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Determinants of first-year students' career path in Ghana

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Abstract. A successful career chosen by the student is the essential component in academic success. The aim of this study was to examine the determinants of first-year students' career paths in Ghana. The study was underpinned by Trait and Factor Theory (TFT), Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), and the theory of planned behaviour (TPB). The study was based on interpretive philosophical assumptions, and a qualitative approach was used to investigate the factors that influence the choice of career path of first-year university students in Ghana. All in all, 36 students were purposefully selected in three focus groups. The study found that socioeconomic, educational, sociocultural, and individual factors were the key determinants of a student's career path. The study concluded that students from wealthy backgrounds have greater flexibility in choosing career paths that align with their interests than those from lower-income backgrounds. Again, it was revealed that students' personal values and desires have a positive impact on their career paths.

Keywords. Career path, Ghana, First-year student

Introduction

Student transition to the world of work is critical when career choice is effectively followed. Career paths play an essential role in shaping students transition into their professional lives (Owusu, Essel-Anderson, Kwakye, Bekoe, & Ofori, 2018). The determinants of career path have been studied using theories of career choice (Owusu et al., 2018; Wen et al., 2015). However, Agarwala (2008) investigated the importance of personality factors in choosing a vocation, while Gore, Holmes, Smith, Southgate, and Albright (2015) and Jackling and Keneley (2009) concentrated on how socioeconomic status affected students' career decisions. Joshi and Kuhn (2011) considered university students' perceptions and how their self-efficacy affected their choice of career. Wen et al.'s (2015) work focused on how family expectations impact students' choice of major, whereas Bajunirwe, Semakula, and Izudi (2022) and Zbilgin et al. (2005) assessed how gender influences career choices.

Empirical studies have shown that students career choices are normally made within these contextual factors, which include socioeconomic, educational, individual, sociocultural,

and external (Gore et al., 2015; Owusu et al., 2018; Scott & Kahn, 2017; Watt et al., 2012). Socioeconomic factors frequently influence students' opportunities, career aspirations, and access to resources in Ghana (Kobia-Acquah, Owusu, Akuffo, Koomson, & Pascal, 2020). An important consideration in choosing a career is the family income. When choosing a career path, students from low-income families may give priority to financial security and the chance for career advancement (Siddiky & Akter, 2021). They might have a stronger preference for occupations that can generate income right away and offer them job opportunities to ease their financial burdens (Siddiky & Akter, 2021). Students from wealthier backgrounds may, on the other hand, have the freedom to consider factors other than financial rewards when considering a variety of career options (Bajunirwe et al., 2022; Rukewe et al., 2017). However, Porter and Woolley (2014) asserted that the professional experiences of parents can affect how exposed their children are to different careers and how they can offer advice based on those experiences. Higher-educated parents may stress the importance of education and encourage their kids to pursue careers requiring more education (Kobia-Acquah et al., 2020; Owusu et al., 2018).

According to Kobia-Acquah et al. (2020), the variety of subjects offered—including science, the arts, business, and technical subjects—can affect students' preferences and aptitudes. Differences in subject availability and instructional quality can have an impact on students' perceptions of and tendencies towards career paths. However, Owusu et al. (2018) and Porter and Woolley (2014) were of the view that the accessibility and efficacy of career guidance and counselling services provided by schools have an influence on students' career choices. With the help of experienced counsellors, tools for career exploration, and exposure to various career paths, students can make informed decisions.

Olmos-Gómez, Luque-Suárez, Becerril-Ruiz, and Cuevas-Rincón (2021) and Rabi, Abubakar, and Ibrahim (2017), asserted that gender stereotypes have a significant influence on how students choose their careers. For instance, due to societal expectations and traditional gender roles, female students may be discouraged or restricted from pursuing specific fields or professions. Olmos-Gómez et al. (2021) believe that unequal access to high-quality education may affect students' career choices. Even students with access to a wide range of educational opportunities and experiences may be constrained by disparities in educational resources, infrastructure, and teacher quality. However, these circumstances might make it more challenging for students from underserved communities or rural areas to receive a quality education, which may have an impact on their knowledge of different career options and their ability to pursue their preferred career paths (Fantinelli, Esposito, Carlucci, Limone, & Sulla, 2023).

