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# DEGREES OF CHOICE?

*Dominant theories on choice of higher education tend to regard students as rational consumers in an educational marketplace. Tracing the logic of student decision-making in South Africa shows the complexities of these processes*

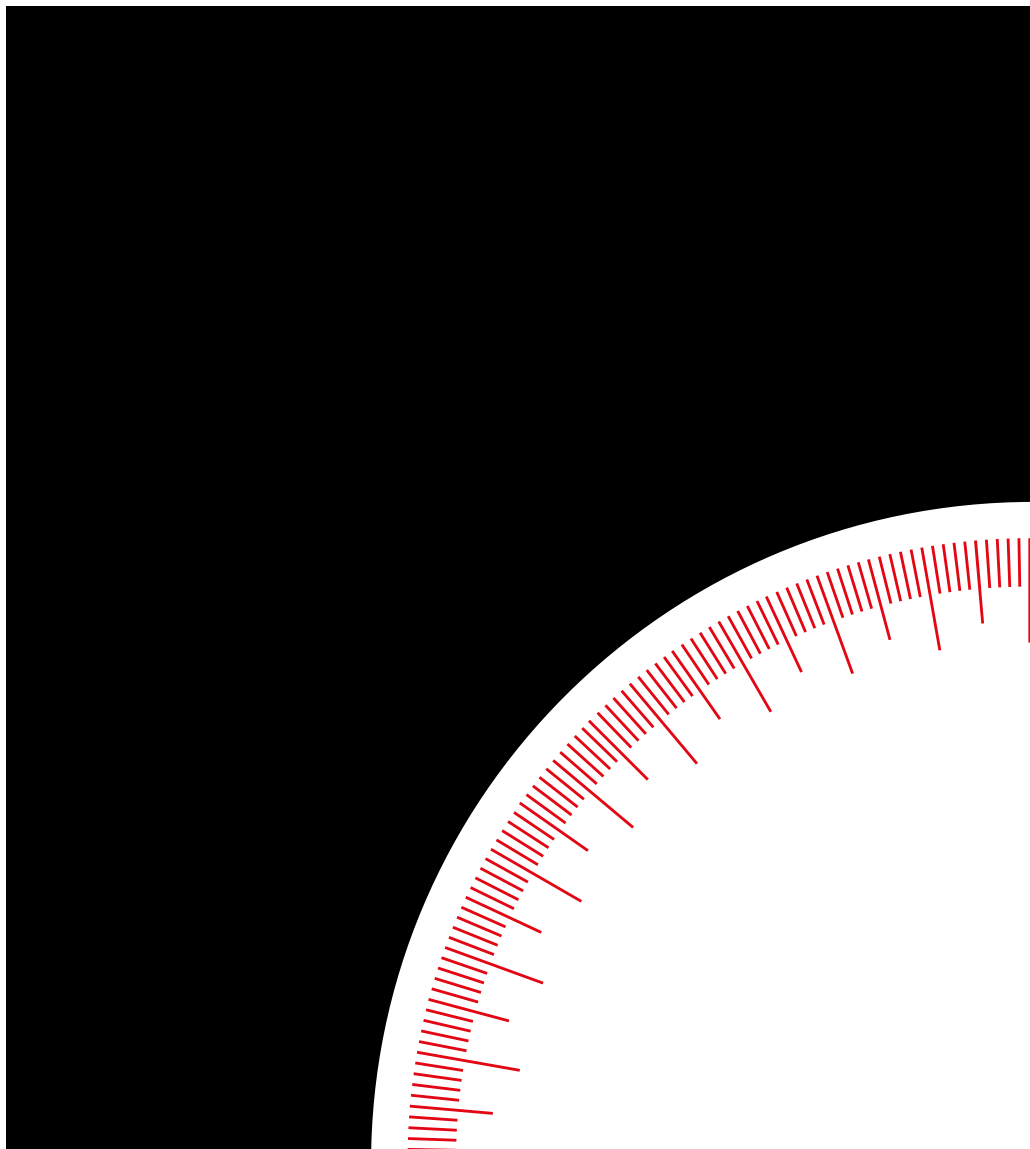
The notion of student choice holds a central position in the current discourse on higher education in South Africa. The transition from secondary to tertiary education is a critical branching point as decisions made by young people at this stage not only affect their own careers but equally determine the supply of skilled labour in the economy. In recent years, the field of student decision-making has received increased attention from researchers and policy-makers as a result of the rapidly changing educational landscape.

