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*Chances or Choices?*

The Influences on subject choices in the Curriculum for Excellence

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy (PhD)

University of Glasgow

School of Social and Political Sciences



*For Molly*

## **Abstract**

Over the past two decades, the education system in Scotland has been - and still is - in a state of deep structural reform. Considerations over equity, curriculum design, opportunity, and the post-school pathways of young people, have long remained at the forefront of considerations for both policy and practice (e.g. Cryrie, Furst & Lauder, 1979; Scottish Government 2008, 2009a, 2011a&b; Priestly & Minty, 2013). The subjects that young people have the option to study, and subjects they then choose to study, are profoundly important to them, their communities, and ultimately the economic skills pipeline of the country. What has often been missing during these considerations are the perspectives, perceptions, and experiences of young people regarding their potential pathways and factors underlying the learning decisions they make.

The aims of this research were to explore the internal and external influences upon the subject choices of young people, under the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), and explore the impact of social background and policy structures on these learning decisions. It highlighted the voice of pupils in an environment which has seen increasing politicisation since the implementation of the CfE. The present research employed a multi-method qualitative design of interviews and documents, comprised of N=79 semi-structured interviews; N=72 of these with pupils in S4-S6 within four participating schools, and N=7 interviews with invited expert stakeholders. These experts were selected for their knowledge in a range of key areas of the policy of subject choices and classroom practice, including individuals with significant influence in Government, policy, and practice. Thematic analysis was applied to make sense of the data and draw meaning and conclusions from it. The research also used a form of content analysis on the choices forms in each participating school. The focus of the analysis was to identify similarities and differences in the characterisation of schools' curriculum structures in a systematic manner, setting the context of the choices that young people had in each school.

Findings revealed that schools have employed different processes for subject choices and different curriculum structures, with varying width (the maximum number of qualifications a young person could take), breadth (the range of subjects a young person could choose from), and intent (the curriculum experiences and type of pathways the school was predominately focused on facilitating towards). Indeed, the analysis of the school choices forms, and interviews with staff reveals four distinct approaches to curriculum across the four schools: Diverse Breadth Mandatory Width, Collaborative Depth, and Flexible Facilitation. The research suggests that post-school aspirations were a key driver of subject choices, because aspiration becomes the frame within which choices are made. Aspirations were overwhelmingly related to direct and indirect family influence. Exposure to the job market through employer engagement also played a key role in shaping aspirations. Social background played a further role in shaping the perception of what was possible, proliferating a ‘perception gap’ amongst more and less deprived pupils; i.e., where less deprived pupils had less exposure to types of post-school pathways open, and less knowledge of how to access such pathways.

Pupil interviews revealed a strong interrelation between the internal and external influence and the extent to which they operate is impacted by factors such as age and stage, and social background. The research established the main internal influences over young people’s aspirations and subject choices were perceived as; enjoyment of subjects, usefulness towards attaining their aspirations, and importance of subjects to general development, knowledge, or their future. In addition, it pointed to five ‘spheres’ of external influence: family, teachers, media, employers, and peers. These insights have important implications for education policy and practice, in Scotland and internationally. If Scotland’s secondary education system is to reduce inequalities in subject choice, including concluding that there is a need for greater flexibility within the curriculum, a need for enhanced guidance provision relating to choices, and policies that challenge rather than reinforce socio-economic disparities.

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## **Acknowledgements**

The support, advice, patience and direction of Professor Keith Kintrea and Professor Catherine Lido has been all-encompassing. I am grateful to have had such an amazing and committed supervision team. It has been such a privilege to learn from them throughout this process, and words cannot express my gratitude.

I am thankful every day for the love and guidance of my sister Emma, who consistently goes above and beyond in the support she gives. None of this would have been possible without the unconditional love of my Ma & Da, Alison and Richard. I am remarkably lucky to have them, and the credit for submitting this work should be as much theirs as mine!

Paul, Callum, Susanne, and Kenneth have all provided immeasurable contribution to me professionally and (most importantly) personally. The privilege of my life is calling them friends.

Most importantly, thanks to all the participants who made this research possible. Especially the seventy-two young people who took the time to speak to me. I can only hope the contents of this thesis does justice to their voices.

**Author's declaration**

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

**BARRY BLACK**

## **Glossary**

**BGE** - Broad General Education in secondary schools (S1, S2, S3)

**CfE** - Curriculum for Excellence

**DYW** - Developing the Young Workforce

**FE** - Further Education Colleges

**FSM** - Free School Meals

**Nat4/N4** - National 4 Qualifications

**Nat5/N5** - National 5 Qualifications

**OECD** - The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

**RIC** - Regional Improvement Collaboratives

**RTA** - Reflexive Thematic Analysis

**S4/S5/S6** - Secondary Four (Fourth Year), Secondary Five (Fifth Year), Secondary Six (Sixth Year)

**SCQF** - Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework

**SIMD** - Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation

**SQA** - Scottish Qualifications Authority

**SSI** - Semi-Structured Interviews



## CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 - Chances or Choices?

If an individual has participated in mainstream schooling in the UK, they will have experienced the process of selecting the subject that they will study from a range of choices. In this process, pupils as young as 11 can begin to select from options of subjects they may wish to study for qualifications attainment. This approach of apparent pupil autonomy differs from other global education systems, such as the high schooling system in the United States, which remains largely generalist until the ages of 17 or 18 (and sometimes beyond into liberal arts colleges) or Germany (an example of selective academic tracking (both of which are comparatively explored in more detail in Chapter Four)).

The system of selecting subjects has remained in the UK since the introduction of comprehensive education in the 1960s (West 2016). Therefore, subject selection in secondary schools in Scotland can be thought of as a gateway, or key point of transition, into senior schooling, and even into one's future career destinations. This has remained the case despite - and through- multiple periods of reform, including to the curriculum, qualifications, and broader educational governance structures. The issue of subject choices, and how they are made, has long been of interest to academics (Cryrie, Furst and Lauder 1979), partly due to the universality of this decision-making across generations, places, and social backgrounds. . Such core life decisions can impact on onward future choices, and even life chances, of young people. Therefore, the present PhD aims to explore these influences on subject choices under the context of the Curriculum for Excellence. Using data from pupil and expert interviews, as well as context analysis of school curriculum structures and subject options forms. The thesis will offer policy recommendations, and further areas of research as Scotland's education reform process continues. Cryrie, Furst and Lauder's 1979 landmark study '*Chances and Choices*', from which this thesis takes its title, investigated the influences over subject choices in two areas of Scotland: Lanarkshire and the Borders. They identified a range of broad issues, including the impact of the social and economic contexts of the time on decisions, the influences of internal

motivations and external actors, and the impact of recent reform to curriculum structure. These core issues, identified in their research over forty years ago, still have relevance to issues in contemporary Scottish education, and are therefore worthy of deep reflection.

Since its implementation, Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) has remained at the forefront of an increasingly politicised debate over education in the country. This has accompanied an increased focus, and Government prioritisation, over closing Scotland's significant and stubborn poverty-related education attainment gap. Over the past two decades, the education system has been (and remains) in a state of deep structural reform. Considerations over equity, curriculum opportunity, and the post-school pathways of young people all remain at the forefront of considerations for both policy and practice. These issues have therefore been a key point of contention in both the structuring of the CfE, debates surrounding it since, and a key focus of the process of continued curriculum review.

Therefore, the aims of this research are to explore the internal and external influences upon the subject choices of young people under the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) and to explore the impact of social background and policy structures on these learning decisions. This is to better understand what are the motivating factors that drive young people into (or out of) making certain decisions and to understand which external actors influence these choices, and how that influence is exerted. Key to this aim is understanding how the particular school a young person attends impacts on these subject choices, both in terms of the curriculum design and structure of the school and the social background of its pupils. Alongside this, it aims to highlight the voice of pupils in an environment which has seen increasing politicisation since the implementation of the CfE, providing their experiences and perspectives on the choices process and their experience of the curriculum that they are able to experience.

## 1.2 - The Curriculum for Excellence

The introduction of a new curriculum in Scottish education in 2010, and the subsequent introduction of new qualifications and assessment in 2014, have been major changes in the education system. The Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) has seen wholesale reform of curriculum structure and intent, has introduced 'experiences and outcomes' which set out what children should learn and progress through curriculum areas. It has also seen reform to the qualifications young people aim to attain. While the intention of this section is not to fully assess or review the CfE (which is also explored more deeply in Chapter Four), there are key elements to consider from the outset in terms of impact on subject choices, and broader learning decisions, with the changes to curriculum structure and qualifications being absolutely central to these issues.

First envisaged in the early 2000s, the CfE was hailed as one of the most significant reforms to Scottish education in modern history (Scottish Executive 2004). While the CfE was lauded as a vehicle to transform the learning and teaching experience in Scottish schools, it was 'in sync' with general trends of curricular reform witnessed in many OECD and EU countries at the time (Priestley & Minty 2013). The central goal of the CfE was to replace the 5-14 framework which preceded it (Scottish Government 2004). The 5-14 structure was often described as prescriptive and meant teachers were often relaying information for the purposes of passing a test, rather than being allowed to make teaching an interactive and shared experience. Though the new curriculum's development began with a 'national conversation' followed by the publication of 'A Curriculum for Excellence' by the Curriculum Review Group in 2004, its implementation did not begin until the cohort of the 2010/11 academic year began S1 (Secondary School Year One). The first new 'Nationals' exams took place in 2014 by this year group (once they had reached S4). During these interluding years between inception and rollout, two accompanying documents outlined the new curriculum, its mission, aims, structure, expectations and potential outcomes, to join the three that has been published prior (Scottish Executive 2004, 2006 & Scottish Government 2008, 2009a, 2011a&b).

The Curriculum for Excellence sought to devolve significant autonomy over curricular structure to individual schools and teachers, so that they could - in theory - take advantage of local opportunities and reflect in their curriculum offering what was best for their young people (Scottish Government 2009b). The general framework of the CfE was designed to grant more freedom to educational 'establishments', so that their curriculum could be designed to meet the individual needs of young people. While the framework stressed that national guidance would still play an integral role in education, the hope was for schools to have flexibility to adapt to local need and opportunity. Local authorities still remained the bodies charged with delivering education, but the curriculum offer was designed to be in the gift of schools to enhance the strengths and tackle the weaknesses within their cohort of pupils.

Further, the conceptual framework of the CfE was to equip young people with the tools to be active agents within their education, as well as enabling teachers to assert agency over their methods and learning outcomes. A core part of this was increased 'personalisation and choice'. The general framework of the CfE aimed to develop the skills of young people based on four capacities making them; responsible citizens, effective contributors, successful learners and confident individuals (Scottish Government 2010). While these competencies are referred to widely through the documents and are now established in the professional vocabulary of the education system in Scotland, there is criticism of the lack of depth explaining how these capacities will be achieved for each young person (Priestley & Minty 2013).

Therefore, the present thesis will seek to revisit and further explore the factors influencing secondary school choices in Scotland, examining whether these decisions are driven by genuine choices or constrained by external circumstances (chances). The study addresses key research questions offered below in Section 1.3, but before these are addressed by the research conducted this, and the subsequent review chapters define essential concepts to frame the research questions, the research itself, and discussion which follow.

### 1.3 - Research Questions

The full structure of the thesis will be outlined below in Section 1.5, consisting of thematically grouped chapters reviewing existing literature, identifying the contemporary key issues regarding the CfE, and linking to social theory. It is worth, however, front-loading the intended aims of the research, surrounding three foundational research questions, each with sub-questions, which emerged throughout the literature, theory, and policy review process. The way in which these developed is discussed in Section 6.2.1:

**Research Question One: What are the main influences over young people's learning decisions under the Curriculum for Excellence?**

- A) What is the relationship and balance between internal and external influences?
- B) What is the role of aspirations in influencing choices?
- C) How significant is the role of social background in how influences apply?

**Research Question Two: What is the role of processes, curriculum and policy frameworks on these learning decisions?**

What is the impact of the Curriculum for Excellence on how schools structure their curriculum, and are there differences between schools in curricular opportunity?  
What is the role of deprivation on curriculum opportunity?  
What are young people's experiences of the formal support available to them during the choices process?

**Research Question Three: What is the role for employer engagement in influencing these learning decisions?**

- A) Are there any differences in the experience of employer engagement opportunities between schools?
- B) What role do further and higher education institutions play in influencing subject choices?

## 1.4 – Definition of key concepts

Though the definitions of key concepts are defined and discussed in the following chapters, there are several concepts introduced in this study which are useful to define as they are used in this thesis from the outset:

**Curriculum Width** - This relates to the maximum number of choices that a young person can make as part of a subject choices process (eg. five Highers in S5, Seven National 5s in S4m and so on).

**Curriculum Breadth** - This is the range of subjects - and subject areas - a young person can select from (e.g., Maths, Biology, History).

**Curriculum Depth** - This is the level at which subjects can be studied, and the structure of courses, including at which stage these can be studied at, and if prior attainment is required (e.g. National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher).

**Curriculum Intent** - This refers to the pathways that a school prioritises and aims to facilitate (e.g., availability of vocational pathways, mandatory subject areas).

**Employer Engagement** - The formal engagement of employers, industry bodies, and Further and Higher Education institutions in school activities and curriculum.

**The Senior Phase** - This refers to years S4, S5 and S6 (the senior years) in Scottish Education.

## **1.5 - Structure of the thesis**

There follows an outline structure of each chapter in order to orient the reader. The structure is not ‘typical’ of theses in that the literature chapters are thematically grouped with four main foci- applications of an applied theoretical framework, subject choice influence research; policy context impacts, and the role of employer engagement. Theory and cross-cultural considerations are also woven throughout these chapters and feed both ‘findings’ chapters and the triangulated discussion, as per below.

### **1.5.1 - Literature review**

Chapter Two sets out the conceptual framework which underpins the thesis. Rather than presenting an abstract overview of theoretical perspectives, the chapter applies key sociological theories to the specific context of subject choice, providing an analytical lens for the interpretation of both literature and data. The work of Bourdieu forms the foundation of this framework, particularly his conceptualisation of education as a ‘social space’ and the interrelated concepts of capital and habitus. These ideas are used to explore how social background shapes young people’s educational experiences, their aspirations, and the choices available to them. The chapter also applies the notion of institutional habitus to the school environment, illustrating how the practices and expectations of schools themselves contribute to the reproduction of social stratification. While the chapter is grounded in a structural understanding of inequality, it also considers the role of individual agency in educational decision-making, drawing on rational choice theory and motivation theory—including Self-Determination Theory—to account for how young people negotiate influences and make decisions. The conceptual framework developed in this chapter provides the foundation for the analytical approach taken throughout the research, supporting an understanding of subject choice as the outcome of complex interactions between individual motivations, institutional practice, and broader social structures.

Chapter Three reviews the existing literature related to the influences on subject choices. It reviews the frameworks, principles and intentions behind the system of subject choices that young people navigate, before setting out some of the core issues that have been identified in previous studies in relation to how young people choose their subjects, and the influences upon them. This includes literature regarding the role of enjoyment of subjects, subject ‘difficulty’, and the utility of subjects to achieving a post-school destination. The existing research of the role of teachers, family, and peers in influencing learning decisions is then considered. The importance of how perceptions impact pupils’ decisions is also explored. Additionally, there is discussion over the multifaceted conception of ‘aspiration’ in education, with a focus on how the concept is defined and operationalised.

Chapter Four discusses the policy context impacting upon subject choices in Scotland. Policy decisions significantly influence the curriculum, directly affecting its content, pupil experiences, and the learning opportunities available to young people. The chapter also explores the principles behind Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence, situates it in an international context through the exploration of other countries’ systems, and reviews research surrounding its implementation and issues that have arisen as a result. In particular, the chapter discusses literature which evidences that an unintended consequence of curriculum reform has been narrowing curriculum width in S4, which has seen pupils able to take fewer subjects in the Senior Phase as the system which preceded it. Within this discussion there is a focus on the impact of these consequences on those from the most deprived backgrounds.

Chapter Five builds on policy discussions from Chapter Three but focuses on employer engagement and the Developing the Young Workforce program. The chapter then reviews literature discussing the types of employer engagement and the impact that they can have on young people’s experience of education, including consideration of the role of social background and social networks in reaping the benefits of employer engagement. Research which sets out the potential benefits of employer engagement is explored.



Each of these three literature review chapters identify gaps in the literature throughout, and each conclude with the development of foundational research questions which the current study aims to address.

### ***1.5.2 - Research and findings***

Chapter Six sets out the methodological approach to the research. It then justifies the selection of methods and goes on to detail the process of data collection, namely an extensive process of interviews of pupils across four schools, of experts across many sectors, and of content analysis of school's subject choices and curriculum structures. It then explains the step-by-step process behind each analysis that was used within the research. The chapter begins by discussing social constructivism as an approach to the research, with a focus on the elevation of the voice of participants and the fluid nature of constructing meaning throughout the research process. There is then discussion of why semi-structured interviews were used in the research and exploration of reflexive thematic analysis as the mode of analysis. Detailed description of the methods of participant selection and the interview process is done, including reflections of the methods as a whole.

Chapter Seven presents findings that situate the aspirations of young people for what they want to do when they leave school as a foundational lens with which they approach their subject choices. It discusses factors which influence these aspirations, and the role of social background in their formation. These factors include the subject selection based on specific subjects, the role of media and employers, and the influence of family on shaping aspirations. Chapter Eight presents findings on the role that curriculum structure, the policy that shapes it, and the processes of choice and support in influencing learning decisions. It sets out the choices process in each of the four participating schools and draws out points of difference in their curricular approach. The chapter then discusses the formal support that is offered to pupils (and their families) throughout the process, and highlights the perspective of pupils on the salience of the support. It then considers how certain subjects are prioritised (or not) by schools and considers young people's approaches to navigating their way through the three years of the Senior Phase.

Chapter Nine defines the three internal motivations towards making choices that were identified in the research. These influences were Enjoyment, Usefulness and Importance. Enjoyment was linked to the pleasure of studying a subject, interest in the subject area, or the impact of non-enjoyment. Usefulness was defined as the perception that a subject was needed or would be useful towards attainment of an aspiration. Importance was the perception of how vital the subject was to the future - concerning aspirations and general life skills. It however, was more perceptive than usefulness and reflected internalised societal views of what is 'important'. The chapter explores how participants negotiated these internal influences when making their learning decisions.

Chapter Ten identifies five spheres of external influences that emerged from the data as impacting upon pupils' choices. These spheres - Teachers, Employers, Peers, Media and Family - and findings related to how their influence was exerted is discussed. Findings are explored which relate to the way in which the three influences described in Chapter Eight are used by the external spheres, and the role of social background in the experience and reception of external influences.

### ***1.5.3 - Discussion and conclusion***

Chapter Eleven discusses these findings in relation to the research questions, and research sub-questions, which developed through the research process. It sets out the main contributions of the thesis as; development of understanding around what the internal motivations of young people on subject choices are, what are the main spheres of external influence are, and how these are balanced and negotiated; the demonstration of the pivotal role of aspirations in influencing choices and the key influence that social background has upon this; and the providing of insight into the impact of the changes to curriculum structure that CfE has had, concluding that the choices that young people have open to them in Scottish education are chances based on social determinants, and the width and breath of the curriculum that a pupils will have the opportunity to experience is based on the school they attend. Policy implications of this research are then outlined.

Chapter Twelve draws together some concluding thoughts, including on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of place within the findings, and areas of interest for future research.

## **1.6 - Origins of the research and reflexivity**

In 2018-19, I was privileged to work as a Parliamentary Researcher for Iain Gray who (at that time) was a Member of the Scottish Parliament, and Scottish Labour's Shadow Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills. As his Researcher, I gained a detailed insight into - and indeed a responsibility to contribute to - national education policy. One of the most prominent issues within the policy area at that time was the impact that the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence was having on the experiences and outcomes of young people in Scotland. This was particularly in relation to the Scottish Government's commitment to fully eliminate the attainment gap between the richest and poorest pupils and how CfE was contributing - or not - to that aim. The predominant focus of this was emerging research that unintended consequences of curriculum reform was leading to a situation where there was a narrowing of subject choices in the Senior Phase, that this narrowing was particularly in S4, and that it was impacting on the most deprived schools at an accelerated rate. It struck me that there was potential that a new 'attainment gap' may have been opening, one that was not just related to attainment of qualifications, but in curriculum opportunity too.

My belief was that this particular issue - of narrowing subject choices - exemplified the core of issues of inequality in our education system. Disparity in curriculum opportunity - at the base level of more disadvantaged young people being able to study fewer subjects than others - is so much deeper than the inequality of outcome that is discussed so much. It is about the basics of equality of opportunity. Having attended a school in an area of multiple deprivation, it occurred to me that while the research focus on the impact of reform on the numbers of subjects was vitally important, the voice of pupils and the impact that such narrowing may have on their choices - compared to my generation just years previous - was largely missing from consideration.

I worked for Iain part-time alongside studying for a Masters of Research at the University of Glasgow. At this time, in the summer of 2018, I was attracted to an advert for postgraduate research which was to explore the influences over young people's learning decisions, with a specific focus on employer engagement. While I did not propose the premise of the research, it is my understanding that it was developed before the policy issues discussed above became prominent.

Before leaving Iain's office to begin this research, I worked extensively supporting his Education and Skills Committee role during the Scottish Parliament Subject Choices Inquiry, which gave me a detailed insight into the policy issues and processes which impact upon subject choices under the CfE.

This has also not been a traditional journey through a PhD thesis. There was first the disruption that the pandemic - and the related public health measures - had upon the research. I was halfway through my fieldwork at the onset of the COVID-19 virus in March 2020. I was privileged during that period to have my research cited, and to be asked to comment, on the impact that the disruption was having on education in Scotland. Of prominence was my research on the impact of the Alternative Certification Model in the 2020 examination diet which saw exams cancelled, and the estimated grades of young people statistically moderated based on the prior attainment of the school they attended. This meant that those who attended schools with higher levels of deprivation (and therefore had lower historical attainment) had their grades downgraded at accelerated rate compared to those in less deprived schools.

Following this period of disruption, I also experienced periods of significant ill-health which impacted upon engagement with this work. This has meant the work has been completed in three main 'stages' (initial work and two 're-engagements') which has meant the ideas and conclusions within this work have developed over time, as my ideas and experiences have developed. The potential impact of this on the findings, compared to if there had been a direct 'traditional' progression through to submission are worth noting.

The experiences outlined have shaped the positionality of this research. My perspective on these issues comes from a critical lens that policy - as is - is widening inequality, and that the voice of young people is vitally important to considerations on subject choices, and inequality within the education system as a whole.

## CHAPTER TWO - CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 – Conceptual Framework

This chapter seeks to set out a robust conceptual framework which provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the complexities within the education system as they relate to subject choices. It aims to contextualise the academic and policy literature which has been and will be set out in the review chapters. The purpose of this framework is not to offer an abstract exploration of various theories, but to conceptualise them in a focused and applied sense to enhance the understanding of the analytical framing of the analysis of this research. Firstly, the chapter will set out key concepts from the work of Bourdieu (1986, 1990, 1992) which will aid in understanding of the education system itself and how social background intersects with the experience of education. It will then consider concepts in relation to motivations in decision making.

The first concept considered relates to understanding education as a ‘social space’ which sets a framework of understanding as to how inequality impacts upon the experience of education. It seeks to aid the examination of how different actors within the education system interact, compete, co-operate, and ultimately reinforce existing structures and outcomes. This approach allows for a nuanced analysis of how social background influences educational pathways and curriculum experiences, particularly in the context of subject choices. The second is focused upon the understanding of social inequality and social background based upon Bourdieu’s theory of capital which aims to understand disadvantage at a deeper level than just economic wealth. This leads to discussion of the role of habitus in how learning decisions are approached, which gives insight into how these decisions do not all stem from an equal place and are influenced by background, culture, and circumstance. It develops the application of habitus to that of individual institutions (schools), highlighting how they, through their distinct cultures, influence the aspirations and decisions of young people, often reinforcing social stratification. Lastly, the framework applies the key concepts of Rational Choice Theory to subject choices. The theory helps to enhance understanding of how pupils approach subject choices, considering factors like future career prospects, personal interests, and perceived benefits to themselves. Though there is an extent to which this is an alternative theory to habitus, it

applies the theory alongside elements of Bourdieu's; mainly that learning decisions are deeply influenced by the broader social context in which they are made, and the resources available. This adds complexity to the notion of 'rational' decision making.

### ***2.1.1 - Education as a 'Social Space'***

Nash (1990) describes that in modern society(ies), the school has become the most important agency for the reproduction of social class, with the family also being vitally important. Bourdieu's conceptualisation of social fields or 'spaces' is one that can help understand the education system and how the various different influences that actors contend with inter-relate (Lingard, Taylor and Rawolle 2005). This is an important framework for this study given the focus on competing influences. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) iterated that fields - social spaces - are networks that impose values on specific social spaces. Their contention was that social spaces are multi-faceted systems of relations and power struggles, which show the ways in which there exists conflict between the competing agents within a space. Though they can be viewed as a metaphorical image of how society is organised, the argument exists that an individual or group's 'positioning' within a social space informs the tangible power that they hold within it. Andersen and Jaeger (2015) described a space as an institutional setting governed by its own particular sets of rules, norms and values, where agents within compete to impose their own versions of these for advantage in society.

It is important to note that the analysis that Bourdieu and Waquant (1992) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) put forth is that education is not a social space of social reform and equity, as is often culturally portrayed (Nash 1990). Rather, they contend it as a system that produces and re-enforces inequality. James (2006) cautions that the tendency of Bourdieusian social theory to reflect general pessimism of the social space presents challenges to researchers and particularly to educationalists, who are usually looking to improve equity of outcomes. A core example of this in relation to subject choices in Scottish education is the narrowing of curriculum width outlined in Chapter Four. That there has been a reduction in subject choices generally, but that it has been accelerated in schools with more disadvantaged pupils, demonstrates the ways in which the structure of

education - its processes and policy frameworks - re-produce rather than challenge inequalities. This is further exemplified by the widening inequalities in the attainment of qualifications between the most and least deprived pupils seen in Scottish education, despite the policy focus, and vast amounts of public spending, to address exactly this issue (McEnaney 2024, Black 2023). The key contention made however is not unique to Scotland. Structural inequalities - and their reproduction through education - could be observed in the discussion of different types of curriculum structures that are implemented internationally, which all demonstrate unique challenges for educational inequality across cultures and structures.

Further, Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2011) found that teachers view of aspirations and their influence in shaping them was based on a foundational belief that the education system is a route to resolve inequalities, rather than a system which re-enforces it. This develops understanding of the role of social background in the education system, and the opportunities that are within it. This consideration is also important in the context of teachers influence during the subject choices process that is detailed in Chapter Three. Indeed, as teachers occupy their own 'space' within the 'social space of education' - and hold authority and trust within the space - this makes their opinions, perceptions, and decisions with regards to young people's subject choices highly influential (as will be demonstrated throughout this thesis). This trust, however, also means that teachers' biases and perceptions can shape the educational pathways of their pupils. Teachers' perceptions are not formed in a vacuum - just like the fact educational inequality is not driven by the four walls of a classroom - they are influenced by the broader social and cultural contexts, including social background academic performance, and other factors. This is a key example of some of the tensions that can exist between different groups in the social space of education when young people come to make their learning decisions and is a key driver behind the exploration in this research of external influences on choices. Though social spaces are not mere areas of conflict or competition, but of co-operation and mutual influence also. Crucial to the understanding of how different groups operate in the social space of education in aiming to exert influence in their own interest and in the best interests of others.

### ***2.1.2 - The formation of capital***



Bourdieu (1986) stated that the notion of capital is what interrelates agents throughout time. This understanding of social background is of relevance to this study, as the conceptualisation of it goes much deeper than economic inequalities and makes relevant the role of social networks and prior knowledge of the education system. It also aligns with it a broader understanding of deprivation beyond just economic poverty. This is much more in-fitting (but by no means perfectly aligned) with the definition of indexing multiple deprivation in Scotland (which is the measurement of 'poverty'/social disadvantage used in Scottish education), that looks at place-based multiple deprivation beyond household income. Bourdieu (1986) argued that solely focusing upon economic capital - as many of the traditional conflict theories do - makes it impossible to account for the functioning and structure of the social world. Economic, cultural, and social capital are the three forms which Bourdieu analyses as comprising and dictating habitus, and where a group is placed within a social space. Each form of capital have their own applied relevance to the issue of subject choices and curriculum opportunity.

Economic capital is the raw form of material wealth that is traditionally thought of as determining social class. Money and assets which are used to purchase goods and services - and by extension - privileges and power within society. Young people from families with higher economic capital have more access to educational resources, such as private tutoring, advanced learning materials, and extracurricular activities that enhance academic performance. They are also more likely to live in postcodes where there are 'better forming' schools due to the economic advantages of the cohort, which re-produced educational advantage. This can influence their subject choices by providing them with the necessary support to pursue the attainment of qualifications at a higher level.

Cultural capital is perhaps seen as the most important aspect of the social space of education (English and Bolton 2016). Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) stated that the construction of relations between the system of education and the relations between classes is paramount in society. In 1973, Bourdieu stated that educational success was directly dependent on cultural capital and its investment in the '*academic market*' (pg. 96). With higher cultural capital - at its core a higher level

of education and higher level of attained qualifications - for young people and their family units comes a deeper encompassing of the knowledge, skills, education, and cultural experiences to appreciate and understand the education system. Young people with high cultural capital are more likely to be familiar with the expectations and norms of the educational system, which often align with both their aspirations and the reality of the economic market that they will enter upon leaving school

Indeed, the conception of cultural capital was borne out of hypothesising what the causes were of unequal attainment in school of children from differing social contexts. It has been defined as '*institutionalised i.e. widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviours, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion (Lamont & Lareau 1988, p.156)*'.

Increased cultural capital also expands the perception of what can be aspired to by broadening the understanding of different social spaces, opportunities, and the types of pathways which can be taken. Applied to the current research, the appreciation of the role of cultural capital of the individual and their wider networks (mainly family), is central to their perceptions of how their choices impact their future aspirations, the knowledge of the subjects and pathways they 'need' to attain, and the ability to make these choices with confidence. Pupils with higher cultural capital may also either naturally gravitate through their own motivations - or be influenced - towards subjects that are seen as 'prestigious' or more economically valuable. They are also more likely to have networks and come from backgrounds where they have a greater familiarity with such subjects. On the other hand, young people with lower cultural capital might undervalue certain academic subjects and perceive them as less relevant to their immediate goals or aspirations. This flows through to influence the curriculum offer that may be available within schools where there is a hegemony of a certain 'level' of cultural capital (explored further in the next Section).

Social capital, the final form in Bourdieu's theoretical analysis, is the culmination of networks, or access to networks, that can be used to advance privilege, power and/or cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu 1986). It is the theoretical embodiment of the saying '*it is who you know, not what you know*' (Ramsay 2016) (or 'it's no wit ye know, its who ye know' in Glasgow) which has direct relevance to the forming of aspiration and the labour market that is a focus of this research. The contention is that through having access to influential networks, an individual or a group can use them in the short or long term for social or material advantage. These networks can be seen as investment strategies, and whether those mechanisms such as friendship, kinship, or mutually beneficial acquaintance, can allow access to increased or potentially increase economic or cultural capital. If applied relevance to this research study is the impact of social capital on employer engagement. As set out, the ability of less deprived young people - who have family connections which can aide their attainment of work placements directly aligned to their aspiration or in industries with higher economic and social capital - is a key factor in the quality of engagements such as work experience. This is an example of how social capital can allow for the occupation of a more beneficial position in the social space. Social capital can also be a means to acquiring increased cultural capital. Indeed, as has been mentioned, those pupils with informed social networks, particularly those involving family members, mentors, or peers who are knowledgeable about the education system are more likely to receive informed advice on subject selection and future pathways.

Each form of capital—economic, social, and cultural—plays a critical role in shaping individuals' subject choices and indeed the curriculum opportunities available to them. The different forms of capital tend to reinforce each other, leading to a cycle where pupils from privileged (or less deprived in Scottish education measurement parlance) backgrounds are more likely to access and succeed in subjects that lead to further educational and career opportunities. They are also more likely to have the knowledge and networks to make the pathways they want to pursue a reality. The accumulation of these forms of capital significantly influences educational outcomes, often perpetuating existing social inequalities within the education system, and is a useful way to understand and apply understanding of the role of social background within this research.

The theory of the formation of ‘capital’ sets out that the ability to pass on, and inherit, capital and the power and positions - or lack thereof - that stem from it is what allows the social world not to ‘be reduced to a discontinuous series of instantiations mechanical equilibrium between agents (Bourdieu 1986, p. 15)’. This illustration of the continuous and fluid endurance of the influence of capital is useful in conceptualising how social spaces and agents, and institutions within them, embody their past and are presently conscious of the traditions which govern them. Perhaps an even more important point on the influence of capital is the statement that it is what makes the ‘economic games of society’ not just based on mere luck, and not just strings of events of which the outcome of each is not related to those previous. Rather it renders them as almost pre-determined, interlinked, and contextualised by circumstance and background. This illustration becomes more relevant to the current research. If education - and success with it - is perceived as one of these ‘games’. It also builds on the conceptualisation of education as a space which re-produces inequalities rather than exacerbating them by ensuring that there is a level of pre-determination of the average outcomes in education based on social background.

### **2.1.3 - Social background and habitus in decision making**

Traditional analysis of social structure and conflict in society reasons that groups are socially categorised based on their economic power. Bourdieu (1986) argued that the forms of *capital* which comprise the *habitus* of an individual or group - which dictates class categorisation. Dumais (2002) argues that the study of one of these concepts without the other leaves the theoretical framework incomplete in its practical application.

*Habitus* is the way in which an individual sees themselves in the world, where they are placed in ‘social space’ and their relationships with regards to others. It is how an individual views the environment around them, and their orientation towards it. It also factors into their perception of the world and not only what people believe to be possible, but what possibilities they believe even exist, and is shaped over time. Andersen and Jaeger (2015) noted that this is largely based upon class position - though gender, race and other social characteristics are integral too. Indeed, when ‘grouped’, it can be visualised as similar to a social

class of people. Similar tastes, norms, values and outlooks will be shared by those who are similarly situated within social space (Bourdieu 1979).

Swartz summed up habitus concisely commenting it as '*a set of deeply internalised master dispositions, that generate action (1997, pg. 100)*'. Dumais (2002) sets out that these dispositions are what reproduce structural inequalities as those in privileged positions - those who hold the power in social space - embed and act in ways which secures future privileges for themselves, their children, and those of others who share their habitus (their class interests). Of course, action can only be taken when an individual knows what type of action is possible. This is an important framework with which to view learning decisions such as subject choices, and aides understanding that young people do not make subject choices from the same 'starting point' but one that is inextricably built upon their prior experience, position in social space, and habitus. Piroddi (2021) argues that individuals unconsciously adjust their social actions to match their aspirations and the possibilities of their aspirations - a form of 'knowing your place'. Key to learning decisions is the conclusion that this only happens '*insofar as habitus permits agents to perceive their actions as an outcome of their free choices*' (pg. 621).

Of importance to the current research is the conception of 'institutional habitus', which is an extension of Bourdieu's notion of habitus. Institutional habitus refers to the ways in which the organisational culture, practices, and social relations within an (in the applied context of this research) educational institution, influence young people's' perceptions, expectations, and choices (Reay, David, and Ball, 2001). In the case of their article, the focus was on Higher Education institutions, but the same conceptualisation can be applied to schools, particularly within a system where they have significant autonomy over their curriculum structure and offer, like under the Curriculum for Excellence. The paper emphasises that institutional habitus, alongside familial and peer influences, play a significant role in shaping choices. Reay, David, and Ball (2001) set out that "habitus produces action, but because it confines possibilities to those feasible for the social groups the individual belongs to, much of the time those actions tend to be reproductive rather than transformative dispositions inevitably reflect the social context in which they are acquired (Pg. 2)" Crucially, and linking to the

concept of education as a social space, it confers that the institutional habitus - in determining curriculum experience and setting an approach towards facilitating the aspirations (and perceived aspirations) of a cohort of pupils, reproduces social stratification.

#### ***2.1.4 - Individual agency in decision making***

While the applied concepts which have been outlined give insight into the set of predispositions and illustrate how structural factors and institutional practices contribute to the persistence of inequality within the education system, there must be space for conceptualising individuals' agency over the individual learning decisions they make. After all, we are individuals not to be simply defined simply by group or class. Even within the social and policy context, there exists individual agency over the choices available. Individual agency, within the conception of habitus, can often appear constrained due to tendency to conceive individuals are predisposed to behave in certain ways based on their social backgrounds, crucially in a largely unconscious manner (Chandler 2013, Sayer 2009).

