

Dissertation Synthesis



MARIO DELICATA

Bachelor in Occupational Health and Safety (Hons)

TITLE

Are iGaming employees being exposed to high psychosocial risks?

THE AIM OF THE STUDY

The objective of this research was to explore whether psychosocial risks are prevalent among employees in the iGaming industry. To accomplish this the researcher adopted the model proposed by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, which outlined six primary sources of work-related stress, namely: Excessive Job Demands, Lack of Control & Role Conflict, Inadequate Support, Poor Relationships, Poor Management of Change, and Violence & Harassment. This framework provided a solid basis for the study, facilitating a thorough assessment of the psychosocial risks experienced by iGaming employees.

METHODOLOGY

To gather primary data, a qualitative method was utilized whereby 8 semi-structured interviews based on the model proposed by Jonker and Pennick (2010) were conducted. The collected data was analysed thematically, using the method outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Purposive sampling was utilized as recommended by Bryman (2008). The sample selection criteria included individuals with a minimum of 2 years of work experience in the iGaming sector, between the ages of 25–45.

KEY FINDINGS

‘Long hours,’ and ‘High Intensity’ were the most prevalent psychosocial risks faced by the employees across every sector. High intensity was an issue that was encountered by all employees, most at risk were those working in the roles of ‘Customer Care’, ‘Odd compliers’ and ‘Live traders’ since they work shifts and even on weekends (Uehata, 2005; Hing & Breen, 2008). However, these employees normally worked a 40 hour a week and never exceed the 48 hours, so their exposure was limited. On the other hand, those in managerial positions often work longer hours, typically around 50 hours per week, and may even work on weekends, increasing the risk of burnout (Taormina & Kuok, 2009).

Conflicts due to a diverse and multicultural environment were present on a very small scale. There was a consensus among all the participants, that conflicts or heated arguments were rare and not a common occurrence (Ebbers & Wijnberg, 2017). The study however showed that certain employees from specific nationalities may be more sensitive to certain attitudes due to cultural differences, leading to a potentially uncomfortable work environment. Additionally, the study found that unintentional cliques do form among employees from the same nations who at times speak in their native language, which is unwelcoming to some colleagues.

Job control was identified as a factor that could potentially have a negative impact on the mental wellbeing of employees in the iGaming industry.

Given the nature of their work, since sports events have a predetermined time when to start but not when to finish, many employees in this industry have limited control over their job tasks. However, the study revealed that wherever possible, organizations were making a concerted effort to provide their employees with some degree of flexibility regarding when and how they perform their duties. Measures such as frequent breaks, split shifts, early departures, and relief staff among employees were implemented to mitigate the impact of job control limitations.

There is no concern about role clarity among the participants in the non-managerial positions as they confirmed that their roles were clearly defined and aligned with the tasks specified in their job contracts. The management also appears to adhere to the specified tasks. Additionally, the participants in managerial positions were confident in their knowledge of their responsibilities and tasks. As a result, it appears that there is no potential threat of either “Role conflict” or “Lack of clarity” among the study participants.

Poor change management was found to be a major issue and should be of a grave concern to iGaming companies. Seven out of eight participants confirmed that employees were not involved and consulted prior to change and kept in the dark. Employees occupying managerial positions also admitted that information is only shared at a managerial level. Hence this factor was found to have a negative impact on the mental wellbeing of the employees (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006).

The ‘iGaming Industry’ appears to excel in fostering positive relationships and providing favourable working conditions for its employees. According to this study, all participants reported experiencing good relationships with both their colleagues and management. Additionally, the research highlighted the excellent working conditions and support provided by the companies, which helps employees to become more resilient to stress and burnout. The study also confirmed that exceptional support and a friendly work environment can delay or counter the onset of stress and anxiety at the workforce (Shimizu et al., 1997). These positive relationships between employees and management,

along with the outstanding assistance provided by the company, are critical aspects of organizational support that help employees cope with stressful events and combat stress.

CONCLUSION

When the mitigation measures implemented by iGaming companies are taken into consideration, the study findings indicate that iGaming employees have a low to moderate risk rating for psychosocial risks. Nevertheless, it is crucial to consider three essential factors;

- 5 Psychosocial risks are not uniformly experienced by all employees.
- 6 The level of risk factors varies depending on the nature of the job.
- 7 Employees' resilience and ability to cope with work-related stressors differ from one another.

