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What Influences Accounting Student's Attitudes towards the Accounting Profession- A North West Experience.

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This Dissertation is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of MA in Accounting, Letterkenny Institute of Technology.

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Abstract

This study explores several issues which have been linked with influencing a student's attitude toward the accounting profession. These issues include the factors that influence their choice of career, their decision to pursue a career in accounting, perceptions of the accounting profession and timing of the career decision.

The study will also take into consideration the criticisms of accounting education which have received a lot of attention in related literature, and the decline in the popularity of accounting for leaving certificate.

The results show that three main factors influence the student's decision to pursue a career in accounting, namely long term earnings, job market conditions, and a genuine interest in the subject. This finding is the same regardless of gender. With regard to accounting education, the findings of this study support the argument that a gap has emerged between academic study and professional practice and as a result accounting education is no longer serving the needs of its graduates. The study also concluded that the majority of students still hold the traditional view of the profession as 'bookkeeping' and 'number crunching' orientated, however female students did have a much more favourable view of the profession than male students.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Accountancy is now well established as an elite professional occupation in most parts of the world and most of this status has been afforded through an association with educational qualifications. However, while the numbers of students that are undertaking business degrees is on the rise in most countries, the number of business students that are majoring in accounting has been decreasing.

In Ireland there has been a huge rise in the number of students undertaking business degrees over the past decade mostly as a result of economic growth; however the number of students studying accounting at secondary school has fallen by 66% (Byrne and Flood, 2003). In Australia there has also been a significant increase in the uptake of business degrees of 49.6% between 1990-1999 (Worthington and Higgs, 2003), however the number of these business students that are majoring in accounting is declining both in Australia (Jackling and Calero, 2006) and in the USA (Albrecht and Sack, 2000).

The declining popularity of accounting amongst business students has been in part attributed to the negative views of the profession, particularly the stereotypical view that accountants need good numbers skills (Parker, 2001). In order to understand student's attitudes towards the profession, one of the aims of this study is to investigate the factors that influence student's choice of accounting at third level. There have been a number of studies carried out examining what influences a student's choice of major. These studies have found that the main influencing factors include interests in the discipline, flexible career opportunities (Paolillo and Estes 1982; Ahmed et al., 1997). Previous educational experience, including prior studies in accounting together with personal characteristics such as gender have also been identified with students' choice of accounting major (Nelson and Venzryk, 1996). This study will determine whether these findings can be replicated in an Irish context.

This study will also take into consideration other topical issues such as accounting education and its shortcomings, perceptions of the accounting profession amongst accounting majors in Ireland, and previous accounting experience including accounting at Leaving Cert.

1.2 Research aims and objectives

The main aim of the research is to “What influences the attitudes of accounting students towards the accounting profession”. This can be broken down into the following research objectives:

- What are the factors that influence a student’s choice of career and decision to pursue accounting?

Prior literature in the area seems to suggest that gender, educational influences and perceptions of the profession and the people within the profession are all important factors that will influence a student to pursue accounting as a career. The aim of this objective is to determine whether these findings can be replicated in an Irish context.

- To determine the influence of leaving certificate accounting among today’s accounting students.

Since 1990, the number of students sitting the accounting exam for the Leaving Cert. has fallen dramatically with only 14% of students sitting the exam in 2006. Overall the number of students taking business exams has fallen by 5% between 2002 and 2006. The decline in popularity of accounting at Leaving Cert. level represents a huge challenge for the accounting profession, as this will have a potential influence on the selection of accounting programmes in higher education. The aim here is to determine how many of the current accounting majors in the North West have studied accounting for Leaving Cert.

- To investigate students attitudes towards accounting education.

Many academics and practicing accountants have voiced their criticism of accounting education over the years. They argue that students spend most of their time performing complex calculations and generating figures and not enough time on what these figures mean or represent. The aim here is to get the students views on accounting education, and to investigate weather they agree or disagree with the criticisms.

- Are there gender differences between attitudes to the accounting profession?

Here the author is attempting to build on previous research conducted by Byrne and Willis (2005) in relation to gender in accounting. Previous research in relation to Ireland suggests that females have a more precise view of accounting however on an international level this finding is disputed (Jackling and Calero, 2006).

- When do students make the decision to pursue accounting?

A study carried out by Geiger and Ogilby (2000) in the U.S.A found that the majority of students decided to pursue accounting as a career during their first year in college. This study will determine weather these findings apply to Irish accounting students in the north-west.

- To explore the perceptions students have of the accounting profession.

Many authors including Cohen and Hanno (2003), Seamann and Crooker (1999) have reported that traditional negative perceptions of accountants as being too boring and number orientated have discouraged more creative individuals from specialising in accounting. This objective will determine whether these negative perceptions exist among accounting students in Ireland, and if there are differing perceptions among male and female students.

1.3 Value of the research

The researcher believes that the research will be of value to a number of different institutions for a number of different reasons.

1. Although there has been a large body of research generated in this area in an international context, little research of this nature exists in Ireland.
2. Second, the research will provide some insight into student's attitudes towards the accounting profession and towards accounting education, which will be of interest to the professional accounting bodies as the struggle to attract the 'best and brightest' students to the accountancy profession.
3. The research will also take into consideration accounting education. This will be of use to accounting educators and educational institutions as the research will investigate the student's views regarding accounting education.

For these reasons the researcher believes the research has merit, and will be of benefit to those within the accounting community.

1.4 Limitations of the research

The research presents itself with certain limitations which could not be overcome. These limitations include the following:

1. Time, the researcher only had one year to complete the study.
2. Financial resources were limited which affected the research process.
3. Due to other course commitments, the primary research had to be gathered during the months June and July. This affected the response rate as a lot of students went on holiday during these months. Had the research been carried out during the academic year then the response rate may have been much greater.

4. The size of the population. Although the results were representative of students in the north-west, it is extremely interpretive whether the results could be generalised to reflect all Irish accounting students.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This section of the study will deal with all the relevant literature regarding the factors that influence major selection, accounting education, what shapes a student's perception of the accounting profession and the 'choice of major' decision.

Indeed there have been previous studies which have examined the attitudes of students towards accounting and the influencing factors that contribute to a student's choice of major (Mc Dowell and Jackling, 2007; Geiger and Ogilby, 2000). These influencing factors include extrinsic and intrinsic interests in the discipline. Extrinsic factors such as perceived benefits, opportunities for advancement have been found to be important factors in a student's choice of major (Felton et al. 1995). A study carried out by Byrne and Willis (2005) cited educational experience in accounting together with personal characteristics such as gender as factors which will influence a student's choice of college major.

Perceptions of the accounting profession and the stereotypical view of the accountant is a factor which has been cited by several authors including Geiger and Oligby (2000), Marriot and Marriot (2003), Freidman and Lynne (2000), Cory (1992) as being a negative factor that will deter a business student from majoring in accounting.

