

How are the students selecting their undergraduate courses? A qualitative approach

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Abstract:

Choosing the right career path is becoming more and more important for young students today. Students have to take into account many things when choosing a career and college major. As students try to make course choices, they face many problems of matching their course choices with their abilities and academic performance. Due to the decreasing number of students in universities and to modifications that have appeared in the behaviour of the new generation of students there is a need to build up a framework that gives due recognition to the factors that have important impact on students' choices for their undergraduate courses. The purpose of this study was to investigate into the factors influencing higher secondary students' choice of undergraduate course with the aims to ascertain and explore as to how higher secondary students who aspire to embark on higher studies make their choice of course and why they choose one course over the others. The present paper identifies contextual influences and explicates major concerns related to students' choices for undergraduate courses.

Key words: students' choice, factors, contextual influences.

Introduction

In the last years, in a changing environment, working with a different new generation of students, it has been seen the importance of considering the students as customers, finding their learning motivation and their needs. For every incoming university student, choosing the best course can be a difficult decision as well as thinking about their future career. Some students know exactly what course to pursue while others do not know which one will get them there. In fact, due to the large number of courses available to students, most of them find themselves switching majors. The importance of choosing a degree as well as courses available is a vital and crucial part for every student as it is the building block of future success.

Students need to be knowledgeable about the path they will be taking to help them prepare for their career path. However, career choice has become a complex science with the advent of information technology, the emergence of post industrial revolution and job competition. It was a common practice in the old days to find feudalism converting it into a family affair where the son of a blacksmith was destined to become a blacksmith and a feudal was born a leader. Industrialization and post industrialization has made it possible for a common person to be rich as long as they have due skills and knowledge (Wattles, 2009). Today, one has not only to

make due career planning but also exhaustive career research before making a career choice so as to adjust with the evolving socio-economic conditions (Wattles, 2009).

Students' choice of educational programs

Regarding the student choice behaviour, there is a growing research interest on how the students, as consumers, make their choices in higher education (Naidoo et al., 2011). Extensive research has been conducted on students' decision making regarding their programs and universities (e.g. Moogan and Baron, 2003; Vrontis et al., 2007). These kinds of choices are usually made by students before starting their careers in education. Other research papers focus on student's choices made during their studies (Hugstad, 1997; Newell et al., 1996; Petruzzellis and Romanazzi, 2010). The consumer decision making is considered to be a process that comprises several phases (e.g. Moogan and Baron, 2003; Solomon et al., 2002; Vrontis et al., 2007; Manolika, 2013). The first stage consists of the problem recognition, where the students realize that they have to make a choice regarding their education. In the second phase students start to look for information on the issues that they consider relevant for their decision making. The gathered information is useful for the third part of decision making, in which the alternatives are evaluated based on the information at hand. After evaluation, the final choice is made and implemented by applying to the chosen program. Many attributes play a role in the student decision making but some of them are more important than others. According to Kerka (2000), course choice is influenced by multiple factors including personality, interests, self concept, cultural identity, globalization, socialization, role model, social support and available resources such as information and financial support. Bandura et al., (2001) state that each individual undertaking the process is influenced by several factors including the context in which they live in, their personal aptitudes, social contacts and educational attainment. Hewitt (2010) posits that factors influencing course choice can either be intrinsic, extrinsic or both.

Hewitt further states that most people are influenced by careers that their parents favour, others follow careers that their educational choices have opened for them, some choose to follow their Passion regardless of how much or little it will make them while others choose the courses that give high income. Students perception of being suitable for particular jobs also has been found to be influenced by a number of factors including ethnic background, year in school, level of achievement, choice of subjects, attitudes and differences in job characteristics (McQuaid and Bond, 2003). Perrone et al., (2001) found that role model supportiveness and quality of relationship contribute to course choice of students.

