

An Exploration of the Factors that Influence Male Post-Primary Students in Making their Subject Choices for the Leaving Certificate.

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Declaration

The author hereby declares that this thesis is entirely his own work. No element of the work described in this dissertation has been previously submitted for any degree in University of Limerick, or in any other institution.

Signature _____

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Glossary

ASTI	Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland
CAO	Central Applications Office
CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
CLD	Career Learning and Development Practitioners
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DE	Department of Education (1921-1997)
DES	Department of Education and Science (1997 - 2010)
DES	Department of Education and Skills (2010 – Present)
ELPGN	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
ERST	Edmund Rice Schools Trust
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB	Education and Training Board
EU	European Union
HE	Higher Education
IGC	Institute of Guidance Counsellors
JC	Junior Cycle
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
LCE	Leaving Certificate Established
LCVP	Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCGE	National Centre for Guidance in Education
NF	National Forum

NGF	National Guidance Forum
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PPEF	Post Primary Education Forum
SEC	State Examinations Commission
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
TY	Transition Year Programme
WSA	Whole School Approach

Abstract

As students progress through their post-primary education in Ireland they have many choices to make in relation to the Leaving Certificate programme they wish to study for and the subjects they wish to take as part of their chosen programme (Smyth 2016). These choices have long term consequences far beyond the immediate in terms of the student's career (Warton and Cooney 1997). The overall aim of this research study was to explore the factors that influence male post-primary students in making their subject choices for the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE).

Another aim of this study was to identify recommendations that could inform the design, delivery and supports provided as part of the subject choice process for Senior Cycle students in post-primary schools in the future.

This research study is underpinned by a positivist paradigm which focuses on the researcher taking a detached and objective position with a view to producing findings generalisable and representative of the wider community (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias 1996; Walliman and Buckler 2008; Thomas 2009). The study examines the views of a sample of current 5th year students attending two all-boys post primary schools and studying for the Leaving Certificate Established. An online questionnaire was administered to 150 fifth year students and the data collected was collated, analysed and the findings that emerged were presented.

The choices that students make are heavily influenced by both organisational and personal factors. Organisational factors that emerged included school management decisions, school size and the nature of the Irish post-primary education system. The personal factors that influenced subject choice included the role of parents, siblings, friends and other significant adults.

Overall, the findings suggest that parents are the most significant figures in a student's subject choices for Senior Cycle. This highlights the need to enhance the relationship and the level of communication between schools and parents to enable parents to be of maximum assistance to their child during transitional periods in their academic career. Furthermore, the findings of the research study identify that students are motivated to choose subjects for intrinsic reasons such as enjoyment of a subject which emerged as the most influential factor in students subject choices. Extrinsic motivational factors for choosing particular subjects for Senior Cycle included its usefulness in gaining CAO points to access higher education.

To conclude, this research study can contribute to the existing body of knowledge that exists in relation to the factors that influence male students' subject choice for the LCE. Finally, a number of recommendations are made to inform future policy, practice and research.

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.0 Introduction.

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the topic under investigation in this research study. It outlines the context and justification for the research along with the position of the researcher. The aims, objectives and the methodology of the research will also be outlined. The chapter concludes with a brief outline of the thesis structure.

1.1 Background to the Study

The focus of this study was on the factors that influence male post-primary students in making their subject choices for the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE). The decision to focus on male students only was due to the positionality of the researcher who has worked as a teacher for 14 years in one of the post-primary schools featured in this study and his particular interest in this area.

Education has always been highly valued in Ireland and regarded as a critical driver of economic growth and social progress in a modern society (DES 2004a). Government policy espoused the provision of quality education and training as central to the creation of a high-skill, knowledge-based economy that would underpin our economic prosperity (DES 2004a). Government strategy for economic development and their proposals that appear prioritise the study of Mathematics and Science over all other areas of knowledge, and its impact on students subject choices for Senior Cycle, has been highlighted as an area requiring more informed discussion (PPEF 2013).

As students transition from Junior Cycle to Senior Cycle in post-primary school, the focus turns to the ‘big exam’ but also to making decisions about which pathway to pursue upon leaving school (Smyth 2016). Given that Higher Education (HE) has become the route taken by the majority of students after Senior Cycle to pursue their career goals, the Leaving Certificate is the ‘high stakes’ examination (Smyth 2016) that is used for selection purposes for HE (NF 2015). While the number of Leaving Certificate programmes has been expanded over the past two decades in recognition that the LCE was unsuitable for a large population of students and not catering for students of varying ability levels, intelligences and interests (Drudy and Lynch 1993; Hammond and Palmer 1999), the LCE still dominates the Senior Cycle in Irish post-primary education (Smyth 2016).

Each year a new cohort of students are faced with the task of choosing their subjects for the LCE. Given that such decisions can have implications beyond the immediate; this study set out to investigate the various influencers on the subject choices of male post-primary students (Warton and Cooney 1997). Student's knowledge about the self and possible future careers develop through their social interactions with others (Barnes et al. 2011) and their subject choices may be reflections of what subjects they feel are appropriate to them based on factors such as their academic self-efficacy, social class, parent's expectations and prior experience. Such choices are made during adolescence when students are going through an "identity crisis" as they continue towards forming a stable adult identity (Erikson 1968).

While the transition from primary school to Junior Cycle in post-primary education has been the focus of much literature, the transition from Junior Cycle to Senior Cycle and the possible anxiety and excitement that goes with it is rarely considered (Smyth 2016). A central role of the guidance counsellor is providing educational and career guidance for students at such transitional periods in their lives (IGC 2007; Shannon 2014). A key part in this transition is the need for students to make subject choices for the LCE. Career guidance helps students engaging in such educational choices and focuses on helping students to develop the necessary self-responsibility and career management skills (Council of European Union 2008; ELPGN 2012; Hearne et al.2016; OECD 2004). It is argued that the guidance counsellor has a key leadership role in the delivery of a range of learning opportunities including the subject choice decision making process for students to develop these vital skills within the whole school approach to guidance provision in Irish post-primary schools (Hearne et al 2017; NCGE 2004). The ability of post-primary schools to offer comprehensive guidance services to students may have been impacted by the re-allocation to guidance counselling in Budget 2012 which resulted in the removal of approximately 168 guidance practitioners from post-primary schools and colleges of further education (IGC 2014) and resulted in a reduction of 27.6% in guidance provision for students (IGC 2016a).

1.2 Positionality of the Researcher

As a trainee guidance counsellor, the researcher has a specific interest in the various factors that influence post-primary student's subject choices for the LCE and the role that the guidance counsellor can play in identifying and meeting the needs of students. Gaining a better understanding of the needs of students at this point in their academic careers will

inform his future career guidance practice to meet the needs of the students and facilitate them making informed subject choices.

The opportunity to carry out this research appealed to the researcher who has worked as a teacher for 14 years in one of the post-primary schools featured in this study. This ‘situated knowledge’ is a major aspect of this study (Thomas 2009). However, the researcher was also aware of the potential threat to validity of conducting insider research in his school (Costley et al. 2010; Thomas 2013) and the need to engage in reflexivity to ensure validity and the rigour required for good quality research (Etherington 2004; Loxley and Seery 2008). Throughout the research, the researcher utilised a research diary and reflective journal which served as a self-checking tool to minimise any possible researcher bias (Etherington 2004).

1.3 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The main aim of the research study was to examine the factors that influence male post-primary students in making their subject choices for the LCE. The objectives were:

1. To review existing literature relevant to Irish post-primary education, policy and practice of guidance counselling in Irish post-primary education and the key influencing factors on students subject choice.
2. To collect and analyse the views of a sample of current 5th year male students attending two all-boys post primary schools and studying for the LCE.
3. To identify the main influencing factors on student’s subject choice for the LCE.
4. To identify recommendations that will inform the design, delivery and supports provided as part of the subject choice process for Senior Cycle students in Irish post-primary education.

1.4 Research Methodology

This research study has been underpinned by a positivist paradigm where the researcher took a detached, neutral and objective position (Walliman and Buckler 2008; Thomas 2009) with a view to producing findings generalisable and representative of the wider community (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias 1996). The quantitative study gathered data using an online questionnaire through SurveyMonkey to investigate the main influencing factors on student’s subject choices.

The quantitative data was then analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and converted to graphical form. The qualitative data gathered on the survey was collated using open coding and content analysis. At all times, the research was conducted in accordance with the ethical requirements of the University Of Limerick Faculty of Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee, the Institute of Guidance Counsellors Code of Ethics (2012) and the National Centre for Guidance in Education Research Code of Ethics (2008).

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

The structure of the thesis is as follows:

Chapter One introduces the research study within the context of theory, policy and practice. It outlines the rationale, context and justification for the research and highlights the position of the researcher in relation to the study. It also outlines the aim and objectives of the study and the methodology of the research design. It concludes with an outline of each chapter.

Chapter Two provides a critical review of the existing literature on the topic under investigation. It is presented through three main areas: Senior Cycle in Irish Post-Primary Education; Policy and Practice of Guidance Counselling in Irish Post-Primary Education; and Subject Choice for Senior Cycle students in Irish Post-Primary Education.

Chapter Three outlines the methodology and research design and presents the primary and secondary research questions. It also discusses the techniques of data collection and analysis, validity, generalisability, reliability, reflexivity and ethical considerations in relation to the research.

Chapter Four describes the data analysis strategy used and presents the primary findings of the research.

Chapter Five discusses the findings from the primary data gathered from the online questionnaire in the context of the existing literature.

Chapter Six concludes the research by presenting the overall findings of the research. It examines the extent to which the research has achieved the initial aims and objectives. It also outlines the strengths and limitations of the study; proposes a number of recommendations for future policy, practice and research and discusses reflexivity in relation to the researcher's personal learning.

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an introduction to the dissertation and research study. Chapter 2 will critically examine the existing literature relevant to the research topic.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

This chapter examines the relevant literature to establish what is already known about the factors that influence male post-primary students as they consider their subject options for the Leaving Certificate. The literature review will help the researcher to create a picture of the current state of knowledge and allow the researcher to place their study within the context of this existing body of knowledge (Brink 2006).

This research is examining the factors that influence 5th year male post-primary students attending two all-boys schools and studying for the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE). The review involved engaging with relevant textbooks, relevant national and international policy documents, journals, thesis, documents from guidance counselling representative bodies and relevant web based documents and articles.

This chapter has three sections. The first section discusses Senior Cycle in Irish post-primary education. This will be followed by a review of policy and practice of guidance counselling in Irish post-primary education. The third section is a detailed analysis of the influencing factors and their impact on the subject choices of students studying for the LCE.

2.1 The Irish Post-Primary Education System

This section concentrates on a review of the literature in the context of the Senior Cycle in Irish post-primary education.

2.1.1 Senior Cycle in Irish Post-Primary Education

The Irish post-primary education system comprises of the Junior Certificate (Junior Cycle) and Leaving Certificate (Senior Cycle) Programmes delivered through 735 second level schools (DES 2016). In Ireland one third of all secondary schools are single sex schools with 33 percent of all boys attending these schools (DES 2015a) The Leaving Certificate examination is the terminal examination in the Senior Cycle (SEC 2012). Historically this “high-stakes” examination has dominated Ireland’s post-primary curriculum (Gleeson 1998, in O Mara et al, 2004, p.10) and has been used for selection purposes for employment, further education and training. The results of such high-stakes standardised examinations have significant consequences for the future of both students and schools (Smyth et al, 2011).

In 1995, the Department of Education *White Paper on Education, Charting our Education Future* (DE 1995) set out the restructuring of the Senior Cycle in Irish post-primary education. The expansion of the Leaving Certificate programmes was due to national policy makers desire to encourage more students who have reached the school leaving age of 16 years to continue in full time education (Hammond and Palmer 1999, p.84) It was also recognised that the Leaving Certificate Established was unsuitable to a large proportion of Senior Cycle students (Drudy and Lynch 1993). The new expanded ranges of programmes are suited to a broader range of student abilities, intelligences and interests than the traditional Leaving Certificate Established (Hammond and Palmer 1999). There are four main elements:

1. The availability of the Transition Year Programme as an option for all second-level schools.
2. The revision of the Leaving Certificate Established programme.
3. The introduction of a new Leaving Certificate Applied Programme, and
4. The development and expansion of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme.

Since the introduction of Transition Year in 1994, Senior Cycle in Irish post-primary schools is 2 or 3 years depending on whether the student participates in a Transition Year Programme with over half of all students in Irish post-primary schools participating in a TY programme (Clerkin 2013; DES 2004b). The availability of a TY programme is at the discretion of each individual post-primary school and a school may offer it on an optional or compulsory basis (Smyth 2016).

Currently students entering a Leaving Certificate programme are required to make a choice whether to follow the LCE programme or the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. The grades achieved by a student in their Junior Certificate examinations can influence the type of Leaving Certificate programme they can access at Senior Cycle (Banks et al. 2014).

The LCE programme is a two year programme of study which “aims to provide learners with a broad balanced education while also offering some specialisation towards a particular career option” (DE 1996, p.7). The majority of students who complete the LCE are eligible for entry to higher education (Smyth et al. 2011). Participants on the LCE programme are required to do a minimum of five subjects, of which Irish must be one unless the student has an exemption from Irish (DE 1996). The LCE programme offers over forty different subject

options to students. *See Appendix J.* The LCE has long been criticised for the over academic nature of the curriculum, its failure to accommodate students with different aptitudes and the limited range of assessment tools used (Culleton Report 1992 in NCCA 2003).

The LCA programme, introduced in 1995, is a “stand alone programme” and completely independent of the LCE programme (Smyth 2016, p.71). The LCA programme was introduced for students who do not wish to proceed directly to higher education and for students whose needs, aptitudes and aspirations were not catered for by other Leaving Certificate programmes (Gleeson et al. 2002). In total 4% of all Leaving Certificate candidates in 2016 participated in the LCA programme (DES 2016). The LCA programme is viewed as “a prevocational track” which aims students for the labour market and further education (Banks et al. 2014, p.368). Participation in LCA can lead to students being excluded from other Leaving certificate groups, exclusion from particular sectors of the labour market and exclusion from accessing higher education (Banks et al. 2014).

The Leaving Certificate Vocational (LCVP) programme is also available to students who wish to “accrue extra points for higher education entry as well as the opportunity to access work experience” but it operates within the LCE programme and is treated as a subject choice decision (Smyth and Calvert 2011, p.xvi). The LCE and LCVP programmes “are very similar and cannot be really regarded as distinct programmes” (Smyth 2016, p.71). The distinguishing feature between the two programmes is that LCVP students must take particular combinations of subject in addition to two link modules. *See Appendix K.*

2.2 Policy and Practice of Guidance Counselling in Irish Post-Primary Education

This section focuses on the area of policy in guidance counselling in Ireland and the role of the guidance counsellor in Irish post-primary education.

2.2.1 Guidance Counselling in Irish Education Policy

Guidance and counselling services were formally established in Irish post primary schools by the Department of Education in 1966 (McCoy et al. 2006). The nature of the guidance services in schools was highlighted in the Government’s Green Paper on Education (1992) and in the Report of the National Education Convention (Coolahan 1994). Coolahan (1994) called for a greater emphasis on educational guidance at both Junior and Senior Cycle. The National Development Plan (2000) highlighted the important role played by the guidance

counselling services in enabling each pupil to gain the maximum benefit from the Irish Education system.

The Education Act 1998 Section 9 (c) expresses that:

a school shall use its available resources to ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices.

(Government of Ireland 1998, p.13)

The Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) set down the requirements for the Board of Management (BOM) of each post-primary school in Ireland to develop a school guidance plan (DES 2005a). The guidance plan “describes the school guidance programme and specifies how the guidance needs of students are to be addressed” (NCGE 2004, p.16).

However, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development states that “no definition exists of what appropriate guidance should be” in Ireland (OECD 2002, p.9). What constitutes “appropriate guidance” has, and continues to be, problematic in post-primary schools (Hearne and Galvin 2014). Budget measures in 2012 removed the ex-quota guidance counselling allocation. The term ex quota refers to the allocation of guidance by the Department of Education and Skills based on a set ratio of students to hours (DES Inspectorate 2009; Hayes and Morgan 2011; Hearne et al. 2017) Pre- budget 2012 guidance hours were allocated based on pupil enrolment at the end of September of the preceding year (DES 2005b). The Department of Education and Skills (2012a) circular pointed out that “guidance provision is to be managed by schools from within their standard staffing schedule allocation” and decisions about how school’s allocate resources to the school’s guidance service were decentralised to the management of individual schools (DES 2012a , p.4) . The lack of an “overall policy governing the provision of guidance services in second level schools” has been identified as the cause of huge variations across school guidance services (McCoy et al. 2006, p.193). Budget 2012 resulted in a dramatic decrease in, and a fragmentation of, the guidance counselling service provision in post-primary schools (ASTI, 2013; IGC 2013, 2014, 2016a; JMB 2012; NCGE, 2013). Post budget 2012 has seen “a gradual dismantling of one of the most important professional supports available to students during their formative years” (Hearne and Galvin 2014, p.11; Hearne et al. 2016; IGC 2016b). This has resulted in uneven and disjointed guidance counselling service provision (IGC 2016a) and a reduction in the quality of guidance provision for students (Hearne & Galvin 2014).

Since the Irish Education Act (1998), a whole school approach (WSA) to guidance counselling has been put forward as a model of good practice for the delivery of guidance counselling in Irish posts primary schools (Hearne and Galvin 2014). The WSA advocates a collaborative approach to guidance provision in schools and highlights the responsibility of the entire school community in the provision of appropriate guidance services to support the needs of students (DES 2005a; DES 2012a; NCCA 2007; NCGE 2004). This is in spite of teachers concerns relating to their level of initial training in this area which needs reform (Sexton 2007). The DES (2012b) conducted a reform of initial teacher training in 2012 in an attempt to deal with deficiencies in initial teacher education.

Post budget 2012, DES (2012a) Circular 0009/2012 refers to the WSA as “established policy” (p.4) even though evidence suggests service provision has been less than uniform. (Hearne et al. 2016; IGC 2016a) The impact of national policy, post budget 2012, has had a negative impact on regular teachers commitment towards the WSA to guidance provision with many teachers not always feeling involved in the WSA or seeing its relevance to them (Hearne and Galvin 2014; Hearne et al. 2017). Recent research in Holland has indicated that some teachers even after receiving training in whole school approach to guidance provision still have different perspectives on the role they can play in guiding students’ careers (Draaisma et al. 2017). It has also been highlighted that guidance counsellors were forced to make sense of the WSA after it was introduced and the implicit expectation that they would assume a leadership role in its delivery in schools (Hearne et al 2017; NCGE 2004).

2.2.2 Definitions of Guidance Counselling in Post-Primary Education

The OECD (2004) defined career guidance as helping people of any age “to make educational, training and occupational choices and to manage their careers” (p.19). This definition of guidance, like other international definitions, focuses on guidance across the lifespan (Council of the European Union 2008; CEDEFOP 2009a; 2009b; Hearne et al. 2016). The focus of guidance is on developing self-responsibility in students and developing their career management skills (Council of European Union 2008; ELPGN 2012; Hearne et al.2016)

From an Irish perspective the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) defines guidance in school as:

a range of learning experiences provided in a developmental sequence that assist students to make choices (personal and social, educational and career) about their lives and to make transitions consequent on these choices.

(NCGE 2004, p.8)

The National Guidance Forum (NGF 2007) set out the main objectives of guidance counselling in Irish post-primary schools. The NGF defines guidance counselling as:

Guidance facilitates people throughout their lives to manage their own educational, training, occupational, personal, social, and life choices so that they reach their full potential and contribute to the development of a better society.

(NGF 2007, p.6)

2.2.3 The role of the Guidance Counsellor in Post-Primary Education

Guidance counselling provision in Irish post-primary schools incorporates two main complementary elements namely guidance and counselling. “Guidance” assists students in the development of self-management skills to enable them to make more effective decisions and choices in their lives (DES 2005a, p.4). The three main areas in the guidance element include counselling, assessment, provision of information, advice, educational development programmes, personal and social development programmes and referral (NCGE 2004; 2011). The counselling element is “a key part of the post-primary guidance programme, offered on an individual or group basis as part of a developmental learning process and at moments of personal crisis” (DES 2005a, p.4). The impact of budget 2012 has seen a 51.4% reduction in one to one guidance counselling in Irish post primary schools (IGC 2016a). Counselling is concerned with empowering students to make decisions, solve problems, address behavioural issues, develop coping strategies and resolve difficulties which they may encounter over the course of their life (NCGE 2004).

The OECD (2004) highlighted the important role of guidance in education for laying the foundations for lifelong career development, especially during times in which people are making life decisions and during periods of transition in life. Research in the United Kingdom by Blenkinsop et al (2006), highlighted many differing views on the role of the guidance counsellor which are applicable to Irish post-primary schools and found that the

schools with the best and most appropriate careers advice support mechanisms for students were the schools where students appeared to have made the best subject choice decisions.

One of the key roles of the guidance counsellor is providing educational and career guidance for students at transitional periods in their lives (IGC 2007; Shannon 2014). Smyth et al. (2011) found that particular groups of students such as lower achieving students and newcomer students were more reliant on the guidance counsellor regarding subject choice for Senior Cycle. Careers work was also found to be a powerful influence in helping students in overcoming barriers they faced during their post-primary education (Barnes et al. 2011, p.142)

In contrast, Irish research conducted by Politis et al (2007) raised issues about the effectiveness of career guidance in post primary schools in relation to subject choice. Similar research also highlighted that the educational background of the guidance counsellor can often serve to reinforce the gender-stereotyping of certain subjects (Smyth and Hannan 2006).