This research will take into consideration all the aforementioned factors; however it will also take into account the influence of the accounting education and how the criticisms of accounting education are affecting graduates that are pursuing careers in accounting. This is an area which has never been researched before in Ireland. . Finally the review will cover literature relating to 'timing of the major decision'; this is an American term which basically means 'when do students make the decision to pursue a career in accounting'? A study conducted by Geiger

and Oligby (2000) found that the majority of students will decide on a career by the time they finish secondary school.

2.2 What is an accountant?

Accountants are of vital importance to the efficient operation of an economy. They work with businesses of every size to set up and maintain the systems that collect and report information about business activity. They play a critical role in regulatory functions of government, including day to day operations, taxation, and detection of crime. An accountant can be defined as ‘one that keeps audits and inspects the financial records of individuals or businesses and prepares financial and tax reports’ (Houghton, 2004). Beyond carrying out the fundamental tasks of their work i.e. preparing, analysing and verifying financial documents in order to provide information to clients-many accountants are now required to possess a wide range of knowledge and skills.

The concept of accounting can be defined as the process of ‘recording, summarising, and allocating all items of income and expense of the company and analysing, verifying and reporting the results’ (Gorman, 2006)

2.3 The accounting profession and the ICAI: a brief history

Firstly the author will briefly discuss the accounting profession in Ireland. This is necessary to give the reader an understanding of the increasing need for accountants, as a result of the economic climate which prevailed in the early 1990’s.

Traditionally the accounting profession has been associated with institutional fragmentation, with a range of bodies or associations representing accountants in any one country, Anderson-Gough, Grey and Robinson (1998), McCabe and Mc Hugh (1992). This type of fragmentation is very much evident in Ireland as there are four main accountancy bodies representing the majority of accountants: The Institute of Chartered Accountants in Ireland (ICAI), The Institute of Certified

Public Accountants in Ireland (CPA), The Chartered Institute of Management Accountants in Ireland and the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants.

A detailed description of all of these bodies is outside the scope of this paper; therefore I have chosen to look at the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Ireland. The reason for doing so is simple, The ICAI is an Irish based and managed organisation, unlike CIMA and the ACCA which operate in Ireland as divisions of British bodies. The Institute of Certified Public Accountants is also an Irish based and managed organisation however, they are much smaller with only 5000 members including students. The ICAI has always been the largest and longest established professional body in Ireland.

The ICAI received its royal charter in 1888, and at its formation had 42 members where as today it has some 17000 members and 6500 students. Unlike their British counterparts the ICAS and the ICAEW which grew rapidly soon after their formation, the ICAI did not experience any significant growth until the latter part of the 20th century. This was because Ireland's economy in the early 1990's was dominated by the agricultural sector. During this time most accountants derived their income from bankruptcy and insolvency work and from the provision of debt collection and land agency services to absentee English landlords- Robinson (1983), Hanlon (1994). It is also interesting to note that, since its formation, the ICAI has always been an all-Ireland body. The uniting of Irish accountants from North and South to establish ICAI in 1888 may seem surprising given the increasing political tensions at the time. However, it appears that the desire to form an association was prompted by economic and social factors. A number of the founders had trained and practiced in England or Scotland and so they had first hand experience of the benefits accruing to members of a well organised professional body. Additionally it was perceived that many of the English accounting firms were acquiring the lucrative accounting work in Ireland because of their associations with established professional bodies. It was felt that securing a royal charter for a national professional organisation would enhance the status of Irish accountants and would desist the efforts of English firms to dominate the Irish accounting marketplace (Annisette and O'Regan, 2001) cited by Byrne and Flood, 2003.

Indeed it wasn't until the 1960's that the fortunes of the Irish accounting profession changed as a result of new economic policies. The removal of trade barriers and the fostering of foreign direct investment fuelled both the development of Irish indigenous industry and an influx of overseas companies (Byrne and Flood 2003).

From 1994 onwards the Irish economy experienced growth and became known as the 'Celtic Tiger'. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) rose by an average of 9.6 percent per annum between 1994 and 2000 and the level of unemployment fell dramatically- Haughton, (2000). Other factors which were critical in this success were the growth in exports, wage and price restraints, low inflation, property based tax incentives, and the low corporation tax rate (Byrne and Flood 2003). The availability of a well-educated English speaking workforce attracted many technology and pharmaceutical multi-nationals to establish in Ireland.

All of these developments created more varied opportunities for accountants, attracting ever increasing numbers to the profession (Byrne and Flood 2003).

2.4 Accounting education

This section will cover accounting education in Ireland at second level, third level and at professional level. Also discussed will be the current state of accounting education, taking into consideration the criticisms levelled at accounting education in the higher education sector and, as a result, the challenges facing accounting educators and professional bodies.

2.4.1 Second level education

Second level education in Ireland typically serves students from the ages of 12-18. It consists of the junior certificate and the leaving certificate. For the purpose of this study, we will focus on the leaving certificate examinations, as it is at this level students are first exposed to an accounting course. As stated by the

Department of Education and Science in 2001, the objective of the leaving certificate is to prepare pupils for the immediate entry into open society or for proceeding to further education. Most of the students who sit the leaving certificate examinations will undertake three core subjects; namely English, Irish, and Mathematics. They then choose four other subjects from the other subject groups which include Languages, Sciences, Business Studies, Applied Sciences and Social Studies.

The Leaving Certificate is a highly competitive set of exams. The reason for this is the demand for university places greatly out numbers supply. Students who are looking to progress into higher education will generally complete as many higher level exam papers as possible. The higher level papers are more testing than the ordinary level papers because of the more extensive syllabus and the greater level of difficulty in the questions posed.

2.4.2 Accounting within second level education

Prior to 1969 there was only one business subject on offer on the Leaving Cert programme, this subject combined elements of accounting, business practice and industrial history (Byrne and Flood 2003). Accounting as a separate subject was firstly introduced in 1971. It was revised in 1995 as part of a general review of the entire Leaving Cert programme. As a result management accounting topics were introduced into the syllabus for the first time (Byrne and Flood 2003).

The popularity of accounting at Leaving Cert has varied significantly over the years. The first accounting exam was in 1971 and 28% of all Leaving Cert students sat the exam that year. The percentage declined until 1974 when it started an upward trend and peaked in 1970 with 29% of all students sitting the accounting exam that year (Byrne and flood 2003). Since 1990, accounting's popularity has been declining with only 14% of students taking the accounting exam in 2006 (FAS, 2007). The reasons for this are unclear, though anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that Leaving Cert students perceive that it is more difficult to achieve a high grade in accounting than in other subjects. However, a

review of the examination results show that since the introduction of the new syllabus, the percentage of students achieving 'A' grades in accounting is higher than many of the more popular optional subjects (Byrne and Willis 2001). Teachers contend that the syllabus for junior cert. business studies, which includes basic accounting, does not provide a good foundation for leaving certificate accounting and it fails to stimulate an enthusiasm for the subject (Byrne and Willis, 2002). There should be concern within the higher education and the accounting profession regarding the continuing decline in the popularity of leaving cert accounting, given its potential influence on the selection of accounting programmes in higher education. Recent studies suggest that students are making career decisions earlier, and that many of them choose their career before completing their second level education (Nelson and Vandrzyk, 1996; Smyth and Hamman, 2000), therefore a decline in the numbers at leaving cert. will ultimately mean a decline in the total number of students being attracted to the profession.