While a Bourdieusian perspective on secondary school subject choices in the UK emphasises the structuring forces of social class, habitus, and cultural capital, an alternative approach foregrounds individual agency as a key determinant of educational decision-making. Social theories of agency, such as Giddens' (1984) structuration theory and Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) concept of agency as a temporally embedded process, challenge the notion that pupil's choices are wholly shaped by pre-existing social structures. Instead, these theories argue that individuals actively interpret, negotiate, and sometimes resist structural constraints when making educational decisions. Research on student subject choices suggests that while social background influences preferences, young people also exercise reflexivity, aspirations, and strategic decision-making in response to their perceived opportunities and future goals (Archer et al. 2010). By emphasising the role of agency and applying it to this study, this perspective highlights the potential for young people to transcend their socio-economic positions, making subject choices based not only on inherited and structural dispositions but also on ambitions', interests, and perceptions of opportunity.

As the literature (explored in the following chapters) sets out, when making subject choices, young people are often making choices where they must weigh

subjects against each other to decide which one suits their needs and/or interests best. What encapsulates the 'best needs and interests' is a deeper question which is open to influences, perceptions, and experiences and will be explored in the findings of this research and the discussion of the findings. The personal decisions being made however, can be seen within the notion of rational choice (Hechter & Kanazawa 1997, Green 2002). The theory assumes that individuals are rational actors who make decisions by weighing the costs and benefits of different options. It provides a structured way to understand decision-making in various contexts, emphasising the role of rationality and self-interest. Individuals' primary goal is to maximise their utility (in the case of subject choices to their skill set or suite of qualifications towards a certain aspiration or satisfaction (through pursuing the subjects they are interested in, or indeed 'dropping' subjects that they don't like)). This process of decision making, according to the theory, involves calculating the expected utility of each option, where utility represents the value or satisfaction derived from a choice. Where there is great use in the application of the theory to the current research is the way in which rational choice theory highlights that people will make decisions out of 'self-interest', in that that they hope to best serve their own interests and personal goals. The emphasis, according to Green (2002), is on these decisions being financial, social, and emotional, of which it can be argued decisions as important as subject choices are.

Further to this, it is contended that individual actions aggregate into collective phenomena, such as markets and social norms (Sato 2013), which has pertinence to the role of subject choices in the creation of skills within the future workforce and how they mediate careers pathways. It also links into the concepts of social space, capital and habitus in some key ways, which mean the applications of both theories are not mutually exclusive when applied to this research. It is the contention of the conceptual framework that the decisions that young people make when making their choices are shaped by policy frameworks and institutional practice (it is literally only possible make the choices that are available to you) and by the influences - both internal and external - that impact upon them, and that these are shaped by factors of social background.

Indeed, the context in which subject choices are made means that the making of these decisions is influenced by the broader social structures that dictate what is available and valued in a particular institution and social environment. Further, while rational choice theory assumes that individuals make decisions by weighing costs and benefits, the conceptualisation of understanding social background as mediated by 'capital', depth is added to the rationality of decision by showing how these calculations are influenced by the types and amounts of capital an individual possesses. For example, the benefits weighed up over a decision regarding taking a certain subject will be different between two different pupils, at different schools, with different levels of each capital because their habitus informs them about the potential long-term rewards of these choices. It also informs what goals they will have in mind when making decisions towards attaining them.

In terms of rational choices, habitus can be seen as the underlying framework that guides individuals' preferences and choices, often subconsciously, which adds complexity to the contention that rational choices are made consciously. The application of these concepts to learning decisions can situate the individual agency that exists in a broader social, determined, context. While individuals may strive to make rational decisions, the options available to them, and their perceptions of these options, are significantly influenced by this broader social context.

## **2.2 – Motivation Theories**

Motivation is a critical psychological construct when exploring the driving forces behind decision-making. Broadly, motivation has been categorised by psychologists into intrinsic (internal) and extrinsic (external) types, each broadly influenced by different theoretical perspectives and with different potential decisional and behavioural outcomes. For example, Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is one of the most influential frameworks offering this distinction. According to SDT, intrinsic motivation arises from innate psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, while extrinsic motivation is shaped by external rewards, influences, or pressures. This distinction has significant implications for education, work, and aspirations - and therefore,



offers this research a nuanced perspective beyond structure and individual levels of consideration, instead placing the individual within specific contexts in their learning decisions.

Furthermore, intrinsic motivation is often highlighted as the more long-term influence on decision-making, and is defined as engagement in activities for their inherent satisfaction rather than for external rewards (Deci & Ryan, 2000). On the other hand, extrinsic motivation is driven by external factors such as rewards, punishments, or social pressures (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and can also bear weight on our behavioural outcomes.

A more nuanced perspective is offered by Self-Determination Theory's continuum of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which ranges from amotivation (lack of motivation) to intrinsic motivation, with varying degrees of extrinsic regulation. This continuum challenges the balance between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, suggesting that external motivators can sometimes be internalised and lead to self-driven behaviour and vice versa. This has particular salience for learning decisions such as subject choices.

In conclusion, motivation is shaped by an interplay of internal desires and external influences. While intrinsic motivation is often linked to personal fulfillment and deeper engagement, extrinsic motivators can also play a crucial role in driving decisions and behaviours. These are particularly important to consider in structured settings like education and in career aspirations. Theories such as Self-Determination Theory and Expectancy-Value Theory provide valuable insights into how motivation functions across different contexts. Understanding these theories allows learners, educational stakeholder, employers, and policymakers toward positive decision-making and ultimately educational self-actualisation, woven within the Bourdieusian structural lens and with considerations of individual agency within this thesis.

In summary, this research applies a conceptual framework that attempts to emphasise the interplay between structural inequalities and individual agency, highlighting how social background, institutional practices, and broader policy frameworks shape the curriculum opportunities and educational pathways

available to young people. By situating individual decisions within this broader social context, this framework aims to be applied and focused to aid understanding of the process of subject choices and how young people negotiate the influences upon them when making learning decisions.

The next chapter reviews the existing literature on the influences on subject choices from Scotland, the UK, and internationally.

## CHAPTER THREE - CHOICES, CHOICES - WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE INFLUENCES ON SUBJECT CHOICE?

### 3.1 - Introduction

In Scotland (and across the UK), the main way in which young people experience the curriculum is through subjects. Within secondary education, pupils' go through a process whereby they select the subjects that they will study for the attainment of qualifications (known in Scotland as the 'Senior Phase'). The aim of this chapter is to review the existing literature on the influences on subject choices in order to situate the current research within the context of the 'new' curriculum (the CfE). It starts by discussing the principles and intentions behind the system of subject choices that young people navigate, before setting out some of the core issues that have been identified in previous studies. These studies span over a period of decades, and discussion begins with how many of these issues are still resonant in contemporary research, including the aims of subject choices in the structure of schooling, what is known about the influences of choices, and the influences which exist upon them. Discussion of these issues include the impact of the social and economic contexts of the time, the influences of internal motivations and external actors, and the impact of curriculum structure. The chapter then explores the research relating to pupils' motivations in their subject choices. Next, the external influences upon young people are considered, with exploration of research on the influence of teachers, family and peers considered. The role of perception in influences over subject choices is then discussed. The chapter discusses how these perceptions impact pupils' decisions, and how perceptions impact on attitudes towards different pathways. Additionally, this chapter discusses the social stratification of subject choices based on social background. The role of 'aspiration' is considered before research questions are developed.

### **3.2 – The aims of subject choices**

The principal of school subject choices is - in theory - to give an equitable process that young people themselves are in control of so they can best plan for the future career path or further educational route that they wish to pursue (Murphy 2015). The aim is to provide personalisation and choice to young people regarding their education, and what their experience of the curriculum will be. There is however a clear sense that emerges from the literature that school subject choice is influenced by the structural contexts in which the decisions take place and the individual backgrounds of those young people who are making the decisions (Blenkinsop et al. 2006). Such a conceptualisation of these influences upon choices is useful in appreciating the impact of internal and external social influences they are forced to navigate (McCrone et al. 2005).

Indeed, much discussion exists around whether or not young people do have a ‘free choice’ over their subjects or whether the formal and informal pressures and restrictions that exist mean that the choice is not ‘free’ in any real sense of the word (Turner 2003). Unwin et al. (2004) noted while investigating the situation in England that ‘*individual choices are constrained by a wide variety of socio-economic, educational and personal factors*’ as well as the more formal structures which may exist. When considering the positives and negatives of such processes within the curriculum, the question arises whether the process of selecting subjects is genuinely a choice or whether the process relates more to chances offered or denied to pupils by circumstance. The process in Scottish schools, and pupils’ experiences of it, is explored in detail in Chapter Seven when the approach in participating schools in this research is analysed.

### **3.3 – ‘Chances and Choices’**

Research into subject choice has been a key interest of social scientists and educationalists in Scotland for some time. In 1979, Cryrie, Furst and Lauder published wide-ranging research into subject choices within the Scottish education system. The research was published at a time of reform and change in Scottish education, and wider society, which is not dissimilar to the contemporary

context. At the time of study, there had recently been major reforms to the school curriculum, a renewed focus on vocational education and changes to governance and the qualifications framework. There were also significant changes witnessed in the wider economy, such as more young people staying in education past the junior phase (earlier years of secondary) of secondary school (leaving as soon as legally permitted). That such changes are currently being experienced in Scottish education and wider society once again, albeit at an arguably faster rate from a more progressive baseline, makes the publication directly relevant to the current research. Specifically, the research aimed to assess to what extent subject decisions and future pathways were determined by ‘chances or choices’ within Scottish education. The research sets out several issues which are evident still within contemporary research both within Scotland and from other countries and are worth considering from this outset.

Cryrie, Furst and Lauder’s (1979) research was conducted in eight secondary schools in Scotland. Four were situated in North Lanarkshire, an urban and industrial area with large ‘*working class areas*’ (the definition used in their research, and many of which would now be defined as ‘areas of multiple deprivation’), where few residents held higher education qualifications and most young people went into post-education destinations of manual occupations. The other four were based in the Scottish Borders, an area comprised of rural towns, which are more affluent in comparison to North Lanarkshire and where agriculture and textiles were the main industries that sustained employment. The research was of longitudinal design and utilised mixed methods, which consisted of over six hundred interviews with pupils, parents and teachers, as well as assessment of school guidance systems, curricular structures and pupil’s subsequent destinations. Interviews began as the choices process did and focused upon those in the junior phase across two subsequent year groups. Crucially, the researchers interviewed pupils twice where possible - pre- and post-choice. Firstly, though the removal of formal selection by academic ability had been abolished through reforms years previous, Cryrie, Furst and Lauder (1979) found that separation of pupils by ability simply happened later in a pupils’ school career. An obvious hierarchy was placed upon more ‘academic tier one’ subjects such as Mathematics (Maths), English, Latin, and Sciences. Those with higher educational attainment, who were very often the more affluent pupils, were encouraged to select these

subjects in the majority of schools studied, while those with lower attainment were pushed to do 'tier two' or vocational subjects.

Interestingly, once the school year had begun, there was a clear social class spilt with those who were 'upgraded' with their choices due to good attainment, and those 'moved down' due to poor attainment in the classes they had selected. Even though nearly all of the schools had different mechanisms in place for pupils to make their choices, the research also found that over ninety percent of pupils felt they had a real choice open to them. Only one in four pupils made any subsequent changes to their timetables once the academic year began - showing a general satisfaction with the choices made. The researchers concluded, however, that the policy decisions that influence choices are often undetected by pupils and that choices were very much predetermined by existing structures. The striking thing about these findings from four decades ago is the resemblance they bear to findings evident within the contemporary literature on school subject choices. There however exists a need to interrogate these motivations, influences, and the role of curriculum and structure in a contemporary context.

### **3.4 - Pupils' motivations toward subject selection**

The previous literature often considers that there are internal and external influences which impact upon learning. The internal influences relate to individual motivations which influence the perceptions, feelings, and desire to make - or not make - a certain decision. These internal influences relate to individuals' psychology towards the decisions they are making. External influences relate to groups (such as family, teachers, or peers) and institutions (such as 'their school' or 'the media') and how these external actors shape the decisions of individuals. Of course, throughout the literature, both are related and overlap, and both are influenced by wider social and cultural factors.

The existing literature identifies a range of internal motivations. A major study found that there were clear themes that existed which pupils said contributed to their decision-making. Over a third said they selected a subject because they liked it, 26% mentioned the utility of a subject to a planned future career or educational

route (discussed in Section 10.1 (and introduced prior) as ‘usefulness’) had guided their choice and one in five picked a subject on someone else’s recommendation, or because there were no other desirable options open to them.

### ***3.4.1 - Enjoyment of subjects***

Palmer, Burke and Aubusson (2016) in research that considered factors surrounding why pupils choose and reject science subjects, found that subject enjoyment was a crucial factor in young people keeping a science in their timetable. In a survey of nearly 400 pupils in Australia, the study revealed that teaching style and engagement were key to increasing enjoyment. Academic success within the subject was also deemed an influencer upon perceptions of enjoyment and ultimately uptake. A particularly interesting point that arose from their surveys was that young people did not think enjoyment or proficiency was guaranteed to continue as the subjects got more difficult at a higher level, but opted to select them based on enjoyment regardless. This suggests that increased enjoyment of a subject increases motivation to select it, regardless of envisaged future difficulties or changes (Ofqual 2017).

Throughout interviews conducted by Blenkinsop et al. (2006) the concept of ‘enjoying’ a subject was key to the majority of conversations young people had surrounding the positive reasons they chose certain subjects. Indeed, Deci et al. (1991) noted that enjoyment of a subject led to freer engagement with it, and this was echoed in the Blenkinsop et al. research (ibid). The consequence of increased motivation to engage were increased uptake and attainment. This showed that when a student actively enjoyed a subject, for whatever reason, they were not only more likely to take it in the future, but would find it less challenging also. Reiss (2001) stressed that enjoyment was not a straightforward concept within subject choice, however. In an ethnographic study within science education, he noted that enjoyment stems directly from five factors including ease, quality of teacher and relation to out- of-class (extra-curricular) interests and hobbies. Research also indicated that while enjoyment of a subject was indeed key to decision making at the junior level, the importance of this decreased during the more senior qualification in senior years of schooling. When considering

choices for their senior years, pupils placed a particular importance on the 'usefulness' of a subject to their future, with one pupil commenting '*I like art, but it won't get me a job*' (Blenkinsop et al. 2006, Pg. 6). This indicates that there is a balance to be considered when choices are made involving various internal motivations.

### **3.4.2 - The role of difficulty**

Subject difficulty was deemed a key factor relating to whether a teacher or peer would recommend a subject and whether a young person would consider choosing it (Ofqual 2017). Despite the clear opinion that emerged from the literature, there existed no consensus of how 'difficulty' should be conceptualised with regards to assessments, awards, and attainment. Indeed, it was noted by many studies that teachers were keen to recommend subjects to pupils which they thought they would 'manage' (Foskett et al. 2004). Often teachers made considerations around difficulty of subjects based upon the structure of coursework, describing subjects which required more essay-based work as more challenging (McCrone et al. 2005). Such views were also exhibited by pupils, who would consciously avoid taking too many subjects with heavy coursework requirements. This shows a direct inter-relation between internal influences and external actors, and how pupils' conception of their own motivations can be impacted by the perceptions of those involved with their education.

The interrelation between difficulty, enjoyment, and the utility of subjects to attainment of future pathways became clear in relation to science uptake, where a lack of ability or attainment in a certain science was the largest reason for not enjoying the subject (Stables 1999). Davies et al. (2008) found that 79% of junior phase pupils stated being good at a subject, or finding it easy, was an important reason for selecting it. Further, Ireson et al. (2001) highlighted that subjects which 'grouped' pupils by ability saw disproportionate numbers from 'higher up' (in terms of attainment) groups opting to take them.



McCrone et al. (2005) highlighted that, while there are several factors which have influenced the sharp rate of decline of the numbers of language students, the perceived difficulty of learning languages is key. This is also put forward as a reason a large number of pupils in Scotland drop Maths as soon as possible in the Senior Phase (SQA 2018), and indeed has contributed to why Languages have seen much lower uptake in recent years. Further, Lyons and Quinn (2010) attributed difficulty as a major reason behind the reducing numbers of pupils studying physics in senior qualifications. As no academic consensus exists to objectively measure ‘difficulty’, these decisions are made based in part on the results of tests and qualifications, but also on perceptions on the part of pupils, parents and teachers, which are explored in greater detail in Section 3.6.

### ***3.4.3 – Utility of subjects to future aspirations***

The majority of research, as assessed by Ofqual in relation to the English school system, found that pupils were generally well informed about choices and the potential impact of them upon their future (Ofqual 2017). Most pupils certainly viewed the decisions as important retrospectively (Blenkinsop et al. 2006). It was also apparent within their research that most pupils had logically thought through their choices; positives, negatives, and consequences. This was in contrast to the 1979 study in Scotland (ibid), which perhaps indicates a greater awareness in contemporary schooling of the impact of choices. Understanding the magnitude of the decision’s impact upon future pathways was crucial to the perception of a subject’s utility (usefulness) being a major influencer of choices (Foskett et al. 2005). In a similar vein, Stables (1999) contended that association to career relevance contributed significantly to choices within language courses, and such considerations were closely related to enjoyment. The authors also highlighted that perceived usefulness was closely related to parental influence, showing the complex nature in which all social influences interact to affect young people’s educational decision-making. Young people’s assessment of usefulness was also related to their experiences and perceptions of life post-education. Adey and Biddulph (2001) emphasised that pupils were influenced heavily by usefulness, but this was often misplaced and the usefulness of a subject misunderstood.

Less ambiguity surrounding usefulness existed in relation to accessing Higher Education however. Ofqual (2015) stressed the impact of the Russell Group Universities' recommended subjects in determining outcomes (2015). While such formal guidance could be considered policy, it was clear within the research that pupils considered the listed subjects as useful, even if they ultimately missed out on a Russell Group university place. The research also highlighted that perceived usefulness of a subject outweighed perceptions of difficulty and enjoyment. In all, if pupils felt they 'needed' a subject to achieve their aims, they would select it regardless of other factors.

### **3.5 – External influences on young people's learning decisions**

Another striking similarity between the findings of the 1979 study (ibid) and the more recent literature is the resemblances concerning the significant influence that different groups of people have upon young people's choices. Cryrie, Furst and Lauder (1979) found that teachers, parents, and peers all played roles to varying degrees of importance. The way in which the influence of each group manifested was similar to those found by contemporary studies. It is perhaps unsurprising that outside social influences are important determinants of decision making alongside internal motivations and structural contexts however. While Ballentine and Spade (2015) contend that structural factors are more likely than personal factors to influence changes within education, there is no doubt of the importance of people and their relationships in determining educational experience.

Indeed, in much the same manner which young people's decision making within education is described as an interrelation between structural contexts and individual attributes, the same can be generalised for the education system. While education systems and their development are driven by policy decisions and the subsequent structures that are built and implemented, the context of how those operate is determined by the people within the system and their relationships with each other. Indeed, Rist (1977) argues that individuals are active in shaping their experiences and are not merely shaped by societal and structural forces. Ballentine and Spade (2015) further advance that pupils are social agents within

the 'ecosystem' of a school and are active agents in influencing their reality. This further adds to the need for the appreciation of individual agency in learning decisions in the broader context of policy and social structures.

Young people are however very clearly 'lower'; within the social hierarchy of education systems (the social space) and are open to the influence of authority groups. This can become particularly problematic when teachers share very different experiences and backgrounds to their pupils. It is also clear that education does not exist as a (social) institution that operates in isolation (Ballentine and Hammack 2015), but rather interrelates to other institutions, such as the family. Again, within the family, young people are often not equals in the social dynamics of the group and are open to extreme influence from parents and sibling, particularly in the reproduction of habitus and the inheritance of capital. Thus, the influence of these groups in relation to young people's decision-making within education is an important one.

### **3.5.1 – *The influence of teachers***

There existed a strong sense within the existing literature that teachers had a strong influence over the subject choices that young people make. This is perhaps unsurprising not just due to the relationship of authority that exists between pupils and their teachers, but also the trust that develops (Durnford 2010). Teachers were often best placed to assess the strengths and weaknesses of young people and help channel those to create better outcomes. This however, manifested in a plethora of ways and created complexities.

While conducting research designed to investigate subject decision making of young people during the junior and senior stage within the English education system, Blenkinsop et al. (2006) noted several processes in operation where teachers would influence young people's thinking on learning decisions. During interviews with pupils and teachers, the researchers observed that pupils would often approach teachers for advice and guidance regarding their choices. They found that it was common for pupils to bypass formal procedures of guidance and seek to discuss their future options with teachers whom they liked and trusted.

While teachers of course did their best to advise the young people who approached them, they were not themselves experts in future pathways or career development in the same way as guidance teachers (Golden et al. 2004), or careers advisors. This created an issue with teachers overtly or inadvertently ‘selling’ their subject to pupils they liked. Such issues of teachers ‘touting’ for pupils based on attainment was noted by Cryrie, Furst and Lauder (1979), who noted staff were encouraging the ‘best’ and discouraging the ‘worst’ pupils. Ofqual (2017) found however that pupils were aware teachers engaged in such practices, minimising the influence that it may have. Different findings also existed concerning at what stage of choices pupils approach teachers for advice. The assumption existed amongst teachers that the subject choices made for the senior years was the most important of the two stages; such was the gravity attributed to senior attainment in terms of post-education outcomes (Foskett et al. 2004). This attitude from teachers became internalised by pupils. What is often overlooked is that choices at the junior level affected greatly upon what choices were subsequently available at the senior (McCrone et al 2005). Consequently, Blenkinsop et al. (2006) found evidence that few pupils themselves made a direct link between their decisions on choices at the first round of choices and their future career or education pathways.

Research into the impact that earlier choices have on later choices in Scotland found that there was social stratification on the probability of taking certain subjects, including in Science and Languages in S3/4. These divides were evidenced in S5/S6 choices also. The study demonstrated that the educational background of parents was correlated with the uptake of these subject areas. In analysis of nearly 5000 cases using a range of Scottish data, the research found for example that 70% of pupils’ who had parents with no qualifications took a Science in S3/S4 while this was 83% for those with one parent with Standard Grades, 91% with one parent with Highers and 89% for both parents with a degree. The same social stratification was evident in uptake on Languages and ‘Cultural Subjects’. The research demonstrated how these earlier choices impact on senior choices concluding *‘no significant net effects of social origin on subject choices in S5/S6 were found once controlling for previous subject choice and attainment within subjects’* (Iannelli et al. 2016, pg 11).

Within this influence of teachers, broader external factors such as accountability

pressures can also play a critical role in shaping teachers' recommendations. The demand for schools to meet certain performance metrics may lead teachers to steer pupils towards subjects perceived as less challenging or those in which young people are more likely to achieve higher grades. This practice, driven by institutional goals, may inadvertently limit pupils' exposure to diverse subject areas. There is also, within these same considerations, that teachers (in a similar way to parents) will not want their children to take subjects which they will find too challenging and damage their general experience of school. Indeed, subject difficulty perceptions are influenced not just by teachers' personal influence but also by the wider accountability framework within the education system.

Adnett et al. (2003) cautioned however that it remains unclear if teacher influence always manifests in such an overt way. The researchers highlighted that often a pupil's perceptions and enjoyment of a subject can be related to their perception of the teacher. During the research of Blenkinsop et al. (2006) a teacher noted '*students find it difficult to separate personalities from subjects* (pg. 48)'. Interestingly, the research evidenced that such subtle influences were more evident in choices in earlier years, where pupils felt that their choices were of less seriousness to their future outcomes (McCrone et al. 2015). Skepticism of the influence of teachers remains, however. Foskett et al. (2004) concluded that pupil's viewed teachers as having little to no influence over choices unless they were perceived to be 'inspirational'. Such pronouncements however, rely on pupils detecting and then disregarding the influences that are exerted upon them which are not conducted in a formal and overt manner. Further, Adey and Biddulph (2001) discovered that teachers had no real influence over the option choices of the young people in their study.

Despite the mix of evidence that exists, teacher influences can be seen to improve the uptake of subjects amongst underrepresented groups. In quantitative research aimed at modelling subject choice, Ashworth and Evans (2001) found that in economics and life sciences, female pupils were more likely to take the subjects when a 'critical mass' of other women were taking the subject and where there was a woman teaching the subject. Interestingly, there existed a small effect that women teachers in economics discouraged uptake from men.

### **3.5.2 – Parental Influence**

Clearly, young people do not leave their lives at the door of the classroom. Their current and past personal experiences have significant impacts upon motivation, interest, and aspiration. The clearest example of influence within the existing literature which stems from outwith the education system itself however, is family. In a similar vein to teacher influence, this manifests in a plethora of ways. Within the literature, parental influence represented the largest focus of factors that contributed to pupil's decision making that were not directly stemming from the education system (McCrone et al. 2005).

Throughout the literature, there was interestingly a social divide with regards to the influence of parents. These findings were echoed in Foskett et al. (2004) who assessed that parents who had higher educational attainment had a stronger understanding of the processes within the curriculum. The majority of parents also regarded the influence of teachers as vitally important and placed a large amount of trust in formal guidance structures. A plethora of studies found that pupils did not think their parents had influenced their decisions, even when they had attempted to. Within Blenkinsop et al's (2006) study there was a clear feeling from pupils that subject choices were a decision for them and not for their parents. Despite this, research shows that while pupils ultimately internalise the responsibility for their decisions (Ofqual 2017), support and counsel of parents is well received, even if the advice is ultimately treated as just another piece of evidence to weigh up and is eventually disregarded (Moon et al. 2004).

Stables (1999) reported that the influence exerted by parents was key to choices made in the junior phase and mattered less during senior choices. They assessed that during the senior choices; pupils valued the input of their parents but were more confident in their own abilities to know what they wanted to study. They were also more able to take responsibility for their decisions. This was evidenced in research that found that despite the importance parents placed on subjects such as science and Maths, pupils' interest in these fell in the senior years - showing that parental influence waned over the progress of a young person's schooling. Interestingly, Moon et al. (2004) emphasised that the advice pupils felt

influenced them the most came from formal guidance structures, but that parental support for such interventions was key to their success.

Turner (2003) however argued that many pupils were influenced by their parent's misconceptions of certain subjects. This was particularly the case with regard to parents who had perceptions that were misguided regarding the difficulty of a subject, or their child's ability to navigate such difficulties. This issue was noted acutely regarding subjects the parents had not themselves enjoyed. It seemed, however, that pupils were aware of this and is one of the key reasons the opinions of older siblings were better regarded. A research report from Ofqual (2017) analysed the role of perceptions on choices and found that pupils valued the opinions of those who had recently been through the system. There existed particular interest in older siblings' experiences of subjects, and the level of difficulty that was faced. The report noted that pupils were of the opinion that the age of their parents meant their opinions were not as relevant to the realities of the education system they were part of. The proximity of older siblings to the process of choices made their input invaluable, and consequently meant they had a large influence over choices.

### ***3.5.3 – Do young people just do what their friends do?***

An interesting theme emerged throughout much of the literature that illustrated a 'mythologised' misconception from teachers, parents and the education system itself over the influence of peers upon choices. In many of the schools that were subjects in a range of studies, there existed formal guidance warning against taking subjects just because friends were. Such warnings were evident on a recurring basis through informal guidance during class and from family.

It is perhaps due to these repeated warnings, but there existed limited evidence that peers did play a major role in influencing eventual choices. McCrone et al (2005) pointed out that clearly, peers were the predominant group that young people discussed the process with, but found little to support the view that a young person would select a subject just to 'stick with' their peers in class. Indeed, in the 1979 study, just one percent of pupils attributed a subject choice to a peer.

Friends were found to be a valued secondary influence, who could provide guidance and positive reinforcement or question the developing thoughts of young people (Blenkinsop et al. 2006). This can be seen as advantageous as young people were more likely to understand the reservations of their friends regarding their decisions (Ofqual 2017).

Despite systemic skepticism, where young people did select the same subjects as their peers, this is likely down to the fact that through the virtue of being friends and sharing similar aspirations and interests, young people would naturally be attracted to similar pathways as their close peers. While there is clearly a significant role for peer influence, it remains unclear whether this has an impact that finalises the decisions of young people.

### ***3.6 – The importance of perceptions***

#### ***3.6.1 – Teachers and families' perceptions of pupils***

In major research conducted into the role of perceptions upon subject choice, Ofqual (2017) observed that the perception of pupil's abilities is inherent to determining choices. The research involved one-to-one interviews with 49 teachers and 112 students from twelve schools in England. The research found clear evidence that teachers would make recommendations to pupils based upon their own perceptions of the student's ability and how it matched with the demands of the subject. These recommendations came with such pressure attached that they 'pre-determined' choices that those pupils would consider. Teachers would consider a tri-partite range of perceptive evidence. While this included considering what a pupil enjoyed and what they wanted to do in the future, what a pupil could achieve in a given subject was at the core of considerations. In concluding, the researchers assessed that teachers generally gave advice solely based upon perceptions of difficulty. This was however overwhelmingly done in a 'person-centric' manner, meaning recommendations were made based upon the circumstances of each young person, as opposed to a blanket perception of subject difficulty. In admitting this, teachers noted that perception of difficulty mattered more in senior qualification choices, arguing enjoyment was a more important consideration earlier in the curriculum.



Such impacts of teacher's perceptions were evidenced in other studies. Foskett et al. (2004) argued that despite this effect having an impact on young people's pathways, the recommendations teachers made were not cynical but in the best interests of young people. Significant numbers of teachers contended in the study that such decisions on recommendations were made in the hope that young people would not feel discouraged by taking on subjects they struggled with. Clear similarities were evident with regard to parent's perceptions of their children's abilities. Research noted an apprehension on the part of parents regarding the potential of their children to fail. Parents put an expectation regarding choices on to their young people based on perceptions of academic ability. Some stated things like 'he is not that clever' or 'she is bright', when asked about the uptake of subjects such as maths and science, highlighting pressures young people could face at home regarding being 'too ambitious' in taking certain subjects (Cryrie, Furst and Lauder 1979).

### ***3.6.2 – Pupils' perceptions of self***

When assessing the perceptions that young people held regarding themselves and how these related with subject choice many of the same themes emerged, perhaps pointing towards teachers' and parents' perceptions being internalised. For example, pupils believed that their perception of their own abilities affected their decisions. Perceptions they held made them more cautious about taking subjects where they had lower attainment, despite enjoying them. They also agreed that decision-making was primarily based upon person-specific perceptions as opposed to a general feeling of ability or difficulty within a certain subject (Ofqual 2017). There was also a peer effect noted, where friend groups would use their perceptions of each other's abilities to recommend or warn against certain subjects. Interestingly, far more than the options of teachers and parents, and young people appreciated this advice, and viewed it as objective and genuine.

### ***3.6.3 – Societal perceptions***

It is the case that in contemporary education, pathways open to young people are more varied than in the past. More young people in Scotland are staying on into the senior phase of education and more opportunity of equitable access to vocational and academic routes exists (Scottish Government 2018). While this

trend has reversed slightly post-pandemic, the numbers staying on until the end of schooling far outnumber their historical context. It was apparent in the literature however that teachers' and parents' perceptions that vocational routes were 'lesser' to academic options had an impact upon student's decisions. The perception of the inferiority of vocational education was noted strongly in Cryrie, Furst and Lauder's (1979) study in both the urban and rural environments that they assessed. Importantly, they noted that since the introduction of the comprehensive system of education, institutional structures were struggling to keep pace with providing such opportunities. Perhaps unsurprisingly, former grammar schools had a poorer offer of vocational routes than former technical schools, due to the institutional legacies of the individual schools.

It was apparent that such beliefs regarding the 'superiority' of 'academic' subjects existed in contemporary schooling, despite the significant widening of the numbers of young people accessing these routes. Work experience and links with colleges are becoming more engrained in the formal school curriculum; yet perceptions exist surrounding academic ability determining whether these pathways should be taken. Blenkinsop et al. (2004) found that parents generally held vocational routes or subject choices in low regard. Parents would also dissuade their children from selecting vocational subjects if they viewed their child as 'smart'. Crucially, this was a trend witnessed within the advice given by teachers, who would warn pupils they viewed as 'clever' off of enrolling to do vocational courses.

The research also concluded that an institutional bias against vocational subjects existed. Evidence was presented that some Further Education Colleges and universities did not include vocational attainment within pupils' tariff scores when assessing attainment for entry. In reality, this concerns a lack of understanding on the part of the wider education establishment regarding the benefits of vocational education. Directly relating to this, parents and employers were also unaware of how vocational subjects related to the qualifications framework, meaning the belief festers that such classes are not of equal standing to traditional academic subjects. This is of particular resonance in Scotland, where there has existed confusion and apprehension from stakeholders regarding the CfE curriculum and suite of qualifications that accompany it (Scottish Parliament 2013).

Such perceptions were internalised by pupils, showing the osmosis that can take place between institutional habitus and young people's decisions. Pupils contended that vocational routes were of lesser value to subjects viewed as more 'academic' and were also largely unaware of the value of vocational routes, or the routes that were available to them. This finding is significant as research shows that once pupils begin vocational courses, they enjoy them greatly and appreciate the valuable skills they are taught (Education Scotland 2017).

Ofsted (2004) reported a clear socio-economic split in the backgrounds of those who opted to take vocational subjects. The study found that pupils who were encouraged to, and subsequently selected, vocational subjects were more likely to be those with lower attainment from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Within this, there is further evidence of a process of 'selection' that was formally removed with the introduction of comprehensive education (Cryrie, Furst and Lauder's 1979).

### **3.6.4 – Curriculum and social stratification**

Sullivan et al. (2010) explored the social stratification of the 14-16 curriculum in England. The study considered parents' education, gender, ethnicity and school sector. The research, using longitudinal data, found that there was clear patterning of subject choices based on social background. In terms of gender, the study found boys overrepresented in subject areas such as graphic design, PE and business, and girls overrepresented in arts-based subjects. Further, the type of secondary school was significantly associated with subject choice patterns, distinguishing between private schools, comprehensive schools, and foundation or voluntary aided schools, with private school students being more inclined towards academic subjects and less likely to study applied/vocational subjects. The study also explored the impact of parental educational status (at least one parent with a degree qualification versus non-graduate parents), and discovered that pupils with non-graduate parents were more inclined towards applied subjects such as PE, while those with graduate parents were overrepresented in humanities, foreign languages, arts, and triple-award sciences. The research found that enjoyment of subjects (liking and disliking them) was also socially patterned. Looking at motivation towards the future, the research concluded that 'contrary

to the old idea that less privileged young people live for the present, while the middle- classes plan for the future, concerns about future courses and jobs appeared to weigh more strongly with the less privileged respondents' (Sullivan et al. 2010. pg. 18). The research suggests that there is increasing awareness amongst pupils of all social backgrounds of the impact of their choices on their future pathways, and that aspirations are a key consideration and influence over their choices.

### **3.7 – 'Aspiration' in education**

Aspirations have long been at the centre of policymakers' attempt to 'widen access' and participation to pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds into further and higher education. At the core of subject choices are the aspirations that young people have for themselves regarding their schooling but more crucially, their future. There are a range of factors which influence these choices that are both internal motivations and external influences on the individual. Within most of these motivations and influences though are considerations about the future of the pupil - the path they wish to follow, the career they want to have, and the life they hope to attain. Broadly, aspiration forms a large part of these learning decisions as pathways through education. What young people want to do after school is throughout the literature an important influence on subject choices. The 'selection' of an aspiration is also therefore a 'learning decision'.

Aspiration as a learning decision stems from the sense within the existing literature that young people shape their educational paths - and decisions - based on their future goals upon leaving school. Often, when pupils select subjects in school, they are guided by their aspirations, whether they aim for a specific career, higher education course, or further training. This process involves evaluating which subjects align with their ambitions and the skills they need to achieve them. As such, aspiration is not just a passive 'hope' or idea but an active part of the decision-making process that influences their learning pathway. It becomes a framework - or lens - through which pupils navigate educational choices, making it a fundamental learning decision.

Aspiration, however, has become an increasingly contested concept within education in recent times. In its direct sense it can be defined and understood as '*a hope or ambition to achieve something*' (Oxford Languages 2022), and this is how it has been defined in the findings chapters that will follow, but has increasingly been used to delineate a certain *type* of person, from a certain *type* of social background. Raco (2009) observed that talk of aspiration in this context as a values-based term was first centered around Higher Education and aspirations for access to it, but that the narrative 'trickled down' to the compulsory stages of the education system.

'Aspiration' in a politicised sense of realisation of middle-class ideals was a constant theme during David Cameron's tenure as leader of the Conservative Party and then as Prime Minister. In 2007, his then Shadow Chancellor (and future Chancellor to be) George Osborne set out (what was to be) their Government's economic plans in a speech titled '*It's time for aspiration*' (Osbourne 2007). It formed the basis for much of how they framed policy when in Government. 'Aspiration' was often conceptualised as being something people either had or did not have, and not to have it brought with it an 'othering' with frequent referrals to 'strivers vs. skivers' and 'aspirational hard-working families (the message being that to not be 'aspirational' was to be lazy) throughout official Government announcements.

