

Investigating first Year Students' Abilities to Make Appropriate Career Choices

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ABSTRACT The choice of a career is one of the most crucial challenges currently facing adolescents in South Africa. The purpose of the present study was to investigate first year students' abilities with regard to career planning, awareness of their career interests, career decision-making and exposure to career information. A cross-sectional survey design was used. Four hundred and thirty (430) participants were randomly selected from a population of first year students in a historically Black university. The data was collected through a self-constructed questionnaire and analysed by means of the Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS). The results indicated that students were not fully informed about the 'realistic' type of careers, that is, careers where they use hands, tools and machines. In addition, students were found to lack self-knowledge with regard to their career interests. The recommendations were provided to the university, especially the Student Counselling and Career Development Unit, to address the issue of career guidance in secondary schools in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province.

INTRODUCTION

The choice of a proper career determines one's future life. Many youths go into unsuitable careers as a result of ignorance, peer pressure, advice from friends, parents and teachers or prestige attached to certain jobs without adequate career guidance (Adebawale 2014). Issa and Nwalo (in Adebawale 2014) found that, consequently, many of the youths are unsuited for their careers as they usually find themselves in jobs where they could not satisfy their value needs, thereby, becoming disheartened in the work situation and a nuisance to their employers. Dabula and Makura (2013) viewed that, career choices for many high school students are accidental, rush decisions, imposed by external forces or by circumstances.

One of the factors that influence throughput and graduation rates in institutions of higher learning is the provision of career guidance and development programs at high school level to prepare learners for higher education (Dabula and Makura 2013). Wight and Maree (in Dabula and Makura 2013) indicated that lack of career development programs is one of the issues concerning the difficulties in transitioning from high school to an institution of higher learning. It is imperative, therefore, that career guidance and development programs in high schools should

be properly provided to prepare learners for post-secondary education and the world of work. Hence, the need is to investigate the first year students' abilities regarding career choices.

Mabula (2012) pointed out that successful career services provision to learners in schools should involve career programs which comprise the use of mass media, books, professional journals, the internet, occupational flyers, career counsellors and teachers, as well as exposing learners to role models. These career resources can enable learners to get career information available within and outside South Africa. Learners need to understand what exists in the world of work so that they can examine the different career options available to them and decide their relevance to their personal characteristics (Mabula 2012). Hoppock (in Mabula 2012) indicated that career decision-making is guided by information and awareness about us, information and awareness about occupations, and our knowledge about us and occupations. Career knowledge and awareness are, therefore, necessary in the process of career decision-making so as to match job requirements with the personal characteristics and needs (Hoppock in Mabula 2012).

The study was conducted in an institution of higher learning situated in the rural part of the Limpopo Province of South Africa. This institution offers educational opportunities to a largely rural population, deprived of chances of at-

tending institutions of higher learning mainly due to poverty. In his study, Ngesi (in Shumba and Naong 2012) found that a poor financial base for students from disadvantaged communities deters choices of appropriate educational programs and careers. Such students tend to avoid careers which require a long period of training because of financial constraints. This suggests that students from lower socio-economic families may not be able to pursue careers of their choice.

In their study of socio-demographic factors that influence career choice among Psychology students in South Africa, Mudhovozi and Chireshe (2012) found that the participants who attended rural schools made delayed career decisions. The same study also found that participants were mainly influenced by parents, teachers and friends to choose Psychology as a career. Sax (in Shumba and Naong 2012) examined students' initial interest in science careers, factors influencing career choice during college, and how these factors differ between male and female students. Sax found that male students who abandon career aspirations appear to be driven by financial concerns, while female students were more concerned with the social aspects of their career choice. In a similar vein, Perry (in Shumba and Naong 2012) asserts that adolescent career choice is influenced by life context, personal attitudes, and educational attainment.

Theoretical Framework

An understanding of the theories of career development and choice can assist the career guidance teacher to realise that career decision-making is not a single event in time, but a long-term process which, in some cases, might stretch over the entire life-span of an individual (Naude and Bodibe 1986). Some of the major theories of career choice or career development are discussed below.

