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Why do students choose the medical radiation science profession?

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Abstract Recruitment and retention are of paramount importance to medical radiation science (MRS) as a profession. There is a strong demand for MRS practitioners which is expected to continue as the population ages. This study aimed to examine demographic data, factors relating to the career choice of MRS, and future work or study plans of first year MRS students. Questionnaires were distributed to 83 first year students, currently enrolled in MRS at the University of Sydney. A total of 73 completed questionnaires were received. This sample included 30 diagnostic radiography students, 24 nuclear medicine students and 19 radiation therapy students. The top three factors that influenced students' career choices was wanting to help others, followed by wanting to work in a healthcare field, then wanting to work with technology. The most common source of students' career information was family members, friends and health professionals. Among the students, 68.5% were aware of advancement opportunities in their stream of MRS. About half of the students planned to specialise or undertake postgraduate study in MRS, and 39.7% planned to study another degree after graduating. The results of this study indicated that many students chose MRS as a career with the goal of helping others. The most frequently reported source through which the students first heard about the profession was personal contacts. Furthermore, about half of the students were interested in further study. This information can be used by professional organisations, educational programs, or employers to assist in recruitment and retention strategies of MRS students.

Keywords: career choice, medical radiation science, recruitment, retention, students

Introduction

Workers in the healthcare field are currently in strong demand due to the rise in the aging population. By the year 2011, Health and Community Services is expected to experience the strongest jobs growth with more than 150,000 jobs being created. The Medical Radiation Science (MRS) profession has been identified as a field with very good job prospects and moderate future employment growth.[1] An understanding of the factors affecting students' choices to pursue a MRS career will provide important information that will assist in student recruitment and retention strategies for the MRS profession.

Literature review

Research into the process of choosing MRS as a career is relatively limited. The majority of existing research investigated the reasons for choosing radiography based on the views of students studying for radiography qualifications. Some articles also exist on the career choice of radiation therapy, but articles on choosing nuclear medicine as a career appear to be lacking. Other research on career choice has also been conducted on allied health students studying physiotherapy, speech pathology and occupational therapy.

A study by Vosper, Price and Ashmore (2005) investigated the career progression of radiography graduates in the United Kingdom (UK). The variety of work and ability to specialise in a number of areas were the most commonly stated reasons for recommending the profession. Those who recommended the career stated the fact that jobs were available or the need for recruitment. The main motive for choosing a radiography career was the desire for a health career and the combined interaction with patients and technology. Increasing pay and improving the working environment were stated as the most important factors in improving retention.[2]

A recent peer-reviewed study by Carwile (2003) investigated the issues affecting diversity of the radiography student population in the United States of America (USA). They found that personality, race and gender have an impact on choosing radiography as a career. For example, radiography is more likely to be chosen by students with investigative personality types. Moreover, minority groups and men were less likely to choose the female-dominated allied health professions, preferring male-dominated professions due to the associated prestige.[3]

Another peer-reviewed study conducted in the USA by Adams and Vann (2002) explored student recruitment issues in radiation therapy. The most common reasons for entering radiation therapy for females was increased patient contact and a desire to help patients. Males selected financial security as the main motivation for choosing the profession. The relationship with patients and financial security were the primary reasons for radiation therapists to stay in the profession. The barriers frequently identified in radiation therapy recruitment included the lack of funding for recruitment efforts, declining interest in medical fields, competition from other allied health programs and lack of flexibility for the non-traditional student.[4]

A study conducted by Stewart, Pool and Winn (2002) in the USA assessed the factors in recruitment and employment of physiotherapy and speech pathology students. It was revealed that most students first learned about their professions through personal experience. The most important factors in students' decisions to enter these professions were a desire to help others and the nature of the work.[5]

In a UK study by Payne (1998), gender differences relating to choice of a radiography career were evaluated. Employment opportunities were a determining factor with regard to career choice, since most students wanted to work as a radiographer after graduation. It was also found that female students had a higher level of family encouragement than males regarding choice of this career, and that the technological side of the profession, rather than caring was the incentive for more male students than females when choosing medical imaging. In addition, none of the students indicated an early childhood ambition to study radiography, indicating radiography may not have been their first choice of career.[6]

A study by Akroyd and Lavin (1992) examined career and program choice of radiography students in the USA, and found that the most important factor in career choice was the availability of work. The second most important factor affecting career choice was nature of the work, followed by opportunity to help people, advancement opportunities, and financial rewards. In addition, the most important sources of students' career information were family members, a hospital visit or tour, and other health professionals.[7]

