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To Clare Adamson MSP,

LETTER WITH FINDINGS FROM CONSULTATION ON SUBJECT CHOICES WITH THE SCOTTISH YOUTH PARLIAMENT (SYP)

As the Convener of the Education and Lifelong Learning (ELL) Committee at the Scottish Youth Parliament, I am writing to you to formally record the views of young people on Education and Skills Committee's inquiry into subject choices. On behalf of SYP, we are so grateful that you have already demonstrated your commitment to take these views into account by attending the workshop itself and hearing directly from the young people in my Committee. I trust that you will relay these views to your Committee members, and please do contact us if you have any further questions.

This letter conveys findings from a consultation workshop held during our ELL meeting attended by **eleven young people** called 'Make Your Choice' at our 68th National Sitting on 17th March 2019 in Dalkeith, Midlothian, co-produced by us and your Committee as well the Scottish Parliament's Community Outreach Team.

It also includes findings from co-designed questions in our #WhatsYourTake online survey which was open from 15th February until 20th March, gathering **1136 responses** from young people aged 12-25 across Scotland, **from all 32 local authorities and our 11 national voluntary organisations** and various others representing a diverse range of communities of interest and lived experience (including different faiths, disabilities, care and carer experience, LGBTQI+, young farmers and young offenders).



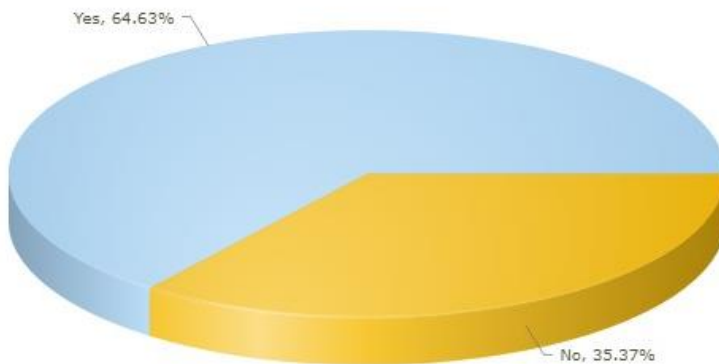
Clare Adamson MSP with the ELL Committee to discuss subject choices at SYP68 on 17th March 2019.

Background information of survey respondents

The majority of respondents are at school (87%) and aged 12-14 (49%) and 15-17 (42%). 55% of respondents are female, 45% were male, 2% identified as non-binary and 1% prefer to use their own term. 13% of respondents belong to black, Asian and minority ethnic groups.

Have you been able to take all of the subjects you wanted to at school?

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The majority of #WhatsYourTake survey respondents were able to take all the subjects they wanted to at school. Similarly, at the workshop, 63% of participants answered 'Yes' to this question, and 37% answered 'No'. At the workshop, the responses were disaggregated by stage from Broad General Education (BGE)-S4-S5-S6. At the S6 stage, more young people answered 'No' to this question.

The workshop participants were from Fife, Dumfries & Galloway, Glasgow, Argyll & Bute, South Lanarkshire, North Lanarkshire and West Lothian.

Online survey respondents who answered 'No'

These young people identified more common, specific subjects they had wanted to take but couldn't. [Drama](#), [modern studies](#) and [Spanish](#) came up most frequently, and other subjects mentioned included: music, art, PE, Italian, human biology, graphic communication, economics, administration, history, geography, RE, Higher German, (Higher) politics, (Higher) Modern Studies, Business Administration and Advanced Highers including Physics, Computing, Design and Manufacture, Statistics and Mechanics and History.

Others specified less common subjects that they had wanted to study, primarily [psychology](#), as well as philosophy, environmental sciences or geology, sociology, theology, classics and [languages](#) such as Gaelic, BSL, Latin, Chinese, Korean or Japanese and Turkish.

Others mentioned a lack of availability of vocational subjects such as [accounting](#), [home economics](#), first aid, fashion and design, hospitality, photography, dance, nursing, electronics, food technology, wood work and metal work. For hospitality, one reason cited was a lack of kitchen facilities at that school.

On one hand, many identified that they were [restricted by not being able to take more than one foreign language](#) - *'I struggled when travelling.'* *'I lack of language options at all levels, due to lack of teachers.'* *'Foreign languages are not given the significance or push needed to underline their importance and benefit to future employment and speaks to an arrogance that "everyone can speak English."*

On the other hand, some respondents were obliged to take a language at S3 but could not take the three sciences which are necessary for applying to study medicine at University. The general issue of [not being able to take three sciences](#) due to timetabling came up frequently.

A few mentioned the inability at their school to take [PE and art](#), [music or drama](#): *'This is because I needed to take 2 sciences. I didn't even want to do a technology but I had too :.'* This chimed with different comments around schools prioritising or making obligatory science or social subject choice over other subjects including social or practical options, as well as prioritising 'academic' subjects over vocational ones. For example: *'I wanted to take hospitality but I was "too smart" according to guidance', '...arts subjects were considered less credible within my school and I was forced to choose between the only two*

arts subjects: art and drama. Despite displaying a keen interest in both subjects and hoping to pursue a career in the arts, I was consistently discouraged from this.'