A number of studies on student choice have been conducted in South Africa, and the vast majority of these have used quantitative methods to examine why young people choose what they do. While they offer rigorous statistical evaluations of learners' rationale for choice of programme or institution, the question of how young people make these choices, and the nature of the actual decision-making process, has largely been left unaddressed. Instead much of the current research and policy literature typically rests on the implicit assumption of young people as technically rational consumers.

This approach has nonetheless attracted criticism for its narrow and overly economic scope. Some scholars have started to question whether aspiring students truly are as calculating as postulated by this body of literature (cf. Brown, 2012; van der Merwe, 2010). In this article I draw on a recent study of the underlying 'logic' of decision-making among university entrants in South Africa (Gausdal, 2013). Here, I challenge the hegemonic position of rational action theory in the South African research and policy discourse, focusing on cognitive processes of choice-making and thus capturing a richer picture of human behaviour.

## The making of choice in South Africa

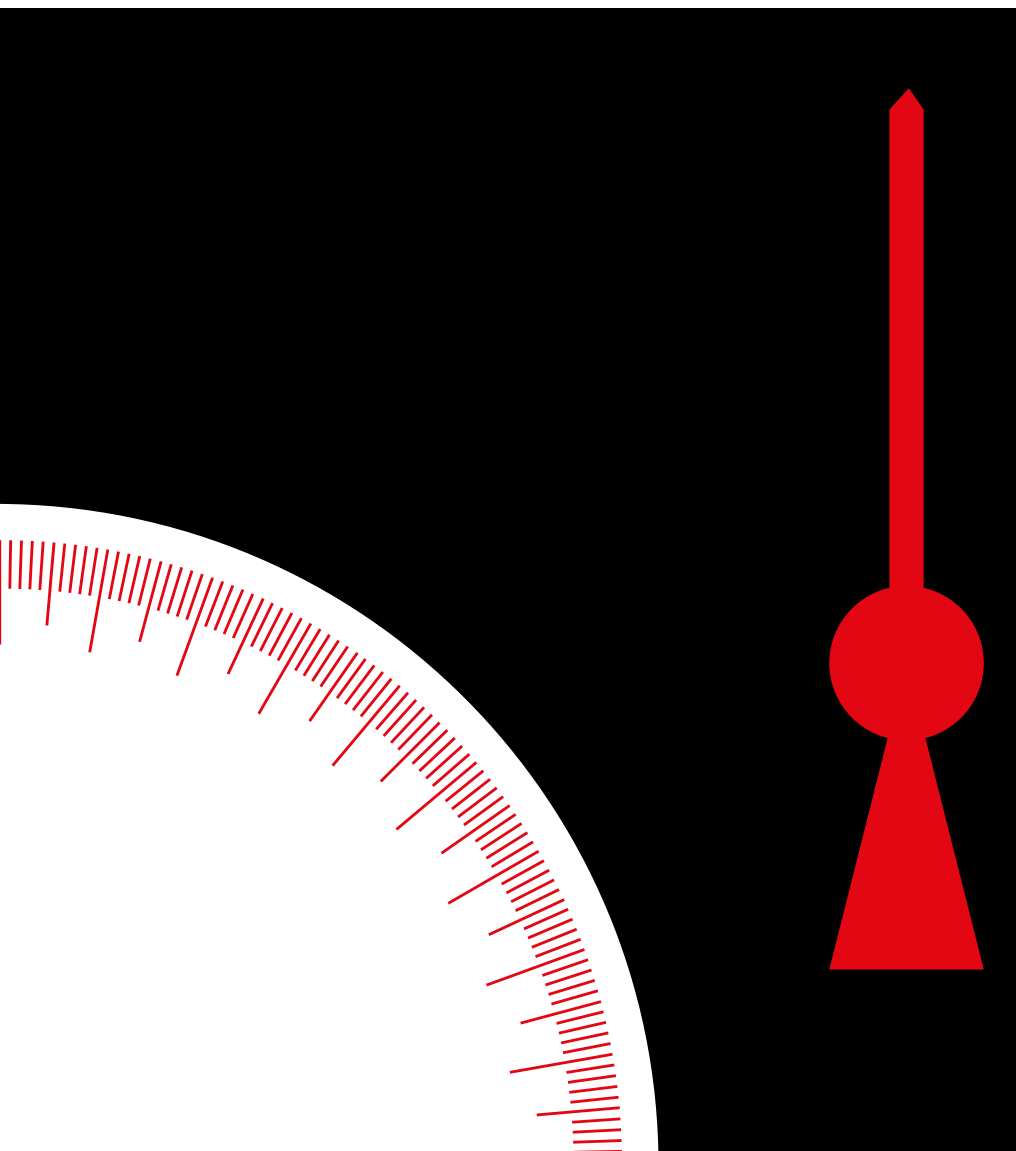
Researchers, policy-makers and university officials have started paying considerable attention to the choices made by prospective students. The origins of this burgeoning interest can partly be found in the changing educational landscape.



