the facilitation of informed career decision-making.

Career choice represents a complex decision-making process shaped by multiple factors, including individual motivation, social background, and the specific characteristics of educational and professional environments. Pusztai and Szigeti (2018) investigated the relationship between career-choice uncertainty, learning motivation, and student competence among university cohorts. Their cluster analysis identified four principal groups: underinformed students, chronically uncertain students, anxious students, and decisive students. Findings indicated that both emotional and cognitive components of career-choice uncertainty directly affect academic motivation: decisive students displayed higher levels of intrinsic motivation and competence, while chronically uncertain students exhibited low self-esteem and externally regulated motivation. The study underscores the need for targeted university counseling, particularly to support the most vulnerable student groups (Lukács, 2012; Pusztai & Szigeti, 2018).

The influence of social background is further substantiated by Lannert's (2009) research, which examined career-choice aspirations and underlying motivations in three Hungarian micro-regions. The relational structure of these factors is illustrated in Figure 1.



1. Figure: Model of factors influencing further study decisions
Source: Lannert,2004.

Lannert's (2004) study demonstrates that parental educational attainment and the family's cultural capital exert a decisive influence on students' intentions to pursue further education. Beyond the family sphere, institutional factors such as school infrastructure, teacher preparedness,

and the composition of peer communities substantially shape the development of career-related motivation. Students in larger urban centers tend to enjoy broader opportunities, whereas in smaller settlements further study decisions are often constrained by the limited institutional landscape.

Education also plays a pivotal role in consolidating career decisions. Students' academic commitment and motivation are strongly mediated by the degree to which they can identify with the chosen profession and envision a viable future within it. Practical components of training—such as internships and fieldwork—serve not only to provide experiential learning but also to facilitate more grounded and informed career decision-making (Lukács, 2012; Pusztai & Szigeti, 2018). These findings underscore the need for regular curricular revision, continuous updating of content, and the integration of practice-oriented approaches to ensure adequate professional preparation.

Leisure education constitutes another essential strand of recreation training, contributing to the cultivation of health awareness and social sensitivity among students. Its pedagogical aim is to foster the ability to manage free time consciously while also equipping students with the capacity to encourage similar practices in others (Ruskin & Sivan, 1995). Participation in community-based programs, interdisciplinary learning opportunities, and practice-driven projects further strengthen professional socialization and enhance graduates' competitiveness in the labor market (Lukács, 2012; Pusztai & Szigeti, 2018).

Overall, in addition to individual preferences, factors such as social background, the educational environment, and profession-related expectations and opportunities exert significant influence on career trajectories. Educational systems and institutions thus play a critical role in sustaining students' intrinsic motivation, ensuring professional readiness, and guiding them in navigating the complex demands of the labor market.

Tracing the Motivations of Recreation Students: Studies on Leisure and Recreation-Related Fields

The study of motivational backgrounds in leisure participation spans several disciplines, with psychological, social, and cultural factors, as well as the role of education and upbringing, being of particular importance. Numerous international investigations have sought to uncover the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations driving different age groups and social strata in their engagement with recreational activities.

Yu (2006), examining university students' motivations through interviews, identified five principal categories: health, body image, self-efficacy, social needs, and enjoyment. The results aligned with self-efficacy and expectancy-value theories, indicating that students' belief in their own abilities and the anticipation of positive outcomes motivate them to engage in physical activity.

A Malaysian study explored motivations for outdoor recreation among higher education students. Using a quantitative survey approach, the research found that both intrinsic factors (e.g., relaxation, knowledge acquisition, social relations) and extrinsic factors (e.g., natural environment, outdoor programs, cultural attractions) were significant. The natural environment emerged as the

strongest motivator, while sensation-seeking and adventure also played a key role in participation (Aziz et al., 2020).

Another investigation compared students engaged in regular versus irregular sport participation. Findings revealed that active students were primarily motivated by challenge, competition, and physical exertion, whereas less active students sought relaxation, withdrawal, or fantasy-driven activities. Gender differences were also pronounced: men tended to participate for competition, while women emphasized health and social relations (Brent et al., 2004).

Dillard and Bates (2011) identified four fundamental motivational dimensions: escape, social interaction, self-development, and goal-oriented recreation. Their perceptual mapping analysis showed that men and individuals with higher incomes placed greater emphasis on achievement outcomes, while other groups were more focused on experiential aspects. The study sought to advance a unified theory of leisure motivation to inform recreation management practices.

Motivational orientations of recreation students in Hungary have also been examined. A 2021 study applied the Hungarian adaptation of the AMS-C28 (Academic Motivation Scale – College version). Results highlighted the diversity of motivational backgrounds: intrinsic motivations (e.g., knowledge acquisition, novelty seeking, achievement) and extrinsic motivations (e.g., compliance, social expectations) were present in nearly equal measure. Importantly, amotivation scored low, indicating a baseline commitment to studies among students (Kós, 2021a).

