



**An Exploration into the Career Decision Making Experiences of Adults in
Apprenticeships**

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Master of Arts in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development

Submitted to the University of Limerick, 7th October 2020

Declaration

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

Signed:

Sinéad Burke

Acknowledgements

A very special thank you to my husband and my children for all their understanding, love and encouragement throughout this research study.

I would sincerely like to thank the six apprentices who gave of their time and experience, without whom this study would not have been possible. I would also like to thank the Gatekeepers for permission to carry out my research.

I would especially like to thank my research supervisor Dr. Petra Elftorp, for her support, guidance and patience throughout. It is greatly appreciated.

I would also like to thank my classmates for their help and support, I am grateful to have been part of such a wonderful group.

Finally, I would like to thank the University of Limerick for allowing me to conduct this research study.

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List of Abbreviations

AEGI	Adult Education Guidance Initiative
CEDEFOP	Central Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
DES	Department of Education and Skills
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB	Education and Training Boards
FET	Further Education and Training
HEA	Higher Education Authority
IBEC	Irish Business and Employers Confederation
ICCDPP	International Centre for Career Development and Public Policy
IGC	Institute of Guidance Counsellors
NCGE	National Centre for Guidance in Education
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate
RHRUAT	Report on Hearings Relating to the Uptake of Apprenticeships and Traineeships
SCCT	Social Cognitive Career Theory
SLTCDM	Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making
SOLAS	tSeirbhís Odeachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
VEC	Vocational Educational Committees

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Abstract

The overall aim of this research was to explore the career decision making experiences of adults in apprenticeships. The study focuses on the experience and perceptions of both male and female apprentices participating in an electrical apprenticeship programme. It looks at the factors which influenced the adults in their choice of pursuing an apprenticeship, their experience of guidance counselling support while in second level education and post leaving secondary education; and their experience of participating in what is traditionally considered a male dominated apprenticeship programme. Apprenticeship recruitment faces several challenges, one of which is promoting the apprenticeship route as an equally valid opportunity to third level options. Another challenge lies in attracting more females into the apprenticeship programmes, particularly those previously considered to be male dominated trades.

This study employed an interpretive paradigm approach using semi-structured interviews with six mixed gender participants, each at various stages of apprenticeship training. A thematic analysis approach was used to interpret the data from the findings (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

The overall findings indicate the importance of a whole school approach to guidance counselling along with the importance of early interventions to prevent early school leavers from falling through the cracks. Evident also was the need for apprenticeships to be made more visible as career pathways on completion of the leaving certificate. The findings from this study highlighted various experiences of information provision in terms of apprenticeship programmes and their value.

The findings also indicated the overall experience of both male and female participants and gender considerations when applying for the apprenticeship, in training centres and while on the job. Gender did not present as an inhibiting factor from the participants perspectives in this study. In general participants perceptions of apprenticeships were positive and participants outline practical considerations for individuals considering the apprenticeship route. Finally, several recommendations are put forward to inform policy, practice and research in the future.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the research study within the context of relevant theories, policy, and practice. An outline of the justification for the study and the positionality of the researcher will also be presented. This chapter also provides a description of the aim, objectives and research methodology employed by the researcher.

1.1. Context and Justification for the Research Study

The aim of this research was to explore the experience of career decision making from the perspective of adults in apprenticeships, in the context of guidance counselling practice and provision; and to explore the implications for career guidance in post primary schools. An apprenticeship is defined as “a programme of structured education and training which formally combines and alternates learning in the workplace with learning in an education or training centre” (DES, 2013, p.6). Ireland's apprenticeship system is a statutory national programme, based on dual modes of learning, combining ‘on-the-job’ employer-based training and ‘off-the-job’ training, completion of which prepares the apprentice for a specific occupation and a nationally recognised qualification from level 5 upwards under the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (DES, 2013).

The national apprenticeship system in Ireland is governed under the 1967 Industrial Training Act with SOLAS (tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna) as the national FET authority with legal responsibility for administration of apprenticeships in Ireland (McGuinness et al. 2014). SOLAS was established in October 2013 to co-ordinate and fund educational and training programmes, working also in partnership with 16 Education and Training Boards (DES, 2013). In the past, the Vocational Educational Committees (VECs) were the main providers of Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland. In 2013, the 33 VECs were amalgamated into 16 Educational and Training Boards (ETB) whose functions is to plan and provide, co-ordinate and review the provision of education and training for the purpose of employment (McGuinness et al. 2014).

Apprenticeships are traditionally associated with the construction, electrical, automotive and engineering industries, more recently there have been efforts to expand this approach into areas not traditionally associated with apprenticeships (Report on Hearings Relating to the Uptake

of Apprenticeships and Training (RHRUAT), 2019). The review of apprenticeship training in Ireland recommended the expansion of the apprenticeship model to meet the needs of people and society's future skills needs (DES, 2013). An Apprenticeship Council was set up, hosted by SOLAS and including close co-operation with the HEA (Higher Education Authority) regarding delivery and planning (DES, 2013). The Action Plan to Expand Apprenticeships and Traineeships 2016-2020 was launched in 2016, there has been a growth in craft apprenticeship registrations, with a wider range of apprenticeship options available including quantity surveyor, cybersecurity, insurance and accounting for example (RHRUAT, 2019). While the minimum age for many apprenticeships is 16, less than 1% of apprentice registrations in 2016 were 16 with age profiles ranging from 16 to 54, showing the appeal of apprenticeships to a wide cohort (Eustace, 2017). 'Generation Apprenticeship' under the guidance of the Apprenticeship Council aims to meet the skills needs and double the number of learners of all ages and backgrounds taking the apprenticeship route by expanding the apprenticeship model (SOLAS, 2018). Generation Apprenticeship is "blurring the boundaries" between FET and higher education with award outcomes from NFQ Levels 5 to 10 (Eustace, 2017). SOLAS aims to increase female participation in apprenticeship programmes and in the traditionally male dominated apprenticeship programmes (SOLAS, 2020).

This study is concerned with the guidance counselling supports availed of by the apprentices and the perspectives of apprenticeships as not having parity of esteem with other post leaving certificate pathways. School guidance plays an important role in highlighting the apprenticeship option to students and creating awareness around alternative career routes other than third level college courses. The Indecon Review (2019) of guidance counselling indicated that students were more likely to ask about progression to third level education. Apprenticeship recruitment faces challenges due to the Irish psyche regarding apprenticeships as a route for students who do not do well in school (Indecon, 2019).

1.2. Positionality of the Researcher

The positionality of the researcher is that of a secondary school teacher, and therefore, an 'outsider' to Apprenticeship Programmes and having no personal experience or familiarity with the research topic. The researcher was aware that participants might consider the researcher as an expert, and in this regard respectful treatment of participants was a priority (Oancea, 2014). While not providing any predictive power, the findings of the experience of adults' career

decision making experience, may be transferable and apply to other contexts (Bryman, 2012). To avoid charges of subjectivism on the basis that the interviews are guided by the person conducting the study, the researcher used rigour and validity to ensure against claims of subjectivity and bias (Tracy, 2010).

1.3. Research Aims and Objectives

The overall aim of this research is to explore from an adult's perspective the experience of career decision making on apprentices both while making the decision and while participating on an apprenticeship programme. The rationale for the chosen research is based on a genuine interest to explore the process of decision making of adults pursuing the career pathway of traditionally male dominated apprenticeships. In carrying out this research it is hoped the researcher will gain an insight into this experience from an adult's point of view and that the findings will inform future practice in supporting clients when choosing this career pathway.

The research objectives are:

1. To review the literature in relation to career-decision making and apprenticeship participation.
2. To gain an understanding of the influences on career decision making from both a male and female perspective using qualitative methods.
3. To critically analyse the findings, draw conclusions and identify recommendations for policy, practice and research in the future.

1.4. Research Methodology

The researcher used an interpretivist paradigm to gain an insight into the perspectives of adults in apprenticeships and their career decision making experiences. A qualitative approach was best suited to this research, and reflects the researchers concern for the participants understanding and interpretations of the world around them (Bryman, 2012). This study employed semi-structured interviews with adult apprentices to gather qualitative data on male and female adults currently participating in apprenticeship programmes. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and then analysed using a thematic analysis framework (Braun and Clarke. 2006).

1.5. Thesis Outline

The Thesis is structured as follows:

Chapter 1: This chapter provides the introduction to the research topic and outlines primary and secondary research aims and objectives. The context and justification for the study is also outlined, along with the positionality of the researcher. It includes an outline of the methodology used in the research and the structure of the thesis.

Chapter 2: Reviews the literature relevant to the study and provides a contextual background from a range of sources.

Chapter 3: In this chapter the methodology is discussed along with the rationale for the chosen paradigm. It describes the methods of data collection and analysis used, and addresses the issues of reliability, validity, reflexivity and ethical practice.

Chapter 4: This chapter presents the primary research findings under three main themes.

Chapter 5: Provides a discussion on the synthesis of the primary findings and the literature sources reviewed in Chapter 2.

Chapter 6: This chapter contains an overview of the findings. It outlines the strengths and limitations of the research and recommendations for policy, practice and research. It concludes with the researcher's reflection on personal and professional learning.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0. Introduction

The literature review aims to examine policy, research and practice literature related to guidance counselling in Ireland, career decision making processes and apprenticeships. Research literature was sourced from a range of materials. These sources include journal articles, primary texts, Irish and International policy documents, Government publications and reports.

The literature is reviewed under four sections, including:

- Guidance counselling definition, policy and professional practice
- Career decision making and theoretical perspectives
- Apprenticeships, challenges to recruitment and female participation
- Non-traditional career choices theory and research

2.1. Guidance Counselling Definition, Policy and Professional Practice

From an international policy context ‘Career Guidance’ is defined as “services and activities intended to assist individuals, of any age and at any point throughout their lives, to make educational, training and occupational choices and to manage their careers” (OECD, 2004, p.19). In Ireland, guidance services in the educational sector are not just based in post-primary schools, but also in higher and further education colleges and adult and second chance education programmes (DES, 2005). Section 9 of the Education Act (1998), stipulates that guidance provision in post primary schools is a statutory requirement and post primary students are entitled 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 in second level schools refers to:

a range of learning experiences that assist students to develop self-management skills that will lead to effective choices and decisions about their lives. Guidance encompasses the three separate, but interlinked, areas of personal and social development, educational guidance and career guidance” (DES, 2005, p.4)

In post-primary education, the guidance policy framework is based on a whole-school approach. This is integrated into all school programmes and is a whole school responsibility (Hearne, et al., 2016), requiring the implementation of a whole school guidance plan which:

“should outline the school’s approach to guidance generally and how students can be supported and assisted in making choices and successful transitions in the personal and social, education and career areas.” (DES, 2017),

This integrated model includes “personal and social development, educational guidance and career guidance” and includes responsibility for the “two activities of guidance and counselling” (DES, 2005, p. 4). Post primary schools structure their school guidance plan to meet the educational, vocational, and personal needs of all students. Guidance counselling has a crucial role in facilitating clients to master vocational development tasks, and assist in identifying influencing factors (like family, peers, socioeconomic factors) which in turn influence decision-making (IGC, 2016).