2.3 The Subject Choice Process for Senior Cycle Students in Post- Primary Education

This section discusses the subject choice process for Senior Cycle students following the LCE and the factors that influenced their subject choices.

2.3.1 Subject choice and motivation

As students' progress into, and through, their post-primary education in Ireland they have many choices to make. Such choices include choosing a Leaving Certificate programme for Senior Cycle, subject choice and subject levels (Smyth 2016). Given that "the choices made have consequences far beyond the immediate in terms of later career paths" an understanding of the various factors which influence students choices as they progress through the Irish post-primary education system is of the utmost importance (Warton and Cooney 1997, p.389).

Students in choosing their subjects for the LCE are motivated to do so for intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. Some form of motivation to learn must exist for a student to achieve in their subjects (Ali et al. 2011). Students in many instances choose subjects that they have an underlying interest in and in other cases because they feel they may achieve examination success (Eccles 1996, in Darmody & Smyth 2005).

The intrinsic value that a student attaches to different subjects is often determined by their liking/disliking of a subject (McCrone et al, 2005). This has resulted in subjects which even though students recognise as important in further education becoming less popular due to being perceived as boring and/or difficult (Williams et al, 2003). Research has found that positive feedback from teachers often increased the intrinsic value which male students placed on a subject (Deci 1971, in Deci 2012).

Mc Crone et al. (2005) highlighted that students often chose subjects for extrinsic reasons such as the subject's usefulness in gaining entry to further education and /or future careers. Extrinsic motivation "has traditionally been characterised as a pale and impoverished (even if powerful) form of motivation that contrasts with intrinsic motivation" (deCharms 1968, in Ryan and Deci 2000, p.55). Negative perceptions towards some subjects have resulted in a fall in the extrinsic value which some students attach to certain subjects. This has been highlighted as a possible reason why certain subjects such as physics, with a high perceived level of difficulty compared to other subjects, has experienced a decline in the number of students choosing it as a subject option for the LCE (Politis et al, 2007).

2.3.2 Adolescent Career Development Theory

Many career development and decision making theories have been put forward to try to explain adolescent's decision making processes ranging from traditional theoretical approaches from the early 20th century to more recent approaches. The expansion of the range of theories available to career learning and development practitioners (CLD) working with adolescents allows them to draw on these theories to inform their practice (Barnes et al.2011). The expanded range of theories is due to the recognition that adolescents "come with infinite variety" (Barnes et al. 2011, p.20).

Supers lifespan career development theory (1957) identified that individuals pass through five life stages (Barnes et al, 2011). Students are allocated to a particular stage based on age. Students during adolescence are in the exploration stage (14-24 years old) which comprises of action and reflection (Super1963, in Savickas, 2001), after which they will have developed the "necessary building blocks for making choices" (Sharf 2010, p225). Super focused on how adolescents during this stage went through the developmental "tasks of crystalizing, specifying and implementing occupational choice" and how they grew in readiness to make educational and vocational choices (Super et al.1996, in Brown et al 1996a, p.132). Super

(1955) pointed out that during adolescence children develop a values system but highlighted that “different values develop at different times for different children” (Sharf 2010, p224).

Super’s lifespan career development theory has “splendidly stood the test of time” (Borgen 1991 in Brown et al 1996a, p.144). Super’s theory in providing a systematic framework to describe the process of vocational development has also been praised as it guides CLD’s towards effective interventions (Hackett et al. 1991 in Brown et al. 1996a). On the other hand, Super’s theory like other theories which allocates people to particular categories is criticised as exceptions will always be present (Barnes et al. 2011). It has also been highlighted that children have different levels of maturity during adolescence and that age did not mean that students were ready to make good career decisions (Sharf 2010).

Erikson’s (1959) life stage theory of development contains eight stages. Erikson believed that in order to develop a health personality an individual must pass through these stages in a particular order. Each stage involves resolving an internal crisis that are social in nature from which a “virtue or particular quality” emerges when resolved and which the person carries throughout their life (Kidd 2006, p.33). These “crises” are turning points in life and not threats of catastrophe (Erikson 1968). The fifth stage (12-18 years old) explores issues in relation to adolescent identity and links the first four stages which occur in childhood to the last three stages which occur in adulthood (Sharf 2010). Erikson’s fifth stage involves Identity versus Role Confusion which if successfully resolved leads to the development of a firm sense of identity (Boyd and Bee 2015). During this stage an adolescent may be troubled as their sense of identity from childhood becomes “partially unglued” and they may choose to associate with a peer group as a form of defence against their unique identity crisis and use this group as a base from which to solve their crisis (Boyd and Bee 2015, p.318).

Erikson’s theory is praised for its emphasis on continuous personal development across the lifespan, its description of major themes involved in personality development at various ages and its recognition of the important role which culture plays in human development (Boyd and Bee 2015; Sugarman 2010). Erikson’s theory also helps guidance counsellors gain a better understanding of what is really important to adolescents during this developmental stage and helps guidance counsellors to design learning opportunities and establish an “identity safe environment” in which the adolescent can grow their own identity (Hamman and Hendricks 2005, p.74). Erikson also offers a hopeful theory as it allows for second

chances as it recognises that failures at one stage of development can be rectified by successes at later stages (Elkind 1970; Sugarman 2010).

On the other hand, Erikson's theory has been criticised for its seemingly benign view of society and the fact that the evidence to support his assertions are rooted in his experience working as a psychoanalyst and give little attention to the negative impact which society can play in constraining people (Kidd 2006). Some have also identified that Erikson's theory is over simplistic in identifying a single crisis during each stage (Boyd and Bee, 2015) and the fact that it "does not provide clear prescriptions" for career practitioners (Sharf 2010, p.233)

Marcia (1966, 1980) built on the work of Erikson and argued that an individual's "identity structure is dynamic, not static" with elements being continually added and discarded (Marcia 1980, p.109). During adolescence individuals explore and examine different beliefs and careers (Marcia 1966, 1980). Marcia highlighted that during adolescence identity formation involved "a crisis and a commitment" (Boyd and Bee 2015, p.319). This "crisis" involves a re-examination of previously held values and choices previously made resulting in a commitment to a role, goal, value or belief (Boyd and Bee 2015).

While Marcia's theory has been praised for extending our understanding of how adolescents develop their sense of self (Rew 2005), it has been criticised as identity formation may occur later than he thought but also because an adolescent who has reached identity-achievement status does not necessarily mean they retain this status over their life (Boyd and Bee 2015).

Academic choices are made by adolescents at a time when their self-concept is changing as they move towards maturity (Barnes et al, 2011). Self-efficacy is a critical determinant in such academic life choices (Pajares 2005). At such key stages students judge their capabilities to perform in particular activities rather than judge their personal qualities (Bandura 1995). Academic self-efficacy is defined as "personal judgements of ones capabilities to organise and execute courses of action to attain designated types of educational performances" (Zimmerman 1995 in Bandura 1995, p.203). This results in students selecting activities and tasks which they judge to be within their capabilities, often as a result of "mastery experience", and avoid others which they believe to be beyond their competence (Pajares 2005, p.344).

Unlike other theories Gottfredson's points out the social aspects of self rather than the personal elements and highlights that "career choice is an attempt to place oneself in the

broader social order” (Gottfredson 1996, p.179). Gottfredson suggested that people develop a “zone of acceptable alternatives” (Gottfredson 1996, p.194) in which compromises are made. The formation of ones “zone of acceptable alternatives” necessitates students having information of what is available to them in order to limit their choices (Warton and Cooney 1997, p.390).

2.3.3 Key Influencing Factors on Senior Cycle Subject Choice

There are a number of influencing factors on student’s subject choices. The structure of each individual post primary school is one such influencing factor. The subject choices on offer can differ between schools for reasons such as the ethos of the school, the geographical area, the social class of the community which the school serves and the priorities of school management (Stables 1997). Davies et al, (2004) concluded that such institutional influences play a significant part in moulding student’s preferences. The “nature of choice” in Ireland is still strongly constructed by school practice (Smyth 2016, p.67) and organisational decisions made within post-primary schools in areas such as the banding of subject options and the timing of the subject choice decision making process all have an impact on the subject choices of students (Smyth and Hannan 2006). Such institutional factors often create “illusory subject choices” (Ryrie 1981, in Smyth 2016).

Furthermore, the management in Irish Post primary schools have a significant amount of discretion in the design of the subject choice process and subject options which they offer to students participating in the LCE (Smyth and Darmody 2009). Management of all boys schools have long been accused of advocating a “gendered curriculum” as they traditionally focused on offering subjects which focus on cognitive areas of study as opposed to all-girls schools which tend to put greater emphasis on the social and personal development of students (Looney and Morgan 2001, p.81).

School size is also a factor in deciding on the subjects being offered to students. Smaller schools have a more constrained curriculum than larger schools in the range of subjects they can offer their students with larger schools more likely to provide technological subjects than smaller schools (Darmody and Smyth 2005). School size has a strong influence on subject choice as the “primary determinant of curriculum is what is available to choose from” (Lee 1993, p.143) and “students can take a subject only if it is offered in the first place” (Looney and Morgan 2001, p.75).

The post-primary education system in Ireland can be a “one way system” for some students as subject choices they have previously made can be used to constrain future subject choices (Smyth 2016, p.203). “Constrained choice” emerged due to the discretion of individual post-primary schools to design their own subject choice process for Senior Cycle (Smyth and Darmody 2009, p.289). Some schools use the relationship between subjects studied at Junior Cycle and progression to Senior Cycle to restrict student’s subject choices through the application of a system of subject choice which includes an element of constrained choice (Smyth and Darmody 2009).

The chance to participate in “taster programmes” in school’s was also seen as a major aid to students in making informed decisions regarding subject choices and being more satisfied when looking back at the subjects they had chosen (Smyth and Darmody 2009, p.14). Giving students the opportunity to sample subjects prior to making final subject choice for the LCE has been highlighted as one of the major benefit for students who have participated in a Transition Year programme (Smyth et al, 2011).

Blenkinsop et al, (2006) found that even though parents were found to be “primary influencers” in student’s subject choices, they are rarely the “sole influencers” on students (p.52). Students can be influenced by the management in schools, teachers, class tutors, year heads and guidance counsellors. School personnel play a part in forming, altering and shaping students attitudes towards certain subjects (McCrone et al, 2005; Smyth and Hannan 2006). In some Irish schools subject teachers are “highlighted as being instrumental to guiding students on subject choice” (Hearne et al. 2016, p.53). Smyth et al, (2011) found subject teachers to be more influential than the guidance counsellor in the area of subject choice at Senior Cycle. A worrying trend has been identified where students have engaged in “positive choice” where students pick a subject because it is taught by teachers that they like and avoid certain subjects due to their dislike of other teachers (Darmody and Smyth 2005).

The importance of previous experience has also been highlighted as a key factor in student’s subject choices for the LCE. Student’s subject choices tend to reflect the student’s “cumulative experiences throughout their schooling career” up to that point with a student who had a positive experience of a subject at Junior Cycle more likely to continue with that subject, or a similar subject, at Senior Cycle (Smyth and Hannan 2006, p.316). Research of students who did not do a subject at Junior Cycle highlighted a reluctance among them to

take up the subject, or a similar subject, at Senior Cycle due to apprehension of having to get to grips with a new subject (Millar and Kelly 1999; Smyth et al, 2011).

Research by Rowbottom (2013) in the United Kingdom highlighted that some A-Level subjects such as Accounting and Business have attained a “soft subject” label compared to the “harder subject” label attached to subjects such as Maths and Physics. This labelling of subjects as “softer subjects” has led some academic institutions such as the University of Cambridge placing certain combinations of A-level subjects on a “non-preferred” subject combination list (Rowbottom 2013, p.249). For students in Irish post-primary schools intending on studying in the United Kingdom this restriction may lead them to make their subject choices to allow them to attend a particular University.

The current Leaving Certificate points system, introduced in 1978, has been blamed for creating a post-primary education system in Ireland which is very much examination and CAO points focused (Hourigan & O Donoghue 2007). This focus on gaining points in order to access third level education has resulted in a “backwash effect” with some students choosing subjects not based on ability or relevance to future higher education but in order to “optimise their potential points” (Hyland 2011, p.4). The focus by some students on choosing Leaving Certificate subjects in which they view a greater likelihood of achieving success and gaining CAO points is in line with “expectancy value theory”. “Expectancy value theory” puts forward the idea that

subject take-up is found to be influenced by the extent to which the student values different subject options and the extent to which the student expects to achieve success in that subject

(Smyth and Hannan 2006, p.320)

This has caused many students to choose subjects which they may have achieved prior successful grades in or in a related subject (Smyth and Hannan 2006). Such a focus on prior attainment “is likely to constrain the choice of academic subjects” available to students as they progress through their post-primary education (Van De Werfhorst 2003, p.42).

The role of family members, especially parents, has been highlighted as the main influencer on Irish student’s subject choices for the LCE (NCGE 2004). International research has indicated that parents communicate their interests to their children who are therefore likely to choose subjects that match their parents interests (Van De Werfhorst 2003). Research has also found that parents often encourage students to choose subjects which they view as being

“useful subjects” as they “would enhance access to employment” in the future (Smyth and Darmody 2009, p. 28).

Whilst a large proportion of students rely heavily on their parents and family members for advice, Warton and Cooney (1997) found that students can attach a higher rating to the usefulness of advice given by teachers and careers advisors over that given by their parents in the United Kingdom. Smyth and Darmody (2009) found that the advice received by students who use family members as the main source of subject advice may only serve to reinforce gender stereotyping. This is especially true if parents and/or family members are basing their advice on out dated information in terms of the content of the syllabi and/or their attitudes towards various subjects (Darmody and Smyth 2005). This underscores “the importance of providing comprehensive information on the nature of subjects to students and their parents before they choose subjects” (Darmody and Smyth 2005, p. 169)

The subjects chosen by Senior Cycle students are strongly influenced by their future career aspirations which in turn are strongly influenced by their parents/guardians occupation and their socio-economic background/social class (Smyth and Hannan 2006). Social class in capitalist societies can be viewed as “the distribution of productive property and wealth” (Weber 1968, in Drudy and Lynch 1993, p.138) and includes factors such as a family’s current income, the parent’s current occupation(s), the status associated with their occupation and the parents highest educational level (Brown et al, 1996 b). Furthermore, Inkson (2002) put forward the idea of the “inheritance metaphor of career” which has a major influence on students’ subject choice decisions at Senior Cycle. Students tend to choose subjects which people from their parents social class require in order to engage in particular occupations associated with their current social class (Inkson 2007, cited in Barnes et al, 2011, p.122). Conversely, Miller and Budd (1999) found no relationship between the future occupational goals of students in the UK and their subject choice. Young people are now less constrained by socio-economic boundaries and determinants of life paths and more able and more inclined to make their own choices regarding their career (McKie and Cunningham-Burley 2005). In addition, Davies et al, (2008) found that most subject choices were made based on a student’s belief in their own ability rather than social background.

Gottfredson (1996) found the social class of the post primary student to be a more significant influencing factor than values and interests in students’ career choices. She highlighted that students often engage in a process of compromise and modify their occupational preferences

in response to issues such as the availability of particular jobs in their local area, existing family obligations, and local hiring practices which all serve to narrow the options available to post-primary students. Engaging in such compromise also affected student uptake of certain subject choices for the LCE (Smyth and Darmody 2009).

The culture which a child is born into, and their development of self within that culture, produces adolescents with strikingly different views on their role in society. Research by Markus and Kitayama (2003) explored adolescents development of self and their interdependence with others in society among adolescents from the United States of America and Japan. They found that adolescents from Japan aim to maintain a sense of interdependence with others by doing things the way most people do things, the “ordinary or the common” way whilst American students are concerned with self-expression rather than one’s place in the social order (p.279). This has been referred to as “individualism versus collectivism” (Hofstede 2001 in Kidd 2006, p.49). These vastly different views impact on the career decisions of adolescents which filter back into the subjects they choose. On the other hand, Dekkers et al, (2002) found little influence of culture on the uptake of subjects.

2.4 Conclusion

This concludes the literature review chapter. Chapter 3 will identify the primary and secondary research questions and will also outline and discuss the research paradigm adopted for the purpose of this study, the method of data collection and issues in relation to ethical considerations, validity, generalisability, reliability and reflexivity.

Chapter 3 Methodology

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter the researcher will identify the primary and secondary research questions which form the basis for the study. A comparison of the various research paradigms will follow. The reason for choosing a quantitative method to conduct the research will be outlined along with how the target sample was selected and the collected data handled. Finally, issues in relation to ethical considerations, validity, generalisability, reliability and reflexivity will be discussed.

3.1. Research Questions.

Research questions are an integral and driving feature of research that must be answerable in a concrete fashion and with supporting evidence (Cohen et al. 2011). They provide a direct and open-ended method of investigating a topic through asking a question or a series of questions and conducting an in-depth analysis of the answers from various different angles (Walliman and Buckler 2008). Formulating these research questions is vital as they “will lie at the heart of your research” and if not carefully selected can cause failure in the research being conducted (Thomas 2013, p.7). The rigor and validity of a research project rests on the extent to which the conclusions of the study answer the research question (Mantzoukas 2007, p. 371). In the current study, the researcher is conducting an exploration of the factors that influence male post-primary students in making their subject choices for the LCE. In order to do this the researcher formulated primary and secondary research questions.

3.1.1 Primary Research Question

The primary research question of this study is ‘*What are the factors that influence male post-primary students in making their subject choices for the Leaving Certificate Established?*’ Given the many different possible influencing factors which may impact on student decisions a number of secondary research questions were also warranted.

3.1.2 Secondary Research Questions

1. *When do male post-primary students make their subject choice decisions for the Leaving Certificate Established?*

2. *Who/what are the main influencers on male post-primary students making their subject choice decisions for the Leaving Certificate Established?*
3. *What advice do male post-primary students seek prior to making their subject choices for the Leaving Certificate Established?*
4. *What type of advice/support do male post-primary students receive within schools regarding subject choice?*
5. *What role does the guidance counsellor play in supporting male post-primary students making their subject choice decisions for the Leaving Certificate Established?*
6. *What are the implications for school planning with regards to assisting male post-primary students in making their subject choice decisions for the Leaving Certificate Established?*

Having formulated the primary and secondary research questions, the researcher gave careful consideration to the research paradigm most suited to answer the research questions.

3.2 Research Methodology

Research methodology goes beyond looking at the research method to be used by examining the reasons for the selection of a particular research method and how it will support the researchers work (Thomas 2009, 2013). Research methodology “discusses a range of associated issues and considerations you will have to make which inform your research activities” (Walliman and Buckler 2008, p.203). The research methodology chosen for the current study took account of the information required by the researcher, the environment in which the researcher was working and the research paradigm to be used.

3.2.1 Research Paradigms

A paradigm is “the technical word used to describe the way that we think about and research the world” (Thomas 2013, p.105). Kuhn (1970) viewed a paradigm to be the assumptions held by a researcher into the way research should be conducted (cited in Thomas 2009). There are two principal research paradigms namely quantitative (positivism) and qualitative (interpretivism). Each paradigm has its own unique and distinctive ‘worldview’ regarding research (Creswell 2009).

3.2.2 The Positivist approach to Research (Quantitative)

The positivist approach is based on the idea that the world around us can be observed, measured and analysed scientifically and necessitates the researcher taking a detached and neutral view of an issue (Walliman and Buckler 2008). In conducting quantitative research the researcher takes an independent, detached and objective position (Thomas 2009). Research is conducted with a large enough sample, using structured techniques under very controlled conditions and the data produced is in statistical/numerical form (Punch 2005; Thomas 2013). The positivist approach has been criticised for being concerned with the accumulation of “brute data” (Gray 2014, p.21) and for being “reductionist in character” in that less measurable sciences are reduced to more measurable ones (Walliman 2011, p. 21). It has also been criticised for its inadequate view of the nature of social reality and its failure to take account of how social reality is formed and maintained by people (Blaikie 2007).

3.2.3 The Interpretivist Approach to Research (Qualitative)

The interpretivist approach, in contrast to the positivist approach, holds the view that the world around us is not straight forward and the way people perceive the world is unique to them (Thomas 2013). The world is interpreted through the mind of the individual (Williams and May 1996, cited in Gray 2009). The main focus of the interpretivist approach is gaining an understanding of research participants views of the world by taking up an insider participant role in their research (Thomas 2013). Qualitative research focuses on perceptions, feelings, thoughts and actions observed by the researcher in order to understand what has been observed and/or described by the research participants (Oakley 2000, cited in Thomas 2013). Responses to qualitative research are in the form of descriptions, accounts and observations by the researcher. However, the results of qualitative research are open to the interpretation of the researcher and may be susceptible to researcher bias (Thomas 2013). This may occur due to the researcher adopting a subjective rather than an objective position (Cohen et al 2011). This approach is also criticised for lacking the rigour associated with quantitative research and for producing data which is based on small research sample sizes and/or case studies (Jupp 2006). The researcher chose the positivist research paradigm to conduct their research as he felt that there would be an increased probability that the data obtained from the research participants would be generalisable to the overall target population.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis Methods

This section will present the methods employed in the study, access to the sample population and the instruments used to collect the data.

