The Longitudinal Study on Career Decisions and Tertiary Pathways: School Case Study

Interim paper prepared by

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Introduction

According to Chapman (1993) previous research has investigated the nature and relevance of occupational information at critical times in decision making, although little research has included assessing the value of information given to school students (National Board of Employment, Education and Training 1995). Further, Harvey (1984) (who conducted semi-structured interviews to reveal differences of career style) found that pupils in lower curriculum groups did not understand that early setbacks and lack of status would prove to be handicaps in the latter years of schooling. While all students have little knowledge of career pathways, tertiary courses and career options in the early days of schooling, it appears to be those students who are academically less able who are disadvantaged when selection of subjects and career decisions are made.

Research into subject selection procedures (Washbourne & Simpson 1986, Tuettemann 1987) has been carried out in the Western Australian context after alteration to the curriculum in both the senior and lower secondary levels. Other studies on career and subject choices have provided insights into the influences on choices (Sleet & Stern 1980, Lee and Ekstrom 1987). However, few studies have been carried out focussing on the process and context over time in which students make choices about school subjects, post school courses and careers (Dellar 1994).

In 1995, the Tertiary Entrance Procedures Authority (TEPA) completed out a study which analysed differences and similarities across the policies and practices adopted by schools in their educational planning and career development programs throughout Years 11 and 12. The current Longitudinal Study on Career Decisions and Tertiary Pathways addresses similar issues from a different perspective, over a four-year time period. This project aims to identify the impact of school policies and practices on students as well as other influences which affect individual subject choices and career decisions. The Longitudinal Study also seeks to gain an additional insight into these processes and procedures by primarily using a qualitative research methodology to access the views of students directly. This project intends to evaluate from the students’ perspective the usefulness of information given at times of decision making and factors which facilitate or hinder their post school choices. One of the aims of the study is to improve the use and effectiveness of information and publications given by the schools and TEPA in order to facilitate students’ decision making processes.

Background to the study

During the later half of 1995, seven schools were approached to participate in the TEPA longitudinal study. As shown in Table 1, the type and location of the schools is broadly representative of the full range of schools in the Queensland senior secondary system. After the initial phase of the investigation, a Catholic systemic school was included in the
subsequent interview rounds to ensure that the views of this particular student group were also part of the study.

Table 1. School type and location.

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<th>SCHOOL TYPE LOCATION</th>
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<tr>
<td>Government secondary co-educational suburban</td>
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<tr>
<td>Government secondary co-educational regional (remote)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Catholic systemic co-educational suburban</td>
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<td>Independent single sex — male inner city</td>
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The first round of focus groups was conducted by a project coordinator and local researchers in early 1996. This initial contact with the schools and students was developed as a pilot phase of the project with the intention of establishing a productive working alliance with those involved in the study. The information collected also facilitated identification of relevant issues and provided a tentative framework for the planned second round of focus groups.

In 1997, the focus groups were replaced with a semi-structured, individual interview program. While some of the data collected across students yielded inconsistencies, nevertheless it appears to be possible to analyse and link a selection of the questions to the 1996 focus group data. This will permit identification of issues over time and also provide a link to future data collection. As further analyses take place when transcription is finalised, additional themes may arise from the data and these can be further explored in subsequent phases of the investigation.

As the data set is yet to be finalised for the 1997 interview program, the findings from one school in the study are presented as part of this paper.

Method

Measures

As the initial phase of the investigation was primarily intended to introduce students to the concept of talking about tertiary pathways and career-related decisions, there was no strict set of questions asked by the researcher. Discussions centred around school resources which are perceived by students to be helpful or unhelpful in facilitating choice of school subjects and career options as well as a range of additional influences which have impacted on subject choice, tertiary course options and career decisions.

In the second phase of the study, discussion topics were developed based on the themes which emerged from the student focus groups. Areas covered related to the subject selection process, assistance with subject selection, careers events, and information provided by the school.

After completing two rounds of group discussions, it was decided that the experiences of individual students should be the focus during the next phase of the study. A semi-structured interview schedule was developed by the research team and aimed to address issues relating to information provided about school subjects, tertiary pathways options, people who
influence student decision making, the perceived usefulness of school subjects, and future career plans.

