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CHOICE AND REALITY IN CAREER DEVELOPMENT:

A TRACER STUDY OF THE CLASS OF 2002 MASTER OF EDUCATION

OF THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

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0010620 J

A research report submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Masters in Education: Policy and Management.

Supervisor: Professor M Cross

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this research is my own, unaided work. It is being submitted for the Degree of Masters in Education at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.

_____

Chandika Sing
Johannesburg
February 2010

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my loving parents, Mr and Mrs W M Sing, for their motivation, support, wisdom and guidance throughout my adult life.

To my wonderful husband, Rinel Sing, for providing his invigorating inspiration and companionship in working alongside me to progress to higher levels in our academic lives.

My beloved children, Aksara and Vyasti, who have exhibited patience, understanding and kindness beyond their age to their "student" parents.

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The graduates of the WITS class of 2002, for their time, effort, quick responses and willingness to be samples of the research report.

ABSTRACT

More and more people are attempting to increase their human capital by increasing their qualifications. Post-graduate studies, according to many, is the way forward as it will enhance one's personal and professional prospects. This research project is intended to make a contribution to the field of education by looking at how a Masters degree affects the life values (the meaning and status attached to one's life) and prospects of individuals taking up post-graduate studies. It uses the tracer study methodology to create an impact in determining how the WITS Masters Programme has affected the post-graduate student in terms of life values. It specifically targets the Masters in Education degree at the University of the Witwatersrand (WITS) by tracing the lives of six graduates from the year 2002. The research is a qualitative tracer study that aims at establishing a relationship between what is studied and the effects this has on the lives of the graduates.

Key words:

Aligned ambitions, human capital, choice and reality, tracer studies, labour market, career aspirations.

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1 CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The world is in a constant state of flux. Paradigm shifts occur frequently and it is becoming increasingly difficult to keep up with dynamic current trends. A critical survival tool for the 21st century academic (a person increasing their knowledge base through the process of educational studies) is the ability to make correct choices and decisions with regard to the pursuit of tertiary study. These choices impact on future life opportunities. From this perspective, ambitions play an influential role in one's life. Whether realistic or not, immediate or long-term goals provide direction and make sense of our lives and futures. Ambitions are like compasses that help chart a life course and provide direction (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). Ambitions collectively influence study and career choices, future earnings and employment opportunities.

> "Two roads diverge into a yellow wood. I took the path less travelled by and that has made all the difference." (Dylan Thomas)

Stemming from this profound thought is the realisation that people in South Africa today are requiring more and more assistance in ironing out or mapping the type of career path that they need to follow in order to achieve the type of life trajectory to which they aspire towards. A lifestyle, for example, that provides both financial and emotional security, contentment and the drive to meet the demands of an increasingly globalised and technically advanced world is an example of what urban educated people expect to achieve. Foresight and the ability to

make the right decisions, together with one's educational and vocational forte, influences the life path upon which one embarks.

Education plays an important role in developing and influencing the thought processes that enable people to make informed decisions regarding life choices. Tertiary education is a means required for ensuring that life's aspirations do become a reality. This belief is iterated in the Masters degree offered by the University of the Witwatersrand advertisement which states that: *"A Masters degree in Education (M.Ed) opens up opportunities for career development, for professional renewal and for research in a range of related fields."* (Pendlebury, 2001).

This particular study forms part of a broader tracer study that follows up on graduates from the M.Ed degree at WITS in the period 1999 – 2002. It seeks to examine the path of graduate students from the Masters in Education degree (M.Ed) to after completion of the degree. The research report investigates what happens to students after they graduate with an M.Ed degree and whether the experience of the M.Ed has had an impact on their lives and their employment. To enable this process, this study traces the consequences of the life choices made by a sample of six M.Ed graduates from WITS in the year 2002. Of the selected six graduates, four completed their M.Ed majoring in Educational Policy, Planning and Management, while one majored in Adult Education, Training and Development, and the other majored in Education, Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights.

1.2 Aim of the research

This study explores the experiences, problems and challenges faced by the graduates studying the M.Ed programme during 1999 at WITS, graduating in the year 2002. The research contributes to the knowledge base of education by exposing how choices made by Masters graduates influence their career paths. The research concentrates on whether the choice to earn an M.Ed degree at WITS assisted the graduates in achieving in any way the objectives that they set out to achieve upon registering for the degree. The study explores whether WITS is meeting the needs and expectations of its M.Ed students.

The main question is:

What bearing does the M.Ed degree have on career development, career aspirations and professional renewal of the graduates of 2002 from WITS?

To answer the question above the research study aims to investigate the following.

- What are the factors that informed the graduates' choice to study for a Masters Degree in Education?
- What were the expectations of the students prior to registering for their post-graduate degree?
- What does the human capital of WITS perceive to be the purpose, aims and merits of the M.Ed degree?
- How did the students face the problems or challenges they experienced in the duration of the degree?

- What is the relationship between the M Ed degree and employment opportunities after graduation?
- Is there a correlation between the students' choice to study further as a means of enhancing career opportunities and the outcome that exists upon graduation?

1.3 Argument

The M.Ed degree in Education from WITS is aimed at making people more effective in the workplace and this programme claims to provide the necessary skills people need to perform better in the workplace. However, the perceptions of most individuals opting to study an M.Ed degree not only includes becoming a more effective person at their current jobs, but also that the degree provides a stepping stone to success in their career paths and will encourage them to achieve other goals in life. This study argues that the perceptions of these individuals and the reality of what the degree actually does are different. The study achieves this by tracing M.Ed graduates from the year 2002 from WITS, highlighting the reality, the discrepancies and similarities between what is studied at WITS and the outcomes achieved in the workplace. The study shows that while the M.Ed degree does make an individual more effective in the workplace, it also allows individuals to pursue their goals and ambitions in life. Obtaining the M.Ed degree from WITS creates opportunities and opens doors for career mobility, upwards and outwards, while at the same time providing individuals with great personal motivation and a zest for living life to the fullest.

1.4 Rationale for the research project

Tracer studies are commonly used for the purposes of gathering and analysing data. Reasons for a tracer study may include main destinations at a point in time, location of work, level and type of occupation, course experience and the extent to which employment is related to completed course of study (Schomburg, 2000). It is envisaged that the information gathered from surveys and focus groups will provide the basis upon which informed decisions can be made on future curriculum redevelopment and research. It can therefore be deduced that most tracer studies focus on survey information. The subjective dimensions of such studies are usually not important or not necessary.

This tracer study explores the subjective dimensions that are usually ignored in tracer studies. By considering these unexplored dimensions, the study provides insight into the experiences of the chosen sample of graduates. The results of this study add to the knowledge base of prospective students faced with personal decisions or choices to enter into a higher education institution in order to gain a higher qualification level. Subsequently, highlighting these subjective dimensions is a means to assist the course providers in retaining and further developing or adapting the elective coursework. The study, a small test at a micro level, enquires into the reputation of the University of the Witwatersrand in being a relevant and vibrant tertiary institution that recognises the role of the customer and stakeholder feedback, in shaping its future directions.

1.5 Overview of the research project

The research report consists of seven chapters:

Chapter 1 provides the background to the research elaborating on the need for the tracer study. The aim and rationale of the research is clarified. This chapter provides an overview of the research report.

Chapter 2 presents the literature review that has informed this research project. Debates on the relationship between university degrees and career development are dominated by two major claims. First, there are those who argue that university degrees are not always instrumental in determining careers paths of graduates. There are other important factors that that may influence experience of university graduates. These include for example race, class, gender and other labour market forces. Second, and more important to this study, is the claim that the higher the alignment of the degree with career aspirations, the greater is the likelihood of matching an individual's choices or aspirations with the career paths. This is in line with Schneider and Stevenson's (1999) concept of aligned ambitions, which entails the ability to set goals set in life (e.g. to become an education system manager) and devise strategies to achieve them successfully (e.g. undertaking M Ed studies in Educational Management).

Chapter 3 covers issues relating to the research design. It describes the processes and methods of data gathering and analysis. The interview design, the interview methods, the

population researched, the sample size and data analysis are described. The chapter also highlights the limitations of the research.

Chapter 4 The students' expectations before beginning the programme are explored to determine the goals and purposes of the M.Ed degree. This chapter argues that underpinning the M.Ed programme at WITS is the assumption that it provides a stepping stone to achieving success at the workplace (Pendlebury, 2001). The experience with the WITS M Ed degree raises critical issues and challenges what university degrees can or cannot do.

Chapter 5 focuses on the backgrounds, profiles, reasons and expectations of the graduates before attending the programme. This chapter elucidates the varied circumstances that influence and encourage students to pursue post-graduate studies. The focus of the chapter provides a contextual link between the candidates' expectations and circumstances of the M.Ed degree with the reality of the workplace. The chapter shows that concerns with upward mobility by far outplayed concerns with improvement of their workplace practice.

Chapter 6 explores the learning experiences of the graduates and the effects of their experiences on their chosen career paths. The challenges, disappointments, ambitions of their experiences during and after studying the M.Ed degree are provided. This chapter argues that post-graduate studies are rewarding and necessary for purposeful career mobility and change.

Chapter 7 concludes the research report and provides recommendations for future research. It argues that post-graduate studies positively influence patterns of career changes in terms of career mobility and development. The findings of the study describe the discrepancies and similarities of the workplace in relation to choices of studying. Effectiveness and application of concepts learnt during the study of the degree largely impact upon the lives of the graduates.

2 CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

A sizeable percentage of graduates enrol for post-graduate courses yet there is sparse published literature on the aspirations and career goals of these students, as well as the extent to which particular courses impact on these goals. In spite of the time, effort and resources devoted to higher education, little is known about several basic issues. One of the issues involves the understandings of what motivates students to attend particular courses in post-graduate degrees. A second issue relates to the possible benefits derived by students from universities. However much interest persists in understanding the benefits of higher education, a concerted effort has yet to address these topics fully.

