

15. AN INVESTIGATION INTO STUDENTS' CHOICE AND PLACEMENT IN AREAS OF SPECIALIZATION IN THE DEPARTMENT OF FINE AND APPLIED ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF BENIN, BENIN CITY, NIGERIA

Felix Onaiwu Osaigbovo,³⁷¹
Felix Efeoghene Umukoro³⁷²

Abstract: *This paper examines Students' choice and their placement into various areas of specialization in their third year (300-level) of study in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Benin, Nigeria and what informs such choice and placement. Oftentimes, most students, before this level may not have any area of specialization in mind but the course advisers are to counsel them regarding their areas of strength and interest. Sometimes, the Department uses its discretion to place some student. The objective of this paper is to carve out certain criteria to be taken into consideration in placing students into their various areas of specialization. Pedagogic and survey research designs were used in which case questions were served to respondents in order to elicit responses and at the end, it was found out that majority of the students preferred study areas that attracts immediate and attractive monetary rewards like Graphics and Painting. This research examines students' attitudinal disposition towards areas of specialization from 2016/2017 to 2020/2021 academic sessions.*

Key words: *Specialization, Graphics, Painting, Pedagogic, Placement, Attitudinal disposition*

1. Introduction

The aspiration of any intending university student is to study a course of his or her interest and choice but there are times when the students, either by accident or design finds themselves in a course they did not intend to study. The above is true as it relates to the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria. Some of those that find themselves in the department in the first year of study most often may not have chosen the course in their qualifying examinations but the University sometimes magnanimously place these student in other areas as a result of not meeting up with the cut-off marks of certain courses; and so these students that finds themselves in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts go into various areas of specialization in their third year of study and their choice of these areas are dependent on diverse variables as will be discussed in the course of this paper.

2. Statement of the problem

Knowing why students make their choice of course is important and one may not ignore the fact that most of these choices may be inspired by a litany of reasons, which is to acquire a long-term career goal or to an advantage of a passion but in all these, however the student must be sure of the reason for choosing a particular course even before starting school. Most students are not aware of the dangers of going into the wrong course and so they accept any course offered them and this

³⁷¹ Associate Professor PhD., University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria, email: felix.osaigbovo@uniben.edu, ID ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8230-1680>

³⁷² Assistant, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria, email: felix.umukoro@uniben.edu

leads to redundancy and unfulfilled academic dreams and that is why it is of importance students receive some forms of orientation before they venture into any course of study. This study is an investigation into this area and why students should be properly groomed before making their choices.

Conceptual Framework

This study is based on the works of some psychological thoughts and studies propounded and espoused by psychologists like Francis Galton (1822-1911), and also the works of renowned psychologists like Jean Piaget (1896-1980) who is considered one of the most significant psychologists of the 20th century and his theory of cognitive development of the child, also the teachings of Erik Erikson (1902-1994) who is best known for his theory of psychological development, which has its roots in the psychoanalytic importance of identity.

The concept of education

Generally, Gonzalez-DeHass (2013) submits that explaining education aims to describe its essential features. Various authorities in the area have defined education in various ways and at the end these various definitions points out to mean the transmission of knowledge. Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia (2009) defines education as the act or process of imparting or acquiring general knowledge, developing the powers of reasoning and judgment and generally of preparing oneself or others intellectually for mature life. Schofield (2017) thinks that education should be thought of as the process of man's reciprocal adjustment to nature, to his fellowmen and to the ultimate nature of the cosmos. Taking a cue from the above concept of education, art education therefore encompasses the total gamut of teaching and learning of all aspect of art.

Importance of Education

In all ramifications, the importance of education to all facets of society cannot be overemphasized. The following reasons are why it is important for people to be educated: According to Snowman and McCown (2014), education confers utmost confidence in people; this confidence makes it possible for people to express themselves and contribute their quota in the development of society. Education, in most cases as Hopkins (2018) sees it, confers financial security on individuals in the sense that an educated person is most likely the one to be employed into sensitive positions for instance, in a society like Nigeria, it is only educated people that are appointed into ministerial and other sensitive governmental offices; whereas, Eggen and Kauchk (2019) are of the opinion that education helps students develop critical skills especially in decision making processes, it enables students develop real mental astuteness in problem-solving including logical and rational thinking.

