An Investigation into Decision Making Factors that Influence a Students Subject Choice in Senior Cycle

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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

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<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>ASTI</td>
<td>Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCYA</td>
<td>Department of Children and Youth Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DE</td>
<td>Department of Education (1921-1997)</td>
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<td>DEIS</td>
<td>Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DES</td>
<td>Department of Education and Science (1997 - 2010)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DES</td>
<td>Department of Education and Skills (2010 – Present)</td>
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<tr>
<td>EC</td>
<td>European Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESRI</td>
<td>Economic and Social Research Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETB</td>
<td>Education and Training Boards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>HSCL</td>
<td>Home School Community Liaison</td>
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<tr>
<td>IGC</td>
<td>Institute of Guidance Counsellors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISSU</td>
<td>Irish Second Level Students Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LCA</td>
<td>Leaving Certificate Applied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LCVP</td>
<td>Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCCA</td>
<td>National Council for Curriculum and Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCGE</td>
<td>National Centre for Guidance in Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGF</td>
<td>National Guidance Forum Leaving Certificate Applied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDST</td>
<td>Professional Development Service for Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEC</td>
<td>State Examination Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPSS</td>
<td>Statistical Package for the Social Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STEM</td>
<td>Science, Technology Engineering and Mathematics</td>
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<tr>
<td>TUI</td>
<td>Teachers Union of Ireland</td>
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TY Transition Year
VEC Vocational Education Committee
WSA Whole School Approach
Abstract
The overall aim of this study is to investigate factors that influence Senior Cycle post primary students in their subject choice for Senior Cycle. As students transition from Junior Cycle to Senior Cycle in Irish post primary education, the task of subject choice is an exciting time (Smyth, 2016). Students look forward to the opportunity of choosing subjects and this process can be influenced by multiple factors (Smyth and Hannan, 2006; Smyth, 2016). However, subject choice is a time when decisions are of critical importance as choosing the wrong subjects, can have long term consequences on schooling, future educational and career choices (Mooney, 2009, 2011).

A post positive approach was utilised in this study to collect data (Gray, 2014; O’Leary, 2014). This involved surveying 96 fifth year post primary students in two DEIS schools, through the use of an online questionnaire.

The key findings of this study highlight that subject choice is influenced by a myriad of extrinsic and intrinsic factors. Extrinsic factors include parents, school management and structure, subject choice bands, TY programme and the school guidance counsellor. Intrinsic factors include students aptitudes, gender and Junior Certificate subject results.

The impact of Budget 2012 has resulted with a gradual dismantling of guidance provisions for Junior Cycle leaving students marginalised, with guidance counsellors spending most of their time with Senior Cycle students (Hearne et al., 2016b). The findings identified that student’s interest and ability in a subject takes precedents over their socio-economic background. The opportunity to sample subjects in TY provides students with a greater insight into subject content, enabling students to make a more informed subject choice for Senior Cycle.

To conclude, this research study can enhance the existing body of literature that exists in relation to the factors that influence subject choice for Senior Cycle and a number of recommendations are made to inform future policy, practice and research.
Chapter One 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 of the study and the positionality of the researcher. The aims, objectives and the research methodology, which underpin this study are addressed. Finally, a structured plan of this dissertation will be presented.

1.1 Background and Justification for the Research Study
This research investigates the factors that influence Senior Cycle students in their subject choice for the Leaving Certificate in two Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) schools. The task of selecting subjects at Senior Cycle is an exciting time, but students may hold ambivalent emotions when selecting subjects (Smyth and Hannan, 2006). Decision making, subject choice and career direction is a crucial task for young adolescents, with incorrect subject choices having unintended consequences when pathways into third level are restricted by unfortunate subject gaps (Patton and Creed, 2001; Mooney, 2011). While literature exists on the transition from primary to post primary education, limited literature exists surrounding the transition from Junior Cycle to Senior Cycle (Smyth, 2016).

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) (2014) highlights that over 90% of students who enter post primary education are now completing their Leaving Certificate and the consideration of subject choice is an issue of critical importance. Currently, the DES offers 36 potential subjects to study for their Leaving Certificate, with the majority of students selecting between six and nine subjects (DES, 2017c). However, not all subjects are offered in every school (DES, 2011). School management play an imperative role in the development and design of subject band offerings. This can be influenced by various factors such as school types either secondary, vocational, community or comprehensive along with single sex school or co-education schools, all holding different value systems and ethos towards which subjects they believe suit the needs of their school and students (Stables, 1997; Smyth, 2016).

Students’ knowledge about the concept of self and possible future careers, develops through their social interactions with others (Barnes et al., 2011). The process of subject
choice can be influenced by multiple factors such as socio economic setting, personal characteristics, gender, subject choice bands and structure (Boyd and Bee, 2012). Such choices are made during adolescence, when students may be experiencing an identity crisis as they continue towards forming a stable adult identity (Erikson, 1968). In addition, students are selecting subjects at a younger age (Smyth and Calvert, 2011) and often without the assistance and support of the guidance counsellor and the possibility of anxiety that accompanies these decisions is rarely considered (Hearne et al., 2016b; Smyth, 2016). It has been found that students hold regrets about the career pathways they choose after post primary education and identified the subjects they selected for Senior Cycle, restricted their options (McCoy et al., 2014). Therefore, the provision of appropriate guidance and information to students during this crucial period of their development is needed (NCCA, 2007).

A central role of the guidance counsellor is to provide educational and career guidance to students during transitional periods of their lives such as Junior Cycle to Senior Cycle (IGC, 2007). The impact of Budget 2012 resulted in a gradual dismantling of the guidance provisions in Irish post primary schools during students formative years (Hearne and Galvin, 2014; Hearne et al., 2016a; IGC, 2016b). However, the “restored guidance provision should be able to provide redress for some of the impact of Budget 2012 measures on subject choice” (DES, 2017a, p.2). Lower achieving and disadvantaged students, in particular DEIS students, have an increased reliance on the post primary school guidance service to provide them with accurate subject choice information for Senior Cycle (Smyth et al., 2011). A whole school approach to guidance has become established policy, whereby schools are expected to collaboratively cultivate and deliver a school guidance service to support the needs of students (DES, 2012; IGC, 2016; NCGE, 2004). Therefore, this study examines the factors that influence fifth year Senior Cycle students with subject choice, during the Junior Certificate and Transition Year (TY).

1.2 Positionality of the Researcher

The positionality of the researcher is an important element of this research (Thomas, 2009). During this research, the researcher worked as a teacher in a DEIS post primary school and a trainee guidance counsellor. This researcher’s current school lacks a guidance counsellor, which led to the researcher having a specific interest in the factors that influence Senior Cycle students with subject choice during the transition from Junior
Cycle to Senior Cycle. It is anticipated that this study will provide the researcher with a
greater knowledge of the needs of students and inform his future guidance practice, to
assist and facilitate students in their subject choice for Senior Cycle. Throughout this
research, the researcher remained cognisant to the validity of the research and thus
engaged in reflexivity to critically reflect on his own position and assumptions throughout
(Thomas, 2009).

1.3 Aims and Objectives of the Research
The overarching aim of this research was to investigate the contributing factors that
influence subject choice for Senior Cycle students in post primary from the perspective of
students who have already chosen there subjects for Senior Cycle in Junior Certificate and
TY.

The research objectives were:

1. Examine literature relevant to the research topic. This included Irish post primary
   educational policy which underpinned subject development in schools. Additionally, the
   various intrinsic and extrinsic factors which influence subject choice for students and the role
   of the guidance counsellor in supporting students with subject choice will be addressed.
2. To collect and analyse through an online questionnaire the perceptions of fifth year
   Senior Cycle students in two DEIS post primary schools with regards to their
   subject choice for Senior Cycle.
3. To identify the main intrinsic and extrinsic factors that influence student subject
   choice for the Leaving Certificate.
4. To analyse the overall findings and identify recommendations for future practice,
   that will inform the subject design process, its delivery and supports needed, as
   part of subject choice process for Senior Cycle fifth year students.

1.4 Research Methodology
This research study has been underpinned by a post positivist paradigm. The utilisation of
this paradigm allows for objective quantifiable numerical data to be collected and
concludes with findings of probable influences (Gray, 2014; O’Leary, 2014; Mertens,
2015). The data was gathered though an online questionnaire (SurveyMonkey). The
collected quantitative data was analysed by infernal tests and theme mapping, using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and imported into Microsoft Excel for graphical representation. All qualitative data was collated by nomothetic coding. At all times, the research adhered to Institutional ethical requirements of the University of Limerick Faculty of Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee, the Institute of Guidance Counsellor (2012a) *Code of Ethics*, the National Centre for Guidance in Education (2008) *Research Code of Ethics* and the Data Protection Act 1988 and 2003.

1.5 Structure of the Dissertation
The following is the structure of this dissertation:

**Chapter One: Introduction**
Chapter one sets out the context and justification of the research with regards to the factors that influence post primary students in their subject choice for Leaving Certificate. It examines the positionality of the researcher; the aim and objectives of the study and the methodology adopted, before concluding with a structured plan of the dissertation.

**Chapter Two: Literature Review**
The literature review scrutinises existing literature relevant to the research topic to provide a theory, policy and practice context. It is demarcated into three sections: the first section examines Irish educational policy shaping subject choice; the second section examines the various intrinsic and extrinsic factors influencing subject choice. The third section examines policy and practice of guidance counselling in post primary education.

**Chapter Three: Methodology**
The methodology chapter provides a justification for the research methodology chosen. It outlines the process of research, including the data collection instrument and analysis. In addition, it outlines the validity, reliability, reflexivity and ethical issues associated with the study.

**Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Findings**
This chapter presents the primary findings of the study through a discussion of the predominant themes that emerged from the data.
**Chapter Five: Discussion**

Chapter five provides a critical discussion of the overall findings in the context of the literature review in Chapter two.

**Chapter Six: Conclusion**

The closing chapter presents conclusions derived from the study. It examines the extent of which the research aim and objectives were achieved. In addition, it outlines the strengths and limitations of the study and proposes recommendations for future policy, practice and research. The chapter finishes with reflexivity in relation to the researchers learning, during the research process.

Chapter two will critically review literature relevant to the research topic.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

This literature review aims to critically examine literature related to the factors that influence subject choice in fifth year students in post primary education. To do this, the review engaged with Irish and international policy documents, academic journals, research reports, education documents, documents from guidance counselling representative bodies and internet based articles and documents. The first section examines Irish educational policy which altered the landscape for subject choice in post primary education. The second section examines how various factors can intrinsically and extrinsically influence a student when it comes to subject choice and finally, the third section will discuss the role of the guidance counsellor in supporting subject choice for Senior Cycle students.

2.1 Irish Educational Policy on Subject Choice since 1924

The Irish educational landscape during the early twenty century underwent political, social and economic changes (Coolahan, 1981). Irish post-primary education was predominately provided by denominational or religious schools, with a classical-academic subject choice available generally intended to prepare students for third level education and white collar occupations (Coolahan, 1981; Heraty et al., 2000). However, during the progression of the 20th century, various acts and policies were enacted by the Irish Government which allowed for a broader range of subjects, such as modern language and science being introduced into the curriculum (Coolahan, 1981).

The 1924 “Intermediate Education Act” introduced two certified examinations for Secondary Schools; the Intermediate Certificate and the Leaving Certificate (Coolahan, 1981; O’ Buachalla, 1988). Subject provision and choice was limited whereby, male students studied a language, English or Irish, Maths or Arithmetic, while female students undertook a different set of subjects namely, Geography, Drawing, Music, Science and Domestic Science (Coolahan, 1981; Lewis and Kellaghan, 1987; O’ Buachalla, 1988). In 1930, the “Vocational Education Act” attempted to combat subject inequality, access, non-denominational education and social divide (O’ Buachalla, 1988). It led to the creation of Vocational Educational Committees (VEC’s) or vocational schools, now known as Education and Training Boards (ETB’s) (Elsner et al., 2008). However, denominational
secondary schools imposed restrictions on vocational schools issuing certified examinations and subject choice, resulting in vocational schools not being allowed to provide the academic Intermediate and Leaving Certificate, but instead they offered an alternative certified examination, the Group Certificate, which was completed after two years of study (Hannan and Boyle, 1987; Tuohy, 2002). Similarly, this Group Certificate offered a limited subject choice for students with male students studying Irish, English, Maths, Woodwork and Metalwork, while female students studied Irish, English, Maths, Home Economics and Secretarial skills (Tuohy, 2002) and although alternative school types existed, the choice of school selected, determined the subject choice a student studied (Elsner et al., 2008) with vocational schools placing greater emphasis on practical subjects which contributed to the employment demands of the growing economy while secondary schools placed greater emphasis on university progression (Elsner et al., 2008; Tuohy, 2002).

This separation of curriculum, subject choice and examinations structures continued to exist between secondary schools and vocational schools until 1966 (Hyland, 2014). In 1967, The Department of Education (DE) *Investment in Education* report highlighted inequalities in the Irish Education system, resulting with the 1970 publication of the Government’s “Community School” document (Hyland and Milne, 1992). This document emphasised the integration of academic and practical subjects into the curriculum to eliminate the stigma which was attached and associated to each individual school and student (Hyland and Milne, 1992; Hyland, 2014). Additionally, from the *Investment in Education* (DE, 1967) report, the free fees scheme was announced which witnessed a dramatic increase in enrolment in post primary education from 143,000 in 1965 to 340,000 in 1985 (Whyte, 2003). This yearly enrolment increase placed additional expectations on schools to provide a more balanced curriculum that served the needs of its pupils, the economy and the social class within the boundaries of the school (Whyte, 2003).

In the mid-1970s, the integration of curriculum, subject choice and examination structures within post primary schools started to emerge (Hannan and Boyle, 1987; Tuohy, 2002; Hyland, 2014). Subject availability and choice was widening with vocational schools offering for the first time, the Intermediate Certificate and the Leaving Certificate with academic subjects such as geography and music and likewise, secondary schools now offered practical subjects such as engineering workshop and building construction to its
students (Lewis and Kellaghan, 1987). Students who completed the Leaving Certificate were required to select five subjects along with Irish, three subjects from a group of five namely: Languages, Sciences, Business Studies, Applied Science and Social Studies and two subjects from outside this group (Lewis and Kellaghan, 1987). Therefore, by the late 1970s, government policy had widened subject choice and offered a more balanced curriculum to students (Heraty et al., 2000). This intermingling of subject curriculum was welcomed by the Irish government with all schools encouraged to adopt this approach (Whyte, 2003). Furthermore, these changes led to vocational and secondary schools amalgamating to become community colleges which offered greater subject choice to its students (Elsner et al., 2008).

In the 1980s, the Irish government enacted educational policy and acts such as “Programme for Action in Education 1984-1987” and “Building on Reality” focusing on education to work nexus, poorly preforming students and providing additional help for the disadvantaged within the system (Lewis and Kellaghan, 1987). Additionally, throughout the 1980s discourse emerged about the unsuitability of the Leaving Certificate programme for a large proportion of Senior Cycle students, resulting in it being restructured into three parts to cater for a variety of student abilities, intelligences and interests namely; the established Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (L.C.V.P) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (L.C.A) (Drudy and Lynch, 1993; Heraty et al., 2000; Hammond and Palmer, 1999). The LCVP followed the established Leaving Certificate curriculum with a grouping of subjects and additional modules (Malone, 2011; Smyth, 2016). However, subject choice availability for LCVP students is limited. Firstly, students have to select five mainstream Leaving Certificate subjects with two being selected from designated vocational subject groups, a language along with work experience and enterprise modules (See Appendix A), and secondly, subject choice is dependent on subject availability within the school (Heraty et al., 2000; Malone, 2011).