The Developmental Theory of Donald Super

The Developmental Theory is also referred to as the 'self-concept theory' because the role of the self-concept is emphasized (Jacobs et al. 1991). Super's theory is summarised in the following points.

- ♦ People differ among themselves with regard to abilities, interests, personality traits and values;
- ♦ The different occupations demand a unique pattern or profile of abilities, interests and certain personality traits from the potential practitioner;
- ♦ Occupational preferences, skills and living conditions of people and, therefore, their self-concepts as well, change with time and with experience. Having this, occupational choice and adjustment become an on-going process;
- ♦ This process takes place in a series of stages or phases of life, namely growth, exploration, settlement, maintenance and deterioration; and
- ♦ The individual's career pattern is determined by his parents' socio-economic status, his intellectual ability and personality traits, and the opportunities to which he/she is exposed.

The Developmental Theory of Ginzberg and his Fellow-Workers

Ginzberg (in Jacobs et al. 1991: 7) pointed out that occupational choice is a "lifelong process of decision-making in which the individual seeks to find the optimal fit between his career preparation and goals and the realities of the world of work". Other points in Ginzberg's theory are as follows:

- ♦ Occupational choice is a process that remains open-ended as long as the individual has to make decisions about his career;
- ♦ Occupational choice is a reversible process as specific factors can cause occupational related behaviour or decisions to be changed. Practical considerations such as the cost and length of training often make people reconsider their decisions; and
- ♦ An individual's attitude towards compromise is replaced by the approach of optimization, because practising an occupation is dynamic and continually strives for the best balance between an occupation and the person's ever-changing desires and circumstances.

Frank Parsons' Trait-Factor Theory

The basic idea of the trait-factor approach is that occupational choice is a rational decision,

which a person makes after he has weighed his aptitude, interests, and other personality factors against the specific requirements of a certain occupation (Jacobs et al. 1991). Parsons (in Jacobs et al. 1991) identified three factors that are important in choosing an occupation, namely:

- ♦ Obtaining self-knowledge with regard to attitudes, abilities, interests, aptitudes, aspirations and the person's limitations and the possible reasons for them;
- ♦ Obtaining knowledge with regard to the demands made by different occupational fields, to succeed in them; and
- ♦ Reflecting on and integrating these two sets of information that have been processed to knowledge by the person concerned.

John Holland's Career Guidance Model

John Holland was a career counsellor who categorised individuals according to specific personality types and related these types to specific occupational environments as a basis for structuring career guidance classes (Jacobs et al. 1991). According to Holland's model, a person's personality type is determined and the personal particulars are then related to occupational environments from the world of work. Holland's model consists of the following six personality categories:

- ♦ *Realistic Type*: Persons with a preference for working with manual tools, machines, animals and/or plants;
- ♦ *Investigative Type*: Persons who prefer activities that involve problem-solving, intellectual and analytical thinking;
- ♦ *Artistic Type*: Persons who prefer creative work such as music, sculpting and writing;
- ♦ *Social Type*: Persons with a preference for caring for others, helping and teaching them;
- ♦ *Enterprising Type*: Persons who prefer taking the lead, managing and convincing others in attaining specific objectives; and
- ♦ *Conventional Type*: Persons who prefer organisation and routine in performing their jobs. (Cited in Jacobs et al. 1991).

These categories are not mutually exclusive as most people have more than one of these personality traits. However, in most cases, an individual more clearly represents a specific group of traits. For example, a person could be mainly realistic and have enterprising and creative traits in addition.

Research Objectives

The study had the following objectives:

- (1) To investigate the first year students' abilities regarding career planning;
- (2) To determine whether first year students are aware of their career interests and intellectual abilities;
- (3) To determine first year students' career decision-making abilities; and
- (4) To establish the level of first year students' exposure to career information.