3.3.1 Access to Sample

Prior to seeking access to the research sites, which were two all-boy post primary schools, the researcher sought ethical approval from the Faculty Ethics Committee in the University of Limerick. Once ethical approval was given on September 21st 2016, the researcher sought access to the two schools (School A and School B), See Table 3.1:

	School A	School B
Total Enrolment 2016/2017	290	1170
DEIS Status	Yes	No
Compulsory Transition Year Programme	Yes	No
No of Qualified Guidance Counsellors	0	2

Table 3.1 – Research Site Information

The target population were 5th year students participating in the LCE programme. In both schools the Principal acted as the gatekeeper. The gatekeeper in social research is the person who controls research access and “makes the final decision as to whether to allow the researcher access to undertake the research” (Jupp 2006, p.126). In order to gain access to the sample participants in both schools a Subject Information Sheet and a Consent Form was provided to both Principals. *See Appendix A and Appendix B.* The Consent Form was signed by the Principal in school A on 25th October 2016 and in school B on 28th of October 2016.

In order to gain informed consent from potential participants, students were provided with two documents. Gaining informed consent “involves providing adequate information on the purpose of the research, the voluntariness of the client, and the nature of confidentiality” (McLeod 2003 in Hearne 2013, p.10). The first document was a Student Subject Information Sheet plus Consent Form, *See Appendix C and Appendix D,* and the second was a Parent/Guardian Subject Information Sheet and Consent Form, *See Appendix E and Appendix F.* All documents set out a response time of seven working days. These documents were distributed in both schools on 21st November 2016. The Subject Information Sheets outlined

the voluntary nature of participation and guaranteed anonymity to the research participants. Participation in the research project required opted in consent which:

relates to the active choice about becoming involved in the study through the standard practice of gaining agreement in advance through an information sheet and a signed consent form.

(Hearne 2013, p.10)

The voluntary nature of participation in the research study applied to both post-primary school settings. The researcher’s insider position in one of the research settings did not grant him automatic access to participants and was an ethical consideration in the study. A number of steps were taken to overcome this potential threat to the validity of the research and are outlined in detail in Section 3.4.1. In order to facilitate the return of the signed Consent Forms from parents/guardians and student in both schools, the researcher organised two separate sealed collection boxes, one for parent/guardian Consent Forms and one for student Consent Forms, which were placed in the Guidance Counsellor's office in the respective schools. The Consent forms were collected from both schools on the 1st December 2016 and were used to compile a complete list of the participants email addresses for the purpose of dissemination of the data collection instrument.

3.3.2 Sample Population

Taylor (2005) describes a sample as a subset of a population or universe. The target sample population for the research was a total of 150 5th year male post-primary school students attending all-boys post-primary schools who were participating in the LCE. The target sample was 40 5th year students in school A and 110 5th year students in school B. See Table 3.2.

	School A	School B	Total
Sample Population	40 students	110 students	150 students
No of Returned Signed Consent Forms	33 students	64 students	97 students
No of Completed online Questionnaire	27 students	37 students	64 students

Table 3.2- Participation Rates

While there is no clear cut answer to the sample size one should use, the researcher considered various factors such as the nature of the research, the target population for the research, the estimated response rate and the level of accuracy required (Cohen et al. 2011). Careful consideration in choosing the sample population from the overall population was

critical in order to “choose in such a way that their characteristics reflect those of the group from which they are chosen” (Henn et al, 2009, p.153).

The sample size of 150 current 5th year students was decided upon as the researcher was conscious that a larger sample size may become unwieldy, whilst a smaller size sample may be under representative of the overall population of students (Cohen et al.2011). This cohort of students was chosen as they were the most recent cohort of students who have made their subject choice decisions for the LCE. The respondents ranged in age from 15-19 years.

The sampling strategy utilised by the researcher was a non-random sampling technique called convenience sampling. Convenience sampling involved choosing the nearest potential participants, or participants who they had easiest access to, to be the participants in the research and to continue with this approach until the sample size had been achieved (Cohen et al. 2011). Whilst the researcher accepts that “convenience samples are not the optimal way to go, especially when the researcher wants to generalise to a population on the basis of a single study” it was chosen in order to minimise possible disruption in the school settings in which the research was taking place (Burke Johnson and Christensen 2013, p.264).

3.3.3 Methods of Data Collection and Analysis: Online Questionnaire

For the purpose of this quantitative study the researcher collected primary data from the sample using an online questionnaire. This method used “questions to elicit responses in self-completion formats in order to generate data” (Scott and Morrison 2006, p.189). It was chosen as it “is a versatile tool which can be tightly structured, but can also allow the opportunity for a more open and discursive response if required” (Thomas 2009, p.174). Mitchell and Jolley (2009) highlight the many benefits of using questionnaires such as accessing a large amount of data from a large number of participants at the same time, i.e. students in two schools, and the cost and time savings compared to other primary data collection methods. Conversely, Cohen et al. (2011) argue that they are “an intrusion into the life of the respondent” due to the time required to complete them and other issues such as the sensitivity of the questions being asked (p.377).

The development of self-administered electronic surveys, such as web surveys, has been an important advancement in data collection. The benefits of this method include reduced paper wastage, reduced postage costs, reduce data handling problems and its ability to overcome access boundaries (Baker et al. 2011; Barrios et al.2011). Online survey tools have similar

response rates to hard copy questionnaire but for some “special populations”, such as groups who regularly use the internet, often facilitate higher response rates (Kaplowitz et al. 2004, p.94). Research by O’Neill and Dinh (2014) found that 87% of all 15-16year olds in Ireland access the internet on a daily basis. Online survey tools also eliminate the need for the manual entry of data collected as data is automatically stored in a database (Yun and Trumbo 2000). Web based questionnaires also offer features that are not available in traditional questionnaires such as drop-down menus and pop-up instruction boxes (Gray 2014). However, the drawbacks of on-line questionnaires include response rates being affected by respondent’s access to a computer, respondent’s proficiency in computer applications and technical failures which adversely affect response rates (Fan & Yan 2010; Symonds 2011)

In the current study, Survey Monkey was chosen as the platform to be used as it is a market leader in web survey commercial software (Fan and Yan 2010). Survey Monkey did not require the research participants to download software prior to the completion of the questionnaire. Whilst Survey Monkey has been criticised for not providing the amount of customisation that other similar web based survey platforms offer (Marra and Bogue 2006), it does facilitate the researcher in tracking participants’ responses (Gray 2014). It also allows participants responses to be transferred to statistical packages, such as Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), for further analysis (Smith 2015).

Careful consideration was given to the design of the questionnaire in order to engage the students in the research. The researcher adopted Cohen et al.’s (2011) approach to questionnaire design and looked at the questionnaire through the eyes of participants and envisaging how participants would regard the questions contained in the questionnaire (boring, suspicious, difficult etc.). The researcher designed a web based questionnaire consisting of twenty one questions. *See Appendix H*. The sequencing and wording of the questions as well as the ordering of the first number of questions was vital as they often “set the tone or mind-set of the respondents for later questions” (Cohen et al. 2011, p.397). In the first section, the first number of questions were “non-threatening, factual questions” and were included to gain a general background profile of the respondents (Cohen et al. 2011, p.398). The next two sections of the questionnaire sought to gain an understanding of the factors which influenced student subject choice decisions and to get their views on the subject choice decision making process. These sections utilised filters to include or exclude participants from certain questions (Cohen et al. 2011). Such self-inclusion or self-exclusion was based on whether participants decide a question is relevant to them based on the answer they gave

to a previous question in that section. These sections contained a mix of closed, open-ended and ranking questions. Closed questions have the advantage of being quick for participants to complete but they do not provide answers of any depth to the researcher (Thomas 2009). Open ended questions were used to gain more in-depth data and allowed the participants to write responses in their own words and to qualify their answers if they so choose (Thomas 2009). They also removed the barrier of pre-set categories of responses which restricts the set of responses available to the research participants (Cohen et al. 2007). It must be noted, however, that open ended questions can be a turn-off for many respondents who often have a complete memory blank when asked to complete them (Thomas 2009). The analysis of responses to open ended questions can also be very difficult and time consuming for the researcher (Thomas 2009). The researcher also included rank order questions in the questionnaire (e.g. Question 20). Rank order questions require respondents to rank items on a list based on a given criterion and have the advantage of being quick for respondents to complete (Thomas 2013). On the other hand it has been argued that it is unrealistic for participants to arrange rank order questions with more than five ranks (Wilson and McLean 1994 in Cohen et al. 2011)

The online questionnaire was piloted with four 5th year pupils in the researcher's presence on 1st November 2016 in School A. The four participants who were involved in the piloting process were excluded from the research sample. A pilot "is done to refine or modify research methods or to test out research techniques" (Thomas 2009, p.132). Brace (2013) highlights that piloting the questionnaire is an essential and integral part of the process of collecting primary data while Oppenheim (1992) highlighted that everything about the questionnaire should be piloted. The piloting of the online questionnaire allowed for feedback on the layout of the questions, sequencing of the questions, the language used and the time requirements for completing the questionnaire. The online questionnaire was updated where necessary and then administered to the sample participants. The online survey was opened on 29th November 2016 and closed on 27th January 2017. Reminders for completion of the questionnaire were sent to participants at three intervals during this period.

3.3.4 Analysis of the Data

Data analysis involved analysing numbers and/or words in order to understand what the numbers and/or words were saying and gaining meaning from them (Thomas 2009). The researcher in deciding on the form which the data analysis would take was governed by

“fitness for purpose and legitimacy” (Cohen et al 2007, p.86). The questionnaire used to collect the primary data had both quantitative and qualitative elements. The results of the quantitative elements to the questionnaire were analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. SPSS was chosen as it is a powerful and user-friendly software package which allows for the manipulation and statistical analysis of data (Landau and Everitt 2004). Responses to closed questions were put into frequency tables and converted to graphical form.

The qualitative data from the open questions was analysed using the qualitative data analysis process set out by Creswell (2009). This involved organising and preparing the data for analysis, reading through all the data, coding the data, looking for themes and descriptions, interrelating these themes and descriptions and interpreting the meaning of the themes and descriptions. This necessitated the critical examination and interpretation of all respondents’ data. The researcher used coding as a starting point in his qualitative data analysis (Bryman 2012). Open coding involved the researcher going through all the respondents’ data and assigning codes to particular words etc. (Thomas 2013). The researcher engaged in content analysis to keep track of the type of words and the frequency of these words used by respondents. Content analysis has been defined as:

a multipurpose research method developed specifically for investigating a broad spectrum of problems in which the content of communication serves as a basis of inference, from word counts to categorization.

(Cohen et al. 2007, p.197).

A description of the data findings and issues and themes which emerged during the data analysis are discussed in Chapter 4.

3.4 Validity, Generalisability, Reliability and Reflexivity

The trustworthiness of data collection and interpretation “can be ensured through validity and reliability” (Walliman and Buckler 2008, p.207). This section will outline the importance of validity, generalisability, reliability and reflexivity in protecting the trustworthiness of the data collection in the study.

3.4.1 Validity

Validity is a key requirement for all types of research (Cohen et al. 2007). Validity estimates the extent to which a test, a set of data or a design actually measures or reflects what it is supposed to measure or reflect (Newman and Benz 1998). Thomas (2013) separates validity in-to two types:

1. Instrument based validity focuses on the degree to which the chosen instrument measured what it was supposed to measure.
2. Experimental validity which focuses on the extent to which the design of an experiment can control or eliminate factors which could possibly affect the experiment.

In order to ensure the validity of the research being undertaken the researcher decided to follow procedures set out by Creswell (2009) which attempt to address the main threats to the research, namely researcher bias, participant's bias and respondent reactivity. The validity of the quantitative data collected was increased through careful consideration of the sampling strategy to be used, the data collection instrument to be used and how the collected data was handled (Cohen et al. 2011). Throughout the research the researchers main objective was to maximise the validity of the data collected whilst accepting that "it is impossible for research to be 100 per cent valid; this is the optimism of perfection" (Cohen et al. 2011, p.179). This reinforces Gronlund's (1981) view that validity is not an absolute state but a matter of degree which can be achieved by researchers during the course of their research.

As a teacher of a choice subject at Senior Cycle in one of the research sites there were possible threats to the validity of the research if the researcher had adopted the approach of "the selection of data that fit the researcher's existing theory, goals, or preconceptions" (Maxwell 2013, p. 124). The following steps were taken to avoid these possible threats to validity and to overcome researcher bias in conducting "backyard research" (Glesne and Peshkin 1992, in Creswell 2009, p.177):

1. A record of all participants' responses (audit trail) was kept in order to facilitate the revisiting and/or re-evaluation of data if required.
2. A reflective journal was utilised to document issues which arose during the course of the research which required further reflection.

Reactivity can become an issue when the participants know that they are being studied and may alter their normal behaviour or responses accordingly (Thomas 2013). In order to decrease the problem of reactivity the researcher took the following steps:

1. The questionnaire was administered to students whom the researcher does not teach in School A and was administered online. Whilst the researcher is a teacher in one of the research schools he does not currently teach the 5th year group taking part in the research.
2. The participants completed the questionnaire anonymously online.

Respondent bias emerges when the research participants provide answers which they think the researcher wants to hear (Thomas 2013). Given that some of the respondents in School A know the researcher, they may be keen to impress the researcher or in some cases may be anxious that by providing their true answers to certain questions that they may make themselves identifiable to the researcher.

In order to reduce respondents' bias the following steps were taken

1. The questionnaire was completed anonymously online.
2. Participants were reminded prior to the research that the information they provided would not be identifiable as theirs.

3.4.2 Generalisability

Generalisability means to look at your research findings and to say that these events will tend to occur given the same kind of circumstances in the future (Thomas 2013). For this research the sample was male 5th year students attending all boys' post-primary schools and participating in the LCE programme. The researcher took care to select the sample using a sample method namely convenience sampling that assured representation (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias 1996). The researcher feels that the sample is adequate as a representative sample of the overall population which may have the potential to be generalised to similar student populations. However, the researcher recognises the uniqueness of the two settings in which the research took place and in order to overcome possible threat to external validity has restricted his "claims about groups to which the results cannot be generalized" (Cresswell 2009, p.165).

3.4.3 Reliability

Reliability in research is concerned with trustworthy and consistent data collection and the selection of a reliable research instrument (Walliman and Buckler 2008). The reliability of a research instrument “refers to the extent to which a research instrument, such as a test, will give the same result on different occasions” (Thomas 2009, p.105). Bollen (1990) highlighted that reliability is the part of a measure that is free of purely random error (Bollen 1990 in Drost 2011). At all times during the research the researcher was conscious that while reliability is necessary it does not guarantee validity (Drost 2011; Walliman and Buckler 2008; Thomas 2013).

3.4.4 Reflexivity

The researcher engaged in reflexivity at all points during the research process as he believed that it would allow him to come close to the rigour required of good quality research (Etherington 2004). Reflexivity is the understanding of how the researcher operates in the world in which they are conducting their research (Cohen et al. 2007). Reflexivity refers to “the way in which all accounts of social settings-descriptions, analyses, criticisms, etc. - and the social settings occasioning them are mutually interdependent” (Cohen et al. 2011, p.19). This necessitated the researcher being acutely aware of, and disclosing, their own biography, views, positions held etc. and to monitor these factors throughout the course of the research (Cohen et al. 2007, 2011). The ‘positionality’ of the researcher may affect the observations and interpretations that they make (Thomas 2013).

Given the researcher’s role as a teacher in school A he had certain beliefs and assumptions at the outset of the study. He believed that teachers play a central role in how male post-primary students make their subject choices for the LCE and how this belief stemmed from the level of assistance he got from teachers during his own post-primary education. Such self-awareness by the researcher was critical as the choices we make in relation to paradigms and research methods are affected by our personal views and beliefs (Etherington 2004). Throughout the research the researcher utilised a research diary and reflective journal. The reflective journal was used to keep notes but also as an aid to revisit and reflect on the answers provided by certain participants. This “internal process of reflection” helped the researcher to think/rethink about the answers provided by participants but also served as a self-checking tool to minimise any possible researcher bias (Etherington 2004, p.28).

3.5 Ethical Issues in Guidance Research

Ethics are “sets of moral principles or norms that are used to guide moral choices of behaviour and relationships with others” (Gray 2014, p.68). They involve consideration of how the decisions we make and the behaviours we use impacts on others. It is about how researcher’s conduct their work, how researcher’s think about their research and researcher’s respect for others (Thomas 2013). As researchers we must be aware that ethical issues arise at each stage in the research sequence (Cohen et al. 2011). They also need to consider the “costs/benefits ratio dilemma” which requires them to weigh up “the likely social benefits of their endeavours against the personal costs to the individuals taking part” (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias 1992 in Cohen et al. 2011, p. 75). The costs to participants may be in the form of psychological, emotional and/or personal damage (Cohen et al. 2011).

At all times during the research the researcher adhered to the ethical requirements of the University of Limerick Faculty of Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee, the Institute of Guidance Counsellors Code of Ethics (2012) and the National Centre for Guidance in Education Research Code of Ethics (2008). The ethical principles of the IGC (2012) and the NCGE (2008) correspond with McLeod (2010) five key ethical principles of nonmaleficence, beneficence, autonomy, fidelity and justice. These ethical principles and guidelines provided the researcher with guidelines and reference points to conduct ethically sound research, to make ethically sound decisions and to help him to deal with issues that arose in the area of duty of care (Hearne 2013).

The researcher recognised that there is an imbalance of power in research, in favour of the researcher, that utilises a questionnaire survey method (Sapsford 2007; Thomas 2013). The researcher was aware that his role as a teacher of a choice subject for senior cycle in School A, “insider research”, could serve to further enhance this imbalance in the power relationship (Costley et al. 2010; Thomas 2013) and raised particular ethical considerations, namely duty of care and necessitated the selection of appropriate strategies to deal with them (Hearne 2013, p.5). At all time during the research the researcher took care not to compromise or breach confidentiality (Thomas 2013). In order to avoid harm to participants, and to maintain confidentiality, the online questionnaire platform utilised allowed for anonymous responses to questions whilst all data collected has been handled appropriately to maintain confidentiality. At all points during the research the researcher was conscious of his responsibilities towards the research participants but also towards the gatekeeper in each

school. Oliver (2003) points out that upon completion of research, the researcher can move on but the gatekeeper has to live with the consequences of the research and the effects it may have on the research participants.

The researcher followed the same procedures to access research participants in both of the schools as outlined in Section 3.3.1 (Access to Sample). The issue of gaining informed consent from students and parents emerged at an early stage in the research. In monitoring the signed consent forms that were returned early by participants in school A it became clear that students whom the researcher had previously taught were the students who were choosing to participate in the research. The researcher felt that some students may have felt that they had to participate in the research. In order to overcome this issue the researcher decided to revisit all 5th year students in school A to remind them of the deadline for the return of the signed consent forms, to reemphasise the voluntary nature of participation in the research and to remind them that participation was not confined to students that the researcher had previously taught.

3.6 Conclusion

The first section of this chapter identified the primary and secondary research questions and was followed by an outline of the research methodology and the research method chosen. An explanation of how access was gained to the target population and how the data was analysed followed. The final section of the chapter explored issues in relation to validity, generalisability, reliability, reflexivity and the ethical considerations involved in the research.

Chapter 4 Data Analysis and Findings

4.0 Introduction

This chapter will present and discuss the primary data findings of the research. This chapter is divided into four sections.

4.1 Data Analysis Strategy

For the purpose of this research, the researcher chose the positivist approach to research and used a quantitative data collection method. The researcher utilised the SurveyMonkey online platform from which the data was downloaded into an Excel report and transferred to a Word document to provide a base from which further analysis took place. The findings of the online questionnaire contained both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data was analysed using SPSS and converted into graph and chart format. The qualitative data was analysed by organising and preparing the data for analysis, reading through all the data and analysing the data using open coding and content analysis. This facilitated the identification of emerging themes and allowed the qualitative data to be presented in a thematic way (Cohen et al. 2007; Creswell 2009; Thomas 2013). Some of the qualitative data is supported by relevant direct quotes. The findings are based on a sample of 150 fifth year students attending two all boys' post-primary schools and following the LCE programme. The final response rate was 42.66% (n=64).

4.2 Results from Online Questionnaire.

This section presents the combined quantitative and qualitative data from the online questionnaire. The data is presented according to the three demarcated sections in online questionnaire.