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Worldwide, the system of public higher education has gone through a process of unprecedented transformation in recent decades, including broadening access to higher education, changing student profile, increased marketisation of the education sector and growing institutional competition.

With the demise of the apartheid system in South Africa and the transition to democratic rule in 1994, the sector of higher education was finally opened up to previously excluded groups. The removal of the discriminatory admission policies of the past regime was accompanied by a general expansion of the system. While the number of students enrolled in public tertiary education was just past half a million in 1994, the figure was nearly 900 000 in 2011. The transition from an 'elite' to a 'mass' system of higher education led to an increased diversification of the student body, especially in terms of ethnicity, class and gender. The presence of women in public higher education increased from 43 per cent in 1988 to 57 per cent in 2010. Alongside the rapid growth of female entrants, the sector also witnessed a surge of students from previously disadvantaged racial groups. The proportion of non-white students in public higher education increased from 55 per cent in 1994 to 80 per cent in 2010 (DHET, 2012: 10-37; Subotzky, 2003: 362-365). These new and fairly swift changes have made the government cognisant of the need to strengthen the research on educational choice-making.

In parallel with the expansion of the education sector, the institutional landscape has witnessed significant changes. Public institutions now face increased competition from both foreign and private service providers. These institutions have, as a result, been forced to become more 'market-oriented' in order to attract the best students, thus paying greater attention to branding and marketing. As part of this process, university officials have recognised the importance of understanding the way in which young people make decisions about their future.

Within the dominant discourse on choice behaviour in higher education, there seems to be a growing tendency to regard aspiring students as autonomous consumers operating in an educational marketplace (van der Merwe, 2010). There is an implicit assumption that young people are rational and utility-maximising beings who 'assess their own abilities and interests, evaluate the range of opportunities which are available to them and then make a choice which matches ability to opportunity' (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997: 31).

There is also however increasing scepticism towards the belief in the idea of students' rational choice (Brown, 2012). The reliance on an overly individualistic and economic framework appears to have blurred the vision of researchers and policy-makers alike. Commenting on the current policy discourse, van der Merwe (2010) makes the point that:

South African higher education policy evidently assumes a human capital interpretation of the value of higher education. However, not much local evidence has been provided to support the human capital view that individuals enrol in higher education primarily on the basis of future earnings they expect to flow from such investments. [...] [T]he variability and unpredictability of human behaviour cannot comfortably be reconciled with the perfect knowledge and rationality that economic agents are assumed to possess in a neoclassical economic world' (van der Merwe, 2010: 81).

The inability of dominant choice theories to provide satisfactory frameworks has prompted calls for new and alternative approaches. The study I report on in this article set out to explore the finer nuances of the decision-making process, employing a qualitative framework.

### A qualitative approach to choice-making

The study was conducted using qualitative research methods in the form of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This enabled me to explore the context in which decision-making occurs. The investigations included a sample of 26 first-year students in the Civil Engineering and Social Care programmes at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) and the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). The social care cohort was made up of students from the Bachelors Degree of Social Work at UKZN and the National Diploma in Child and Youth Development at DUT, while the civil engineering cohort consisted of students from the Bachelors Degree of Civil Engineering at UKZN and the National Diploma in Civil Engineering at DUT. Pseudonyms were used for the participants in this study.