Guidance in Further Education and Training is informed by the DES *Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019*, which outlines the need for an integrated approach to guidance.

“FET Guidance Service ought build on current AEGI integrated Guidance services to adult and young people over the age of 16 who have left post primary school early, which includes impartial adult education information, one-to-one guidance and group guidance, which will help people to make informed educational, career and life choices” (DES, 2014, p, 112).

Information and Guidance services in the FET sector provides services to early school leavers over 16 and adults who are 18 and older, to help them in their educational, career and life choices (DES, 2014). The Irish ‘unified model’ of guidance counselling is ‘unique compared to guidance provision in other European Union countries’ (Hearne et al. 2018, p. 317). The DES (2005) Guidance counselling definition addresses the personal and social development of the person, acknowledging the necessity to develop self-management skills that will lead to effective life choices and decisions.

It is important to acknowledge the obligations of professional practice and recognise the necessity to support all who avail of the guidance service in our post primary schools, higher and further education and adult education (DES, 2014; IGC, 2016).

2.2. Career Decision Making and Theoretical Perspectives

This section discusses theories of human development and career decision making, thus providing the basis for this research study as they provide essential considerations about stages of self-discovery that young adults face when forming their own identity, while simultaneously making choices for their future.

2.2.1 Theoretical Perspectives on Career Decision Making

Career decisions are difficult at any stage of life provoking feelings of anxiety and insecurity (Savickas, 2012). For students, decisions about career choices are made during adolescence, when they are already struggling with their identity, questioning their self-image and their sense of ability (Blustein, 2011). In Erikson's (1963) stages of psychosocial development, the identity versus role confusion stage refers to the theory of adolescent identity crisis. The danger of this stage is 'identity diffusion or role confusion' - "uncertainty about who one is and what one is to become" (Sugarman, 2001, p.95). The development of "self and self-identity is a major developmental milestone for the teen to accomplish" (O' Brien, 2013), and those who do not resolve this stage face 'role confusion', leaving the adolescent "unsure of who they are and where their lives are going" (O' Brien, 2013, p. 152). At the end of adolescence students in post primary schools must "make commitments about what to become" (O' Brien, 2013, p. 153).

The main framework for understanding occupational choice and career decision making over the last century was the idea of "person-environment fit" (Kidd, 2006). Frank Parsons' (1908) concept of vocational guidance was based on three proposals: "people are different from each other; so are jobs: and it should be possible, by a study of both, to achieve a match between person and job" (Kidd, 2006, p. 13). Though this is a 100-year-old concept it founded "what later evolved into trait and factor theory" (Sharf, 2013, p. 25). Holland (1997) expanded on Parsons work, proposing that "people seek occupations that are congruent with their interests" (Kidd, 2006, p. 15). He theorised that people and occupations can be categorised into six interest types: 'realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising and conventional' (Sharf, 2013, p.119). Holland introduced 'congruence' as a concept of the degree of fit between the person and the environment which results in job satisfaction and stability (Hamley and Bomford, 2019; Kidd, 2006). This method of 'matching' can oversimplify the complex decision-making process, it excludes the influences of other people and 'random events' and the context in which decisions are made (Hamley and Bomford, 2019, p. 17).

Super (1957) developmental career theory proposes that career development proceeds through stages: “growth, exploration; establishment; maintenance; and disengagement” (Sharf, 2013, p.232). Super takes a broader view of career using two concepts, life role and life stage. (Sharf, 2013; Arthur and McMahon, 2019). Super depicts career development as an archway of career factors, centred on the ‘self’ and a range of ‘personal determinants’: values, aptitudes, interests and situational determinants such as labour market, society, school and family (Arthur and McMahon, 2019, p.10) Super’s stages are not always age related and individuals may go through these stages at different times in their lives (Sharf, 2013) This approach is more flexible than the matching framework but pays insufficient attention to economic and social limitations. (Sharf, 2013; Hamley and Bromford, 2019)

Like Super, Linda Gottfredson (1981), proposed a career theory based on sequential stages, focusing on childhood and adolescence. Gottfredson (2002), discusses how children develop career ideas and then adjust them to what they see in the world around them, influenced by family and the media. Her theory of ‘compromise and circumscription’ outlines how children’s career ideals are a reproduction of the social norms they live with. “Compromise refers to having to make trade-offs among sex type, prestige and interests” (Sharf, 2013, p. 192).

The Social Learning theory of career decision making (SLTCDM) (Mitchell, Jones & Krumboltz, 1979), proposes “individuals learn about themselves, their preferences, and the world of work through direct and indirect experiences” (Patton and McMahon, 2014, p. 96), and subsequently individuals take action based on their learning. Krumboltz identifies four groups of factors that influence career decision-making, - genetic endowment and special abilities (i.e., gender, ability), environmental conditions, and events including job and training opportunities, families, learning experiences and task approach skills. (Hamley and Bromford, 2019).

Lent, Brown and Hackett’s (1994) Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) suggests that self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations “predict academic success and occupational interests” (Kidd, 2006, p. 26). This theory proposes that people have self-direction and personal agency and that career choice is influenced by the beliefs that the individual develops through four sources of self-efficacy; performance accomplishments, vicarious learning or modelling, low levels of anxiety, and encouragement and support from others (Betz, 2000; Kidd, 2006). Family of origin, social class, gender and ethnicity and quality of educational opportunities form the bases of self-efficacy. (Bandura, 1977; Kidd, 2006). Schoon (2006) also

refers to the concept of agency under the term “human agency”. According to Schoon: “By recognising and exercising their own competencies, interests and values, individuals formulate expectations by projecting themselves into the future”. “Bounded agency” refers to the concept that life plans involve not only the individual but are made interdependently with the “desires and goals of others” (Schoon, 2006, p.29).

Theories on human development discuss the age-related stages of development in young people. Decisions about career choices coincide with the struggle for identity and questioning of self-image and ability, and these years are significant in the adolescent’s orientation towards their unique personal identity (Gottfredson, 1981). Adolescence (Erikson 1950) marks the period where young people develop their sense of self and they develop a feeling of independence. Positive role models are important and are found through personal contact and relationships (Bassot et al., 2014). According to Marica (1980), identity also includes adoption of work possibilities. This is an important time for students to gain experience of working life by ‘trying out’ work experiences to gain insights into the world of work. (Bassot et al, 2014, p. 75). However, while work experience offers a good opportunity to explore an area of interest and the working world and it can also be a useful addition to a curriculum vitae, the purpose and benefits of work experience are not always clear and for some work experience does not fulfil any of the these. (Bassot et al., 2014, p. 75).

2.2.2 Influences on Career Decision Making

This section reviews research literature on the topic of career choice influences. An understanding of the complexity of influences on decision-making is essential, as well as understanding their impact. There are various factors that influence career decision making and these will be discussed under the following categories: Family and Peers; Gender; and Socioeconomic Status, as being most impactful.

2.2.3 Family and Peers

From an Irish perspective, according to the Indecon Review of Career Guidance (2019), there are several factors that can influence career choice, and family and peers are perceived by students to be the most important factors. This finding was similar to research carried out in Scotland which supports the idea that career decision making was based in the family and

personal networks of young people (Howieson et al., 2009). Other factors range from work-experience, the career guidance teacher and class teachers, visits from employers, to Career Fairs and Exhibitions, Career self-assessment tools and social media (Indecon, 2019).

“Parents are seen as a key source of information and influence upon a young person’s career choices” (Smyth et al., 2011, p. 161). Three quarters of sixth years students surveyed as part of that research, considered their mothers and fathers important are very important in their plans for the future. In addition to parents, advice from siblings and wider family were also relied upon, and in some cases; “the negative experiences of siblings in college informed what courses students applied for” (Smyth et al., 2011, p. 163) The guidance counsellor followed parents in importance, and over half of the students pointed to their friends as having an important influence. Subject teachers were also considered influential while year heads had a “less important role at this stage” (Smyth et al., 2011, p. 161).

Findings from the of Growing Up in Ireland research on the lives and circumstances of 20 year olds and their achievements at the end of second level education revealed, that when it came to choosing a higher or further education institution, ‘parental encouragement’ rated higher than ‘recommendation by a teacher/guidance counsellor’ by 52% compared to 32% (Growing up in Ireland, 2019, p.8).

According to the OECD (2018) young people frequently seek out career support from a ‘trusted adult’ in their social network. In this respect teachers are a source of support in terms of careers connected to academic subjects of interest. Teachers need to be cognisant of the fact that their advice although well intentioned may be biased towards pursuing a higher educational pathway. “Good career guidance requires the involvement of both qualified career guidance specialists and the wider teaching and school staff” (Musset and Kurekova, 2018, p. 47).

In Bright et al.’s 2005, study on Australian students showed family and teachers are significant influences on career decision making. Peers, the labour market, media and web-based information and unplanned and serendipitous events added to the complexity of the process, highlighting the need for guidance counsellors to support students career decision-making (Bright et al., 2005). While there are many external influences on students’ career decision making, the individuals’ agency also needs to be acknowledged as influential on vocational choices and outcomes (Smyth et al., 2012).

2.2.4. Gender

According to the OECD (2018), “career ambitions are also heavily shaped by gender with some important national variations” (Musset and Kurekova, 2018, p. 10). With girls having higher career expectations than boys, but these expectations are often ‘narrowly focused’ towards teaching or the medical profession, while girls often ‘turn away’ from STEM professions. The OECD proposes that gender stereotyping can be countered by improved information, and first-hand experiences of careers which can appear ‘unfriendly to the those not of the dominant gender’ (Musset and Kurekova, 2018, P. 10).

According to the Indecon Review of Career Guidance (2019), gender can play a role in who students consult with about their career choice. In this review it was found that female students chose to speak with the guidance counsellor, while the male students showed a preference to consult with their Year Head or subject teacher, although it does not suggest the reason for this. “There are relatively few differences between male and female students in the perceived importance of certain groups of people, although mothers are seen as a more important source of influence by girls than boys (Smyth et al.,2011, p.161).

An understanding of the complexity of influences is important to this research study as identifying factors of influence is important and how they impact on career decision making.

2.2.5. Socioeconomic Status

Another finding in the Indecon Review was that students from lower income groups were less likely to have consulted with parents around career options. The implication being that those students were most in need of guidance support in order to tackle the barrier of intergenerational disadvantage (Indecon, 2019). Advice and support from parents can vary according to social background and within socioeconomic groups, and in some cases these parents can view the ‘child as expert’ in their post school decision making and while they supported their decisions they did not ‘push them’ in any particular direction. In these cases, young people are far more reliant on their school for support and advice. (McCoy and Byrne, 2011, p.151) In other research it was found that students attending working class schools are more reliant on the guidance counsellor, subject teachers and class tutors when it comes to post primary school decisions. For these students, “the guidance counsellor is as important an

influence as their mother” (Smyth et al., 2011, p. 161). The Indecon report highlights the important considerations for practice and provision of support. There are also considerations here relevant to the importance of a whole school guidance approach in our schools, as teachers should not underestimate their influence with the students studying their subject (Indecon, 2019; McCoy and Byrne, 2011).

