

Subject Choice Survey - Pupils

Summary

Key Findings

- Just over half of respondents (56%) stated that they had not been able to take all the subjects they wanted to at school.
- Higher was the subject level most commonly reported as when they were unable to study the subject.
- Modern Studies was the most frequently cited subject that respondents were unable to study.
- Column clashes/timetabling was the most frequently mentioned reason as to why a subject could not be studied.

Introduction

To help inform its subject choice inquiry, the Committee published surveys targeted at young people, parents and teachers. The online surveys ran for four weeks from Monday 4 February to Monday 4 March 2019 and were advertised/promoted through social media channels.

The purpose of the surveys was to give young people, parents and teachers an alternative option for contributing their views and experiences to the Committee's inquiry.

This survey analysis is only one piece of evidence collected in order to support the Committee with their inquiry into subject choice. Therefore, it should be read alongside the other pieces of evidence gathered by the Committee which can be found on the inquiry webpage:

<https://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/110962.aspx>

SPICe was not involved in the design of the survey but was asked to undertake an analysis of the raw data collected.

Design and analysis

The survey was issued on SmartSurvey (an online survey tool). The survey questions replicated those included in [the inquiry call for written evidence](#) and are listed at Annexe A.

Of the two questions asked, only the first was a closed question. Question one invited respondents to answer from Yes/No options. The second question offered no specific options but did include suggested issues that respondents may consider in their responses. Respondents were provided with open text boxes in which they could provide their views, in their own words. This approach had a significant impact on the analysis that was possible:

- Question one is the only question which allows for the reporting of percentages, as it was sole question where respondents had discrete options to choose from, i.e. Yes/No.
- For the second question, a more qualitative analysis approach was used. The responses to the question varied greatly as people were free to write whatever they wished. In addition, people interpreted the question in a variety of ways and respondents chose to highlight different issues. The task was then to organise, identify themes and attempt to codify (as far as was possible) these varied responses.
- Consequently, the results of the survey cannot reliably be reported in numeric terms. Where numerical data are included in this briefing, it is simply to indicate commonality of certain issues being mentioned by respondents. The results are not presented as percentages as this would not accurately reflect the qualitative nature of his work.

As respondents were not given options to select for questions two-five, the responses vary considerably in terms of language used, length and relevance to the question asked. As such, the analysis SPICe has provided involves a significant degree of interpretation of their responses. In some instances, the respondent may be making several different points within one answer. In other cases, what specifically is being referred to in the response is not clear. The analysis offered in this briefing aims to organise and codify responses to indicate trends and themes from the varied responses received. It does not attempt to generalise beyond the views that were shared by those who gave their opinions through the survey.

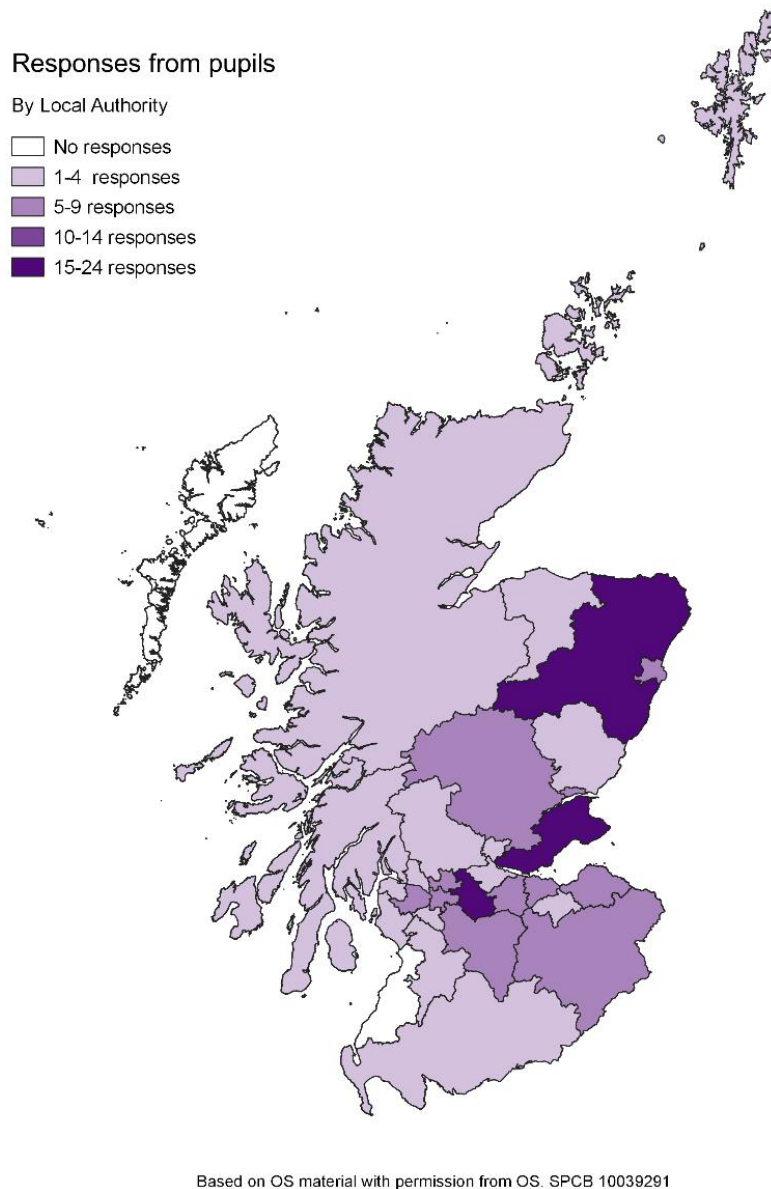
It is important to note that the analysis presented here should not be treated as representative of all pupils, as those who took part in the survey were self-selected. As such, the views gathered through this work may not offer the full range of views on the issues of interest to this inquiry.