Education teaches us the abilities and skills we would need to contribute to societal development and increase our quality of life; education is a part and parcel of a positive society and without education; society would be inundated with misinformation and would be unable to function properly. Societal needs are always multiplying and changing and so a workforce that is educated will always contribute to societal ability to run smoothly. The result of being educated, as Efiand (1990) posited is noticeable throughout life especially knowing the difference between wrong and right, creating factual opinions and contributing to the society and regarding values can all be entrenched in the quality of education we obtain. We

become more knowledgeable and understand things that are happening around us more accurately and why it happened, and we apply logical reasoning to come to our own conclusions.

Importance of Art

Art, as a specialized area, has a lot of advantages for the students and consequently for society in general. Emeka (2014) as cited by Osaigbovo and Osaigbovo (2023) thinks that beyond the individuality of imagination, articulateness and communication, art itself is also a kind of occupation. Right from time, artists and artisans have engaged in various artistic works. There is hardly any African culture where artistic pastimes were not engaged in. From basketry, woodcarving, clay pot molding, images used in shrine propitiation to cloth weaving, Lester (2017) noted that Africans have been engaging in either art for art's sake or art for life.

The consciousness of modern artists probably took its roots from this ancient artistic vocation. Art, in the words of Sickler-Voigt (2019) helps in the development of a sound mind, especially in the areas of self-expression; it exposes children to the appreciation of the world around them by critically studying scenes and drawing them in colourful renditions. Art helps in the psychomotor skill development of the child; with regular exercise of the muscles of the arm through drawing, painting and sculpting, the muscles undergo gradual and symmetrical development.

Art, in the opinion of Lewis and Lewis (2008) makes a potential graduate self-reliant and independent; this could be exemplified by the fact that as the student graduates, he already has a vocation that can sustain him for life while his colleagues are still roaming about with their certificates, seeking white-collar jobs. To the society, art serves as a tourism potential to a country that in turn engenders foreign earning potentials. And ultimately, since visual art is a component of the human experience reflecting the world and the time in which we live, it can help us understand our history and culture.

In the same vein, Goldstein (1980) posits that art helps an individual process his emotions and understands his surroundings. Stressing further, he wrote that art allows one to see life from a different perspective and makes one feel alive. Corroborating this stand, Knobler (2018) stressed that art has always been an important part of human society since the beginning of time and has been used as a tool for cultural exchange, education and expression. Since art is an integral aspect of education, Schofield (2012) outlined three criteria for education which in turn is a translation into art thus:

1. Education implies the transmission of what is worthwhile to those who become committed to it, meaning that art is the transmission of creativity by practitioners to the society at large.
2. Education must involve knowledge and understanding and some sort of 'cognitive perspective' which is not inert.
3. Education at least rules out some procedures of transmission because they lack willingness and voluntariness on the part of the learner.

Judging from the submission of Schofield, art as a specialized area of learning, require all seriousness and attention from all concerned. Art is good for the economy: When artists make money from their works, it rubs off on the economy of the nation.

University Education

Arising from the analogy above, the university education is the type received in the third tier of study which is the university. Students from their respective secondary schools take qualifying examination into their various areas of choice; the examining body like the joint admission and matriculation board (JAMB) in the case of Nigeria conducts the examination each year and successful candidates go ahead to take the post-UTME examination in their respective first choice universities; and the successful candidates are in turn officially admitted into their respective areas of study.

In the University of Benin, there are faculties, colleges and institutes and the Department of Fine and Applied Arts falls into the Faculty of Environmental Sciences. Suffice it to state here that the Department was in the Faculty of Arts until it was relocated to Environmental Sciences but some persons might be wondering why the department was relocated to environmental sciences but the reason is not farfetched.

