

What Should I Study? An Exploration of the Study Choice Process of Year 12 Students

Andrea Parks

University of South Australia, Adelaide
Andrea.Parks@unisa.edu.au

Julie E. Mills

University of South Australia, Adelaide

Delene Weber

University of South Australia, Adelaide

Martin Westwell

Flinders University, Adelaide

Karin Barovich

University of Adelaide, Adelaide

Making a choice about what to do after high school is an inevitable reality for secondary school students in their final year. It is also a reality that university students often withdraw from studies during their first year due to unsuitable degree choices. Drawing from career decision-making and career exploration research, and higher education literature related to recruitment, retention and transition, the project was designed to examine the Year 12 Student Study Choice process within South Australia from three stakeholder perspectives: University Staff, Secondary School Staff and Teachers, and Year 12 Students. This paper will discuss findings from the research that describe how universities and high schools engage with each other and with Year 12 students in relation to particular aspects of the study choice process.

Keywords: Year 12 Students, Higher Education Marketing, Career Exploration

Introduction

Whether you call it attrition or retention, early student departure from university is a concern. Research has shown that first-year students often withdraw early from university programs because they don't have clear career goals and objectives, and/or they make unsuitable program choices (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2016; James, Krause & Jennings, 2010; Long, Ferrier & Heagney, 2006; Simpson, 2004; Tinto, 1993; and, Willcoxson, Cotter & Joy, 2011). But what support do students actually get at critical times to assist them to make study choices? And how can the university sector better support students and secondary schools to enable students to make better choices?

Student engagement and retention strategies are commonly designed to support enrolled students. Yet it is during the application process that Year 12 students “struggle to find out what they really want and what would be suitable for them” (Holmegaard, Ulriksen, & Madsen, 2014, p. 36). There has been little research on the needs of Year 12 students as they determine in which degree to enrol: study choice has been under-researched in Australia. The aim of this

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project has therefore been to explore how Year 12 students decide what to study, and to describe how government and education sectors support them.

Literature Review

The traditional model of ‘College Choice,’ refined by Hossler and Gallagher (1987), offers this outline of the decision-making behaviour of prospective students: Predisposition – Years 7-9; Search – Years 10-12; and, Select – Years 11-12. Our research is positioned within the Search phase when Year 12 students determine *what to study*, as they gather information about tertiary institutions (Bergerson, 2009), and investigate educational options (Diamond, Vorley, Roberts & Jones, 2012; Hossler et al., 1999; James, Baldwin & McInnes, 1999). Program choice – *what to study* – overlaps (Figure 1) with institutional choice (James et al., 1999; Maringe, 2006) but there is merit in considering program choice more distinctly.

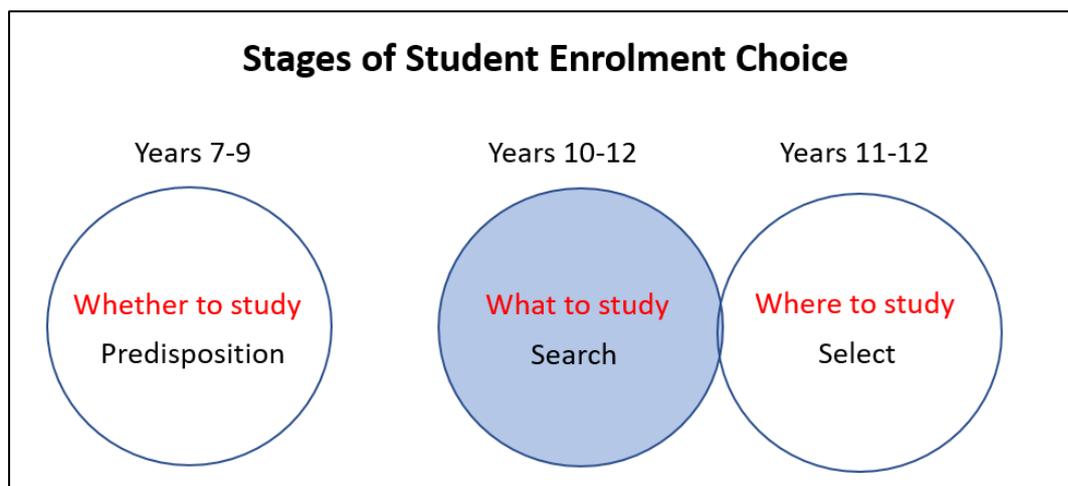


Figure 1: Enrolment Choice Model

There is something of a dichotomy in the research that relates to study choice. In the tertiary context, much research focuses heavily on *where to study* and on university characteristics that students consider (Ali and Miller, 2007; Chapman, 1986; Diamond et al., 2012; Harden, Davis, & Mengerson, 2014; James et al., 1999; and, Szekeres, 2010). Conversely, Year 12 students’ decision-making is largely bound within the field of career development, career decision-making and, educational psychology. Only a few current studies examine study choice/degree selection specifically (Germeijs & Verschueren (2006); Glorioso, 2011; Hirschi & Lage, 2007; Holmegaard et al., 2014; Jung, 2013a, 2013b; and, Simpson, 2004).