Much commentary however places the origins of this political narrative around aspiration with the New Labour Government, with the focus of 'education, education, education' (Blair 2001) and 'third way' politics, the relationship of the state with education sifted. Then Chancellor Gordon Brown stated that education was 'our best economic policy' (2005). This method of 'aspiration' - as 'striving for better' - as the means of social mobility placed significantly more responsibility on the individual, away from broader society, and promoted ideals of individual emancipation. Raco (2009) described this as a shift from '*a model of expectational citizenship, where the welfare-state is seen as a provider, to aspirational citizenship, where the state is instead seen as an enabler of facilitator (pg. 5)*'. They importantly also concluded that 'aspirational citizenship' is based around middle class ideals, norms and tastes.

Loveday (2015) in a study which researched the relationship between working-class participation in university and social mobility, commented on the construction of the narrative stemming from Government that Higher Education is a middle-class aspiration. They contended that working class participation is trying to emulate middle class ideals, instead of being something that can independently exist within that social background. Though the paper rejected this analysis, they discussed work which reflects on some perspectives that see working-class 'culture' as incompatible with university life. While this is a specific example, it gives insight to the class-based lens in which 'aspiration' is often understood in the context of education. More broadly, Reay (2012) contended that the structure and intention of education policy is a remorseless focus on raising working-class ambition. 'Aspiration' - in the *'narrow sense of becoming middle class'* - in and of itself is a middle-class trait or pursuit. Inbuilt into this narrative is also the sense that 'becoming educated' is the same as being or becoming 'middle-class' and that the realisation of such a class position should be an inherent desire met by 'raising aspirations' or 'aiming higher' (Loveday 2015).

In research focused on English primary schools during the New Labour Government, Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2011) looked at professionals' views on parental aspirations and understandings of 'appropriate aspirations'. Their survey of headteachers - in schools serving largely white, low-income areas - found that 'low parental aspirations' were a 'challenge' to over 90% of them. The researchers concluded that headteachers derived that lack of aspiration was connected to a lack of emphasis on the importance of education and a lack of money. Within this, the researchers found clear perceptive differences of what constituted a 'high aspiration' based on their own social class position - or habitus. The research found that parents in low-income households had aspirations around their child enjoying school, being happy, and getting something from their lessons. This however was seen as being 'low aspirational' by 'middle-class' professionals, who had ideas more concerned with career paths and higher education. Gilby et al. (2008) noted that often parent aspirations are deemed as 'low' if they do not emulate behaviours and paths which valorise 'middle-class lifestyles'.

Halloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2011) concluded that this ‘disjuncture’ stems from parents’ views on aspiration being formed from their own experiences. Guttman and Akerman (2008) noted this as an economically rational response - that a family’s poorer financial situation and poor experience of schooling forms the aspirations that they have for the next generation. This builds on Bourdieu’s (1973) contention that aspirations are shaped by the likelihood of achieving them (Nairn et al. 2007), though this analysis perhaps does not reflect fully the role of *perception* around what is even a possibility in forming aspirations.

There has also been a recent conflation of ideas of ‘social mobility’ and ‘aspiration’ in which both have been talked about in terms of Bourdieusian ideas of ‘capital’. In 2012, the Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility and Child Poverty in England, stated that *‘social mobility is not just about moving people up the earning ladder. It is also about ensuring that access to social and educational capital is open to all (Milburn 2012)’*. Gordon Brown (cited in Gutman & Akerman 2008) stated that *‘the greater failure is not the child who doesn’t reach the stars, but the child who has no stars that they feel they are reaching for’*. While this analysis succinctly describes differences in both equality of opportunity and ‘aspiration’, it misses out the role of the perceptions of what is possible. Not quite the ‘feeling’ of having no stars to reach for, but rather not even knowing such stars exist at all. Aspiration can only extend as far as what you perceive to exist - this is different to perceptions of what you *feel* you are capable of. An individual can only take opportunities which they know to be there.

### **3.8 - Research Questions**

What can be derived from the existing literature is that research into the influences on learning decisions has found broad themes of similarity across generations. These are predominantly the impact of utility of subjects to post-school pathways, what aspirations young people have for their life post school, and the influence that stems from family and teaching staff. Interestingly, research across different periods of time, and from different education systems, points to the impact of the perceptions of all of these groups, how these are formed, and the eventual influence this has on young people. Where divergence emerges within the literature is the wider contextual factors - social, economic

and educational (in terms of curriculum structure and breadth which is the focus of the next chapter) - and how these interrelate with the internal motivations of young people and the external influences that they have to negotiate. It is also clear from the literature that social background, particularly deprivation (or 'class' as many studies define it) is a key indicator - and influence - on the choices young people will make. It is pertinent to investigate in the context of contemporary Scotland: what are the main influences over young people's learning decisions (subject choices, and aspirations) under the Curriculum for Excellence, and what is the role of social background upon these decisions? This is with a particular focus on how these influences operate and interrelate.

This gap has been articulated into the following question(s):

Research Question One: What are the main influences over young people's learning decisions under the Curriculum for Excellence?

- A) What is the relationship and balance between internal and external influences?
- B) What is the role of aspirations in influencing choices?
- C) How significant is the role of social background in how influences apply?

The next chapter will explore the impact of curriculum structure on subject choices, and the policy and processes which govern subject choices. In particular, subject choices in the context of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence will be explored.



## **CHAPTER FOUR - PROCESS, POLICY, AND THE CURRICULUM FOR EXCELLENCE**

### **4.1 – Introduction**

The policy context of education significantly influences the content and experiences within the curriculum and directly affects the learning opportunities available to young people. The aim of this chapter is to explore the impact that the curriculum - and policy which influences it - has upon subject choices and curriculum opportunity. The chapter first considers the importance of the curriculum in relation to subject choices and post-school pathways. It explores how curriculum development and subject choices are shaped by national and local policies, impacting the educational experiences of pupils and reflecting societal expectations and inequalities. Following this, Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) is discussed, with focus on its inception, its relation to other international systems, its aims, and implementation. In particular, the way in which CfE has changed the structure of the Senior Phase is explored, setting out the ramifications of the new curriculum structure has impacted upon subject choices and curriculum opportunity. Research which investigates the consequences of curriculum reform - including the narrowing number of subject choices in Scotland - is then reviewed. Within this discussion there is a focus on the impact of these consequences on those from the most deprived backgrounds. Consideration of other factors which impact upon curriculum opportunity such as resources and numbers of teaching staff are set out, before development of research questions are introduced.

### **4.2 - Importance of curriculum in choices and pathways**

The policy context of education establishes the framework for the content of the curriculum that young people will be exposed to and shapes the educational experience of pupils. Policy decisions over what is included - and excluded - from a curriculum will directly impact young people's learning decisions. Principally through literally dictating the width and breadth of the options that they have available, but also in shaping their interests, perceptions, and perspectives through the experiences it offers. The imposition that different groups can make within a social space, and the free active choice that individuals have within it, is dictated

by the structures and parameters which govern it. In the case of schools in Scotland, this stems from policy as set by National Government, Local Authorities and individual schools. Stenhouse (1975) argued that a key element of curriculum policy, design and evaluation is philosophical critique. According to Kelly (1999), it is important to recognise the planning model that underpins a curriculum as from there stems the policy and operation of the curriculum. This is to ensure there is clarity and consistency surrounding the purposes of education and learning within a system.

Schools in Scotland now have significant autonomy over their curricular offer. With regards to this offer and its development Bernstein (1975) asserts that a school's expressive order plays a vital role in the educational status of an institution. This curricular offer is a reflection of the culture of an institution and will embody the expectations, values, and norms of a school - its institutional habitus. Thrupp (1999) contends these processes as reflecting the school's socio-economic composition that structures the educational opportunities and constraints for young people.

The Scottish Government (2008) defines 'a curriculum' as the entirety of planned experiences young people have throughout their education, wherever their education may take place. They place importance on the ethos of the school community, curricular areas and subjects, interdisciplinary learning, and opportunities for personal achievement as part of this. While this broad definition encompasses the totality of formal activity within the progression of a young person's education, it remains vague on the important role that policy and structure have upon the ability to realise the range of 'planned experiences' aspired for. This definition perhaps diminishes the role, and impact, that actors involved in the process of curriculum making can have on young people however. Ridell (1992) contends that 'the curriculum' is not fixed, but a dynamic and evolving identity. A curriculum is informed and developed by social and cultural contexts, which (in theory) respond to the prevailing values, and social and economic 'needs' of the time. None of these contexts are free from ideological influence and the curriculum is continually influenced by politicians and policymakers. Priestley et al. (2021) develop further that curriculum is a social practice which is made by practitioners and other actors, and that is made by a

range of actors across multiple '*sites of activity* (pg. 10)' from supra-national bodies all the way through to teachers and pupils in a classroom. Central to this is recognising that there are multiple practices which comprise 'curriculum' which of course include the logistical organisation of teaching (timetabling, resourcing) and policy frameworks.

Policy - at both a national and local (school and classroom) level - emerges in the literature as key to subject choices, though they are sometimes not considered on the surface of the choices of by individuals. In a longitudinal study that explored the views of young people in relation to 'choice and fairness' in the GCSE curriculum in Northern Ireland and Wales, Barrance and Elwood (2017) found that access to subjects and the curriculum were mediated by national and school-level policy decisions. The research highlighted that national level policy decisions, particularly as they pertain to assessment of qualifications, define the localised options open to individual schools. The administration of these decisions, they conclude, '*affect students' experience of the curriculum* (pg. 22)'. The research found that institutional inequalities related to curriculum, subject choice, and assessment are as significant as structural inequalities determined by regulators and awarding bodies. Interestingly, while it can be considered often that young people are unaware of the broader policy contexts which impact on their education, the study found that there was a desire amongst young people to be consulted on policy with regards to the curriculum at a national, school and individual level. Anders et al. (2017) further notes that schools may face constraints from national government in terms of how policy may impact their curricular offer and development. They also discuss how the local social and economic context of the school can impact on the intent of the school's curriculum, however there is a need to understand this in a Scottish context which has much more engrained socio-economic inequalities.

In an English context, Alldritt and Taylor (2015) demonstrated the key role of curriculum policy on subject choices and broader curriculum experience. The research, which focused on the variability of opportunity to take GCSEs and BTEC (technical/vocations) qualifications, raised concern about the impact of policies in education in providing opportunities to young people. The research concluded that the curricular experience that a pupil will be exposed to in an

English school is heavily dependent on where they live, and further, whether that is in a poorer or wealthier neighbourhood. The research raised questions regarding the impact on local decision making on expanding, and restricting, curriculum opportunity. Woods (1976) also found such impacts as far back as the mid-70s.

#### **4.3 - Curriculum for Excellence in an International Context**

The Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) was introduced in Scotland in 2010 to create a more flexible, skills-based education system that prepares students for the challenges of the 21st century by focusing on holistic development and the releasing of a range of personal capacities (Scottish Government 2004, Education Scotland 2010). It was designed and intended to provide a holistic and flexible, approach to education from early years through secondary school. It focuses on developing four key capacities—successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens, and effective contributors—through a broad general education and a senior phase that prepares young people for further education, employment, or training. Despite international recognition of CfE from organisations like the OECD, the principles, intention of outcomes, and structure of the Curriculum for Excellence differ from that of other major economies' education systems. In particular the structure of national exams and choice differs from the USA (an example of comprehensive education) and the flexibility and comprehensive nature of the CfE differs from some Central European countries such as Germany (an example of selective academic tracking). The purpose of this study is not to compare international systems, the aim here is to provide the international context in which the Scottish system operates. Indeed, each system shares commonalty and contrasts with each other, which helps situate the global context of the present research beyond the Scottish context. There are broad implications that each system must consider within its structure, design, and implication. Additionally, there are interesting considerations for socio-economic inequality in assessing the nature of subject choices and curriculum design between the three distinct systems.

Brief discussion of the educational structures in both nations is necessary to situate Scotland's curriculum in an international context and consider the different impact that different systems have on social stratification and education inequality.

#### ***4.3.1 - Comprehensive education, electives and tracking GPAs: The United States***

The United States Diploma system has some broad commonalities with the Scottish system in terms of its process of subject choices. Its structure however, differs. A major point of departure is that it has three levels of schools: Elementary, Middle, and High School. These map roughly into Scotland's Primary, S1-3, and Senior Phase, meaning that the attainment of qualifications in the US happens at school where resources and space is not shared with that of younger pupils who are experiencing - what Scotland would define as - 'broad general education'. It is important to note that education in the USA is primarily delivered at the State level, with State (and Local) Government having the majority of responsibility for regulation and funding. There is no National Curriculum as there is in Scotland, but there are frameworks and standards which are shared across the country in some curriculum areas. It should be noted that this situation of devolution is likely to advance further as President Trump signed an Executive Order to abolish the federal Department of Education under Secretary Linda McMahon (Nittle 2025).

Commonality with Scotland is found in the intention of High School curricula being designed to provide breadth, flexibility, and choice. Generally, pupils in the US attend comprehensive schools where there are academic and vocational options open to them. They have a range of mandatory subjects, such as Maths and English, and then the requirement to study at least one subject in some 'subject areas' such as science and social studies. Beyond these requirements however, there are elective choices which pupils can take based on their own motivations and aspirations. Similarly to Scotland, courses in subjects generally last a year, but they are often taken over multiple years with increasing levels of progression, though there are no individual qualifications at the end of each year.

There is fundamental difference, however, in how these subjects are assessed. Unlike in Scotland - where pupils sit formal national exams each year that they are within the Senior Phase - the US has a system of credits whereby the completion of courses contributes to the attainment of a 'High School Diploma' at the point of finishing school. Most states require students to complete a set number of 'credits' over their four years at High School (it varies by state but often in the range of 22-26 credits, with often 1 credit being awarded per year of a course (ACS 2024)). Achievement in the US is often recognised in a 'broader' sense also, in that attendance, community service, and extracurricular activities can contribute to the attainment of credits. While there is no national exam set at the end of a year, in some states, and in some subjects, there will be exams which contribute to the completion of courses. Pupils take standardised tests for college (University) admission.

As part of this, it is common for schools to track - and require - the attainment of a certain 'Grade Point Average' (GPA), where grades across subjects are averaged and calculated to track attainment level across the curriculum. GPA is also a crucial factor in college (university) admission and eligibility for scholarships. A key factor of GPA is that, unlike end-of-course high stakes exams in specific subjects, it reflects consistency over time and across subjects. As part of this system, there is often 'tracking; employed by schools - or school districts - such as 'honours' programmes, regular programs and so on, which can have an impact on the curricular breadth and depth that a young person may be entitled to and their choices and experience of the system. Cohodes (2015) notes that while studies of this form of tracking provide mixed results - with proponents arguing that it allows for targeted instruction and intervention, and those opposed saying that it limits the social mobility of disadvantaged students - it is difficult to attribute the impact of tracking that which should be attributed to the impact of social background.

#### ***4.3.2 - Tracking, selective pathways, and parity of esteem: Germany***

There are examples of systems where curriculum structure - and subject choices - are manifestly different than the comprehensive school systems experienced in Scotland and countries like the US. In Germany (which shares many characteristics with the systems in European countries such as Austria and the Netherlands), there

exists a much more rigid system of tracking, whereby students in the senior years of their education attend schools specifically tracked to their academic performance: academic track, intermediate track, or vocational track. Education is devolved to State and Local Government, therefore there is some variation in approach across the country, though there are set national standards and - like in Scotland - national qualifications (EU Commission 2024). Secondary education is split into lower secondary and upper secondary. Though it is dependent upon the specifics of the state, lower secondary will prepare pupils for an upper secondary curriculum experience which young people will begin attainment towards a vocational pathway or a high school diploma. Typically, pupils on vocational track at lower secondary do not typically transition to the upper secondary in the same way academic track students do. They usually enter vocational training or dual education systems (described below).

It is a much clearer distinctive pathway than is experienced in the comprehensive system within Scotland. Tracking ('specialisation') also happens much earlier in Germany, typically at the age of nine-or-ten years old. This tracking is based upon academic performance and teacher recommendations. There are three 'types' of Secondary School **students are placed into that lead** to different educational and vocational pathways: Gymnasium (for academic track), Realschule (for intermediate curricula), and Hauptschule (for vocational education).

### **Vocational Pathways**

The Hauptschule (vocational track schools) are intended to prepare students for vocational training and entry into the workforce. The curriculum at these schools includes a combination of general education subjects like German, Maths, Social Studies and practical based subjects. The curriculum is focused on practical skills and early career direction, with work placements and other types of formal employer engagement integrated into the curriculum, in similar ways to what the Developing the Young Workforce programme in Scotland has sought to introduce more of (discussed further in Chapter 4). There is an opportunity for advanced certificates which allow for access to more advanced vocational education and training.

Most students who complete the Hauptschule enter the German "dual education system," where they split their time between vocational school and on-the-job training with a company. This system leads to recognised vocational qualifications. There is also possibly to attain a Vocational Baccalaureate which is a higher form of vocational attainment that allows access primarily to Universities of Applied Sciences.

### **Academic Pathways**

In Gymnasium (the academic track), the upper secondary phase is geared towards university access. Students study a broad range of subjects in this phase, and there is some level of specialisation. Indeed, pupils choose their main subjects for deeper study, usually two or three, which carry more weight in the final 'Abitur' exams. They also study a broader range of compulsory subjects. The German Abitur is broadly equivalent to 'senior' qualifications for Higher Education access in Scotland. Indeed, it is considered the highest form of educational certificate within the school system. The Abitur exam is taken at the end of the upper secondary phase. It consists of written and oral exams in multiple subjects. The exam phase for the diploma is over two-to-three years, which shares similarity with the duration of Scotland's Senior Phase, though within the Phase in Scotland students sit one-year qualifications, with assessments taken in each individual year, with access to different progressive levels of qualification in subjects. It is important to note that there are schools which are 'intermediates' which offer both tracks, and that these are growing in number, moving towards a more comprehensive school offer. In some states, there is the opportunity to move between tracks depending on academic performance and career aspirations.

There are some criticisms that stem from such systems of tracking. Most revolve around the segregation and channeling of people based on their academic performance and attainment at such a young age (Pekkarinen 2018). Particularly the 'closing off of aspiration' that can be a cultural feature of attitudes towards vocational education and subject choices in the UK (Atkins and Flint 2014), though there is evidence to suggest that such attitudes are modernising in Britain (Social Market Foundation 2021).



It is however noted that - while in Scotland (and England) there have been several education initiatives, qualifications, and curriculum reforms to bring 'parity of esteem' - in countries like Germany that parity of esteem does exist to a much greater extent. Green and Kaye (2022) found, in an analysis of the effects of education system type on skills inequalities using OECD data, that the dual system of the vocational track in Germany (and similar countries like Austria) have a high rate of participation in vocational education, and that the attainment of higher achieving individuals in these tracks adds to the prestige of the track. They also note that there is value put on the qualifications and experience stemming from the vocational curriculum and that there is strong economic demand for intermediate skills given the economic base of the country in skilled trades, engineering, and manufacturing. Fürstenau, Pilz & Philipp Gonon (2014) contend that the system ensures that there is the development of a skilled workforce to meet the needs of a high skilled economy. Their research noted that the strong involvement in industry in the vocational track of education ensured that the skills being taught and the curriculum being experienced was adaptable to meeting the needs of the real economy that young people would be leaving school to work in. This may mitigate some of the inequalities and social segregation that stems from tracking, but it does not mean that such inequalities do not exist.

Indeed, Pekkarinen (2018) argues that postponing tracking can increase social mobility without any significant negative impact on eventual attainment. In particular, he sets out that tracking - and the change in composition of peer groups and classmates which stems from it - can reduce average achievement and that low-achieving students are more susceptible to these effects. He also notes that less-demanding tracks tend to be allocated less resources than academic tracks. Further to this international research - which used three large-scale comparative datasets - also determined that between-school tracking significantly increases social segregation between advantaged and disadvantaged students (Strello, Strietholt and Steinmann (2022)).

#### ***4.3.3 - Similarities, differences and social stratification***

Germany's early tracking system contrasts with the more comprehensive systems in the Scotland and the US, where all students follow a similar path until mid-secondary school. While there is to the extent that the Scottish and US systems

allow for much later 'specialisation' and choice, the German system maintains a rigidity - and although there has been more of a move to intermediate education - sets young people on a much more distinct track from a much younger age. The early selection process can exacerbate inequalities, as children from wealthier families are more likely to attend Gymnasium and pursue higher education, while poorer students may be funneled into vocational tracks with limited upward mobility. It can therefore be argued that with such a process there are limits to social mobility that are allowed within the German system, with young people set on a vocational track unable to 'aspire' to the more academic education experienced by their peers deemed to have higher academic performance.

Of central importance to this academic tracking however is that, in Germany, there is broad societal respect and relative parity of esteem for vocational tracks, in relation to the forms of capital attached to such careers. They offer robust pathways for students who pursue vocational careers, with high-skilled opportunity in an economy that is based on manufacturing and skilled-trades, which is a key difference from the US and Scotland where vocational education is often viewed of a lower importance - lower cultural capital - and has less economic opportunity stemming from it. This perception influences the choices available to more disadvantaged students. The relative devaluation of vocational pathways - and the varying level of industry integration - often leaves these students with fewer viable post-school options which have any level of esteem with other pathways, further entrenching inequality.

The Scottish and German systems have formal, centralised exam diets that determine university eligibility (though the systems differ where the German system has a final exam at the end of senior school compared to the annual diet in Scotland), while the US relies on a broader assessment system, with no single final exam (or set of exams). Arguably, the US system offers the most flexibility, allowing students to mix and match courses and determine their own educational path with the inclusion of broader assessments and 'credits', but the US too has impacts stemming from tracking, where the system of GPA and continuous assessment which contribute to the metric benefiting more affluent students (Betts 2011). The US system of standardised testing for university access has shown to benefit richer students with more resources available in more affluent schools,

and more resources for private tuition, to be taught to the tests for better performance for admission. It also means that the principles of flexibility are undermined as these tests shape the curriculum and teaching strategies in schools, often narrowing the focus to test preparation rather than a more holistic educational experience.

#### **4.4 - A continual process of reform**

There have been significant critiques of the implementation of the CfE in Scotland, the new qualifications framework that accompanied it, and the application of the philosophy that it is based upon (Paterson 2018). There have been a range of reviews, research and reports that have brought to light issues with regards to the implementation and operation of the Curriculum for Excellence. Perhaps the most notable of these have been two reviews carried out by the OECD. A 2015 OECD 'perspective' on the CfE interrogated key areas of the CfE including the new phases of curriculum, assessment, and clarity within the system. It recommended a range of areas for action and these related to simplifying core guidance, including the definitions of what constitutes the CfE. A 2021 OECD review, which was commissioned due to a vote in Parliament requesting one due to a range of concerns raised on issues including subject choices, recommended that a better balance between breadth and depth of learning throughout CfE was needed, and that the senior phase needed adapted to match the vision of the rest of the curriculum. This highlighted issues with the basics of curriculum structure over a decade into the curriculum's implementation. The issues highlighted by the OECD are perhaps indicative of some of the confusion teachers felt, and still feel, regarding their role and what it is they are supposed to be teaching (Bruce 2024). Further to this, research which brought educators together to consider the future of the Curriculum for Excellence identified the 'cluttered' nature of it, the structure of its operation, and the structure of assessment within it as the core issues teachers faced with it (McLennan, Arshad and MacPherson 2019).

Some critiques focus on the philosophy rather than the implementation, and it would be remiss not to acknowledge when considering the issues within this chapter. While the curriculum has enjoyed broad political support, some discontent stems from declining educational standards, particularly in international studies such as PISA (2024), and the OECD reviews that have been

outlined. Paterson (2018) set out his belief that the lack of a foundational knowledge framework within the CfE impedes students' abilities and has contributed to the decline.

Paterson (2018) also describes Scottish education as a 'data desert'. While questions can and have been raised around how successful curriculum the CfE has been in practice, it is clear that such a philosophy and structure was and remains the intention of successive Scottish Governments.

#### **4.5 - Stages, phases and choices**

Of most pertinence to the issue of subject choices however is the significant changes made to the structure of a young person's journey through the education system. The CfE overhauled the phases within education, and the exam structure that accompanied it. It is these phases, and the key points of transition that many of the criticisms of the CfE relate to. Outlining the changes between the CfE and the system preceding it is important as it contextualises some of the most important impacts the CfE has had on the Senior Phase, curricular opportunity, and subject choices. The previous 5-14 curriculum offered three 'stages' of secondary school. Often referred to as the 2/2/2 or 2+2+2 model:

- **S1-2** was focused upon a broad education, giving young people an experience of a range of subjects.
- **S3-4** were the years where pupils would sit a first phase of exams; usually Standard Grades which were two-year courses.
- A young person could then leave after S4 or enter S5. After S5 they could leave or enter S6. In S5 and S6 they could sit one-year Higher and Advanced Higher courses. Usually this would be a progression (Standard Grade in S4, Higher in S5, mix of Higher and Advanced Higher in S6). There were also 'Intermediate' courses available. The subject choices process was undertaken between all of these key transition points.

There were three levels to a Standard Grade course (from highest to lowest): Credit, General and Foundation. These were multi-levels of the same qualification, and as such were designed to be taught concurrently (for example a teacher could teach a Credit/General class). This system offered fluidity in that pupils were permitted to sit exams at multiples of these levels, allowing for more chance at attainment of an award than is allowed with a simple pass/fail on one assessment (for example a pupil deemed at 'Foundation' level could present also for the 'General' exam). The structure came in for criticism however. In particular, the OECD (2015) critiqued the lack of depth within subjects given to young people in the initial years of secondary schooling and the rigid nature of the transition points young people were forced to navigate.

With these criticisms in mind, the CfE aimed to create one fluid curriculum that would guide young people from age 3-18, and hoped to make the transition between key points more seamless and flexible. Comprised of five levels; early, 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> and senior, the new system attempted to shift away from progress being based solely upon the year a pupil was in, but rather the academic progress they had made relative to the 'stage' they should be at. Only in the Senior Phase (S4, S5 and S6) would young people be working towards attaining formal qualifications (whereas before this began formally in S3). Though as will be discussed, this has not always been the case in practice. The range of SQA subjects available can be seen in Appendix One, and subject areas can be seen in Appendix Two.

Figure 4.1 outlines the stages of learning relative to year of schooling within CfE. The CfE however stipulates that young people move through subjects and the stages at their own pace, so a situation would be likely whereby those in the same year at school would be at a higher or lower level than their classmates.

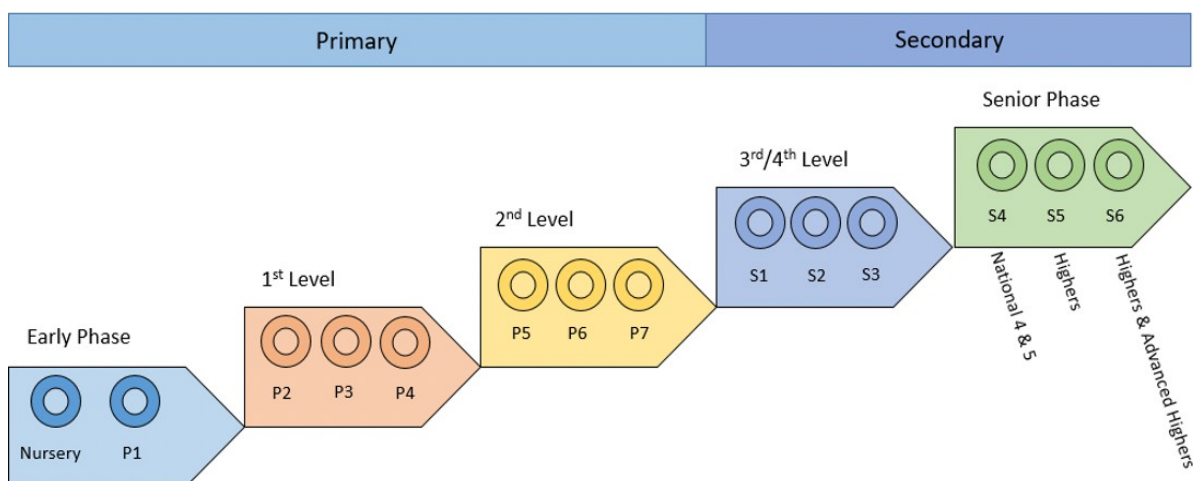


**Figure 4.1:** *Phases, Levels, and Stages of Curriculum for Excellence, created by author*

#### 4.6 - The Senior Phase

Of greatest potential impact to subject choices is the structure by which the ‘Senior Phase’ (S4, S5 and S6) curriculum operates. A key change introduced by the CfE was to the qualifications framework, which guides the shape of curricular offer open to young people. Standard Grades were replaced with ‘Nationals’ subjects which come at various levels, but the most prominent of which are National 4 and National 5. While not a perfect and direct comparison, broadly National 4’s can be seen to replace Foundation level subjects, and National 5’s credit. Crucially though, unlike Standard Grades, these are separate qualifications. Presentation for more than one of them is multi-qualification, not multi-level, learning.

Another key change introduced by the CfE was to the qualifications structure. The replacement of two-year standard grades, with one-year ‘Nationals’ exams, shifted the breakdown of stages in secondary school. Instead of three separate and progressive phases at secondary school present within the 5-14 curriculum, the CfE intended to have two:

- **S1-3** was comprised of a ‘broad general education’ (known as BGE), whereby young people were encouraged to develop their learning and specialisms before entering the Senior Phase.

- **S4-6** was the ‘Senior Phase’ where young people worked to attain formal qualifications. This senior phase was intended to come with more flexibility and fluidity where young people could gain greater depth of subjects, but also take different subjects, at different levels, at various stages. This was meant to ensure wider educational experiences, including the integration of more vocational based learning predominantly through Developing the Young Workforce (the focus of Chapter Five).

Though it must be noted there existed some flexibility in this, with schools able to adapt their curriculum structures which is discussed in greater detail in Section 4.7 below. While this change to phases within secondary education seems slight, its impacts have been profound, and it does have an impact upon the number and importance of choices at key stages. Indeed, a core goal of the CfE was to introduce **more** choice to young people over the course of their education. Indeed, the curriculum set out that young people should be encouraged to make learning decisions from the **early** phase, even if over simple types of play (Scottish Government 2008). This is in part to make choices in education a learning process in themselves, and not just a means to an outcome.

#### **4.7 - Curriculum structure and the narrowing of choices**

The implementation has led to a large variance of curricular structure across Scotland’s secondary schools. A Scottish Parliament inquiry into subject choices concluded that the implementation of the new structure has led to ‘unintended consequences’ with regards to curriculum opportunity. The most profound of these consequences has been a reduction in the number of subjects young people can study in S4 (Scottish Parliament 2019). The report concluded that this was ‘*at least in part a result of the change to the curricular structure (pg. 28)*’.

This inquiry stemmed from the issue of structure rising to prominence within the ‘national debate’ on Scottish education, with increasing disquiet and evidence regarding narrowing curriculum width (the maximum number of subject choices a young person can make) and curriculum breadth (the range of subjects a young person can choose from). While the two are related, the extent to which they both have narrowed is contested, with evidence pointing towards an expansion of the breadth of subjects

available within the curriculum, even if the width has narrowed. Scott (2019) assessed the differences in curriculum structure in the country. Evaluating structure through Local Authority curricular guidance documents and the school handbooks of around sixty percent of schools. The research identified that in the S1-S4 curriculum, there were 162 different structures across 224 of Scotland's schools (there are 359 secondary schools). These ranged from schools offering between;

- 8 and 24 subjects in S1
- 10 and 21 in S2
- 10 and 16 in S3
- And in S4 - the first year of formal qualifications - 5 and 8, with six being overwhelmingly the most common (excluding the non-assessed mandatories).

Further, Scott (2019) explored the provision of subject choices in S4. Table 3.1 shows S4 curricular provision and the proportion of schools and the number of qualifications offered.

| No. of Qualifications Offered | No. of Schools Providing This | % of Total |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------|
| Eight                         | 35                            | 10%        |
| Seven                         | 120                           | 33%        |
| Six                           | 195                           | 54%        |
| Five                          | 3                             | 1%         |
| Unknown                       | 6                             | 2%         |
| Total                         | 359                           | 100%       |

*Table 4.1: S4 Curricular Provision in Scottish State Secondary Schools in 2018, re-produced from Scott (2019) (pg. 11).*

Many of the schools had similar structures in S1 and S2, with the variations beginning in S3 and widening into S4. Significant variation existed surrounding the move from 'broad general education' in S3 to the beginning of formal qualifications in the Senior Phase in S4, which raised questions around how



successfully the reform of secondary phases has improved this key transition point, as identified by the OECD (2015). This transition stage has been continually identified as a key issue in curriculum narrowing.

The findings showed that a majority of schools were offering six subject choices for qualifications in S4. This represented a reduction from the numbers available in the curriculum structure which preceded it. Under the 'old' system, eight Standard Grades subjects was the maximum routinely available to pupils. The average number of National 5 courses taken per enrolled student had decreased - in 2017 - by 2.1 courses since the new qualifications framework began in 2013 (Priestley and Shapira 2017). Indeed, analysis found that *'prior to the introduction of new qualifications under CfE, there was a little variation in the number of subject entries at the SCQF level 5 [National 5 equivalent], across schools in areas with different level of deprivation* (Shapira and Priestley 2019) (pg. 19)'.

#### **4.8 - Impact on curriculum width**

It must be considered how these unintended consequences occurred. The previous Standard Grade qualifications - studied over two years in S3 and S4 - comprised of 160 hours of study. These were 120 hours of teaching and learning and 40 hours of assessment and revision (Shapira and Priestley 2017). The Nationals courses were still designed to be 160 hour courses, but are intended to be taken over a single year. This has simply meant that there is no longer space within the timetable to offer eight subjects at S4. Schools' adapting to such logistical constraints has contributed to the diversity of curricular structures in schools which has been outlined. This has left schools between two extremes - of only offering six qualifications in S4 or in running a structure similar to the '2/2/2' model and still offering eight subjects for National qualifications taught over S3 and S4 (or indeed a structure in-between). The extent of the confusion over the unintended nature of these outcomes was evident when the Scottish Qualifications Authority (responsible for design of qualifications) and Education Scotland (responsible for curriculum development) disagreed during the Parliamentary Inquiry over what the 160-hour of time was intended to be used for (Scottish Parliament 2018). This which precipitated questions concerning how schools and teachers are meant to

have a consistent and shared understanding over the structure of the CfE, when the two national bodies which govern the education system cannot even agree, in front of a Parliamentary Committee, over something as seemingly straightforward as the amount of teaching hours needed to deliver a National qualification (Black 2022).

The impact of this has not been felt equally, and there is substantial evidence within the literature that the reduction in curriculum width has been more pronounced in schools with higher levels of deprivation. As well as Scott (2018) finding evidence of S4 narrowing curriculum width in his analysis of curricular structure, Shapira and Priestley (2019) explored school-level determinants of curriculum narrowing. They conducted a longitudinal analysis of administrative education data from 2011 to 2017 and used regression modelling to identify variations between schools relating to a range of characteristics. The research found that there had been a larger reduction in subject entries for National 5 qualifications in schools in more deprived areas and indeed in schools with a larger number of pupils who were from more deprived social backgrounds.

These findings were compounded by research which compared the proportion of pupils in receipt of Free School Meals at a school with average number of SQA entries (as a proxy for subject choice) in 2018/19. The research found that, over the course of the Senior Phase (S4, S5 and S6), schools where between 40 and 50 per cent of students received free school meals there was an average of 12.94 entries, whereas this increased to 14.25 for schools with less than 10% of pupils receiving FSM (Black and McEnaney 2019). This research led to a First Ministers Question in the Scottish Parliament, where Daniel Johnson MSP stated that *‘the poorer you are, the fewer choices you now have’*.

Further, a paper from the Royal Society of Edinburgh detailed that there had *‘undoubtedly’* been a narrowing of curriculum width in S4 (2019, pg. 1). The research highlighted that the most significant impact of such narrowing predominantly impacted those who leave school earlier, especially those who leave after S4 due to the smaller number of qualifications that they will have the opportunity to leave school with. Importantly the paper explored what the impact a narrowed number of choices in S4 could have as pupils progress to S5 and S6, explaining that it places limits on realistic options for pupils, as it reduced the

range of subjects that pupils have proficiency in to study as Higher level. The research also pointed out that a decrease in course options at S4 also diminished the flexibility for learners if they encountered difficulties in one or more chosen subjects as they progressed.

#### **4.9 - Impact on curriculum breadth**

Scott (2018) contends that one of the key issues stemming from such narrowing is the extent to which it impacts - or inhibits - pupils' learning, progression, and future choices. Central to that is the resultant impact on curricular breadth (what subjects they have to choose from). While there is broad agreement within the research in the area that there has been a narrowing of curricular width, there is much less coherence in findings relating to reductions in breadth. While Priestley and Shapira (2017) concluded that there was evidence of curriculum narrowing, they highlighted that the narrowing was a reduction in the maximum number of subject choices a young person could take to study for qualifications (curriculum width), which is not the same as a reduction of the range of subject available within the curriculum (curriculum breadth). The Scottish Parliament (2019) inquiry also found that while the number of S4 choices had reduced, the range of subject available to choose from had actually increased.

