



Do Students' Career Aspirations Predict their Career Choices? A Qualitative Survey of Advanced Level Secondary School Students in Uganda

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Abstract

This article presents findings from a study on- "how students' career aspirations predict their career choice at the advanced secondary level of education in Uganda". This was premised on three predictors of career aspirations namely; financial remuneration, employment prospects and opportunity for professional growth. The study aimed at answering the question: Do Students' Career Aspirations Predict their Career Choices? The study presents qualitative narratives from a survey of 48 male and female students randomly selected from 16 secondary schools in the Eastern and Northern regions of Uganda. The narratives were collected using an interview schedule. These were analyzed using a thematic strategy with inductive coding. The study findings showed that students peg their choices to career they perceive have stable progressive salaries for a decent life. They also look at occupations that will enable them have quick placements and finally career that will allow avenues for further training and robust skills. The results revealed that although most of the students' career choices were based on the three predictors of career aspirations, other contributory factors including the student's interest and ability were equally paramount. It was concluded that financial remuneration, future employment, and career growth were critical determinants of career choice at this level of education. It is recommended that education stakeholders should design holistic career support programs for students. These will enable students to access relevant career information, implied prerequisite skills, and the prevailing career path to enable them make appropriate career decisions at this level of education in Uganda.

Keywords: Career Aspirations, Career Choice, Advanced Secondary Level Education

INTRODUCTION

Uganda is increasingly facing difficulty in implementing career programs for its students. This is due to lack of trained career personnel, limited access to career information and resource centers, and failure to prioritize career choice issues at different levels of education (Ministry of Education & Sports, 2011). In secondary schools for instance, career choice is only addressed during or shortly before the time of registration for final examinations, particularly in relation to the selection of prospective schools, subject combinations, or tertiary education academic programs (Sentongo, et al, 2010). Little or no attention is put on career choice determinants like

students' abilities, interests, career aspirations, career opportunities, networking and mentorship by skilled persons in the career fields. This limits students' capacity to explore wider career options and ability to base their career decisions (Taskinen, et al. 2013).

Choice of a career path is a fundamental milestone in the students' life. The career pathway that students decide to pursue have a lasting mark on their lives. Any mistake that is made is in most instances irreversible or costly to address. Thus, sufficient guidance to students to enable them make informed choices is imperative. Career aspiration is a critical feature in career decision making (Simiyu, 2015), and refers to optimism and expectations that a student has about how the career will be rewarding for personal satisfaction (Ehigbor & Akinlosotu, 2016). Kisilu, et al. (2012) define career aspirations as the envisions about what a student intends to study and engage in when he/she joins the world of work. Aspirations motivate the students' focus on a professional course with commitment (Simiyu, 2015). Whereas as there are several determinants of career choice, students tend to focus on what will lead to a decent and admirable life (Kazi, et al. 2017).

Career aspirations are modeled by childhood fantasies, cultural orientation (Pascual, 2014), and other factors such as life roles, gender, personal interests, and personality traits (Ahmed, et al. 2017 & Ministry of Education & Sports, 2011). Atitsogbe, et al. (2018) assert that career aspirations are determined by skills, abilities and aptitude of students. The people within the reach or vicinity and role models also influence aspirations (Mtemeri, 2017).

Dynamism of Career Aspirations and Its Effect on Career Choice

Career aspirations are dynamic. Although not obvious to students, decisions regarding their career prospects start at an early stage of secondary school, as they choose subjects to study and transition from one class to the next. In absence of sufficient guidance at this early stage, the decision to choose or drop subjects largely depends on easiness, peer influence, characteristics of the teacher, without consideration of the career aspirations. Yet more, career training for teachers is still lacking to warrant adequate career support availed to students (Nsereko, 2012). The standardization of career guidance information and oversight by Ministry of Education and Sports is not sufficient. Career support is scanty and often not timely. Teachers in charge of career guidance still have to partake in the teaching (Kiweewa et al. 2018; Wambu & Fischer, 2015), and in several instances, students lack thorough knowledge about the prospective career fields they wish to follow.