2.3. Apprenticeships, Recruitment Challenges and Female Participation

This section reviews literature on the apprenticeship progression route and the challenges of recruitment and female participation, these will be discussed under two categories: Challenges to Apprenticeship Recruitment and Female Uptake of Apprenticeships.

2.3.1. Challenges to Apprenticeship Recruitment

Despite the “blurring the boundaries”, uptake of Apprenticeships in Ireland is not without its challenges. The DES Review (2013), highlighted the importance of “having clear and transparent progression routes into higher education if apprenticeship is to be expanded successfully and attract parity of esteem with other career pathways” (DES, 2013, p. 3). Vocational Education and Training (VET) in many European countries suffers from ‘a lack of esteem’ and perceptions are ‘poor compared to general education’, where VET is considered a ‘second choice for second rate students’ (CEDEFOP, 2017, p. 16). The National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy (2020) identified “lack of exposure to vocational learning, and vocational options or pathways” as one of the impediments to developing interest in FET options among school leavers (SOLAS, 2020, p.51).

In recent years, young people are staying in education longer with a higher participation rate in higher education (McCoy and Byrne, 2011; Musset and Kurekova, 2018). Accessing highly skilled employment through higher education has increased while the percentage of young people interested in skilled trades and manual employment has fallen to fewer than one percent in twenty countries (Musset and Kurekova, 2018). According to the OECD, career aspirations are often poorly aligned to the labour market demand and reflect a poor understanding of how the world of work has changed (Musset and Kurekova, 2018). However, from an Irish perspective the Indecon Review highlighted family and peers as the most important influence on career aspirations from the student’s perspectives (Indecon, 2019).

Apprenticeships face prejudice and stereotyping. Career guidance has a role in improving the attractiveness of apprenticeships to young people and their parents, which can reduce negative stereotypes (Eustace, 2017). The Industry Apprentice Council Annual Survey (2017) in the United Kingdom found; while apprenticeships have evolved over time and provide great opportunities, it faces the barrier of teachers and parents having outdated perceptions and lack of awareness of those opportunities. While traditional trade apprenticeships continue, emerging technologies have resulted in a wealth of new opportunities. This lack of sufficient information and understanding regarding apprenticeships and associated careers, hinders young people when making sustainable educational choices (Musset and Kurekova, 2018).

From a policy perspective, parents and guidance counsellors have a large role to play in promoting apprenticeships as a career path and raising the parity of esteem with other educational options (RHRUAT, 2019). The Indecon Review of Career Guidance (2019) findings showed that students more commonly asked guidance counsellors about progression routes to third level, while a very low percentage of students asked about apprenticeships. This highlights the challenge to ensure all career options are considered with post primary students. Further to this, the Indecon Review research shows how, among a minority of guidance counsellors, there is dissatisfaction with the quality of available information on apprenticeships and on employment trends. Guidance counsellors struggle to access user friendly market information despite this information being available from SOLAS (Indecon, 2019). Learners also indicated in the Indecon Review that there were gaps in the availability and quality of careers information related to apprenticeships. To ensure an awareness of alternative routes into the labour market, wider access to alternatives to higher education is crucial (Indecon, 2019). This challenge is not unique to Ireland however, as other countries observed a weakness in career guidance delivery in this area. (OCED, 2004)

The Irish Business & Employers Confederation's (IBEC)s submission in the 2019 Report on Hearings relating to the Uptake of Apprenticeships and Traineeships, highlighted while there is great respect for "tradesmen", there is a significant barrier to persuading public opinion on the credibility and equality of apprenticeships as a professional career route. The apprenticeship route has been "overwhelmed by the media and public and private discourse" on the points system and college places. Other deterrents identified by IBEC include the perception that you are required to have a master's degree to enter certain sectors, such as technology (RHRUAT, 2019). The Generation Apprenticeship review of pathways participation in apprenticeships

reported that overall apprenticeships were presented as a “less attractive option” along with the “perverse effect of media-reported school league tables” (SOLAS, 2018).

Lack of awareness of companies’ value on recruiting apprenticeship candidates, where competence over credentials are a regular part of recruitment strategies and initiatives (Musset and Kurekova, 2018). According to the Indecon Review (2019), it had been suggested that the profile of apprenticeships needs to be elevated. There is a prevalence of the traditional belief that apprenticeships are best suited to “kids that are not good at school” (Indecon, 2019, p. 56). The status and social values of education and training programmes were deeply embedded within the Irish psyche, with the FET sector considered as the poor relation of training routes (McGuinness et. al. 2014).

The perceptions of the term apprenticeship may change with the development of new apprenticeships and degree programmes in sectors not previously assessable via the apprenticeship route. However, it may take considerable effort over a prolonged period to change public perceptions of the “earn-and -learn” model of apprenticeship (RHRUAT, 2019, p.11). Ireland also differs from other countries in that 70% of entrants completed their leaving certificate. For other countries apprenticeship is something that begins in schools at secondary level, around 4th or 5th year, with students choosing between an academic or vocational route. There is no data recorded on the social background of students undertaking apprenticeships currently (RHRUAT, 2019).

2.3.2. Female Uptake of Apprenticeships

Recent analysis by SOLAS, suggests there are around 17,000 women in Ireland with second level or higher education qualifications who are seeking to return to work. Despite rapid growth in recent years, there are still challenges in female participation in the skills development areas, with only 3% participation in apprenticeships. (SOLAS, 2020).

The issues impacting on female participation in apprenticeships are firstly occupational segregation (trades traditionally viewed as male dominated) and quality and affordable childcare (family commitments). The broadening of the range of apprenticeship opportunities through the generation apprenticeship campaign is trying to encourage female participation in areas that traditionally had a high uptake of female employment but also encouraging females to consider places in traditionally male roles, such as the construction industry (RHRUAT,

2019). Encouraging female participation is not just an Irish policy objective, countries such, as Canada and the United Kingdom, where reshaping the “equity dimensions of apprenticeship” is also a priority (Levasseur and Paterson, 2015, p. 522; Young Women’s Trust, 2017)

Technology Ireland runs a ‘REBOOT’ programme aimed at getting women back into work in the technology sector (RHRUAT, 2019, p. 12). In 2018, the ESB recruitment worked on attracting more women into electrical apprenticeships and increased female participation to 16 females, where in previous years there were only two participants (RHRUAT, 2019, p. 13). The insurance apprenticeship has been most successful in attracting female apprentices with 60% of apprentices being female (RHRUAT, 2019).

2.4. Non-traditional career choices theory and research

Organisations and governments nationally and internationally are appealing for greater numbers of young women to undertake a career in what are traditionally male-dominated trades (Musset and Kurekova, 2018). According to the OECD, this reflects concerns around the need to build economic productivity and to address continuing gender inequality. “Gendering of subjects at school level facilitates and reinforces gender segregation within the labour market” (Smyth and Darmody, 2009, p.273). Schools play an important role in reducing gender stereotyping through the nature of subject choice and provision, where the gendering of subjects is “actively constructed and produced within and across school settings” (Smyth and Darmody, 2009, p. 290). In this study, where girls had opted for less traditional choices of technological subjects, they viewed the subject as irrelevant to their career pathways and reported that they did not intend to pursue ‘male’ craft occupations (Smyth and Darmody, 2009, p. 290). Employers and educators in “perceived masculine and feminine fields, can also help to eliminate existing stereotypes” (Musset and Kurekova, 2018, P. 63). Direct exposure of young people to the world of work can enable them to see for themselves if it is possible to go against gender norms in the workplace (Musset and Kurekova, 2018).

In Simon and Clarke’s (2016) Australian study of issues affecting employment outcomes for young women in male-dominated careers accessed through apprenticeships; outline that apprenticeships have been a vital “mechanism of skill development” and are central to an efficient education system (Simon and Clarke, 2016, p. 1). Simon and Clarke (2016) state that the foundations for transition from education and training to employment are established during school and it is during these years that young people have what possible for them and not

possible re-enforced. Gendered stereotypes around career options are re-enforced and create barrier especially for young women in relation to participation in careers traditionally dominated by males. This study also found there was ‘general dissatisfaction with career exploration activities’ at school. With many schools still focusing on university entry while VET programmes were not being encouraged; except among those students that it was felt were ‘not capable’ of achieving the higher educational route (Simon and Clarke, 2016, p. 4). Another finding was that when advice was received it reinforced gender stereotypes. Respondents described the influence of home and parental expectation, and views on occupations and pathways as problematic (Simon and Clarke, 2016).

2.5. Conclusion

The reviewed literature substantiates the importance of guidance counselling in supporting individuals throughout the career decision making process. Promotion of apprenticeship routes and raising the vocational training route as on par with higher education routes is crucial. Reducing gender stereotyping, beginning with subject provision across and within second level education is essential, along with increasing the number of female participants in non-traditional careers and in the labour market. Consideration of the many factors that influence student and adults in their career aspirations is salient to supporting career decision making.

In the following chapter the researcher will identify the research questions along with the discussing the research paradigm, the data collection and analysis methods to support this study. Chapter 3 will also discuss validity, reliability and ethical considerations.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.0. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the career decision making experiences of adults in apprenticeships. The chapter first introduces the primary and secondary research questions, the research paradigm framing this study and the methodology. This is followed by the research design frame, data collection and analysis methods, along with addressing validity, reliability, reflexivity and ethical issues.

3.1. Research Questions

The research questions for this study developed from a combination of issues identified in the literature review and from the researcher's interest in career decision making experiences. The primary question of this study is:

What are the career decision making experiences of adults in apprenticeships?

The subsequent secondary questions asked include:

- 1) *What factors influenced the decision to become an apprentice?*
- 2) *What Career Guidance supports were availed of while making the decision?*
- 3) *What are the experiences of participating in a male dominated apprenticeship programme for male and female adults?*
- 4) *What are the implications of this research for the guidance counselling service?*

This question lead to the chosen paradigm outlined in the following section.

3.2. Research Paradigm:

This research study employs an interpretivist qualitative paradigm using a semi-structured interview. The use of this paradigm allows for an exploration of the interviewees perceptions and lived experiences. In interpretive research, the key concern is "understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants perspectives, not the researchers" (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015, p. 9). Qualitative research best suits this research study as the "stress is on the understanding of the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants" (Bryman, 2012 p. 375).

