



Balancing Passion and Prospects: How Personal Aspirations and Job Market Trends Influence the Academic Programme Selection Among Students

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ABSTRACT

Selecting academic programmes at the undergraduate level is a critical decision that defines students' future careers and general well-being. This study aims to explore the influence of personal aspirations and labour market trends on the choice of academic programmes at the undergraduate. The study was rooted in the Situated Expectancy-Value Theory and Human Capital theory to understand how personal and labour market trends influence academic programme decision-making. The study employed a case study design and used a convergent-parallel mixed-methods approach to collect data from 379 students through structured questionnaires and 20 qualitative data through semi-structured interviews. The findings of the study revealed that passion for a course, personal fulfilment, and peer influence are the most dominant personal factors, while future employment opportunities, job security, expected income as well and opportunities for international mobility are the labour market-related factors that strongly shape programme choice among undergraduate students. The results show that programme selection among undergraduate students is not purely driven by passion or market-labour market trends, but a balance between intrinsic motivations and external market realities. The study highlights the need to strengthen career guidance systems, curriculum design that combines passion with employability, and higher education policy that takes into consideration the labour market demands and the personal aspirations of students.

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Keywords: Academic programme, Personal aspiration, Job market, trends, higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Choosing a higher education programme is one of the most significant choices that students at the pre-tertiary level would have to make to continue their higher educational career, specifically at the undergraduate level. This does not only shape their immediate learning experience but also their future professional life and general well-being. Such a decision would be determined by multi-dimensional factors, including individual aspirations such as interest, passion, and self-concept, and external factors such as employment market trends and possibilities of employability (Steele et al., 2020; Owusu et al., 2018). While passion is a key driver of motivation and persistence in learning (Schunk et al., 2022), the increasingly competitive and unstable work environment compels students to consider pragmatic factors such as career security, high earning salaries, and demand from the market (ILO, 2023). How to balance such competing forces often presents a pressing dilemma for higher education decision-making among students.

Globally, studies show that students often experience tensions between pursuing a field they are passionate about and choosing a discipline perceived to offer better employment prospects (Cech, 2021). In emerging economies, this tension is intensified by limited labour absorption rates. Economic instability and evolving industry demand driven by technological change (Ocampo, 2003). In Ghana, graduate unemployment and underemployment have consistently been a policy concern, prompting a stronger discussion on aligning higher education outputs with national labour market needs (Mawutor, 2024; Adjei and Bah-Boateng, 2023). While policy discussions have often placed strong emphasis on employability, the personal aspirations and intrinsic motivations of students remain an important yet underexplored aspect of understanding programme choice among undergraduate students in Ghana.

Existing literature on academic programme selection in Ghana has largely focused on factors such as socio-economic background, academic performance, and parental influence (see Adebassah, 2025; Adzovie; Kwarteng et al., 2022; Boateng; Ampomah, 2018). Even though there is a growing body of literature that addresses employability concerns, fewer empirical studies explicitly examine how students often negotiate the trade-offs between the intrinsic interest and perceived career viability.

This study seeks to fill the gap by exploring how Ghanaian undergraduate students are influenced by personal and job market trends in their choice of academic program. By situating the analysis within both local and global debates on higher education, the study contributes greatly to the understanding of the motivations underpinning programme selection among undergraduate students. Insights from the study will not only inform career guidance strategies but will also offer broad implications for aligning higher education provision with both the developmental needs of Ghana and the personal ambitions of the youth.

Research Questions

1. What are the perceived personal factors that influence the selection of undergraduate programmes by students?

2. What are the perceived job market trends that influence undergraduate academic programme choice?

BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Review

Situated Expectancy-Value Theory:

Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (SEVT), formulated by Eccles, Wigfield, and colleagues (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020), provides a helpful framework for understanding students' educational choices. According to EVT, individuals' decisions to perform a particular activity or take a particular path are determined by two salient constructs: (1) expectancies for success (i.e., the individual's belief that they can be successful in a given task) and (2) subjective task value (i.e., the perceived value, interest, or utility of the task). In the context of programme selection in higher education, this means that students will choose programmes in which they believe they will perform well and which they perceive to be aligned with their personal ambitions, interests, or social identity.