Procedure

Throughout 1996 and 1997 class observations, at times convenient to schools, were an additional strategy employed to enhance information gathered. Additional information distributed by the schools relating to subject selection, careers, tertiary study and pathways options was also collected by the research team.

Phase 1 (Semester 1, 1996 — Year 10 students)

Each class participating in the study was divided into self-selecting friendship groups of approximately two to five members, with the most common grouping consisting of four students. Discussions lasted the length of a school period which, in most cases, was around 40 minutes.

Phase 2 (Semester 2, 1996 — Year 10 students) During the latter half of 1996, students were again involved in a focus group situation targeted at a time when decisions were being made in relation to subject selection for Years 11 and 12. Student absences and relocation of students in conjunction with changes to friendship groupings resulted in membership of groups varying somewhat during this phase of group discussions. Researchers encouraged all students to participate in group discussions of the topics. As was the case in the previous phase, the length of the focus groups was limited to approximately 40 minutes.

Phase 3 (Semester 2, 1997 — Year 11 students) Early in second semester, school personnel were contacted to arrange individual student interviews. The majority of schools scheduled the interview program over a period of between one or two days, resulting in a time limit of 20 minutes per interview. In some cases, researchers gave students the option to discuss topic areas, rather than ask the full schedule of questions.

Sample

As can be seen from Figure 1, the number of participants increased during the second phase of the investigation due to the inclusion of an additional school. The original number of students involved in the study was 164. Of the 187 students at the eight schools who were part of the second phase 157 (84%) also completed the individual interviews in the third phase.

Figure 1. Number of students participating in the study.

Results

The results discussed in this presentation are the preliminary findings from two phases of four focus group discussions. These focus groups were conducted in February and October 1996 with Year 10 students who were in the initial stages of selecting subjects for Years 11 and 12. The results reported are confined to one of the eight schools participating in the longitudinal study. These findings are reported in three sections: themes unique to the first round, those unique to the second and finally, themes evident across both focus group phases.

Themes unique to the first round
Career options

Based on the first round of focus groups, students can be divided into two main groups: the majority expressing ambivalence with regard to career choices and the minority having an interest in a general disciplinary area and post-school courses although they did not specify a definite career path. All students, at this stage, appeared to be experimenting with ideas about ‘what they would like to be’ and ‘what they thought would be a good career’. As the process of linking subject selection and career path at this time was not clearly formulated, discussion relating to subject selection are, for the most part, unique to the second round of focus groups.

While specific careers were discussed by the majority of female students, male students tended to discuss areas of interest.

Occupations mentioned included being: an actress, a lawyer, a park ranger, a diving instructor, a vet, a pilot, a doctor, a chef, an economist, and a teacher. Areas of interest discussed were: “a physio or something in that area”, “something in tourism and hospitality”, “science”, and “a marine biologist or something with animals”. The careers and areas of interest mentioned were not gender specific and were discussed by both male and female students.

The students who had not decided on a specific career illustrated how, over time, they experimented with ideas as they attempted to make decisions relating to career pathways.

S: “Um, I’ve thought about being a vet cause I really like animals or something to do with animals but I don’t think I’d enjoy putting them down and stuff”.

S: “I’ve always wanted to be doctor or something along those lines like medicine or science or something”.

Further, in all cases these students illustrated changing ideas and preferences — a process of acceptance and then rejection of specific careers. The students often expressed the difficulties associated with having to choose a career at this time.

S: “I didn’t want to do anything like that (being a doctor), I wanted to be an actor but kind of all those things you go through, I dunno”. S: “You hear about things and you think, oh yeah, I dunno, I dunno how you can decide because there’s so many things you can do”.

From the following interchange between students the changing preferences over time are clearly discernible:

S: “Um, like I was going to be a marine biologist cos just like I used to really like marine life...”

S: “Weren’t you gonna be a civil engineer”?

S: “Nah, that was ages ago”.

Other students did not specify occupations but rather expressed interest in pursuing general disciplinary areas at university or TAFE. Choice of courses after school appeared to be the focus of their attention rather than specific occupations. These areas of interest included: medicine, computing science, science degree, engineering, hospitality and tourism, and catering. These students were prepared to consider most jobs in their chosen area.

