

Comparing levels of career indecision among selected honours degree students at the University of Pretoria

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Abstract

Career indecision plays a major role in the way students perceive their future career prospects and how they approach these prospects. In addition, career indecision influences career-related thoughts and decisions, and plays a role in the way students formulate career goals. A convenience sample from honours students in Accounting Sciences, Financial Management, Economics and Marketing was drawn and their levels of career indecision were measured using self-administered questionnaires. The study demonstrates that differences exist between students whose employment status differs, and those who were studying for different degrees. Consequently, this study has vital implications for groups (such as career counsellors and educational institutions) involved in the career decision-making processes of university students.

Key words

Accounting

Career

Career indecision

Career uncertainty

Chartered accountant

Degree of study

Economics

Employment

Management

Marketing

Students

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1 Introduction

A number of studies have been conducted to determine, analyse and explain students' perceptions of career opportunities (Germeijs & De Boeck 2003; Morgan & Ness 2003; Myburgh 2005; Tien 2005; Agarwala 2008). Many students perceive their career prospects

with a great deal of uncertainty, which affects the way in which they perceive their future career prospects, how they approach these careers and how they anticipate advancing in those careers (Counsell 1996; Gordon & Meyer 2002; Morgan & Ness 2003; Ng, Burke & Fiksenbaum 2008). More importantly, career uncertainty is a major precursor for career indecision because students facing uncertainty often become indecisive about their careers, which negatively affects their ability to make sound career-related decisions (Elyadi 2006). Understanding career indecision and its contributory factors might help students, academic departments and educational institutions to formulate effective strategies to enhance students' chances of career advancement.

Previous studies have focused on analysing the sources of career indecision and investigated specific contributory factors in career indecision (Gati & Saka 2001; Gordon & Meyer 2002; Roland 2004; Tien 2005; Esters 2007). These studies found that a critical factor in the reduction of career indecision was the process of gathering information relating to career alternatives. Furthermore, these studies suggested that a student's choice of degree of study (indicating vocational choice) and current employment status (working full time, part time or not working at all) played a role in either increasing or decreasing the levels of career indecision.

The purpose of the study, on which this article reports, is twofold. The first aim is to determine whether there are differences in the levels of career indecision experienced by students studying for different degrees (specifically Accounting Sciences, Financial Management, Economics and Marketing Management). Owing to the nature of the convenience sample and limited access to honours classes, students from only four of the available degrees of study could be included in the study. The second aim is to determine whether there are differences in the levels of career indecision experienced by students with differing employment status. The article commences with an examination of career uncertainty and career indecision as related concepts. This is followed by a description of the research aim and methodology, after which the results are presented and discussed. Finally, the article concludes by outlining the limitations of the study and making recommendations for possible future research.

2 Literature review

Although many studies have revolved around the broad theme of career indecision, most have failed to clearly define the construct (Gati & Saka 2001; Tien 2001; Morgan & Ness 2003; Tien 2005). Furthermore, some studies seem to confuse the construct "career uncertainty" with "career indecision" and treat them as the same (Orndorff & Herr 1996; Gordon & Meyer 2002; Morgan & Ness 2003). Although career indecision and career uncertainty are closely related, they differ in terms of meaning and it can be stated that career uncertainty is a contributory variable in creating career indecision in students.

2.1 Career uncertainty

To understand the construct "career uncertainty", it is necessary to understand how a decision is made. Decision making is a multidimensional construct, comprising two principal perspectives, namely the consequentialist and the nonconsequentialist perspective (Elyadi 2006).

The consequentialist perspective describes decision making as an analytical process based on expected outcomes and probabilities of choice. Before making a decision, an individual considers the impact and likelihood of the expected outcomes and tries to predict the probability of each separate outcome as well as how favourable or unfavourable each outcome is (London 1983).

The consequentialist perspective postulates that decision making is a process of cognitive evaluations which form the basis of the way individuals process a choice, as well as the level of risk associated with that choice (Elyadi 2006). Previous research has shown that individuals who lack the means or ability to make these consequentialist decisions may experience elevated levels of uncertainty (Gati & Saka 2001; Gordon & Meyer 2002; Germeijs & De Boeck 2003; Morgan & Ness 2003; Tien 2005). One should bear in mind that this perspective does not in any way propose that emotions are not related to decision making, but suggests that emotions occur as a result of the decision-making process (Elyadi 2006).