Further developments occurred in the early 1990s as the Government restructured the Junior Cycle curriculum and replaced the Group and Intermediate Certificate with the Junior Certificate, “to ensure that the full range of pupil’s abilities and aptitude were catered for” (DE, 1989 p.5). Through the introduction of this uniformed certified examination system, the barriers associated with previous certificates was eroded (Malone, 2011). By 1994, 26 subjects were available to be studied at Junior Cycle and 33 at Senior
Cycle (NCCA, 2004). In 1995 the term ‘educational disadvantage’ emerged in educational policy discourse in the “White Paper on Education, Charting our Education Future” and the Education Act 1998 Section 32 (9) (Smyth and Hannan, 2000). Importantly, from these, in 2005 the DEIS Action Plan for Educational Inclusion was delivered. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds were found to have based their subject choice on their disadvantaged social grouping (Craven, 2012). To combat this, the DEIS Action Plan set out on “improving the path of educational opportunity for those who come to education at a disadvantage” (DES, 2017b, p.4) and provides additional supports namely a reduction in the pupil teacher ratio and the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (DES, 2005a).

In spite of these developments, the Irish economic recession from 2008 onwards resulted in Government cutbacks to education having profound impact on students and their subject choices (O’ Connell, 2013). In particular, the reduced school capitation grants and teacher allocation has placed pressure on schools to provide a curriculum of subjects that would best suits the needs of its students (ASTI, 2013b). These cutbacks reversed previous government policies that had once, widened subject availability and choice for students with four in ten schools reporting the removal of at least one subject from their Leaving Certificate curriculum, with accounting, physics, economics and chemistry being the top four subjects removed (ASTI, 2013a). In more recent times, the DCYA report that over 90% of students who enter post primary education now complete the Leaving Certificate (DCYA, 2014). With the DES offering 36 potential subjects to study for the Leaving Certificate, a consideration of subject choice is an issue of critical importance (DES, 2017c; Smyth and Hannan, 2006) as half of students hold regrets towards the career paths they chose after post primary education, identifying subjects they had selected for Senior Cycle restricted their options (McCoy et al., 2014).

2.2 Extrinsic and Intrinsic Factors Influencing Subject Choice

This section discusses various extrinsic factors such as, school management and structure, subject choice bands, parents and the TY programme and intrinsic factors such as students’ aptitudes, gender and Junior Certificate subject results that impact and influence a students’ subject choice.
2.2.1 Influence of School Subject Provision

The area of subject choice and provision is a complex process for students, with various interlinking factors influencing subject choice, one being school type (Davies et al., 2003). The Irish Constitution (Articles 42.2 and 42.3.1) in conjunction with the Irish Education Act, (1998) entitles parents to send their child to a school of their choice. The subject choice offering of a school is a key influencer in selecting a child’s post primary school, as parents from different social backgrounds hold different views towards schools and the subjects they offer (Byrne and Smyth, 2010; McEvoy, 2003). At present, there are five different types of post primary schools in Ireland, namely; Secondary, Vocational, Community, Comprehensive and Educate Together and although each has a variety of similar characteristics, they can vary significantly in the provision and availability of subjects to students (Davies et al., 2003; Smyth and Hannan, 2006; Smyth, 2016). However, the provision of subject choice offering varies from school to school depending on factors such as school size and available resources (NCCA, 2007).

Furthermore, post primary schools play a significant part in moulding students preferences (Davies et al., 2004). Historically, Vocational, Community and Comprehensive schools placed greater emphasis and availability on practical subjects, whereas Secondary schools place greater emphasis on academic subjects (Hannan et al., 1996). Additionally, subject availability in single sex schools has been found to be restrictive in nature, with male single sex schools less likely to offer subjects such as Home Economics and Music. Likewise, single sex female schools being less likely to offer Engineering and Construction Studies (Mac an Ghaill et al., 2002; Smyth and Darmody, 2009). However, these differences in subject choice offering between schools, can be influenced by geographical location, ethos of the school, social class of the community and the managerial structure within the school (Stables, 1997; Smyth, 2016).

Management in Irish post primary schools have a significant amount of discretion in the design of the subject choice process they offer to students, with decisions inevitably shaping students subject choice preferences (Davies et al., 2004; Smyth and Darmody, 2009). It has been found that school Principals have a tendency to assume and make decisions about the interest of their students and appropriate subject choices (Davies et al., 2004; Smyth, 2016). These managerial decisions are influenced by policies and practices, school type, subject option blocks, qualifications of staff, class size restrictions, the
available resources of the school, gender preference and balance along with the student population (Smyth and Hannan, 2006). However, by Principals making assumptions about a suitable match between social backgrounds, personal characteristics and gender, this can have a restrictive nature towards the students’ subject choice availability and future career aspirations (Davies et al., 2003; Smyth and Hannan, 2006).

The Department of Education and Skills (DES, 2009) recommend schools allow students appropriate time to sample subjects. The opportunity to sample subjects is a major aid in making informed decisions regarding subject choice for Senior Cycle (Smyth and Darmody, 2009). Subject sampling provides exposure to a variety of different subjects and allows students to experiment with subjects they may not have studied before (Smyth et al., 2011). Additionally, this sampling process improves student-teacher relationships, creates positive attitudes towards school, increases self-awareness and provides knowledge of future career possibilities. Conversely, students who are not afforded the opportunity to sample subjects after Junior Cycle felt ‘they would have made different subject choices based on their results or on the sampling of subjects for the Leaving Certificate’ (ISSU, 2014, p.22).

Students who participate in the TY programme express greater levels of subject gratification (Smyth et al., 2004b). The TY programme is an optional, one-year, full-time programme, aimed at students who are 15 or 16 years old (Clerkin, 2012; Jeffers, 2011; Smyth et al., 2004b). This programme acts as a bridge from Junior Cycle to Leaving Certificate (Clerkin, 2012) and ‘offers students a space to learn, mature and develop in the absence of examination pressure’ (DES, 1993, p.2). As part the TY programme schools have freedom to design their own syllabus with many schools offering subject sampling (Clerkin, 2012; ISSU, 2014). Giving students the opportunity to sample subjects is a major benefit associated with the TY programme, as students get the opportunity to explore the content of different Leaving Certificate subjects (Smyth et al., 2011). Additionally, this knowledge of subject content along with the benefits of obtaining their Junior Certificate results, provides TY students with a greater knowledge to make informed subject choices for Senior Cycle (ISSU, 2014).

Another element of the TY programme is work experience (Smyth et al., 2011). Participation in work experience provides students with an understanding of the world of
work, the opportunity to be treated as a responsible adult with social interactions of the workplace regarded as more important than learning skills (ISSU, 2014; Smyth et al., 2004b, 2011). Students are encouraged to explore and test assumptions of particular occupations along with traditional gender and social class expectations (Jeffers, 2011). One of the main insights gained from work experience is clarifying thoughts on potential future careers. This provides students with a justification and realisation of specific career paths which may or may not match their expectations and therefore, help students achieve a more informed subject choice for Leaving Certificate (ISSU, 2014).

2.2.2 Parental Influence and Social Class Background

Smyth and Darmody (2009) advocate parental influence and family social class can have a strong influence on the decision making process of students. Parents have an imperative role in the decision making factors and are seen as integral partners in the education of their child (NCGE, 2004; Mortimer, 2002). The relationship between parent and child has a significant impact on the competence, decision making, resilience and well-being of children (Letha, 2013). It has been found that students consider their parents as the most influential factor in their subject choice decisions and value their opinions more than teachers and peers, with mothers being more influential than fathers (Byrne and Smyth, 2010; Grolnick and Slowiaczek, 1994; Hannan, 1983; NCCA, 2007; Hearne et al., 2016b; McCoy et al., 2014; Reay, 1996; Smyth et al., 2004a). This parental influence is related to students making naïve links between certain subjects and career aspiration corresponding to their parents interests, allowing parents to act like chief advisers (Wikeley and Stables, 1999; Van De Werfhost et al., 2003). However, the kind of information parents receive in advising their children is limited (Byrne and Smyth, 2010).

Although parents appear to be the most influential factor, various factors such as socio-economic and parental educational background also influence subject choice (Pena, 2000; Smyth and Hannan, 2006; McCoy et al., 2014). Parents of different educational and socio-economic backgrounds differ in their values and attitudes towards the education system and the subjects their child should select (Pena, 2000; Vidal Rodeiro, 2007). In particular, students are more likely to select subjects based on the socio-economic standing of their parents (Vidal Rodeiro, 2007). Students of working class families place greater value on extrinsic reasons such as job security and income, whereas middle class students place greater importance on intrinsic reasons by selecting subjects they are interested in and hold
personal fulfilment (McCoy et al., 2014). Additionally, parents educational background is important when it comes to involvement with school authorities and subject choice (Hornby, 2011). For example, with regard to subject choice meetings with school partners, “parents with lower levels of education were less likely to attend” (McCoy et al., 2014, p.161). Furthermore, cohabitating parents hold greater attendance than single parents (Grolnick and Slowiaczek, 1994; Fantuzzo et al., 2002; McCoy et al., 2014).

A lack of active parental involvement in their child's subject choice can have long term consequences on their child’s schooling and future career choices (Feldman, 2003; Warton and Cooney, 1997). It is argued that parental involvement positively impacts and influences students subject choice and career aspirations, as parents assist students with homework, help to select courses and keep abreast of school progress (Letha, 2013; Ryan, 1994; Smyth et al., 2015). Parental involvement, especially in socio-disadvantaged areas not only benefits the students and schools, but is fundamental with involving parents in the lives of their children (DES, 2006). To address social barriers and a lack of active parental involvement in education for students the DEIS programme aimed to address the educational needs of students in disadvantaged areas through a variety of school supports (DES, 2005a). One of these supports is the Home School Community Liaison officer whose role (HSCL) is to increase parental involvement between school and home (DES, 2006). The HSCL officer works with salient parents to increase parent and student participation in schools (DES, 2006; Smyth et al., 2015). Post primary school is the most crucial period when career decisions are taken by students. (Letha, 2013). However, with a lack of parental involvement with students growing up in areas of high social and economic deprivation, high unemployment and low school retention rates, students have a limited worldview and lack of value towards subject choice, career decisions and educational progression (Connolly, 2006). Additionally, disadvantage parents lack knowledge of where to obtain information with their children becoming reliant on the school guidance counsellors (McCoy et al., 2014).

2.2.3 Gender Influence
A considerable amount of literature identifies that one of the major factors that influence subject choice, is the gender of the student and the gender stigma associated with a specific subject (Hannan, 1983; Lynch and Lodge, 2002; Tenenbaum, 2008). According to Coolahan (1981) even at the onset of Irish education with subject choice and examination
structure, gender differences between subjects were evident and increased further when vocational schools were established. This stereotypical perception of subject choice became the norm in schools and resulted in subjects obtaining a categorisation of being either female or male, with female subjects categorised as arts, domestic sciences and languages, whereas male categorisation included technical and scientific (DES, 2007; Francis, 2000). Furthermore, stereotyped perceptions of subject have also been associated with peer pressure (Paetcher, 1998). During adolescence students are required to choose these stereotyped subjects when self-image and gender identity is still developing (Stables, 1996). In mixed sex schools in England, for example male students labelled females ‘lesbian or butch’ if they appeared to be interested in a masculine associated subject, whereas girls from single sex schools were less likely to be influenced by subject stereotype and choose masculine associated subjects (Paetcher, 1998, p.8). A concerning issue is that perceptions of subjects being masculine or feminine may then be carried through to students future career choices (Knowles and Landers, 2011).

The European Commission Eurydice Report (2010) highlighted school type as a contributing factor to subject gender differences in Irish education. In Europe, Ireland has one of the highest number of single sex schools (EC, 2010) whereby, one third of all post primary schools are single sex with 33% of boys and 46% of girls attending (DES, 2017c). Single sex schools were found to offer limited subject availability compared to mixed sex schools, with subjects such as Home Economics and Music not offered in single sex male schools, and Engineering and Construction Studies not offered in single sex female schools (Mac an Ghaill et al., 2002; Smyth and Darmody, 2009).

Irish government curriculum policy further contributes to gender differences within post primary education, with science and engineering given as an example (DES, 2007; DES, 2016). A recent report by the DES (2016) identified the low levels of female students selecting Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects and has set out measures to combat this. However, one issue is that students at Junior Certificate undertake science as a unified subject but are then required to select a distinct course from biology, physics or chemistry in Senior Cycle with the majority of females selecting biology (DES, 2007). This low uptake by female students of chemistry and physics can contribute to low levels of females in engineering (DES, 2007).
The Se Si report on Gender in Irish Education (2007) identified that subject choice in a ten year period from 1993 to 2003 resulted in a limited change to gender difference. However, gender preconceptions towards subject choice are found to be diminishing (SEC, 2017; Wikeley and Stables, 1999) as the most recent statistics released by the State Examination Commission (SEC, 2017) identified that the ratio and gender difference between male and female students selecting specific subjects has increased on 1993 levels (SEC, 2017). Table 2.1 outlines the gender differences from the top nine subjects in Ireland which hold the greatest gender divide from 1993 to 2017. The statistics identify that in 2017 there is greater uptake of female students in seven subjects with construction and D.C.G showing the greatest increase of 56% and 138% since 2003. Additionally, there was an increase of 20% and 34% respectively in Biology and Music for male students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>1993 Male</th>
<th>1993 Female</th>
<th>2003 Male</th>
<th>2003 Female</th>
<th>2017 Male</th>
<th>2017 Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Art</td>
<td>38.7%</td>
<td>61.3%</td>
<td>36.1%</td>
<td>63.9%</td>
<td>30.1%</td>
<td>69.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
<td>68.4%</td>
<td>38.0%</td>
<td>62.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>55.8%</td>
<td>44.2%</td>
<td>46.1%</td>
<td>53.9%</td>
<td>43.4%</td>
<td>56.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>97.4%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>93.8%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>90.3%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.C.G</td>
<td>95.9%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>94.1%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>85.9%</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>97.3%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>95.3%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>94.2%</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Economics</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>94.6%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>86.3%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>90.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
<td>82.1%</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
<td>77.4%</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
<td>69.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>75.9%</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
<td>75.4%</td>
<td>24.6%</td>
<td>72.2%</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.1 Gender Percentages from 1993 to 2017 (Drudy, 1994; DES, 2007; SEC, 2017)

2.2.4 Teacher and Peer Influence

Other influences in subject choice can include teachers, peer relationships and interest in a subject (Blenkinsop et al., 2006; McCrone et al., 2005). Teachers can act like role models and are more influential than guidance counsellors when it comes to subject choice, as teachers hold high expectations and encourage students through a positive student-teacher relationship (Smyth et al., 2011; Smyth and Hannan, 2006). This student-teacher relationship helps with the forming and shaping of students attitudes towards subject choice (Hearne et al., 2016b; McCrone et al., 2005; Smyth et al., 2011; Smyth and Hannan, 2006). Teachers indirectly influence subject choice and students engage in a positive choice process, whereby they can determine what teachers they will have for a
specific subject and select that subject based on that specific teacher (Darmody and Smyth, 2005; Hearne et al., 2016b). A concerning issue with this practice is students may hold assertions to the gender stereotype attached to a particular subject and teachers, which can reinforce gender stigma and impact on future career choices (Paetcher, 1998; Smyth et al., 2011).

It has been suggested that a students popularity amongst peers is more important than educational performance with peer relationships impacting upon subject choice and decision making (Felsman and Blustein, 1999). The attitudes of peers amongst groups can have a major influence on a specific subject orientation, its value, usefulness and future career opportunities (Jeffers, 2007). Students within these relationships have a sense of connectedness which provides security along with physical and psychological support within a subject (Felsman and Blustein, 1999). This relationship builds self-confidence and further contributes to commitment and friendship (Smyth and Calvert, 2011). However, students who lack career maturity can over identify with peers and sub groups in terms of aptitude and interests and can make subject choices that are not associated with their inner-self (Sugerman, 2001).