This chapter argues that there exists a complex but necessary relationship between post-graduate education and career opportunities and professional renewal. The body of literature consulted outlines particular and current debates regarding choices in education and career trajectories. It looks at the role education plays in determining career paths. The literature also focuses on choices and career aspirations, introducing the concept of aligned ambitions. The third point of departure for this literature review involves the relationship between higher education and the workplace. The following are the main issues explored in this chapter:

- The role of post-graduate studies.
- Ambitions, choices and career aspirations.
- Higher education and the workplace

2.2 The role of post-graduate studies

Theories regarding post-graduate studies are divided between two domains, one being the Human Capital Theory and the second being the Reproduction Theory. One set of theories, that is, the Human Capital Theory, claims that acquiring post-graduate degrees is beneficial to the individual and society (Buchman & Schwille, 1983; Delaney, 1997; Heath, 1998; Pring, 1999; Roizen & Jepson, 1985; Toohey, 1999; Hodkinson, 2005). The second set of theories, Reproduction Theory, contest this and claim that universities reproduce social relations in society (Bowles & Gintis, 1975; Varghese, 1982).

Human Capital Theory

Development of human potential can be seen as a fundamentally necessary investment for individuals as well as the labour market. Education has the capacity to make positive contributions towards any individual's or country's advancement. Those who favour certification approaches to learning argue that it is useful to have a qualification because qualifications take learning to recognisable levels (Barth, 2001). Qualifications are thought to advance "the mobility of our conceptions and it expands the scope of our thoughts and actions as can be envisioned" (Buchman & Schwille, 1983: 42).

The assumption of acquiring skills and knowledge of particular qualifications are most important to students. Weber (2002) contends that there is strong empirical evidence that unemployment rates decrease as the educational level increases. Weber (2002) also found that literature evaluating the incidence and duration of unemployment has always found education

to be a key factor because labour markets are not perfectly flexible. A need for human investment in higher education is therefore necessary for the advancement of the labour market. The human capital theory perceives skills as commodities and functions around the perception that a person will choose to invest in his/her own education with the belief that such a venture will result in enhanced lucrative skills. The labour market places demands on individuals to modernize their skills as technological advancement requires a higher educated workforce to ensure productivity and operational effectiveness. Research using the human capital model provides evidence showing the effect of education on income and efficiency, including the beneficial impact of education on economic growth.

Vandenberghe (1999) however, states that the human capital theory should not take for granted that an individual's demand for education will automatically be transformed into real human capital. Notwithstanding the extensive research work conducted to express the human capital model, there is still a lack of concrete evidence to draw definite conclusions about the link between education and training and economic growth. In spite of these issues, there is still a large body of empirical data that recommends that occupational training indeed does have an optimistic impact on earnings and employment opportunities for those individuals who pursuit valid educational experiences.

The rapidly growing population of South Africa increases steadily, influenced further by the influx of migrant workers from neighbouring countries, as well as illegal immigrant workers. Thus, ensuring that the labour market has a sufficient number of potential workers and that there is no shortage of human labour. However, the problem posed by most of the workforce

is the lack of skills. Human capital theory is a powerful learning process that helps students to acquire the skills demanded by the labour market. The primary purpose of universities becomes that of preparing graduates for their occupational lives by equipping them with the necessary skills. However, Davenport (1999) states that both industry owners and students are considered self-interested individuals who seek to maximise returns on their respective financial investments by making themselves more marketable through higher education. He further contends that students are future workers who believe that the acquisition of work-related knowledge and skill translates into enhanced economic return. People are, as a result, more productive once they have received training. The latter translates into higher wages and in general should create a more productive graduate who can find his/her niche in society.

Cohn (2000) compares the effect of training to the effect of providing a worker with equipment. For example, a worker with a bulldozer is more productive than one trying to remove dirt with his bare hands. The productive enhancing power of acquired skills propels an individual to greater heights as human capital. Investment in workers represents the shift from a homogenous perspective of the role of labour, and productivity and growth, is viewed as driven by a focus on quality and the upgrading of skills, in line with post-industrial society. Such investments are required to meet the burgeoning numbers of technical, professional and managerial workers required in this society . Human capital theory assumes that there will be greater internal mobility as a result of employer investment in education and training. With globalisation and increased pressure on the labour markets of the world, the question arises whether the latter will actually lead to greater employee retention.

Robertson (1998) offers the view that human capital education, with its focus on labour market preparation, potentially undercuts the traditional social, ethical and democratic objectives of education by viewing graduates as passive learners who are prepared for globalisation. In reality, only larger organisations are likely to invest in general training as there is little or no financial benefit to them as they will have to pay a market-related wage to recruit and retain such employees. Buck and Barrick (1992) state that contemporary human capital education emphasises generic employability skills, rather than specific technical abilities, rather than specific technical abilities, to address current labour market needs. In other words, employability skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving and a positive attitude towards occupational change are not job specific but transferable among a range of occupational contexts. This translated means that a person should possess a range of skills that can be applied to a variety of jobs because society is now faced with technological, economic and social influences which cause significant change in vocational roles. The graduate has to adapt to and capitalise on these changes by demonstrating the value that their work can add to an organisation. This is imperative to the fulfilment of a satisfying and productive life.

Vandenberghe (1999) avers that the human capital theory is very optimistic as it promotes the idea that education is a very powerful individual and social lever. This translates into better-educated people and nations earning more and prospering at a faster rate. Thus public investment in education should be able to reduce income inequality and eradicate poverty. But the human capital theory takes for granted that an individual's demand for education will automatically be transformed into real human capital based on the assumption that this theory essentially develops a 'black box' to the production of education issues. This model assumes

that educational systems mechanically respond to their private or public clients, or in other words, the labour market. However, individuals or governments investing in the educational system will not automatically get 'the best value for money' because the production of education services is exposed to information problems, quality control challenges and co-ordination constraints. Human capital accumulation is more than individual effort accomplished by students who expect some financial return on their investment since both the demand and supply side can pose regulatory difficulties (Vandenberghe, 1999). The implication is that if there are no new jobs in the labour market, a graduate cannot progress up the corporate ladder.

Sugrue (2004) argues, however, that recognising learning as the primary vehicle for building human capital is the logical argument for the value of learning. In the new economy, work is primarily intellectual and human capital is a competitive advantage for both organisations and nations because it represents the knowledge and skills of the workforce. Learning is the vehicle through which knowledge and skills are developed and maintained. Universities and other tertiary institutions that can provide the right learning opportunities for their students will be most successful in terms of productivity, growth and innovation, thereby boosting human capital.

Organisational leaders, who address all the variables that contribute to performance such as incentives, work processes and talent management, maximise the value of learning and take advantage of growth in human capital (Sugrue, 2004). Sugrue also suggests that if one wants to restructure an organisation's learning investments and practices to mirror those of high-

performing organisations which enjoy effective and efficient learning operations, then one should gather data on 'best practice' from these organisations through social networking. Implementing these 'best practices' can strengthen investment in higher learning and other performance improvement practices, which means investing in social capital. Social capital is thus linked to human capital at another level by linking employee development and organisational performance to include learning as part of a larger set of human resource practices. Investment in learning has become easier with the growing acknowledgement of human capital as the key to economic and organisational success (Sugrue, 2004). There is a need to maximize the value of learning in all contexts. Human capital development assumes that nation states are being forced to adopt neo-liberal market policies and that the role of the state should be to create the necessary environment in which flexible market forces can operate, so that such forces can respond rapidly to any changes emerging in the global market. In other words, nation states have to create a world-class labour force in order to attract investment and a demand for services.

A university degree is awarded more status than a mere academic qualification (Pring, 1999 and Toohey, 1999). Students are encouraged to express their imaginations while at the same time making sense of the difficult notions they are expected to conceptualise. Having an undergraduate degree is generally perceived as having a good education. Post-graduate education equips students with the high levels of reasoning skills needed to handle professional work, including problem-solving, teamwork, communication skills, creativity, management skills and leadership skills (Delaney, 1997; Heath, 1998; Pring, 1999; Roizen & Jepson, 1985; Toohey, 1999).

Graduates have an advantage in the labour market and can afford to be mobile (Moleke, 2003). People with higher education are relatively more mobile, flexible and autonomous. These are the very reasons for individuals investing in education. The goals of higher education include equity, access, and fairness of opportunity. Individuals are offered equal opportunities to participate in the economy and society. The expectation of achieving post-graduate status is driven by the positive correlation between education and economic outcome (Moleke, 2003). And yet, Masters courses were seen by students as a period of transition, leading to a major turning point experienced in significantly different ways by different students (Hodkinson, 2005).

Reproduction Theory

Contrary to the argument that degrees are beneficial and useful, there is also the perception that degrees and education channel people into society according to societal stratification of class (Bowles & Gintis, 1975). This is highlighted in the effective skill development model. This model shows that the labour market is affected by the way the education system socialises students. Through education students develop a variety of characteristics that influences their capacity to be productive at the workplace. Varghese (1982: 12) supports this by asserting that "education is used as an instrument of social reproduction and the role of education is to inculcate certain affective traits through the structural correspondence between education and the production sectors."

Socio-economic backgrounds play a leading role in the educational attainment of individuals. It is claimed that those who are better educated in society are individuals who come from the middle class. Varghese (1982) and Bowles (1975) agree that there is minimal relationship between education and earnings but a strong correlation between social class and education, which inadvertently affects productivity at the workplace. This encourages the notion that university degrees may expropriate a negative view of not being able to "move up" the social ladder.

It is the researcher's view that higher education thus serves a dual purpose. It provides both positive and negative influences on individuals. While some perceive it to enhance their lives, others believe that higher education may not allow social barriers to be crossed.

2.3 Ambitions, choices and career aspirations

Motivational theorists are always interested in why people do things. The way a person behaves has meaning and purpose and these aspects form important relations in education and behaviour. Maslow (1968) avers that human life will never be understood unless its highest aspirations are taken into account. However, Maslow believed that behaviourist theories could not explain human behaviour in its entirety. His theory of self-actualisation stresses the importance of achieving the full development of potentialities in life (Craig, 1992 in Inglis, 2004).