The nonconsequentialist perspective on decision making suggests that individuals make decisions on the basis of how they feel or in terms of their emotional responses. This perspective views the risk associated with a decision as an overwhelming feeling, as opposed to making decisions based on the probability of an expected outcome or utility (Elyadi 2006). One may infer from this that decision making is influenced by both anticipated and experienced emotions.

Many authors have attempted to define the construct “career uncertainty”, but their definitions do not seem to cover the full scope of the construct (Smits, Bryan & McLean 1996:306; Orndorff & Herr 1996:639; Counsell 1996:34). The most appropriate and simplistic definition of career uncertainty can be found in the study by Tien (2005:2), who defines it as “... any factors that make an individual feel uncertain of their career future”.

Despite the factors influencing career uncertainty, many situations may also contribute to this uncertainty. Some believe that the greatest contributors to career uncertainty are the difficulties individuals experience when trying to make career-related decisions. Previous research has indicated that a person’s ability to make difficult career-related decisions is negatively correlated with career uncertainty (Morgan & Ness 2003; Tien 2005). Career decision-making difficulties reflect the lack of essential elements necessary to make the right decision (Tien 2001:87). These elements can be best explained by utilising the taxonomy of difficulties in career decision making as developed by Gati, Krausz and Osipow (Gati & Saka 2001:332). The elements in the taxonomy are consistent with the factors of career uncertainty.

The taxonomy makes a distinction between career decision-making difficulties occurring before the decision-making process and decision-making difficulties occurring during the process (Morgan & Ness 2003). These factors can be subdivided into lack of readiness, lack of information and inconsistent information (Gati & Saka 2001). The lack of readiness subfactor accounts for the career decision-making difficulties that might occur before individuals engage in the career decision-making process. The second and third subfactors, namely lack of information and inconsistent information, refer to difficulties that individuals may experience during the decision-making process (Morgan & Ness 2003).

2.2 Career indecision

The studies by Gati and Saka (2001), Tien (2001) and Morgan and Ness (2003) suggest that career decision-making difficulties may lead an individual to becoming completely indecisive about his or her career. Other research findings determined that students prefer choice in selecting subjects, but within limits, and they do appear to place value on guidance and direction (Ackerman & Gross 2006).

When facing a significant decision, the ensuing negative emotions may be so strong that an individual is unable to clearly engage in the cognitive evaluation process and is unable to make a decision. This state is known as indecision, and indecisive people often find it hard to commit to their decisions and may even overturn them (Charan, in Elyadi 2006). Elyadi (2006:1367) defines indecision as a state that occurs "... when an individual is facing a difficult decision that has no clear easy choice". Elyadi (2006) also identifies the following mediating factors that may influence the level of indecision: personal perceptions; values; personal preferences; emotional reactions; and self-efficacy expectations.

Jones (Elyadi 2006) categorises a person's decisional state into four subtypes, namely decided-comfortable, decided-uncomfortable, undecided-comfortable and undecided-uncomfortable. It is the latter that is the most pertinent to this study. The undecided element suggests that one is stuck in the decision-making process. The uncomfortable element points to the negative emotions experienced before, after or during the decision-making process.

Career indecision is regarded as a multidimensional, complex construct, represented by different forms of indecision. For the purposes of this study, career indecision will be defined, according to Morgan and Ness (2003:33), as "... the inability to resolve one or more [career] decision-making difficulties".

From the factors of career indecision one can deduce that a critical area in career decision making is the process of gathering information about career alternatives. This process is known as career exploration, which is defined as the self-evaluation and external activities that provide individuals with information to progress in the selection of, entry into and adjustment to an occupation (Esters 2007:2). The purpose of career exploration is to collect and analyse career-related information to enable the individual to make optimal career-related decisions and effectively reduce career indecision.

Self-knowledge is one contributing factor to individuals' awareness and understanding of themselves. Skills relating to individual self-management are essential for adapting effective career management strategies such as engaging in realistic goal setting and adapting effective career strategies such as mentoring, attending workshops on both task-related and development issues. The findings of a study by Anakwe, Hall and Schor (2000) showed that increased self-knowledge fostered career decision making.