Scott (2019) set out that a number of subjects had seen a significant reduction in enrolment between 2013 and 2018, with Modern Languages, Arts subjects (namely Art, Drama and Music) and some STEM subjects impacted particularly badly. The analysis also pointed towards curriculum narrowing having a severe impact on attainment, which caused a significant amount of political concern. The research indicated that since the introduction of the new curriculum, there are roughly 200,000 fewer attained awards per year, with cumulatively over 600,000 fewer since 2013 (Scott 2018), claiming dramatic falls in the proportion of attainment. Though analysis of these findings concluded that this was not the case, and noted '*we have not seen evidence that the attainment at National 5 level and Higher level has deteriorated under the new curriculum, as is claimed by Scott (Shapira, Barnett, et al., pg.1)*' and actually found attainment rates had risen over the period. Noting a lack of methodological rigor within the enrolment and awards

research, it was noted that there was no controlling for cohort size year to year. Importantly, the reduction in the number of choices open to young people meant that there were less enrolments in courses, but this did not mean that there was necessarily a reduction in attainment rates of those courses, or indeed the breadth of courses available to young people. Concluding *‘we believe that studying the impact the curriculum reform is complex. It needs to consider a broad range of indicators that assess the outcomes of young people (pg. 7)’*, the researchers sought to consider the issues outlined in this section in their totality.

These issues were fully considered in a major research study which focused on the impact of curriculum policy changes on young people, centred on subject choice attainment and positive destinations (Shapira et al 2023). The University of Stirling research found that under the Curriculum for Excellence there had indeed been a reduction in the number of subjects studied by S4’s and a reduction in entries. In particular, the researchers found the reduction has been more pronounced in Social Subjects, Arts and Languages compared to ‘core curriculum’ subjects such as Maths and English, which matches with previous findings in regards to how schools have been faced with the prioritisation of certain subjects, or subject areas (Scott 2018). Crucially, the Shapira et al report found that there is a narrower range of subjects available in ‘areas of comparative disadvantage’, indicating that in deprived schools there has been an accelerated narrowing of curriculum width and depth. Further, their findings showed that young people in more disadvantaged areas face delays in presenting for National 5 and Higher qualifications. Indeed, the University of Stirling study (Priestley et al. 2018) found a socioeconomic disparity emerged in school curricular structure, as disadvantaged students faced greater curriculum narrowing. Schools in more advantaged areas seemed to adhere to traditional qualification patterns, potentially disadvantaging those not taking a wide range of SCQF level 5 (National 5) qualifications in S4, as demonstrated in a range of the previous studies, and the Scottish Parliament Inquiry report (2018). It was in this sense there was an impact on ‘attainment’, rather than a collapse in attainment standards as put forward by Scott (2019). Of concern within the study from Shapira et al. (2023) was the conclusion that found *‘significant evidence of the existence of a culture of performativity in many schools, encouraging the instrumental selection of content and the organisation of curriculum provision to maximise*

Targets and metrics set by government regarding the performance and assessment in certain subjects mean that there are both overt and unconscious attempts to move students that are more talented into these pathways (Ofqual 2017). While this is regarded as a more acute issue in England, where there are formalised school league tables based on performance, it has ramifications for Scotland also. The introduction of National Standardised Assessments and the assessment of nationwide literacy and numeracy through attainment in specific modules risks similar instances of pupil selection. Ofqual (2017), in England, found that teachers were consciously aware of the impacts of allowing children to select classes they felt were too difficult for them, with one commenting 'you cannot afford to have kids fail because you get hammered by Ofsted (page 15)'. More starkly, one teacher linked results to their own career progression, stating 'the longevity of my career in teaching is down to the results that the children get, and I can't accept anybody who's not going to achieve (pg.19)'.

#### **4.10 - Other factors: finances, staff, and resources**

Though the unintended consequences of the narrowing of curriculum width due to the structure of the new national curriculum has seen a clear impact on the subject choices of young people, there are other factors contributing also. These issues - mainly financial resources in schools and teacher recruitment - are interrelated.

Evidence from research, and commentary over the implementation of the CfE in schools, suggests that resources are one factor at the core of the reasoning behind curriculum narrowing (Scottish Parliament 2018). Pressures both on the resource of time - as just discussed - but also of finances, can be seen to have an effect. The University of Stirling research showed a link between the student-staff ratio and curriculum width in schools, indicating the relationship between the ability to recruit teaching staff and curricular provision (Shapira et al. 2021). Gasteen (2018) in doctoral research found that at Advanced Higher level, for example, *schools are only able to offer a very narrow range of subjects at this level due to limited resources (pg. 139)'*.

There has been an ‘age of austerity’ stemming from the (now former as of Summer 2024) UK Government’s reductions in public spending since 2010, which has meant there has been diminishing resources in Scottish education while the CfE has been introduced and implemented. Though spending in Scottish schools is 18% higher per pupil than in other parts of the UK (IFS 2023), there has been an impact on curriculum provision due to a lack of resources. The Scottish Parliament Information Centre (2018) indicated that there was a reduction in real terms of roughly £400 million in Scottish schools (through Local Authority budgets which fund schools) between 2010-2017. It is important to note of course that since then, and owing to emergency funding invested during the pandemic, there has been some recovery within these figures since. Hepburn (2024) indicates that further rounds of cuts to core education provision are likely to continue in the current financial environment, which will further impact on curriculum provision. Since 2010, there has been a reduction in teacher numbers in Scotland, and despite an active Scottish Government commitment to recruit 3,500 more teachers by 2026, some local authorities are continuing to cut teacher numbers, with 450 teaching jobs being considered for cuts in Glasgow City Council, for example (McEnaney 2024). This highlights that the issues surrounding curriculum provision, structure and resourcing have transcended the period of the pandemic, and though much of the published research relates to pre-pandemic years, the issues are still very much live. Indeed, considering these issues as a whole is a restriction in the range of subjects available in some schools, linked to an inability to recruit subject-specific teachers (RSE 2019).

The Royal Society of Edinburgh (2019) highlights this as a core contributor to the lack of ability of schools (and Local Authorities) to make decisions to provide as broad a curricular experience as possible. The Scottish Parliament Inquiry (2019) into subject choices heard a range of evidence with regards to a lack of specialist teachers, with particular issues in the recruitment of Modern Languages staff and teachers in STEM subjects, hearing evidence that ‘we [*The Scottish Education system*] have a modern languages problem, an ICT problem and a STEM problem (pg. 33).’ A survey of headteachers in one local authority found that subjects were either being removed from the curriculum altogether, or scaled back, owing to staff shortages and issues with the recruitment of specialist staff (Seith 2024). The Learned Societies’ Group on Scottish STEM education (2019) have echoed the

evidence on the impact of staff shortages, noting *'the availability of subject specialist teachers is a key factor in enabling schools to offer a broad range of subjects'*, as well as setting out the CfE's structure has impacted on a decline of the uptake of STEM subjects.

At the confluence of these issues is a question regarding if the implementation of the CfE has meant that some of the core principles of it have been unrealised. While the CfE also intended to create more 'holistic' experiences, such as more space for art, sport, music, dance and issues like sustainable development and enterprise to broaden the curricular offer open to young people, it is clear that this is not being achieved within its Senior Phase. There is also questions around whether the implementation of structure has undermined ambitions for a more 'flexible' Senior Phase with personalisation and choice at its core, which saw a dynamic three-year period of senior schooling as opposed to a three term linear dash towards qualifications. There is a crucial matter concerning the ability of schools to provide diverse curriculum pathways that cater to individual learners' needs, rather than adhering to a uniform curriculum structure. While there has clearly been a move towards schools' implementing their own structures, the extent to which this is purely due to educational reasons, rather than dealing with the unintended constraints upon timetabling and dealing with ever tighter demands on resources, is a clear concern regarding the current position of curriculum provision (RSE 2019). While individual teachers, schools, and authorities must be empowered to develop the curriculum in their classrooms to take account for local contexts, there is a potential that such a disparate approach from school-to-school, and even class-to-class, enhances the likelihood of engraining, rather than removing, educational attainment gaps and differentiation in curriculum experience.

There is also an ongoing process of reform underway in Scottish education which could (if implemented) have implications for the Senior Phase and further impact on the curriculum structure. While the extent of the proposed reform is extensive, the key elements of it relevant to this research are recommendations from the Muir Review (2022), which proposed replacing the Scottish Qualifications Authority with a new body, the creation of a new organisation responsible for curriculum development, and a new independent inspectorate. An Independent Review into

Qualifications and Assessment has proposed significant structural reform to the Senior Phase, including the removal of examinations as a means of assessment in S4. Part of the reason for the review stemmed from increasing concerns about the impact of three years of high-stakes assessment as described in the Sections above, which are seen as not taking advantage of a flexible three-year stage as intended. The review proposes the creation of a new Scottish Diploma of Achievement which would be intended to better capture the CfE aims. Though, the Government are yet to respond to the recommendations.

#### **4.11 - Research Questions**

It is clear from the existing literature that the role of curriculum is of central importance to learning decisions. All of the elements of curriculum - making, intent, width, breath and broader structure - all have a fundamental impact in young people's experience of education, and the opportunities and choices that they have (or do not have). Issues concerning Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence have been at the forefront of policy considerations in Scotland in recent years and research has well established the impact that its new structure has had on the curricular opportunities in Scottish schools. There has been increasing divergence of curriculum structure between schools, including a narrowing of curriculum width, while simultaneously an expansion of curriculum breadth with many more vocational opportunities available (and explored further in the next chapter). Further to this, it has been established that the narrowing curriculum width has been more pronounced in S4 and more pronounced in schools with cohorts of pupils with higher levels of deprivation.

Given that these issues are present in Scottish education, and that perhaps the key issue impacting on structure - the narrowing of curriculum - was an unintended consequence of curriculum reform, there is a clear gap in the literature of how these changes are influencing choices. This gap in understanding the impact on curriculum opportunities and choices develops the second research question of this research:



**Research Question Two:** What is the role of processes, curriculum and policy frameworks on these learning decisions?

A) What is the impact of the Curriculum for Excellence on how schools structure their curriculum, and are there differences between schools in curricular opportunity?

B) What is the role of deprivation on curriculum opportunity?

C) What are young people's experiences of the formal support available to them during the choices process?

The following chapter builds on the themes from the literature reviewed in this chapter and explores the impact of Developing the Young workforce programme in young people's experience of education. The influence of employer engagement is discussed, including reviewing research on the influence that such engagements can have when integrated into the curriculum.

## CHAPTER FIVE - THE ROLE OF EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

### 5.1 - Introduction

There has been an increasing focus on employability within the Scottish education system. As well as broader educational arguments surrounding whether schooling prepares young people for the modern labour market. There have also been wider structural changes in employment and the wider economy that have made occupations more complex and precarious and therefore, there has been a perceived greater need to prepare young people for the 'world of work'. The aim of this chapter is to explore the role of employer engagement in Scottish education and discuss previous literature on the impact such engagement can have on the educational experiences of young people. The chapter first explores the context of employer engagement in Scottish education, discussing the Developing the Young Workforce programme and its implementation. This includes discussion of new qualifications, initiatives, and reforms to guidance.

The chapter then reviews literature discussing the types of employer engagement and the impact that they can have on young people's experience of education, including consideration of the role of social background and social networks in reaping the benefits of employer engagement. The benefits of employer engagement and the reasons why employers do (or do not) engage in schools and the curriculum is explored, before research questions are developed.

### 5.2 - Employer engagement in Scotland – Developing the Young Workforce

In Scotland, far more young people now leave school with Higher qualifications (despite falls in Higher attainment over the last several three years, the longitudinal trend is now much higher than previous school cohorts), there has been an increase in vocational Skills for Work qualifications and more young people are going onto further and higher education to attain qualifications there. Mann and Huddleston (2017, pg. 208) state '*considered collectively, no prior generation has ever entered the world of work with more years of schooling,*

*higher levels of qualification or greater human capital to their names, and yet mounting evidence shows them struggling to compete for economic opportunities.'*

Research also shows that young people's aspirations of employment are mismatched compared to the economic opportunities which exist (St Clair, Kintrea and Houston 2011). Such 'disjointment' between aspirations and actual opportunities was also a key finding within late 1970s research, showing that this has been an issue for some time and through many curricular structures in Scotland (Cryrie, Furst and Lauder 1979). Another key issue that has been noted in several reports in Scotland, and the wider UK, has been young people's difficulty with skills such as CV writing, interview skills, and networking. The Wood Commission (Scottish Government 2014) noted that this skills gap was particularly acute between the most and least deprived - with social capital of parents bearing heavily upon a young person's ability to navigate the labour market. This reality is why many industrialised nations are beginning to formally incorporate career education and employer engagement into their school curriculum. In Scotland, this has manifested as *Developing the Young Workforce*, a national policy framework that stemmed from the Wood Commission into the future workforce (Scottish Government 2014b).

All governments within the UK have curricula designed to encourage and enable employer engagement within schools. Scotland's current employer engagement strategy stems from 2004's *Determined to Succeed* which put the onus on employer to commit to engage with young people to ready them for the 'world of work'. This, however, did not lead to much more engagement across the education system. Under the new CfE there has been renewed emphasis placed on the importance of vocational education, and the development of equivalent choices and pathways for those not perusing a traditional academic one. Of course, employer engagement at, and in school is a core component of this wider ambition.

Due to the low rates of engagement actually witnessed under *Determined to Succeed*, the ‘national conversation’ which preceded the new CfE highlighted that there was a disjointed relationship between the classroom and the subsequent workplace. As has been the case throughout the decades, a cultural diminishment of the role and importance of ‘vocational’ pathways also existed, and continues to some extent, within the minds of teachers, parents, young people, and the education system itself (Macnab 2013). The fact that there was not enough emphasis and support for young people who did not aspire to go to university was also noted as a key defect within the choices process, and therefore broader curricular offer, within the 5-14 model (SPICE 2018).

Before this ‘conversation’ led to the emergence of the Developing the Young Workforce strategy, employer engagement in Scotland was seen as not much more than one week of compulsory work experience during secondary education. Developing the Young Workforce instead aimed to embed vocational and careers education within the curriculum. A large amount of the DYW’s focus surrounds the engagement between schools, colleges and employers and also the rates of employment for young people is the mechanism that allows and encourages schools to create partnerships with organisations and provide an embedded and structured programme of employer engagement. Structured through regional implementation boards, the aim was to change the culture of Scottish education to create new experiences and opportunities for young people. It has been noted that this reform could be as fundamental as CfE in reforming Scottish education. Concerns have been raised however about the patchy nature of implementation between schools and between local authorities. The Scottish Parliament’s (then named) Education and Skills committee also questioned whether the tools are available to properly measure if the cultural and co-curricular changes are being achieved (Scottish Parliament 2018).

The CfE defines vocational education as ‘*learning which is generally about the development of pre-vocational and employability skills which will be made use of in future working life*’ (Scottish Government 2008, pg. 16). It states also that such learning should be embedded across the curriculum for all young people. This is an important and profound cultural shift, as traditionally, such education has been considered as an alternative, ‘lower’ pathway compared to an ‘academic’

route. The ambition to embed such measures solidly within a comprehensive offer to all was, and remains, an important step towards equity in education for all and will be key to securing a cultural shift in views (Scottish Government 2014c). The focus of the CfE with regards to vocational education ignited the 2014 Wood Commission, or *Vocational Education for All! Developing Scotland's Young Workforce* (Scottish Government 2014a). The recommendations of the review developed into the Developing the Young Workforce Strategy (DYW), which is a multi-year strategy aimed at improving the parity between 'traditional' academic education and vocational options. A central goal of this was not only to enhance the vocational offer present within the curriculum but also stir a cultural shift as to how vocational education is embedded in society and viewed by the employment market, increasing the cultural capital which can be gained from it.

While a large amount of the DYW's focus surrounded the engagement between schools, colleges and employers and also the rates of employment for young people, there were significant recommendations regarding the curricular structure of schools. These were particularly focused within the Senior Phase. The Commission recognised the opportunity that the CfE curricular structure presented for schools to blend vocational pathways into their broad offer to benefit a wider range of young people (Scottish Government 2014d). Research has highlighted that careers work, and employer engagement, is often at conflict with 'core' subjects for space within the curriculum (Hooley et al. 2012). This often leaves to it being reduced or scrapped altogether. Even within the context of a narrowing curriculum in Scotland, DYW is aiming to keep parity of importance of employer engagement within the school year.

### **5.2.1 - Senior Phase options**

#### ***Skills for Work***

One of the core tenants of the strategy was to better recognise the benefits of vocational education. The *Skills for Work* initiative was expanded by the Scottish Qualifications Authority as part of the DYW strategy. The initiative was comprised of qualifications such as the National Certificate and the National Progression Award. These qualifications are recognised within the formal qualifications framework. The subjects are often themed around certain industries and focus on

the skills needed for success in the workplace (SQA 2015). Crucially, such subjects are often conducted outwith the classroom and in partnership with colleges or employers to give pupils a chance to work on practical skills in real or simulated workplaces. Developing the Young Workforce has put emphasis and resource into the initiative, which was designed to enable schools to integrate Skills of Work into their curricular offer. Qualification Awards data shows that there has been an increasing uptake of such Senior Phase opportunities (SQA 2018).

### ***Foundation Apprenticeships***

Another addition to the choices landscape that was introduced to the Senior Phase were Foundation Apprenticeships (FAs). Launched in 2016, FAs are two-year courses, normally commenced in S5 and taken alongside other subjects. It is a formal qualification and involves working in a practical setting within a further education institution or employer. They were designed to equip young people with the skills to begin a formal modern apprenticeship post-school. While FAs have been welcomed by the further education sector and bodies which they represent, delivery of the option remains geographically varied. This variation exists between local authorities and between schools within the same authority. If available to a young person, the FA represents a subject choice that professionalises vocational pathways and gives parity of esteem with Highers on the qualifications framework.

### ***Formal choices guidance***

The role of careers guidance was identified as a key influence upon young people's subject choices. The commission (Scottish Government 2014) found wide-ranging evidence that young people who were not pursuing a pathway that led to university often felt overlooked with regards to accessing support and guidance surrounding the pathways and choices open to them. A key recommendation of the DYW was to bring better parity of support regarding all options, choices and pathways. The Scottish Government commented at the time that the DYW will have been a success if by the end of the seven years young people considered there to be parity of information available to them on all options. Developing the Young Workforce tasked Skills Development Scotland and Education Scotland with improving the subject choices guidance in schools, by formalising vocational

options within guidance and increasing the one-to-one support available to young people. Often, the commission made clear that young people were faced with a messy and confusing set of pathways and were not always sure of the steps they needed to take to achieve a goal. This was further compounded by an institutional focus upon university pathways.

Such actions seem to be having an impact. Research conducted by the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (2018) asked around 900 young people under the age of 25 which options they were told about more during the choices process. While the results showed that young people at school (aged 15-17) were still told more about university than others, there was a significant drop compared to those over 21 who had left school before DYW rolled-out. Nearly a quarter of young people currently at school felt they were given the same information about all options compared to only 6.7% of those over 21. Interestingly, 12.8% of 18-20-year-olds felt the same, showing that as the implementation of DYW has progressed, so has the parity of guidance during the choices process (ibid).

### ***Measurement and progress***

The Scottish Parliament Education and Skills Committee's Inquiry into the implementation of DYW raised a few key issues however (Scottish Parliament 2018). Firstly, the progress highlighted above was welcomed and in particular the cultural shifts of guidance was noted as a positive development. The inquiry however, raised concerns about the patchy nature of implementation between schools and between authorities. There were also concerns around timetabling and the possibility of continuing sustained progress on widening vocational options while the curriculum generally is narrowing.

The committee's biggest concern however surrounded commitments given within the DYW that there would be wide ranging performance indicators regularly published regarding the vocational pathways being offered within Scottish schools. Such metrics would be better able to map the local opportunities being offered as part of the DYW and the choices available to young people. Little progress had been made on such commitments, and there was no way of knowing the number

of vocational options and pathways being offered by which schools, aside from general Awards statistics. Despite a ‘mixed picture’ with regard to national implementation, the DYW can be seen to be having an impact upon the subject choices available to young people in the Senior Phase. This can be witnessed through formal recognition within the qualifications framework, the professionalisation of vocation pathways and the increased parity in careers and subject choices advice.

### **5.3 – Types of employer engagement**

Mann, Stanley, and Archer (2014) contend that ‘employer engagement’ describes *‘the process through which a young person engages with members of the economic community, under the auspices of their school, with the aim of influencing educational achievement, engagement and/or progression out of education into ultimate employment (p.1).’*

While there are some critiques that can be made surrounding this definition - such as defining the ‘economic community’ as just those who are ‘employers’ - it succinctly describes the process of facilitation that the education system performs for the young people within it. There is also a broader argument around whether engagement from institutions of Further and Higher Education should be defined within the parameters of ‘employer’ engagement. Indeed, much of what these institutions are seeking to influence is the same as that of employers - a skills pipeline, skills enhancement, information sharing, and ultimately recruitment of schools leavers. Despite this, the overwhelming majority of the literature is focused upon *employment* and the transition to it. Hooley et al. (2012) describe employer engagement within the curriculum as managing the ‘interface’ between pupils’ and the labour market. With crucial focus on being able to equip young people with the knowledge of how what they are learning in school relates to life beyond school. This clearly highlights the role and engagements of Further and Higher Education institutions to be included within a broader definition of ‘employer engagement’, not least due to the integration of these institution’s activities into Developing the Young Workforce activities in Scotland.



Employer engagement comes in a plethora of forms. Traditionally in Scotland it is thought of as a 'week of work experience' done in the senior years of compulsory education (i.e., before the age of 16) but is much broader than that, particularly in the new policy context. Certainly, work-based learning such as placements are a key and important part of employer engagement, but so too are careers talks, skills workshops, networking events, mentoring, tutoring, support with navigating Further and Higher Education processes, and enterprise competitions. Importantly, while in the past there was a reliance on the private sector to be the source of involvement, increasingly the public and third sectors are becoming integral to engagement activity.

In a research paper discussing the options for future careers work in schools in England & Hooley et al. (2012) identified three broad approaches to delivery of careers work and employer engagement within international literature. Activity-based approaches described the provision of a series of activities which were disconnected from each other, and from the school's core curricular offer. These were one-off activities such as careers' fairs, visits from employers and higher and further education institutions, and career skills workshops. It is noted that these activities are often evaluated as useful and engaging within themselves, but their lack of integration with the curriculum and the sporadic nature of them can mean their long-term impact was limited.

The second broad theme of approaches are service based. These approaches related to access to a service that can provide advice, information, and support regarding future options - such as careers advisors and support with UCAS Higher Education admissions applications. These approaches were often modelled on working with individual pupils exploring their preferred post-education pathways. While these approaches varied from school-to-school in Scotland, particularly in relation to whether they were permeant or just offered on a one- off basis, they are often very practical.

The final area identified was a much more coherent and integrated curriculum-led approach, which the authors contended was the most effective approach in impacting upon the experience and outcomes of pupils. This approach incorporated most elements of the previous two but is delivered in a way that is

embedded within the curriculum, has a strategic and coherent development that builds throughout schooling and is treated with equal importance as 'core' subjects. Importantly, the researchers noted that such an approach required engaged school leaders to drive forward the curriculum changes that are needed, as well as substantial buy-in from teachers, and from the services and employers that are required to be engaged with the curriculum. Further to this, Mann and Percy (2014) argue that the benefits of employer engagement are best observed where an individual's experience of employer engagement is not distinctive interventions, but co-curricular learning outcomes attained within the mainstream learning experience of the curriculum. It is this model that Developing the Young Workforce seeks to embed in Scottish education.

#### **5.4 - Social background, social networks, and employer engagement**

Of particular interest to the current research is the prominence within the existing literature of the role that social background - through cultural, social and 'human' capital - has on the impact of employer engagement. Mann and Percy (2014) identified a range of 'gains' that young people receive from such activities that can be themed into these capital forms.

Within this context, cultural capital encompasses the attitude and confidence that young people have regarding their career choices, approaching and networking with employers and 'insider' knowledge that they may have of certain pathways or application processes. Social capital takes on the form of contacts that they may already be able to derive from family and others regarding opportunities and being in a position to exploit such networks, while human capital usually relates to practical employability skills. The report notes that while traditionally employer engagement has been perceived and aimed at improving the 'human' capital of young people, the most common impact that young people themselves report is increased cultural capital - especially the increased confidence of navigating the labour market and Further and Higher Education processes. This is well explained by Mann and Percy (2014) who note that due to employer engagements being for relatively short in time, there is little chance for tangible technical skills to be enhanced, but knowledge of employment and a clearer idea of how the 'labour market' works is possible. Particularly in relation to enhancing

young peoples' views of what they themselves want to do. Indeed, within an OECD study (2015) and in relation to increased cultural capital, pupils from all state schools reported increased confidence about transitioning from education to work and gave young people a clearer understanding of the pathways that were open to them - it broadened the perceptions discussed in the previous chapter. In terms of social capital, the biggest gains reported within the literature relate as having clear lines of communications opened with employers, and the ability to have information on careers from outwith the education system. In addition, the beginning of network building, particularly for those who did not have such opportunities in 'home life' was cited as a key enhancement for young people.

Jones, Mann and Morris (2015), explored the testimonies of young British adults regarding what they gained - or did not gain - from experiencing employer engagement at school. The researchers drew on the written responses of 488 young people to a survey investigating what they got out of employers being involved in their education. They found that the gain of confidence surrounding transitions, was the key benefit, which is consistent with the findings of the OECD review (2015).

The research also noted that it helped young people visualise new pathways for themselves. This was particularly important for disadvantaged young people who had not been exposed to such environments and information before. Whereas more affluent respondents gained most from taking advantage of networking skills they already had to build up networks for themselves. It is important to note that a significant number of respondents did not find their experiences useful, but it seemed that it was more to do with a poor experience - e.g. work experience where they were asked to photocopy all week - rather than it having an unhelpful bearing on their perceptions, skills or motivations.

## **5.5 - The impact of employer engagement**

The question against this backdrop, then, is what can be done to ensure the transition between education and the labour market is easier, and more successful for young people. Particularly if and why employer engagement in education can

be a tangible benefit in resolving the disjointment between the two. The research is clear that there is a positive case for employer engagement's integration into the curriculum as post-school transitions are a key policy priority.

Within the literature, three clear themes emerge that emphasise the importance of employer engagement in education, within a broader form of formal careers' education within the curriculum. The first is around basic readiness to embark upon the labour market - 'transition to work' skills - the skills of application, interview and being prepared for the reality of 'work', and the demands that stem from it. These skills can broadly be defined as what is needed to begin and successfully complete a job (or other, such as college/university) application - CV and cover letter writing, completion of application forms, communication and interview skills. Murphy (2015) has noted how in the past, and even into the present, in Scotland these skills would have been taught by guidance teachers through personal and social education. Through such mechanisms there is a risk that teachers have not been through such processes for some time and have no direct experience of recruitment. Evidence shows that employers largely believe that young people are not appropriately equipped with such skills. A 2012 survey of employers in the UK highlighted that over half of them felt young people lacked these skills - with issues surrounding performance in interviews and aptitude tests particularly prevalent (CIPD 2012). Though, the same survey found that 56% of employers believed that they could play a key role in improving these skills, illustrating that there is a willingness on behalf of employers to engage. The situation is much the same for young people themselves.

The second theme is that often career aspirations do not match the reality of the economic opportunities that are available in the labour market. As has previously been discussed, this is also a key issue within the subject choices process, where young people will often select subjects they perceive to be useful to serve their career aspirations without basing the perception in evidence (Blenkinsop et al. 2006). The research highlights that these aspirations are often developed at an early age and are heavily constructed through the influence of social background. Research has suggested a large minority of children - 36% - base their career aspiration at late primary school age on those they know. This of course translates into more affluent children having aspirations of more affluent careers (Chambers

et al. 2018). While this is perhaps unsurprising, it is vitally important, as Mann et al. (2017) demonstrate that 'higher' aspirations throughout school contributes towards a reduced risk of disengaging from education, and higher overall attainment.

This misalignment of aspiration and existing opportunities dictated by the demands of the labour market has been known for some time. Exemplifying this, interesting findings from England found that 21% of young people aged 15-16 aspired to jobs in culture, media and sport, while only 2.4% of new jobs created were in these areas (Mann et al. 2013). This was shown to be a general trend in many areas and can have significant implications for the young people - who may invest in a certain pathway throughout school to find it closed off - and for employers who can't access the skills base that they require. Indeed, research broadly finds that very few young people consult with employers while selecting their school subjects to ensure that the choice will be beneficial to their career prospects. Foskett et al. (2006) found that only two percent of young people take this step during their choices process, even though the 'usefulness' of a subject to future aspirations is a key motivation for selection. While not explicitly considering subject choices, Mann and Caplan (2012) found that 57% of young people in England found employer engagement through school the most useful source for making career choices, when compared to the 'close ties' of friends and family and public information. The research did not enquire however about other information sources available through school, such as that of teachers. The third theme within the literature which makes the 'case' for employer engagement in schools surrounds the greater assistance young people need in the contemporary economy due to its more complex, precarious and fluid nature (Srnicek 2017). There are complex issues within the economy, such as the loss of a 'job for life' culture, the later age of retirement and the rising demand for experience as an employer requirement - which make the labour market harder for young people to enter (Mann & Huddleston 2017). This is alongside the broader structural changes of precarious 'gig economy' work, technological change and globalisation making the economy increasingly competitive. Hooley et al. (2012) argue that engagement with employers can better prepare pupils for these challenges that they may face, and how to better mitigate the risks while navigating them.

## 5.6 - Impact on engagement on pupils

The clear logical aspiration of having employer engagement within education is improved employment outcomes for young people transitioning from school to work. Not simply in terms of increased employment but also in terms of obtaining better paid, more secure employment. Within Scotland's most recent 'positive destinations' statistics - the survey dedicated to tracking the post-school destinations of Scotland's young people - show that 25.1% of young people entered employment (Scottish Government 2023). No more contextual information on the types of employment is given, and the figures include practices such as zero-hours and temporary work. . There were 45.1% entering Higher Education, 25.5% going into further education and 3.9% were unemployed (ibid).

Mann and Percy (2014) conducted research which examined the wage-earning outcomes experienced by young adults in Britain as a result of employer engagement while at school. Through use of a 2011 survey of 169 full-time workers aged 19-24 in Scotland, England and Wales, the researchers analysed that each employer 'contact' at school was linked with an average increase of £900 in salary - or 4.5%. Their regression controlled for factors such as school type, gender, ethnicity and level of qualification. They concluded that this was due to the increased networks and social connections of young people through the access of information from employers, and the creation of contacts and networking ability that stems from engagement. There was also evidence, they argue, that increased employability skills through experience contributes to the premium. The research did not however control for social background, such as family income or parents occupation, which has significant ramifications for the distribution of social capital, and indeed the ability to acquire more of it from experiences such as engagement with employers. This is a clear gap within the study, as it could be that such wage premiums come from connections and opportunities inherited through family ties, instead of directly from experiences of employer engagement.

This research is however not the only study to identify such a wage premium. Kasefpakdel and Percy (2016) found that participation in a career talk at school was associated with an increase of 0.8%. Interestingly, they found that this doubled if the young person deemed the talk very helpful to them. Further studies have shown that activities such as sustained work-shadowing can increase earnings by a tenth (Mann et al. 2017). Further, particularly important when considering the contention that employer engagement should not be just random activities, but designed to be embedded in the curriculum, is findings which show that of those who have had four or more instances of employer engagement at school earn up to 16% more than those who have had none

Indeed, in a review of literature, Mann, Rehill and Kasefpakdel (2018) found that about two-thirds of studies in the area found employer engagement to have positive economic outcomes. While the rest noted that there was no effect on wage premiums and other economic outcomes such as employment rates, there were no studies that found a negative economic effect for individuals involved. The review concluded that overall, the evidence is robust that employer engagement leads to economic benefits for those who experience engagement.

Evidence also suggests that as well as having direct employment and economic benefit to young people, there are educational benefits present also. Within the same literature review, Mann, Rehill and Kasefpakdel (2018) found that 58% of the 47 studies they identified concerning the impact upon educational attainment had positive outcomes noted. Within this measure however, 40% showed mixed results and four percent noted negative consequences for attainment. The key reason behind this was attributed to the loss of class time on 'core' subjects. Interestingly, a key factor attributed to the positive effects was that careers education and employer engagement allowed young people to apply their subject knowledge to practical situations and gave them a clear view of how what they were learning in class was of relevance to what they wanted to do after school. It should be noted however, that this review was of international literature across PISA nations, and national context can be of huge importance depending upon how vocational education is integrated into the structure of schooling.

The teaching profession in the UK would seem to be unequivocal on this point however, with 93% of teachers believing that employer engagement has a positive impact on students' exam results (Kashefpakdel et al. 2017). The analysis was of a YouGov survey of 824 secondary school teachers in England, who believed that work experience placements and careers' fairs were the activities most likely to be of positive benefit. Crucially, they believed that the most disadvantaged pupils gained the most from employer engagement, as it offered opportunities such as work experience that would not informally be open to many of these young people. Consistent with other studies, teachers believed that helping students to understand the relevance of their education to employment was key to the reason they thought it was of educational benefit. They also believed that exposing students to 'role models' was a key motivation for pupils. The OECD (2015) also found that pupils' academic motivation increased as a result of employer engagement. Evidence from the US highlights that a key reason pupils drop out of secondary school is that they can't see a clear, coherent connection between their learning and their future life - and recommends that careers work can be a way of improving these rates. Further to this, a literature review found that careers work in English schools contributed to increased retention rates through the senior phase of schooling as well as increased transitions to work (Hooley et al. 2011).

A major report into employer engagement also found that four or more instances within secondary education reduced the risk of becoming NEET (not in employment, education or training) upon leaving school by up to 86%. The report from Mann et al. (2017) noted that those who have more engagement at school had self-declared as more ready to face the 'adult world' and had better educational attainment. Interestingly, despite reporting a steady increase in the number of employer engagements pupils have had over time (20% increase from 2011 to 2016), those who were most disadvantaged had less than their more affluent peers.

Within these outcomes, pupils' themselves categorise the different types of employer engagement they receive as being useful to fulfilling different pathways. Broadly these relate to getting into further/higher education, deciding on a 'career' and for getting a 'job' after school. The differentiation between a 'job' being something done for money and a 'career' as a longer term, and important



matter, is interesting within itself in terms of the role of motivation and perception. An interesting differentiation is made by Hooley et al. (2012) who argue that a career is pursued at work, but also through hobbies, interests and social relationships. Survey data analysed by Mann, Dawkins and McKeown (2015) highlights how pupils categorise different activities. Illustrated below, the research notes how these activities relate, with career talks and mentoring perceived as the most helpful to all three destinations. Interestingly, work experience - by far the most widely used form of employer engagement in the UK - came third behind talks and mentoring and was only seen as helpful by the majority of those surveyed for helping decide on a career.

### **5.7 - Why do(nt) employers engage?**

One of the key problems that has been noted with the implementation of DYW has been the recruitment of employers to partake (Scottish Parliament 2018). Due to the localised nature of employer/school relationships, the DYW offering in each school varies depending on the individual employers' available for schools to create partnerships with. The buy-in from employers surrounding DYW has been positive but still requires much more work if the policy is to become commonplace in curricular structures across the country. Employer buy-in in the youth labour market policy has been a challenge across a host of different policy initiatives in the UK, such as apprenticeship expansion and new vocational school pathways. The same is true for the suite of activities encouraged by DYW.

In qualitative research exploring the reasons why some UK employers choose to engage in youth market policy and why some do not, Simms (2017) identified a range of reasons which influence organisational decision making. One key point that the research uncovered was a risk assessment that organisations would conduct upon their participation - weighing up whether any benefits that could be gained from partaking would be offset by being associated with a policy if it were to become unpopular in public discourse. On the flip side of this can be an organisational motivation to enroll should a policy be popular - this can be seen in the expansion of living wage accreditation for example - and is perhaps salient to promoting participation in DYW.

These findings are also closely related to corporate social responsibility and the role that such 'obligations' play within motivations. Interestingly, Simms found that societal and cultural obligation played a key part. Discussing apprenticeship programmes, some participants in the research noted that in their operations in other countries it would be expected that they participated in such policies - not to do so would be 'bad for business' - whereas, they stated, this was not true in the UK. Such cultural expectations are important to consider concerning embedding employer engagement in schools. Perhaps one of the most important findings was also the key reason identified behind the motivation to participate was the commitment of individual managers within the organisation. The findings highlighted that where senior managers within an organisation had a personal interest in engaging in such policies and often take on the extra administrative workload, it was far more likely they could get agreement to do so. Organisations which lacked a person to counteract concerns, often did not. Such findings go some way to explaining why engagement often becomes fragmented and localised. Another reason that was highlighted which contributes to this also was organisations engaging where they are in need of certain skills or are within an industry not often 'traditionally' thought of as a career destination. It is often the case that such organisations would engage to raise awareness and change perceptions as to the opportunities they may have available. This is however usually done within a specific location - an example of this would be high levels of engagement of the energy sector in schools in the North East of Scotland where the oil and gas industry is predominately based -but this not replicated across much of the country.