In general, students are assumed to be informed consumers regarding their intended careers. The higher degree institute is there to prepare them to pursue their career choice and in some

cases to find a job. Students make assumptions about particular careers and jobs, and in some cases realise a little too late their error in judgement. False beliefs and assumptions could influence their career-related decisions and lead them to enter career paths that are unsuitable. Only by validating their assumptions and beliefs can feasible career paths be chosen.

This section of the literature review looks at the following key themes:

- University degrees
- The background pressures and signals.
- Workplace experiences.

A. University degrees

Many higher degree institutes offer students services for entering into particular majors, yet these courses may not be the real choices or may not relate entirely to what the student requires. The student still chooses to complete the particular courses. "Students do not enter universities as *tabulae rasae*. They have been affected by prior experiences with their families, earlier educational settings and the workplace" (Coote & Levine, 1997). Motivations for attending particular courses will be encouraged by these experiences. These previous experiences constitute key input factors that make up differing forms of motivational readiness (Coote & Levine, 1997).

B. The background pressures and signals

Course choices leading to career aspirations develop from a variety of reasons and circumstances. These choices stem from interplay between the individual (internal) and social (external) factors. Academic achievement, ambition and self-esteem fall into the internal factors category. Societal experience, work-related experience and family involvement constitute the external factors. This highlights the conception that individuals are or should be aware of personal choice and societal constraints.

The choice of courses selected and attended at post-graduate level should provide indications of the type of careers envisaged by the student. Aligned ambitions reflect the knowledge of the world of work and the educational pathways to different occupations (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). People with educational expectations that are consistent with occupational aspirations are considered to have aligned ambitions. Schneider & Stevenson (1999) also reflect that knowledge that allows one to sustain higher levels of motivation empowers one to make strategic choices about how to use time properly and invest efforts carefully. Making choices has significant consequences for a student's present and future aspirations. Choices influence what is learned, what skills are acquired and what qualifications are necessary for particular occupations.

C. Workplace circumstances

There is a link between what is studied and the labour market. Education is required by various individuals to develop the human capital labour markets require. Students seek, by acquiring an education, academic skills, work skills and credentials, which they exercise to

further their careers. A major motivation for acquiring post-graduate degrees is the enhancement of employment opportunities and income (Piotrowski & Cox, 2004). The workplace opens up the competitive nature of some individuals to aspire for the highest position available. This places stress on employees to perform to standards and this is only possible through the acquisition of relevant knowledge, skills, values and attitudes (Piotrowski & Cox, 2004).

Carnoy (1999) states that the main ingredient in new services is the restructuring of knowledge that leads to an increase in productivity and a closer fit between a client's specific needs and the services delivered. To a greater extent, this constant restructuring of knowledge promotes life-long learning and has positive implications for universities. There is extreme pressure on universities to adapt their curriculum to better suit the expectations of the labour market.

2.4 Higher education and the workplace

While there are internal factors that influence a student's career aspirations and choices, the labour market is an external factor that shapes career aspirations and choices. The demand for skills and knowledge are forever increasing as the globalised market is always changing. A business is not complete without its human capital at the helm. To ensure this capital is at the optimum, people must acquire the necessary knowledge and skills required to succeed. "People with higher education experience a persistent advantage in the labour market" (Moleke, 2003). Structural changes in the economy, leading to varying patterns of demand,

also impact on the demand for people with higher qualifications. Moleke (2003) also avers that there is a general perception that graduates have an advantage in the labour market.

General perceptions also indicate a trend that people with higher qualifications tend to have more mobility in the labour market. According to human capital theory, people will benefit more from changing their labour market situations, as their investment in education has to be paid off (Moleke, 2003). Thus education not only affects whether graduates receive employment but also influences their labour mobility.

People invest in education for particular purposes, among which is a desire to increase labour market skills, productivity and earnings. Post-graduate study is a way to delay unemployment and thus provides the link between the academic and professional world. High skills and high wage economy has become a common aspiration across many of the world's developed and developing nations. Human resource development is the key element of global competitiveness and competency in the labour market.

2.5 Conclusion

Despite the dual purpose of tertiary education, higher degrees are still very much pursued by many individuals. The internal and external factors influence a person's entry into post-graduate studies. Thus, the literature explains that there are connections between career aspirations and higher education. There is an interplay between the individual and society or an interaction between internal and external factors in social reality. Career choices are not unfettered choices. Individuals are simultaneously both able to make choices and are

constrained as they are influenced by a number of internal factors and external factors. Table 1 below highlights the internal and external factors that enable or constrain to varying degrees career aspirations and choices of post-graduate studies.

Table 1: Influences on career aspirations/choices of post-graduate studies

EXTERNAL FACTORS	INTERNAL FACTORS
Educational experiences	Academic achievements
Labour market and employment experiences	Self-esteem/self-concepts
Family involvement in schooling and personal circumstances.	Ambition

These theories provide the framework with which to analyse the signals, pressures and trends of the various factors that relate higher education to career aspirations. Schneider & Stevenson's (1999) concept of "aligned ambitions" pulls various themes together, showing how choices made at the conception of studying affect career paths later on in life. The complex relationship between life histories, educational attainment and career aspirations can be analysed through this literature review.

2.6 Conceptual and theoretical framework

The theoretical starting point of this study was to determine how graduates make choices when studying further and what effects these choices have on their career aspirations. The key assumptions drawn from the literature review comprise the following:

- There is a relationship between background and career paths.
- Workplace experiences have an influence on choices in education and future careers, while labour market perceptions affect choices of degrees and future careers.

The emerging picture of the relationship between university degrees and career aspirations is a highly complex one affected by a number of factors. These factors also seem to be integrated with each other in multiple dimensions. To clarify these presuppositions, the study will draw on the key points obtained from the literature.

2.6.1 Relationship between background and career paths

Knowing that one wants to study a post-graduate degree is a huge step in life. But an even bigger step is *knowing what* one wants to study and *why* one decides on that particular choice. The critical events that lead up to a person enrolling for a post-graduate degree are stimulated by a number of pressures and signals from a variety of sources that include parents, jobs, social conformities, and internal motivations. Depending on the background and the baggage one carries, the person may be an asset or liability in the workplace.

There is the belief that people's social position is an important determinant of their career-related life chances. People do not choose work nor agonise about career choices, but are rather chosen for work and take what they can get (Law, 1996 in Watts *et al*, 1996: 48). "Human beings construct their social existence by entering into social relationships that are 'independent of will' and thus their actions are conditioned by society" (Waters, 1995: 102). On the other hand, post-structuralists are concerned with analysing and explaining people's actions in relation to their motives and goals and the meanings attributed by people to their actions (Waters, 1995: 15-17). Schneider & Stevenson's (1999) notion of "alignment of ambitions" is fundamental to this study since this notion illuminates a possible tension

between the aspirations of individuals and the realisation of their career goals through the pragmatism of their particular personal circumstances.

2.6.2 Workplace experiences and labour market expectations

The literature indicates that graduates of higher degrees enjoy more flexibility, autonomy and mobility than non-graduates. A perception exists that having a degree is equal to having a good education, without which you cannot progress in your career. Possession of high knowledge and skills has become an important tool for graduates. These skills allow the graduates to become sought after candidates for particularly high-paying occupations. There is now a demand in the workplace for professionals with good qualifications. The labour market encourages healthy competition between individuals to ensure their effectiveness. Graduates are required to be equipped with knowledge and skills that will allow them to cope with most situations in the workplace. However, there is also a perception that university degrees do not equip graduates adequately, leaving a gap between what is studied and what is actually required in practice in the workplace. University courses are often criticised for failing to acknowledge the connection between education and the labour market (Hiep, 2001; Roizen & Jepson, 1985). These writers argue that the gap between theory and practice needs to be bridged and balanced for universities to produce holistic graduates – that is, graduates who have a sound knowledge base together with highly-equipped practical skills. Due to the demands of globalisation, the labour market has been refined in terms of knowledge, capital and labour. Networking ensures that knowledge and information can be easily accessed throughout various cities and countries. Investing in education that provides higher knowledge and skills places individuals on par with the international arena, despite conflicting

internal and external circumstances. This tool (the possession of high knowledge and skills) allows graduates the autonomy and flexibility of various career opportunities and aspirations.

3 CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will deal with the methodology that was used to investigate the research objectives identified in the previous chapters. Research and theory studies can be either quantitative or qualitative (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). This study is based on a qualitative research design, involving case studies and interviews. A qualitative and explorative study was deemed most appropriate. Data gathering strategies included: a literature review, semi-structured one-on-one interviews, document analysis and triangulation to picture emerging patterns in graduate choices and the realities they face in their careers.

3.2 Research approach

3.2.1 Qualitative methods

Qualitative research differs substantially from quantitative research. Qualitative research focuses on meanings expressed through words, rather than meaning derived from numbers. Qualitative research involves a process that looks at effects and tries to determine the causes of these effects. It is rather open-ended and interpretative. The researcher's interpretation and description are the significant data collection acts in the study. "The Laboratory of Qualitative Research is everyday life and cannot be contained in a test tube, started, stopped, manipulated or washed down in a sink" (Morse, 1994: 1).

Frankel & Wallen (1993: 382) illustrated the major characteristics of qualitative research as being its ability to generate detailed data with rich descriptions of what is being studied.

People's personal perspectives and experiences are reflected in direct quotations making the research in-depth. The value of qualitative research is that it enables the researcher to relay the story from the eyes of the respondent. For the purposes of this study, a qualitative research design was deemed most appropriate as the nature of the situation and individuals required an exploratory and discovery-orientated analysis. This methodology is suited to a study in which phenomena are studied within their context (Yin, 1994). In this particular study qualitative analysis was used to elicit responses from the various participants according to their perceptions and choices made before and during the study of the M.Ed degree.

