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Influences on school leavers' career decisions – Implications for the accounting profession

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ABSTRACT

Studies show that students begin to make their career choices during their secondary education and for many their educational and occupational aspirations are quite fixed by the time they enter their final school year. As the future success of the accountancy profession depends on its ability to attract high calibre students it should not overlook the significance of school students in its recruitment drive. A questionnaire requiring respondents to rate the importance of 26 factors, synthesised from research on professional career-choice decisions, was completed by school leavers in Ireland. They consider job satisfaction to be the most important criteria when selecting a career, followed by good working conditions and career aptitude. In contrast, neither their parents' career nor the opportunities to work in their home area are viewed as important. Students intending to pursue an accounting career regard prestige and financial rewards to be more important than those who are not contemplating such a career, while the latter group rank work-life balance, good citizenship and self-fulfilment as more important. The respondents report that their parents and subject teachers are the only people who influence their career decisions with friends, relatives, guest speakers and interestingly, career guidance teachers having no influence.

1. Introduction

Recruiting high quality students is critically important to the future success of the accountancy profession (Wilder & Stocks, 2004). Indeed, the recruitment of top class students into an occupation serves to legitimise and enhance its professional status (Annisette & Kirkham, 2007). However, in today's global economy there are a range of alternative career opportunities available to high calibre students. Thus, the accountancy profession needs to be highly competitive if it is to attract its share of quality students. A key way in which it can achieve this is by gaining an enhanced understanding of the factors that determine students' career choices. Although there is a substantial body of research which has explored the key influences on students' career decisions or choice of major, this work has typically focused on tertiary students and has ignored school leavers (see studies referred to in Table 1). However, there are several compelling reasons why the accountancy profession should be interested in the determinants of occupational choice of school leavers.

Firstly, developmental career theorists have identified adolescence as an important time in the establishment of future career and educational plans (Paa & McWhirter, 2000). In fact, several studies have confirmed that students begin to make

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Table 1
Variables selected for inclusion in study.

Variable	Study
Job satisfaction	4, 10, 11, 12, 19
Good working conditions	5, 6, 13, 14, 18
Aptitude for career	1, 4, 10, 11, 17, 19, 20
Job security	2, 5, 6, 8, 9, 12, 13, 18
Long range earnings	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 19, 20
Availability of employment	1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 19, 20
Adequate leisure time	5, 7, 13, 14, 20
Opportunities for promotion	2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14, 18, 20
Variety of work	5, 8, 9, 18
Intellectual challenge	2, 5, 8, 9, 17, 18, 20
Prestige of career	1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20
Opportunity to travel	3, 5, 18
Family friendly work schedules	5,14
Study of subject in school	2, 8, 15
High initial salary	2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 13, 14, 17, 18, 20
Chance to exercise leadership	3, 5
Opportunity to help others	3, 5, 8, 9, 13
Being part of a team	5, 15
Ease of obtaining qualification	1, 7, 13, 18, 20
Self employment opportunities	2, 3, 7, 12, 13, 14, 17, 18, 20
Opportunity to work with the public	3, 7
Years of formal education	4, 10, 11, 18, 19
Cost of education	4, 11, 19
Previous work experience	2, 4, 10, 11, 17, 19
Remaining in the area where I grew up	3
Parents' occupations	1, 7, 17, 19

Key

#	Author(s)	Country	Study focus
1	Adams et al. (1994)	US	Choice of major
2	Ahmed et al. (1997)	New Zealand	Career choice
3	Ashworth (1969)	US	Quality of recruits
4	Auyeung and Sands (1997)	Australia, Hong Kong Taiwan	Career choice
5	Bundy and Norris (1992)	US	Employment choice
6	Carpenter and Strawser (June 1970)	US	Employment choice
7	Cohen and Hanno (1993)	US	Choice of major
8	Felton et al. (1994)	Canada	Career choice
9	Felton et al. (1995)	Canada	Career choice
10	Gul et al. (1989)	Australia	Discipline of study
11	Gul, Huang, and Subramaniam (1992)	Australia	Career choice
12	Haswell and Holmes (1988)	Australia	Employment choice
13	Hermanson, Hermanson, and Ivancevich (1995)	US	Choice of major
14	Inman et al. (1989)	US	Career choice
15	Jackling and Calero (2006)	Australia	Career choice
16	Karnes et al. (1997)	US	Career choice
17	Lowe and Simons (1997)	US	Choice of major
18	Myburgh (2005)	South Africa	Career choice
19	Paolillo and Estes (1982)	US	Career choice
20	Tan and Laswad (2006)	New Zealand	Choice of major

