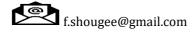# Career Decision-making Process of Secondary School Students in Maldives: Recommendations for Integrating Career Education into Secondary Schools Curriculum

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Abstract

While the career choice process has been extensively studied, research on the career decision-making process has yet to be done in the context of the Maldives. This qualitative study addresses this gap in understanding the career decision-making process of adolescents in Maldives. The paper focuses on first-generation students' reflections on encounters with occupational information and experiences that raised their self-awareness during their adolescent/secondary school years and their challenges and unmet decision-making needs with the aim of identifying revenues for incorporating career education into the secondary school curriculum. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis and semi-structured interviews were used to explore the experiences of college/university students studying in career-relevant undergraduate degree programmes. Findings highlighted the need for a broad generalist secondary school curriculum, increased young people's occupational knowledge, and kept interests alive through extracurricular activities. Policy implications include addressing equity issues between schools and incorporating occupational information into teacher training programmes for secondary school subject teachers.

Keywords: Career decision-making, occupational information, self-awareness, career education, phenomenology

Introduction

The concept of 'career development' captures the dynamic nature of career behaviour and includes the whole working life span, beginning from childhood, continuing into adulthood, and ending with retirement (Rojewski, 2021). However, Brown and Lent (2021) noted that the term' career' is also commonly used to refer to "...one's involvement in occupation or job family (e.g., engineering), which may include multiple jobs" (p. 9). In this sense, 'career choice' refers to choosing and entering a particular career path and the time frame preceding the initial career choice overlaps with the educational life (Rojewski, 2021). Therefore, while acknowledging a career as a lifelong process, this article adopts the everyday use of the terms' career' and 'career choice' as they align more with this paper's scope and focuses.

Good career education programmes are believed to be a powerful tool for improving the efficiency of education and ensuring a matched supply of young people to meet labour market needs (Moote & Archer, 2018). However, current literature on career development highlights the global uncertainty uncertainties related to future employment in light of rapid changes due to globalisation, automation, and the rise of artificial intelligence (e.g., Blustein et al., 2019; Hirschi, 2018; Lent, 2018). Some scholars argue that we may suffer substantial job losses due to technology and artificial intelligence. Other scholars suggest that the loss of old jobs will be mitigated by new occupations, which may offer new employment prospects (Blustein et al., 2019). Despite these debates, scholars (e.g. (Hirschi, 2018; Lent, 2018) anticipate future changes and are open to suggestions for new career development interventions (Blustein et al., 2019).

For the context of this paper's discussion, the Maldives is an island state with over three hundred thousand residential Maldivians (National Bureau of Statistics, Maldives, 2015). The current National Curriculum comprises four stages. The lower secondary consists of four years, divided into Key Stage 3 (grades 7 and 8) and Stage 4 (grades 9 and 10). As student progress to Key Stage 4, they are offered a range of subject electives (National Institute of Education, Maldives, 2014). Usually, students are offered groups of subjects (e.g., science, business, arts), as this was the earlier practice. Nevertheless, subject stream offerings in island schools are based on the availability of teachers and the number of students interested in each stream. At the end of lower secondary, students sit for the O-level examination, marking the end of

compulsory schooling—those who continue to Upper Secondary elect three or four subjects for their A-level examinations.

The Maldives maintains universal enrolment in grades up to the Lower Secondary level (Asian Development Bank, 2015). The island communities have limited access to Upper-secondary education (Asian Development Bank, 2015). For example, in 2018, 205 schools in the country offered Lower Secondary Education, but only 52 schools offered Higher Secondary Education (Ministry of Education, Maldives, 2018). While two public universities and nine colleges conduct diploma and degree programmes in Maldives (Ministry of Higher Education, Maldives, 2020), the leading universities and most private colleges are in the capital city of Male'. Therefore, many young people who complete compulsory schooling in their local islands move to Male for Upper Secondary and Higher Education.

Career education is not compulsory in the Maldives, and there is no planned system (e.g., career education/curriculum, guidance sessions, or counsellors) for career development. However, according to the Curriculum Framework, the lower secondary grades allow students to explore possible career pathways and prepare students for higher education and employment. The two years of higher secondary "provide a platform for exploring an in-depth understanding of specialised areas that would prepare students for higher education and employment" (Ministry of Education, Maldives, 2014, p.24). The current Master Plan for Higher Education (MPHE) 2017-2022 proposes to increase GER in higher education from 26 per cent (in 2015) to 60 per cent (Ministry of Education & Ministry of Higher Education, Maldives, 2019).