Another study employed an adaptation of the FIT-Choice scale for recreation organizers to investigate factors influencing career choice, including values, social perceptions, expectations, and future outlook. Students primarily identified with motivational dimensions such as positive experiences, the use of personal abilities, social contribution, and working with children. Notably, most students did not classify recreation organization as “easy work with secure employment”; rather, many perceived the profession as emotionally demanding and uncertain. Interestingly, even those with strong intrinsic commitment often doubted the feasibility of establishing a career in the field (Kós, 2021b).

Further research drawing on Réthy Endréné’s learning motivation framework examined gender differences and program-related variations among recreation students. Results showed that women more frequently reported internalized and knowledge-seeking motivations, but also exhibited higher levels of avoidance or negative motivation compared to men (Kós, Bognár & Herpainé Lakó, 2021b). Differences were also observed between full-time and part-time students: intrinsic motivation was twice as common among full-time students. Crucially, discrepancies emerged between learning motivations and actual career-entry intentions, underscoring that not only individual factors but also contextual and systemic determinants (e.g., education, labor market conditions) shape professional commitment. No clear positive correlation was found between intrinsic motivation and actual intentions to work in the field. Indeed, this research also revealed that many motivated students eventually abandon the profession—primarily due to its limited visibility, low social prestige, and geographic constraints on employment opportunities (Kós, Bognár & Herpainé Lakó, 2021a; Kós, 2021a).

Taken together, these findings highlight that when analyzed against the Training and Outcome Requirements of the Recreation and Lifestyle program, a complex motivational base emerges.



2. Figure: Possible motivational bases
Source: author's own compilation

It is important to note that recreation training in Hungary initially emerged only as a supplementary track to physical education teacher training. Thus, a brief review of research on the motivational profiles of physical education teachers offers a useful point of departure. Abós and colleagues (2019), drawing on self-determination theory, analyzed the motivational profiles of physical education teachers. They found that teachers with autonomous motivation reported higher job satisfaction and lower emotional exhaustion, whereas those working under external pressure showed elevated levels of burnout. These results underscore the psychological significance of autonomous motivation.

In a study of career choice, Spittle and Spittle (2014) examined the decision-making of Australian teacher education students who selected the physical education specialization. Interest in sport, interpersonal skills, and role models played a central role in their choices. Gender differences were pronounced: while male students often highlighted the program's relatively low requirements, female students emphasized self-development and commitment to the teaching profession. Students confident in interpersonal interaction demonstrated stronger intrinsic motivation, whereas others based their decisions more on external expectations. These differences suggest that motivational orientations may influence future performance.

Early career experiences were the focus of a U.S. study by Hand and Stuart (2012), which investigated the integration and professional confidence of beginning physical education teachers. The findings revealed that perceived teaching efficacy was shaped primarily by opportunities for independent learning, the quality of mentoring, and supportive school leadership. The study emphasized the importance of subject-specific mentoring programs in promoting teacher satisfaction and retention.

A representative Hungarian study by Paksi et al. (2015) explored the motivations underlying career choice in the teaching profession. Results indicated that entry into teaching is driven predominantly by intrinsic motivations: joy in working with children, a sense of social

contribution, and commitment to the vocation were cited as decisive. Prior learning experiences and positive feedback from the environment also played a role. By contrast, extrinsic factors such as financial considerations, job security, and social status were found to be less influential, and teaching was rarely chosen as a secondary career path. Respondents perceived teaching as a demanding yet valuable profession characterized by high expectations. The study also found that teacher retention is determined primarily by supportive institutional and organizational environments rather than by individual characteristics (Paksi et al., 2015).

These examples illustrate the breadth of research on motivations for leisure and related activities, consistently highlighting that participation is influenced by both intrinsic factors (e.g., health, enjoyment, self-development) and extrinsic ones (e.g., social relations, environmental appeal). Such findings parallel those of recreation student motivation studies as well as the requirements articulated in the *Training and Outcome Standards* of the Recreation and Lifestyle program. Different age groups and social cohorts engage in recreation for distinct reasons: young athletes, university and secondary school students, and teachers alike report motivations ranging from stress reduction and the pursuit of social experiences to personal growth. Collectively, the research affirms that effective recreation program design requires a thorough understanding of target group motivations and the fostering of autonomous, intrinsic drivers. In this regard, mapping the career motivations of future recreation professionals is of particular importance, as they will not only participate in but also organize, lead, and further develop such programs in the years to come.