Students often choose subjects for a variety of intrinsic reasons, one being previous examinations attainment (McCrone et al., 2005). Subjects studied at Junior Certificate can influence what subjects to choose for Senior Cycle (Smyth, 2016; Smyth and Darmody, 2009). Students choose subjects based on prior success and believe that future success is likely to occur if the best subjects are carried forward to Senior Cycle (Taylor, 2015). This practice of selecting subjects based on examination success, has been attributed to the Leaving Certificate points system, whereby third level progression is linked to examination performance (Hourigan and O’Donoghue, 2007). This practice of selecting subjects in order to gain access to third level, incentivises students to focus their choices solely on specific subjects in order to optimise potential points (Hyland, 2011; Smyth and Hannan, 2006). However, this practice can be restrictive to subject choice and impact on future educational and career progression (McCrone et al., 2005; Taylor, 2015). Conversely, disadvantaged ‘students choose subjects that they believe are right for people like them’ (Davies et al., 2003, p.6) and the more valuable the subject is to their future career, the greater they will select it (Ackerman and Gross, 2006).
A second rationale for choosing subjects based on Junior Certificate results, is a student’s concept of self (Davies et al., 2003). Self-efficacy and self-belief is a critical determinant in academic life choices (Pajares, 2005). During adolescence, individuals explore and examine different beliefs and careers (Marcia 1980). Students judge their capabilities to perform in particular activities rather than personal qualities, resulting in students selecting subjects and activities they judge to be within their capabilities (Bandura, 1995; Pajares, 2005). However, a concerning issue is that students from disadvantaged backgrounds choose subjects based on their social grouping and at times lack self-belief and self-efficacy towards studying specific subjects and “question whether these subjects not traditionally associated with their social grouping will hold future merit” (Craven, 2012, p.24). Furthermore, society as a whole loses out when talented students from disadvantaged areas, avoid studying certain subjects, due to the assuming nature they may not “fit in” (Craven, 2012, p.25). In the context of guidance counselling provision, guidance counsellors working within disadvantaged schools need to be more cognisant that some students may hold a linear approach to subject choice (Craven, 2012).

2.3 Guidance Counselling in Irish Post Primary Sector

This section will discuss the role of the guidance counsellor in supporting students with subject choice in post primary education.

2.3.1 Definition of Guidance Counselling

The provision of guidance counselling in Irish post primary education is a statutory requirement under the Education Act 1998 (DES, 2005b). Article 9 (c) of the Education Act, places the responsibility on schools, to provide guidance to students. It states:

A recognised school shall use its available resources to - (c) ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices.

(Education Act, 1998, p.13)

Guidance counselling is vital to enable each individual to gain the maximum benefits from the education system, especially during times in which people are making life decisions and during periods of transition (OECD, 2004). However, the definition of appropriate guidance has and continues to be a problematic issue in post primary schools with the OECD stating that “no definition exists of what appropriate guidance should be” in Ireland (OECD, 2002, p.9). However, the DES (2005b) define guidance in Irish post primary
schools as:

A range of learning experiences provided in developmental sequence that assist students to develop self-management skills which will lead to effective choices and decisions about their lives. It encompasses the three separate, but interlinked areas of personal and social development, educational guidance and career guidance.

(DES, 2005b, p.4)

Additionally, the DES (2005b) define counselling in Irish post primary schools as:

Key part of the school guidance programme, offered on an individual or group basis as part of a developmental learning process and at moments of personal Crisis. Counselling has as its objective the empowerment of students so that they can make decisions, solve problems, address behavioural issues, develop coping strategies and resolve difficulties they may be experiencing. Counselling in schools may include personal counselling, educational counselling, career counselling or combinations of these.

(DES, 2005b, p.4)

In conjunction, the National Guidance Forum (NGF) sets out the main objectives of guidance counselling in Irish post primary schools and 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)

2.3.2 Whole School Approach to Guidance Counselling

The 1992 Green Paper on Education made reference to school guidance becoming a collaborative approach (DE, 1992) and argued “guidance should be seen as a school-wide responsibility involving all school administration, guidance counsellor and teachers” (Shiel and Lewis, 1993, p.107) to support the needs of students and should be delivered through a Whole School Approach (WSA) (DES, 2012; NCCA, 2007). The DES (2012) Circular 0009/2012 refers to the WSA as established policy. However, service provision has been less than uniformed (Hearne et al., 2016b; IGC, 2016b) with a third of Principals holding inadequate knowledge of WSA and guidance counselling issues (Keating, 2014). Guidance counsellors were forced to make sense of the WSA with the assumption they would lead its delivery in schools (Hearne et al., 2016b).

The provision of WSA to guidance can be a complex process as it involves various contributing stakeholders (Lam and Hui, 2010). A WSA to guidance counselling has been
put forward as a model of good practice in Irish post primary schools (Hearne and Galvin, 2014). Students respond well to a WSA with subject teachers being invaluable and instrumental sources of information on subject choice and additionally, a WSA can be very effective when students are reluctant to approach the guidance counsellor (DES, 2009; McCoy et al., 2006; Hearne and Galvin, 2014; Hearne et al., 2016b). Furthermore, by schools fostering a WSA, students develop a greater sense of the concept of self (DES, 2009). However, schools describe low levels of collaboration amongst school personnel with respect to the delivery of a WSA (McCoy et al., 2006) and attribute this to the attitudes and involvement of regular teachers (Hearne and Galvin, 2014). The impact of educational cutbacks have some teachers feeling reluctant and hesitant to be involved in a WSA, due to staff shortages, time pressures and increased paperwork along with the feeling of it should be left to the experts (Finney, 2006; Hearne et al., 2016b).

A WSA is required to be delivered through a guidance plan (DES, 2005b). This plan aims to identify, prioritise and respond to the needs of students and outlines the roles, responsibilities and practices of guidance counsellors, school staff and management, “for it to maximise its effectiveness and utility to students” (McCoy et al., 2006, p.143). Therefore, through this collaborative approach, parents, students and school personnel are involved in preparing and establishing a guidance plan which support the needs of students (DES, 2012; DES, 2009; DES, 2005b; Hearne and Galvin, 2014; NCGE, 2004). Conversely, there is a lack of evidence regarding the effectiveness of post primary schools in adopting a whole school approach to guidance counselling (Hearne et al., 2016a; Hearne and Galvin, 2014).

2.3.3 Budget 2012 and the Role of Guidance Counsellor Supporting Subject Choice

One key role of the guidance counsellor is providing clear and accurate information towards subject choice for students at transitional periods in their lives (DES, 2005b). The guidance counsellor must provide the following competencies in their schools guidance service: counselling, personal and social contexts, assessment, education, content specific practice, vocational and professionalism and it is important for guidance counsellors to employ multiple methods of gathering information for assisting students with subject and career choice (IGC, 2017a; Kidd, 2006). Students will hold different levels of career maturity and guidance counsellors need to be cognisant of the particular level each student has reached as sound career guidance towards subject choice can make an enormous
difference in the students’ life and their educational paths (IGC, 2007; Sharf, 2010; Sultana, 2014).

Schools are required to provide guidance to students in which to aid and assist students in making effective and appropriate subject and career choices from Junior Cycle to Senior Cycle (DES, 2012). However, a lack of guidance provision in subject choice process for Junior Cycle students has been identified in recent years, due to the impact of Budget 2012 which involved the removal of ex-quota guidance counselling allocation of hours from schools (Hearne et al., 2016b; NCGE, 2013; TUI, 2014). These budgetary cuts to education led to the guidance counsellors undertaking a dual role; guidance counselling and subject teaching (Hearne et al., 2016a, 2016b). This dual role of the guidance counsellor has seen a reduction in one to one guidance counselling services by 53.5% and an increase in classroom timetabled guidance by 13% (Hearne et al., 2016b; IGC, 2016a; IGC, 2014; Leahy et al., 2017; NCGE, 2013). In terms of DEIS schools, guidance services have reduced by 30% (IGC 2017b). Additionally, students in Junior Cycle remain for the most part, marginalised by these cuts (Hearne et al., 2016a; IGC, 2013) as greater emphasis is being placed on guidance counselling to Transition, fifth and sixth Year students, to prepare them for working life or further education (Hearne et al., 2016b; McCoy et al., 2014; NCGE, 2013).

A concerning issue with this lack of guidance provided to Junior Cycle students is that students of disadvantaged backgrounds, lower achieving or international students are more reliant on the schools guidance provisions to provide them with accurate subject choice information for the Leaving Certificate (Hearne et al., 2016a; NCGE, 2013; Smyth et al., 2011; TUI, 2014). A lack of accurate information can have long term consequences on students schooling and future career choices (Feldman, 2003). Students who do receive help and advice from the guidance counsellor express a higher level of gratification and value towards the information received and the consequences of subject choice (DES, 2009; Smyth et al., 2011; McCoy et al., 2014). Correct advice is best placed in the hands of those who are trained to give it and in this regard, that would be the guidance counsellor (Smyth and Banks, 2011). The Government Circular 0003/2016 announced an additional 400 guidance posts to be re-instated with the allocation of these posts at the discretion of school management. However, due to a lack of definite guidelines provided to school
management, these additional “hours are not being used for their well-intended purpose” (IGC, 2017b, p.2) leaving guidance counsellors to continue in their dual role for the foreseeable future, resulting with a continual fragmented and marginalised guidance service for Junior Cycle students.

2.4 Conclusion
This chapter reviewed various theoretical research which underpinned the influencing extrinsic and intrinsic factors which can impact and influence subject choice for fifth year Senior Cycle post primary students. Multiple factors such as socio-economic background, school type, school personnel and gender stigma associated with subjects can all be associated with influencing a students’ decision making process. The role of the guidance counsellors can play an imperative role in supporting subject choice however, due to the implications of Budget 2012, student in Junior Cycle are marginalised and disenfranchised from school support to assist with subject choice.

Chapter three sets out the methodologies which underpinned and were utilised in this research study.
Chapter Three: Methodology

3.0 Introduction
The underlying premise of this methodology chapter is that it not only addresses the methods and approaches employed by the researcher, but also justifies how they were selected and used (Thomas, 2009). This chapter identifies the primary and secondary research questions of the investigation. It also discusses the data collection methods, sampling strategy, data analysis techniques, reliability and validity issues, reflexivity and ethical considerations associated with undertaking the study.

3.1 Research Questions
A research design acts as a blueprint to your entire research which integrates different research components in a coherent and logical way (White, 2009). The most important consideration within any research design is the research question or questions (Saunders et al., 2009). Furthermore, this “research question represents the facets of inquiry that the researcher most wants to explore” (Miles et al., 2013, p.25).

The primary research question for this study was:
“What factors influence Senior Cycle post primary students in their subject choice for the Leaving Certificate”?

In addition, a number of secondary research questions were identified:
1. What structures are in place within schools to assist students with their Senior Cycle subject choice?
2. Do students consider third level matriculation when choosing subjects?
3. Does parental socio-economic background impact subject choice for students in Senior Cycle?
4. How influential is the Guidance Counsellor regarding subject choice for students in Senior Cycle?
5. Does the gender stereotype of a subject influence a student’s subject choice?

3.2 Research Methodology
This section will address the research methodology that underpinned this study to answer the research questions.
3.2.1 Research Paradigm: Post Positivism

The aim of this research was to investigate factors that influence students subject choice in post-primary education for the Leaving Certificate. This study employed an empirical research approach through the utilisation of theoretical research and a post-positivist paradigm. Empirical research is primary research undertaken to investigate and answer a specific question and is seen as data, which has been collected in the real world (Bell, 2005). Theoretical research provides an in-depth level of information on a given topic allowing researchers to analyse, compare and comprehend different methods and applications authors have undertaken, allowing for different investigations to be constructed (Blaxter et al., 2006; Cohen et al., 2011). Theoretical research was undertaken by the researcher which identified the primary and secondary research questions that were investigated.

A paradigm is a theoretical framework in which theories, generalisations and experiments performed are formulated (Anderson, 2004). In guidance research, a paradigm is a set of belief systems or interpretive frameworks representing the worldviews of the holder (Patton and McMahon, 2006). All paradigms encompass ontology, epistemology, methodology and axiology stances (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008) and are the lenses to which the researcher views the world. The ontological and epistemological viewpoint of this researcher is that scientific methods and approaches provide a greater justification of knowledge and that knowledge about the social world is obtained objectively.

Within educational research there are two general approaches to paradigms namely; interpretivism and positivism (Bryman, 2012; Thomas, 2013). Interpretivism is associated with qualitative research methods, which is usually undertaken on a small number of participants through interview or case study methods (Basit, 2010; Thanh and Le Thanh 2015). It requires the researcher to interact with the subjective meaning of the social world and the uniqueness of the individual and aims to achieve results which can be generalised beyond the situation in which they are measured (Basit, 2010; Flick, 2011). The data collected therefore, cannot be measured scientifically and can be critiqued for this limitation (Merriam, 2009; Thanh and Le Thanh, 2015). However, it is acknowledged by this researcher that within guidance research, the interpretivists paradigm is increasing as a research approach (Patton and McMahon, 2006). Nonetheless, the researcher wanted to gather larger amounts of objective data from participants, so this approach was deemed
unsuitable for this study.

Conversely, positivism is viewed as a scientific approach to research and has long been recognised as the epistemology of quantitative research (Cohen et al., 2007). Quantitative research approaches are particularly common in decision making processes with a view to generalising to the wider population, with collating data in the form of numbers and statistics (Punch, 2011; Thomas, 2013). The positivist approach strives for “objectivity, measurability, predictability, controllability, patterning, the construction of laws and rules of behaviour and the ascription of causality” (Cohen et al., 2011, p.31) with methods employed including surveys and questionnaires (Bryman, 2012).

In this study, this researcher wanted to analyse different factors, trends and patterns in the data to identify factors that influence decision making by students regarding their subject choice. However, Mertens (2015) presents a post-positivist paradigm which emerged from the positivists approach. A post positivist paradigm respects the science, objectivity and measurability of its predecessor but also acknowledges that humans are complex (Mertens, 2015). The post-positivist approach accepts that a flexible approach is necessary and that research can only conclude probabilities rather than generalised outcomes (Gray, 2014; O’Leary, 2014). Furthermore, this approach maintains objective but operates on the premise that science is our belief in the truth and not proof beyond doubt (Scotland, 2012). The researchers use of a quantitative data collection instrument is in keeping with a post-positivist approach (Castlellar, 2010). This approach was deemed suitable for this research study as it provides an objective scientific and systematic approach to research which infers probabilities.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis Methods
This section will discuss data collection and analysis methods utilised for this research study.

3.3.1 Access and Sampling Strategy
This research commenced with Ethical Approval (See Appendix B) received by the University of Limerick Research Ethics Committee (2017_03_07_EHS) on 7th March, 2017. For the purpose of the data collection, access and sampling of fifth year students was necessary. Two DEIS schools were selected for this study, due to theoretical research
identifying various influencing factors. For a quantifiable response rate to be obtained, two post primary schools in one geographical region were selected for participation under the following criteria:

1. Both schools held DEIS status.
2. Both schools had a mixed gender student population.
3. Both schools provided TY.
4. Both schools had a guidance counsellor on staff.
5. Both schools had a minimum student population of 500 students.

When undertaking research with students under the age of 18, informed consent must be obtained from school gate keepers, parents/guardians and students (Cohen et al., 2007; Sugarman, 2001). A subject Information Letter (See Appendix C) and Consent Form (See Appendix D) was issued to the Principals of both schools requesting participation in this study. The consent forms were returned, granting access on the 4th April 2017 and 11th May 2017 respectively. The researcher visited the schools on the 26th April 2017 and 16th May 2017 respectively and the proposed research study was explained to fifth year participants in the presence of the school guidance counsellor, using the aids of the General Information Sheet (See Appendix E), Subject Information Letter (See Appendix F) and Parents/Guardian Consent Form (See Appendix G). A detailed account of the research, its methods of data collection, the conditions regarding anonymity of the participant, confidentiality issues related to the data collected and the ability to withdraw at any time prior to the data analysis phase were explained to students (Cohen et al., 2007). The researcher returned to each school four days later to collect parental/guardian and students signed consent forms.