Finally, there were limits to the analysis of responses as a result of specific issues with the design of the survey. The first was that the second open-ended question suggested what further information respondents may wish to provide. This may have influenced what respondents said, leading them to think about the suggested issues more than what respondents may have said if no suggestions were offered. In addition, not all respondents addressed these aspects. This made the analysis more challenging as there was no consistency in the way that this question was engaged with.

Before any analysis commenced, data cleansing was undertaken to remove duplicate responses. In addition, responses that contained either personal information or reference to a particular school, were anonymised.

Overall, there were 241 responses to the survey. Respondents were asked to provide a postcode. Figure 1 shows the geographic spread of responses. Aberdeenshire, Fife and North Lanarkshire had the highest response rates. No responses were received from South Ayrshire.

Figure 1: Geographic representation of survey responses



Source: SPICe

Questions

In response to the first question: 'Have you been able to take all the subjects you wanted to at school?' 134 respondents (56%) replied 'No'.

Figure 2: Response to question one

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



Source: SPICe

Respondents were then asked in the second question: 'If you answered no, please tell us a bit more? i.e. what level the subject was (e.g. Nat 4, Nat 5, higher), why you think the subject wasn't available, any impact it had on your future study/career options etc'.

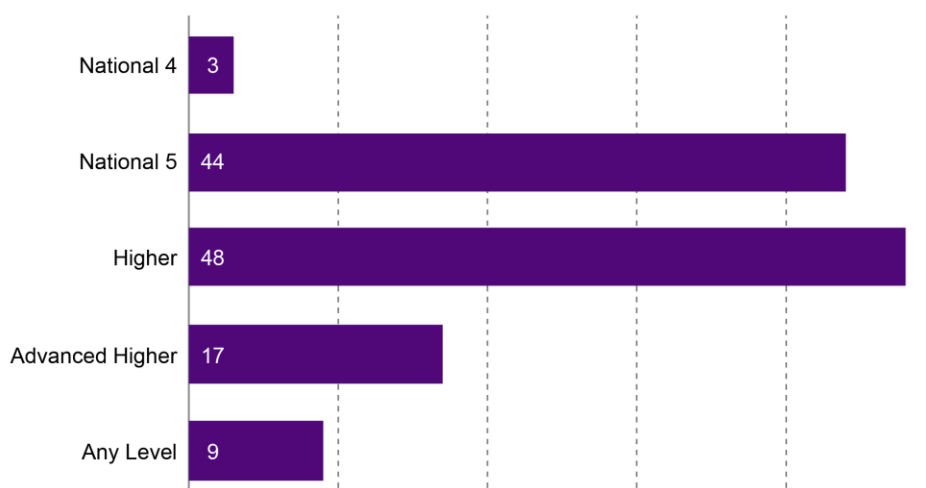
Analysis of the responses to this question identified four key themes:

1. The subject level at which pupils were unable to take a subject.
2. The subject they had been unable to take.
3. The reason they had been unable to take the subject.
4. The impact(s) of not being able to take the subject.