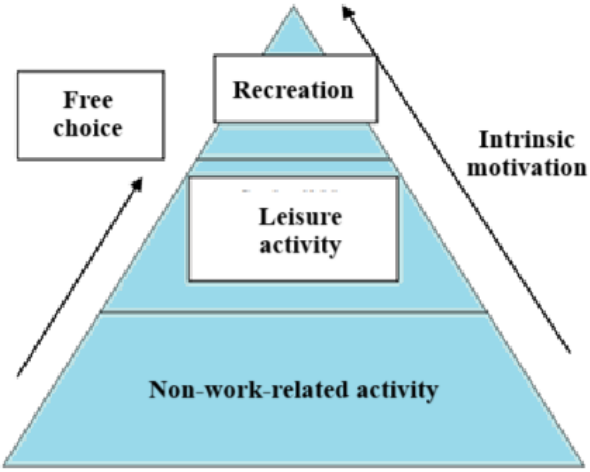
Career Motivation: Work, Leisure, and Recreation

The relationship between work, leisure, and recreation has long been a central theme in the social sciences, particularly during periods of socio-economic transformation when shifts in labor patterns, lifestyles, and the use of time prompted new interpretations. In modern society, leisure is no longer seen merely as a complement to work but increasingly as a value in its own right (Ábrahám, 2016). Today, however, this value is also being integrated into the sphere of work. It is widely recognized that healthy employees generate not only measurable profit for employers but also contribute to workplace environments rich in recreational surplus—an attribute that has become a major trend and one which younger generations increasingly regard as a fundamental necessity, especially when standing at the threshold of career orientation.

The interrelationship between work, leisure, and recreation in the Hungarian context was among the first to be emphasized by Ábrahám (2016), who drew on two classical theoretical models to interpret the transitional nature of these concepts. Iso-Ahola's model (1980, cited in Ábrahám, 2016) sought to delineate leisure and recreational activities by positing a gradual continuum between them. He defined the nature of activities along two principal dimensions: the degree of individual free choice and the type of motivation underlying the activity—that is, whether it is externally driven (e.g., expectation, reward) or internally driven (e.g., enjoyment, interest).

The essence of the model is that the more an activity is governed by personal choice and intrinsic motivation, the closer it approaches the concept of recreation. Activities characterized by

full autonomy and intrinsic motivation may be considered recreation, whereas those performed under compulsion and external regulation fall within the domain of work. Leisure occupies the intermediate space, providing opportunities for recreation but not necessarily carrying inherently recreational value (Ábrahám, 2016).



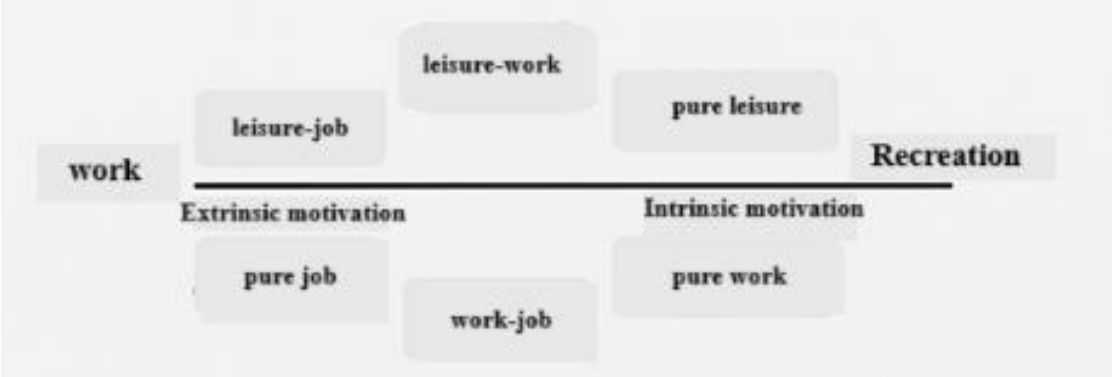
3. Figure: The transitional nature of recreation based on Iso-Ahola's (1980) model
Source: Ábrahám, 2016

Is it always necessary to draw a strict distinction between these two domains? In the case of recreation as a career path, the two areas are closely intertwined, raising intriguing questions when reinterpreting Iso-Ahola's model. One key issue is what types of motivation come to the fore when an individual chooses recreation as a profession. To understand the motivations of future recreation professionals, it is therefore essential to identify the motivational factors that drive individuals to make meaningful use of their leisure time. These drives constitute a stable foundation that may also underpin the choice of recreation as a vocation. In this regard, Neulinger's paradigm (1981, cited in Ábrahám, 2016) provides further guidance, as it also interprets the relationship between work and recreation along the dimensions of freedom and motivation.

Neulinger distinguished six types of activity, grouped into two overarching categories: recreational and work-related. The recreational category comprises activities based on free choice, which contain varying proportions of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. In the case of *pure leisure*, only intrinsic motivation is present—for example, hiking or conversing purely for enjoyment. *Leisure-work* activities are more result-oriented, such as body shaping or playing chess. *Leisure-job* activities are primarily extrinsically motivated, for instance running to maintain health or engaging in sport to sustain social connections.

Work-type activities, by contrast, are characterized by the absence of freedom and the dominance of external motivations. *Pure work* refers to intrinsically motivated, passion-driven activity, such as the creative work of an artist. *Work-job* denotes occupations that are enjoyable but also strongly influenced by material or moral rewards. Finally, *pure job* represents activities performed solely under external compulsion, where the motivation is primarily income generation (Neulinger, 1981, cited in Ábrahám, 2016).