Importantly, the research found that a culture of employer ownership of skills increased the likelihood of industry engagement. Where the youth labour market policy had been co-designed and implemented with organisations, there was increased involvement due to the shared buy-in and responsibility for the policy's success. This finding is particularly salient given the involvement of all sectors within DYW, but that engagement remains geographically fragmented across the country. On the co-production of skills, organisations clearly felt that they were able to guide the policy to ensure that there would be mutual benefits for them.

The existing literature on the subject outlines some key benefits that employers gain from engaging with schools. A survey of 325 employers in the UK found broad agreement between the public and private sectors in the benefits they believed existed. A better community and public image, recruitment opportunities and a higher profile for the organisation were cited by both sectors as the top three benefits they experienced. They also noted fresh ideas and an increase in staff morale as reasons behind participation (Mann, Lopez and Stanley 2010). A similar question within the 2010 education and skills survey noted similar responses with regard to perceived benefits for employers. Interestingly, 30% of respondents in this survey noted training and development opportunities for their existing staff as a core motivation for them. One key benefit noted within the literature is perhaps a contemporary emergence in corporate considerations. Many organisations through the literature felt that engagement in schools allowed them to appeal to and access a more diverse workforce. This is particularly the case with companies involved in STEM who are attempting to attract more women into their industries (RSE 2019).

In conclusion, there is much work to be done, it seems, to ensure secure transitions from school to the labour market for young people. In Scotland, the frameworks for employer engagement are improving but progress remains localised still, and more must be done to achieve buy-in from employers to create meaningful partnerships with schools. It is clear that there are economic and educational benefits for young people who experience engagement within education, but how social background and ownership of capital influences that benefit is worthy of consideration when designing engagement in the curriculum. So too is evidence that concerns why employers engage or do not. The evidence suggests a situation whereby employers are more likely to engage where they have co-design over the policy that they are engaging with. This is of key relevance to the current research when assessing the implications for employer engagement brought about by the choices process within the senior phase.

## **5.8 - Research Questions**

Existing literature highlights the guiding role that aspiration has on learning decisions at school. Within this, according to research, is a link between the

perceptions of post-school pathways and experience of education, showing that there is a key role for employer engagement in shaping aspirations and informing choices. The literature also shows the benefits of employer engagement in a range of ways, including improving knowledge of processes, skills development, and higher future earnings. The research also argues however that, to be successful and achieve its aims, employer engagement must be integrated into the curriculum, not as sporadic events. A key part of Scotland's curriculum and education reform has been the intent and attempt to embed a national framework of vocational education and employer engagement into the CfE through Developing the Young Workforce. It is therefore imperative to ask, when considering choices in Scotland more broadly, what influence does employer engagement have in influencing learning decisions? Stemming from this must be consideration of the utility of employer engagement, how DWY is operating in helping guide young people through the choices processes, and what opportunities exist for developing further employer engagements. In that vein, the following questions were developed to gain understanding towards addressing the gap:

Research Question Three: What is the role for employer engagement in influencing these learning decisions?

A) Are there any differences in the experience of employer engagement opportunities between schools?

B) What role do further and higher education institutions play in influencing subject choices?

## CHAPTER SIX - DATA AND RESEARCH METHODS

### 6.1 - Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to set out the methods employed during the research process and justify why this approach was taken. The research paradigm used was qualitative methods and comprised seventy-nine (N=79) semi-structured interviews. Seventy-two (N=72) interview participants were with pupils in S4-S6 across four participating schools in the Greater Glasgow region. The remaining seven (N=7) interviews were with experts who had knowledge in a range of key areas. Reflexive Thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun and Clarke 2005) was used to make sense of the data and to begin to draw meaning and conclusions from it. Content analysis on the options forms of the participating schools was also employed.

The chapter begins by explaining the reasoning behind the use of qualitative methods, including situating their use in the context of the range methods that have been used to explore subject choices in previous research. The appropriateness of semi-structured interviews is then described, including positioning the epistemological and ontological context for the use of the method, these are grounded in a central purpose of the research being the elevation of pupil's voices with regards to the issues of subject choices and curriculum opportunity.

The criteria used to select participating schools, and how the participants within these schools were selected, is then explained before the procedure is described including the development of the research instrument. The use of expert interviews is then explored including the criteria and purpose for selecting each of the experts.

The process of conducting thematic analysis is finally discussed, as well as highlighting examples of how this was done and the development of the themes and sub-themes that comprise the findings chapters to come. Lastly, limitations of the study are considered.

## **6.2 – Multi-method, multi-stranded approach**

A central purpose of the research, as illustrated through the construction of the research questions, is to highlight the voice of pupils with regard to the key issues surrounding subject choices. Schelbe et al. (2014) note that often, research about children and young people rarely hear their voices directly, often deferring to data from teachers, parents or '*other proxy sources (pg. 1)*'. Though it also must be considered that 'young people' or 'school pupils' generally, even if at the same school or from a similar social background, are not homogeneous and have individual agency. Individuals' interpret, perceive and ascribe meaning in different ways, and though they may go through the same process, they will interact with it differently. In fitting with these aims a social constructionist (Da Silva 2008) approach emerges as an epistemological approach in which to construct, and understand, the data within this study. This perspective suggests that reality is socially constructed through language, discourse, and shared meanings (Boyland 2019). The focus of the research on understanding the influences on subject choices, how the processes are navigated and interpreted, and ultimately how they impact on the decisions of young people is of central importance to this positioning. This position crucially also recognises that the researcher has an active role in discovering and constructing meaning from the data (Kim 2014), and with this the significance of background context in the gathering and formation of knowledge (Boyland 2019).

It is from this basis that qualitative methods, and specifically semi-structured interviews, are deemed as the most appropriate and most effective methods, and that Reflective Thematic Analysis (RTA) is employed as a method of analysis. In this vein, Kvale (1996) understands qualitative research interviews as attempts to appreciate '*the world*' (the research focus) from the perspective of participants.

Broadly, they contend, the discussions are attempting to unpack meaning from their experiences and draw shared meaning and experience from them. This is key to semi-structured interviews as conversations where the researcher directs questioning and listens, and the participants answers using their experiences, given the space to express and explore the issues they wish to. Further to this Rubin and Rubin (2018) state these conversations as situations where a researcher will guide conversation in extended discussion, providing the clear role for the researcher in ensuring the key research topics are covered. Bias, and differences in power dynamics, need to be appreciated and reflected upon.

Indeed, the selected qualitative methods stem from an epistemological position which views the perspectives and the knowledge generated from participants as situational and contextual. Ruslin et al (2021) contend that such methods allow social explanations and arguments to be contrasted in-depth and allow for nuance, complexity to be taken into account. Mason (2002) argues that this positioning must go beyond a one size fits all' approach, and that it is preferable to give the fullest opportunity for the *'construction of contextual knowledge while maintaining a focus on relevant and specific experiences'* of participants. These key points inform the method of thematic analysis (explored further in Section 6.3.1), in recognising that themes emerge from shared meaning which are subjective, and understand the diversity within them. It also allows for the emergence of questions pertinent to the research to develop throughout the process. There is also a need within the research to understand the broader social and cultural context in which the internal and external influences, and the processes relating to learning decisions, operate. Additionally, this is to ensure that the interconnectedness of themes is considered.

### **6.2.1 – Developing Research Questions**

As set out in the concluding sections of previous chapters, broad research questions were established in relation to three identified areas of interest: the influences on choices and especially the role of social background, the role of processes, curriculum and policy on these decisions, and the role of employer engagement. Stemming from these questions are a range of sub-questions that developed throughout the research process. The research identified clear gaps in

the literature, particularly with regards to developing understanding of these issues in contemporary Scotland, given its new curriculum and changing social and economic contexts. The questions were crafted as foundational in order to develop the methodological approach and broad areas of research interest, in particular the selection of participants and the development of the interview schedule and instrument.

As the research progressed, not only did new themes in relation to these questions emerge but also sub-questions that could better articulate the findings and situate them within the existing literature. They also provided relevant pointers to the ongoing consideration of policy issues related to subject choices, curriculum, and employer engagement. These new themes and questions - and indeed the answers to them - emerged through a triangulation of the existing literature, the process of data gathering, and the thematic analysis process (which is outlined below). During this process, the research focus and the contribution that it could make was refined and more finely focused. This process is consistent with the approach to the research set out in the section above on the approach to the research. Social constructivism sets out how the process of knowledge development includes deriving meaning from the data as it is explored. Development of understanding and refinement of research focus is central to the contrasting of and allows for greater nuance and appreciation of the complexities of the central themes (Ruslin et al. 2021).

The fully developed set of questions (Table 6.1) brings together the range of questions the research seeks to answer. The set of questions aims to reflect the complexity of the issues related to subject choices and provides a framework for the exploration of the findings.



| Research Question One                                                                                    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| What are the main influences over young people's learning decisions under the Curriculum for Excellence? |
| A) What is the relationship and balance between internal and external influences?                        |
| B) What is the role of aspirations in influencing choices?                                               |
| C) How significant is the role of social background in how influences apply?                             |

| Research Question Two                                                                                                                                                  |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| What is the role of processes, curriculum and policy frameworks on these learning decisions?                                                                           |
| A) What is the impact of the Curriculum for Excellence on how schools structure their curriculum, and are there differences between schools in curricular opportunity? |
| B) What is the role of deprivation on curriculum opportunity?                                                                                                          |
| C) What are young people's experiences of the formal support available to them during the choices process?                                                             |

| Research Question Three                                                                              |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| What is the role for employer engagement in influencing these learning decisions?                    |
| A) Are there any differences in the experience of employer engagement opportunities between schools? |
| B) What role do further and higher education institutions play in influencing subject choices?       |

Table 6.1: Research Questions and Sub-Questions

A key benefit of the method of semi-structured interviews (set out in detail below) is the opportunity for the exploration of issues important to the participants and the emergence of themes and research threads as the process of data collection and analysis develops. Their intention is to facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between various factors influencing subject choices in contemporary Scotland. This includes a wider contribution to the broader discourse on subject choices and related policy and practice.

### **6.3 - Qualitative methods**

A multi-method, multi-stranded qualitative methodology was selected as the most appropriate and effective approach to develop understanding in relation to the research questions. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, there has been a plethora of research and policy interest into subject choices under the Curriculum for Excellence. The main focus of this has been quantitative analysis of the number of choices available in schools and the availability of subjects in the curriculum. But there has been little focus - particularly under the Curriculum for Excellence - on the voices of young people in exploring their perspectives on the competing influences on their learning decisions, and indeed the key issues of availability and choice. One central purpose of the research is to highlight the voices of pupils and centre their experiences with regards to subject choices, and the broader curricular themes.

Broadly, qualitative methods allow for questions to be asked that cannot be easily replicated by more structured methods such as surveys or quantitative data analysis (whether primary or secondary (Bryman 2008)). Cleland (2017) highlights that qualitative methods allow for exploration of everyday experiences and realities of social phenomena which allows contextual understanding in relation to research questions to be developed. Qualitative methods allow for complex and nuanced data to be captured and analysed (Bryman 2008). Through the existing literature on the topic, it is predicted that young peoples' perception of topics related to the research questions would comprise much of the data, as well as discussion of competing influences that they face. As a result, insight into a range of rich and diverse experiences would be needed to determine which qualitative research is best placed to deliver.

#### **6.3.1 - *Semi-structured Interviews (SSI)***

There are several reasons semi-structured interviews were employed as the most appropriate qualitative method. They are used both for the interviews with pupils and with experts. Semi-structured interviews are a popular method in qualitative

research (Bryman 2008). They are research conversations - usually between one researcher and one participant - that have pre-prepared questions or broad themes, but which allow for flexibility, follow-up inquiries, and relevant 'tangents' (Adams 2015). They often blend different styles of questions and provide a framework for a guided discussion relevant to the research.

The aim within this research is to achieve balance between structure and flexibility for participants to describe their own perspectives and experiences, including following up on any interesting points they make which are unique to themselves. Crucially, the SSI method allows for the maintenance of a level of standardisation over the large amount of data generated over the course of the seventy-nine interviews (Adams 2015), whilst allowing the subjective experiences of the participants to emerge. This is as different individuals - both within the cohort of pupil participants and the between the experts - have unique perspectives and experiences, semi-structured interviews allowed for tailoring the questions to the specific context of each participant as the conversation progresses (Adams 2015). This method allows for a balance between ensuring structure in discussing key themes that are relevant to the research questions, while also allowing the freedom to explore areas of interest which may develop during conversation, ensuring there is opportunity for themes to emerge and take shape (Knott et al 2022). Indeed SSIs, in the context of this study, allow for a person-centred capture of data, whereby the voice and experiences of participants is shared in their own words. The participants need be able to explore their narratives on the broad themes which are raised but also crucially for unique perspectives and stories which emerge during discussion that are not structured into the research instrument, or the foundational RQs.\

These types of interviews are well-suited for generating a large amount of rich data that permits for a depth of analysis with regards to the research questions that other methods do not. Semi-structured interviews provide detailed data which provides context and depth to responses, this depth is particularly valuable when exploring complex topics like subject choices, as it enables a richer understanding of the factors influencing the decision-making process. Ruslin et al (2021) state *'while the structured interview has a formalised, limited set of questions, the semi-structured interview on the other hand is flexible, allowing new questions*

*to be brought forward during the interview as a consequence of what the interviewees have said (pg. 25)'.*

It is for these reasons that other qualitative methods, such as surveys and focus groups were considered but discounted. Focus groups in particular could have been a valuable method. Within the context of this research, they would have facilitated the capture of data from potentially a larger number of participants, in a more efficient timescale. Using focus groups would have also allowed for construction of knowledge of the research questions at specific stages of learning, specific demographics or specific aspirations, for example if separate focus groups were held with S4, S5 and S6's; men and women; or those seeking to go to university, college, or into work. A benefit of this would have been the deep interrogation of themes and issues relating to those groups. It would have allowed any agreements and differences in perspectives to play out in 'real time' and be less reliant on the construction of meaning coming from the analysis.

There were, however, a few factors which dissuaded the use of focus groups. The key one was that the voices of individuals can be lost within a focus group as there is a risk of dominant, or confident, voices taking the time and shutting out the perspective of others which would have potentially meant some rich data and individual perspectives were lost (Bryman 2008). There can be an increased risk of this when working with young people. The research also asks questions that could lead to disclosure of information critical of individuals' schools, teachers, or families and focus groups, even with ethical safeguarding, compromise the anonymity of data. Further on this point, in group settings there can be a social desirability bias where participants conform to what they perceive as the most socially acceptable responses.

### **6.3.2 - Expert interviews**

The intention of expert stakeholder interviews is to speak to individuals – or individuals representing organisations – who have deep and direct experience and knowledge of the key issues pertinent to the research (Moyser and Wagstaffe 1987). The aim is to gather a detailed knowledge of a subject area and are often used in research which may consider institutional knowledge and processes

(Hothschild 2009). It should be noted that although the participants in this research are experts in the areas which they were interviewed about, it is a limited view, and care should be made when making vast generalisations from the data.

### ***6.3.3 - Reflexive Thematic Analysis***

A six-phase thematic analysis process based on work by Braun and Clarke (2006) is used for pupil interviews. Bryman (2008) defines a ‘theme’ as categories that can be defined by a researcher through their data which relates to the research focus and questions. Often this builds on codes which are identified throughout the data and provides the researcher with the basis for a theoretical understanding of the data. The six-phases on which the analysis is based can be seen in Table 6.2 below.

| Phase                                    | Description of the process                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Familiarizing yourself with your data | Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas                                                                                                                                                  |
| 2. Generating initial codes              | Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code                                                                                                              |
| 3. Searching for themes                  | Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme                                                                                                                                                    |
| 4. Reviewing themes                      | Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis                                                                                        |
| 5. Defining and naming themes            | Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme                                                                                       |
| 6. Producing the report                  | The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis |

*Table 6.2: Braun and Clarke (2006) phases of thematic analysis, reproduced by author*

Core to this, in fitting with the research approach, is the application of Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Byrne (2021) contends that the principles of this are often missing in often missing in applications of Braun and Clarke's Approach. Reflexive Thematic Analysis emphasises the researcher's active role in knowledge production, highlighting reflexivity and subjectivity. This RTA highlights the researcher's active role in knowledge production, highlighting reflexivity and subjectivity. In applying these principles codes represent the researcher's

interpretations of meaning across the dataset, and themes emerge through organising codes around central organising concepts (Terry et al. 2017). This process is flexible and organic, evolving throughout analysis as the researcher becomes more familiar with the data. Which further develops the focus of the research, and the questions it is seeking to answer. Therefore, RTA was chosen as the best method for categorising similarities in experience, whilst capturing subject differences, contrast and conflicts. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009) was considered to be too individualised, and Discourse Analysis (Potter & Whetherell 1988) too focused on wider social structures, but RTA captured both of these needed to address the present RQs.

#### **6.4 - Content Analysis**

A form of content analysis of documents was conducted on the options/choices forms in each participating school (the results of which are presented in Chapter Seven). The purpose of this analysis was two-fold. Firstly, the focus of the analysis was to identify similarities and differences in the characterisation of schools' curriculum in an objective and systematic manner (Bryman 2008), and secondly it was to set out the context of the choices that young people had in each school, so that what the choices were that were open to influence were understood.

When working with secondary documents which have not been created for the purpose of research, but rather exist for their own purpose and are being analysed for research purposes, Scott (1990) sets out four criteria that they must meet. Authenticity (if the origin of the document is genuine), Credibility (if it is free from error and bias), Representativeness (the evidence is typical of its kind) and Meaning (that it is clear and comprehensible). The choices forms - given they are official school documents which were used and provided by the participating schools match all the criteria.

In order to increase the credibility (and by extension the reliability and replicability (Bryman 2008), the findings of the analysis in Chapter Seven present the documents which were publicly available. In order to ensure the clearest meaning could be derived from them, informal conversations (that is to say not formally recorded, transcribed, and analysed) were held with staff in each school

to explain the form and the pathways that young people had available to them during their choices process. Swain and King (2022) set out that informal conversations can ensure a greater ease of communication and can well compliment more formal methods, providing greater context to analysis and findings.

In each school the choices forms which pupils received for each of their S4, S5 and S6 choices were analysed. There were two phases to the content analysis of the documents. The first was to identify the key features of the choices process in each individual school, beginning with the S4 choices, then S5, and then S6. These key features were based upon areas of importance identified in the previous literature, as well as issues which emerged during the research process: Mandatory Subjects, Vocational Curriculum Integration, S4 Column Subject Areas, Available Progression Throughout Phase, Range of Advanced Highers, and Average Number of Entries.

The second phase was to then compare how each of these elements shared similarities and differences across schools with a focus on curriculum structure, number of choices, potential pathways and subjects (and areas) which were priorities by the individual institutions. From the analysis of this information, triangulated with conversations and the findings of interviews with pupils, ‘characterisation’ of their curricular approach was made.

## **6.5 - School selection**

‘Greater Glasgow’, the region from which schools were selected, comprises nine local authorities with 109 state secondary schools. The rationale for the inclusion of the nine authorities which make up ‘Greater Glasgow’ was due to these nine authorities (West of Scotland: East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, Glasgow City, Inverclyde, North Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire, South Lanarkshire, and West Dunbartonshire) being members of the ‘West Partnership’ Regional Improvement Collaborative. The ‘RICs’ were intended to be formal structures where Local Authorities could collaborate on all aspects of education, with a move to a regional delivery model, including on curriculum development (Scottish Parliament Information Centre 2020). This, coupled with the regional delivery of



Developing the Young Workforce, meant that it was an opportune time for the research to investigate any issues that were linked to the new regional nature of service delivery. This policy intention however did not come to fruition, RICs did not form a core part of any findings, and they have since been announced as defunct and will be scrapped (Hepburn 2023) removing any salience in providing practical recommendations based on their structure. Though important to note is that 35% of Scotland's school population attend a school in this regional area (West Partnership 2024).

One of the nine authorities had a research committee to which a proposal needed to be submitted and approved before the schools in that authority could be contacted to seek their participation. The proposal for this research was rejected on the grounds of lack of schools' capacity to participate. Of the schools in the eight remaining authorities, analysis was conducted to define key characteristics which previous research had indicated were important to the width and breadth of a senior curriculum and attainment: local authority, pupil numbers, proportion of pupils on Free School Meals (FSM), proportion of pupils in the most deprived fifth of postcodes (as measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation), proportion of pupils from urban areas, National 5 pass rate, Higher pass rate, literacy and numeracy attainment, senior phase subject areas, and positive destinations data. The selection was based on the schools having defining characteristics which deviated significantly above or below the national average, or characteristics that were consistent with the national average. This was done as an attempt to ensure that participating schools were not similar to each other in terms of key characteristics such as location, attainment and social background of their pupil cohort. 1. - this is section 6.5 ?

### ***Defining deprivation and Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation***

There were two mechanisms to define deprivation which are used throughout the research and used for the purposes of analysis. Both are intrinsically related but do have important differences. The first is defining the deprivation levels of the school itself as an institution, and the second is describing the deprivation level of its cohort as a whole. Two measures were used for this: the proportion of pupils at the school in receipt of free school meals (FSM) and the proportion of pupils at

the school in the 20% most deprived postcodes as measures by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). The SIMD was chosen as the metric to measure deprivation in the research. SIMD is metric of area deprivation used by the Scottish Government to assess deprivation and plan service delivery and policy responses. It is calculated using census data across 38 indicators of deprivation from categories such as income, educational attainment, employment, housing and crime. It clusters population areas of between five hundred and one thousand people and ranks their level of relative deprivation from 1 to 10. Conventionally, these are amalgamated into quintiles and deciles. Both measures are for 2019/20. In both measures, schools 'ranked' the same in relation to each other, with School B being the school with the least deprived cohort of pupils and fewest FSM, and School D having the most deprived cohort and the most FSM. Figure 6.2 below details comparisons of key characteristics between the schools - and the regional and national averages and includes deprivation metrics. It sets out that Schools A and D have pupil cohorts more deprived than the national average and Schools B and C have cohorts less deprived than the average. Note that these metrics are for the whole school cohort, and not just the participants in this research.

For capturing the deprivation level of individual participants, their postcode was taken and inputted into the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) (National Services Scotland 2020). A plethora of academic studies have used SIMD as a measure of deprivation. These studies include assessments of crime rates, educational attainment, and public health amongst others. It was selected ahead of using isolated indicators such as income or educational attainment as it incorporates a range of deprivation outcomes, which is much more in fitting with the conceptualisation of social background through the lens of social, economic and cultural capital. In Scotland, it is the accepted metric of poverty and deprivation, and is the key driver of measuring deprivation in Scottish education policy (Office of the Chief Statistician 2006). Well established criticism is levelled that SIMD does not work as effectively as metrics perhaps should for assessing the deprivation of individuals. However, SIMD is a robust metric of measuring structural deprivation and inequality. ISD Scotland (2016) contend that if SIMD is weighted and being used as a measurement to chart area-based deprivation, it is a strong and accurate measure. Research highlights that SIMD is an accurate measure of community deprivation and is a valid and reliable tool.

### **6.5.1 - Participating schools**

All thirty-six schools were contacted via a letter with a request for a meeting to discuss if the school was in a position to participate in the research (Appendix Three) of which replies were received from nine. After meeting to discuss the research further, two declined to take part. Research schedules were agreed with seven schools to take place from February to May 2020. Research fieldwork was completed in four schools, across three authorities (Schools C and D were in the same council area). The Schools' alias: School A, B C and D simply refer to the order of which fieldwork began in each.

One session which would have included three pupils in School D was cancelled, and fieldwork did not take place in the other three schools due to the national public health restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which closed schools. Schools were officially closed in Scotland on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020. Fieldwork was planned and agreed in one school for that week, and for another commencing the Monday after (30<sup>th</sup>). It was agreed with those three schools that it would not be appropriate to arrange alternative methods of research - such as online interviews - given the unprecedented nature of the disruption and the uncertainty regarding everything in young people's lives including that of their and their families health, their schooling, and imminent examinations.

Despite this disruption to conducting fieldwork in three schools, the extent and depth of the data collected in the four participating schools allowed for the emergence of clear and substantiated themes. Saunders et al. (2018) note that saturation as a methodological principle in qualitative research is taken to indicate that the methods employed have allowed the development of analysis, where there is confidence in the empirical findings. It is the case that within 79 interviews that data relating to emergent themes was consistent. Additionally, as Glaser and Strauss 1967, cited in Saunders et al. 2018) set out, the data within this study was based on as wide a possible range of participants. This is demonstrated in Sections 6.5.1 and 6.6 below, which show there was a balance of participants between ages, school year, sex, and level of deprivation. Crucially to this consideration is the fact that between the four participating schools, there

was a balance between the deprivation levels of the schools, with one school much less deprived than average, and one much more so, with the two other schools wither side of that average. This allowed for an appreciation of the role of social background in the analysis of the data.

### **6.5.2 - *Schools' characteristics***

Table 6.1 sets out the key characteristics of the participating schools and sets them out alongside the averages for Greater Glasgow and Scotland as a whole. It is important to note that some of the data - such as for proportion of pupils on Free School Meals; with Additional Support Needs; from postcodes of the most multiple deprivation - the data dashboard the data was collated from does not give specific percentages, but rather which decile. For example, it shows between 10-20% of pupils at School A are in receipt of Free School Meals, but not the exact percentage, while the exact percentage is available for the region and nation as a collective. Below Table 6.3 (below), there is further discussion of this data in relation to each school, and some characterisation of why they were approached for participation in the research.

*Table 5.3: Schools Key Characteristics, created by author*

| School              | Pupil Numbers | Percentage achieving CfE Levels | % Of pupils in 20% most deprived postcodes | % Of pupils in 20% least deprived postcodes | % Receiving FSM | Positive Destination Rate | % Living in urban postcodes | % Attaining 1+ National 5 | % Attaining 1+ Higher |
|---------------------|---------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| School A            | 1350          | 90-100%                         | 20-30%                                     | 10-20%                                      | 10-20%          | 95                        | 90-100%                     | 85                        | 66                    |
| School B            | 1632          | 90-100%                         | 0-10%                                      | 70-80%                                      | 0-10%           | No Data                   | 90-100%                     | No Data                   | 91                    |
| School C            | 1380          | 90-100%                         | 0-10%                                      | 20-30%                                      | 10-20%          | 96                        | 90-100%                     | 94                        | 71                    |
| School D            | 621           | 90-100%                         | 40-50%                                     | 0-10%                                       | 20-30%          | 89                        | 70-80%                      | 78                        | 60                    |
| All Greater Glasgow |               | 92.6                            | 30.8                                       | 21.3                                        | 16.5            | 94.8                      | 88.4                        | 90.1                      | 71                    |
| Scotland            |               | 89.8                            | 22                                         | 20                                          | 14              | 94                        | 69                          | 88                        | 66                    |

### ***School A***

School A is an urban school (as defined by the Scottish Government) which had moderately above average pupil numbers. Between 20-30% of its pupils lived in Scotland's 20% most deprived postcodes - this was higher than the national average, but in line with the average in Greater Glasgow.

Between 80-90% of its cohort was white, and between 20-30% of students had additional support needs (lower than both the national and regional average) - (note tense is as the data relates to 2019/20)). Its National 5 and Higher attainment was lower than both the national and regional average, as was the number of subject choices it offered across the Senior Phase.

Over 95% of its pupils left school to a positive destination. The school had well developed Developing the Young Workforce programmes integrated into its curriculum and had dedicated staff who oversaw DYW as part of their contracts.

### ***School B***

School B had larger than average pupil numbers and was situated in a much smaller town than any of the other schools sampled, but one where residents were still overwhelmingly urban. It drew the majority of its pupils from the 10% least deprived postcodes in Scotland. Less than 10% of the cohort received free school meals. Between 80-90% of its cohort was white, and between 20-30% of students had additional support needs (lower than both the national and regional average). It was a very high attaining school, with 98% leaving with at least one National 5, and 90% leaving with one higher, which is nearly a third higher than the national average. Virtually every school leaver left to a positive destination. The school offered significantly more subject choices (had a wider curriculum) than the regional or national average.

### ***School C***

School C had a larger number of pupils than both the national and regional average. Its cohort was overwhelmingly classed as urban and was situated in a suburb of a large town. It had a variety of deprivation levels in its catchment areas - over 80% of its pupils came from the 20% least deprived postcodes - and the remaining pupils lived in the 20% most deprived postcodes as measured by SIMD. Between 10-20% received Free School Meals. Over 90% of pupils there were white, and between 20-30% had additional support needs. Its National 5 attainment was almost exactly in line with national averages, but its Higher attainment slightly lower, with 63% of people leaving the school doing so with at least one Higher. The schools' pupils left to positive destinations in line with national averages. It was unique in the sample of this research, that it had a formal 'consortia' arrangement with two other local schools, whereby they shared resources in the senior phase so pupils were able to travel between schools in order to take different subjects.

### ***School D***

School D had a below-national average number of pupils. Though 70-80% of its cohort lived in urban postcodes, 80% received school-provided transport due to the larger catchment area the school had, which is perhaps indicative of it being the only school in the research which was not entirely urban dwelling. It was also the most deprived school in the sample of the research. Between 40%-50% of its pupils lived in the most deprived postcodes in Scotland - well above the regional and national average. Between 20-30% of its pupils received free school meals. Over 90% were white and between 40-50% had additional support needs. Its attainment level was below the national and regional average, with 78% leaving school with at least one National 5, and just over half (52%) with at least one Higher.

#### ***6.5.3 - Pupil participant selection***

In all schools, semi-structured interviews took place in the school setting during

the school day. In discussions with school staff, I requested that the research participants would include a representative sample of young people, balanced across; year group, gender, and expected attainment level. Schools, however, kept a level of autonomy over the scheduling and selection process, and the pool of participants was also dependent groups of students in that school available for interview at the times access was agreed (the potential impact of this is reflected upon in Section 5.10 which reflects on the methods as a whole). Table 6.4 details the research schedule in each school and the way in which participants were selected.

| School   | Schedule                                              | Participant Selection                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|----------|-------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| School A | Four morning sessions over four weeks in Feb- March   | Teacher with responsibility for Employability (DYW) selected participants based on the request for a balanced range of years, gender, potential aspiration (incl. S4 school leavers) and attainment level                   |
| School B | Three all day sessions over three weeks in Feb- March | Teacher with interest in Employability selected participants                                                                                                                                                                |
| School C | Five afternoon sessions over four weeks Feb-March     | Senior Management Teacher selected participants, based on the request for a balanced range of pupils. Self-study periods (i.e. so the pupils would not miss class time) was a driving factor for S5 and S6 pupils selection |
| School D | Four full day sessions in one week in March           | Complete free choice of pupils. Every pupil in S4-S6 was informed of the research at an assembly, and was randomly selected by the researcher on the day, and called out of class                                           |

**Table 6.4 - Participating Schools Schedule and Participant Selection Process**



#### ***6.5.4 - Pupil characteristics***

There was a range of key demographic information that was collected from pupil participants to aid with the analysis of the impact of social background on subject choices. These characteristics were captured to aid analysis as they were deemed relevant factors throughout the previous literature and in the design of the research questions, in particular Research Question One and its sub-questions.

##### ***Year of schooling***

The collection of participants' year of schooling - whether they were in S4, S5 or S6 - was a crucial contextualising factor in the research. This was crucial to understanding the level of qualifications they were selecting subjects for and had clear relevance to their perspectives on the process itself. It also facilitated the identification of potential patterns or shifts over time, contributing depth and context to the exploration of influences on subject choices.

##### ***Age***

The collection of age obviously correlated strongly to the year of schooling but was collected in case of any outliers and differences between young people who were 'young' or 'old' for their year.

##### ***Gender***

Examining the gendered demographics of participants at each school aimed to allow the highlighting of nuanced perspectives and discern any potential gender-specific influences on subject choices.

|                                               |           |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Total Interviews</b>                       | <b>72</b> |
| <b>Interviews by School</b>                   |           |
| School A                                      | 23        |
| School B                                      | 17        |
| School C                                      | 17        |
| School D                                      | 15        |
| <b>Year</b>                                   |           |
| S4                                            | 28        |
| S5                                            | 29        |
| S6                                            | 15        |
| <b>Age</b>                                    |           |
| Fourteen                                      | 1         |
| Fifteen                                       | 25        |
| Sixteen                                       | 30        |
| Seventeen                                     | 16        |
| <b>Gender</b>                                 |           |
| Female                                        | 40        |
| Male                                          | 32        |
| <b>Average SIMD Decile (all participants)</b> |           |
| School A                                      | 5.2       |
| School B                                      | 9.8       |
| School C                                      | 7.3       |
| School D                                      | 3.9       |
| <b>Average Interview Time</b>                 |           |
|                                               | 18:00     |

***Table 6.5: Participants Demographic information***

As detailed in Table 6.5, across the four schools, there were seventy-two (N=72) interviews with pupils carried out. There was a relatively equal balance of participants across the four schools, and indeed across the three years of the senior phase. The age reflects a similar breakdown to the year, as would be expected.

Eight more young women were participants than young men. This is in keeping with what would be expected from a representative sample. It is important to note again that ‘prefer not to say’, non-binary’ and ‘other self-declaration’ options were available on the form, but unused.

With an average SIMD decile of participants of 6.4 (with 10 being the least deprived decile), this also shows a good balance of socio-economic backgrounds.

It is important to note that this average is driven up by participants from School B - all but one of whom lived in a postcode from decile nine or ten (the 20% least deprived postcodes).

A full list of participants and their demographic and interview information can be read in Appendix Four.

## **6.6 - Ethics**

Ethical approval was granted by the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee on 17<sup>th</sup> January 2020. This was acceptance of a revised ethics application, with feedback on the first provided and actions. This related to how anonymity would be guaranteed to organisations (employers) engaged with school partnerships. There are elements of the ethical considerations worth exploration as they relate to the research approach used and the inclusion of young people as participants.

The rooms used for the interviews with pupils either had glass frontage or the door was kept open for researcher and participant safeguarding purposes. In each school, I was made aware of how the internal phone system worked and given relevant details to contact the school office or a responsible staff member in case of any issues. My supervisors were also aware of my interview schedule, and I sent an email once I had left a school after each session.

Participants who were approached to take part (or in the case of School D, every pupil) were given a Participant Information Sheet (Appendix Five), and if under-16, a parental consent form (Appendix Six). At this stage (in Schools A, B and C) pupils agreed with the school whether they wished to take part and were scheduled in for one of the planned sessions. Each participant was assigned a unique code for the purposes of linking their interview, demographic information and consent forms (for example the third interview at School B was coded as SB3 and so on). Pupil interviews were transcribed verbatim, and each pupil participant was assigned a pseudonym randomly from the 'top 100 boys and girls names' (LittleList 2020). When participants arrived at the room, they were already

somewhat informed of the scope and purpose of the research, and time was taken to discuss this further so that there was clarity over what the research was intending to explore and the areas of which they would be asked about. They were also informed of their right not to take part, without giving a reason, and each point of the Consent Form was discussed and agreed (Appendix Seven). While this would be done of course as part of every research process, it was important to emphasise and explain that just because the school had asked them to take part, there was no requirement to do so. Two pupils - one at School C and one at School D - withdrew at this point after being informed of this.

For the purposes of analysing the impact of social background and school stage on choices, participants were asked to complete a simple demographic information form which included gender, age, and postcode for SIMD purposes (Appendix Eight). Interviews were recorded on a mobile phone. Immediately following each interview, the recording was uploaded to the University of Glasgow Onedrive in a password protected folder, and the data destroyed from the phone. Their consent forms were scanned into the same folder and their demographic information input to a spreadsheet. Following the interview, participants were again asked to consent to the data they had provided to be used and reminded of their right to withdraw their data at any time without the need to give a reason. No pupil withdrew following interview.

## **6.7 - Pupils Interviews**

The research instrument was developed with regards to areas of interest which had stemmed from the previous literature and research questions. The first version of the instrument can be seen in Appendix Nine and sets out the broad themes of interviews: aspiration, choices and employer engagement. This was developed further into a second version (Appendix Ten) that included questions of greater detail, a stronger structure, prompts, and certain 'routes' through the questions. Though it was designed in such a way that not every question needed to be asked and there was ample scope for issues and themes to be explored that were raised by each unique participant. It was piloted with two young people before the first research interview was done

Interviews with pupils took place in a one-on-one format with no staff present. This was to ensure that pupils felt they could give honest and full reflections without an authority figure present. In each school a room, or a classroom, was made available. The rooms were set up so that there was not a table between the two chairs, so that the interview as much as possible did not feel 'formal'. Instead, two chairs facing each other with a table at the side was arranged.

