

## Factors influencing career choice of accounting students in University Putra Malaysia: Qualitative pilot study

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 28 October 2016

Received in revised form 8 December 2016

Accepted 16 December 2016

Available online 23 December 2016

### ABSTRACT

The study aims to identify factors that influence career decision making among accounting students in University Putra Malaysia. The study relied on primary data obtained from the final year of accounting students, who are almost graduate. The findings reveal there were two categories based on researcher judgement, which are internal and external factors influenced the career decision making. The internal factors are interest in the subject, self- perception, relationship with family and friends as well as lecturers. The external factors stated by respondents in this study are education attainment, salary, experiences from practical training, school and university's entry system and gender gap. All the factors, however, may related to each other and graduates have a longer time and several step to choose their career. As the study is based on a single institution, the research strategy used does not allow for wider generalisation but provides an important insight into the career decision making of accounting student in Malaysia.

#### Keywords:

Career decision making, Career choice,  
Undergraduate accounting students

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## 1. Introduction

According to Malaysian Institute of Accountants (MIA), Malaysia needs 60,000 accountants to help the country in achieving developed nation status by year 2020. To achieve the figure, universities not just have to produce graduate with competence with a broad array of skill and knowledge but also should expose them to the boundless career opportunities that waiting them ahead. Unfortunately, there are a claims that only 30 percent of accounting graduates are truly practicing accounting [1-2]. In addition, [1] indicates that only 28.2% of their respondents interested to obtain professional qualification after they graduate assuming that only the same figure has an intention to become professional accountants. If this situation continues, it is may affect the government's goal to have at least 60,000 professional accountants in Malaysia by the year 2020.

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Few studies claim that new graduates usually facing the dilemma in making a career decision [3-5]. Hence, to understand the career decision-making process, it is vital to identify and understand what factors influence career decision making. The objective of the study is to identify the factors that influence accounting students at University Putra Malaysia in career decision making. Most research in the area are conducted by quantitative research. This study used qualitative methods as an intention to identify more factors (if any) other than already discuss in previous literature.

## 2. Literature review

Many studies have examined the factors that influence career decision making. Early studies in 1970's to early 2000's find that starting salary is one of the major job characteristic preferences by graduates major in accounting [6-10]. In addition, [9] found that the market economy changed make university students put self-interest before societal interests, and rated money and power as the primary motivators in finding a job.

At the early 2000s', [11-14] studied the role of relationships in making career choices and discussed the factor in depth. Those studies imply that parents provide support and facilitate the children's apprehensions about future job. Consequently, they play a major role in career choice of their children. However, in United States, a study conducted by Eddy, Ronald, Burke Lisa, Fiksenbaum [15] on MBA students did not find both family and non-family to be a predictor of students' career decision making. Although there are mixed result, Hewitt [16] as well as Shumba and Naong, [17] explained that most people are influenced by their parent's chosen careers, or in short, the parent will choose the career for their children.

As time passes by, other factors may influence the career choice of new graduates. A survey conducted by UK Graduate Careers Survey (2008) finds that daily obstacles or challenges and responsibility were regarded high priority besides salary, reputation, location work life balance, the opportunity for rapid promotion and giving something back to the community. Thus, the "the nature of the work" was most important priority.

Beside the above factors, [18] claims that career decision making is influenced by many factors such as self-concept, cultural identity, personality, interests, socialization, social support, role model, globalization, and available resources such as information and financial. Students' perception of being suitable for particular jobs also had been found to be influenced by a number of factors including attitudes and differences in job characteristics, ethnic background, choice of subjects, years in school, and level of achievement [19].

## 3. Methodology

Data from face-to-face, semi structured interviews has been used as main source of the information constitute for this study. Questions that are asked during the interview are generally on the career choice topics. However, the order and structure of the questions are not fixed, as they were exploratory, loosely-structured, and open-ended in nature. Before an interview takes place, respondents will be informed about the details of study and given assurance about ethical principles such as anonymity and confidentiality. In total, 10 interviews involve final year accounting student at University Putra Malaysia have been conducted and all of the interviews have been recorded. The length of interviews is vary depending on the researcher and participant agreeable time. However, it is between 20-60 minutes.