Having carefully considered the characteristics of quantitative and qualitative research, the researcher concluded that for the purpose of exploring career decision making the best approach was one which uncovered the direct experience of adults' decision-making experiences. "Quantitative research works with numbers" whereas qualitative research "sets itself other priorities" (Flick, 2011, p. 11). Adopting a detached objectivist approach has the potential to yield outcomes that are objective, measurable, predictable, but also external to the individuals involved (Cohen et al., 2000). However, the interests of this study, lie in the subjective experience of individuals, which are 'richly descriptive' (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). The researcher hopes to gain insights into meanings and not measures. A large proportion of research into career decision making is quantitative, this study hopes to address the gaps in knowledge by providing rich descriptions of the individuals experience of the decision-making process. "The interpretive paradigm, in contrast to its normative counterpart, is characterized by a concern for the individual" (Cohen, et al., 2000, p. 22). The choice of a qualitative perspective reflects the researchers 'concern' for the participants understanding and interpretations of the world around them; a world which is fluid, ever changing and evolving over time (Cohen et al, 2000).

3.3. Access and Sampling:

The sampling method in this study is 'purposeful' sampling (Patton, 2015). In purposeful sampling, "researchers handpick the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of their judgement of their typicality" (Cohen et al., 2000 p, 103). For this study, it is necessary for the researcher to "select a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015, p. 96). The purpose of the exploration in this study, is to gain insight and an in-depth understanding of the specific experience of adults career decision making. This sample therefore will be "information-rich" (Patton, 2015), purposeful, non-random and small (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). From this sample the researcher can learn what is central to the experiences of the participants and consequently the purpose of this study.

Following ethical approval from the University of Limerick, the researcher sought the permission of the Training Service Manager (Gatekeeper) of an apprenticeship programme (Appendix B), to collect data from apprentices about their career decision making experiences before and during their apprenticeship. An information letter was also attached (Appendix A). Accessing participants was difficult due to the pandemic and it took time to get in contact with

participants meeting the required criteria, namely adults over 18 years of age and a gender balance of three males and three females. Participants understandably were not in training centres but in isolation with the rest of the country.

Before embarking on the interview process, all participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Consent forms (Appendix D) were sent to participants along with a participant information letter (Appendix C). Due to the pandemic the interviews had to be conducted over the phone. While telephone interviews were not the interview method of choice, under the circumstances, they were the only option permissible. An advantage was that they could be more easily reached, and at times that were convenient to them (Cohen et al., 2007). The interviews were carried out between the 20th of May 2020 and the 4th of June 2020. Each interview was audio recorded with the participants permission and transcribed by the researcher. Throughout the interview, the researcher employed interview techniques like paraphrasing and summarising to check for accuracy and ensure responses were clarified (Kornbluth, 2015). Participants were also offered transcripts for ‘member checking’ and validation (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Cohen et al., 2007), this did not result in any significant amendments.

3.4. Interviews

The purpose of an interview “is to obtain a special kind of information” (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015, p. 108). The design frame is a semi-structured interview. This flexible form of inquiry will involve the collection of data from six adults, followed by an examination of the data for existence of relationships between and among them (Bryman 2012). Participants were given the freedom to talk about what was of significance to them, with some loose structure to ensure topics relevant to the study aims had been covered. (Bell, 2005). This approach is best suited to an exploration of the career decision experience of adults. “Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behaviour, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them” (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015, p. 108). By using this design, the focus was on the personal meaning for the adults in apprenticeships. It was a narrative account from each adults’ perspective, their individual experience and understanding of the world (Bell, 2005).

In the semi-structured interview, participants are given the opportunity to discuss issues salient to them which the researcher may not have predicted (Braun and Clarke 2013). An interview framework was used (Appendix E). In the initial questions, specific information was sought in

order to lay the ‘foundations’ for later questions that access the participants perceptions (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). As the interview developed there was more flexibility, but all questions were guided by the issues under exploration. Thus, allowing the researcher to respond to the emerging ‘world view’ of the participants and new ideas about the topic of exploration. Individual interviews provided an opportunity for the researcher to clarify and to check with respondents around the accuracy of their interpretation, particularly in the case of unusual responses (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015).

While acknowledging that the researcher is the ‘primary instrument’ for data collection; they also bring their own subjectivity and bias to the research. To safeguard against such bias, the researcher identified and monitored all subjectivities and biases in the form of a reflexive diary (Appendix G), to record how the researcher may be shaping and interpreting the collection of data (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015).

3.5. Data Analysis Method

The qualitative data from each individual interview was transcribed thoroughly in preparation for analysis, using the Thematic Analysis approach. Thematic Analysis can be used “to answer almost any type of research question, and used to analyse almost any kind of data”(Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 206). This analytic approach was best suited to this study in terms of theoretical flexibility, methods of data collection and to the sample size. (Braun and Clarke, 2013). In contrast to an Interpretive Phenomenological Approach (IPA) where the “dual focus on individual cases and themes”, lacks the substance of Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 183). In the presentation of the data in the findings chapter, the researcher has ensured to anonymise the data by using pseudonyms and changing any data that may potentially make participants identifiable (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Oancea, 2014).

Coding is a process of ‘identifying aspects of the data’ relating to the research question (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 207). There are two main types of coding approaches in qualitative research: selective and complete coding (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Selective coding involves selecting data of a type or of particular interest to the researcher. This type of coding is used in narrative, discursive and conversational analytical approaches, and involves identifying a ‘corpus of instances’ and then selecting those ‘instances’ out for analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 206). Complete coding in contrast involves identifying and coding all instances of interest or relevance to the researchers’ question. In complete coding, codes are identified using

a word or a phrase, to capture the essence of why that piece of data may be relevant to the research (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Coding allows the researcher to ‘cluster’ key issues in the data, which adds meaning to the collected data and can be used to help the researcher toward ‘drawing conclusions’ (Bell, 2010, p. 222). In this study, the researcher employed the complete coding approach to all relevant data to the research topic and then carry out an analysis. After coding the data, the researcher looked for larger patterns in the data set, to develop themes A theme ‘captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning in the data set’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82) Where a code will capture a single idea, a theme has a ‘central organising concept’ containing many different concepts - “Codes combine to form themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 224).

In order to carry out a thematic analysis, Braun and Clarkes (2006) six phase approach was applied to each individual interview, as seen below:

Phase 1: Familiarisation with the data

Phase 2: Creating initial codes

Phase 3: Searching for themes

Phase 4: Reviewing themes

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

Phase 6: Producing the report

Using an inductive approach to data coding, and analysis with a bottom up approach, means that the codes and themes derive from the data itself, so the thematic mapping (Appendix H) (Robson & McCartan, 2016), used by the researcher matches the content of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis of the data provides “a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of the data” by organising and describing it in rich detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). Themes catch something important about the data in relation to the research and researcher judgement is crucial to determine what the theme is. For the purpose of this research the verbal data was transcribed into written form for thematic analysis, using coding schemes in the analysis process (Appendix F). It will be important for the researcher’s interpretations and analysis to be consistent with the data extracts and in this way demonstrate the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.6. Validity and Reliability

Qualitative researchers design data collection much more openly than quantitative researchers, in order to discover new aspects of the situation (Flick, 2011).

“An advantage of qualitative research is that detailed and exact analyses of a few cases can be produced, in which the participants have much more freedom to determine what is relevant for them and to present it in its contexts” (Flick, 2011, p.14)

Validity as a concept refers to whether you are measuring what you say you are, and also relates to the integrity of the conclusions drawn from the research (Flick, 2011; Bryman, 2012). “In qualitative data the subjectivity of respondents, their opinions, attitudes and perspectives together contribute to a degree of bias” (Cohen et al. 2000, p. 105). In qualitative research, data validity might be achieved through the honesty, depth, richness and scope of the data collected (Cohen et al., 2000).

The concept of validity is established by evaluating the ‘trustworthiness’ of the interview interpretations (Flick, 2011). An audit trail was produced in order to ascertain dependability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose ‘trustworthiness’ as a criterion to assess qualitative research studies. Using four aspects of trustworthiness as a parallel with quantitative research criteria as follows:

- Credibility (Internal Validity), - how believable are the findings?
- Transferability (External Validity), - do the findings apply to other contexts?
- Dependability (Reliability) – are the findings likely to apply at other times?
- Confirmability (Objectivity) – has the investigator allowed her values to intrude to a high degree? (Bryman, 2012).

To achieve credibility, the researcher having captured the interviewees story in the interview, engaged in frequent rechecking and clarification with the participant throughout the telephone interview. Transferability refers to the extent to which findings could be transferable to other contexts, thus detailed and thick descriptions of the setting has been provided. Dependability was established through keeping a reflexive diary throughout the process, an audit trail and record of coding procedures in all interviews. Confirmability was addressed through reflexivity, as researchers bring their own values and perspectives into their research.

Reliability relates to whether the results of a study are repeatable and consistent ‘over time, over instruments and over groups of respondents’ (Cohen et al. 2000, p. 117). Issues of reliability can be overcome by the researcher documenting the whole process in a detailed and reflexive way (Flick, 2011, p. 208). Reflexivity refers to “the process of critically reflecting on the knowledge we produce, and our role in producing that knowledge” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 37). The researcher kept a reflexive journal throughout the research process to record researcher influence.

3.7. Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a crucial strategy in qualitative research (Berger, 2013), that requires “honesty and authenticity with one’s self, one’s research, and one’s audience” (Tracy 2010, p. 842). Understanding the role of self-knowledge, the researcher’s personal positionality in relation to bias, beliefs and personal experience is a salient focus of the researcher. Taking responsibility for the researchers own “situatedness” within the research and the effect that may have on those being studied, the questions they are asked, how data is collected and the interpretation of the data (Berger, 2013). Reflexivity is crucial to all stages of the research process by keeping it visible and ethical and “can be seen as part of ‘quality control’ in qualitative research” (Braun & Clark, 2013, p.37). For this research study, the researcher reflected on the research process, but also on the researchers position as an ‘outsider’ and not a member of the group that was being researched.

As a researcher it is important to reflect on our own presumptions and biases in our research. Reflexivity is vital for reflecting on, learning from and moving beyond, the discriminatory research practices we almost all (unintentionally) engage in” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 67). Reflexive research acknowledges the role of the researcher in the production of knowledge, and then on their standpoint which might have influenced the collection and analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

3.8. Ethics

Ethical approval was sought and given by the EHS Ethics Committee in February 2020. Ethics can be defined as:

“principles of conduct about what is right and wrong. When applied to research, ethical principles encompass some decisions and dilemmas that not just pit right against wrong, but balance one right action against another right action, taking into account the possibly conflicting interests of the parties involved. What is right for me may not be right for you. What is right for the researcher may not be right for the participant”

(Thomas, 2013, p. 38).

All research should be carried out to the highest ethical standard. Ethics has an integral part in all stages of research, and an ethical researcher adheres to ethical codes of conduct, ensuring the research is conducted in a moral and non-harmful manner (Braun & Clarke, 2013). However, ethical challenges arise in all research designs, approaches and stages of a research project (Oancea, 2014). Researchers are entrusted with personal and sometimes sensitive information about participants and must comply with the legal requirements for recording and storing such data which was outlined by the UL Ethics Committee.

Ethical research involves the practitioner researcher carrying out their research with compassion for the interviewees and insuring non exploitation of the students who participate (Berger, 2013). For the purpose of this research study, the researcher maintained a research journal, and monitored the involvement and the detachment of the researcher. By doing this an audit trail was kept for all stages of the process, to enhance the rigor and ethical considerations of the study.