3.2.2 Limitations of qualitative research

Quantitative research is weak on validity but strong on reliability(McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). Qualitative research limitations include the following:

- The perceptions and views of the respondents may not be interpreted accurately.
- The researcher's views may be biased, as he/she becomes involved with the study.
- Participants may not be willing to reveal necessary information, believing that they may be misinterpreted or misunderstood.
- The researcher needs to create trust between her/himself and the stakeholders.

If the trust is not mutual, the findings of the study may be affected. Some respondents may not be willing to participate as they may feel threatened. In this study these limitations were avoided by using instruments that underwent the rigour of pilot testing and adaptation to ensure the impact of the instruments were positive. The instruments were questionnaires and autobiographies which helped to eliminate distrust and encourage participants to air their

views on this subject. Bias was avoided by ensuring questions were relevant to the study and leant in the direction of obtaining information without the researcher's emotions becoming involved. Participants were interviewed at places most convenient to them as this developed the trust between the researcher and participant.

3.2.3 Exploratory research

Woods & Cantazaro (1998: 150) maintain that exploratory research involves the scrutiny of unknown areas for the purpose of discovery. It is acknowledged that exploratory research provides meaning in determining "What is happening; to seek new insights; to ask questions and to assess phenomena in new light" (Robson, 1993: 42).

A further advantage of exploratory research is that it is flexible and adaptable to change as new insights emerge from the data. This study is exploratory in nature in that it serves to determine the relationship between choices and decision-making and the reality of career development. What was envisaged by the researcher was not always what the participants disclosed. The researcher had to ensure that changes allowed the study to be flexible yet by the same token, also achieved what the study set out to prove, i.e. the relationship between choice and reality in career development.

3.3 Research Design

3.3.1 Literature review

The literature review involved an account of the theoretical and contextual framework of the links between education and the labour market. Books, articles, academic journals and

electronic resources provided the knowledge base for identifying the core issues. The literature review explores the concepts required to analyse the relationship between higher education and career paths.

3.3.2 Document analysis

Education has been recognised internationally as a key to development. Education contributes to society, multiplies the economic productivity of nations and increases individuals' ambitions. How education relates to development can be explored through document analysis of relevant educational policies. For the purpose of this study, document analysis incorporated the study of the M.Ed syllabus, course outlines, course content and goals of WITS from the year 2002. Document analysis together with analysis of the answers obtained in the semi-structured interviews was the strategy used for obtaining data relating to the choices made by the sample graduates for their specific purposes.

3.3.3 Case study approach

Leedy (1997) describes the case study approach as descriptive research in which data are gathered directly from individuals or groups in their natural environments for the purposes of studying interactions, attitudes, or characteristics of individuals or groups.

Case studies are appropriate for exploratory and discovery orientated research (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). While some classify "the case" as an object of study (Stake, 1995) others consider it a methodology (Yin, 1994). The researcher usually defines the case and its boundaries. The study provides a detailed description of the case, an analysis of the themes or

issues and the researcher's interpretations or assertions about the case (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001).

This study adopts a case study design as a step towards obtaining the relevant data for the purpose of exploring and accentuating how choice and decision-making impact on the reality of career development. The cases considered for this study involved the autobiographies of each student selected for the study. This is a case study with six different sub-cases. The study itself is a case, while each participant became one of six sub-cases. The case determines the relationship between what is studied and the workplace. While the sub-cases delve into particular experiences of each graduate interviewed. Each participant was interviewed, wrote an autobiography and was studied using document analysis methods.

3.3.4 Tracer studies

This study is a tracer study of six M.Ed students who graduated in 2002 from WITS. The research design highlights why tracer study theory will help in reaching the answers to the critical questions mentioned in the rationale. Tracer studies are usually carried out for the purpose of measuring and tracking graduate performance and hence infer institutional performance. Tracer studies are often seen as important tools of institutional development, especially when the world of work is changing rapidly (Schomburg, 2000). Higher education institutions require systematic feedback to assess and renew their curricula. However, such studies are rare. "To know the whereabouts of graduates, their working conditions and their retrospective assessment of their course of study might stimulate the curricular debate and could be also very interesting for the current or later students" (Schomburg, 2000).

Traditional tracer studies are used for determining the attrition of a particular set of people over a particular time frame for the purpose of acquiring interesting and useful information. Usually tracer studies are conducted in the form of surveys. Graduate Destination Surveys or Tracer Studies are conducted by many tertiary institutions throughout the world for planning purposes and as an integral component of quality assurance systems(Schomburg, 2000). For this particular study, surveys would not be beneficial. A survey comprises a set of questions, usually with closed-ended questions, handed out to a large population sample. Surveys are commonly used for tracking or tracing a specific sample for distinctive reasons. This particular study, being a qualitative study, it drifts away from the usual tracer studies and delves deeper to acquire more personalised information. The sample of graduates interviewed comprised six individuals. Thus, the survey methodology cannot apply. The sample is small for the purpose of delving behind the scenes to gather more relevant data to validate the findings. This study does not just track the students after graduation, but also explores the experiences and perceptions of the students, before entering the post-graduate degree, during the post-graduate degree and after qualifying.

3.3.5 Sample and population size

The population researched comprised Masters of Education graduates of the year 2002 from WITS. Six graduates were selected. The selection was based on race – that is the sample included as many race groups as possible; gender – both male and female graduates were included; and availability of the graduates from the particular year. For this study two black male graduates, two white female graduates and two white male graduates were selected. All

graduates had Policy and Management as the main courses for their degree. Graduates included those individuals who had successfully passed all the requirements for a Masters in Education degree and had attended the graduation ceremony or obtained their certificates as proof of graduating.

The small sample allowed for in-depth interviewing of respondents and analysis of data. As this was a qualitative case study and tracer study, the sample did not need to be too large otherwise it would detract from the main intentions of the study.

3.3.6 Interviews

Interviews allow the interviewer to clarify answers and follow up on interesting answers. Pertinent questions are asked for the purposes of achieving the aims of the study and these questions have led to other interesting answers that required further exploration. The way the researcher phrases the questions or the tone of voice may result in incorrect or inappropriate responses. According to Kerlinger (1973: 448) "the best instrument available for sounding people's behaviour would seem to be the interview with a schedule that includes open-ended, closed and scale items."

The type of interview selected for this study was the "standardised open-ended" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). The wording and sequence of questions were predetermined and the questions were completely open-ended. Qualitative in-depth interviews are noted for their probes and pauses rather than for their particular question formats (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). Interview questions focus on experience or behaviour, opinions or values, knowledge,

feelings, sensory perceptions, and the individual's background or demographic information. These question topics can be phrased in present, past or future time frame.

In this study the interviews were one-on-one interviews, with semi-structured questions. Each graduate was interviewed to gain insights into his/her experiences of the M.Ed. The main focus of the interview was to gather the information that would show how and why they entered into post-graduate studies, their experiences throughout the course and what impact it had on their careers and lives afterwards.

Data gathered from the interviews was in the form of audio and written responses. The selected graduates received typed copies of the interview questions to complete, which included an autobiographical response. The interviews were also taped using a Dictaphone. Transcriptions were created from each of the audio-recorded interviews. These transcriptions and the written autobiographies were analysed to obtain the required information for achieving the aims of this study.

3.3.7 Autobiographies

A study that focuses on an individual, especially the pivotal points of their life, as told to the researcher or recorded in documents or archival material, is a biography (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). Biographies include autobiographies, life histories, and oral histories. Validity and criticism of primary sources and developing a factual base for explanations is what the researcher concerns him/herself with.

Autobiographies allow the researcher to probe and explore the events of a particular respondent's life. This study uses this method for obtaining the information necessary to establish a connection between the choices made in their M.Ed curriculum and what bearings it has had on their career paths.

Each selected graduate wrote an autobiography which was handed to the researcher after completion of the interview for analysis. They were written by the graduate and where possible, were audio-taped as well. The issues explored in the autobiographies include a life history of the graduate, detailed experiences while studying the M.Ed degree, the graduate's expectation upon acquiring the degree and the extent to which the degree has impacted upon their career aspirations.

3.4 Validity and reliability of the research

Reliability and validity are inherent methodological issues in qualitative research. Rudestam & Newton (1992) maintain that one cannot separate the investigator from the object of inquiry. Reliability refers to the repetition of similar situations, same studies, so that related conclusions can be developed. In this research the issue of reliability can be addressed by pilot testing the instruments prior to use to identify and correct shortcomings, and careful analysis of the answers provided by respondents.

Validity according to Stanfield (1993: 69) "addresses itself to the truth of an assertion that they make about something in the empirical world". Discrepancies in data control and data interpretation are expected, as a case study perspective is subjective and interpretative (Millon

& Diesenhaus, 1972). The validity of the study depends upon the observational and inferential skills of the researcher and this cannot be considered free from bias. Though this may be a viable form of research, problems around interpretative bias remain unsolved. The validity issues of this study were dealt with in a similar manner to the reliability problem, that is to test the instruments thoroughly and analyse the responses carefully. The issues of reliability and validity were dealt with cautiously in order to avoid bias in the study.

3.5 Limitations of the research

An outdated student details list (hard copy) from the WITS Office of Alumni Affairs was the first limitation. It was difficult to obtain the correct contact details of some graduates, especially if they did not study further at WITS or moved away from previous residences. The second constraint was the availability of respondents. To solve this constraint, the various aspects of the study were explained in a letter that included a request for the graduate to participate in the study. These letters were sent either by post or by e-mail to all graduates whose details were on the list obtained from Student Affairs. From the replies to these letters, six graduates were short-listed and interviewed for this study. Comprehensive and self-explanatory interview questions were designed. Each graduate was met by the researcher for a one-on-one interview. The respondents were also given the interview schedule to complete in written form. The respondents were given adequate time to complete and return the questionnaires either by hand or through e-mail.

