

## How do Nigerian parents influence the career choices of their children?

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### Abstract

This study is an initial exploration of how parents influence their children's courses of study at tertiary level in Nigeria. Analysing a dataset of 73 respondents comprising students and professionals, we find that parents play an important role in the choice of course of study and that socioeconomic considerations mediate this influence. The study however asserts that choice of academic course does not necessarily align with career trajectory due to factors such as insufficient supply of tertiary level places and high levels of unemployment.

### 1. Introduction

Upon graduation from high school, many young adults are faced with the reality of charting a course for their future and determining the quality of lives they will live by deciding on professional careers to pursue. While choices are often made based on skills and passion, there is a body of literature which asserts that family background is a strong predictor of career choice. In this regard, parental influence is a strong factor in post-secondary education transitioning. The level of parental involvement in a child's life, whether positive or negative can impact how the child chooses his/her future career. Parents directly or indirectly influence the choices of their children even when they do not directly choose the courses which these children study (Kristen Tiillman, 2015).

### 2. The role of family in supporting youth employment outcomes

Globally, the family is viewed as a dynamic network of interdependencies that influences behaviour of individual members (Lopez, 1989). To understand career choice therefore, it is imperative to explore the role of family structures and parental involvement in determining courses of study at tertiary level.

In the Nigerian context, several studies have investigated how family characteristics including socioeconomic background influence the choice of career (for example see Pepple (2014), Amasuomo (2014), Ehigbor (2016) and Egbo (2017)). Ukaegbu (2014) also finds that parental level of education influences student career choice. Analysing these studies, we find that key predictors of students' career choice include family characteristics such as parental motivation and education level, socio-economic status and occupational background. Furthermore, when students feel supported and loved by their parents, they have more confidence in their own ability to find career information and to choose a career that would be interesting to them (Egbo, 2017). A young adult raised in an environment where he or she receives parental support and lives harmoniously is more likely to be influenced by parental occupation than one raised in an atmosphere of conflict (Kazi and Akhlaq, 2017). Besides being active participants in career choice decision making, families in Nigeria have also been found to provide other forms of support in the form of financial investment in academic development, as well as moral support. Factors mediating family influence in career choice include prospects of career success – which is related to projected income from the career, sociocultural issues including gendered perspectives and notions of continuing family traditions.

### **3. Transitioning to higher education: a choice?**

Amoor and Aliyu (2014) suggest that societal factors, such as value, attitudes, and practices play a significant role in the choice of a professional course of study, with students more likely to opt for courses which society places a premium on. Nevertheless, within the context of a country with high demand for tertiary education places but short supply of same, notions of career *choice* must be interrogated. In 2017, approximately 1.7 million candidates wrote the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examinations (UTME) which is required for admittance into universities, monotechnics, polytechnics and colleges of education; whereas the carrying capacity of these institutions is just over 600,000<sup>1</sup>. Only one third of candidates who sit this exam can be admitted into any of these institutions. There are therefore severe entry barriers for those seeking to transition from secondary to tertiary levels of education, resulting in many candidates opting for any course of study they are admitted for, regardless of parental guidance or personal preferences. Ajibola, Emeghe, Oluwumi & Oni (2017) in their study on students' choice of programme at Covenant University, found that 33.8% of their respondents were studying courses the university assigned to them as against courses of their choice.

Furthermore, given that unemployment rates are high in Nigeria – 18.8% in the third quarter of 2018 – and worse for the youth demographic, it is pertinent to highlight the oft broken link between courses of study at tertiary level and eventual employment. Parents and families have been found to support the career navigation of young adults based on the realities pertaining to insufficient tertiary education places and jobs, with parents supporting strategic and often pragmatic decision making on the prospects of different professional paths and courses of study.

The next section highlights empirical work carried out to further interrogate parental influence in the choice of professional course of study at tertiary level.

### **4. Methodology and Sample**

The purpose of this initial exploration study is to investigate the process of career decision making for post-secondary level students and young professionals, and to establish the level of influence parents have on the career choices their children make. The study is situated in Lagos, Nigeria and designed to address the following research questions:

1. In what way and to what extent do Nigerian parents influence the professional career choices of their children?
2. Do socioeconomic considerations influence choice of academic course of study?

The sample, generated via purposive sampling, comprises 73 respondents, 40 of whom are UTME candidates and therefore looking to transition from secondary school to tertiary education, while 33 are young adults at different stages of their professional careers and who hold tertiary education degrees. The mean age of the respondents is 23 years and the sample comprised 36 male and 37 female respondents. Those seeking non-formal, vocation and technical education were excluded from the sample. The research instrument was a questionnaire and the survey was administered both online and in person. The average completion time per respondent was four minutes.