Waele et al. (2021) also found that career preferences are influenced by personality traits. For instance, extroverted people might be drawn to occupations requiring much social interaction, whereas introverted people might favour analytical or solitary work. Students can find suitable career paths that fit with their innate tendencies and preferences by considering personality traits (Gu, Tang, Chen, & Montgomery, 2020; Ni, Shen, Chen, & Liu, 2022). Similarly, students with high self-efficacy influence or connect with career-related tasks. Higher self-efficacy among students increases their propensity to pursue challenging career paths and to persevere in the face of difficulties (Jianchao, Yumei, & Dongchen, 2022; Kang, 2016; Ye et al., 2020; Zhou, 2015; Zhao, Li, Chen, Hao, & Qin, 2022).

Olmos-Gómez et al. (2021) believed that students are likely to think about the marketability and relevance of their chosen career paths, coordinating their choices with those of the labour market to improve their employability. For instance, students who are well informed about the changing trends in labour market demand can make informed decisions and

adjust to changing career paths. However, Suhi et al. (2021) asserted that the choices and aspirations of students in terms of careers can also be influenced by their peers, including friends, classmates, and role models. The career path of students is influenced by their deeper understanding of various career options if they have greater access to resources like career fairs, mentorship programmes, and professional networks, which would help them make effective career choices (Suhi et al., 2021). On the contrary, inequalities in the availability of resources can prevent students from having equal access to a range of career opportunities and restrict their career exploration (Porter & Woolley, 2014).

Students' career choices have a big impact on their professional lives as well as their general well-being. To effectively guide and support students in Ghana, educational institutions, policymakers, and parents must be aware of the issues influencing students' career paths. Identifying factors influencing first-year Ghanaian students' career paths is crucial for targeted assistance and counselling, but lack of research hinders effective career counselling programs (Kobia-Acquah et al., 2020).

Theoretical review

Trait and Factor Theory (TFT)

Trait and Factor Theory (TFT) suggests that personal traits and features should align with professional paths, as each person has unique characteristics and abilities that influence career choices. The theory highlights the importance of understanding a student's unique traits and characteristics when selecting a career path. Personal traits, intelligence, aptitudes, competencies, hobbies, and values influence career choices.

The theory emphasizes career exploration in decision-making, guiding students to assess their characteristics, abilities and passions, research job options, and find a career environment that complements their abilities, resulting in happier, successful professions. The theory ensures prudent decision-making and career planning, guiding students to gather information, evaluate possibilities, and make judgments based on personality traits, interests, and job research knowledge. Employment planning involves setting goals, creating action plans, and regularly reevaluating choices. **TFT emphasizes responsible decision-making and career planning, guiding students to gather data, assess options, and create opinions based on personality traits and job research.**

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)

The Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) examines the impact of behavioural, environmental, and personal factors on job choices and outcomes. It emphasizes self-efficacy, result expectations, and social influences on professional decisions. Self-efficacy is crucial for students' confidence in their abilities and career paths. Greater career exploration, more aggressive goal setting, and perseverance in pursuing desired career paths can all be attributed to higher levels of self-efficacy (Joshi & Kuhn, 2011). SCCT places a strong emphasis on encouraging students to believe in their abilities to improve the way they choose careers.

The SCCT highlights the importance of outcome expectations in influencing career decisions. The term "outcome expectations" refers to people's perceptions of the probable effects or results of choosing a specific career path. These expectations cover things like pay, job satisfaction, work-life balance, and chances for professional development. Students' expectations of the potential benefits and expenses of various professions impact their career decisions. Recognising the significance of outcome expectations aids in understanding why students might be drawn to or discouraged from choosing career paths. An essential element of

SCCT is observational learning. It implies that people pick their careers by observing and imitating others, particularly role models and powerful people in their environment (Lent et al., 2003). Parents, teachers, mentors, and accomplished professionals all fall into this category. Students' perceptions of the viability and desirability of various careers can be influenced by their observations of others' experiences, accomplishments, and career paths.

To encourage diversity and inclusion in career decision-making, SCCT is aware of the need to address and challenge prejudices, stereotypes, and sociocultural barriers (Lent et al., 2003). Educators, career counsellors, and policymakers can create interventions and support systems that improve students' career self-efficacy, expand their career aspirations, and support equitable and informed career decision-making by taking considering these the Theory of reasoned action (TRA) and Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB).