It is challenging to make suggestions for a career development programme in this context of uncertainty, and it is wise to make suggestions by exploring the social context and the lived experiences within this context. Hooley and Sultana (2016) remind us that the role or context in enabling or limiting their realisation of people's career dreams should be acknowledged. Considering these factors, this study explores the lived experience of education and career decision-making process of Maldives' young adults who have successfully transitioned from school to career-relevant undergraduate programmes. This paper focused on two main questions: What challenges did they face in making educational and career decisions? How can secondary school facilitate the career decision-making process? Based on the findings,

suggestions for incorporating education into secondary school curricula are made. Given that economic development and employment prospects in small states have always been precarious (Baldacchino, 2015, 2019; Sou et al., 2022), Maldives is an interesting context for exploring educational and career decision-making. In the current climate of uncertainty of future employment, the findings of this study can be relevant to other small island states like Maldives.

Literature Review

The career decision-making process of adolescents

The career decision-making process is the process by which students make choices relating to their educational and career directions (Castellanos, 2018). The importance of the adolescent stage for career development is highlighted in career development theories (e.g., Lent et al., 1994; Lent & Brown, 2013; Savickas, 2013; Super, 1980). Meta-analysis of literature on career interest development shows that the time frame between adolescence and late adulthood is essential for developing career interests (Hoff et al., 2018). Within career development stages, "decision points occur before and at the time of taking on a new role" (Super, 1980, p. 291). The standardised school systems of a country with its branching points illustrate such decision points in the career decision-making process.

While young people are encouraged to make career decisions early, as a rule, such decisions are not required by a specific age (Ford et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the structure of the education system carries some implicit and explicit stages for when career decisions should be final. Many adolescents are often required to make crucial academic decisions about curriculum paths when they are not ready to commit to specific career paths and these choices (Rojewski, 2021). For example, in many countries, students must decide early in secondary school which education track to follow. Unfortunately, such choices can affect young people's future education and career opportunities (Rojewski, 2021).

Gati and Kulcsár (2021) highlighted that the career decision process might vary according to the number of alternatives available and their varying familiarity with the options available. Gati and Kulcsár (2021) noted that individuals may vary in their knowledge and familiarity with various occupations. In addition, the continuous technological developments and

changes in industries and occupations mean that young people must continuously learn about new occupations, employment opportunities, and career prospects (Hirschi, 2018). While acknowledging that it may be impossible to learn about all possible occupations in the current climate of rapid change, it should be acknowledged that adolescents need to have a basic knowledge of a variety of potential occupations so that they can relate their interests and abilities to occupational possibilities and educational and career pathways.

Career education and guidance

There is a diverse understanding of career education and guidance regarding conceptualisation, policy research and practical application (Moote & Archer, 2018). This research conceptualises career education and guidance as "the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes through a planned program of learning experiences in education and training to assist informed work and study decision-making" (Keele et al., 2020, p.55). Education denotes programmes and activities purposefully developed to facilitate learning and career education uses the assumptions, rules, and practices of education, including defining curricula, identifying a teacher, setting tasks and activities to facilitate engagement with knowledge and development of skills, and assessment (often informal) of the outcomes of these activities (Hooley, 2021).

Career decisions are generally based on personal interests and abilities (Gati & Kulcsár, 2021; Lent & Brown, 2021). Therefore, making a good career choice also depends on having adequate information about occupations and understanding one's preferences and abilities (i.e., self-awareness), which are key ingredients of making a well-informed career decision (Gati & Landman-Tal, 2019). In addition, the experiences that influence raising interest and knowledge of the work world are essential aspects of the career development process (Brown & Lent, 2021). Theories and research findings suggest that secondary school is the optimal time for young people to develop talent, ability, and interest to learn about several attainable career goals (Conkel-Ziebell et al., 2018; Lau et al., 2021). Research findings also highlight the importance of helping young adults in setting career goals (Lee et al., 2022). It suggested that secondary school students should engage in educational and career planning to identify possible fields of work consistent with their interests and abilities (Lau et al., 2021; Theresa, 2015). Enhancing the college/university

and career readiness of young adults has also become an essential goal of educational policy (Falco & Steen, 2018).