Hypotheses

Based on the discussed literature and theory, and to address the objectives of the study, the following hypotheses were formulated:

- H₁: First year students are not adequately informed about career planning
- H₂: First year students are not significantly aware of their career interests and intellectual abilities
- H₃: First year students are not significantly able to decide on their career choices
- H₄: First year students are not significantly exposed to career information

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A cross-sectional survey design was used to investigate the views of first year students with regard to choosing careers. This design has the advantage of measuring current views or practices, and it can also provide information in a short space of time (Creswell 2012).

Sampling

The study used simple random sampling method to select 430 participants from the population of all the first year students in a historically Black institution of higher learning in South Africa. The simple random sampling method was chosen so that every first year student had an equal probability of being selected from the population (Creswell 2012). The sample included students from different faculties and degree programs.

Instrument

A self-constructed questionnaire was used to collect data. The instrument had four sections which focused on the following four areas:

Section A: Career Planning (Q1–Q8)

Questions in this section were aimed at establishing whether students are able to plan their short-term and long-term career goals. Shertzer and Stone (1981) investigated that, career planning consists of thinking through short-term, as well as long-term career goals. These authors state further that the attainment of short-term goals often contributes to the achievement of long-term goals. For a student, career planning should be an attempt to determine “what is there to be done? What do I want to do? What can I do?” (Shertzer and Stone 1981: 378).

Section B: Self-Knowledge in Relation to Career Fields (Q9 – Q15)

The purpose of the questions in this section was to find out whether students are aware of their interests, aptitudes and personalities. Maree and Ebersohn (2002) are of the opinion that the students’ career choices should be in line with their interests, aptitudes and personalities.

Section C: Career Decision-Making Q16– Q23)

These questions were aimed at determining the role that parents, teachers and peers played in the career aspirations and decision-making of students and whether students consulted parents and/or teachers regarding their career choices.

Section D: Career Information (Q24–Q32)

These questions were aimed at establishing whether there were sufficient sources of career information in the schools and the community, and whether the students were utilizing these sources to get information.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

The questionnaire was given to an experienced statistician to establish its ‘content’ and

‘construct’ validity before it was administered to the selected group of participants.

The Pilot Study

Twenty-five students from the Humanities and Management Sciences Foundation Program participated in the pilot study. The questionnaires were administered to the participants as a group. The participants completed the questionnaires without any difficulty and it was, therefore, not necessary to change items or the wording in the final version of the questionnaire.

Procedure

The researcher administered the questionnaires to the whole sample of 430 students during normal class periods. One period of fifty minutes was sufficient as it took approximately forty five minutes to answer the questionnaire. All the questionnaires were collected at the end of the sessions.

Data Analysis

The Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyse data.

Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct the study was granted by the university’s Research Ethics Committee. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research. Their participation was voluntary, and they were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and that their identities would be confidential as they did not use their names.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results on all individual questions are shown in Table 1. The number of participants and percentage of those who either agreed or strongly agreed are indicated. The scores on the responses were coded as:

- | | | |
|---|---|-------------------|
| 1 | - | Strongly Disagree |
| 2 | - | Disagree |
| 3 | - | Agree |
| 4 | - | Strongly Agree |

Table 1: Participants who either agreed or strongly agreed to the individual question

Question No.	Participants who agree or strongly agree	
	Sample (N)	Percent (%)
1	356	89.45
2	366	91.96
3	230	57.78
4	242	60.81
5	387	97.24
6	317	76.65
7	330	82.91
8	336	84.42
9	198	49.63
10	243	71.11
11	365	91.71
12	258	64.83
13	283	68.11
14	215	54.02
15	326	81.91
16	345	76.68
17	236	59.29
18	230	57.79
19	150	37.69
20	282	67.86
21	275	69.09
22	359	90.2
23	372	93.47
24	349	87.68
25	328	82.41
26	279	86.94
27	333	83.66
28	293	73.62
29	300	75.38
30	278	69.85
31	284	71.35
32	227	57.04

From Table 1, it can be seen that a high proportion of participants either agreed or strongly agreed to all the questions except question 9 and 19.