4 CHAPTER FOUR: GRADUATES' EXPERIENCES OF THE M.ED COURSES OFFERED

4.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the claims made in the M.Ed courses offered at WITS and briefly explains the content covered in each relevant programme. This allows the researcher to shed some light on what the graduates experienced in terms of course and subject choices. This chapter conveys the message of what degrees can and cannot do in terms of giving participants choices for furthering their goals for a better future. This chapter provides insight of the courses given in 2002 in relation to achievement in career aspirations.

4.2 Claims of the university

The university explored in this study is the University of the Witwatersrand. In particular, the School of Education in terms of policies and coursework. Thus, it stands to reason that a little background information about the university and its goals should be reviewed. WITS claims to be a world class university, offering its students an education of the highest quality (International Office Guide, 2002: 4). This statement suggests that many people would want to register at such a prestigious university. In terms of post-graduate studies, WITS claims that more than one third of its students are involved in post-graduate studies in various faculties (International Office guide, 2002: 19). WITS provides internationally recognised degrees in a wide variety of fields, focussing on sustaining globally competitive standards of excellence in learning, teaching and research. It is generally perceived that people with higher

education experience a definite advantage in the labour market. Therefore, attending a university like WITS should give Masters graduates the "edge" in the workplace.

4.3 What was offered in the Masters in Education programme?

The M.Ed programme at WITS is offered in two forms. One form is the M.Ed degree by dissertation, and the second form is the M.Ed degree by coursework and research report. Table 2 summarises what each form entails.

Table 2: Forms of M.Ed programmes at WITS

DEGREE	INFORMATION
M.Ed by dissertation	This involves full time research work and culminates with the submission of a dissertation to qualify.
M.Ed by coursework and research report	Students select three courses in their likely area of research. They also do a compulsory course in research design. A research report is also submitted to qualify for the degree.

All six graduates completed their M.Ed degrees by coursework and research report. Therefore, the policies and goals of this form of the M.Ed degree will be explained. The M.Ed degree by coursework and research report can be completed in two ways. The one way was to be a full time student, and complete the three courses, the research design course and the research report in one year. The other was to be a part time student, completing the coursework in the first year of study, and the research design course and the research report in the second year of study. As the coursework related, directly or indirectly to the research report, candidates entering the M.Ed programme at WITS were asked to consider very

carefully the choices they made in terms of their coursework. Two out of the six participants were full time students and all graduated in the year 2002.

4.4 Choices in coursework

Career development, professional renewal and research in a range of related fields are some of the opportunities provided by the M.Ed degree. Various courses or packages are offered relating to the rich interdisciplinary fields of education. At Masters level, all students are required to provide commitment to a particular academic direction. Students must therefore consider carefully the courses they choose. The kind of research undertaken should follow from the courses studied. By completing the M.Ed degree, WITS believes that all M.Ed graduates can contribute something to the sphere of education (School of Education Guide, 2000: 3). The annual course and package offerings can be seen in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Course and package options

Adult Education, Training and Development	Curriculum	Education, Democratic Citizenship & Human Rights	Educational Policy, Planning & Management	Mathematics & Science Education	Psychology in Education	Tertiary Teaching
ADED 509: Adult education	EDUC 521: Issues in Curriculum	EDUC 536: Aims & Conceptions of Education	EDUC 550: Issues in Educational Management	EDUC 540: The Learning & Teaching of Mathematics	EDUC 515: Developmental Psychology	EDUC 547: Studies in Pedagogy
ADED 542: Research and Evaluation in Adult education	EDUC 560: Inclusive Education	EDUC 505: Society, State & Schooling	EDUC 545: Issues in Educational Policy	SCED 536: The Learning & Teaching of Science	EDUC 527: Cultural Psychology in Education	EDUC 517: Curriculum, Evaluation & Research
ADED 545: Management in Adult education	EDUC 516: Curriculum Development	EDUC 538: Education & the Social Order	EDUC 526: Education in Developing Countries	SCED 538: Curriculum Issues in Maths Education	EDUC 514: Psychology and Pedagogy	AELS 516: Language & Assessment
ADED 511: Literacies in Adult education, Development & the Workplace	EDUC 547: Studies in Pedagogy	EDUC 502: Research design	EDUC 557: Issues in Applied Education Economics and Planning	SCED 524: Language & Communication in Science Education	EDUC 547: Studies in Pedagogy	ADED 502: Research design
ADED 502: Research design	EDUC 517: Curriculum Evaluation & Research	EDUC 503: Research report	EDUC 553: Studies in Education Finance	SCED 535: Language & Communication in Mathematics Education	EDUC 502: Research Design	ADED 503: Research report
ADED 503: Research report	EDUC 502: Research design		EDUC 559: Studies in Educational Information	EDUC 502: Research Design	EDUC 503: Research report	
	EDUC 503: Research report		EDUC 502: Research design	EDUC 503: Research report		
	EDUC 540: Mathematics Education		EDUC 503: Research report			

Not all courses detailed in Table 3 are offered every year. Demand, change and availability of staff determine which courses are offered during a particular year. The School of Education usually approves a student's course and package selections at the time of registration. Changes can be made afterwards but this is generally not the case. Post-graduate students usually know what field they would like to pursue. As there is such a variety of packages offered, the researcher has decided to examine more closely the Educational Policy, Planning and Management package, the Education, Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights package

and the Adult Education package. The six graduates interviewed completed their M.Ed in one or another of these three packages.

4.4.1 Educational policy, planning and management

The Educational Policy, Planning and Management package (EPPM) is divided in two broad sections: policy and management. In the policy section, the general emphasis is on educational policies. Students are equipped with knowledge and skills necessary to interrogate and evaluate educational policies. Special reference is made to governance and policies around curriculum change. In the management section, various models of management are presented to enable students to analyse their own management roles. The course is based on research on educational management in Africa and internationally. Particular attention is given to the challenges of changing from an authoritarian to a democratic approach to school a management (School of Education Guide, 2000).

In the EPPM package, the four focussed courses offered were EDUC 550, EDUC 545, EDUC 526, and EDUC 557. The task of each course was quite specific in terms of its purposes and goals. The diagram in Appendix A explains the individual course expectations and goals.

4.4.2 Adult Education, Training and Development

The aim of the Adult Education, Training and Development package (AETD) is to promote informed leadership in adult education. Its goal is to ensure that students increase their capacities in constructive and reflective roles as researchers, consultants and managers in workplace education and community context. The courses encourage the students to tailor

their reading, thinking and writing to their research interests. The specifics of each course (ADED 509, ADED 542, ADED 545) can be seen in the diagram in Appendix B.

4.4.3 Education, Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights

The Education, Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights package (EDCHR) is interdisciplinary as it combines philosophical and sociological perspectives on education for democratic citizenship and human rights. The objectives of this package allow for the development of the research capacity of the trainee researchers registered for the M.Ed degree and the Ph.D degree (Doctorate in Education). This package also allows students to work as part of a community of researchers who investigate various aspects of education for democratic citizenship and human rights. The three focus courses (EDUC 536, EDUC 505, and EDUC 538) are explained further in the diagram in Appendix C.

4.4.4 Compulsory courses: the Research Design and Research Report

The Research Design course has to be taken by all post-graduate students. It introduces basic vocabulary, concepts and fundamental knowledge and skills necessary for conducting quality educational research (Cross, 2005). In this course, students develop a research proposal that forms the basis for the preparation of a research report. The Research Report involves a small-scale research project in the sphere of education. According to the School of Education Guide (2002) its major goal is the production of a report of approximately 20 000 words on a topic firmly located in the area of concentration of the course package.

4.5 Assumptions of the M.Ed degree

The aim of the M.Ed degree, especially in Policy, Planning and Management (PPM) is to develop students' understanding of concepts, theories and competences needed to reflect on current policy, planning and management issues and to produce new knowledge and understanding of the practices (National Review, 2005: 21).. These aims are discussed in more detail as four of the participants majored in this course selection, while one student majored in Education, Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights, and one majored in Adult Education, Training and Development. Students are encouraged to use their abilities to research their own work situation so as to reflect on and strategise better. Course presentations are strategised in ways that promote professional competences across the different fields of specialization demanded by current pressures for professional adaptability and flexibility (School of Education, 2005: 22).

It is assumed that the M.Ed degree develops a student's understanding of how a manager in action accomplishes the various aspects the required tasks. A further assumption is that the degree encourages better and more effective thinking and decision making in defining challenges and strategies. Thus the degree enables one to become more effective in the workplace and provides the necessary skills for candidates to perform better. According to Cross (2005) a fundamental goal of the PPM package is to produce students capable of engaging in critical thought in and well-grounded analysis of contemporary theories of educational policy, leadership and management theory and practice, and of engaging in design and application of advanced methods of educational research.

4.6 Students' expectations

Students enter the Masters programme for various reasons and have varied expectations of the outcomes of the M.Ed degree (see Table 4). Some of these expectations include the following. An individual will choose to invest in his/her own education on the basis that such an investment will result in enhanced marketable skills. These skills will be met by a demand in the labour market as technological advances require a better-educated workforce for the productive system to operate effectively. Most students further their studies with the expectation that a higher education qualification will help them get a better job. Students believe in the fact that studying allows one to pursuit more expanded opportunities that would not be available with qualifications. Moleke (2003) suggests that this is a reasonable expectation, particularly in the South African context, where labour demand is shifting to higher skilled workers and professionals. Some regarded the pursuit of a post-graduate degree as a means to professional development that will enhance their personal efficiency in the work place. Accordingly, some of the interviewees are currently employed in the same jobs they were in prior to pursuing their Masters degree and are content to be there. They did concur that the changes that took place were at a cognitive level. Other respondents felt that career progression was the underlying incentive for their hard work in pursuing a further qualification. There was no doubt in any of the participants' minds that obtaining an M.Ed degree has helped them to realise the potential of furthering their education. All the participants believed that both personally and professionally, they had achieved more in their lives, allowing them to constantly strive for aligned ambitions.