Sampling procedures for educational research are complex but must meet the criteria of the data collection strategy (Thomas, 2009). Purposive sampling was employed by this researcher as it is recommended for questionnaire based research as it involves participants that hold specific criteria and characteristic of the sample (Saunders et al., 2009; Bryman and Bell, 2015). However, with purposive sampling, generalising beyond the sample may be inappropriate as it may not be representative of the general population (Gray, 2014). In this study, all fifth year students in both schools were invited to participate in the study. In total 163 signed consent forms were returned. In school A, 110 consent forms were issued with 96 returned. In school B, 84 consent forms were issued with 67 returned.
3.3.2 Data Collection Instrument: Online Questionnaire

The online questionnaire instrument SurveyMonkey was utilised in this study as participants could engage and complete it in a location and time that was convenient for them (Boudah, 2011; Gray, 2014). Additionally, by employing this instrument, geographical boundaries were removed, allowing for a broader study to be investigated with a larger amount of data being collected in a short time frame. The benefits of utilising SurveyMonkey are multifaceted as no software or code installation is required, various tools to assist with data analysis are provided and the programme is user-friendly for participants (Symonds, 2011). Generally, online questionnaires reduce cost, time and there is a greater reduction in response errors compared to paper-based questionnaires (Wright, 2005; Bell, 2005). Personal biases are avoided with this type of method, allowing for greater objectivity and accuracy of results (Bell, 2005). Finally, data analysis can start immediately after the data collection stage has ceased (Katsirikou and Skiadas, 2010). Nonetheless, there are also limitations to this method of data collection. Online questionnaires must encourage the respondents to engage with the survey and participants must complete it in its entirety for data collection (Fan and Yan, 2010; Oppenheim, 1992). Questionnaires only provide an understanding of “what is” but lack investigation of “why it is that way?” (Blaxter et al., 2006, p.35). With regards to online questionnaire through the platform of SurveyMonkey, one limitation that researchers fail to recognise is participants proficiency in technological skills and computer applications (Symonds, 2011) and secondly, participants may have limited access to the internet. However, in this study, limitations that accompanied the fieldwork stage was the illegibility of handwriting displayed on consent forms and invalid emails addresses provided to the researcher.

3.3.3 Instrument Development and Structure

A crucial part in quantitative research is the design and development of a questionnaire; with a considerable amount of time needed to develop, rewrite and refine questions and question types, so that the research question is addressed (Couper, 2000). In designing this online questionnaire, this researcher was cognisant of the target population, as researchers often employ over-descriptive language which is incomprehensible for the participant (Blaxter et al., 2006). Furthermore, an excessive use of open ended questions can generate poor response rates, as questionnaires can appear long and repellent for the respondents (Oppenheim, 1992; Cohen et al., 2011). Successful questionnaires hold different types of
questions such as open, closed, single versus multiple responses, ranking and rating Likert responses (Punch and Oancea, 2014).

In this study, the primary influence in the development and structuring of the questionnaire (See Appendix H) originated from the literature review, which provided the researcher with four themes to investigate. Section 1 “General Information” collected data on the demographic profile of the participant. Section 2, “Information on Subject Selection” collected data around the amount of information received prior to subject selection. Section 3, “Subject Choice Decision Making Factors” collected data on the factors that influence subject choice for Leaving Certificate and Section 4, “Career Guidance” collected data on the provision of guidance services to students. There was 29 questions in total consisting of open, closed, single versus multiple responses, ranking and Likert responses which generated quantitative and qualitative data.

3.4 Piloting of the Questionnaire

As part of the initial design stage, firstly a paper-based version of the questionnaire was piloted on the 17th February, 2017. This helped remove inaccuracies so that future respondents experienced no difficulties (Bell and Waters, 2014; Remenyi, 2013). Furthermore, piloting increased the reliability, validity and practicability of the questionnaire (Bernhardt and Geise, 2009; Cohen et al., 2007). For the purpose of the pilot, a convenience sample was utilised. This sample held high compatibility to the selected sample and consisted of two male and two female fifth year students. Two participants of the sample had completed TY. The researcher was present during this pilot to ensure accurate interpretation of questions. This piloting examined the structure, layout and language used. (See Table 3.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues Identified</th>
<th>Issue Rectification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Four questions were identified to be repetitive.</td>
<td>The researcher amalgamated questions. This was mostly highlighted in Section Three.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Certain questions/words were found to be confusing in terms of the language used.</td>
<td>The researcher simplified and used age appropriate language along with re-examining all questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Participants highlighted the</td>
<td>The researcher employed more rating and</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
amount of opened ended questions were disengaging, resulting with participants not answering them  

4. The time scale issued to participants outlining completion was 30 minutes. This was found to be too long.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues Identified</th>
<th>Issues Rectification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Overall progression box to be added.</td>
<td>A progression box was added.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Progression button hard to identify</td>
<td>The researcher changed the colour of the button to yellow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Text employed was found to be too small</td>
<td>The researcher increased the font by 2pt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Likert and rating scales not uniformed.</td>
<td>The researcher uniformed rating and Likert scales in all questions to be the same. (1 being the highest)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The inability of selecting two of the same numbers on certain rating and Likert responses.</td>
<td>The researcher made alterations so that two of the same numbers could be selected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Not informing the participants to click submit when complete.</td>
<td>The researcher added instructions at the end of the questionnaire to inform participants to click submit.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2: Recommendations from the Online Questionnaire.

Secondly, a pilot of the online questionnaire was undertaken on 22\textsuperscript{nd} May 2017 with two fifth year students. This piloting examined design features with participants identifying the following issues. (See Table 3.2).

The data collection period for this research commenced on 23\textsuperscript{rd} May 2017 and ceased on 8\textsuperscript{th} June 2017. The final version of the online questionnaire was distributed by electronic
mail to all participants who had consented on the 23rd and 24th of May. In total, there was 163 emails distributed however, 9 emails had delivery failures resulting in 154 electronic mails issued. Participants were informed that the questionnaire link would be open for 10 days from the date of electronic mail through the questionnaire Information Email (see Appendix I).

As online questionnaires can generate low response rates, a strategy employed by this researcher to increase response rate was reminder electronic mails (Costly et al., 2010; Dillman et al., 2009). On 31st May 2017 reminder electronic mails were issued to all participants. On 2nd June 2017, a total of 73 participants had completed the online questionnaire. The researcher decided to extend the closing date to 8th June 2017 and issued one further reminder electronic mail. This resulted with an additional 23 questionnaires completed resulting in a total of 96 completed questionnaires. Response rates for online questionnaires can be low however, researchers employing questionnaires should allow for an attrition rate of 30-40% (Reynolds et al., 2006). “Most commentators consider a minimum response rate of 50%-75% as adequate” (Remenyi, 2013, p.260) whereas, Mangione’s classification views response rates of 50% or below as unquantifiable data (Bryman and Bell, 2015). In this study, the final response rate was 63% (n=96) when the survey was closed on 8th June 2017.

3.5 Data Analysis Method
The quantitative research undertaken in this study was analysis and interpretation of numerical data collected using mathematically and scientific based methods and techniques (Bell, 2005; Bryman, 2012). In this study, the online data collected was collated in SurveyMonkey and was downloaded and imported into Microsoft Excel for coding and editing (Bryman, 2012). As the questionnaire included quantitative and qualitative data through various question types, different approaches and procedures were employed to analyse the data within each question. The quantitative data was analysed through the use of infernal tests and theme mapping using SPSS (Pallant, 2010). Infernal testing allowed this researcher to compare groups to and analyse the data in a single measure, whilst theme mapping examined repetition in data, transitions, differences, similarities and relationships and are presented using graphical charts (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). The qualitative data received from open ended questions was analysed using a comparative and descriptive approach. A descriptive analysis of all responses was coded
and a thematic content approach identifying similarities and differences in the findings was applied (Cohen et al., 2007). See Chapter four for further explanation.

3.6 Validity, Reliability and Reflexivity

This section will discuss validity, reliability and reflexivity in relation to this research study.

3.6.1 Validity

“If a piece of research is invalid, then it is worthless” therefore, consideration of validity is crucial (Cohen et al., 2007, p.132). In quantitative research, the validity of an online questionnaire refers to the degree to which the questionnaire measures what it is supposed to measure (Pallant, 2010; Robson, 2002). Furthermore, validity in quantitative research is concerned with accuracy in measurement and in representation to the larger population and whether the conclusions are reflective of the information generated by the research (Slapsford, 2007). The aim of this study was to ensure that the results presented were accurate and to ascertain whether or not they portrayed the influencing factors Senior Cycle students have towards subject choice.

To increase the validity of this research, two piloting phases of the questionnaire was employed. Additionally, the researcher selected external schools to undertake this study so that personal biases were avoided and greater objectivity and accuracy of results could be achieved. Purposeful sampling was utilised and all data collected was through an online provider which was coded, which further assisted with research objectivity and validity. To address any further potential threats to validity, the researcher employed a reflexive approach.

Generalisability or external validity is the extent to which the findings of a study can be applied to other situations (Merriam, 2009). Purposive sampling was employed with fifth year participants from two DEIS post primary schools. This sampling method means that participants who completed the online questionnaire were a representative of a specific population (Creswell, 2008) However, this researcher comprehends that humans are complex and that schools employ different working approaches and are made up of various complex layers of meaning, interpretations, attitudes and values systems (Mertens, 2015). Therefore, this researcher acknowledges that the returned response rate was 63%
(n=96) and hopes that the findings from this sample can be used to describe probable influences of fifth year students in post primary schools on subject choice more so than generalised.

3.6.2 Reliability
Reliability is the degree in which the results of a measurement consistently and accurately represent the magnitude and quality of the construct (Teddie and Tashakkori, 2009). Reliability of data indicates how free it is from error (Pallant, 2010). In assessing reliability of this study, an internal consistency measurement namely, Cronbach’s coefficient alpha was adopted in SPSS (Pallant, 2010). The correlation alpha is expressed as a number ranging from 0 to 1, with a higher value indicating greater reliability (Field, 2006; Pallant, 2010). The optimum alpha of the scale is 0.7 or higher which indicates good reliability (Bonnett and Wright, 2015; Pallant, 2010). In this study, Cronbach’s coefficient alpha achieved from the online questionnaire was 0.872, displaying internal consistency or reliability of the questionnaire was adequate.

3.6.3 Reflexivity
The Process of reflexivity is fundamental for ensuring validity of a research study (Cohen et al., 2007; O’Leary, 2014) and was a central component in this study. Reflexivity is described as “a process of reflecting critically on the self as a researcher” (Merriam, 2009, p.219). In educational research, the researcher must understand their own role in terms of professional, personal, social and emotional wellbeing and how their values, perceptions, attitude, actions, feelings and assumptions can impact on the outcomes of the research (Hennink et al., 2011, Cohen et al., 2011). In this study, the researcher is a teacher in a DEIS school and a trainee guidance counsellor. He believed from his own experience of subject choice, socio economic factors play a decisive factor in shaping students subject choice.

Being reflexive involves keeping track of influences, bracketing biases and monitoring your emotional responses in order to understand what is occurring (Hatch, 2002). To ensure that this research was as objective as possible, a research journal was employed by this researcher, which recorded and noted all thoughts, questions, ideas and methods in relation to all chapters within this study. Researchers “must be willing and able to ask critical questions of themselves” to ensure objective research is achieved (Hearne, 2013,
To prevent any further contamination or personal bias of the data collected, the researcher selected participants from external schools. Furthermore, interpersonal checking and reflective discourse with my supervisor occurred. This researcher believes that by employing all the various approaches, this has enhanced the reliability and validity of this research.

### 3.7 Ethical Considerations of the Study

A lack of ethical awareness can result in the harming of clients, loss of privacy and deception (Cohen et al., 2007). Ethical considerations were an integral part of the planning and implementation of this research study (Mertens, 2010). To avoid ethical issues the researcher was guided by his own judgement and reflexivity (Hearne, 2013). Institutional Ethical Approval was granted by the University of Limerick Faculty of Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee on 7th March 2017. The researcher adhered to the duty of care as set out by the Institute of Guidance Counsellor (2012) *Code of Ethics*, the National Centre for Guidance in Education (2008) *Research Code of Ethics* and the Data Protection Act 1988 and 2003. Both professional codes consist of four ethical principles which were adhered to: 1) Respect for the rights and dignity of the client; 2) Competence; 3) Responsibility and 4) Integrity (IGC, 2012; NCGE, 2008).

In guidance research, issues of consent are particularly important when conducting research with participants under the age of 18 years (Hearne, 2013). Adhering to ethical procedures and to address the imbalance of power between the researcher and child in the relationship, signed consent was requested from gatekeepers, parents and participants (Danby and Farrell, 2005; Thomas, 2009). Additionally, all parties involved in this research were provided with an Information Sheet which outlined and detailed the purpose, benefits, risks, voluntary participation and confidentiality issues associated (*See Appendix E*).

Confidentiality is valued and expected in situations where personal and sensitive information is accessed or shared (Cohen et al., 2007). In this study, anonymity was guaranteed to participants. All hard copies of consent forms received with participants personal information was stored in a safe place in a locked filing cabinet. All online questionnaires were anonymised by selecting Anonymous Response which was provided...
by SurveyMonkey. Furthermore, a coding system was applied to the data collected, which was encrypted and stored on a password protected external hard-drive.

Finally, in terms of duty of care, a key risk identified by the researcher was that some information within the questionnaire could have been considered sensitive with participants perhaps questioning their own subject choice as a result of the questions. However, in order to mitigate this, participants were informed that if any matters or issues arose, or if participants wished to further discuss their subjects’ choice, their guidance counsellor would be available if needed (Hearne, 2013).

3.8 Conclusion
This chapter discussed the methodological research design of this study, the research paradigm chosen and the data collection instrument utilised. It further addressed the participants sample, data analysis, validity, reliability, reflexivity and ethical consideration associated.

In chapter four the data analysis and findings will be presented.
Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Findings

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter, the results of the primary data collected from the online questionnaire completed by fifth year students in two DEIS post primary schools will be presented. The quantitative data will be presented in graphical format first, directly followed by the qualitative data pertinent to that question.

4.1 Online Questionnaire Data Analysis

Data analysis is essentially about making sense of the data in terms of the research questions that provided the starting point for the study (Bryman, 2012). The total completed response rate was 96 respondents which was a 63% return rate for this study. As the online questionnaire held quantitative and qualitative findings, both methods were analysed separately. As aforementioned, quantitative data analysis is the management, analysis and interpretation of numerical data collected using mathematically and scientific based methods and techniques to produce statistics (Bell, 2005; Bryman, 2012).

There were several interrelated stages in the process of analysing the quantitative data which needed to be followed (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2008). Firstly, the researcher downloaded the raw data from SurveyMonkey and imported it into SPSS for coding, cleaning and correlation (Bryman, 2012) with the data obtained plotted into charts and tables using Microsoft Excel. The cleaning of data is imperative and prepares the data for analysis by eliminating or replacing any anomalies or values which may jeopardise true and accurate findings (Hinton and McMurray, 2017). In this study, any missing values were replaced by the default series mean method within SPSS which calculates a substitute value for a variable and assigns every missing case of that variable that value (Pallant, 2010). After this stage, the levels of measurement of data analysis are dependent on the researcher in applying the correct procedure of data analysis to each question type within the questionnaire (Etheridge, 2011). The levels of measurement employed within this study were nominal, ordinal, interval and ratio with each measurement determining which data analysis procedure to be utilised, namely: data tabulation, data descriptive, data disaggregation and data correlation (Etheridge, 2011).

The qualitative data was analysed by nomothetic coding (Cohen et al., 2011) which included a data reduction and content analysis approach (Thomas, 2009). This data
analysis involved a comparative method to examine, interpret and identify themes, words and patterns within the data and to furthermore determine how these assisted in answering the research question (Thomas, 2009). The data was exported from SurveyMonkey into Microsoft Excel for scrutiny and deciphered which data was most relevant by coding the data for certain words and content. Additionally, the researcher then applied a thematic analysis to the data which involved the grouping of data into themes that emerged as the study was conducted (Thomas, 2009; Braun and Clarke, 2006)

4.2 Findings
The finding will be presented in line with the four demarcated sections of the questionnaire (See Appendix I).

4.2.1 Section One: Demographic Profile

Questions 1 to 7 gathered data on the demographic profile of the respondents. Question 1 was answered by 99% (n=95) of the respondents with 1% (n=1) skipping this question. In total, there were 55% (n=52) female and 45% (n=43) male respondents. Through the use of nominal data analysis, Question 1 was cross tabulated with Question 5 which identified that 69% (n=66) were represented by TY respondents, with 48% (n=32) female and 52% (n=34) male. The remaining 31% (n=29) represented non TY respondents, with 69% (n=20) female and 31% (n=9) male. (See Chart 4.1).