2.5 Third level education

Currently, approximately 50% of all Irish school leavers proceed to higher education with around half of these taking degree level programmes (Department of Education and Science, 2002). Furthermore, the investment in higher education in the last 30 years has resulted in Ireland having one of the highest levels of higher education attainment among OECD countries. Indeed in 1996/1997 a greater percentage of 25-27 year olds in Ireland held higher education qualifications than in any other EU country (White, 2001).

Today, higher education institutions in Ireland comprise universities, institutes of technology, colleges of education and a number of independent private colleges.

Despite all this, the rate of growth of accounting and business programmes within higher education was quite slow, thus reflecting the stagnation of the Irish economy

(Byrne and Flood, 2003). The arrival of the 'Celtic tiger' in the early 1990's led to huge development in the Irish economy and a huge diversification in Irish business activity. Suddenly Irish businesses found themselves needing more versatile and needing more skilled graduates. This forced the Universities and the Institutes of technology to develop their business faculties (White, 2001). The development of the IFSC also played a part in business/accounting degrees becoming a popular choice for students during the 1980's and the 1990's.

Today, all of the Irish Universities and Institutes of Technology, with the exception of NUI Maynooth offer an accounting degree or a major in accounting and many of the other higher education institutions offer accounting programmes at certificate, diploma or degree level. To cope with the expansion in accounting education, the 1980.s saw a huge rise in the number of full time accounting academics. The Irish accounting directory 2000 (Clarke and Brabazon, 2000) lists 57 accounting academics employed in the seven Irish universities, 86% of whom hold a professional accountancy qualification, the majority (57%) being members of the ICAI. The largest accounting department is UCD with twelve staff and the smallest is Trinity with two staff (Byrne and Flood, 2003).

2.6 The link between education and professional status

In order to become a member of a professional accountancy body, students are required to complete a training contract, normally of 3 ½ years in length while at the same time passing a suite of examinations. This is the case with the ICAI; however they also have entry routes for non-business/accounting graduates and for school leavers with a Leaving Certificate.

The current examination system of the ICAI means that there are three levels of professional exams to complete; CAP1, CAP2, and the Final Admitting Exam (FAE). Students with an undergraduate degree in business/accounting will be exempt from the CAP1 exams. Graduates from a specialised post-graduate accounting course may gain exemptions from CAP2. However everyone regardless of entry route will have to sit the FAE.

The number of students with business/accounting degrees dominated the student intake within the ICAI. According to figures published by the body in 2000, 73% of the students held relevant business/accounting degrees (see appendices). The proportion of graduate recruits to accountancy bodies with high quality degrees has continued to rise (POBA, 2004). The majority of students registered with the chartered accountancy bodies (ICAS, ICAEW, ICAI) have first or upper second class honours degrees (FRC, 2003) and 89% of graduates that entered the chartered accountant programme with ICAS in 2003 had achieved this. Indeed this is not the case with all accountancy bodies, trainees with accountancy bodies the ACCA and CIMA display a significantly different educational profile with only 50% of the student intake being graduates (FRC, 2003; POBA, 2005; POB 2006).

Many authors argue that this is important for the profession; that in order to maintain its elite professional status it must be associated with educational qualifications (Larson, 1977; Freidson, 1986; Burrage, 1990). This is a view shared by the Professional Oversight Body for Accountancy who stated “Many of the best graduates are attracted to become trainees with the biggest firms and the quality of those entering through this route is undoubtedly critical to the success of the profession and should not be neglected” (POBA, 2004, p.9). The ICAS also supported this view and added that any erosion of this link may influence the career choices of potential recruits (ICAS 2003).

2.7 Criticisms of accounting education

Having explored the evolution of accounting education within the second level, third level and professional system, it is also necessary to evaluate the current state of accounting education with reference to the literature.

The criticisms of accounting education at academic institutions are both varied and manifold. One of the more common criticisms is that accounting education focuses on fact based learning; that students spend a disproportionate amount of their time and effort memorising accounting and auditing standards, law and tax regulations which make them experts in the technicalities of accounting (Albrecht and Sack 2000). The study by Albrecht and Sack (2000) is a landmark one in the area of accounting education. It contained the following facts:

- The number and quality of students electing to major in accounting is decreasing rapidly. Students are telling us by their choice of major that they do not perceive an accounting degree to be as valuable as it used to be or as valuable as other business degrees.
- Both practicing accountants and accounting educators, most of whom have accounting degrees, would not major in accounting if pursuing their education over again.
- Accounting leaders and practicing accountants are telling us that accounting education, as currently structured, is outdated, broken, and needs to be modified significantly.

Lee (2005) supports this view claiming accountants have been more concerned with accounting monetary numbers than with what they represent or what they correspond. Ovalle (2006) is also in agreement; claiming accounting education overloads students with static skills and knowledge and as a result students and accountants are blinded to the failings and deficiencies that are inherent within the profession.

A similar view is held by Henderson (2001) who concluded that such a concentration of technical skills duplicated in both degree programmes and professional education can only serve to erode student's likelihood of developing critical thinking.

Such arguments obviously do have merit, however it is important to bear in mind that the very nature of accounting as a discipline means that accountants/students have to be able to retain high volumes of technical information, otherwise how are they going to be able to perform every day tasks such as producing accounts, performing audits, or advising clients in relation to taxation and other business related issues?

Another common criticism of accounting education is concerned with environmental accounting and the societal role of the accountant. Inanga and Schneider (2005) argue that researchers, educators, practitioners and professional bodies all have their own agendas serving their own self-interests and as a result the effectiveness of promoting environmental accounting in accounting education is severely curtailed.

One would hope that in the wake of major accounting scandals which have had a serious impact on the reputation of the accounting profession, that environmental accounting and ethical issues would be a top priority for accounting educators and professional bodies.

McPhail (2005) as cited by Ovalle (2006 p.43) had this issue in mind when he stated:

“If the professional institutes in the U.K and the U.S.A continue to provide accounting students with little help in understanding the role of accounting within the broader political economy; no critical appreciation of the moral values upon which the system is based; and little help in developing the kind of ethical/emotional capabilities required to engage with ethical issues they will face as practicing accountants; then another Enron is not only possible, but inevitable”

The literature seems to suggest that this is the case; that accounting education is narrow and although students have in-depth knowledge of the technical aspects of accounting, they lack the various other characteristics which are necessary for professionals to go about their daily work. This clearly has implications for the profession as a whole.