Rojewski (2021) highlights that more attention should be paid to the educational curriculum and career development. Furthermore, given that career identity development and stabilisation of career aspirations occur during early adolescence, there is a great need and opportunity to make the connection between academic learning and career possibilities during middle and high school years (Rojewski, 2021, p.760). Career education is often delivered within the formal education system as a standalone component through a separate subject in the curriculum or the infused/embedded model, which integrates different subjects across the curriculum (Mahat et al., 2022). While weak implementation of the embedded approach can be patchy and disconnected, it can be highly effective when the whole school is involved in the co-construction of career education programmes (Mahat et al., 2022). It is argued that career education that is embedded in the curriculum can promote social equity by minimising the effects of socioeconomic background (Theresa, 2015) by countering the information deficit associated with disadvantaged backgrounds and restricted conceptualisation of careers (Keele et al., 2020; Moote & Archer, 2018) and promote social justice (e.g., Hooley, 2021; Keele et al., 2020; Thomsen et al., 2022).

The theoretical perspectives on career interest development

Career development theories highlight the role of formal and informal learning experiences in childhood and young adulthood in giving rise to talents and interests and their impact on a career choice. Two significant perspectives on interest can be career choice literature, from the personal interest perspective used in vocation psychology and situational interest perspectives used in educational psychology (Su, 2020). In vocational psychology, interests are conceptualized as relatively stable predisposition preferences towards activities or environments, and educational psychology conceptualizes interests as a psychological state (Su, 2020). While personal interest perspectives focus on the content of interest, situational interest focuses on experiences and the process of interest development interest (Rounds & Su, 2014; Su et al., 2019).

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) provides a framework for understanding internal and external factors influencing individuals' career

development (Lent et al., 1994). Currently, the SCCT consists of five interconnected models. SCCT considers interest to be a key component of career development, and the first two models focus on (a) interest development and (b) choice-making/choice goals (Lent & Brown, 2019). Within the SCCT framework, interests are regarded as stable predispositions and vocation interests are conceptualised as liking, disliking, or indifference towards a career-related activity or occupation (Lent et al., 1994b).

SCCT suggest that personal inputs (e.g., predisposition), core social cognitive variables (e.g., self-efficacy, outcome expectations), and contextual influences (e.g., supports and challenges) influenced career development (Lent et al., 2016). Hence, according to SCCT, contextual supports and challenges (e.g., from educational context) and internal psychological influences (i.e., self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations) significantly impact one's career interests and choices.

The SCCT framework provides an understanding of how personal and contextual factors "make particular career-relevant learning experiences – and subsequent choice options – more or less available to particular individuals (e.g., via differential socialization processes, performance opportunities, modelling, and social encouragement)" (Lent & Brown, 2019, p.1). Based on the importance of learning experiences for interest development, understanding the various sources of learning experiences and possible ways of modifying these experiences hold valuable implications for career interventions (Lent & Brown, 2019). In this paper, SCCT is used in the discussion as one of the theoretical lenses through which the findings can be viewed.

Alternatively, educational psychology focuses on situational interest, which is defined as quick responses that arise in response to contextual stimuli (Nye & James, 2019; Rotgans & Schmidt, 2017) and are often defined as feelings of curiosity, fascination or enjoyment triggered by the stimuli (Su, 2020). Hence, to develop an interest in a career (e.g., robotics), the person first needs to encounter the career in the environment (i.e., family, school, community context).

The situational interest perspective highlights that interest development is a dynamic process that occurs through person-environment interactions. Situational interest may involve the cognitive appraisal of the activity or object interest and can become a source of intrinsic motivation that drives the direction, efforts, and persistence in learning and knowledge acquisition (Su,

2020; Su et al., 2019). Therefore, such experiences from the school context can increase occupational knowledge and enhance self-awareness. For example, for a student interested in robotics, opportunities to study relevant subjects (e.g., physics), participate in activities relevant to the field (e.g., science fairs) and study in a relevant higher education programme all provide learning experience towards the aspired career.

