

SUMMARY

Study choice and drop-out on higher education

Do I want to work with people, or do I just want to earn money? Should I follow my heart or my head? In the end, what are the differences between the various study programmes? Where should I go for advice?

Choosing between architect, occupational therapist or multimedia design and communication is a huge decision for young people, but the care and effort they invest in making the right decision can easily be decisive for whether they later drop out of their programme.

This issue is presented in this report, which has examined the correlation between students' degree of certainty about their choice of study and the risk of them dropping out. The report also identifies five factors that characterise young people who are most certain about their choice of study programme.

The report is particularly relevant for student counsellors at the seven regional education and career guidance centres, but it will also be interesting for staff in upper secondary education and higher education programmes who help students to select their study programmes. Young people who are about to choose a programme can also apply the five recommendations in the report to help them plan a good process for deciding which programmes to choose.

Results

Three out of four students are certain about their choice of programme

The decision process is rarely easy for budding students. Nevertheless, 73% of students who were admitted to a higher education programme in 2016 were certain about their choice of study programme according to the analysis by the Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA).

Students who are less certain are far more likely to drop out

The analysis shows that students who are less certain have a significantly higher risk of dropping out of their study programme than those who are very certain. 37% of students who, on the date of application, stated that they were not at all certain about their choice of programme drop out during their first year of study. The same applies to only 15% of students who are very certain about their choice of study programme.

The report also provides a strong indication that the correlation between students' degree of certainty with regard to choice of programme and their risk of dropping is not just a statistical relationship, but also represents a real causal effect. In other words, lack of certainty with regard to choice of study programme leads to a high risk of drop-out.

While there is uncertainty regarding the exact scale of the difference in risk of drop-out between certain and less certain students, there are indications that the difference is substantial. Overall, 22% of those who were admitted in 2016 dropped out during their first year of study. In light of this, the difference in risk of drop-out between certain and less certain students is substantial. However, part of this difference may be caused by other underlying differences between certain and uncertain students, and, therefore, it is difficult to accurately assess the size of the effect.

Five factors characterise students who are certain about their choice

EVA's analysis shows that five factors in particular characterise young people who are certain about their choice of study programme. The analysis does not examine the effects of the individual factors, but presents a descriptive characterisation of the process of choosing a programme by students who are certain.

1. Students who are certain often decide on their choice of study programme early

This report shows that early programme selection strongly equates to certainty of choice. There is a very strong correlation between when students make their choice of study programme and how certain they are about their choice of programme. For example, 93% of students who made their selection more than two years before the deadline for applications were very certain or certain about their choice of study. The same applies to only 35% of students who made their choice in the days leading up to the deadline.

2. Students who are certain have often used many different sources to find out about the study programme they are applying for

The more sources students use to find out about the programme they are applying for, the more certain they usually are. 84% of students who use nine sources state they are very certain or certain about their choice of study programme. The same applies to only 69% of students who only use one source.

3. Students who are certain have more often contacted staff and students on the study programme they are applying for

A significantly higher percentage of students who are certain contact staff and students on the programme they later enrol on. Students who are certain:

- Visit the programme more often (e.g. at open house events or through study experience programmes)
- Talk more often with current or previous students from the programme they are applying to
- Talk more often with a supervisor or a teacher from the programme they are applying to

4. Students who are certain have often found out a lot about the study programme they are applying for

The report shows that a selection of study programme by a student who is certain is often a well-informed choice. There is a very strong association between the degree to which students feel they have been informed about the study programme they are applying for and how certain they are about their choice of programme. 92% of students who very much feel they were adequately informed feel certain or very certain about their choice of study. The same applies to only 33% of students who do not at all feel adequately informed about their study programme.

5. Students who are *not* accepted for their first priority programme are less likely to be certain about the selection of the alternative study programme they enrol on

The percentage of students who are certain is lower among students who are not accepted for their first priority programme. Only 50% of students who did *not* enrol in their first priority are certain, while the corresponding figure is 77% for students who *did* get onto their first priority programme. The difference in the degree of certainty cannot be attributed to differences in upper secondary school average grades between the two groups.

