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 (Adebowale 2014). Issa and Nwalo (in Adebowale 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 commu-
nities deters choices of appropriate educational
programs and careers. Such students tend to
avoid careers which require a long period of train-
ing because of financial constraints. This sug-
gests 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 de-
cisions. The same study also found that partic-
ipants were mainly influenced by parents, teach-
ers and friends to choose Psychology as a ca-
reer. Sax (in Shumba and Naong 2012) examined
students’ initial interest in science careers, fac-
tors 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 stu-
dents were more concerned with the social as-
pcts 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 at-
tainment.

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 dis-
cussed 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 fol-
lowing 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 stag-
es or phases of life, namely growth, explo-
ration, settlement, maintenance and deteri-
oration; and
- The individual’s career pattern is deter-
mind by his parents’ socio-economic sta-
tus, 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 pro-
cess 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 theo-
ry are as follows:
- Occupational choice is a process that re-
mains 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 dynam-
ic and continually strives for the best bal-
ance between an occupation and the per-
son’s ever-changing desires and circum-
stances.

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:

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<td>1</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
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<td>Disagree</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Agree</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
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Table 1: Participants who either agreed or strongly agreed to the individual question

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<tr>
<th>Question No.</th>
<th>Participants who agree or strongly agree</th>
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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 Hoppock (in Mabula 2012) when he said that career decision making is guided by information and awareness about various occupations.

Adebowale (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-
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 specific 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.

**REFERENCES**