## 4. Result

Based on the interview, the factors influence the career choice stated by respondents would be divided into two dimensions which are internal and external factors. For internal factors, it revolves on respondents itself which are controllable and within their capacity or limit. On the other hand, for external factors, it is uncontrollable and beyond their capacity or limit.

### 4.1 Internal factors

#### 4.1.1. Interest on the subject

One of the respondent stated that her own interest in the subject may takes the first place in directing her to the chosen career. She argued that she did not have the ability to memorize quickly, thus she had chosen accounting field during pre-university level (diploma) instead of other fields as accounting course in diploma level dealing with lot of numbers.

“I can’t memorize fast, so I can’t and I love more calculation.” (Female, 25)

Interviewee perceived learning accounting at degree level might be similar with pre-university level which most of the subjects will dealing with numbers. However, in university, Bachelor of Accountancy is not merely learning accounting solely, but also other areas such as management, taxation and etc. Actually, accountancy is beyond what she perceives before enter the bachelor program. It’s involves many standards, concepts to be memorized and understood. This respondent plan to choose taxation field as started career after graduation.

“Yeah, I’m interested in taxation and so far I can say I can do little bit very well than accountancy, I do better in taxation.” (Female, 25)

#### 4.1.2. Perception on career opportunity

Another factor highlighted was more opportunity. The respondent had actually changed study’s course from Bachelor of Economics to Bachelor of Accountancy in second year of the study. She insisted accounting career would provide more opportunity in term of chances to get future job in a specific field.

“I have more opportunity when I’m in accounting instead of economics because economics is too general.” (Female, 24)

She believed the job descriptions were more specific compare to economics and the syllabus taught in class directly correlate with the duty of accountants and auditors.

#### 4.1.3. Relationship

Relationship was divided into two parts. One is a close family such as parent and siblings. Second is somebody out of family, in this study the respondents focus on friends and lecturers. Close family members especially mother, according to the respondent of this study, really influences in decision making of career choice. In answering the question during the interview, one of respondent quotes that: “My mum really influences me, because she is small business woman, so behind of my mom is me, (involve in marketing and finance) so my mum is very influencing me.” (Female, 23)

Friends also give a huge influence in making decision. One interviewee said, her friends developed her interest in accounting. The interest had initiated after following many of her peers entering art

science class which accounting was one of compulsory subject to be taken. After learning the subject, she found that, she was interested and determined to pursue accounting course in higher level.

“At first place, I do not have interest but when all my friends enter that class, then the interest start to develop.” (Female, 25)

Few interviewees mention about the influence of their teachers. Lecturers had played roles in determining the action taken throughout their study. One of interviewee said that, before choosing the courses that they want to take in university, he did ask her matriculation’s lecturers what courses suitable for him based on the result achieved by him. Most of them had recommended him to pursue in accounting degree.

“Before applying for UPU, I did ask suggestion from my own lecturers about what courses to take in university, and because of I got 4 flat pointer, almost all lecturers prefer me to take accounting.” (Male, 23)

Due to advice and encouragement from the lecturers, at the first place, one interviewee did not have interest in accounting after being offered to further this course at university level. However, continuous motivation given by the lecturers on the prospect jobs and career in the future had initiated him to have interest in accounting field.

“No, maybe as I said just know, it’s one of the lecturer on the course (accounting) that influence me to take it because I feel it’s interesting. This is one of the reason.” (Male, 25)

## 4.2. External factor

### 4.2.1. Education attainment

Before pursue a study at higher learning institution, students or candidates must fulfil the minimum requirement (results or scores) stated by schools, institutions or Ministry of Education. Hence, an interviewee said, he just *‘follow the flow’* of what the education systems had provided to him in Malaysia.

“At school, I took science course, then just follow the flow, look based on the result, then in matriculation I continue in accounting stream, and after that I now in UPM taking accounting that is my education background. As I said just know, based on my SPM result, because I got A in Account, Economy, Add Math , Math . However I not get A ia all science subjects.” (Male, 23)

That means, the results obtained would determine courses to be taken in the next study levels. Other interviewee realised his result during secondary level did not fulfil the minimum requirement to be in science stream class, he could only qualify to be in art stream’s class. As a result, he needed to make decision based on the criteria possessed on the meantime in order to pursue his study in the next level.