their career choices at a relatively early stage of their lives and for many their educational and occupational aspirations are fairly fixed by the time they complete their school education (Furlong & Biggart, 1999; Jackman & Hollingworth, 2005; Smyth & Hannan, 2000). Secondly, there is evidence that in the case of some competing professions, such as engineering and medicine, most students decide on these professions while in school (Paolillo & Estes, 1982). Thirdly, governments internationally have been actively promoting greater participation in higher education (Naidoo, 2003; Osborne, 2003; Wolf, 2002). One consequence of this strategy has been a tremendous growth in the range of specialist degree programmes available to students and these programmes may encourage many students to decide on their future career paths while in school (Byrne & Flood, 2003; James, 2000; Snowden, 2008). Fourthly, many professional accountancy bodies across the world (e.g., Australia, Canada, New Zealand, USA) require that potential entrants have a degree in accounting or a degree with specified business credits (Annisette & Kirkham, 2007; Gammie & Kirkham, 2008). As a result students in some countries must consider a career in accounting prior to commencing their higher education studies. Finally, a number of professional accountancy bodies maintain a direct route to membership for school leavers (e.g., Association of Chartered Certified Accountants, Institute of Chartered Accountants of England and Wales, Chartered Accountants Ireland, Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland). This route is increasingly important to small and medium sized accountancy firms (Annisette & Kirkham, 2007). In recent years, the "big four" accountancy firms in the UK

have all introduced initiatives to recruit significant numbers of high calibre school leavers (Deloitte, 2011; Ernst & Young, 2011; KPMG, 2011; PwC, 2011).

The current study is set in Ireland where, in addition to the reasons outlined above, the significance of school leavers to the accountancy profession is heightened by its history of predominately recruiting graduates who have completed an accounting degree or a business degree with a specialism in accounting, i.e., relevant graduates. In 2010 over 80% of entrants to Chartered Accountants Ireland were relevant graduates (Professional Oversight Board, 2011). This entry route to the Irish accountancy profession is encouraged by the profession's policy of granting very generous exemptions from their professional examinations to relevant graduates. Hence, in Ireland, students typically make decisions about a career in accounting before completing their school education, as this is the time when they decide to apply to a denominated degree programme. In light of the foregoing considerations, research identifying the factors that influence school leavers' career choices is clearly worthwhile as it may help the accountancy profession identify aspects of its promotional and recruitment campaign that could be improved.

Consequently, this study investigates the relative importance of a set of factors on the career decisions of school leavers in Ireland. In particular, it explores if there are any significant differences in these factors between school leavers who intend to pursue a career in accounting, those who maybe interested in a career in accounting and those who are not. It also seeks to discover the influence of key referents on these students' career plans. While, this study is set in an Irish context, it is of interest to a broader audience. The reasons outlined earlier demonstrate that school leavers are an important recruitment target for professional bodies in many countries. Further, there is no reason to believe that the participants in this study are not representative of school leavers in other western countries.

2. Prior research

Several major career development theories recognise that values play a significant role in the career decision making process (Holland, 1997; Krumboltz, 1979; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Super, 1980). Consequently, several studies have relied on Carpenter and Foster's (1977) three-dimensional model to explore the factors affecting students' career decisions (Agarwala, 2008). This model recognises that a career's perceived value is determined by the importance an individual places on intrinsic factors (e.g., intellectual interest, job satisfaction) extrinsic factors (e.g., availability of employment, remuneration) and interpersonal factors (i.e., the influence of others). It acknowledges that people develop proclivities for particular values and that they perceive different occupations as varying in terms of the extent to which they satisfy particular desired extrinsic and intrinsic outcomes (Lent et al., 1994). Additionally, a young person's belief about a career's value is influenced by the perceptions, attitudes and expectations of others such as parents, teachers, guidance counsellors and friends (Agarwala, 2008; Carpenter & Foster, 1977; Dick & Rallis, 1991). Although many of the studies which have explored career choices from an accounting perspective have not explicitly referred to Carpenter and Foster's framework they typically focus on the influence of intrinsic, extrinsic and interpersonal factors on students' career choices (e.g., Felton, Buhr, & Northey, 1994; Lowe & Simons, 1997; Myburgh, 2005; Paolillo & Estes, 1982).