Other departments that belong to the faculty of Environmental Sciences include Architecture, Estate management, Geomatics and Quantity Surveying. The department of Fine and Applied Arts popularly known as the Uniben Art School, belong to the faculty of Environmental Sciences in tune with global best practices and actually because most areas of the course are science related for example Photography in the graphics section is purely based on principles of physics whereas in Textile design, the use of chemicals like caustic soda whose IUPAC nomenclature is Sodium Hydroxide (NaOH), Sodium Hydrosulphite, IUPAC name, Sodium dithionite ($\text{Na}_2\text{O}_4\text{S}_2$), and Water, IUPAC name, dihydrogen oxide (H_2O) is a commonplace experience in the study of printed and dyed fabrics. (IUPAC is acronym for International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry). Metal design is involved with metallurgy of various metals like Aluminum, zinc, iron, bronze, brass and their alloys.

Sculpture has its fare share of science, the use of *'thixotropics'* which are essentially chemical elements suggests the ascendancy of chemistry; these thixotropics includes cement, plaster of Paris, resin, plastics and glue which have their respective chemical properties. Ceramics is the science of *'Art Chemistry'* due to its versatility in the use of various constituents of clay and glazes. Painting too has some form of chemical usage as in turpentine ($\text{C}_{10}\text{H}_{16}$), linseed oil, thinner and the various pigments used and just of late, a post graduate fashion design student in the department has brought in science denotation into the subject by way of *decarbonization* which have to do with the elimination of dangerous carbon substances in fabrics to prevent poisoning. With these explanations, it is obvious that overtly or covertly, the course, Fine and applied Arts is more of science than the pure arts.

The candidates, after passing the qualifying examinations and are admitted, faces a rigorous screening by way of clearance exercise and successful candidates resumes lecture in their first year known as 100 level. Successful 100 level students go to 200 level which is year two. Suffice it to state here that this course is for a minimum of four years unless with the exemption of direct entry student which are

those from the Polytechnics and Colleges of Education whose study goes for a minimum of two years.

By the second semester of 200 level, the students are made to choose their areas of specialization which is to begin in their 300 level. In most cases, students are given preference of choosing their areas of interest and strength. Over the years, the writers have noticed that students takes certain criteria into consideration before making their choice and that is the crux of this paper.

3. Discussion and analysis

The table below gives a graphic interpretation of students' placement in areas of specialization from 2016/2017 to 2020/2021 academic sessions. This study has been carried out to cover the past five years.

S/N	Sections	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020	2020/2021
1	Graphics	24 (35.29%)	24 (34.78%)	23 (42.60%)	36 (46.15%)	26 (27.95%)
2	Metal Design	2 (2.94%)	3 (4.35%)	1 (1.85%)	1 (1.29%)	1 (1.05%)
3	Textile Design	20 (29.88%)	14 (20.29%)	13 (24.07%)	9 (11.54%)	10 (10.75%)
4	Fashion Design	-Nil-	-Nil-	-Nil-	2 (2.56%)	9 (9.68%)
5	Ceramics	4 (5.88%)	7 (10.14%)	2 (3.70%)	2 (2.56%)	4 (4.30%)
6	Sculpture	-Nil-	6 (8.70%)	5 (9.26%)	2 (2.56%)	6 (6.45%)
7	Painting	17 (25.0%)	15 (21.74%)	10 (18.52%)	25 (32.05%)	31 (33.33%)
8	Art History	1 (1.74%)	-Nil-	-Nil-	1 (1.29%)	6 (6.45%)
	Total	68	69	54	78	93

Table 1: Table showing students placement in areas of specialization for the period 2016/2017 to 2020/2021 Academic sessions

A careful study of the above table reveals that overtime, and even before the period under study, students have shown unequivocal preference for Graphic design and painting and the writers sought to know what informs their choice. In the current session, 2021/2022, the university commenced the second semester in the month of May, 2023 and the writers administered oral questions on twenty randomly selected respondents and the following were the questions administered:

1. What is your name?
2. What level are you?
3. What year did you gain admission into this university?
4. What area of specialization do you intend to go into?
5. What motivating factor influenced your choice?
6. Were you influenced as to the choice of your area of specialization by an external factor?
7. If yes, who or what influenced you?
8. What do you think about the cost of art materials in your section?
9. What do you want to do after your study?
10. What is your general comment?

