

Career Planning Profiles of High Income Community College Graduates

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ABSTRACT

The discussion on high-income careers has been heavily debated. Vision 2020 was created in 1991 for Malaysia to become a developed and high-income country. Vision 2020 should be achieved without neglecting anyone, especially those academically disadvantaged students. In general, however, society perceives that these individuals do not have the ability to achieve high income careers and thus, they could not contribute toward achieving Vision 2020. As such, a case study was conducted to analyze how community college graduates plan to obtain high income careers. In this article, only two community college graduates were selected and interviewed regarding their career development. The results were analyzed in terms of individual profiles and detailed track of their success. The theoretical framework for career planning construct was mainly based on Super's model of career decision making. The individual profiles were constructed based on the interview data.

Keywords: Career planning, community colleges, high income career, Vision 2020, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Polemics on high-income careers for vocational graduates has been discussed. Aspiration for Malaysia to become an advanced industrial and high-income nation was stipulated in Vision 2020. Its goal is to attain high income status by 2020 while ensuring that socio-economic growth is sustainable. To achieve equitable and sustainable growth, the Malaysian economy has to embrace and solve economic disparities that our nation faces. An inclusive development is necessary to avoid marginalizing certain groups in advancing the nation toward modernization. However, academically disadvantaged students could inhibit the achievement of Vision 2020 due to their lower class jobs and careers that they hold. In reality, however, many of these low and medium-class achievers actually able to succeed in their careers. Some even succeeded to become successful entrepreneurs. The public skills training institute such as community colleges have produced many skilled workers and some of these individuals are able to achieve success in their careers. Their success is noteworthy because it could give hope and encouragement to those low academic achievers but highly skilled individuals.

What is high income community?

A high-income community is a prerequisite for becoming a high income nation as specified in Vision 2020. In order to become high-income country, Malaysia should enhance the productive capacity of the individuals generated through proper investments in education, training and health. Achieving high-income is consistent with the theory of human capital expounded by Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964), which sees human capital, especially in education as a determinant for future earnings (Becker, 1993; Mincer, 1974). Therefore, to achieve high-income communities, education is a crucial investment. Quality human capital is fundamental to high-income communities.

Fixing the interpretation of high-income communities is difficult to determine because until now no specific designation for the high income community as to whether to use the currency as a benchmark or a percentage of revenue for the local population (Murphy et al., 2007). However, the distribution of income received by individuals and society is a common economic measure. The level

of income is often used as an indicator to determine the economy of a community (Rahmah et al., 2011). Djohadikusomo (in Rahmah et al., 2011) stated that a relative measurement of income distribution is commonly used by the World Bank by dividing the population into three groups: 20% of households in the high income group, 40% of households in the middle income group and 40% as a group of low income.

To profile the level of individual income of community college graduates, the Household Income Survey (HIS) was used as a source of income classification. HIS is one of the surveys conducted by the Department of Statistics, Malaysia. According to HIS report of 2012, the threshold level of income of MYR 5,742 was used as high income level in the city and MYR 3,080 as a high-income level for the rural areas. The Central Bank of Malaysia [Bank Negara Malaysia] (2013) defined MYR 3,000 and below as low income, MYR 3,001 to MYR 5,000 as middle income and MYR 5,000 and above as high income (Bank Negara Malaysia, 2013).

Career planning

Super (1957; 1977) stated that career planning as the preparations made by an individual before work. Super also defined career as a series of circumstances that occur sequentially in the life of a person related to career selection; the role and status of a person throughout life. Tolbert (1994) defined career as a network of work involving the individual self. Sidek (2006) summed up a career as the preparation before a person is involved in the world of work. Career planning is the ability of an individual to plan his future career. Individuals with career maturity actively design career, look for information about career choices, talk to the parties concerned (counselors, family and others) about planning his career, take part in outdoor activities or work part-time that would help him to explore career, attend related courses and obtain additional information that could add value to his future career (Amla et al., 2009).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework used in this study was based on Super's career development theory (1984), social learning theory (Krumboltz, 1979; 1996) and theory of career aspiration (Gottfredson, 1981). Super theory is one of the most comprehensive career theories ever produced (Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996; Sharf, 2013; Sidek, 2006; Zunker, 2012). He has spent almost 40 years to identify critical factors and the necessary competence to assist individuals to be able to make their own career decisions. He has produced an inventory of career choice readiness to meet the career needs of adolescents (Glavin & Rehfuß, 2005). Super and his colleagues have studied the career development of young people and how they select career options. They argued that even if an individual has been out of high school, he/she cannot be said to be prepared for his/her future careers. Not only they looked at the different levels of maturity of individual careers, but they also examined at the different components of career maturity (Super, 1977; Super et al., 1984; Sharf, 2013). The model proposed by Sharf (2013) was also used to understand the concept of career development for youth. Mohd Sani (2011) and Niles (2001) stated that the age range for college students who are mostly young people aged between 18-21 years. The profile for career planning was built on the four constructs: career planning objectives, self-efficacy in career planning, the catalyst in career planning, and approach to career planning. These constructs were generated by the theories stated above.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to explore the career planning factors of the successful community college graduates who have reached high income/salary in their career.