If represented on a continuum, the relationship between these categories may be visualized as follows:



4. Figure: Scale-type representation of Neulinger's paradigm
Source: based on Ábrahám (2016), author's own compilation

A common feature of both models is that they do not impose rigid boundaries between concepts but rather interpret the work–leisure–recreation relationship as a dynamic system shaped by subjective experience, freedom of choice, and type of motivation. This perspective underscores that in modern societies recreation is not merely a privilege but a necessity—an essential determinant of quality of life whose conscious cultivation can contribute to societal well-being. Accordingly, its embeddedness in the social fabric has become increasingly pronounced. These models also encourage us not only to analyze the external form of activities but to consider their subjective experience, motivational background, and psychological effects, thereby advancing our understanding of the motivational foundations of those who choose recreation as a career.

Incentives and Barriers to Becoming a Recreation Professional: The Intersection of Education and the Labor Market, and the Role of Mentorship

The development and societal recognition of the recreation profession are closely linked to the adaptability of educational systems, labor market expectations, and evolving motivational contexts. According to Ábrahám (2008), the goal of recreation programs is to promote health-conscious lifestyles and prepare students for the effective organization of community programs. However, curricula often fail to align with market needs (O'Sullivan, 2007; Gáldi, 2011; Ghenadie, 2021). Ensuring the sustainability of the profession requires an interdisciplinary approach, integration of health-promotion modules, and stronger collaboration between practice-oriented training and market actors.

The sport and recreation labor market is structurally heterogeneous and diverges from classical labor market models (Kaiser & Beech, 2012). It incorporates for-profit, non-profit, and state actors simultaneously, while employment is often informal, part-time, or seasonal. Recreation professionals may occupy positions at multiple levels—from direct service provision through middle management to strategic leadership—each requiring distinct competencies and offering different opportunities across economic sectors (Lacza, 2010; Magyar, 2016). Challenges include the seasonal nature of the animation market, deficiencies in practical training, and low entry-level

salaries, all of which diminish the prestige of the profession (Lacza & Keszei, 2008; Lacza, 2010). Part-time employment is particularly prevalent in the event organization sector, offering little long-term perspective for young entrants.

At the same time, new opportunities are emerging. Growing demand for wellness, fitness, and tourism—especially in the post-COVID era—has created new jobs in Budapest and around Lake Balaton. International examples, such as the U.S. National Park Service or the career prospects of graduates from Galați University in Romania, highlight similar challenges worldwide: barriers to entry, lack of experience, and discrepancies between training and market needs are global phenomena (see Browning et al., 2016; Iconomescu et al., 2013).

The solution lies in redesigning training programs, strengthening professional practice, and enhancing cooperation between training institutions and market actors (Lacza, 2010; Kós, 2021a, 2021b), which can be further supported by mentorship systems. Student retention is bolstered not only by financial incentives but also by non-material ones, such as a positive workplace atmosphere, recognition, and autonomy (Gáldi, 2011; Magyar, 2018; Belošević & Feric, 2022). The future supply of recreation professionals thus depends not only on appropriate training structures but also on study support and the maintenance of student motivation.

One of the most pressing challenges in higher education is student attrition. According to Pusztai and Szigeti (2018), lack of motivation, poor career choice, and insufficient institutional support frequently lead to dropout. Mentorship programs, scholarships, and community-building initiatives can counterbalance these risks. The mentoring systems at Dunaújváros University and Széchenyi István University provide good examples of how students can be supported through personalized counseling, administrative assistance, and academic guidance (Uniduna, 2025; SZE Library, 2025). These tools assist first-year students in adapting to the university environment, thereby reducing the likelihood of attrition.

Research highlights that in the recreation profession, non-material incentives—such as opportunities for professional development, recognition, a positive atmosphere, and flexible working arrangements—are often more effective in the long term than purely financial rewards (Kaiser & Beech, 2012; Magyar, 2018; Belošević & Feric, 2022). These factors not only enhance loyalty and job satisfaction but also play a vital role in preventing burnout and strengthening professional identity. Accordingly, the role of higher education institutions cannot be limited to knowledge transfer: they must create supportive learning environments that respond to students' individual needs and allow them to prepare for recreation careers in a conscious and purposeful manner. Mentorship systems, committed educators, and practice-oriented curriculum elements together hold the key to ensuring the future sustainability of the profession.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this study was to examine the status and popularity of the Sport and Recreation Management program, while also exploring students' career choice motivations and future professional aspirations. The investigation of the integrated program was deemed particularly relevant, as it provided the structural foundation for the subsequent reorganization of

the field. At the time of data collection, this program was still offered nationwide; thus, the student motivations and institutional experiences identified here constitute a valid benchmark for the future development and evaluation of the Recreation and Lifestyle program. The study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing semi-structured interviews.

