

Career Choices of Nigerian Youths Entering Public-Funded Universities

Nyitor A. Shenge

Department of Psychology, Faculty of the Social Sciences, University of Ibadan, Nigeria

Choosing a career is a very challenging process especially among youths. Although career choices and career dynamics are given considerable research attention in the developed countries, these subjects do not attract sustained attention in developing countries. This study tried to fill this research gap and also rekindle desired attention in this research area. The study analyzed Nigeria's publicly available Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examinations (UTME)'s statistics for 2003 and 2007. The focus was on public universities. Results showed that for 2003 and 2007, there were: significant variability in the choices of courses by male and female university admission applicants (more males than females chose science, engineering, and other "hard" courses); and significant variability in admission trends for Northern and Southern Nigerian regions (more southern than northern applicants sought to enter the university and chose science, engineering, and other "hard" courses). It was noted that these findings have serious implications for Nigeria's future educational planning and outcomes. Further suggestions were proposed.

Key Words: disciplines; disparities; gender; Nigeria; region; universities

Introduction

The term "career" broadly refers to sequence of occupations, jobs and positions engaged in or occupied throughout a person's lifetime (Makinde & Alao, 1987; Oladele, 1992; Shenge, 1997). Career is also a manifestation of a person's learned and acquired abilities and relationship to society through work (Makinde & Alao, 1987; Oladele, 1992; Shenge, 1997; Herriot and Pemberton, 1996; Kanter, 1989). Many people loosely use the term "career" in relation to occupation, vocation, job, position, and profession. However, career is a term that is broader than the popular idea of hierarchical progress within an occupation or organization (Kidd, 2001).

Careers are very central in the lives of individuals and they help build societies too. Therefore the concept of "career" has become increasingly important in today's world of work. Its meaning and choice may mean different things to different people. For some individuals, career begins with, or is influenced by, choice of discipline or course of study. In this context, career is used in connection finding a career path, which could also mean choice of discipline or course.

An individual's career partly shapes organizational behavior. According to Kidd (2001), career encourages the study of individuals and institutions and the relationship between them. Many



university or college students have difficulty finding the “right” profession or career for themselves (Brown et al., 2000; Kelly and Pulver, 2003). Kelly and Pulver (2003) suggest that after vocational interests research, vocational indecision is now the most important field of inquiry in vocational behavior. Students invest a great deal of their time, energy, and resources in obtaining a higher education degree; hence, they have high expectations regarding their future careers and employment status (Wood, 2004).

Often, choosing the right subject combination leading to the right profession can make the difference between enjoying and detesting a career in the future. Dedicating oneself to career choices that are unattainable leads to frustration. Each individual undertaking the process is influenced by many factors, including the context in which they live, their personal aptitudes, and educational attainment (Bandura, et al. 2001).

Arnold’s (1997) useful overview of some influential definitions of “career” suggest that a common feature of all definitions of career is that they refer to sequences of roles and positions over time. According to Arnold (1997), two rather distinct bodies of knowledge inform our understanding of careers. The first is vocational psychology while the second is organizational behavior. Whereas vocational psychology literature focuses on early career decision making, organizational literature is concerned about later career development. According to McDonald (2008), evidence-based career profiling is very much needed in today’s world where myriad opportunities abound for the average individual and making the right career choice has become difficult. Career profiling is defined as an eclectic approach that develops a behavioral pattern of an individual who is interested in pursuing a particular career (McDonald, 2008).

As students enter high schools and universities, many questions bordering on preparation for the job market surface in the minds of the students. McDonald (2008) has identified these questions to

include “What does the current job market want from a prospective employee?” “How can one know if one is suited for the job of one’s fancy?” Is there evidence-based research that could help a person to decide on a career? An instructive career profile should ideally address the above questions and other fundamental variables relating to career and career choice (McDonald, 2008;p.1).