Other researchers, interested in career choices in accounting, have used the theory of reasoned action (TRA) (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) to examine the factors that impact on students' career decisions (e.g., Felton, Dimnik, & Northey, 1995; Jackling & Keneley, 2009). According to the TRA, individuals' career choices are determined by their intentions to pursue a particular career which in turn, are influenced by their attitudes towards that career and their perceptions of social pressure to follow or reject that career. Attitudes about a career are determined by an individual's belief that a career will lead to certain outcomes. An individual's perception of social pressure is a function of that person's beliefs that specific referents, such as parents or teachers, will approve or disapprove of a particular career. The extent of a referent's influence on an individual's career choice depends on how much significance the individual places on the approval of the referent. The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) extends the TRA by incorporating perceived behavioural control as an additional variable in the model (Ajzen, 1988, 1991). Perceived behavioural control captures the extent to which individuals believe they have the ability to perform a particular behaviour and their beliefs about the existence of factors that may facilitate or impede the performance of that behaviour (Ajzen, 1988, 1991). A small number of researchers have used the TPB to explore career choices from an accounting perspective (e.g., Allen, 2004; Cohen & Hanno, 1993; Tan & Laswad, 2006, 2009).

Despite the range of approaches used, there are significant similarities in the career choice variables selected for consideration in accounting career choice studies. In addition, background variables, such as prior work experience and parents' occupation, have also been included in some of these studies (e.g., Gul, Andrew, Leong, & Ismail, 1989; Lowe & Simons, 1997). The remainder of this section focuses on the findings from this body of work.

In one of the earliest research studies, Paolillo and Estes (1982) surveyed accountants, lawyers, engineers and doctors to determine the importance of 12 career-choice factors to each of these professional groupings. They found that aptitude for the subject, job satisfaction, and earnings potential were the most important career choice factors for accountants. A comparison of the professional groups showed that availability of employment, years of education, teacher influence, aptitude for the subject and earnings potential were more important to accountants than to the other professional groups. This early study helped to encourage other researchers to explore students' reasons for deciding on an accounting major or a career in accounting.

While, there is some variation in the factors found to be influential in students' career choices, the importance of some variables is evident across a variety of studies regardless of the approach taken. Financial rewards, especially potential earnings have been identified as a highly significant factor affecting tertiary students' decisions to major in or to choose a career in accounting (e.g., Cohen & Hanno; 1993; Felton, Buhr, & Northey, 1994; Gul et al., 1989; Nelson, Vendrzyk, Quirin, & Allen, 2002). Indeed, potential earnings are frequently ranked as the first or second most important factor. Typically, many of these studies have also shown that accounting students are more concerned with financial considerations than non-accounting students. Unsurprisingly, given the starting salaries in accounting, Felton et al. (1994) found that accounting students were less interested in initial salary than non-accounting students. In contrast with the aforementioned studies, a recent Australian study by Jackling and Calero (2006) reported that the potential to earn a high salary was not a significant influence on a student's intention to become an accountant but they suggest that it maybecome important as they progress through their course.

Job-related characteristics and career prospects as captured by descriptors such as: job satisfaction; variety of work; prestige/social status; years of education; promotion/advancement opportunities were shown to be highly influential when selecting a career or majoring in accounting (e.g., Cohen & Hanno, 1993; Felton et al., 1995; Gul et al., 1989; Tan & Laswad, 2006). In particular, Gul et al. (1989) found that job satisfaction was the most important factor in deciding to major in accounting, while, Horowitz and Riley (1990) reported that it was the second most important criterion used by accountancy students in choosing their careers. In a cross-cultural comparison of the relative importance of career-choice factors, Auyeung and Sands (1997) noted that Australian students ranked job satisfaction second while the Chinese students placed it third in their rankings. Accounting students also ranked good job opportunities (Adams, Pryor, & Adams, 1994), prestige and career options (Lowe & Simons, 1997) and years of education (Gul et al., 1989) more highly than other students in their career/academic decisions. In contrast, Paolillo and Estes (1982) found that the cost of education and job satisfaction were less important for accounting students in selecting their career than for other professional groups.

Job market considerations such as availability of employment and job security were also reported to have a significant influence on accounting students' major or career choices (e.g., Ahmed, Alam, & Alam, 1997; Gul et al., 1989; Myburgh, 2005). Additionally, accounting students generally placed more emphasis on these job market factors than non-accounting students (Ahmed et al., 1997; Felton et al., 1994; Gul et al., 1989).

Other career-choice factors reported as being important to accounting students were: aptitude for the subject/career (Auyeung & Sands, 1997; Gul et al., 1989); the possibility of establishing a private practice (Cohen & Hanno, 1993; Tan & Laswad, 2006) and the opportunity to work with people (Cohen & Hanno, 1993). Some researchers also found that accounting majors were more likely to have studied accounting in school (Chen, Jones, & McIntyre, 2005; Felton et al., 1994). However, other studies noted that taking accounting in school had no significant impact on choosing a career in accounting (Ahmed et al., 1997; Jones & Wright, 2010).

Overall, the above studies demonstrate that students are motivated by a mix of intrinsic and extrinsic outcomes in choosing a career in accounting. Additionally, they illustrate that students who select accounting place more importance on extrinsic rewards than students attracted to alternative business or professional careers.

