



Universities Scotland submission to Education and Skills Committee inquiry into Subject choice

This response is submitted on behalf of Universities Scotland, the representative body for the Principals and Directors of the 19 higher education institutions in Scotland. We welcome the Committee's inquiry into subject choices in schools and focus this brief response on the following question: 'What is the impact, positive or negative, of any limitations on subject choices?'

We are aware that the Committee has separately written to Principals to ask for specific information on Medicine, Law and Mechanical Engineering. Any responses to that request will be provided separately.

Introduction

Scottish HEIs provide a very extensive range of courses and some offer significant flexibility to students in terms of possible degree pathways, and being able to study multiple subjects or even to switch subjects. We would welcome a situation whereby all schools across Scotland were similarly able to offer the widest-possible range of subjects necessary to meet their learners' needs, and to enable them to progress successfully to university, college, work or any other positive destination.

The benefit of the Scottish higher education system is that Scottish degree programmes are designed to include four years of study to give students a broader and more flexible education. They also allow students to try a range of subjects before specialising. Even if students know exactly what they want to do, they can study additional subjects and add depth to their education.

The benefit of this approach, and having a broad subject choice, is that it allows flexibility in the learner and employment journey and offers the skills and knowledge for adaption and success in an increasingly digital and complex world. This latter point is increasingly important in an age with increased level of automation where soft skills such as analytical skills, emotional intelligence, problem solving, creativity, negotiation and resilience for example are increasingly important (World Economic Forum 2022 Skills Outlook, Future of Jobs Report 2018) and achieved through exposure to a variety of subjects rather than limited subject choices.

During the course of its inquiry, the Committee may also therefore wish to examine the means of curriculum delivery in addressing 'real world' problems, and ensuring that young people are prepared for, shape and flourish in the digital age. Universities Scotland would be happy to provide further information on these points, including information to demonstrate that employers also want the above skills in their recruits.

Learner journey

In 2017 we provided views on the Scottish Government's Learner Journey review¹, setting out our key principles such as putting the learner at the centre, widening access to higher education and developing learners' broad capacity to succeed in life and work. These principles, and our response in general, remain valid to the Committee's current inquiry.

¹ Universities Scotland, [Learner Journey Review: Proposals from Universities Scotland](#), April 2017



We reiterate below some points of particular relevance—

- “Choices made from a restricted range of senior-phase subjects or with poor advice at school can narrow learners’ opportunities. We need to retain learners’ capacity to follow diverse journeys from their senior phase subject choices to their eventual higher education qualification, with the opportunity to change subject specialism. This is a particular widening access risk if students progressing from schools with narrow senior phase choices to college HN study are expected to stay on this path of subject when progressing to university, rather than having the option to choose a different pathway that may require studying a different subject at SCQF level 7 or 8.”
- An additional and related factor is that young people currently choose subjects for National 4s and 5s in S2 (approximately aged 13/14 years and typically choose 7/8 subjects) and choose a narrower subject choice following exams in S4 for Highers in S5/S6 (approximately aged 15/16 years). Further narrowing of subjects at this level will potentially ‘pigeon-hole’ young people at a very young (arguably too young) into potential employment and onward education choices.
- “Many schools are unable to provide a full range of subject choice in the senior phase, and colleges’ HN provision is narrower than the subject choice available at university. Learners from all backgrounds deserve the breadth of opportunity that the 4 year degree can provide, with its scope for learners to choose subjects and specialisms as their understanding of their own capacities and aspirations increases.”
- Our report also referenced the Education & Skills Committee’s previous survey on learners’ choices. We noted that three quarters of the schools responding said that difficulties recruiting teachers constrained subject choice at S4 either a great deal or to some extent. We said that if this is a factor at S4 “it is also likely to limit the subjects that can be offered later in the senior phase, including Advanced Highers”.
- We supported exploring the scope for increasing the number of learners who progress from Advanced Higher directly into Year 2 of the flexible 4 year degree. However, we also cautioned that the scale of growth “is likely to be modest unless there is a major increase in the proportion of learners who are able to study a range of Advanced Highers. This would require major investment in schools (or in alternative provision of Advanced Highers or other suitable level 7 qualifications) to allow learners to take a suitable number of Advanced Highers in subjects of their choice”. In the same context, we noted that some schools offer only a small number of Advanced Highers or may offer joint Higher/Advanced Higher classes, which may impact on student learning and success.

Other relevant issues

We highlight some issues of broader relevance to the current inquiry, or that the Committee may wish to explore in future inquiries:

- Widening access to university for disadvantaged students is a crucial issue for the sector and we will write to the Committee soon to describe how institutions are delivering major change on minimum entry requirements. A further crucial factor in ensuring more equal representation in our institutions will be increasing the number of school leavers with suitable qualifications for applying to university. Scotland’s Commissioner for Fair Access intends to examine how schools can best contribute to meeting widening access targets and we therefore encourage the Committee to monitor the progress of the Commissioner’s work.
- As part of the implementation of Learner Journey recommendations, the Scottish Government is mapping availability of Advanced Higher provision across Scotland and “responding to gaps to ensure there is real choice for all pupils staying on into S6 in the senior phase”. The Committee is aware from



its previous work that Glasgow Caledonian University's Advanced Higher Hub offers a selection of Advanced Highers to pupils from across Glasgow using teachers employed by the university. Our Learner Journey response provides examples of other models that blend the school and university experience², while the sector intends to publish a statement soon that will explain how Advanced Highers – and other qualifications/ non-academic factors – are taken into account during the admissions process. One CoWA recommendation relevant to subject choice in school will now be progressed through implementation of the Learner Journey recommendations³.

- We noted above the issue of students progressing from schools with narrow senior phase choices to college HN study to university. The SQA is currently undertaking a review of HNs, while Universities Scotland and Colleges Scotland have jointly established the National Articulation Forum⁴ to consider how articulation routes and understandings of articulation could be improved.

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² Universities Scotland, [Learner Journey Review: Proposals from Universities Scotland](#), April 2017 (page 15)

³ Commission on Widening Access, [A Blueprint for Fairness](#), March 2016 (recommendation 18)

⁴ The Forum comprises members from colleges and universities, as well as representatives from the National Union of Students, Scottish Funding Council and Scottish Government.