Theme 1: Subject level

Figure 3 shows at which level respondents stated they were not able to take a subject at school. The most frequently cited level was Higher, closely followed by N5.

Figure 3: Subject level

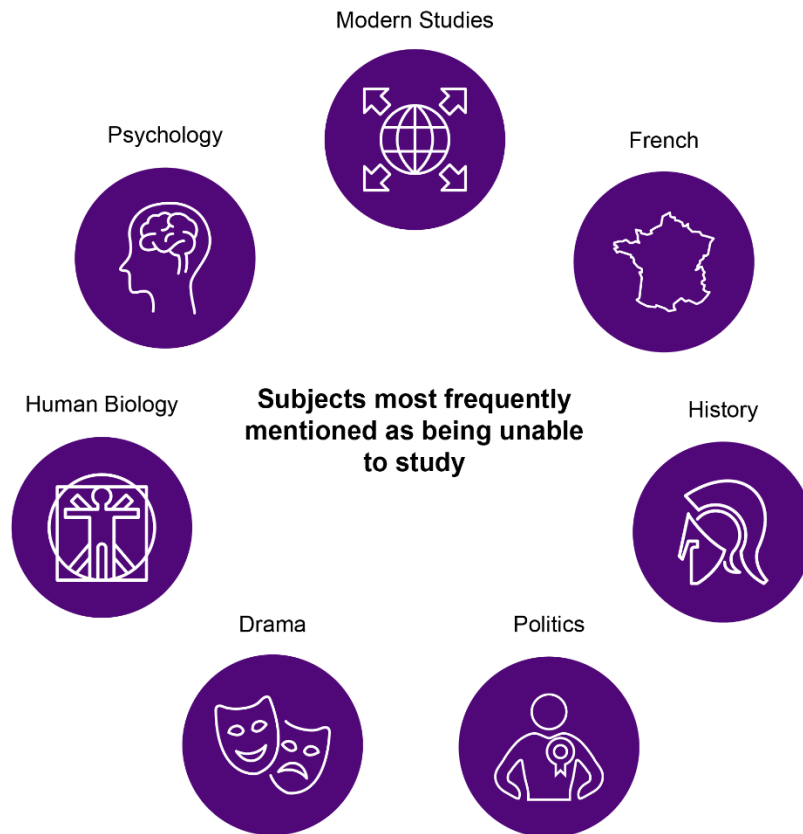


Source: SPICe

Theme 2: Subject type

Figure 4 shows those subjects that respondents most commonly mentioned as being unable to study. There is a mix of subjects including social subjects, languages, expressive arts and sciences.

Figure 4: Most frequently mentioned subjects



Source: SPICe

As shown in Table 1, the subject pupils most frequently mentioned they were unable to take was Modern Studies. See Annexe A for the complete table.

Table 1: Subject mentions

Rank	Subject	Frequency
1	Modern Studies	11
2	French	8
3	History	7
4	Politics	6
5 =	Drama	5
5 =	Human Biology	5
5 =	Psychology	5

Source: SPICe

Theme 3: Reasons why they were unable to take a subject

Figure 5 shows the top three reasons pupils gave as being why they were unable to study a subject. The full list of reasons, and their frequencies, can be found in Annexe B

Figure 5: Most common reasons



Source: SPICe

The most frequently cited cause was ‘column clash’, whereby column choices or the timetabling of subjects prevented the pupils from taking a subject.

“We have to pick from certain col[umns] and so therefore our choice is limited to the arrangement of the subjects.”

“My first choice of subjects wouldn’t work in the timetable offered.”

The second most common reason given by respondents was that the school did not offer the subject itself, or the subject at their desired level of study.

“My school specifically doesn’t do drama or p[sych]ology at all. I would love it to be put in our curriculum.”

“I have not been able to take modern studies or classics as the school don’t offer it at any level. And we have qualified teachers.”

Staffing was another common reason given as to why they had been unable to take the subject. Respondents referred to various aspects including a shortage of staff, a lack of qualified teachers and not having a subject specialist in the school.

“I believe these subjects weren’t offered because of the limited number of teaching staff available in my school.”

“I think the subject wasn’t available due to staff being under qualified.”

