

## A Qualitative Inquiry into the Career Aspirations of Pakistani Business Students

Sara Khan

Institute of Business Administration, Karachi

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### Abstract

This paper looks into the career aspirations of a sample of business students from Pakistan. The purpose of this paper thus is to identify where students are headed once they complete their business degrees and to document where they are obtaining their ideas from. The significance of this research lies in its use of qualitative methodology that enables students to define their career aspirations and the quarters they think are influencing their thoughts in their own words. It is seen that most business students use multinational corporations as their main reference point when discussing their career ambitions. Further inquiry into the topic reveals that family, associates and business schools all encourage students to think about their career choices from an MNC perspective. To the author, such patterned predetermined ways of thinking appear like discourse that is making it difficult for these students to identify alternative career paths. This raises questions as to the ultimate purpose and hence potential socio-economic impact of business education in the country. It is hoped that this research will be useful for business program developers and teachers who can guide students and their families towards more diverse career paths that can contribute more strongly to the socio-economic development of the country.

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**Keywords:** business students, qualitative, discourse, MNCs careers, family, Pakistan.

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### INTRODUCTION

Business education is one of the fastest growing educational degrees of the world, with MBA jobs growing at an average rate of 15% p.a. since 1990. Hiring of BBA graduates is also growing fast. In fact, as Datar et al (2010) observe, employers are increasingly preferring BBA graduates and training them in the market rather than waiting for them to complete their MBA degrees. Asian economies are a particularly large hirer of business graduates, with growth rates exceeding more than 20% a year<sup>1</sup>. Of these, financial services, FMCG companies and law and energy firms are the highest absorbers of MBA and BBA graduates, with the first of these noting steepest growth rates. In this scenario it is no surprise that most BBA/MBA students look forward to careers in well known large financial houses or FMCGs, particularly the large foreign ones, when they enter business schools.

This research explores the above in the Pakistani context. The problem statement of the study is: What are the career aspirations of Pakistani business students and where are their ideas influenced from?

The objective of this research is to shed light on the career aspirations of Pakistani business students in order to encourage business schools and faculty to reflect on the purpose and hence the potential socio-economic impact of their business programmes.

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Using qualitative methodology, a sample of BBA students from a renowned B-school of Karachi, Pakistan, is asked about their career choices and the

influences which they think are impacting upon their plans. An analysis of their answers is given in their own words, along with discourse analysis by the author. Being an interpretive research, the findings of the study may not be generalizable to the whole of Pakistan but may have contextual similarity to other business graduates.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Management education was first introduced in the North American business school of Wharton in 1881. The MBA was soon publicized outside the United States of America, to both the developed as well as the developing world, with financial sponsorship of Ford, Carnegie, Rockefeller. In the developing world too, President Harry Truman's remark of January 20, 1949, outlines America's global strategy:

We must embark on a bold new programme for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas (quoted in Banarjee and Linstead, 2001:686).

In the same year, President Truman announced financial aid to the developing world. Thus commerce and industry had a notable support and influence on business education from the very beginning.

Pakistan too was a beneficiary of the abovementioned US aid. American investments in oil, pharmaceuticals, natural gas and education picked up overnight in the 1950s-60s, while development of

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<sup>1</sup> 2013/14 QS TopMBA.com Jobs & Salary Trends Report

business schools and transfer of management programmes continued under the Marshall Plans at the same time (Fox, 2001; Khilji, 1999). The Institute of Business Administration, Karachi, was the first business school in the country, set up in 1955, as a joint project of the United State Agency for International Development (USAID) and the University of Pennsylvania. The Pakistan Institute of Management (PIM) was the next collaborative effort with the Ford Foundation in 1961. Today there are several business schools in the country. Out of the 150 HEC (Higher Education Commission) recognized institutes of higher education many are pure business schools, while several others offer degrees in business education<sup>2</sup>. Some of the these business degrees include MBA in International Marketing, MBA in Banking, MBA in Management Information Systems, BBA in Entrepreneurship, BBA in Accounting and Finance and countless other diplomas and certificates.