Theoretical frameworks like the theory of reasoned action (TRA) and the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) concentrate on how beliefs, attitudes, and subjective norms affect people's behavioural intentions and subsequent behaviour. These theories offer a useful framework for comprehending the elements that affect students' career path decisions (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Both TRA and TPB emphasise the importance of attitudes in influencing behavioural intentions. Individuals' general assessments or evaluations of a particular behaviour are called attitudes. Regarding choosing a career, attitudes can include opinions on career paths' value, suitability, and desirability. Stronger intentions to pursue a career are more likely to result from positive attitudes towards that career choice. The importance of evaluating students' attitudes towards various career options is emphasised by TRA and TPB to comprehend how they choose their careers (Ajzen, 1991).

Subjective norms, another concept in TRA and TPB, refer to people's perceptions of social pressures and expectations for a specific behaviour. Subjective norms in the context of career choice include the impact of important others, such as parents, peers, teachers, and society, on students' career choices. Students' perceptions of what others expect them to do or their opinions of what is deemed desirable by society can greatly impact the careers they choose. According to TRA and TPB, subjective norms influence people's behaviour and decision-making. By introducing the idea of perceived behavioural control, TPB builds on TRA. Individuals' perceptions of their capacity to successfully carry out a behaviour and get past potential challenges are referred to as perceived behavioural control. Perceived behavioural control in the context of career choice is related to students' assurance in their abilities, resources, and opportunities to pursue their desired career paths. Stronger intentions and a higher likelihood of pursuing a particular career are linked to higher levels of perceived behavioural control.

Both TRA and TPB put forth the idea that behavioural intentions, which are influenced by attitudes, arbitrary norms, and perceived behavioural control, can be used to predict future behaviour. Students' intentions to pursue a particular career path are likely to influence their actual career decisions and actions when it comes to choosing a career. Understanding the elements that influence students' behavioural intentions can help us gain important insights into how they decide on careers and help us design interventions that will encourage students to make informed and deliberate career decisions.

Methods

Study design and population

The study was in line with interpretive philosophical assumptions, where a qualitative approach was used to investigate the factors that influence the choice of career path of first-year

university students in Ghana. The participants consist of first-year university students in Ghana. The authors purposefully selected three premier universities in Ghana that have existed for more than five decades. The estimated sample from the three universities were 36 participants. In each university, the researchers selected twelve first-year students, which included six (6) male and six (6) female students. The twelve participants were purposefully selected from the three universities for a focus group discussion (FGD). Since the authors were lecturers at various universities, most students became acquainted with the study through a series of communications.

Study tool and data collection

The authors used FGD as a method to collect data. The researchers used focus groups because they provided the best opportunity to explore decisions and compare differences and similarities among focus group members. It helps gain multiple perspectives and unfiltered feedback from a large group (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Kusi, 2012). There are however some limitations, since the use of small number of participants to make in-depth assessments of the case may have limited generalizability (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The questions asked were based on the factors that influence the choice of career path for first-year students. Due to participants proficiency with the language, the FGD was conducted in English. The credibility of the study was ensured because FGD was conducted in a language that both the authors and participants could understand avoid misunderstandings and allow the free flow of information.

The pilot test was conducted to correct all ambiguities before the data collection. In addition, the authors gave the questions to independent raters to assess them before the FGD was conducted (Kusi, 2012). Before the data collection, the authors ensured all ethical issues were addressed. The authors debriefed the participants about the voluntary nature of their participation and their confidentiality. The authors also sought permission from the participants to audio record the conversation during the FGD. The data collection lasted for two (2) months. The data was collected from February 7, 2023, to June 1, 2023, whereas each FGD session lasted between 1 hour, 30 minutes, and 2 hours.

Data analysis

The authors read the data several times to become acquainted with the data before analysing them. This was done to understand and become familiar with the information provided. The data was arranged into themes, while the report and write-up on the participants' assertions were also recorded in written form. The data was thematically analysed in every way possible.