A study by Rozier, Gilkeson and Hamilton (1992) in the USA assessed the reasons for choosing occupational therapy as a career. The results of the study indicated that most students chose occupational therapy as a career with the goal of helping others. Job availability and prestige of the profession influenced their choice of occupational therapy over other helping professions. Personal experience in the field influenced career choice and careers advisors had little impact.[8]

The findings of recent studies on radiography and radiation therapy students are similar to earlier studies as there are many shared factors affecting career choice. These include the opportunity to help people, employment opportunities and technology. The studies on allied health students are also similar to these studies as the opportunity to help others is a common factor affecting career choice. However, allied health students do not mention technology and the ability to specialise as a reason for choosing their career.

Previous studies have explored many of the factors affecting career choice but have not collectively analysed the three streams of MRS. In addition, these studies were undertaken overseas and no literature currently exists in Australia on the factors affecting students' choices on the MRS professions. Furthermore, the previous studies have failed to assess the impact of entry criteria on career choice.

Aims

The aim of this study was to examine demographic data, factors relating to the career choice of MRS, and future work or study plans of first year MRS students. The results are discussed in terms of implications for recruitment and retention of students. The following research questions were developed based on the above aim:

- What are students' ages, genders and races?
- What factors are important to students in making MRS their career choice?
- Has previous experience with the MRS influenced students' decision to choose a career in MRS?
- Does the Universities Admission Index (UAI) influence students' decision to choose a career in MRS?
- What are students' future work plans?
- Do students have plans to undertake further study in the stream of MRS or do students plan to change their career in the future?

Method

Subjects

The questionnaire was distributed to a sample size of 83 first year students, who are currently enrolled in MRS at the University of Sydney. A total of 73 completed questionnaires were received. This included 30 Diagnostic Radiography students, 24 Nuclear Medicine students and 19 Radiation Therapy students. Both males and females with a minimum age of 18 years were invited to participate in the study.

Instrument

The investigators developed a one-page questionnaire (Appendix 1) to obtain demographic information about participants and specific information related to the students' choice of the MRS profession and their future study plans. The questionnaire contained 23 items, consisting of five closed questions, one open-ended question, and 18 items to be rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The questionnaire required about 10 to 15 minutes to complete. Ethics approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee, The University of Sydney.

Procedure

The questionnaire was administered in semester two during students' scheduled practical classes after obtaining permission from their lecturer. Students were invited to participate in the study after an explanation of the study was provided to them. Students were given the option to complete the survey and were assured that their decision of non-participation would not affect their class grade or progress through their course. Students were provided with a booklet containing a letter of introduction, subject information sheet, informed consent form, and a questionnaire. The students' informed consent was gained before they attempted the questionnaire. Participants were given approximately 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity of participants, student names and student numbers were not required on the questionnaire. Upon completion of the questionnaire, students detached the questionnaire and signed consent form from the booklet and handed them in separately. The students retained the letter of introduction and subject information sheet.

Data analysis

Data analysis was carried out after the collection of the questionnaires using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) (College Station, Texas, USA). The results were presented as frequencies, percentages, means, tables and charts.

Results

Students' age, gender and race

Table 1 contains descriptive measures of the sample. From the 83 questionnaires distributed, 73 questionnaires were returned providing a response rate of 88%. The class size varied between the three streams with 30 students in diagnostic radiography, 24

students in nuclear medicine, and 19 students in radiation therapy. Of the respondents, 76.7% of MRS students were currently aged between 18 and 20 years old with the median age of 19 years. The decision to pursue the MRS profession was made at a median age of 18 years. The gender distribution of the sample was 58.9% female ($n = 43$) and 41.1% male ($n = 30$). The majority of students were from Australia (48%) and the second most common country of origin was China (20.5%), the remainder consisted of students from other countries (Table 2).

Table 1: Student profile ($n = 73$).

Survey Items	n	%
Gender: Female	43	58.9
Male	30	41.1
MRS stream: Diagnostic Radiography	30	41.1
Nuclear Medicine	24	32.9
Radiation Therapy	19	26.0
Decision age: 10–15	2	2.7
16–20	60	82.2
21–25	7	9.6
26–30	4	5.5
Current age: 18–22	64	87.7
23–27	5	6.8
28–32	4	5.5

Table 2: Country of origin of MRS students.