We draw from the works of Super regarding career development and career choices (Super, 1990). Super's theory focuses on how careers unfold over the life span. As stated by Super, 'people choose careers that allow them to express their self-concept and as someone's self-concept becomes more stable, so do career choices. Super outlined different stages of career development, with each one characterized by appropriate developmental tasks. The participants in this study largely belong to the cohort of 14-24 years that fall into Super's exploration stage. In this phase, students attempt to understand themselves in order to find place in the world of work. As they try to identify their hobbies, interests, and capabilities, they figure out how to fit within various career fields. The implication of the theory supports the notion that career decision-making goes through a process of understanding and defining what students want to do by exploring a variety of career options with the aid of career support. In this study, we investigated the extent to which students career choices are influenced by three predictors of career aspirations. We sought answers to three research

questions: 1) How do financial remunerating careers predict students' career choice? 2) Can employment prospects influence students' career choice? 3) How do career growth opportunities relate to students' career choice?

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a qualitative survey research design. This is a more casual research methodology used to gain in-depth information. The study was conducted in the Eastern and Northern regions of Uganda. These were purposively selected because they seem to be more socially and economically challenged regions in Uganda (MGLSD, 2015; NAPE, 2015), and hence more likely to have a high number of schools with inadequate career guidance, and its associated challenges.

In each study region, eight secondary schools were selected making the total of sixteen schools. From each of the selected secondary schools, three students were interviewed making a total of forty-eight participants. The selection of the schools took cognizant of sex composition, school ownership, school location and the status of the school. The use of senior six students was significant for the study because they had studied for two years of Higher Secondary School Certificate. These students were preparing to sit for Uganda Advanced Certificate of Examination (UACE) which marks a successful completion of that level. This would finally initiate them into a University or Tertiary education which prepares students for professional or vocational careers. It was hoped that these students were mature enough, had career plans, and had made their decisions in line with their career aspirations.

The study utilized an interview schedule, which was preferred because the face-to-face interactions with participants increased the accuracy of information obtained, and enabled us to ask follow-up questions for clarity, and in-depth explanations. Furthermore, the interviews enabled us probe for more relevant and useful information, about how career aspirations related to participants' career choice.

The data were analyzed using a thematic strategy with inductive coding. The audio recordings were transcribed into qualitative narratives. NVivo (V.10) software supported the analysis. Open codes were developed using a sample of 10 scripts which were shared and later a common position grounded. This was arrived at by familiarization with data through severally reading and revising to get engrossed with data. This approach is emphasized by Braun, and Clarke (2013) as a necessity to attain quality findings. The process of familiarization with data provided a coding frame which facilitated conceptual organizing of the entire data. Meaningful themes related to research questions were identified and constructed. The themes were revised and revisited severally for robustness. The themes were finally redefined and para phrased to fit well into the research questions. This was followed by a coherent narrative where convincing expressions of participants were earmarked and extracted for verbatim reporting purposes.

RESULTS

The study results were aligned along the predictors of career aspirations. However, some unique narratives emerged as challenges associated with students' career aspirations and choice.

Financial Remuneration as a Predictor of Career Choice

The participants (95%) revealed that they were motivated to tag career choices to occupations they perceived to be highly rewarding with progressive compensation. The strategic explanations given in choosing particular career fields appeared to be grounded in the financial returns. It emerged severally from almost all participants regardless of sex that they desired careers which would earn them a lot of money, economical welfare benefits, and admiration. It was also established that students had their own ranking and grading of occupations in terms of economic rewards. It emerged for instance that courses like medicine, engineering, law, and economics related courses, were more alleged to be high income earning professions. The participants (89%) revealed that they eyed careers which lead to socio - economic personal satisfaction. It was emphatically indicated that students have personally spelt out occupational goals so as to realize a fulfilling academic destiny to attain a decent life for themselves and immediate relatives as illustrated in the following way:

my entire desire is to enter into a course that will lead into a well-paying occupation, to realize a good life and that of my relatives, especially my parents. I yearn for a career that will change my outlook and that of my family. [A 20-year-old Male student]