Students who did *not* attain their first priority also have a higher drop-out rate. 28% of students who did *not* get onto their first priority programme in 2016 dropped out during their first year of study. The same applied to only 18% of students who were accepted for their first priority programme.

Perspectives

The report shows the importance of applicants to higher education programmes being as certain as possible about their choice of study programme, as students who are not certain have a far higher risk of subsequently dropping out of their programme.

Selection of study programme is, however, difficult for many young people among the annual student intake. Some end up never reaching a decision, even though they actually want to, as shown in previous EVA publications (EVA, 2015, 2016a, 2016b). Therefore, it is important to help young people navigate through the process of selecting their study programme as effectively as possible.

The results in this report indicate that it may make sense to look closely at the education advisory services for young people and to consider whether it is possible to provide more advice about good decision-making processes when selecting a study programme.

On the basis of the analysis and other knowledge of this field¹, EVA offers five recommendations to enable young people to become more certain about their choice of study programme. The recommendations are not exhaustive and should be seen in context with other relevant guidance tools.

¹ See e.g. <https://www.ug.dk/videregaaendeuddannelse/omvalgafuddannelse/i-tivl-om-dit-valg-af-videregaaende-uddannelse> or <https://videnskab.dk/kultur-samfund/hvordan-vaelger-jeg-den-rigtige-uddannelse>.

Recommendation 1: Start early to search for information about study programme options

There is a strong correlation between early start and certainty of choice of study programme. The most certain students have often made their choice early. Thus, the prerequisites for reaching a well-founded decision may be promoted if prospective students make an early start in researching the various study programme options.

Recommendation 2: Seek knowledge from many different sources

The more sources students use to gain knowledge about the programme(s) they are applying for, the more well-informed and certain they are about their choice. This indicates the advantage of seeking information via a number of different sources to clarify which programme(s) they should apply for.

Recommendation 3: Talk to students, teachers and supervisors on the programmes you are considering

Students who contact the employees and students on the higher education programme(s) they are considering are more certain about their choice than other students. This result is in line with the conclusion in the EVA 2015 report that one of the challenges for young people is that they do not have enough specific experience with higher education during their upper secondary education. Of course, it is easier for young people to take on an education programme if they already have a degree of certainty about which programme(s) they are interested in. However, the analyses suggest that obtaining or listening to specific hands-on experience from the programmes can enhance students' final decisions with regard to choice of study programme.

Recommendation 4: Do not commit to one specific programme before you know a lot about it

It is a good idea for students to ensure that they know enough about the programme(s) they are considering applying to before they make their final decision. The analysis shows that students who are certain have often researched a lot about the study programme they enrol on.

Recommendation 5: Make at least two study programme choices about which you have extensive knowledge and feel certain

Not all future students have the grade-average and the right combination of subjects to be able to choose from all the higher education programmes they find interesting. If budding students are unsure about whether they will gain access to their first choice, it is a good idea for them to be equally seriously committed to their second and perhaps third priority programmes. This is because students who do *not* attain their first priority have a tendency to choose second and third priority programmes they are significantly less certain about. These students also have a high risk of drop-out.

Data basis for the report and methodological considerations

The report is based on data from the EVA student drop-out panel, which, since 2016, has followed students enrolled in higher education through a number of surveys covering, as a minimum, their first year of study. The report includes questionnaire data from the first questionnaire survey of both the 2016 and 2017 cohorts. The questionnaires were distributed in, respectively, August 2016 and August 2017 after the students had been notified that they had been admitted, but before they commenced their programmes. Register data from Statistics Denmark was then incorporated, as well as drop-out data from the higher education institutions.

In the analyses in chapter 3 of the report, we seek as far as possible to isolate the effect on risk of drop-out of the degree of certainty of students with regard to their choice of programme. Our design, controls and robustness tests point towards strong confidence that the correlation expresses a real causal effect. However, we cannot rule out that a part of the correlation may reflect selection bias, and, therefore, there are reservations about the magnitude of the effect. In other words, it is certain that students with a low degree of certainty with regard to their choice of study programme have a higher risk of drop-out than other students because of their lack of certainty. However, it is possible that the difference in risk of drop-out is partly also the result of other underlying differences between certain and uncertain students.

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