At present, business schools are among the most expensive educational institutions in Pakistan. The annual tuition fee alone of well-known business schools is at least PKR 150,000 (approximately USD 1500) a year (school websites), in a country whose per capita income is around USD 750 per annum. Nevertheless, business education is still in high demand in the country, with business schools confidently assuring students of prosperous careers ahead. For example, Director's message in one of the well-known business schools to incoming students reads:

Your performance and our placement efforts help you in finding internships during your studies, in helping your admission process for M.Phil, MS & Ph.D. programs, in universities both at home and abroad and also finding jobs demanding your competence in diverse business environments, both nationally and globally...Finally, remember leading national and multi-national organizations are constantly on the watch for young people who bring about value-addition to their organizations, and that is what ABC (real names disguised for reasons of privacy) is going to equip you with.

Websites of schools frequently refer to well known local or multinational companies (MNCs) with regard to career opportunities for their students. For example, one school spoke of the phenomenal success of its alumni in the corporate world, with a large number of them occupying top positions not only in Pakistan, but around the world.

Most of the Chief Executives and top management positions in leading listed

companies, corporations and banks are held by the alumni of XYZ (real name disguised for reasons of privacy). A large number of XYZ graduates are working outside Pakistan in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia, United Kingdom, Canada, Singapore and the United States ...Currently, amongst the top leading banks in Pakistan, XYZ graduates take the lion's share in managing these esteemed organizations. Moreover, amongst the top MNCs and FMCGs, alumni of XYZ are holding the top most positions.

Some business schools provide prospective students with lists of renowned local and foreign employers of their graduates while some school websites feature success stories of their alumni.

These business schools' publications, websites and open day programs can be called the *pull* factors that attract prospective students to specific business schools and programs. In addition, there are also numerous *push* factors that encourage or pressurize students to opt for business educational programs in specific schools. Ozbilgin et al (2004) classify family, senior colleagues and school alumni as some of the significant push factors. In their comparative study of MBA careers across several cultures, they found family to have a considerable influence on the career choices of collectivist cultures. Moreover, senior work colleagues, such as school alumni, are also looked up to for advice and their suggestions in such cultures. In addition to collectivism, they also consider money to have an impact on students' career choices. This is because in collectivist cultures even university students' tuition fee is paid by parents or older siblings. Family thus exercises considerable influence when students finally land in practical life.

## METHODOLOGY

This exploratory study is an interpretive look at the career aspirations of business students of Pakistan. For this purpose, a sample of BBA students was selected at random from a renowned business school in Karachi. Some students were freshmen while some were final year students. Respondents, totaling 27, were asked to write down and briefly explain the kinds of careers they were looking forward to after completing their BBA degrees. They were also requested to notify influences they deem to be significantly impacting on their above-mentioned choices (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). All answers were collected and then read several times in order to identify the main themes emerging from the data (Hycner, 1985). Next, the main themes were analyzed to see any relationships or patterns amongst them. It was seen that the respondents' answers had striking similarities and some of the themes also seemed to be related. Hence, a discourse analysis was also

<sup>2</sup> www.hec.gov.pk

conducted on the emerging themes to recognize the presence of major discourse(s) (Fairclough, 2003). Research findings are given below in respondents' own words (real names disguised for reasons of privacy) and discussion in the light of relevant literatures follows after.

## FINDINGS

The following paragraphs present students' answers in their own words to my research questions. I have organized them according to the themes that emerged from the data. Leaving discussion to the next section, I have given only brief explanatory notes to help the reader understand the emergent issues.

In response to the kinds of careers they were aspiring to, most students disclosed they were looking forward to well-paying jobs, preferably in multinationals or in large local corporations, such as banks or FMCG companies. At times they even named the companies they dreamt of joining some day. Very often such respondents seemed in a hurry to reach the top managerial positions. Following are some of the answers I received:

I want to pursue a head post in a multinational company. These kinds of positions are mostly at managers and directors [levels].