### **5. Findings**

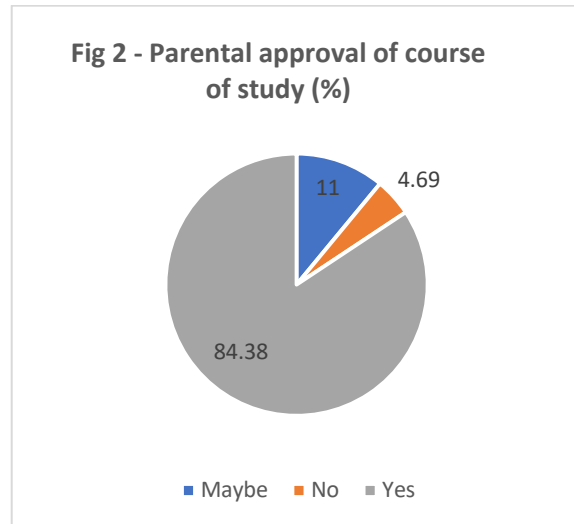
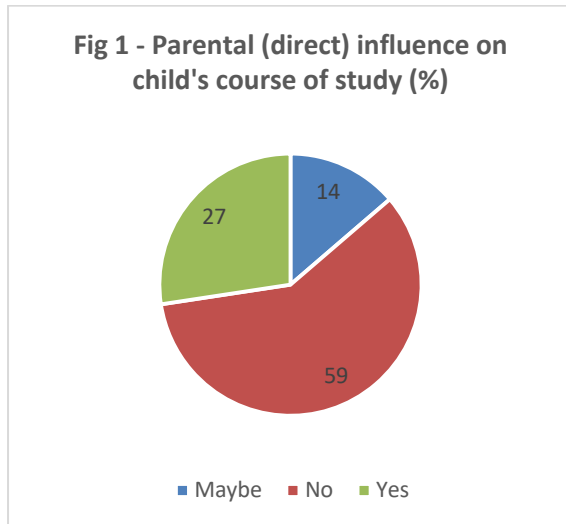
#### **a. Parental influence on professional career choices of their children**

According to Tillman (2015), the level of parental involvement in a child's life, whether positive or negative can impact how the child chooses his/her future career. In this study we find high levels of

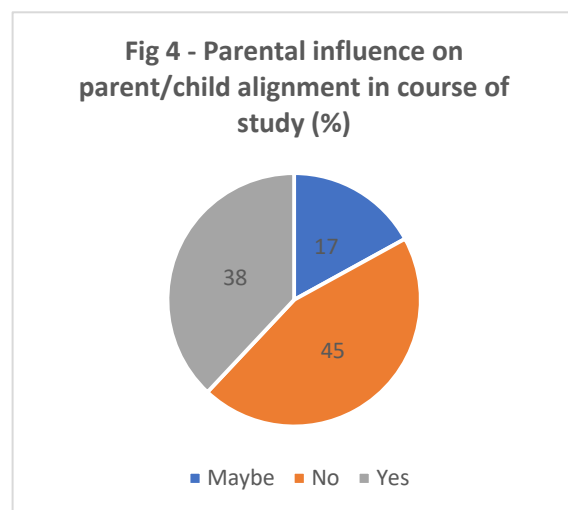
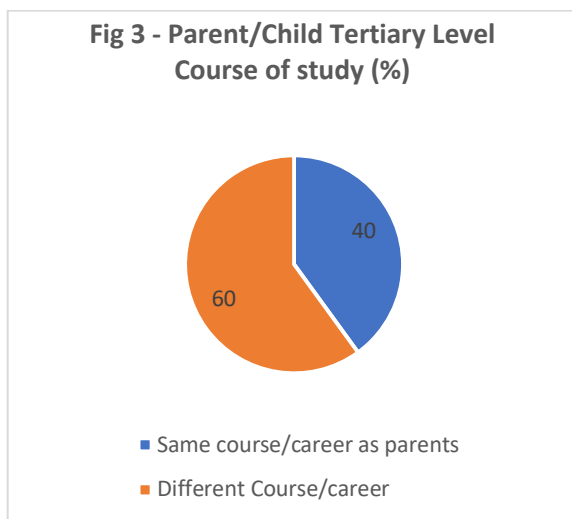
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<sup>1</sup> Source: <https://punchng.com/only-30-utme-candidates-can-be-admitted-says-nuc/>. Accessed November 29 2018

parental influence on course selection process of their children or wards. Almost one third of respondents assert that there was direct parental influence on their choice of course of study, while another 14% state that their parents may have had a role to play in their choice of course (see Figure 1). From the share of respondents who do not believe their parents directly influenced their choice, an overwhelming majority (84%) assert that their parents approved of their choice (see Figure 2).