However academics are not the only one's voicing their concerns over accounting education. So too are the partners in some of Ireland's biggest accounting firms. Sinead Donovan, a partner with accountancy firm Grant Thornton recently spoke of the shortcomings in accounting education in an interview with Accountancy Ireland magazine. In the interview she stated; "having a sound grasp of the double entry system is critical to being an effective accountant. However complex a problem or an issue it will always come down to the debits or credits. That is why it is so crucial in accounting education that we continue to educate students in double entry. I have noticed that some of the trainees from some of the universities do not have the best grounding in double entry. They could go out and do a thesis but they would find it difficult to do bank reconciliations. This is something that the accounting profession has got to get to grips with" (Accountancy Ireland, 2005). This proves that shortcomings in accounting education do exist and that a gap exists between what the students are learning in third level education and what is expected of them in the workplace. This presents huge challenges for the accounting profession and for the colleges and universities. The profession must address these issues if they hope to recruit the best and the brightest students into the accounting profession.

2.8 The need for change

The study carried out by Albrecht and Sack (2000) highlighted these issues and also expressed concern regarding the survival of accounting education and the profession's ability to attract and retain the 'best and brightest' students.

As a result the Accounting Education Change Commission (AECC) was established to redirect the structure and content of accounting education in the U.S. Soon after other jurisdictions followed and the call for accounting education change became a global one. For example, in Australia the Matthews Report was Published (Matthews, Jackson and Brown 1990). In the U.K the Q.A.A subject benchmarks for accounting include cognitive abilities and generic skills such as communication skills, the capacity for critical evaluation and the capabilities for independents and self-managed learning (QAA, 2000). In Ireland the pressure for change came from the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB).

All of this is good news for students, as these changes aim to address the way in which accounting is taught in academic institutions, thus resulting in a highly skilled and competent graduate.

So far the response has been positive with the number of accounting degrees awarded in the U.S rising by 11% in 2003, according to the Wall Street Journal. In Australia the number of professional accountants rose by 40,000 in the ten years 1996-2006. In Ireland the demand for Business/Accounting degrees also remains high. However, the deterioration in the economy creates further challenges for accounting educators. The emphasis should now be to equip graduates with more transferable skills that will distinguish them in an increasingly competitive market place and will also enhance their career flexibility (Byrne and Flood 2003).

2.9 Prior studies in accounting literature

Here the author will discuss the prior studies in accounting literature which will take into account both intrinsic and extrinsic factors, and also the theory based studies which have received a lot of attention in prior literature.

2.9.1 Gender based studies

Turner and Bowen (1999) examined the gender gap in choice of major, specifically the under-representation of women in the sciences and engineering in the 1990s. They suggest that this phenomenon may be cultural and that gender and socialisation skills may lead males and females to have different career choice preferences. The Taylor Report (2000) states that compared to college students in general, accounting majors are more likely to be female.

A study conducted by Leppel et al. (2001) found that female students are more likely to be influenced in choice of major by a professional father, and that women from “high” socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to major in business. Research undertaken by Nelson and Vandrzyk (1996) in the USA demonstrated that females had more favourable attitudes towards accounting than male students. A study carried out in Ireland by Byrne and Willis (2005) supports this view concluding that female secondary school students viewed accounting as more definite, precise and compliance driven than males. Lowe and Simons (1997) found that female accounting majors ranked “the inherent nature of the subject matter” more important than male accounting majors, and that females in their study placed a higher value on the “ability to succeed academically in the major”.

A study conducted by Jackling and Calero (2006) however did not find any significant difference in females and males in their interest in becoming an accountant.

2.9.2 Personal influences

A Study carried out by Noland et al. (2003) found that student's choosing a career in accounting considered the following factors important; long-term salary opportunities, starting salary and prestige of the profession. This is consistent with Simons et al. (2003) who concluded that the most important factors a student considered when choosing a major were; financial rewards (with long term earnings outweighing initial earnings), job availability, and interest in the major/career. A study conducted by Galotti and Kozberg (1987) listed the following four factors as the most important in influencing students when selecting a college major;

1. How much I care about the subject
2. Something with good career opportunities
3. Something I will do well in
4. What I want to do with this major after college

A number of studies have also indicated that job satisfaction is important in accounting students career choice (Ahmed et al. 1997, Auyeung and Sands 1997). Jackling and Calero (2006) found that enjoyment of the subject plays a significant part in the choice of major decision. This finding is supported by the work of Saemann and Crooker (1999) who also found that students are more likely to pursue accounting when they considered the subject interesting and enjoyable.

As well as the factors mentioned above Galotti (1999) also mentions that parental advice and influence plays a significant part in the student's choice of major.

This is consistent with the work of Cangelosi et al. (1985) and Harrison (1998) who find that it is not only students own perceptions that affect their career decision but also the perceptions of those around them i.e. by an accounting lecturer from college, by parents or by friends.

A survey carried out by Smith (2005) found that accounting instructors have a strong influence on the student's decision to pursue further studies in accounting. The research also found that students are likely to be influenced by their family. A

significant portion of those surveyed choose to major in accounting because they knew an accountant.

2.9.3 Theory based studies

As well as the studies that look at the relative importance of selected factors used in the decision making process, it is also necessary to discuss the theory based studies. One social psychological model in particular has received a lot of attention in prior accounting literature. The Theory of reasoned action was coined by Ajzen and Fishbein back in the early 1980's and over the last 20 years or so, different variations of this theory have been used to determine what exactly influences one to choose accounting as a career (Cohen and Hano 1993, Felton et al.1994).

The theory of reasoned action states that a person's behaviour is a function of:

- a) the individuals attitude toward the behaviour and
- b) his/her perception of social pressure to do that behaviour

Attitude in this context is the belief that behaviour will lead to certain outcomes and social pressure is the belief that specific individuals or groups approve or disapprove of the behaviour. Cohen and Hano (1993) believed that use of a formal model would help to identify the existence of a theoretical relationship between underlying cognitive constructs and the examined behaviour. The model was used to identify specific beliefs that students who had chosen to major in accounting as opposed to students who had chosen other business majors. Their research found that non-accounting majors had chosen other disciplines as they viewed accounting as too quantitative and boring, they also had a strong negative perception of the subject matter of accounting.

Felton et al (1994) used the theory of reasoned action with regard to choosing a career in chartered accountancy. Felton found that both accounting and non-accounting majors ranked long term earnings as the most important criterion, followed by variety in the work and flexibility of career options.

2.10 Perceptions of accounting

While every profession is concerned with its public image, perhaps none has devoted more attention to this subject in recent years than the accounting profession. For many years the accounting profession has agonised over what is perceived as a dull, boring image, fearful that this negative perception will impact upon the professions ability to attract the “best and brightest” students. In this section of the literature review the author will discuss what influences a student’s view of accounting under two broad headings:

- the introductory course in accounting
- stereotypical view of accountants

2.10.1 The introductory course in accounting

The importance of the first course in accounting in shaping a student’s perception of the accounting profession was first highlighted by the Accounting Education Change Commission (AECC). The AECC argued that the course shapes their perceptions of (1) the profession, (2) the aptitudes and skills required for successful careers in accounting, and (3) the nature of career opportunities in accounting.