4.2.1 Section A - Background Information

The opening section of the questionnaire gathered background information from participants. Question 1 was a closed question which had a 100% (n=64) response rate. The findings indicate that the largest cohort of participants were age 17 (50% / n= 32) and followed by 37.5% (n=24) aged 16, 7.8% (n=5) aged 18 and 4.7% (n=3) aged 15. *See Chart 4.1.*

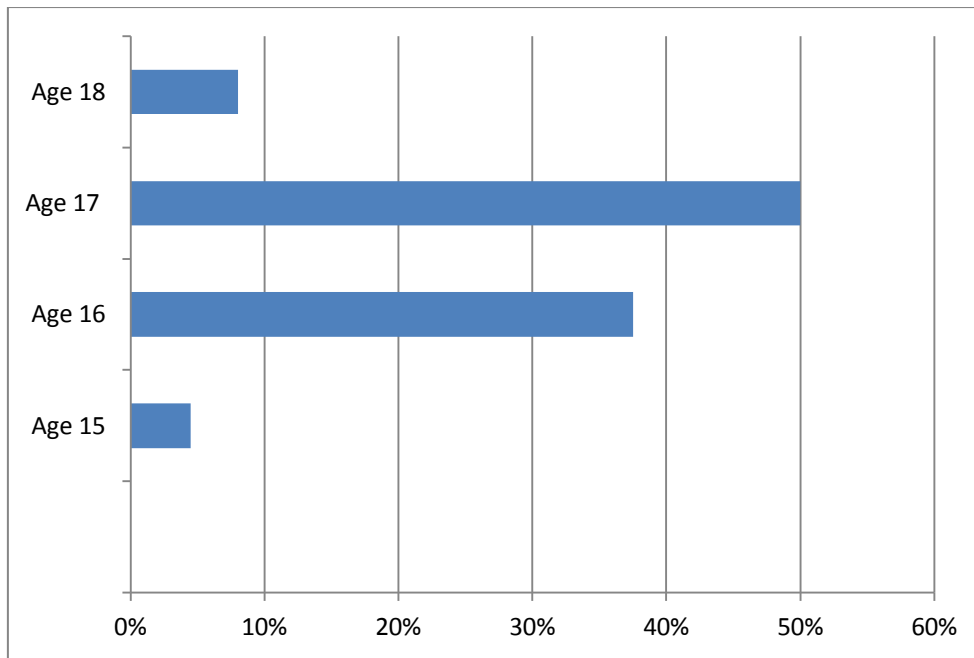


Chart 4.1: Age of participants

Question 2 was answered by 100% (n=64) of participants. The majority of the 64 participants answered Irish (70.31% / n=45). Of the 19 remaining participants, 17.19% (n=11) were from non-EU member states whilst 12.5% (n=8) were from another EU member state whilst. See Chart 4.2.

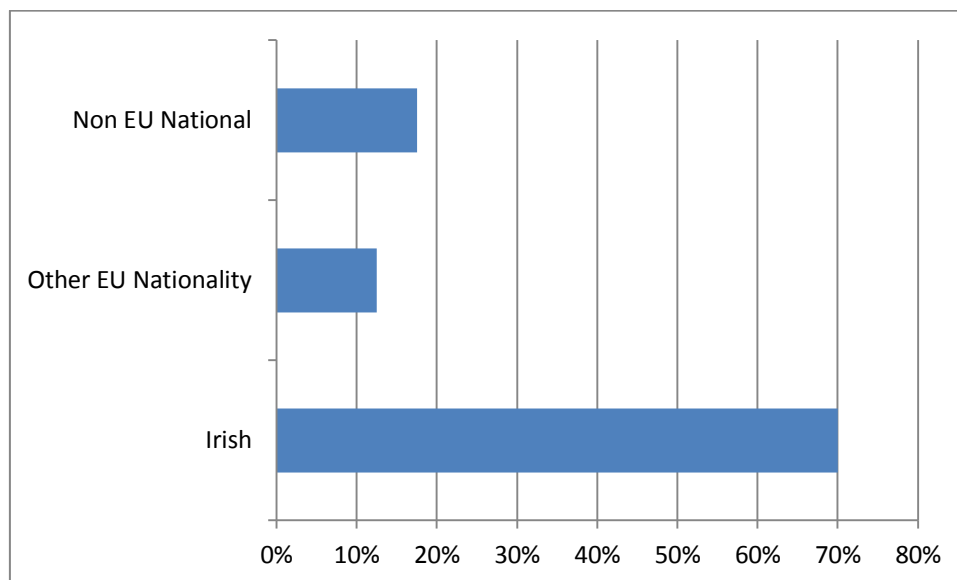


Chart 4.2: Nationality of participants

Question 3 explored how many of the participants took part in a TY programme in their school. One participant did not answer this question. The 98.43% (n=63) of responses indicate that a sizeable majority of participants (82.5% / n= 52) had taken part in a TY programme while 17.5% (n=11) had progressed directly from JC to the LCE. *See Chart 4.3.*

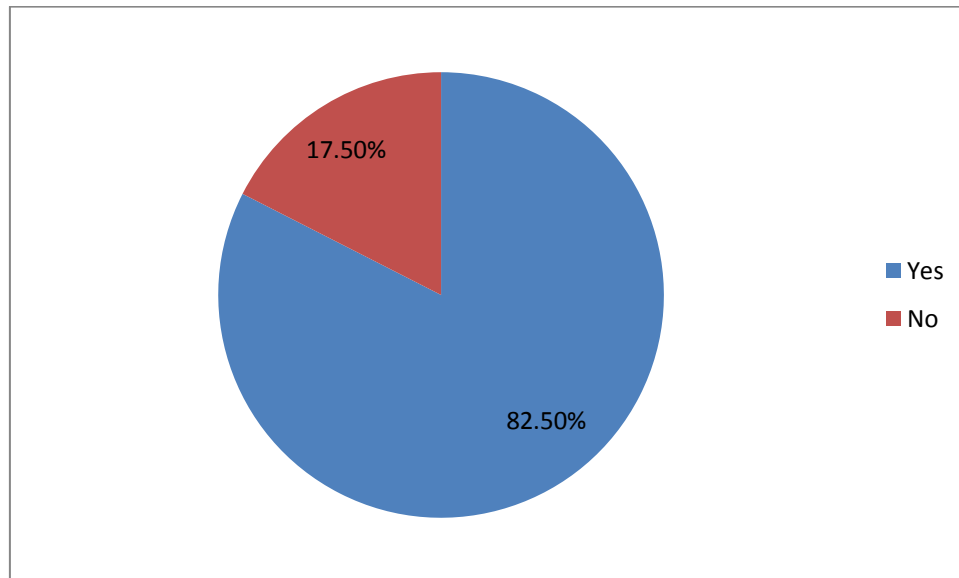


Chart 4.3: Participation in a TY programme

Question 4 sought to explore how useful TY was in assisting the participants make their subject choices for the LCE. There was a 100% (n=52) response rate from those who had completed the TY programme to this question. Overall, 53.84% (n=28) of participants indicated that TY was useful in helping them to make their subject choices, whilst 19.23% (n=10) found it very useful. The remaining 26.93% (n=14) of participants did not find TY useful. *See Chart 4.4.*

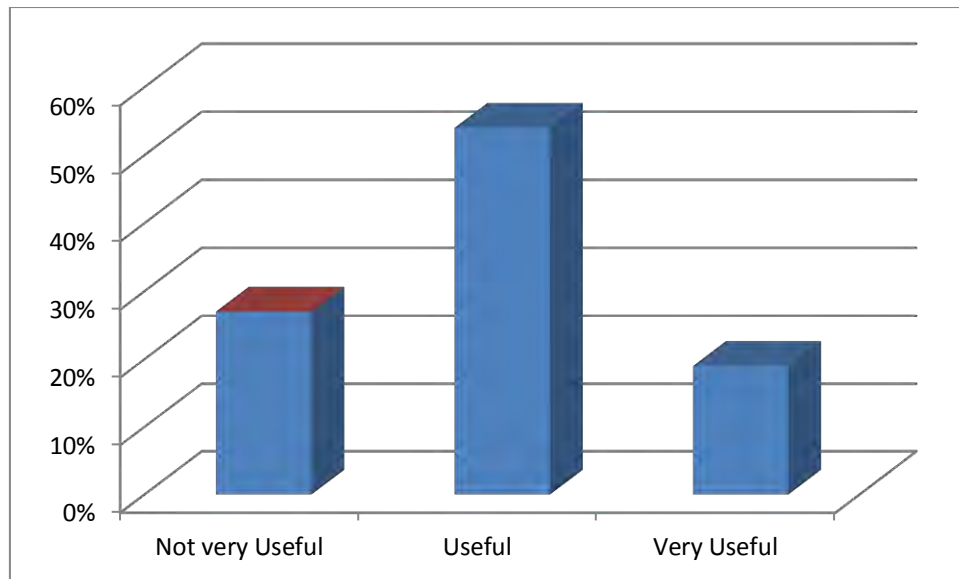


Chart 4.4: Usefulness of Transition Year in helping students make their subject choices for the LCE.

Question 4 requested participants to elaborate further through qualitative responses on the usefulness of TY in helping them choose their LC subjects.

The words used by the participants who found TY useful included “*space*”, “*time*” “*sampled new subjects*”, “*developed socially*” and “*learned new skills*” gave an insight into the positive aspects of engaging in a TY programme. Of the 73.07% (n=38) of participants who identified TY as being very useful or useful a key theme that emerged was that students felt that TY put them in a position to make better subject choice decisions. One participant emphasised that TY “*allowed them to grow as an individual*” and he felt “*more mature allowing for better subject choice decisions to be made*”. These sentiments were echoed by another participant who pointed out:

it gave me a chance to really look at what I wanted to do and at what I would be best at. It gave me a deeper insight into the variety of different paths studying particular subjects could lead me to.

This view was also held by another participant who stated “*it opened my eyes to all my options*”.

Taking part in TY, as pointed out by some participants, was useful for affording them more time and space to explore subjects while also learning new skills. This helped them to identify the subjects and careers they would like to pursue. One participant stated TY “*allowed me to explore possible career choices and pick subjects to suit these careers*”

whilst another felt he “*had a clearer idea of what direction to go in after the Leaving Certificate, course wise*”. Another participant referred to being “*more ready to make big decisions*”. Some participants also stated that TY gave them the opportunity to sample subjects that they had no prior experience of. These participants pointed out that they would have liked more time to be made available to engage with a subject in more detail in order to get a deeper understanding of the subject. Several participants who found TY beneficial also highlighted that TY was a missed opportunity to help students develop the research skills necessary to gain access to information about various subjects available on the LCE which could have made the subject choice process easier. For some participants (7.69%/n=3) engaging in a TY work placement was highlighted as a positive aspect of TY. The extra responsibility that came with organising and completing the work placement boosted their self-confidence to make decisions whilst it also helped them to develop their social skills through their interaction with co-workers and in some cases the general public.

However, the 26.93% (n=14) of participants who did not find TY useful used words such as “*got lazy*”, “*boring*”, “*programme was poor*” and “*unhelpful academically*” to describe their perceptions of their TY experience. A number of participants held the view that they did not do much work in class during TY and that subject choice was not a priority or a concern for teachers on the TY programme. Another reason given by some participants was that they had already made up their mind in third year about the subjects they would choose for the LCE.

Following on from Question 4, Question 5 asked participants if they had completed a TY work placement generating a 100% (n=52) response rate. The vast majority of the participants in the TY programme completed a Work Placement programme (96.15% / n=50) as part of their TY programme while 3.84% (n=2) did not. *See Chart 4.5.*

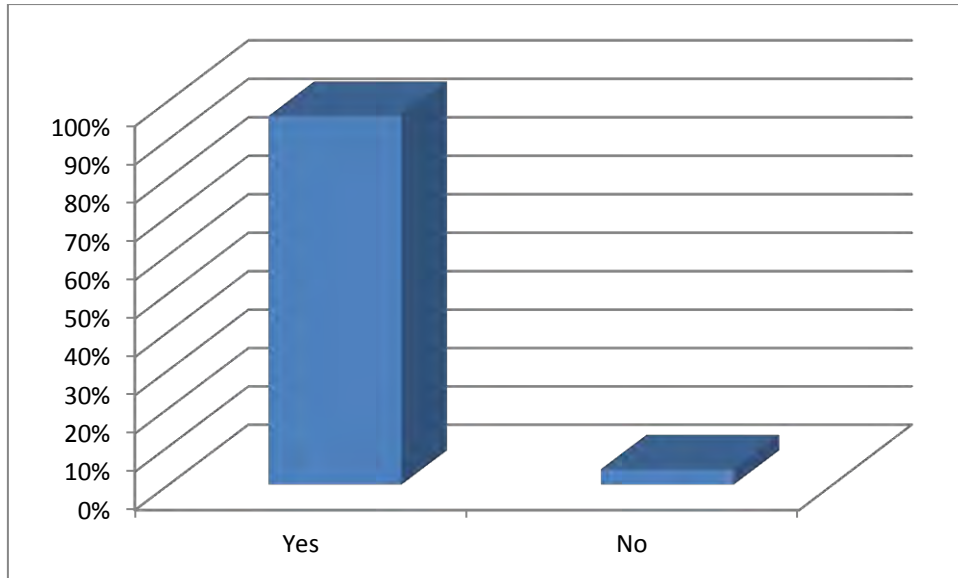


Chart 4.5: TY work placement completion rates.

Question 6 sought to explore if engaging in the TY work placement influenced the subjects that participants chose for the LCE. This question was completed by 100% (n=52) of participants. In total, 53.85% (n=28) stated their work placement did not influence their choice, whilst 46.15% (n=24) stated it did. See Chart 4.6. It is striking to note that whilst only 7.69% (n=3) of participants in Question 4 highlighted the work placement as a positive aspect of engaging in TY it had a significant effect on student’s subject choices.

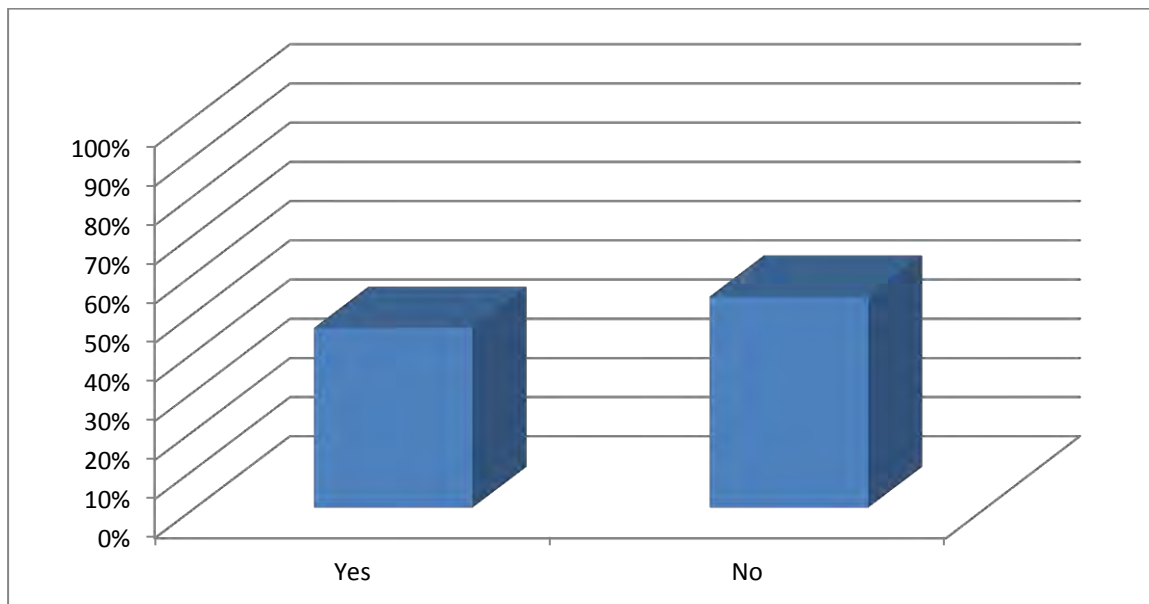


Chart 4.6: Did TY work placement influence subject choices?

4.2.2 Section B – Preparation for and Experience of Making Subject Choices

Section B of the online questionnaire is divided into four parts. Questions 7 and 8 explored the various sources of information available to participants prior to making their subject choices. Question 9 examined the subjects chosen by participants. Questions 10 to 13 explored the role played by sampling subjects. Questions 14 and 15 sought to gauge participant's satisfaction with the subjects they had chosen and their experience of the subject choice decision making process.

Question 7 was answered by 96.87% (n=62) of participants and skipped by 3.13% (n=2). Of the 62 participants the top three sources of information regarding subject choice were: the school subject choice information booklet (30.64% / n=19), subject specific teachers (22.58% / n=14) and Principal/Deputy Principal in the school attended (16.12% / n=10). A disquieting finding was that only 9.67% (n=6) had received information on a one-to-one basis from the school Guidance Counsellor while (8.06% / n=5) said classroom guidance. Attendance at a subject choice information open night in school appeared in 8.06% (n=5) of responses while other sources of information were highlighted by 4.83% (n=3) of participants to Question 7.

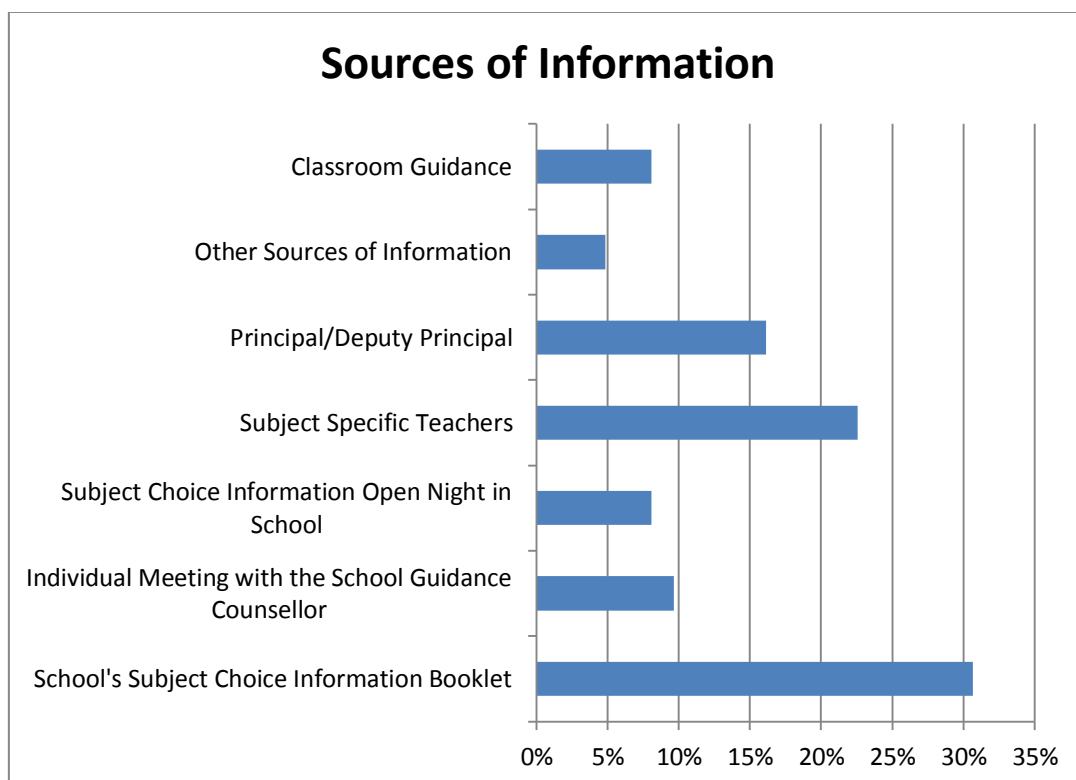


Chart 4.7: Sources of information regarding subjects offered in school attended.

One participant argued that with regard to the subject choice information night the content:

focused more slides and time on certain subjects than others with literally no time allocated to subjects that students were apprehensive about such as Applied Maths. It was like they were selling something.

Of the three participants who referred to *Other Sources of Information* in Question 8 one participant mentioned “*my friends in 6th year in school and doing the subject gave me advice*”. A second participant referred to the advice he received from his brother who had studied the same subject. The third participant disclosed that he had spent a considerable amount of time conducting online research. *See Chart 4.7.*

Chart 4.8 displays the data from Question 9 regarding the subject’s that participant’s had chosen for their LCE. This question was answered by 93.75% (n=60) participants and skipped by 6.25% (n=4).

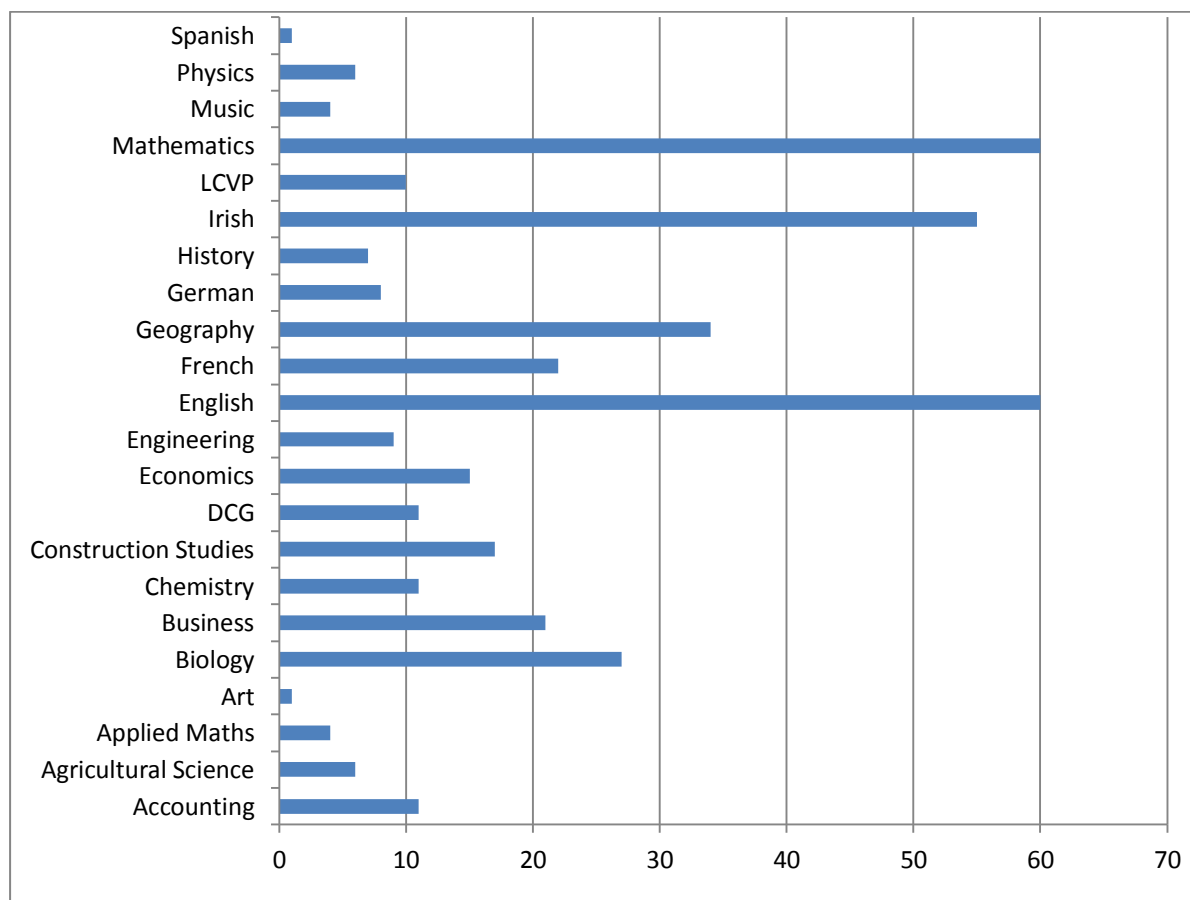


Chart 4.8: Subject choices of participants.