“Wasn’t available because no teachers for that subject.”

Theme 4: Impact of not being able to take a subject

Of those respondents that referred to the consequences of not being able to take all their desired subjects, the most common impact mentioned was that they had taken

a subject they did not want to study. This was described in various ways by respondents. Some respondents wrote that the subject they ended up studying was one that they disliked or even hated.

“i wasn't allowed to take Modern Studies and another Social Subject so I had to take art instead which i hated.”

Others wrote that they were not interested in subject and/or it was not relevant to their future career, and that taking the subject felt like a waste of time and effort.

“led me to take useless subjects as filler for my timetable which led to a lot of wasted time”

“I was then forced to take spanish (a course I have no interest in) and miss a class I really enjoy.”

Several respondents noted that the grade they achieved/anticipated achieving in this subject was below that which they anticipated receiving in their preferred subject.

“I had to replace it with a higher I am less successful in therefore jeopardising my chances of getting into university.”

It is interesting to note the language used by respondents to describe this outcome. For example, they were ‘forced to take’, ‘had to take’ or ‘got put into’ in subject. It is not just that they ultimately took a course they did not wish to study but that they had considered they had no choice in the outcome.

The second outcome that pupils referenced was that they crashed a subject. Crashing a subject in of itself is an impact, however, respondents spoke about the additional consequences crashing a subject had.

“I crashed higher biology which I found to be a course I thought was harder and less interested in so I struggled more to get the grades I needed for uni.”

“I had to crash the higher in 6th year which I have done much worse in than if I had done Nat 5.”

Another outcome described by respondents was that they had not able to take the required/relevant subject for college or university.

“i wanted to go into cooking but cant because i dont even have the basic qualification to get into college for it.”

“Computer science at N5 and higher ... This is what I'm going to study in university so it would've been useful.”

“I want to go to university to study sociology and did not have the opportunity to have this as a subject at school.”

Although not an impact *per se*, respondents did express of concerns about what impact not being able to study their subject of choice would have on their future.

“Unable to study all the subjects I wished to due to my school only offering 6 choices over a one year instead of 8 over 2 for National 5, leaving me worse off in my future.”

“i think it’s going to really impact my future study as i might not be able to take the subjects i need to get to university.”

S1 Responses

Nine responses to the survey came from respondents who stated they were currently in S1 and had yet to reach senior phase. However, their responses expressed concerns around: the need for more IT skills; the need for more research skills; and the ability to learn different things within a subject (i.e. alternative sports in PE);

Kate Wane
SPICe Research
25 April 2019

Annexe A

Subject	Frequency
Modern Studies	11
French	8
History	7
Politics	6
Drama	5
Human Biology	5
Psychology	5
German	4
Photography	4
Physics	4
RMPS	4
Dance	3
Economics	3
English	3
Health and Food Technology	3
Business Management	2
Classics	2
Computer Science	2
Engineering	2
Environmental Science	2
Geography	2
Hospitality	2
Italian	2
Media Studies	2
Philosophy	2
Sociology	2
Spanish	2
Administration	1
Art	1
Biology	1
Design Manufacturing	1
Fashion/Textiles	1
Graphic Communication	1
Home Economics	1
Language (general)	1
Latin	1
Music	1
Music Technology	1
R.E.	1
Statistics	1

Annexe B

Reason	Description	Frequency
Column Clash	How the subject choices were offered to students/how the courses were timetabled, meant that students were unable to take their desired subjects, i.e. two subjects they wished to take were only available in the same column so had to choose between them.	44
School does not offer subject	School does not either offer the subject in question, or the subject at the desired level of study.	21
Staff Shortages	Not enough teachers overall; not enough qualified teachers; teachers have left but not been replaced; not enough subject specialists.	20
Limited to taking X subjects at N5	Pupils are restricted to a certain number of subjects at N5.	10
Insufficient Demand	The course did not run as there were not enough pupils interested in taking it	10
Funding	The impact of budget reductions in general and that funding cuts had led to subjects being removed from the timetable.	5
X subject(s) is compulsory	Pupil has to take a particular subject, i.e. PE; Maths; English or a subject type, i.e. a language; social science.	3
Only available at another school	The subject was only available at another school but due to travel costs and time, and the prospect of missing classes at own school did not take it up.	3

Cannot take more than one social subject	School does not allow pupils to take more than one social subject.	3
Other		2