Many other studies have since examined various aspects of the first course in accounting. Wooten (1998), Eskew and Faley (1998) looked at the possible effect of gender on accounting course performance. There is also a considerable amount of research concerning the content of the first course in accounting (AECC, 1992; Baldwin and Ingram, 1991).

A study carried out by Friedman (1995) in Canada asked accounting students, both at the beginning and the end of their course, the perceived importance of 12 skills on their ability to perform well in introductory accounting. However this research did not directly assess student’s perceptions of the introductory accounting course itself.

A study carried out by Geiger and Ogilby (2000) investigated student's perceptions of the first accounting course. Their research found that although intending accounting majors perceived the course more positively than non-accounting majors, both groups of students had fairly positive perceptions of the introductory accounting course. Interestingly the research found significant variation in changed student perceptions across individual instructors. This particular aspect of the findings is consistent with the work of Gangelosi et al. (1985) and Harrison (1998), who argued that students will be influenced not only by their own perceptions but by the perceptions of the people around them.

A study by Saemann and Crooker (1999) found that the traditional perceptions of precision and order in the profession discourage more creative individuals from pursuing a major in business or accounting. They stated; "If there is a need to attract these (more creative) individuals, college accounting courses will require a new focus with less emphasis on preciseness. Greater efforts will also be necessary to convince high school students that the profession does not require as much precision as it may seem" (Saemann and Crooker, 1999 p.15).

2.10.2 Stereotypical view of accountants

Given the significance that stereotyping plays for any social group, accounting researchers have devoted much attention to investigating the public image of the profession. Research conducted by Freidman and Lyne (2000) found that the 'beancounter' image seemed to be growing during the period from 1979 from 1995.

Hunt et al. (2004) found that accounting students viewed the profession more favourably compared to other business majors, regarding accountants as leaders and valued business advisors. Interestingly all majors reported that the media (movies and television) provided a negative image of accountants.

Brass (2004) argues that accountants are to blame for the misconceptions as they never attempted to correct the 'scorekeeping' image which is widely held. This argument is somewhat backed up by Bougen (1994). He related the stereotype to

the relationship the accountant had with bookkeeping in that it was a reflection of the work accountants carried out and not the actual accountant. Accountants must move forward and compete with others in the changing environment, Parker (2000) states 'those accountants that remain content to carry out routine accountant compliance work are set for sub-ordinate corporate career prospects, declining customer bases and ultimately early retirement'. According to the AICPA (2000) most secondary school and college students cannot accurately describe the work of accountants, their responsibilities or the opportunities available in the accounting profession.

The main concern here for the accounting profession is how they can expect to attract the 'best and brightest' students when the perception of the accounting profession among students and the other professions is so poor. In a study carried out by Cory (1992) the objective of the research was to determine if there was a relationship between the quality and quantity of students entering the profession and the stereotypical accountant. The research found that the current stereotype may attract students who will perpetuate the accountant's image and deter those who actually have the qualities for which the profession is actively searching.

An interesting study conducted by Dimnick and Felton (2005) examined how the accountant is portrayed in cinema, as cinema is an influential medium that reflects and shapes social attitudes. Their research suggests that the accounting stereotype is not as straightforward as one would think. The research found that movies presented several different stereotypes of the accountant which ranged from eccentric to villain to hero. Of the 168 coded characters they used in their analysis only 7% fell into the eccentric category. This is the category that prior research suggests is the widely held perception of accountants (Cory 1992; Freidman and Lyne 2000). Surprisingly they found that while 23% fell into the villain i.e. Nick Leeson in *Rogue Trader*, 70% fell into more sympathetic stereotypes.

2.11 The decision to pursue accounting

Several studies have been conducted in an attempt to establish when students actually make the decision to pursue accounting. In the literature this is commonly referred to as the ‘choice of major’ decision.

Nelson et al. (2002) found that the second year in college showed the highest percentage of responses to the question “at what point did you decide to major in accounting”. The next highest response was at second level. These findings are consistent with the work of Geiger and Oligby (2000) who found that the majority of students made the decision during the first accounting course.

A study conducted in this area by Paolillo and Estes (1982) found that while 23% of students made the decision to major in accounting at second level, 40% of students made the decision in either their first or second year at college.

Again these studies support the view of the Accounting Education Change Commission (AECC) that the first course in accounting will shape a student's attitude towards the accounting profession.

2.12 Conclusion

Investigating the attitudes of accounting students towards the accounting profession has produced a large body of research. This section has focused on the literature related to factors such as; ‘why and when students decide to major in accounting’, ‘what shapes their perceptions of the accounting’, and ‘accounting education ‘.

From reviewing the literature it's fair to say that there any number of factors that will influence a student's decision to study accounting. Research from theory based and non-theory based studies suggest that “financial rewards”, “interest in the discipline”, “job availability” and the “influences of parents and teachers” are all factors that will impact on a student's decision. The research also suggests that the students are making career decisions earlier in life.

With regard to accounting education, the literature suggests that both academics and practitioners are united in their belief that accounting education has many shortcomings.

The bulk of this literature has come from studies that were conducted in America, Australia and even in Japan. In Ireland, little research exists regarding accounting student's attitudes and perceptions of the profession. This is why I have chosen to conduct this type of study in Ireland. By surveying third level accounting students from the colleges and universities in the north-west, I hope to provide greater insight into as to what influences the attitudes of accounting students in Ireland towards the accounting profession.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will identify and explain the methodology adopted which will include a description of the research problem, research process and the data collection methods used. The research methodology describes “an approach to a problem that can be put into practice in a research programme or process, which formally defines an operational framework within which the facts are placed so that their meaning may be seen more clearly”. (Remenyi et al., 2003)

There is no consensus in the literature on how research should be defined; however there seems to be consensus that it:

- Is a process of enquiry and investigation
- Is systematic and methodical
- Increases knowledge (Collis and Hussey, 2003)

The first step in conducting research is to identify an area of interest. The literature searches suggest that what influences students to pursue accounting at third level and at professional level is of considerable interest to accounting educators and the accounting community as a whole. This is reflected in the large amounts of academic journal articles and articles from professional accountancy bodies attempting to attract the best and brightest students.

3.2 Research process

The research undertaken was instigated by an explicit review of the literature in the specific research area. After all secondary sources of information were explored and reviewed; primary research was carried out through the following research process.

3.2.1 Research problem

The aim of the research was to investigate the factors that influence students to pursue accounting, their attitudes towards the accounting profession and accounting education. Many studies have been carried out in this area in an international context, however in Ireland; it is an area which is remarkably under researched.

3.2.2 Research question and objectives

The main research question was to investigate the attitudes of accounting students towards the accounting profession. This was broken down into the following objectives:

- What are the factors that influence a student to pursue accounting?
- How many accounting majors have studied accounting at second level?
- To investigate students attitudes towards accounting education.
- Are there gender differences between attitudes to the accounting profession?
- When do students make the decision to pursue accounting?
- What are the implications for educators and professional bodies?