Less than 50% of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed to question 9 and 19. Question 9 was aimed at establishing whether the participants were aware of their interests in relation to careers where they use hands, tools and machines, as well as make and mend things, or grow plants and take care of living creatures such as animals (Jacobs et al. 1991). This also relates to Holland's 'realistic personality type', which refers to persons with a preference for working with manual tools, machines, animals and plants (Gevers et al. 1997). This result may be due to participants' lack of information and awareness about these careers as noted by Hop-pock (in Mabula 2012) when he said that career

decision making is guided by information and awareness about various occupations. Adebow-ale (2014) asserted that occupational information may include valid and usable data on such issues as employment prospects, entry qualifications, nature of work, conditions of service and training opportunities. The researcher has also noted that very few first-entering students at the university in question register for degree programs in Agriculture such as Animal Science and Soil Science, even though most of these degrees are regarded as 'scarce skills' areas in South Africa. This may partly be due to lack of information on the part of prospective students about the importance of these degrees for the economic development of the country.

Question 19 was aimed at finding out whether friends had some influence on the participants' career choice and decision-making. Shumba and Naong (2012) point out that peers play a major role in the career choice of the students. Stuart (in Shumba and Naong 2012) found that peers' attitudes toward gender and ethnicity may increase or decrease a person's confidence in pursuing a career. Stuart indicates further that adolescents are easily influenced by their peers because they rely on their friends to provide validation of the choices that they make including career decisions. On the contrary, Bojuwoye and Mbanjwa (in Shumba and Naong 2012) found that peers were reported not to be influential in career decision-making among university students. The result of this study is in line with the latter findings by Bojuwoye and Mbanjwa.

Table 2 shows that 39.95% of the participants were fully aware of their interests in relation to careers. This is in line with a low percentage of participants who either agreed or fully agreed in question 9 in the self-knowledge section. According to Parsons's trait-factor theory (Jacobs et al. 1991), gaining self-knowledge with regard to career interests is an important factor in choosing a career. Sharf (in Mabula 2012) explains that, to select a career, an individual should ideally have information which indicates a clear understanding of himself/herself, his/her attitudes, abilities and interests. The result indicated that participants had not fully acquired knowledge about themselves in regard to choosing a career.

Table 2 also shows that only 51.26% of the participants were fully exposed to career information. The majority of students who enrol at this university come from relatively poor educa-

Table 2: Percentage of students responding to career planning, self-knowledge, decision-making and career information questions

Aspect	Response	Percent
Career Planning	Uninformed	1.26
	Partially informed	35.68
	Adequately informed	63.07
Self-knowledge	Not aware	2.76
	Some awareness	57.29
	Fully aware	39.95
Decision-making	Unable	2.26
	Able	97.74
Career Information	Not exposed	6.28
	Exposed	42.46
	Fully exposed	51.26

tional backgrounds. The schools which these students come from are in rural areas and these schools have little or no resources necessary for adequate provision of career information to learners. Shumba and Naong (2012) asserted that career choices of tertiary students from previously disadvantaged schools are negatively impacted by lack of career information. In his study, Maree (in Shumba and Naong 2012) found that many learners passed Grade 12 without having received adequate career information.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings above, the study concludes that the participants were not fully informed about careers where they use, hands, tools and machines, or where they grow and take care of animals or plants. The study shows that friends or peers have less influence on the participants' career choice and decision-making. The study further indicated that participants did not know themselves well, or their level of self-knowledge with regard to career choice and decision-making was inadequate. Finally, the participants did not have full exposure to career information.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order for learners to make right career choices and choose suitable study programmes in tertiary institutions, schools need to provide career guidance to learners during their high school studies. Schools should establish spe-

cific units for the purpose of gathering, processing and disseminating career information to learners. The units should be staffed by trained career guidance teachers. Teachers should guide learners in choosing appropriate careers in line with their aptitudes and abilities in various subjects. The Careers Exhibition and Information Association (CEIA), a non-governmental organisation in Limpopo Province, should maintain an effective working relationship with the Department of Education in the province and continually liaise with schools to keep them informed about forthcoming Career Exhibitions. The CEIA should strive to satisfy the need for updated information regarding the ever changing study environment in tertiary institutions, career opportunities and study programs available in various colleges and universities.

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