

Making the Right Choice: Investigating the Factors Influencing Career Choices and Learning Preferences of Students at Higher Education

Asia Zulfqar¹, Uzma Quraishi² & Iqra Aslam¹

¹Associate Professor, Department of Education,
Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Pakistan.

E-Mail: Asia.Zulfqar@bzu.edu.pk

²Professor, Faculty of Education, Lahore College for
Women University, Lahore, Pakistan.

E-Mail: uquraishi@yahoo.com

¹MPhil Scholar, Department of Education, Bahauddin
Zakariya University, Multan, Pakistan.

E-Mail: iqraumar116@gmail.com

Abstract

The study intends to explore the challenges of career choices and learning preferences of students in higher education. A qualitative research methodology was adopted to conduct this research. Convenient sampling technique was adopted to select the research sample from university students studying in the first semesters of BS programs. In total, fifty respondents were invited to participate in this research after obtaining their consent for interviews. A semi-structured type interview protocol was designed to collect data from the selected sample. Thematic analysis was carried out to analyze the interview transcripts. The findings identified the following key challenges of students which influenced the selection of the right field of study due to family and social pressures, high merit, lack of guidance from parents and teachers, and financial problems. As to learning preferences in higher education, respondents highlighted the following major challenges in their learning: their teachers are lacking advanced teaching methods, there is no alignment between teachers' teaching style and students' learning style, students face pressure of performance from parents and teachers. Students also revealed that their

teachers do not motivate their performance. Limitations and recommendations were also discussed.

Keywords: Career choices; Learning preferences; Higher Education; Thematic analysis; Qualitative study.

Introduction

Due to the increasing developments and boom in technology, the contemporary world of the job market is becoming more challenging than ever and it is continuously changing the professional landscape of the employment system (Donald, Ashleigh, & Baruch, 2018). This leads higher education learners to make a wise selection of their career at the time of entrance into higher education (Koech, Bitok, Rutto, Koech, Okoth, Korir, & Ngala, 2016). Nevertheless, career selection is the most crucial decision in one's life. Making a career choice means determining a field of study for the whole life (Pam, 2013). Students require guidance and support at this stage to make a better and wise decision for their future. At this stage, the role of schools, their teachers, counselors and parents is important to guide and support the child to make a better choice (Pitan & Atiku, 2017). Career choice is generally based on the aptitude of an individual towards that specific field. Though, the choices are also based on other dimensions, e.g., sufficient knowledge about the certain field, future prospect and available jobs in that particular field and individuals' personal attributes matching with that field (Ahmed, Sharif, & Ahmad, 2017). Moreover, other factors also contribute, for example, aptitudes, competencies, interests, self-concept, knowledge, skills, awareness, and benefits (See e.g., Shumba & Naong, 2012).

Career selection is not only an important decision, but it is quite challenging for students. There are certain major challenges which students commonly face during their career selection. For example, parents influence their choices, through pressure from family, friends and social circles (Cheong, 2018). A lack of guidance from school and teachers (Xing & Rojewski, 2018). Korir & Wafula (2012) stated that at this stage, students are not confident enough to make decisions about their future, they are often occupied with many choices and are unable to choose the best one (Korir & Wafula, 2012).

Besides career selection, learning in the preferred field of study is also of the utmost importance. It is believed that a learner can perform better in his selected field of interest compared to that field where he/she does not have any interest. This means, every individual has his/her own learning preference which mainly depends on personality, aptitude, interest and level of intelligence (REF). A person can only make a better choice when he is aware of his personality, aptitude and interest (Yenge, Massa, & Karlsson, 2018). Literature proved that a person can perform efficiently if his/her learning style matches with the teachers' teaching style (Arikpo, & Domike, 2015). It means learning style contributes to obtaining and assimilating knowledge at school and processing information. Since students are individually different from each other, there are a variety of learning styles matching with students' needs, interests, personality and level of intelligence (Yasemin & Gülbahar, 2013).

Thus, learning style is a broad framework of knowledge and skills that requires expertise in information processing and utilization in order to learn effectively (Moayyeri, 2015). If students' learning style is not aligned with teachers' teaching style, it might be crucial for students to give the required performance and efficiency that affects their career. It creates frustration, lack of interest and motivation among students and affects the learning environment that causes drop-outs at school (Lowy, 2013). To explore the factors, we planned this study to outline the certain challenges in career selection and learning preferences of students in higher education. This study will be conducted at a public sector university following the qualitative methodology.

