

HIGHER EDUCATION

The importance of subject choice



Each year about 60,000 Irish students will have to pick their Leaving Cert subjects before they even complete the Junior Cycle while others may have the luxury of Transition Year to choose their subjects. On average, students are about 15 years of age when trying to decide on subjects that have long term effects on their career paths and college courses. The author, having worked at both second and third level, highlights the implications of choosing the wrong course because students did not give enough time and research into the subject choice decision making process during their initial years of second level education.



Unfortunately, according to the latest [Career Guidance Review](#), guidance counsellors estimate that only 26.3% of Irish students have received Career Guidance Information during Junior Cycle (see *table p.vi of report*). Subject choice can have unintended negative consequences as the wrong subject choice can block certain career pathways, but this may not become apparent until 6th year when students realise they don't meet the Matriculation subjects or specific College requirements when filling out their CAO form. Dropping all science subjects or all European Languages is a common irreversible mistake and would be very limiting in terms of Career choice. If students are unsure about the path they wish to take perhaps students should choose a variety of subjects from the different subject groups to keep their options open for as long as possible but again this is not ideal as choosing a subject just to keep your options open is not the wisest move.

In the Guidance Review, an alarming 21.3% (see *table 3.3 of report*) of Irish students reported that they only started thinking about their careers at third level. Very often students can sometimes find that their subject choices in their degree are sometimes limited and they don't meet the requirements or don't like the subjects they have picked and now confused about what career to invest in because they get locked into studying subjects they don't like. For example, in general unnominated degree subjects such as Arts, Science and Commerce to a lesser extent there are certain subject that would not be available to students who have not studied certain subjects to their leaving cert. Many third level students fail to engage with Career departments at third level and Career advisers could possibly help

with these options. If a student does find themselves in this situation, they should book an appointment with their Career Centre Adviser for Individualised advice.

Subject choice is influenced by many factors but predominately by parents, Guidance Counsellors, teachers, peers and of course the subjects offered in the schools. It is important that each student carefully researches what they are good at and what they enjoy. Junior Cycle results or even DAT scores may indicate what a student is good at but again the Junior Cycle results may not be available at the time of choosing subjects. Being good at a subject is an important factor however it is crucial that the student also likes the subject they are choosing as it can be hard to study a subject that you do not like.

From the review it is evident that some Guidance Counsellors (in post primary schools) simply do not have the time to have the 1 to 1 conversation (see P27 of report) about subject choice and the student sometimes make the choice alone. Ideally, second level students should try gather as much research during their timetables career class and attempt to do as much research on subject choice and career pathways as possible before discussing this with the Guidance Counsellor. The Guidance Counsellor can then verify and validate the results and information of their research, guiding them to make the best possible informed decision. There is a lot of readily available Information on-line, but many on-line psychometric results can be misinterpreted. On-line tools should complement the knowledge of the Guidance Counsellor and not replace them.

So what can students do for themselves with regards to subject choice research?

- The NCCA has several very useful on-line resources to allow students to explore their subject options and go through the Career decision making process and figure out what is the best option for them [NCCA Subject Choice Aid](#)
- Researching college courses is essential. This can be done through specific college websites or the CAO. Qualifax is very useful as it highlights all the Matriculation requirements as well as all the post graduate requirements for every course in Ireland. www.Qualifax.ie
- Researching subjects and how subjects are examined in the Leaving cert can help a student decide if they would be suited to this subject. Is there an Oral exam or a project or a portfolio or a field trip as part of the assessment process? Students should look at previous exam papers, the results break downs as well as chief examiner's reports. It is also useful to know what percentage of students take higher and ordinary and what the general results are like. All of this Information is available on the Stateexaminationscommission.ie
- Students should also attend specific open days and talk to Course directors early on. Most of these talks and Open day sessions can be found at www.Qualifax.ie
- Speaking to past students from the year ahead is very helpful as it gives a great insight into what the subject and course is like! Current students can be found through LinkedIn or through school Facebook pages.
- TY if used wisely is one of the best ways to experience certain jobs and careers and to attend Career events. The work experience and volunteering that students participate in allows students to speak to people already in their chosen career giving them a glimpse into the variety of skills and competencies required for different roles.
- Some careers involve working in certain companies and now more and more companies are running open days giving students a chance to experience certain careers

within these companies. There is a full list of companies here however students would need to also check the specific company. A list of open days for universities and Organisations can be found here [Careers Portal TY Company days](#)

NUI Galway organises the Galway Science and Technology fair which sees many companies such as Medtronic, SFI Discover, Boston Scientific, Cisco, Galway Local Enterprise Board, NUI Galway, GMIT, Hewlett Packard Enterprise, Fidelity Investments, Creganna Medical, Merit Medical, IDA Ireland, Galway County Council, The Marine Institute, DHKN, Aerogen, Electronic Concepts, Údarás na Gaeltachta and Enterprise Ireland talking to students and setting up games and exhibitions giving TY students a real insight into the work these companies do.

- Explore PLC options through www.fetchcourses.ie and for subjects needed for apprenticeships see www.apprenticeships.ie

It is important to note that all is not lost if a student chooses the 'wrong subject'. There are many alternative Career Pathways in which a student can carve out a career which they have not previously studied. This can be achieved through completing a graduate programme, work experience or a postgraduate course and this is what the Careers Office in third level institutions specialised in. However, many students would save a lot of time and money in the long term if they thoroughly researched their subjects and got to know what their interests, strengths and values were and choose 'the right subjects' which matched their interests, strengths and values.

Fortunately, there is a lot of good quality career Information available from a variety of sources, but it is how students explore and interpret this information that makes a significant difference in their Career Pathway. While the most recent Guidance review is a great initial step more needs to be done to ensure that Individual Career advice is available to all Irish students before they make their initial subject choice.



The Author

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