Factors affecting Career Certainty among University Students

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Abstract
While the career development process is life-long, choices made during the college years are particularly significant in setting the foundation for future professional options. Selecting a career can be a daunting task for many University students who must balance their own interests with what is available in the various Universities as with their academic performance. It is in this view that the researcher aimed at investigating the career certainty of the university students. Stratified sampling was used to enhance representation of the student population while the academic advisors were randomly sampled. The main research instruments utilized in the study were questionnaires and interviews. The data gathered was both qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative was thematically presented in narrative form while quantitative statistics involved the use of frequencies, totals, percentages, and tabulation. Correlation techniques by Pearson’s product-moment correlation \( r \) were carried out to analyze the degree of relationships between the variables while Chi-square and analysis of variance were done to determine the significant differences between the variables. There were many factors that affect the students’ career choices amidst them being their level of occupational information, their decision-making ability and their level of clarity in their personal attributes and resources. The need for career counseling across all the levels of education was highly revealed by the findings of this study.

Key words: Career certainty, Career decision profile, Self-clarity, Occupational information, Decision-making ability

Introduction
Giving young people the tools and knowledge to realistically plan for their futures is a primary goal of education globally. Career development is vitally important for today’s youth, who are more than ever “motivated but directionless” (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). While the career development process is life-long, choices made during the college years are particularly significant in setting the foundation for future professional options. During the college experience, academic and career choices are complex as they integrate two major considerations: individual development along with ongoing self-discovery and the current and future work environment. Better understanding of the career development process can enhance linkage of academic and career experiences and improve career preparation and management. (Northwestern University Career Services, 2007).

The Education and Skills White Paper (2005) by the Department for Education and Skills (DFES) in the government of UK outlined the need for young people to make their own career choices and set out the subsequent need for the provision of quality, impartial advice to ensure young people make well-informed choices. The Paper also stated that young people need the skills to make sound career decisions. The (2006) Implementation Plan by the same department (DFES) followed and emphasized the necessity of schools, colleges and training providers working together to provide appropriate support to young people. In a briefing paper published in March 2004, the National Institute for Careers Education and Counseling (NICEC) identified a need for careers specialists to work with senior management to set policy and resource priorities for careers education and guidance, to support those involved in its delivery, to constantly review the provision of careers education, and to develop and
Blenkinsop, McCrone, Wade and Morris (2006) report noted some incidences of students struggling to cope when faced with unanticipated changes indicating that most university students are poorly prepared for major life decisions such as career choice. The first year of college is crucial to college success where student retention and career indecision are important factors. The report on the Kenyan public universities Vice Chancellors committee on causes of disturbances/riots in public universities (2000) stated that University Academic Advisory services are scantily offered due to; large numbers of students; lack of office space for most lecturers who also leave campuses soon after delivering their lectures and unavailability of the Dean of students and head of departments who by nature of their positions are not easily available. The committee however noted that lack of academic advisory services was one of the major problems particularly for the first year students who spent a lot of time deciding which programmes and courses to pursue.

According to the study by Mwangi (1991) at Kenyatta University on students’ problems, students rated academic/career issues as their most prevalent problems. Karihe (2006) found that Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology students rated academic problems highly amongst other problems. Some of such academic problems included irrational course selection procedures, low academic grades and poor relationships with their lecturers all which point to the need for academic and career guidance and counselling. Perrone (2002 P.1) quotes;

“The College years are a crucial time for career-related decision-making. College students are faced with the need to choose an academic major as well as to develop career goals for the future. Career indecision is often thought of as a developmental phase through which college students pass on the road to making a career choice and is negatively related to adjustment and well-being for college students.”

People typically make their first career related decisions during adolescence. Such decisions may have lifelong consequences for the individual’s vocational future, psychological well-being, health, and social acceptance (Mann, Harmoni, & Power, 1989). With the Kenyan University student belonging to the category between late adolescence and early adulthood according to the Kenyan public universities Vice-Chancellors’ committee report (2000), assistance by professional career specialists is necessary. This stage of life is characterized by periods of instability, conflict, anxiety and tension. Some of its manifestations include idealism, experimentation, risk taking, emotional instability and inner turmoil. All these affect rational decision-making.