Factors or attributes of interest in career profiling include resourcefulness, dedication, resilience, patience, management, personality orientation, critical thinking, and assertive communication. Others are divergent thinking, autonomy, independence, ethics, optimism, flexibility, reliability, dependability, commitment to continuous learning, responsibility, high self esteem and self-efficacy, self-discipline and self-reliance (McDonald, 2008). An evidence-based career profile allows the prospective employee to assess his/her abilities, interests, and personality type to link him/her with appropriate career options. Evidenced-based knowledge of career profiles can facilitate students in their future choices. It has been observed that information about these careers such as the growth rate, salary, training required, where to go to school and many other important characteristics can be useful in assisting the individual in making the most appropriate career choice.

Career studies and career profiling are routinely done in developed economies. However, there is a paucity of research in this area in developing countries (McDonald, 2008). Therefore, Stakeholders such as students, employers, recruitment agencies, outplacement organizations, schools, colleges, universities, career management professionals, psychologists, industry associations, executive coaches and aspiring professionals stand to benefit from the findings of this present study.

As information about admission patterns and students’ career choices become available and future students beneficially utilize the information, employers would have fewer mis-matches in their workplaces.

As well, employees would enjoy their work experiences. Hopefully, there would be a corresponding increase in productivity, job satisfaction, and career fulfillment.

Despite the fact that much has been written about the individual variables affecting career aspirations and of the relationships among them, a survey of the literature, however, revealed that very little empirical studies on this subject exist in Nigerian (Issa and Nwalo, 2008). Due to this knowledge gap, many youths in Nigeria make wrong career choices due to ignorance, inexperience, peer pressure, advice from friends, parents and teachers, or as a result of the prestige attached to certain jobs without adequate vocational guidance and career counseling.

Consequently, many of them are unsuited for their careers, as they usually find themselves in jobs that do not satisfy their value needs. When this occurs, they constitute nuisance to themselves and their employers. They are usually unable to contribute meaningfully to the society, and they ultimately become liability to the nation. Therefore, this study aimed to fill the aforementioned knowledge gap.

Denga (1988) examined influence of traditional factors on career choices of Nigerian students (N=400) in their last year of secondary school. Results revealed traditional factors (social prestige, family occupation, religious beliefs, etc.) ranked very high on the list of factors influencing career choice. Psychological factors (interest, aptitudes, intelligence, etc.) received relatively low rankings. In a study based on meta-analysis and aimed at investigating the relationship between culture and vocational or career choice, it was reported that race/ethnicity differences do not significantly affect career aspirations. However, they noted differences among racial/ethnic groups in perceptions of career-related opportunities and barriers (McDonald, 2008).

The purpose of this present paper was to investigate the choices of disciplines and courses that potential university students make when they register

for and take the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME). These choices probably represent or point to the careers that the UTME candidates intended to make in the future. The study analyzed UTME data for publicly-owned universities in Nigeria covering 2003 and 2007 admission years. It provided basis for understanding choices of courses, disciplines, university admission patterns and future career outlook.

UNIVERSITIES' JOINT MATRICULATION (ENTRANCE) EXAMINATION IN NIGERIA

Currently, there are forty federal (central) government-funded and thirty eight state government-funded universities in Nigeria. There are fifty one private universities in the country. Altogether, there are one hundred and twenty nine universities in Nigeria today (National Universities Commission - NUC, 2013). Each year, more than two million qualified applicants (potential students) compete for limited spaces in these universities. The population of the country currently stands at 170 million people. There are 36 states and a federal capital territory (FCT, Abuja) within the Nigerian federation.

The establishment and activities of all Nigerian universities (federal, state, private) are regulated by the National Universities Commission (NUC). Since 1978, the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) has been conducting joint university matriculation (or entrance) examinations (UME), now re-designated Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME), into publicly-funded universities, polytechnics, monotechnics, and colleges of education in Nigeria. Since the past five to ten years, a few privately-funded universities, polytechnics, monotechnics, and colleges of education in Nigeria have been included in the matriculation examinations. More privately-funded tertiary academic institutions in the country are being expected to join the JAMB matriculations examinations in the years ahead. In this paper, the researcher investigated career or discipline



(course) choices of Nigerian youths that entered public-funded universities in 2003 and 2007. Not enough research has previously been done in this important area.