Ethical considerations

Before the FGD was held, the ethics review boards of the three universities gave their approval. The authors promised participants' privacy before the FGD. The voluntary nature of the participants' participation was explained to them during the debriefing. Because taking notes might have caused the interview to run late, the researchers asked the participants for their consent before audio recording the discussion. After the authors had finished conducting the interviews, the participant listened the audio recording of the conversation to confirm their comments. For purposes of ensuring the anonymity of the participants, they were assigned codes as a form of identification. For example, participants in FGD were first-year students from the University of Ghana. They were assigned these codes (FGD-A1), (FGD-A2), (FGD-

A3), (FGD-A4), (FGD-A5), (FGD-A6), (FGD-A7), (FGD-A8), (FGD-A9), (FGD-A10), (FGD-A11), and (FGD-A12), while participants from Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology were assigned these codes: (FGD-B1), (FGD-B2), (FGD-B3), (FGD-B4), (FGD-B5), (FGD-B6), (FGD-B7), (FGD-B8), (FGD-B9), (FGD-B10), (FGD-B11), and (FGD-B12). Participants from the University of Cape Coast were also assigned these codes: (FGD-C1), (FGD-C2), (FGD-C3), (FGD-C4), (FGD-C5), (FGD-C6), (FGD-C7), (FGD-C8), (FGD-C9), (FGD-C10), (FGD-C11), and (FGD-C12).

Results

Table 1 shows the background of the study participants. The study had an equal number of males and females. The participants were all first-year university students from the University of Ghana (UG), Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), and the University of Cape Coast (UCC). Since the researcher accepted participants' voluntary participation, their courses of study were different. In terms of household settlement, more students were staying in urban areas than rural areas, and their sources of career information were mostly from friends and alumni, with a few coming from seminars. However, the data show that more students have not attended a career seminar or conference in their lives. The analysis of the FGD recorded four main themes and different sub-themes. The main themes were socioeconomic, educational, sociocultural, and individual influences.

Table 1: The background of study participants

Participant No.	Gender	Specialties	Household location	Source of career info.	Career seminar attended
FGD-A1	Male	Science	Urban	Friend	No
FGD-A2	Male	Social science	Rural	Alumni	No
FGD-A3	Male	Law	Rural	Parent	No
FGD-A4	Male	Science	Urban	Alumni	No
FGD-A5	Male	Psychology	Rural	Friend	No
FGD-A6	Male	Political	Urban	Alumni	No
FGD-A7	Female	English	Rural	Seminar	Yes
FGD-A8	Female	Science	Urban	Alumni	No
FGD-A9	Female	Maths	Urban	Friend	No
FGD-A10	Female	Social science	Urban	Alumni	No
FGD-A11	Female	Law	Urban	Seminar	Yes
FGD-A12	Female	Engineering	Urban	Seminar	Yes
FGD-B1	Male	Social science	Urban	Alumni	Yes
FGD-B2	Male	Education	Rural	Seminar	Yes
FGD-B3	Male	Engineering	Rural	Friend	No
FGD-B4	Male	Dentistry	Urban	Seminar	Yes
FGD-B5	Male	Optometry	Urban	Friend	No
FGD-B6	Male	Social science	Urban	Parent	Yes
FGD-B7	Female	Nutrition	Urban	Parent	No
FGD-B8	Female	Political science	Urban	Alumni	No
FGD-B9	Female	Social science	Rural	Seminar	Yes
FGD-B10	Female	Social science	Urban	Alumni	No

FGD-B11	Female	Science	Urban	Alumni	No
FGD-B12	Female	Education	Urban	Alumni	No
FGD-C1	Male	Agric	Urban	Alumni	No
FGD-C2	Male	Education	Rural	Friend	No
FGD-C3	Male	Education	Urban	Alumni	No
FGD-C4	Male	Maths	Urban	Seminar	Yes
FGD-C5	Male	Pharmacy	Urban	Parent	No
FGD-C6	Male	Maths/economic	Urban	Teacher	No
FGD-C7	Female	Social science	Urban	Seminar	Yes
FGD-C8	Female	Science	Urban	Friend	No
FGD-C9	Female	Votec	Urban	Alumni	Yes
FGD-C10	Female	Education	Rural	Friend	No
FGD-C11	Female	Education	Urban	Alumni	Yes
FGD-C12	Female	Votec	Rural	Teacher	No

Source: Field data, (2023).

Main Theme 1.0: Socioeconomic influences

Sub-theme 1.1: Family income and financial stability

The participants asserted that students who come from households with higher incomes might have stronger access to resources to handle them in their education (FGD-B8), career assistance (FGD-C5 and FGD-C7), and opportunities for networking (FGD-B8, FGD-A11, and FGD-A12), all of which can have an impact on the careers that these students choose. In the same vein, students from families with higher incomes frequently have more opportunities to pursue quality education and will be able to learn about various job alternatives to help their career trajectories. On the contrary, FGD-C9 were of the view that “*students who originate from households with lower incomes may place a higher value on jobs that provide financial security and opportunities for professional advancement to enhance their socioeconomic standing*”.