Many authors use the terms "career uncertainty", "career decision-making difficulties" and "career indecision" interchangeably. For the purposes of this study it is necessary to clearly distinguish between these concepts. Career indecision or being indecisive means that an individual is stuck in the career decision-making process, that he or she is incapable of coming to a decision, whereas decision-making difficulties refer to the lack of essential elements necessary to make the right decision (Tien 2001:87; Elyadi 2006:1372). Career uncertainty, however, is merely a feeling or emotion an individual has in relation to his or her career or vocational future.

3 Aim of the research

Many studies have investigated career choice factors for different professions, focusing on what determinants most significantly influence the decision to pursue a specific career (Gul, Andrews, Leong & Ismail 1989; Bundy & Norris 1992; Felton, Buhr & Northey 1994; Järlström 2000; Agarwala 2008; Ng *et al.* 2008). Findings from several international studies showed that a difference in levels of career indecision existed among students who were studying for different degrees, and those whose current employment status differed (Neapolitan 1992; Roland 2004; Esters 2007).

No evidence of previous studies conducted in South Africa could be found that could confirm the findings of previous international studies as discussed above. Based on this, the following research hypotheses were formulated for application in a South African environment:

- H₁: There is a significant difference in the levels of career indecision experienced by students studying for degrees in Accounting Sciences, Financial Management, Economics and Marketing Management.
- H₂: There is a significant difference in the levels of career indecision experienced by students who work full time, part time or who do not work at all.

4 Methodology

4.1 Sampling

The target population for the proposed study consisted of postgraduate students from the Departments of Accounting Sciences, Financial Management, Economics and Marketing Management in the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences at the University of Pretoria. The students who participated in this study were studying full time or part time and were enrolled for a Bachelor of Commerce honours degree.

A convenience sample was drawn by distributing questionnaires in lecture venues where the compulsory subjects for the respective degrees of study were held. This method effectively isolated the target population from the general population of students at the University. The realised sample included only four of the available honours degree programmes in the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences. Besides general constraints such as time and money, the sample was also affected by a decision of the Ethics Committee to limit data collection to one Faculty, as well as the lack of permission from individual lecturers in the Faculty for data collection in class.

4.2 Data collection and measurement instrument

The initial questionnaire was pretested with a convenience sample of 20 students using the collaborative participant pretesting method described by Cooper and Schindler (2006:396). Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to 250 students and a final sample of 202 was realised. The Career Decision Scale (CDS), developed by Osipow, Carney, Winer, Yanico and Koschier (Walsh & Osipow 1988:46), was used to assess respondents' levels of career uncertainty and career indecision. The CDS consisted of 18 items measuring the degree to which respondents viewed the individual career items pertaining to their situation (Walsh & Osipow 1988:46). The first two items described career uncertainty and the next

16 items dealt with the components of career indecision. The entire scale was presented in the form of a four-point Likert-type scale with scale points ranging from “not like me” (1) to “exactly like me” (4). Use of the CDS was considered appropriate on the basis of the reliability results by Guerra and Braungart-Rieker (1999:258) which indicated a Cronbach alpha value of 0.90.

It is worth noting that the career uncertainty scale measures two separate constructs and that career uncertainty and career indecision are not subdimensions of a single construct in this regard. The original CDS only measured career indecision, but the career uncertainty construct was retained because of a suggestion by Carney, that adding the two items on career uncertainty would “... give respondents who are not uncertain a chance to say so” (Walsh & Osipow 1988:46). The first two items in the questionnaire were also included to serve as an informal validation check because they should always correlate positively with items 3 to 18 (Walsh & Osipow 1988:46). The first two items, which measured career uncertainty, were thus retained in the measurement instrument, but were not used in any formal hypothesis testing. Cronbach’s alpha was used to measure the internal consistency of the career indecision items, which resulted in a reliability result of 0.86.

5 Results

As illustrated in Table 1 below, the sample of 202 was slightly dominated by females (58.4%) and by respondents who were studying Accounting Sciences (33.2%). Respondents who were not working at all made up the majority of the sample (52%), whereas 32.2% of respondents were working part time and 15.8% full time.