Improved standard of living was considered as an important component of career choice among A-level students. Professions that are perceived rewarding in monetary terms form the most important craving for their career choice. Occupations with professed stable salaries motivated student's career choice notwithstanding the entry grade points. For instance, participants alluded that careers that may lead to Uganda Revenue Authority (URA) were mostly cherished by many. In various narratives, it was indicative their career goals lay in the material plane. They expressed ambitions for careers that would reward them to meet posh housing facilities, own a car and enjoy a standard cost of living. Severally, participants showed that they hankered for careers that would ascribe them a role model social status. These findings were summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Themes and Overarching Themes Derived from Thematic Analysis

Themes	Overarching Themes
Perceived high salary for earning careers	Interested in financial remunerating careers
Socio-economic admiration	
Anticipated decent life and standard of living	
Professed stable salaries	
Societal role models	

Employment Prospects as a Predictor of Career Choice

The student participants (88%) indicated that employability was a critical consideration in making career decisions. In various instances, participants accounted that it was common knowledge that they contemplate on the availability of jobs in the careers sought for. Students indicated that they do not want to spend a long time on streets seeking for employment. It emerged that students aspired for careers perceived to have readily available employment opportunities. Most of them intimated that they focus on the prevailing job market trends to forecast job stability and absorption opportunities when making decisions.

The results further revealed that job accessibility and perceived availability was an important deciding factor for students' career decision. Familiarity with certain career fields were reported to attract students career choices. Certain known jobs in the vicinity arouse students career interest and admiration. It came out that jobs available in local governments and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) were attracting students into perceived related careers in those circles. This was concisely illustrated as thus:

I hear that certain career fields are known to have scarce placements. Some careers in social sciences could have reached saturation level. I can't wish to study an occupation which I know I will find difficulties in getting a job. I consider a career for occupation where I will find a job regardless of its status. [A 19-year-old Male student]

From the narrative, it was evident that some students aspire for vocational and skill-oriented careers where they can become job makers. They mentioned that hands on careers lead to self-employment and open up avenues for job creation. The findings are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Themes and Overarching Themes Derived from Thematic Analysis

Themes	Overarching Themes
Available employment	Careers Inspired by
Job stability	Employment Prospects
Job security	
Admirable jobs	
Vocational prospects	
Familiarity about the field	

Professional Development Opportunities as a Predictor of Career Choice

The students (45%) looked at careers that will provide avenues for further career development opportunities. Academic advancement was believed to thrust skills enhancement for professional growth and competence. Students' narratives, indicated that career development opportunities open avenues to become academicians, which spontaneously enable them to reach high professional horizons. Throughout the interviews it was deciphered that some students are professional mellowed and they realize that through acquisition of the necessary skills and knowledge they can become consultants, or academicians, who are respected in society. This would thus, leverage their academic prestige, proficiency statuses and actualization.

However, though recognized, career development opportunities were not as popular as the other two predictors of career aspirations. It was clear that most students were inspired by development opportunities that increase prospects of promotion at work related places, and were not necessarily interested in acquisition of knowledge for academic careers. The summary of the findings is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Themes and Overarching Themes Derived from Thematic Analysis

Themes	Overarching Themes
Careers that provide skills enhancement	Interested in careers with
Job training opportunities	Professional Development
Valued skill competence	opportunities
Skills required to become successful	
Renowned Academicians	

Challenges Arising Out of Students' Inadvertent Career Choices

The study findings revealed that as much as students had established career aspirations, they had inherent constraints. For instance, the narratives of 84% of the participants revealed career biases arising from their socio-cultural environments on jobs. Consequently, some students' career choices were not based on their interests or abilities but rather on other people's views, and the general societal beliefs and prejudices about certain careers. Some students reported that they selected and

registered for subject combinations that were not consistent with their interests, and believed this had subsequently changed their career aspirations. Some students revealed that the entry cut-off points at the university and other tertiary institutions, the need to maximize their chances of admission with government sponsorship, and the cost of privately sponsored degree programs, also jeopardized and greatly influenced their decision to select A-level subject combinations that were contrary to their dream careers.

