

146 Too complex for policy? Identity work in students' paths through and out of university

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Research Domains

Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

Abstract

Fifteen students were followed from 18 months before high-school graduation until three years after graduation to study their considerations concerning choice of study after high school. This paper presents the results from interviews with the fifteen students made ten years after high school graduation. The paper presents their study paths through higher education and into the labour market. While the paths at the surface appear more continuous and less volatile than their choice process following high school, several students also talk about having doubts and about social relations to other students as important for their completion of the study. In the choice of higher-education programme, students emphasised whether the study matched their sense of identity. In the recent interviews, the concerns about family and where to settle affected their choice of career. The paper discusses the implications of this for policy initiatives to make students follow particular study paths.

Full paper

From a policy perspective, higher education is about serving the needs of society, including providing graduates to the labour market. Therefore, there is a policy interest in students completing particular study programmes. This has led to initiatives informing future students to make them interested in and choosing particular lines of study (e.g., STEM programmes). However, students' choice of study programme follows a less linear decision process (Holmegaard, Ulriksen, & Madsen, 2014), and different concerns play a role in the process (Vulperhorst, van der Rijst, & Akkerman, 2020).

This paper presents the results from the second part of a longitudinal study following 15 students over a total of 11½ years. The first part of the study followed the students from 18 months before completing high school until three years after completion (Lykkegaard & Ulriksen, 2019). We found that the students had different choice processes, many of them did not decide on which study to pursue until after high-school graduation, and several changed their minds during the process (Lykkegaard & Ulriksen, 2019).

This second part is a follow-up study where the students were interviewed 10 years after high-school graduation to map their study and career paths retrospectively. The overarching research question of this paper is:

How did the students' study and career paths evolve, and what affected this progression?

Methods

Sixteen students were selected when attending an outreach project at a research-intensive university targeted STEM-oriented high-school students from underserved backgrounds. The students were interviewed 10 times over a 4½ years period. In 2022, fifteen (10 males, 5 females, no one identified as non-binary) students were interviewed using a timeline approach (Adriansen, 2012) about what had happened in the intermediate seven years. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings

Compared to the volatility of the choice processes in the first part, the study paths were continuous. Only four of 15 changed their line of study after having entered, and two of these did so already during the first part of the study. Fellow students and the social life at the study programmes were emphasised as important for their persistence.

However, after graduation from higher education some of the students were considering changing their career paths. Reasons for this were, e.g., an interest in theoretical aspects of the discipline, dissatisfaction with the way the job content was developing, or being unsure whether one would be physically able to remain in the profession. While the informants' paths appeared stable, for some of them there was a sense of uncertainty underneath.

In the first study, the students' choices were linked to whether they found the study programme reflected the way they perceived themselves (ego identity) and to some extent how they found it would affect the way they related to others (personal identity) (Côté & Levine, 2002). In this study, we found that the choices were strongly linked to family situations. This could be a wish to living close to parents after having become parents themselves or because the parents needed help. To some (also male students), prioritising time for family made an academic career unattractive.

Discussion

While the students had appeared uncertain and changing by the end of school, most students had continued at the chosen study programme. Student departures had mainly been during the first year or two, in line with previous research (Ulriksen, Madsen, & Holmegaard, 2015). Still, several students had had more concerns about their choice while studying than the actual path revealed, but had continued, not least due to social relations.

We found that the students' career considerations included thoughts about the job content and employment prospects, but other realms of life played a decisive role as well. Particularly, family concerns affected the informants' reflections and decision. This was the case for both genders. It appears, that the students' decisions build on whether they can see themselves in the life they pursue (ego and personal identity), rather than going for status (social identity) (Côté & Levine, 2002). Thus, just like Akkerman and Bakker (2019) found choice of higher education to be a balance of multiple interests in multiple contexts, career decisions involve balancing different realms of life against each other.

Education and career policies need to consider these complexities. Students' choice of study is not simply a matter of nurturing an interest in a discipline or pursuing status. Neither are career decisions. This may also have implications for the way employability is perceived and addressed in policy and in conversations with present and future students (Quinlan & Renninger, 2022).

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