Table 1 Demographic profile of respondents

| Demographic variables | <i>n</i> | % |
|--------------------------|------------|--------------|
| Gender | 201 | 99.5 |
| Male | 83 | 41.1 |
| Female | 118 | 58.4 |
| Employment status | 202 | 100.0 |
| Working full time | 32 | 15.8 |
| Working part time | 65 | 32.2 |
| Not working at all | 105 | 52.0 |
| Degree of study | 202 | 100.0 |
| Accounting Sciences | 67 | 33.2 |
| Financial Management | 37 | 18.3 |
| Economics | 48 | 23.8 |
| Marketing Management | 50 | 24.8 |

Note: Totals may not add up to 100% owing to missing responses.

5.1 Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 explored whether the levels of career indecision experienced by students in different fields of study were different. The various Bachelor of Commerce honours degrees included in the sample were Accounting Sciences, Financial Management, Economics and Marketing Management.

This two-tailed (nondirectional) hypothesis was tested at a 95% confidence level using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test. One-way ANOVA has two assumptions, namely normality and equality of variance for all populations (Green & Salkind 2003;

Pallant 2005). The assumption of normality was tested by means of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and the results indicated a substantial departure from normality. A decision was therefore made to use the nonparametric alternative, namely the Kruskal-Wallis test.

The Kruskal-Wallis test revealed an overall significant difference of $p=0.001$ ($df=3$) between the groups. This was followed by pairwise comparisons (using the Mann-Whitney U test) to determine where the group differences lay (Green & Salkind 2003). The Bonferroni approximation was used across the follow-up tests to control for Type 1 error, and a revised alpha value (α) therefore had to be calculated and assigned to the follow-up tests (Green & Salkind 2003). The Bonferroni correction indicated that the follow-up test results were significant when $p<0.0083$. Table 2 depicts the results of the follow-up Mann-Whitney tests and significant results are indicated in bold.

Table 2 Results of the Mann-Whitney U follow-up tests for Hypothesis 1

| Pairwise comparisons | Mann-Whitney U | p value |
|---|------------------|--------------|
| Accounting Sciences and Financial Management | 493 | 0.001 |
| Accounting Sciences and Economics | 1015 | 0.001 |
| Accounting Sciences and Marketing Management | 930 | 0.001 |
| Economics and Financial Management | 611 | 0.014 |
| Economics and Marketing Management | 1091 | 0.438 |
| Financial Management and Marketing Management | 689 | 0.043 |

From Table 2 it can be seen that there is a significant difference between three of the groups ($p<0.0083$). More specifically, a significant difference existed between respondents who studied for an honours degree in Accounting Sciences compared to the rest of the groups in the sample. Based on these results, there is support for the alternative hypothesis, which suggests that a student’s degree of study may have an impact on his or her levels of career indecision. The findings specifically indicate that students studying for a Bachelor of Commerce honours degree in Accounting Sciences generally showed lower levels of career indecision than all the other degrees of study surveyed, namely Economics, Financial Management and Marketing Management.

5.2 Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 was concerned with comparing the levels of career indecision experienced by students with differing employments status, namely those working full time, those working part time and those who were not working at all. Table 3 indicates the spread of respondents in terms of employment status across the different degrees of study.

Table 3 Employment status across degree of study

| DEGREE | Full-time work (%) | Part-time work (%) | Not working (%) | TOTAL (%) |
|----------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------|-----------|
| Accounting Sciences | 0.0 | 11.9 | 88.1 | 100.0 |
| Financial Management | 29.2 | 39.6 | 31.3 | 100.0 |
| Economics | 13.5 | 51.4 | 35.1 | 100.0 |
| Marketing Management | 26.0 | 38.0 | 36.0 | 100.0 |

From Table 3 it is evident that none of the Accounting Sciences students were involved in full-time work – probably because their degree programme involved full-time study. Few of the Accounting Sciences students, however, were involved in part-time work (11.9%).

Based on these statistics, a decision was made to exclude the Accounting Sciences students from further analysis, because the researchers felt that the hypothesis testing result would not represent an accurate picture in terms of students who work versus those who do not work.

As in Hypothesis 1, this nondirectional hypothesis was also tested at a 5% level of significance. Similarly, the appropriate statistical test was one-way ANOVA, provided that its assumptions could be satisfied. Once again, the assumption of normality was tested by means of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for normality, indicating a substantial departure from normality. The researchers therefore decided to use the Kruskal-Wallis test as a nonparametric alternative. The overall Kruskal-Wallis test result showed a significant difference ($p=0.025$; $df=2$) and pairwise follow-up comparisons between the groups were conducted. Three Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted as follow-up tests, and the results are represented in Table 4.