SEVT also emphasizes that subjective task value is multidimensional and includes intrinsic value (enjoyment or passion for the subject), utility value (practical usefulness for plans such as employability), attainment value (importance of doing well to re-conform one's self-concept), and cost (the sacrifices, such as effort, time, or foregone opportunities, in pursuing the option). This theory explains why some students emphasize passion and interest in programme selection, while others consider the long-term usefulness and social value of studies. In the Ghanaian context, where students often balance between intrinsic motivation and labour market pressure, EVT provides a lens through which these are traded off and negotiated in choice.

Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993):

Human Capital Theory (HCT), popularized by Becker (1993), holds that education is an investment in human capital that enhances the productivity, employability, and income-generating capacity of a person. From this perspective, the choice of an academic programme is not merely a question of taste but also an economic decision driven by future labour market returns. Students are expected to make a rational choice by weighing the costs (tuition, time, effort) against the anticipated returns (future wages, job security, mobility prospects).

Under situations of economic uncertainty and high graduate unemployment, such as in Ghana, HCT becomes more relevant in shaping educational decisions. Students would tend to prefer programmes that ensure higher employability, good income, and opportunities for working outside the country, thereby framing their decisions in the investment and return rhetoric. Human Capital Theory therefore explains that, alongside intrinsic reasons, labour market conditions external to the individual-such as job security, demand for specific professions, and levels of income-strongly influence programme choice.

Both Situated Expectancy-Value Theory and Human Capital Theory offer complementary insights into academic programme selection. SEVT focuses on the psychological and motivational influence of programme choice, underlining the role of passion, self-concept, and intrinsic value. HCT, on the other hand, introduces the economic rationale of educational investments, foregrounding employability, earnings, and practical career considerations. From

both models, this study places programme choice as a dynamic interplay of personal aspirations and labour market externalities, which strongly resonates with the Ghanaian higher education context.

Socio-Economic and Cultural Factors Influencing Programme Choice

A growing body of literature in Ghana and at the international level has highlighted the significant roles of family, peers, and community norms in influencing programme choice. For instance, Boateng (2025) highlighted that Parental education, involvement, and expectations frequently steer students towards or away from specific educational pathways, including STEM and TVET, effects that appear stronger for girls when combined with visible role models and counselling. Studies by Leonelli (2023) and Srivastava & Dhamija (2022) stressed that peer influence also matters: information flows through classmates, social media, and alumni networks often shape perceptions of students on programme prestige and job prospects, sometimes more powerful than guidance and counselling. Hallmark & Ardoin (2021) indicated that at the community level, norms related to gender and occupational identities, as well as local opportunity structures (e.g., teaching, nursing, public administration), affect what students see as “appropriate” or achievable. Studies in Ghanaian senior high schools and universities consistently find that advice from parents and teachers, as well as perceived prospects, are important factors that influence programme choice alongside academic performance (see Senyametor et al., 2023; Dawson-Ahmoah, 2022; Quansah et al., 2020).

Socio-economic status has also been found to be a key influence in programme selection. Families with higher income or education can provide better information, networks, and financial support, allowing students to pursue programmes that align with their aspirations with a longer or riskier path (eg, Professional degrees) rather than pursuing “job-ready” programmes. Under-resourced students may opt for programmes designed to offer faster or more certain employment (eg. Nursing, education, medicine, etc.) (Missaghian, 2021; O'Shea et al., 2024).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed the case study design in an attempt to gain in-depth insight into how personal aspirations and employment market trends influence university programme selection among undergraduate students. Case study design is particularly effective when the objective of the study is to explore in its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined (Yin, 2018). With a focus on one of the public universities in Ghana as a single case, the study provided rich, context-specific insights that contribute to the wider body of knowledge on higher education decision-making in Ghana.

Research Approach

A convergent parallel mixed methods approach was employed. In this approach, quantitative and qualitative data were both collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and subsequently integrated for interpretation in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023). The quantitative data allowed the measurement of patterns and the associations between individual aspirations, employment market conditions, and programme selection, whereas the qualitative data facilitated richer insights into students' decision-making processes.