The study concluded, that although some of iGaming employees are faced with intense demands, lack of Job control/flexibility, and are not consulted during changes, they have the necessary procedures and support programmes in place. The implementation of 'Zero Tolerance' policies for violence and harassment, as well as mental health programs were found to promote both physical and mental health among employees. Furthermore, the exceptional support provided by companies, combined with positive relationships between management and employees, increased employees' resilience in managing work-related stress and mitigated the negative effects of such risks.

The thesis was supervised by Ms Stelmart Khalil

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CHRISTIAN ABELA

Bachelor in Occupational Health and Safety (Hons)

TITLE

The stressors that affect the performance of occupational health and safety officers.

THE AIM OF THE STUDY

This qualitative research sought to explore the stressors impacting Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Officers in relation to their work performance. The basis of this research was to insightfully analyse, workplace specific stressors (Gilboa et al., 2008) being experienced by OHS Officers. The research focused on the perspectives of OHS Officers employed within the local sector since related research on the matter is very limited.

METHODOLOGY

A cross-sectional qualitative design was adopted capitalising on semi-structured interviews. All research participants were chosen on specific criteria of interest ensuring that their outcomes were both valid and reliable to the objectives of the research. The participants were selected based on their work experience in the occupation as OHS Officers, so that common stressors may be identified and thus generate specific data which could be analysed. In total twelve participants were engaged in this research. A thematic analysis was adopted which helped in the structure and analysis of the data compiled (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was beneficial to the research as it served to interpret the distinct dimensions of the research area in comprehensive terms.

KEY FINDINGS

A set of themes emerged in view of the interviews carried out, with regards to the stressors experienced by employees at the workplace. At a later stage these were classified into six primary themes.

- Stressors related to OHS Officers' Professional Duties
- Management Related Stressors
- Employee Related Stressors
- Adverse Circumstantial Factors due to Covid-19
- Stressors generated by Communication
- The Impact of Stressors on Performance

Six themes were eventually identified and further expounded in terms of their relevant sub-themes. Five of which focused on stressors whilst the last theme addressed performance. The study highlighted stressors being experienced by OHS Officers in various aspects aligned to the conduct of their professional duties. The research concluded that although the perception is that the OHS Officers can generally cope with the elements of stress, uncertainty still persists when it comes to potential stressors which exert a direct impact on their professional duties. Following Dormann and Zapf (2004), participants need to be aware of their responsibilities on a 24/7 basis. OHS Officers were found to adopt flexible approaches in addressing management and employees, granting priority to organisational efficiency and effectiveness. One factor that emerged as an impact on the performance level of OHS Officers was the sheer lack of human resources within the H&S department.

The findings indicate that within organisations, it is the managers who tend to be the most sceptical regards OHS Officers' recommendations. This created the inertia being experienced within the organisation which ultimately impacted its OHS Culture. This resulted in the ineffective implementation of control measures as suggested by OHS Officers. Although employees were more willing to implement the OHS recommendations, whenever the management was perceived to be unsupportive, it resulted in a failure

of the required initiatives from being implemented. This led to higher levels of stress impacting both management and employees, resulting in lower job satisfaction levels in the latter category as described by Brough and Pears (2004).

Employees proved to be highly vulnerable to stressors. Their root cause being family issues rather than organisational. Psychological counselling services served as a support in this respect. This factor was also impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, a contextual factor on which the business can have limited control.

The organisational culture was likewise qualified as a stressor, particularly whenever safety was not prioritised, as affirmed by Leitão, McCarthy and Greiner (2018). A safety culture needs to be smartly supported by safety policies, procedures and practices tailored to the specific exigencies of businesses. Additionally, organisational stressors were generated by the communication system whenever this lacked transparency and openness. Poor communication in this regard impacts adversely the organisation's culture particularly as regards issues related to safety. Consequently, this results in misallocation of resources, a vicious cycle of pressure on the employees and a less effective value delivery chain throughout the organisation.

CONCLUSION

The research outcomes brought to light stressors that influence OHS Officers in the conduct of their professional duties. It transpired that currently there is a sheer absence of qualified personnel within OHS departments. This constraint has been long standing but has not been specifically addressed. Additionally, it is evident that managers tend to be highly sceptical of the recommendations voiced by OHS Officers. This is probably in view of perceived implementation costs and apprehension to changes in familiar working methods. Thus, the managers tend in most situations to perceive the OHS Officers as an intrusion rather than a source of support.

To mitigate these challenges, an array of recommendations is presented.