Table 4 Results of the Mann-Whitney U follow-up tests for Hypothesis 2

| Pairwise comparisons | Mann-Whitney U | p value |
|--|------------------|--------------|
| Working full time and working part time | 629 | 0.015 |
| Working full time and not working at all | 527 | 0.034 |
| Working part time and not working at all | 1288 | 0.881 |

The results from Table 4 indicate that those students working full time, differed significantly from both the part-time workers ($p=0.015$) and those not working at all ($p=0.034$). Based on these results, there is support for the alternative hypothesis, which suggests that there is a significant difference in career indecision experienced by students who work full time (mean=1.78) and those who work part time (mean=2.01) or not at all (mean=2.01), with the full-time workers exhibiting lower levels of career indecision. This is in line with the findings of international studies, which indicated that students who were not working at all displayed higher levels of career indecision than those who were working full time (Neapolitan 1992; Roland 2004). There is thus no significant difference between students who work part time and those who do not work at all.

6 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made in terms of the role that both industry and educational providers can play to improve the career decision-making processes of prospective and current students. Several authors have also suggested that industry as well as educational providers (at both school and university level) should be involved in the career decision making of these individuals (Gault, Redington & Schlager 2000; Callanan & Benzing 2004; Myburgh 2005; Esters 2007; Paulins 2008).

6.1 The role of industry

The first finding of this study indicates that students studying for a Bachelor of Commerce honours degree in Accounting Sciences show lower levels of career indecision than students in all the other honours degrees of study that were surveyed, namely Financial Management, Economics and Marketing Management. The reasons for this are not clear and one could speculate on possible contributing factors. One reason could be the existence of an extremely active professional body in the accounting profession, namely the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (SAICA), which provides ongoing professional

education, career guidance and networking opportunities (SAICA 2008). SAICA is actively involved in guiding accounting education while involving different role players such as government, schools and universities in addressing issues present in the industry.

It is interesting to note that the three disciplines that showed high levels of career indecision among their fourth-year students all have industry bodies, none of which seems to be as active as SAICA. Financial Management is guided by the Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) Institute in South Africa, a body that promotes the highest standards of professional excellence and integrity (The Chartered Financial Analyst 2008). Economics has a society known as the Economic Society of South Africa (ESSA), which only acts as a discussion forum for economists in academic life, government and business (The Economic Society of South Africa 2008). Marketing Management finally saw the long-awaited Marketing Association of South Africa launched in 2007 after being left without a representative body when the previous Marketing Federation of South African went bankrupt a few years ago (Marsland 2007). Unfortunately, none of these industry bodies seems to be actively involved in curriculum or educational development, as is the case with SAICA, leading to the conclusion that an industry body that is active in tertiary education may help to lower levels of career indecision among students.

The second finding of this study indicates a significant difference in career indecision experienced by students who work full time versus those who work part time or not at all (excluding the Accounting Sciences students). This supports the findings of previous research, which reported that students who were not working at all, generally exhibited higher levels of career indecision than those who worked full time (Neapolitan, 1992; Roland, 2004). The industry may also wish to consider offering holiday work or internship opportunities to ensure that students gain experience in a field relating to their degree of study.

The findings of a study by Gault *et al.* (2000:45) determined that there were significant early career advantages for students with internship experience. This suggests that organisations should provide practical exposure to students as part of a degree programme because this will give them with an indication of what a career in their chosen field of study entails. The findings of a study by Callanan and Benzing (2004) support the availability of internships because the findings show that the completion of an internship programme during the undergraduate years is a useful strategy in helping secure a career-oriented decision after graduation. Even a recent study, conducted in the marketing field, confirms that academic marketing programmes should be positioned to form positive relationships with industry internship placements and potential entry-level employers (Paulins 2008). During internship programmes, students are afforded the opportunity to initiate and complete projects on which they subsequently receive evaluation and feedback, which tends to enhance the interns' satisfaction levels.

