

# CAREER ASPIRATIONS AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF BMTs IN THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

## **ABSTRACT:**

### **Purpose of Study**

This paper seeks to explore the relationship between career aspirations (CA) and academic achievement (AA) for business management technicians (BMTs) from state-run technical institutions (SRTIs) in The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago in the West Indies.

### **Methodology**

For the purposes of this study, AA was defined as '*task oriented behavior that allows the individual's performance to be evaluated according to some internally or externally imposed criterion that involves the individual in competing with others, or that otherwise involves some standard of excellence*' (Spence, 1983, p. 43). AA was measured as a nominal variable (1= successful completion of the BMT program, 0 = unsuccessful completion of the BMT program). CA referred to the expressed future career wishes of the BMTs. Using a non-convenience, cross-cultural random sample of 500 participants, a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and academic records provided relevant data.

### **Analysis**

Basic descriptive statistical analysis included cross tabulation tables indicating percentages. Qualitative analysis using the unitizing and categorising method provided additional useful information.

### **Research Findings**

Results showed that CA appeared to be related to AA. Those BMTs who completed their BMT programs had higher career aspirations than those who did not. Neither age, gender, time to get the job, present job status or area of specialization appeared to affect respondents' career aspirations. CA also appeared to be related to perceived career opportunities at the work place and the fringe benefits received, suggesting the need for employer support.

### **Conclusion/Implications**

This paper is particularly valuable to students in their quest for suitable career opportunities to match their academic achievements. Aligning career aspirations with reality could avoid disappointments and unnecessary worry. A new value-based approach to the job search process may be possible with empirical information from this under-researched area of study.

Key words: Business management technicians, academic achievement, career aspirations.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Robbins, Wallace and Dunstone (2002), in exploring the academic achievement and career aspirations of college-bound and postsecondary Zulu students, found that the family as support, a desire to succeed in school and a concern about having the necessary skills to do so were important factors. However, *'a commitment to academic/career success appeared disconnected from concrete future goals and plans for many students, suggesting the need for improved social support networks that promote academic achievement and career opportunities'* (Robbins, Wallace and Dunstone, 2002).

To add support, Bender (2004) in exploring the perceptions of grade 12 female high school students on the factors that influenced their non-traditional or traditional science career aspirations, found that parents, older siblings, other people, work experiences, volunteer experiences and certain school experiences strongly influenced female students' career choices. Additionally, she found that *'female high school students commonly exhibited doubts about their academic ability and expressed fears that they would not succeed.'* So significant is this issue that several web-based polls attempt to probe respondents' career aspirations. In particular, SmartGirl (<http://www.smartgirl.org/reports/213724.html>) asked respondents questions like, *'What is your ultimate dream job?', 'What are your chances of getting your dream job?', 'What you would need to do in order to get your dream job?' , 'It is more important to me that I make a lot of money in my career rather than being really happy in my career?', 'Has anyone ever told you that you could NOT go into the career that you aspired to go into?'*,

*'Do you think that there are fewer women than men in science related fields?'*, *'Who encourages you the most in your career aspirations?'* and finally *'Who tells you over and over again that you can be anything you want to be?'*. The results of the poll (available from the website) indicate a growing interest in CA and AA. Further, Francis (2002) in analyzing the career aspirations of 14-16 year old students in terms of gender, found that girls have become far more ambitious than was previously the case in their occupational choices. Whilst boys' occupational aspirations remained high he found that, to some extent, the choices of both girls and boys do reflect *'a deeply embedded gender dichotomy'* without recognition of changes in the adult employment market. Since these studies were done outside the Caribbean, this researcher saw reason to zero in on this under-researched area of study to focus on the association between CA and AA as it impacts the unique cultural life in The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, West Indies.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This present paper draws information from a more comprehensive study that examined how business management technicians (BMTs) from state-run technical institutes (SRTIs) fared on the labour market following the oil boom period that ushered the business studies boom or era in The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. Individuals thought it necessary to retool to make themselves more marketable for the fewer available jobs during that period of recession. They also visualized changes in their CA as a result of higher credentialing.

For the purpose of this present study, AA was operationally defined as '*task oriented behaviour that allows the individual's performance to be evaluated according to some internally or externally imposed criterion that involves the individual in competing with others, or that otherwise involves some standard of excellence*' (Spence, 1983, p. 43).

