How does gender influence course options in Higher Education?

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We know that traditional roles of women and men have been changing in recent decades, and there are increasing numbers of women in the workforce. Changes in these roles have resulted in increasing considerations of balancing caring responsibilities as well as earning an income. However, even though women are increasingly actively participating in male dominated professional and academic areas, they are still underrepresented in managerial and higher prestige roles.

This research project looked at how gender stereotypes can impact student’s study and career choices. We surveyed male and female students within science and liberal arts subjects in Irish Third Level institutions to investigate their perceptions on their career and study choices. Out of 387 questionnaires distributed, 202 were fully answered (60% female and 37% male) and were used in SPSS for analysis. All respondents were attending an Irish Institute of Technology.

Results from the survey showed that male students had a greater preference towards Science and Maths related subjects than their female counterparts. Also, interestingly, male respondents have more confidence than female respondents that more secondary and third level female students will complete a science/maths subject/course.

Most respondents (60%) shared the opinion that there is no difference in the time both sexes devote to their work. 71% of the respondents answered that men spend more time away from their families, 23% answered that there is no difference between men and women, while 6% indicated women to do so. Regarding perceptions of who is more likely to achieve high levels of performance in maths, 39% answered men, 14% women and 47% no difference between the two sexes. Answers to the question on who shows more natural interest is Science, Technology, Engineering or Maths yielded the following results: 51% men, 2% women and 47% no difference between genders.

These results indicate that the gender / area of study stereotypes, in favour to men, still exists, especially within the female group of participants as they believe that more male than female students are expected to complete a Science/Maths subject/course.

Participants felt that even though both genders devote time to their work equally, it is men that spend more time away from their families, have a higher performance and show more natural interest is Science, Technology, Engineering or Maths.

One of the study’s female participants stated she regretted not choosing physics, engineering and technical drawing while at Secondary School. She stated these
subjects “Were available but I didn't take them they were seen as "the boys" subjects. We will encourage our daughters to take any subjects they are interested in.”

These results give us further motivation to explore the reasons behind the persistence of such stereotypes qualitatively. Through a deeper analysis of these themes, researchers could discover efficient ways to enable men and women to pursue their studies/career without any stereotype bias.

Output of this research project

Paper
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Conference presentation

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