Generally, the interviews flowed well. The conduct of young people in the interviews was impeccable and there were zero issue in relation to behaviour, attitude or anything similar. No advice needed to be sought from the school on my or their behalf with regards to the research. The average interview time was exactly 18 minutes, and this excludes pre- and post-amble such as briefing and consent procedures. The shortest interview was only ten minutes, and was with an S4 in School A, the longest was nearly twenty-six minutes and was with a S6 in School C. Four of the five shortest interviews were with S4s, and all five of the longest interviews were with S5s and S6s. Some interviews, where young people were giving one word, or short answers, time had to be taken in teasing out follow-up questions. With these interviews though they started 'slow', discussion widened the deeper the interview became, particularly as questions related to their timetables and their decisions. Unsurprisingly, because these young people were older, interviews with those in S5 and S6 had much less instances of beginning 'slow'.

Consideration must be given to the differential in power dynamics that were present throughout the interviews. The first of these relates to an authority and age gap between me and the participants. An important aspect of reflexivity with regards to this research is acknowledging the existence of such power differentials and that they cannot be eliminated completely. Given the nature of the research, it was not possible and would not have been appropriate to develop any prior relationship with participants ahead of the interview. Though I did offer to come and speak at assemblies or classes prior to fieldwork in the school, no school took this up.

I presented in casual dress and introduced myself with my first name (noting that my full details were on the Participation, Information and Consent Sheets, and noted that I was a 'Student' at the University of Glasgow carrying out a research project for my PhD). I offered the opportunity to ask any question around my background, and what my PhD course is, means and entails.

As the research was arranged through their school, and conducted on-site during the school day, issues regarding pupils' feeling compelled to partake were considered (through the withdrawal process outlined earlier) but still remain. Schelbe et al. (2014) also highlight in similar scenarios to this research young people often feel they are being evaluated, or judged, on responses. This is particularly the case where audio-recording or note taking is present. Note taking particularly can give the presentation of 'assessment' so no notes were taken while the interview was taking part, and I was mindful to refer to the interview schedule in front of me as little as possible. At the beginning of the interview, it was explained that the paper on the table was just a list of questions that I might ask and not 'notes'. It was also explained the recording would be deleted as soon as the interview was written down (transcribed). Throughout the interviews care was taken not to act surprised, excited, concerned or display any other emotion at responses young people would give, aiming to remain 'neutral' in asking follow-up questions or seeking clarifications. In consultation with staff following the interviews, no concerns with regards to the interviews were raised and all feedback from pupils to them was positive.

## **6.8 - Expert interviews**

Seven expert interviews were carried out following the fieldwork in schools, their identities and the purpose of their inclusion can be seen in Table 6.6 below. The purpose of these interviews was to provide contextual information as to the pertinent issues regarding choices, and to reflect on the emerging themes from the pupils' interviews. Within the findings chapters, there are a small number of direct quotations from the expert interviews presented. These mainly relate to the policy context on subject choices. Though not extensively quoted (some requested not to be quoted but were happy to provide information) the majority

of Expert Interviews were useful in offering contextual information and their perspective as to the area of interest and expertise that they held (see Table 5.6). Some interviews, such as that with a Scottish Government official, did not provide much more information than would be available through reading public Government statements. This must be appreciated within the context of this issue being near the top of the education policy agenda at the time - having just been subject to a Parliamentary Inquiry - and the fact it is likely to have been known that I had worked for a Scottish Labour Member of the Scottish Parliament who sat on the Committee which conducted the Inquiry (as set out in Section 1.6). Quotes from Experts are used where there is direct applicability to theme being discussed, and where their knowledge of processes is useful in providing context.

All experts were approached via email to provide information regarding the research, why they were being approached and what the purpose of their data would be. These interviews took place between May and July 2020, which meant they were conducted in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Space was given to discuss COVID- 19's potential impact on education, but the core of the interview regarded the choices process as was before any public health related disruption, and the specific area of expertise that experts could contribute too. Participants were approached based on the identification of individuals - or organisations - who would represent key stakeholders in the themes of the research.

| Stakeholder Expert                                                                                                                           | Purpose                                                                                                                             |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| An opposition party Member of the Scottish Parliament with a seat on the Education and Skills Committee                                      | To provide context to the policy process and the narrowing of subject choices in the senior phase following their Committee Inquiry |
| A representative from Colleges Scotland, the umbrella organisation for Scotland's Further Education Institutions                             | To provide context to the proliferation of vocational options and links with schools and colleges                                   |
| A representative from an organisation which represents businesses                                                                            | To provide context to the operation of Developing the Young Workforce and experience of employer engagement                         |
| An academic who had published research on the topic of subject choices                                                                       | To provide context to the curricular structure in Scotland's schools                                                                |
| A member of the Senior Management Team at School C                                                                                           | To provide context to issues of timetabling, process and findings of influences                                                     |
| An official from the Scottish Government Education Department (the request was initially made to elected members of the Scottish Government) | To provide context as to national policy concerning choices                                                                         |
| A representative of a national parents' organisation                                                                                         | To provide a parental view on the issues raised in the research, particularly parental involvement in the process                   |

*Table 6.6 - Expert Participants and Purpose for Select*

Attempts were also made to conduct interviews with a representative from Catholic education, two employers involved with Developing the Young Workforce in Greater Glasgow, and a representative of a university but these were either declined or received no response. All expert interviews took place either over the phone (N=5) or via Zoom (N=2). At the beginning of each interview and, in a similar vein to pupils, following the interview they were informed of their right to not take part, without giving a reason, and each point of the Consent Form was



discussed and agreed. How they would be referred to was also agreed. Following the interview, the recording was uploaded to the University of Glasgow Onedrive in a password protected folder, and the data destroyed from the phone or computer.

## **6.9 - Data analysis**

### **6.9.1 - Thematic Analysis**

Themes emerged in both a deductive and inductive manner.

There were a range of 'set' themes which were derived from the previous literature. As set out, there had been strong evidence of internal motivations (explored in Chapter Eight) and regarding the external actors who are significant in the subject choices process also (explored in Chapter Nine). This body of previous literature was instrumental in the development of the Research Questions and as such the themes relate directly to them. This approach allowed for clarity regarding what the key aims of the research instrument would be and allowed for the SSIs - and the resulting analysis - to be structured in such a way that allowed learning to develop on from previous literature. It also allowed a focus on testing existing theory and considering whether findings of this study were replicable to that of previous research on the issue that has been done in different contexts (in different countries, at different times or under different curriculum structures). This approach however can lead to confirmation bias (Fife and Gossner 2024) which is why care was given to ensure there was flexibility within the interviews so that participants had the space to follow threads that were important to them, which ensured there was diverse data in which to derive themes.

Further to this, it was important that other themes emerged directly from the analysis of the data in a more inductive manner. Braun and Clarke (2006) set out that 'the process starts when the analyst begins to notice, and look for, patterns of meaning and issues of potential interest in the data - this may be during data collection'. The key benefit of this was the flexibility in the open endedness of discussions and the rich level of detail that was provided to analyse.

The development of potential themes began during the interview process as key

points were repeated and patterns emerged during the process. While it is important to note that mere repetition of points throughout the interview process does not necessarily identify a theme (Ryan and Bernard, 2003), potential codes began to be identified. This process was part of the phase one of 'familiarising oneself with the data' which was continued during the transcription process and a defined process of re-reading the interviews in full.

NVivo qualitative analysis software was used to conduct the analysis and organise the data. Each transcript was then read through to generate initial codes. Across the interviews, fifty-eight initial codes were identified due to a range of factors including: relevance to research questions, points raised across different year groups or schools, an important point relevant to the process within their school or an explicitly positive or negative experience of a part of the choices process. A short memo was also created for each interview, which characterised their aspiration, their subject choices, their employer engagement and any other salient observations which stemmed from the data. Examples of these memos can be read in Appendix Eleven. The memos were used to aid the development of themes (further detailed below), but also to ensure that wider context could be highlighted when presenting data and contributing towards the development of case studies that are presented throughout the findings. From these codes, there were a range of themes which were compiled and reviewed. The codes within the themes were reviewed to ensure that the data within them cohered together and was sufficient enough to warrant being defined as a theme. This process was done to organise the data, aid the process of drawing meaningful findings, and in helping in ensuring the validity of the data.

A thematic map of the outcome of this process can be seen in Figure 6.1 below. The Figure details the 'results' of this analysis, and sets out the broad themes which make up the structure of the findings chapters which follow. In reading the Figure, it is important to follow the branches that sub-themes are related to in order to understand their placement within their broader theme. For example, 'family connections' being a sub-theme of 'curriculum' must be understood within the context of 'employer engagement', meaning that it relates to the ability (or lack of ability) of families to use their networks to arrange employer engagement

for their young people. It is not that 'family connection' is integral to curriculum in and of itself. Similarly, it is important to note that there are linkages within the themes and sub-themes to each other which are discussed throughout the findings chapters, but for clarity of presenting the themes are not 'linked' within the figure.

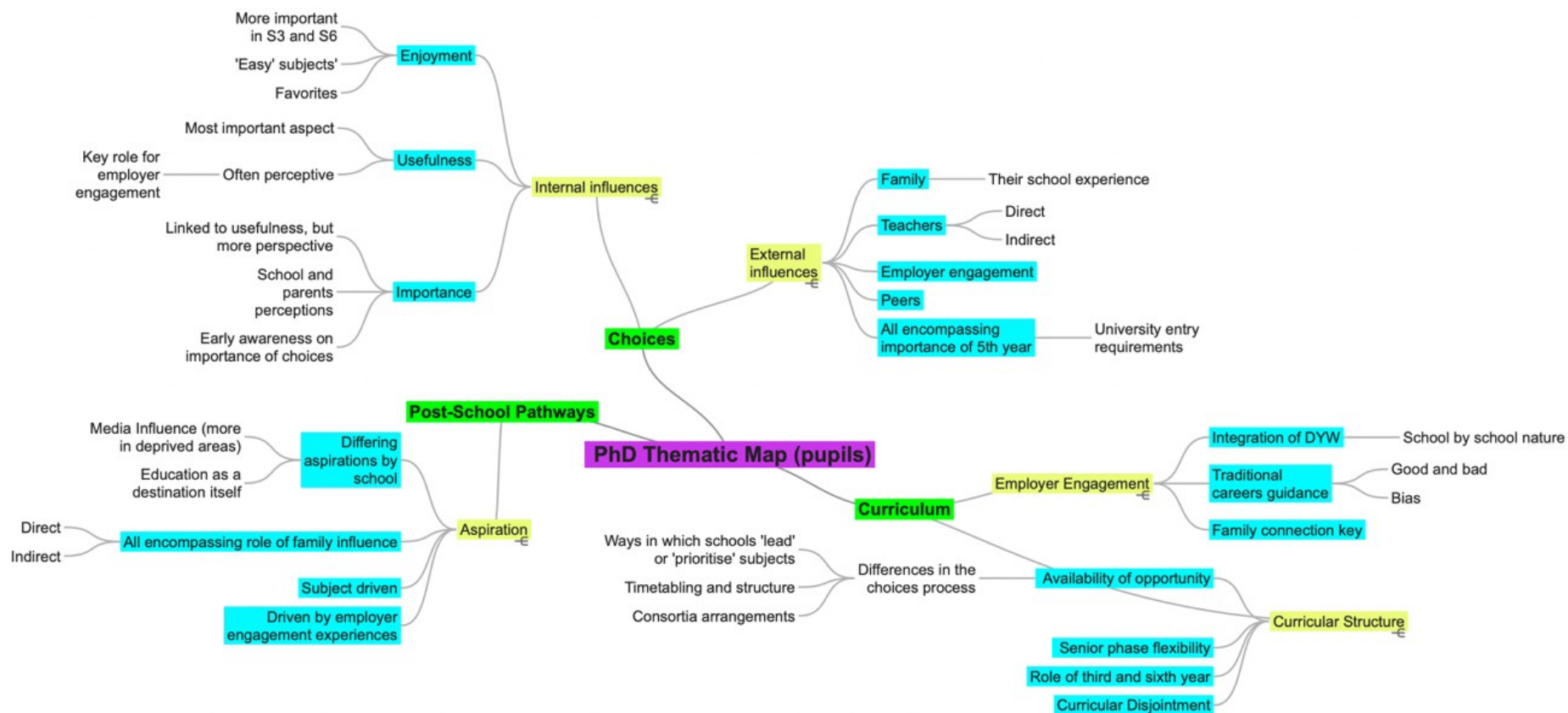


**Figure 6.1:** PhD Thematic Development Map



There were three overarching core themes (level one themes): Choices, Curriculum and Post-School Pathways. These are detailed in green in the Thematic Map in the Figure below. There were five level two themes identified, detailed in yellow: Aspiration, Internal Influences, External Influences, Employer Engagement and Curricular Structure. These are the themes which began to form the basis of the findings chapters, which start with Chapter Six. There were nineteen level three themes, detailed in blue, which also had sub-themes emerging from them to better understand and organise the data.

There was careful consideration given to the presentation of quotations throughout the findings chapters which follow. While several quotes were included to comprise a theme or sub theme, in the main the quotations which most directly linked to, and complimented in the explanation of, the themes and sub-themes are presented. There was then consideration of balancing the presented evidence to reflect the diversity of the participant group ensuring a representation of participants across schools, school years, deprivation and sex.

There are a number of case studies presented in the findings chapters (identified in purple boxes). These case studies represent data where young people provided a deeper insight into a particular issue, articulated well a tension that is being described or had an particularly interesting story to share that was outwith the ‘normal’ experience of the participant population as a whole.

The expert interviews were also analysed thematically, using an inductive approach with the themes at all levels set as above. Analysis of the expert interviews were applied to the area with which they had expertise. These interviews were individually coded according to the themes that they had relevance to. Often these expert interviews were used to provide context and framing of the pupils’ data throughout the findings chapters.

## 6.10 - Reflections on methods

There are limitations to the research methodology which are worth considering. Reflections on limitations of the study as a whole are discussed in Section 10.7 of the thesis. In terms of qualitative methods being used exclusively, Arskey and Knight (1999) suggest that connections may be discerned through qualitative methods, but without the formal support of statistical analysis to triangulate findings, it can be an error to do more than speculate on possible causal relationships.

In terms of defining deprivation - key to defining social background in the study - there are also well-established problems with SIMD as an indicator of individual deprivation. Due to the nature in which SIMD maps deprivation by grouped areas, the metric can misclassify some households (Fischbacher 2014). Indeed, individuals/families with a low income and low educational attainment who would otherwise normally be regarded as 'deprived' can fall into a SIMD category unrepresentative of these circumstances, should they live in a less deprived *area*. This can have ramifications for service delivery and access. Similarly, critics suggest that SIMD downplays rural poverty and overestimates deprivation in urban city centres (Fischbacher 2014). This is due to the rates of crime witnessed in these areas which are significantly lower in rural areas and higher in urban environments.

As outlined in Section 6.4, schools were selected from Greater Glasgow. All four schools included in the research were non-denominational, despite efforts to have Roman Catholic schools included. Four Catholic schools were written to as part of the call for participating schools (due to the factors set out in Section 6.4, not explicitly their denomination), following no responses three further Catholic schools were written to based on desire for inclusion (though they also satisfied the criteria set out in Section 6.4). Efforts were also made for religious school representation through interview of leaders in Catholic education as part of the expert interviews to share findings and understand the different perspectives - if any - that they may have regarding the key issues the research explores. Given that a large section of schools in Greater Glasgow are Roman Catholic schools (36

secondary schools), this can be seen to represent a potential limitation of the research methods.

There is also the impact of COVID-19 to consider as a limitation. This is both in the sense that should the pandemic not have happened, there would have been another three schools included in the research, which would have allowed for broader analysis of the role of different curricular structures and a broader range of participants from different social backgrounds. There is also the impact of COVID-19 on changing elements of school structure and education policy, though potential impact of this on the findings is reflected upon in Chapter Eleven.

Research in many countries has found evidence that schools aim to present favourably in research. King, Orazem and Paterno (2018) found in England that schools aim to attain well in the metrics which contribute towards school 'league tables'. Recently, in Scotland Shapira et al. (2023) found evidence of a 'culture of performativity' across the education system. While many of these studies' findings relate to quantitative metrics relating to attainment (and post school destinations), it must be considered that in the context of being invited to take part in any research project that a school will hope to be seen in the best possible light.

As detailed in Section 6.6, the four schools in the study - as part of agreeing to participate - all sought various levels of autonomy over the selection process. Schools B and C selected the participants and arranged the scheduling. While in School A, there was agreement to provide as diverse a range (including on aspiration and leaving stage) as possible. School D was the only school where there was a completely 'open' and 'randomised' process. Schools B and C were the only schools who did not present 'early' leavers. While it must be considered that School's B and C have higher rates of attainment, less deprived cohorts of pupils, and higher proportions of young people who stay at school until the end of S6 - and indeed the knowledge that they schools would be presented anonymously - it is still worth considering in the wider context of performativity.



## **6.11 - Conclusions**

Using a social constructivism as a methodological framework and approach to the research, the study used qualitative semi-structured interviews as the research method. This was done to ensure that all individuals within the research could raise issues unique to them and relate to a central purpose of the research to elevate the voices of young people with regards to the issues of subject choices and curriculum opportunity.

There were seventy-nine interviews conducted, with seventy-two of these done with pupils across four participating schools. These four schools had varying 'characteristics' in their size, attainment, and social background of their pupils. Seven interviews were carried out with experts who possessed knowledge in a range of areas pertinent to the research. Thematic analysis was used to construct meaning from the data, and a version of analysis derived from Braun and Clarke (2006) was utilised.

The following Chapters - Seven, Eight, Nine, and Ten - will set out the findings of the research which this research approach, these methods, and the process of the analysis produced. Chapter six details the role of aspiration in influencing subject choices and explores how it is constructed.

## CHAPTER SEVEN - THE SHAPING OF ASPIRATIONS

*‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’* is a question that is familiar throughout childhood. It however becomes real at some point and begins to shape learning decisions. The forming of aspiration is key to subject choices, as aspirations become the lens with which these decisions are made.

The chapter first discusses the extent to which participants had an aspiration, before discussing the central role of family in shaping it. The role of family manifested in two ways. The first was direct, where young people had been told, pressured or heavily encouraged into pursuing an aspiration by a family member. The second was indirect, which was more subjective and unconscious. Family influence strongly shaped young people’s perceptions of what the ‘job market’ looks like, and consequently, the opportunities available to them, and findings in relation to this are explored. The chapter will then discuss where specific subjects shape aspirations, through interest or enjoyment of an academic subject, young people were aspiring to a resulting career. Then, the key role of employer engagement will be discussed with a focus on the participation in work experience placements in each school, how these differed, and the clear role and opportunity which exists for employer engagement to inspire aspiration and expand perceptions. The role of the media and the aspiration to become a teacher, particularly amongst more deprived pupils is then considered.

### 7.1 - Aspiration

As can be observed within the interview schedule discussions began with participants being asked *‘have you thought about what you want to do when you leave school?’*. The question - and the follow up discussions - were designed to situate and contextualise the conversation about subject choices, and how they relate to post-school pathways. While the question achieved the aim of setting a foundation of discussion about individuals’ journeys through subject choices, it also revealed much wider and deeper themes regarding the role of aspiration, how it is formed and the important role of social background within it.

The central role of ‘aspiration’ – simply meaning in this context what young people want to do after they leave school (but discussed more widely in Section 3.7), in influencing young people’s subject choices cannot be overstated. As will be explored in depth in Chapter Eight, subjects that are perceived as useful or important towards realising an aspiration become major influences over what subjects a young person will take. While this of course makes sense – students who want to study medicine will be inclined to take science-based subjects, for example – it means that what influences aspiration becomes centrally important to what influences subject choices. Aspiration influenced the way in which young people viewed their subject choices. It became the framework, or the lens, in which they perceived the choices available to them. Therefore, the influences over setting their aspirations are the foundational influences over their subject choices and understanding of this is central to understanding pupils’ learning decisions. This is the reasoning as to why this chapter is key to contextualise the chapters which follow.

Therefore, it is important to note that the data presented within this Chapter does not always necessarily set out the role of aspiration on each individual subject choice (although that is a predominant driver of the internal motivation of usefulness explored in Section 9.3), but rather to set out how aspirations are shaped. The influences over the shaping of aspiration are integral to subject choices, because aspiration essentially becomes the frameworks through which young people approach their subject choices process as a whole and indeed shape the support available to young people when making their choices.

While many of the spheres of influence on specific subject choices are the same influences that shape aspirations, such as family, employers and the media, they operated in different ways, and to much different extents. Across all schools, socio-economic-background and year groups, all pupils had an aspiration. Even if it was not wholly settled and specific, all students had an idea and a hope of achieving something. They all wanted good jobs, which they deemed to be important and meaningful, and all wanted good lives. This could differ from very specific and well-developed job roles, such as:

*‘I want to be a lawyer... domestic humanitarian law. I’ve always known that’ - Elizabeth (S4, F, School C)*

*‘I want to be a general theatre surgeon’ - Harper (S4, F, School B)*

To more general areas of potential interest:

*‘Something to do with computers’ - Rosie (S5, F, School C)*

*‘Something at uni - erm, sciencey’ - Georgia (S5, F, School A)*

As will be developed, it is the case that the more ‘generalist’ aspirations tended to be driven by enjoyment or interest in a particular subject, while the more specific pathways mentioned were more influenced by further experiences beyond these factors, such as employer engagement activities or family experience. While it is to be expected, it is worth noting that those in S6 generally had a much stronger idea of the specifics of what they wanted to do. In S5, there was generally a stronger level of specificity in their aspirations, but many of the responses were still discussing general, rather than specific, aspirations.

## **7.2 - Family influence**

The discussion then went to focus on why and how they had come to their aspirations. One influence was mentioned by participants in some way, shape, or form: the role of family. While the role of family influence has been highlighted within the previous literature, its prevalence amongst the participants of this study was overwhelming. A large number of participants within the research had family influences threaded throughout their stated aspiration. This manifested itself in two key ways: direct and indirect.

### 7.2.1 - Direct

‘Direct’ influence over aspirations - and ultimately post-school pathways - refers to instances where young people had been told, pressured, or heavily encouraged into pursuing a specific aspiration by a family member. The majority of this direct influence surrounded encouragement to follow professions and occupations that existed within the family already. Often this was parental influence, but it also included wider family and siblings. This type of direct influence often revolved around direct instruction or encouragement into job roles and paths. Ryan (S5, M, School B), who was going to university to do a degree in STEM, described his post-school plans as ‘forced’:

*‘My dad works in Maths at [redacted] uni. So, he sort of forced me down to do Science, Maths type of thing. My brother is doing maths [there] as well...it’s been encouraged from a young age.’*

Particularly amongst young people from less deprived backgrounds, there existed an expectation and enthusiasm from family members to follow the ‘family profession’. These were often professions that would attract high levels of cultural and economic capital. Although not universal, there was also a further notable theme whereby the aspirations of those from less deprived backgrounds were more specific than those raised by more deprived pupils, either in identifying a specific role or industry. Participants at times discussed how members of their immediate family were uniformly employed in a specific occupation. This established path suggests that for these participants a strong expectation - both conscious and subconscious to follow suit - existed. Of note was a disparity between those from less deprived backgrounds seeking to access medicine and other STEM professions compared to participants from more deprived backgrounds. This was noteworthy in the certainty and specificity of the aspiration, knowledge of the qualifications that may be needed to achieve it and having secured work experience, or having engaged an employer in that field in some way. Family influence and the knowledge and perception of the jobs that could be attainable, and the pathways to them, was strikingly different from one school to the next.

Direct influence from family did not always relate to professions that existed within the family already - a 'family trade' - however. There were instances where young people's families would exert influence over them to get 'better jobs' than existed already within the family unit. Again, the conception of 'better' would present as careers that were in well paid industry or that required degrees.

There were cases also where the family influence over aspiration skipped a generation and was based on grandparents' jobs. Margot (S5, F, School C) spoke of how she had mentioned to family members during the course of her choices for S4 that she might wish to look at post-school pathways in engineering, and how her family '*jumped on*' that as her preferred route. This eventually influenced her choices and the subsequent pathways that she considered open to her, despite her reservations:

*'I don't know, I think I liked the idea of it but didn't look into it enough. I feel like as soon as I said it, everybody jumped on it - I felt like there was a lot of pressure and it was like that was exactly what I had to do. My grandpa is an engineer so, I feel like there was a lot of pressure put on to stick with that and I just got a bit like 'woah''*

Direct influence was predominantly based on discussions, whereas indirect influence stemmed from exposure and knowledge based on young people's perceptions.

### **7.2.2 - Indirect**

Indeed, the most common manifestation of this family influence however, was more subjective, indirect, and subconscious. Rather than specific aspirations related to direct experience, or encouragement to go down a certain career path, many participants either wanted to do so, or appeared to be almost subconsciously 'following in the footsteps' of members of their immediate or wider family. This was fairly universal regardless of pupils' social background.

This indirect family influence shaped young people's perceptions of what the job market looks like, and consequently, the opportunities that seemed available to them. This is the significant characteristic of families' influence: the exposure through social networks increases the perceptions of what post-school pathways exist and are attainable. Those from the less deprived schools often knew more specifics about the occupations they wanted to enter and knew better the steps to achieving them. They were also more aware of wider industries and what opportunities these options presented. A lack of knowledge - through family background and educational experience - restricts the scope of possible social space and ensures that young people do not feel, or simply, do not know, what pathways may exist for them, and people like them.

Interestingly, for most participants where this indirect influence was evident, it took follow up questions to ascertain that their aspiration had been influenced by their families. Some even noting that it was the first time they had consciously made the link. Ollie (S5, M, School C) was going to university to study science and maths discussed he had prioritised STEM and business studies subjects throughout all of his rounds of subject choices. He noted that he had taken his interest in the area from having '*always been good at maths - always enjoyed it and it has just carried through*', before discussing that his mum was an accountant. A number of interviews contained similar reflections, the influence of the occupational history of the family was clear.

For some pupils, like Eleanor (S4, F, School D) in the case study below, there was a convergence between their own interests and indirect influence of family:

### Case Study - Eleanor - Speaking of Family

For an S4 -the least likely group to have a settled and specific aspiration - Eleanor was assured in her desire to go to University to study to become a Modern Languages Teacher. She had considered French and Spanish, but also had strong interest in Italian. Interestingly, Italian was not available as subject at School D.

Asked what had inspired interest in Language teaching as an aspiration, she discussed how learning languages was a skill that had come 'naturally' to her, saying:

*'I've always wanted to be a teacher and I've always tried to find a subject I'm good at. Developing the skills in languages I could pick up on it quite quickly - I want to share that with everyone else'.*

Through further discussion, it emerged that there had been several people in Eleanor's family that had been teachers, including her grandmother who had taught at a primary school. Her aspiration was a confluence of her interests and her exposure to teaching through the social network of her family:

*It's just an occupation that runs in my family I guess...my gran is a teacher... and a couple of people before her'.*

In addition to the case study above, other participants demonstrate the impact of exposure to family professions. For instance, Lucas (S4, M, School B) was one of the participants who was most unsure about what to do after school, in that he had a vague idea of the type of pathway he may choose - an apprenticeship - but had not firmly set on *what* that would be in. Family influence was still key in his thinking:



*Lucas: 'I don't really know. Apprenticeship is probably the thing that I was really looking at but it's really open right now.'*

*Interviewer: 'That's fair. What is it your dad does?'*

*Lucas: 'He owns a bike shop...so, engineering kind of was always the stuff I'd look at.'*

'Family influence' should not however just be thought of in terms of influence from immediate family, but from the wider social networks of family too. Elizabeth (S4, F, School C), aspiring to be a lawyer, conceptualised what is at the core of this indirect family influence when she discussed how close family friends being lawyers had 'brushed off' onto her.

For some young people, an aspiration linked to and influenced by family seemed a 'default' or 'fall back' option. These options offered what some participants viewed as a safety net if no other ideas or inspirations struck them before the point of leaving school. Such options were often talked about calmly by participants in S4 but were brought up with more inductiveness and uncertainty by those in S5 and S6. Erin (S5, F, School C) noted that if she could not make a decision over a university subject, she would aspire enter a similar industry as her mum:

*Interviewer: 'Have you thought about what you might want to do when you leave school?'*

*Erin: 'I don't really know. I've thought about events planning, but apart from that I don't really know. And I'm not really set on that, do you know what I mean.'*

*Interviewer: 'What's brought that thought about, that that is something you might be interested in doing?'*

*Erin: 'Well, my mum actually does - she conducts weddings, funerals and stuff like that. So, she obviously works with the people and when she tells me what they do, the kind of stuff - I think I might be quite good at that. Organising stuff, events - but I don't know.'*

This was one instance of many where a pupil was uncertain of exactly what they wanted to do, so 'reverted' to thoughts around aspiring to a profession they had exposure to through family.

What is overwhelmingly clear throughout the interviews was the pressure that young people felt to have a clear view - and thus a plan - of what it is they want to do. Generally, fourth year pupils believed that there 'was time' to decide what they wanted to do, but that they would have to decide soon. Fifth years who had not yet decided by that point in the school year had the decision at the forefront of their minds, and sixth years who had not yet decided were often continuing to further or higher education. This overarching feeling was summed up by Orla (S5, F, School A) who's decision regarding what she wanted to do after school was being made in the shadow of a looming deadline:

*Interviewer: 'So, a fairly broad question to start with, have you thought about what you might want to do when you leave?'*

*Orla: 'Yes, I have, I'm in 5th year now so I really do need to decide now.'*

Many young people noted that aspirations - or the sense that a young person should have one and that it should guide their subject choices - was engrained deeply in the information provided by schools:

*'I don't want to push down on the school too much. When you have your career days people would always say you need a practical career choice - law things like that.'* - *Zoe (S6, School C)*

These findings show the key role that perception has upon aspirations, which in turn drives subject choice, and curricular opportunity.

### **7.3 - Subject-driven aspirations**

A distinct theme also emerged whereby aspirations were influenced by subjects themselves. This theme was deeper than simply enjoying studying a subject. It emerged from responses where the selection, or experience, of a certain subject had inspired or changed an aspiration within a young person. This manifested itself in positive ways - where young people were motivated and driven to further pursue a subject, but also as a negative where young people were put off an aspiration by experience of a subject.

Oscar (S6, M, School A) discussed how he was destined to pursue a career in architecture after school, but a subject choice of Art in his fifth year (a subject closely related to the aspiration) - having studied the subject throughout all three years of the senior phase - actually changed his mind on what he wanted to do after leaving school:

*‘Well, I used to want to do architecture up until the end of fourth year when I took Art. I think it’s the amount of work for Art, I got an A in the end, but just the amount of work I had to put in. I don’t really enjoy it that much as well, so I thought maybe it’s not for me.’*

Freya (S6, F, School A) had already accepted an offer to do a Higher National Diploma at College in Drama. At the start of her sixth year however, she had intended to apply to university to study Primary Teaching. She noted that she had ‘picked up’ Drama only in her senior phase, but that the actual process of going through the assessments had driven her to take on extra-curricular activities associated with it. What is particularly interesting about Freya’s story is that the subject choice did not only alter her aspiration in terms of post-school course choice, but also the type of institution she would attend - from university to a further education college.

Millie (S4, F, School B) discussed being set on becoming a Physiotherapist from a young age, but having selected the three science subjects required, was no longer sure due to her experience of these subjects. She was now looking at how she could use her next set of choices (for S5) to pivot her aspirations:

*Interviewer: 'So, when did that view change then? From Physiotherapy to not knowing?'*

*Millie: 'It was kind of, probably about S3. When I'd started doing my subjects that I'd chosen because I - I don't know, I kind of just thought because I'm doing three sciences, I just thought that I could maybe do something more - rather than physio being one set area, maybe something that's more diverse. Because I'm doing the three sciences and it gives me the option to do something like medicine, but then I also enjoy Modies and English so I could do law. I'm not saying - they're very very hard to get into but yea - I don't, it was kind of about then.'*

Millie's experience raises an interesting point, whereby commitment at 13 or 14 years old (S3 into S4 (or sooner as explored in the next chapter)) to a certain path ensured her curriculum was geared toward a certain aspiration, with consideration needing to be made in later school years to pivot subjects to attain qualifications at a Higher and Advanced Higher level. It is a clear example of how aspiration - and the drive purely towards attaining it - can narrow the breadth of curricular experience of young people.

Callum (S6, M, School A) highlighted how some of the more holistic curricular opportunities available had helped shift his aspirations from architecture to medicine. He spoke about how a British Sign Language short course taken in S6 had changed his outlook, which had changed what he aspired to do - and in which there was no family influence present:

*'It's only been the past year or two because last year I took a First Aid and British Sign Language course through the school, getting a college units bundle with them, that's when I really found a passion for helping others and doing something medical, which has also led me on to become a*

*lifeguard so that furthers my help towards people. I've also went on to study Biology that I've never studied before but I'm really enjoying it because of the medical aspects of it.'*

Of pertinence to Callum's shift was that when he made this change in his aspirations in S5, he was studying a suite of subjects aimed at a career in architecture. Callum spoke of how he wished he had taken subjects like biology sooner, and that he had to change his subjects dramatically for S6 and look at a whole new suite of subjects so he could get into the course he wanted.

This theme demonstrates the impact of subjects that young people find enjoyment in or are good at (the importance of both is explored in greater detail in Chapter Eight), whereas the next section turns attention to the impact of employer engagement on shaping aspiration.

#### **7.4 - Employer engagement as an influence**

The change of direction discussed by Callum was further influenced by his work experience placement, where he worked in a local hospital. Indeed, he was among a group of participants who had their aspirations influenced either heavily or wholly by their experience of employer engagement. This was critically important to both the influence that employers can have over subject choices given aspirations' central importance to guiding subject choices, and to the potential for employers to influence the post-school pathways of pupils to their institution or industry. Indeed, it was clear that for some participants exposure to employers influenced significantly what they wanted to do after school, and the learning decisions taken between the point of exposure and leaving school. The influence of employer engagement was evident across pupils of all backgrounds, years and schools. It was however evident that the increased social and cultural capital that those from less deprived backgrounds had significant impact over the scale and depth of employer engagement open to these young people. Those from less deprived backgrounds had a stronger sense and precision over what their aspiration was.

### **7.4.1 - Work experience**

The structure of employer engagements, including how these are arranged and what and how many opportunities are available to young people in each school, were revealed as vitally important for some young people in influencing aspirations. As set out in Section 5.3, employer engagement is offered in a range of different forms. The most important type of employer engagement integrated into the curriculum was work experience, and this is detailed in the examples given below.

In Scotland, work experience is usually a week within S3 or S4 where instead of attending school, a pupil will attend a workplace to gain experience of the ‘world of work’. The *experience of work experience (author emphasis)* varied in each school, with important ramifications for what impact this had on influencing aspirations and subject choices. Every school, except school C, had a mandatory formal week of work experience. School C had a programme for ‘Skills for Work’ which could include a work experience placement, but many participants within the research had not done so.

### **7.4.2 - School A**

Work experience in School A was arranged through the school, in that it would find placements for young people. Young people were asked earlier in the year to provide a small number of potential areas of interest and were encouraged to match these to any aspirations that they held. The school would aim to arrange placements aligned with their stated interests. Young people could instead arrange their work experience independently if they wished, with the agreement of the school. There were fewer examples of independent placements than in Schools B or D amongst research participants.

School A had several direct examples of employer engagement influencing aspirations. It had a dedicated staff member working on employer engagement for 0.5 of their employment, and well-developed links with employers in a range

of sectors. This meant that pupils in School A were less reliant on their families and their social networks to find placements, which meant that a much broader experience of work during this week was possible. It also meant that pupils in School A usually had a work experience placement that was in some way related to their aspiration.

School A also had additional opportunities for work experience available in its curriculum, particularly for young people who were planning to leave school and not go into an apprenticeship, or further and higher education. This was highlighted by Clara (S4, F, School A) who was one of few S4's in the research (and increasingly in the country) who was leaving school at that stage instead of staying on for S5. She was going to take up a role at a care home which she had been volunteering at on a Thursday afternoon instead of attending class. She had originally selected a foundation apprenticeship in health and beauty as a subject choice in S4 but dropped out due to non-enjoyment of it. Instead of the Thursday afternoon two-period slot to go to 'waste', the placement was arranged through the Developing the Young Workforce links and at its conclusion Clara received a job offer.

There were also examples where engagement with activities outwith school drove aspirations. These typically revolved around sports, music and arts, but sometimes also came with more specificity, such as Georgia (S5, F, School A) who had been inspired to go into aeronautics:

*'Well I joined the Air Cadets and I'd never really considered going into aeronautics or anything before that but seeing how that stuff, it made me more interested in it.'*

### **7.4.3 - School B**

School B also had a dedicated week of work experience, but pupils were responsible for finding their own placements. They had to make all attempts to ensure that the placement was aligned with their aspiration. Pupils at the school often engaged with placements set up by their family. The school also offered time away from classes so that young people could contact potential employers for them to engage with.