Literature Review

The following section will present the literature on career choices and learning preferences of students and related challenges in higher education:

Career Choices

Career choice determines the next stage of an individual's life, it leads a person to what he/she wants to do in life (Pam, 2013). If there is proper counseling and guidance at the time of career selection, it can remove confusions and ambiguities and help students select better and suitable fields according to their interests and aptitudes (Nachmias & Walmsley, 2015). Career guidance facilitates students to better plan their activities and

enhanced knowledge about self helps to determine future goals). A better career can set up the whole life of an individual, build his confidence, skills and make his/her identity (Pitan & Atiku, 2017; Robertson, 2013). It also leads students to develop self-esteem and an enhanced level of confidence in their class and schools.

As mentioned elsewhere, there is growing and challenging competition in the job market which requires more proactive and skilled graduates to contribute to a knowledge-based economy in the country. If students make decisions at this stage of their lives, they can succeed in the competitive market (Mudulia, 2017). However, it is not that simple for students to identify and choose their careers. Many factors play their role in making these choices and, at the same time, it is quite a challenge for students to make such choices. Literature helps to identify the following key challenges:

Parents influence the career choice: this is the most important challenge which students face during their studies. Generally, parents push their children to select a field of study according to their choice, which is most of the time opposite to child interest (Wildman & Torres, 2002). Very often, parents also want to engage their children in their own family businesses despite their interests and abilities (Zody et al., 2006). In a Pakistani context, the majority of parents want to make their children doctors and engineers to earn handsome salaries without considering the choices of their children (Abbasi & Sarwat, 2014). This creates frustration in children and they cannot develop their interest and cannot adjust themselves in their studies, which turns to poor grades and drop-out.

Teachers influence career choices: In addition to parents, teachers also play a dominating role in career selection of the child. It is always helpful to get professional advice before making a career decision, but sometimes teachers influence them negatively and impose their choice on students (Faitar & Faitar (2013). Teachers should organize career counselling sessions at school to guide young students about their future and prospective fields of occupations (Ahmed, Sharif, & Ahmad, 2017).

Individuals' interest in a particular career: Students' interest and aptitude should be utmost preference in view of selecting a career. We can produce quality and skillful graduates if a career decision is based on this

criterion. Moreover, students' academic ability also plays an important role in career selection, which is again linked to aptitude (Beggs et al., 2008). Research has proved that students perform better if they for the career on the basis of their abilities, interest and aptitude.

Societal influence on making a career choice: Society also affects the students' choices at the time of career selection. For example, the job trends of society. Parents are also influenced by societal pressures and demands. If they see other children are intending to choose a specific career, they put pressure on their child to choose that specific field without considering his/her aptitude and abilities (Bhattacharya, 2013). This influence is mainly from society and sometimes within the family.

Employment prospects in relation to career choice: This is the most important factor influencing the students' choice in career selection. But this is primarily from parents, teachers and other stakeholders who are playing their role in students' lives. They usually unveil such choices to students through which they can secure a handsome job and salary package. But, this is not always true. Sometimes such choices are influenced due to recession and saturation in a particular field and graduates remain unemployed (Fraser, 2010). Moreover, students do not get their dream job and salaries (Beggs et al., 2008). In such situations, students get frustrated and they are unable to join other fields or start their own businesses. They feel themselves misfit for other jobs. If students are well aware of the facts, they can make good decisions.

Learning preferences

Learning is generally termed as a change in behavior. It is a process of obtaining knowledge and skills and attitudes (Dorgu, 2015). Author Balachandran (2015) identified that there are various learning styles and it is based on students' behavior, emotional, attitude and aptitude, contextual, and physiological factors. Moreover, external factors e.g., class environment, teachers' teaching styles, behaviors, content all play an important role in setting up a learning preference (Akareem & Hossain, 2016). Learning preferences are also based on individual differences. There are a variety of students in a class having a variety of background and prior knowledge, a variety of acquired and innate differences which lead to students' learning styles (Stirling & Alquraini, 2017).