Sub-theme 1.2: Social status and perceived prestige

The participants were of the view that students may be motivated to pursue certain jobs, such as medicine (FGD-B4), law (FGD-C6), or engineering (FGD-A3), due to the perceived prestige that is associated with these fields. In the same vein, FGD-A9 reported that “*some students may not be led astray by the beliefs and expectations of society regarding renowned vocations, which may cause them to pursue careers that have better social standing and reputation*”.

Sub-theme 1.3: Job market and employment opportunities

Jobs that are in high demand, like nursing and medicine, influence one’s career path (FGD-C1). However, FGD-A7 was of the view that “*when students decide on their career path, they usually think about the job openings in their field of interest and the level of competition in that field*”. In a similar vein, FGD-B10 concluded that “*the high demand in the local or global job market influences students' career paths*”. FGD-C12 added that “*the likelihood of finding employment in a particular profession affects a career path*”. However, FGD-C8 believed that “*promising prospects have an impact on career paths*”.

Sub-theme 1.4: Access to resources and support

FGD-B2 states that the career path of a student is highly dependent on a network of support from your family. But FGD-B11 believed that “*there is no equitable pivotal role in*

bridging the resource gap, so providing equitable opportunity for all students to investigate and select the career pathways that best suit their interests and aptitudes will be difficult".

Main Theme 2.0: Educational influences

Sub-theme 2.1: Academic performance

The level of academic success that students achieve can play a role in the careers they choose (FGD-A6). He further states that attaining a grade of 6 to 7 in WASSCE can help the student pursue a course like medicine or pharmacy. Similarly, FGD-B1 posits that *"students who excel in courses or who have a passion for academic disciplines may be more likely to pursue careers linked to those fields of study once they have completed their education"*.

Sub-theme 2.2: Educational background and exposure

These participants shared a common view by asserting that students' educational histories (FGD-B5), as well as their exposure to a variety of topics (FGD-C2) and areas of research (FGD-C10), might play a role in determining their eventual job paths in their educational pursuits. In the same vein, these participants also commented that the career path of a student can depend on their previous educational experiences and extracurricular activities they participated in when they were in senior high school (FGD-A11 and FGD-C11). Students' choices about their future careers may be influenced by the accessibility of a variety of helpful resources, such as libraries, research facilities, and career development centres (FGD-B9 and FGD-C1). FGD-B9 further asserted that their ability to access resources that encourage skill development and job exploration might be a contributing factor in their process of decision-making about their career path.

Sub-theme 2.3: Career guidance

The participants confirm that students' accessibility to career guidance burdens their choice of courses to pursue when pursuing their education (FGD-B5). In the same vein, FGD-A8 asserted that career guidance and counselling services offered by educational institutions could be a significant factor in students' decision regarding their future professional lives. FGD-B12 said that *"students can benefit from the supportive assistance of career counsellors by exploring numerous career options, gaining a better understanding of their own talents and interests, and making more informed decisions"*.

Sub-theme 2.4: Relevance of curriculum

FGD-C3 was of the view that *"a curriculum connected to real-world applications and industry requirements can influence the career paths that students choose"*. But FGD-A4 states that *"students have a better chance of selecting career options that are congruent with the abilities and information they gain throughout the course of their education"*. These participants were of the view that the accessibility of hands-on experience (FGD-B3, FGD-B8, FGD-C7, and FGD-C10) and internship opportunities (FGD-A10, and FGD-C4) might also play a role in their choice of career path.

Sub-theme 2.5: Networking opportunities

It was revealed that students' decisions about their future careers may be influenced by peers (FGD-A2). Other participants asserted that the career path can also be affected by educational institutions that offer networking opportunities, such as career fairs, trips to local businesses, and guest speakers to share experience (FGD-A9, FGD-A12, FGD-B2, and FGD-C2). However, FGD-A12 further explained that *"students who attend such a career fair or workshop will have a better knowledge of the various job alternatives available to them as well as the ability to make significant contacts if they are exposed to professionals and industry experts"*.