After completing my BBA degree, I expect to get into a multinational organization. Starting from the bottom I expect to make my way to the top CEO level. My target is Unilever or Engro.

Some students wanted a learning experience, whether in universities or in the corporate sector. In the latter case they hoped to join firms that offered opportunities for learning and where they could experiment with their chosen subjects of study. Quite often such firms too were MNCs:

I look forward to work in the corporate communication department of a multinational company or local company. Why? 'Cause I'm good with my communication skills and I like the dynamism that is involved in this particular role. Hence the idea comes from my own self-awareness of my strengths and aspirations.

Students who did not want to work for MNCs were aspiring to set up business enterprises of their own or continuing with family businesses. Some of these students wanted to be 'my own boss' and some wanted to work for the development of women entrepreneurs:

I plan opening an entrepreneurial centre for women development. I want to work for improving the conditions and give women in

rural areas freedom to develop abilities. And break the hold of male dominance.

Among those who did not want to work for MNCs, some also again referred to MNCs from a contrasting point of view:

I believe that Pakistan needs researches than graduates who end up with become corporate slaves of MNCs. It is my personal motives not influenced by any person.

I also heard ideas of serving society from my research participants. However, these ideas were not as well formed or sounded as definite as those in favour of employment in MNCs. Besides such students often seemed torn between serving society and earning material status and recognition. One such response was:

I am at a place where I am uncertain at the moment. I would like to work for an NGO, fighting poverty and I would also like to pursue a career in strategy building in any big or small organization which has a dynamic system. It does not have to be a place which needs to be very famous, because I believe with handwork, organizations can be brought up to higher levels. But I am unsure which career to go with. May be being in an NGO I would not really have a status, which my family expects me to have, may be I won't earn that much which would help my brothers or family grow.

When I asked my respondents from where they could have obtained ideas about their future careers, an overwhelming majority pointed out to their families:

I think these ideas are influenced by my family and other relatives. My aspirations come from my father's career and he is my inspiration to follow this career path.

It is my brother who is the source of this inspiration. He is my role model and since he is working in Unilever, I look forward to join him there in future.

An important source of inspiration for students was their experience at their business schools where not only teachers and colleagues, but also alumni and managers from industry played a significant role in shaping their conception of practical work:

I got these ideas from my colleagues and my family. Multinationals usually pay high. They seem efficient and somewhat challenging. Working in a multinational means to me to work for the globe, not for a single country. In a sense my ideas are also by the influence of the media.

Some students talked of actively following advisory videos and job advertisements on the internet to gauge where the market was headed. Other media, such as films and dramas also informed them of good life ahead:

From films showing idealized work places and luxurious living and from dramas as well. Second, my elders or seniors telling me about the high salaries and perks and of course inspiration for being better.

## DISCUSSION

Summarizing respondents' ideas about the jobs they preferred, I found that most students desired jobs that paid well, quickly led to managerial positions, made use of their learning in business schools, and were preferably in the multinational corporate sector of the country. Some students also spoke of their ambition of setting up businesses of their own or looking after family businesses, while some others intended to serve society in future. The following paragraphs discuss these findings in detail.

Illuminating my research participants' ideas on the nature of their prospective jobs, a Business 2.0 report (2005:99) states

More than any other prospective grad students, MBA candidates want a handsome return on investment. They want to know what kinds of salaries await them, and which schools offer the fastest route to the top.

In her study on values endorsed in Pakistani MBA programs, Khan (2006) also notes students' fascination with MNCs. In one of the focus groups she moderated students explained their main purpose of being in a business school in the following words:

Focus in PQR (real name disguised for reasons of privacy) for me is towards getting a good job. All the accounts courses we have, in the end what we are trying to do is to generate profits. One core value is that...If someone gets a very good job at Procter and Gamble, he would go for it...I mean that could be one of the goals that we have.