The variables that influence the student choices were divided in two categories by Moogan and Baron (2003). The first category is about the universities' and programs' characteristics. The second category groups variables regarding the influencers of choice such as the sources of information and the influences of the students' decision making (Moogan and Baron, 2003). Some of the most important attributes that influence the students' decision making seem to be: personal interest in the program, the labor market and the location (van Deuren and Santema, 2012). It seems that the most important characteristic that is taken into account in the decision making is the personal interest in the program (Owen and Jensen, 2004). Also, another issue reported by the students as being very important in the selection process is the personal interest in the subject taught (e.g. Calkins and Welki, 2006; Lapan et al., 1996; Maringe, 2006).

In the second place, considering importance, seem to be the variables related to the labor market: expected earnings, employability, career opportunities (van Deuren and Santema,

Students' Choice Models

A number of models have been used to explain students' choice of higher education. These models have been examined by diverse methods, assumptions, and varied theoretical perspectives (Hossler *et al.*, 1999). Hossler, *et al.*, (1999) has suggested four forms of models for examining the determinants of students' choice of colleges or higher education. The four major types are: econometric models, socialization or status attainment models, information processing models and combined models. The econometric model focuses on the assumptions students make regarding the cost benefits of college and the social and educational outcome related to the investment in college by the individual (Bishop, 1977, Hossler, 1999 and Paulsen, 2001). This means that the models follow a cost-benefit framework that assumes that students of higher education are rational and are completely informed about the potential costs and benefits of both education and non-education to arrive at a decision regarding choice of higher education. The sociological models are also known as status attainment models. They concentrate on the importance of students' background characteristics and socioeconomic status as factors affecting students' choice of higher education. For instance, Hurtado *et al.*, (1997) demonstrated that Blacks were less likely to attend their first choice higher institution compared to white students. Hossler, *et al.*, (1999) posits that information processing models incorporate the information gathering process as the main component of the college choice decision. The models are with the assumption that the decision to enrol in any higher education institution is dependent on the amount of information gathered by the student. Emphasis is placed on the student who is gathering and processing the information (Hossler, *et al.*, 1999). The fourth choice model is the combined models. The combined models use the characteristics of the economic, status attainment models and information-gathering models to describe students' college choice process (Clark & Wiebe 1993, McDonough, 1997 & Stinchcombe, 1990). According to Hamrick & Hossler (1996), the combined models offer more depth and perspective to the college decision-making process. The combined models can be discussed under four major models; Jackson's Model, Chapman's Model, Hanson and Litten's Model & Hossler and Gallagher's Model (Hossler *et al.* 1999).

Here are some factors discussed which are inevitable to affect the decision of course choice.

Factors influencing course choices of undergraduate students:

The location:

The location of the university also contributes to students' choices for their undergraduate courses. Banwet & Datta (2003) also indicate that physical environment, layout, lighting, classrooms, the size of the class, appearance of buildings and grounds and the overall cleanliness of the university campus also significantly contribute to students' perception of quality of institutional performance.

Jekayinfa (n.d.) sees location of the school as an environmental factor which can influence students' enrollment in undergraduate studies. Students located in urban areas show more positive interest in higher studies because of their exposure to the media and information about social advantages of studies after secondary education unlike their counterparts in the rural areas who have little or no exposure to the beneficial nature of higher studies and the career opportunities opened to them. Marwan (2011) also finds that the city where a school is located influences students' choice. According to Choy & Carroll (1998), location-related reasons can include: proximity or distance, some students may choose to remain close to home so as to maintain close ties with their families and friends or to be assured that they could get home quickly and inexpensively for vacations or in case of emergency.

Personal factors:

Splaver (1977) posited that it is important for students to have a good understanding of themselves and their personality if they are to make intelligent career plans. What they would like to be and what they are determine factors in their course choice. Personality factors to be considered include their mental abilities, special abilities and interests. Splaver (1977) considered factors of mental abilities to be "verbal comprehension, word fluencyability, spatial ability, numerical ability, reasoning ability, and memory." Splaver urged students to become familiar with their personality in order to guide their major choice. Harris and Jones (1997) stated that a developed career plan included evaluation of personality through self-assessment, and communication with others, another trait that depended heavily on personality.