The concept of study choice as a process was established by Germeijs and Verschueren (2006) and their Study Choice Task Inventory (SCTI) which adapts career-decision making tasks to represent the process of choosing a program of study at university. According to Germeijs and Verschueren, there are six critical decisional tasks associated with study choice: orientation to choice, self-exploratory behaviour, broad exploratory behaviour of the environment, in-depth exploratory behaviour of the environment, decisional status, and commitment (Germeijs & Verschueren, 2006). Our research uses this framework, with some focus on *Exploration* and *Commitment* tasks, to unpack the "Search" process (Figure 2). This has allowed us to delve more deeply into the nuances of the study choice process, and particularly how Year 12 students determine *what to study*.

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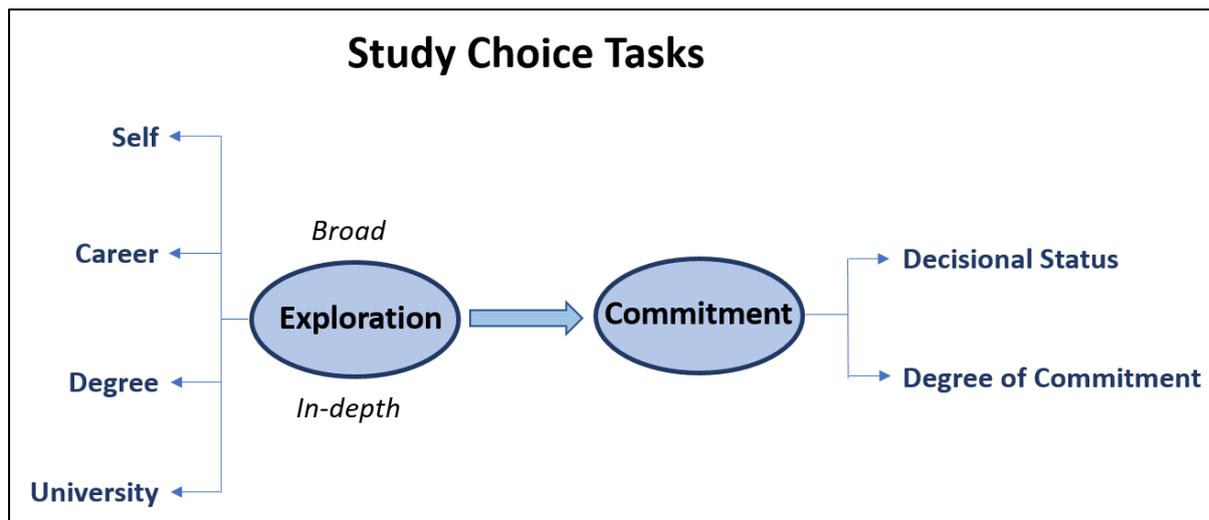


Figure 2: Study Choice Tasks

Methodology

The research was designed using a pragmatic approach, with a multiple methods design. With a smaller populace, South Australia provides an efficient research setting as it is largely concentrated within a single city and has limited university participants.

Data Collection

Using a staged approach, each study served to inform the ensuing phase (Figure 3). Selected websites/pages and critical publications from government agencies and universities were examined. A purposive selection of university staff were interviewed, based on positions involved with Year 12 students prior to enrolment and during the recruitment/application period. Secondary school career advisors and teachers were surveyed across SA. Twenty-eight schools out of 225 participated, with 223 respondents in total, followed by interviews with 12 volunteers.

