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THE CHOICE OF CAREER AFTER GRADUATION: THE CASE OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION GRADUATES FROM A SMALL UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a study of a group of undergraduate business administration graduates from a small university from a gendered perspective. The emphasis is on early career when the graduates entered a labour market characterized by high demand. Most of the graduates are married and have children, and are considerably older than traditional undergraduates. The findings show that there is no gender difference when the respondents choose the first job after graduation and residence, while more men are in managerial positions. This indicates that family status has similar impact on men and women, except regarding managerial responsibilities in the workplace. The study indicates that labour market situations should be taken into account when careers of men and women are considered.

Keywords: career, gender, business administration graduates, university, Iceland

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a study on a group of undergraduate business administration graduates from the University of Akureyri (UNAK) and their choice of career shortly after graduation in 2004-2007. The focus of the study is on both work and non-work related issues that may affect career choices, such as influence of family and children. The study is also a follow up to a similar study conducted among business graduates in 2000. At the time of graduation in the present study the unemployment rate was below 4% and there was shortage of labour in most sections of the labour market. The paper will, moreover, analyze the factors that affected the selection of career just after graduation among men and women. It is hypothesised at the outset that family related issues affect women more than men when choosing job after graduation. It is also hypothesised that men are more likely to be in managerial positions than women; and that women tend to hold middle managerial or general employee positions to a greater extent than men.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Simply put, career is a life journey (Baruch, 2006). Scholars have defined career as “the occupational positions a person has had over many years” (Dessler, 2009, p. 236), or “the sequence of work-related experiences one has over the course of one’s working life-time” (Adamson, Doherty and Viney, 1998, p. 251). These definitions consider only change of career in time, but not where people work or how people consider their career. Careers can be described in two other ways as well: Subjective careers refers to people’s own sense of their career and what it is becoming, while objective careers describes the more or less publicly observable positions, situations, and statuses – a

shared social understanding of career rather than particular individual understanding. How people consider their career and success may be expected to involve both subjective and objective aspects (Arthur, Khapove and Wilderom, 2005).

Career developmental stages have been mapped out by many authors in order to match successful career against age range. The number of stages varies, but many authors suggest five stages (Torrington, Hall and Taylor, 2005). These often involve occupational choice and preparation of work; organisational entry; early career; mid career and late career. This paper focuses on early career that usually starts between ages 25 and 40 years. The early career involves fitting into the organisation and understanding the basic practice of the work. It also involves demonstrating competence and gaining greater responsibility and authority (Torrington, Hall and Taylor, 2005).

Until recently, employees could join an organisation fully expecting to stay with it for their entire career. That has been the traditional career perception of an upward movement or advancement in work roles within a single organisation (Baruch, 2006; Stone, 2005). The economy and the employment context have been rapidly changing recently. As a consequence of globalization, rapid technological changes, downsizing, and outsourcing of activities, an increase in short-term contracts and self-employment has occurred (Adamson et al., 1998; Mayrhofer et al., 2005; Stone, 2005; Torrington, Hall and Taylor, 2005). This increases inter-organizational mobility, and gives rise to a new form of career patterns, such as frequent lateral moves and employment changes, assigning a high priority to external employability and self-responsibility for outcomes (King, 2003). Such careers have been termed portfolio careers, post-organisational or boundaryless careers.

In her study of UK graduates' preferences for careers, King (2003, p. 10) concludes that employability (the importance of doing a variety of jobs to gain a range of experience) is a key concern. Graduates, however, expect to be able to develop that employability within the context of a traditional career. The conclusion of the study by Mayrhofer et al. (2005) is that 42% of Austrian business school graduates prefer a traditional career pattern, quite closely tied to the world of organisations. The majority of the sample, 53.6%, shows a preference for post-organisational career patterns, especially for continued flexibility or free-floating professionalism.

In a study of American doctoral graduates in accounting, Kirchmeyer (2006) found that at the time of graduation, the presence of a young child, and not having a non-employed spouse, were associated with women favouring work-family balance in jobs that in turn predicted geographic restrictions on employment. No such associations were found for men. Later in their career men did experience the performance benefits from having a non-employed spouse, whereas women did not. Moreover, women were far less likely to have non-employed spouses. This turned out to be a career disadvantage as having non-employed spouses was associated with achieving high ranks by middle career for both genders.