Therefore, literature suggests the following learning styles which learners can prefer according to their choice and needs: Kolb learning style (Kolb & Kolb, 2013; Honey and Mumford learning style (Honey & Mumford, 1992); VARK model of learning style (Fleming & Mills, 1992); Felder and Silverman model of learning style (Felder & Silverman, 1988). On the basis of styles, learners can be activists, theorists, reflectors and pragmatists. However, certain challenges are also associated when students struggle to choose and opt for their preferred learning style. For example, students' aptitude and interests in the class. If students are unable to recognize their interests and aptitude, they can never learn effectively in class (Lee, 2017). If such students do not perform up to the mark, their relationship and interaction with the teacher will also become weaker. They will be hesitant to interact with their teachers and class and prefer to remain quiet in class. On the other hand, teachers' role is also crucial. If teachers do not pay attention to students' learning style, it will affect students' learning (Hulme, & Allcock, 2010). They will lose interest in the class and their learning performance will also be affected. A competent teacher always identifies the learners' needs and plans his/her teaching strategies according to class interest. The alignment between teachers and students' learning styles could create a conducive learning environment in the class, which can also enhance students' performance and grades.

Research Objectives

The following objectives were designed to carry out this research:

- To explore the key challenges in relation to career choices of male and female students studying at higher education.
- To investigate the key challenges in relation to learning preferences of male and female students studying at higher education.

Research Methodology

Procedure

The main objective of this research was to investigate the key challenges to career selection with regard to learning preferences of students in higher education. A qualitative research methodology was adopted to carry out

this research. A purpose sampling technique was adopted to interview the study participants. An interview guide was developed to interview the students studying at Bahauddin Zakariya University. All the data were recorded and stored in view of analysis. Thematic analysis was performed to extract the study findings.

Population

The population of this research was based on one public university, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan. There are more than 600 teachers and 28000 students teaching/studying at various faculties/departments of Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan (Bahauddin Zakariya University, 2022). The target population for this research is students of the faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Sciences at Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan.

Sample

Considering the nature of this research, a purposive sampling technique was adopted to select the sample for this qualitative research. In total, 50 participants from both the above-mentioned faculties were invited for interviews. We invited only those students who were studying in the first semester as this is a stage where students make important decisions about their career in line with their learning preferences.

Instrument

To meet the study objectives, thorough literature was explored to design the research questions on students' career choices and learning preferences. Thus, we divided the interview questions in both parts to cover all the aspects of both variables. After an introductory question, we present the questions on learning styles and then career selection. In total, seven interview questions were presented to the research participants. The interview guide is attached in Appendix-A. The following are the sample questions: (a) What do you think you will be in the future after getting a degree in this subject? (b) Are your teachers' teaching styles matching with your learning style?

Data Collection

Researchers visited all the selected faculties/departments to seek permission from Deans/Heads to collect data from their students. Later,

consent was obtained from all the individual respondents after explaining the research objectives and interview protocols. Appointments were made with each individual participant to record the interview. The last author of this paper conducted the interviews with respondents. All face-to-face interviews were conducted with BS first semester students from various departments e.g., Education, Sociology, Economics, Fine Arts, Biology, Physics and Chemistry etc. The average age of each respondent was between 18-20 years. Each interview was recorded for analysis purposes. On average, each interview lasted between 15-20 minutes. We tried our best to comply with the research ethics.

Data Analysis

To achieve the study objectives, thematic analysis was best suited to analyzing interview data. Initially, all recorded data was transcribed verbatim. First, we studied the transcripts to get familiar with the interview responses. Secondly, a code book was developed to map out the occurrence of responses and each was labeled with a code. Later, similar codes were merged together and their frequencies were also noted down to present the results in numbers and percentages for a better representation of qualitative results. There were seven main themes which were designed based on each question and 22 sub-themes were finalized after merging the similar themes.

Next, patterns of code were labeled as themes. In the next stage, the themes were further refined to make it meaningful and comprehensive. Now, each theme is ready with its frequency of occurrences. In the subsequent section we will present each theme with the help of interview chunks. All the interview data were also segregated on a gender basis so that we can analyze the difference between the male and female students in relation to their learning preferences and career selection.

Results

In the following section we will present the results of thematic analysis. All the identified themes will be presented in relation to each interview question. All the themes will also highlight the gender differences as to setting learning preferences and making career selections. All the themes will be enriched with interview fragments.

