

Determinants influencing learners' choice to enrol in commercial subjects in Thabo Mofutsanyana Education District (TMED)

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ABSTRACT

Accounting, Economics and Business Studies form part of the commercial stream in secondary schools. This stream represents a significant educational pathway that contributes to the enhancement of learners' social and global awareness. The objective of the study was to ascertain the determinants influencing learners' choice of commercial subjects in the Thabo Mofutsanyana district. The study employed qualitative research methodology. The Uncertainty Reduction Theory by Berger and Calabre was used to guide the study. Ten learners from two secondary schools in the Thabo Mofutsanyana district were purposely sampled to form part of the study. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data, which were subsequently analysed using codes. The findings revealed that various determinants, including a lack of career guidance and learners' capability in the subject, influence their choice to opt for the commercial stream. The study recommends that before choosing subjects, learners should receive guidance, mentoring and support. Lastly, secondary schools should conduct assessments on learners' ability and interest in the subjects. The significance of this study lies in its ability to provide helpful suggestions for enhancing curriculum development and career guidance related to commercial subjects in Thabo Mofutsanyana. In addition, it aims to inform educational stakeholders about strategies to overcome potential barriers to enrolment in commercial subjects. Ultimately, this study serves as a foundational framework for a more extensive investigation into the enrolment trends of commercial subjects across South Africa.

Keywords: Learners' choices, Subject combinations, Commercial subjects

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of incorporating commercial streams into secondary schools' curriculum is to empower learners to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to cope with economic problems relevant to the South African context. Three main subjects in this stream are Accounting, Business Studies and Economics. The commercial stream provides a fundamental framework for examining theoretical and practical dimensions

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of the business landscape as well as the overall economy.¹ As a result, it is imperative that many learners opt for commercial subjects in the FET phase and successfully pass these subjects in matric. A solid, quality education serves as the foundation for the growth of an individual's socioeconomic, political, geographical, scientific, and technical abilities. Notwithstanding various socioeconomic challenges, like high unemployment rates, poverty, and crime, the assertion made in 2009 remains valid and continues to hold relevance to this day.² Nevertheless, a recently conducted survey by the Department of Basic Education indicates a decrease in the enrolment of learners choosing commercial subjects in secondary schools. Learners must be adequately equipped with a solid understanding of market, financial and economic issues to navigate the prevailing economic challenges effectively.³ According to Lyman et.al, it is not possible to effectively address social, political, and economic challenges without adequate knowledge; furthermore, commercial subjects continue to play a crucial role in the nation's advancement.⁴ Therefore, we anticipate an increasing number of learners choosing commercial subjects during the FET phase. Many invasive strategies have been implemented in this area of research to enhance the situation, yet there has been minimal progress, because learners' enrolment has consistently decreased each year. Other School Management Teams (SMTs) have started to phase out the commercial stream in their schools. The failure of these strategies to make progress suggests a need for a more practical discussion to identify hidden problems and factors. Numerous studies have explored the impact of learners' enrolment, particularly in the fields of science and mathematics. The study uncovered a range of findings, including factors identified as obstacles stemming from ethnic and psychosomatic issues. The current body of literature is insufficient in exploring commercial subjects. The aim of the study is to examine the factors influencing learners' choice to enrol in commercial subjects in five secondary schools in the Thabo Mofutsanyana district. The research seeks to understand what factors influence learners' choices in enrolling in these subjects.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section gives a detailed description of the significant factors that influence learners' enrolment in commercial subjects. These factors are categorised as (a) lack of career guidance services and (b) learners' capability in the subject.

Lack of Career Guidance Services in South Africa

Notwithstanding the potential efficacy of career guidance services, learners frequently encountered difficulties in making well-informed decisions concerning their futures, resulting in a limited understanding of their available options. In the study conducted by Mokodutlo, the results indicated that secondary school learners in South Africa often made poor subject choices, which negatively impacted their career options.⁵ Various social factors normally shape these decisions. Hako further highlights that insufficient exposure leads to learners possessing average self-confidence and limited career ambitions. Such behaviour is because of the narrow professional opportunities available to them.⁶

According to Hako, the effects of inadequate career guidance are extensive, resulting in an ongoing cycle of poorly informed career choices, impractical aspirations, increased dropout rates, and the pursuit of

¹ Department of Basic Education, *National Strategy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support* (Pretoria: Government Printers, 2014).

