

Patterns of Choice: a Model of Choice and Decision-making

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Introduction

Careers guidance is a critical factor, particularly where young people from social backgrounds with no family traditions of FE or HE make a choice to pursue such a pathway. The findings from research highlight the role of careers guidance as an important counter to negative attitudes, knowledge and perceptions of some education, training and career pathways.

The paper aims to present an overview of choice and decision-making in educational markets. The research projects on which this paper is based are discussed in more detail in the book *Choosing Futures* (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001). The fundamental argument for enhancing choice in a marketised education and training arena was based on assumptions about the impact of individual choice on the responsiveness and performance of educational institutions and training providers. The forces which determine how parents, and young people discriminate between the competitive alternatives offered to them in the educational market place, at every stage from choosing a nursery school to choosing a higher education institution, is at the very heart of planning in education and training.

An integrated model of choice is presented which is applicable in a wide range of educational choice arenas, and has emerged from the findings of sponsored research carried out by the Centre for Research in Education Marketing (CREM).

Continuity, interaction and choice

The findings from a wide range of projects carried out by CREM indicate that strong themes underpin decision-making:

- Choices and decisions are not discrete, unique experiences but are simply part of a complex web of choice and decision-making that links every choice and decision from early years, through post-compulsory education and/or training, to labour market entry.
- While there are specific issues at particular points, there are also many common themes and linkages between them.
- Decisions at each point can shape, and may ultimately strongly determine, the opportunities that fall into the individual's choice environment in the future.
- The traditional research approach in student choice focuses on only one choice point. While providing a useful part of the picture, this simply contributes to the jigsaw puzzle.

This paper draws together some of the emerging ideas by looking at:

- Patterns and themes in choice that have emerged;
- Models of choice making that can be inferred from the analysis;

- Implications of the ideas for some wider policy issues that emerge.

Patterns of choice

A number of themes have emerged from our synthesis of ideas relating to choice in education and training markets, which weave together both the *process* of choice and the *outcomes* of decision-making. These relate to:

- The role of the family in choice;
- The social context of choice;
- Institutional context - the role of teachers, schools and colleges in shaping choice;
- The primacy of academic pathways in choice;
- The importance of perceptions and images;
- The psychological dimensions of the development, reinforcement and protection of self-image;
- The role of failure, defaulting and dissonance in choice; rationality and sub-rationality in choice;
- The tensions between stability and instability of choice outcomes.

Choice is dynamic. The evidence from each of the key stages of the education/training pathway demonstrates that choice is a dynamic and emergent concept at all times.

Choice is not an instantaneous or even short-term period of decision. It is a momentary external expression of the balance between a wide range of social, cultural and economic perceptions. Its expression as a choice today is unlikely to be identical to its expression as a choice tomorrow.

Three important points emerge from this:

1. **Expressions of choice are unstable.** At any one moment choices are inherently unstable in terms of their precise specification, and possibly in terms of their essential components. This idea of instability of choice will be explored further below.
2. **Change requires action.** Any desire at a policy level to alter the macro scale patterns of choice preferences requires actions that will change perceptions and understandings both amongst all the influencing factors in choice (young people, parents, teachers and the media, for example) and across the whole time span of choice.
3. **Choices can lead to unintended consequences.** While choice makes the system more responsive to the wants and needs of individuals within society, it makes the exercising of any form of political control to shape choice much less easy and much less predictable in its outcomes, and can lead to a number of 'unintended consequences'.

The family context of choice

Choice is the product of complex social processes. The family environment is, of course, a product of its social situation. The contrasts between choice in middle class contexts and working class contexts may reflect differences in the importance of economic and social factors in lifestyle models, differences in educational and social histories, and differences in the 'cultural capital' of individuals and families. Such differences are clearly not just based in social class, but interact in different ways with the cultural values of particular ethnic communities.

The choices of young people are never free of the influence of their family. This implies that replication of choice and values from generation to generation is a significant element in understanding broad patterns of choice in education and training markets.

The social context of choice

Social class and ethnicity are linked to choice. The expected link between social class, social status and choice has emerged very strongly in relation to each of the choice points we have considered. Broadly speaking, middle class aspirations relate strongly to notions of economic

advancement and social status, while working class choice is focused more strongly on the young person's own preferences and the desire to preserve social acceptability. Just as choosing is strongly linked to social class, so we have identified a number of strong links between choice patterns and ethnicity.

'Life-stylism' - lifestyle is an important choice factor. The growing significance of lifestyle as a theme in the development of personal image is one we have stressed elsewhere in our research. Lifestyle is intimately involved with social relations, leisure and social status in relation to peers and other groups. We would suggest therefore, that the expansion of 'lifestyleism' might see a growing influence on choice of factors relating to this aspect of the social context of young people and their parents.