The research specifically sought to identify the internal and external factors shaping students' career choices and long-term professional trajectories. Particular emphasis was placed on the role of prior sporting experience, health consciousness, and individual career goals, as these are key determinants of student motivation.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The study was guided by the following assumptions and hypotheses:

- H1: Students' career choices are primarily influenced by internal motivations, most notably their commitment to sport and adherence to a healthy lifestyle.
- H2: Processes of professional socialization and authentic teacher role modelling significantly strengthen the development of students' professional identity and commitment.
- H3: Community values and a supportive institutional environment (e.g., mentoring, professional practice) enhance students' likelihood of program persistence.
- H4: Internal motivation constitutes the most critical factor for long-term career persistence and the maintenance of the profession's social prestige.

In line with these hypotheses, the research also sought to address the following questions:

1. Which internal and external factors influence students' career decisions and long-term professional orientations?
2. In what ways do professional socialization and teacher role modelling contribute to the formation of professional identity and commitment?
3. How do community values and institutional support mechanisms foster students' persistence within the program?
4. Which factors are most influential in sustaining long-term career engagement and in shaping perceptions of the profession's societal prestige?

The comprehensive exploration of these issues is expected to contribute to the qualitative advancement of recreation-related higher education, the reduction of student attrition, and the strengthening of the profession's social recognition. Furthermore, the findings may inform the ongoing revision and enhancement of the "new" Recreation and Lifestyle program. Within this context, the introduction of academic mentors is regarded as particularly important, as their personal guidance can play a decisive role in sustaining motivation, reinforcing professional identity, and supporting the conscious planning of career trajectories.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research population comprised Hungarian universities (N=9) offering BSc in Sport and Recreation Management and MSc in Recreation programs that were still active in 2021. A central aim was to capture career motivations and aspirations prior to the formal separation into distinct

Sports Management and Recreation and Lifestyle programs, thereby creating a baseline against which projected changes could later be evaluated. The study sample included nine participants: eight program directors and one head of an academic unit. Of these, six were female and three male, with a mean age of 48.13 years. From each institution, one program director or relevant unit head was interviewed, all of whom possessed substantial expertise regarding the functioning, challenges, and future directions of their respective programs.

Data were collected through structured in-depth interviews. The interviews were guided by a 16-item questionnaire organized into four overarching thematic areas, addressing students' career choice motivations and their career visions following graduation. The primary aim of these questions was to capture instructors' perceptions of the current state and future outlook of the program, as well as the trends they observe in students' attitudes and aspirations. The qualitative analysis paid particular attention to the identification of common themes, institution-specific characteristics, and emergent trends.

RESULTS

The findings emerging from the interviews clearly indicate that students enrolled in the Sports and Recreation Organization program share significant similarities in their motivations, career-choice backgrounds, and attitudes toward training processes, while at the same time notable institutional differences were observed. The structured interviews made it possible to compare institutional practices with respect to student motivations, dropout, and engagement with the program. The results obtained are summarized in the following table:

Table 1. Summary table

Universities	***Sports background***	***Supplementary training***	***Direction of motivation***	***Career abandonment***	***Career change***	***Dropout***
DE	*majority have*	*typical*	*both*	*cannot tell*	*average*	*not typical*
EKE	*decreasing*	*both*	–	*relatively low*	–	–
ELTE	*majority have*	*not typical*	*cannot tell*	*typical*	–	–
ELTE-Savaria	–	–	–	–	*small*	–
ME	*about half have*	–	*internal*	*small*	–	*minimal*
PTE	–	*typical*	–	*typical*	–	–
SZE	*majority have*	*both*	–	–	*none*	–
SZTE	–	–	*internal*	*cannot tell*	*small*	–
TE	–	–	*internal*	*typical, decreasing*	*average*	*not typical*

Source: based on Kós et al. (2021), author's own compilation

When the results are examined thematically, valuable correlations can be identified (see Figure 5). With regard to student motivations, several similarities are observable. According to program directors, the majority of students enter the program with a sporting background, though there are substantial differences within this group: ranging from those with elite sports experience

to those engaged in sport only at a recreational level. Love of sport, enjoyment of movement, and commitment to a healthy lifestyle frequently appear as internal (intrinsic) motivations. Curiosity and interest in employment opportunities also emerge as important factors. Several instructors noted that students often lack concrete career plans at the time of entry; nevertheless, the diverse opportunities offered by the program and its close connection to sport are highly attractive to them. These findings may suggest that, along both Iso-Ahola's and Neulinger's motivational continua, students' motivations seem to be positioned closer to the recreation pole, reflecting a stronger orientation toward intrinsically motivated and self-determined forms of engagement.



5. Figure: Main internal and external factors influencing students' decision to enroll in the recreation and leisure studies program.
Source: based on Kós et al. (2021), author's own compilation

The motivations underlying students' choice of a recreation career are highly diverse and complex. As illustrated by the motivational network, it is clear that the decision is influenced by a wide range of internal and external factors. Among the most decisive elements are passion for sport and a sporting background, which many students bring with them from childhood and which has historically played a significant role in the development of the program. Closely linked to this is an interest in a healthy lifestyle, which plays an increasingly prominent role in the lives of younger generations. Many students are not only motivated to improve their own quality of life but also wish to support others in doing so. In this way, recreation becomes not only a personal commitment but also a socially valuable profession. Commitment to health-conscious living and preventive practices thus frequently appears among initial motivations, according to the accounts of interviewees.