The value of an internship programme lies in its design to allow student interns a variety of independent and collaborative work tasks, initiation and completion of projects, and an opportunity to network with colleagues in an environment in which continual feedback on progress and work performance is provided. One programme that is proving to be highly successful is the Standard Banking Group Internship programme whereby Standard Bank offers two-month internships at undergraduate second-year level (Vala 2008). This programme gives students real-life business experience by allowing them to solve real business problems. It also allows them to identify their strengths and weaknesses to

determine whether they still feel that a career in financial services is where they want to be. Should they decide that this is not the sector for them, the internship is still valuable in the sense that it assists them in being work ready, but more importantly provides them with the tools to make correct choices (thus lowering career indecision) before finishing their degrees and entering the workforce.

6.2 *The role of educational providers*

The findings of this study suggest that schools and tertiary educational institutions should work closer together to inform and educate prospective students about career prospects and how to make career choices. This could include elements such as awareness of the attributes employers seek; a detailed analysis of the typical types of jobs and the availability of these jobs associated with specific degrees of study; and the industry standard remuneration associated with these jobs. This could empower current and prospective students to make informed decisions about their degrees of study and ultimately their careers, which could help to minimise career indecision (as seems to be the case with the Accounting Sciences students in this study).

Career guidance enhances a person's career development and enables an individual to make more effective career-related decisions (Esters 2007). This includes a variety of activities that help people develop self-awareness and vocational knowledge, learn career decision-making skills and adjust to occupational choices after they have been implemented. At secondary level, career guidance teachers should provide more information to enlighten students about the pros and cons of each profession (Myburgh 2005). The findings of the study could have implications for vocational guidance and counselling among learners aspiring to a career in economics and management. By gaining insight into how confident learners are about career decisions, an effort could be made to guide learners towards more realistic career choices. Hence it is possible that career guidance programmes could be designed to help prospective students resolve certain kinds of career indecision.

Because universities are facing a growing problem of placing graduates in an extremely competitive employment market, tertiary institutions may want to consider a strategy of investment in career development for students in Economic and Management Sciences. In general, the number of graduates in the labour market has increased, resulting in an oversupply of applicants for graduate placements, especially in areas such as marketing (Mokgata 2008). The Accounting profession is probably the exception because a shortage of accountants is currently being experienced (Van Zyl 2007; Temkin 2008), which may be another contributing factor to the lower levels of career indecision identified in this study. This imbalance between supply and demand may be a signal to universities (including course administrators and curriculum designers) to invest resources in programmes that optimise students' job-seeking success, while also imparting career management skills to graduates. One element of this strategy could be to implement a career development subject at tertiary level. A similar strategy was implemented in 2002 at the Victoria University in Melbourne designed to extend job search skills, self-awareness and strategies for the achievement of employment goals. The results of the programme showed that students perceived the subject to be extremely valuable to their career prospects (Miller & Liciardi 2003).

Another contributing factor to the lower levels of career indecision experienced among Accounting Sciences students may be that these students are better informed about what the career of an accountant entails. The findings of previous studies have shown that the provision of adequate information about a career has been found to be critical in the reduction of career indecision (Roland 2004; Esters 2007). One also tends to believe that Accounting Science students may have a more realistic perspective of what the profession entails. This viewpoint stems from the findings of several studies which showed that there is a highly significant association between senior students' estimation of ratio of benefits to costs and the choice of whether or not to become a Chartered Accountant (Felton, Dimnik & Northey 1995; Ahmed, Alam & Alam 1997; Chen, Jones & McIntyre 2005). Felton *et al.*'s (1995) study specifically indicated that Chartered Accountant (CA) students indicate higher assessments of both benefits and costs, and the ratio of benefits to costs for CA students ultimately outweighs that of their non-CA counterparts.

Several years ago, two studies addressed the issue of the relative importance of criteria that motivated students to select Accounting Sciences instead of other majors such as Marketing and Management. Both studies determined that job availability ranked at the top of the respondents' list of benefits (Kochanek & Norgaard 1985; Haswell & Holmes 1988). Recently, Myburgh's (2005) study confirmed that students ranked availability of employment as the most important benefit of a CA career and employment security as the second most important. Linked to this, various studies have reported that financial remuneration ranked high on the list of decisive factors and influenced individuals' decisions to pursue the Accounting Sciences as a discipline (Gul *et al.* 1989; Felton *et al.* 1994).