METHODS

This study used a qualitative case study method. In conducting this study, the researchers observed 15 respondents from 189 successful community college alumni and were selected based on the following criteria: (a) community college graduates from 2003 to 2011, (b) earn minimum salary of MYR 5,000 and above per month, (c) listed and recognized by Division of Industrial Relations and Alumni Tracer, Department of Community Colleges as a successful alumni. The definition of a high income in this study refers to an individual with a monthly income of more than MYR 5,000 and have a stable career. The value of MYR 5,000 income benchmark is based on the Household Income Survey (HIS) which sets MYR 5,742 as high-income level in urban and MYR 3,080 as a high-income level in rural areas (EPU, 2013). Data were collected by using interviews and the selection of participants for the study was intended (purposive sampling) and the informants were selected based on the stated criteria.

An interview protocol was prepared and the interviews were conducted at the participants' workplace. The interview time and place were determined by the participants. This was to ensure that the informants were comfortable during the interviews. The research focused on four important aspects in career planning: career planning objective, self-efficacy in career planning, the catalyst in career planning and approach to career planning. In-depth interviews or purposeful conversations (Dexter, 1970) were used to collect the qualitative data for this study where face-to-face interviews were conducted. The interview protocol was validated by experts. Interview data were transcribed and then reaffirmed by the participants. Overall, 15 respondents participated in the study. All the interview data were analyzed using a computer software program Nvivo 8.0. In this article, however, only the empirical data from the two informants (out of the 15) interviewed were discussed due to the limited pages allowed for this article.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profiles of high income of graduates

Informant 1 is the graduate of one of the community colleges. He held the position of a managing director of two engineering and construction-based companies. He came from an ordinary family with a father who worked as a factory worker to support his family. After completing his national school examination, he decided to continue his studies at a community college in the field of integrated manufacturing technology at a certificate level. After completing his studies, he worked in several companies to gain work experience. He was promoted and eventually was invited to become a partner with his former employer. He is a person who has a vision of his own in everyday life. For him, planning is very important in all aspects of life, including planning for future career. According to Magnusson and Starr (2000), life planning skill is very important and should be a part of the habit of a person. Career planning should be emphasized and this was the key to Participant 1 success as stated by him:

"One reason for my success is because I am a person who likes to plan everything..."
(Participant 1)

Thus, it is not surprising that planning of his career has begun at a community college and he has worked hard to ensure his achievement. Career planning ahead has helped him to focus on future career and that led him to become an entrepreneur.

"The career planning, from the beginning, I have in mind to do business, so I become entrepreneurs"
(Participant 1)

Meanwhile, Informant 2 is a mechanic specialist for BMW and owner of a BMW workshop. He has opened his workshop since 2008 and now has four full-time and part-time employees. He holds a certificate in automotive from a community college. Despite a fairly moderate academic achievement

during his studies at either the high school or community college, he managed to own a BMW automotive maintenance workshop.

Career planning goal

(a) Specific objective

He (Informant 1) has set a specific objective to become an entrepreneur and this enabled him to draw up appropriate measures to achieve his goal. Hence, he has planned carefully to ensure that his goal could be realized. He also took initiatives to ensure that the target goal could be achieved. The goal has guided him in his studies and organized his future career path. Zikic and Klehe (2006) suggested that looking on specific career objective would be a good guidance in career development because that person may need the guidance to achieve his target.