² Agnes Ebi Maliki, Anthony Ntol Ngban, and Julie E. Ibu, "Analysis of Students' Performance in Junior Secondary School Mathematics Examination in Bayelsa State of Nigeria," *Studies on Home and Community Science* 3, no. 2 (2009): 131–34.

³ Department of Basic Education, *NSC Examinations 2021: Diagnostic Report – Part 1 (Content Subjects)* (Pretoria: Government Printers, 2021).

⁴ L. L. Lyman, A. Lazaridou, and J. Strachan, "Critical Evocative Portraiture: Feminist Pathways to Social Justice," in *International Handbook of Educational Leadership and Social (In) Justice*, ed. I. Bogotch and C. M. Shields (London: Springer, 2014), 253–74.

⁵ Berlina Mokodutlo, "The Exposure of Township Secondary School Learners to Career Education in Lejweleputswa District" (Central University of Technology, Free State, 2019).

⁶ N Hako, "Young and Uniformed: Why South Africa's Youth Desperately Needs Career Guidance" (News24, 2021).

a career based solely on perceived financial benefits.⁷ The challenges encountered by learners indicate a potential shortcoming in the provision of high-quality educational services, which remains a primary objective of the Department of Education in South Africa. Furthermore, it is important to recognise and address these challenges to enhance the overall effectiveness of educational service delivery. In addition, assistance and programmes from entities outside the education sector significantly contribute to the success of career guidance services. The South African Career Development Association has crafted a comprehensive educational framework that includes counselling, self-assessment tools and resources for career and vocational training.⁸ Additionally, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) partnered with the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) to establish the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the Career Advice Services. This initiative offers a range of resources. These resources include an occupational guidance helpline, an online platform, and a weekly broadcasting programme that airs on nine local radio stations.⁹

Learners' Capability in the Subject

In the study conducted by Lyons and Quinn, the results indicated that numerous learners select which subjects to specialise in based on their beliefs regarding their abilities and their likelihood of achieving success in those areas.¹⁰ Additionally, learners often choose subjects in which they believe they will excel, regardless of their perceived level of difficulty in learning those subjects. As noted by Mathiba, a learner's assessment of their capabilities influences their decisions to enrol for specific subjects.¹¹ For example, if a learner does well in Economic and Management Sciences (EMS) in the Senior Phase (SP), there are high chances that the learner will opt for commercial subjects in the Further Education and Training Phase (FET) compared to those who do not perform well in that subject.¹² Moreover, learners who engage with subjects that align closely with their strengths and possess confidence in their capabilities are more inclined to achieve higher scores.¹³

The reliability of the information available to learners at the moment of making subject selection is contingent upon their capacity to make choices that reflect their relative strengths. An important factor affecting a learner's subject choice is self-awareness.¹⁴ While other researchers have observed that some learners opt for less challenging subjects, there are others who choose more difficult ones to showcase their ability. Furthermore, Ahmed et al., identify additional factors, including role models, school reputation, curriculum, and future opportunities that have been recognised as influential in a learner's subject selection process.¹⁵ According to De Ridder, learners tend to perform more effectively and obtain satisfactory results when they are allowed to opt for a stream they wish to pursue.¹⁶ It is asserted that this perceived stance enhances their composure, which in turn elevates their appreciation for the subject and ultimately nurtures their enthusiasm for it.¹⁷ The impact of learners' goals and interests on their subject selection has been

⁷ Hako, "Young and Uniformed: Why South Africa's Youth Desperately Needs Career Guidance."

⁸ South African Career Development Association (SACDA), "A Curriculum Framework for Career Education and Guidance in Schools," SACDA, 2020, https://researchgate.net/publication/349009027_Educational_guidance_and_career_counseling_in_South_African.

⁹ Department of Basic Education, *NSC Examinations 2021: Diagnostic Report – Part 1 (Content Subjects)*.

¹⁰ T. Lyons and F. Quinn, "Understanding the Declines in Senior High School Science Enrolments," *National Centre of Science, ICT and Mathematics Education for Rural and Regional Australia (SiMERR Australia)*, University of New England, 2010, 2015.

¹¹ Thema Adolph Mathiba, "Factors Influencing a Decline of Learners Enrolment in Commercial Subject: A Case of Driekop Circuit in Limpopo Province" (2021).

¹² N. Taylor, "What's Wrong with South African Schools," in *What's Working in School Development Conference* (Cape Town: JET Education Services, 2008).

¹³ Fynn-Mathis Trautwein, José Raúl Naranjo, and Stefan Schmidt, "Meditation Effects in the Social Domain: Self-Other Connectedness as a General Mechanism?," 2014, 175–98, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-01634-4_10.