Excluding the compulsory subjects of Mathematics, English and Irish, the top five most popular subjects were Geography (56.66% / n=34), Biology (45% / n=27), French (36.66% / n=22), Business (35% / n=21) and Construction Studies (28.33% / n=17). The least popular subjects were Agricultural Science (10% / n=6), Physics (10% / n=6), Applied Maths (6.6% / n=4), Music (6.6% / n=4), with both Art and Spanish the least popular choices with 1.66% (n=1). *Appendix L* contains a detailed breakdown and analysis of the subjects, and combinations of subjects chosen, revealed by participants in their responses to Question 9.

It emerged that of the participants (n= 11) who chose two or more subjects from the business suite of subjects, 27% (n=3) did not choose any Science based subject for the LCE, whilst 9% (n=1) did not choose any curricular language. It is quite striking that 50% (n= 30) of all participants chose subject options which included at least one Science based subject and a Business based subject option. In analysing the responses to the questionnaire, 48% of participants (n=29) chose a curricular language and a Science based subject, whereas 33% (n=20) of participants chose a curricular language subject and a Business Studies subject option. Finally, 27% (n=16) of all participants chose a combination of subjects with at least one subject from each of the subject ranges of Curricular Languages, Sciences and Business subjects. *See Chart 4.9.*

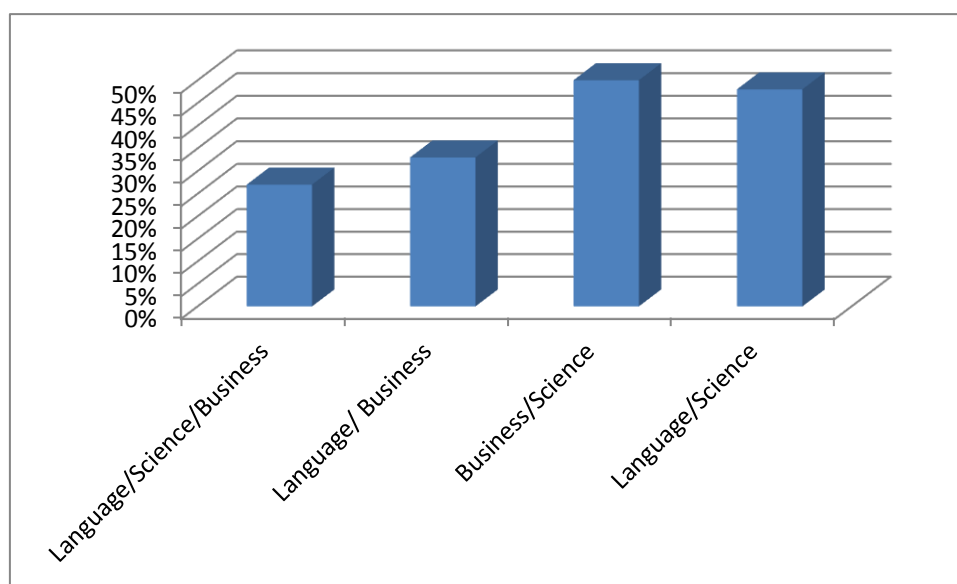


Chart 4.9: Subject combinations chosen by participants

Question 10 sought to find out whether participants had an opportunity to sample, also known as trialling in some schools, a subject prior to making their subject choices for the LCE. In total, 92.18% (n=59) of participants answered Question 10, whilst 7.82% (n=5) did not. A

small majority (52.54% / n=31) of participants sampled a subject before making their subject choice decisions for the LCE, while 47.46% (n=28) did not. See Chart 4.10.

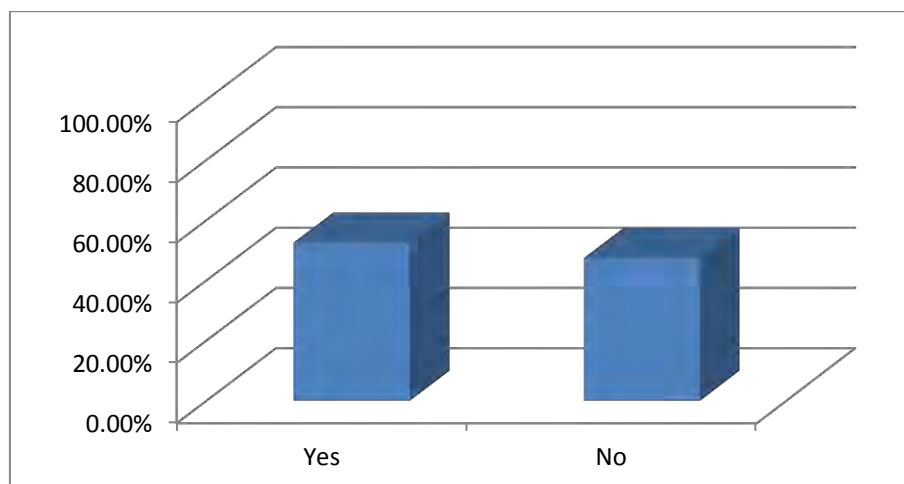


Chart 4.10: Subject sampling prior to subject choice.

Question 11 and 12 were follow-up questions to establish whether participants who had sampled a subject found the process beneficial. The vast majority (78.12% / n=25) of participants to Question 11 highlighted the beneficial role of subject sampling for their subject choices, whilst 21.88% (n=7) reported they did not benefit from it.

In Question 12 participants explained how they had benefited from the subject sampling process. This question was answered by 39.06% (n=25) of participants. The words used in responses included “*taste*”, “*explore*” and “*get a clear view*” of what the subject was really like and whether they might enjoy a particular subject. One participant highlighted that he felt sampling a subject facilitated him to “*analyse the subjects I may be good at and exclude the subject I might be bad at*”. This sentiment was echoed by another participant, “*I got to know what the subject was like and if I was able for the subject*”. Another participant who was considering taking up a subject that he had no previous experience of pointed out that it “*made up my mind that learning a new language from scratch would be very difficult so the opportunity of sampling French did benefit me*”. It was also highlighted by another participant that sampling subjects “*allowed time to identify my strengths and weaknesses while engaging in subjects*” rather than “*just receiving a brief talk and someone else’s opinion about what a subject is like*”.

Question 13 sought to explore the perceptions of participants who had not had the opportunity to sample subjects prior to making their subject choice for the LCE. This

question was answered by 27 (42.18%) participants. In total, 81.48% (n=22) of the participants would have liked the opportunity to sample subjects whilst 18.52% (n=5) stated No. See Chart 4.11.

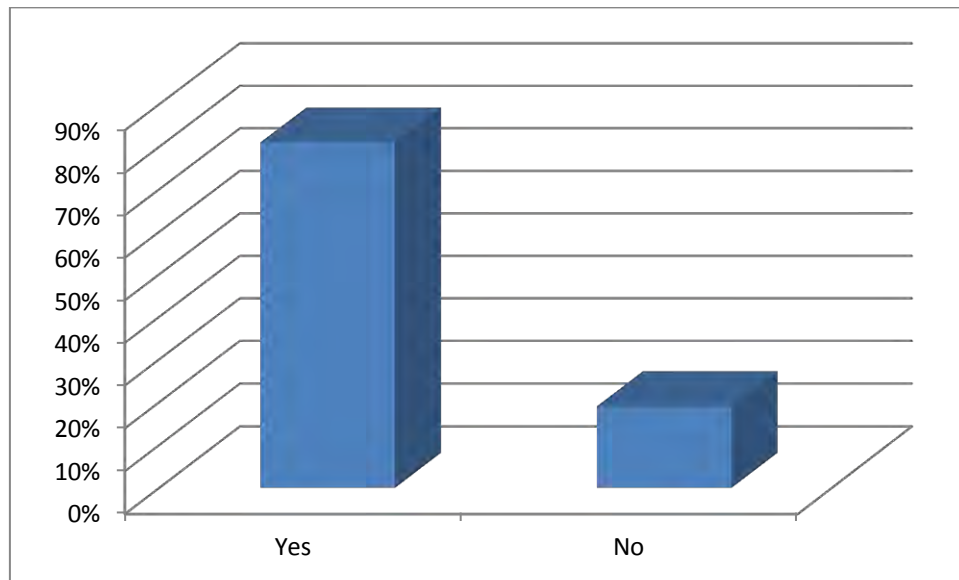


Chart 4.11: Retrospective desire of non-sampled students to engage in subject sampling process.

A participant who pointed out that he would have liked the opportunity to avail of subject sampling to help him overcome a feeling that his subject options were limited. This feeling was based on the *“fear of taking up a new subject versus choosing subjects he was familiar with from his time in post-primary school to date”*. On the other hand another participant said *“No because I got to sample some of my subjects as I did some of them, or similar subjects, for my Junior Certificate”*.

To conclude, a major theme that emerged from the responses to Questions 11, 12 and 13 was that participants felt that the opportunity to sample a subject would be hugely beneficial to their subject choices for the LCE.

Question 14 sought information on whether participants were happy with the subjects they had chosen for the LCE. Question 14 requested participants to elaborate further through qualitative responses In total, 93.75% (n=60) of participants answered this question and 6.25% (n=4) did not. Of the 60 participants that answered the question, a significant majority (80% / n=48) were happy with the subjects they had chosen whilst 20% (n=12) were unhappy. See Chart 4.12.



Chart 4.12: Satisfaction with subjects chosen for the leaving Certificate Established.

A majority (55% / n= 33) of the participants provided qualitative explanations to Question 14. Mutual comments from participants who were satisfied with their subject choices included, that they were enjoying their subjects and being successful in them, subjects were meeting their expectations and they can see a strong link between the subjects they are studying and their future career aspirations. On analysing the qualitative data for Question 14 the theme of real choice versus constrained choice emerged for participants who were unhappy with the subjects they had chosen. Of the 20% (n=12) of participants who were unhappy, responses included words like *“struggling”*, *“had to do”* and *“regret”*. A number of participants pointed out that they were not given the option to do a subject as the school did not offer it in the curriculum. One participant highlighted *“I would have liked to do Physics but due to a lack of students interested in the subject it was discontinued”*, whilst another participant stated *“I wanted to do History but it was not a subject option”*. Another dissatisfied participants stated *“there are some subjects that I had to choose because of how the subject choices were laid out”*, whilst other participants pointed out that the subjects they wanted to do were opposite each other in the subject options resulting in not really having a *“free choice”*. A major regret of some participants was taking up a subject which they had not done in the past to meet the entry requirements for courses they were interested in pursuing in University after the LCE.

It is interesting to note that of the 52.54% (n=31) of participants who were allowed to sample a subject prior to making their subject choices, (See Results for Question 10), a significant majority 77.42% (n=24) were happy with the subjects they had chosen, whilst 22.58% (n=7) were unhappy. Of the participant’s (20% / n= 12) to Question 14 who were unhappy with the

subjects they had chosen, 50% (n=6) had the opportunity to sample a subject prior to making their subject choices whilst 50% (n=6) did not.

Question 15 sought information about participant's experience of choosing their subjects for the LCE. A total of 92.18% (n=59) answered this question while 7.82% (n=5) did not. Of the 59 responses, 59.32% (n=35) found the process of subject choice 'easy', whilst 6.77% (n=4) found it very easy. On the other hand a 33.89% (n=20) of participants indicated they found the subject choice process difficult. *See Chart 4.13.*

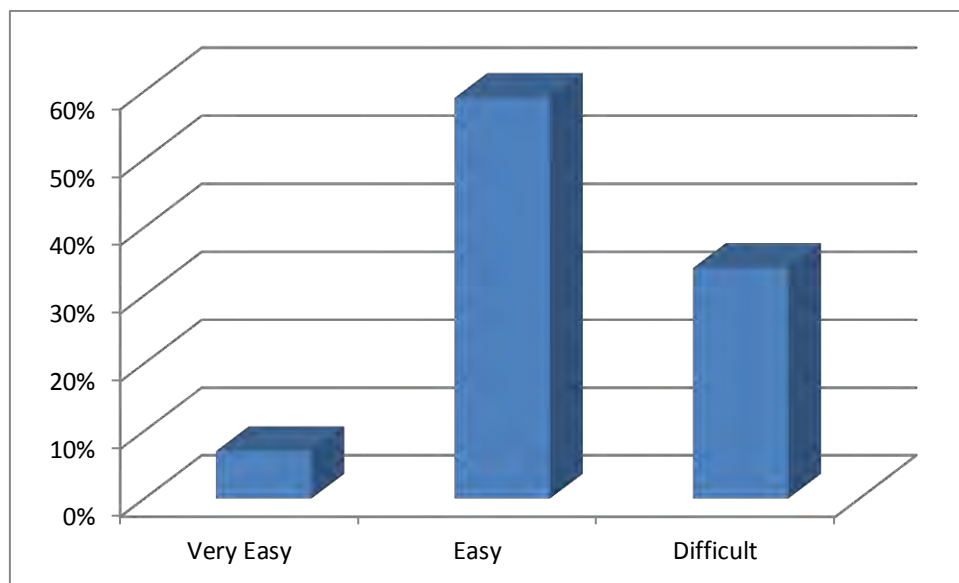


Chart 4.13: Experience of the Leaving Certificate subject choice process.

4.2.3 Section C – Influencers on Subject Choice.

There are seven questions in section C. In Question 16, participants were asked whether they considered the jobs they might like to do in the future when choosing their subjects for the LCE. Overall, 93.75% (n= 60) answered this question while, 6.25% (n=4) did not. Of the 60 participants, 73.33% (n=44) said they did consider future jobs, while 26.67% (n=16) did not. *See Chart 4.14.*

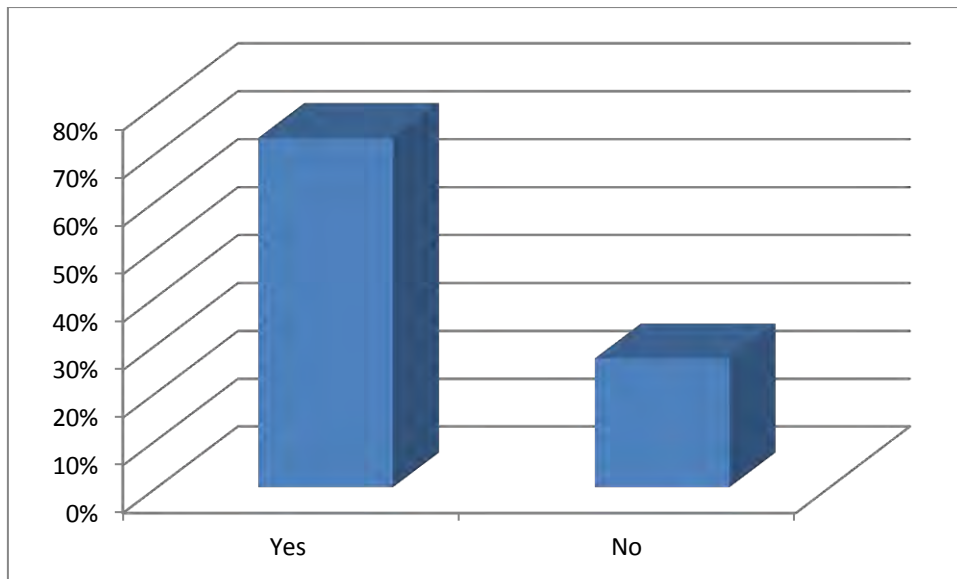


Chart 4.14: Did future career aspirations influence subject choices?

Question 17 was a follow-on qualitative question to Question 16. In total, 59.37% (n=38) answered the question while 40.63% (n=26) skipped it. The responses to this question varied with some participants having a career already in mind whilst others were keeping their options open. Words like *“useful”* and *“essential subjects for this job”* appeared in responses of participants who had a career already in mind. One response was *“I considered what subjects would be both necessary and beneficial for my future career”*. It was very striking that 36.84% (n=14) of participants to this question named the career they were interested in as part of their answer and the most suitable subjects required to pursue the identified career, for example one participant stated *“I want to be a Doctor so I chose two science subjects, Biology and Chemistry”*, whilst another stated *“I am interested in a career in Engineering so I chose DCG and Physics”*. Many of the common responses included already knowing the career they wish to pursue and highlighted that participants chose subjects to meet college entry requirements. *“I want to study Sports Science in UL which requires two Science subjects and a Language”* was a typical answer given in response to this question. Other participants identified that they chose subjects they believed may be useful to have studied prior to pursuing a particular career, while other participants had conducted research to see if a subject had a link to a future career they had in mind. A number of participants pointed out that they chose their subjects to keep as many different career options as possible open to them. One participant disclosed that *“I didn’t know what I wanted to do in a future job so I*

picked my subjects to have a wide range of career options". This was echoed in a similar response that *"I chose subjects that would give me a wide range of careers to choose from"*.

In Question 18, participants were asked whether they sought advice on their subject choices from the school Guidance Counsellor. In total 93.75% (n=60) responded, while 6.25% (n=4) skipped the question. A majority of participants (60% / n=36) did not seek advice from their school Guidance Counsellor prior to making their subject choice, while 40% (n=24) did seek advice. See Chart 4.15. However, it is worth noting that the high percentage (60% / n= 36) of participants who did not seek advice may be related to the fact that there is no Guidance Counsellor in residence in School A.

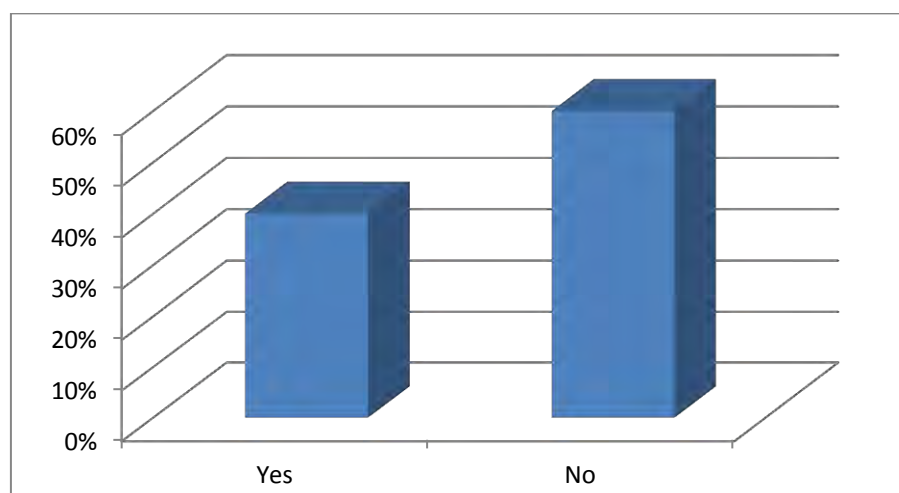


Chart 4.15: Did you seek advice from school Guidance Counsellors advice regarding subject choices?

Question 19 was a qualitative question which sought information on why students did not seek advice from their school Guidance Counsellor prior to making their subject choices for the LCE. Of the 60% (n=36) of participants who answered *No* to Question 18, 91.66% (n=33) answered this question, while 8.34% (n=3) skipped it. Reasons for not seeking the advice of the school Guidance Counsellor included students seeking advice from other sources such as parents and siblings, students feeling comfortable in making their own decisions, previous negative experience of engaging with a Guidance Counsellor and a feeling that the participant could better relate to other people who would understand them better than the Guidance Counsellor. The fact that one of the schools does not refer to the availability of a Guidance Counsellor to help in the area of subject choice on a one-to-one basis was pointed out by one participant whilst another participant stated *"one-to-one Careers Guidance wasn't something that was advertised but we had guidance classes"*. The decision made, and the subsequent regret, by one participant not to avail of the chance to talk to the Guidance Counsellor about

his subject choice was evident, “*At the time I didn’t think I would need the advice, looking back on it now, I would have liked to talk to a Guidance Counsellor about my Leaving Certificate Subjects*”.