These questions were administered on twenty (20) of the present 200 level students (2021/2022) who will be drafted into their various areas of specialization by the next semester (2022/2023) and taking a careful look at the table above, it could be seen that in 2016/2017 academic session, only Graphics, Textiles and Painting had student above 25% out of the 68 total students in 400 level of that year. While Graphics recorded the highest students of 24 out of 68 students representing 35.29 or 35.3%, Textiles came second with 20 students representing 29.88 or 30% of the total enrolment and Painting came third with 17 students representing 25% of students. Metal Design, Ceramics and Art History collectively recorded just 7 students while Sculpture recorded zero enrolment which is the reason this research is being undertaken, to know why they have preference for a particular area of specialization. It should be noted that Fashion Design was not yet accredited in the department until 2019/2020 and this is the reason the column of Fashion is blank for the sessions 2016/2017, 2017/2018 and 2018/2019.

In 2017/2018, 69 students were enrolled in 400 level and Graphics again recorded the highest enrolment of 24 students representing 34.78 or 35% of the total enrolment while Textiles and Painting dropped to 14 and 15 respectively; this year, Textiles recorded 20.29% or 20.3% as against 30% in the previous year; Painting also dropped from 17 students or 25% to 15 students or 21.8% of 69% total enrolment for that year. This same year, Metal Design, Ceramics and Sculpture again recorded the lowest number of enrolment while Art History recorded zero enrolment; Metal Design recorded 3 students representing 4.5% of 69 students, Ceramics recorded 7 students representing 10.14% of the total enrolment and interestingly, Art History recorded zero enrolment this year.

In the 2018/2019 academic session, Graphics again recorded the highest enrolment of 23 students out of the total 54, 400 level students; this represents 42.60 or 43% while Textiles came second with 13 students representing 24.07% of that year, Painting followed closely with 10 students representing 18.52 or 19%. Metal Design, Ceramics and Sculpture this time recorded the lowest enrolment of One (1) student (1.85%) for Metal Design, 2 students (3.70%) for Ceramics and 5 students (9.26%) for Sculpture; Art History recorded zero enrolment.

2019/2020 academic session recorded the highest enrolment for Graphics and Painting. Total enrolment this year stood at 93 which is also the highest enrolment so far. While Graphics had 36 students this year representing 46.15 or 46.6% of the total enrolment, Painting followed with 25 students at 32.05% whereas Textile Design, this time recorded only 9 students representing 11.54 or 11.6% of the total population and remarkably the lowest enrolment for them so far. Fashion Design debuted this year with 2 students representing 2.56 or 2.6%. Although attitudes of students towards Sculpture have not been encouraging but it further dipped this year with only 2 students also representing 2.6% and Ceramics followed with same enrolment and same percentage. Metal Design recorded only 1 student representing 1.29 or 1.3% and Art History had the same statistics with Metal Design with 1 student and 1.3%.

The last year in this study 2020/2021 academic session recorded a total enrolment of 93 students and this year happen to be the year with the highest enrolment. As usual, Graphic Design recorded an interesting enrolment of 26

students although less than the previous year but this year, Painting recorded the highest enrolment of 31 students or 33.33% which happens to be their highest enrolment so far. Graphics came second with 26 students representing 27.95 or 30%; Textile Design followed with 10 students which is 10.75 or 10.8% of the total enrolment. Interestingly, Fashion Design recorded 9 students representing 9.68 or 9.7% and this can be attributable to the fact that being a new course, the awareness in the previous year was not much and now that the course handler has succeed making the course interesting to the students, more of them especially the females wants to have a steady job after graduating from the university as adduced by some of the respondents. Art History and Sculpture recorded 6 students each representing 6.45 or 6.5% of the total enrolment, Ceramics had 4 students representing 4.30% and Metal Design, came last with 1 student or 1.05%.