¹⁴ K. A. Ahmed, N. Sharif, and N. Ahmad, "Factors Influencing Students' Career Choice: Empirical Evidence from Business Students," *Journal of Southeast Asian Research*, 2017.

¹⁵ Ahmed, Sharif, and Ahmad, "Factors Influencing Students' Career Choice: Empirical Evidence from Business Students."

¹⁶ Charine De Ridder, "Collaboration in Full-Service Schools: Learning Support Teachers' Roles and Practices" (Stellenbosch University, 2020).

¹⁷ De Ridder, "Collaboration in Full-Service Schools: Learning Support Teachers' Roles and Practices."

examined in several studies, including those conducted by Cleaves.¹⁸ These researchers discovered that when learners exhibit a strong motivation to engage with a particular subject, they tend to demonstrate greater resilience when confronted with challenges. Furthermore, they are more likely to pursue a comprehensive understanding of the material than settle for a superficial grasp of the content.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT), developed by Berger and Calabre, provided the theoretical framework for this study.¹⁹ This theory identifies two distinct methods for mitigating uncertainty, namely, cognitive and behavioural approaches. Additionally, it outlines three interactive strategies that individuals can use to obtain pertinent information about a subject of interest, which include passive, active, and interactive search techniques. The theory posits that a primary aim of communication is to eliminate ambiguities, which are prevalent in social interactions. Scholars who advocate this theory contend that effective communication serves as the principal means of alleviating an individual’s uncertainties. The literature reviewed indicates that learners often experience uncertainty regarding their choice of subjects. Consequently, the Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) is particularly relevant to this study, as it addresses the confusion surrounding learners’ subject choices.

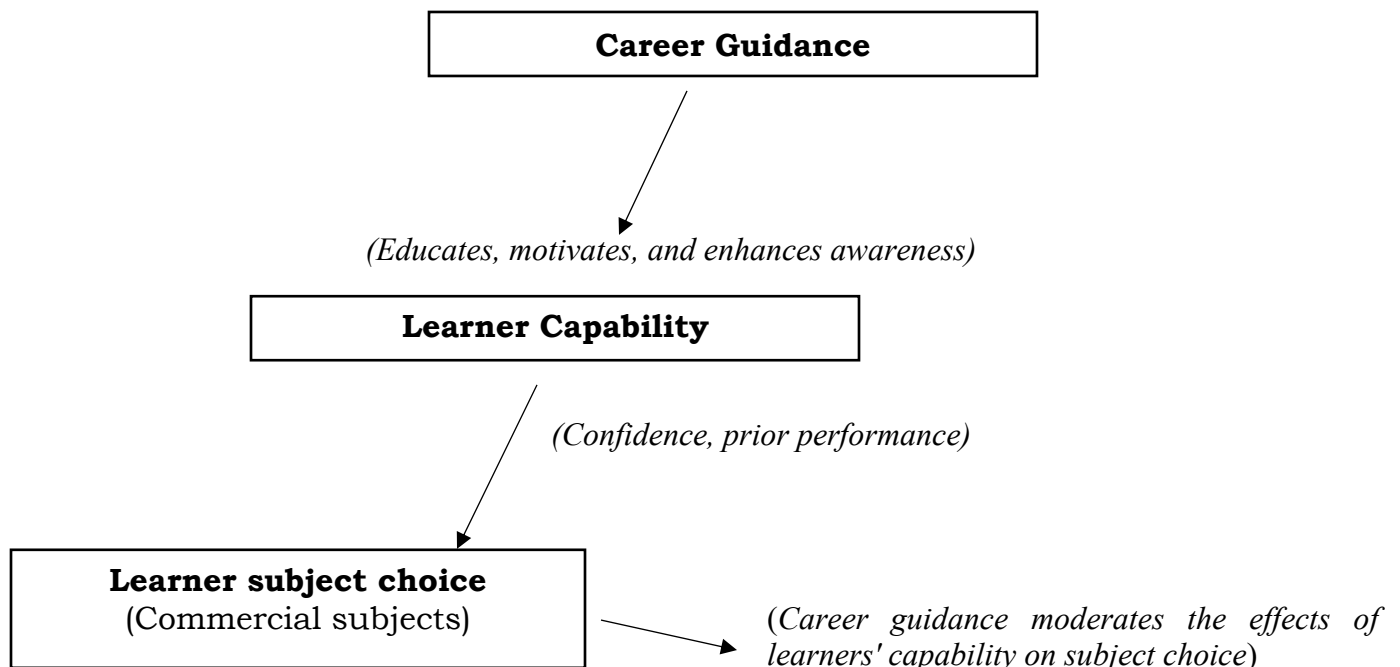


Figure 1: A conceptual framework diagram showing the relationship between career guidance, learners' capability and subject choice.