Method
Research approach and design
This qualitative study employed the phenomenology tradition to explore and understand the young adults' experiences in making their career choices. Phenomenology focuses on the diversity of lived experiences, contextual influences, and the life narratives of the participants (Miller et al., 2018). Phenomenology's propensity for capturing context-specific situations and understanding the issues and needs of individuals in the context (Charlick et al., 2016) is aligned with making suggestions for creating support and facilitating the career decision-making and choice of young adults in the Maldives.

Sample of the study
Fourteen young adults listed in Table 1 voluntarily participated in this study. They are the first generation in their families who succeeded in furthering their studies to an undergraduate degree.

Table 1 Undergraduate Degrees of the Study's Participants

Participant	Academic program
Danish, Neena, Zaid and Mala	Bachelor of Business
Haneefa, Sudha & Sara	Bachelor of Teaching Primary School
Mana, Aiman & Zeenath	Bachelor of Psychology
Sujau & Haleem	Bachelor of Information Technology
Dhana & Dhawood	Bachelor of Computer Science

Sampling technique
Purposive sampling procedures were used to recruit participants who met the recruitment criteria of the study, which were: (1) a college/university student studying in a degree program at a college in Male', and (2) the student

is between the ages of 18 - 26 years. Furthermore, to ensure the inclusion of participants from various career domains, the researcher identified four areas of career-related education programmes: Bachelor of Business, Bachelor of Teaching Primary School, Bachelor of Psychology, Bachelor of Information Technology, and Bachelor of Computer Science, for participant recruitment. Educational programmes were based on higher education statistics and overall enrolment in various degree programmes (Ministry of Higher Education, Maldives, 2020).

Data collection technique and the interview protocol

The primary data collection technique was individual semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interview questions gave the researcher the advantage of adjusting questioning accordingly (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The researcher developed the interview protocol, guided by the research objectives and the review of the theoretical and empirical literature on the role of occupation knowledge, self-awareness, and career-relevant learning experiences in the career choice decisions of young adults. The interview protocol included preliminary questions about participants' demographic and socioeconomic background (e.g., college/university generation status, schooling), the core analytical question, sub-questions, and probes relevant to each critical question. The core analytical question was: How did the young adults of the Maldives (currently studying in local colleges/universities) describe their career-relevant learning experiences (e.g., encounters with occupation knowledge, self-awareness) and their challenges and unmet career decision-making needs?

Data analysis

The online interviews (as the study was conducted during the pandemic era) were recorded, transcribed verbatim were analysed using the six-step guidelines suggested by the founders of IPA, Smith et al., (2009). The six steps include (a) reading and re-reading, (b) initial coding, (c) developing emergent themes, (d) searching for connections across emergent themes, (e) moving to the next case, and (f) looking for patterns across cases. The researcher first identified the emergent themes for each participant. The analysis for connections and patterns was held off until the initial steps were conducted on all interview scripts. The researcher was interested in finding the critical

emergent themes for all participants. At the end of the sixth data analysis stage, the researcher took the analysis deeper by importing other theoretical lenses to view the analysis (Smith et al., 2009).

Ethical consideration

Ethical issues were considered during all stages of the research. It included gaining approvals from the University Ethics Committee (Ref No: UM. TNC2/UMREC_1134), local college/university, and informed consent from participants. All interviews, transcribing, and the researcher undertook data analysis. At the start of each interview, the researcher ascertained that the participants understood that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point. In the write-up of research findings, pseudonyms and aggregates of participants' demographics are used to protect the identity of participants.

Findings

The key findings of the analysis of participants' experiences of choosing a future career direction and a career-relevant higher education programme are presented under the two key themes: challenges to career-relevant decision-making and opportunities for facilitating the decision-making process. Three significant challenges, as denoted by the three sub-themes, are limited awareness of various occupations, limited guidance and support at crucial decision-making points, and previous choices made in secondary school. School subjects as a choice of career-relevant information and extracurricular activities were identified as opportunities to facilitate the career decision-making process.

Limited awareness of a variety of occupations

Five participants recalled that their school had conducted a career session for them. However, the participants highlighted that this one-off session provided information about common, well-known occupations or local guest speakers, which meant that they were exposed to the limited careers available in their small island community:

> "I remember three people, including a doctor, a pilot, an artist, and a sportsperson, describing their career journeys."