Question 20 sought information from participants regarding the factors that influenced their subject choice decisions for the LCE. In total, 93.75% (n=60) of participants answered this question, while 6.25% (n=4) did not. The responses of participants are listed below from the most influential to the least influential. *See Chart 4.16.*

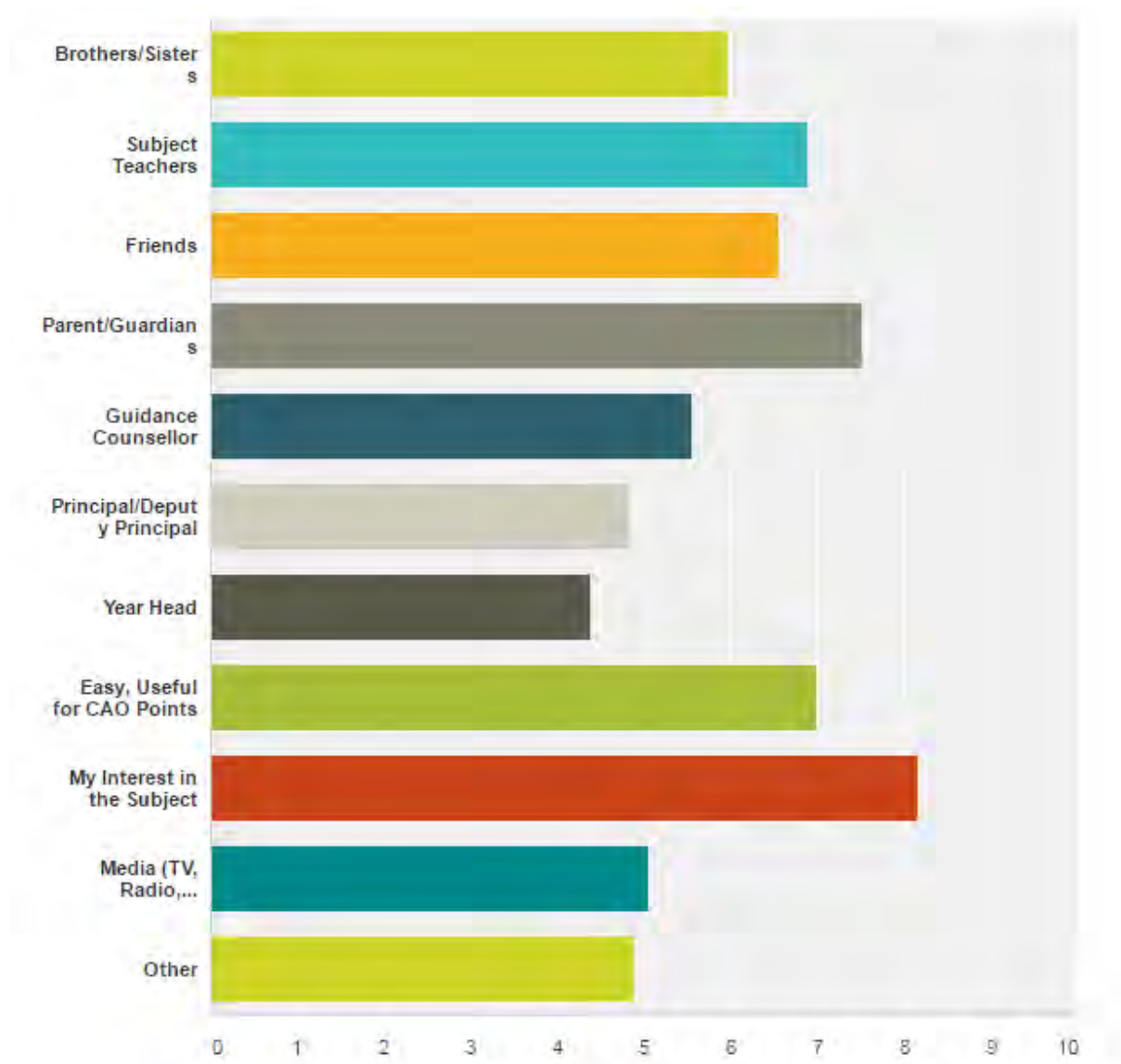


Chart 4.16: Influences on Subject Choice for the LCE.

To summarise the findings to question 20;

Interest in subject was the most influential factor in participant's subject choice decisions with 45.28% (n=24) ranking this as the number one influence. The second most influential was Parents / Guardians with 25.92% (n=14) ranking it as their first or second influence. Easy and useful for CAO points was the third most influential with 18.75% (n=9) of participants listing it as their first or second influence. The fourth most influential was Subject Teachers with 38% (n=19) of participants ranking this choice as their first, second or third influence. Friends were the fifth most influencing factor with 24% (n=12) ranking it as their first, second or third influence.

Brothers/Sisters were the sixth most influencing factor with 28.26% (n=13) of participants ranking them as their fifth, sixth or seventh influence. The Guidance Counsellor was the seventh most influential factor with 27.91% (n=12) of participants choosing a ranking of fifth, sixth or seventh. Media ranked eighth overall with 36.36% of all participant's ranking it their sixth, seventh or eighth most influential. Other ranked ninth overall with 25% (n=6) choosing a ranking of sixth, seventh or eighth. Principal/Deputy Principal were the tenth most influential factor overall with 40.91% (n=25) choosing a ranking of ninth, tenth or eleventh. Year Head was the least influential factor with 50% (n=21) of participants ranking this as either their ninth, tenth or eleventh most influential.

In analysing the data for Question 20 the strength of the role that interest in a subject plays as a motivational factor in student's subject choice decisions emerged with 45.28% (n=24) of participants ranking enjoyment of a subject as the number one factor in influencing their decisions. This exceeds the combined total of the percentages of first placed rankings for school personnel and immediate family members (45.01% / n= 22). The findings also highlighted that students chose subjects for extrinsic reasons i.e. easy, useful for CAO points, and ranked it third overall with a higher ranking than all school personnel.

Question 21 asked participants who had answered *Other* in Question 20 to explain further. In total, 23.43% (n=15) of participants provided a response to this question while 76.57% (n=49) skipped it. Some of the responses include taking advice from other family member not covered in Question 20, with guest speakers and attendance at open-days in Colleges and Universities also mentioned. One participant highlighted the use of online media, "*I used Qualifax and Careersportal to research subjects*" as opposed to traditional media sources, namely television, radio and newspapers.

The final question in the questionnaire (Question 22) was a qualitative one which sought to gain an overall view of how participants found the process of choosing their subjects for the LCE. A total of 84.37% (n=54) of participants provided responses to this question while 15.63% (n=10) skipped it. In analysing the 54 responses, words such as “good”, “fine”, “easy” or “Ok” were used in 55.55% (n=30) of responses, while words such as “difficult”, “hard”, “bad” or “not great” appeared in 25.92% (n=14) of responses. The two themes that were distilled from the qualitative responses to question 22 were:

(i) Positive Experience

Of participants (55.55% / n=30) who found the subject choice decision making process an easy and enjoyable experience a number of key factors were identified in the data. One factor was that participants had a good idea of what subjects they wanted to do with one participant highlighting “*it was easy as a I already knew what I wanted to do*”. Three participants pointed out that they had lots of support available to them at home and in school with one commenting “*my school and family were really helpful and supportive*”. Another indicated that TY work experience and the chance to sample subjects during TY took the stress out of the subject choice decision making process. Many participants who found the process easy emphasised that their school was very accommodating in helping them in relation to subject choice with one participant citing “*the process was made easier as my school were very accommodating*”.

(ii) Challenging Experience

The participants (25.92% / n= 14) who found the subject choice process difficult highlighted a number of issues which included; subject choices made for JC affecting subject choices at Senior Cycle. Several participants highlighted this as an issue in relation to Curricular Languages and some Applied Social Science subjects. The issue of restricted subject choice was “*upsetting*” and “*stressful*” for some participants, with one participant pointing out that “*I am not enjoying school due to doing choice subjects I have no interest in but had no real choice*”. This was echoed by another participant who felt “*it was difficult because there were some subjects I had to do, not because I had an interest in it but because of what the subject choices were*”. The difficulty in weighing up a subject a student was interested in versus a subject he had the possibility of enjoying future examination success in was raised as an issue by one participant. Another participant found the timing of the subject choice process problematic as “*it was literally at the start of the pre-exams and to throw in such a huge*

decision on students at this point was very misjudged". Similarly, another commented "*the time allocated in preparation for such a big decision was very cramped*". Interestingly, two participants felt that even though they were satisfied with their subject choices they "*would have liked to talk to a Guidance Counsellor*". For another participant "*more counselling and information is required in second Year*" to help students who have not participated in TY to prepare for making such a major decision in third year.

4.3 Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings from the online questionnaire with current fifth year students following the LCE programme. The findings show the myriad of factors, and the complex interplay between such factors, that influence students subject choices. While enjoyment of a subject emerged as the most influential factor in subject choice, the influence of parents and other significant influencers such as teachers etc. also emerged along with the major role played by organisational factors. The primary data finding of the exploration will be discussed in relation to previous research and literature in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5 Discussion

5.0 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the overall findings in the context of the primary data and the existing literature that was critically analysed in Chapter 2.

5.1 Research Questions of Study

This section will briefly contextualise the discussion in the context of the research questions underpinning the study. The primary research question set out to examine ‘*what are the factors that influence male post-primary students in making their subject choices for the Leaving Certificate Established?*’ To explore this question the researcher examined the views of 5th year male post-primary school students attending two all-boys post-primary schools who were participating in the LCE on the factors that influenced their subject choice decisions. The findings are based on a sample of 150 fifth year students and a final response rate of 42.66% (n=64). The researcher also had a number of secondary research questions which sought to find out when male post-primary students make their subject choices and who/what influenced them; explore the type of advice they sought prior to making their subject choices; examine the advice/supports available to them in their school including the role of the school guidance counsellor and to identify implications for school planning in relation to the design and delivery of the subject choice decision making process.

The two overarching themes that emerged in the overall findings and which will be discussed in the upcoming sections are: (i) organisational factors, and (ii) personal factors.

5.2. Organisational Factors

The discretion given to the management of Irish post-primary schools plays an important role in influencing students’ subject choices (Smyth and Darmody 2009). Management decisions impact the “nature of choice” given to students and often creates “illusory subject choices” (Smyth 2016, p.67). Management have significant discretion in the design of the subject choice process, the subjects they offer to their students and the timing of the decision making process (Smyth and Darmody 2009). Such institutional decisions inevitably shape student’s subject preferences (Davies et al. 2004). The literature supports the view that the design of the subject choice decision-making process, especially the banding of subject options, impact on the subject choices of students (Smyth and Hannon 2006) often resulting in illusory

subject choices (Ryrie 1981, in Smyth 2016). Similarly, it emerged in this study that many of the students (20%) who were unhappy with the subjects they had chosen indicated that they were constrained in their choices due to the design of the subject choice process in their school and how various subjects were banded with some students referring to not really having a free choice. A number of students reported that they wanted to do subjects that were opposite each other as subject options resulting in having to forego a subject they wanted to choose (Smyth and Darmody 2009). This is perturbing as the implications of choices made by students for the LCE can have long term consequences beyond Senior Cycle for them (Warton and Cooney 1997).

The findings of the current research study indicates that a significant majority (80%) of students were happy with the subjects they chose for the LCE which corroborates previous research (Smyth 2016). This study found that for many students the source of happiness stems from the fact that they are enjoying the subjects, achieving success in them and the subjects are meeting their expectations. It also emerged that the support structures and the level of support available to students in their school was a key factor for them (55.55%) finding the subject choice decision making process a positive experience. This also helped to reduce their stress levels during a time of significant decision making in their lives. This suggests that the provision of stronger levels of supports, through the whole school approach model, could facilitate making the subject choice decision making process a more helpful and positive experience for students (Hearne et al 2016).

However, for some second level students, low self-efficacy expectations may lead them to avoid certain academic subjects (Betz 2004). For students who may not be receiving the necessary support from home the school environment can offer a safe and understanding environment in which the student can grow their own identity and increase their academic self-efficacy (Bandura 1995; Hamman and Hendricks 2005). This presents an opportunity for students to develop self-belief in their ability to perform in activities such as making good subject choice decisions (Zimmerman 1995, in Bandura 1995). For many students with low self-efficacy who dwell on personal deficiencies and focus on potential adverse outcome (Bandura 1994), utilising role models who have succeeded in a similar task, and with similar attributes as the person observing them, can be a source of improving their self-efficacy (Hoyt 2013). In addition, guidance practitioners, in recognising the positive impact they can have in challenging students own beliefs to make career decisions, can utilise role models whom the student can relate to and help improve students' self-efficacy (Kidd 2006). The

influence of role models was evident in the findings of the current study with some participants referring to choosing subjects based on advice they had received from friends and siblings who had picked similar subjects in the past. For some students engaging in a TY work placement can be a powerful tool in the development of young people and helps increase their self-esteem and self-confidence in their ability to make good decisions (Jeffers 2011). The findings of the current study indicate that students felt TY facilitated them to learn new skills and develop socially whilst also improving their readiness and self-belief in their ability to make important academic decisions such as subject choice.

It is acknowledged that the size of the school attended by a student impacts their subject choices with small and medium sized schools offering a more constrained curriculum than larger schools due to logistical difficulties (Darmody and Smyth 2005; Smyth 2016). Such difficulties effecting subject provision includes the availability of teachers, facilities and funding (Hammond and Palmer 1999). For example, in Ireland school size has led to subjects, such as Applied Mathematics, being removed from the curriculum offered in some schools (NCCA 2014). The removal of subjects such as Applied Mathematics and Physics may seem to contradict government policy that highlights the importance of mathematics and science in underpinning Ireland's future economic prosperity (PPEF 2013).

A similar issue emerged in this current study with a number of students highlighting that certain subjects, such as Physics, were no longer offered in their school due to a fall in demand for them which serves to further constrain student choices. The research was conducted in two schools, with school A having a total enrolment of 290 students and school B having a total enrolment of 1170 students. Although possible solutions to this issue were not explored in the study the variations in funding of the different school types at second level has been blamed for the removal of certain subjects at Senior Cycle with low level of uptake among students, and has led to calls that funding and supports provided to schools should reflect students' needs rather than the type of school they attend or school size (Darmody and Smyth 2013; Edmund Rice Schools Trust 2013).

A key finding that emerged in this study was the relevance of TY in the subject choice process. The vision set out for the restructuring of the Senior Cycle in the 1990's led to the option for all second-level schools to introduce an optional or compulsory TY programme (DE 1995). The majority of students (82.5%) in this study had participated in a TY programme with a large proportion of students finding it very useful or useful in assisting

them with their subject choices. It is quite striking that only a small cohort of students (7.69%) highlighted the TY work placement as a positive aspect of engaging in a TY programme yet a majority of students (53.84%) stated that it played a role in their subject choices. The explanations for this were not examined in the study but given the significant role it plays in students choices it would be worthy of further investigation. Nevertheless, research has shown that the TY work placement presents students with an opportunity to develop their personal skills, gain confidence and independence and as a result enable them to make more informed vocational decisions including subject choice (Egan 2017). On the other hand, the findings of this study contradict Egan (2017) who found no definite link between students' time spent on the TY Work Placement and the subjects they subsequently chose for Senior Cycle.

Furthermore, during adolescence students develop the “building blocks for making life choices” (Sharf 2010, p.225) and grow in their readiness to make educational choices (Super et al.1996, in Brown et al 1996a). This study found that engaging in the TY programme provided students with the necessary time and space to grow, explore and develop socially. The findings appear to indicate that a high quality TY programme can support students during a period when their self-concept is changing and they need the space to develop their self-efficacy which is crucial for making academic and life choices (Barnes et al. 2011, Pajares 2005). The TY programme also allows students time to reflect on past academic performance before making important subject choice decisions (Smyth 2016).

Another major benefit of engaging in a TY programme can be the opportunity for students to sample subjects prior to their final decisions for the LCE (Smyth and Darmody 2009; Smyth et al. 2011). A striking finding in this study was that a sizeable percentage of students (47.76%) entering 5th year did not get the opportunity to sample a subject prior to making their decisions. The findings were that the vast majority of students (78.12%) who were given the opportunity to sample subjects found the process beneficial which highlights the need for more structured and consistent sampling opportunities to be provided to students across all Irish post-primary schools. The need for a more concentrated and targeted effort to provide subject sampling opportunities for 3rd year students who do not participate in a TY programme prior to entering 5th year emerged in the study with some students (17.5%) believing that the opportunity to sample subjects would have helped reduce a feeling that their choices were really limited.

With regards to the issue of support in the school system the imbalance in the level of guidance counselling provision between Junior and Senior Cycle, and the deficiencies of guidance provision in Junior Cycle, need to be addressed to improve the level of information regarding subject choice provided to students who do not participate in a TY programme (DES 2009; Hearne et al 2016; McCoy et al 2006). In some schools such deficiencies include the minimal or ‘non-existent’ contact between Junior Cycle students and the guidance counsellor prior to the selection of subjects for Senior Cycle and the feeling amongst some students that advice has to be sought rather than offered from the guidance counsellor (Hearne et al 2016). The reform of the Junior Cycle currently taking place may present an opportunity for the DES to allow post-primary schools the scope and flexibility to allocate more time for guidance provision during Junior Cycle (DES 2015b). This issue is especially relevant with regard to post Budget 2012 provision and, “appropriate guidance”.

Since the Irish Education Act (1998), the whole school approach to guidance counselling has been advocated in Irish post-primary schools (DES 2005a; DES 2012a; Hearne and Galvin 2014; NCGE 2004) and is regularly referred to as being an established Government policy (Hearne et al. 2016; IGC 2016a; IGC 2016b). The involvement of regular teachers, who along with other stakeholders of the school community are supposed to play a role in the provision of appropriate guidance activities (i.e. subject choice) emerged in the findings of this study.

It is long accepted that adults working in schools act as role models for students (Sharf 2010). Existing literature suggests that school staff play a central role in forming and shaping students attitudes towards subjects in Irish post-primary schools (Hearne et al. 2016; McCrone et al.2005; Smyth and Hannan 2006). The findings of this study indicate that subject specific teachers were a key source of information for students (24.19%) prior to making their subject choices. However, the study also found that some teachers assigned to the TY programme were found to have shown little interest in preparing students for their subject choices. A possible reason for a lack of teacher commitment could be down to them not seeing the relevance of the whole school approach to their work in the context of supporting students with their subject choices (Hearne and Galvin 2014; Hearne et al. 2017). This coupled with additional duties for subject teachers arising out of Budget 2012 may have affected some teacher’s commitment to the whole school approach to guidance provision.

In addition, subject teachers concerns relating to their initial level of teacher training in the area of guidance provision has been identified as an area that requires reform (Sexton 2007), and which the Structure of Initial Teacher Education Provision in Ireland Review (DES 2012b) failed to tackle. This highlights the need for possible CPD training opportunities to be made available to teachers to upskill which would require flexibility from the DES and schools to facilitate this. The allocation of financial supports for such CPD may also need to be explored. It is also important that school personnel in Irish post-primary schools are aware of their particular role amongst school personnel (Hearne et al. 2017) in the delivery of the whole school approach to guidance provision and prevent the whole school approach been seen as “everybody’s and nobody’s responsibility” (Barnes et al. 2011, p.70).

The findings also support the literature (Smyth et al. 2011) that found subject specific teachers can be more influential than the guidance counsellor in relation to subject choice at Senior Cycle. This may be due to more contact time between students and subject teachers during Junior Cycle and the development of the teacher student relationship in this period (Hearne and Galvin 2014; Hearne et al. 2016). A greater focus on, and allocation of time to, guidance counselling provision to Junior Cycle students may foster stronger relationships between students and the school guidance counsellor.

The literature highlights the vital role of guidance during transitional periods in people lives (IGC 2007; OECD 2004; Shannon 2014). Central to this is the provision of guidance services in schools that offer a range of leaning experiences to assist students with the choices that they make (NCGE 2004). In providing a whole school approach to guidance provision in Irish post-primary schools, and the implied leadership role that the guidance counsellor plays (Hearne et al. 2017), the need for greater consistency in guidance services across schools has come to the fore.

In this study, the lack of a qualified guidance counsellor in one of the schools with DEIS status and the varying levels of guidance provision emerged as an important issue in relation to subject choice support for some students. Given the literature (Smyth et al. 2011) highlights the increased reliance of lower achieving students and international students on the guidance counsellor regarding subject choice than the main cohort of students, it is disquieting that a DEIS school has no qualified guidance counsellor on staff and as a result raises the question of who has assumed the central leadership role of the guidance counsellor in guidance provision in the school. It is striking that during the important transition from

Junior Cycle to Senior Cycle, 60% of all students did not seek advice from the guidance counsellor. For some students, the lack of understanding of the guidance services available to them especially on a one to one basis was evident. Other students highlighted that group guidance classes were the most common guidance activity in their school. This finding corroborates the literature that points to a reduction (51.4%) in one-to-one guidance provision in Irish post-primary schools (IGC 2016a) with significant change in this aspect of the role of the guidance counsellor (Hearne et al. 2017). The findings of this study also point toward the possibility of improving the level of communication between post-primary schools and their students in relation to the range of career guidance services and supports available in the school for students and an understanding of how students can access the various services. There may also be scope to increase the types of guidance counselling service for students in schools, including having open access hours for students to meet the guidance counsellor (Hearne et al. 2016).

This is the end of the section which discussed the organisational factors that influence students subject choice that emerged in the study. The next section will discuss the second overarching theme; personal factors that influence students subject choices.

5.3. Personal Factors

The second overarching theme that emerged in the finding of the study was the personal factors that influence students subject choices.