¹⁸ Anna Cleaves, “The Formation of Science Choices in Secondary School,” *International Journal of Science Education* 27, no. 4 (January 2005): 471–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950069042000323746>.
¹⁹ C. R. Berger and R. J. Calabrese, “Some Exploration in Initial Interaction and beyond: Towards a Developmental Theory of Interpersonal Communication,” *Human Communication Research* 1, no. 2 (1974): 99–112.

1. Career guidance encourages, educates, and broadens learners' understanding of possible career paths, empowering them to choose subjects that best suit their interests, skills and long-term objectives.²⁰
2. Learners' perceived self-efficacy, academic competence, and prior success in foundational subjects like EMS and Mathematics are reflected in learner capability (Confidence and Prior Performance), which influences their inclination to choose commercial subjects.²¹
3. Schunk and Parajes state that career guidance can enhance the positive impact of learners' confidence and past performance on their commercial subjects. This is because career guidance moderates the effects of learners' capability on subject choice.²²

Modise and Mokoduwe claim that by exposing learners to pertinent career pathways connected to accounting, business studies, and economics, the framework positions career guidance as a strategic catalyst that educates and inspires learners.²³ When used properly, career guidance assists learners in matching their subject choices and long-term professional goals. In this way, it serves as a motivational and informational catalyst that enhances learners' decision-making abilities.

METHODOLOGY

This research paper employed qualitative research methodology, utilising semi-structured interviews as the primary tool to collect data from the participants in two secondary schools in Circuit Five of Thabo Mofutsanyana, Education District, Free State, South Africa. Furthermore, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, and the findings were presented in a summarised format rather than verbatim. The study's population included 10 learners, with each of the two schools contributing 5 learners. The participants and the schools were purposefully selected with the aim that they would provide in-depth information on the factors influencing learners' choice to enrol in commercial subjects.

Data Analysis

The data underwent analysis and synthesis through a thematic approach, which revealed distinct patterns that formed the basis for interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

To safeguard the rights of participants, informed consent was obtained. This involved explaining the study's purpose and any potential benefit or the absence thereof. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous. In addition, they were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point without facing any negative repercussions.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

a) Lack of career guidance services

The data gathered from the participants unveils a deficiency in guidance for learners in the Further Education and Training Phase (FET), especially when selecting subjects. The study exposed an insufficiency in schools' provision of assistance to learners in the process of subject selection. Numerous learners confirmed the presence of a significant number of learners who had limited exposure to a variety of subject combinations.

²⁰ T. Mapfumo, N. Chitsiko, and R. Chireshe, "Influencer of Career Guidance on Students' Subject Choice in Zimbabwean Schools," *African Educational Research Journal* 7, no. 4 (2019): 210–18.

²¹ L. I. Nwosu, B. C. Okeke, and M.S. Makhubela, "Perceived Resources Factors Influencing Accounting Learners' Performance in South African Secondary Schools," *International Journal of Education and Social Sciences Research* 6, no. 9 (2023): 12–15.

²² D. H. Schunk and F. Pajares, "Self-Efficacy Theory," in *Handbook of Motivation at School*, ed. K. R. Wentzel and A. Wigfield (London: Routledge, 2009), 35–53.

²³ Mosimanegape Elton Mokoduwe and Motalenyane Alfred Modise, "E-Learning Framework Development for Grade 12 Accounting Learners in South African Public High Schools," *Journal of Education and Learning Technology* 5, no. 10 (December 24, 2024): 514–27, <https://doi.org/10.38159/jelt.202451011>.

Participant 1 highlighted that the majority of learners were unfamiliar with the diverse subjects available at their schools.

“Other streams, such as commerce and science, do not have many learners because some learners do not know about them; the school does not provide career guidance to us, especially when it is time to choose the subjects. In short, we don’t get any guidance on how to choose the subjects.” (Participant 1, male, 15 years old).