![Chart 4.1: Gender](chart.png)
There was a 99% response rate to Question 2 (n=95) with 1% (n=1) skipping this Question. This ratio question identified that the mean age was 17 years of age representing 46% (n=44) of all respondents. The second largest age group were 16 year olds representing 41% (n=39) and the smallest proportion of respondents, 2% (n=2) were 19 year olds. From cross tabulation with Question 5, statistical analysis showed that 63% (n=42) of 17 year olds were represented by TY respondents. (See Chart 4.2).

Chart 4.2: Age Profile

In relation to Questions 1 and 2, a disaggregation approach was undertaken which identified that the average mean age was 17 years old with 51% (n=22) were male and 42% (n=22) were female. The youngest respondents were female with 8% (n=4) aged 15 years old. (See Chart 4.3).
Question 3 was an open-ended question which was answered by 97% (n=93) respondents with 3% (n=3) skipping this question. Overall, the largest nationality was Irish at 90% (n=84), other nationalities included British 3% (n=3), Polish 3% (n=3), with Dutch, Thai, Russian and Nigerian all representing 1% (n=1). (See Chart 4.4).

Question 4, an opened ended, descriptive question was answered by 98% (n=94) respondents with 2% (n=2) skipping it. In total, 64% (n=60) identified having a sibling who was/is in third level. On the other hand, over one third of the respondents 36% (n=34) identified that they had no siblings in third level. From the qualitative responses pertinent to this question, it was identified that the average mean was one sibling attending/attended third level college. (See Appendix J).
Question 6, a nominal question, analysed by data disaggregation examined the educational qualification of the respondents’ parents/guardians. It was answered by 98% (n=94) with 2% (n=2) of respondents skipping it. The findings indicate that there were almost twice as many mothers 77% (n=72) who had obtained Leaving Certificate compared to fathers 38% (n=35). Furthermore, the ratio of 7:1 is identified where mothers obtain a Leaving Certificate compare to a guardian 11% (n=10). (See Chart 4.5)

![Parental/Guardian Secondary Education Chart]

*Chart 4.5: Parental/Guardian Secondary Education*

Interestingly, the data indicates that 60% (n=56) of fathers and 56% (n=53) of mothers did not attend third level education. Furthermore, 63% (n=22) of fathers who completed a Leaving Certificate progressed onto third level education compared to 38% (n=27) of mothers. (See Chart 4.6).
Question 7, a qualitative question was answered by 97% (n=93) of respondents with 3% (n=3) skipping it. This question was correlated with question 1 to identify subject choice by gender. In total, 17 subjects were highlighted outside of Maths, English and Irish, with Biology identified as the most popular subject selected by the respondents. Home Economics had the largest gender difference with a ratio of 7:1 (n=29) females and (n=4) males. Construction Studies had a ratio of 4:1 with (n=32) males and (n=8) females. Engineering had a ratio of 11:2 with (n=22) males compared to (n=4) females. Art had a ratio of 7.5:1 with (n=15) females compared to (n=2) males. (See Chart 4.7).
4.2.2 Section Two: Information on Subject Choice

This section will present the findings from Questions 8 to 13. These questions sought data on information on subject choice and consisted of open, closed and Likert type questions.

Firstly, Question 8 asked TY respondents about schools offering sampling of subjects and was answered by 71% (n=68) of respondents with 29% (n=28) skipping it. This question was correlated with question 5 which identified that 92% (n=62) of the respondents were TY students, whereby 85% (n=53) sampled subjects and 15% (n=9) did not. (See Appendix K).

Following on from Question 8, Question 9 asked the TY respondents if they found this sampling process useful. This question was correlated with Question 5 and filtered through SPSS to segregate TY respondents. In total, 80% (n=53) of TY respondents answered this question with 85% (n=45) reporting it useful. Only 15% (n=8) did not find it useful.

The words used by respondents from the qualitive data from Question 9 included “subject”, “sample”, “insight”, “helped”, “gave” and “taste” as to how this sampling process was useful. The theme that emerged was that this sampling process was advantageous towards subject choice. One respondent echoed that this process gave them an “opportunity to try subjects I had not studied before” (6210334700 female student) while another identified that it had “helped me on what subjects I would like to do for the Leaving Certificate” (6210334688 male student).

![Chart 4.8: Did you Find this Sampling Process Useful](chart.png)

*Chart 4.8: Did you Find this Sampling Process Useful*
Question 10 asked TY respondents if work experience undertaken was useful. This question was answered by 70% (n=67) with 30% (n=29) skipping this question. This question was correlated with Question 5 and identified that 88% (n=62) of TY respondents found that work experience they undertook in TY was useful (See Appendix L).

The qualitative data identified a mutual common theme of awareness to the world of work, greater belief in their self-concept and further educational progression and requirements. One respondent highlighted that “Yes, I found it useful as it gave me an indicator of different jobs aspects” whilst another stated “I found out what requirements are needed for certain careers” (6210242790, female student).

Question 11 was answered by 48% (n=46) respondents and skipped by 52% (n=50). This question examined if non-TY students sampled subjects in fifth year and was correlated with Question 5. It identified that 30% (n=14) of respondents were non-TY respondents whereby 36% (n=5) of non-TY sampled subjects while 64% (n=9) of them did not. (See Chart 4.9)

The qualitative responses to Question 11 were limited with 5 respondents responding to this question. One respondent reported that this process “gave you a chance to try out different subjects” (6214260869 male student) while another reported they “did not get a chance to trial subjects” (6214260901 female student).
Question 12 was a nominal open ended question which sought to find out if a presentation or information evening was provided to assist students in their subject choice. This question was answered by 92% (n=88) with 8% (n=8) skipping it. It identified that 56% (n=49) were provided with a presentation/information session while 44% (n=39) were not. (See Appendix M).

The qualitative data pertinent to Question 12 asked respondents if they found the information received useful. The words used by respondents included “showed”, “percentages”, “practical”, “theory”, “subjects”, and “focus”. This data identified common themes such as college matriculation, subject breakdown and analysis and decision making. These sentiments were echoed by one respondent who stated “yes, because it showed me which subjects are 100% academic and which have a practical project based side” (6210334700, female student) while another stated “yes, as it made me more aware of what subjects I need for college” (6210334641, female student).

Question 13, was an opened ended ordinal question and asked respondents how their school provided information to them regarding their subject choice. It was answered by 86% (n=83) of respondents with 14% (n=13) skipping it. The provision of career guidance classes was found to be the most popular method with 33% (n=53) of respondents selecting this option. Career fairs was the second most popular methods reported by 26% (n=42). Talks from guest speakers and psychometric assessments was identified as the third most popular with 13% (n=21) of respondents selecting this option. Others were found to be fifth with 9% (n=14). However, one to one meetings with the guidance counsellor was 6% (n=9). (See Chart 4.10).
Chart 4.10: School Provision towards Subject Information

This question was correlated with question 5 to identify what percentage of TY and non-TY respondents selected each option. It found that TY respondents held a response rate of 85% or more when it came to the top 4 school provisions towards subject information. Interestingly, non TY respondents selected ‘Other’ as their top preference (See Chart 4.11).

Chart 4.11: TY/non TY Subject Choice Breakdown

The qualitative data pertinent to Question 13 requested respondents to identify additional forms of information they received. A limited number of 11 respondents responded to this question. Themes identified were lack of information and informal information. The majority of responses identified they “weren’t talked too” (6214260898, male student)
while another respondent stated “talks from current teachers in school” (6214331267, female student).

### 4.2.3 Section Three: Subject Choice Decision Making Factors

This section will discuss the findings from Questions 14 to 25 which sought information on subject choice and consisted of open, closed and Likert type questions.

Question 14 was answered by 90% (n=86) of respondents and skipped by 10% (n=10). Overall, 60% (n=52) selected subjects based on their Junior Certificate results, while 40% (n=34) reported they did not. In order to analyse the data further Question 14 was correlated with Question 5 to identify how many TY and non TY respondents had based subject choice on their Junior Certificate results. It was found that 64% (n=39) of TY respondents and 52% (n=13) of non-TY respondents based subject choice for their Leaving Certificate on their Junior Certificate results. *(See chart 4.12).*

![Chart 4.12: Subject Choice Based on Junior Certificate Results](image)

The qualitative data pertinent to Question 14 sought additional information on other factors that influenced their decision making process outside of their Junior Certificate results. Words used by respondents from the qualitative data included “enjoyed”, “interest”, “future career”, “college” and “Junior Cert”. This data identified common themes such as having a particular interest in a subject, future educational progression.
and previous examination attainment. Mutual comments from participants pointed to how they based their decisions on having an interest in the subject. One respondent echoed “to picking subjects they enjoyed doing” (6218576760, female student) while another stated “needed for my intended college course” (6210334638, male student). It is interesting to note that one respondent identified role models and stated “I based them on the subjects I liked and the teachers mostly” (6214260905 female student).

Question 15, an open ended ordinal question analysed by data tabulation, requested information on respondents’ attitudes and values towards subjects that may hold gender association. This question was answered by 90% (n=86) of respondents with 10% (n=10) skipping it. A very high percentage, 87% (n=75) of respondents identified that no subject should be labelled with a gender bias preference, whereas 13% (n=11) reported that certain subjects are gender bias. (See Chart 4.13).

The data from Question 15 was further correlated with Question 5 to identify the perception of male and female attitudes towards subjects. It was found that 40% (n=30) males and 60% (n=45) females found subjects were mixed gender whereas, 63% (n=7) males and 37% (n=4) females were found to associate a subject with a gender.

The qualitative data obtained from Question 15 identified the themes of inclusivity and stereotype. Words used by respondents included “sexists”, “it doesn’t matter” and “no subject is for any gender”. A significant amount of mutual comments echoed that “all subjects are for any gender” (6210334745, male student) and “gender should not make a difference” (6210052712 male student). However, a minority of respondents labelled subjects such as engineering and construction as male and home economic as female. One respondent identified “girls should not do construction, boys should not do home economics” (6214009669, male student).
Chart 4.13: Gendered Subjects

Question 16, an interval Likert scale question analysed by data disaggregation and sought information on the most important factor when choosing a subject for the Leaving Certificate. This question was answered by 89% (n=85) of respondents with 11% (n=11) skipping it. The top four preferences found were “Your Interest in the Subject” with 61.9% (n=53). “Future Careers” was second with 47.06% (n=40) selecting this. “Your Ability in the Subject” was the third most preferred by 29.41% (n=25), while “Teacher of the Subject” was fourth with 17.65% (n=15) of respondents choosing it. (See Chart 4.14).

Chart 4.14: Most Important Factors when Selecting a Subject
Question 17 was an interval Likert scale question analysed by data disaggregation. This question sought information on individuals who were most influential in their subject choice decisions. This question was answered by 89% (n=85) of respondents with 11% (n=11) skipping it. The most influential individuals in chronological order were “Mothers” at 29.76% (n=25). Others was the second highest selected by 19.05% (n=16) of respondents such as Neighbours and People with Work Experience. Fathers were the third highest for 13.92% (n=12), while Brother and Sisters were found to be the fourth highest for 11.54% (n=9) of respondents. Friends and Peers were the fifth highest at 8.64% (n=8), and Teachers/Tutors were sixth at 6.17% (n=5). Finally, Guidance Counsellors, Carers/Guardians and Principals/Deputy Principals were all 5% (n=4) or lower as influential for the respondents. (See Chart 4.15).

Chart 4.15: Most Influential Individuals
Question 18 was an open ended ordinal question analysed by data descriptive, data disaggregation and data tabulation. This question sought information on how schools provided subject choice information to your parents/guardian and was answered by 89% (n=85) with 11% (n=11) of respondents skipping it. Both schools provided information through an Information Evening with 87.06% (n=74) selecting this method. This was followed by an Information Leaflet for 20% (n=17). “Other” was selected by 5.88% (n=5) of respondents. Face to face meetings were found to be the lowest at 3.53% (n=3), while some respondents made reference to receiving no career information. 

(See Chart 4.16).

![Chart 4.16: School Provisions on Subject Choice](image)

A limited amount of qualitative data was reported for question 18 however, respondents identified that “a letter” and “a power point was emailed” was utilised to inform parents. Question 19, an open ended ordinal question was analysed by data descriptive and data disaggregation. This question was answered by 89% (n=85) of respondents with 11% (n=11) skipping it. In total, 59% (n=50) of respondents felt they had received sufficient information prior to making their subject choice for the Leaving Certificate, whereas 41% (n=35) of respondents felt they did not. (See Appendix N).

This question was correlated with question 5 and identified that students are more content with subject choice after completing TY as 82% (n=41) of respondents that selected ‘yes’ had completed TY whereas, 49% (n=17) of respondents that said ‘no’ had
not undertaken TY.
In this question, the theme that emerged was insufficient information being provided. One respondent stated that “no information was given to me about the subjects prior to choosing” (6214260950, female student) while another said “we had no counselling or information; we were just expected to pick one with nothing to tell us what was in store” (6214331615, female student). Participant who did receive information stated that “one talk is not enough” (6214010645, female student) and “would like to have done more tasters of subjects” (6210060091 female student).

The next question, Question 20 addressed levels of awareness by students regarding the effect of subject choice on their future career options. It was answered by 88% (n=84) of respondents with 12% (n=12) skipping it. In total, 82% (n=69) of respondents were aware that subject choice might affect future career options while 18% (n=15) of respondents were unaware. This question was correlated with Question 5 which further identified that 77% (n=53) of respondents who selected yes were TY respondents while 53% (n=8) who selected no were non-TY respondents (See Chart 4.17).

From the qualitative data pertinent to Question 20 it identified three main sources of information were identified, namely, “Teachers” “Guidance Counsellor” and “Parents”.

<chart>
Were you made aware that your subject choice might affect your future career options after school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non TY Responses</th>
<th>TY Responses</th>
<th>Total Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chart 4.17: Awareness of Subject Choice for Future Career Options

Question 21 asked respondents if they were aware that a language is a requirement for some third level courses. This question had a response rate of 90% (n=86) with 10% (n=10) skipping this question. In total, 92% (n=79) of respondents were aware that
subject choice can affect future career options, while 8% (n=7) were not aware of this (See Appendix O).

Question 22 was an open ended ordinal question analysed by data descriptive and data disaggregation. This question was answered by 89% (n=85) with 11% (n=11) of respondents skipping this question. 64% (n=54) of respondents found no difference in the subjects they had selected. However, 36% (n=31) did report a difference (See chart 4.18).

The words used by respondents from the qualitative data from Question 22 included “harder”, “more in depth” and “different from the Junior Cert”. This data identified the themes of challenging, contrasting and interest. Mutual comments echoed “there are a lot harder than expected” (6214260855 female student). Another respondent stated that “there is a big difference in work between Junior and Leaving Cert” however, other respondents said subjects were “more interesting than expected” (6210107537 male student).

![Chart 4.18: Expectation of Leaving Certificate Subjects](image_url)

Question 23, was a nominal open ended question analysed by data descriptive and answered by 83% (n=80) with 17% (n=16) skipping it. In total, whilst 75% (n=60) of respondents felt that the subjects they selected will not restrict their future careers paths. However, 25% (n=20) of respondents identified that some subjects will restrict it.
The qualitative data from question 23 suggests that the majority of respondents were satisfied with their selection. However, a limited number of respondents identified the common themes of college progression and subject usefulness with responses such as “yes, not doing a language” (6210242043 male student), “not picking any science subject” (6214010714 female student) and “D.C.G. is only useful for a handful of careers” (6210242973 male student) as possible restrictions.

Question 24 asked respondents if there were any subjects you wished to study for the Leaving Certificate against other subjects in choice blocks or not offered. This question was answered by 86% (n=83) of respondents with 14% (n=13) skipping it. It was found that 49% (n=41) were restricted in their subject choices as a direct result of choice blocks/school offerings, whereas 51% (n=42) were not impacted.

The qualitative data from question 24 identified the subjects schools subject bands restricted respondents. The data highlighted that a majority of respondents wished to pursue agricultural science, home economics and art.