These are addressed to distinct stakeholders including the management and the employees. As regard to the former, OHS Officers need to sustain a culture where the management appreciates and respects OHS, its functions and values. Consequently, management would become an active participant alongside OHS Officers. As regards employees, since stressors are usually related to family issues, sufficient time needs to be allocated so they can be appropriately resolved.

Finally, organisations need to develop safety cultures. Effective communication systems reinforced by customised procedures and operations may represent a constructive step so as to address stressors.

This thesis was supervised by Dr Luke Fiorini.

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DANIEL SAMMUT

Bachelor in Work and Human Resources (Hons)

TITLE

Motivation and performance among employees in a food manufacturing and retail organisation

AIM OF STUDY

In a competitive business climate, motivation and performance are important factors to consider for organisational growth and success. Studies have shown that motivation and performance are linked, however, locally, there seems to be a need for relevant research in manufacturing and retail organisations. The aim of this study was to determine the levels of different types of motivation and performance amongst employees in a food manufacturing and retail organisation in Malta. Moreover, this research will explore the relationships between different types of motivation in relation to overall performance. Furthermore, this research study can serve a higher purpose as it can help to establish policies and/or tailor-made reward systems that seek to increase positive work performance and as a result, decrease counterproductive work behaviour.

METHODOLOGY

This research study adopted a quantitative research method and as a result, a structured questionnaire was used to gather primary data. The questionnaire had the following structure:

Demographic data: This part of the questionnaire involved questions to help gather demographic information such as age, gender, educational level,

departments within the organisation, job roles, as well as length of service.

Motivation: This part of the questionnaire focused on intrinsic, identified, introjected, and extrinsic regulation, and their effect on the motivation of individual employees. Three perceptions for each type of motivation were adopted from the Motivation at Work Scale (MAWS) developed by Gagne et al. (2010). Moreover, the Higher-Order model was used to obtain autonomous and controlled motivation. Intrinsic and identified regulation were combined to form autonomous motivation, whilst introjected and extrinsic motivation were combined to form controlled motivation (Howard et al., 2020).

Work performance: This part of the questionnaire was used to evaluate the performance of individual employees. The dimensions for performance involved task performance, contextual performance, and counterproductive work behaviour, based on the Individual Work Performance Questionnaire (IWPQ) (Koopmans et al., 2012; Koopmans et al., 2014). Task performance involved eleven perceptions, whilst contextual performance and counterproductive work behaviour were based on five perceptions each.

KEY FINDINGS

In terms of motivation, mean scores were greatest for intrinsic motivation, followed by identified, introjected and extrinsic motivation. Consequently, autonomous motivation was greater than controlled motivation. A significant difference between the mean scores of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, as well as between autonomous and controlled motivation were identified.

In terms of performance, mean scores for contextual performance were greater than task performance. A significant difference between these scores was identified.

It was found that there was a significant positive relationship between overall work performance and various types of motivation including intrinsic, extrinsic, autonomous, controlled, and overall motivation. From this hypothesis, it emerged that overall motivation has a considerable positive effect on performance.

Finally, the findings indicated that autonomous and intrinsic motivation tends to lead to the highest performance when applied at the right levels.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, this study can benefit the studied organisation as it exposed the organisation's strengths and weaknesses in relation to motivation and performance, thus providing guidance on areas of improvement. Motivation is a driving force that inhabits each and every human being. The direction and magnitude of motivation depend on regulation and as a result, it is by modifying these regulations that employees' motivation can be directed. This research study indicates that an organisation can expect better employee performance by focusing on achieving the right balance between autonomous and controlled motivation. Employees are likely to perform better when they are intrinsically involved in their job task, believe that their work task is of value, are exposed to good levels of communication, and are able to participate within the work community.

This thesis was supervised by Dr Luke Fiorini

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Data from this thesis was used in the following published study:

- Fiorini, L.A. & Sammut, D. (2023) The relationship between employee motivation and work performance in a manufacturing and retail foodservice organisation, *Journal of Foodservice Business Research*, DOI: 10.1080/15378020.2023.2214069



ANTONIO BUHAGIAR

Bachelor in Work and Human Resources (Hons)

TITLE

Analysing the introduction of new paternity and parental leave entitlements for fathers in accordance with European Union Directive 2019/1158: A qualitative study on the employers' perspective in Malta