3.2.3 Research philosophy

The research philosophy concerns the way in which the researcher thinks about the development of the research and this then affects the way we go about doing research. The research paradigm is the general approach to the research. Collis and Hussey (2003, p46) state that the term 'paradigm' refers to;

'The process of scientific practice based on peoples philosophies and assumptions about the world and the nature of knowledge....about how research should be conducted.'

The research is dominated mainly by two research paradigms, namely positivism and interpretivism. They are different if not, mutually exclusive views about the way in which knowledge is developed and judged as being acceptable. (Saunders et al. 2007).

3.2.3.1 Positivism

Positivism, also referred to as the traditional scientific approach, is when there is only one truth that we all agree upon. It is a structured approach to gathering data, which is analysed and interpreted in a factual statistical manner.

Saunders et al. (2007) point out that if the research philosophy reflects the principles of positivism then the researcher should adopt the philosophical stance of the natural scientist

Positivism implies that the researcher is:

‘Working with an observable social reality and that the end product of such research can be the derivation of laws of law-like generalisations similar to those produced by the physical and natural scientists’ (Remenyi et al; 2003, p32)

Saunders et al. (2003) and Remenyi et al (2003) refer to the researcher as an objective analyst in this tradition. Positivism is based on the concept that other similar studies should be comparable and achieve similar results.

However according to Saunders et al. (2003) the researchers critical of positivism argue that the rich insights into this complex world are lost if such complexity is reduced entirely to a series of law like generalisations. Critics of positivism believe that it is impossible to treat people as being separate from their social contexts and they cannot be understood without examining the perceptions they have of their own activities. They also believe that the highly structured research design process imposes certain constraints on the results and may ignore more relevant and interesting findings. Also, capturing complex phenomena in a single measure is at best misleading, for example, is it possible to assign a numerical

value to a person's intelligence? (Collis and Hussey, 2003) Therefore interpretivism was developed due to the criticisms of positivism.

Strengths of Positivist Research

- Positivist research is developed to achieve defined theoretical objectives.
- Positivist research is economical both in terms of time and for sampling large numbers.
- Positivist research is easily analysed and clearly demonstrates existing or emerging patterns and trends.
- Positivist research gives the researcher control in measurement using validity and reliability testing (Easterby-Smith et al 2002).

Weaknesses of Positivist Research

- Positive research is rigid and inflexible and once data gathering has commenced is difficult to change.
- Positive research is vague, in terms of understanding the social processes behind the data.
- Positive research while useful in assisting decision making is not holistic enough to interpret social actions and therefore is limiting when used in policy making (Easterby-Smith et al 2002).

3.2.3.2 Interpretivism

An interpretivist approach to research is based on the idea that the researcher and reality exist in the same world. As a result, knowledge of the world comes from life experience and the object of research has to be interpreted in terms of the life experience of the researcher.

Interpretivism assumes that the social world is continually changing and that the researcher is part of this. In contrast to the positivist paradigm, rather than studying facts and developing a series of law like generalisations, interpretivism is

concerned with understanding and appreciating the different constructions and meanings that people place on their experience (Saunders et al. 2007). Each situation is seen as unique and its meaning is a function of the circumstances and the individuals involved. According to Collis and Hussey (2003) what is researched cannot be affected by the process of the research.

Collis and Hussey (2003) summarise the main features of the two paradigms in the table presented below.

Table 1: Features of the two main research paradigms

Positivistic Paradigm	Interpretivist paradigm
Tends to produce quantitative data	Tends to produce qualitative data
Uses large samples	Uses small samples
Concerned with hypothesis testing	Concerned with generating theories
Data is highly specific and precise	Data is rich and subjective
Location is artificial	Location is natural
Reliability is high	Reliability is low
Validity is low	Validity is high
Generalises from sample to population	Generalises from one setting to another

Smith (2003) and Saunders et al. (2007) support the view that both positivist and interpretivist approaches are valid, one being neither better nor worse than the other, and that much research is actually founded on a combination of the two philosophies.

Advantages of Interpretivism

- Explores subjective meanings behind peoples actions
- Highly flexible giving many different answers
- Accounts for the changing business environment

Disadvantages of Interpretivism

- Data analysis and collection can be time consuming and difficult
- No exact pattern or law like generalisations
- Not perceived to be as credible as the positivist approach
- Observer bias can be evident

(Adapted from Saunders et al., 2007)

3.2.3.3 Research philosophy adopted

The choice of research philosophy depends on the research aims and objectives. In this case the researcher used both philosophies. Interpretivism was used at the start of the research process, carrying out semi-structured interviews with third level students. The reason why interpretivism was used is because it is flexible and can result in many different answers which is necessary when conducting interviews. One of the main advantages of doing the interviews was that it allowed the researcher to obtain a better understanding of the interviewee's thoughts and opinions, thus enabling the researcher to design a more effective questionnaire. One of the major drawbacks of this philosophy is that findings are open to observer bias but the researcher overcame this by tape recording the interviews.

The researcher also used positivism via the use of questionnaires which were sent to third level business students in Institutes of technology and Universities in the North West. The use of questionnaires can be more advantageous as they allow the researcher to interpret findings in a more quantifiable manner, because of the structured nature- the use of yes/no answers and the Likert rating scale. This approach allowed the researcher to become a more objective analyst. The use of questionnaires was less time consuming than conducting interviews which meant that larger numbers could be surveyed. Questionnaires are also easier to analyse and they clearly demonstrate existing or emerging patterns and trends. The main limitation of questionnaires is that the highly structured research design may

ignore more relevant and interesting findings. The researcher attempted to overcome this by allowing the individuals who completed the questionnaires to include any additional comments at the end of the questionnaire.

3.2.4 Research approach

This decision had to be made correctly in order to progress with the correct research design process. An understanding of the research theory was necessary to do so. There are two possible approaches to research, namely inductive and deductive research.

3.2.4.1 Inductive/ Deductive

Inductive research is when theory is developed from the observation of empirical reality, thus general influences are induced from particular instances. Deductive research is when a conceptual and theoretical structure is developed and then tested by theoretical observation; therefore particular instances are deduced from general inferences.

3.2.4.2 Research approach adopted

The inductive approach was more suitable for this research as the researcher was trying to determine the attitudes of business students towards the accounting profession, and the factors that influence them to pursue accounting. This involved the researcher developing the theory from data collected via questionnaires and interviews. With the inductive approach there is a realisation that the researcher is part of the research process so that the researcher should gain an understanding of the meaning that humans attach to events; this may not have been possible had the deductive approach been undertaken.

3.2.5 Research focus

Saunders et al. (2007) states that; “the classification most often used is the threefold one of exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory research”. The researcher will explain each one of these research methods briefly.

3.2.5.1 Exploratory

Robson (2002) states that exploratory are a valuable means of finding out ‘what is happening; to seek new insights; to ask questions and to assess phenomena in a new light’. Through exploration the researcher develops the concepts more clearly, establishes priorities, and improves the final research design (Cooper and Emroy 2000). Exploratory research is particularly useful if you wish to clarify your understanding of a problem. It may be that time is well spent on exploratory research, as it may show that the research is not worth pursuing (Saunders et al., 2003).