Finally, Question 25 asked respondents if they were studying any subjects outside of school. This question was answered by 88% (n=84) of respondents with 12% (n=12) skipping it. The data identified that 10% (n=8) of respondents undertook a subject outside of school with the main subjects being Languages, Music and Science.

4.2.4 Section Four: Career Guidance
This final section will address the findings from questions 26 to 28 which sought information on the school guidance service and consisted of open and closed questions.

Question 26 explored the quality of information on subject choice received from the school guidance service. This was a nominal question analysed by data disaggregation and answered by 88% (n=84) of respondents, with 12% (n=12) skipping it. The majority of respondents, 45.24% (n=38), deemed the quality of information received from the school guidance service as “good”. This was followed by “Fair” by 25% (n=21); “Poor” was ranked third by 17.86% (n=15) and “Very Good” was selected by 11.90% (n=10). (See Chart 4.19).
Question 27 was a nominal question analysed by data disaggregation. It was answered by 88% (n=84) of respondents with 12% (n=12) skipping it. In total 69% (n=58) of respondents received guidance classes on subject choice, whereas 31% (n=26) did not. Interestingly, the findings further suggested through cross tabulation with question 5 that 88% (n=51) of respondents who had received guidance classes were TY respondents and a limited amount 12% (n=7) of non-TY respondents had received guidance classes. This highlights that 71% (n=17) of non-TY respondents did not receiving guidance classes on subject choice. (See Chart 4.20).

Question 28 was an open ended nominal question analysed by data disaggregation with a response rate of 88% (n=84) and 12% (n=12) skipping it. It was found that a limited
amount 15% (n=13) of respondents availed of a one to one meeting with the guidance counsellor regarding subject choice, with 85% (n=71) not doing so. (See Chart 4.21).

The qualitative responses for this question was limited with 5 responses, however, it was identified that one to one meetings with the guidance counsellor held an average of 1 meeting.

![Chart 4.21: One to One Meeting](image)

Question 29 was an open ended question seeking information on additional information respondents may wish to provide on their subject choice experience and was answered by 52% (n=45) of respondents with 48% (n=51) skipping it.

In this question, the majority of respondents had no other information to provide however, an overarching theme of additional information emerged with responses such as “students should be given more information on their subjects and be told about their careers” (6214260937 female student).

4.3 Conclusion

This chapter presented the primary findings from the online questionnaire. These finding have been presented in graphical format with various approaches used to analysis the data. These findings will be critically discussed in Chapter five allowing for synthesis and interpretation with the literature.
Chapter Five Discussion

5.0 Introduction
This chapter provides a synthesised discussion and analysis of the primary findings from the online questionnaire in chapter four with the findings in the literature review from chapter two.

5.1 Research Questions
The primary research question set out to examine ‘What factors influence Senior Cycle post primary students in their subject choice for the Leaving Certificate’. To explore this question the researcher examined the views of fifth year Senior Cycle students in two DEIS schools on the factors that influenced their subject choice decisions. The findings are based on a sample of 153 fifth year students and a final response rate of 63% (n=96). Despite the research having a low response rate, it does provide a snapshot of factors that influence subject choice for Senior Cycle.

In addition to the primary research question, the secondary research questions identified that school structures can restrict students with subject choice. The findings revealed that students valued their parent’s opinions when it came to subject choice however other various key influences can impact on subject choice such as interest in a subject, participation in the TY programme and subject sampling. The findings further indicated that a minority of students identified that gender bias exists during subject choice and that the type of advice students received on subject choice varies from Junior to Senior Cycle with support received from regular teachers and the guidance counsellor.

The primary findings revealed that various extrinsic and intrinsic factors influence subject choice for Senior Cycle students and will be distilled through two overarching themes.

1. Extrinsic Influences on Subject Choice
2. Intrinsic Influences on Subject Choice

5.2 Extrinsic Influences
This section will discuss extrinsic influences on students subject choice.
5.2.1. Parental Influence

It has been found that parents are the most influential factor towards subject choice (Byrne and Smyh, 2011; Grolnick and Slowiaczek, 1994; Hannan, 1983; NCCA, 2007; Smyth et al., 2004a, 2011). Parents can act as role models for their children which can impact perceptions towards careers and subject choice (Sharf, 2010). Additionally, children place great value on their parents opinions for information on subject choice than school structures (NCCA, 2007). According to the current findings, 43.67% of students ranked their parents as their first choice of influence in their subject choice and valued their parents opinions more than teachers and peers, with mothers being more influential and ranking first with fathers ranking third.

Parental involvement positively impacts and influences students on subject choice and career aspiration as parents assist students with homework, help to select courses and keep abreast of schools progress (Letha, 2013; Ryan, 2004; Smyth et al., 2015). Parents’ educational background can also contribute to their levels of involvement with school authorities regarding subject meetings and subject choice (Hornby, 2011). The educational background and involvement of a parent can be the greatest influencing factor in assisting and helping their child with subject choice as it creates and provides a safe and understanding environment, whereby organic reassurance, resilience and greater self-efficacy is developed (Hossler et al., 1998). However, parents who are undereducated may be “uninterested or unable to support their children in school” (Paratore et al., 2003 p.106). This study identified that mothers were the most educated at secondary level whereby 77% had obtained a Leaving Certificate compared to fathers at 38% however, the findings further showed that a greater percentage of fathers (63%) who had completed a Leaving Certificate progressed onto third level compared to that of mothers (38%). As the findings point to fathers being less educated at second level than mothers. Hill et al., (2004) argue that parents who lack secondary education may feel inferior within the realm of education which can create barriers to supporting children in subject choice.

This study was positioned in two DEIS post primary schools whereby a core objective of the DEIS programme is to increase parental involvement with school partners (DES, 2005a). A concerning issue within DEIS schools is a general lack of parental
involvement and as a result parents themselves may not attend subject choice meeting leading to misconceptions and inaccurate knowledge towards subjects and their usefulness (DES, 2006; Ryan, 2006). These parental misconceptions are then filtered onto students who solely rely on their parents and value their opinions for subject choice information, which only alters attitudes and reinforces gender stereotyping of subjects (Smyth and Dermody, 2009). Although the study did not investigate the level of involvement of parents in student support activities, the findings do show that 87% of students highlighted that the main source of information on Senior Cycle subject choice offered to parents was through a subject choice information evening.

As the study population was fifth year students there is also a concern that parental involvement may further decrease. It has been suggested that as the child progresses through post primary education parents disengage resulting with a further lack of support for students with subject choice (Hill et al., 2004; O’Brien, 2015). Therefore, school provision of subject choice information to parents needs to be disseminated much earlier in the curriculum and throughout the year (Hearne et al., 2016b). This highlights the need of school management to make greater efforts to target uninvolved parents to provide updated information at various stages throughout the year and by various communication tools such as emails, text messages, social media, letters and telephone calls prior to making subject choices. These actions can only serve to improve career related parental support for students at home and improve and assist children with subject choice and further education progression. Another need is to increase discourse between parents and school personnel such as teachers, Home School Community Liaison Officer and the guidance counsellor, this un-tapping of a valuable resource could lead to healthier academic choices for their children (Darmody and Smyth, 2005; DES, 2006; Letha, 2013; Smyth et al., 2015).

Another associated issue relates to students and parents social background which may be more influential on students achievement in one subject than another (Smyth et al., 2015). The occupations associated with parents social class can lead students to compromising on future careers, which can impact, alter and affect subject choice (Gottfredson, 1996, Inkson, 2007, in Barnes et al., 2011; Inkson et al., 2015). Students from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to select subjects based on parental social background and occupations (Craven, 2012; Vidal Rodeiro, 2007).
They may also place greater value on extrinsic reasons such as role models, job prospects and potential earnings which can have an impact upon subject choice, exam performance and schooling (Jin et al., 2011). The findings of this study contrast somewhat with the literature and highlight that the majority of students chose subjects in the two schools investigated based on intrinsic value such as interest and ability in subjects more so than their social background. However, a small minority of students reported wanting to study a certain science subject that held connotations to their socio-economic background linking their justification to their interest and family occupation.

5.2.2 School Influence
This section will discuss the influential role of the school students’ subject choice. Parents’ choice of school often reflects their values, beliefs and social class and the school ethos serves to reflect the subject band offering made available to students (Darmody and Smyth, 2005; Smyth, 2016). However, school management have a significant amount of discretion in the design of the Senior Cycle subject choice process and subject options offered to students (Smyth and Darmody, 2009). School arrangements and provision of subject choice bands is vital for students and if not considered accurately, students can end up selecting unsuitable subjects by default (Smyth and McCoy, 2011). Similar to previous findings, in the current study a large amount of students (49%) were unhappy with subjects they had chosen due to constraints in the school’s subject bands resulting, with students having to forego a subject they wished to pursue (Smyth and Darmody, 2009).

Additionally, post primary subject choice provisions are strongly influenced by the student population (Smyth, 2016). This study also found that school size can have an impact on subject bands and subject offerings with a number of students reporting that they wished to pursue a subject but, due to a lack of adequate student numbers, the subject was not offered. It also emerged that due to the arrangement of subject choice bands and curriculum offering, 12% of students pursued additional subjects outside of their school. This suggests that a student’s educational and career paths can be hindered by school size, school curriculum, subject choice bands and policy (Smyth and Calvert, 2011). Consequently, greater attention is required from school management to provide subjects and support that reflects the needs of the students more so than the needs of the school such as previous practice, teacher allocation and qualifications (Smyth and
Hannan, 2006). This further highlights the need of school management to collaborate with external partners or neighbouring schools to facilitate students more so than removing subjects leading to students selecting subjects by default.

Teachers can be another key influencer on subject choice for Senior Cycle (Smyth et al., 2011). This may be due to teachers having more contact time and closer relationships with students (Hearne et al., 2016b). Furthermore, teachers may act as role models for students with students seeing subject interests and preferences aligning closely to both teacher and future college courses (Hearne et al., 2016b). The findings in this study highlight that teachers appeared to be marginally (6%) more influential than guidance counsellors (5%). A factor that may be contributing to this may be the impact of Budget 2012 on guidance provision, whereby 30% of regular teachers were found to be undertaking guidance related work with Junior Cycle students (TUI, 2014). Furthermore, 70% of schools have reduced their guidance services to its students (IGC, 2016a) which is impacting on the quality of guidance provision to students (Hearne and Galvin, 2014).

Another factor is that students can determine the specific teacher they will have for a subject in Senior Cycle, which may contribute to students selecting specific subjects (Hearne et al., 2016a). This is of concern, as students may be selecting subjects without consideration to various factors such as aptitude, course content, their ability or future career progression and requirements. This highlights the need for teachers and school staff to be provided with training to proficiently support students with their subject choice (Sexton, 2007; DES, 2012). Additionally, it places a greater focus on school personnel in their function and role in supporting students through the delivery of the whole school approach to guidance. Another focus needed is guidance at Junior Cycle to be provided by the qualified guidance counsellor giving rise to greater student teacher relationships, as this relationship helps with the forming and shaping of students attitudes towards subject choice (Hearne et al., 2016b; McCrone et al., 2005; Smyth et al., 2011).

A major finding in this study is the impact of the TY programme on students subject choice for Senior Cycle. The TY programme promotes the personal, social, vocational and educational development of students (DES, 1993). A large proportion of students (69%) in this study had participated in the TY programme and had a positive attitude to the subjects they had selected for Senior Cycle. Making subject choices at a young age
can lead to serious consequences for their future (Ferry, 2006). Students have different levels of maturity and as students develop so does their ability in making life choices and their readiness to make educational choices (Sharf, 2010; Super et al., 1996 in Brown et al., 1996). In this study, the average age of a TY student was 17 years compared to a non-TY student at 16 years. Through participation in the TY programme, this extra year of schooling may contribute to student’s enhanced psychological career maturity which is essential for making educational and life choices (Barnes et al., 2011). One of the benefits of the TY programme is that it allows students time to reflect on past experiences, gain exposure to personal, emotional and social development which can influence subject choices for Senior Cycle (Smyth, 2016).

The Department of Education and Skills (DES, 2009) recommend schools allow students appropriate time to sample subjects. Subject sampling is valuable as it provides the opportunity to sample and experience a variety of different subjects and thus can be a major aid for student contentment in making informed decisions regarding subject choices (NCCA, 2004; Smyth et al., 2004). However, over 40% of students regret taking at least one subject by not being afforded the opportunity to sample subjects before final selection (Smyth, 2011). This important issue also emerged in the current findings whereby a small proportion of non-TY students (36%) were afforded sampling compared to TY students (85%). The findings identified that the majority of non-TY students were dissatisfied with subject choice and referenced a lack of opportunity to sample subjects as a contributing factor before making their final decisions. However, the vast majority of TY students in this study found the process of subject sampling provided them with a greater insight into what subjects to study for the Leaving Certificate and what the curriculum would entail. Literature suggests that it is highly beneficial to allow students sample subjects prior to making subject choice (Smyth et al., 2011). This was evident in this study as 74% of TY students were satisfied with their subject choice due to sampling process. However, students who are not afforded the opportunity to sample subjects tend to express greater levels of stress and anxiety towards the Leaving Certificate (Smyth et al., 2011). An interesting finding of this study is that in spite of the literature suggesting that the sampling of subjects benefits TY students, 64% of TY students in the current study selected their subjects for Leaving Certificate based on their Junior Certificate results. Therefore, academic achievement and intrinsic self-belief and ability serve to be a greater influencer than sampling. Furthermore, students show a reluctance to
commence new subjects for the Leaving Certificate with no prior experience (Smyth and Hannon, 2006; Smyth et al., 2011).

Another issue that emerged in the findings was the relevance of work experience in TY and students subject choice. TY students who participate in work experience mature in their attitude and personality, which helps increase their self-concept and their ability in making educational and career decisions (Jeffers, 2011). The findings of the current study indicate that the TY work experience mainly facilitates students in their personal, social and vocational development. Furthermore, a minor amount of students reported that work experience gave them a greater insight into subject choice and for progression to third level education. It can therefore be suggested that the TY work experience has an important role in students development and career maturity, by enabling them to make greater informed vocational and subject choices.

One of the key personnel involved in subject choice, is the school guidance counsellor whose role is to support students during transitional periods in their lives (Shannon, 2014). Guidance counsellors are the most significant providers of clear and accurate information regarding subject choice to students (NCGE, 2013; Hayes and Morgan, 2011; DES, 2005b, 2009; Smyth et al., 2011). Guidance on subject choice can make an enormous difference in the students life and their educational paths (Sultana, 2014). Although guidance counsellors are the most influential in subject choice (McCoy et al., 2014), the findings of this study contradict the literature as guidance counsellors were one of the least influencing factors (5%) for students in their subject choice in the two schools investigated. However, it may be suggested that various factors such as available allocated contact time, the dual role of subject teacher and guidance counsellor, parental and extrinsic influences such as parents, school structure and management, subject choice bands, the TY programme and socio-economic standing may be contributing factors (Hearne et al., 2016a).

Career guidance is a vital service for students and schools are required to provide a guidance service to aid and assist students in making effective and appropriate subject and career choices from junior to Senior Cycle (OECD, 2004; DES, 2005b; DES, 2012; NGF, 2007). During the transitional period from Junior Certificate to Leaving Certificate, the provision of accurate information to students about educational and
vocational choices is vital (NCCA, 2007). As this study was positioned in two DEIS schools, lower achieving and disadvantaged students have an increased reliance on the guidance counsellor to provide them with accurate subject choice information for the Leaving Certificate (Smyth et al., 2011). It has been found that students prefer one to one guidance as it enables them to probe further without feeling pressured or embarrassed (McCoy et al., 2006). It emerged in this study that 44% of non-TY students sought advice from the guidance counsellor on a one to one basis regarding subject choice. The impact of Budget 2012 which resulted with a reduction of 53.5% (IGC, 2017b) in one to one guidance counselling with a greater emphasis towards classroom based guidance provision also needs to be considered (ASTI, 2013b; IGC, 2013; 2014; NCGE, 2013; Hearne et al., 2016b). The findings of this study are that 85% of non TY students did not receive a timetabled guidance class at Junior Certificate for subject choice. This may contribute to non-TY students dissatisfaction with their subject choices for Senior Cycle. Furthermore, this highlights the imbalance of guidance provision towards subject choice between junior and Senior Cycle in particular for the cohort of students who do not participate in the TY programme (DES, 2009; Hearne et al., 2016a; McCoy et al., 2006).