2.1. Key referents

As previously noted, general research on career choice has demonstrated that key figures in the lives of young people exert a strong influence on their career aspirations (Dick & Rallis, 1991; Levine & Hoffner, 2006; Paa & McWhirter, 2000). However, studies that have examined the importance of referents on students' career choices in accounting have failed to provide consistent results.

Paolillo and Estes (1982), in a US study, reported that teachers had a greater influence than parents or peers on students' decisions to pursue a career in accounting. The influence of parents was also much greater for accountants than for three other professional groups. Silverstone and Williams (1979) found that 26 percent of female chartered accountants in England and Wales considered parental influence to be a factor in career choice. In two US studies, Inman, Wenzler, and Wickert (1989) and Mauldin, Crain, and Mounce (2000) found that parents, followed by teachers, had a strong influence on students' decisions to major in accounting. In a study set in New Zealand, Tan and Laswad (2006, 2009) reported that accounting majors were more motivated to comply with their parents than non-accounting majors when making career choices. In contrast, Gul et al. (1989) found that Australian students were not influenced by their parents, teachers or peers in choosing to study accounting. In an exploration of students' views at two Scottish universities, Bebbington, Thomson, and Wall (1997) reported that parents, friends and career advisors had very little influence over students' desire to be an accountant. Similarly in the US, Lowe and Simons (1997) reported that friends, teachers and parents were the least influential factors in the decision to major in accounting. This latter finding is consistent with a later US study by Strasser, Ozgur, and Schroeder (2002), who reported that parents, peers and advisers had little influence on students' choice of business major. However, Auyeung and Sands (1997) found that while Australian students ranked these referents very low, they did exert a significant influence on Hong Kong and Taiwanese students. Similarly, Tan and Laswad (2006) reported international students (mainly Chinese) placed more value on the opinion of parents, other relatives, friends and career advisors than domestic students (New Zealanders). Myburgh (2005) in a study set in South Africa, also found that the advice given by parents, relatives and school teachers influenced Asian, black and white students' decision to pursue a career in accounting. Hence, the inconsistencies in the findings regarding key referents maybe due, in part at least, to cultural differences.

3. Research design and data collection

3.1. Research design

A questionnaire was designed to gather data on the relative importance of a set of variables on the career decisions of school leavers in Ireland. It was divided into three sections. The first section solicited demographic data such as gender, age and information on students' intentions towards a career in accounting. The second section comprised a list of 26 distinct variables. These were synthesised from the prior studies discussed above which examined the relative importance of various variables on students' choice of career or academic major. This approach offers the greatest opportunity to compare the findings of the current study with prior work. Table 1 presents the 26 variables together with the list of studies that examined each variable. Respondents were asked to indicate how important each of the variables were to them in choosing a career using a 5-point Likert scale, anchored by 5 = very important and 1 = very unimportant. The final section of the questionnaire collected evidence on the importance of key referents to school leavers' career decisions.

3.2. Data collection

The principal objective of the current study is to explore differences in the importance of various variables to those who intend entering the accounting profession, those who would consider doing so and those who would not. In order to ensure sufficient numbers in each group, the data were collected from two cohorts of school leavers. One cohort are students who were only a few months away from completing their second level education,[2] while the other cohort had just completed their second level education and were about to commence a degree in accounting and finance. In the case of the first cohort, teachers were contacted and access was requested to classes of high achieving students.[3] The questionnaire was distributed by the researchers during class. All students in attendance consented to partake in the study and 242 questionnaires, which were completed anonymously, were returned. The average age of this cohort was 17 years and 2 months. The data were collected from the second cohort of school leavers immediately on their arrival at university, prior to registration or any academic exercises taking place. There was a potential population of 222 school leavers and completed questionnaires were received from 173 (78% response rate). The average age of this cohort was 17 years 11 months. Respondents (415 students) were asked to indicate whether they intended to become a qualified accountant, whether they would consider a career in accounting or if they had no interest in an accounting career. Five respondents did not answer the question and they were omitted from the study. The final sample of 410 was classified into three groups, those who intend entering the profession, (*yes* group, $N = 135$), those who would consider doing so, (*maybe* group, $N = 89$) and those who would not (*no* group, $N = 186$). The sample consisted of 189 males and 221 females. A chi-square test revealed no gender differences in the composition of the three groups and thus it was not necessary to control for gender when exploring differences across the three groups.