There are relatively high levels of alignment (40%) between courses of study pursued by the respondents and those pursued by their parents (see Figure 3), and for almost two fifths of the sample, this alignment is a deliberate result of parental influence (see Figure 4).

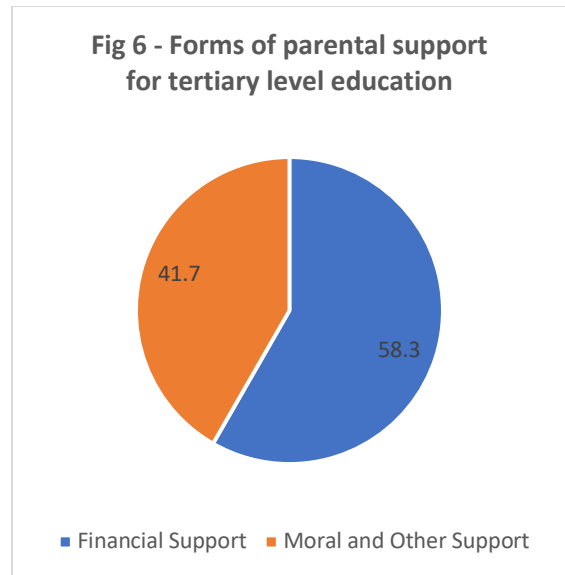
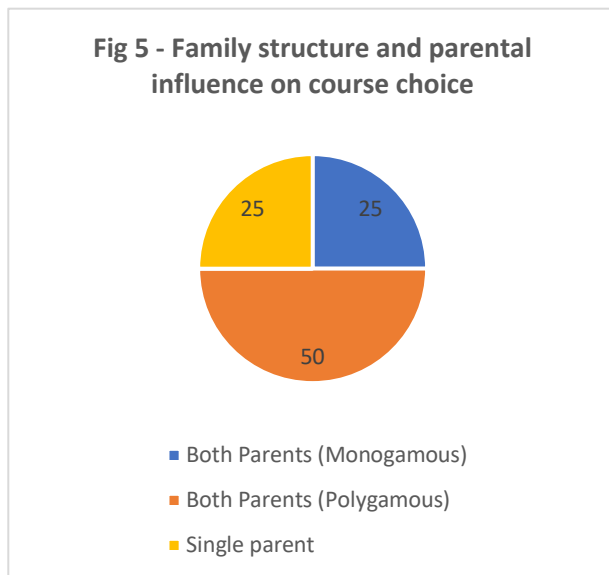


The data presented suggests a high degree of parental influence on course of study. Even when parents do not directly influence this choice, notions of parental consent are prevalent among the respondents. This consent we find, goes a long way in providing the needed support for the child or ward to pursue that course.

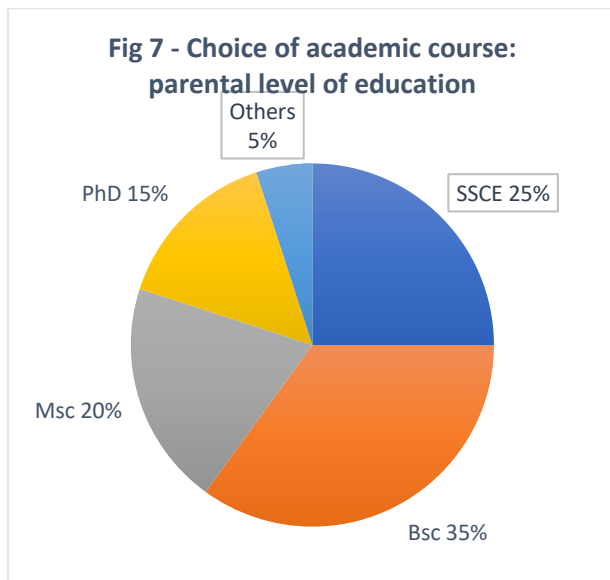
### **b. Family background**

Whilst there is limited literature on the influence of family structure on choice of professional course, in our study this factor presents as significant. Half (50%) of those whose parents influenced their

choice grew up in polygamous - polygynous<sup>2</sup> to be specific - homes, 25% from monogamous homes and 25% were raised by single parents (see Figure 5). An explanation for this is the often-competitive nature of families where there are multiple wives/mothers, and a perceived greater need to guide children into career paths where chances of success are greater.