Theoretical Propositions on Career, Career Choice or Course of Study

Cohen (2003) postulated a four-stage model of career decision-making. His model is based on existential themes such as freedom, responsibility, meaning, and authenticity occurring across an individual's life span. According to Cohen, career satisfaction and stability are obtained when the meaning and opportunities for '*authentic existence*' that the vocation provides corresponds to the vocation. He adds that a failure to acquire opportunities for meaning and '*authentic existence*' in an individual's occupations may respectively lead to an '*existential vacuum*' and '*existential guilt*.'

Neault (2002), preferring the term *career management* to *career development*, found that optimism and flexibility predicted career success more accurately than other given variables like 'planfulness' and continuous learning. She notes that correct choices could greatly improve an individual's chances of educational success and the potential for a career that is rewarding. Correct choices could greatly improve an individual's chances of educational success and the potential for a career that is rewarding.

Lofquist and Dawis' (1984) in their Person-Environment-Correspondence (P-E-C) Theory observe that the majority of problems presented to counselors stem from "discorrespondences" between the client and his or her environment. They found that while the individual brings unique abilities to the given environment, s/he in turn has certain needs mandatory for success in that setting. Both 'objective fit' (does the client have the ability to do a specific job?) and "subjective fit" (is the client's perception of the situation accurate?) are factored in. Clearly, career profiling would provide useful information for determining both

objective and subjective fit. Career profiling must also take into cognizance personality orientation.

According to Holland (1997), career profiling needs to be cognizant of several sociological factors of work. He proposes a Human Capital Theory which establishes a relativity between supply and demand in the marketplace. Because the supply of skilled labor is generally less than the supply for unskilled labor, then one may expect higher wages for skilled workers. However, a number of exceptions can and do occur (Holland, 1997).

Modern scholars do recognize the fact that career choice is a dynamic process that occurs throughout the life span (Ashforth and Saks, 1995; Price, 2009), and that people are likely to change careers several times (Lips-Wiersman and McMorland, 2006). As well, appreciable research exists on the concept of self-efficacy, which refers to a person's belief about his or her ability to mobilize requisite motivation, cognitions, and actions to successfully accomplish a specific task (Bandura, 1990). Research finding point to a strong, positive relationship between self-efficacy and work-related performance (Stajkovic and Luthans, 1998a, p. 255).

Indeed, self-efficacy directly leads to the magnitude and persistence of effort that a person will exert toward accomplishing an objective. People with high self-efficacy will expend sufficient effort to execute a task. People with low self-efficacy will give up when they encounter difficulty and will fail to complete the task (Stajkovic and Luthans, 1998b, p. 66).

However, Stajkovic and Luthans (1998b) concede that self-efficacy alone will not spark people to effort. People need to know that their efforts will result in valued outcomes in the form of benefits and rewards. Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) has applied theories of self-efficacy to careers. This theory argues that people choose to enter career fields that will maintain their sense of self-efficacy and in which they can expect continuing success (Lindley, 2005).

SCCT argues that people's current self-efficacy is heavily influenced by past successes (or failures).

A related field of study concerns the research on core self-evaluations (CSE) conceptualized as a broad underlying trait that encompasses self-esteem, locus of control, generalized self-efficacy, and neuroticism/emotional stability (Judge, 2009). Judge (2009) reviews the decade long research in this area and concludes that people higher on CSE have more successful careers and better job performance.

According to Nicolson and Arnold (1989), career transition from higher education to employment consists of three phases: preparation/anticipation, encounter, and adjustment/stabilization. The preparation/anticipation phase relates to readiness for change and steps that can be taken to help prepare for such change. The encounter phase borders on the shocks and surprises of new circumstances or demands and identifies the necessary coping mechanisms.

The adjustment/stabilization phase focuses on the challenge of evaluating and minimizing any misfit between person and situation, either by changing to absorb the new demands, or by preparing for the next work-role transition. Although it is important for educators to prepare students for their future career prior to this work-role transition, it is equally important for employers to ensure that this transition is smooth through all three phases.

Career exploration is "the process of generating and assimilating career information relating to self and the world of work" (Atkinson and Murrell, 1988, p. 374), and is a pivotal element in any career-related decision-making process (Hurst and Good, 2009). Individuals typically obtain career information through self-exploration of values, interests, skill strengths and weaknesses, and environment exploration (Noe, 1996). Thus, it is important for individuals to recognize how their own personal values, wants, needs and interests could influence future career choices.