(Dhana, 19/05/2021, 01:30 pm)

"And sometime people working in different jobs of the island does come to school to share information about their work."
(Haleem, 21/04/2021, 08:00 pm)

Based on their experiences, participants noted that schoolchildren should be made aware of occupations beyond what they would come across in their everyday lives. Neena, who completed her formal schooling in her island school, said:

"In school I was not able to get into internet. I did not have Wi-Fi or internet at all. At that time, I was just thinking about how a young child would think. I would be a lawyer, a doctor, a cabin crew…it was very mixed. In the island, it is a small community, like in a bubble. But when I moved to Male', I knew there were many sectors. If I knew about it then when I was in my Level, I could have made plans."
(Neena, 18/03/2021, 07:00 pm)

Participants also highlighted the need for awareness of a variety of careers so that they can identify a possible career path by the end of compulsory schooling. Sarah and Dhana noted that many of their friends needed more fundamental knowledge about the possible occupations:

"I think providing students with career awareness/information would be very useful because even though I have decided on a career I had many of my friend who were doing A' level and did not what they were doing after that. They did know they want to do higher studies, but they did not know the area that they would follow. So, I think it would be very helpful before we finish O' levels".
(Sara, 18/05/2021, 09:00 am)

"Most of my friends actually did not know what to do and so that is why they actually came to do A' levels."
(Dhana, 19/05/2021, 01:30 pm)

Likewise, both Sujau and Dhawood (studying IT and computer science, respectively) believe that many students need to know that these are potential

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careers in Maldives. Sujau used the example of the tourism sector in Maldives and said that when students think of the sector, they would think about tourism management. However, it is unlikely that they would think about the many IT jobs, such as web developers, within that sector. Alternatively, Dhana, who had studied computer science in school and got interested in the field, said:

> "I had a talk about it with my teacher, but he said this is not a very good career for in Maldives. He said they usually don't hire Maldivians for jobs in this field. They prefer people from other countries. He said it would be difficult for me to get opportunities if I go for this field. So that is the reason why I decided to go for A' level."
>
> (Dhana, 19/05/2021, 01:30 pm)

Most interestingly, the interviews of all three participants studying towards an undergraduate degree in psychology show that they encountered the occupation through unplanned encounters. For example, Zeenath explored the local university courses and found she could not meet the requirements for physiotherapy, so she looked for other options. She found that the next exciting thing was psychology. Mana (who volunteered at a local NGO after school hours) also attributed their initial interest in psychology to an unplanned encounter. She said:

> "At that time, someone from a Malaysia university had an event. So, I went to the event through the volunteer work and actually it was through that event that I got really interested in this area. In that event we were acting as the host, so we did not get too much time to stay and listen to the speeches, but it was through the event and the brochures that I got interest."
>
> (Mana, 25/04/2021, 03:00 pm)

Likewise, Aiman said:

> "I think the first time I came across this (counselling) was in one of the sessions we had grade 10 in the island school. I really think the session was about child abuse. … I don't remember everything about the session. There was this one part where they covered reasons why people hesitate to seek help. But there was this one part where they shared a lot of stories of students and children who went through things and how to reach for help. It was very interesting."
>
> (Aiman, 26/04/2021, 08:30 pm)

Limited guidance for career-relevant decision making

Most participants had realised the need to make a career choice by the time they were in junior secondary but could not make a firm career commitment as they did not know how to proceed with the process. Nine participants said their schools did not hold formal career-relevant sessions or activities. For example, participants responses to the question included:

"Actually, I don't think there was any support for the process of choosing a career. I wish like when I was young, at least from grade seven."

(Zeenath, 28/04/2021, 03:00 pm)

"When we were in school there were no specific programmes related to how to build a career."