Table 4: Graduate expectations of degree

GRADUATE	EXPECTATIONS OF DEGREE
1 – EPPM	This degree will help me to obtain a better and higher paying job while satisfying my desire for life long learning.
2 – EPPM	I will be able to conscientiously pursue a career path that will allow me to engage with policy at a higher level.
3 – EPPM	I may or may not get a better job, however, I believe that this degree will help me to become a better person and provide me with more cognitive reasoning abilities.
4 – EPPM	I want to know how and why policies are made and what effects these policies have on us as individuals and a community. I want to pursue a better opportunity in the research department at work.
5 – AETD	I want to ensure that I can contribute in some way to the development of my country by helping adults become better people. This degree will provide that stepping stone I need for me to realise my career path.
6 - EDCHR	South Africa is a new democracy. People need to know more about their rights. My decision to complete my M.Ed in this course is to ensure that I can contribute in some way to the needs of my country.

4.7 Conclusion: What degrees can and cannot do

Students begin their studies with the hope that a higher education qualification will help them get better job opportunities. A post-graduate qualification does to a large extent supplement the first degree. It is at this level that some specialisation occurs. Hence better labour market prospects and the optimal utilisation of their education and skills. When examining the overall purposes and aims of the M.Ed degree for career development, professional renewal and research, it can be seen that courses offered aim to meet these expectations. Most courses are located in a specific field of study, providing through the necessary readings, literature and interaction, a genuine understanding of that field of study. In terms of career aspirations, the courses are designed in ways that allow for the students to make choices related to what they would like to pursue.

Student evaluations are undertaken for all modules when reviewing and redesigning them. At the beginning students are invited to express their expectations and to explore with course presenters how these can be addressed in the course. Sessions begin by looking at a student's specific circumstances and map out strategies on the best ways of confronting the challenges expected throughout the course (Cross, 2005). With these expectations in mind, the PPM M.Ed degree would provide students with relevant information, techniques and strategies for pursuing post-graduate studies to better enable them in their life and career goals and aspirations.

Another aim of acquiring a post-graduate degree consists of specializing oneself to meet the demands for professional adaptability and flexibility. The PPM package contains competencies and learning outcomes that are promoted by a wide variety of teaching and learning activities that include interactive lecturer-led teaching, group discussion and seminars, case or experience-based problem-focused discussion and student-led presentations (Cross, 2005). These strategies aim to promote professional competencies across varied fields. Thus degrees provide opportunities for students to further their aspirations and career goals. The PPM post-graduate degree package also allows students to obtain the necessary support required while completing their degrees for enhancing their interests. Students create a network with other students and lecturers in their fields of interest, receiving intellectual and emotional support, and become aware of performance benchmarks. By establishing these networks students are provided with opportunities for furthering their career aspirations and committing themselves wholly to their life goals.

5 CHAPTER FIVE: EXPERIENCES, EXPECTATIONS AND CHALLENGES OF GRADUATES

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the experiences, expectations and challenges encountered by the graduate students. Insight is given into the lives of the selected graduates before, during and after completing the M.Ed degree. It is explained what choices the M.Ed degree offered the graduates. This chapter provides the answers given by the graduates about their post-graduate studies and the workplace and whether what was perceived while studying actually occurred in the workplace.

5.2 Perceptions and reality

This study set out to explore what connections can be made between post-graduate studies and career choices. The results of the interviews with the selected graduates are organised in three important themes.

a) The relationship between background and career paths

b) The influence of workplace experiences

c) Labour market perceptions

a) The relationship between background and career paths

A person's background relates to and affects their chosen career paths. The literature explored in Chapter Two provides the necessary references to this statement. Background is determined by various factors such as social standing, where and how the person has grown up, what family influences are experienced, the type of education received, the emotional and mental

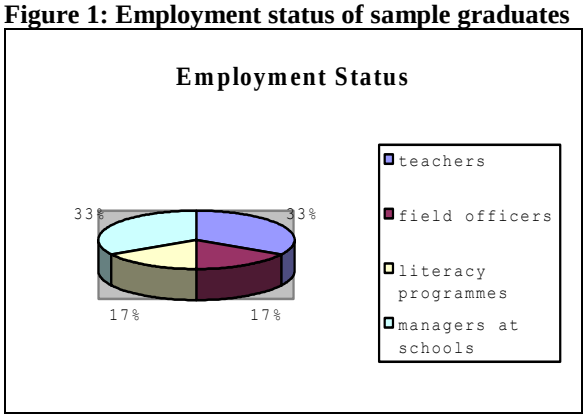
baggage carried by the person, and self-ambition, self-esteem and self-concept. The graduates interviewed had the following to say about background influences on their career paths.

The interviewees grew up in different settings. Race, religion, culture, area all influenced their chosen paths in life. There were varying socio-economic backgrounds among the graduates. Despite the varied nature of their social standing, a common element that emerged was the fact that they all had academic ambitions. One graduate said that she is an "academic by heart". Another graduate said, "I enjoyed the academics of life, which I found to be quite addictive." Each graduate felt a personal need to ensure they completed their M.Ed degree, no matter the costs, monetary or otherwise, incurred. The decision to continue with post-graduate studies was motivated by both personal needs and external influences like family and society. "In order for me to get more recognition at my workplace, I needed to complete this degree. This showed them that I was prepared to increase my net worth" (graduate 1). Another graduate said, "I was at a point in my life where I felt personally I needed to do more with myself academically, so I pursued my Masters."

The choice of which package to complete in the M.Ed degree depended upon the area in which interviewees were experienced. The pie chart in Figure 1 depicts employment status of the sample graduates. All graduates were involved in education. Some were teachers, some were involved in literacy programmes and one was an education field officer. The M.Ed degree became the suitable choice as it would extend their involvement in their chosen fields. The various courses chosen within the degree depended on different factors of their lives as well. How they made those choices was influenced by what they wanted out of life personally

and professionally. Four of the interviewees stated that the courses and the work done in those courses were very relevant to what they were experiencing in life. “I am able to use my research to further my career aspirations in terms of promotion posts.” and “The course work offered allowed me to gain in depth knowledge about the relevancy of my job.” were the responses from the graduates. Two believed that coursework could have been slightly different to introduce more practical and directional theory in relation to their practices in life. One graduate stated that, “the course work was too theoretical for me to apply the knowledge successfully at work.” The other stated that, “I required a more hands on approach for explanations pertaining to my field of work but never really received that. It was too academic and far above the level of approach for me to use in my job.”

Figure 1: Employment status of sample graduates



In terms of them making choices at beginning of their post-graduate studies, all believed that the M.Ed degree was limited in coursework but allowed them some freedom in their research reports. WITS School of Education allows the M.Ed coursework to be completed in particular packages. These packages are set out by the various lectures involved in each field of study. As a result, the students are allowed choices in terms of what packages they can study in but

no choices are made for individual courses. The interviewees based their choices on what they believed would be suitable to the area of study they wanted to pursue. In most cases the area of study was influenced by their social, personal and work-related backgrounds at that particular moment in time.

b) The influence of workplace experiences

The interviewees had the following to say about work experiences. All graduates stated that the workplace provided positive influences that encouraged them to undertake post-graduate studies. All graduates were working or had worked before embarking in post-graduate studies. They believed that obtaining the M.Ed degree would put them at the cutting edge of their chosen career paths. Two interviewees stated that their workplace pushed employees to obtain higher qualifications. It was expected of them, especially for promotion purposes. "I was basically told by my senior that for me to qualify for a promotion post, I had to increase my qualifications. I did so by enrolling for the Masters Programme."

Besides the external influences of the workplace, internal ambitions in possibly climbing a corporate ladder also encouraged higher qualification and post-graduate studies. One graduate said that he completed his M.Ed as he wanted to get a better handle on the situations occurring at his workplace. Another stated that she wanted to improve her experiences in teaching adults and hoped that the course would directly feed into her practice. The third graduate explained that he was hoping to extend his teaching career into that of a researcher and the best way for him was to undertake a Masters study in research. With all these positive influences, both external and internal, ambitions in career paths seem realisable.

Another point that came out of the discussions with the graduates was that of 'networking'. The concept of networking deals with interacting with other people at different levels in society and occupations. The public perception of 'it is not just what you know, but who you know that counts' lends itself to this concept of networking. All respondents agreed that the research report allowed them to interact with people outside of their normal social circles. This provided opportunities for them to speak to and relate to people who could possibly influence their career paths. One graduate explained that networking was a very valuable experience that actually helped her to gain employment in different sectors. Another stated that networking provided expanded opportunities for him to branch out into an occupation he had always dreamed about. Two graduates said that networking provided good contacts as these other people were able to provide information about related and other fields of study. Networking created both internal and external positiveness in all graduates interviewed.

c) Labour market perceptions

Labour market demand is shifting to higher skills and professionals. The references in Chapter Two indicate this quite clearly. According to Moleke (2003) graduates are quickly absorbed into the labour market. Post-graduate qualifications make this prospect even better for the individual. The labour market dictates what types of skills and knowledge are required in particular areas of employment. This suggests that people register at universities for enhancing particular skills and knowledge as required by the labour market. Sometimes post-graduate studies are accomplished for purely personal benefits. More often that not it is taken up because of better employment opportunities.

Stemming from this the researcher argues that coursework done in the M.Ed programme should take into consideration the labour market requirements. Does this really happen? The graduates' responses differed somewhat to this question. "The M.Ed degree could do with a complete overhaul. It is not directed or focused enough. It should be devised in a way that looks at pumping out graduates who can actually get into proper educational management. It needs more human capital and investment on restructuring. The overall purposes are good but it needs more direct focus on bridging the gaps between theory and practice" said one graduate. On the contrary, another graduate said the following, "The M.Ed prepares you to cope with work in a variety of fields. It provided more than the necessary direction I expected from it. It provided the links that allowed me to become a junior researcher at my current job." This contradiction about the coursework does present some problems that the university and the students need to carefully consider. Perhaps the university needs to ensure the coursework is thoroughly explained to prospective students before they register for the M.Ed degree. This will help the students to make better choices relating to what area of work they would like to pursue. From the six graduates interviewed, four believed that coursework could be more relevant to the practical, one felt that it was quite relevant and another graduate believed that the coursework was both relevant and irrelevant at times. He said, "You have to be positive and seize all opportunities presented when studying."