The IGC Code of Ethics (2012) outline four ethical principles for guidance counsellors in Ireland, namely: respect for the rights and dignity of the client, competence, dignity and integrity. The NCGE also propose four ethical principles for practitioner research which are “respect for the rights and the dignity of the person, competence, responsibility and integrity” (NCGE, 2008, p.2). When engaging with research it is the researcher’s obligation to protect the dignity and wellbeing of the research participants (IGC, 2012). It was necessary for this study to consider the possible impact that this research process may have on the adults participating. Ethical research design included acquiring the informed consent from participants and maintaining confidentiality of the participants (McLeod, 2003). Acquiring permission to carry out the study from the relevant ‘gatekeepers’ (Punch, 2014), in this case

the Training Services Manager. Anonymity of the individual was upheld by removing any uniquely identifiable information in the data relating to the students participating in the study. Participants were informed of how their data will be held and for how long (Appendix C) (Oancea, 2014).

For this research study, the purpose of the study was outlined to the participants openly and accurately. Respectful treatment of the participants was always a priority including participation without coercion and recognition of participant autonomy to withdraw from participating at any stage of the process (Oancea, 2014).

3.9. Conclusion

Research questions were developed, and a qualitative approach was deemed to be the most appropriate for data gathering. The qualitative paradigm utilised was semi-structured telephone interviews with research participants. The data collection method, data analysis and thematic analysis engaged in are also discussed, along with sampling, validity and reliability, reflexivity and ethical considerations.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

4.0. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the primary findings of the research. Applying Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phased approach to thematic analysis, enabled the researcher to take an 'inquiring and interpretive position on the data' (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.204). Stage 1 consisted of the researcher listening to the audio recordings and transcribing the interviews. Stage 2 involved reading and familiarisation with the data gathered, taking note of information and items of interest. Stage 3 included identifying aspects of the data that related to the research questions and 'generating codes' across the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 207). Stage 4 entailed working from the codes and coded data to identify 'broader patterns and themes' (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 224). Stage 5 resulted in producing a thematic map (see appendix) of provisional themes and subthemes to achieve Stage 6, defining and naming the themes and subthemes as presented below.

Three overarching themes emerged during the analysis phase. These are as follows:

1. Factors that influenced the decision to become an apprentice.
2. Guidance Counselling and apprenticeship information.
3. The experience of being an apprentice in an electrical apprenticeship in a male dominated programme

To present the themes, it is necessary to introduce the participants under their pseudonyms as follows:

4.1. Participant Introductions

Ainé is a 20-year-old electrical apprentice, she started her apprenticeship at 19 and is in the first year of her apprenticeship. Her father works for Irish Rail and her mum is a factory worker. Ainé completed a PLC course in Veterinary Nursing prior to being offered an apprenticeship.

Aidan is a 43-year-old electrical apprentice, in his third year of apprenticeship which he started when he was 41 years of age. His father is a factory worker and his mother is a carer. Aidan worked after completing post primary education in third year. In each position held he progressed to the highest position possible, until he began his apprenticeship. Aidan had

considered becoming a Project Manager but felt this would be a long process to gain the requirements for third level opportunities.

Cormac is a 23-year-old electrical apprentice in his second year of apprenticeship which he started when he was 21 years of age. His father is a storeman and his mother is an accountant. On completion of his Leaving Certificate he worked for three years in a hardware store before accepting the offer of an apprenticeship.

Brian is a 23-year-old apprentice, in his third year of an electrical apprenticeship, he started his apprenticeship at 20 years of age. His father is a chef and his mother is a wedding cake maker. On completion of his Leaving Certificate, he participated in a PLC course in Culinary Arts but did not complete this course. He worked in the hotel industry before taking up his apprenticeship.

Bríd is a 23-year-old apprentice in her second year of an electrical apprenticeship. Her father is a mechanic and her mother had worked in office administration but is now a full-time carer. Bríd studied at an IT on completion of her Leaving Certificate, she decided not to complete the course, and afterwards completed a PLC, during which she applied for the Guards, the Prison Service and for an apprenticeship. She was offered an apprenticeship, and subsequently the Guards but remained with the apprenticeship programme.

Ciara is a 20-year-old electrical apprentice in her second year of apprenticeship. Her father is a builder and her mother is a nursing assistant. Ciara took a gap year after completing her Leaving Certificate, having deferred her course of Woodwork and DCG for secondary school teaching, during this time she decided to become an apprentice.

4.2. Theme 1: Factors that influenced the decision to become an apprentice

The first theme relates to factors that influenced the adult's choice to become an apprentice and pursue an apprenticeship programme. None of the six participants commenced their apprenticeship straight after school, and each participant reported that they had considered other career options before making the decision to become an apprentice. Participants had taken varied routes on completion of their secondary education, specifically; PLCs, third level courses, a gap year and full-time employment. The findings are presented under two subthemes: Most influential person on career choice and Work Experience.

4.2.1. Most Influential Person on Career Choice

The first subtheme explores the most influential person on the participants career choice. The influences that participants identified were either family or themselves when asked who or what was most influential in their career choice.

“Strangely enough, probably, or not it was always in me, it was always in my head...I have been pretty self-driven since I was young” (Aidan).

One participant said that the decision was based on both his brother and himself:

“Yeah, well like I said, mainly my brother, now like I would have always thought that electrician was a good job and like I said I did enjoy it anytime I did go with him.... That was one big aspect of it and then I suppose too actually, I know myself that I wouldn't have been the most academic in school either, I was a bit more hands on” (Cormac).

While Ciara, Brian and Aine reported family members, such as father, mother, brother, and cousins, as the most influential in their choice.

When asked why choose an electrical apprenticeship, the participants stated that they chose this apprenticeship due to a variety of reasons: ‘love of maths (Aine), being electrical minded (Aidan), a good job and enjoyed the work (Cormac), the money is better in the electrical trade, best trade, clean trade with minimal heavy lifting (Brian), easier trade on the body (Ciara), outdoor work, good opportunity for progression and female participants’(Bríd).

Cormac and Brian identified the trade itself as a ‘good’ trade. Cormac also concurred with Ciara that this work was less strenuous on the body physically. Aine, Aidan and Bríd identified aspects of the trade that appealed to them personally as the main reason for their choice of an electrical apprenticeship.

Traditionally electrical apprenticeships were male dominated, this however did not have an impact on the female apprentices’ choice, to take up an apprenticeship. From Ciara. Bríd and Aine’s experience the gender make-up of the apprenticeship programme did not affect their choice in any way.

“It wouldn't have been an issue for me, it wouldn't have been something that would have stopped me from doing it, I have grown up with lads and I have all brothers and everything so it really didn't bother me if I am honest” (Ciara).

Ainé did acknowledge that she was nervous at the start because there wasn't any girls on her programme when she started, she did say however that she would have been as nervous even if there was other girls as it is a challenge going in and meeting new people when you start a new course. For the female participants in this exploration, gender was not a factor that affected their choice of apprenticeship programme.

4.2.2. Work Experience

The second sub-theme explores the importance of work experience programmes in relation to influencing the participants choice to become an apprentice. In terms of work experience opportunities, two adults had not completed a work experience programme while in post primary school, one of those had gained work experience as an electrician and that was outside of school at the weekends, while the other had worked and gained experience in a number of areas independent of a work experience programme.

“I was always kind of whenever, any job I had...I always used it to get to whatever higher position I could.... like prior to this I was with a company... I started in 2003.... I was there right up to the apprenticeship you could say. I started off as a truck helper and became project supervisor by the end” (Aidan)

Three of the adults had taken part in work experience through the LCVP programme, while one had gone on work experience in Transition Year.

“I did Transition Year.... I did my experience in a leisure centre so it was, I would have wanted to do something in Sport and Recreation at the beginning...around Transition Year...so I was in and around fitness and stuff like that....Yeah you know it was completely different to what I would have ended up doing” (Cormac).

Apart from recognising that the work experience reinforced the appeal of ‘on the job’ learning. A common thread emerged in the narratives, that participation in work experience placement through school was not directly related to the choice to become an apprentice. Work experience after completion of second level education was more indicative of the participants subsequent decision to become an apprentice.

4.3. Theme 2: Guidance Counselling and Apprenticeship Information

The second overarching theme focuses on the career guidance support and information on apprenticeships. This is presented under two subthemes: Guidance counselling information and support in post-primary school and Apprenticeship Information outside of post primary school.

4.3.1. Guidance Counselling Information and Support in Post-Primary School

Adults perspective of their experience of guidance support in post primary school was varied. Ainé highlighted that in her experience that while information on apprenticeships was not readily available on her first meeting with the guidance counsellor, the guidance counsellor researched the topic of apprenticeships and then met with Ainé a second time and provided her with the required information.

“Yeah, I did a few times about the apprenticeship but...not many people had asked him anything about it, so the first time I talked to him he got all the information for me....and came back to me with it” (Ainé).

According to Ciara and Bríd, the path of apprenticeships was not presented to them in post-primary school as an option, the focus was more on CAO applications to third level institutions:

“ I kind of discovered all this by myself about apprenticeships and stuff it was never an option for me in school I don't think....maybe very vaguely but it was never really pushed on us or encouraged to look into it more or anything. It was kind of brushed over if you get what I mean.... if we were given more choices and shown more choices with apprenticeships and that it wasn't all just college” (Ciara).

Aidan mentioned that there was no Career Guidance support in his school up to when he left in third year, and he had no experience of career guidance support.

“There wasn't one.... those people didn't exist when I was in school....it was never something I experienced” (Aidan)

According to Cormac and Brian apprenticeships were not given adequate focus in their experience:

“I don't know now to be honest...it could have been mentioned, obviously I am not saying it wasn't but there wasn't a great emphasis on it or anything like” (Brian).

The lack of focus on the apprentice option and in some cases for participants no reference to it as an option, resulted in the participants being unsupported in terms of the application form process and interview skills for apprenticeship programmes.

4.3.2. Apprenticeship Information outside of post-primary school

The second subtheme focuses on Apprenticeship Information the participants received or accessed outside of post-primary school.

Bríd and Ciara both learned about apprenticeships through social media:

“I first found out, like I said on Facebook. That’s the first time I seen an apprenticeship. I saw this lovely video for the ESB and there was a girl in the video, and I said...I could do that... And before that I never, never ever heard of an apprenticeship and never realised that option was available (Bríd).

Another participant reported always knowing about apprenticeships and found out more from his brother in law when he was working:

“ I always knew they existed...I was aware of them but never got the opportunity to be in one” (Aidan).

Cormac’s brother was a qualified electrician, so he learned about apprenticeships from him. Brian had attended a Guidance Counsellor privately outside of school, apprenticeships were not mentioned at this stage, but later Brian contacted Citizens Information about apprenticeships where he got his information and contact details for the ETB. Brian attended a meeting with the local Apprenticeships Training Officer where he learned more about the apprenticeship route.