As read in the quote, the participants indicated that learners lacked sufficient information and guidance when choosing the subjects or streams, resulting in a hindrance to acquiring the necessary information to opt for the right subject combinations. These findings are similar to those of Ndalichako and Komba, who revealed that secondary school learners were choosing irrelevant subject combinations because of a lack of information and career guidance when making their subject selections.²⁴ It is crucial to emphasise that not receiving enough guidance has made it difficult for learners to get accurate information about the subjects they ought to select. This caused them to opt for unsuitable subject combinations. The participants’ collective insight highlighted the lack of career guidance and relevant information regarding other subjects as the main reason why they did not choose commercial subjects. Some participants stated the following:

“I have no information about commercial subjects, so I am not opting for any. Commerce is not in future plans because I have obtained the information I need if I want to be a doctor.” (Participant 5, female, 15 years old).

Similarly, Participant 4 expressed the same views with regard to the lack of career guidance. She said:

“I am choosing not to take any commercial subjects in FET because I do not have enough information about them, as well as possible career opportunities.” (Participant 4, female, 15 years old).

Participant 3 expressed similar feelings, stating that he is not choosing the commerce stream because he does not have enough information about it, and the lack of guidance from the teachers on which subjects to choose makes him more uncertain.

“I am not sure which stream to follow. We have not been guided on how to choose subjects, and we are not even taken to career guidance exhibitions. I tried to ask my LO teacher about different careers, but she did not mention any career related to commerce.” (Participant 3, male, 15 years).

The above comments from the participants indicated that a lack of career guidance in secondary schools makes it difficult for learners to gather relevant information regarding which subjects to choose. These findings were consistent with those of Maganga, who revealed that a large number of Tanzanian public secondary schools lacked access to career guidance when choosing subjects.²⁵ Furthermore, Sefotho discovered that a majority of learners in South Africa’s historically underprivileged communities do not have access to career guidance services since their schools do not have trained career counsellors or psychologists.²⁶ Due to inadequate information, learners in secondary schools were unable to make informed decisions about their subject choices and evaluate their level of confidence. The lack of appropriate career guidance consequently had a detrimental effect on their decision-making process. The lack of pertinent information about subject combinations or streams prevented learners from realising their goals, and streams like commerce and science experienced low student enrolment.

²⁴ Joyce Lazaro Ndalichako and A. A. Komba, “Students’ Subject Choice in Secondary Schools in Tanzania: A Matter of Students’ Ability and Interests or Forced Circumstances?,” *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 2, no. 8 (2014): 49.

²⁵ J. H. Maganga, “Factors Affecting Students’ Academic Performance: A Case Study of Public Secondary School in Llala District, Dar-Es-Saalam” (2017).

²⁶ M.M. Sefotho, “Career Guidance in South Africa as a Social Justice Travesty,” *Journal of Orientation and Society* 17 (2017): 153–63.

b) The learner's capability in the subject

A significant number of remarks were expressed by the learners concerning their capability in the subject, along with their justification for selecting or not selecting commercial subjects. Participant 2 articulated the following perspective:

"I have not opted for the commerce stream because I have struggled with EMS from grade 7. I do not understand anything in EMS, and I have been performing badly in this subject, so opting for the commercial stream is not an option since it demands a lot of time and practice." (Participant 2, Male, 14 years old).

Another learner expressed his difficulties in excelling in EMS, stating:

"From a personal perspective, I find commercial subjects unappealing due to my inability to grasp basic concepts in EMS. Studying subjects such as Accounting and Economics will not be easy, particularly when the teachers are subpar, and there is a lack of textbooks and other additional resources." (Participant 7, male, 15 years old).

Similarly, another participant expressed her lack of interest in commerce because of its complexity.

"I lack comprehension of EMS, and I have no interest in the commercial stream. Commercial subjects are complex, and there are many rules and principles, especially in subjects like Accounting." (Participant 6, female, 15 years old).

Participant 8 expressed similar sentiments, stating that his lack of interest in commerce stemmed from a poor background in mathematics, which led him to choose an easier subject combination.

"I do not hate commerce, but due to my poor performance in Mathematics, I do not want to put myself under a lot of stress by adding subjects like Accounting or Economics because I do not have the capability to do those subjects combined." (Participant 8, male, 15 years old).

Although the majority of learners stated that they did not opt for commercial subjects because of their difficult nature, Participant 9 pointed out the reason why he chose commerce and said:

"I have opted for the commercial stream because I love Accounting and I want to be an accountant in the future." (Participant 9, male, 15 years old).

Participant 9 went further to say that he loves EMS, as it has a business part.