A previous survey of how students from two Icelandic universities selected jobs after graduation in nursing and business administration (Edvardsson, Hallgrimsdottir, Johannsson and Eyþorsson, 2002) found that the most important factor when selecting a job after completing studies was whether the job provided opportunity for gaining useful experience. Other important factors were 'interesting job relevant to my specialisation;' 'solid company/establishment to work at,' and that the job was in line with the potential career. More of the business administration graduates mentioned solid company/establishment and potential career than nursing graduates. The latter base their first job choice more often than the former on being able to go on living in the same municipality.

Gender and career

Research on women's careers shows that these tend to be embedded in their larger life contexts, such as relational orientations, family concerns and multiple roles. Women's careers are more diversified than men's, suggesting more snake-like careers for women (upward mobility, stability, downward mobility, and fluctuations), versus ladder-like career paths for men (O'Neil, Hopkins and Bilimoria, 2008). A longitudinal study of Swedish women's career patterns showed that a vast majority of women had experienced upward mobility or horizontal mobility (stability). Few women, primarily in lower-level occupations, had experienced fluctuations or downward mobility in their career. The results also corroborated previous research on gendered labour market: The fields in which women tended to work were services, personal care, education and office work (Huang and Sverke, 2007).

In her study of gender pay gap for UK graduates, Chevalier (2007) discovered that women care about the usefulness of their job (altruistic) and are less career-oriented than men. Men tend to be more career-driven and financially motivated. These differences typically "affect occupational choice and may explain the high feminization of jobs such as teaching and nursing" (2007, p. 827). Previous studies have shown that women tend to work in the public sector and in occupations associated with lower wages. Chevalier also found that career break expectations explained 10% of the gender wage gap, and women with traditional views concerning childrearing were found to show less intensive job search behaviour.

Kirchmeyer (2006) argues that many studies have shown that marriage and children represent obligations that limited women's advancement, whereas they represent assets that benefited careers for men. Moreover, highly successful women, such as female executives, are more likely to be childless and unmarried or married to another professional than are their male counterparts. Kirchmeyer (2006) compares, furthermore, single-earner and dual-earner families, and finds that for both men and women, dual-earner families have in general been less willing to relocate, have had lower career commitment, and fewer hours of work, compared to single-earner families.

Aryee and Luk (1996) also point out that much of the research on enhancing the career performance of women has suggested the availability or provision of child-care centres, as women take the main responsibilities for children.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study was conducted in the summer of 2008. The research population consisted of all business administration students who graduated from UNAK during the period 2004-2007, a total of 227 individuals; of those 59.1% were distance education students. Information on former students was gathered from the university's information system. All the students were of Icelandic nationality. It was not possible to find the addresses of 12 individuals so the final population consisted of 215 graduates. The gender distribution and the response rate are presented in Table 1. Answers were received from 127 individuals, constituting a response rate of 59.1%, for males the ratio was 46.5%, slightly below the female response ratio of 65.3% (see Table 1).

Table 1. Study population and response rate

	Male	Female	All
Local students	31 (32.2%)	57 (52.6%)	88 (46.6%)
Distance students	40 (57.5%)	87 (71.3%)	127 (67.7%)
All	71 (46.5%)	144 (63.9%)	215 (59.1%)

The reason for selecting graduates from this period relates to the fact that this was when significant numbers of distance students began to graduate from the university and that a study had already been made of students graduating earlier (Sigursteinsdottir, 2005).

The mean age of the respondents at graduation was 34.9 years. One reason for this high average age among students is the large proportion of distance students. Local students were on average 5.6 years younger than distance students. For local students the average age was 31.0 years, men were 27.6 years old and women were 31.9 years old. For distance students the mean age was 36.6 years old, the men were 39.8 years old and the women 36.3 years old. 80.8% of the students have one or more children; 72.5% of the local students and 84.7% of the distance students. The average number of children among students is 1.98; distance students have 0.25 more children than local students.

The questionnaire used in the study contained 40 closed questions. It was, for the most part, created by the organisers of the research (Edvardsson, Hallgrimsdottir, Johannsson and Eyþorsson, 2002), and was based on interviews with 20 business administration and nursing graduates in 1999 relating to their choice of further study and career after obtaining a university degree. The questionnaire took into account the findings of the interviews, such as: many nurses mentioned that they chose a particular job after they had been in practical training in particular departments; some graduates chose place of residence before selecting a job; and graduates with families mentioned factors such as their spouse's job, communal services, such as health care and schools, family friendly environment and other issues that are related to the well being of family members.