Main Theme 3.0: Individual influences**Sub-theme 3.1: Interests and passions**

FGD-A9 reported that *“interests and passions are the underlying reasons students select their career paths because it enables them to pursue a meaningful career”*. FGD-C7 added that *“when students choose a career that is in line with their values, they are motivated and satisfied to work”*. However, FGD-C4 asserted that *“when students are intrinsically motivated, they are enthusiastic to choose a career in which they are likely to be motivated, committed, and self-driven”*. FGD-C4 further explains that *“students will be more inclined to put time and effort into expanding their knowledge and set, resulting in higher performance and professional advancement when they have passion for their career”*.

Sub-theme 3.2: Personal values and beliefs

These participants explained that a student's career path is heavily influenced by one's core ideas and values because one might give priority to pursuing such a career (FGD-A6, and FGD-A7). Other participants also asserted that the quest of students pursuing certain careers is sometimes based on their fundamental beliefs and goals, such as assisting others, making a difference, or working towards personal development and satisfaction (FGD-B5, FGD-B10, and FGD-C8).

Sub-theme 3.3: Skills and abilities

FGD-A11 gives an account of why she chose to pursue law in school. She asserted that her ability and interest in reading and making arguments by defending the underprivileged made her choose law. In the same vein, FGD-A9 and FGD-C4 said that their abilities and skill attainment made them pursue mathematics as a career in their higher institution. All the participants attested to the fact that their career was chosen based on their abilities and the skills they possess.

Sub-theme 3.4: Self-efficacy and confidence

These participants believed that students with high self-efficacy always wish to embark on a challenging career path more than those with low self-efficacy (FGD-A8, FGD-B4, and FGD-B6). FGD-B4 further states that *“students who have higher levels of self-efficacy may be more likely to pursue challenging career pathways, whereas students who have lower levels of self-efficacy may choose career tracks that are either more known to them or are thought to be safer”*. In the same vein, *“students who have strong self-efficacy may have a stronger sense of purpose and drive, which may help them overcome obstacles and disappointments about any factors that affect their career paths (FGD-B6). But FGD-A8 posits that high self-efficacy influences the career path of students to become more likely to exhibit resilience, tenacity, and a willingness to overcome challenges when they are genuinely excited about their work”* (FGD-A8).

4.0 Main theme: Sociocultural factors**Sub-theme 4.1: Role models, friends, and influential persons**

From the background description of the data, these participants (FGD-A6, FGD-A8, FGD-A9, FGD-A10, FGD-B1, FGD-B3, FGD-B5, FGD-B11, FGD-B12, FGD-C1, FGD-C2, FGD-C3, FGD-C8, FGD-C9, and FGD-C10) all reported that their friends or alumni group influenced them about their career path. However, FGD-A3 asserted that, regarding his future career, his role model helped him choose it. Again, FGD-C3 confirms that one's choice of career path can be influenced by the extent of social support and encouragement received from one's family, friends, and the larger community because, in Africa, we over depend on people for our daily lives. Similarly, FGD-C7 shares her story: *“My friend's career choice as a mechanic came to light when he moved from his parent's house and stayed with his father's friend. Because he*

was a houseboy, his father's friend made him learn mechanics rather than his future aspiration of being a medical doctor”.

Sub-theme 4.2: Economic considerations and global and local labour market trends

“Global market trends are seen as the most effective when it comes to the decision students make when choosing their career in Ghana. For instance, when nursing was in high demand in Ghana, most parents influenced their wards to pursue nursing because there is work available afterwards” (FGD-B5).

FGD-A6 and FGD-C2 concluded that, considering the country's current socioeconomic climate, students may decide to pursue lines of careers that they believe would provide them with more excellent economic prospects (FGD-A6) and a higher level of financial stability (FGD-C2).

Sub-theme 4.3: Family and social influences

Participant FGD-C10 shared her story by saying her quest to choose a career in education was aided by advice from her parents. The father has a school and is currently on pension, so he wants to hand over the school to her as the head, so she needs the rudimentary knowledge in education. In the same vein, FGD-B4 and FGD-B5 also shared a similar comment; they said their career paths in optometry and pharmacy were influenced by their senior siblings who were at the university. FGD-A9, FGD-A11, and FGD-B1 concluded that the expectations and experiences of students' parents, siblings, relatives, or peers are potential sources of influence on their career path.