Furthermore, to gain a more comprehensive exploration of the self and world of work, it is important

for individuals to seek career-related information and try different work roles to form personal experiences regarding potential careers. This career exploration process helps individuals generate an appropriate quantity or quality of information, on which a sound career decision can be made (Atkinson and Murrell, 1988). Individuals who gather and use career-related information to assist in their career decision-making process are more likely to choose a suitable career (Osipow, 1983). In sum, career exploration results in increased knowledge of career opportunities and a greater awareness of what skills and behaviors are necessary for career success (Noe, 1996).

Ferry (2006) examines students' initial interest in scientific careers, factors influencing career choice during college, and how these factors differ between men and women. Men who abandon career aspirations appear to be driven by financial concerns, whereas women who decide not to pursue scientific career appear more concerned with the social good of their career choice. Ferry (2006) asserts that adolescent occupational choice is influenced by many factors, including life context, personal aptitudes, and educational attainment. He contends further that whether college-bound or work-bound, meeting the challenge of this developmental milestone is critical in adolescents' lives.

Almost all the theories reviewed in this study have dealt extensively with career and career choice issues. Each has, in a way, provided a clearer understanding of these terms. However, not any of the theories has provided a really holistic view of the issues under consideration. For instance, in what ways do factors such as peer, family, spousal, and gender influences, experience, abilities, aptitudes and other factors combine to influence a person's choice of career? Why do people switch careers midway? What really constitute good and bad career choice and exactly how much do "right" or "wrong" career choices contribute to success or failure in workplaces?

These are issues that further research need to focus more on.

Specific Research Questions

This researcher asked and answered the following specific research questions:

- Is there major variability in the choice of disciplines that male and female students choose in publicly-owned Nigerian universities?
- Is there major variability in the admission trends for Northern and Southern Nigerian students at publicly-owned Nigerian universities?
- Which disciplines have the highest intakes of students in publicly-owned Nigerian universities?
- Which disciplines have the least intakes of students in publicly-owned Nigerian universities?
- Has the trend in the choice of disciplines by students in publicly-owned Nigerian universities changed noticeably in 2003 and 2007?

Method

To obtain data for this study, the author visited <http://www.jamb.org.ng/> which is the website of the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB). The

website had statistics of candidates who took its examinations. The statistics included candidates' information such as gender, state of origin, course of study, and faculty. They covered only a period of about eight previous years, somewhere around 2000 and 2008. The researcher selected and analyzed data for years 2003 and 2007 because data for these years had the least missing information about candidate. As well the years spread out (not so closely followed each other) and appeared to be most representative of JAMB candidate's information within the years shown on the website.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Data (gender, state of origin, course of study, and faculty gender) were analyzed using simple charts and percentages.

As could be seen in Table 1, there were major differences in the number of males that were admitted in the various academic disciplines (Social Science, Science, Medicine, Law, Engineering and Environmental Science, Education, Arts, Agriculture, and Administration) across publicly-owned Nigerian universities in the year 2003. This same trend persisted in year 2007 and did cut across all disciplines and states.

TABLE 1: DISTRIBUTION OF MALE AND FEMALE UTME CANDIDATES ACROSS VARIOUS DISCIPLINES IN 2003 AND 2007

| DISCIPLINE | 2003 | | 2007 | |
|--|-------|--------|-------|--------|
| | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| Administration | 6279 | 7247 | 5279 | 5133 |
| Agriculture | 2059 | 2002 | 3798 | 2636 |
| Arts | 4819 | 5752 | 4791 | 5319 |
| Education | 5753 | 6885 | 6994 | 6490 |
| Engineering & Environmental Technology | 13633 | 2719 | 11898 | 2149 |
| Law | 3885 | 1396 | 1969 | 1494 |
| Medical Science | 6815 | 3291 | 3937 | 3111 |
| Sciences | 9603 | 7491 | 14853 | 8644 |

| | | | | |
|-----------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Social Sciences | 10194 | 6730 | 11297 | 7678 |
| Total | 59742 | 45415 | 64706 | 42663 |