### 4.2.2. Salary

The salary is one of the essential determinants when respondents make any decision regarding the career to pursue in the future. Although they are now studying accounting at degree level but they would not pursue career in accounting field if the benefit in term of monetary value not worth. An interviewee measures the worthless of salary paid must be based on the cost of living right now. “The pay plays important role as cost of living getting higher now.” (Female, 24)

Another interviewee said, as part of family’s backbone, she considered herself important to feed her family. She further elaborated about her family financial condition which she perceived not as strong as it should be. Thus, to choose career in the future, salary is one of the important element when making career decision.

“But for now, the salary also important for me as my family background, my father is already in retiring age. He is still working as private worker in factory. It’s quite burden for the family if he retire, then only my brother is still working and the salary is just so..so (not enough)to really can cover our expenses so if I graduated and choosing my career, salary will be one of important thing to think off.” (Female, 23)

#### 4.2.3. Experience from practical training

The respondents of the study is focussing on final year accounting students, the interviewees have experienced 6 months practical learning. In University Putra Malaysia, accounting students have to undergo industrial training in third year. Throughout the industrial training, they will be exposed with the working environment and culture which they are going to face after graduation. Based on that real experience which interviewees have been going through, one of the interviewee states that: “I think whatever you do the most important things is that the environment at your workplace plays a role whether you’ll like the job or not. The working environment itself ..... but the most important, they have to work in good environment such as controllable stress.” (Female, 24)

As mentioned above, an interviewee views working environment would be the most factor that influence her when making decision about the career. She explained the working environment should not be stressful. For her, whether she preferred the job or not, it shall be within her capabilities to cope with it. In addition, due to experience acquired during industrial training, she became not sure and confident whether to pursue career in auditing.

“After I have gone through industrial training, I’m still thinking whether I’m suitable auditing or not because auditing is a part of our career.” (Female, 23)

However, for a several interviewees, industrial training experience have made them more firm in making decision on career path. A female interviewee has said that she did not realise the relevance of learning all financial standards in depth. She just studied for exam purpose and managed to score in the first year but not in the next two consecutive years in which the results were in downward trend. Usually, first year of study only touches basic and not advances syllabus which are not revolving on accounting, auditing and taxation subjects. Hence, the industrial training has exposed her to the relevance of the courses she takes and more understand about accounting career, consequently improving her performance in fourth year.

“It was quite ok in the 1st, but in the 2nd year, we are going more depth in financial standard and all the regulations and deeper and deeper such as taxation and management accounting. It’s started to be chaotic. At the end of the 1st semester, in 3rd year, I fell out of first class and when I have gone to internship for a half a year, when I came back here last semester, I managed to boost up my pointer to 3.8 but CGPA is still out of the first class. So this quite explain that internship had help me in term of understanding this career more and when I came back to university, I saw the relevance and I can score.” (Female, 23)

From the view of respondent, the real experience in industrial training has become one of the factor influence students before making decision on career path.

#### 4.2.4. School administrative and university’s entry system

To continue study from each level to another, not just merely qualifications and minimum requirements are needed to be fulfilled but also the third parties’ influences. Related parties such as school administration for school level and Higher Education Ministry for tertiary level act as final decision maker to determine future courses taken.

“School set it....That’s why I chose accounting.” (Female, 23)

After PT3 (formerly known as Penilaian Menengah Rendah, PMR), students have to choose either to be in science stream or art science classes. However, it depends on the quota imposed by the school administration at particular schools when allocating how much students to be filled in for two types of streams. As mentioned by above interviewee, she said, the school had determined art science (accounting) class for her, so she just follow the instruction.

On other occasion, a male interviewee for instance, said that, he chose law as the first choice from eight choices in university’s admission online application but have been offered to further accounting course at degree level. Although accounting was his fourth choice, he just put this course to fill up the choices.

