

A Career in Science

By Dr. Tom Cotter, Dean of Science, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth.

"To be or not to be - a scientist - that is the question"? I hope Will Shakespeare will forgive me for the liberty I have taken with one of his best known quotations in the English language, but this is a question that many students ask between the ages of 15-18. In fact it's a question I asked myself during my leaving certificate year, the answer which ultimately led me to my present position. The contents of this article I hope will go some way to explaining the many career paths open to individuals with either degrees or diplomas in science subjects.

First of all there are many roads to becoming a scientist, but almost all involve taking some kind of degree or diploma at third level. The options available are many and varied, and it requires some thought before such a choice can be made. Advice in this regard can be obtained from school career offices or direct from any third level colleges, many of which operate "open days" when prospective students can avail of the opportunity to come and talk to lecturers in various subjects and disciplines. Information on career opportunities are also generally available at such events.

Part of the decision of becoming a scientist is the choice of subjects to study and in this regard consideration should be given to those you find stimulating and interesting. The subjects in which you have achieved high grades in exams generally reflect your ability and interest and this can be a good indicator when choosing degree/diploma subjects. This does not mean however, that you should completely avoid subjects which you found difficult, since this may simply reflect the way it was taught or the limitations of the curriculum.

Job Opportunities

When choosing a degree/diploma course, is it important to consider the job opportunities which will be available when you have completed your course? Again this is a question that is often asked, because students want to know what the job prospects are going to be if they spend two, three or four years of third level study. A good question to ask, given the current level of unemployment in this country, but a difficult one to answer given the scope of this short article.



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Traditional career paths for scientists have in general terms reflected the subjects they choose to study at third level. For instance students who study chemistry get jobs in the chemical industry while those who study food science get positions in the food sector. Science degrees have also been a route into the teaching professions. Science is the corner-stone of so many of our industries there will always be a need for scientists. In addition to studying science to primary degree level there is an increasing number of students taking post-graduate courses to really hone their skills in a particular subject area and improve their employment prospects.

Skills Transfer

An important point that many students fail to appreciate is that once you have completed your course for example, in Chemistry or Biology, that does not mean that the only jobs you can apply for are as Chemists or Biologists. A Science degree opens up many different opportunities. One of the main skills you learn while studying science is how to approach and deal with complex problems in a clear and rational way. This skill in many instances may be more valuable than what you learn about the subject itself. One of the key characteristics of being a successful manager or entrepreneur is the ability to make quick clearcut rational decisions. As a result while we have many scientists working at their profession such as Chemists, Physicists, Mathematicians, etc, there are also many more working in managerial positions in a variety of different companies. I know of science graduates who have developed successful careers in the advertising, financial, food industries areas in which their skills at making decisions are more important than the subjects they did in science courses. The message is that in addition to learning the fundamentals of a science subject, scientists also learn to approach problems in a rational way and this skill is much valued in many different professions.