THE AIM OF THE STUDY

Through the European Union (EU) Directive 1158/2019, the EU imposed on all its member states to introduce a minimum of ten days paid paternity leave and four months parental leave for fathers, two months of which will be paid and non-transferable between parents. Research shows that if there is a specific paid leave entitlement for fathers, it encourages men to share childcare responsibilities and household duties more equally (ILO, 2019). Thus, given that the EU is pushing for more fathers to be away from the place of work to raise their children, the aim of this research was to explore the perspective of employers on the introduction of such measures for fathers in Malta.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative approach was selected, and semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data from the participants by utilising the “general interview guide approach” (Turner, 2010, p. 744). Eight Human Resources (HR) professionals who worked in medium sized enterprises employing between 50–249 employees took part in the research. The study was directed towards medium sized enterprises as 99.8% of private enterprises in Malta are

SMEs (European Commission, 2019). To further increase the validity of the research, the choice of interviewees was restricted to the three male-dominant employment sectors identified: the wholesale and retail trade, the food service and hotel industries (HORECA) and the manufacturing sector (NSO, 2019). To identify the right participants that could provide relevant information to the questions being posed, purposive sampling was adopted (Bryman, 2012), irrelevant of interviewees gender and grade within the HR department.

KEY FINDINGS

The main findings captured through this research revolved around two main themes:

- Awareness of EU Directive 2019/1158 and the new entitlements
- The tussle between organisational and employees' needs

The results suggest that the interviewees were not completely aware about the new entitlements, especially those involving parental leave. Albeit being knowledgeable about an increase in the number of days associated with paternity leave, they were not informed that the increase constitutes ten days. That said, once employers were made aware what the new entitlements emanating from the directive entail, their overall reactions were quite positive. They also acknowledged, at least theoretically, the need of a longer paternity leave entitlement.

A reason why employers may have had limited awareness about the new paternity and parental leave entitlements was due to the low number of requests being received from fathers to avail themselves of such leave. Whereas some fathers do make use of their paternity leave, the uptake of parental leave is non-existent. This does not come as a surprise when considering that Malta has one of the lowest birth rates across the EU (Eurostat, 2020).

When the reasons for the low uptake of parental leave by the fathers were discussed, several issues were raised, such as the fear that this might jeopardise their relationship with management and colleagues, and that it could also

negatively affect their career prospects. The persisting gendered social norms and the fact that fathers may not even be aware of their entitlement to use parental leave were other reasons brought forward. Such remarks resemble findings by Briffa (2019) and her research conducted from the fathers' point of view.

In relation to the rate of pay associated with such leave entitlements, most employers agreed that to have fathers making use of the new paternity and parental leave entitlements, the compensation rate for both entitlements should be paid at 100% of their earnings. Such observation is in line with O'Brien (2009) who asserts that men are more likely to take up parental leave if it is paid at 100% of their earnings. Most of the employers also reasoned out that the costs associated with the new leave entitlements should ideally be shared between the Government and employers.

Employers from the manufacturing and HORECA industries showed more concern about the operational, organisational and financial impacts that such measures might bring to their businesses, particularly if the leave is taken during high peak seasons. They were concerned that they would need to hire temporary staff to cover up such absences, which could lead to additional logistical problems and costs. However, overall employers were keen to seek compromise with both the Government and employees on the implementation of the new rights.

CONCLUSION

This study had provided useful insights on the Work-Life Balance Directive and fills a gap in the literature on the perceptions of employers concerning the idea of having fathers making use of their entitlements. It revealed how employers have two opposing views on the subject matter whereby the needs of employees are recognised and yet, these clash with organisational demands to sustain operational functionality. Such point of view was empirical for the implementation of the much needed measures for fathers which should hopefully aid to close the gender caring gaps between mothers and fathers,

instil further equality, promote work-life balance and enhance the relationship between fathers and children. Even though employers recognise that gender stereotypes are ill-suited at this age and era, it seems that these are still dominant in a society within which patriarchal roots are deeply embedded. It transpires that a change in legislation together with the right implementation of such entitlements is the right way forward to challenge the status quo.

This thesis was supervised by Dr Anna Borg

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JESSICA BORG

Master in Lifelong Career Guidance and Development

TITLE

An analysis of the new role of student mentors in the career advisory process at a vocational college for arts, science and technology in Malta.

THE AIM OF THE STUDY

Many students are at risk of dropping out of the Maltese education system. Malta had the second-highest rate of Early Leavers from Education and Training (ELET) within the European Union at 16.7% in 2019 (Eurostat, 2020). The Maltese education system is making great efforts to combat ESL in order to meet the European Commission's 2030 target of no more than 9% of the population falling into the ELET bracket (Eurostat, 2022).