The institutional context of choice

An important environment of choice influence is that of the young person's school or college. At each of the key break points in the education/training system, the teachers in the school, and the overall ethos and value system of the school, are important in shaping perceptions and images. Several aspects of this institutional context appear to be of particular importance in the choice process.

The interaction of institutional 'messages' and 'parental' values is important, for they may act as positive reinforcement to each other or, through contradictions and conflicts, provide substantial dissonance in the thinking of young people and their families.

The knowledge and guidance of teachers other than careers teachers is of importance in shaping perceptions, but the accuracy and reliability of that knowledge is questionable. Added to this limited knowledge is the institutional pressure for teachers to push young people towards decisions that are primarily in the school or college's interest because of its own competitive needs.

The role of careers guidance is important as a counter to existing attitudes, knowledge and perception, and is a critical factor where young people from social backgrounds with no family traditions of FE or HE make a choice to pursue such a pathway.

The role of marketing and promotional strategies is important. These have emerged as a very important influence in choice, perhaps more by providing 'just-in-time' information to enable choices to be justified rather than in fundamentally changing the choices that may be made.

The primacy of academic pathways

Academic pathways are still the most popular choice despite government policy and rhetoric to the contrary'. A dominant theme that emerges from the analysis of choice

from 5 to 18 is the importance of academic pathways as the most frequent choice of young people, and the market value that academic choices appear to possess. For active choosers, whether they are parents of three-year-olds or 10-year-olds, or young people themselves considering post-16 pathways, the dominant themes in their choice relate to accessing academic pathways. University entrance seems to represent the kite mark of economic and social success in the wider community, and is perceived as the gateway to economic enhancement, social status and lifestyle benefits by most young people.

The academic pathway is viewed as the only route to university. Access to university is itself seen as only achievable by the pursuit of academic pathways through post-16 education, and active choosers appear to make their choice at any key point so as to optimise the chance of pursuing a successful academic route at later stages of their individual pathway.

Vocational routes are often viewed as a second choice. At all stages, non-academic pathways are seen as the option of those not able or willing to access academic routes.

The role of perception and image

Within any decision-making process, whether related to education/training choice or the purchase of consumer goods, an important element is an individual's belief and understanding of the benefits and disadvantages of choosing each particular option. Central to this process is the role of perception, for to the individual it is their perception of the world that is the objective reality on which this cost-benefit analysis is made. Three forms of image in career choice have been identified:

- *Contracted images* that an individual has constructed for themselves from their own experiences.
- *Delegated images* which are acquired from other people's perceptions.
- *Derived images* which emerge from the media.

These images interact to create the individual's overall perceptual model of any component of the choice they are engaging in, and this will be true for both the young person and the adults who are involved in advising, formally or informally, that choice.

This creates three interesting issues in understanding choice:

1. The perceptual models held by each person will be unique, which will in turn provide a unique input into the choice making process.
2. Guidance, information or input from a third party is itself the product of that individual's own personal perceptions. Since education and training choices are largely concerned with decisions about an adult world

that young people have not directly experienced, almost all their perceptions will have been passed through the filter of other people's perceptual models before reaching them.

3. The great significance of the media in the lives of all sectors of the community, and the importance within media communications of the creation of image linked to the objectives of a consumerist society. 'Lifestyle' has become an important element both in formal marketing by organisations and in the general approach adopted by the media. Our research suggests that derived images from the media are important in creating and amending the perceptual constructs young people have in relation to careers and the labour market.

The psychological dimensions of choice

Reinforcement of self-image It is implicit within any discussion of education and training pathways that young people are preparing, and being prepared, to assume a role within adult society. Central to all this is the development of self-image by the individual young person. Identifying who they are, what their relationships with family, friends and the wider community can be, and seeking a role in the adult world, is built around creating, protecting and expressing self-image.

Protecting self-image is not a process unique to young people, of course. Our analysis of school choice, where parental influence is very substantial, has shown that adults operate the same psychological processes, as their older teenage children will in due course. Exploring the mechanisms for defending and justifying school choice in different social groups will be an important arena of future research.

Choice, defaulting and dissonance

High expectations. A strong theme that has emerged from the analysis within the research has been the high expectations of children, young people and their parents throughout the decision-making process. The reasons for this over-optimism are complex. In part it reflects the underlying values of society that support the pursuit of high aspirations. There is also a strong belief in luck or chance, a belief that things will fall into place, based on a serious over-estimate of the likelihood of such chance events occurring. This is no more than the over-estimation of the likelihood of success that has made the National Lottery in the UK so popular a form of recreation.