The questionnaire was divided into background information; choice of study, university, domicile and work; study-related information; other items and distance education. Response options to each question varied from two (yes/no) up to 14 options (e.g. in what occupation are you currently engaged?) and for some questions the respondent had to fill in the answer (e.g. one's age). In some questions, ticking more than one option was allowed. Most of the questions were of nominal and ordinal scale characteristics, which only permit the calculation of number, frequency and the use of cross tables. In questions regarding age, number of dependents and income, use was made of ratio scales since these allow more complex statistical processing.

RESULTS

Marital status

The family role and the number of children have been found to affect the career of men and women. Of the respondents in the study, 81.1% were married or in cohabitation relationships in 2008, while 8.7% were single and 10.2% were divorced. Also, 80.8% of the graduates had children. No statistical difference was found between the groups of married and singles, and graduates with children or not. Marital status did not, therefore, affect career development in the study. Men have, however, more children on average than women, and the difference is significant ($p=0.049$). No difference was found between the age of male and female graduates. More women than men were married upon enrolment, but after graduation more men are married, whereas more women have divorced.

Choice of job after graduation

32.7% of the respondents placed highest emphasis on being able to live in the same municipality when choosing job after graduation. It is also interesting to note how many business administration graduates place a high value on a solid company/establishment (20.9%) when selecting jobs after graduation; followed by provided the opportunity for useful experience (13.6%) and an interesting

job relevant to my specialisation (10.9%). The gender difference is quite limited in Table 2, no statistically significant difference between genders was found.

Table 2. The choice of career after graduation. Main impact factors. Percentages.

	All	Male	Female	p-value ^a
Able to go on living in the same municipality	32.7%	39.3%	30.5%	0.403
Solid company/establishment	20.9%	21.4%	20.7%	0.937
Provided the opportunity for useful experience	13.6%	14.3%	13.4%	0.908
An interesting job relevant to my specialisation	10.9%	3.6%	13.4%	
Opportunity for promotion	3.6%	3.6%	3.7%	
Opportunity for ongoing education	1.8%	3.6%	1.2%	
Salary and terms of employment	3.6%	3.6%	3.7%	
Workplace facilities	0.9%	3.6%	0.0%	
Professional morale	3.6%	3.6%	3.7%	
Supply of work	1.8%	0.0%	2.4%	
My final project was relevant to the job	5.5%	3.6%	6.1%	
Other	0.9%	0.0%	1.2%	

^a z-test for two proportions.

Able to go on living in the same municipality would be categorised as balance between work and family (spouse's occupation, children's school). Under the "new career" pattern we can classify the option "provided the opportunity for useful experience and ongoing education." Only 15.4% of the respondents voted for those factors. For comparison in Table 2, 61.7% of the respondents mentioned factors related to balance between work and family or traditional career.

Previous studies have indicated that many non-work related issues may affect career choices of men and women (Chevalier, 2007; Kirchmeyer, 2006). The participants in the study were asked about those factors that most affected their choice of residence after graduation. About half of the men and about four out of ten women mention the residence of family and relatives. Significantly more women than men choose to reside at their place of origin ($p=0.001$), while significantly more men choose their residence after being offered a job at an organization ($p<0.001$). Hence, it is clear that family related issues have a vast impact on the decision of choosing residence after graduation and accordingly graduates are less willing to move to other places in search of jobs. Few of the respondents have moved after graduation. Of the women, 20.8% have moved between regions, while only 16.1% of men have moved. The difference is not significant. The women move primarily to the capital area and Akureyri, whereas no pattern was found among the men. As depicted in Table 3, family related issues were mentioned by 58.7% of the graduates.

Table 3. The choice of residence after graduation. Main impact factors. Percentages.

	All	Male	Female	p-value ^a
The residence of family	42.20%	48.40%	39.70%	0.164
Origin (grew up in the area)	14.70%	6.50%	17.90%	0.011
Job opportunity	8.30%	3.20%	10.30%	
Job offer from a company/organization	7.30%	16.10%	3.80%	<0.001
Spouse chose to live on in the pres. area	6.40%	3.20%	7.70%	
Spouse's job/study	5.50%	6.50%	5.10%	
Supply of housing according to family needs	2.80%	0.00%	3.80%	
Income opportunities	1.80%	0.00%	2.60%	
Good transportation (to home town)	0.90%	3.20%	0.00%	
Quality of primary and secondary schools in the area	1.80%	0.00%	2.60%	
The price and supply level	0.90%	0.00%	1.30%	
Surroundings (nature/urban-rural areas)	2.80%	3.20%	2.60%	
Other	4.60%	9.70%	2.60%	

^a z-test for two proportions.