Interest and motivation to choose a field of study

After their general introduction, we presented the specific question to know about their interest and motivation in their disciplines. A large number of codes 145 were identified in relation to this question and later formulated in the shape of three following key themes. These codes merge into three key themes: (a) Usually inspired by others while choosing a particular discipline. The majority of the respondents claimed that they usually get inspired by other people around them while choosing a particular field for their studies. As to measuring gender differences, the majority of female students get inspired by others in contrast to their counterparts. As to the next theme, (b) parents influence their children's choices. Few students share that their parents force them to choose a particular field, e.g., medical and engineering, which is sometimes not possible due to acquired grades and may be due to interest. Interview analysis shows that generally, parents of female students influence their choices as compared to male students. As to the next theme, (c) could not secure admission in their preferred disciplines, a few students said that they were unable to secure admission in their preferred discipline due to high merit. The following interview chunks supported these claims:

A respondent said: "One of my mathematics teachers inspired me a lot, so I decided to continue with mathematics." (RP, 09). *Another respondent stated:* "I wanted to study Psychology, but my father pushed me to study this subject." (RP-04). *Another explained:* "I want to go in medical field but I could not get admission due to high merit. Thus, I chose Chemistry and I will continue my studies in this subject. I took this as a challenge." (RP-01)

Support and guidance in choosing a preferred field

Respondents were asked if they received support and guidance from parents and others in choosing their preferred field of study. We have identified a good number (89) of codes related to this question. Two key themes were identified based on these codes. Moreover, it was found that female students receive more support than male students. (a) Received support and guidance, the majority of students acknowledge the support and guidance of their family members, teachers, parents, and seniors. (b)

Not received proper guidance and support, there were some respondents who reported reversed, they have not received sufficient or no support from their family and teachers. The following interview responses highlighted this:

A participant shared: “My teachers supported and guided me a lot about all aspects of this discipline.” (RP-03). *An interviewee said:* “My teacher supports me quite a lot and suggested two options either literature and the law. So, I choose literature (RP-16).” *A respondent replied:* “There is no proper guidance and counseling in subject selection, one of my friends told me about this subject and I took admission. I am not sure about the future of this subject.” (RP-11)

Challenges in selecting the field of study

As expected, students reported a number of challenges while choosing their disciplines according to their interests. Based on interview responses, 95 codes were identified in view of this interview question. We reach to the following themes after merging the similar themes. (a) Financial constraints in selecting a discipline, this is the most dominant theme that occurred in interview responses. The majority of the respondents mentioned this as a great challenge in making their dreams true and selecting their preferred field of study. In contrast to this, (b) Respondents did not face any challenges while choosing their subjects. A few respondents also revealed that they have not faced any challenges while taking admission into their preferred learning fields. Again, it is observed that female students face more challenges than male students in choosing their preferred field of study. The following interview fragments present this narrative:

“Mainly, I had some financial issues, but I tried applying for scholarships, now I am comfortable after winning a scholarship.” (RP-12). *One of the respondents explained:* “Higher education is very expensive nowadays; this is one of the major challenges in pursuing higher studies.” *A participant shared:* “I did not face any challenge for choosing this subject.” (RP-03)

Learning preferences

Respondents were also asked to share their preferred learning styles and how their learning style matches with teachers' teaching style. They were also asked to share the challenges that you face during lectures when it is not of your interest. During the analysis, many learning styles included activity-based learning, practical learning, self-study, discussion etc. The following related chunks were explored after analysis: the preferred learning styles of respondents were self-study and discussion. The majority of students highlighted that they prefer to learn by themselves when out of class and in class they like to discuss the assigned topics with their peers. The results also showed that female students preferred self-study and discussion as compared to their counterparts. The following interview fragments support these results:

"I usually prefer to study independently. It helped to clarify the concepts. I also draw my concepts for concrete learning." (RP-03). *Another reported:* "I prefer to listen and note down the lectures that helps to prepare for exam." (RP-13). *A respondent explained:* "I generally want to discuss with my fellows and friends. I like when teachers asked us to discuss in groups that help to develop understanding." (RP-25)

Alignment of teachers' teaching style with students learning styles

As to identifying the challenges in learning styles of students, the majority of the students reported that the teaching style of teacher does not match with their learning styles. This claim is mainly highlighted by female students. Male students experience this to a lesser extent. A few male students claimed that their learning style matches with their teachers' teaching style. The following interview quotes were extracted from the interview data: "Sometimes, teaching style of teachers matches with my style however some of the teachers just want us to read their given notes (RP-31)." *Another participant explained:* "Often, my learning style aligned with my teacher's style, it is always very helpful to understand the concepts." (RP-10)

Pressure for good performance

This is the next most occurring theme in the data analysis. Students feel pressure from their family members and teacher to perform in their studies. Quite a good number of code 95 were identified against this question. Majority of the students reported that their families do support them for studies and generally they do not put any pressure on them for good performance. An equal number of respondents shared that their parents motivate them for studies and provide all kinds of facilitation in their studies. A very few participants reported that they receive no support from their family and they do not motivate them in their studies. The following interview chunks highlighted these claims:

A respondent said: “My family is always there to support me that help to do well in my studies.” (RP-06). *An interviewee commented:* “My family respects my decision and always supports me. I do not have any pressure of performance from them.” (RP-12). *An interviewee commented:* “My father is very concerned about my results, he always expects highest grades from me, this is quite a pressure.” (RP-09). *A respondent replied:* “There is a lot of competition in the family with siblings and cousins to achieve high grades, thus, sometime it is very irritating.” (RP-08)

Teachers should motivate students

The majority of the respondents highlighted the need for motivation and interaction with students. They feel that their teachers do not motivate them sufficiently, they hardly appreciate their efforts and do not encourage interaction and participation in lectures. Most of the female students highlighted this need compared to male students. The following interview fragments present this claim: “Usually, our teachers focusing on delivering of lectures, they do not encourage us to participate, a kind of one-way teaching. Teachers should interact us and motivate us to get involve in lecture.” (RP-10). *One more respondent said:* “Teachers should teach their students according to their level of interest and knowledge. They should appreciate their students for class participation.” (RP-34)

Lack of advance teaching methods

This challenge was highlighted by many students and mainly female students complain about this. Their teachers do not have up-to-date knowledge and they are not aware of modern teaching methods. Respondents think that this is a great challenge in their study fields that their teachers are not aware of advancements in the fields. A few male students also highlighted this challenge. The following interview pieces are evidence of this claim.

A respondent said: “Teachers should be well trained in his/her field and have advance knowledge and skills to meet the students’ expectations to add in students’ knowledge and skills.” (RP-21). *Another respondent revealed:* “Many teachers come in class without preparation and they do not have sufficient knowledge about their fields. This is a major challenge in our grooming.” (RP-39)

Lack of practical

Many respondents highlighted this theme and consider it a big challenge in modern learning styles. They complain that their teachers do not give them practical exposure to the field, they mainly rely on lectures. There should be sufficient practice of the concepts in labs and fields so that we can apply our knowledge and concepts. Again, most of the female respondents highlighted this claim in contrast to male students.

The following interview responses identified this need: “What I lack in my class, our teachers should give real life examples and give exposure to the field and labs to experience the knowledge.” (RP-07). *Another respondent said:* “Teachers should give some practical examples about the topic to create our interest in the class otherwise it is very boring to sit for hours in lectures.” (RP-31)

Discussion & Conclusion

The study aimed to investigate the challenges of students in career choices and learning preferences in higher education. The qualitative study findings revealed a number of key challenges both related to career choices and learning preferences, which are completely in line with the available studies conducted in various educational contexts. As to career choices,

parents and teachers influence children's career choices, which is in line with the study results of Faitar and Faitar (2013) who concluded in their study that teachers and parents affect students' choices in making career decisions. The study findings of Abbasi and Sarwat (2014) conducted their research in a Pakistani context and achieved similar results.

Moreover, the study results of Arikpo and Domike (2015) also corroborate with our study results in view of making career choices and setting a learning preference. Bhattacharya (2013) conducted his study to measure the same variables with engineering students and concluded the same findings that parents and teachers' play an important role in career selection of students. The study results of Donald, Ashleigh and Baruch (2018) concluded that the job market has an important impact on making the right career decision, it actually determines the right career path for students, which is also aligned with our study findings.

As to learning preferences, the study results of Tulbure (2012) concluded that if students' learning styles match with instructional styles, it can produce better results, which is also according to our study findings. As to identifying the difference in career choices and learning preference of students, the study results of Bhalli, Khan, and Sattar (2015) found that these choices are different on a gender basis.

Limitations & Recommendations

This study aimed to investigate the career choices and learning preferences of students in higher education. However, the study stretched to the maximum, considering the qualitative approach. However, there are limitations which can be addressed in future studies. First, we focused on two variables; career choices and learning preferences. It is realized that most of the participants discussed their level of motivation in the case of both variables, future research can focus on considering the level of motivation in relation to these variables. A quantitative approach can also be adopted to see the clear relationship among these variables. Opting qualitative and quantitative research methodologies will help to apply in-depth data analysis as well. As for sample, teachers and parents can also be involved to know their opinion about the selection of the right field of study for their children and the learning style of students can be better learnt from their teachers.

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