Young people often default to a less ambitious career choice. The consequence of this over-optimism, though, is that for many young people, the reality of their eventual choice is one that emanates from a failure to achieve their original personal goals. Their choices are second (or lower) choices, and they must go through the process of defaulting to lower ambitions in pathway and career choice arenas.

Rationality and sub-rationality in choice. The development of enhanced choice in education has been founded on an unquestioning policy view of choice as an economically rational process. The evidence from the analysis of education/training choice in our previous research has confirmed that we must not base any true understanding of decision-making and choice on such models.

Overall, therefore, we should describe choice in education and training arenas as either sub-rational or, according to Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997), pragmatically rational i.e. rational within the confines of limited information, the inherent human desire to minimise effort and the pressure to preserve self-image in the announcement of decisions. What we are seeing is not a non-rational process but a choice of justification strategies.

Stability and instability of choice

The use of the term choice in relation to education and training pathways can be misleading, for the term has an implication of irrevocable commitment to a line of action or behavioural strategy. It suggests that choice is the ultimate culmination of a rational, reasoned process, and once made will not be revisited. This is an invalid and naive view of choice and the choice process, for we have shown that many 'choices' are unstable, and are subject to change, modification and reversal over short or long periods of time.

We must regard instability of choice not as a sign of a failure in the process, but as an integral part of choosing. Stability is a much less common state than instability in this environment.