The precise meaning of AA is not a simple one because people are motivated by a multiplicity of historical and contemporaneous factors, external and internal to the individual. Besides, each individual has a unique genotype that provides a specific pattern or framework for the development of that individual's physical characteristics and psychological functions. Consequently, each individual, by virtue of his or her peculiar constitution (mental ability, that is a subtle blend of heredity and environment, cognitive functioning and intelligence), reacts in a unique manner to the environment around him or her. It is this interactive process combined with 'non-intellective' factors like personality and the social environment that determines that particular individual's AA.

Writers like Sennett (2005) suggested 101 stunts for principals to inspire students. Other suggestions have been posited for improved AA. For instance, a student-centered approach with student-centered educational programs in a supportive environment *transcending socioeconomic and learning differences* was proposed by Chall (2000). AA was therefore measured as a nominal variable (1= successful completion of the BMT program, 0 = unsuccessful completion of the BMT program). Based on current literature and the perceptions of individuals with whom this researcher has come into contact, there appear to be a relationship between career aspirations and academic achievement that needed to be explored. Such exploration promises to have implications for the quality and

quantity of individual effort in preparation for their future careers as they strive to self actualize through their careers. The urgency and timeliness of this under-researched area provided the rationale for this paper. In this context, CA was defined as the expressed future career wishes of the BMTs.

In the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago early childhood education generally commences at age three and continues to age five before entry into public or private primary schools for the next approximately seven years. Education is compulsory for all citizens from age five. The transition from primary to secondary level is based on continuous assessment at the primary level. Both public and private secondary schooling normally last for seven years. From the late 1980s, there were numerous options for secondary school students transitioning into tertiary education. For instance, students could opt for five-year technical education or teacher-training programs at the Point Fortin Vocational Center, state-run technical institutions, one of the five teacher-training colleges or The Eastern Caribbean Institute of Agriculture that operated a two-year program. Students completing the entire seven years of secondary academic training were eligible for further instruction at the university level or at the several other private tertiary educational institutions. Numerous changes in the education system have been implemented over several years including the amalgamation of the SRTIs and several other post secondary education institutions into The College of Science, Technology and Applied Arts of Trinidad and Tobago (COSTATT). COSTATT which was established to increase the country's competitiveness on the international business market has since given way to community colleges.

As a prerequisite for economic growth, productivity and national development, underscored by technological development researchers (Psacharopoulos and Woodhall, 1986) among others saw the need for an adequate number of well-trained technicians on the labour market. So great was the demand for BMTs that labour practices involved employing even those BMTs who had not fully completed their programs at SRTIs. With an exponential increase in industries to meet the ever changing demands of the labour market BMTs continue to enjoy an enviable place in the society.

### **OBJECTIVE**

This present paper therefore seeks to explore the relationship between CA and AA for BMTs from SRTIs in The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago which a twin island state in the West Indies, just north of Venezuela.

### **METHOD**

A non-convenience, cross-cultural sample of 500, representing about 43% of the total population (1170) of BMTs, participated in the comprehensive study that explored certain perceptions of BMTs regarding job relatedness, job preparedness, job satisfaction, job stability, fringe benefits, career aspirations and future job. This present paper focuses on an important domain in career development research, that is, career aspirations and academic achievement. Respondents came from two state-run technical institutes offering tertiary education in The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago in the West Indies. Detailed demographics about the respondents was obtained from a four- page questionnaire, opinionnaires and semi-structured interviews (obtainable upon request from the author).

A detailed four-page questionnaire designed and administered by the researcher specifically asked respondents about their perception on job relatedness, job preparedness, job satisfaction, job stability, fringe benefits, career aspirations and future job. The research question of concern for this present paper pertained to the respondents' career aspirations. The question was deliberately open - ended to allow respondents to freely express themselves and not feel constrained to choose predetermined options that perhaps could limit their freedom of choice and silence their spontaneity for self expression. The unitizing and categorizing method of qualitative analysis using grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was used to identify four most commonly occurring areas that were nominally coded as follows:

1= Higher Education, 2 = Private Business, 3 = Other, 4 = None.

It must be noted that 'No response' was interpreted differently from 'None'. If there were an explicit no/none written, category 4 was used. Blank spaces were interpreted as no response. The category 'other' comprised views distinctly different from any of the coded categories and included aspirations like '*want to make money*', '*want to do anything except studies and business*', '*want to do something different*', '*want to enjoy life*', etc. The entire instrument was pilot tested on 100 respondents. Several changes were made reflecting the views expressed by those respondents. Some changes included placing key words in bold print and underline, clarifying certain definitions and removing some ambiguities. The computer software package, SPSS was used to extract information from the data. Table 1 shows only the relevant biographical data. AA was measured as a nominal variable determined by completion of the BMT program or being certified as a

BMT graduate of the institution (0 = non completion, 1= completion). In other words, a BMT completer was a student who graduated with a *bona fide* certificate from the institution.