4. Results

The mean scores for each of the variables for the full sample and the three interest groups together with their rank are shown in Tables 2 and 3.[4]

There are several features of Table 3 which are striking. The majority of the variables are considered important by the respondents, with 19 of the variables important for all three groups. The top ranked item, 'job satisfaction', is the same for all interest level groups. All three groups award high rankings to 'good working conditions', 'aptitude for career' and 'job security'. The two lowest ranked items, 'parents occupations' and 'remaining in the area where I grew up', are the same for all three interest level groups. Variables that are neither important nor unimportant for all the groups are: 'years of formal education' and 'previous work experience'. Both the *yes* and the *maybe* groups are neutral about the 'opportunity to work with the public', while the *maybe* and *no* groups are indifferent about the 'cost of education'. The *yes* group consider this unimportant.

For the *yes* group the most important variables (significantly higher than 4) are: 'job satisfaction'; 'long range earnings potential'; 'aptitude for career'; 'good working conditions'; 'opportunities for promotion' and 'job security'. The *no* group considers the following variables as being highly influential: 'job satisfaction'; 'good working conditions'; 'aptitude for career'; 'job security'; 'adequate leisure time'; and 'variety of work'. The most significant variables for the *maybe* group are: 'job satisfaction'; 'good working conditions'; 'job security'; 'aptitude for career' and 'long range earning potential'.

To facilitate comparisons between the groups, factor analysis was carried out to derive a smaller number of underlying constructs. Bartlett's test of sphericity and the Kaiser Meyer Olkin measure (.776) both indicated that the data were suitable

[2] In Ireland, students typically attend second level education between the ages of 12 and 18 and enter university straight from their second level studies.

[3] Students are usually streamed into different classes on the basis of their prior performance in state examinations which they take at the end of three years of second level education.

[4] The maybe group was selected to determine if there was any significant difference in the responses of the school students and university entrants for the 26 career choice variables as this is the only group to include a sufficient number of both cohorts. No significant differences were identified at the 1% level (only 3 differences were significant at the 5% level). Accordingly, it is acceptable to add the school students and university entrants together for the purposes of the analysis.

Table 2
Sample.

	Whole group	*Yes* group	*Maybe* group	*No* group
School students	240	6	50	184
University entrants	170	129	39	2
Total	410	135	89	186

for factor analysis. Table 4 reports the factor loadings for a principal axis factoring with a promax rotation of the 26 identified determinants of career choice.

The seven factors identified account for 54.3 percent of the variance in the 410 observations. The communalities range from 21 percent (cost of education) to 67 percent (opportunity to help others). The recurring theme amongst the items which comprise the first factor are extrinsic outcomes relating to status and financial advantage. This is the strongest factor of the seven, embodying 17.6 percent of the variance in the data. It is the only factor which reflects monetary rewards, and power and prestige. Hereafter, it will be referred to as the 'prestige and financial rewards' factor.

The second factor captures constraints affecting career choice. It includes leisure time and family-friendly work schedules and reflects the trade-off between the costs of striving for a qualification and the advantage which that qualification entails. It will be titled the 'work-life balance' factor.

The third factor comprises intrinsic rewards which reflect a willingness to give on the part of the employee, rather than items which reflect a benefit of one kind or another to be enjoyed by the employee. This factor reflects selflessness and sociability and it will be referred to as the 'good-citizen' factor.

The fourth factor encompasses extrinsic career outcomes concerning continuing availability of employment and opportunities for advancement; it will be referred to as the 'security of employment' factor.

The fifth factor captures intrinsic rewards associated with a career. It includes the desire for self-fulfilment through experiencing intellectual challenge, satisfaction and variety in the work, as well as an aptitude for the job. It will be labelled as the 'self-fulfilment' factor.

The sixth and seventh factors are more prosaic. The sixth factor captures background variables reflecting previous familiarity with and experience of the particular work environment, and family and schooling influences and will be identified as the 'predisposition' factor. The seventh factor is simply 'opportunity to travel'. Unsurprisingly, the item 'remaining in the area where I grew up' loads positively on the 'predisposition' factor and negatively on the 'opportunity to travel' factor.

Table 3
Means and ranks of means of the 26 variables.