S: “Yeah, if I don’t get into surgery then there’s still a lot of different types of medicine which you can do, like physiotherapy and um.......No I’m not doing nursing — couldn’t do that.”
A very small minority of students at this time were specific about career choices. The majority of students, therefore, appeared to be still formulating their ideas about career options and these ideas were influenced by a number of intersecting factors.

Factors which influenced career choices

Many factors appeared to influence the students’ ideas regarding career pathways. However, the degree to which the students were influenced by differing factors is difficult to discern. Rather, what appeared to be more important was that these influences provided a wealth of vicarious experiences of the world outside school and this, together with their limited personal experiences, widened their horizons. The following factors appeared to influence career ideas: activities outside school, influence of parents, and perceptions of what would be boring and what would be exciting as occupations.

Extra-curricular experiences

Students who were involved in extra-curricular activities outside school reported that these pursuits had influenced their career ideas.

For example, one group of students’ career preferences were affected by being an air cadet and wanting to go into the air force, studying music and wanting to be a teacher, experience of bush camping resulting in the idea of becoming a park ranger and, finally, attending drama classes outside school and a performance at an Eisteddfod giving the idea of becoming an actress or drama teacher.

S: “Last year I was in an Eisteddfod.......I did like character pieces and poems and I got two seconds in that. ......I really enjoyed that so I’d like to do something like um, be an actress or drama teacher or something. You know, you know, I like that sort of thing..."

Experience outside school appeared to encourage wider interests and options for careers for these students.

Family influences

A number of students reported that their parents wanted them to go to university because they had graduated from a tertiary institution, other siblings were at university, or the parents regretted not having completed their course.

S: “Um, I’m kind of going through the whole thing cause my brother left Year 12 last year and he’s doing uni so I get to go through all the rigmarole with that ... It’s probably more a big thing because like he’s the first child to go through and it’s all changed for us”. Most of the students believed that staying on at school would benefit them with regard to post-school courses and careers. Whilst this was in some cases due to the parental expectations it was also expressed as due to their own perceptions and assessment of the skills needed for the work force.

S: “My sister she reckons it’s a waste of time but I’m going to keep going.....cause I want to get a good job. You can’t get a good job if you leave at Grade 10 these days”.

S: “Yeah, have to try and get a degree or something. Yeah like you wanna go to Grade 12 at least, then go to uni cos like a degree, that’s like work experience, the more things you can get, degrees, experience, the better chance you’ve got”.

While some students expressed a desire to follow their father’s or family occupation, others rejected this course of action. A student who wanted to do something in the field of graphics
or design did not mention influence but noted the connection between his family’s traditional work area and what he wanted to do.

S: “Um well my father’s a professional engineer and my mother’s a civil engineer... the strange thing for three generations on my father’s side all of us have been in some kind of draftsman”.

Alternatively the following student rejected the idea of following his father.

S: “Everybody my Dad knows thinks that I’m gonna follow in his trade but I just wanna do something different that my family’s never done”.

The experimentation with ideas about careers and further education courses illustrated either rejection or affirmation of experiences and influences which were associated with the individual student’s preferences.

Jobs classified as ‘boring’

All students in the first round of focus groups expressed dislike of jobs which they perceived as boring. These included secretarial occupations, and desk jobs where as one student stated in answer to the researcher’s question:

R: “Okay ..... and in the air force, you said you want to be a pilot”.
S: “Yeah, I don’t want to be stuck behind a desk and doing all that paper work and all that”.
S: “...... couldn’t stand being in an office job...”
S: “I couldn’t, I couldn’t sit behind a desk”.

Students wanted to do ‘exciting’, ‘interesting’, ‘physical’ and ‘practical’ jobs rather than those which they believed were sedentary and administrative. This can be attributed in part to their experiences in school where they preferred the more practical subjects rather than those which were theoretical.

Financial rewards

Although the majority of students did not consider the financial rewards of an occupation, a minority of male students did link career options to money.
S: “It depends.....I’m just trying to think of a job though that would make a lot of money...”

Themes unique to the second phase

Tertiary prerequisites and subject selection

Subject selection was also influenced by the student’s perception and knowledge of the requirements for post-school courses and career paths.
S: “Um I don’t wanna go to uni or anything but, um I might do a TAFE course on catering and I’ll go and finish Year 12 so I can do a Diploma in Business Catering but if I can, I’m just
gunna go straight to an apprenticeship without doing that so um — I don’t really need an OP”.