4.4. Theme 3: The experience of being an apprentice on an electrical apprenticeship in a male dominated programme

The third and final theme of the experience of adults in apprenticeships is divided into two subthemes; Perceived Social Attitudes Towards Apprentices; and Experience of participating in a male dominated apprenticeship programme.

4.4.1. Perceived Social Attitudes Toward Apprentices

All participants were asked about the reactions they received from family, peers and the general public when they said they were on an apprenticeship programme. The participants reported positive experiences and reactions:

“Am, they would be kind of shocked but it’s a good shocked it’s not like ‘oh you shouldn’t be doing that.... it’s kind of like... oh well done” (Ainé).

Bríd’s experience of family and peer reaction was also positive, but she also mentioned her experience while working with the public on the job:

“The public side of it. yeah generally people are great, like obviously I am out among the public the whole time...whatever job you do you are going to deal with difficult people...like when it comes to that I have been abused...like you get people that give out then...you could be working with ‘Johnny’ on the day...and Johnny comes out of the van behind you and ...the man is absolutely boring down your throat and showering you with abuse and as soon as Johnny steps out of the van.. he covers into his littler corner and stops talking then... unfortunately you do see a lot of that.” (Bríd).

One of the participants suggested the importance of presenting apprenticeships to young people as a ‘career’ and was the only participant to refer to the negative social perceptions of apprenticeships:

“Apprenticeships, there is a stigma surrounding apprenticeships...there always has been and always will be... in my career you need a degree to be what you need to be anyway....that kind of gets... falls by the wayside...ah...”you’re a tradie”..... where you are not really identified for who you are...it is a stigma that does carry in the trade..”

4.4.2. Experiences of participating in a male dominated apprenticeship

Both male and female participants reported the positive impact of working and learning with female and male apprentices. In the learning environment Ciara highlighted that:

“Am at the start, maybe the lads are a small bit ‘standoffish’ and they are just not used to it I suppose, but after a week or two you are part of the group, there is never any problems” (Ciara).

Aidan and Cormac both mentioned the positives of a male and female learning environment and on the job:

“I can totally say from experience that I have worked with female apprentices, and I think they are a breath of fresh air the work standard is just as good if not better...attention to detail can be a lot better” (Aidan).

From the female perspective one participant referred to training and, on the job, experiences:

“There is never a feeling of being out of sorts or out of place. if anything, you are the go-to person... like the mammy of the group really... Like when you are out in the field with the lads and you are after showing them that bit of help in the class...they are helping you pull...a transformer of whatever it would be on a rope...there was one situation I had going onto a job site... and I drive a truck.... The ESB has always been a male dominated job..they might ask you ‘Oh where is the boss man?...you might take personal offense to that...but when you go back to the same yard and the farmer gets to know you and he will go to you then..’right what are you going to do today?’ (Bríd).

Bríd's experience highlights the changing environment of the traditionally male dominated trade and how with time gender is less significant.

Both male and female participants highlighted similar positive experiences of being on an apprenticeship which were learning while on the job, the possibility of progression from apprenticeship, learning from the experience of others, earning while learning:

“The positives for me...well for me..... the fact that from day one you are being paid to go to college, and being paid to learn....and the opportunities to see much more, to progress yourself both personally and professionally....” (Bríd).

Ainé, Brian and Ciara's concurred with Cormac and Brian in terms of the positives of an ‘on the job’ learning environment.

Three participants recorded a negative to apprenticeships, while the remaining three could not think of any negative aspect to pursuing an apprenticeship programme. One participant recorded that it can be difficult financially starting off in an apprenticeship, and that engagement in learning after being out of school for several years may be difficult. This was not the participants experience but what she thought others might experience:

“...like financially it is hard starting off I know it can be difficult for some apprentices who are renting, and they are really struggling.... A lot of people are gone out of school a long time and going back into college I imagine that is daunting...I know there were people who struggled” (Bríd).

Aidan identified limited learning while on the job as a negative to the apprentice who has not gained enough experience by the time it comes to phase two of the apprenticeship. While Brian identified that travel may be a negative for some people and that the type of work they may be exposed to might lack variety.

“it’s what they have been learning coming in... all these people go into college...it’s all based on their employer, what their employer has taken them aside and taught them.... The actual quality of teaching (in the training centre) is second to none...and the support it there but it is very hard to support someone who doesn’t have a foundation” (Aidan).

When participants were asked what advice they would give to young people and students the advice ranged from financial aspects, suitability of employers, the appeal of learning while doing but researching the programme and having an awareness of the college phase requirements.

“.... just to say that it is nothing like school really.... you would actually be surprised how quick you would take it upand you’d really enjoy it... I suppose it would be better for someone...well not straight out of school but soon enough....cause they will be starting off on something like €6.50 an hour....so you would be better off so if you are making alright money before you start an apprenticeship...cause then you would be taking a drop in wages” (Brian).

Overall, the advice was encouraging of participation in an apprenticeship programme and highlighted the practical considerations that young people and students would need to be mindful of from both the male and female perspective.

4.5. Conclusion:

This concludes stage 7, the explanation and analysis of the primary findings (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The researcher has presented the overarching themes and the subsequent chapter will discuss the findings in relation to the literature reviewed in Chapter two.

Chapter Five: Discussion

5.0. Introduction

This chapter contains a critical discussion of the findings from the six semi-structured interviews, synthesised with the literature reviewed in chapter two.

5.1. Research Questions of the Study

This study was underpinned by the primary research question:

What is the career decision making experience of adults in apprenticeships?

The subsequent secondary questions also framed the study:

- 1) *What factors influenced the decision to become an apprentice?*
- 2) *What Career Guidance supports were availed of while making the decision?*
- 3) *What are the experiences of participating in a male dominated apprenticeship programme for male and female adults?*
- 4) *What are the implications of this research for the guidance counselling service?*

To explore these questions, six adults participating in an apprenticeship programme were interviewed. The research findings are based on the experiences and perceptions of three males and three females in relation to their career decision making and apprenticeship experiences. A number of themes emerged from this study, including: factors that influenced the participants decision to become an apprentice; the career guidance support received and sources of apprenticeship information that participants acquired prior to making the decision to become an apprentice and; the overall experience for males and females of being an apprentice in what was traditionally a male dominated apprenticeship. The implications of the findings in relation to guidance provision will be discussed in the next chapter.

5.2. Key Influences on Career Decision Making

Super (1957) proposed that career development proceeds through stages, while not always age related. Supers theory places the 'self' at the centre of a range of personal determinants while also acknowledging the influence of situational determinants such as family, society, school and the labour market (Arthur and McMahon 2019). In previous research, key external influencing factors on career decision making have included parents and mothers in particular;

as well as siblings and extended family; work experience programmes; and school context is also another significant influence on student's future plans (Smyth et al. 2011). Studies from an Irish context acknowledge 'social background'; 'the value system in the home'; 'success and relative risk aversion' and the individual's own preferences and aspirations as influential in educational decisions and post-school pathways (McCoy and Byrne 2011, p. 142). School experiences and processes, career guidance and advice along with financial considerations are all issues which shape students' choices (Smyth and Byrne, 2011). The findings from the study correlate with the some of the literature as the two main factors of influence identified by the participants were firstly family members such as parents, siblings, and extended family (cousin). The second factor identified was what Schoon (2006) describes as the participants' own 'agency'.

However, the findings also diverge from the literature in some respects. For example, in relation to the influence of friends, work experience and teachers (Indecon 2019). The findings from this study did not indicate friends, teachers, or work experience as influencing factors. In fact, for the participants in this study, friends and teachers were not cited by any of the participants as influential. The findings in relation to work experience highlighted that participants who took part in school-based work experience programmes did not consider this experience as a contributing influence to participate in an apprenticeship programme. While some participants indicated that work experience had affirmed the appeal of 'on the job' learning, it was not directly responsible for the choice to become an apprentice. It was highlighted in fact that paid work outside of the school was more beneficial in terms of influencing the decision to take up an apprenticeship.

Social learning theory of career decision making, suggests that people learn about themselves through instrumental and associative learning experiences (Krumboltz, 1979). Through these learning experiences beliefs about the individual's abilities, interests, values, and task approach skills such as decision-making skills and work orientations are made (Kidd, 2006, p. 64). Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) is based on self-efficacy beliefs, outcomes and goals which influence how career related activities are selected and practised. Sources of self-efficacy are social learning through interacting with others (Lent et al., 1994; Kidd, 2006). The findings from this study correlate with this literature when participants revealed other influential factors

in which they learned about themselves which relates to social learning theory, participants highlighted influences that represented their personal self-beliefs in their own abilities, interests, values and the prestige of the work (good trade) and the opportunities to progress from the apprenticeship programme.

5.3. Guidance Counselling Supports and Apprenticeship Routes

The findings also differ from the literature in relation to the influence of guidance counsellors. In this study, the findings revealed that participants who received career guidance did so through the post primary school provision or in one case through a private career guidance professional. The study highlighted that participants' perception of this experience was varied. Some participants identified that from their experience the focus of career guidance was on application for third level colleges and apprenticeships were not presented as a career route. This echoes findings on the importance of having transparent progression routes from apprenticeships into higher education. Particularly if apprenticeship programmes are to be expanded and given parity of esteem with third level pathways (Eustace, 2017). This finding also reflects the findings from the Indecon Review where learners indicated there was a gap in the availability and quality of careers information relating to apprenticeships, The Indecon Review findings revealed that guidance counsellors reported a very low percentage of 'commonly asked questions' were about apprenticeships (Indecon, 2019). This is similar to the findings in this study where one participant reported that when she asked about apprenticeships in her one-to-one guidance meeting, her guidance counsellor told her not many people asked about apprenticeships and so the guidance counsellor did not have apprenticeship information available in the initial one to one meeting.

The National Further Education and Training strategy proposes the need for FET and apprenticeship programmes to be promoted and developed within schools at an early stage as valid potential destinations, along with the development of support materials for teachers to help explain these types of opportunities to students of all ages (SOLAS, 2020). For some participants in this study, apprenticeships were discussed but not with any great focus and not in parity of esteem with higher education routes. This concurs with the literature whereby the FET sector is seen as having a lower status, and with higher education being established as the "norm". FET is often referred to in derogatory terms such as "the poor relation" or the "Cinderella Sector" (McGuinness et. al. 2014, p. 59).

Under the Irish Education Act (1998, Section 9c) all secondary school students are entitled to access appropriate guidance to “support their educational and career decision making” (Hearne et al., 2018, p. 317). For one participant in this study who left school in Junior Cycle, guidance support had not been made available in his case, and so had no exposure to career guidance or information on apprenticeships when leaving school. This finding supports policy in relation to the importance of early intervention and guidance provision being introduced in the Junior Cycle programme (DES, 2005). Similarly in the Indecon review, research with guidance counsellors suggested that students initially consider career choices during Junior Cycle and during Transition Year and while “best practice suggests that early intervention is merited for many students” the research from the Indecon Review highlighted that career information was provided from Transition year and Fifth year (Indecon, 2019, p. 36). This is where many students and early school leavers are at risk of falling through the cracks and leaving the post primary school system without receiving any career guidance or support around future career decisions.