	Whole group $n = 410$		*Yes* group $n = 135$		*Maybe* group $n = 89$		*No* group $n = 186$	
	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank
Job satisfaction	**4.69**	1	**4.53**	1	**4.61**	1	**4.84**	1
Good working conditions	**4.40**	2	**4.28**	4	**4.43**	2	**4.48**	2
Aptitude for career	**4.38**	3	**4.39**	3	**4.29**	4	**4.43**	3
Job security	**4.29**	4	**4.17**	6	**4.42**	3	**4.32**	4
Long range earnings	**4.23**	5	**4.40**	2	**4.26**	5	**4.11**	7
Availability of employment	**4.07**	6	**4.06**	7	**4.12**	6	**4.06**	8
Adequate leisure time	**4.03**	7	**3.70**	12	**4.03**	7	**4.26**	5
Opportunities for promotion	**4.02**	8	**4.23**	5	**3.98**	8	**3.89**	9
Variety of work	**3.98**	9	**3.68**	13	**3.96**	9	**4.21**	6
Intellectual challenge	**3.85**	10	**3.84**	9	**3.88**	10	**3.85**	10
Prestige of career	**3.75**	11	**3.96**	8	**3.79**	12	**3.59**	14
Opportunity to travel	**3.75**	12	**3.64**	14	**3.87**	11	**3.77**	11
Family friendly work schedules	**3.56**	13	**3.30**	19	**3.57**	14	**3.74**	12
Study of subject in school	**3.51**	14	**3.74**	11	**3.57**	13	**3.31**	18
High initial salary	**3.50**	15	**3.78**	10	**3.46**	16	**3.31**	19
Chance to exercise leadership	**3.47**	16	**3.46**	16	**3.54**	15	**3.44**	15
Opportunity to help others	**3.46**	17	**3.24**	20	**3.35**	19	**3.68**	13
Being part of a team	**3.38**	18	**3.41**	17	**3.42**	18	**3.33**	17
Ease of obtaining qualification	**3.33**	19	**3.32**	18	**3.45**	17	**3.28**	20
Self employment opportunities	**3.28**	20	**3.56**	15	3.29	20	3.08	23
Opportunity to work with the public	**3.27**	21	3.14	21	3.18	21	**3.40**	16
Years of formal education	3.05	22	2.96	23	3.03	23	3.12	22
Cost of education	3.04	23	2.81	24	3.08	22	**3.18**	21
Previous work experience	2.99	24	3.01	22	2.88	24	3.02	24
Remaining in the area where I grew up	*2.46*	25	*2.49*	25	*2.45*	25	*2.45*	25
Parents' occupations	*1.99*	26	*2.07*	26	*1.97*	26	*1.94*	26

Bold indicates significantly higher than 3 at 1% level.
Italics indicates significantly lower than 3 at 1% level.
As there is no non-parametric test that satisfactorily tests whether the mean scores are significantly different than 3 and as the sample size is large, one sample *t*-tests were used.

Table 4
Factor loadings.

	Factor						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Prestige and financial rewards							
Prestige of career	.58						
Long range earnings	.56						
High initial salary	.51						
Chance to exercise leadership	.42						
Opportunities for promotion	.41						
Self employment opportunities	.40						
Work-life balance							
Adequate leisure time		.68					
Family friendly work schedules		.64					
Ease of obtaining qualification		.37					
Cost of education		.36					
Years of formal education		.36					
Good-citizen							
Opportunity to work with the public			.84				
Opportunity to help others			.79				
Being part of a team			.40				
Security of employment							
Job security				.72			
Availability of employment				.69			
Good working conditions				.32			
Self-fulfilment							
Intellectual challenge					.56		
Aptitude for career					.54		
Job satisfaction					.47		
Variety of work					.33		
Predisposition							
Parents' occupations						.62	
Study of subject in school						.47	
Remaining in the area where I grew up						.39	−.36
Previous work experience						.33	
Opportunity to travel							
Opportunity to travel							.75

Factor loadings below .3 not shown.

The seven factors were saved, and the question of whether the factor structure differs across the three groups corresponding to interest level in accounting as a career was addressed.

The saved factors are, in each case, an index of the identified construct, with zero mean and standard deviation approximately equal to one. Normality tests were conducted on the factors, and the results were equivocal. Accordingly, both parametric and non-parametric analyses of variance were carried out to test for significant differences in the factors across the three groups. The results are summarised in Table 5.

There are four factors namely; 'prestige and financial rewards'; 'work-life balance'; 'good citizen' and 'self-fulfilment', where highly significant differences are evident across the interest groups in both batteries of tests. To determine the direction and the location of the significance, Scheffe's post hoc tests were conducted on the four factors and the results are presented in Table 6.

The results in Table 6 reveal that school leavers who intend to become accountants (the *yes* group) are far more focused on the financial rewards and the status of their chosen occupation than those who express no interest in becoming an accountant (the *no* group). In contrast, the school leavers who express no interest in an accounting career are far more concerned with

Table 5
ANOVA results for the 7 factors.

	Parametric		Non-parametric	
	ANOVA		ANOVA (Kruskal–Wallis)	
	$F_{2,382}$	Sig.	χ^2_2	Asymp. Sig.
Prestige and financial rewards	17.48	.000	31.55	.000
Work-life balance	7.27	.001	14.08	.001
Good citizen	4.74	.009	10.24	.006
Security of employment	.56	.571	.21	.902
Self-fulfilment	4.83	.008	9.53	.009
Predisposition	2.68	.070	4.54	.103
Travel	.45	.637	.13	.939

Table 6
Post hoc results for the 4 significantly different factors.