"I'm definitely going to be an entrepreneur, any courses related to entrepreneurs, I will attend".
(Participant 1)

Informant 2 admitted that he did not have systematic planning, but he has a clear career objective. Since schooling days he has instilled ambition to become a mechanic and continued until he graduated from a community college. His specific objective has influenced his career development. To pursue his ambition, he was involved with automotive-related activities, such as working part-time as a mechanic. Haratsis et al. (2015) stated that by having specific career objective and proper attitude could help the individual to focus toward achieving his target career in the future.

"Since from school I wanted to be a mechanic... at that time too, I already worked as a part-time mechanic, and finally took an automotive course at college community."
(Participant 2)

(b) Realistic goal

Being realistic is very important in career planning. According to him (Participant 1), a good career and a bright future is very important. But a person needs to recognize his strengths and weaknesses as well as to focus on the goal that he could achieve on his own. Participant 1 asserts that community college graduates have the opportunity to generate high income by doing business and not necessarily work with other people. According to Amla et al. (2008), an individual who plans a career should have a realistic goal to prevent stress and burnout if he fails to achieve the target. The person should know his strengths, abilities and advantages before setting up his career goal.

"Community college graduates do not necessarily want to work with other people... if we work for other people, how much can we get as a community college certificate holder?"
(Participant 1)

Self-efficacy in career planning

(a) Self-confidence

Informant 1 also claimed to possess high self-confidence and that was a strong driving force to pursue his future career. He realized that he has the potential to become an entrepreneur since his school days. It started when he felt saddened by the failing of the food business ran by his father during the economic crisis. He was determined to revive his father's family business legacy. According to social cognitive career theory, factors such as self-efficacy, outcome expectations and personal goals are critical determinants for career success. These elements could shape future career and guide individual's planning (Lent et al., 1996).

"I am very confident that I can do business, I am sure I can succeed...although my father failed to continue his business".
(Participant 1)

His confidence also grew when his former employer recognized his ability and invited him to become a partner and this was a great encouragent for him to excel.

"More confident for me when my employer did not allow me to resign and even invited me to be his partner".

(Participant 1)

Informant 2 was passive in the class but he was skilful as an automechanic. He knew his potential was in the area of automotive servicing and really determined to become a good mechanic. Hall and Chandler (2005) stated that people that follow their intended path would be more happy and productive in their career. Based on that, Participant 2 was determined to achieve what he had dreamt before and eagered to prove his ability.

"When I was in college, I was skillful in repairing engine...many people said I was good [mechanic] when I was doing it part time...but I seldom show to my lecturer...I am more silent in class".

(Participant 2)

(b) Career planning

High self-efficacy and confidence have helped him (Informant 1) to achieve his ambition. His career planning was to become an entrepreneur. The combination of these two factors has enabled him to become an entrepreneur. According Super (1957), each occupation requires a characteristic pattern of abilities and personality traits. With strong self-efficacy and confidence, Participant 1 was determined to achieve his goal.

"I think I could do it ... so I was determined to involve in the business one day".

(Participant 1)

In the same token, Informant 2 said that self-efficacy was the driving force in his effort to focus on becoming a successful mechanic after graduation. His confidence did help him to venture in automotive business. His self-efficacy has sustained his success in automotive sector.

"I select automotive and I am very confident I can succeed and go a long way in this field".

(Participant 2)

Catalysts in career planning

Participant 1 stated that there are no shortcuts to success. According to him, success needs catalyst as a bridge to success.

(a) Part-time work experience

Part-time work experience evidently has a significant impact on career planning. As such, part-time work experience could be a powerful catalyst to career developmet. Beside that, exposure to co-curricular or external courses related to his field during his studies at the community college was also important. Creed et al. (2007) said self-efficacy and work experience have played critical roles in current and future career planning. Research has shown that part-time work experience was positively associated with career planning and able to guide individuals in their career planning. According to Informant 1, his strategy to gain experience in the work ahead was to work part-time in the evenings during his student's days at the community college. Part-time work has greatly assisted him in building his business competence.

"At night I went to work ... this did affect my career planning...because I can feel how the life of a merchant".

(Participant 1)

Career planning could be more guided if an individual has participated in part-time working experience. For him (Informant 2), part-time job provided direction to him to plan his future career. Guile and Griffith (2001) stated that the importance of work experience and suggested new curriculum framework to allow work experience to be used as the basis for the development of knowledge, skills and identity.