(Mala, 3/07/2021, 02:00 pm)

Looking back on their journey and based on the challenges they experienced, participants highlighted the need for career information during critical decision points and transition in schooling, such as subject/stream selection for junior secondary and transition from junior secondary to senior secondary and college/university programmes. Over half the participants noted the importance of receiving career information before choosing a course. They believed that students should know the broad career direction they want to follow before choosing a subject stream. Few participants highlighted the need for support prior to stream selection and before the end of formal schooling (grade 10). For example:

"Career decision making …. I don't know…. even in our school, stream selection was also very difficult. At that time, I did not know what the benefit of the science or business stream. My friends choose business stream and that is why I choose business stream too. But after completing my O- levels and starting A-levels, I was thinking it is better to take science subjects like there are more job opportunities in the science stream."

(Zaid, 19/06/2021, 10:00 am)

"Actually, I don't think there was any support for the process of choosing a career. I think when students are in grade seven and they are choosing a stream they and their parents need

awareness. For example, when there are going from primary to junior secondary this is an important milestone. From that point the awareness of parents and students should be built. Like these are the options and opportunities in this field. Awareness is very important. After completing 10 and going to grade 11-12 making students aware of the option and how to research these is very important. Something like this should be there from the school system. Something that I missed."

(Zeenath, 28/04/2021, 03:00 pm)

Challenges due decisions made in secondary school

While all participants had always wanted to get a higher education, by the time they completed compulsory schooling, most participants had a clear idea of career-relevant higher education programmes they wanted to pursue. In addition, while nine participants had done A-level, none had made a healthy career choice or explored career-relevant higher education programmes. The interviews showed that all participants knew the need to choose a career direction. Most participants (12 participants) had given some thought about some careers but gave up on these ideas (due to perceived or actual challenges) by the time they completed their formal schooling. Hence, when taking A-level subjects, participants had not considered linking it to career interests. Subjects taken for A-level had been based on other factors such as liking a subject, best subjects in terms of O-level results, or subject availability in the school.

Some participants had become aware of the need to link A-level to their career-related higher education starting senior secondary (A' level) or after facing the challenge of failing to meet the academic requirements for the career-related academic programme they were interested in. For example, during his senior secondary years, Dhanish thought he would study medicine. However, at that time, Dhanish had not been studying A-level chemistry and did not seem to realise that it was required to study medicine. Likewise, when Zaid, who wanted to do an accounting degree after his A 'levels, was probed about why he did not take three A-level subjects (excluding Islam and Dhivehi (the local language), he said:

"I did not know then but after completing A-level, and I was searching for a course in nearby countries like in Sri Lanka and India and saw that most programme required three A level passes that are excluding Islam and Dhivehi (local language)."

(Zaid, 19/06/2021, 10:00 am)

Mana went through compulsory schooling with little thought for a future career area. When a local college on her island offered a certificate course in psychology, she decided to enrol. Mana decided to do a degree in psychology after completing the certificate programme. Mana said:

> "I took the business stream but now when I have to study subjects like biology in psychology, I am kind of lost initially."
>
> (Mana, 25/04/2021, 03:00 pm)

Zeenath took the science stream in secondary school and chose her A-level subjects based on her O-level results. After her A-level, Zeenath looked for other career options and got interested in physiotherapy, but she did not get a chance to study it because she did not study physics at her A-level. Zeenath said:

> "But later I was sad that I had not taken physics because after completing school I suddenly got interested in physiotherapy. And as my first option of study then was physiotherapy and search for that. But because I had not done physics, I did not get a chance to study it when I tried to apply for a college in India that offered that program. I tried about two colleges and they both said that physics was a requirement. I thought if I do A' levels again it will take a lot of time so then I thought of psychology."
>
> (Zeenath, 28/04/2021, 03:00 pm)

School subject(s) as source of career-relevant information

The findings show that more than half the participants had reflected on their interest or abilities in school subjects as a basis for future career considerations. The influence of subject interest and abilities was mainly seen in the career journey of four participants who were studying for an undergraduate degree in a career in information and technology or computer sciences at the time of the interview. The two participants, studying towards an undergraduate degree in computer science, had taken computer studies as an elective subject. For example, according to Dhana:

> "In grade 8 to10, I studied science stream, and I took computer science as the option. That the reason why I liked this career; I mean computer science. I do not know maybe it was the teacher that got me interested in the subject. It was a very interesting class. So, after taking it in grade 8 I thought it would be a very nice career."
>
> (Dhana, 19/05/2021, 01:30 pm)

Dhawood also shared that the subject "*did spark some interest or more like added to the interest*". Furthermore, he added that:

> "I considered myself to be decent in programming because I was able to pick up the concepts really fast. It felt like a puzzle-solving activity, and I loved anything of that sort, and that was why I love Math as well, and that is why I thought programming would fit well."
>
> (Dhawood, Jun 5, 2021, 02:00 PM)

Similarly, Sara and Mala had other relevant career interests purely based on their liking for a school subject. For example, Sara considered becoming a secondary mathematics teacher because she likes mathematics. When Mala chose the business stream, she did not even know what biology was, but she became interested in the subject after moving to another school and took biology and knew what it was. According to Mala, she wanted to become a nurse because she wanted to study biology. Dhanish was also interested in science subjects and in choosing zoology or botany as a career choice before giving up on this career interest as he believed there was no job prospectus for this in the Maldives.

Alternatively, two other participants had considered career areas based on their interest in school subject(s). However, they gave up on a career interest due to their lack of perceived ability in a subject. For example, Zaid wanted to become an accountant and chose the subject for A's level but gave up because he had difficulties understanding some accounting concepts. Haneefa took the business stream in secondary school and studied marine science as an elective subject. Haneefa said:

> "My favourite subject was marine science at that time because it was about marine environments. We went on many field trips to many places. Sometimes I really wanted to become a scientist.

But I came from a business background. So, it is very difficult for me to study science."

(Haneefa, 14/03/2021, 20:00 pm)

Extracurricular activities as a source skill development and self-awareness

All study participants had been active in school and were involved in multiple extracurricular activities. The extracurricular activities mentioned by participants included sports, scouts, bands, subject clubs, science fairs, national-level competitions, and community events. Furthermore, a few participants had also held leadership positions such as club president, school post (e.g., house or games captain), and representative of the school executive committee. For example, according to Suja, he played football and took part in sports at the interclass level. He also took part in Quran competitions, even at the school level.

Similarly, Mala participated in inter-house netball tournaments, athletics, and many other extracurricular activities in school and was a house captain and vice-captain. Zaid and Neena believe that their strengths influenced their career areas. Zaid noted that a manager needs to have good leadership skills, and he has those skills. He highlighted that he had shown exemplary leadership skills in school and had been in many leadership positions. Neena had studied in a business stream in school and enrolled for a business administration diploma before considering a future career. She noted how the experiences she gained during her diploma increased her self-awareness:

"I got interested in marketing because I am the event manager in the college. I started going to meetings and events, and I liked that. So, the college played a huge role in my interest. I was doing all these things as a volunteer, but as I got the chance to engage and interact with people, I started understanding myself better and what I wanted."

(Neena, Mar 18, 2021, 07:00 PM)

Dhawood was involved in both English and mathematics clubs at school, highlighting clubs' potential for developing skills to help identify career potential careers. He said:

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"I think what schools should do is focus on what students are good at. Their talents and hobbies and that can be done easily through clubs. Clubs has died down a lot in schools. If they could somehow fix this and push students to focus on their hobbies over their marks because not all students are supposed to be good at scoring. If they can somehow focus on polishing skills, I think they could do a way better job in selecting careers".

(Dhawood, Jun 5, 2021, 02:00 PM)

Discussion

The period of young adulthood is supposed to be a time for understanding career preferences and information about careers and narrowing down career preferences to a final choice (Gati & Landman-Tal, 2019; Sampson et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the research findings highlight young adults' limited encounters with occupational knowledge. For example, the few who recalled career-relevant information highlighted that it was limited to the few occupations available in their island context. The research findings revealed that without a career development curriculum, young people used their interest or ability (or lack thereof) in school subjects to make career-relevant educational decisions. Vocational interests are contextual in that interest always includes an object or activity from the environment that arouses interest (Rounds & Su, 2014; Su, 2020; Su et al., 2019). Interest in a school subject(s) or task about a specific career area (e.g., coding for computer programmes or working with children) are examples of career-related objects and activities. Theory and research confirm that interest promotes learning, exploration, and knowledge acquisition in specific domains (Rounds & Su, 2014) and guides academic and career trajectories (Harackiewicz et al., 2016). The findings of this research support this notion. This research shows that in the absence of a formal career guidance programme, one salient object of career relevance for participants was interest in school subject(s). Nine participants had considered careers based on their liking for a school subject at one time or another.