Unfortunately, it would seem that some of the other student groups included in the study may have had limited information on, and less clear perspectives of their careers. As a result, they have to rely on other sources of information, one of which is their own perceptions of the different occupations and professions in their field, and these perceptions are not always accurate (Vala 2008). One could infer from the above that a career in CA offers the security of job availability as well as proper financial remuneration. If one, for example, compares this to a career in Marketing, it would be difficult to provide a short list of the typical marketing jobs, the availability of these marketing-related jobs and the financial remuneration of these jobs, because the marketing industry offers a wide variety of different jobs at different levels (Broadbridge 2003). Also, an Accounting Sciences graduate's career path is laid out for him or her from the moment he or she graduates (Garrun 2008), whereas a Marketing graduate can follow many directions before becoming a marketing executive. He or she may start his or her career as a sales representative, advertising assistant or even a general office help. This is evident in the findings of a study by Broadbridge (2003), which indicated that marketing students do not really understand what a marketing management job entails or even the variety of career opportunities it offers. Marketing graduates' career paths are thus pretty flexible and they do not necessarily know if they will become a marketing executive one day or end up in distribution, marketing research, advertising, brand management or any of the many areas of marketing. This indicates a need for educational providers and industry to play a more dominant role in students' career development.

7 Limitations of this study and directions for future research

Owing to the nature of nonprobability sampling, the respondents were not representative of the broad South African student population, and the results could not therefore be generalised to the entire population and should be interpreted with caution. Furthermore, the sample was drawn from a single institution in a specific faculty and the results may not even apply to all students in that faculty. For example, a number of students apply for admission to the BCom Accounting Sciences degree, and some are accepted and others not. Those who have been accepted would probably have a higher entry-level score and therefore a clearer career focus. Those who are not accepted (but may set their hearts on it) into the BCom Accounting Sciences degree because of a lower entry-level score, would necessarily be less certain of their career opportunities because they would now probably enrol for a degree that would not be their first choice. To address this situation, future samples could consider subsamples that are more comparable in terms of admission requirements such as comparing different degrees in the same faculty with the same entry requirements (entry-level score) or comparing different degrees in different faculties with the same entry requirements (high entry-level score). It is therefore recommended that a national sample be obtained involving a larger number of students from a wider array of degree programmes and universities. In addition, attention could be focused on ethnicity as a potential factor in career exploration and development.

It is recommended that further research be conducted on why students in certain degree programmes display lower or higher levels of career indecision. This study did not uncover why these differences exist and it is recommended that further research be conducted into determining the specific reasons for these differences. Knowledge of these differences could help guidance counsellors to assist students in making career-related decisions, or assist educational institutions on how to lower career indecision in degree programmes with high levels of career indecision. Career guidance could, for example, include the use of learning activities that help to facilitate students' use of career information, or teach students how to acquire occupational information and assess its personal relevance. Further research could be conducted to determine whether the students' career expectations were met during the course of their studies, and even at a later stage, when they are employed in industry.

Future researchers could consider the feasibility of a longitudinal study to assess the changes in individual students' perceptions from high school to final-year students. This study interviewed honours students and another possibility would be to confirm the lower levels of career indecision prevalent among first-, second-, and third-year Accounting students in the Accounting Sciences. This would be necessary because of the contradictory findings of previous studies not agreeing whether Accounting Sciences students decide on their careers prior to embarking on tertiary education or only during their first and second years of their tertiary education (Paollilo & Estes 1982; Hermanson, Hermanson & Ivancevich 1995; Sale 2001; Nelson, Vendorsyk, Quirin & Allen 2002; Myburgh 2005; Chen, Jones & McIntyre 2008).

8 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine whether differences exist in the levels of career indecision experienced by students studying for different degrees and by students with

differing employment status. The principal findings showed that there were differences among students from different fields of study and employment status. Career indecision plays a role in the way students formulate career goals, influences career-related thoughts and decisions, and is an effective indicator of how optimistic or pessimistic students are about their future careers. Understanding career indecision and its contributory factors might help students and educational institutions to formulate effective strategies that they could use to enhance students' chances of career advancement. Managing one's career requires individuals to take responsibility for their careers, but educational institutions and industry should become partners and provide resources to enable students to make informed career decisions.

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