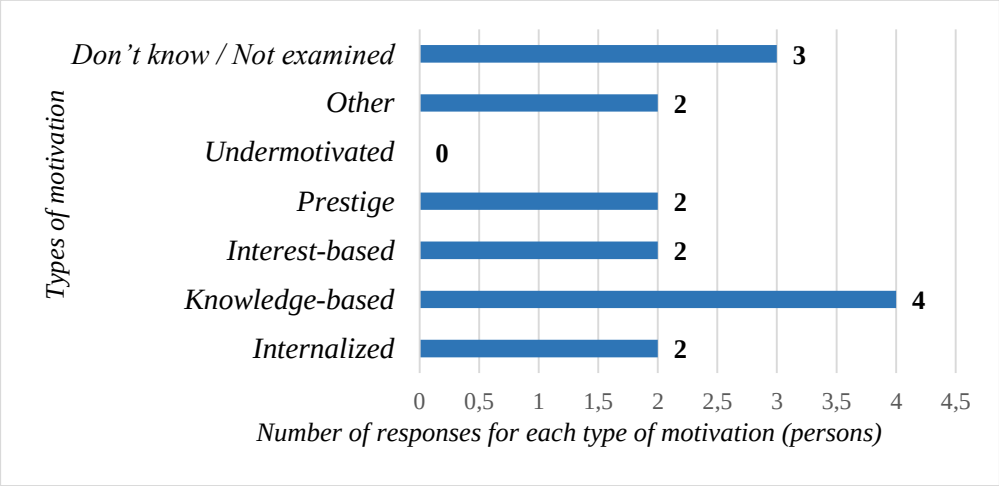
Conscious career choice and clearly defined professional goals also play an important role, particularly for those who enter the program with a strong vision of their future professional trajectory. This is often observed among part-time students, many of whom already work in recreation or wish to transition from another professional field. Conversely, a large proportion of students select the program primarily out of interest and curiosity, hoping that their career vision will become clearer during their studies. The prestige of the degree is also a non-negligible motivational factor, especially for those who prioritize obtaining a higher education qualification regardless of whether they ultimately pursue a professional career in the field. The career choices

arising from these types of motivation may also indicate, in line with the frameworks of Iso-Ahola and Neulinger, that this group of students can be positioned on the continuum closer to the domain of "dedicated work," characterised by a predominance of intrinsic motivation.

At the same time, some applicants base their choice on incomplete or inaccurate information: many imagine the recreation program as consisting merely of light, sporty leisure activities, whereas in reality the profession requires much more complex preparation, interdisciplinary knowledge, and strong social sensitivity. Career prospects and employment opportunities also carry significant motivational weight. Students who perceive the availability of diverse roles within the recreation sector (e.g., wellness, animation, sport tourism) generally progress more purposefully in their studies. This is particularly true for those who value labor market flexibility and the potential for professional autonomy. These motivations exhibit a predominantly external and instrumental orientation, which, in Iso-Ahola's theoretical framework, can be positioned near the external end of the continuum between amotivation and intrinsic motivation.

A further reinforcing factor is the perception that the recreation profession offers the opportunity to maintain an active lifestyle without the constraints of a physical education teaching career—an aspect frequently mentioned as a source of motivation.

In response to the question of what types of motivation students possess after entry into the program, varied answers emerged, which are illustrated in the following figure:



6. *Figure: Relative proportions of knowledge-based, interest-driven, and internalized motivations reported across institutions.*
Source: based on Kós et al. (2021), author's own compilation.

Based on the responses, the most common type of motivation was knowledge-based, indicating that many students primarily choose the program in order to acquire new knowledge and experiences. In addition, interest-based and internalized motivation were also mentioned frequently, suggesting the presence of intrinsic commitment and conscious career orientation. Several program directors highlighted the prestige of the degree as well as other, less easily categorized factors that may also play a role in students' decision-making. It is noteworthy,

however, that the presence of undermotivated students is virtually negligible. It should also be noted that several respondents indicated that student motivation had not been examined in detail. Many instructors emphasized that students' intrinsic motivation plays a fundamental role in their success in the field. Formal knowledge alone is not sufficient for practicing the profession—health consciousness, empathy, and professional commitment are also indispensable. The responses made it clear that instructors consider the development and maintenance of intrinsic motivation as key, particularly since this profession in many respects resembles a "calling" rather than simply a job.

The role of instructors is crucial in sustaining student motivation and fostering commitment to the profession. A recurring theme in the interviews was that students particularly value instructors who support them not only with their expertise but also through personal role modeling, authentic communication, and advisory attitudes. Most instructors strive to assist students' development with personal guidance, counseling, and supportive approaches. Instructor presence and authenticity—especially during practical sessions and camps—play a decisive role in shaping students' attitudes and professional identity. Modern, diverse, and trend-oriented classes, experience-based teaching, and instructors' own attitudes toward the profession all exert significant influence on the formation of professional identity. Sharing personal experiences, providing direct interactions, and adopting an open attitude toward students contribute to enhancing motivation and fostering a sense of mission toward the profession.