Another interesting aspect that came out of the interviews was that of labour market mobility. The literature presented earlier in this study argues that people with better qualifications tend to look for better job prospects. These prospects could be increased monetary values or better outcomes in occupational attainment. All the graduates interviewed changed jobs at least once

either during their studies of the M.Ed degree or after completing the M.Ed degree. Most achieved both higher incomes and better jobs than where they were before attaining their Masters degrees. Some felt that the degree opened up occupational pathways they did not expect. Others believed that obtaining the M.Ed degree allowed them better mobility in the workplace where their skills would be well recognised.

From this the researcher concludes that the M.Ed degree does to a certain extent impact on graduates' mobility in the labour market. There are connections that encourage people to apply for post-graduate studies, but at the same time these connections are not fully exploited by the university courses offered.

5.3 Other interesting perceptions

From the interview schedules the following facts provide a little more understanding of the experiences, expectations and challenges of the graduates. All interviewees felt that completing the M.Ed degree gave them personal and professional satisfaction. They all agreed on the fact that the degree looked good on paper, meaning that having an M.Ed degree written on their curriculum vitae gave them a better chance at grasping opportunities.

By obtaining the M.Ed degree the general status of each individual was increased. People have respect for those with higher academic qualifications. All the interviewees believed that the degree gave them a higher status in the way others looked at them. The degree provided a depth of wisdom in thinking about issues. The M.Ed degree provided lots of positive aspects

that improved the lives of all the graduates. Examples of these positive aspects are listed in Table 5.

Table 5: Positive aspects which improved the lives of sample graduates

INTERVIEWEE/ GRADUATE	PERSONAL STATEMENTS
1	It propelled and motivated me into thinking more. I became more critically aware. The degree expanded, stretched and helped me to manage myself better. It also helped for me to learn how to manage my time better.
2	The degree has allowed me to achieve a really solid foundation. I continue to learn and grow in various aspects of life. People give me new respect and greater autonomy.
3	The M.Ed degree has equipped me to lead the particular life I want to lead. I can reason and think differently. I have learnt how to deal, address and interact with people on all levels. It prepares you for life.
4	With the M.Ed degree I have learnt how to reason and not act irrationally. It has taught me how to find, engage and analyse readings from all fields. It increased my currency as someone who could head a school or college. I can use my degree as a prop to give weight to my words.
5	Degrees give you an academic punch. They are very valuable on paper. It has taught me how to present myself in an interview. I have learnt how to manage things better. I can speak more authoritatively on certain aspect of education. I have realised the value of life-long learning.
6	I enjoyed the degree as it was very intellectually stimulating. It has transformed me as a person. The M.Ed degree has made me a more effective person as it has helped me in my formal meetings and made me a better head of the college. It has helped me career wise and personally.

5.4 Conclusion

Reading through the interview schedules and listening to the interviewees provided the researcher with some positive and some negative connotations associated with achieving an M.Ed degree. The generally positive perceptions of graduating with the M.Ed degree outweigh the negative aspects. An expressed negativity was that the nitty gritty, mundane details of the degree need to be tweaked by the university and its lecturers. Overall, the degree

is meeting the expectations of the students registering for it. This brings in the broad picture of aligned ambitions stated in the literature. All the interviewees felt that they were putting together or aligning the different aspects of their lives so that it made sense to them in one way or another. What they wanted out of life from the time they left school to investing in their future by educating themselves well, has placed them on this path of alignment. Acquiring the M.Ed degree has directly and indirectly caused all the graduates to assess their lives differently and has propelled them into the fields of work they enjoy. According to the sample graduates, both personal and professional or occupational satisfaction is enhanced by completing the M.Ed degree.

6 CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

This research project aimed to ascertain the relationships, if any, between career aspirations and the acquisition of an M.Ed degree. It provided a literature review to provide the necessary groundwork towards answering the research question. The researcher then used qualitative research methods to discover if the theory has any bearing on the practices of various individuals. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a summary of the findings of the research. Recommendations for further research in the field of higher education and career aspirations are given.

6.2 Summary of perceptions versus reality

The findings of the research illustrate that:

a) Reasons for entering into a Masters programme vary. Events and experiences of individuals dictate which course package they choose. Both internal and external influences have great bearing upon entering this programme.

b) There is not much choice in determining what can be studied within the coursework of each package the M.Ed degree. More choices are experienced in the research report part of the degree. There seem to be gaps between what is read in the coursework and what is actually experienced in reality. What is required by the labour market needs to be clearly addressed by the university so that these gaps can be closed.

c) The M.Ed degree provides enhanced opportunities for all individuals who complete the degree. Personally, it allows for thinking and reacting on a more intellectual level.

It provides abilities that individuals can extend into their personal and professional lives, like time management and rational thinking.

d) Choices made upon entering a higher degree will eventually impact on the type of career progression they can expect in the future. Aligned ambitions allow one to sustain higher levels of motivation and to make strategic choices about how to use time and invest effort.

e) Obtaining an M.Ed degree both directly and indirectly affects a person's career aspirations. While the coursework may not be totally enabling towards a particular field of study, the overall effects of the degree are certainly very positive. The degree definitely improves one's status and career opportunities.

6.3 Conclusion

The question the research posed was whether the choices made to invest in post-graduate studies affect the realities of career aspirations. The research also intended to show whether having an M.Ed degree has any bearing upon the types of choices people make in life generally. These questions have been answered in terms of what the literature has provided and what the graduates interviewed have stated. The research confirms that career aspirations, career ambitions and professional renewal are possible when one obtains an M.Ed degree. The research also shows that choices made in studying directly affect what happens afterwards. The choices made in the M.Ed degree may not have been widely varied, but have provided for the individual graduates to assess their own lives in terms of what ambitions they have for themselves. The research has shown that post-graduate studies, if aligned with the individual's expectations, provide choices in the labour market that increase the individual's

net worth. Informed choices ensure realistic aspirations in life. Education, even better, higher education, increases a person's abilities to make informed choices in life. There is no blueprint for dealing with how to make an informed choice in life, but with education better choices can be made.

6.4 Recommendations for further research

Issues that may arise from this study for future researchers to explore:

- This is a relatively small qualitative tracer study. A more in-depth study with a larger number of graduates would be informative.
- Behavioural attitudes cannot be easily generalised. A study into the specifics of choice and decision-making could be a point of departure for enquiring reasoning to the choice of degrees applied for.
- No studies on tracking graduate performance has been done at WITS using a qualitative method. Research to follow up on graduates from all fields would be beneficial to prospective students and to electives offered by the university.
- Accountability and development of quality of the various degree programmes offered at WITS may provide insight to prospective students and lectures. As yet no studies have occurred in this area.