The choice of Board, Board-registered and non-Board subjects was determined by the students’ self perception of their academic ability, the choice of courses post-school, and their preferred career.

S: “...what I wanna do at university is Information Technology and I don’t think I’ll have a problem with that because I’ll get an OP of 9 and I don’t think that’s too hard to get into the subjects I want”.

These students’ decision making processes regarding subject selection for Years 11 and 12 appeared from this discussion to have been formulated linking areas of interest to areas at which you are good, to possible university or TAFE courses and eventual career paths. The majority of students appeared to have made the transition between “not having a clue” to having some idea of general area.

Keeping career options open

The minority of students who were still undecided as to a specific career had chosen subjects which kept their options open:

S: “…that’s why I chose the subjects I did because all of them can get me into any type of engineering and there’s a lot of other jobs which apply in Maths B and Physics”.

All the students reported that they had taken more time in choosing their subjects illustrating that they knew the importance of selecting subjects wisely for the future.

S: “Um, I thought about this very carefully, the subjects I was gunna do and chose ones that would give me every Field Position that I could get, like that didn’t happen automatically....I chose Maths B because I couldn't do Maths C”.

Students who wished to go on to university courses appeared to have worked out their OP and FP requirements and these factors were important in deciding which subjects to take. However, also taken into consideration were the subject prerequisites needed to gain entry to specific courses. These students appeared to have an understanding of the academic standards they were required to attain whether or not they wanted to go to university. Those students who were still undecided about post-secondary courses and pathways appeared to choose subjects which kept their options open.

Students’ perception of relevant information

During the interval between the first and second round focus groups the students had been provided with a variety of information about careers and subject choices. The following information sessions and publications were arranged or made available by the school: parents evening, information sheets on different subjects, subject teacher talks, QTAC’s publication Tertiary Prerequisites 2000, and TEPA publications relating to tertiary entrance requirements. Other information sources available for post-compulsory school students were career markets and tertiary study expositions. However, visits to career markets were not arranged by the school. The students who had formulated their selection of subjects by linking these to post-school courses and career pathways expressed a higher degree of satisfaction about the usefulness of the information provided than those students who were still uncertain.
There was, however, a general consensus that more information was required to make such important decisions and select appropriate subjects which would affect their future lives. While a few talked about the usefulness of the guidance officer, the subject teacher talks and the written material, the majority felt that the information had been inadequate, and the booklets confusing. A minority of students admitted not bothering to get information sheets and booklets and not really listening to the information sessions.

S: “I read ‘em all and they were — they sort of gave me an idea but they still weren’t much help, basically all they told us about was what university was, how you got into it...”

While some students felt the teachers were selling their subjects, others found them helpful in selecting subjects. However, all the students who went to the subject talks said the time limits and timetabling did not permit them to attend all that were of interest.

S: “...if you didn’t really go then um you would be kind of well stuffed, if — when you went to choose your um subjects; ‘cause there might have been certain parts of the subjects which might help you like, um, Film and Television is writing and reviewing and, um, most people would just think it wasn’t that. They would just like watching, um, movies and filming things which it — which is a large part of it but they wouldn’t think of the writing style so they wouldn’t choose it... Um most people think art was just painting and drawing and stuff whereas there’s a lot of researching and everything else for that and the same with all manual arts”.

The students reported that they did not know about the career markets and TSXPO forums and, in fact, only one student had actually attended the exhibition. Similarly, a minority of parents had gone to the parents evening although some had telephoned the guidance officer for advice and information. These types of forums appeared not to be well attended by either the students or their parents. One student expressed dissatisfaction with the school’s information procedures.

S: “See, they’re not very good at getting information to us in this school. I didn’t even know about that”.

While indicating a level of dissatisfaction regarding the information given to them to help them in subject selection the students also recognised the difficulties the school had in providing information for everyone’s individual needs.

S: “I suppose it’s hard for them to give information to everybody ‘cause you know everybody’s got different ideas on what they wanted to do and they really want to know about what they have to do...” S: “All they can do is sort of give a broad idea of everything and if you want extra information — or go to Mrs. ... or something ...you’ll have to go about it yourself”.