Like the times of Industrialization when vocational guidance was birthed, a lot of changes have occurred in the labour market today. More than any other single factor, technology and economic competition have had mutually accelerating effects (UNESCO, 1996).

Echoing the same, the report by the vice-chancellors committee on causes of disturbances/riots in public universities (2000) states that; the advent of technology and the media revolution has had long-term significant effects on University Education. Competition has created opportunities for some, and hardships for others. The committee says, for better or worse, technology is one of the primary causes of the growing polarization of the work force, of increasingly glaring inequities. Though there have been technological shifts that have impacted to the labour market greatly, Education programmes may not have reflected
According to the Education symposium on re-engineering University Education for National development (2003), Universities were challenged to develop curricula that are sensitive to technological developments and the need of the industry and society. The Universities were also challenged to inculcate the idea that one was not being educated for a job but for life and to be able to survive in an increasingly competitive and sometimes hostile environment. Such an understanding would only be reached if students were equipped with both up to date labour market information as well as individual personal awareness both of which are basic for mature career decision-making. In secondary schools where career guidance have been emphasized over time, teachers have heavy teaching workloads and so many students to attend to especially with the introduction of free primary education in Kenya. Kinyanjui (1990) recommended proper guidance and counselling services should be offered to students in secondary schools from as early as when they join form one. She suggested that such services would help students to adjust their career aspirations to the realities and prevent future frustrations. In his research on career aspirations of form four students in some Kenyan schools, Mwangi (2002) noted that majority of the students (64.9%) appeared not to have specific orientation to careers. Most of these students (50%) intended to join the university though. This implies that most students at University entry have no specific career aspirations.

Adolescent occupational choice is influenced by many factors, including life context, personal aptitudes, and educational attainment. Whether college-bound or work-bound, meeting the challenge of this developmental milestone is critical in adolescents’ lives (Ferry, 2006). The career choice that young adults make is embedded in their perceptions of the “ideal job” and their career decision-making maturity. In a 1996 NICEC briefing paper, it was reported that young people’s career decisions are influenced by a range of factors and issues, including parents and other relatives, friends and peer-groups, careers specialists, subject teachers, contacts with employers and direct experiences of employment, and individual interests and values. Blenkinsop et al. (2006), in addition, identified perceptions of a subject and financial issues as influencing factors. This indicates the dire need for assistance through this process for most young people.

With the 8-4-4 System chances of pursuing courses of personal interest are limited due to the stiff competition for the few vacancies in the Universities. Besides, those joining the universities are younger and less specialized than in the previous 7-4-2-3 Education system in Kenya. Academic/career issues have therefore increased and become more complex unlike in the days when Mwangi (1991) carried out his study. There is a mismatch between the job market needs and the university admission process where in spite of decline in the demand for some degree programmes, there is still increase of students admitted to them as is indicated by the University chancellors’ committee report on causes of disturbances in public universities (2000). The committee observed the need to emphasize individual choice and academic ability to guide admission to University programmes.

Kenyatta University has had counselling services offered since the early 90s at the counselling
Professional counsellors were however first employed in the University in 2005. The counsellors deal with all the psychological issues of the students but refer them to their Academic advisors for academic/career issues. Last year, June 2006 saw the Vice-Chancellor of KU Professor Olive Mugenda establish the first ever Centre for Career Development in the Kenyatta University. The Canter, which doubles up as, the attachment-coordinating unit serves the students and alumni of the university in the career development and job-placement services. The Centre has no fulltime employed career specialists by the time of this proposal writing.