Some management scholars hold management texts and school publications responsible for such managerially oriented outlook. A look at the school websites in the literature review section of this paper bears testimony to this, as do the colleagues' and alumni's advisory words to upcoming graduates in the findings section. Explaining business students' career choices and their schools' role in putting forward such ideas, Peltonen (2000:410) writes that students' ideas are classified into normal and deviant 'freedoms,' depending on how they match corporate

norms and values. Texts, in fact the whole curriculum, include hints about appropriate aims in life, not leaving it to the imagination of the individual.

In Khan's (2006) study, a business school teacher observed a larger reason for the MNC aspiration:

They provide good growth opportunities, they pay very well, they treat you well and have nice air-conditioned offices, so you're attracted. Pakistani companies are not offering such environments, perks, attractive packages, mixed boys-girls environment. They would have male-dominated culture, men with beards and moustaches, MBAs will not go there.

According to Hofstede (1984), defining achievement in these ways is a characteristic of masculine cultures, on whose continuum of femininity-masculinity Pakistan falls in the middle. Not only did my respondents express such materialistic and elitist ideas coming to them from family, friends and media, but other research has also found the Pakistani society to be thinking on similar lines. Khilji's research (1999), for example, indicated that the Pakistani society is materialistic and status-conscious. Her research on the banking sector of Pakistan showed how various banks are competing in offering higher salaries and better growth opportunities to appropriate the crème of the country, thereby further encouraging materialistic and elitist ideas. Shahan, a manager in a local bank in Khan's (2006) study made a similar observation, "Everybody is selfish in society, not only business graduates."

The way multinational corporations (MNCs) were spoken of by my research participants is suggestive to me of a discourse. According to Norman Fairclough, one distinguishes discourses when particular ways (partly variable, partly stable) of representing the world become of social significance, perhaps in terms of 'effectivity of discourse,' and its 'translation into non-discursive aspects of social life' (Fairclough, 2003:126). Discourse analysis tries to find out how a particular account was created and for what purpose or to achieve what results. Hence discourses very often give a limited and stereotypical view of reality (Said, 1995). In this research too, the way family and business schools talked about careers in MNCs – as being associated with prestige and power, bright future prospects and socially liberal working environments – without pointing out any negative characteristics of them - represent to me a discourse on the MNCs.

The MNC discourse also finds strength in the collectivist culture of Pakistan. Since Pakistan has a fairly collectivist culture and family and seniors are looked upon for advice and financial support towards

even university students' education, it is not surprising that students' families have a considerable influence on their prospective careers. Thus the results of this research to echo Ozbilgin et al's (2004) findings in the collective oriented Turkish culture, only much more strongly.

Said (1995) suggests that discourses make it difficult to look at alternative ways of thinking. This was evident in the words of students who felt a tension exploring other career options that appeared less lucrative. Moreover, these students expressed abstract ideas about social work and spoke vaguely about further education and jobs outside MNCs. Some students, however, intended to set up businesses of their own or continue their family businesses. But some of these students again referred to MNCs by stating they desired to be independent players, not *slaves* of the MNCs. Thus the hold of the MNCs on the career aspirations of business students was considerable.

### CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to look interpretively at the career aspirations of a group of Pakistani business students. A qualitative inquiry has revealed that the career aspirations of these students are dominated by multinational corporations. References to MNCs are found to be constructed in such patterned ways and are such stereotypical in stance that the author sees them as almost a discourse on the MNCs. This discourse is impinging itself on the minds of the business students from various corners – families, colleagues, business school experiences, alumni and managers in industry and even the media. Its effect is so overpowering that it argued that it is becoming difficult for students to opt for or even identify career paths independent of the MNCs.

### LIMITATIONS

The major limitation of this research is its small sample size that could not allow for meaningful comparisons between freshmen and graduating business students. A larger sample from more than one business school would have made a comparative study more in-depth and interesting. However, this limitation opens up avenues for further research.

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