Unanticipated difficulties encountered when selecting subjects

The students reported encountering a number of difficulties which they had failed to anticipate when making final subject selections. These problems were related to the structure of subject choices, school resources, time constraints, and the school’s academic assessments of students. At the time of these focus groups not all students were certain that their subject choices would be confirmed.

Structure of subject choices
The subjects were present in a block formation and this structure determined the students’ choices. While some students were able to select their subjects without difficulty others had to reassess their initial choices to fit in with the structure. This was seen to disadvantage some students.

S: “All mine’s stuffed. I was doing.....but then they changed it so we got Ancient History.... Yeah, I was gunna do Technology Studies instead of IPT but it didn’t work out with the subject in blocks”.

The disadvantaged students felt that this could jeopardise their ability to get into the courses they wanted.

S: “…for those people that have to choose another one that they don’t like, that could be really unfair to them because then they —then they — they go into the class every day or whenever it is and go well I don’t really wanna be here. I shouldn’t have to be here.... so they don’t and then they get an average or below average and then their OP’s in trouble...”

Those students who chose Board subjects appeared to have less difficulty than other students in choosing subjects which would help their post-school courses and career paths. In comparison, one student who wanted to do hospitality, which was a Board-registered subject at this school, reported a particular problem.

S: “We don’t have much choice in subjects here because it’s like —there’s one that'll help me with what I wanna do um after grade 12 and that's um hospitality....... I mean — and the thing that really annoys me is Dancing and Speech and Drama are Board subjects when Hospitality is Board-registered. It’s a joke........There’s a lot more chefs than there are ballerinas”.

The structure of the selection choices is often due to timetabling needs of the school and is dependent on school resources.

School resources and subject options

A few students found that the subjects they had chosen were not well supported and the subject had to be withdrawn because of lack of enrolments. While in some cases the difficulty is overcome by doing the subject by correspondence or, as with Japanese in this school, there is a composite group of Years 11 and 12 students, in other cases the subject is withdrawn.

S: “We chose economics but um they’re not gunna have economics. Not enough people wanted to do it so we’ve gotta do it by correspondence ....Like there were no more subjects out of your choice that I could’ve liked to have had to pick so that was lucky”.

S: “...If you need certain subject to get into um areas and — you can’t — there’s some Tourism ones and they’ve cancelled their subjects cause there’s not enough people in them. You need those subjects anyway to get into the course”.

Those students who had no specific career path or course in mind appeared to be more flexible when required to change their subjects to a second choice. Those who felt dissatisfied with the structure of selection choices were those students who needed specific subjects for their post-school courses especially those who were attempting to achieve high OPs and FPs.

Schools assessment of students’ achievement

The school advised some students that a certain level of academic attainment in Year 10 was needed to take mathematics and sciences in Years 11 and 12. A number of students believed this limited their choices and future career and post-school options.
S: “They called us up to the, um......the Staff Common Room ... and it was Science and they said you probably shouldn’t do science ‘cause you people have got Sounds and, um, below High Achievements and they said the science you’ve chosen you probably won’t be able to cope with it. I’m still gunna do science ‘cause I can definitely cope with it and I’ve just — I’ve just been cruising in science for the past two years”.

Themes evident across both phases

Selection of subjects
Prior performance and self-assessment
In the initial phase of the investigation, students linked the idea that if you are not good at a subject then perhaps you should not take it. This discussion regarding science as a suitable subject illustrates their thought processes.

S: “Oh, you gotta have, well you gotta have do something in science, (you have to be) really good at science and stuff and that’s not me.”

In the second round of focus group discussions, those students who required an OP illustrated in their decision making processes the need to compromise between what they wanted to do and what they were good at.

S: “If you need Maths C and you know you can’t handle it them you know you have to choose something else because you’ll just fail. You might as well completely pass another subject and get to a different area rather than try to get into a career with certain subjects and then fail — you’ll have nowhere to go because you will have failed everything”.

Senior subjects which were perceived to be difficult for a large minority of students were mathematics and sciences, while boring subjects appeared to be those which were perceived to be too theoretical. Often the assessment of the difficulty of the subject is confirmed by other students and how much they understand in the class situation.