Some schools restrict pupils to taking 6 or 7 subjects in S3-4. Having **limited choices** came up frequently in the responses.

In some cases, a lack of choice has a very **serious impact on the young person's future**:

- *'I could not take all of the subjects I needed for university as classes were on at the same time, this resulted in me not meeting the minimum entry requirements for the course I am applying, meaning it is very unlikely for me to be accepted.'*
- *'I couldn't study higher drama as it was not offered. I want to work in musical theatre so [sic] this could have been detrimental to my future.'*
- *'Computing higher and it was due to too many people taking it, ended up having to take something else instead and yes it held back a year for going to college.'*
- *'I would have liked to study chinese at higher level however our school does not offer this. In the future I would like to work in international business or investment management for international companies. Having a higher in chinese would make me unique.'*
- *'PE - any level. Removed my ability to feel adequately prepared to study sports science.'*
- *'... I would have liked to take a technology- this made me very frustrated, as a woman who enjoys STEM subjects I find it unfair that I cannot take this due to multiple reasons.'*

Young people highlighted the given reasons for the lack of choice: **shortages of (qualified) staff, especially in rural and island areas; a lack of interest or uptake for a subject to run; timetabling issues (clashing or overlapping class times); a lack of funding or resource; lack of pupil opinion** and not enough classroom space. One young person said their head of department set *'specific and unnecessary entry requirements'* for Higher subjects.

However, the most common reason given was issues with the **columns subjects are put in during subject selection to facilitate timetabling**. For example:

- *'I was not able to choose [sic] all of the subjects that I wanted to take for National 5 because we had to choose [sic] one subject from each column in a table, some columns had no subjects that I wanted to take, for example I wanted to take History and Spanish but I had to take Physical Education and Computing Science. I asked the Deputy head of the school if I could change, but no, I had to stick to the columns. In other words, I was forced to take subjects that I didn't want to take and I wasn't able to take some of the subjects that I did want to take for National 5. This makes me very annoyed.'*
- *'I would have liked to take music, art and P.E but we were only allowed to pick 1 as it was in the same column [sic]. I was also told not to pick design and manufacture as it was not graded properly.'*

Some mentioned **alternative arrangements** organised by their school, including attending nearby schools or colleges for that class as there was no teacher to teach a subject at their school, or due to timetabling issues. For another respondent, this was considered but not possible due to a lack of transport. Some could take a subject they wanted but were timetabled for less class time for that subject. One pupil who had sat Advanced Higher Maths the previous year did an Open University module through Young Applicants in Schools (YASS) so they could keep learning maths in S6.

The most surprising result included: *'Forced to do higher French because there were [sic] no spaces in higher English.'*

Workshop participants

For BGE, the general feedback was that [the wide range of subject choice gives pupils the space and opportunities to identify strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes](#). We agree that this is too early a stage to be narrowing subject choice or choosing careers, but wonder if classes could be tiered to take into account different abilities.

At S4, there can be a lack of teachers, timetabling issues and restricted quantity of subject to take. The members who could take all the subjects they wanted reported that they got higher marks and were more interested and engaged, but those who couldn't reported that they had to crash subjects later on and had limited career and University options.

At S5, a lack of class space and issues with columns when choosing subjects were cited. The impacts of this were having to take crash Highers to meet conditional University offers and being forced to do 'a subject you don't love'. Members encouraged [more cooperation between schools in the same local authority to offer Advanced Highers, increased staffing and for choice not to be limited via. columns](#) and to be afforded in accordance with need, not necessarily convenience.

At S6, a member from Fife reported being able to take four Advanced Highers, whereas none were offered in a school in Argyll and Bute. Advanced Highers should be given parity of esteem with A Levels in England in terms of availability. One member had to get help from their MSP to be able to take music due to timetable restructuring. There is a lack of subject range and timetabling, making it harder to get into University, that you miss 'vital skills' and your future careers are affected. We need more funding to bridge the gap between public and private education, for 'creative' subjects not to be discouraged and subject choice to be widened to improve transferrable skills.

Recommendations from the ELL Committee

We believe that subject choice is important for broadening horizons and prospects, and support the concept of BGE. However, we note that there is a large disparity in the lived experience of subject choice between different schools and local authorities across Scotland.

- We therefore believe that the Scottish Government should try to minimise inequality in subject choice in rural and remote areas by investing in these schools as well as subject choice generally, and encouraging cooperation within local authorities to offer subject choices including National 4s, 5s and Advanced Highers.
- SYP believes that greater investment and incentives are needed for teacher training generally, as well as for subjects including languages, modern studies, drama and psychology.
- We believe that pupil participation should play a key role in reviewing how subjects are chosen in schools, and that subject columns should not restrict young people from pursuing subjects which are necessary for their career aspirations.

Should you wish to meet with us or update us on how the findings will feed into your work, please do not hesitate to get in touch with our Policy and Public Affairs Manager, Laura Pasternak at laura.p@syp.org.uk or 0131 557 0452. We hope you have found this engagement with SYP informative and valuable.

Yours sincerely,

Chloe Whyte MSYP for Falkirk East
Convener of the Education and Skills Committee
Scottish Youth Parliament