The overall dropout rate, according to the interviews, is generally low; however, changes in specialization or study track occur to varying degrees across institutions. Such shifts are most often caused not by deficiencies in the training system but by personal life circumstances or uncertainties in orientation, as reported by instructors and program directors. The relatively short duration of study and low credit requirements can facilitate completion but may also contribute to motivational fluctuations during the program. Some instructors observed that students often require continuous reinforcement, particularly those who entered the program with uncertain goals.

Students' attitudes toward professional development are also reflected in the fact that many pursue supplementary training during their studies, such as fitness instructor, wellness instructor, or sports specialist courses. On the one hand, this paints a positive picture of student commitment; on the other, it highlights that the undergraduate program often does not fully provide the competencies needed for direct employment. Several instructors stressed the need to restructure curricula, strengthen practical training, and integrate interdisciplinary modules better aligned with labor market demands. Respondents emphasized the role of internships in clarifying career orientation. According to some instructors, practical experience has a decisive influence on students' envisioned professional directions. Positive examples were also cited: some students launched their own businesses after completing fitness center internships, or received job offers after organizing sporting events.

Differences in professional commitment were also evident between full-time and part-time students. Several instructors observed that part-time students tend to be more goal-oriented and

often enter with prior work experience, while full-time students more frequently exhibit uncertainty in career choice.

Several instructors pointed out that the development of self-management skills is lacking in the current educational structure. Success in employment is heavily influenced by the ability to build networks, for which universities can provide only limited support. Independent initiative and active participation in internships and events are essential for future success. In addition, institutions place different emphasis on practical training. At MTSE, for instance, students must engage with all target groups (e.g., mother-and-baby, senior, prenatal classes), while in other institutions theoretical knowledge is given greater priority. This influences students' career perspectives: where more practical opportunities are available, motivation and commitment are generally higher.

Another notable observation is that the social recognition of the profession remains relatively low. In the labor market, the meaning of a recreation degree and the competencies of such graduates are often unclear. As a result, career abandonment or employment in alternative, non-specialized fields is frequent, according to instructors. Several interviewees also pointed out that students' employment opportunities vary regionally. Larger cities (e.g., Szeged, Budapest) provide more opportunities through spas, wellness centers, and sports facilities, while smaller towns offer more limited options. Some students compensate by seeking employment abroad, where recreation qualifications are more highly valued and the culture of sport consumption is more developed.

The interviews further highlighted that institutions differ in the emphasis they place on theory versus practice. Universities that maintain close ties with local spas, hotels, or sports clubs provide their students with more favorable opportunities for internships and subsequent employment. Thus, the availability and quality of practical opportunities exert a strong influence on students' professional development during their studies.

Figure 8 presents the diverse career visions students have for their future in the recreation profession. Based on instructor interviews, it is clear that students' career perspectives are highly varied and become increasingly focused as the program progresses. Several main directions can be identified, reflecting both the diverse applications of the profession and the different motivations of students.



7. Figure: Major career trajectories and professional goals identified from instructor interviews. Source: based on Kós et al. (2021), author's own compilation.

One of the most prominent career visions is that of becoming a personal trainer or fitness instructor, which is particularly attractive to students with an active athletic background. These students often complete the necessary certifications during their studies, aiming to assist individual clients in developing a healthy lifestyle and improving sports performance. Closely related to this is the role of sports coach, which appears mainly in the long-term plans of students experienced in competitive sports.

Another major direction is event organization and hotel animation, which especially appeals to creative, community-oriented students. These career paths require practical knowledge, strong communication skills, and adaptability, and are often seasonal in nature, such as summer camps, animation programs, or sport tourism events. Camp organization and outdoor recreation are also attractive to those who wish to lead engaging outdoor activities for both children and adults.

An increasingly frequent career vision is workplace health promotion, which is particularly important among health-conscious students. This area combines preventive approaches with the world of work, offering graduates the opportunity to support the physical and mental well-being of employees in companies and institutions. Similarly, therapeutic recreation is another important direction, which according to several instructors also reinforces the social responsibility dimension of recreation: its target groups may include the elderly, people with disabilities, or those in rehabilitation.

The career visions of becoming a wellness specialist or a school health promoter are also strong, especially among students who wish to apply the health-preserving role of recreation in a complex manner, often within institutional settings. Interest in wellness is evident not only in

coursework but also in the students' choice of internship placements—such as hotels, spas, and health centers.

Another key career vision is further studies, pursued by students who plan to enter specialized master's programs, pedagogical careers, or even academic research in the long term. These students tend to approach the program with greater awareness and view it as a pathway for professional development from the outset.

An interesting observation is that while most students hold positive career visions, the low social prestige of the profession and the limited financial rewards may act as deterrents to long-term commitment. Several interviewees mentioned that after obtaining their degree, students may not necessarily seek employment in recreation or sport-related fields, but instead pursue alternative career paths, partly in the hope of a more stable financial future.