At the heart of the analysis lies the theoretical framework of 'pragmatic rationality'. The framework stems from the work by Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) on career decision-making among British youth. The approach describes decision-making in terms of three integrated dimensions. The first is that of pragmatically rational decision-making. It claims that while a decision involves some degree of rational calculation, it cannot be divorced from the life history of the person making it. Thus, decision-making is neither technically rational nor completely irrational. It is instead pragmatically rational.

The second dimension is concerned with the power relations existing among the participants in the field of higher education (Bourdieu, 1984). The structure of this field is governed by the degree of power (defined by cultural, economic and social capital) held by the different individuals. *Cultural capital* refers to the sum of symbolic (non-financial) elements such as skills, credentials, knowledge, tastes, attitudes and mannerisms that are acquired by belonging to a specific social class. *Economic capital* encompasses (material and financial) assets which are immediately convertible into monetary units. Finally, *social capital* is the aggregate of resources (actual or potential) accrued by virtue of membership in a group or social network. The composition of the different capitals determines the ability of the individuals to position themselves in the field and, in turn, influence the rules by which the field is governed (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997: 36).

The third dimension focuses on the notion of turning-points (Strauss, 1962). A turning-point takes place when an individual reconsiders or questions the status quo. It can, as a result, cause a significant transformation of identity. The process of choosing a career should therefore be read as an irregular pattern of experiences dispersed with turning-points.

### The logic of decision-making: pragmatic rationality?

I examined three key areas of student choice – how the decision to enrol in higher education was made; how the field of study was chosen; and finally, how students settled their choice of an institution.

The responses in the study outlined three main characteristics in the decision-making process. Firstly, the participants described a process in which they themselves were instrumental in making the decisions. Secondly, the students had largely rational reasons for making these decisions as they were based on evidence from lived experiences, either from first- or second-hand sources. Many of the students had been influenced by relatives or neighbours who worked in the same fields. This influence included both implicit inculcation of attitudes and values, and explicit transmission of information and knowledge. Thirdly, these choices were also pragmatic in the way that they were based on partial and highly localised information. The reliance on fragmented information was perhaps most explicit among the students from poor backgrounds who had attended ordinary public schools. Decisions were, in other words, shaped by the students' personal dispositions or habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). These dispositions had been moulded by their life histories and were situated in the context in which they, their families and friends lived. Within these horizons for action, the students made logical and rational choices. Hence, one could argue that they made pragmatically rational choices.






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These findings largely support the observations made by Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) about the nature of decision-making. This pattern of pragmatically rational choice-making was found in all of the 26 interviews, irrespective of ethnicity, social class, gender and discipline. This does not, however, imply that the students experienced the decision-making process in a similar way, or even that they entered the process on equal terms. On the contrary, the study illustrated how the participants were engaged in highly differentiated choice-making processes. This was, in turn, largely due to the unequal access to relevant information about the system of higher education.

The interviews showed how educational choices were shaped by interactions with others in the field of higher education. Within the field students came in contact with, and were subsequently influenced by, a large number of other actors. This included caregivers, siblings, peers, teachers and career guidance counsellors. The main differences in this regard were related to students' social and educational background. The middle-class students in the sample highlighted their own families as the most important source of influence. Following the definitions provided by Lareau (2011), 'middle-class' refers to households where at least one caregiver is 'employed in a position that either entails substantial managerial authority or which centrally draws upon highly complex, educationally certified skills' (Lareau, 2011: 365). Siya, one of the middle-class students in the civil engineering programme at DUT, described the significance of familial support in the following manner:

Dad used to be a principal at a school but now he is retired. ... And my mum is a nurse. Dad did his B-Ed [Bachelors of Education] at UJ [University of Johannesburg] and mum got her degree from UKZN... They know how learning systems operate and all that. If I phone them to tell them about my problems they can recall having similar problems when they were studying. That helps and it motivates me. ... The support they gave me was the most important thing because they understand. If my parents had not been exposed to higher education, they would not have been able to help me in the way they did.