“I never chose it, they give me. I apply for law, but they didn’t me give lawyer, they give me accounting. I choose accounting for 4th choice. My first choice is lawyer.” (Male, 25)

The similar situation also happened to a female interviewee where at the first place, he chose actuarial science as a course in tertiary level, but the result released had shown otherwise.

“I went to matriculation and it’s also arts stream but accounting wasn’t my first choice in UPU. I didn’t choose it, the government choose for me because I choose actuarial science and accounting is basically my third choice.” (Female, 25)

This is because, according to the online application, candidates are compulsory to fill up all eight choices with different courses and universities. Hence, the courses offered by the Ministry of Higher Education are final and conclusive.

#### 4.2.5. Fulfil the gender gap

One of the male interviewee took accounting course is due to fewer male accounting student in university in the country. He said, at this particular time, the ratio of female to male students in accounting course is large based on the composition in class either in matriculation or university.

“I took accounting course because nowadays, less men in accounting field.” (Male, 25)

Based on the result from the interview, the factors that influence the career choice decision making can be summarized as follows:

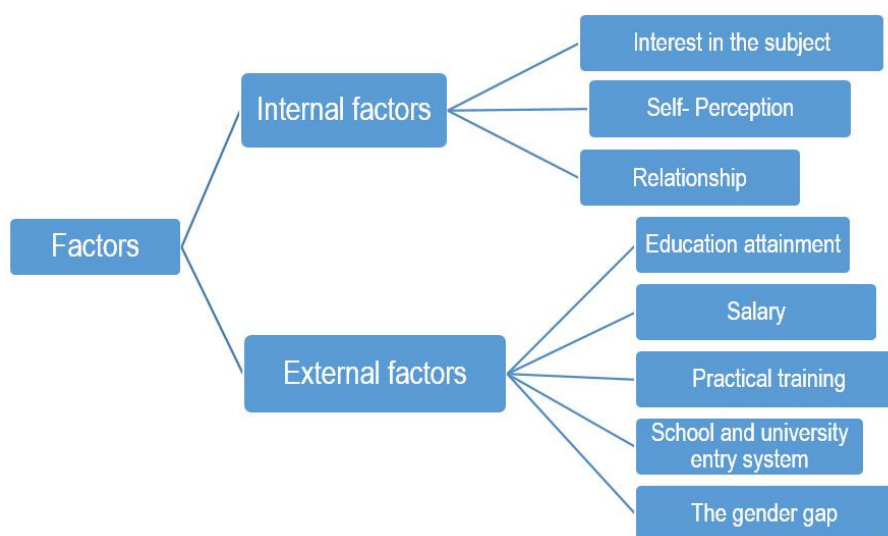


Fig. 1. Factors that influence career choice decision making

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

Out of all factors found to be influenced students in career choice decision making, “interest in the subject” is the most essential determinant factor stated by literature [20]. Each of interviewees in this study had stated this factor in all interview sessions, which they said, whatever decision chose was on their own and other people would just be part in the decision making process likes advising and counselling purposes. The interest would be due to several reasons such as several students perceive the career has more opportunity, love calculation and others believed that it met with their own ability and capability. Everyone is an individual with their own way of doing things. This brings into the discussion the statement made in the literature that only the student can decide what is best for them. Students must remember that while there are an infinite number of resources available for research, they must decide for themselves what works for them. The student can use all the tools available, but it is the make-up of the student’s personality, drive, ambition, and creativity that synthesizes the effort into success.

Students must sort out recommendations wherever they come from. Evaluating decisions will help students sort out the answers. The more experienced we become in our decision-making process, the more intuitive the process becomes. The more practice, the better and students should not ignore advice; they can save themselves a lot of trouble when they heed good advice. In the end, no one knows oneself better than they know themselves. They are the ones who must make the decisions and then live with those decisions, able to learn and move on.

Students and instructors should always be aware of the potential for integrating academic as well as life experiences into their portfolios. One of the primary reasons why people go to school is to become productive members of society. They can always apply math, English, and history as well as computer, auto mechanics, and consumer education, to a career. When they find a roadblock in a particular area or interest, students should analyse or isolate what it is in particular that they don’t like. If they need help, getting a different prospective from someone they trust may help them move on. They need to ask many questions form parents, instructors, business people, and counsellors.