## **RESULTS**

### *Take in Table I*

The relevant demographics of the respondents are given in Table 1. Modal future career aspiration (80.6 %) (Table II) was recorded as higher education primarily in the form of a degree program tenable at the University of the West Indies (Mode = 1, Skewness = 2.22, Kurtosis = 6.83). The least number of persons (1.4 %) opted for private business as their future career aspiration.

### Take in Table II

About 7.7% more BMT completers than BMT noncompleters opted for higher education as their future career aspiration. It must be noted that 5.9% of BMT completers reported having aspirations like '*making money*', '*doing something different*' or '*wanting to enjoy life*' (Table III). Semi-structured interviews revealed that these respondents indicated interest in anything other than academic studies. Accordingly, these responses were categorized as 'other'.

### *Take in Table III*

Higher education in the form of a university degree appeared to be the most popular future career aspiration for temporary BMTs (Table III), a finding that appears to match the larger picture as found in current literature. Only 1.6 % of temporary BMTs reported

no interest in private business. The relationship between present job status and future career aspirations appeared positive but weak ( $\text{Gamma}=0.25$ ).

Table IV provides the percentage distribution of BMTs regarding their future career aspirations by industrial sub-sector of their present jobs. In all industrial sub-sectors from agriculture to the self employed BMTs respondents recorded interest in higher education. One hundred percent of respondents employed in the agricultural, finance, other and self employed industrial sub-sectors indicated interest in higher education.

Take in Table IV

Using the unitizing and categorizing methods of qualitative analysis numerous comments from semi-structured interviews revealed the respondents' perceptions of the relationship between CA and AA. Some selected comments included, *'Now that I am doing better in my school work I can make concrete plans about my career'*, *'I feel much better about my future career since my grades have improved'*, *'Who would think that improved grades could influence my career aspirations'*, *'My future looks much brighter than ever before since I am doing well at school'*, *'I often wondered how high achievers could be so confident about their career aspirations ...now that I am performing well I can make definite plans about my future career'*.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

This present paper seeks to explore the relationship between career aspirations (CA) and academic achievement (AA) for business management technicians (BMTs) from state-run technical institutions (SRTIs) in The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago in the West Indies. For the purposes of this paper, AA was defined as *'task oriented behaviour*

*that allows the individual's performance to be evaluated according to some internally or externally imposed criterion that involves the individual in competing with others, or that otherwise involves some standard of excellence'* (Spence, 1983, p. 43). Recognizing several definitions of AA, in this present paper, AA was measured by completion of the BMT program or by being certified as a BMT graduate of the SRTI. A BMT completer was a student who graduated with a *bona fide* certificate from the SRTI. Hence, AA was measured as a nominal variable determined by completion of the BMT program or being certified as a BMT graduate of the institution (0 = non completion, 1= completion). For the purposes of this present paper, CA referred to the expressed wishes of the BMTs in relation to their future careers.

Results showed that respondents interested in continuing academic studies were willing to move from one job to another in order to facilitate their continuing studies. From the unitizing and categorizing methods of qualitative analysis, higher education, private business and 'other' were the areas identified by BMTs as their career aspirations. In particular, more than 80% of respondents desired higher education. Most (94%) of those respondents wanted to attend the University of the West Indies (UWI) for training in Business Management. UWI is a world recognized regional tertiary educational institution, offering an extensive number of certificate, diploma and degree programs up to and including doctoral and post doctoral programs. UWI has campuses in Trinidad, Barbados and Jamaica in the West Indies, representing the diversity and geographical distribution of some of its patrons. Nevertheless, six percent of the respondents indicated their desire to attend private or other business schools.

The category 'other' covered a wide range of interests that for the respondents themselves appeared partly undefined. The respondents were certain that they explicitly

meant '*no form of higher education or any form of private business*'. Common responses selected included the desire to '*make money, do anything except studies and business, do something different, enjoy life...*' Here we may note the contrast in career aspirations of BMT completers and BMT non completers. BMT completers desired higher education whilst BMT noncompleters reported wanting to '*do anything except studies*'. Private business attracted only 1.4% of respondents. BMTs who were trained in business management skills appeared to be least interested in the field of private business. The temporary workers apparently thought that their present job status could be changed after acquiring further academic qualifications. Many permanent BMTs reported having no future career aspirations. Perhaps permanence at a job for many respondents gave them some form of personal security and assurance. Higher education as a future career aspiration was popular amongst respondents in all industrial sub-sectors especially from the 'other' industrial sub-sector and from the petroleum industrial sub-sector. Respondents interested in all defined areas of future career aspirations came from the petroleum industrial sub-sector. It would seem that the petroleum industrial sub-sector allowed for the widest diversity of skills.