The literature highlights that students choose subjects for intrinsic and extrinsic reasons (McCrone et al, 2005). Intrinsic reasons include interest in a subject which has been identified as the most influential factor in student's subject choices (McCrone et al. 2005; Smyth and Calvert 2011). The findings of this study support existing literature and show that 45.28% of students indicated that interest in a subject was the most significant influence on their subject choices.

Students chose subjects based on their cumulative experience of a subject to date and show a marked reluctance to take up a subject that they have no prior experience of (Millar and Kelly 1999; Smyth and Hannon 2006; Smyth et al. 2011). For some students with no previous experience of engaging with a subject, or similar subject, this may serve to place self-imposed restrictions on future subject choices. The findings of this study support this literature with some students highlighting that their subject choices for Junior Cycle affected

their subject choices for Senior Cycle, especially in relation to curricular languages and some applied science subjects (Smyth 2016; Smyth and Calvert 2011). The implications of such decisions can emerge for some students coming towards the end of their post-primary schooling who realise that they are doing the wrong subjects and that they do not have the subjects needed to access particular higher education courses (Smyth 2016).

The current research findings also support the literature in relation to expectancy value theory (Smyth and Hannan 2006) and found that students choose subjects for the extrinsic reason that they are useful for gaining CAO points to access third level education. It has been found that the desire of some students to optimise their points potential has created a “backwash effect” (Hyland 2011, p.4) and has resulted in students picking subjects for Senior Cycle not because of their relevance to a future career but to optimise their CAO points. In this study, 18.75% of students chose a particular subject they perceived as easy and useful for gaining CAO points. This pale and impoverished yet powerful form of extrinsic motivation (deCharms 1968, in Ryan and Deci 2000) may be attributed to the current Leaving Certificate points system.

The focus of the current points system, in which grades are more important than subjects studied (Iannelli et al. 2015), has led to subjects which are perceived as being difficult being removed from some schools altogether (NCCA 2014; Williams et al. 2003). This was evident in one student’s response that *“I would have liked to do Physics but due to a lack of students interested in the subject it was discontinued”*. This presents a worrying development where students’ choosing subjects for the extrinsic reason of maximising their CAO points may be leading them to soft subject choices (Rowbottom 2013). Some students also choose subjects based on prior success and their belief that future success is likely which may serve to restrict their subject choices as they progress through post-primary education (Wigfield and Eccles 1992, in Taylor 2015).

Another personal factor that emerged in the findings is the influence of parents on adolescent’s choices which begin from an early age, with parents free to choose the type of school they want their child to attend (Government of Ireland 1937), and continues through the choices they make for their children as they grow and develop over time (Letha 2013). Parents, like other adults, act as role models for children as they learn about the world of work and impact the perceptions their children have of certain types of careers (Sharf 2010). Parents social class, occupation and employment status have an impact on students career

choices and their academic choices (Barnes et al, 2011; Gottfredson 1996; Kidd 2006; Smyth and Hannan 2006; Sultana 2014). Parents social class can lead some students to compromise future careers aspirations and focus on occupations associated with their social class (Gottfredson 1996) which may also affect their subjects choice (Inkson 2007, in Barnes et al. 2011). Parent's choice of school for their child often reflects parents' values, beliefs and social class (Smyth 2016). In addition, the ethos of the school they select for their child and the social class of the students that a school serves is often reflected in the subject options they make available to students (Darmody and Smyth 2005; Smyth 2016; Stables 1997).

This current study found that parents and other family members played a key role in influencing the student's subject choices. The findings closely align with the literature that highlighted parents as the main influence on Irish student's subject choice (NCGE 2004). Unfortunately, not all parents may be knowledgeable enough to give their child the best information regarding possible future careers or academic choices (Gratz 2006). Students who use their parents as the main source of choice regarding subjects often reinforces gender stereotypes (Smyth and Darmody 2009), and the advice received from parents is often based on outdated information regarding subjects and skewed by their attitudes towards certain subjects and certain careers (Darmody and Smyth 2005). This highlights the need for schools to provide comprehensive and updated information regarding subjects targeted at parents and students prior to making their subject choices to help improve career related parental supports available to students in the home (Zhang et al.2015). It is also important that schools encourage parents to engage in dialogue with the guidance counsellor and school staff in the development of the school guidance plan whilst also encouraging them to take part in school guidance events (Hearne et al. 2016). Engaging in such increased collaboration between school and home, and the untapping of the valuable resource that parents are for their children, may lead to better academic choices and performance for students (Letha 2013).

The influence of friends on students' subject choices also emerged in the study. For some students it was a source of information in relation to the content of particular subjects that a student may not have experienced in the past. Interestingly, some students disclosed that they discussed their subject options with their friends rather than school personnel as they could relate better to their friends and that their friends would understand them better. This view is to be expected as students negotiating their identity crisis during adolescence often rely on their friends as a base to solve their crisis (Boyd and Bee 2015; Erikson 1968).

The findings of this study also supports the literature that highlights that future career aspirations strongly influence the subjects chosen by students for Senior Cycle (Savickas 2001; Smyth and Calvert 2011; Smyth and Hannon 2006). Future career aspirations have been identified as a major influencer on student's decision to study certain subjects, especially Physics and Chemistry (Vidal Rodeiro 2009; Taylor 2015). In this study, 73.37% of students considered their future careers in making their subject choices. Two distinct groups emerged from the findings; namely, students who knew the career path they wanted to pursue and, students who did not and picked subjects to keep as many possible careers options open to them. A key findings from the study is that a significant number of student's (36.84%) named the career that they were seeking to pursue and highlighted that they chose subjects in order to meet the entry requirements for access to a third level course in order to pursue the particular career. Nevertheless, the findings show some participants also regretted choosing a subject which they had no previous experience of to meet the entry requirements for third level courses. Such a focus on meeting entry requirements for access to a particular course of study leaves little flexibility for students who have a change of mind regarding their future career during the course of Senior Cycle. Such a strong degree of specialisation towards a certain career by some students goes against a key objective of the LCE programme, namely to provide students with a broad balanced education with a degree of specialisation towards a particular career (DE 1996). This study also found that a number of students were unsure of the career area they wished to pursue after their post-primary education. It appears that students (27%) in this situation followed the age old advice of choosing a combination of subjects that includes a curricular language, a science subject and a business subject. This grants students the greatest degree of flexibility to keep as wide a range of future careers open to them as possible.

Finally, the uniqueness of students during the period of adolescence as they grow in readiness to make educational and vocational choices also emerged in the current study (Super et al. 1996, in Brown et al 1996b). The need for effective career guidance interventions to meet the uniqueness of each student is vital. The implications of Budget 2012 cuts to guidance provision has seen dramatic cuts in one to one guidance provision and a move towards class based guidance provision (ASTI 2013; IGC 2013; 2014; JMB 2012; NCGE 2013; Hearne et al. 2016) with particular cohorts of students more vulnerable as they rely more on the school guidance services than the main student body (Smyth et al. 2011). The restoration of guidance hours in budget 2017 (DES 2017a), and the specified allocation of time for one to

one guidance counselling (DES 2017b), may help address the deficit that has emerged in guidance provision in recent years.

5.4. Conclusion

This chapter discussed the primary findings in relation to the existing literature reviewed in Chapter 2. The discussion provided an insight into the factors that influence male post-primary students in making their subject choices for the Leaving Certificate Established. The findings show the myriad of organisational and personal factors that influence students at this vital time in their academic career. It is evident that organisational factors such as the school attended by a student and management decisions made in the school, in relation to programme and curriculum provision and the organisational supports available to students to help them with various academic decisions have a significant influence on student's subject choices. The disconnect between the central role of the guidance counsellor as set out in established Government guidance policy and the reality experienced by students in Irish post-primary schools also emerged in the study. A large number of personal factors were also identified and discussed such as students' motivation to choose a particular subject, the role that expectancy value theory plays in students' subject choices, the influence of family and friends, and student's future career aspirations. The overall conclusions and recommendation from this study will be presented in Chapter 6.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

6.0 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the main findings in the context of the aims and objectives of the study. It presents the strengths and limitations of the study and identifies a number of implications for policy and practice in schools. This chapter offers a number of recommendations informed by the findings. Finally, the chapter concludes with an examination of the personal learning of the researcher.

6.1 Overview of the Research Findings

The overall aim of this research was to explore the factors influencing male post-primary subject choice for the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE). This study had a number of objectives:

1. To review existing literature relevant to Irish post-primary education, policy and practice of guidance counselling in Irish post-primary education and the key influencing factors on students subject choice.
2. To collect and analyse the views of a sample of current 5th year male students attending two all-boys post primary schools and studying for the LCE.
3. To identify the main influencing factors on students subject choice for the LCE.
4. To identify recommendations that will inform the design, delivery and supports provided as part of the subject choice process for Senior Cycle students in Irish post-primary education.

These objectives were realised and a number of conclusions can be drawn from the study;

Firstly, the various choices that students make for the LCE can have long term implications on their educational and career opportunities (Warton and Cooney 1997). In making such choices, a number of influential factors come into play. In this study, the choices students make appear to be primarily influenced by a combination of organisational and personal factors and the complex interplay between both. In terms of the organisational factors, the findings that decisions made in individual post-primary schools can have a major impact on students' subject choices (Smyth and Hannan 2006). The autonomy given to school management regarding the educational programmes offered to their students and the subjects available as part of these programmes appear to impact significantly on students (Smyth and

Darmody 2009) as they can only choose a subject if it is offered in the first place in the school (Looney and Morgan 2001). The findings of this study show that engaging in Transition Year (TY) is also beneficial to students as it offers them the time and space for personal development and also the opportunity to sample subjects. The desire of students to be given the chance to sample subjects was a key finding that emerged in this study.

Secondly, the provision of appropriate guidance to students and the role of the guidance counsellor in Irish post-primary schools in relation to subject choice also emerged in this study. The findings highlight the different levels of services available to students across the two sampled schools and also point to the negative impact of the removal of the ex-quota guidance allocation in Budget 2012 in School A. It highlights the disconnect between government policy in guidance counselling provision, which assumes the guidance counsellor takes a leadership role in the design and delivery of a whole school approach (Hearne et al 2017; NCGE 2004), and the actual reality for some schools where there is no qualified guidance counsellor on staff. The findings of the study also correlate with previous research that classroom guidance provision has increased in popularity in schools with a decrease in the level of one-to-one guidance for students entering Senior Cycle (IGC 2016a). Moreover, the need for a greater focus on guidance provision for students in Junior Cycle also emerged in the study (McCoy et al 2006; Hearne 2016), along with the requirement for more effective communication between some schools and their students in relation to the guidance counselling services available to them.

Thirdly, student's future career aspirations appear to play a key role in their subject choice for the LCE. This study highlighted the uniqueness of student's in their readiness to make educational and vocational choices (Super et al. 1996, in Brown et al 1996a). For some students, this lack of readiness appears to be due to poor self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura 1995). On the other hand, students with a definite career in mind prior to making their subject choices often choose subjects aimed towards a particular career which allows limited flexibility for a change of mind during Senior Cycle (Smyth 2016). This can result in a student reaching a state of identity foreclosure (Marcia 1966; 1980) but subsequently experiences a change of mind and finds that they are doing the 'wrong subjects' (Smyth 2016). The challenge for post-primary schools is to have a whole school guidance plan that provides students with a range of learning opportunities which serve to assist them to learn and develop their decision making skills, to enhance and challenge their beliefs, to develop

their resilience and belief in their ability to make good decisions and to develop their ability to source and interpret the huge volume of information available to them (DES 2005a).

Finally, with regards to personal factors that influence subject choice the findings indicate that enjoyment of a subject can be one of the most influential factors in subject choice for students and it is often based on their cumulative experience of a subject to the point of decision making. The findings also suggest that students often make decisions based on their family values and beliefs and the expectations of society. The advice of family members, especially parents and siblings, appears to have a significant influence on them. In order to ensure that parents have up to date knowledge and information regarding subjects and careers, the challenge for guidance services and other stakeholders who play a role in the delivery of a whole school approach to guidance provision is to encourage parents to be involved. The provision of educational opportunity for parents may help to improve their ability to support their child during periods in their lives when they make academic choices such as subject choices (DES 2005a; Hearne et al. 2016; Letha 2013; NCCA 2007; NCGE 2004; Zhang et al.2015).

6.2 Strengths and Limitations of the Research Study

A key strength of this study is that it has investigated a topic which appears to have been under researched, apart from research carried out by the ESRI, compared to the volume of research conducted into the transition from primary to post-primary school (Smyth 2016).

Another strength of this study is the use of an online questionnaire which allowed access to the perceptions of two student groups in two schools at the same time and the associated cost and time savings compared to other primary data collection methods such as interviews (Mitchell and Jolley 2009). This resulted in a large amount of data being quantitative data but also included qualitative data.

In analysing the qualitative responses to the online questionnaire, the researcher utilised open coding and content analysis to identify emerging patterns and common responses. This may have led to the subjectivity of the study being brought in to question (Cohen et al. 2011). The researcher's position as a teacher, and trainee guidance counsellor, in one of the schools may also leave the research open to the accusation of bias. However, the researcher engaged in reflexivity to minimise this risk as much as possible (Etherington 2004).

The researcher acknowledges that the focus on male students only may be seen as a limitation of this study. The decision to focus on this cohort was due to the researcher's particular interest in this area. It is also based on his positionality as he has worked as a teacher for 14 years in one of the post-primary schools featured in this study which has DEIS status but does not have a qualified guidance counsellor on staff.

On reflection, the researcher felt that a mixed methods approach would have facilitated a more substantial study but there were time constraints to be considered. The use of interviews or focus groups could have complemented the quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire and would have provided thick descriptions and the opportunity to probe deeper. This would have been extremely useful especially in gaining a deeper understanding of participants views especially the participants who found the subject choice decision making process challenging.

6.3 Recommendations

Arising from the findings of this study a number of recommendations are put forward:

1. The desire for the creation of a high-skill, knowledge-based economy has dominated discourse in Irish education for the past number of decades. In many cases curriculum development has responded to meet the needs of the economy. The Irish education system at present forces students to make subject and career decisions very early in their lives which may result in funnelling students in a particular direction at a very early age. This process needs to be revisited and there ought to be a rebalancing in the emphasis of education policy towards meeting the changing needs of learners which will benefit the learner, society and the economy in the long-term.
2. The effectiveness of the subject choice decision making process and supports available to students in a post-primary school needs to be subjected to regular evaluations to ensure that it is satisfying the needs of as many students as possible who are entering Senior Cycle. This process could be used to gathered feedback from students and parents to determine if existing processes are as effective as possible and to identify any possible deficiencies that may exist.
3. Consideration should be given by schools to offering students the opportunity to sample subjects prior to making their final subject choices for the LCE. While subject sampling may operate in some schools, it may not in others. Although TY offers students the opportunity to sample subjects, for those who do not to participate in it

the requirement for subject sampling opportunities emerged in this study as a factor that needs to be considered by schools.

4. Based on the strength of the influence of parents on the subject choices of their children, from a whole school approach perspective stronger relationships and communication between schools and parents is recommended. The guidance counsellor needs to enhance the communication channels between parent and schools in order help equip parents with the most up to date information regarding various subjects offered in schools and to facilitate parents to be a useful resource for their children. A particular focus of the school guidance plan needs to focus on providing educational opportunities to parents to enable them to be of maximum assistance to their child during such transitional periods in their academic careers.
5. The increased flexibility offered by the reformed Junior Cycle programme holds the potential for post-primary schools to place a greater emphasis on guidance counselling provision through the Wellbeing component. It ought to make students aware of the guidance services available to them, to develop a relationship between the students and the guidance counsellor from an early stage in the post-primary system while also offering a range of learning opportunities to students to develop the vital self-management skills necessary for making academic and life choices.
6. Finally, further research involving a longitudinal study exploring the long term impact of subject choices made at Junior Cycle for both genders is recommended for evidence-based practice in the future.

6.4 Reflexivity in Relation to Personal Learning

I came to this research study with many preconceptions about the topic based on my experience as a post-primary teacher in one of the schools in the study. On many occasions I had conversations with students in Senior Cycle who sought my advice regarding the subjects I chose for my own Leaving Certificate and the content of the subjects I currently teach on the Senior Cycle. I often found myself questioning the level of assistance and the different sources of advice available to students prior to making their subject choices for the Leaving Certificate established. I also felt that guidance counselling provision and the value placed on it in Irish post-primary schools had been diminished over the last number of years especially post budget 2012. This thought had been reinforced as I currently work in a school with DEIS status with no qualified guidance counsellor.

Carrying out this research study has taught me that I need to set aside my own assumptions and opinions, and focus on the views of students. As an insider researcher, I applied a reflexive approach over the course of the research which challenged me to be acutely aware of my own biography, views, positions held and to monitor these factors (Cohen et al. 2007; 2011). I found reflective conversations with my research supervisor extremely helpful while the use of a diary and reflective journal allowed me to constantly monitor my own thoughts and reactions to participant's responses which helped to minimise any possible researcher bias (Etherington 2004).

Engaging in this research has also provided me with an increased awareness of the myriad of organisational and personal factors that influence student subject choices in schools. The research has also facilitated the identification of a number of areas for my own future practice, namely: the promotion and communication of the guidance counselling services available within my school; better understanding of all stakeholders role in the planning and delivery of a whole school approach to guidance provision; increased communication and involvement of parents in school guidance activities and finally, the need for regular reviews of existing school practices such as the subject choice decision making process currently in operation in the school. These key learnings will inform my future practice in my role as a guidance counsellor.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter concludes the research investigation. The main findings were summarised and presented in the context of the original aims and objectives of the study. The strengths and limitations of the study were identified and a number of recommendations were presented. Finally, the personal leaning and reflexivity of the researcher were discussed.

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Appendices

Appendix A



SUBJECT INFORMATION LETTER (PRINCIPAL)

Research Title: An exploration of the factors that influence male post-primary students in making their subject choices for the Leaving Certificate.

Date:

EHS Rec No: 2016_09_09_EHS

Dear Principal,

I am currently a student of the MA Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development course with the School of Education University of Limerick, under the supervision of Dr Lucy Hearne. As part of my studies I must complete a research dissertation on a topic related to guidance counselling. In my research I aim to explore the factors that influence male post-primary students in making their subject choices for the Leaving Certificate.

It is hoped that the findings of the study will help Guidance Counsellors, management and teachers understand the issue of subject decision-making for this group of male post-primary students. I would be grateful if you would give me consent to carry out part of my research study in your school. The research would require the participation of a sample of 5th year students. Students who consent to participate will be invited to complete an online questionnaire which will be e-mailed to them and will need to be completed in their free time within a two week time period.

I would also appreciate the assistance of the Guidance Counsellor to accompany me to the 5th Year classes to enable me to explain my research topic to the students and to distribute the necessary Information Sheets and Consent Forms to the students.

Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time prior to data analysis. The collected data will be securely stored according to University regulations. It is important to note that the school's name and the name of the individual

participants will not be used in the research and the school will not be identifiable to anyone other than those directly involved. The collected data will be kept for seven years after which it will be destroyed in accordance with the University of Limerick's guidelines.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. I would be grateful if you would consider granting me permission to conduct this research in your school. I would be grateful of a response within seven working days .If you have any queries or require further information on the research study, please feel free to contact me or my supervisor:

Researcher's Signature

Researcher

Name: Aiden Maher

E-mail address: 14092247@ul.ie

Principal Investigator (Supervisor)

Name: Dr Lucy Hearne

E-mail address: lucy.hearne@ul.ie

Phone: 061 202931

This research has received Ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EHSREC No.: 2016_09_09_EHS). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact:

*Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee,
EHS Faculty Office,
University of Limerick, Tel (061) 234101, ehsresearchethics@ul.ie*

Appendix B



CONSENT FORM (PRINCIPAL)

Research Title: An exploration of the factors that influence male post-primary students in making their subject choices for the Leaving Certificate.

EHS Rec No: 2016_09_09_EHS

Please read the following statements and if you agree to them, please sign the consent form:

1. I have read and understood the Subject information sheet.
2. I understand in detail the particulars of the research project and what the results will be used for.
3. I understand that the identity of the participants and the school will not be disclosed at any stage in the reporting of this research study.
4. I understand that the students' participation in the research study is voluntary and they can withdraw from the study at any time prior to the data analysis stage.

I agree with the above statements and hereby give my consent for Aiden Maher to carry out this research in [insert name of school]

Printed Name: _____

Principal's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix C



SUBJECT INFORMATION SHEET (STUDENT)

Research Title: An exploration of the factors that influence male post-primary students in making their subject choices for the Leaving Certificate.

Date:

EHS Rec No: 2016_09_09_EHS

Dear Student,

I am currently a student of the MA Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development course with the School of Education University of Limerick, under the supervision of Dr Lucy Hearne. I am carrying out a research study to explore the factors that influence male post-primary students in making their subject choices for the Leaving Certificate.

What you will have to do?

You will be invited to consent to complete an online questionnaire. All participants will be e-mailed a web link to the on-line questionnaire which will need to be completed within a two week time period. The online questionnaire will focus on factors that influenced you when making your subject choices for the Leaving Certificate. The on-line questionnaire will take approximately 20 minutes to complete. I cannot see any risks attached to your participation in this online questionnaire. If something does go wrong when completing the online questionnaire you can e-mail the researcher. If you do not understand something, please feel free to contact the researcher.

What will the findings be used for?