Pupils at School B had homes in the least deprived areas in the research. Their exposure to, and ability to access employer engagement opportunities in professions which have significant economic and cultural capital attached was evident. Harper (S4, F, School B) who wanted to be a surgeon had secured work experience in a hospital with her Dad, who was a surgeon. She was planning to take up more voluntary experience there:

*'I went with my dad to [X] Hospital and I'm planning to in the summer go back or apply to [X] hospital to spend some time there... I loved it. Obviously, I can't do anything other than shadow so I thought it would be a bit - not boring but you know I'd be sitting in the chair all day. But it was actually really interesting.'*

There were a range of pupils at School B who had secured work experience in medical or scientific fields, or at business which members of their family owned. There was one pupil who had secured work experience through his father who was a fashion designer for TV dramas and films. These were experiences few pupils in any of the other schools had attained, out with social care.

### **7.4.4 - School C**

School C did not mandate formal work experience. The school had a 'Skills for Work' programme focused on employability skills that was designed to 'prepare pupils for the world of work'. This could include a placement, but whether to



participation was up to pupils and the expectation was that pupils would arrange it. Most pupils in School C who participated in the research had not participated in a work experience placement as a result, however some pupils had arranged their own and they tended to be from less deprived backgrounds. It was notable that young people at School C, who had not had any formal work experience engagements at all generally had the vaguest ideas of their aspirations, and often discussed what a member in their family did as a profession as a 'fallback' of sorts.

The impact that family connection enabling work experience can have was highlighted by Zoe's experience in the case study below. Though it is an atypical experience, it demonstrates the access and benefit social capital, and the networks of family, can provide, as demonstrated in the case study below:

### Case Study - Family Connections Were Music to Zoe's Ears

Zoe (S6, F, School C) was in the process of applying for a variety of music degrees in the USA. She had originally wanted to study law, but the music industry had been of interest to her. She managed to arrange her own work experience through her Aunt who worked for a major label and *'had a relationship with the manager of The Who'*. She described how she had received experience working with artists such as Mabel, and how this admittedly elite experience had influenced her plans.

She discussed how her parents were keen to utilise their connections once she had come to the realisation that a career in the music industry was the path she wished to follow:

*Zoe: They've also got connections in California like the Backstreet Boys. We know them.*

*Interviewer: Some pretty big names*

*Zoe: Yea. I didn't know any of this. When I wanted to start music management my parents were like 'oh, we know some people.' I was like 'you could have told me that.'*

Zoe's example is indicative of how exposure to the job market and specific professions - whether through social networks of family or through employer engagement (or both) - was central to determining aspiration.

In a similar - if less sensational - vein, Charlie (S6, M, School C) was about to leave school and go on to study law. He had his aspirations confirmed and driven further by a work experience placement at a prominent law firm, arranged by his father whose friend was a Partner at the organisation. Key to this was him getting courtroom experience and being integrated well into the team during his placement. On a completely contrary note, Arran, an S6 at the same school was

discouraged from pursuing law after having a similar experience at a law firm arranged by his mother. While Arran's example is not about aspirations being driven by employer experiences, the realisation that law was is not what he wanted to do is, in itself, a valuable realisation made crucially before he had decided to pursue the subject formally.

There were young people from less deprived backgrounds whose social capital (networks) had been at the forefront of their aspirations being shaped in this way. Opportunities to gain experience of the workplace, in addition to specific careers advice on how to realise any aspirations to work in specific fields, were created utilising family connections. These experiences had a bearing on recipients plans when leaving school.

#### **7.4.5 - School D**

School D also had a dedicated week, where young people had to arrange their own placements. If this was not possible, the school would attempt to facilitate usually through one of its feeder primary schools.

Similar to School B, most young people relied on family connections to secure a placement, and often this was in teaching, social care, or retail environments. There was no demand from the school that a placement should be related to aspiration, though it was of course encouraged. Young people who did manage to secure a related placement did so through social networks also, such as Sophia (S5, F, School D) who arranged some sports coaching experience through her taekwondo coach.

#### **7.5 - Differing aspirations by school**

What was evident throughout the research was that every single young person had some kind of aspiration. As mentioned, the aspiration may not have been a specific career path, industry or area, but everyone had a sense that what they wanted to do when they left school was something that would be of interest to them. There

was no interview conducted where there was not a statement of post-school destinations as important, or that the participants did not want to do well in their lives.

It is also the case that those in schools with the less deprived catchments aspired to roles and sectors associated with higher pay, more security and progression, and higher social status - all with more of the three forms of capital conceptualised in Chapter Two. Some key specific themes emerged in relation to how aspirations differed by school, in which socio-economic background seemed to have an influence.

### ***7.5.1 - University for university's sake***

Within the majority of interviews, young people would state what their aspiration was, and then outline what they thought was needed in the immediate term to work towards and achieve it. This could be a statement of the subjects they would have to take in their next year at school, or the further or higher education qualification that would be needed in order to open up the 'path' to their aspiration.

There were, however, some participants within the research whose stated aspiration was simply to attend university. Not as a means to an end, but as an end within itself. Of participants where this was the case, many were from less deprived postcodes and/ or enrolled at the schools where university entrance is seen as the 'norm'. For some, like John (S4, M, School C), this was due to perceptions of earning potential that stems from a degree:

*Interviewer: 'Have you thought about what you might want to do when you leave school?'*

*John: 'I've not got a clue. I want to go to University but I don't know what for - if you know what I mean.'*

*Interviewer: 'What is it about University then that attracts you?'*

*John: 'I feel as if you get better job offers and things and you're more likely to have a better future if you go to university.'*

Another participant, Ada (S5, F, School A) explained that although she had some subject interest, 'university' itself was the key aspiration under consideration:

*Ada: 'Yea, I'd to go to uni, yea.'*

*Interviewer: 'What is it about uni that's making you...'*

*Ada: 'I'm not sure, my dad went to uni, I've always...'*

*[pause]*

*Interviewer: 'Always been the plan?'*

*Ada: 'Yeah.'*

Ryan (S5, M, School B) explained that parental expectations and the school curriculum structure were very much focused upon going to university after school. As mentioned earlier, Ryan was also steered towards STEM subjects by his dad, who was a lecturer saying: *'I want to go to University but the subject I take, I'm not really sure what in'*. In two schools particularly - B and C - there existed an expectation that university is where their pupils would go upon leaving school.

## **7.6 - Media influence**

Another prominent theme which emerged was the influence of the media on shaping aspirations. Of interest is that this influence was concentrated in more deprived pupils, from the schools with the most deprived catchment areas. Media influence on aspirations was most notable when family influence was weaker and

also where there was previously uncertainty regarding aspiration. Aria (S5, F, School A) was aspiring to study law after school. Though unlike other aspiring lawyers within the research (typically at the more affluent schools), she did not yet know what type of law. She highlighted that the inspiration was TV, which was confirmed by the work experience the school arranged:

*Interviewer: 'So you've wanted to be a lawyer since you were like eleven, twelve?'*

*Aria: 'Yeah, genuinely since I started high school'*

*Interviewer: 'What was it that made you want to do that?'*

*Aria: 'I'm actually not sure. This is going to sound daft, I watched this film, like I watched, and I can't even mind [remember] the name of the film. And I seen someone doing it and I was like "I want to do that" so then through school I went to work experience, I did work experience in third year, and I did another work experience a couple of weeks ago and I was in court and stuff.'*

George (S4, M, School A) was beginning to select his subjects for S5 and was gearing them towards meeting the police entry requirements. He had also already decided he would stay until S6 so he would be closer to the police entry age threshold of 18. Interestingly, his aspiration to become a police officer was fairly new, and discovered online:

*George: 'I want to go into the police force'*

*Interviewer: 'Alright, okay. So how long have you wanted to do that?'*

*George: 'Probably, I thought about it back in November - because in third*

*year, before that back in second year I didn't know what to do'*

*Interviewer: 'What was it that triggered your thought that you might want to do that?'*

*George: 'I started watching YouTube videos and that about what they do and it piqued my interest'.*

There was also a small cluster of participants, predominately males, aspiring to enter fields such as design, programming, and software development due to their interest and passion for gaming that many had developed from a young age. They were also predominately at School D:

*Interviewer: 'What is it about that industry that appeals?'*

*Michael (S4, M, School D): 'Gaming has been a part of my life since I was about 5 years old. I've been addicted to them the entire time, I thought I may as well turn my addiction into a career. It makes sense to me'.*

Another S4 pupil had also been inspired to design games though interest and studying Computing:

*Arthur (S4, M, School D): '[I'll] maybe pursue more the computing side with designing games or something like that?'*

*Interviewer: 'Alright okay so, practical elements of that. How long have you thought about doing that?'*

*Arthur: 'Probably, the last year or so since I've taken on Nat 5 computing - that's probably how long I've been thinking about pursuing that...just because I've got an interest for it as well. Outside of computing I've always liked the idea of it'*

Similarly for Robert (S5, M, School D), his interest in perusing an aspiration in the gaming industry had stemmed from his interest in working in something practical, and interest in gaming as a hobby:

*Robert: 'I always wanted to be an engineer of some type. I never really liked the idea of working at an office job or a white collar job. I always wanted to get my hands in something, make something, do something that - it finishes, it doesn't just keep on going...'*

*Interviewer: 'Is there anything specific that triggered that interest or has it just always been there?'*

*Robert: 'I play video games a lot and I play a lot of games where there was always a guy who would build something and I was always like 'that's cool' - I always wanted to be the guy who builds stuff'*

Amongst the participants who had clear media influence over their aspirations, there was a range of attainment levels evident. Indeed, it tended to be high attaining young people who had such influences. The clear shared characteristic however was school and socio-economic background. James (S4, M, School D) was a 'straight A student' and was in the process of considering specialist flight schools outside of Scotland as he wanted to be a pilot. While he talked about having flown a lot as a child, he described his passion stemming from the game *Flight Simulator*:

*James: 'It's not always been an idea that I've had - to be perfectly honest with you I don't really remember when I got the idea of doing it, it was just something I.... In fact, maybe it was - I remember there was this game. You could always get these cheap little flight simulators where you had something on the phone screen that let's you tap around and fly planes from place to place but there's this app that's still available and it's been updated thousands of times now called Infinity Flight, that you can get on your phone on your tablet, for mobile devices that allows you to fly planes in a little bit more depth. With all these airlines and different scaled*



*model planes.'*

*Interviewer: 'A flight simulator?'*

*James: 'Yea. Then, after doing so for a couple of years I got a flight simulator on my computer and I find that always really fun. I haven't been able to do it as much recently because I've been wanting to study for my subjects but I always, that always interests me to do'.*

Such examples showed a media influence that extended beyond an interest and actually began to alter subject choices and applications for what the participants would seek to do after they left school.

## **7.7 - Aspirations for Teaching**

Teaching was one of the common aspirations which young people raised. Within this aspiration, there existed a mix of those who wanted to teach a certain subject for love of that subject, and those who wanted to teach for the love of teaching itself. Understandably, due to the requirements needed to access further and higher education qualifications, aspiring teachers tended to be higher attaining pupils, predominately young women and predominantly at the schools with the higher levels of deprivation. This is perhaps due to the lack of exposure within social networks to other professions, particularly if they were the first in their family to be attending university.

Those aspiring to be teachers often had held the aspiration for some time. There were numerous reasons behind teaching aspirations but family influence once again featured prominently. Often the profession had been present within the immediate family for some time or it was the profession of aunts and uncles.

Throughout the conversations, there was a balancing of young people considering what they could do with the good grades they were on track to get, being able to use their favourite subjects in their future work, and in helping people. Zoe (S6, F, School D) had wanted to be a history teacher for about a year:

*Interviewer: 'Okay, have you always wanted to be a teacher or a history teacher specifically?'*

*Zoe: 'Not really, it's just more of a recent thing'*

*Interviewer: 'What triggered that idea or brought that idea about?'*

*Zoe: 'Just the fact that I found I was really into History and I decided that that might be where I want to go'*

*Interviewer: 'Does anyone in your family do similar work in teaching?'*

*Zoe: 'My mum's a teacher'*

Similarly, it was quite common for young people aspiring to be teachers in specific subjects or environments to have family members who taught a different subject, or worked in a different setting, suggesting inspiration around the vocation itself:

*Interviewer: 'That's quite a long time you've wanted to be a teacher then? Was there something in particular that triggered it?'*

*Jack (S5, M, School C): 'My dad is a primary teacher but I don't think that was ever the reasoning. It was always something I liked the look of and kind of thought maybe it's a fun job, you get to inspire a generation into the future and stuff like that. So, it's always been something that's there.'*

There was also a number of young people who had been inspired by their own teachers. The idea of ‘giving back’ or extending the opportunities to others that teachers had given them came across quite strongly, particularly in relation to primary schooling:

*Jessica (S4, F, School D): ‘I don’t know, I just really liked primary school and then I really liked - when I was younger I used to always play teachers and stuff. I just always wanted to be that’*

Another issue that was highlighted by those with an aspiration to teach was a lack of awareness of the pathways that existed for certain subjects. Holly (S5, F, School B) discussed how her love for Drama, but a lack of understanding about what she could do with it led her to research teaching degrees, at the encouragement of her own Drama teachers:

*‘Yea, well. It’s always changed but I think the last couple of months I’ve stuck to what it is. I want to go on to be a Drama teacher. My pals have always said ‘you’d be quite a good teacher,’ and stuff like that but I just didn’t know what subject. I’ve loved Drama my full life so I don’t know why I’ve never thought about it. I started thinking about it and I realised I would like this. I researched it - Unis and what I’d need to have and stuff. I was like “why not?”’.*

Although Holly was from School B - the minority school in this discussion - one particularly interesting aspect of her aspiration was that it was driven by her work experience in helping out with the classes of younger pupils. Particularly in Schools A and D, this was a familiar theme. Both schools had very strong links with local primary schools - one even shared a campus with a primary school. These partnerships manifested in several ways, but a key aspect was the placements - either during allotted work experience weeks or non-timetabled periods - where senior pupils would assist in primary classrooms. This was a product of proximity within School D and a formal part of the integration of Developing the Young Workforce into the curriculum in School A.

While the young people partaking in the activity clearly already held some interest in teaching, the experience of engaging with the primary schools was often cited as a key factor to teaching being their aspiration:

*Zoe (S4, F, School D): 'It was a good experience, it made me think about what I wanted to do more.'*

*Interviewer: 'So, were you thinking before that you might want to be a teacher or was it after that it kind of picked up?'*

*Zoe: 'Before that and then going and doing it in a school made me realise that maybe that was what I wanted to go and do'*

Similarly:

*Liam (S5, School A): 'It was a full class sitting down calling me Mr McKenzie...They didn't even know I was a pupil at school, you know what they're like - they're younger and they don't have a clue. I didn't have a school tie, I was in my trousers - my checked trousers, my brown brogues and my tie, like I was a teacher. They didn't have a clue they just call me Mr McKenzie'*

*Interviewer: 'That was a useful experience and affirmed what you wanted to do?'*

*Liam: 'Definitely'*

This illustrates the importance and potential of employer engagement in shaping aspirations and the rich potential that exists for young people, and employers, to increase knowledge of the available post-school pathways.

## 7.8 - Conclusions

In conclusion, pupils' aspirations - what they want to do upon leaving school - is at the foundation of the subject choices they make. The career they have developed an interest in pursuing begins to form the lens with which they base their decisions and shape their curricular experience at school. Even if they do not go on to pursue that aspiration, it will have a significant impact on their experience of school, their qualifications and their knowledge and skills. It shapes life chances.

The influence of family on the aspirations and post-school pathways of pupils emerged as a pervasive and significant theme in the research. The impact of family influence was multifaceted, with direct manifestations involving the pressure to pursue specific professions within the family's network. These were often associated with higher cultural and economic capital. Moreover, family influence extended beyond immediate family members and included influence from wider social family networks.

The indirect aspect of family influence was also prevalent, shaping young people's perceptions of the job market and available opportunities. This indirect influence manifested as individuals subconsciously mirroring the career paths of family members without explicit direction. This was due to the exposure and knowledge that they had regarding these roles. The pressure to have a clear and decisive plan for the future was evident throughout the interviews, emphasising the importance of understanding and addressing the impact of family influence on young people's aspirations. The findings underscore the critical role of perception of post-school pathways such as university access and the labour market in shaping aspirations, influencing subject choices, and ultimately impacting life chances. There was also a clear gap in job market perception between the more and less deprived pupils.

Those in the schools with a more deprived cohort of pupils were more influenced by positive employer engagements. Rather than family influence - where it may not have existed - more deprived, but high attaining young people - sought inspiration from the media and increasingly the world of technology. There were

a number of young men who had developed an aspiration through their interest in gaming, which had an impact on their subject choices also. Interestingly many took inspiration from their teachers also, people carrying out a degree-level role who they had built a relationship with over time. While not family influence it was a similar - if less recurrent - effect taking place.

This suggests that young people from more deprived schools may be held back by a lack of perception of the paths open to them, and how to attain them. Opportunities that are hidden, or they might not realise are open, cannot be aspired to. This also presents a crucial opportunity for employer engagement to expand the social space - the 'horizons' - of young people at the sharp end of this, though the current approach advantages the already advantaged further. This presents the need for greater considerations of the barriers faced by many young people the ways in which, and the reasons why, these barriers are created.

The next chapter will discuss the influence of the choices process and curriculum structure on the subject choices of young people, assessing the varied approaches in each school and the differential impact this had on their young people's learning decisions.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT: PROCESS AND POLICY: THE POWER OF COLUMNS**

Long before students are open to internal or external influence over their subject choices, the parameters of the choices that are open to them are pre-determined. This chapter seeks to set out findings illustrating the crucial role that the curriculum structure has in governing the subject choices, and aspirations, of young people.

The chapter discusses the individual choices process in each participating school, investigating the logistics of the process as well as exploring the structure of the senior phase curriculum in each school, crucially including the differential impact of the social demographics of schools in relation to curricular opportunity. It then sets out the support available to pupils, including general advice to the whole cohort, careers service guidance, and events such as careers' fairs, drawing together the similarities that existed within the process and the key differences experienced by pupils.

Pupils' perspectives on the process are then investigated, including the relationship they perceive between the logistics of the choices process and how the school prioritises the choices they deem to be most important through issues such as compulsion of subjects. The chapter then highlights perceptions of flexibility across the senior phase and student's perspectives on the role of Sixth Year.

### **8.1 - The process of making choices**

The process of choosing subjects is fairly typical across schools in Scotland. Generally, once a pupil has decided to stay on at school (depending on what year of schooling they are in), they are presented with a form, from which they select a set number of subjects that will make up the suite of qualifications they will then attempt to attain. These subjects will be arranged alongside each other in a number of columns where the pupil selects a subject in each column. Normally, a young person will get anywhere from four to six weeks to make their decisions, with the information about the process introduced to them before that.

In essence - curriculum structure and the complex policy and resource process which influences it - is of acute importance in shaping subject choices and post-school aspirations, but it is understandably not an influence young people are often immediately aware of. Indeed, before the internal and external influences upon young people's subject choices can be considered, it is important to first assess the curricular framework in which their choices operate. Young people only have the opportunity to make the choices that their school offers them. That is to say, the national curriculum - and then the local authority and the school policy - shape the choices that are available to young people. It is then *these* choices which are subject to internal motivations and external influence.

Something is only open to influence if it exists. If a curriculum is, as the Scottish Government (2017) sets out, '*the full breadth of a young person's learning experience*', it must be recognised that the scope of breadth is decided by policy makers - at a national, local and school level. Young people therefore do not have a 'free choice', their choices are to a considerable extent pre-determined and shaped by actors well beyond their subject choice form. This is not to say there are not practical reasons behind pre-determination and limitation of free choice. On a logistical level, it would prove difficult, if not impossible, to allow a totally 'free' choice for young people over their subjects - problems of timetabling, space, and staff resources would become apparent. There are also developmental, pedagogical, social, and economic reasons behind why subjects such as Maths and English remain mandatory at certain levels of the senior phase, for example, and why processes designed to ensure a breadth of subject areas are evident. These reasons, however, do not mean that the structure of the curriculum does not itself bear a major influence on subject choices - and thereby on aspirations and life chances.

The purposes of 'columns' is intended to be two-fold. Firstly, in theory, it allows the school to set out a broad curriculum offer, where pupils are forced to take subjects from a range of different curriculum areas. Secondly, it allows timetable and resource management by the school. During the expert interviews, a member of School C's senior management team - who had responsibility over the timetable - explained:



*‘The purpose of the columns is to allow us to manage the timetable. It means that staffing and room allocation can be decided upon before a subject choice is made. Most importantly though, it ensures that young people are exposed to as broad a range of subjects as the school can allow, it is not a perfect way to do it, but it is an essential tool in the process, and the best option we have.’*

## **8.2 - When do pupils choose?**

At its core, the point at which pupils made final subject choices, and the number of choices processes they had to take part in, was broadly the same in each participating school. There were however key differences, which are explored within this section.

In each of the four schools the formal process began in February or March, where course information and ‘choices assemblies’ were conducted with pupils and their families. This was in S3 in all the of the schools except School B, where it took place in S2. Choices (or ‘Options’) Forms would be issued and the process would run over approximately two months. This timing allowed young people to make choices during the later stages of their current courses and crucially - in some schools - allowed them to know their expected grades and have results from preliminary assessments (‘prelims’). This information is vital to the process. As will be discussed, access to subjects- whether new subjects or the continuation of one to a new level - often depended on evidencing attainment in that, or similar, subjects. Indeed ‘Good’ attainment was also found to be a motivator towards taking subjects (as will be detailed in the next chapter).

There were two schools which introduced a mock process. School A issued mock forms in January, and School C issued them in February. These mock forms would be returned during the month, before the ‘formal’ process would be conducted and concluded. Although they were subject to the same rules (that will be discussed below) and were intended to represent the choices that a young person would make, they were not final. They were designed to gauge the demand for courses to ensure that staffing, resources like classrooms, and curricular structure would allow pupils to be able to access their desired choices. Clearly, while some

changes could be made between the ‘mock’ and ‘formal’ process, significant divergence would undermine the exercise, and pupils were made aware of this.

### **8.3 - The number of choices processes**

Each school had three formal choices processes where young people would choose subjects to sit qualifications for S4, S5 or S6 (the senior phase). The first decision to be made at the beginning of choices for S5 and S6 was whether or not to stay on at school. Depending on the school, various wider achievement, vocational courses, foundation apprenticeships (including college attendance) and extra-curricular opportunities were available, and in some cases mandatory, at various stages of the senior phase.

### **8.4 - Earlier choices**

It is important to note that most schools in Scotland (and every school which participated in the research) have processes of choice in earlier years too. Called ‘personalisation’ there will be elements of choices within curriculum areas. For example, prioritising the particular sciences or social subjects that pupils prefer so that more exposure to these can be timetabled. These *are* choices but are often more fluid in being able to change them. There are also many more subjects studied in earlier years. Schools did not require pupils to have studied a subject in S1-3 (S1-2 in School B) to select it for S4 choices, though young people are influenced by exposure to subjects, so there are elements of impact of these early choices of ‘personalisation’.

### **8.5 - The choices process**

Typically under the Curriculum for Excellence structure, where there are three years of ‘broad general education’ from S1-3 and a senior phase from S4-6, young people, will usually but not always, make their subject choices for qualifications as follows

- In S3 for their S4 subjects
- In S4 for whether to stay on at school and their S5 subjects
- In S5 for whether to stay on at school and their S6 subjects

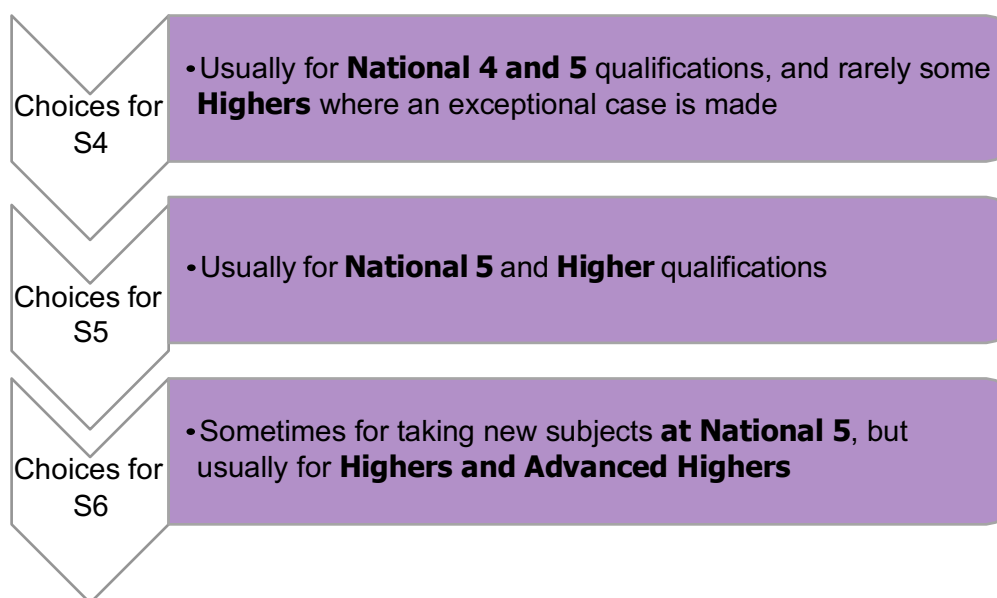


*Figure 8.1: ‘Typical’ subject choices process by year, created by author*

While this is typical it is not the case in every school. School B ran its choices process for S4 subjects in S2 (and there is increasing practice of this across Scotland). Pupils would study their S4 subjects over two years in S3 and S4, instead of just one year in S4 as is the norm and set out in the national curriculum. This gives pupils considerable extra learning time and allows for a higher number of choices and qualifications to be taken. The timing and structure of each schools’ choices process can be seen in Figure 8.2.

Figure 8.2 sets out how the choices process is structured in each year in each participating school. It includes the number of options available at each stage and notes relating to where there are mandatory options.

|                                                                                   | S3                                                                                              | S4                                                                                                                                                                   | S5                                                                                                                                           | S6                                                                                                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>School A</b><br>'Mock process in January<br>'Formal process complete in Feb    | <b>Final year of BGE</b><br><br><i>Choices Process for S4</i>                                   | <b>7 National Qualifications</b><br>English and Maths Mandatory<br>5 other NQs<br>(or 3 with a college option)<br><br><i>Choices Process for S5</i>                  | <b>5 National Qualifications</b><br>+ 1 'wider achievement bundle'<br>Maths mandatory if all Highers<br><br><i>Choices Process for S6</i>    | <b>4 National Qualifications</b><br>(3 if all are Advanced Highers)<br>+ 1 'wider achievement bundle'<br><br><i>Choices Process for S6</i> |
| <b>School B</b><br>Process in Mid February-March                                  | <b>First year of S4 qualifications</b><br><br><i>No choices process (Subjects chosen in S2)</i> | <b>8 National Qualifications</b><br>English, Maths, French Mandatory<br>+ Nat 5 PE can be taken instead of 'core' meaning 9 NQs<br><br><i>Choices Process for S5</i> | <b>6 National Qualifications</b><br>Private study can be selected as one option, which would mean 5 NQs<br><br><i>Choices Process for S6</i> | <b>5 National Qualifications</b><br><i>Advanced Higher Options</i>                                                                         |
| <b>School C</b><br>'Mock process in February<br>'Formal process complete in March | <b>Final year of BGE</b><br><br><i>Choices Process for S4</i>                                   | <b>7 National Qualifications</b><br>Maths and English Mandatory<br><br><i>Choices Process for S5</i>                                                                 | <b>5 National Qualifications</b><br><br><i>Choices Process for S6</i>                                                                        | <b>4/5 National Qualifications</b><br><i>Advanced Higher Options</i>                                                                       |
| <b>School D</b><br>Process in Mid February-March                                  | <b>Final year of BGE</b><br><br><i>Choices Process for S4</i>                                   | <b>7 National Qualifications</b><br>English and Maths Mandatory<br><br><i>Choices Process for S5</i>                                                                 | <b>5 National Qualifications</b><br><br><i>Choices Process for S6</i>                                                                        | <b>4/5 National Qualifications</b><br>4 if all are Higher or there is one Advanced Higher taken                                            |

**Figure 8.2:** Combined choices process information of the schools' participating in the research, created by author

As can also be seen in Figure 8.2, as well as National Qualifications in S4, S5 and S6, schools also include 'core' Physical Education (PE), Religious & Moral Education (RMPS), and Personal, Social & Health Education in the curriculum. These core subjects are directives from central government. 'Core' subjects are not qualifications and take up one or two periods in a week. Additionally, PE and RMPS can be taken at National, Higher and Advanced Higher Levels.

## 8.6 - The Choices form and curricular offer

### 8.6.1- School A

School A was a large school (1350 pupils). It had a greater than average level of deprivation. Ninety-five percent of its pupils went on to Positive Destinations, and it had lower than average attainment with 85% of leavers attaining at least one National 5 and 66% attaining at least one Higher.

## S4 options structure

As mentioned, in S4 pupils at School A had the opportunity to take seven National Qualifications (subjects). Maths and English were mandatory which left pupils with five options for National Qualifications. These options are all at National 4 and 5 level and can be observed in Figure 8.3.

Please select one subject in each column. If you choose College in column E you must select DYW in column F.

| Level            | A                        | B                                                                                  | C                                                                                                                                                                                | D                                                                                                                                                      | E                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | F                                                                                                                                                        | G                                                                                                                                                                                |
|------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| SCQF Level 4/5   | English N4<br>English N5 | Mathematics N5<br>Applications of Mathematics N4<br>Applications of Mathematics N5 | Art & Design<br>Biology<br>Business Management<br>Computing Science<br>Dance<br>Drama<br>Geography<br>History<br>Mandarin<br>Metalwork<br>Physics<br>RMPS<br>Spanish<br>Woodwork | Admin & IT<br>Biology<br>Chemistry<br>Fashion and Textiles<br>Health Sector (NPA)<br>History<br>Metalwork<br>Modern Studies<br>Music<br>PE<br>Woodwork | Admin & IT<br>Biology<br>Chemistry<br>Computing Science<br>Design & Manufacture<br>Drama<br>French<br>Geography<br>Modern Studies<br>Photography (NPA)<br>Physics<br><br>College – Gradu8 Programme<br>(Please state course from list below.) | Accounting<br>Biology<br>Business Management<br>Computing<br>Science<br>History<br>Modern Studies<br>Physics<br>Practical Cookery<br>Woodwork<br><br>DYW | Art & Design<br>Biology<br>Business Management<br>Chemistry<br>Early Education and Childcare<br>Graphic Communication<br>Music<br>PE<br>Physics<br>Practical Cookery<br>Woodwork |
| Select Here<br>→ |                          |                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                  |

**Figure 8.3: School A S4 Options Form**

Within the choices, there was a fairly wide range of subjects available. The choices are well balanced in that multiple subject areas are evident within each column. Of note, however, was the prevalence of Science based subjects throughout, with Biology an option in each column and Physics available in four. History was the most prevalent social subject which appears in three columns, while no Arts subjects, including Languages, appeared in more than two columns. There were some subjects available that have low uptake and availability nationally, such as Mandarin and Photography.

As an alternative to selecting five National Qualifications, pupils could opt to take three National Qualifications (from columns C, D and G) and opt for a college-based course instead. The college-based courses included a range of vocational based subjects, which involved engagement with Further Education institutions based local to the school. By taking a college course in column E, pupils must have selected the ‘Developing the Young Workforce’ option in column F. This was due to twin factors: the learning hours associated with the college courses, including travel, making the course load of another National Qualification impossible to

timetable, and the introduction of employability skills into the curriculum for these young people. It was the experience of the school that those who opted for the three National Qualifications route often either did not stay on at school, and/or were not planning to continue to Higher Education. According to staff, they were often seeking to enter an apprenticeship or employment.

School A's choices form asked for the pupils' anticipated date of leaving school, and what aspirations a pupil had for what they wanted to do when they left school (Figure 8.4). This was, according to staff at the school, to focus young people to make their choices with their plans and aspirations in mind, and to help teachers assess whether to 'sign off' on choices. This was the case in each year of School A's process. This represents aspiration being a formal guide of the process of subject selection.

**Intended Pathway (after leaving school) – Place a tick in the appropriate box**

| Other Training | Employment | College | University | Modern Apprenticeship |
|----------------|------------|---------|------------|-----------------------|
|                |            |         |            |                       |

*Figure 8.4: School A Options Form Intended Pathways Question*

### *S5 options structure*

For S5 choices, pupils at School A had to take five National Qualifications or three NQs if a college option was picked in column E (which again ensured column F was for Developing the Young Workforce). They also had to select one wider achievement bundle in any column. See Figure 8.5.

|                                          | A                                   | B                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | C                                                                                                                                                                                                    | D                                                                                                                                                                                                | E                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | F                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>SCQF Level 6</b><br>(e.g. Higher)     | English<br>Mathematics<br>Economics | Applications of<br>Mathematics<br>Mathematics<br>English                                                                                                                                                                                             | Art & Design<br>Business Management<br>Chemistry<br>Computing Science<br>Prof Theatre Prep (NPA)<br>History<br>Human Biology<br>Music<br>PE<br>RMPS<br>Spanish                                       | Administration & IT<br>Art & Design<br>Business Management<br>Computing Science<br>Geography<br>Human Biology<br>Modern Studies<br>PE<br>Physics<br>Foundation Apprenticeship                    | Accounting<br>Business Management<br>Chemistry<br>Design & Manufacture<br>French<br>History<br>Human Biology<br>Modern Studies<br>Music Technology (NPA)<br>Music Performing (NPA)<br>Photography                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Administration & IT<br>Computing Science<br>Drama<br>Geography<br>Graphic<br>Communication<br>Human Biology<br>Physics                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>SCQF Level 5</b><br>(e.g. National 5) | English                             | Applications of<br>Mathematics<br>Art & Design<br>Business Management<br>Biology<br>Chemistry<br>Community Café<br>(NPAs)<br>Early Education and<br>Childcare (NPA)<br>Graphic<br>Communication<br>Mathematics<br>Music<br>PE<br>Physics<br>Woodwork | Art & Design<br>Biology<br>Business Management<br>Computing Science<br>Dance<br>Drama<br>Geography<br>History<br>Mandarin<br>Metalwork<br>Physics<br>RMPS<br>Spanish<br>Woodwork<br>Travel & Tourism | Administration & IT<br>Biology<br>Chemistry<br>Community Café (NPAs)<br>Fashion and Textiles<br>Health Sector<br>History<br>Metalwork<br>Modern Studies<br>Music<br>PE<br>Web Design<br>Woodwork | Administration & IT<br>Chemistry<br>Computing Science<br>Creative Cakes<br>Design & Manufacture<br>Drama<br>French<br>Geography<br>Lab Skills<br>Modern Studies<br>Photography (NPA)<br>Physics<br>Sports Leader<br>College – Gradu8<br>Beauty Skills, Construction,<br>Early Education and Childcare,<br>Engineering Skills,<br>Hairdressing, Health and Social<br>Care, Hospitality,<br>Make-up Artistry,<br>Sports and Recreation, Uniformed<br>and Emergency Services | Accounting<br>Biology<br>Business Management<br>Computing Science<br>Creative Cakes<br>History<br>Modern Studies<br>Physics<br>Practical Cookery<br>Sports Leader<br>Travel & Tourism<br><br>DYW – if you picked<br>college then you must<br>pick this option. |

**Figure 8.5: School A S5 Options Form**

A pupil who intended to take all subjects at National 5 Level would have to take English in Column A. For a pupil taking all Highers, Maths would be mandatory in column B. To avoid taking English in S5, a pupil would have to take either Higher Economics or Higher Human Biology (or one of the ‘wider achievement’ bundles).

Any subject selection at School A which was not the continuation of a subject from S4, but rather a new subject without prior attainment, could only be taken at National 5 level. No National 4 options were available in S5. Before asking for a list of prior S4 attainment, the form states:

*‘It is important that your journey shows progression from your prior learning and is planned in a coherent way which will lead to a positive destination when you leave [Name of School A].’*

In column D, pupils had the opportunity to select a Foundation Apprenticeship option. These could be taken at SCQF level 5 (National 5 level) if taken solely in S5, and SCQF level 6 (Higher level) if taken over S5 and S6. These are different

from the college options available in S4, as these are formal qualifications with progression pathways. The courses available were Accountancy, Business Skills, Children and Young People, Civil Engineering, Creative Digital Media, Engineering Systems, Financial Services, Food and Drink Technologies, ICT Hardware, ICT Software, Mechanical Engineering and Scientific Technologies. Pupils also had to select a 'wider achievement' bundle, which was designed to offer broader educational experiences and extra-curricular opportunities. Any bundle in S5 would come with one period a week of Citizenship and in S6 it would come with Leadership. The bundles covered a wide range of areas. Some bundles would come with opportunities for the attainment of certificates, such as the Duke of Edinburgh option.