Some students noted that their A-level combinations were not their choices but rather an imposition by the teachers and significant others. This had other negative outcomes like less commitment, as evidenced in the selected cases below:

I ended up doing Arts not because I was interested in that field but because of the rigidity of my school. My prospects were in sciences and my dream was medicine. I had passed most of the subjects quite well. [18-year-old Male student]

Another participant alluded,

Honestly, I think if I had offered my desired combination of History, Literature, and Economics, maybe I would be doing far much better. The subjects I am offering are complex and too difficult; I may not perform well, and might not get government sponsorship. [17-year-old Female student]

These narratives imply that the socioeconomic support given to most students is entrenched in the socio-cultural biases of our communities. The findings are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4: Other Factors That Influence Students' Career Aspirations and Choices

Themes	Overarching Themes
Interest and ability	Challenges of career aspirations and career choice
Reality of cut-off points	
Subject combinations	
Gender bias	
Sponsorship	
Biased career support	

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed that students don't make career choice haphazardly. A salient number of them have expectations related to future career. Consistent with the findings of Atitsogbe et al. (2018), this study revealed that students prefer careers that offer high income or well-paying stable wages and packages. These are careers perceived to improve their position and that of their family with economic admiration in society. Such careers propel students to envisage an improved standard of living and a decent life. This is in tandem with Super's career development theory which postulates that students are optimistic for a fulfilling and satisfying life. In particular, students aspire for careers that offer them stable salaries to guarantee a good welfare for themselves and the immediate family (Simiyu, 2015; Bani-Khaled, 2014; Ajufo, 2013). Students aspire for careers they presume to have assurance of employment to avoid uncertainty (Pascual, 2014), and thus, seemingly stable and secure jobs are a critical feature that students consider when making career choices (Ajufo, 2013).

Furthermore, we found that students seek careers that will offer opportunities for professional growth. These careers are espoused by students because they offer

opportunities for competence and skills improvement, which is associated with highly valued professional prestige and self-actualization in the world of academia, as well as prospects for promotion at work, that comes with benefits such as a pay-rise. Thus, opportunity for professional development is a major career-influencing factor (Guan et al., 2015). Student look at improved performance, job satisfaction (Adnan Bataineh, 2019) and need for an elevated socioeconomic status (Cavus, Geri, & Turgunbayeva, 2015). Individually focused students are future oriented and look at career development opportunities for future placement in the career field and often aim at career fulfillment.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is concluded that for most of Uganda's A-level secondary school students, there are three predictors of career aspirations namely: financially remunerating careers, employment prospects and career development opportunities. The findings show that career aspirations are a critical determinant of students' career decisions at the Advanced Secondary Level of Education. The study recommends that through the MOES, schools should put emphasis on the career support strategies and student career guidance than leaving it to remain theoretical in practice. A full-time guidance counsellor (or at least, a part timer) should be instituted in schools to give students enough space for proper preparations needed for informed career decisions.

Career guidance practitioners should stop reinforcing the socio-cultural stereotypes and prejudices about certain careers, and the belief that one has to only pursue careers with prospects of 'money fetching' opportunities. This does not only increase on the number of students making career choices that are contrary to their interests, abilities, and aspirations, but is also likely to propagate a culture of money-hungry graduates whose attitude is geared towards the "*I cannot do anything without a monetary reward syndrome*", which is a reflection of corruption tendencies at the workplace. We recommend that students should be encouraged to pursue careers that are consistent with their interests and abilities, and helpful in community transformation.

The present study is limited in scope of sample in regard to students' career aspirations. Particularly, the study focused only on the High School Level students (A-level), yet there are other transitional levels at which important decisions are made. Thus, the study lacks a comparative analysis across transitional levels where career aspirations exist, and career decisions are made. There is thus a need for a longitudinal study to follow up students from the earlier stages of secondary education, and establish whether their career interests, and decisions remain consistent over time, and then identify factors, which might be responsible for any inconsistencies.

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