The findings also highlighted how students got information about apprenticeships through their own self-directed research, through relatives and through the medium of social media, independent of career guidance. This concurs with the concept of “human agency” and individuals being persistent in pursuing an ambition evident in the literature (Schoon 2006, p. 29). It also concurs with Smyth and Banks (2012) study where the young person’s own ‘agency’ was identified as part of the process of decision making. In this context, they define agency as “the conscious process whereby students seek out information on different options and evaluate these alternatives” (Smyth and Banks 2012, p. 3).

These findings also indicate that, from the participants experience apprenticeship routes, were not being presented as an opportunity in the same way that higher education options were encouraged in post primary school. In the literature it was identified that apprenticeships were not given the same visibility within the mainstream education system (RHRUAT, 2019). Again observed in an international context as Simon and Clarkes (2016) Australian study findings indicated general dissatisfaction with career exploration activities, with many schools focusing on university entry, and vocational educational programmes encouraged only among those students who it was felt would not be capable of achieving the higher educational route (Simon and Clarke 2016). This lack of information and guidance is a disadvantage to prospective apprentices, particularly if they do not have a family member or community contact to assist them in gather information on the apprenticeship option (SOLAS, 2018),

5.4. Being an apprentice on a male dominated apprenticeship programme.

While electrical apprenticeships were traditionally a male dominated apprenticeship programme, the findings from this study indicated that the experience of both male and female participants was a positive one. Gender did not appear to impact on the participants decision to choose a male dominated apprenticeship and gender was not an issue for either male or female participants while on training or work placement. However, all the participants revealed in the findings that women were in the minority on their apprenticeship programme. This concurs with the literature that number of females that participate in apprenticeships remains low despite initiatives to increase female participation in the traditionally male dominated apprenticeship programmes (SOLAS, 2020). These findings are not just reflective of the Irish context but also of the UK, Canada and Australia (Levasseur and Paterson, 2015; Young Women's Trust, 2017; SOLAS, 2018)

The Generation Apprenticeship Review (2018) outlined the impact of gender inequality in apprenticeship programmes and highlighted that women and men contribute different strengths and skills in a workplace. The findings from this study supported this when male participants reported their perceptions of the impact of women in the apprenticeship programme and identified the attributes that they perceived women bring to the workforce. Attributes like; attention to detail, high motivation and high standards of work. This concurs with the findings in the Generation Apprenticeship Review where “a lack of gender diversity in any industry leads to significant loss of agility, creativity and innovation” (SOLAS, 2018, p. 9). SOLAS outlined the ESB recruitment strategy as an example of good practice for employers whereby female applicants were welcomed and female ambassadors championed the recruitment of female apprentices (SOLAS, 2018). This is reflected in this study's findings where two of the female participants revealed that they first learned about apprenticeships from social media and the ESB recruitment advertisement. It was the ESB advertisement on the social media platform that presented apprenticeships as an option and prompted them to make an application.

Reactions to both male and female participants from the family, peers and the public was positive toward their participation in an apprenticeship programme. The findings also revealed that from the participants perspective when they told people they were participating in an apprenticeship; reactions were contrary to the literature, where the social perception of the term apprenticeship and the social values attached to it were not evident in the reactions the

participants received (RHRUAT, 2019). The literature highlighted the public perception of apprenticeships as an unequal alternative to traditional education (McGuinness et al. 2014). The findings from this study did not support this as reactions to all participants both male and female from their perspectives were encouraging and reflected that society and family members endorsed the apprentice's choice. However, one participant did acknowledge his awareness of the existence of stigmatisation surrounding apprenticeships in society, although he had not experienced any negativity personally.

These findings did not concur with the Report on Hearings Relating to the Uptake of Apprenticeships and Traineeships, that female uptake of apprenticeships were impacted firstly due to apprenticeships being in trades in traditionally male dominated areas of work and secondly due to family commitments and affordable childcare (RHRUAT, 2019). The findings suggest high levels of self-efficacy in the participants and contrary to the literature, gender did not impact on their choice to become an apprentice in a trade traditionally perceived as male (Kidd, 2006; Gottfredson, 1981). While gender did not negatively impact on the participants included in this study, however, it is possible that some of the participants peers were dissuaded from pursuing such apprenticeship programmes due to gender stereotyping and perceptions that "apprenticeship were only open to boys" (SOLAS, 2018, p.9).

One of the findings from this study highlighted by the participants was the identification of low levels of apprenticeship pay particularly at the commencement of the first year of the apprenticeship. Living costs and low pay rates are a challenge for apprentices. This is reflected in the Young Women's Trust review which identified low pay scales as a deterrent to some who may chose the apprenticeship route and that apprentices struggle to support themselves on a low wage. It also revealed that childcare payments were an additional concern for women (Young Women's Trust, 2017). Although this is a UK report it may still be relevant an Irish context and as it is reflective of the findings from this study, where participants identified that low wages in the first year as being a disadvantage of apprenticeships. Another finding from this study indicated the importance of finding the right employer. Further to the gender issue SOLAS outlined in the Generation Apprenticeship Review that women may not have the same contacts in initiating the conversation with the employer due to the informal aspect of how employers take on apprentices. SOLAS also acknowledges the existing work of the ETB and linking employers with apprentices but suggests more resources need to be dedicated to the promotion of opportunities particularly for women (SOLAS, 2018).

5.5. Conclusion

In the context of the research questions, the study reveals that the most influential people in the career decision to become an apprentice were either parents, family members or the individual's agency. In terms of Career Guidance provision, the study revealed the experience of the participants was varied. While some participants had been introduced to the apprenticeship route in school, it had been with little promotion of apprenticeship as an opportunity. In some cases, participants were not given any information on apprenticeships and the focus of career information they did receive was on third level education. The study also highlighted the importance of early interventions and provision of guidance support in Junior Cycle. One participant had no exposure to career guidance due to leaving school before reaching Senior Cycle.

The self-efficacy and agency of the participants were evident in the findings when participants revealed that they had carried out their own self-directed research either through family or social media. Self-efficacy was also evident in terms of female participation in the apprenticeship despite it being traditionally viewed as a male dominated trade.

The findings also revealed that family, peers, and wider societies perceptions of the participants participation in an apprenticeship programme was encouraging and did not reflect any stigmatisation of this career route as a lower status option. The study also revealed that one of the very few disadvantages that the participants outlined in the findings was the challenge apprenticeships might face with the low pay scale in the first year of the apprenticeship programme.

The next chapter contains the conclusion of the research study and the recommendations which were identified as part of the research.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.0. Introduction

This chapter presents the key findings in the context of the aims and objectives of this study. It also presents the strengths and limitations of the study. This concluding chapter also contains recommendations which were informed by the findings, along with the researcher's consideration of her own reflexivity and personal learning from undertaking this research.

6.1. Overview of Key Findings

The overall aim was to explore the career decision making experience of adults in an apprenticeship programme. Through employing an interpretivist approach, the experiences of six apprentices and their career decision making was explored.

The most influential person was either a parent, family member or personal motivation. However other factors within the trade eclipsed personal motivation including the inherent appeal of learning by doing, and that electrical apprenticeships were less strenuous. Less influential were school-based work experience placements and gender issues. The latter is surprising because electrical apprenticeships are a traditionally male dominated field.

In terms of Guidance Counselling in schools, a gap in provision of apprenticeship information was evident and participants experience highlighted the focus on third level and CAO applications as a priority and concurred that little or no information was provided on apprenticeship programmes. The lack of information provision and push toward third level education options is significant as it emphasises that apprenticeships are not acknowledged as on par with third level pathways. As a direct result of this participants were not supported in the application process or with apprenticeship interview competences. Apprenticeship information outside of the education system was varied also, with participants outlining that they learned about apprenticeships through social media for the first time. Citizen information and ETB services, along with family members were cited as other sources of apprenticeship information.

6.2. Strengths and Limitations

The interpretivist paradigm facilitated an exploration and provided an insight into the participants 'lived experience' of decision making and participating in a traditionally male dominated apprenticeship programme. The use of semi-structured interviews provided the subjective experience of the participants, and yielded findings which were richly descriptive (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015).

A good researcher-participant relationship was established throughout the interviews. The researcher was able to follow her intuition and diverge from the interview framework when appropriate to clarify and to excavate responses a little further.

The mixed gender balanced sample enabled the researcher to gain both the female and male perspectives of the career decision making experience of the apprentices. The positionality of the researcher was of an "outsider" with no personal familiarity or experience of apprenticeships (Berger, 2015).

This was a small-scale study the findings from which cannot be generalised but could be transferable to other career guidance and apprenticeship training centre settings (Bryman, 2012). Due to the time-constraints of an MA dissertation, this study has not focused on socio-economic status, even though it may be an important and intersecting factor.

6.3. Recommendations: Policy

The importance of policy in relation to whole school guidance support was evident from the findings. Early interventions with guidance programmes as outlined in an integrative whole school approach indicates how salient the whole school guidance plan is for all post primary students; not just in Senior Cycle but for all years from first year right through, in meeting the diverse needs of all students (DES, 2005). While the importance of family influence in relation to career decision making was highlighted, subject teachers and career guidance counsellors also impact on students and have an important role in guiding and supporting students and their career decision making (Indecon, 2019). All teachers need to speak about trades in the same positive terms as they do about university. It needs to be discussed as an option on an equal footing with third level opportunities.

6.3.1. Practice

Career Guidance has a role in improving the attractiveness of apprenticeships to both young people and parents (Eustace, 2017). For students to be able to make sustainable educational choices improvements in quality of information and understanding of apprenticeships and what they can offer in terms of careers needs to be addressed (Musset and Kurekova, 2018). Career guidance has a crucial role to play in creating a greater awareness of alternative routes other than higher education for students and young people. Career guidance counsellors need to ensure they access and make available up to date information pertaining to further education and training routes and apprenticeships as viable career paths for all students and deliver it as a valid alternative to third level (Indecon, 2019).

Studies indicate the importance influence that the Guidance counsellor has on students and often follow parents in order of important influences, along with subject teachers (Smyth et al., 2011). The importance of a whole school plan (DES, 2017), and recognition of the impact that subject teachers have on students' career decision making is crucial. As the Musset and Kurekova (2018) highlighted young people seek out the support of 'trusted' adults such as teachers, particularly in terms of subjects of interest and the careers connected to them. Some students within socioeconomic groups are far more reliant on their school for support and advice (McCoy and Byrne, 2011). In some cases, the guidance counsellor is as important as a mother in terms of their influence (Smyth et al., 2011). Schools also need to be mindful of the gendering of subjects in mainstream education and the effect these can have in reinforcing gender segregation in the labour market (Smyth and Darmody, 2009).

Continual professional development for guidance counsellors in promoting apprenticeship routes and keeping abreast of up to date relevant labour market information are essential.