Population

The population of concern was all undergraduate students who were pursuing their undergraduate studies at one of the public Universities in Ghana in the 2024/2025 academic year. Times Higher Education (2025) indicated that specific public University registered 28,014 undergraduate students in the year 2025. Given the focus on undergraduate decision-making, the population of interest excluded postgraduate students.

Sample Size Determination

Determination of an adequate and representative sample size was a crucial methodological consideration to ascertain the reliability, validity, and generalizability of the study's findings. Sample size was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination table, which provides scientifically validated estimates based on population size at a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%. From Krejcie and Morgan's table, for the target population of 20,000 to 30,000, the sample size of 379 is considered sufficient for generalization to the target population. Applying the above rule in the present study, a total of 379 students were selected to participate.

Sampling Procedure

A multi-stage sampling technique was employed, using a combination of probability and non-probability sampling techniques to achieve representativeness while also aligning with study objectives. Four of University's 75 undergraduate programmes were purposively sampled: MBChB (Medicine), BSc Nursing, BSc Midwifery, and B.Ed. Basic Education. The samples were picked using maximum variation purposive sampling to allow for variation in programme types (education and professional health sciences), study duration, and labour market orientation. These programmes were selected because they reflect both higher demand professional fields and fields with broader employability challenges, aligning with the study's focus. In each of the selected programmes, the population was stratified on the basis of programme enrollment sizes to ensure proportional coverage.

For the quantitative data, students in each programme were selected through simple random sampling to give equal probabilities of being selected among all eligible students, while for the qualitative data, criterion purposive sampling was employed. The approach involved the selection of participants included: (a) final-year students who had completed at least three years of study, so they would have had adequate experience with their programme, and (b) students who could articulate the influences on programme selection. This allowed the qualitative component to obtain more complete, experience-based perspectives.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected over a period of eight weeks through two parallel streams. For the Quantitative Data Collection, A total of 379 participants completed a closed-ended questionnaire. The tool consisted of closed-ended and Likert-scale items on personal aspirations, perceived labour market trends, and socio-cultural influences in programme choice. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 purposively sampled students (five from each programme). The interview guide addressed participants' motivation, career aspirations, and perceptions of the labour market. Each interview lasted 30–45 minutes and was audio-recorded with permission. Field notes were also taken to capture contextual information.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed and coded using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, percentages, and frequencies) were used to describe participant characteristics and principal variables.

The qualitative data were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step guideline: (1) familiarisation with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. QDA Miner software was used to aid data organisation, coding, and retrieval.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical principles of human subject research. Ethical approval was obtained from the University Institutional Review Board. Informed Consent was obtained, in which all the participants received sufficient information about the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits. Signed consent forms were obtained. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without any penalty. Data were anonymised by assigning identification codes to participants. Electronic data were kept on password-protected devices, and hard copy documents were kept in a locked cabinet. Audio files and transcripts were kept confidential and will be destroyed five years after publication. Precaution was exercised not to inflict any psychological, social, or academic injury on participants for their participation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Characteristics