Arising from the analysis above, the writers are of the opinion that there must be certain criteria students take into consideration before choosing a field of specialization and the responses from the respondents explains this as could be seen from the analyses of the questions and responses elicited from them. In most cases, students are placed in their areas of natural strength rather than interest and sometimes areas where they have performed well over time.

In analyzing the outcomes of the questions, questions 1, 2 and 3 are general questions that may not affect their choice of specialization; question 4 asks what area of specialization they intend to go into. Out of 20 students, the areas of their choice are as follows: Graphics – 7, Sculpture – 2, Textiles - 3, Ceramics – 1, Art History- 1, Fashion – 1, Metal Design - 1, Painting – 4.

Question 5 asks what motivated them to choose their areas of specialization and to this, 7 students answered that job prospect after school was their motivating factor; whereas 3 answered that the study environment was what motivated them, 4 said it was the lecturer's style of teaching that inspired them and 2 students were indifferent and the rest 4 respondents said their parents instructed them to chose.

Responding to question 6, all respondents agreed that they had external motivation before making their choice and question 7 asks who influenced them and apart from the 4 that said their parents instructed them to pick their areas, the rest respondents said it was their course handlers, study environment and career prospect that was their motivating factor.

Responding to question 8 that have to do with the cost of Art materials, all respondents agreed that in all aspects of Art, cost of materials have skyrocketed especially in these times of economic meltdown. Most of these art materials are imported from abroad and that makes it even more complicated getting access to them. In the area of Graphics, students needs personal computers, graphic tablets, camera, pens and drawing instruments and these materials are most often than not, beyond the reach of an average student. Textile design students need looms of various types, threads and wools, dyes and chemicals, fabrics and brushes and these are also very expensive.

In Painting, students need various types of colours and inks, easel, donkeys, brushes of various shapes and sizes and chemicals like linseed oil, turpentine and mentholated spirit. Sculpture sometimes seem the most expensive because of some heavy equipment required to work; such equipment like grinding machine, welding

machine, kiln, electroplating machine and other work tools makes the study of this course challenging. Even though the university provides throwing wheels and kiln for Ceramics students, they still have to provide certain materials for themselves.

Although Art history is not a practical course aside buying books and maybe personal computers, this area seems the cheapest as far as use of money to procure materials are concerned. Metal Design requires a lot of energy and power to produce works because of its engineering orientation and that is probably why most students run away from it. Fashion design records the highest enrolment of female students and this is not surprising because females generally like fashion.

Question 9 asks what the students would want to do after leaving school. Two female students said they would love to become some of the best fashion designers around while those who opted for Graphics said they would like to work in advertising agencies. Some are just waiting to get out of school before knowing what they want to become; this is the opinion of five of the 20 respondents.

On a general note in question 10, all the students said they are happy with their chosen field of specialization apart from 2 of them who came into the course by accident and these two said they will like to go back and read the course they initially planned to read.

Generally, there are certain criteria that influence students' choice of area of specialization and these researchers have decided to discuss these criteria in this segment as follows:

(i) Cost of studying a course is a factor in students' consideration of some courses. Some Art courses are more expensive in terms of procuring materials and equipment. Course like sculpture in most cases requires procurement of equipment like welding and grinding machine and to some indigent students, it may be better to go into a less-expensive area.

(ii) Convenience of studying a particular course is also a factor; female students do not like going into sculpture because of the power and energy required to carry out certain works like welding, casting, grinding and lifting of heavy objects. The male students find it easy to perform these tasks than the female students and this is why female students do not like majoring in sculpture.

(iii) Career prospect after leaving school is a major reason students go into a particular study area. Most often, students choose a particular course of specialization because they perceive career opportunity in the industry the course relates to. A look at table 1 (pg. 7) reveals students' preference for graphic design over and above all other areas over the years and probably in the coming years.

The reason for this is because graduates of graphics have a wide area of career interest to go into; areas like advertising, printing, public relations department of most companies and government offices, communications companies, oil and gas, Radio, Television and satellite stations, automobile and electronic companies and the teaching field. This reason is mostly why students flock into graphics. Most other areas of art specialization have limited scope with the exception of those who like to go into studio practice.