	Yes vs *maybe*		*Maybe* vs *no*		*Yes* vs *no*	
	Factor mean difference	Sig	Factor mean difference	Sig	Factor mean difference	Sig
Prestige and financial rewards	.2545	.090	.3139	.015	.5684	.000
Work-life balance	−.2564	.101	−.1246	.536	−.3811	.001
Good citizen	−.0929	.764	−.2218	.174	−.3147	.013
Self-fulfilment	−.0755	.800	−.2056	.150	−.2811	.013

work-life balance, good citizenship and self-fulfilment than are prospective accountants. In the case of the factor 'prestige and financial rewards' the *maybe* group is closer to the *yes* group' than to the *no* group. However, there are no significant differences between the scores of the *maybe* group and the *yes* group or between the scores of the *maybe* group and the *no* group on the factors relating to work-life balance, good citizenship and self-fulfilment.

4.1. Referents

To further understand what influences students' career choices, respondents were asked to indicate how influential various referents are on their career choices. Respondents answered using a 5-point Likert scale with 5 corresponding to very influential. The mean scores for the three groups are presented in Table 7. Parents are the only referent that is considered influential by all three groups. Subject teachers also exert a significant influence over the accounting group's career choices although they are not as important as parents. Surprisingly, career guidance teachers[5] are not considered important by any of the groups.

Both parametric and non-parametric analyses of variance were carried out to test for significant differences in the importance of the referents across the three groups and the results are presented in Table 8.

Table 8 reveals that there is a difference across the groups in the influence of 'relatives and family friends', 'visiting speakers' and 'promotional material'. However, as none of these referents is considered influential by any of the groups, differences across the groups are not considered further.

5. Discussion, implications and limitations

The research described in the prior literature reviewed in this paper was mainly carried out with students at a more advanced stage in their studies than those in the current study. Not withstanding this, the findings are quite consistent with the findings in these other studies. Job satisfaction, good working conditions, job security and aptitude for career were all found to be important career factors for school leavers. This shows that these students are influenced by a mix of intrinsic and extrinsic outcomes in making their career choices. The consistency between the findings of this study, conducted with school leavers, and earlier studies with tertiary students suggests that higher education has no impact on the factors which influence students' career choices.

To facilitate comparisons between the groups, factor analysis was carried out to derive a smaller number of key constructs. This analysis reveals that 'prestige and financial rewards' are far more important to students interested in a career in accounting (*yes group*) than those who have decided against an accounting career (*no group*). This finding is consistent with the results reported in similar studies conducted in other countries which reported that students interested in accounting place more importance on extrinsic rewards (e.g., Ahmed et al., 1997; Felton et al., 1994; Lowe & Simons, 1997; Paolillo & Estes, 1982). Students who would not consider a career in accounting believe 'work-life balance', 'good citizenship' and 'self-fulfilment' to be more important than students interested in accounting.

The respondents in the current study report that career guidance teachers have no influence on their career decisions. For all groups in this study, parents are the most influential referent albeit they are not considered very influential. Subject teachers exercise an influence on those intending to become accountants but not on the other groups. As stated previously, the findings in the literature are inconsistent with respect to the key referents for those pursing accounting careers.

The results from this study are valuable as they provide the accountancy profession with an insight into the factors which influence the career decisions of school leavers, a constituency which has largely been ignored by prior accounting researchers. Once in possession of this knowledge the profession can better tailor some of their recruitment campaigns to highlight the ways these influential factors feature in an accounting career. The study's findings suggest that the profession needs to demonstrate that a career in accounting provides job satisfaction, good working conditions and job security as all of these aspects are ranked highly by all students. In the case of job satisfaction the profession could address this aspect by making greater use of its members in their recruitment efforts, especially younger members. Young people are likely to respond positively to actual members who describe how they get a real sense of achievement and satisfaction from the work they perform.

[5] In Ireland, nearly all schools are allocated at least one career guidance teacher who is based in the school.

Table 7
Means and ranks of means of referents.

	Whole group $n = 410$		*Yes* group $n = 135$		*Maybe* group $n = 89$		*No* group $n = 186$	
	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank
Parents	**3.60**	1	**3.64**	1	**3.63**	1	**3.57**	1
Subject teachers	3.11	2	**3.25**	2	3.10	3	3.03	3
Career guidance teachers	3.04	3	2.94	4	3.00	5	3.13	2
Relatives and family friends	2.87	4	3.10	3	2.78	7	*2.76*	7
Visiting speakers	2.87	4	*2.68*	6	3.12	2	2.88	5
Promotional material	*2.84*	6	*2.64*	7	3.01	4	2.90	4
Peers & friends	*2.83*	7	2.79	5	2.87	6	*2.85*	6

Bold indicates significantly higher than 3 at 1% level.
Italics indicates significantly lower than 3 at 1% level.
As there is no non-parametric test that satisfactorily tests whether the mean scores are significantly different than 3 and as the sample size is large, one sample *t*-tests were used.