The purpose of this study was to create awareness on the status of career certainty among university students and the reasons related to their levels of certainty. The influence of the mode of University admission to the students’ career certainty was also investigated. The study was used to extend the existing knowledge of the university students’ problems and provoke new ways of dealing with them. The results of the study were also be used to make the necessary recommendations on career decision-making of university students. The specific objectives of this study were to assess the level of career choice certainty amongst University students and to investigate the factors related to career choice certainty levels among the university students.

Research Methodology
This study adopted a descriptive case study design. While this study sought to explain the status of career choice certainty as it is through use of interviews and questionnaires, it was done only in Kenyatta University hence a case study. The independent variables in this study included the students’ year of study, Mode of University admission, Decision-making ability, Gender, Comfort and the factors that relate to career certainty. The dependent variable on the other hand was the career certainty of the students. The study assessed the implication of the independent variables that is mode of university admission, Gender, year of study and reasons related to career uncertainty on the dependent variable (level of career certainty). Kenyatta University was selected as the site for this study because of its accessibility to the researcher and also due to time and financial limitations. KU being one of the large public universities in the country has such a large population of students both JAB and SSP where the sample was derived from. KU is also typical of other Kenyan public universities in its administration and management, running of semesters, students’ admission and learning and all other operations. This as well as the in-depth investigation of the problem enabled generalization of findings to the other public universities.

The target population for this study included all the JAB and SSP 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th year students in the full-time degree programmes and the school/departmental academic advisors of KU. (School based, diploma, Open learning and part time students are not included in the study). Stratified sampling technique was used in selection of the student sample. The student population was first sub-divided into strata according to year of study and school. 720 students were selected from the four years. 12 academic advisors on the other hand were selected for the study through a random sample of two advisors per school. The total sample therefore added up to 732 subjects (720 students + 12 academic advisors)
This study used questionnaires and interviews data collection methods because they provide greater depth of response and consequently greater understanding. The use of the two methods enabled maximum effectiveness in data collection and in reduction of biases. Darlington and Scott (2002) say that a thorough understanding can be gained from combining a number of qualitative data collection approaches. The following instruments were used to collect data:

Questionnaires were used to gather information from the students since a questionnaire is an instrument that gathers a large sample (Kombo and Tromp, 2006). The questionnaires contained two sections A, and B. A gathered the demographic information of the respondents while B entailed the Career Decision Profile, which measured the level of their career decisiveness and investigated the reasons related to the students' level of career certainty. The randomly sampled academic advisors were interviewed one on one in focused semi-structured interviews. Questions were formulated in advance to structure the interviews. Validity and reliability was enhanced in this study through the use of a Career Decision Scale (CDS), which is a standard test in collection of the data. A pilot study was however carried out to find out any possible shortcomings during the actual study.

This study generated both qualitative and quantitative data; hence descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data obtained. Statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) was used for analysis of data. Qualitative analysis considered the inferences that were made from the opinions of the respondents. This analysis was then thematically presented in narrative form and where possible tabular form. Descriptive statistics involved the use of frequencies, totals, percentages, and tabulation. The data was further subjected to significance tests using Pearson product-moment correlation techniques and Chi-square tests to establish linear relationships between the variables.

Results and Discussion
The demographic information of the student respondents has been presented in this section in accordance to the questions asked in part A of their questionnaire. It outlines the demographic factors that relate to students' career decision-making.
The distribution of the students was investigated in relation to each student’s gender, year of study and the mode by which he/she was admitted to the University. It was established that out of the entire student respondents, 51.7% were females while 48.3% were males. These were distributed in the years of study and schools of the university as indicated in the tables 4.1 and 4.2 respectively.

**Table 4.1:**
Distribution of Students According To Their Years of Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of study</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>29.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>621</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4.1.2:**
The Distribution of the Student’s Sample according to their Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>19.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>37.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pure and applied sciences</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>50.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>68.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental &amp; human sciences</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>81.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health sciences</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>617</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further findings of the study indicated that 505 (87.7%) of the students were admitted through Joint Admissions Board while 113 (18.3%) were self sponsored as is shown in Figure 4.1 below.