TABLE 2: DISTRIBUTION OF MALE AND FEMALE UTME CANDIDATES FROM NORTH AND SOUTH ACROSS VARIOUS DISCIPLINES IN 2003 AND 2007

| DISCIPLINE | 2003 | | | | 2007 | | | |
|--|-------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| | Male | | Female | | Male | | Female | |
| | North | South | North | South | North | South | North | South |
| Administration | 1158 | 5120 | 585 | 6662 | 1492 | 3768 | 6964 | 432 |
| Agriculture | 250 | 1809 | 98 | 1904 | 1086 | 2710 | 415 | 2220 |
| Arts | 1119 | 3700 | 686 | 5064 | 2136 | 2645 | 1617 | 3691 |
| Education | 586 | 6130 | 290 | 6695 | 2324 | 4664 | 1130 | 5356 |
| Engineering & Environmental Technology | 1294 | 12336 | 203 | 2516 | 2945 | 8935 | 479 | 1669 |
| Law | 354 | 3531 | 166 | 1230 | 723 | 1242 | 397 | 1092 |
| Medical Science | 498 | 3115 | 271 | 3020 | 1019 | 2912 | 654 | 2454 |
| Sciences | 1182 | 8420 | 497 | 6958 | 4781 | 10036 | 2090 | 6536 |
| Social Sciences | 2461 | 7732 | 781 | 5949 | 4367 | 6890 | 2152 | 5497 |
| Total | 8902 | 50830 | 3776 | 41636 | 20873 | 43692 | 9629 | 32947 |

Table 1 indicates that there were also major differences in the number of females admitted in the various academic disciplines across publicly-owned Nigerian universities in the year 2003. This trend also persisted in year 2007 and equally did cut across all disciplines and states.

In Table 2, it has been shown that there were significant differences in the number of students from the southern and northern states of Nigeria that were admitted into publicly-funded Nigerian universities. Not only did the southern states have more of their students admitted into publicly-funded universities, they also had more of their students in almost all the academic disciplines under review.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results in this study indicate that the first research question "Is there major variability in the choice of disciplines that male and female students choose in publicly-owned Nigerian universities?" was answered in the affirmative. This shows that the socio-economic realities being faced by Nigerian youths (such as unemployment - especially in some key sectors, the need to enter certain academic disciplines, and stiff competition for admission slots or spaces) indeed influenced the choice of disciplines of men and women in Nigeria.

There was also major variability in the admission trends for Northern and Southern Nigerian students at publicly-owned Nigerian universities. This also answered research question 2 in the affirmative.



It similarly pointed to the often reported gaps in education between the northern and southern parts of Nigeria.

Question 3 and 4 respectively sought to find out which disciplines had the highest intakes of students and had the least number of intakes in publicly-owned Nigerian universities in 2003 and 2007. Results of the analysis showed that Sciences, Social Sciences, Engineering and Environmental Technology, Education, Administration, and Arts were among the disciplines with the highest intakes in 2003 and 2007 while Agriculture, Law, and Medical Sciences were the disciplines with the least number of intakes in 2003 and 2007. These results point to the much-talked-about lopsidedness in the Nigerian economy in favour of the service sector. The results also point to the increasing efforts by government to encourage the study of science, engineering and environmental technology in the universities and other higher institutions of learning.

Regarding research question 5, the trend in the choice of disciplines by students in publicly-owned Nigerian universities changed noticeably between 2003 and 2007. It suggests that a large number of university admission applicants may be adjusting or changing their choices of courses in response to local (Nigerian) and global economic changes

It is recommended that more research should be done in the areas of admission trends and educational imbalances between males and females in Nigeria. Further research should also investigate the regional (north versus south) educational imbalances in Nigeria as well as why some disciplines have significantly more intakes than others. Could it be only as a result of candidates' choices of these courses, more awareness of career choice dynamics, or could it be due to some other factors? Understanding these issues will lead to better future educational planning and outcomes in Nigeria.

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Biographical Note

Nyitor Shenge(PhD) lectures in the Department of Psychology, University of Ibadan. He has published in national and international journals. His research interests include Industrial Psychology.

Figure 1: Distribution of Male and Female UTME Candidates from North and South Across Various Disciplines in 2003 and 2007