Nationality	%
Australia	48
China	20.5
Vietnam	5.5
India	2.7
Korea	2.7
South Korea	2.7
Sri Lanka	2.7
Croatia	1.4
Indonesia	1.4
Iran	1.4
Malaysia	1.4
Philippines	1.4
Russia	1.4
Singapore	1.4
South Africa	1.4
Sudan	1.4
Syria	1.4
Thailand	1.4

Factors important in students' career choice

Table 3 illustrates the percentage of respondents who answered strongly agree to strongly disagree to attitude inventory items about these factors. The total is more than 100% because respondents were given the option of selecting more than one item. The percentage values from strongly agree and agree were combined to give a favourability rating. The top three factors that influenced students' career choices was wanting to help others (91.8%), followed by wanting to work in a healthcare field (87.7%), then wanting to work with technology (64.4%). Knowledge of the profession, and recommendations from family, friends, and other health professionals (60.3%) were ranked as the fourth. Universities Admission Index (54.8%) was ranked fifth and then employment opportunities (50.7%), financial rewards (42.5%), and whether the profession was their first choice (49.3%). The careers advisor rated very low (15.1%) (See Figure 2).

Table 4 illustrates the percentage of respondents in each steam of MRS who answered agree to strongly agree to these factors and the mean rating for each factor. Although all three groups of MRS students were similar in their rating of the factors, Table 4 shows the differences in their responses. The main differences in

Table 3: Respondents' Rating of the Factors as a percentage.

Factor	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Don't Know	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree
Help others	91.8	4.1	2.8
Health care field	87.7	8.2	2.7
Technology	64.4	24.7	10.9
Knowledge	60.3	17.8	21.9
Family, friend, health pro	60.2	8.2	31.5
UAI	54.8	9.6	35.6
UAC guide	54.8	9.6	35.6
Employment	50.6	19.2	30.1
First choice	49.3	5.5	45.2
Financial	42.4	24.7	32.9
Previous experience	37.0	5.5	53.4
Careers advisor	15.0	24.7	60.3

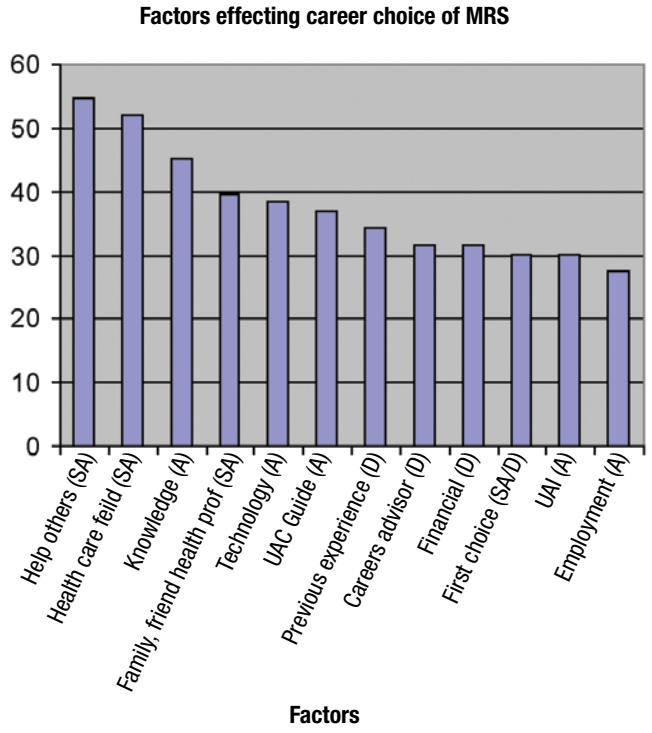

Figure 2: Factors affecting career choice of MRS.
Note: (SA) = Strongly Agree, (A) = Agree, (D) = Disagree.

Table 4: Factor rating by the three MRS streams.

Factor	DR* *n* = 30 Mean	NM* *n* = 24 Mean	RT* *n* = 19 Mean
First choice	2.57	2.96	3.00
UAI	2.73	2.17	3.26
UAC guide	2.77	2.71	2.58
Careers advisor	3.73	3.42	4.05
Family, friend, health pro	2.67	2.13	3.16
Previous experience	3.63	3.46	3.45
Health care field	1.87	1.79	1.71
Technology	2.17	2.25	2.23
Help others	2.00	1.58	1.66
Financial	2.70	3.00	2.79
Employment	1.80	3.33	2.70
knowledge	2.30	2.92	2.51

Note: 1 = strongly agree, 3 = don't know, and 5 = strongly disagree. *DR = Diagnostic Radiography, NM = Nuclear Medicine, RT = Radiation Therapy.