There are three principal ways of conducting exploratory research. They are:

1. A search of the literature
2. Talking to experts in the subject
3. Conducting focus group interviews. (Saunders et al., 2007)

3.2.5.2 Explanatory

Saunders et al. (2007) states that ‘studies that establish casual relationships between variables may be termed explanatory studies’. They state that the emphasis here is on studying a situation or problems in order to explain the relationships between variables.

3.2.5.3 Descriptive

Cooper and Emroy (1995) state that; “the objective of a descriptive study is to learn; the who, what, when, where and how of a topic”. The study may be simple or complex and can be done in many settings. Robson (2002) as cited by Saunders et al., (2007) argue that the object of descriptive research is to ‘portray an accurate profile of person’s events or situations’. They state that it can be used as an extension to or forerunner to exploratory research. Sekaran (2000) identified the following benefits from conducting descriptive research:

1. They assist in decision making
2. Provide a basis for further research
3. Develop an understanding of the group.

3.2.5.4 Research focus adopted

The research focus undertaken can be classified as both descriptive and exploratory. The descriptive element of the research involved an analysis of the relevant literature and similar studies that were conducted in other countries. However, the exploratory part comprises the opinions and attitudes of the students in the North West towards the accounting profession. This part of the research was conducted via semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. The great advantage of both exploratory and descriptive research is that they are both flexible and adaptable to change.

3.3 Data collection methods

There are many collection methods available to the researcher. These methods include case studies, focus groups, interviews, and surveys. The type of method used for data collection depends mainly on the objectives of the research. This section focused on the methodologies of interviews and questionnaires as the researcher felt that these were the main methods which satisfied the objectives.

Case studies were ruled out as they can be time consuming and observation was also deemed unsuitable for the research.

3.3.1 Interviews

An interview can be described as a purposeful discussion between two people. (Kahn and Cannell, 1957). There are three main types of interviews: unstructured, semi-structured and structured.

At the initial stages of the research the researcher felt it would be necessary to carry out semi-structured face to face interviews with business studies students in order to determine their opinions and attitudes regarding the accounting profession, accounting education, and the factors that influence them to pursue accounting as a career. The reason semi-structured interviews were chosen was the researcher believed they would allow for more flexibility and would allow the researcher to ask or omit questions on the spot depending on the interviewee's answers and reactions. The researcher felt that unstructured interviews were unsuitable as they are time consuming and are also difficult to interpret findings as there is no standard on which to base the findings. Structured interviews were also deemed unsuitable as there is no room for flexibility in relation to questions asked and there is little room for interaction between interviewer and interviewee.

The students interviewed were chosen at random and the interviews were conducted face to face in early June 2008. Each interview was approximately thirty minutes in duration. The interviews were tape recorded by kind permission of the interviewees. Tape recording the interviews allowed the interviewer to concentrate on questioning and listening to the answers given. It also limited the possibility of interviewer bias as it provided an accurate record of the interview which could be re-listened to. The information that was gathered in the interviews was then used by the researcher to design a more effective questionnaire.

3.3.2 Questionnaires

Collis and Hussey (2003) describe a questionnaire as being a list of carefully structured questions with a view to eliciting reliable responses from the chosen sample. Questionnaires are a widely used research tool, however, Easter-Smith et al. (2002) state that they may seem simple to use but their design is by no means simple. Collis and Hussey (2003) outline a number of issues to be considered when using questionnaires, these include: sample size, type of questions, wording of questions, cover letter, method of distribution and tests for validity and reliability.

An online questionnaire was used to investigate the factors that influenced major selection among business students in the north-west. The questionnaires were sent directly to business/accounting degree students at Letterkenny Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Sligo and Magee University. The main reason that online questionnaires were used was their speed of response, low cost and ease of processing collected data. It also meant that a larger number of students could be surveyed.

The researcher decided to develop and design his own questions as the research area had not been investigated in Ireland before. All the questions were designed on the basis of literature review findings and on information gathered from interviews conducted with accounting students at Letterkenny Institute of Technology.

A copy of the cover letter which accompanied the questionnaire can be found in Appendix I and a copy of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix II. The aim of the covering letter was to explain the purpose of the research and state who the researcher was.

Giving the time and financial constraints of the research, the researcher thought that questionnaires were the best option to give the most reliable and general information although they do have their limitations, namely possible low response

rates. However, the researcher tried to overcome this limitation by sending out reminder emails encouraging the population to respond.

3.4 Data analysis

The data was analysed using tables and graphs. The questionnaire used yes/no questions and rating scale questions otherwise known as likert-style rating questions. This type of question asks the respondents to what extent they agree or disagree with a statement or to what extent they feel a specific factor has influenced them in their choice of career. The likert style questions were useful to find out the attitudes and opinions of the respondents where yes/no questions were not appropriate.

3.5 Ethical considerations

The researcher conducted all primary research with professional integrity and strict confidentiality. With regard to interviews, verbal permission to record was obtained before interviews. With regard to online questionnaire, a confidentiality statement was placed on each questionnaire giving the respondents full anonymity.

3.6 Conclusion

The research undertaken was to investigate the factors that influence business/accounting students to pursue accounting. It involved both the positivism and interpretivism philosophies. The research was descriptive and also exploratory in nature. The research process involved the circulation of online questionnaires and the undertaking of semi-structured interviews, the findings of which are discussed in chapter four.

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will examine the data collected from the research process and divide it into appropriate sections so that conclusions and recommendations can be drawn. As stated in the research methodology chapter the main research tool used in the research process was the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. For the semi-structured interviews accounting students from Letterkenny Institute of Technology were chosen for convenience purposes in order to explore the research question. The information gathered from these interviews and reviewing the literature was then used to develop a questionnaire which could be sent to fourth year accounting students at colleges and universities in the North West of Ireland.

Table II: Summary of Questionnaire Responses

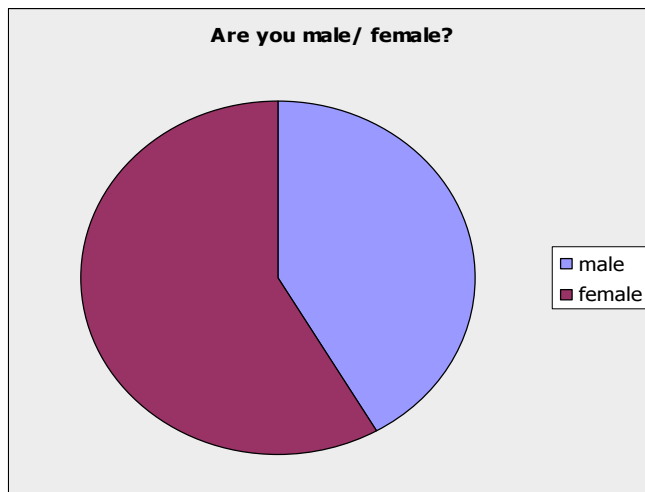
Details	Number
Total Population	93
Responses	36
Total Completed Responses	29
Response Rate	31%

4.2: Demographic details

In this study questionnaires were distributed to final year accounting students at each of the three colleges in the North West. Of the 93 surveys that were sent out to students at each of the colleges, 36 students responded. Of the 36 students that responded; 21 were female and 15 were male.