(iv) Personal career interest is also a reason students go into a particular area of study; this could be influenced by study environment, the teaching technique and attitude of the lecturer. This is a very important factor as most students see their

lecturer as their role model.

(v) Area of academic strength plays a role in student's choice of specialization; it is of importance that student's performance in academic work has a strong foundation to help boost their morale to pursue their dreams.

(iv) Peer group and parental influence according to Tassel-Baska and Little (2023) is also a factor in students going into a particular area of study. In the school environment, there is a strong connection between peer group influence and student's attitudinal and behavioral patterns. The theory of nature-nurture controversy as championed by the psychologist Francis Galton (1822-1911) is actually what is responsible for student's behaviour. This nature-nurture debate is concerned with the impression that both parental and environmental influences contribute to human cognitive and personality traits.

While nature is influenced by genetic inheritance and other biological factors, nurture is principally the influence of external factors after conception such as exposure to external influences especially as it bothers on gregariousness which is a major characteristic of adolescents at this stage; coupled with life's experiences and learning. Taking a cue from the explanation above, it then means that both peer-group and parental influence, (environment and heredity) are responsible for student's behaviour towards the choice of specialization area. There have been instances of students taking after their parents who are natural artists which mean that the artistic genetic traits of the parents have been passed onto their offspring.

In spite of the above parameters, these writers feel strongly that some of these students just want to go into graphics for extraneous reasons like the dress codes of students in the section whereas a lot of them do not have any cogent reason for wanting to go into graphics. This could be found in the enrolment of students into various sections in the 2021/2022 academic session where out of the total 300 level student population of 96, a whopping 39 students opted for and were drafted to graphics, whereas Fashion Design had 7 students, Metal Design had only 2 students while Sculpture has 8 students. 5 students opted for Textile Design and Ceramics had 6 students while Painting had 20 students and Art History had 9 students.

The above analysis shows the bias for Graphic Design by the students over the years at the detriment of other areas of specialization; and the very ridiculous aspect is that most of these students opting for Graphics do not actually know the reason why they want to go into the area and this is why a professional career guidance counselor is very important at this level of education. This bias is not without its negative concomitant effect especially on the students. A situation where a lecturer is supposed to supervise a maximum of 6 students, that lecturer is now made to supervise 15 or more students; productivity will generally drop and the lecturers may not perform to their optimum.

4. Conclusion

Hetland et al (2013) argues that to succeed in having a fulfilled higher education begins with and from the ability to answer or understand why a course is chosen and if it is the right institution to acquire the academic knowledge and so the student need to understand the following fundamental principles:

(a) It is important for the student to know why he or she wants to study. This is

important because, sponsoring education is capital intensive; therefore it would be better not to proceed at all than become a drop-out; but if the reason is to acquire a degree that will eventually qualify the student for the acquisition of a degree that will eventually make him become independent or even an employer of labour, then that is good reason to get a degree.

(b) The student should also allow his zeal guide him before embarking on a chosen course; that, to a large extent makes the student serious in whatever he does.

(c) The student should also consider his academic strength before going into any course of study. A science oriented student should not consider reading a course in social sciences or arts and this is why psychological counseling is good for students therefore students in Fine and Applied Arts are to undergo this counseling in order to place them in their right footing.

In line with the objective of this paper which is to outline out certain necessary criteria to be taken into consideration in placing students into their various areas of specialization, the writers has concluded that the following considerations should be taken into account while considering students into various areas of specialization:

1. Cumulative scores from 100 level should be calculated and areas where their academic strength lies should be taken into consideration.
2. The students' family financial strength should be taken into consideration. It would be a misnomer for an indigent student to go into area that is capital intensive
3. Students' health status should also be considered, for instance, an asthmatic student should never be placed in an area where chemicals are in frequent use and also an SS genotype student should not be placed in an area where physical strength is a must.
4. Placement of students must not be done with sentiments in spite of the fact that a lot of interests from external factors may come in.

Finally, these writers submit that in the placement of students into various areas of specialization, care must be taken in order not to allocate the students in areas that will result in negative outcome.

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