Table 5: Other reasons stated which have influenced career choice.

Comment
Diagnostic Radiography
■ 'Health care profession is my dream'
■ '3 year span as opposed to 4'
■ 'Passion of learning methods of body imaging'
■ 'Travel opportunities. As they are in high demand around the world'
■ 'I have been interested in working at the health care field'
Nuclear Medicine
■ 'I have family members who have done the course, and I wanted to be part of the health care system'
■ 'The fact that many courses are postgraduate'
■ 'I wanted to do something different and that would change (technology) as I do it'
Radiation Therapy
■ 'Family members all work in medical profession'
■ 'Was interested and enjoyed science at school'
■ 'Death of family member who suffered from tumour'
■ 'Very good course for immigration'
■ 'RT (radiation therapy) had similar course to diagnostic radiography which was first career choice – plan to study this as graduate having completed RT degree so I have some knowledge and experience of MRS already'

the three groups centred on the issues of employment, knowledge of the profession, and whether their MRS stream was their first choice, as evidenced by the mean scores. A lower mean score correlates with a greater degree of favourability, where 1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree. Diagnostic radiography students agreed that there were good employment opportunities (DR mean of 1.8) compared to radiation therapy (RT mean of 2.7) and nuclear medicine (NM mean of 3.33). Diagnostic radiography students also had the greatest knowledge of their profession and nuclear medicine had the least knowledge (DR mean of 2.30, RT mean of 2.52, NM mean of 2.92). Also, more diagnostic radiography students were in their first career choice (DR mean of 2.57, NM mean of 2.96, RT mean of 3.00).

There was also one open item on the question which allowed responders to state other reasons for their career choice which were not present on the questionnaire. Table 5 illustrates their responses. Factors such as the length of the course, travel opportunities, the changing field of technology, enjoyment of science, death of a family member, and opportunity for immigration were all stated as reasons which influenced their career choice.

Sources of career information

Of the factors influencing career choice, four items related to sources of career information. Most of the respondents first learned about the profession through personal contacts. The most common source of career information was family members, friends or other health professionals (60.3%), followed by the Universities Admissions Centre guide (54.8%), previous experience (37%) such as a diagnostic procedure or hospital tour, and then career advisor (5.1%). More than half of the respondents were most likely to become aware of the profession in high school. Careers advisors had little impact on career choice (15.1%).

Students' future work plans

Among the students, 68.5% (n = 50) were aware of advancement opportunities in their stream of MRS, and 53.4% (n = 39) planned to specialise or undertake postgraduate study in their stream of MRS. 39.7% (n = 29) planned to study another degree after graduating in MRS. Of students 9% (n = 62) said that they enjoyed their clinical placements and 74% (n = 40) said that they would recommend the MRS course to others. From the sample,

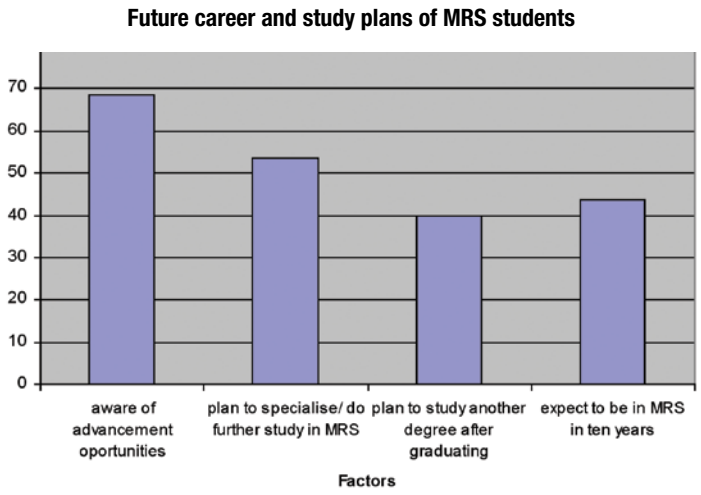

Figure 3: Future career and stud plans of MRS students.

43.8% of students (n = 32) planned to be in the profession in ten years after their first year of university (Figure 3).