The situation was significantly different for his working-class counterparts. The notion of 'working-class' refers to households where neither caregiver is 'employed in a middle-class position and at least one [caregiver] is employed in a position with little or no managerial authority and which does not draw on highly complex, educationally certified skills' (Lareau, 2011:365). In the absence of caregivers with experience from or relevant knowledge about the system of higher education, these students primarily relied on so-called 'informal' guidance provided by significant others in their community or, for those who had attended a well-resourced secondary school, from career education services in the formal school system.

The way the different participants experienced the decision-making process was, in other words, determined by their individual composition of social, cultural and economic resources. The social work cohort from UKZN provided an interesting case in this regard. All of the students came from relatively poor backgrounds and possessed little economic capital. They had largely been raised by individuals with low levels of formal education, and had all attended secondary schools with only a minimum of career guidance provision, resulting in low cultural capital. Consequently, the students had few people to consult about the system of higher education, which in turn led to low social capital. They were, in effect, forced to rely on themselves or on informal guidance from people in their community. A similar pattern was detected among the vast majority of the working-class students in the sample. The fact that over two-thirds of the sample was made up by students of working-class background explains the prevalence of this pattern.

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The study also documented that career decision-making was shaped by a series of turning-points. Over the course of a lifetime people experience a number of these moments, some more transformative than others. The analysis demonstrated how patterns of biographical discontinuity (Alheit, 1994) had affected choice of career paths. Many of the students had altered the course of their career after an encounter with an inspiring individual. This was particularly the case with the social care students. Others admitted to have been forced to change their plans due to external constraints, a common feature among the working-class students. The frequency of turning-points underlines the dynamic nature of the students' dispositions. Faith, one of the social work students at UKZN, explained how she had tried out different pathways since leaving school:

In 2010, I went to do IT at a private college here in Durban. [...] Why I choose IT? Because all my friends were doing IT and I thought I must do it too. Maybe I would enjoy it. I didn't know what IT was all about so I chose it. And then I got bored. I lasted only one year. [...] But the experience made me realise one important thing – that I like working with people. Helping people. That is why I decided to become a social worker. I wouldn't want to sit in an office all day working on a computer.

Mandla, another student from the same programme, described how a difficult episode at the end of secondary school had altered his trajectory completely:

In high school, I had a lot of bad friends. We were always drinking, smoking, skipping classes. I never thought about the future and what I wanted to be. I ended up failing grade 12 and was forced to repeat it. This was in 2009. Failing taught me an important lesson. I left my friends, many of them ended up dropping out of school. I'm not drinking alcohol anymore. I failed matric and that taught me a lesson that I needed to stop doing all of that, to get away from my old friends. I ended up choosing this course because I wanted to help people in a similar situation.

The responses from the students in the sample reveal the intricacies of the decision-making process. In contrast to the more dominant theoretical models on choice behaviour, the pragmatic rationality approach in this study recognises the unpredictable nature of educational decisions. The deliberately vague framework, seeking out the broader cognitive processes of choice, concedes that human behaviour cannot be fully comprehended through the lens of a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. It demonstrates, moreover, the futility of models that oversimplify or ignore the contextual complexities at which they are directed.

## Conclusion

In this article I have argued that the policy discourse on student decision-making in South Africa is founded on the false premise of rational choice behaviour. Drawing on a recent study of first-year university entrants, I have shown that their choices were neither rational in the technical sense nor the outcome of a planned, linear process. Instead their decisions were found to contain elements of both approaches, encapsulated in the concept of pragmatic rationality.

One of the implications of the misalignment between policy and reality has been the implementation of a series of the misguided career guidance reforms. I contend that attempts to improve the choice-making process will not succeed unless policy-makers in South Africa are willing to recognise the intricacies of the decision-making process, and to understand that providing young people with more information about higher education will not necessarily lead to sound and logical choice-making. At the time of writing it remains unclear whether the current government is prepared to alter the key principles guiding its education policies. Yet what does seem certain is that a sustained reluctance to act on this matter will prove detrimental to future generations of South Africans.



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## About the author

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## Keywords

student choice, higher education, research and policy discourse, pragmatic rationality