**Figure 4.1.** Distributions of Student Respondents according to mode of admission

In this section of the chapter, the findings form the student respondents have been presented and discussed in relation to the objectives of the study.
The responses of the career decision profile items were distributed on a likert scale of 8 responses, which were numbered 1-8 where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 8 strong agreements to the statements given. The responses were finally grouped into two main groups with 1-4 representing a below average score and 5-8 representing an above average score for the positive responses. For the negative responses 8-5 indicated a below average score and 4-1 an above average score.

The career certainty index measures how decided one is or how certain one is about their career choice. It was worked out from responses to items 1 and 16 of the career decision profile. The percentage of those below average was only 21.71% and an overwhelming majority of 78.29% was above average as in table 4.4 below.

Table 4.4:
Career Certainty of the Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below average</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>21.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above average</td>
<td>476</td>
<td>78.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>608</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This indicates that most of the university students are certain about their career choices. This is commendable considering the observation by the Vice-Chancellors Committee on causes of riots in public universities (2000) that most students admitted to the University through JAB were hardly admitted for courses they had personally chosen. This shows that despite the challenges student face at admission; they are quick to either transfer to their career related courses or they quickly adjust to the courses they are admitted for. However, the group of students who scored below average is not decided about their career choices. Such students require assistance to enable them establish the reasons for their indecision and gain skills to make sound career decisions. The Career Certainty of the respondents who had received career guidance and those who had not was later compared and the findings are shown in Figure 4.7.

Savickas, 1990 noted in his study that high school students who took a career-decision making course had less career related indecision at the end of the course than did a comparison group. In the same way, the respondents of this study who received career guidance had higher levels of career certainty than their counterparts who did not receive any career guidance. This confirms that career counseling enhances career decision-making.

As is explained earlier in this report, the study was limited to three factors relating to career choice namely Self-clarity, Occupational information and Decision-making ability. Self-clarity: This was measured through three items on the career decision profile. After working out the self-clarity index, it was evident that only 32% of the respondents felt that they clearly knew their interests, abilities, strengths and weakness while 68% felt otherwise as is indicated in Figure 4.8.
Literature indicates that Career decision-making begins with the self, one’s awareness of the world around him/her and the ability to understand what is important to him or her. (Georgia Career Resources Network, 2005). These findings therefore contradict the reviewed literature. It appears most respondents made their career decisions without first internalizing their personal interests, skills, work values, strengths and weaknesses. There are high chances then that the career choices of these respondents are not realistic and not easily achievable. On the other hand, these findings may imply that other people such as parents, teacher or peers imposed the career choices on the respondents.

Occupational Information: The results in Figure 4.9 showed that only 41% had sufficient knowledge about occupational and Educational programmes that fit their interests and abilities. 59% lacked sufficient occupational knowledge. See Figure 4.9.

Although almost 80% of the respondents were certain about their career choices, only 41% had sufficient occupational information to facilitate this kind of decision making. This is a contradiction to the literature reviewed. It would have been expected then only the 41% who had sufficient occupational knowledge would have been certain about their careers. Larson, Heppner, Ham, & Dugan 1988 in Gaffner et al. (2002) state that progress in career development becomes blocked when there is a lack of information about self, the world of work (occupational information), and ways of obtaining information. Students who lack career information may enter college and quickly find that their career goals are unobtainable.
Decision-making ability: Decisive people do not feel comfortable while others make decisions for them. They do not have difficulty in making personal decisions neither do they delay making such decisions. The results of this study show that half of the respondents are indecisive. Out of those who responded to the item on the career decision profile stating that 'I feel relieved when someone makes the decision for me.' 65.2% strongly agreed while only 5% strongly disagreed. The aggregate score on the three items used to measure this scale is shown in Figure 4.10 below.

Figure 4.10. Findings on the Respondents’ Decision-making Ability

According to Gaffner et al. (2002), some students that are undecided about their careers have trouble with decision making. The fact that half of the respondents have trouble with decision making contradicts their results on career certainty level and on whether the course being pursued was personally chosen or not.