Discussion

An overwhelming majority of students in the sample considered the need to help others as the most important factor in their career decision, followed by wanting to work in the health care field. This finding is consistent with previous studies examining the career choice of allied health students. Studies by Stewart, Pool and Winn (2002) and Rozier, Gilkeson and Hamilton (1992) on occupational therapy and physiotherapy students indicated that most students chose the career with the goal of helping others.[5,8] In addition, a study by Vosper, Price and Ashmore (2005) of radiography students found that the desire to help people was a highly motivating factor in career decisions.[2] Adams and Vann (2002) showed that female radiation therapy students chose the career to help patients.[4] Hence, altruism has always been a vital component of health care professionals' work and this quality has been reinforced in our study.

Wanting a health care job and the opportunity to work with technology were also major reasons for choosing a career in MRS. This finding is similar to a study by Vosper, Price and Ashmore (2005) which found that the main motive for choosing radiography was the desire for a health career and the combined interaction between patients and technology.[2] Payne (1998) also found that the technological side of the profession, rather than caring was the incentive for more male students than females when choosing MRS.[6] Overall, the student sample expressed a desire to help others. Recruitment materials might emphasise how the MRS professions provide opportunities to help others and enumerate the employment setting. For students in the present study, financial rewards were not an important factor in career decisions. However, male radiation therapy students in a study by Adams and Vann (2002) indicated that financial security was the main incentive to enter the profession.[4]

Payne (1998), Rozier, Gilkeson and Hamilton (1992) found that the most important factor for choosing radiography was the availability of jobs.[6,7] In this study, the availability of jobs was not the most important factor when deciding to enter the profession. However, from examination of the MRS stream differences, most nuclear medicine and radiation therapy students indicated that there were poor employment opportunities in their stream of MRS (NM mean of 3.33 and RT mean of 3.32), whereas most radiography students agreed that there were good employment opportunities in their stream (DR mean of 1.8). This may have implications for retention of students in radiation therapy and nuclear medicine for those wanting to work as MRS practitioners after graduation.

The results of this study also indicated that students were most likely to find out about the MRS professions through personal contacts. The most important source of students' career information was a family member, friend or other health professionals. This finding supports previous studies that found that most students chose a health career through personal contacts.[5,7,8] Since personal contacts were important to students choosing MRS as a profession, knowledge of the course and its purpose should be reaching appropriate community citizens, employers and agencies to serve as the initial source of information for many students. Only a small percentage of students indicated that careers advisors had influenced their decisions to become medical radiation scientists. This finding has implications for decisions about where to send recruitment material, because material sent to high school personnel might not be influencing many students. Communicating directly to high school students may be more effective in recruitment strategies. Other sources of career information such as UAC guide and previous experience did not greatly influence career choice and UAI was also not the determining factor for choosing the profession.

Demographic data were also examined to determine the students' current age, career decision age, gender and race diversity. The median age of respondents was 19 years with 76.7% of MRS students aged between 18 and 20 years. The median decision age was 18 years. This suggests that most students first become aware of the MRS professions in high school and enter the profession immediately after high school graduation. It would seem that any marketing or recruitment strategies should focus mainly on the secondary school environment. In addition, none of the students taking part expressed an early childhood ambition to study MRS, with 45.2% of respondents indicating that their stream of MRS was not their first choice. More diagnostic radiography students were in their first choice (DR mean of 2.57), compared to nuclear medicine students (NM mean of 2.96) and radiation therapy students (RT mean of 3). Nuclear medicine students exhibited the lowest level of knowledge of the profession before entering the course, followed by radiation therapy students. This indicates that more recruitment material should be directed towards increasing awareness of these streams of MRS. This would help meet student expectations after their entry into the course, and may help reduce attrition rates in first year MRS students. Furthermore, gender and racial diversity in the student population was examined. The gender distribution is 58.9% female and 41.1% male. Our study also found that MRS has a high representation of nationalities with many different races comprising the course. This finding has implications for program coordinators who must ensure that the delivery of the course content is adapted for people from other countries. The finding also suggests that efforts to recruit minority groups are not needed as the course already attracts those of different nationalities. However, this study did not explore whether this high representation is unique only to MRS and comparison with other fields is needed.

Student future work plans were also shown to have an effect on career choice and subsequent recruitment. Of the sample, 53.4% of students indicated a desire to work in a specialty area of MRS in the future or undertake a postgraduate degree in MRS. This was

reinforced in a previous study on radiography students, where the majority of students indicated a desire to work in a specialty area such as ultrasound. About half of the students also were interested in further study.[7] Institutions that have such specialty programs could therefore attract additional applicants. In addition, this study indicated that 31.5% of students were not aware of advancement opportunities. Hence, increasing awareness of advancement opportunities within the streams may help improve retention rates of students.