6.3.2. Research

There is no recorded data on the social background of students currently undertaking apprenticeship in Ireland according to Report on Hearings Relating to the uptake of Apprenticeships and Traineeships (2019). This study also highlights a potential future research opportunity in relation to the socio-economic background of participants in apprenticeship programmes, and whether socio-economic status is an influencing factor.

6.4. Reflexivity in Relation to Personal and Professional Learning

While the researcher was an outsider to apprenticeship programmes, initially the researcher expected that gender and social perceptions of apprenticeships would be a more evident issue in the findings. Gender did not turn out to be as prominent as the researcher predicted.

Having gained valuable insights into the experiences of the participants in this study, the researcher has gained an invaluable perspective in regard to supporting students and presenting all post-secondary school pathways on equal parity. This was an area in which the researcher had no previous experience and now the researcher's personal learning has been expanded and this will inform the researchers future practice as a guidance counsellor.

6.5. Conclusion

This chapter concludes the study on the exploration of the career decision making experiences of adults in apprenticeships. An overview of the main findings from the research in the context of the main aims and objectives of the study has been provided. The strengths and limitations of the study have also been discussed and a number of recommendations outlined. This chapter also includes a reflexive account of the researchers personal learning as a result of this study.

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Gatekeeper's Information Letter

Date: 2nd April 2020

EHS REC no: 2020_20_37_EHS(ER)

Research title: An exploration of the career decision making experiences of adults in apprenticeships.

Dear Training Centre Manger,

I am a student of the MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development programme in University of Limerick, under the supervision of Dr. Petra Elftorp. I am undertaking a research study on the topic of the career decision experiences of young adults in apprenticeships.

In order to gather this information, I would appreciate if you would give me consent to carry out interviews with six apprentices on your apprenticeship programme, around their career decision making experience before and during their apprenticeship. Given the current situation with the Coronavirus, phone interviews are deemed most appropriate.

All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. Interviews will be audio tape recorded and the data will be destroyed after analysis according to UL guidelines. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time prior to data analysis phase. The results from this research study will be reported in my final dissertation and may also be disseminated through other professional publications.

The collected data will be stored in a secure location approved by the University of Limerick. It is important to note that the ETB Training Services name and the name of the individual participants will not be used in the research and your service will not be identifiable to anyone other than those directly involved. If you have any queries or require any further information on the research study, please contact me, my Supervisor, or the Principal Investigator:

Researcher: Sinéad Burke
Phone number: 0863725566

Supervisor: Dr. Petra Elftorp
Phone number: 0857034972

Email address: 18151337@studentmail.ul.ie

Email address: petraelftorp@live.com

Principal Investigator: 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 (2020_20_37_EHS(ER)). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact:

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

Appendix B



Gatekeeper's Consent Form

EHS REC no. 2020_20_37_EHS(ER).

Research Title: An exploration of the career decision making experiences of adults in apprenticeships.

I have read the project Information Sheet and understand in detail the particulars of the research project. I understand that the identity of the participants and the Centre 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 interviews will be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to the research and the supervisor. Excerpts from the interviews 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 Sinead Burke to carry out this research in the organisation:

Signature: _____

Printed name: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C



Volunteer Information Letter

Date : 25th May 2020

EHSREC no. 2020_20_37_EHS(ER)

Research title: An exploration of the career decision making experiences of adults in apprenticeships.

Dear Apprentice,

I am a student of the MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development programme in the School of Education, University of Limerick, under the supervision of Dr. Petra Elftorp. I am undertaking a research study on a topic of career decision making experiences of adults in apprenticeships.

In order to gather information on the topic I would appreciate if you would agree to participate in audio-taped interview. The interview will take approximately 30-60 minutes and be held over the phone.

All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used instead of your real name, to ensure anonymity. Interviews will be audio tape recorded and the data will be destroyed after the analysis process. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time prior to the data analysis phase. The results from this research study will be reported in my final dissertation and may also 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 your name will not be used in the reporting of the research. If you have any queries or require any further information on the research study, please contact me, my supervisor, or the Principal Investigator:

Researcher: Sinéad Burke
Phone number: 0863725566

Supervisor: Dr. Petra Elftorp
Phone number: 0857034972

Email address: 18151337@studentmail.ul.ie

Email address: petraelftorp@live.com

Principal Investigator: 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 (2020_20_37_EHS(ER)). 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

EHSREC Approval Number: 2020_02_37_EHS



EHS RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

PARTICIPANT CONSENT

Title of Study: “An exploration of the career decision making experiences of adults in apprenticeships”.

Should you agree to participate in this study please read the statements below and if you agree to them, please sign the consent form.

- I have read and understood the participant information sheet.
- I understand what the project is about, and what the results will be used for.
- I understand that what the researchers find out in this study may be shared with others but that my name will not be given to anyone in any written material developed.
- I am fully aware of what I will have to do, and of any risks and benefits of the study.
- I know that I am choosing to take part in the study and that I can stop taking part in the study at any stage without giving any reason to the researchers.

This study involves audio recording. Please tick the appropriate box

- I am aware that my participation in this study may be audio recorded and I agree to this. However, if I feel uncomfortable at any time I can ask that the recording equipment be switched off. I understand that I can ask for a copy of my recording. I understand what will happen to the recordings once the study is finished.
- I do not agree to being audio recorded in this study.

After considering the above statements, I consent to my involvement in this research project.

Name: (please print): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Investigator's Signature _____

Date: _____

Appendix E

EHSREC Approval Number: 2020_02_37_EHS



Interview Framework

Title of Study: “An exploration of the career decision making experiences of adults in apprenticeships”.

Background questions:

- Can you tell me a little about the apprenticeship you are doing? When did you start? (e.g. straight after school? At what age?)
- How old are you now?
- What do your parents do?

School and Apprenticeship decision

- Do you remember talking to your career guidance counsellor in secondary school? Can you tell me more about that? (e.g. nice/not so nice experience? did you discuss apprenticeships? Did you get help with the application? What could have been better?)
- Did you ever do any work experience while you were in school? (if yes, for how long? Tell me more)
- Did you choose to do LCVP / LCA / Transition Year?
- How did you first learn about apprenticeships?
- What made you want to do this particular apprenticeship?
- Did the fact that there are mainly boys/girls on the apprenticeship matter to you when you were making up your mind about applying for it?
- Did you consider any other options? (for example PLC or college?)
- Did you consider other careers? Tell me more.
- What, or who was the most influential in your career choice do you think?

Experiences as apprentice

- Most apprentices on your programme are boys/girls, how do you find being one of the only girls/boys? Both on placement and in the classroom.
- How do other people (family, friends, public) react when they hear that you are an apprentice on this programme?
- What is the most positive thing about being an apprentice?
- Any negative aspects?
- What advice would you give to young people/students about apprenticeships?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix F

Extract from Interview Analysis

Sample Interview

Interviewer: So, you would never have discussed apprenticeships?... Or would it have been brought up in Careers class or anything?

Ciara: Maybe very vaguely but It was never really pushed on us or encouraged to look into it more or anything. It was kind of brushed over if you get what I mean?

Interviewer: And so obviously when you were going about your apprenticeship you wouldn't have got any help from your Career Guidance counsellor to complete your application form or any of that as you were gone out of school?

Ciara: Yeah, I was gone out of school.

Interviewer: So how could your experience with the Guidance Counsellor been better do you think?

Ciara: Just if we were given more choices and shown more choices with apprenticeships and that it wasn't just all college. I found that college was pushed on us a lot and if we were shown all the different types of apprenticeships like. When I looked into it first, I didn't really realise that... I kind of thought it was more just carpentry and a basic electrician. I didn't really look into the ESB and all those different types of apprenticeships and all that.

Interviewer: So, you weren't aware starting off of the scope of apprenticeships?

Ciara: No, I wasn't.

Code: *Guidance Counselling/ lack of focus apprenticeship route\ higher education route given priority*

Interviewer: When you were in secondary school then, did you ever take part in any programme that had a work experience element so like Transition Year or LCVP?

Ciara: Yeah, I did one through LCVP where I went to a butcher.

Interviewer: How did you find that?

Ciara: It was great yeah, on the job learning I find it the best. That's what I respond to best anyway, so I really enjoyed it.

Code: *Work experience \ benefit – on the job learning \ not influential on choice*

Interviewer: Would you have done Transition Year?

Ciara: No, I didn't.

Interviewer: Can I ask you then, how did you first learn about apprenticeships?

Ciara: Am.... I saw an ad, the ESB were advertising on Facebook and I looked into it that way. And then it's kind of opened my eyes to it, so I started to look into different types of ones online then and looking at all the different types and that is how it started.

Interviewer: Facebook is an interesting one, I would never have thought of people learning through Facebook about apprenticeships?

Ciara: It was just an ad on Facebook and I just clicked into it and it's kind of went from there.

Interviewer: What made you want to do the particular apprenticeship of electrician?

Ciara: I kind of looked at my options, a mechanic is also another one that I really looked into, down the line it seems that the ESB it would have been a better option, depending on my body as I get older the electrical apprenticeship would be a better option down the line.

Interviewer: Down the line the physical aspect of the mechanics, it might be easier on the body if you were to become an electrician?

Ciara: Yeah that was just my thinking behind it. Obviously, the money is better in the electrical as well.

Code: *Social Media – first introduction to Apprenticeships\ Appeal of Apprenticeship – electrical less strenuous on the body\ financially better choice*

Appendix G

Research Diary Extract

Interview 1: Aine

Date: 20/04/20

I was nervous starting this interview as it was my first one but also the fact it was over the phone and I was really conscious that it was going to be a very different experience for both myself and the interviewee. I lacked the comfort of talking to someone face to face and being able to read their body language. I was conscious that Aine had not seen me in person before and how it might feel impersonal. I did my best to make sure my tone of voice was reassuring realising the trust that Aine was putting in me. Aine was very easy to talk to and I learned a lot particularly about her experience of career guidance in school. I was concerned about using the audio device and if it was recording. Having practiced the interview questions several times before the interview, I kept the interview framework in front of me and followed it. When asking the question about parent's occupations I checked with the participant first to see if she was comfortable for me to ask about her parents. Not knowing anything about the participants family situation, I felt it was best to check if I could ask this question, in case the participant may have a deceased parent or may not be comfortable to talk about a parent. From time to time I felt I moved on to the next question too quickly and began to add brief pauses after questions. I was aware that the conversation might not flow in a linear pattern and I would have to be skilled enough to allow this to happen and still gather the required information. I settled about halfway into the interview and was pleased with how it progressed.

THEME MAP

"An Exploration of the Career Decision Making Experiences of Adults in Apprenticeships"

IPERES:

Guidance Provision / Career Information

- Limited Information
- One / third level focus
- WSA - Approach
 - ↳ Junior Cycle
- Citizens Advice / Social Media / Family
 - (Out side of Post-primary education)

Experience of being an apprentice (in a male dominated apprenticeship)

- Positive / Negative
- Gender - Training Vs. Workplace
- Perceptions of Apprenticeships
- Advice for adults considering Apprenticeships

Factors of Influence

- family
- Self
- Motivation
- Career, Making
- Gender
- Work Experience