The findings of this study show that the students scored low generally in all the three factors that affect career decision-making. This definitely implies that their career certainty is low unlike what their results on the career certainty index shows. The possible reasons for these contradictions include: (i) Majority of the respondents did not tell the truth about their career certainty. (ii) The career decisions of most of the respondents may have been imposed on them by other significant people such as parents, peers, teachers etc because their decision making ability is low as the findings indicate, and (iii) The career decision-making of the respondents is influenced majorly by other factors besides the ones studied. It is therefore possible that the career choices made by the respondents of these studies are not realistic or may be unwise as they do not match their potentials and other personal attributes. Phillips & Pazienza (1988), state that in a wise choice of a vocation, there are three broad factors: (i) a clear understanding of yourself, your aptitudes, abilities, interests, ambitions, resources, limitations, and their causes; (ii) a knowledge of the requirements and conditions of success, advantages and disadvantages, compensation, opportunities, and prospects in different lines of work; (iii) true reasoning on the relations of these two groups of facts.

Most of the respondents will find job searching quite difficult as they are not aware of the occupations they best fit in. This is a possible explanation for the high rate of University graduates' unemployment. Chances are that most of the respondents will change their careers later in life when they fully discover their personal attributes. Gaffner et al. (2002) after their study on Factors related to indecisiveness and career indecision in undecided college
students proposed that Proper interventions, which are more personal and intense, may result from a better understanding of what factors have strong relationships with a student’s level of indecisiveness. Proper interventions for the students involved in this study will have to rotate around increasing their self and occupational knowledge and to empower their decision making ability.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The career certainty of most students have been compromised due to their lack of sufficient occupational knowledge as well as that of their personal abilities, aptitudes, and potentials, likes and dislikes and of other personal resources. Lack of awareness about what happens at the universities by many secondary school students limits their University course selection and career decision-making process as a whole. There is dire need for professional career guidance and counselling at all education levels.

The following recommendations have been grouped according to the various sectors discussed.

Education Sector: (i) Emphasis should be laid on activities that raise levels of students’ self-knowledge, (ii) Visits to companies, industries and prospective employers, institutions of higher learning, public and private sector as well as inviting employers to schools and colleges would raise the occupational knowledge of the students, (iii) High school students should be exposed to University programmes early enough to enable them make wise university course selection, and (iv) Invitation of employers and other guest speaker in various forums can help meet the need for students to see more role models and motivate them to make wise career decisions.

Universities: (i) Universities should take up the challenge and market their courses and programmes to their potential and future students in high schools. This will reduce uncertainties and course transfers during the first academic year, (ii) Career counselling should be promoted in the Universities through involvement of professionals such as career counsellors. This will help to change the trend where most students lack career guidance at a time when they need it most, (iii) Students should be empowered as decision-makers and discouraged from over-reliance on others for decision making, and (iv) Career guidance should centre on provision of self and occupational knowledge, which the students are most deficient in.

Career counselling: (i) There is need for well-structured career guidance and counseling services to facilitate the process of career development right from Primary school level through to the University level, (ii) In secondary school level, career counsellors should put more emphasis on raising levels of students’ self-knowledge and of occupational information, which are basic to career decision-making, and (iii) Professionals should be hired at all the Education levels to deal with career issues and not be left to teachers who already have high teaching workloads. And very little time to interact with he students.

Labour Market: (i) Stronger linkage between the Education sector and the labour market should be established and maintained through invitations of employers to school and colleges, (ii) Industries and other employing firms and institutions should provide attachment opportunities to students. This will promote acquisition of labour market information and raise career decision-making ability of students, (iii) Employers should give feedback on the quality of graduates being released to the market to enable better teaching and equipping of students with relevant and updated skills, and (iv) Exchange programmes where industrialists are attached to teach some units in the universities can foster linkage with the labour market and hence raise occupational knowledge of students.
References


References