The role of instructors is crucial, as they are responsible for transmitting the values of the profession and shaping student identity. The research highlighted that personal role modeling, openness, and the support and inspiration provided to students contribute both to the improvement of educational quality and to the enhancement of the social prestige of the profession. Overall, it can be concluded that for the further development of training systems, it is essential to update educational content, strengthen practical training, and ensure the long-term maintenance of student motivation.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, career choice in recreation and student motivation represent a highly complex and multi-layered phenomenon. Intrinsic motivations (health consciousness, the desire to help others, commitment to lifestyle) play a decisive role in students' decisions, yet the influence of external factors (e.g., degree prestige, employment opportunities) cannot be disregarded. Interest in recreation programs shows diverse trends across universities: in some institutions it is growing, while in others it is stagnating or slightly declining. The interviews revealed that program visibility and the social perception of the profession greatly influence applicants' willingness to enroll. Dropout rates are generally low; however, employment uncertainty and career changes remain significant risk factors.

The results confirmed that students' career choices are primarily shaped by intrinsic motivations—athletic background, commitment to a healthy lifestyle, and personal career goals (H1). It was also validated that part-time students tend to demonstrate more purposeful career motivations than full-time students, as their decisions are more closely tied to deliberate career-building (H2). The interviews further highlighted that authentic and exemplary instructor attitudes significantly strengthen students' professional commitment and long-term motivation (H3). Finally, it was confirmed that the main threats to retention in the profession are its low social prestige, uncertain financial recognition, and limited labor market opportunities, which often lead to career abandonment (H4).

These findings are consistent with both international and domestic research, which demonstrate the highly diverse motivational background of recreation students (Yu, 2006; Aziz et

al., 2020; Kós, 2021a). The dominance of intrinsic motivation, the emphasis on athletic background, lifestyle commitment, and social usefulness reflect similar patterns. The importance of refining career visions during studies and the central role of internships also appear in the international literature. The development of students' self-management skills, professional identity, and the implementation of mentoring programs (Pusztai & Szigeti, 2018; Lukács, 2012) align with the perspectives of instructors.

The "calling" nature of the recreation profession, as well as the significance of intrinsic motivation described by the Neulinger and Iso-Ahola models, further reinforce the validity of the interview results. The interview findings indicate that many students initially approach the recreation and leisure studies programme with pragmatic and externally driven motives, such as perceived job opportunities or the influence of peers and family. In terms of Iso-Ahola's motivational framework, these patterns can be located closer to the extrinsic end of the leisure motivation continuum, where participation is motivated by instrumental outcomes rather than intrinsic enjoyment. However, as students advance in their studies, a gradual shift toward more self-determined forms of motivation becomes observable — reflecting Neulinger's notion of perceived freedom and intrinsic engagement in leisure-related learning. Overall, the findings reinforce the theoretical assumptions of Iso-Ahola and Neulinger, suggesting that leisure education can function as a context in which students gradually internalize more self-determined forms of motivation through meaningful learning and professional socialization experiences.

Education and instructor attitudes strongly influence the development of student attitudes and the formation of professional identity. Current challenges of the program (labor market position, social prestige, marketability of training) justified curricular reform, the strengthening of practical training, and the reconsideration of instructor roles. Further research is required on the development of students' career identity and career motivations in relation to the "new program," as well as on the effectiveness of mentoring systems and career trajectories in the recreation profession, to ensure meaningful and sustainable program development.
The research findings, in line with international best practices, underscore the significance of structured mentoring programs in supporting students enrolled in recreation and leisure studies. Particularly effective are multi-level mentoring systems in which students receive guidance not only from academic staff but also from alumni mentors who can assist them in professional integration and career planning. A relevant example is provided by the Alumni Mentorship Program of the University of Illinois Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism, where graduates actively participate in the professional development of current students. Through one-to-one mentoring, career advising, and reflective discussions, the program effectively bridges the gap between academic training and professional practice, thereby improving retention and strengthening the cohesion of the professional community.

For curriculum developers and decision-makers in higher education, further progress may be achieved through curricular innovations specifically tailored to recreation and leisure studies students, building upon their motivational profiles and feedback from professional practice. This may include the implementation of reflective courses linked to internships, the systematic monitoring of graduate career paths, and the establishment of curriculum advisory boards that

bring together students, educators, and industry partners in collaborative curriculum development. Such initiatives not only enhance the responsiveness and practical relevance of leisure education to labor market expectations but also promote students' long-term professional commitment and persistence within the field.

While the qualitative findings provide valuable insights into the motivations and professional socialization processes of recreation students, it is important to acknowledge that the study was based on a limited sample (N=9). Consequently, the conclusions drawn here should be interpreted with caution and cannot be generalized to the entire population of Hungarian recreation students or institutions. The results primarily reflect the perspectives of program leaders and capture institutional tendencies rather than representative trends. Future research with larger and more diverse samples—including students and graduates—would be necessary to validate and extend these findings.

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