In addition to interest, people also need direct social learning experiences with positive outcomes experiences to acquire a higher sense of efficacy for those tasks (Lent et al., 1994). A recent meta-analysis confirms mastery experiences strongly correlate to self-efficacy (Lent & Brown, 2019). Participants' subjective assessment of their past mastery experiences is believed to inform self-efficacy rather than their objective performance (Lent

& Brown, 2019). The findings of this present study are consistent with these findings. The analysis shows that participants referred to both subjective and objective mastery assessments. The final career choice of five participants was based on their satisfaction with higher performance and achievement in school subjects or a basic college certificate in the area. As highlighted in the findings, this was the most salient in interviews of four participants studying information technology and computer science.

The findings of the research also highlight the limited curricular choices. While Maldivian students are required to choose a subject stream (science, business stream, or arts stream) from the onset of their junior secondary schooling (grade 8), the arts stream (consisting of history and geography) was not available in any of the atoll or island school (the arts stream is only available in few selective schools in Male'). Participants interviews also showed the island/atolls schools offered marines science, fisheries science, or tourism studies as elective subject while participant who studied in Male' (capital) was also offered computer science as an elective subject.

For young adult to realise their interest in a career or a career-related task, they need an encounter with the career or task. The Planned Happenstance Theory (Mitchell et al., 1999) emphasised the importance of opportunities within unplanned encounters in the environment, increasing the likelihood of chance events and being prepared to capitalize when opportunities arise. Participants of this study have encountered chance encounters and reflected on these encounters once they started thinking about a future career. Participants shared experiences of such chance encounters, which aroused their interest. One interesting finding is that three (out of four) participants who recounted chance encounters are currently studying for an undergraduate degree in psychology. Moreover, these chance encounters factored significantly into the participants' career choices. For example, the chance encounter was her first encounter with a professional for Aiman, and these incidents motivated them to explore the area and finalise it as her career choice. Similarly, through a chance encounter, Zeenath realised that psychology was an area that could fulfil her passion for helping people.

Conclusion and Implications for Policy and Practice

The result of the only available published information based on the result of a brief survey on career choices identified interest as the predominant influence

on the career choice of recent school leavers. This research showed that school subjects were a predominant source of career interest. These findings have implications for further research and policy considerations for the Maldives. Thus, they highlight the importance of extending the limited secondary school curriculum and eliminating the curriculum disparities between the island schools and schools Male' (capital).

Furthermore, the findings highlight the need for an infused/embedded career education model incorporating occupational information into relevant school subjects. The broader curricula articulated in the New Curriculum Framework must be implemented in all schools to eliminate the existing disparity between the island disparity and schools. All secondary schools should have the opportunity to study a broad curriculum including (a) Environment, Technology, and Science, (b) Health and Wellbeing, (c) Social Science, (d) Creative Arts, and (e) Entrepreneurship to supplement the subject stream subjects that they choose. This would extend the limited curriculum, limiting the students to a particular stream too early.

Young people need knowledgeable adults to guide them through the career planning process. First, they provide formal career guidance programmes and counsellors during every school dissolution. There may be more practical and viable solutions than providing a guidance counsellor in every school, considering the small population size of the island schools' financial and human resource constraints. While subject teachers are in an ideal position to impart occupational knowledge, research findings also highlighted that teachers needed more awareness of career options relevant to the subject(s) they teach. Hence, policy implications include incorporating occupation information into school subjects, enhancing subject teachers' knowledge of career options related to their subject, and pedagogical strategies for connecting occupation knowledge to the subject curriculum. These aspects could be part of the school curriculum through in-service training of schoolteachers and incorporating these into teacher training programmes.

Young adults must acknowledge the realities of the rapidly changing work world and the possibility of new occupations and employment opportunities. Popular concepts of "proteron" and "boundaryless" careers emphasise the young people's pursuit of their priorities and willingness to pursue career opportunities across an organisation. In addition to a broader curriculum, extracurricular activity is an alternative avenue for catering to young adults' interests. Given the importance of interest in career choice and

the potential of extracurricular activities to cater to various interests, there is much value in keeping students' interests alive through extracurricular activities.

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