This reduction in one to one guidance further segregates a particular cohort of vulnerable students, who rely heavily and greatly on the school guidance services than the main student body (Smyth et al., 2011) for accurate knowledge and assistance regarding subject choice. Worryingly, it emerged after Budget 2012, 15% of students did not meet with the guidance counsellor on a one to one basis (IGC, 2016a). The findings of this study highlight the need for an increase in one to one sessions of guidance at Junior Cycle, to discuss subject and career options for Senior Cycle.

In a previous study Senior Cycle students identified that their first contact with the guidance service in Junior Cycle was through the administration of psychometric assessment (Hearne et al., 2016b). Psychometric results were only discussed in a one to one session with students (Hearne et al., 2016a) however, as aforementioned, with a 51.4% (IGC, 2016a) reduction in one to one guidance counselling, students may be receiving psychometric results after the subject choice process, therefore selecting Leaving Certificate subjects without any knowledge of the results of the assessment (Hearne et al., 2016b). The findings of the current study were that a small amount of non-TY students (10%) received information regarding psychometric assessment compared to
TY students (90%). This further suggests the need for increased one to one guidance sessions at Junior Cycle in the context of providing feedback and guidance on psychometric assessment results.

An interesting finding in this study was that although the information provided through guidance classes, talks from external speakers and psychometric assessments, 60% of students primarily based their subject choice on their Junior Certificate results. This may suggest that some students choose to ignore additional supports and information provided and select subjects based on prior success, which relates to Bandura’s and Betz’s propositions that self-efficacy is sourced through success and affirmation of ability and in their belief that these are the best subjects for them to pursue for the Leaving Certificate (Patton and McMahon, 2014). This may identify why some students have regrets about their career paths after post primary education; identifying subjects they had selected for Senior Cycle restricted their options (McCoy et al., 2014).

Finally, where schools offer the best appropriate guidance services for students, students appeared to make the best subject choice decisions (Blenkinsop et al., 2006). Budget 2012 resulted in a gradual dismantling of one of the most important professional supports available to students during their formative years (Hearne and Galvin, 2014, Hearne et al., 2016b; IGC, 2016b). The additional 400 guidance posts to be re-instated as outlined in Circular 0003/2016, may provide some restoration to the function and roles of the guidance counsellor in post primary schools for Junior Cycle students, in particular regarding assistance with subject choice. Additionally, the reform of the new Junior Certificate may also provide school management flexibility to allocate more time for guidance provisions for Junior Cycle (DES, 2015). The implementation of these factors serves only to support students in making greater decisions with subject choice.

5.3 Intrinsic Influences
The second theme that emerged in the findings was intrinsic influences on student subject choice.

Gender identity of the student and the gender stigma attached to specific subjects are a major factor influencing subject choice for students in post primary school (Tenenbaum, 2008). Students select subjects within the context of a specific school situation, whereby
schools influence subject choice formally through the way in which subject choices are framed (Smyth and Darmody, 2009). Subjects that are perceived to be either masculine or feminine are carried through to subject choice which can impact on career pathways made by students (Knowles and Landers, 2011). It emerged in this study that the majority of the students had a non-gender bias attitude towards stereotyped perceptions of subjects. However, for some students, the stereotyped perception of subjects was evident. A number of students reported that practical based subjects held association to specific genders. Engineering was labelled as male, while Home Economics was labelled as females only. A striking finding was that although a non-gender bias attitude was evident, the actual subject selected by students showed gender bias similar to those suggested in the literature by the State Examination Commission (2017).

In coeducational schools, students associate specific subjects to social construction and occupational segregation (Smyth and Darmody, 2009). The findings of this study point towards school policies regarding subject provision, subject packaging and timetabling can serve to either reinforce or challenge exiting gender patterns of subject take up (Smyth and Darmody, 2009). By schools providing a more gender balance curriculum this contributes to the imbalance and low levels of female students selecting STEM subjects. A lack of self-belief and self-efficacy in selecting a subject can lead to students dwelling on personal deficiencies and focusing on adverse outcomes (Bandura, 1994). However, the utilisation of role models who have succeeded and hold similar aspirations and attributes as the person observing, can be a source to improving a person’s self-belief, self-efficacy and self-confidence (Hoyt, 2013).

It has also been claimed that students from disadvantaged areas may lack self-belief and self-efficacy towards studying specific subjects (Craven, 2012). It is also claimed that students may be less influenced by socio-economic boundaries and more inclined to make intrinsic choices towards careers and subject choice (McKie and Cunningham-Burley, 2005). Furthermore, intrinsic reasons can outweigh any other influence when it comes to student subject choice (McCrone et al., 2005; Smyth and Calvert, 2011). The findings indicate that some students do make subject choices based on their beliefs in their ability about a subject rather than their social background with 61.90% of students rating their “interest in the subject” and 48.24% rating their “ability in the subject” as the top two factors for selecting subjects for Senior Cycle. A contributing factor to this could
be that students select subjects based on their cumulative experience of a subject along with their mesosystem such as positive affirmation from family, friends, peers and teachers. (Rosa and Tudge, 2013)

5.4 Conclusion
This chapter discussed the overall findings of this study through the two key themes of extrinsic and intrinsic influences. The findings highlighted that a myriad of extrinsic and intrinsic factors impact and influence subject choice for Senior Cycle. It is evident that students are less influenced by socio-economic background and seek greater influence through intrinsic self-belief and self-efficacy towards subject choice. Schools management continues to play an imperative role in the provision of subject choices for students and this discussion highlights the consequences of students future educational pathway being hindered, if greater consideration is not undertaken by school management in providing students with a gender balance subject choice bands. The discussion highlighted the impact of budget 2012 and the dual role of the guidance counsellor resulting with a disconnect and a gradual dismantling of supports provided to students in Junior Cycle compared to those in Senior Cycle. Finally, the opportunity to sample subjects in TY held greater satisfaction with fifth year subject choice and this additional year provided students with greater career maturity.

Chapter six will present an overview of the findings and highlight the strengths and limitations associated with this study.
Chapter Six Conclusion

6.0 Introduction
This chapter will discuss the main findings of this study in the context of the original aim and objectives. It presents the strengths and limitations of the study and identifies a number of recommendations informed by the findings. Finally, the chapter will outline and conclude with a reflection on the personal learning of the researcher.

6.1 Overview of the Research Findings
The overall aim of this research was to examine and explore the factors that influence subject choice in Junior Cycle with Senior Cycle students in post primary schools. Several key objectives were also identified in this research. Firstly, an examination of relevant literature to the research topic was undertaken, involving critical analysis of Irish post primary educational policy underpinning subject development, exploring the overall role of the Guidance Counsellor in supporting students with subject choice decisions.

Secondly, the online questionnaire collected and analysed the views and opinions of fifth year students in two DEIS Post Primary Schools with subject choice. This quantitative approach identified the various extrinsic and intrinsic influences which impact the subject choice of students such as school provisions, parental involvement, gender and the guidance counsellor.

Thirdly, an analysis of the overall findings identified recommendations for future practice that will inform the design process, delivery and supports available and provided as part of subject choice process for fifth year students. These objectives were realised and a number of conclusions can be drawn from this study.

Students look forward to the opportunity to choose subjects (Smyth and Hannan, 2006) and subject choice decisions are of critical importance, with choices made having long term consequences on schooling and future educational and career paths for students (Smyth and Hannon, 2006; Warton and Cooney, 1997). In this study, the findings are that Senior Cycle subject choice is influenced by a myriad of extrinsic and intrinsic influencers with a complex relationship between both. The extrinsic influencers include
the school, guidance counsellor and parents, whilst intrinsic influencers include gender, aptitude, interest and perceived future career pathway.

Parental involvement in their child’s education can play a fundamental factor in a student subject choice (Hill and Taylor, 2004). The educational achievement of a parent can result in the level of involvement with school partners with greater parental involvement resulting in healthier academic choices of students (Darmody and Smyth, 2005; DES, 2006; Letha, 2013; Smyth et al., 2015). In this study, parents were the most influential factor in subject choice with mothers appearing to be more educated at post primary level compared to fathers; however a greater percentage of fathers had progressed to third level compared to mothers. In contrast, parents who lacked educational qualifications lack involvement with school partners, leaving educational decisions to be made by students themselves (Hill et al., 2004; Hornby, 2011).

A key influence is the school itself, its management and the subject choice offerings have a significant impact on the subjects students chose and pursue for Senior Cycle. From the findings it identified that subject choice offering is solely at the discretion of school management, with subjects offered in favour of the majority than the minority of students. In this study, it found that participation in the TY programme had benefits for students in relation to their subject choice as they were afforded the opportunity to sample subjects prior to making subject choice. This provided students with a greater insight into what subjects to study for the Leaving Certificate and what the curriculum would entail. However, where subject sampling is not provided by schools, greater levels of stress and anxiety are argued to be found in students (Smyth et al., 2011). The findings identified that the majority of non-TY students were dissatisfied with subject choice and referenced a lack of opportunity to sample subjects as a contributing factor before making their final decisions.

The role of the guidance counsellor is argued to be paramount in helping and assisting students with subject choice (McCoy et al., 2014). However, following the impact of Budget 2012 some students had limited access to the Guidance Counsellor at Junior Cycle and as a result it was found in this study that teachers were more influential than the Guidance Counsellors for subject choice. This influence can be attributed to teachers having more contact time giving rise to greater student teacher relationships (Hearne et
In this study, it was found that one to one guidance was the most effective and preferred service for students subject choice information at Junior Cycle. However, following Budget 2012, a 53.5% reduction of one to one guidance services places students in a position to make subject choice decisions with a lack of accurate information and support from the guidance counsellor (IGC, 2017b). Recent Government announcements of an additional 400 guidance posts is a positive development, however with a lack of guidelines on how these hours are to be utilised may further marginalise the supports for students in subject choice. In addition, a need for greater focus on guidance at Junior Cycle emerged in this study, however, with the reform of the Junior Cycle; greater flexibility by school management is needed to allocate time for guidance provisions at Junior Cycle (DES, 2015).

In terms of intrinsic influences, the gender stereotype of a subject can influence subjects selected by students (Knowles and Landers, 2011). In this study, it was highlighted that school structure and provisions of subject bands either reinforces or segregates the masculine or feminine association of subjects. The findings further suggest that the majority of students held a non-gender bias to subjects, however, a small minority identified and associated gender stigmatisation to certain practical based subjects such as Engineering being associated as male and Home Economic as female. The findings also suggest that students are less influenced by socio-economic boundaries and more inclined to make intrinsic choices based on their interest and ability in a subject when it came to subject choice.

In addition, examination attainment can have an influential role in subject choice with subjects studied at Junior Certificate carried forward to Senior Cycle (Smyth, 2016; Smyth and Darmody, 2009). They can offer and provide students with a greater sense of self-belief and self-efficacy towards studying a specific subject for Senior Cycle (McCrone et al., 2015; Taylor, 2015). In this study, 60% of students selected subjects for Senior Cycle based on their Junior Certificate results. In addition, students associated enjoyment and interest of a subject to examination achievement and success. Furthermore, this study highlighted the uniqueness of students in their readiness to make educational and vocational choices as examination achievement was linked to future
career aspirations and the need to select specific subjects for educational progression.

6.2 Strengths and Limitations of the Research Study

The main strength of this study was that the data was collected from two DEIS schools which were external to the researcher to ensure objectivity as much as possible. This approach allowed the researcher to gather data which was free from contamination or personal bias during the data collection stage. A second strength was the use of the positivist paradigm and an online questionnaire method which allowed access to the perceptions and attitudes of fifth year groups in the two different schools (Bryman, 2012). This resulted in the removal of geographical boundaries with a larger amount of quantitative and qualitative data being collected in a short time frame. Furthermore, the coefficient alpha achieved was 0.872 identifying that the reliability of the questionnaire was adequate. Finally, a third strength of this study is the utilisation of information to inform future research on the factors that influence Senior Cycle post primary students in subject choice in DEIS post primary schools. It identifies the views of students in DEIS schools and can contribute towards the subject choice process, its option bands design, supports and delivery.

Nonetheless, one of the limitations of the research study is that it did not investigate non-DEIS schools. The second limitation is related to the generalisability of the findings with a study response rate at 63% (n=96), the generalisability of the findings can be viewed more so as probability influence (Thomas, 2013; Mertens, 2015). A third limitation associated is the lack of separate data comparability between schools. Applying separate data collection instruments to each school would have added comparability to this study and would have allowed the researcher to examine the data with greater correlation between schools, yielding greater statistical analysis and data. Finally, the quantitative approach utilised, could be seen as a limitation. The use of a mixed method approach could have produced a more in-depth study through the employment of interviews or focus groups to allow the researcher probe deeper on the topic. However, this was beyond the scope of the exploratory study in terms of cost and time.

6.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study a number of recommendations based on policy and practice can be made as follows:
6.3.1 Policy

1. As parents are the most influential factor with subject choice the Department of Education and Skills along with various other partners need to develop policy which places greater emphasis on parents to be actively engaged with the educational progression of their children in post primary education. Currently, the DES employs a HSCL in DEIS Schools to increase parent participation with school partners, however; there is no accountability for parents who fail to engage with schools partners on subject choice with their children’s post primary Education.

2. The effectiveness of subject provisions and supports with regards to the subject choice process needs to be subjected to external evaluations. This process could be used to gather data from students and parents to examine if subject provisions and curriculum offering is satisfying the needs of the students more so than school management, school policies and current practice.

3. It is strongly recommended that there should be a reinstatement of the ex-quota allocation of guidance hours, as students in Junior Cycle are not being provided with the necessary guidance supports needed for subject choice.

6.3.2 Practice

1. Schools should afford students the opportunity to sample subjects in fifth year prior to their final subject choice. Whilst some schools may do this, others may not. The TY programme provides the opportunity to sample subjects with greater contentment towards subjects after sampling. It is recommended that the TY programme becomes a mandatory year in all post primary schools, as the benefits allow students to make greater informed decisions towards educational and career decisions. However, the substantial cost associated may hinder this approach (Jeffers, 2011).

2. Students see teachers as role models and seek advice on subject choice (Hearne et al., 2016b). This study highlighted that teachers can be more influential than guidance counsellors. Therefore, appropriate training should be provided to regular teachers in supporting a WSA. Furthermore, this training should be expanded to all school personnel in order to support students.

3. Management, teachers and school staff to place emphasis on the guidance counselling provisions through the well-being component of the reformed Junior
Cycle. This emphasis provides a signpost for students in Junior Cycle to the guidance counsellor at an early stage and allows students to develop the necessary skills and accurate information for making greater academic choices.

4. School policy should be developed further with various subject teachers, parents and students, whereby gender bias in subject bands could be examined. Additionally, subject bands should be developed so that certain preconceived stereotyped subjects should not be allotted on the same subject band.

5. School policy should be developed to supports cohorts of students who wish to pursue subjects that schools initially offer but then remove due to lack of numbers. Greater external support should be made available for these students who are disenfranchised.

6.3.3 Research

1. As guidance counsellors were less influential than teachers in this study, future research needs to be carried out in respect to the overall benefits of the 400 reinstated guidance hours and their impact on fostering students subject choice in Senior Cycle.

6.4 Reflexivity in Relation to My Personal Learning in this Study

Reflexivity involves deliberately asking about the way we interpret and analyse evidence (Thomas, 2009). Researchers are encouraged to speak about themselves and their experiences while carrying out research (Hearne, 2013). I came to this research study with assumptions about this topic based on my experience as a teacher in a DEIS school. As a teacher and past pupil of my current school, I often find myself perplexed towards how students make subject choice decisions and relate these to my own personal subject choice journey. Assumptions I made were that students would select their best six subjects to progress for the Leaving Certificate based on previous examination achievement and they could select any subject they desired. Furthermore, I felt that parental involvement and socio-economic background played a major role in subject choice. Budget 2012 had an impact on my school, through the removal of our guidance counsellor, leading students to seek advice from me about their subjects for the Senior Cycle. I found myself internally questioning my own experience in supporting and providing adequate advice and information to them.
Etherington’s (2004) model of reflexivity informed this research study. This approach encourages researchers to identify and constantly monitor, through writing, their own thoughts, perceptions and reactions to participant responses and to identify the knowledge learned and how it was learned (Etherington, 2004). I kept a research journal which recorded all of my thoughts, feelings, questions and ideas to facilitate reflexive practice and to minimise personal bias. Additionally, I engaged in critical discussions with my research supervisor, which was found to be extremely beneficial.