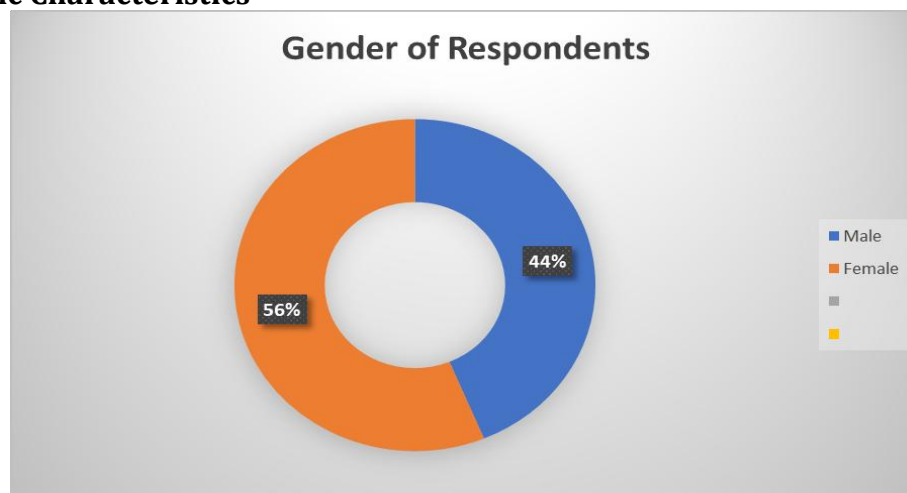


Figure 1 Gender of Response

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The figure reveals the gender distribution of the respondents. A higher percentage of respondents were female (56.3%) compared to male (43.8%). This implies that a greater proportion of the study respondents were females which may reflect broader trends in university enrolment. This is as a result of the fact that the university gives an advantage to female admissions as a boost to encourage female education in the north and in Ghana as a whole.

Perceived Personal Factors Influencing Undergraduate Programme Choice

Participants expressed the degree to which they agreed with ten statements on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree). Means (M) and standard deviations (SD) were calculated, and a midpoint value of 3 was used as a cut-off: scores higher than 3 indicate agreement, lower than 3 indicate disagreement, and equal to 3 indicate neutrality. Low levels of SD indicate consensus, and more extreme values indicate varied opinions. Table 1 presents the findings in detail.

Table 1: Perceived Personal Factors that Influence the Selection of Undergraduate Programmes (n=368)

Influencing Factor	Mean	Std. Deviation
My current career choice is in line with my personal goals	2.81	0.49
The reputation of the programme influenced my decision	3.63	0.41
My values and aspirations influence my programme choice	1.84	0.58
My passion for the course influenced my decision	4.2	0.21
I'm naturally good at the programme of interest	1.8	0.32
My current programme will help me to apply skills and knowledge	3.91	0.20
I want to feel a sense of accomplishment in my choice	4.14	0.37
My academic performance influenced my decision in SHS	1.97	0.91
My current programme choice will make me impactful to society	3.54	0.69
I am interested in the programme because my friends are also interested in it	4.06	0.14

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The data from the table above shows that the highest rated personal factor that influences choice of undergraduate programmes was 'passion for the course' (M=4.20, SD=0.21). closely related, the 'desire for a sense of accomplishment' (M=4.14, SD=0.37) and 'peer interest' (M=4.06, SD=0.14) also scored highly, showing that emotional fulfilment and social influence are significant. 'Programme reputation' (M=3.63, SD=0.41) and the opportunity to apply skills and knowledge (M=3.91, SD=0.20) were strong motivators. in contrast, natural aptitude (M=1.80, SD=0.32), Personal values and Aspirations (M=1.84, SD=0.58), and academic performance in SHS (M=1.97, SD=0.91) scored low, suggesting they are less influential in initial programme choice among undergraduate students.

In an interview, many students emphasized personal passion and societal contributions as the reasons for selecting undergraduate programmes. For example,

"Medical professionals are seen as trusted, knowledgeable, and compassionate experts... I like putting on the white coat." (SR1, Male, Level 100)

"I chose education because all other professions derive from it, and it's the one that takes care of the future generation." (SR4, Female, Level 100)

Impact on the community also emerged as an important motivator:

"I decided on my course because I want to return something to society... maybe I can get people to think differently about nurses." (SR7, Female, Level 400)

Peer influence was mentioned repeatedly:

"I was influenced by my friends in choosing my course; we wanted to study together in the same hospital." (SR5, Male, Level 100)

The findings suggest that intrinsic motivations, particularly passion and desire for personal fulfilment, play a dominant role in the influence of programme selection among undergraduate students. These findings support the Situated expectancy-value theory (Eccles and Wigfield, 2020) and the findings of Hinduja et al. (2024), which emphasise that personal interest and self-efficacy strongly shape educational decision-making among students. The study also shows that peer influence, while external, still exerts a substantial impact on programme selection, consistent with Sarkodie et al. (2020)'s work on social decision-making. The low influence of academic performance and natural aptitude suggests that students may prioritise enthusiasm and perceived career potential over measured ability, which aligns with the studies of Tabolova et al. (2021) that found that students often select programmes based on aspirations rather than competence-based considerations. These findings highlight the need for career guidance interventions that help students align passion with their skills and long-term goals, while also fostering well-informed decision-making based on realistic self-assessment.