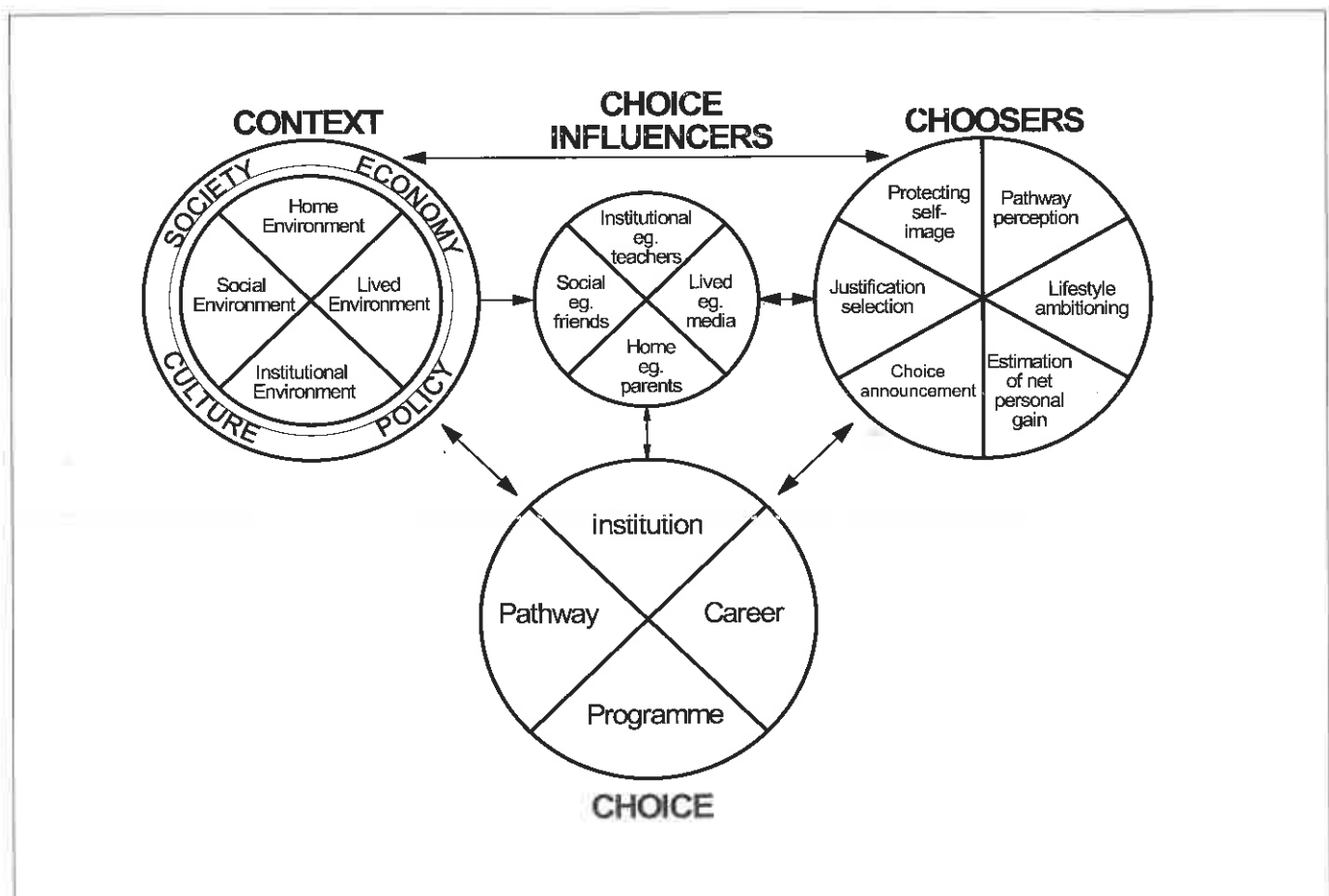
Modelling choice and decision-making

In examining some of the patterns and themes that have emerged from a consideration of young people's choice it is possible to begin to construct a conceptual model of the choice process. The analysis of choice within this paper is the basis of our own model of choice and decision-making in education and training markets (Figure 1).

The four components of the *Four C's model* are:

1. Context;
 2. Choice influencers;
 3. Choosers;
 4. Choice.
1. **Context.** The chooser operates within a context that is defined by the full range of components of their individual life: their home; their institutional

Figure 1 – The four C's model of choice and decision-making



environment (work or school); their social existence; their lived space (i.e. the geographical locations that their lives encompass); and the social, cultural, economic and the policy environment within which each of these operates. This context provides the passive backdrop to choice, the panorama of the individual's life that defines their own existence. Each element within it comprises people, processes, culture and values, each of which will contribute to the whole environment of choice.

2. **Choice influencers.** This context provides not just a passive, inert background of implicit influences on choice, but also active explicit influences, and this is represented in the model by the choice influencers. These influencers may be people or they may be processes such as media communications. The difference between the passive 'context' and the active 'choice influencer' can be illustrated with reference to the role of a child's school in the choice process. Its passive implicit influence lies in its mere existence as a component of the child's life, albeit imbued with strong value-laden implicit messages about the world of work, education and training. Its active explicit influence, though, emerges when it engages with the choice process directly through the ideas and actions of teachers and careers teachers. Such choice influencers act as an important intervening filter on the perceptions of the environment that an individual chooser may have. Where these influencers are people, whether they are teachers, friends, peers or parents, they will be engaging in a range of psychological processes to generate their own interpretations of the environment and preferences for choice. These are described below in our consideration of 'Choosers'.

3. **The 'Chooser'** is important within the model. We have recognised that the question of 'who chooses' generates different answers in relation to each young person and to the particular choice point they have reached. The chooser of a child's primary school is not the child, but will be an unequal partnership decision between mother and father. At age 11, the child will contribute to this partnership choice, and by 16 or 18 will be the dominant partner in the choice. We can identify a range of psychological processes they will be applying to the choice on a continuing basis, whether they are a mature adult, child, adolescent or young adult. These will be:

- the construction of perceptions of careers, and of FE and HE options, from contracted, delegated and derived images (pathway perception);
- the construction of lifestyle ambitions from similar sources (lifestyle ambitioning);
- the comparison of perceptions and lifestyle images in an informal estimate of net long-term and short-term personal gain (estimation of net personal gain);

- the comparison of perceptions and lifestyle images with the need to protect and enhance self-image in the social and cultural context that the individual operates within (protecting self-image);
- the selection of post-hoc justifications to preserve self-image and group identity (justification selection);
- the announcement of a choice within the social and cultural environments where the individual operates (choice announcement).

There is no implication in this description of the internalised psychological processes of the choosers that this is a rational, sequential and essentially positive process of choice. Our analysis of the generic principles of choosing futures earlier within this paper has emphasised how many choices are second best options, or are simply a default residual after other options have been rejected or have simply not been acted upon.

4. **Choice.** From this interaction of context, choice influencer and chooser, will emerge a 'Choice'. That choice is not fixed or irrevocable, however, and itself is subject to interaction with the other components of the model, and hence subject to change. It is important to recognise, therefore, that choosers may revisit any of the stages many times, as significant changes in context (e.g. policy changes), or new information provided by choice influencers (e.g. careers education and guidance input), are drawn to the chooser's attention.

Travelling the pathways of education and training

The model we have described above provides an objective view of the nature of choice in education and training markets. Our interviews with many young people and their parents through our research suggests, however, that to each individual the story of their choosing and the way in which they follow 'their' pathway is more a narrative of a personal history than a systems model can portray. We believe the choice process may be perceived, therefore, like a journey, where decisions and choices made along the way determine, not individually but through the product of their interaction, the final destination to be reached.

The concept of a career or educational trajectory is an oversimplification, for it suggests a logical link - once a student is on a particular path then that leads, inexorably to a specific, or one of a narrow range of, outcomes. An analogy of journeying, following pathways, is much more appropriate. The model is that of a careers and education and training 'landscape', representing a three dimensional view of the whole careers and jobs field.

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