This qualitative study examined the newly created role of student mentors at a post-secondary vocational college in Malta and the goal of the mentoring program to improve student retention rates and enrich their educational experience. Ryan and Deci's (2017) Self-determination theory is used to explore whether the mentors' relationship helps students develop their inner resources from the mentors' perspective. In addition, Patton and McMahon's (2014) Systems theory framework is used to examine how the mentoring program is perceived by other student support service providers and to gain insight into the internal dynamics between professionals.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative design and an interpretivist approach was adopted for this research study. Multiple perceptions about the at-risk mentoring program

were investigated via interviews with nine stakeholders including the student mentors, career advisors, counsellors, and their respective directors. Student mentors were appointed to act as an intermediary role that filters and refers students to both career advisors and therapists. Since career guidance is the main discipline around which this study is centred, the focus on the mentors' work reflects the parts which intersect with the career advisory process. The research was carried out between 2019 and 2020 when the mentoring program had already been running for a whole academic year within the vocational institution. The interviews were audio-recorded, in-depth, individual, and semi-structured. Data was transcribed and analysed through Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

KEY FINDINGS

Three main themes emerged from this research, shedding light on the effect the new role of student mentors has on the service provided by the professionals, as follows:

- A positive shift in service delivery
- Students still dropping out
- Challenges faced by professionals

All participants involved in the study concurred that the addition of student mentors generates various benefits within their service provision. Student-mentor relationships are restoring the mentees' trust in the student services within the vocational college. This provides a better footing for the other professionals to start their career guidance or counselling work with students. Career advisors and counsellors have increased referrals which led to the reinstatement of multidisciplinary team meetings. This provides a space for the whole team to discuss cases from a holistic perspective. Such collaboration between professionals decreases the number of students slipping through the net as students are better monitored.

Reducing the number of foundation students dropping out is one of the main reasons student mentors are employed in this post-secondary institution. However, the student mentors' work does not necessarily result in increased retention rates. The main reasons why students leave their studies vary from personal issues and/or the course not meeting their expectations. Furthermore, all participants agreed on the existent percentage of students who remain 'invisible' to student services and who do not obtain the required support. These students might have reached 50% of absenteeism and must therefore terminate their course or remain unnoticed for the difficulties they might experience. ELET is a cumulative process in which 'invisible students' might have reached its peak earlier on during their educational journey (Audas & Williams, 2001). Given that students are sixteen years of age and over, once they decide to drop out, all efforts and compensatory measures from the institution's end may be rejected and become in vain.

One of the main challenges that ensue within the career advisors' department is the imbalance between the internal and external service provision. The institution being studied has a ratio of two career advisors to 6,000 students. This makes it very complicated to cater for both the internal (official full-time students, including at-risk students within foundation level) and external (prospective) students' needs proportionately. The career advisors' focus is on outreach to prospective students, which leaves very little time for internal students. The introduction of the role of student mentors has bridged such lacunae. In fact, the student mentors contribute by helping mentees with study skills, opportunity awareness through job searching and career fairs, soft skills and employability skills, and school-to-work or placement transitions. Even though the college embeds some of these employability skills within the curriculum, it seems insufficient. The intersection between mentoring and the career guidance provision, leads to the understanding that career advisors need to collaborate with the mentors in order to extend their service provision to support internal students to enhance their self-career management skills.

CONCLUSION

One of the main findings pertaining to this research is that, although the mentoring program has brought a positive shift in the students' service delivery, professionals face many challenges which might impact the dynamics with the other teams and their respective clients. As a result, this might affect the number of students slipping outside the system.

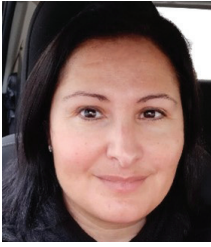
A distinct challenge these professionals are faced with is the fragmentation of services which results from having 3 different directors for 3 teams which all fall under one umbrella- the student services. Fragmentation of services ensues when multiple decision-makers make disjointed decisions on each of their services rather than a unified decision that encompasses the bigger picture of such service (Elhauge, 2010).

Overall, this study proves and advocates that mentoring could be considered a feasible subsidiary resource to collaborate with career guidance practitioners within post-secondary institutions, as it helps such practitioners adequately cater to internal students' needs. Moreover, the support provided needs to empower students to have personally agency. As Rolfe (2007) said metaphorically about lifelong career development skills and the empowering relationship between the mentor and mentee, "Give a person a fish and you feed them for a day; teach a person how to fish and they can feed themselves for a lifetime".