The graduates' occupations

Most business administration graduates work as specialists, closely followed by managerial positions (management/head of department). Few work as general employees, or run their own businesses as can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4. The occupation of the business administration graduates

	All	Male	Female	p-value ^a
Specialist/Project manager	29.4%	39.4%	25.8%	0.159
Middle management/ head of department	15.9%	12.1%	17.2%	0.461
Top management	15.1%	33.3%	8.6%	0.004
Auditing services	9.5%	3.0%	11.8%	
Other	9.5%	6.1%	10.8%	
General employee	8.7%	0.0%	11.8%	
Consultancy	4.8%	3.0%	5.4%	
Own business	3.2%	3.0%	3.2%	
Postgraduate study	2.4%	0.0%	3.2%	
Primary teaching	1.6%	0.0%	2.2%	

^a z-test for two proportions.

The only significant difference between the genders in Table 4 is in top management, 33.3% of men work as top managers versus 8.6% of women ($p=0.004$). Also, a considerably greater number of men than women work as specialists (39.4% versus 25.8%). The female participants, on the other hand, tend to be more involved in general work and auditing; they also occupy middle management positions to a greater extent than the males, and they go to postgraduate studies.

The labour market for business administration graduates is gendered to a limited extent. Little more than half are employed in the business and financial sector, followed by public administration (see Table 5). Very few graduates enter other sectors. More men than women go into manufacturing, fishing, and information and knowledge intensive sector, whereas more women go into teaching and research.

Table 5. The sectors in which the business administration graduates work.

	All	Male	Female
Business and Finance	55.9%	54.5%	56.4%
Public administration	9.4%	6.1%	10.6%
Other	7.9%	9.1%	7.4%
Fisheries	4.7%	6.1%	4.3%
Teaching and research	3.9%	0.0%	5.3%
Manufacturing	3.1%	6.1%	2.1%
Transport and logistics	3.1%	3.0%	3.2%
Services to Business	3.1%	3.0%	3.2%
Information and knowledge	3.1%	6.1%	2.1%
Health and social	1.6%	0.0%	2.1%
Other services	1.6%	3.0%	1.1%
Agriculture	0.8%	0.0%	1.1%
Retail outlet	0.8%	3.0%	0.0%
Hotels and restaurant	0.8%	0.0%	1.1%

CONCLUSION

This paper presented a study of a group of undergraduate business administration graduates from the University of Akureyri from a gendered perspective. It has to be emphasised that the study group is unique in many respects for undergraduate students: The average age at graduation was nearly 35 years; 81% were married or in cohabitation relationships and 81% had children (two children on average). They entered a labour market characterized by high demand. It was anticipated in the introduction that family related issues would affect women's careers more than men's. That is not the case: by and large non-work related factors, such as family and relatives, had much impact on both sexes when choosing their career moves. This indicates that family status has similar impact on men and women, except regarding managerial responsibilities in the workplace. This is similar to previous studies. Aryee and Luk (1996) for instance point out that family status can affect the career satisfaction of men positively, but negatively affect the career of women. Kirchmeyer (2006) comes to similar conclusion.

The study showed that the most important factors that influence the selection of job after graduation were: The possibility of remaining in the same municipality (family related issue); solid company/establishment to work for; the career choice provides useful practical experience, and the job offers interesting work in the graduates' specialist field. That is similar to the findings of Edvardsson, Hallgrimsdottir, Johannsson and Eyþorsson (2002). Very few graduates mentioned factors associated with "new career" patterns. This could relate to the fact that the majority of the respondents were married with children. This is similar to previous studies by King (2003) and Mayrhofer et al. (2005) who found that the security of traditional career is more tempting for graduates than the boundaryless career.

This study is based on one measure in time that was a follow up of similar study conducted in 2000, and it is based on a small population and only 33 men participated in the study. The group is also different from undergraduate students at other universities. That could have made an impact on the results so they should be interpreted cautiously. This research is based on previous research by the authors that include more family related issues than previous research in the field. Perhaps, that could explain the similar effects of families and children on men and women in the study. Arthur et al. (2005) argue that the complicated issue of career development and success has primarily been researched one-dimensionally – by surveys. They conclude that the answer lies in more qualitative research, and we do agree that a mixture of interviews, surveys and cross-cultural studies should be encouraged in further research.

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