

“I don't think I ever made the choice myself.....” Exploring the influences on undergraduates higher education choices (0227)

Cinderey Linda¹, ¹University of the West of England, Bristol, United Kingdom

Learning is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “knowledge or skills acquired through study or being taught”. This is a simplistic view of what is a complex experience that can be influenced by a wide variety of different factors. Entwistle (1997) emphasises that it is important to know what conceptions learners already have of the subjects that are to be introduced to them.

Much of the research into learning in higher education has taken a positivist approach. Many researchers are searching for a cause and effect relationship and use a variety of tools to judge the effect of one particular variable such as, previous academic success (Chapman, 1994, 1997) gender ((Fraser *et al*, 1978, Tyson, 1989, Auyeung and Sands, 1994) age of the learner (Koh and Koh, 1999) or prior experience of studying accounting (Baldwin and Howe, 1982, Bergin, 1983). The range of possible variables and the sometimes conflicting results suggest that there may be more subjective factors that could be captured by a more in depth approach to understanding learner expectations and the choices they have made.

Some choices in higher education are strongly related to the desire to become successful and gain access to better paid jobs and career options. Thus, one potential influence on students will be economic imperatives to achieve “value for money” with their qualifications. The expected return on a degree is 25% (Leitch review, 2006) and thus the acquisition of a degree level qualification may be seen by many students as offering value for money for the investment they make in their education. Although economic imperatives may be important for some students there may be other returns that cannot be measured in strictly economic terms. For example, there may be some “prestige” or even fashionability associated with a particular course or qualification. The assumption that potential economic rewards may have particular significance assumes that there is some degree of rationality in the decision making processes of young people. Hodkinson (1996) introduced the concept of pragmatic rationality arguing that choice is “a rational process that is constrained by a realistic perception of opportunities and shaped by individual personality”. This suggests that the choices made by young people are not completely rational and based on a full understanding of the range of options available to them.

Choice is not a “rational action” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) in the sense that there is a systematic review of a wide range of options that leads to a clear unambiguous decision. An individual will be subject to a range of influences at any moment in time and the choice that is made will simply be an expression of a preference at a particular moment in time. This implies that choice is subject to change. In a rapidly changing world it will be difficult, if not impossible, to take into account all possible information. Young people have to rely on a restricted source of information about the choices that are available to them and that information is likely to come from the significant influences on them. Thus choices will be restricted by the life experiences of young people and their aspirations will be decided by a limited range of influences. Although choice may not be entirely rational it is not random. The choice may appear to be rational to the young people concerned but it will be based only on partial information.

Preliminary results suggest going to university was what was expected of students rather than a definite choice that they had made. The students in this study were influenced by their schools who seemed to build an expectation of going to university but provided less help and advice with choosing a degree course. Students talked about help with preparing their applications and writing personal statements and so on. There seemed to be less help and advice available with choosing a degree course or knowing what type of career a degree might lead to. This may be why the students were attracted to the idea of an accounting and finance degree course. Studying accounting seemed to have definite career paths open after graduation for a professional accounting qualification but also held options for other types of careers in banking and finance.

Their decisions were not irrational but not entirely rational either as they were based on a limited range of information. They appeared to be rational in the sense that there might be good reasons to choose a particular university because of the physical space available or because of the initial impression of the lecturing staff. It was not rational in the sense that the students did not always appear to make use of the full range of information that might have been available to them about a particular university, for example, research excellence, teaching excellence, "league tables" etc. The decision to study accounting was rational in the sense that students could see "value for money" in the qualification and a clear link to a career. However, students did not appear to have a clear view of what accounting was or the possible different career paths for accountants.

Students' expectations have important implications for the development of curricula in universities. Students may withdraw or fail courses if it does not meet their expectations but their expectations may not be founded in reality. The decision about which university course to study may be more influenced by the physical and social environment of the university than about detailed research of the components that make up the course.

Employability is an important feature for many students. Their expectations of what and how they learn may be influenced by the notion that this degree programme is preparing them for employment. The curriculum needs to appeal to students and match their expectations to some extent. This is particularly difficult as students have reached their expectations about the course without every really researching what the course involves. This has important implications as we develop curricula and initiatives to enhance the student experience.

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