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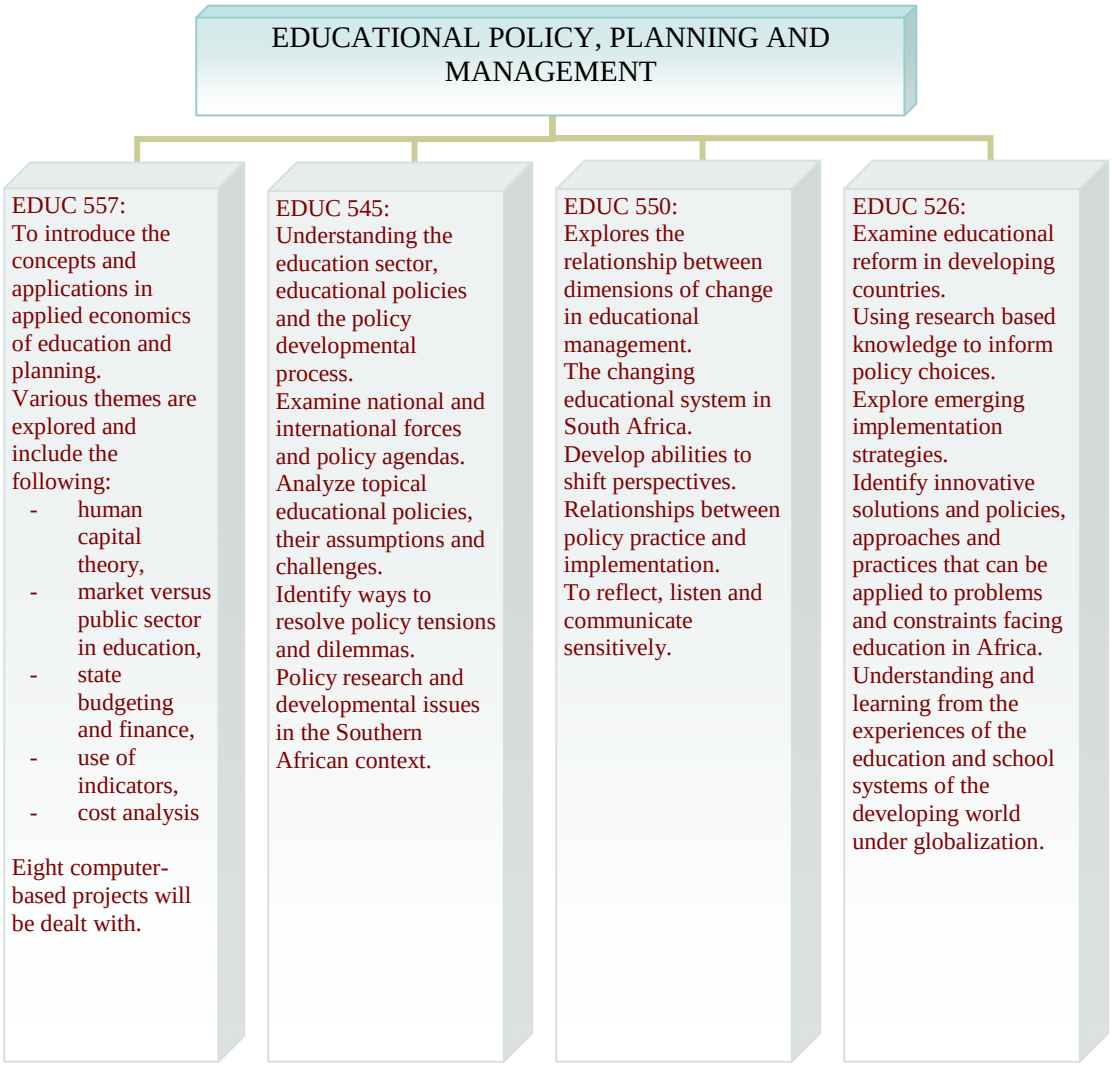
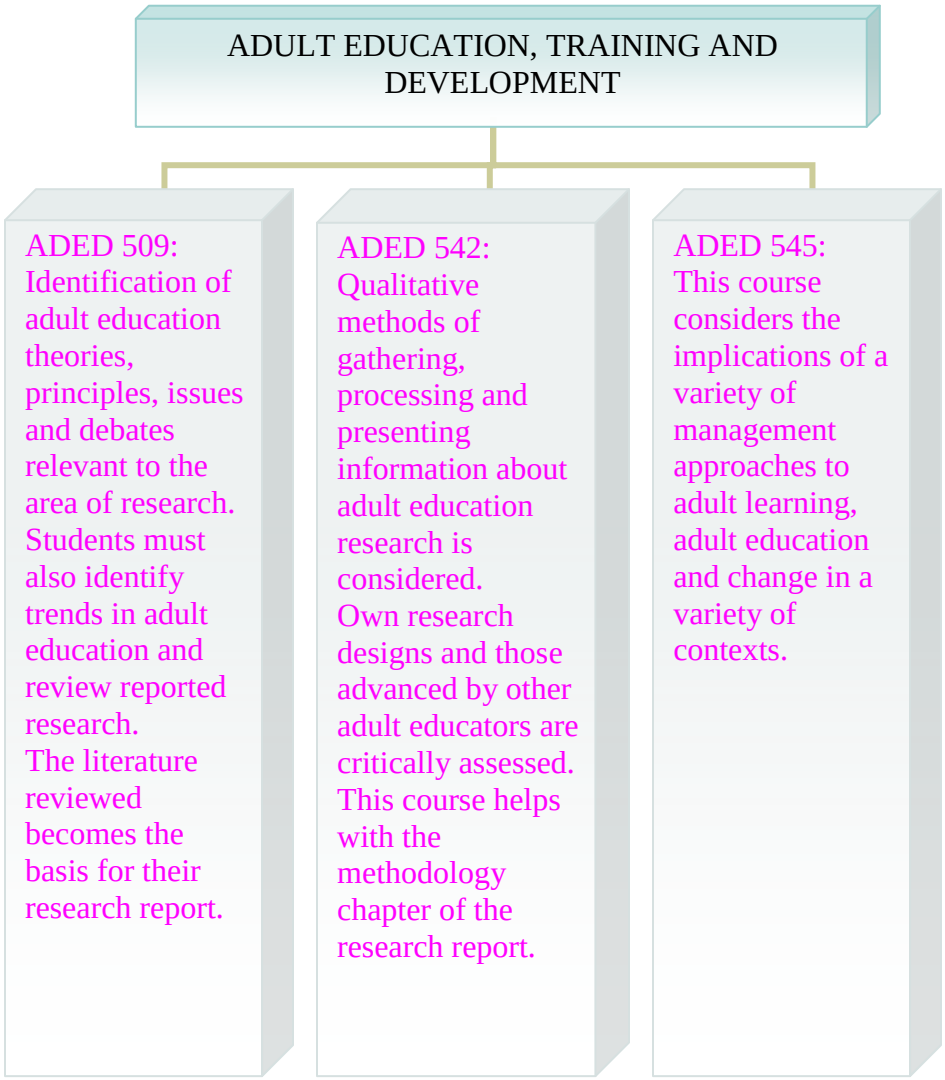
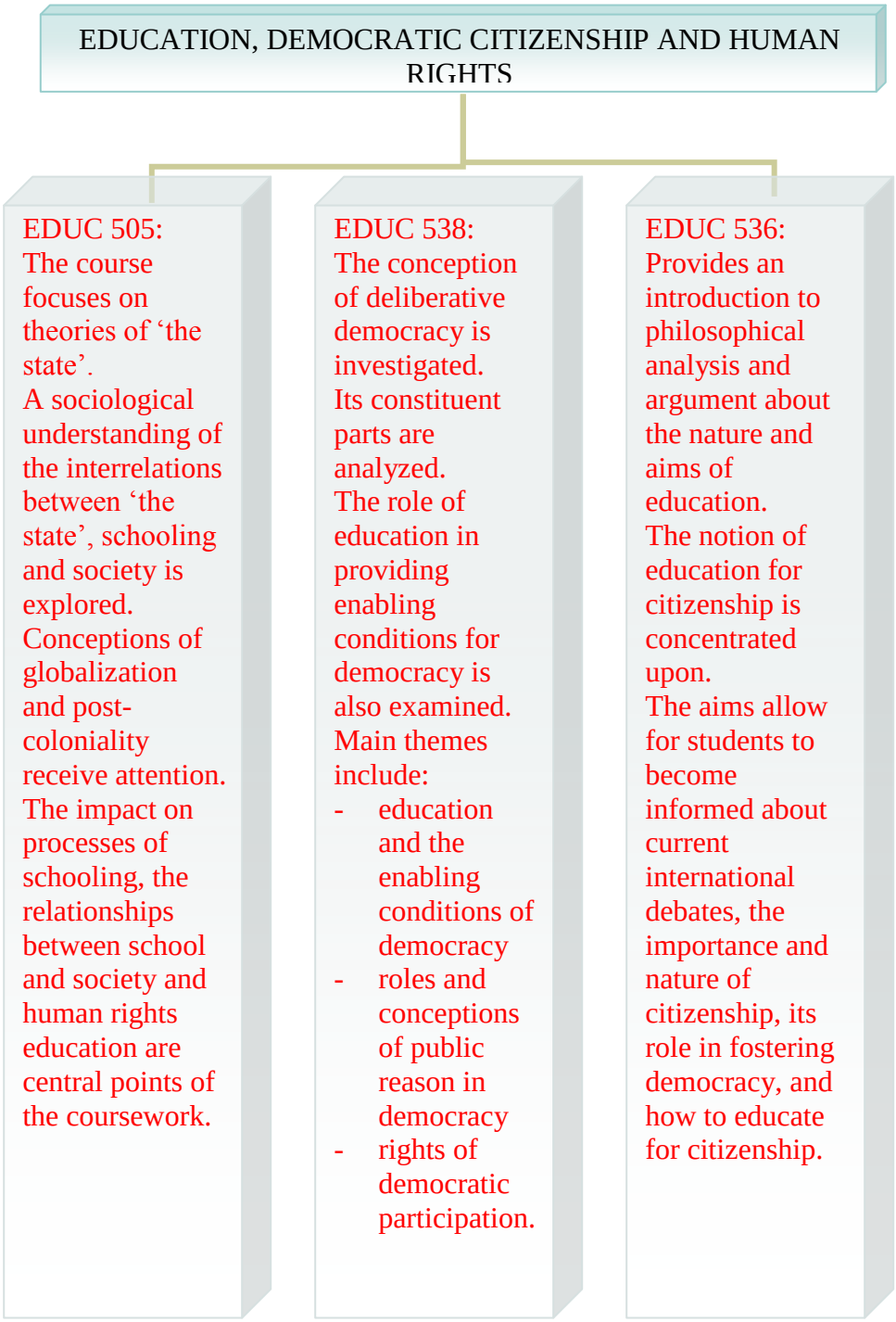
APPENDIX A EDUCATIONAL POLICY, PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT



APPENDIX B ADULT EDUCATION, TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT



APPENDIX C EDUCATION, DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP AND HUMAN RIGHTS



APPENDIX D INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. Brief introduction: name, address and occupation.

_____

_____

_____

2. Age/sex/ethnicity/race

_____

_____

_____

3. Company employed at? Since? Designation?

_____

_____

_____

4. Outline of the study that is being conducted /purpose of this interview (this will be done by interviewer).

_____

_____

_____

5. For what degree did you register and was it completed?

_____

_____

6. Why did you decide to study for your M.Ed? Motivations and reasons. (Perhaps a peek into disadvantaged/advantaged community?)

7. What were the specific courses you studied?

8. Where the specific courses goal-orientated or mandatory for the degree?

9. Elaborate on each course in terms of content, purpose and the way in which it was presented to you.

10. Explain some of your experiences before registering for the M.Ed Experiences related to registering for the degree and courses chosen.

11. Support system for the course? Did it exist? How effective?

12. Difficulties experienced? Was it a new area of study in terms of previous research?

13. What are some of the highlights of your experiences while studying for your degree?

14. Any misconceptions and low points during this time? What were they? Why?

15. Describe the challenges you experienced while studying. (Enumerate and elaborate on each)

16. How did you decide on what courses to complete? How much of a choice was there? Was it academic-related or other? Did you get help? Any particular reasons?

17. Did the courses you chose encourage /develop further /motivate your chosen career path?

18. Were these courses completely different from your then current occupation?

19. Were the courses related to your experiences in life and occupation?

20. Did the courses provide the necessary direction you expected? (Elaborate)

21. Was what you gained from the M.Ed Degree helpful/not helpful for your future experiences?

22. Was the M.Ed Degree enabling or disabling towards your career expectations?

23. Did the degree provide the necessary opportunities for closing the gaps at the workplace? Was it fruitful on the career path?

24. Completing an M.Ed degree is hard work. Do you think it served the purpose of allowing you to attain your goals in life? Why? Why not?

25. Did the degree improve your general status?

26. How has studying impacted on your ability to reason in life? Has the studying empowered you in improving life-skills?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Thank you for your time and assistance in completing this questionnaire.