Conclusion

Based on the data, the median age of MRS students indicates that a significant number entered courses immediately from high school. The genders are fairly evenly distributed with only a few more females than males. The countries of origin of students were ranked in order from Australia, China, and other countries.

The most important factor in student's career choice was helping others, followed closely by a job in the healthcare field, technology, knowledge of the profession, and family, friends, and other health professionals. Previous experience such as a diagnostic procedure or hospital tour, and the UAI were not major determining factors of career choice.

The sources of career information most important to students in making their career decision (in rank order) were family members, friends, and other health professionals, UAC guide, previous experience such as diagnostic procedure and hospital tour, and then career's advisor.

About half of the students (53.4%) planned to specialise or undertake postgraduate study in their stream of MRS. Of students surveyed, 39.7% planned to study another degree after graduating in MRS.

The type of degree the students planned to study could not be ascertained from the questionnaire. Future research regarding career choice should be structured to obtain this information to determine whether there are similar interests among those students.

The results of this study indicated that many students choose MRS as a career with the goal of helping others. This information is important to those who are responsible for promotion literature, which should emphasise this aspect of the profession. The most frequently reported source through which the students had first heard about the profession was family, friends, and other health professionals. Again, this is valuable information for accessing potential recruits and further emphasises the importance of personal contacts in promoting the recruitment of future MRS practitioners. Furthermore, awareness of advancement opportunities should be increased to improve recruitment and retention of students.

The factors influencing students' decisions to enter the MRS profession were similar across the three streams. Information about important factors can be used in recruitment efforts by professional organisations and educational programs. Employers who wish to enhance the attractiveness of their facility or to improve retention can also benefit. Since the majority of respondents chose their career in high school and identified personal contacts as influential on career decisions, those persons responsible for expenditure of resources for recruitment might take note of this. Instead, focusing on health care settings and directly on high school students should prove more beneficial.

Recommendations

The sample group of students surveyed from the one educational program does not allow generalisation of these results to the medical radiation science professions in Australia. Based on the survey findings, some preliminary observations are offered. We recommend that this study be replicated with the use of a larger pool of subjects and a sampling of every MRS education program. The methodology employed in this study appears to be effective and a larger sample could result in even more generalisable outcomes. In summary, this project represents the beginning step in an effort to determine effectiveness in current recruitment practices, factors important in student career decisions, and their future in the profession. Information obtained from this study may be useful for planning and implementing effective recruitment programs and retention strategies.

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Appendix

Medical Radiations Project Questionnaire:
'Why do students choose the Medical Radiation Science profession?'

1 At what age did you first decide to pursue a career in the medical radiation science (MRS) profession? _____
2 Please indicate your current age _____
3 Please indicate your nationality _____
4 Please circle your gender: Male / Female
5 Please circle your stream: DR / NM / RT

In the following section please answer on a scale of 1–5 where,
1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Don't Know; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly Disagree

Questions	**Strongly Agree**	**Agree**	**Don't Know**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**
My stream of MRS was my first career choice	1	2	3	4	5
My Universities Admission Index (UAI) influenced my career choice	1	2	3	4	5
My main source of information about MRS was the Universities Admissions Centre (UAC) guide	1	2	3	4	5
My careers advisor encouraged me towards MRS	1	2	3	4	5
Family members, friends or other health professionals recommended MRS to me	1	2	3	4	5
I had previous experience with MRS eg. diagnostic procedure, hospital tour	1	2	3	4	5
I wanted to work in the health care field	1	2	3	4	5
I wanted to work with technology	1	2	3	4	5
I wanted to be in a position to help other people	1	2	3	4	5
I chose the career because of the financial rewards	1	2	3	4	5
There are good employment opportunities in my stream of MRS	1	2	3	4	5
I had a good knowledge of the profession before enrolling in the course	1	2	3	4	5
I enjoyed my clinical placements in the clinical centres	1	2	3	4	5
I am aware of advancement opportunities in the profession	1	2	3	4	5
I plan to specialise or undertake postgraduate study in my stream of MRS	1	2	3	4	5
I plan to study another degree after graduating in MRS	1	2	3	4	5
I expect to be in my stream of MRS in ten years from now	1	2	3	4	5
I would recommend the MRS course to others	1	2	3	4	5

Please state any other reasons which have influenced your career choice
Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.