S: “Nah, that’s one of the reasons I didn’t do it cos everyone that I spoke to, practically everyone said they didn’t like it and they didn’t learn much, so I just chose something that’s kind of practical I guess”.

S: “My maths class, the teacher, everybody likes the teacher, he’s funny and everything but .......but if you ask him to explain something he explains it too fast for me cos I’m dopey”.

Despite the perception by the majority of students that subjects taken in senior years would be based on previous learning experience, a number of students saw Year 11 as a time to “try something” new and change from a vocational to a more academically oriented program.

S: “Yeah, I’d try out new things in Year 11 and 12”. S: “I probably won’t be doing any of these subjects in Grade 11 and 12. I’ll probably be doing things like physics and chemistry or something like that”.

The general belief was that you do not consider a course or subject if you do not like it or if you are not good at it. It was believed that it was better to change your ideas of career or choice of course rather than fail.

Personal interest, enjoyment and usefulness

As part of the first phase of focus groups, it was evident that all the students believed that if you enjoyed a subject then you would learn. However, students also acknowledged that
some subjects were more useful than others for future careers and development of useful skills.

S: “...I like speech and drama. Um, sorta like it'll help me if I do work with children because it gets my imagination working and you need a bit of imagination when you’re working with kids and Home Ec...”

The following statements are illustrative of the students’ thoughts about personal interest and subject choice:

S: “Drama has got a little boring”.
R: “Why is it boring”?
S: “Oh, well last year it was boring because, um, we did a lot of theory and we had to write up a lot of stuff”.

Other students, even if they liked the subject, reported that they would not choose a course where the teacher “reads from a book”.

S: “If the teacher was gonna go through it in detail and tell you what it meant and everything, then I’d stick to that class even if I hated the teacher. If they were gonna teach me, um, straight from the book, I could just might as well take the book home...”

Similar to discussions in the first phase, the students emphasised that the most important things which helped in their selection of subjects were what they were good at and what they enjoyed.

S: “The most important things which helped me choose my subjects was, um, the stuff I was good at which is Graphics and Maths and Physics. I chose them because I was good at em. I chose Information Processing and Technology... ‘cause that’d really help and....basically I — it just works out for me. I chose all — all my subjects are Board subjects”.

Those who had chosen to go on to further education at university or TAFE noted that OP scores and FPs as well as pre-requisite subjects for courses were important issues to be considered. By comparison, those who had not chosen a specific career or course chose subjects which kept their options open.

While the subject selection criteria discussed above illustrated pragmatism derived from personal experiences of school and subjects already taken, other influential factors were also mentioned.

Factors influencing subject and career choices

The influential factors mentioned in the initial round of discussions related to the influence of friends and family. These were discussed in both phases in either positive or negative terms.

During the second phase of focus groups, student discussions illustrated a wide range of people who had been helpful while they were attempting to choose their subjects. While parents, teachers, guidance officers and peers were seen as helpful the students felt that they had made the decisions rather than being influenced by any particular person. However, in both phases the timetabling of the decision was reported to impact on their decision marking processes.

Peer group and friends

There was a consensus in the first round of focus groups that friends were not the ideal people to influence your selection of subjects. However, by the next round of discussions it was agreed that friends were useful when discussing options and to support you while you made decisions.
Based on discussion during the second phase, it appeared to be the case that the school had also suggested that the students should not allow their friends to influence their decision about subject choice. While there was anecdotal evidence that this occurred in some cases, these students reported that, while their friends did not influence their decisions, they were supportive and helpful. The students felt that by talking to their peers they could pool information and often their friends knew them better than the teachers.

S: “I think your friends kinda do help a little bit. I mean they don’t decide for you or anything but they’re kinda always there, like they know the different things”.

Students who participated in the second round of focus groups volunteered that the school had suggested that the Year 10 students should talk to those in Year 11 to find out more information about subjects to help with their selection. However, the Year 10 students reported that this they found difficult unless they knew the Year 11s.

S: “They’re always talking about — go and talk to Grade 11s. Nobody cares what Grade 11s and 12s did unless you’re related to ‘em”. S: “Yeah, none of the Grade 11s will talk about it…You don’t know many Year 11s…”

S: “You couldn’t just walk up to someone and say, yeah, what subjects are you doing and what’s it like and whatever”.

