

Parents Urged To Support Leaving Cert Students To Look Beyond Stereotypes When Making CAO Decisions

Second-level students, their parents and influencers encouraged to visit

Smart Futures while considering their CAO options

18th December 2014 – Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) has called on parents to talk to Leaving Certificate students over the Christmas break and ahead of the CAO deadline on 1st February 2015 to help them avoid ruling out science, technology, engineering or maths (STEM) courses simply because of misperceptions or stereotypes.

According to new research with over 2,000 Irish third-level students, conducted by Amárach Research as part of SFI's *Smart Futures* programme, students' main concern when making their CAO choice is whether they will "fit in", ranking it higher than other factors like career prospects.

Dr. Ruth Freeman, Director of Strategy and Communications at SFI, said: "*We know that there are a number of stereotypes about STEM careers that may discourage a student from choosing these subjects for their Leaving Cert, or as part of the CAO. The reality, however, is that there is no end to the variety of careers in areas like technology or science. There are exciting prospects for graduates in STEM in well paid roles that are making a real difference to our society. From 2004 to 2014 employment in ICT companies grew by more than 30% at a time where overall employment in the Irish economy grew by only 1%. Salaries in these companies are also 29% above the national average.*"

"Given that one of the most frequent conversations with anyone sitting their Leaving Certificate over the next six weeks will be to ask what they are choosing for the CAO, we want to ensure that people are fully informed before making their decisions. Sometimes potential career routes aren't as obvious to parents when thinking of science, technology, engineering or maths. SmartFutures.ie offers the opportunity for students and parents to hear from people studying and working in a variety of exciting areas like pharmaceuticals, cybersecurity, data science and biotechnology."

The Smart Futures programme, which is managed by SFI Discover and coordinated in partnership with Engineers Ireland, is an online resource for students and parents, featuring real life career stories and video interviews with people working in a range of industries. Parents are encouraged to visit www.smartfutures.ie to help support their children in making CAO and career decisions.

As part of the research, a number of perceptions about science, technology, engineering and maths were uncovered. The main findings include:

- 62% of all students (STEM and non-STEM) identified feeling that they will 'fit in' as the most important factor in deciding what to study at third-level. The 'fitting in' factor is even more prevalent among female students, with 65% highlighting it as their biggest influence;
- Career prospects are deemed the second most important factor (56%) with the entry requirements and academic reputation of the institution less important at 23% and 28% respectively;
- When queried about their positive perceptions of STEM subjects, 51% of students felt STEM courses offer good career prospects, with 84% of STEM third-level students surveyed confident they will find a job they enjoy after college;
- When asked about negative perceptions about STEM subjects, there is a perception that STEM courses are difficult (51%) and 49% believe they require too many hours' commitment per week;
- 91% of students agree that STEM is important for the development of the Irish economy.