Discussion

The study revealed that students' career path choices were influenced by their families' income and level of financial security. Students from households with higher incomes may have better access to financial resources, higher-quality educational programmes, career assistance, and network opportunities. The authors believe that this benefit can impact their decision-making regarding their professions, enabling them to think about a wider variety of possibilities and pursue careers that align with their interests and desires. In support, Adams and White (2018); Aslam and Kingdon (2012) and Gore et al. (2015) asserted that the socioeconomic status of family influence students' career decisions. Again, the study concluded that some students were influenced by societal beliefs and expectations to pursue careers that are regarded as prominent or have a high social status. The authors think that students may feel compelled to pick jobs that are highly respected by their families, peers, and communities, even if these careers do not correspond with their personal interests or aptitudes. However, Porter and Woolley (2014) confirm that the professional experiences of parents can affect how exposed their children are to different careers and how they can offer advice based on those experiences. Highly educated parents may stress the importance of education and encourage their kids to pursue careers that society will respect (Owusu et al., 2018).

The availability of career-related resources and support systems can also play a role in the career choices that students make. Students from low-income families might have a harder time getting access to services like career counselling, internships, and networking opportunities. They may find it more challenging to research potential careers and make effective decisions if they do not have access to these resources. Suhi et al. (2021) argued that access to resources like career fairs, mentorship programmes, and professional networks could have an impact on students' career choices. On the contrary, inequalities in the availability of

resources can prevent students from having equal access to a range of career opportunities and restrict their career exploration (Porter & Woolley, 2014).

It was also discovered that the calibre of career counselling offered to students impacted their career choice. Students can benefit from having access to qualified counsellors who can inform them about a range of career options, job prospects, and educational pathways to help them make informed decisions. According to the authors, students who take part in career advice programmes that promote self-evaluation, the examination of interests and talents, and exposure to a range of job options may find it easier to choose the right career paths to pursue. Similarly, Owusu et al. (2018) and Porter and Woolley (2014) concluded that students' career paths are greatly influenced by the accessibility and efficacy of school career guidance and counselling services. Students can make educated decisions with the assistance of knowledgeable person like counsellors to assist them with career exploration, and exposure to a variety of career choice.

Furthermore, a person's self-efficacy, or the degree to which they believe they have what it takes to be successful in a given field, might play a role in their chosen career path. Students who have a high sense of self-efficacy in a particular discipline may have a greater propensity to pursue occupations related to that field. Students may be motivated to select tough and competitive job routes if they have confidence in their own abilities and believe they can succeed in those paths. In the same vein, students with high self-efficacy influence or connect better to career-related tasks (Kang, 2016; Ye et al., 2020). Higher self-efficacy among students increases their propensity to pursue challenging career paths and to persevere in the face of difficulties (Jianchao, Yumei, & Dongchen, 2022; Zhou, 2015; Zhao et al., 2022).

It was revealed that student's career was influenced by gender stereotypes and roles. Students' ideas of appropriate jobs could be influenced by societal expectations regarding traditional gender roles. This can result in gender discrepancies in some sectors, as men and women may be encouraged or discouraged from following specific professional paths based on the prevalent societal standards. Moreover, Waele et al. (2021) believe career preferences can be influenced by traits like extroversion, introversion, openness to new experiences, conscientiousness, and emotional stability. For instance, extroverted people might be drawn to occupations requiring much social interaction, whereas introverted people might favour analytical or solitary work. Students can find suitable career paths that fit their innate tendencies and preferences by considering personality traits (Gu et al., 2020; Ni et al., 2022). Similarly, students with high self-efficacy influence or connect to career-related tasks. Higher self-efficacy among students increases their propensity to pursue challenging career paths and to persevere in the face of difficulties (Jianchao, Yumei, & Dongchen, 2022; Kang, 2016; Ye et al., 2020; Zhou, 2015; Zhao et al., 2022).

The support and guidance of one's family is an extremely important factor to consider when choosing a profession. When deciding on a future career, students could consider their families' viewpoints, recommendations, and expectations. Family members' emotional and financial support is another factor that can affect a person's conviction to pursue a particular line of work. Students from wealthier backgrounds may, on the other hand, have the freedom to consider factors other than financial rewards when considering a variety of career options (Bajunirwe, Semakula, & Izudi, 2022; Dossajee, Obonyo & Ahmed, 2016; Ossai, et al., 2016; Rukewe et al., 2017).