This thesis was supervised by Dr Katya De Giovanni

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TANIA GIORDMAINA

Master in Lifelong Career Guidance and Development

TITLE

The role of career guidance in secondary school subject choice

THE AIM OF THE STUDY

The study sought to examine local influences on students' subjects choice and the students' perceptions of career guidance services they were offered to support them in this choice. Although the Career Guidance Policy for Schools (Debono et al., 2007) ensures that there are quality services aimed at supporting Year 8 students in their choice of subjects, every year, there are a number of students who ask to change one or both of their option subjects upon starting their lessons.

METHODOLOGY

A case study approach was adopted to research students' subjects choice in one state college. The study was carried out in two phases during the scholastic year 2018-2019. In phase one, quantitative data was collected. Questionnaires were administered to 135 Year 9 students who had gone to the College's Middle School in the previous scholastic year. During phase two of the study, a number of face-to-face interviews were carried out. The college career advisor, a guidance teacher from the Middle School and another guidance teacher from the Senior School were interviewed. Following the interviews with these professionals, six Year 9 students who expressed a desire to change one or both of their option subjects were interviewed. Two themes emerged from the data collected: the factors which affected students before they made

their subject choices; and the role played by career guidance throughout this exercise.

KEY FINDINGS

Three main factors transpired when students were asked about the reasons for their choice of subjects: the likeability of a subject; the subject's utility in finding a job; and the students' ability in that subject.

The main reason for choosing a subject was identified as liking a subject and finding it fun. Teaching methods appeared to have a bearing on whether a subject is perceived as fun and enjoyable with students showing a preference towards hands-on and practical subjects. Very few students were influenced by the teacher who spoke to them about a subject or by the surroundings in which lessons were held.

The second most common reason for choosing a subject revolved around the utility of that subject. Some of the interviewed students mentioned how sometimes this issue was a source of disagreement between students and their parents, as parents would advise in favour of or against a subject depending on the career prospects this subject would offer. Students were asked about their career aspirations and data collected from this question indicated that students' aspirations were linked to their family background. These findings corroborate other research (for example, Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Sullivan, 2001; Debono, 2008; Glaesser & Cooper, 2011) which explains how the socio-economic background and the cultural capital of an individual impact their educational choices. When fathers occupied a blue-collar job, there was a higher likelihood that students had low aspirations, when compared to students whose fathers had white-collar jobs.

Ability emerged as the third most common factor affecting student choices. Students' responses indicated that when they made their choice, they considered the grades they used to get in Middle School and the perception they have of a subject, with some opting for certain subjects because they thought they would be easier than others. Moreover, a few of the interviewees

mentioned that they sought reassurance from teachers on their ability in a subject before they chose it.

Gender differences in the take-up of subjects were observed in line with Gottfredson's theory of Circumscription, Compromise and Self-Creation (1981). No female student chose Vocational Engineering and no male student chose Health and Social Care. Only two female students chose Vocational IT and both students expressed a wish to change this subject. A major disparity between the genders was also observed in the take-up of Computer Studies and Design and Technology, where the number of male students outnumbered the number of female students by far.

The vast majority of students (84.4%) sought their parents'/guardians' advice and approval before they committed to a choice. In contrast, 17.1% of students spoke to a career advisor or a guidance teacher. This does not mean that students were not exposed to career guidance, as there were many activities organised during Year 8 aimed at helping students make informed choices. Students were asked to comment on the effectiveness of these activities.

Although the number of students who sought one-to-one guidance sessions was not high, almost all of the students who sought this service reported that it was very effective. In general, PSCD lessons on decision-making were identified as being most helpful, followed by an information meeting which was held in the school's hall for all Year 8 students. Online information or printed material about subjects were next, followed by a visit to the senior school. Discussions with interviewees on these activities revealed how some students preferred talking to someone in person, in particular, teachers of the subject they were interested in, even though they had reviewed the information which was made available to them online or in printed form. It is also interesting to note that many students identified the meeting which was organised for their parents/guardians as another activity which helped *them* in making their choice.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study provided further insight into the factors which influence students' academic choices. Furthermore, it allowed students an opportunity to discuss which career guidance activities they found to be most helpful. These findings have important implications for practice which can assist the practitioner when s/he is designing and implementing the options exercise. Furthermore, a number of recommendations were also put forward by the students themselves, including having taster lessons in all subjects before choosing. Finally, parents' role in this exercise needs to be researched further.

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