Figure I: Breakdown of Respondents

Are you male/ female?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
male	41.7%	15
female	58.3%	21



4.3: The Factors that influence career choice

One of the main objectives of this study was to determine the factors that influence a student's choice of career. For each of the eight factors influencing career choice, students were asked to rate the extent of importance of each factor ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". In order to determine which factor was rated the highest each response was assigned a weighting. A response of strongly agree was given a weighting of four while a response of strongly disagree was given a weighting of one. This enabled the researcher to determine an average rating for each factor. The eight factors are listed below as follows:

1. Provides good initial earnings
2. Provides job security
3. Flexible career options
4. Challenges me intellectually
5. Good job availability

6. Encourages creativity
7. Allows for independence
8. Provides good future earnings

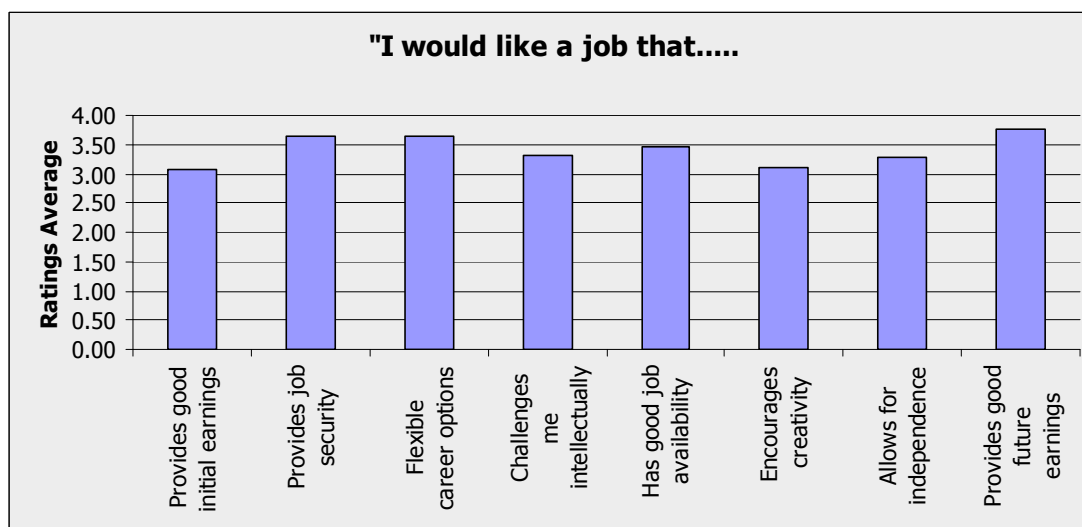
The relative importance of each factor is presented as a bar chart in figure 2. Table 1 gives a breakdown of how each of the respondents answered the question. Of the 36 respondents, 2 failed to answer this question. The results show that the most influential factor by far is a job that provides ‘good future earnings’ as 79.4% of the respondents ‘strongly agreed’ that this was the most important factor, this factor also received the highest average rating of 3.76. A job that provides ‘flexible career options’ and ‘job security’ were rated equally important with 64.7% of the respondents in “strong agreement” for each of the factors. These findings are consistent with many other studies (e.g. Aeyeung and Sands, 1997; Felton et al. 1994; Maudlin et al. 2000). These studies have all shown that accounting student’s career choice has traditionally been heavily influenced by future earnings potential, job market conditions and job security. These findings are disputed however by the work of Adams et al. (1994) who found that students are more likely to be motivated by a genuine interest in the subject as opposed to monetary factors.

Other factors that were rated as being important were a job that ‘encourages creativity’ and one which ‘allows for independence’. 58.8% and 50% of respondents respectively ‘agreed’ that these were both influential factors. With regard to earnings, although the long term earnings of accountants may be perceived as high, starting salaries are often lower than for other business occupations. The results of this study show that students place less importance on ‘initial earnings’ and more importance on ‘good future earnings’ as 26.5% of respondents ‘strongly agreed’ that initial earnings was important, however 79.4% ‘strongly agreed’ that ‘good future earnings’ was a more influential factor. This finding is consistent with the work of Felton et al. (1994) and Noland et al. (2003) who also found that students pursuing a career in accounting placed less importance on ‘initial earnings’ and placed more importance on ‘good future earnings’.

Table III: Breakdown of responses regarding career choice

"I would like a job that....."						
Answer Options	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	
Provides good initial earnings	0	7	18	9	3.06	
Provides job security	0	0	12	22	3.65	
Flexible career options	0	0	12	22	3.65	
Challenges me intellectually	0	4	15	15	3.32	
Has good job availability	0	0	18	16	3.47	
Encourages creativity	1	4	20	9	3.09	
Allows for independence	1	2	17	14	3.29	
Provides good future earnings	0	1	6	27	3.76	

Figure II: Average rating of each factor that influences career choice



4.4: That Factors that Influence a Student to pursue a career in Accounting

Another objective of this study was to determine what influences students to pursue accounting as a career. Of the 36 respondents, 4 failed to answer the question correctly therefore their response could not be used. In the questionnaire

the respondents were given eight factors and they were asked to rate each factor on how it influenced them to pursue accounting. Again each of the responses was given a weighting with strongly agree assigned a weight of five and strongly disagree assigned a weight of one. The eight factors were as follows:

1. Interest in the subject
2. Teachers/Lecturers
3. Ease of earning degree
4. Parents/family
5. Career Guidance
6. Performance in the subject
7. Friends
8. Job availability

The researcher decided to include these specific factors after conducting semi-structured interviews with accounting students and after reviewing all the available literature relating to the research question. Table 3 gives an analysis of how the respondents rated each of the factors.

Table IV: Analysis of responses regarding decision to pursue accounting

How much has each of the following factors influenced your decision to pursue accounting?						
Answer Options	No Influence	Little Influence	Some Influence	Moderate Influence	Strong Influence	Rating Avg.
Interest in the subject	0	0	3	12	17	4.44
Teachers/Lecturers	2	2	8	11	9	3.72
Ease of earning degree	15	8	5	2	2	2.00
Parents/Family	12	7	8	5	0	2.19
Career Guidance	19	9	4	0	0	1.53
Performance in the subject	0	1	5	18	8	4.03
Friends	14	5	8	5	0	2.13
Job Availability	0	4	5	20	3	3.69

The results show that an ‘interest in the subject’ was the most influential factor when accounting students were choosing their major. 53.1% of the respondents ‘strongly agreed’ that this was the most influential factor. The second most