Family assistance and influence

Some students described their family’s influence in general terms, i.e. “they want me to get a good job”, or they “help me” to get further information on courses or careers.

S: “They want me to do well and get a good job”. S: “Oh well, I’ve had a look like at information on being an economist and that, that looks good…. I was talking to Dad and he asked me and he mentioned a few things and then he showed me some information and talked to me about it and it looks good so it sounds interesting”.

While some students reported parental involvement as positive, others experienced their family’s involvement in a negative way and this then was noted in both phases.

S: “Yeah I’ve been thinking about like University and stuff since Grade 7 but that’s all because of my parents like especially my Mum, she really pressures me into doing things, which I don’t think that’s very good at all cos if I’m gonna do anything then I’m gonna have to do it in my own pace. I can’t do it in somebody else’s cos I’m not gonna learn anything then”.

The impact of friends and family appeared to be more important than teachers in influencing choice of careers in both phases. This may have been due to the lack of knowledge about formal structures to help with career information especially at the time of the first round of focus group discussions.

S: “My mum. She pretty much made me do Physics. I didn’t want to do it but she pointed out that I was good at it and it would help me like —

I like Graphics so I could get into Architecture, and Physics would really help me get into Architecture”.

S: “My parents spoke to me about that — said what they thought would be a good idea. Like once I’d chosen all the pre-requisites I needed they sort of said, you know, I think you’d do well doing this or that”.

However, while some students reported during the second round of discussions that their parents had been supportive and helpful others experienced conflict over the choice of subjects. In a minority of cases, the conflict reported in the second round discussions was triangulated between the teacher, the parents, and the student.
S: "I am not doing really well at BP and my dad ...wanted me to do accounting but the teacher had said don't do accounting 'cause I'm not good at it and so it's just a big argument but basically I've got it all worked out now. I am not doing accounting".

For the most part in the second phase, the students said they had selected the subjects themselves first and then discussed them with parents and teachers. Only a small number of students had approached the guidance officer but they acknowledged that if they needed help the guidance officer was the person who knew the system.

S: “Like they (parents) were supportive about it so it’s then — you tend to like make you own — the first choices yourself then the guidance officer helped um — helped like eliminate all the ones that you didn’t like”.

In both phases, those students whose parents had been undergraduates and/or those who had siblings at university reported that this was very useful as they already knew the system and the process of subject selection.

S: "...having older brothers and sister they — they’ve done it (gone to university) and your parents have been through it before so they kinda know what to look for and what things are going on in like, you know, the OPs and FPs".

The degree to which ideas about careers and course options were influenced by differing factors was dependent on the individual students’ perception of what they would like to do and what they would be good at. However, it was evident that students felt they were too young to make final decisions about their future.

Time constraints and decision making

A feeling expressed by a significant number of students during the first and second round focus groups illustrated that they felt pressured into making a decision by both school and parents. These students were lost and confused and expressed feelings of being ‘bugged’ or pushed into decisions about careers.

R: “You haven’t really thought about it”?

S: “No, I don’t know. People are always asking you "What are you going to do when you leave school?".

S: “Parents always bug you about it”.

In the second phase of discussions the focus on time shifted from career choices to subject selection. Many students reported experiencing time constraints when making subject selection decisions.

They believed that the time given was too short and they felt pressured by the teachers to make decisions they were not ready to make. Some had put their selection papers in late and had not got their first choice subjects. This, they felt, would have repercussions at a later date when people tried to change their subjects.

S: “They put pressure on you to get the things in — the forms in… I got my form two days before we had to hand it in… I had to come up with five subjects or something and I had no idea so…”

A minority of students felt that they had been rushed especially those who had no specific course or career path in mind. In addition to this, the majority felt that the school did not appreciate the difficulties involved when choosing subjects which affected your future.
S: “I think the hard thing is in choosing your subjects in Year 10 for 11 and 12 that that kind of like it’s for the rest of your life. You —you’re meant to know in year 10 what you wanna do”. S: “they don’t really give you enough time to — oh then they — they make you choose the subjects too early...People were still deciding on what they wanted to do...They only gave us a couple of weeks between the time which we got all the books and everything”.