The accessibility of mentors and role models hailing from a variety of different backgrounds might influence the career path that one chooses. The authors believe that students should be inspired and motivated to pursue similar career pathways by interacting with others

who have achieved success in their chosen fields and subjects of study. The assistance, counsel, and insights into the realities of many occupations that role models and mentors can provide are invaluable. In support, Suhi et al. (2021) asserted that the choices and aspirations of students in terms of careers can also be influenced by their peers, including friends, classmates, and role models.

Theoretical implications

- Students can learn about their interests and strengths by participating in workshops and using career assessment tools, giving them the confidence to make choices based on their individual characteristics.
- Students' development of self-awareness can be facilitated by encouraging self-reflection and self-assessment, which can result in more satisfying and fulfilling career choices.
- Offering mentoring programs and chances for students to speak with professionals in their desired fields can help them feel more confident in their abilities and increase their knowledge of career-related topics.
- Students' career decision-making processes can be influenced favourably by fostering an accepting and welcoming environment that promotes career exploration and offers chances for observational learning.
- Students' attitudes towards various careers can be shaped by providing career information and exposure to various career paths, which can encourage them to explore a wider range of options.
- Promoting a wider range of career options for students by involving parents, peers, and teachers in career discussions and highlighting the beneficial effects of supportive social networks can change students' perceptions of subjective norms.

Practical and policy implications

- To ensure equal access to education and career opportunities, stakeholders should give financial aid and scholarships to students from underprivileged backgrounds.
- Work together with employers and industries to develop internship and job placement programmes that give students from lower-income backgrounds valuable work experience and exposure to various career paths.
- Encourage students from all socioeconomic backgrounds to pursue their desired career paths by providing them with opportunities for entrepreneurship and self-employment.
- To provide thorough information about a variety of career options, industry trends, and skill requirements, educational institutions should strengthen their career guidance and counselling services.
- Offer mentorship programmes so that students can get in touch with people working in their desired fields and gain important knowledge and direction for their future careers.
- Create career fairs and panel discussions featuring speakers from various backgrounds and professions so that students can learn about various career paths and get over societal prejudices.
- Engage alumni networks to offer students mentoring, networking, and job placement opportunities.
- Connect with employers to create industry-specific curricula and internships that meet the demands of the labour market.

- Create venues for employers and students to interact, such as career expos and job fairs, to encourage the sharing of knowledge and the creation of employment opportunities.

Strength and limitations

First, the authors' deeper comprehension of the variables influencing students' career choices was made possible using a qualitative approach. Again, the experiences gain from the field would help change policy and practice of career guidance of students. However, other participants failed to acknowledge the interview, and that caused the delay of the FGD.

Conclusions

The study revealed that students from more affluent backgrounds may have greater flexibility in choosing careers that are aligned with personal interests, students from lower-income backgrounds may prioritise careers that offer better financial prospects and stability. The study revealed that first-year university students' career path was found to be strongly influenced by personal factors, such as personal interests, values, abilities, and aptitudes. Students frequently choose career paths that fit with their interests, aptitudes, and personal goals. Career paths are also influenced by personal values like the desire to positively impact the world or the pursuit of job satisfaction. The study found that traditional gender norms and societal expectations can influence which career paths students choose to pursue while discouraging them from others. Students' perceptions of desirable career options may be influenced by cultural assumptions about illustrious professions and social pressures. It was revealed that students' career decisions were influenced by educational factors such as academic success, educational background, and access to career guidance and counselling services. The perceived opportunities and eligibility for particular career paths among students can be influenced by their academic standing and educational background. In order to expose students to a variety of career options and aid in their decision-making, educational institutions must offer effective career guidance and counselling services.

Abbreviations

FGD- Focus group discussion

KNUST- Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology

SCCT - Social cognitive career theory

TFT - Trait and Factor theory

TPB - Theory of planned behaviour

TRA - Theory of reasoned action

UCC- University of Cape Coast

UG - University of Ghana

Data availability: The data will be provided by the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethics statement

The study obtained ethical approval from the three (3) Universities UCCIRB/CES/2023/08; ECE004/2022-2023 and CHRPE/AP/445/23. Again, ethical approval was also obtained from all the three (3) universities in Ghana before data collection.

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