There were several limitations to this present study that included the demographics of the non-convenience, cross-cultural random sample of BMTs originating from a small country where, by and large, individuals are preoccupied with academic excellence, even more so than personal comforts and desires. Success in the academic arena is viewed as having implications for upward social mobility. The present paper assumed that the respondents adequately represented those who received training in the area of the BMT program. It is also assumed that memory served the respondents adequately since several questionnaires were completed on the job where in some cases access to documented

evidence (for example resumes, certificates, etc.) might not have been readily available. Further, it is assumed that respondents did not feel threatened in any way and that there existed some measure of honesty and accuracy in responses to all questions. The researcher assumed that speculations regarding the ultimate use of the information supplied would have very little effect on the truth of the written information.

Additionally, the researcher assumed that the respondents did not give answers regarding their present jobs that were tailored to satisfy their supervisors. It was assumed too that there was a reasonable measure of congruence between written/stated objectives of courses offered at SRTIs and the actual delivery of the curriculum as intended. Finally, the researcher conjectured that the respondents had some degree of flexibility in choice of their present jobs that would afford them the privilege of selecting a job that matched their skills rather than being forced to accept a job because of the unavailability of a suitable job at that time.

Where word of mouth often appears to be an accepted form of information dissemination at numerous levels, generalizations to the present study must be guardedly made. With no empirical data for benchmarking, the present study may be considered as exploratory and could serve as a focal point for similar studies in the region. Whilst career aspirations for individuals in developing countries may be dependent on a variety of factors, in developing countries like The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, individuals are often limited by their own perceptions of the labour market with respect to supply and demand of skills. Extrapolations of the present study must therefore be guardedly made.

Results showed that CA appeared to be related to AA. Those BMTs who completed their BMT programs had higher career aspirations than those who did not. Neither age,

gender, time to get the job, present job status or area of specialization appeared to affect respondents' career aspirations. CA also appeared to be related to perceived career opportunities at the work place and the fringe benefits received, suggesting the need for employer support. A more value-based approach to the job search process may be possible with empirical information from this under-researched area of study.

Arising from the results of this present study career counseling could include advising individuals to anticipate what lifestyle they expect in the future and make the relevant choices that are flexible enough to accommodate a range of possible changes should unexpected situations arise that demand changes in their career paths. Further, areas of career counseling research may include examination of career aspirations of high achievers compared to low achievers, career aspirations of other technician groups from SRTIs and possibly compare the career aspirations of those various groups. It is hoped that this research would serve as a catalyst to additional research in this much needed area.

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Table 1 Demographics of the participants

<b>Independent Factors</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>Age</b>	
<20 years	20
20-29	211
30-39	171
40-49	82
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	100
Female	400
<b>AA (Graduation status)</b>	
Completers	391
Non-completers	86

Note. All percentages rounded, N may not total 500 due to missing responses.

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Table II Frequency distribution of responses about future career aspirations

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Career aspirations	N	%	Cum. %
Higher Education	403	80.6	80.6
Private Business	007	01.4	82.0
Other	021	04.2	86.2
None	013	02.6	88.8

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Note. 11.2 % of sample gave no response.

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Table III Future career aspirations by graduation status by present job status

Career Aspirations	Completers	Non completers	Temporary	Permanent
Higher Education	89.3	97.0	94.0	85.9
Private	01.4	03.0	01.6	01.6
Other	05.9	-	02.8	07.6
None	03.4	-	01.6	04.9

Note. 15.2 % of respondents gave no answers about completion.

13.2 % of respondents gave no answers about present job status.

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Table IV Future career aspirations by industrial sub-sector of present job

CA	Agriculture	Communication	Construction	Finance	Government	Manufacturing	Petroleum	Other	Self Employed
Higher Edu	100	84.3	84.9	100	96.7	92.2	78.9	100	100
Private Bus	-	-	08.7	-	-	03.9	01.1	-	-
Other	-	13.7	-	-	03.3	03.9	10.5	-	-
None	-	02.0	06.5	-	-	-	09.5	-	-

Note. 13.0 % of respondents gave no answers.