Summary

A summary of the findings from the first round of focus groups indicates that, while few students had specific ideas of career paths, the majority were experimenting with ideas about future occupations. It was also evident that, at this stage, students were frequently changing ideas regarding potential employment and careers. An absence of formulated options for selecting subjects which related to career options was also apparent, with students having little insight into the relationships between secondary studies, tertiary courses and future work. Based on student responses, it is also evident that subject selection decisions were not based on career pathways or prerequisites for post-school courses at this time. There had been minimal input from the school regarding career and subject selection information. For the most part, in early Year 10 future subject choices for this group of students, were based on ‘what I am good at’ and ‘what I enjoy’. In this phase the majority of students were uncertain of their future directions and tended to base their subject selection choices and career options on their present interests and past experiences.

The discussions in the second round of focus groups illustrated that the majority of students had made the transition between being uncertain of their future career direction to knowing at least their general area of interest. This choice had been linked to the subjects they required to meet the prerequisites of post-school courses or occupations. However, one of the difficulties they reported in choosing their subjects was related to the limitations imposed by the block timetabling structure and the teaching resources in the school.

In both stages while some students valued parental support, others viewed this in a negative way. However, while the parents appeared to influence either negatively or positively the students’ career choices, the school appeared to influence and structure the process of subject selection. The students believed that they themselves had initially chosen the subjects on the basis of what they liked and what they needed for the future although many had taken other factors into account.

In both phases of the focus groups the main difficulties encountered by students in choosing their subjects were related to the early age at which they had to make the decision. They reported not only feeling pressured to decide on a career but also felt the time constraints imposed by the school with regard to subject selection were too short.

DISCUSSION

The discussion in the focus groups highlights the development of the students’ decision making capacities during the interval between the first and second rounds. While a minority of the first focus group had formulated specific ideas on courses and career paths, the majority of students had done so by time of the second round. However, in both rounds those students who had not formulated their course and career options reported more dissatisfaction with subject choice and lack of adequate information.
In both rounds it was apparent that the school had more influence over subject selection while parents and extra-curricular experiences appeared to influence choices of courses and careers.

While little information about subject selection and career pathways had been given to the students in the first round, resources had been provided prior to the second round. Although some students reported inadequacies in the information provision, the knowledge they used in subject selection suggested that the information helped in formulating their ideas and choices.

Future directions
Research plan
There has been a relatively low level of natural attrition (students who have left school and cannot be traced) and this will, no doubt, continue to be the case over the period of the longitudinal study. It is hoped that 100 students will be available for the Year 12 (1998) survey, although it is expected that during the post-school (1999) phase the greatest reduction in numbers will occur.

Phase 4 (Semester 2, 1998 — Year 12 students) During the 1998 phase a questionnaire will be distributed to all Year 12 students at the participating schools, around the time when decisions are being made regarding applications for tertiary courses. The survey will include open-ended and structured questions designed to elicit comments from students regarding the themes identified from the previous phases of the study. Collection of survey data relating to comments expressed by students who have been interviewed will provide additional contextual information about the educational environment which may not be apparent from the interview program. It will also allow the Research Team to be more confident that the findings and conclusions are representative of a range of student opinions.

Students who were part of the initial phases and are still attending the participating schools will be individually interviewed at about the same time as survey distribution occurs in 1998.

Phase 5 (early 1999 — post-school)

In the 1999 (post-school year) phase interviews will be conducted using both open and closed question formats. This approach will allow for the collection of both retrospective data as well as that relevant to the student’s present situation. A questionnaire will be developed for completion by students who are unable to participate in the interview program but still wish to contribute to the final phase of the study.

Data analysis

Due to the extensive amount of data collected, the initial analysis will focus on a limited number of themes noting differences and similarities between school settings. This will allow associations to be made between a number of factors including student satisfaction with subject selection decisions, the school structures which impact on subject choice, the source and usefulness of information resources in facilitating subject and career choices, and the influences on students during this process.

Project outcomes

An extended report detailing student perceptions of the subject selection process across all the schools in the investigation will be available from TEPA in early 1998. It is anticipated future outcomes from the study will include a number of policy-oriented and academic reports which will: detail the structures and process which shape subject selection and identification of post-secondary pathways; provide information which will improve the
effectiveness and appropriateness of TEPA programs designed to facilitate decision making by senior secondary students; and identify models of good practice for dissemination across the secondary sector.

REFERENCES