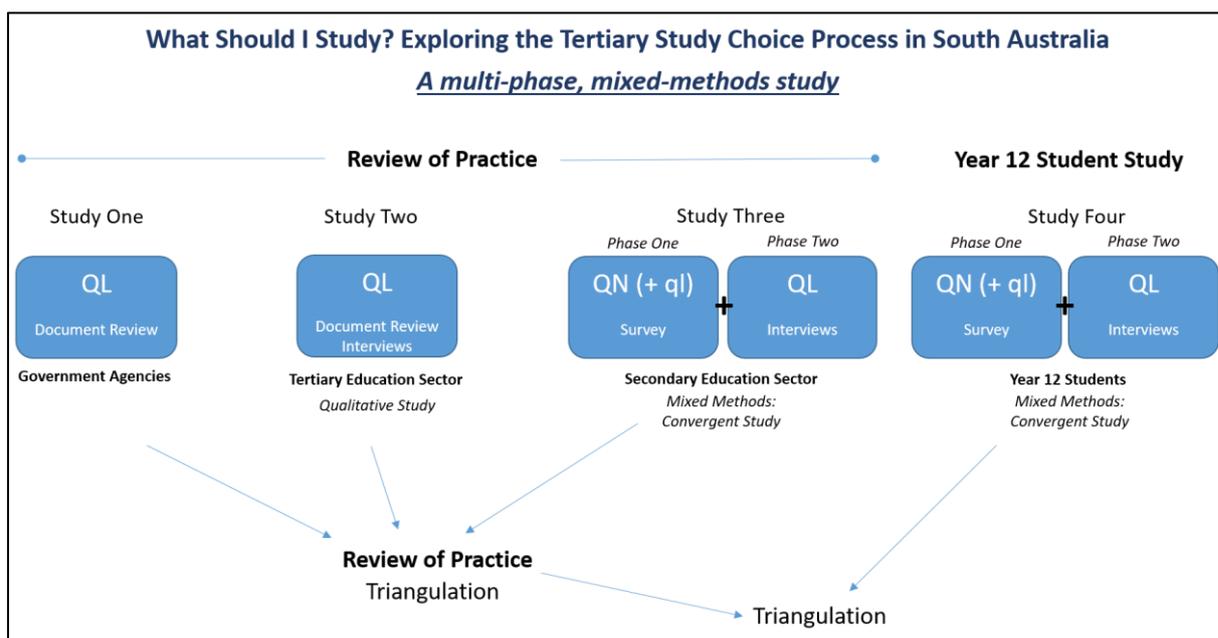


Figure 3: Research Design

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The Year 12 Student Survey was structured around Germeijs and Verschuieren's SCTI (2006), refined for the Australian context. Approximately 67 out of 210 schools participated, with a combined enrolment of 7500 Year 12 students. The resulting 21% response rate, with over 1600 respondents, has provided a significant amount of data. First year university student interviews are underway at the time of writing.

Data Analysis

Document reviews, interviews and other qualitative data from both surveys have been examined using content analysis. The Secondary School Staff survey and the Year 12 Student survey have been examined using exploratory data analysis, with more extensive analysis underway.

Findings

Broad and In-depth Exploration

Resources from government agencies and the tertiary sector, predominantly delivered on-line, robustly support the broad and in-depth exploration of career, university and program options. It is worth noting that universities are the exclusive suppliers of the resources that support in-depth exploration of program choices. Our Year 12 Student survey indicates that at least 90% of Year 12 students that Year 12 students engage in broad exploration of study options.

In-depth exploration of study choice obviously suggests a more concrete and detailed understanding of program/degree structure. Universities supply detailed information to Year 12 students and secondary schools but only 50% of secondary school staff agree that students interpret this information. Approximately 24% who planned to apply to university had never examined a study plan for a preference/choice and 37% did not attend an Open Day. Of those respondents who were planning to apply to university, 20% indicated "I am not certain about my preferences but I will apply [to the state admissions centre] anyway and then sort it out later." And another 5% were completely uncertain. Just over 30% of students who are certain about their preference/choice are not completely certain about what subjects/courses they will study in their first year. Year 12 students may need more support and encouragement with the Study Choice process, especially with in-depth exploration.

How do Secondary Schools and Universities Support the Study Choice Process?

There is a significant variety in the ways support is resourced and offered by secondary schools to Year 12 students. The complicated assortment of responses from secondary school teachers to the question "What is your position?" is indicative of how unique and varied the delivery of career decision making services is at each school. Staff in career counselling-like roles are typically responsible for career development learning and exploration of educational pathways. They often deal with several grade levels, not just Year 12s, and provide support for the breadth of post-school options available to each student. Some staff strive to distribute information - that changes annually - to keep other staff members up-to-date with information from universities.

An important role of the school is to disseminate each university's information to students, and to facilitate liaison between recruitment staff and students. Likewise, each university recruitment unit develops and sustains relationships with secondary schools and their students. A small team (between 5-8 staff members) is tasked with disseminating information and providing connections and support to several categories of prospective students - including more than 15,000 Year 12 students - about the considerable number of programs available at

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their respective university. Universities rely on their relationship with each school to gain access to Year 12 students.

Presentations at schools and visits to the university campus are the most common ways that universities engage with high schools. These forums supply opportunities for often only brief interactions with students, limiting the university's ability to offer more than a broad representation of the university's particular offerings. Product branding that universities have infused in the mix can be less inviting to secondary schools and along with time constraints across the Year 12 schedule, universities don't always get quality time with students to provide information at an in-depth level.

Based on the sheer volume of Year 12 students in South Australia that are eligible to enrol in higher education, more resources would be beneficial, particularly since "Personalized guidance/advice in person" was the preferred method of support selected by Year 12 students who were surveyed. Furthermore, nearly 51% of respondents to the Year 12 Student Survey found it difficult to decide what to study, and 35% found it difficult to understand university program options as well as information about university programs. More resources would expand delivery, and enhance the quality of services, to reach more students.

Conclusion

Study Choice is a unique process that intersects with career decision-making and higher education recruitment in some interesting ways. The process of deciding what to study is supported by both sectors but there is clearly room for a more systemic approach with a more "educative dimension" (James et al., 1999) to the support currently available. Further, Year 12 students must engage more fully in the in-depth exploration of degree options and the university environment. This may require a more targeted approach during Year 12 to encourage a higher level of exploration, with a way to assess or gauge Year 12 students' understanding about program options. Hence, the data from this research is being used to create a study choice model and a learning framework suitable to the Australian context. We hope to develop resources for the design of new activities to better align current recruitment practice with the pedagogies that currently influence student development, retention and transition strategy.

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