"When I was in college I did part time job [as an automechanic]... now, I understand better how to be a mechanic"

(Participant 2)

(b) Industrial training

Through industrial training, Informant 1 felt that the practical exposure in the curriculum provided real working experience in the field. Exposure to industrial training has a significant impact on his future career. A study by Osman et al. (2008) showed that students' performance after the practical training were up from 48-63% to 89-95% in the three main aspects (attitude, communication and work performance) for engineering students. According to Collins (2002), industrial training is important because the hands-on experience cannot be imparted through lectures. It can only be gained through practical activity in the real world.

"I think it is... education and community college curriculum is useful ... in industrial training, we did the practical job ... so we can feel how it was done".

(Participant 1)

(c) External courses

According to Informant 2, attending external courses outside of the community college has helped him to plan his future career. He took courses related to entrepreneurship and these courses has assisted him to obtain information on how to become a successful entrepreneur. Based on the study by MacDonald and Boud (2003), the quality of students' work has been improved by taking external courses. For Respondent 2, the external courses have contributed to the success of his journey to become a high-income earner.

"I attended an entrepreneurship program first time in college ... it gives an impact to me".

(Participant 2)

(d) Skills competition

Participating in skills competition such as "Golden Hands", has made Informant 2 more confident with his abilities in automotive design. This was because the exposure to the skills competition was beneficial in improving his skills and competence. Skill competition was an important thruster for innovation in the new era (Liu-Zhong, 2010). With the intention to win the skills competition, the contender will try their best to product great and innovative product. In addition, new experience could be gained by participating in the skills competition.

"College has sent me to the "Golden Hands competition", it has a great impact on me".

(Participant 2)

(f) Mentor

He (Informant 2) was very fortunate to have a mentor who influenced his career planning. His mentor added momentum to his career planning and it was very important for people like him who have low self-confidence to compete in the working life. The influence of his mentor was very strong and he worked hard to follow in his mentor footsteps, who was also a specialist in BMW car servicing. Chun-Chi et al. (2015) reviewed the role of mentor in nurturing future career and found that mentoring played significant role in social and psychology progress to the protégé's career development.

"My mentor helped me a lot ... I consulted him and I wanted to be like him ... he helped me a lot and show me the way"

(Participant 2)

Approach to Career Planning

(a) Self planning

According to Respondent 1, he planned his career alone. This was the basis of planning his career and became the starting point for the implementation of his career planning. Self planning, which started with imagination has strong influence in his career success. Diekhof et al. (2011) stated anticipatory imagery proactively generated the "illusion" of reduced fearfulness. This situation would allow Participant 1 to create his future career without worries of failure.

"I plan alone... did not talk to anyone at first...just using my imagination"

(Participant 1)

Although it seems not so serious, it was considered as guidance for his future career (Informant 1). This was because at that point he did not receive formal career guidance from anyone and did not know where to get career guidance.

"I never talk to lecturers or a counselor...I did not know how to discuss with anyone"

(Participant 1)

Furthermore, Informant 2 did not discuss his plan with anyone and he just created his own vision. This was because he was an introverted person and seldom discuss his plan with others.

"I plan on my own...I did not share with anyone...I envision it in my mind".

(Participant 2)

(b) Saving plan

During his studies at community college, Informant 2 managed to save the money from his study loan. His father has passed away and his mother was not working. He ended up by working part-time at the workshop while studying. From his savings, he used the money as the capital to open a car workshop. Kennickell and Lusardi (2004) stated saving plan is important to business owners because they need to take the precautionary saving motive into account due to the risks involved in their business. This step may enhance their confident and motivation to become a successful businessman in the future.

"I did not plan so much but I have saving plan."

(Participant 2)

CONCLUSION

The globalization of the world today is obviously demanding effective and systematic career planning to help individuals build their future careers. The purpose of this study was to explore the career planning factors of the successful community college graduates who have reached high income/salary in their careers. The study found that career planning is a critical step for the community college graduates to reach their goal. Besides career planning, other factors such as self-efficacy, self-confidence, work experience and mentoring are also important determinants in career success. The public skills training institutes such as community colleges have produced many skilled workers and some of the graduates are able to achieve success in their careers. Their success is noteworthy because it could give hope and encouragement to those low academic achievers but highly skilled individuals.

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