It is hoped that the findings of the study will help Guidance Counsellors, management and teachers understand the factors that influence male post-primary students in making their subject choices for the Leaving Certificate. This information will then help schools support their students on making their subject choices for Senior Cycle.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in this study is voluntary and you do not have to take part in it if you do not wish to do so. If you choose to take part you can withdraw from the research at any time prior to the data analysis phase. I would be grateful of a response within seven working days.

What happens to the information collected from students?

The collected data will be securely stored according to University regulations. It is important to note that your name will not be used in the research. The data gathered will be analysed and used to produce findings in my dissertation. The collected data will be kept for seven years after which it will be destroyed in accordance with the University of Limerick's guidelines.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. I would be grateful if you would consider taking part in this survey.

Researcher's Signature

Researcher

Name: Aiden Maher

E-mail address: 14092247@ul.ie

Principal Investigator (Supervisor)

Name: Dr Lucy Hearne

E-mail address: lucy.hearne@ul.ie

Phone: 061 202931

This research has received Ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EHSREC No.: 2016_09_09_EHS). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact:

*Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee,
EHS Faculty Office,
University of Limerick, Tel (061) 234101, ehsresearchethics@ul.ie*

Appendix D



CONSENT FORM (STUDENT)

Research Title: An exploration of the factors that influence male post-primary students in making their subject choices for the Leaving Certificate.

Date:

EHS Rec No: 2016_09_09_EHS

Please read the following statements and if you agree to them, please sign the consent form:

1. I have read and understood the student Subject Information Sheet.
2. I understand what the research study is about, and what the results will be used for.
3. I am fully aware of all the procedures involved, and of any risks and benefits of the study.
4. I understand that my name or identity will not be disclosed in the research findings.
5. I know that my participation in the research study is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time prior to the data analysis stage.

I agree to the above statements and I consent to taking part in Aiden Maher's research project.

Student Name (Please print): _____

Date: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix E



SUBJECT INFORMATION SHEET (PARENT/GUARDIAN)

Research Title: An exploration of the factors that influence male post-primary students in making their subject choices for the Leaving Certificate.

Date:

EHS Rec No: 2016_09_09_EHS

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am currently a student of the MA Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development course with the School of Education University of Limerick under the supervision of Dr Lucy Hearne. I am carrying out a study to explore the factors that influence male post-primary students in making their subject choices for the Leaving Certificate.

What will your child have to do?

As part of the research study your child will be invited to complete an online questionnaire to gather information on the topic. An e-mail containing a web link to an on-line questionnaire will be e-mailed to him and it will need to be completed within a two week time period. The online questionnaire will focus on factors that influenced your child in making their subject choices for the Leaving Certificate. The on-line questionnaire will take approximately 20 minutes to complete. I cannot see any risks attached to your child's participation in this online questionnaire. If something does go wrong when completing the online questionnaire you can e-mail the researcher. If you do not understand something, please feel free to contact the researcher.

What will the findings be used for?

It is hoped that the findings of the study will help Guidance Counsellors, management and teachers understand the factors that influence male post-primary students in making their

subject choices for the Leaving Certificate. This information will then help schools support their students on their subject choices for the Senior Cycle.

Does my child have to take part?

Participation in the study is voluntary and your child does not have to take part if he does not wish to do so. I would be grateful of a response within seven working days. He can withdraw from the research at any time prior to the data analysis phase.

What happens to the information collected from students?

The collected data will be securely stored according to University regulations. It is important to note that his name will not be used in the research. The data gathered will be analysed and used to produce findings in my dissertation. The data that is collected in the study will be kept for seven years after which it will be destroyed in accordance with the University of Limerick's guidelines.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. I would be grateful if you would consider giving consent for your child to take part in this research study. If you agree to your child's participation please sign the accompanying consent form.

Researcher's Signature

Researcher

Name: Aiden Maher

E-mail address: 14092247@ul.ie

Principal Investigator (Supervisor)

Name: Dr Lucy Hearne

E-mail address: lucy.hearne@ul.ie

Phone: 061 202931

This research has received Ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EHSREC No.: 2016_09_09_EHS). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact:

*Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee,
EHS Faculty Office,
University of Limerick, Tel (061) 234101, ehsresearchethics@ul.*

Appendix F



CONSENT FORM (PARENT/GUARDIAN)

Research Title: An exploration of the factors that influence male post-primary students in making their subject choices for the Leaving Certificate.

Date:

EHS Rec No: 2016_09_09_EHS

Please read the following statements and if you agree to them, please sign the consent form:

1. I have read and understood the parent/guardian Subject Information Sheet.
2. I understand what the research study is about, and what the results will be used for.
3. I am fully aware of all the procedures involving my child, and of any risks and benefits of the study.
4. I understand that my child's name or identity will not be disclosed in the research findings.
5. I know that my child's participation in the research study is voluntary and they can withdraw from the study at any time prior to the data analysis stage

I agree to the above statements and I consent to my child _____[name] taking part in Aiden Maher's research project.

Name of Child (Please print): _____

Name of Parent/Guardian (Please print): _____

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix G



SUBJECT INFORMATION LETTER (GUIDANCE COUNSELLOR)

Research Title: An exploration of the factors that influence male post-primary students in making their subject choices for the Leaving Certificate.

Date:

EHS Rec No: 2016_09_09_EHS

Dear Guidance Counsellor,

I am currently a student of the MA Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development course with the School of Education University of Limerick, under the supervision of Dr Lucy Hearne. I am carrying out a study to explore the factors that influence male post-primary students in making their subject choices for the Leaving Certificate.

I have been granted consent by the school Principal to carry out the research in your school. In order to do so I would like to visit 5th year classes to explain the study to students and distribute student and parent/guardian Subject Information Sheets and Consent Forms. I would be grateful if you could facilitate access for me to meet the 5th year classes on the day of a pre-arranged visit.

I would appreciate if you could assist with this process. I am contactable at the email address below to discuss this further. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Researcher's Signature

Researcher

Name: Aiden Maher

E-mail address: 14092247@ul.ie

Principal Investigator (Supervisor)

Name: Dr Lucy Hearne

E-mail address: lucy.hearne@ul.ie

Phone: 061 202931

This research has received Ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EHSREC No.: 2016_09_09_EHS). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact:

*Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee,
EHS Faculty Office,
University of Limerick, Tel (061) 234101, ehsresearchethics@ul.ie*

Appendix H



ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE (for SurveyMonkey)

Research Title: An exploration of the factors that influence male post-primary students in making their subject choices for the Leaving Certificate.

EHS Rec No: 2016_09_09_EHS

Instructions: Please complete ALL sections and questions in the questionnaire

Section A

1. What is your age? _____
2. What is your nationality? _____
3. Have you completed the Transition Year programme?
Yes No
4. If you answered *Yes* to Question 3, how useful was the Transition Year programme in helping you to choose your subjects for the Leaving Certificate?

Not very useful

Useful

Very useful

Please explain further: _____

5. If you answered *Yes* to Question 3 above, did you complete the *Transition Year Work Placement Programme*?

Yes No

6. If you answered *Yes* to Question 5, did your Work Placement experience influence the subjects you chose for your Leaving Certificate?

Yes No

Section B

7. How did you receive information regarding the various Leaving Certificate subject options available to you in school? Please tick the appropriate box(es) below:

School's Subject Choice Information Booklet	
Individual Meeting with the School Guidance Counsellor	
Careers Guidance Class	
Subject Choice Information Open Night in School	
Subject Specific Teachers	
Principal/Deputy Principal	
Other Sources of Information	

8. If you ticked *Other Sources of Information* in Question 7, please explain further:

9. What subjects are you now studying for the Leaving Certificate?

- i. _____
- ii. _____
- iii. _____
- iv. _____
- v. _____
- vi. _____
- vii. _____
- viii. _____

10. Did you get to sample (trial) a subject before making your subject choices for the Leaving Certificate?

Yes No

11. If you answered *Yes* to Question 10, did you benefit from sampling (trailing) of subjects before you made your final subject choices?

Yes No

12. If you answered *Yes* to Question 11, how did you benefit from sampling (trailing) of subjects before you made your final subject choices?

13. If you answered *No* to Question 10, would you have liked to have sampled (trilled) subjects before you made your final subject choices?

Yes No

Please explain further:

14. Are you happy with the subjects you chose for your Leaving Certificate?

Yes No

Please explain the reason(s) for you answer:

15. How did you find the process of choosing your subjects for the Leaving Certificate?

Very Easy

Easy

Difficult

Please explain further:

Section C

16. Did you consider the future jobs you might like to do when choosing your subjects for the Leaving Certificate?

Yes

No

17. If you answered *Yes* to Question 19 please explain further:

18. Did you look for advice from the school Guidance Counsellor when choosing your subjects for the Leaving Certificate?

Yes

No

19. If you answered *No* to Question 21, why did you not seek advice from the school Guidance Counsellor when choosing your subjects for the Leaving Certificate? Please explain further:

20. When choosing your subjects for the Leaving Certificate, whom or what influenced your decisions?

Rank in order of preference 1 to 10, (*1 being the most influential and 10 being the least influential*)

Brothers/ Sisters	
Subject teachers	
Friends	
Parents / Guardians	
Guidance Counsellor	
Principal or Deputy Principal	
Year Head	
Easy, useful for CAO points	
My Interest in the Subject	
Media (TV, Radio, Newspapers etc)	
Other	

21. If you answered *Other* above please describe further:

22. Overall, please describe how the process of choosing your subjects for the Leaving Certificate has been for you in your school.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. If you have any concerns in relation to your subject choices for the Leaving Certificate please contact your school's Guidance Counsellor for advice and support.

Appendix I



University of Limerick
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Acceptance of the University of Limerick Child Protection Guidelines

I have read the University of Limerick Child Protection Guidelines and agree to abide by its content. There is no reason why I would be considered unsuitable to work with children or young people.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Print Name: _____

Department: _____

This form must be retained by the signatory's University Department

Appendix J

Leaving Certificate Established Subject Groups

Languages Group	Ancient Greek Arabic Classical Studies English French German Hebrew Studies Irish Italian Japanese Latin Russian Spanish
Science Group	Applied Mathematics Biology Chemistry Physics
Business Studies Group	Accounting Business Economics
Applied Science Group	Agricultural Economics Agricultural Science Construction Studies Design and Communication Graphics Engineering Physics and Chemistry Technology
Social Studies Group	Art, Geography, History Home Economics Music Religious Education

Appendix K

Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme Subject Combinations.

LCVP students take a minimum of five Leaving Certificate Subjects (at Higher, Ordinary or Foundation Level) including Irish. Two of these subjects must be selected from one of the designated Vocational Subject Groupings listed in the table below. Students must also study two Link Modules, namely Preparation for the World of Work and Enterprise Education and are required to follow a recognised course in a Modern European Language.

1. Construction Studies or Engineering or Technical Drawing, Design & Communication Graphics, Technology
2. Physics and Construction Studies or Engineering or Technology or Design & Communication Graphics
3. Agricultural Science and Construction Studies or Engineering or Technology or Design & Communication Graphics
4. Agricultural Science and Chemistry or Physics or Physics & Chemistry (combined subject)
5. Home Economics and Agricultural Science or Biology
6. Home Economics and Art
7. Accounting or Business or Economics
8. Physics and Chemistry
9. Biology and Chemistry or Physics or Physics & Chemistry (combined subject)
10. Biology and Agricultural Science
11. Art & Design & Communication Graphics
12. Engineering or Technology or Design & Communication Graphics or Construction Studies and Business or Accounting or Economics
13. Construction Studies and Business or Accounting or Economics
14. Home Economics and Business or Accounting or Economics
15. Agricultural Science and Business or Accounting or Economics
16. Art and Business or Accounting or Economics
17. Music and Business or Accounting or Economics

Appendix L

Languages (Excluding English and Irish)

It emerged from the data that 51.66% (n=31) of all participants chose a curricular language. Of the 51.66% (n=31) of participants who chose a curricular language, French was chosen by a significant majority (71% / n=22) while German was chosen by 26% (n=8) with the remaining participant opting for Spanish 3% (n=1). *See Chart 4.17.*

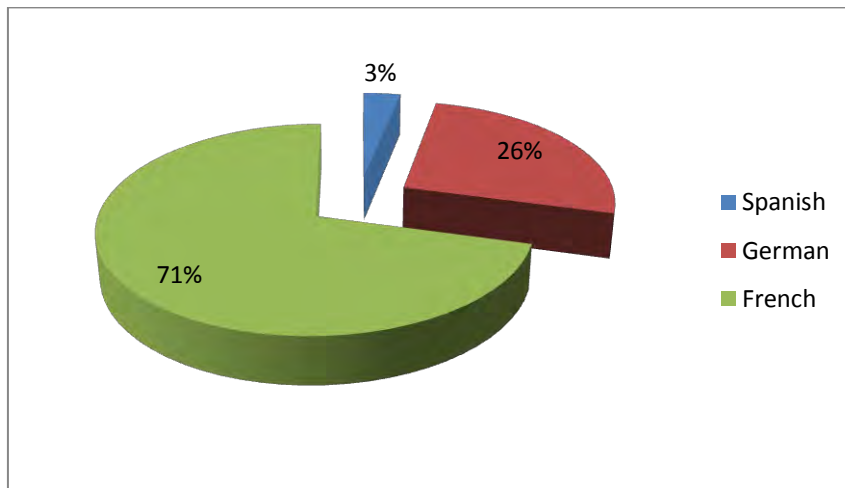


Chart 4.17: Percentage breakdown of curricular languages chosen by participants.

Business Subjects

In analysing the participants who chose a Business subject option, Business was the most popular subject and was chosen by 45% (n=21), Economics was the second most popular with 32% (n=15) followed by Accounting with 23% (n=11). Of the 78.3% of participants (n=47) who chose a subject from the Business Studies suite of subject options, 6% (n=3) chose 3 Business Studies based subjects while 17% (n=8) chose two Business Studies based subjects. *See Chart 4.18.*

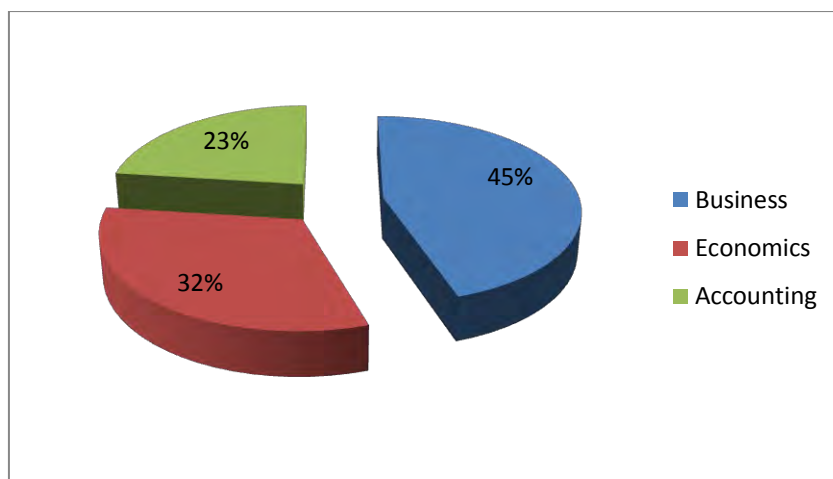


Chart 4.18: Percentage breakdown of business subject options chosen by participants.

Sciences (Excluding Mathematics)

A majority of participants chose a Science for the LCE (80% / n=48). *See Chart 4.11.* As one can see the majority of participants who chose a Science subject chose Biology (57% / n=27). In total 23% (n=11) of all participants who chose a Science subject chose Chemistry, while 12% (n=6) chose Physics with the remaining participants opting for Applied Mathematics 8% (n=4). *See Chart 4.19.*

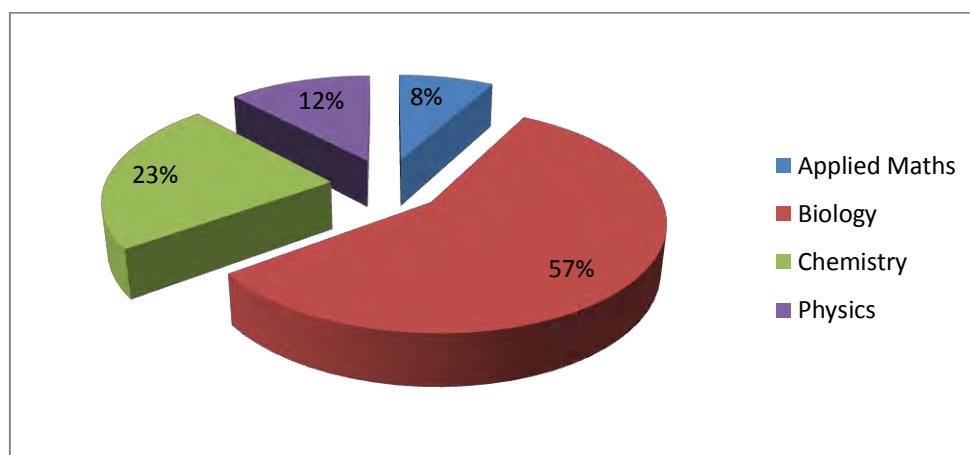


Chart 4.19: Percentage breakdown of sciences chosen by participants.

Applied Science Group

The findings show that 73% (n=44) of participants chose a subject for the applied science group. Of the 44 participants who chose an applied science subject, the most popular subject was Construction Studies (39% / n=17). This was followed by Design and Communication Graphics (25% / n=11) and Engineering (19% / n=9). Of the remaining participants 16% (n=7) did Agricultural Science. *See Chart 4.20.*

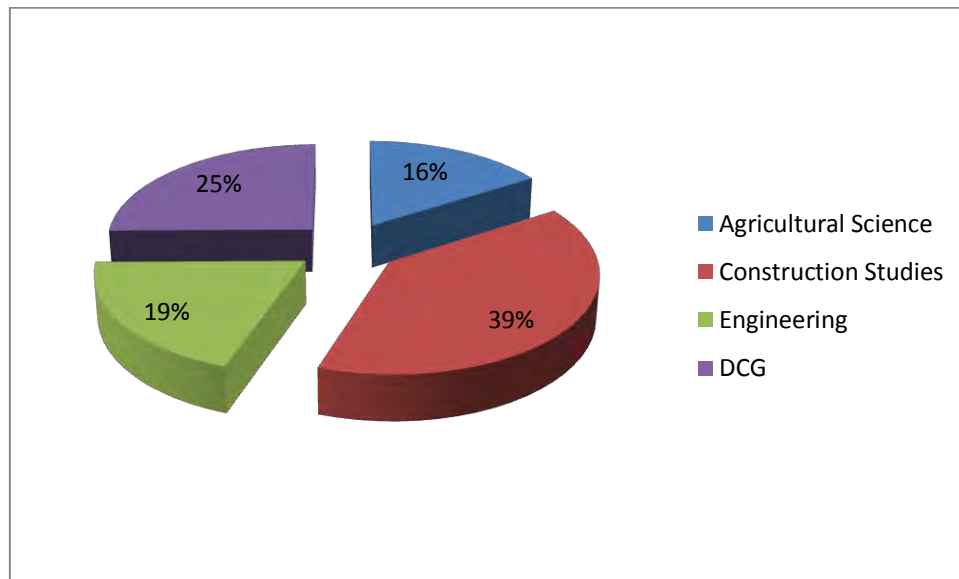


Chart 4.20: Percentage breakdown of applied sciences chosen by participants.

Social Studies Group

The findings show that 77% (n=46) of all participants chose a subject from the Social Studies Group. Of the 46 participants, Geography proved to be the most popular subject option (74% / n=34), while 15% (n=7) of participants chose History with the remaining participants choosing Music (9% / n= 4) or Art (2% / n=1). *See Chart 4.21.*

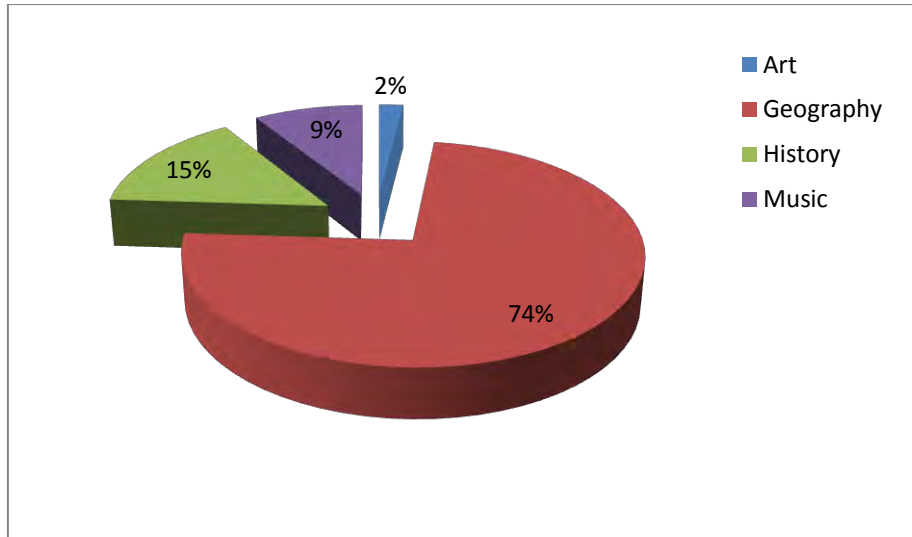


Chart 4.21: Percentage breakdown of social studies subjects chosen by participants.