An analysis of the level of education of parents who influence their children’s professional course of study reveals that 70% of these parents themselves hold a minimum qualification of Bachelor’s degree (see Figure 7), underscoring a sense of informed agency pertaining to their children’s academic and professional advancement.



**c. Financial and moral support from parents**

The reliance of youth on their parents is an indicator of why parental input into academic course decisions is so common. 82% of the respondents indicated that they receive or have received some

<sup>2</sup> In 12 out of 36 Nigerian states, polygyny is recognised under Islamic Law as being equivalent to monogamous marriage. Marriage of a man to more than one wife is therefore a common phenomenon in the country

sort of parental assistance in the pursuit of a tertiary-level course of study. Of this share, 58% primarily receive financial support including funds for examination preparation, accommodation, feeding and course material, while 42% receive moral but not financial support – see Figure 6 above. This finding buttresses the observation by Kazi and Akhlaq (2017) that the occupational aspiration of a child from a family where there is parental support and harmonious living, is more likely to be influenced by the parents’ occupation.

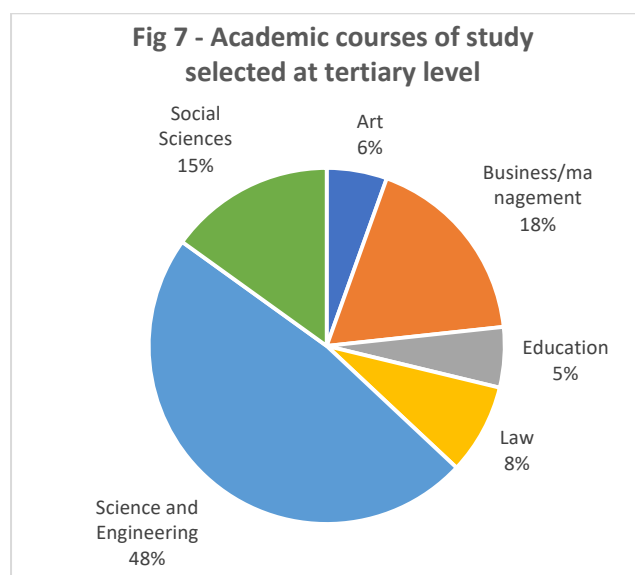
**d. Socioeconomic determinants of academic course of study**

A review of other factors that influence the choice of academic course reveal that projected income from course of study is a key determinant of this choice, with 43% of respondents indicating this. Other factors including family income - and the associated need to align with financial realities of the family – as well as cultural issues, gendered perspectives of suitable careers are all factors situated in the broader context of families and parental guidance. Interestingly, only 4% of respondents consider their own interests and passion when applying for courses of study; a situation which is connected to the noticeable mismatch between courses of study at tertiary level and eventual career and career path in Nigeria.

**Table 1: Overview of non-parental factors influencing choice of academic course at tertiary level**

Other factors influencing choice of academic course	Proportion of respondents(%)
Projected income	43
Relevance in Nigerian environment	29
Family Income	11
Cultural issues	5
Interest and passion	4
Gender	3
Failure to qualify for acceptance on desired course	5

As asserted by Amoor and Aliyu (2014) we also find that societal factors play a significant role in the choice of a professional course of study, with students selecting for courses which society places a premium on and which hold a promised of potential high salaries. Science and Engineering courses are most often selected, followed by Business/ Management and Social Sciences.



## 6. Summary and implications for policy

This study reasonably concludes that parental influence is indeed an important factor in determining course of study. Against the backdrop of massive rural-urban migration, separation of families for financial reasons, this finding highlights how parental influences remain important factors in youth decision making. Family background is an important predictor of course of study, with polygamous families appearing to be more active in influencing their children's courses of study. The high levels of parental education and the degree of alignment between professional courses of study pursued by parents and their children is indicative of parental interest in and agency to ensure that their children choose tertiary level courses that are deemed superior by parents. This finding is further contextualised through an analysis of the role of socioeconomic factors where it is found that societal constructs of valued professional careers heavily influence choice of course at tertiary level. Of concern is the finding that interest, passion and natural inclination are not strong predictors of course of study. This finding is suggestive of a society where young people lack sufficient agency to pursue their own desires, and rather, prioritise parental and societal choices.

Based on these findings, a key recommendation is the need to strengthen career counselling facilities aimed at improving the capacity of families and communities to offer appropriate guidance on career choice and selection of courses of study. These facilities could also present opportunities for low cost aptitude tests to enable young people ascertain their natural abilities and communicate these with confidence. There is also a clear need for rapidly expanding the supply of tertiary level places, particularly in universities, so that as much as possible, alignment can be fostered between preferred course of study and actual course studied.

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