Perceived Job Market Trends and Influence on Programme Selections

Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with 12 statements related to job market conditions on a five-point Likert scale. The results are presented in the table below;

Table 2: Perceived Job Market Trends that Influence Undergraduate Academic Programme Choice (n=368)

Influencing Factor	Mean	Std. Deviation
Trends in industry growth influenced my choice	2.94	0.62
My guidance counsellors provided information on job market trends, hence my choice of this programme	1.9	0.44
The stability of job prospects in my chosen field was important	4.29	0.32
The current job market trends influenced my programme choice	3.11	0.71
The future employment opportunities in this specific industry influence my programme choice	4.40	0.23
Salary expectations played a role in my choice of undergraduate programme.	4.38	0.67
The flexibility of career options in my chosen field was a factor	4.11	0.40
My programme choice is in line with the availability of job opportunities	3.12	0.51
My current career choice will enable me to be self-employed	3.90	0.83
Career goal opportunity to major in the area of Interest	2.13	0.67
The impact of technology on future job opportunities influenced my decision	3.02	0.70
The possibility of working abroad influenced my decision	4.21	0.51

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The most significant according to the above quantitative findings were future career opportunities ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.23$), salary levels ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 0.67$), and job security ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 0.32$). Having the option to work overseas ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.51$) and career flexibility

($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.40$) were also highly rated. On the other hand, specific career goal opportunities ($M = 2.13$, $SD = 0.67$) and guidance counsellor input ($M = 1.90$, $SD = 0.44$) scored low, meaning these are not as strong drivers.

Interviews with the respondents reinforced the quantitative findings above.

"I chose my programme because it has secure jobs and plenty of opportunities in the future. You hardly stay at home after school if you are a doctor." (SR3, Male, Level 200)

"Easing posting, you can get easy posting. It is the hot cake programme." (SS2, Female, Level 400)

The salary potential was a favorite subject:

"The potential salary of being a medical doctor is what encouraged me. Ghana is challenging, so we must be strategic." (SR6, Male, Level 600)

A few also enjoyed foreign work opportunities:

"I'm pursuing nursing because it offers better chances of working abroad... jappa is the new normal." (SR9, Female, Level 400)

The emphasis on job stability, salary, and international opportunities reflects a pragmatic orientation towards education, consistent with human capital theory (Becker, 1993). These priorities align with findings by Chumba & Gachunga (2016) and Furnham (2010), which show that students often choose fields perceived to yield high financial and employment returns. The limited contribution of guidance counsellors suggests a gap in pre-university career counseling, as emphasized by Wiswall & Zafar (2021) and Menon (2017), who highlight the importance of available information on the labour market to make an informed decision.

These results suggest that students' career choices are guided by a combination of intrinsic motivators (fulfilment, passion) and external labour market forces (job security, earnings potential, international mobility). Policy interventions should therefore integrate career guidance mechanisms at both motivational and market levels in a bid to optimize educational alignment with the goals of individual and national development.

Implication for Practice

Findings from the study imply that career guidance in educational policy and institutions must be strengthened, embedding labour market information into the process of counselling and supporting reflective processes that assist students in clarifying and aligning passions with realistic career trajectories. It is also important that higher education curriculum development systematically integrates multi-disciplinary expertise and transferable skills such as digital fluency, adaptability, and entrepreneurship, so that graduates can be resilient in volatile labour markets. Parental and community involvement in career discussions should be encouraged but must be grounded in accurate labour market information to counteract myths and stereotypes about certain professions.

CONCLUSIONS

This study sought to examine how undergraduate students in Ghana navigate the complex interrelationship between professional aspirations and labor market trends in the selection of their programmes of study. The findings revealed that while personal passion remains the strongest programme choice motivator, intrinsic motivation of this kind is also matched by—and, in some cases, moderated by—pragmatic considerations for employment opportunity, levels of pay, and global mobility. The study suggests a balanced integration of personal aspiration and market realities is both possible and desirable in higher education decision-making. However, achieving this requires systemic support. Without this, students risk either over-prioritising passion without regard to employability or over-emphasizing market returns at the expense of long-term satisfaction and personal fulfilment.

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