"Before school and during break or lunchtime, I sell sweets and peanuts. I got all my business ideas from EMS. I got many ideas when we were preparing for market day. EMS is the only subject that has a market day. The reason why I love EMS is that it provides us with skills to make money." (Participant 9, male, 15 years old).

In a similar vein, one of the learners expressed that her capability in comprehending numerical concepts influenced her decisions to choose commercial subjects rather than other streams of study. She stated:

"The reason behind my decision to choose commerce is that I'm good at numbers, especially in Mathematics, so accounting won't be a problem for me because it's like mathematics; it only requires a lot of practice" (Participant 10, female, 15 years old).

Furthermore, participant 10 revealed that she opted for the commercial stream because of her performance in EMS.

"My Economics and Management Sciences marks are excellent, which is the reason why I opted for the commercial stream in the FET phase" (Participant 10, female, 15 years old).

The findings of this study seemed to be complex and inconsistent in nature. Participants in the study generally indicated their lack of understanding and interest in commercial subjects, which influenced them not to opt for the commerce stream. This aligns with the findings of Lyons and Quinn, which indicate that learners often choose subjects they perceive as more manageable, as these subjects are typically less challenging and simpler to comprehend.²⁷ The result indicated that learners tend to avoid commerce because of their insufficient arithmetic skills. Participants expressed that a lack of proficiency in mathematics hinders their ability to engage with commercial subjects, such as accounting. These observations align with DeRidder's assertion that learners are more likely to pursue commerce if they possess a strong mathematical foundation and confidence in their abilities.²⁸

However, other participants in the study stated that their competence in commercial subjects was a crucial factor in their choice of the commerce stream. Several learners expressed that their choice to specialise in the commercial stream was driven by both their enthusiasm for the field and their ability to confront intellectual challenges. These findings align with those of Ahmed et al., who argued that some learners still opt for streams that are considered difficult in order to showcase their competence.²⁹ Moreover, he mentions additional factors, such as curriculum, future opportunities, school reputation, and role models, that have demonstrated an influence on learners' subject selection. The study also found that some participants based their subject choices on the availability of information and resources in commerce, especially in relation to the business side, because it aligned with their desire to start their businesses. One participant added that she decided to opt for the commercial stream due to her outstanding performance in EMS. These results agree with Trautwein et. al, who said that students who study subjects that match their skills do better in school.³⁰

Discussion Summary

The results showed that the participants' proficiency in the subjects influenced their decision to enrol in the commerce stream. Several participants reported opting for commercial subjects for diverse reasons, including the potential career opportunities they offer as well as the business and economic knowledge they impart.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results and discussion, the study recommends that learners receive educational training and that regular tests be used to gauge their proficiency and interest in the subject. Learners require mentoring, counselling and guidance when making decisions. Furthermore, it is important to recognise the impact that a lack of career guidance has on learners' subject choices. The study also recommends that secondary schools should network with relevant organisations, set up office visits, and invite experts to give educational career seminars at their schools, as suggested by Rukewe and Oats.³¹

CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to ascertain the determinants influencing learners' choices to enrol in commercial subjects in the Thabo Mofutsanyana Education District, Free State Province, South Africa. The lack of career guidance and learners' capability in the subjects were discovered to have the largest influence on the learner's choice to enrol in commercial subjects. It has been observed that one of the factors that significantly affects learners' choices when they are deciding which subjects to opt for when they advance to the FET phase the following year is their aptitude for the subject. Another significant factor is learners' misconceptions about commercial subjects, since some learners may simply base their decisions on their personal beliefs and presumptions about them. It is evident that a lack of career guidance and access to relevant information in

²⁷ Lyons and Quinn, "Understanding the Declines in Senior High School Science Enrolments."

²⁸ De Ridder, "Collaboration in Full-Service Schools: Learning Support Teachers' Roles and Practices."

²⁹ Ahmed, Sharif, and Ahmad, "Factors Influencing Students' Career Choice: Empirical Evidence from Business Students."

³⁰ Trautwein, Naranjo, and Schmidt, "Meditation Effects in the Social Domain: Self-Other Connectedness as a General Mechanism?"

³¹ Reginald Oats and Yewande Rukewe, "An Investigation into the Impact of Career Guidance on Career Choice of Secondary Students in Botswana," *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal* 7, no. 1 (January 28, 2020): 384–98, <https://doi.org/10.14738/assrj.71.6865>.

secondary schools has a negative impact on learners in order for them to choose streams such as commerce and science. Nevertheless, some learners still opt for the commercial stream because of their abilities in other subjects like mathematics, while others would like to pursue a career in it.

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