Parents, instructors, business people, counsellors, must not follow the urge to preach. Since the student is searching for pros and cons, it is the pros and cons that should be provide when asked for advice. As explained in the literature, it would be wrong to pretend to know what is best for the student [21]. The student must come to a realization in his or her own way, in order for it to be meaningful. Schools, industry, and family must provide an environment that fosters the student’s own realization and act as mentors, facilitators, or helpers. The student must build some kind of process that will work for them. Again, the earlier the student starts this process, the smaller and less painful are the failures. There can be failures in order for there to be success. This study consistent with [17] which found that the family; the ability of the learner self to identify his/her preferred career choice; and teachers were significant factors that influence the career choice and aspirations of students. One of respondent wanted to discuss career planning primarily with her mothers. Similarly, in the study of factors that influence children’s career choices, [22] found the mother as the most influential person adolescents talk to concerning their career choice. Mothers were cited as particularly influential because they provide support that eases children’s apprehensions about careers [23]. For example, in their study of career choice among a sample of South African students, [24] reported that their parents had a significant influence on their career decisions but mothers were more influential. This implies that mothers play a major role in career choice of their children.

In order for students to make the right career choice, the family (parents) should be encouraged not to force their children into careers. With parental guidance and support, children are able to make the right career choice. Teachers like parents work very closely with learners in schools and

they know the abilities of their students in various subjects. Therefore, teachers should guide their students in their career choice and aspirations in line with their abilities in various subjects. Schools need to provide career guidance to learners during their high school studies. The career guidance programmes guide learners in making their career choices and aspirations before entering university.

Evidently, career guidance offered in university must meet the occupational information's needs of students at various stages of their career development. Major approaches to deliver career guidance i.e. courses, workshops and seminars that offer structured group experiences in career planning, job-access skills and decision making; group counselling activities; individual counselling; placement programs, and automated placement services are necessary. In sum, substantial occupational information is an essential component of career development to help undergraduates make appropriate career life planning and decision making-which in turn could enhance their vocational identity. Taken together, the understanding of factors which contribute to career indecision among university students will provide insights for educators in improving the career developmental process.

Several factors in external category have been determinant as important factor influence students in career choice decision making. Salary has been rank as highest factors that influence in career choice decision making (see [1,10]). However, as time passes [1,25] claims initially, salary is ranked highly, but, other factors tend to crowd out salary in its importance. [18] claims career benefit such as economic stability, availability of job opportunities, image of profession, training and development, career growth prospects and job satisfaction were important factors in determining their choice of career.

The influence of gender factors already revealed career choice decision making literature. [26] revealed that male undergraduate students were more decided on their career choices when compared to female undergraduate students. Generally, male respondents experienced fewer difficulties than female respondents in career decision-making [27]. As for female undergraduates, they are more indecisive or undecided in the sense that they are less risk seeking [28]. Often, females are also more influenced by subjective norms and perceived-behavioural control [29]. For them, interdependence was also associated significantly with vocational commitment [30]. The respondent in this study views the influence of gender in different perspective. The male respondent chooses accounting as a career because of "sustainability" of the gender in the profession. Because of the perception on nature of work in accounting which always related to money, the male respondent may feel that he has to reduce "the control" of the opposite gender.

The findings have showed that, many influence's factors contributed to career choice decision making. The factors influence career decision among accounting students have been divided into external and internal factors. The internal factors are interest in the subject, self- perception, relationship with family and friends as well as lecturers. The external factors stated by respondents in this study are education attainment, salary, experiences from practical training, school and university's entry system and gender gap. However, the factors influence in career choice decision making may related to each other.

## **6. Limitation and suggestion for future research**

As the study is based at a single institution, the research strategy used does not allow for wider generalisation but provides an important insight into the career decision making of Malaysian students. The future research should wider to other public and private institution (universities) and more respondents. This study only focus on the factors influence the career choice in accounting field but do not touch on the factors or the reason why students are not interested in pursuing career in



accounting. This study also lends the idea of gender especially male respondent in different perspective. They felt threatened by the amount of female that already in the profession. The future research should discover why male less interested in the profession.

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