With regard to good working conditions, in part at least, this maybe tackled by giving young people the opportunity to visit accountancy practices to see an actual working environment. Firms should also consider giving school students the opportunity to experience the working environment in a professional practice. While, internships are readily available for tertiary students these schemes do not exist for school students. Offering internships/work experience to these students would give them the chance to visit and work in an accountancy practice and thereby help to dispel any notions that they might have of accountants working in isolated dreary offices. However, in order to ensure that this is a positive experience it is essential that students are not confined to mundane administrative tasks such as filing and copying. Furthermore, the profession should also ensure young people are aware of any family-friendly policies that they have in operation. In addressing the issue of job security the profession should emphasise the employment opportunities that are available and stress how even in a recessionary period there is still a strong demand for high quality accountants.

If the profession is to ensure that it attracts its share of high calibre students it needs to appeal to as large a base of young people as possible. It maybe that some school leavers, who would be suitable to an accounting career, are self selecting themselves out of the profession because they do not realise that many of the career choice factors important to them are attainable from an accounting career. Consequently, if the profession could educate these students that these factors are available from an accounting career it would broaden the cohort from which they recruit. This would enable them to be more selective, thereby ensuring that they recruit their share of suitable high calibre students. Students in this study who would not consider an accounting career identified work-life balance, good citizenship and self-fulfilment as important career choice factors. Hence, where possible the accountancy profession should demonstrate that a career in accounting can satisfy these aspirations. In the case of work-life balance, the profession through its members' experiences should make school leavers aware that the life of an accountant is not all about work. In tackling the good citizenship aspiration the profession needs to emphasise that it operates in the public interest and in carrying out their roles and responsibilities accountants interact with the public and primarily work in teams. Opportunities within the not for profit sector and for volunteer and charitable work should also be highlighted. The profession also needs to show that a career in accounting does offer self-fulfilment. Indeed, to qualify as an accountant, trainees must complete a very demanding educational programme which many may find intellectually challenging. Changes in technology, globalisation, and increased regulation have also resulted in greater variety in the work being carried out by accountants. It is important in appealing to students that they are fully aware of the kinds of activities undertaken by a contemporary accountant. Again, the profession can achieve this by ensuring its recruitment campaign reflects the various roles of the modern accountant.

This study has found that career guidance teachers do not influence school students in reaching their career decisions. Thus, it is important that the profession does not solely focus its promotional efforts at this group. Acknowledging that it is difficult to reach the main group of people who influence students' career decisions, their parents, it is recommended that the

Table 8
ANOVA results for the referents.

	Parametric		Non-parametric	
	ANOVA		ANOVA (Kruskal–Wallis)	
	$F_{2,406}$	Sig.	χ^2_2	Asymp. Sig.
Parents	.22	.804	.56	.757
Teachers	1.76	.174	4.06	.131
Peers & friends	.24	.791	.30	.862
Relatives and family friends	4.35	.014	9.22	.010
Career guidance counsellors	1.01	.364	1.78	.411
Visiting speakers	3.99	.019	8.97	.011
Promotional material	3.20	.042	6.28	.043

profession directs its promotional activities where possible directly to school students and to a lesser extent their subject teachers.

Most prior studies in this area concentrated on tertiary students who opted to specialise in accounting or alternatively on graduates who have selected an accounting career. However, as noted by Karnes, King, and Hahn (1997, p. 29) "by concentrating on those who have already chosen accounting as a career, it is possible that some key aspect of the career decision process or its timing might have been lost due to subject hindsight". Consequently, by focussing on school leavers this study contributes to the literature on career choice by gathering data from an under researched cohort. Nevertheless, some limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the data for this study were collected from final year school students and from students who were about to commence a university degree in accounting and finance. While it may have been more consistent to gather all the data from final year school students, it would have been extremely costly, difficult and time consuming to obtain a significantly large enough cohort who had decided on an accounting career. Hence, incoming university students were included to ensure sufficient numbers who have decided on an accounting career. However, as the data were collected prior to registration or any exposure to their lecturers or courses, this is not considered a serious limitation. Secondly, the study used a self-report instrument to gather the data and as always with such instruments, there is a possibility that some respondents did not report their true beliefs. However, as the instrument was completed anonymously and respondents had no reason to fear any negative consequence for any answer given it is unlikely they misrepresented their beliefs. Despite the forgoing limitations this study does make a valid contribution to the accountancy profession's recruitment agenda.

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