Environmental factors:

Career choice is the balancing of recognizing and meeting needs of the individual while at the same time responding to the outer forces and realities of life. Career decision factors involve two sets of input: the self and the world of work. Individuals in a career constantly balance aspirations and how they have fitted into the reality of the workplace. Man's occupation determines the kind of person he becomes since, through his working hours, his cognitions about himself, his wants and goals, and his interpersonal response traits are moulded (Kroll et al.,1970). Kroll went on to say that much of the informal and formal knowledge provided through the society and the environment has focused on the acquisition, retention, and utilization of information pertaining to the world.

Both the self and the world emerge as important factors in the constructs that have attained, in that they have become the important features in the acquisition, retention, and translation of information about one's self (Krollet al., 1970).

Environment plays a significant role in the career position the student attains in many ways. The environment that is spoken about here is a factor that is used to nurture decisions in course choice. One means of prompting students to participate in the course choice planning is a mandate to require students to submit a description of their plans for some postsecondary education or training to school officials; or at least explain their future career paths in detail wherein graduates. spell out those goals, which could include college, trade school, the military, or other options, even if they have not met the requirement to graduate (Cavanagh, 2002). The

intent of the career explanation was to have students with low expectations talk with counselors about options for advancing their careers in the future. Kochung et al (2011) are of the opinion that environment plays a very minimal role when it comes to students' course choice.

Family factors:

Aspects of the family context are important determinants of postsecondary school enrollment. Two key factors are parents' socioeconomic status and youth bonds or relationships to their parents. The indirect relationship between parents with high levels of education and youth college attendance occurs through the transmission of values towards post-secondary education that translates to encouragement and expectations for their youth to attend college. Parents with goals and expectations that support post-secondary education are more likely to have children when enroll in post-secondary institutions (Demi et al, 2010).Moreover, parents with higher level of income tend to be more actively involved in their children's schooling, which is also associated with later post-secondary school enrollment. Thus we expect that parents with higher education and higher incomes are more likely to have their youth enrolled in post-secondary school (Demi et al,2010).Ming (2010) finds students are often attracted to postsecondary education because of the career opportunities it may provide. Ming (2010) states that, 'students often make choices based on existing job opportunities for college graduates'. Students are interested in outcomes. They are influenced by what graduates are doing, what graduate schools they attend and contributes that they are making to society. Lifestyle may be an important factor in course decision making because students preferred greater financial rewards and higher social status upon graduation. Kochung et al (2011) states that there are often certain benefits that people expect to come with the chosen career as they make career choices. These benefits are referred to as outcome expectations. The outcome expectations include: availability of jobs, employment security, prestige associated with the profession, availability of advancement, ability to choose career specialization, self employment opportunity and opportunity to apply skills and knowledge. Some students chose the careers that give high income. Discrimination in certain profession also prevents students from choosing certain careers (Kochung et al,2011).

Sex related factor:

In a study by Jekayinfa (1996) it was found that sex- being male or female, is a factor which influences students' attitudes towards courses for graduation. She reported that Girls tend to be more inclined to social studies and related subjects while boys tend to be more inclined to the science subjects. Social studies as a course are perceived by many people as a very simple, easy and feminine course.

Gender plays a significant role in this environment. Greenberger (2002) stated that boys are still being steered toward the traditional 'male' jobs, which are higher paying while girls are still expected to cluster into the traditional fields of cosmetology, childcare, and other similar jobs. Skills present in males and females alike have been indicative of their vocational interests. Laleger (1942) ascertained the skill levels of girls as they applied to interests that the girls had. It is difficult to break the code of motivation that students may possess. The fact that Laleger's study was done in 1942 shows that gender bias, and the study of it, is nothing new, and may

continue to be an always-present part of the career choice process. However, Kochung et al (2011) find that gender plays a very minimal role in students' career choice.

Conclusion:

The purpose of this paper was to examine the factors influencing students' choice of courses at graduation level of education. As the study utilized exploratory factor analysis to identify appropriate factors to determine differences in course choice therefore it can be concluded that location of the institution, sex, students' personal factors, environmental, family and parental factors have great influence on students' choice of undergraduate courses.

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