This research study has allowed me to become more mindful in regards to engaging with fifth year students and their subject choices. Areas identified were collaboration with my school Principal in relation to the development and design of subject bands in order to meet the needs of the students. As a future guidance counsellor and following the reinstatement of guidance hours, I will need the continued support of school colleagues in order to deliver a balanced guidance plan. Furthermore, I will need to encourage greater involvement from parents in guidance based activities such as providing open office hours for parental information and support.

6.5 Conclusion
This chapter provided a conclusion to this research study. The findings were summarised and presented in the context of the original aim and objectives. The strengths and limitations of the study were addressed and a number of recommendations for policy, practice and research were put forward. Finally, the personal learning and reflexivity of the researcher were discussed.
References


Data Protection Act 2003, No.6, Laois: Irish Statute Book


Appendices
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. In addition, students must 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.

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

From: Anne.O'Brien
Sent: 24 March 2017 10:37
To: Lucy.Hearne
Subject: 2017_03_07_EHS

Dear Lucy

Thank you for your amended Research Ethics application which was recently reviewed by the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee. The recommendation of the Committee is outlined below:

Project Title: 2017_03_07_EHS - An investigation into decision making factors that influence a student's subject choice in Senior Cycle.
Principal Investigator: Lucy Hearne
Other Investigators: Gerry Sweeney
Recommendation: Approved until October 2017.

Please note that as Principal Investigator of this project you are required to submit a Research Completion Report Form (attached) on completion of this research study.

Yours Sincerely

Anne O'Brien
Administrator, Education & Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee
Ollscoil Luimnigh / University of Limerick
Gothán: Phone +353 61 334101
Facs / Fax +353 61 202561
Room/Email: anne.obrien@ul.ie
Géisín / Web: http://www.ehs.ul.ie
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 contents. There is no reason why I would be considered unsuitable to work with children or young people.

Signature: [Signature]
Print Name: Gerry Sweeney
Department: School of Education

Date: 27-02-2017
This form must be retained by the signatory's University Department.

[Handwritten signature]
28/02/2017
Appendix C

University of Limerick
O L L S C O I L L U I M N I G H

Subject Information Letter (Principal)

ESH REC No: 2017_03_07_EHS

Date:

Research title: An investigation into decision making factors that influence a student’s subject choice in Senior Cycle.

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 have to complete a research dissertation on a topic related to guidance counselling.

In my research I aim to investigate the factors that influence a student’s subject choice in Senior Cycle. Further information regarding my research is provided in the attached document entitled, ‘General Information Sheet’. In order to gather this information I would appreciate if you would give me consent to carry out the research study with fifth year students in your school. This would involve them completing an online questionnaire on Surveymonkey outside of class time. This questionnaire should take no longer than 20 minutes to complete.

All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and the students’ identity will not be disclosed. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time prior to the data analysis stage. The results from this research study will be reported in my thesis and may be disseminated through other professional publications and conferences. The collected data will be stored in a secure location approved
by the University of Limerick. It is important to note that the school’s name and the name of individual participants will not be used in the research.

If you have any queries or require any further information on the research study, please contact me or my supervisor:

Researcher: Gerry Sweeney
Phone number: 0861050850
UL Email address: 15067114@studentmail.ul.ie
lucy.hearne@ul.ie

Supervisor: Dr. Lucy Hearne
Phone number: 061 202931
UL Email address:

This research has received Ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee 2017_03_07_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

UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Consent Form (Principal)

EHS REC No: 2017_03_07_EHS

Research title: An investigation into decision making factors that influence a student’s subject choice in Senior Cycle.

I have read the project Information Sheet and Subject Information Letter and understand in detail the particulars of the research project. I understand that the identity of the participants and the school will not be revealed in the reporting of this research study. The conditions involved in the research which are designed to protect the privacy of participants and respect their contribution are:

1. Participation is entirely voluntary.

2. Participants are free to withdraw at any time prior to the data analysis stage and any contribution made will be subsequently destroyed.

3. The questionnaires will be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to the researcher and the supervisor. Excerpts from the questionnaires may be part of the final research dissertation but under no circumstances will names or any identifying characteristics be included in the report.

I hereby give my consent for Gerry Sweeney to carry out this research in the school.

Signature: ________________________________

Printed name: ________________________________

Signature of Researcher: __________________________

Date: ________________________________
Appendix E

General Information Sheet

ESH REC No: 2017_03_07_EHS

Name of Research
An investigation into decision making factors that influence a student’s subject choice in Senior Cycle.

Research Aims:
The main aim of this research is to investigate the contributing factors that influence subject choice for Senior Cycle (fifth year) students in post primary school from the perspective of students who have already chosen their subjects and are now in Senior Cycle.

Who have I requested to Participate?
Fifth year Senior Cycle students’ male and female in three mixed secondary schools are being requested to take part in this research study.

When and where will the research take place?
The online questionnaire will take place during the month of May 2017 through the school or outside of it.

How long will the questionnaire last?
The online questionnaire will take no more than approximately 20 minutes to complete.

What are the benefits?
The findings of the study will be used to inform and enhance future guidance counselling practice in post primary education with regards to assisting students in their subject choices.

What are the risks?
There are no foreseeable risks involved. Participants may decide that you do not wish to answer a question.

What happens at the end of the study?
At the end of the study the data collected will be analysed to present results and findings in the final dissertation. All data collected will be entirely anonymous, and participants will not be identified nor associated with the results. All electronic data collected will be stored on a password protected computer. All data and information obtained will be stored securely and safely in UL for 7 years.

What if I cannot answer a question or have other questions that needs to be answered
If at any point during the research you have any questions about the study you can contact the researcher. It is imperative that you feel comfortable and knowledgeable about the research and that all questions have been answered.

**What happens if I change my mind during the questionnaire?**
If at any point during the research that you feel you want to stop, you are free to do so and take no further part. There are no consequences for changing your mind.

**Contact details of project researcher and supervisor**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researcher: Gerry Sweeney</th>
<th>Supervisor: Dr. Lucy Hearne</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phone number: 0861050850</td>
<td>Phone number: 061 202931</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UL Email address: <a href="mailto:15067114@studentmail.ul.ie">15067114@studentmail.ul.ie</a></td>
<td>UL Email address: <a href="mailto:lucy.hearne@ul.ie">lucy.hearne@ul.ie</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Yours kindly,

_____________________________________
Gerry Sweeney
Researcher.

This research has received Ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee 2017_03_07_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**
Subject Information Letter (Parent/Guardian)

EHS REC No: 2017_03_07_EHS

Date:

Research title: An investigation into decision making factors that influence a student’s subject choice in Senior Cycle.

Dear Parent or 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. As part of my studies I have to complete a research dissertation on a topic related to guidance counselling.

In my research I aim to investigate the topic of decision making factors that influence a student’s subject choice with fifth year students in your school. Further information regarding my research is provided in the attached document entitled, ‘General Information Sheet’.

I am writing to you to enquire whether you would be willing to consent to your son/daughter taking part in this research study, through completing an online questionnaire on this topic. The questionnaire will take no longer than approximately 20 minutes and the link will be sent to your son/daughter’s email address.

All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and the students’ identity will not be disclosed. Participation in the study is voluntary and students can withdraw from the research at any time prior to the data analysis stage of the research. The collected data will be stored in a secure location approved by the University of Limerick. The results from
this research study will be reported in my thesis and may be disseminated through other professional publications and conferences.

If you have any queries or require any further information on the research study, please contact me or my supervisor:

Researcher: Gerry Sweeney    Supervisor: Dr. Lucy Hearne
Phone number: 0861050850    Phone number: 061 202931
UL Email address: 15067114@studentmail.ul.ie    UL Email address: lucy.hearne@ul.ie

If you are agreeable to your son/daughter participating in this research study please confirm your consent by completing the attached Consent Form and returning it by (insert date) to me at (name of school). A signed copy of this form must be received in advance of the day of the distribution of the online questionnaire in order for your son/daughter to participate.

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) 23410

102
EHS REC No: 2017_03_07_EHS

Research title: An investigation into decision making factors that influence a student’s subject choice in Senior Cycle.

I have read the project Information Sheet and Subject Information Letter and understand in detail the particulars of this research project. I understand that the following conditions are designed to protect the privacy of all participants and to respect their contributions.

(i) Participation is entirely voluntary. Even if I consent to my child taking part, he/she still has the right to refuse to take part.

(ii) All participants are free to withdraw at any time in the process prior to data analysis of the questionnaire.

(iii) The questionnaire data will be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to the researcher and supervisor.

(iv) While excerpts from the questionnaire data may be made part of the final research report, under no circumstances will any names of students or the school, nor any identifying characteristics be included in this report.

I hereby consent to my son/daughter taking part in this research project.

Parents/Guardian Name: ______________________________________________________

Students Name: _____________________________________________________________

Parents/Guardian Signature: __________________________________________________

Researcher’s Signature: ___________________________ Date: ________________
Appendix H

UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

EHS REC No: 2017_03_07_EHS

Research Title: An investigation into decision making factors that influence a student’s subject choice in Senior Cycle.

Online Questionnaire

I appreciate you taking the time to complete the following questionnaire. It should take a maximum of 20 minutes to complete. Your responses are voluntary and will be confidential. Please answer all questions in the questionnaire.

Section 1: General Information

1. What is your gender?
   o Male
   o Female

2. What age are you?
   o 15
   o 16
   o 17
   o 18
   o 19

3. What Nationality are you?

   …………………………………………………………………………………………………

4. Do you have brothers/sisters who is or has been in 3rd level college?
   o Yes
   o No

   If yes, how many are in 3rd level college?

   …………………………………………………………………………………………………
5. Did you do Transition Year?
   o Yes
   o No

6. Please tick Yes or No to the questions below that are applicable to you:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Don’t Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) Has your father completed the Leaving Certificate?</td>
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<tr>
<td>b) Has your father completed a 3rd level college course?</td>
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<tr>
<td>c) Has your mother completed the Leaving Certificate?</td>
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<tr>
<td>d) Has your mother completed a 3rd level college course?</td>
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<tr>
<td>e) Has your guardian/carer completed the Leaving Certificate?</td>
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<tr>
<td>f) Has your guardian/carer completed a 3rd level college course?</td>
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</table>

7. What subjects did you select for your Leaving Certificate? Please list:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject:</th>
<th>Higher Level</th>
<th>Ordinary Level</th>
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**Section 2: Information on Subject Choice**

If you completed Transition Year, please answer Questions 8 to 10:

8. Did you sample a variety of Leaving Certificate subjects during your Transition Year?
   o Yes
   o No

9. Did you find this sample process useful?
   o Yes
   o No
Please explain further:

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

10. Did you do a work placement/experience as part of Transition Year?
   o Yes
   o No

   If yes, did you find this useful?
   o Yes
   o No

   Please explain further:

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

11. If you did not do Transition Year did you get an opportunity to sample a variety of subjects first before selecting them for the Leaving Certificate?
   o Yes
   o No

   If yes, did you find this process useful?

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

12. Was a specific presentation/information session on subject choice provided to you to help you select your Leaving Certificate subjects?
   o Yes
   o No

   If so, did you find this useful?
   o Yes
   o No

   Please explain further:

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

13. From the list below, how did your school provide you with subject choice information prior to making your Leaving Certificate subject choice?
Please tick from the following:

- CATs/DATs/Career Interest Inventory assessment
- Career Guidance Classes by the Guidance Counsellor
- Talks from Guest Speakers
- Career Fairs
- Other (please detail below)

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Section 3: Subject Choice Decision Making Factors

14. Did you base your subject choice on the results you achieved in your Junior Certificate?
   - Yes
   - No

If no, please explain why not:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

15. Do you think that certain subjects are only for boys or girls?
   - Yes
   - No

Please explain further:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

16. In the table below, please rank 1-4 (1 meaning the most important and 4 meaning the least important) what was important to you when choosing your Leaving Certificate subjects.

   Your Interest
   Your Ability
   Teacher of the Subject
   Future Career

17. In the table below, please rank 1-9 (1 meaning the most influential and 9 meaning the least influential) the people who were most influential in your choice of subjects.
18. How did the school provide information to your parent/guardian to advise them on your subject choices? Please select by ticking from the below list:

- A meeting face to face
- Information evening
- Information leaflet
- Other (please state below)

19. In general do you feel you received sufficient advice prior to making your decision for your Leaving Certificate subjects?

- Yes
- No

If no, please explain:

__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

20. Were you made aware that your subject choice might affect your future career options after school?

- Yes
- No

If yes, who made you aware of this?
21. Were you made aware that a language is a requirement for some 3rd level college courses in Ireland?

- Yes
- No

22. From the subjects you did select for your Leaving Certificate, are any of them different from what you expected?

- Yes
- No

If yes, please explain:

__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

23. Do you think from the subjects you have selected, some may restrict your future career path or decisions?

__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

24. Were there any subjects that you wished to study for the Leaving Certificate that were against other subjects in selection blocks or not offered in your school?

- Yes
- No

If yes, please list these subjects:

__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

25. Are you studying any subjects outside of your school?

- Yes
Section 4: Career Guidance

26. Which comment below best describes the quality of the information you received about subject choice from your School Guidance Service?
   - Very Good
   - Good
   - Fair
   - Poor

27. Did you receive career guidance classes in relation to subject choice from the School Guidance Service?
   - Yes
   - No

28. Did you avail of individual one to one meetings with the Guidance Counsellor in relation to your subject choice?
   - Yes
   - No

   If yes, please select the number of one to one meetings you had with your Guidance Counsellor about subject choice?
   - Once
   - Twice
   - More than twice

29. Is there any other additional information you would like to provide about your general experiences of subject choice for your Leaving Certificate?
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________

Thank you for taking the time to complete this online questionnaire. If you feel that you need to discuss any issues that may have arisen from completing it you are advised to contact the schools guidance service
Appendix I

University of Limerick
Ollscoil Luimnigh

Survey Information Email

EHS REC No: 2017_03_07_EHS

Research title: An investigation into decision making factors that influence a student’s subject choice in Senior Cycle.

Dear Student,

I would like to invite you to take part in my research study investigating the decision making factors that influence a student’s subject choice in Senior Cycle.

The questionnaire will take approximately 20 minutes of your time, and needs to be completed by 10 days from date of email. By completing the online questionnaire, you are consenting to participate in this research. Please click the following link https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/KGX8NCK to continue.

All information gathered in the questionnaire data will be held in the strictest of confidence. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the questionnaire at any time prior to data analysis. The results from this research study will be reported in my thesis and may be disseminated through other professional publications and conferences.

If you have any queries or require any further information on the research study, please contact me or my supervisor:

Researcher: Gerry Sweeney Phone number: 0861050850 UL Email address: 15067114@studentmail.ul.ie
Supervisor: Dr. Lucy Hearne Phone number: 061 202931 Email address: lucy.hearne@ul.ie

This research has received Ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee 2017_03_07_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) 23410
Appendix J

Sibling 3rd Level Progression

Do you have brothers/sisters who are or have been in 3rd level college?

- 64% No
- 36% Yes
Appendix K

Did you trial subjects during TY?

Trail Subjects during Transition Year
Appendix L

Was a specific presentation/information session on subject choice provided to you to help you select your Leaving Certificate subjects?

44% Yes
56% No

Information Provided on Subjects
Appendix M

*Subject Choice Based in Junior Cert (TY responses)*
Appendix N

In general do you feel you received sufficient advice prior to making your decision for your Leaving Certificate subjects?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix O

Awareness of a Language

Were you made aware that a language is a requirement for some 3rd level college courses in Ireland?

92% Yes
8% No