### ***S6 options structure***

The options process for S6 was similar to that in S5. Pupils had to take four National Qualifications unless all of their options were at Advanced Higher level, in which case they could take three. As well as taking a wider achievement bundle, this ensured either one or two curricular slots were for personal study time. The form asked for a list of S4 and S5 attainment. Highers could be taken in S6 where there was no prior attainment in the subject, with agreement from class teachers and demonstration of attainment in similar subjects. The choices form was exactly the same as the form for S5 choices, only that a top layer of Advanced Highers was offered, with eleven subjects available over five of the columns. These were only available to pupils who had Higher level attainment in the subject.



|                                               | A                                   | B                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | C                                                                                                                                                                                                    | D                                                                                                                                                                                                      | E                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | F                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>SCQF Level 7</b><br>(e.g. Advanced Higher) | Biology<br>Business Management      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Mathematics<br>Music                                                                                                                                                                                 | Art & Design<br>History<br>Virtual Academy (AH)<br>Spanish (AH)<br>French (AH)                                                                                                                         | Chemistry<br>Modern Studies                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Computing Science<br>Graphic Communication                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>SCQF Level 6</b><br>(e.g. Higher)          | English<br>Mathematics<br>Economics | Applications of Mathematics<br>Mathematics<br>English<br>Politics                                                                                                                                                                        | Art & Design<br>Business Management<br>Chemistry<br>Computing Science<br>Prof Theatre Prep (NPA)<br>History<br>Human Biology<br>Music<br>PE<br>RMPS<br>Spanish                                       | Administration & IT<br>Art & Design<br>Business Management<br>Computing Science<br>Geography<br>Human Biology<br>Modern Studies<br>PE<br>Physics<br>Foundation Apprenticeship                          | Accounting<br>Business Management<br>Chemistry<br>Design & Manufacture<br>French<br>History<br>Human Biology<br>Modern Studies<br>Music Technology (NPA)<br>Music Performing (NPA)<br>Photography                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Administration & IT<br>Computing Science<br>Drama<br>Geography<br>Graphic Communication<br>Human Biology<br>Physics                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>SCQF Level 5</b><br>(e.g. National 5)      | English                             | Applications of Mathematics<br>Art & Design<br>Biology<br>Business Management<br>Community Café (NPAs)<br>Chemistry<br>Early Education and Childcare (NPA)<br>Graphic Communication<br>Mathematics<br>Music<br>PE<br>Physics<br>Woodwork | Art & Design<br>Biology<br>Business Management<br>Computing Science<br>Dance<br>Drama<br>Geography<br>History<br>Mandarin<br>Metalwork<br>Physics<br>RMPS<br>Spanish<br>Travel & Tourism<br>Woodwork | Administration & IT<br>Biology<br>Chemistry<br>Community Café (NPAs)<br>Fashion and Textiles<br>Health Sector<br>History<br>Metalwork<br>Modern Studies<br>Music<br>PE<br>Web Design (NPA)<br>Woodwork | Admin & IT<br>Chemistry<br>Computing Science<br>Creative Cakes<br>Design & Manufacture<br>Drama<br>French<br>Geography<br>Lab Skills<br>Modern Studies<br>Photography (NPA)<br>Physics<br>Sports Leader<br>College – Gradu8<br>Beauty Skills, Construction, Early Education and Childcare, Engineering Skills, Hairdressing, Health and Social Care, Hospitality, Make-up Artistry, Sports and Recreation, Uniformed and Emergency Services | Accounting<br>Biology<br>Business Management<br>Computing Science<br>Creative Cakes<br>History<br>Modern Studies<br>Physics<br>Practical Cookery<br>Sports Leader<br>Travel & Tourism<br><br>DYW – if you picked College in column E then you must pick this option. |

**Figure 8.6: School A S6 Options Form**

### ***‘Diverse Breadth’***

The approach can be defined as ‘diverse breadth’. The school had Maths (incl. Economics in S5) and English as mandatory until S6 and offered a range of subjects, and subject areas, throughout their columns. The school also sought to ensure wider educational experiences, with ‘wider achievement’ bundles outwith formal qualifications mandatory in the curriculum. Choices made in S4 have a significant impact on the options openly available to pupils in S5. At School A, young people could not take a subject at Higher level in S5 unless they had taken, and attained, in a subject at National 5 in S4.

School A’s curricular structure is indicative of the educational diversity of its pupil cohort. The school has a wide balance of pupils who go to a range of destinations. It has a below average proportion of pupils who go onto higher education, and an above national average of those going into further education and apprenticeships. Facilitating the diverse pathways of its pupils is evident within the structure of its

choices and curricular offer. There is provision of a diverse range of subjects throughout its senior phase. This includes full integration of vocational pathways, though due to the fact such option take-up two column options, this is not a true option for those hoping to attain a university place and is provided more for young people keeping other pathways open than Higher Education. The explicit incorporation of formally stating aspiration on the form itself ensures that it is a driving influence at the forefront of pupils' minds while making their choices, and it provides teachers with information regarding it when they are deciding whether or not to sign off on pupil's subject decisions.

### **8.6.2 - School B**

School B was a large school (1632 pupils). It had a lower-than-average level of deprivation and was the least deprived participating school. Between 70-80% of its pupils lived in one of the twenty percent least deprived postcodes in Scotland. The school had higher than average attainment with 91% of its pupils leaving with at least one Higher.

### ***S4 options structure***

At School B, choices for S4 subjects were made in S2. This meant that the National Qualifications were studied over two years, instead of the one year that is common practice among other schools. Thus, the school could offer more choices than others, as it ensured there was space in the timetable to do so. This was a decision taken by the school, all of which have autonomy over the curriculum structure.

| A                                    | B           | C      | D                                                                    | E                               | F                                                                                                              | G                                                                                                                                  | H                                                                                                                    | J                                                                                                                                                     |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|--------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| English                              | Mathematics | French | Social                                                               | Science                         | Option 6                                                                                                       | Option 7                                                                                                                           | Option 8                                                                                                             | PE                                                                                                                                                    |
| English                              | Mathematics | French | Geography<br>History<br>Modern Studies<br>Scottish Studies (Level 3) | Biology<br>Chemistry<br>Physics | Business Management<br>Chemistry<br>Computing Science<br>Graphic Communication<br>Mandarin<br>Music Technology | Art and Design<br>Design and Manufacture<br>Fashion and Textile Technology<br>Music<br>Physical Education<br>Practical Woodworking | Administration and IT<br>Art and Design<br>Chemistry<br>Drama<br>Hospitality Practical Cookery<br>Spanish<br>History | Core PE<br>Physical Education<br><br>(Please note that all pupils have 3 periods of PE in this column. They can opt either for core PE or Nat. 5 PE). |
| Possible Career or Area of Interest: |             |        |                                                                      |                                 |                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                       |

Choose one subject in each column. Write the name of the subject in the box below. (If the numbers are too small, a course may not run).

| COLUMN A | COLUMN B    | COLUMN C | COLUMN D | COLUMN E | COLUMN F | COLUMN G | COLUMN H | COLUMN J |
|----------|-------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| English  | Mathematics | French   |          |          |          |          |          |          |

**Figure 8.7: School B S4 Options Form**

At this school, pupils would select eight National Qualifications. However, column J represented a ninth column. This was the column for PE, and instead of taking ‘core’ PE (mandated by central government and therefore not an ‘option’ on any other school’s forms), pupils could instead take PE as an assessed subject at National 5 level. Doing this would mean pupils were enrolled in nine National Qualifications. Those who enjoyed PE could take it at National 5 level in Column G and have Core PE in column J. English, Maths and French were all mandatory, as was at least one social subject and at least one science, which had their own columns (D and E). The remaining three columns had a range of subjects available within them, including additional languages over and above French.

All subjects were available at National 5 level, except for Scottish Studies in column D. There were no options for vocational or college subjects. The form at every level in School B asked for the pupils ‘*possible career area of interest*’, to help guide choices and help teachers with the sign off process

### S5 options structure

| A                                                                                                                                                                  | B                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | C                                                                                                                                                                                            | D                                                                                                                                                              | E                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | F   | G           | H                                                                                       |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Bio (High)<br>Bus Man (High)<br>Chem (High)<br>Eng (High)<br>Eng (Nat. 5)<br>Eng (Nat. 4)<br>Physics High<br>Physics (Nat. 5)<br>Physical Ed (High)<br>RMPS (High) | Fre (High)<br>Geo (High)<br>Geo (Nat. 5)<br>Hist (High)<br>Maths (High)<br>Maths (Nat. 5)<br>Maths (Nat. 4)<br>Mod St (High)<br>Physical Ed (High)<br>Cake Craft (for pupils with Nat. 5 Hosp only)<br>RMPS (High) | Bio (High)<br>Bus Man (High)<br>Chem (High)<br>Comp Sc. (High)<br>Fre (High)<br>Graphics (High)<br>Maths (High)<br>Maths (Nat. 5)<br>Maths (Nat. 4)<br>Physics (High)<br>SfW Health (Nat. 5) | Art & Des (High)<br>Des & Man (High)<br>Eng (High)<br>Eng (Nat. 5)<br>Eng (Nat. 4)<br>F&TT (High)<br>Fre (High)<br>Hosp (Nat. 5)<br>Music (High)<br>Vocational | Art & Des (High)<br>Bio (High)<br>Bus Man (High)<br>Chem (High)<br>Chem (Nat. 5)<br>Drama (High)<br>Geo (High)<br>Hist (High)<br>Hosp (Nat. 5)<br>Mod St (High)<br>Mod St (Nat. 5)<br>Physics (High)<br>Pract Wood (Nat. 5)<br>Spanish (High) | PSE | Physical Ed | Electives:<br><br>Physical Ed<br>Private Study<br>Drama<br>Music<br>RMPS<br>Photography |
| <div>Possible Career or Area of Interest:</div>                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |     |             |                                                                                         |

Choose one subject and level in each column. Write the name of the subject in the box below. (If the numbers are too small, a course may not run)

| COLUMN A | COLUMN B | COLUMN C | COLUMN D | COLUMN E | COLUMN F | COLUMN G    | COLUMN H |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-------------|----------|
|          |          |          |          |          | PSE      | Physical Ed |          |
| LEVEL    | LEVEL    | LEVEL    | LEVEL    | LEVEL    |          |             |          |

**Figure 8.8: School B S5 Options Form**

In S5, pupils would have to take five National Qualifications, with the option of six if they wanted. There were a range of subjects across columns, with a number of subject areas available in each, with differing levels also on offer. In column H, pupils could also select private study, or a sixth NQ. Column D also allowed for a ‘vocational’ option which was a Foundation Apprenticeship. Availability of these were subject to uptake; they were delivered by a local college, and the options covered a wide range of subjects - around 40 in total if different levels of the same subject were counted - including Cosmetology, Police Studies, Jewellery Art, Barista Skills, Construction Management, and Architecture.

### S6 options structure

S6 choices were broadly similar to that of S5. The options in the first five columns remained the same, except that a range of Advanced Highers were introduced as well as Higher options in Psychology and Philosophy. Every pupil was given two slots of Private Study in S6. Interestingly, column D had an option for Human Body Structure and Function, which was delivered by a lecturer from a local college but only available to those hoping to go on to study a subject related to medicine after leaving school. The option was designed to give an advantage to pupils from this school applying for medical courses at university, which are highly competitive.

| A                      | B                                             | C                   | D                    | E                    | F             | G             | H   |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------|---------------|-----|
| Bio (Adv High)         | Fre (High)                                    | Bio (Adv High)      | Accounting (High)    | Art & Des (Adv High) | Private Study | Private Study | PSE |
| Bio (High)             | Geo (Adv High)                                | Bio (High)          | Art & Des (Adv High) | Art & Des (High)     |               |               |     |
| Bus Man (High)         | Geo (High)                                    | Bus Man (High)      | Art & Des (High)     | Art & Des (High)     |               |               |     |
| Chem (High)            | Geo (Nat. 5)                                  | Chem (High)         | Des & Man (High)     | Bio (High)           |               |               |     |
| Eng (High)             | His (Adv High)                                | Comp Sc. (High)     | Eng (Adv High)       | Bus Man (High)       |               |               |     |
| Eng (Nat. 5)           | Hist (High)                                   | Fre (High)          | Eng (High)           | Chem (Adv High)      |               |               |     |
| Eng (Nat. 4)           | Maths (Adv High)                              | Graphics (High)     | Eng (Nat. 5)         | Chem (High)          |               |               |     |
| Fre (High)             | Maths (High)                                  | Hist (Nat. 5)       | Eng (Nat. 4)         | Chem (Nat. 5)        |               |               |     |
| Fre (Adv High)         | Maths (Nat. 5)                                | Maths (Adv High)    | F&TT (High)          | Drama (High)         |               |               |     |
| Physical Ed (Adv High) | Maths (Nat. 4)                                | Maths (High)        | HBSF (Medics only)   | Geo (High)           |               |               |     |
| Physical Ed (High)     | Mod St (Adv High)                             | Maths (Nat. 5)      | Hosp (Nat. 5)        | Hist (High)          |               |               |     |
| Physical Ed (High)     | Mod St (High)                                 | Maths (Nat. 4)      | Music (Adv High)     | Hosp (Nat. 5)        |               |               |     |
| Physics (Adv High)     | Photography (High)                            | Music Tech (High)   | Music (High)         | Mod St (High)        |               |               |     |
| Physics (High)         | Physical Ed (High)                            | Philosophy (High)   | Politics (High)      | Mod St (Nat. 5)      |               |               |     |
| Physics (Nat. 5)       | Cake Craft (for pupils with Nat. 5 Hosp only) | Physics (High)      | Spanish (Adv High)   | Physics (High)       |               |               |     |
| Psychology (High)      | RMPS (Adv High)                               | SfW Health (Nat. 5) | Vocational           | Politics (High)      |               |               |     |
| RMPS (Adv High)        | RMPS (High)                                   |                     |                      | Pra Wood (Nat. 5)    |               |               |     |
| RMPS (High)            |                                               |                     |                      | Psychology (High)    |               |               |     |
|                        |                                               |                     |                      | Spanish (High)       |               |               |     |

Choose **one** subject and level in each column. Write the name of the subject in the box below. (If the numbers are too small, a course may not run)

| COLUMN A | COLUMN B | COLUMN C | COLUMN D | COLUMN E | COLUMN F<br>Private Study | COLUMN G<br>Private Study | COLUMN H<br>PSE |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|---------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|
| LEVEL    | LEVEL    | LEVEL    | LEVEL    | LEVEL    |                           |                           |                 |

**Figure 8.9: School B S6 Options Form**

### ***‘Mandatory Width’***

The approach in School B can be defined as ‘mandatory width’. The school was unique within the research due to it beginning Nationals courses in S3, instead of S4. While this opened up curricular space to offer a wider number of subject choices than in other schools it placed more stringent parameters and mandates on what these additional choices would be, attempting to ensure a broad range of subjects. In S4, as well as mandatory English and Maths, it also imposed the requirement to study French. If a pupil wanted to study another language it would have to be in addition to this, not instead of. The school also ensured pupils selected a Social Subject, a Science, and PE. This left three elective options where there were a range of subject areas available. Vocational options existed within one column, and uptake was low. These vocational options were broad, and their selection only took up one option, meaning they were a realistic option for those seeking to enter Higher Education. There was a large emphasis on STEM subjects throughout the senior phase, with additional STEM and medicine related subjects available for those seeking to enter these competitive fields upon leaving school. This approach not only prepares students for potential careers in these areas but also fosters a sense of real-world readiness, aligning education with the demands of the workforce.

### **8.6.3 - School C**

School C was a large school (1380 pupils). It had a lower-than-average level of deprivation. Ninety-four percent of its pupils went on to Positive Destinations, and it had higher than average attainment with 94% of leavers attaining at least one National 5 and 71% attaining at least one Higher.

#### ***S4 options structure***

At School C, the S4 choices form was not publicly available, so it is not presented. Pupils had to select seven National Qualifications (or 6 and 1 vocational option). English and Maths were mandatory as was one Social Subject, Language, STEM and Arts subject, all of which had their own column. This was the only school where columns directly represented subject areas. There was then the option for one further choice which was in a column with various subjects from each of the subject areas.

#### ***S5/6 options structure***

The S5 and S6 choices were based on a single form. In S5 a choice was required in each column, and in S6 a choice was required in a minimum of four columns. Subjects in the Advanced Higher row were only available to S6 choices. While there were no additional mandatory subjects for pupils sitting a suite of Highers, there were also options to choose to take Maths and English at Higher over the two years of S5 and S6. This was structured to reflect the relatively low rates of attainment of the school. Pupils had to take these subjects over two years at Higher if their (predicted) grades for National 5 were a C or D. The choices form advised:

*‘Higher and Further Education and employers all put emphasis on the need for good skills of Literacy and Numeracy, therefore, we recommend that you continue to take English and Mathematics to improve academic level’.*

The options at School C also had a row which reflected subjects that could be taken, but where pupils would have to travel to a nearby school to study. School C had a ‘consortia arrangement’ with five other schools whereby each would host a number of less common subjects. This was to increase capacity, share resources, and provide a broader curricular offer. This allowed School C to offer subjects it could not offer alone such as Higher Italian and Higher Psychology.

|                                                 | Column A<br>6 periods                                                                                                                                                                                  | Column B<br>6 periods                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Column C<br>6 periods                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Column D<br>6 periods                                                                                                                                                               | Column E<br>6 periods                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Alternative certification</b>                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Numeracy/Media(Nat5)</li> <li>Referencing (AH)</li> <li>Baccalaureate (S6 only)</li> </ul>                                                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Personal Development &amp; Youth Achievement (S6 only) subject to interview</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Peer Mentoring</li> <li>MyP</li> <li>Young Enterprise(S6 only)</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leadership &amp; Youth Achievement (H)</li> <li>Transition SCQF 4</li> <li>Duke of Edinburgh (Bronze)</li> <li>Subject Ambassador</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sports Leadership (PE)</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Nat 4/Nat 5</b>                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>English</li> <li>Maths</li> <li>Hospitality</li> <li>PCSWood</li> </ul>                                                                                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Admin/IT</li> <li>Geography</li> <li>Languages for life and work</li> <li>Graphics</li> <li>History</li> <li>Modern Studies</li> <li>Environmental Science</li> <li>Gaidhlig</li> </ul>                                                                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Design and Manufacture</li> <li>Lab Science</li> <li>Music</li> <li>Talent and Tourism</li> <li>PE</li> <li>Gaidhlig</li> <li>Dance</li> <li>Accounts(Nat 5 only)</li> </ul>                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Art and Design</li> <li>English</li> </ul>                                                                                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Biology</li> <li>Business Management</li> <li>Chemistry</li> <li>Computing</li> <li>Drama</li> <li>Hospitality</li> <li>Lab Science</li> <li>Maths (Nat 5 only)</li> <li>Physics</li> <li>PCS (Metal)</li> </ul>                         |
| <b>Higher</b>                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>English</li> <li>Maths (fast track S4 only)</li> <li>Maths</li> <li>Politics</li> <li>Psychology (S6 only)</li> <li>English 2 year (S5 only Nat 5 C)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Admin/IT</li> <li>Biology</li> <li>Geography</li> <li>German</li> <li>Graphics</li> <li>History</li> <li>Spanish</li> <li>Gaidhlig</li> <li>Modern Studies</li> </ul>                                                                                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Accounts</li> <li>Biology</li> <li>Chemistry</li> <li>Design and Manufacture</li> <li>French</li> <li>Gaidhlig</li> <li>PE</li> <li>Philosophy</li> <li>Photography</li> <li>Physics</li> <li>Music</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Art and Design</li> <li>Computing</li> <li>Chemistry</li> <li>Geography</li> <li>History</li> <li>Music</li> <li>Modern Studies</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Art and Design</li> <li>Biology</li> <li>Chemistry</li> <li>Business Management</li> <li>Drama</li> <li>Environmental Science</li> <li>Maths</li> <li>Maths 2 year (S5 only Nat 5 C)</li> <li>Physics</li> <li>RSPS</li> </ul>           |
| <b>Advanced Highers</b>                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>English</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Biology</li> <li>Graphics</li> <li>Physics</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Music</li> <li>Design and Manufacture</li> <li>Chemistry</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>History</li> <li>Geography</li> <li>Modern Studies</li> <li>Gaidhlig</li> </ul>                                                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Art and Design</li> <li>Maths</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Locality based offsite provision</b>         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>AH Biology (O)</li> <li>AH Physics (SM)</li> <li>AH Music (CA)</li> <li>AH Design and Manufacture (C)</li> </ul>                                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>AH Chemistry (CA,O)</li> <li>AH Modern Studies (SM)</li> <li>H Drama (CA,O)</li> <li>Psychology (S6 only)(SM)</li> <li>AH French (K)</li> </ul>                                                                                                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>AH Maths (O)</li> <li>AH Graphics (K)</li> <li>Psychology (S6 only)(CA)</li> </ul>                                                                                                                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>H French (O, K)</li> <li>AH Art and Design (CA)</li> <li>Psychology (S6 only)(OLHS)</li> </ul>                                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>H German (CA)</li> <li>H Italian (O)</li> <li>Psychology (S6 only)(C)</li> <li>AH English (CA)</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                |
| <b>Vocational provision /External providers</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Childcare Nat 4/5 (St M)</li> <li>Vehicle Technology w/g (St M)</li> <li>Legal Studies Nat 6 (C)</li> </ul>                                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vehicle Tech w/g (St M)</li> <li>Construction Nat 5 (GHS thc)</li> <li>Rural-Outdoor Learning Nat 4 (CA)</li> <li>Handdressing Nat 5 (K)</li> <li>Foundation Apprenticeship (City of Glasgow SS continue only)Tue/Thu</li> <li>Make up Artistry (St M)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Beauty Nat 4/5 (GHS)</li> <li>Construction Nat 5 (K)</li> <li>Cyber Security NP5 5 (O)</li> <li>Engineering Skills: skills for work Nat 4/5 (Cumbernauld College)</li> </ul>                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Handdressing Nat 4/5 (St M, GHS)</li> <li>Rural-Outdoor Learning Nat 4 (St M)</li> <li>Vehicle Tech w/g (St M)</li> </ul>                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sociology H (C)</li> <li>Dental Studies SCQF 6 (C/Bridge Coll)</li> <li>Construction Nat 5 (CA)</li> <li>Childcare Nat 4/5 (St M)</li> <li>HNC Social Sciences (Coll,SSS only)</li> <li>Foundation Apprenticeship(NCL) SCQF 6</li> </ul> |

**Figure 8.10: School C S5/6 Options Form**

There was also a row for further external provision and vocational options. These subjects could be National Qualifications offered in further education institutions such as Higher Sociology and National 5 Legal Studies, but also other courses such as Cyber Security, Construction and Engineering.

### **‘Collaborative Depth’**

School C’s approach can be defined as ‘collaborative depth’. The school exhibited a collaborative model, a key feature of which was integration with local schools and colleges to offer a much wider range of subject areas and a greater depth of curricular experience for young people. This approach ensured there was a host of formal vocational qualifications on offer across a range of industries including hair and beauty, childcare, and health and social care. The collaboration also meant the School could offer a wider range of Advanced Higher subjects than it

could otherwise have offered, ensure a greater curricular depth for pupils of different attainment levels, seeking to enter university and apprenticeships. The option to study Higher Maths and English over two years (over S5 and S6) was also indicative of providing opportunity to students of varied levels of academic attainment. This strategy allowed School C to offer a broader range of subjects, including less common ones like Higher Italian and Higher Psychology. The emphasis on subject-specific columns in S4, such as Social Subject, Language, STEM, and Arts, provided

a clear framework for students to navigate their choices, though like in School B, imposed a breadth of experience.

#### **8.6.4 - School D**

School D was a smaller school (621 pupils). It had a greater than average level of deprivation and was the most deprived of participating schools. Between 0-10% of its pupils lived in the least deprived 20% of postcodes in Scotland. Eighty-nine percent of its pupils went on to Positive Destinations, which is less than the national and regional average. It had lower than average attainment with 78% of leavers attaining at least one National 5 and 60% attaining at least one Higher.

#### ***S4 options***

At School D, the S4 choices form was not publicly available, so it is not presented. Pupils had to select seven National Qualifications (or six and one vocational option). English and Maths were mandatory. Other columns included a range of subject areas in each, representing a breadth of subject areas within each column. There were also a wide range of levels available throughout, including a number of National 3 and 4 options, which ensured that there were more options open for young people who would struggle to attain qualifications at National 5 level, or who would not be going on to study Highers in their fifth year should they stay on.



### *S5 and S6 options*

As with School C, the S5 and S6 choices were based on the same form. In S5 a choice was required in each column, and in S6 a choice was required in a minimum of 4 if at least one choice was an Advanced Higher course. Advanced Higher subjects were only available to S6 choices. Maths and English were 'recommended' on the form notes. It was not possible to take a subject at Higher in S5 that had not been attained in S4.

There were no Vocational or Foundation Apprenticeship options on the form, but they could be made available on request and with consultation with guidance staff. Class teachers could also identify if a pupil would benefit from a course (for example, a Maths teacher identifying an S4 pupil for an Accounting Foundation Apprenticeship course in S5). In three columns the option to attain a Saltire Award for Volunteering was an external certificate that could be taken.

| A (6 periods)                |  | B (6 periods)                |  | C (6 periods)                |  | D (6 periods)              |  | E (6 periods)            |  |
|------------------------------|--|------------------------------|--|------------------------------|--|----------------------------|--|--------------------------|--|
| Art (All levels)             |  | Art (All levels)             |  | Biology (AH)                 |  | Chemistry (H/N5)           |  | Administration (H/N5)    |  |
| English (AH)                 |  | French (All levels)          |  | Human Biology (H)            |  | Geography (H/N5)           |  | Biology (N5)             |  |
| English (H)                  |  | Health and Food Tech. (H/N5) |  | Biology (N5)                 |  | Graphics (N5/H)            |  | Human Biology (H)        |  |
| English (N5)                 |  | App. Of Maths (H)            |  | Computing (H/N5)             |  | Drama (H/N5)               |  | History (H/N5)           |  |
| Leadership (P.E.)            |  | Mathematics (H)              |  | English (N5)                 |  | Hospitality (N5)           |  | P.E. (N5)                |  |
| Practical Woodwork (N5)      |  | Mathematics (N5)             |  | English (H)                  |  | Applications of Maths (N5) |  | PE (H)                   |  |
| Psychology (H)               |  | Media (N5)                   |  | Modern Studies (H/N5)        |  | Mathematics (N5)           |  | Peer Education (S6 only) |  |
| Volunteering (Saltire Award) |  | Music (All levels)           |  | Music (All Levels)           |  | Mathematics (H)            |  | Photography (H)          |  |
|                              |  | Peer Education (S6 only)     |  | Peer Education (S6 only)     |  | PE (H)                     |  | Physics (N5)             |  |
|                              |  | Travel and Tourism (N5)      |  | Volunteering (Saltire Award) |  | Psychology (H)             |  | Physics (H)              |  |
|                              |  | Volunteering (Saltire Award) |  |                              |  |                            |  | Psychology (H)           |  |
| Study (S6 only)              |  | Study (S6 only)              |  | Study (S6 only)              |  | Study (S6 only)            |  | Study (S6 only)          |  |

**Figure 8.11: School D S5/S6 Options Form**

### ***‘Flexible Facilitation’***

The approach in School D can be defined as ‘flexible facilitation’. Across columns, there was a wide representation of subject areas and levels which ensured a flexible curriculum. It was designed in a way in which pupils could study a range of subjects over many levels. Of particular note is a range of subjects being available at ‘all levels’ or ‘National 5/ Higher’ in the same column’. This approach was ensuring a broad curriculum experience to a student cohort who had well below average number of pupils going into Higher Education. By allowing students and teachers to identify specific areas of interest for additional courses, School D aimed to ensure through its approach that the curriculum was broad and adaptable to the unique requirements of students in its body. This tailored approach reflects an awareness of the diverse needs of students and a commitment to facilitating success in attaining qualifications and readiness for post-school pathways.

### **8.7 - Differences**

There are several key differences in the structure and focus of the Schools’ curriculum. Figure 7.12 sets out the key characteristics of each school’s approach and sets out the key focuses of its curricular structure.

| School and Approach                      | Key Characteristics                                                                                              | Mandatory Subjects                    | Vocational Curriculum Integration                                                                        | S4 Column Subject Areas                                                  | Impact of S4 choices on S5                                                                                                    | Range of Advanced Highers | Average Number of subject entries across the Senior Phase (S4, S5, and S6 combined) |
|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| School A<br><i>Diverse Breadth</i>       | A broad range of subject areas available throughout columns, allowing for a personalised curriculum              | English, Maths (incl. Economics) (S5) | College based courses available in all years taking up two columns                                       | Maths, English, Five Mixed                                               | Must have attained at subject in S4 to take Higher in S5                                                                      | 12                        | 13.6                                                                                |
| School B<br><i>Mandatory Width</i>       | A wider number of choices, with more stringent mandatory subjects and subject areas                              | English, Maths (S5); French (S4)      | College based course option in S5 and S6 taking up one column                                            | Maths, English, French, Social, Science, Physical Education, Three Mixed | Could take any Highers in S5 with teacher agreement                                                                           | 13                        | 16.2                                                                                |
| School C<br><i>Collaborative Depth</i>   | A greater depth in subjects, subject areas and vocational options enabled by external provision and partnerships | English, Maths (S4)                   | Wide range of courses across range of providers, including at the school                                 | English, Maths, Social, Language, STEM, Arts, Mixed                      | Must have attained at subject in S4 to take Higher in S5 (for English and Maths over two years if a C or D at National level) | 13                        | 12.8                                                                                |
| School D<br><i>Flexible Facilitation</i> | A more flexible curriculum with a range of subject areas and levels of qualifications across the senior phase    | English, Maths (S4)                   | No formal integration but college course available if either requested or identified as useful for pupil | Maths, English, Five Mixed                                               | Must have attained at subject in S4 to take Higher in S5                                                                      | 5                         | 12.2                                                                                |

**Figure 8. 12: Key Process and Curricular Differences, created by author**

- **Mandatory Subjects** are the most explicit influence over subject choices that a school can deploy through its curriculum structure. School A (if Economics is included) and School B ensured that pupils had to study Maths and English until S5, while it was S4 in Schools C and D. It must be noted however that S5 options in Schools C and D were very limited if Maths and English were not the choices in their columns. Additionally, School B placed importance on French by making it mandatory in S4. All Schools highlighted the importance of Maths and English - or literacy and numeracy - to employers, and further and higher education institutions.
- **Vocational Curriculum Integration** varied widely by school. Within School A there was deep integration of Developing the Young Workforce vocational options, where Foundation Apprenticeships were an option taking up one column and where other college-based courses were available and coupled with DYW employability-based learning. This choice however, spanned over two columns, therefore in practice only being an option for those not hoping to enter Higher Education after school. This is reflective of School A structuring its curriculum to cater for a cohort with a diverse set of needs related to their aspirations. School B only offered vocational options in S5 and S6, focusing on attainment of SQA National Qualifications in S4. The option took up one column space and had a wide range of vocational subjects open to young people, many of which were focused on enhancing experiences towards aspirations. In School C, there was a depth in the vocational options. Owing to the collaboration that the school has with other schools and colleges, a wide range of subjects - including formal National Qualifications - were open to pupils in a wide range of sectors. Within School D, there was no formal integration of vocational option into the subject choices process, though there was a flexibility in that pupils could request to enter a vocational subject at a college, and teachers in the school could identify pupils who may benefit from one based on their interests, attainment, and aspirations.

The balance of **S4 Column Subject Areas** gives an indication of schools' priorities in how they structure and mandate 'balance' within their curriculum. Following the mandatory columns for English and Maths, the structure of the S4 columns in Schools A and D were mixed with a range of subject areas present allowing for a freer choice of what the area focus of a young person's curriculum would look

like. In Schools B and C there was an ensuring of breadth, with columns which reflected specific subject areas. The importance of the range of subjects and areas available at this stage is of critical importance as it has influence over the choices available. As is evident in the analysis of the choices forms, there is an impact of this felt in how ‘earlier’ choices rounds impact upon the choices in later rounds, resulting in an impact on the breadth and depth of learning in certain subject areas. Access to subjects at certain levels (mainly Higher) is determined by prior attainment in the exact subject (or similar subject) meaning that there is critical importance of the range of subject areas available in S4.

- **The Impact of S4 choices on S5 choices** gives insight into the flexibility that is available within the curricular structure and the extent to which choices that young people make in S3 for S4 determine the suite of qualifications they will have access to in later choices rounds. Only School B allowed Higher subjects to be taken in S5 which had not had prior attainment in S4, though these still had to be in related subjects. In all three other schools, only National 5’s were available as new subjects in S5. In School C, the grade at which Maths and English was attained at dictated if the Higher would be taken over one or two years. In all schools, new Highers could be taken in S6. This is reflective of Higher Education institutions basing admission criteria on a suite of Highers attained in S5, despite aspirations for a more ‘flexible’ senior phase in schools being a stated aim of the curriculum.
- **The Range of Advanced Highers** gives insight into the resources available to the school to prepare young people for Higher Education. As can be derived from Figure 8.12, there is a similar - and wide - number of Advanced Higher courses available in Schools A, B and C. School B has a cohort of pupils who overwhelmingly attend University on leaving school, which is indicative of being the least deprived school in the research. Schools A and C also have large sections of their student body who go into Higher Education and in the case of School C there is a pooling and sharing of resources with other schools and institutions across the curriculum, which frees resources to provide more options to their pupils. The significantly lower number of Advanced Higher courses within the curriculum in School D (the most deprived school in the sample) was the reality of curriculum priorities such as offering a wider range of levels of subjects across the senior phase given fewer young people at the school go on to higher education.

- The **Average Number of Entries Across the Senior Phase** gives a clear and precise picture of the curricular opportunity in each school. It combines the entries across the Senior Phase in each school. While it is not an exact reflection of the number of choices at the beginning of an academic year, it is reflective of the presentations for qualifications. For various reasons - including students dropping out of subjects or schools not putting young people forward for assessment - the number of subjects selected does not always equate to the number of qualifications attempted. This provides a clear status of true curricular width and opportunity. As discussed at Section 4.6, for Scotland in 2020, this disparity between the least and most deprived schools was cumulatively 1.31 subjects across the senior phase (Shapira and Priestley 2019). The pupils in this research faced a significant disparity too, as can be seen in Figure 8.12. The largest observable disparity is the significantly increased choice that pupils in School B have (generally but particularly in S40. It must also be considered that School B had the least deprived catchment area of any school in the research. As set out, this difference is down to different curriculum structures set at school level, particularly the increased number of qualifications open to young people at School B in S4. Scott (2018) found that the structure used by School B to increase the number of qualifications open to their young people is more prevalent in schools that have an intake of pupils from more deprived areas. It is suggested from Scott's research that this stems from an expectation from parents for their young people to attend university, and from schools' aspiration to 'score' highly in school 'league tables'.

These findings give insight into the different pathways, options, and constraints impacting upon young people based on the characteristics of their school and the curriculum width and breath made available to them. As can be derived from Figure 8.12, the most deprived school (the school with the highest proportion of pupils from the most deprived postcodes) had the lowest number of SQA entries and the least deprived school had by far the most. This is an example of the impact of social background in influencing subject choice through the number of choices available. The ways in which different schools can structure their curriculum demonstrate the degree of autonomy that they have in designing their curriculum.

Indeed, schools are able to engrain their institutional habitus into the learning experiences—and ultimately life experiences immediately thereafter—of their pupils. This autonomy allows schools to prioritise different subject areas and develop and facilitate different pathways based on their student aspirations, demographics, and institutional goals (habitus). For instance, the schools in less deprived areas - as is the case with School B and C - may have the resources to offer a wider range of Advanced Higher courses, which is of particular importance to individuals who are more likely to pursue higher education upon leaving school. This underscores the importance of ensuring all schools can offer a broad and flexible curriculum. Ultimately, the findings suggest that while schools have the power to shape educational experiences significantly, there must be systemic efforts to address the disparities that arise and mean there is such a wide gap in the basic breadth and width of curriculum experiences.

## **8.8 - Support**

There were several ‘modes’ of support available to young people in the schools within the research. It is important to note that support *is* influence, and the types of support offered have a bearing on what young people are focused on when making their choices. What is discussed in this section is the formal support offered by schools as part of the process of choices. A varied landscape of formal support that young people could access could be observed in the participating schools. Generally, support manifested in three key ways, with each school having different frameworks of support: whole cohort advice, careers service guidance and support from teaching staff. Support was often focused on navigating the process.

### **8.8.1 - Whole cohort advice**

Present in each school were events in which the same advice was made available to all young people. Many pupils within the research raised that, unless they had family who had experience of choices, their first realisation of the process is when they were first faced with the process at these events. Usually this came in the form of a ‘choices (or options) assembly’ where whole year groups were gathered

for the process to be described to them. Some participants described these assemblies as useful in setting out the process, the structure of columns and any 'rules' (such as areas/subjects of compulsion). Young people also highlighted that within the assemblies there was strong focus on linking choices to future careers:

*'They do assemblies when you're lower down [the years] in the school, they kind of talk to you about stuff...there's always good information to come out of it. They tell you about SAAS, the information you didn't know about it, or what you have to do to get your course or apply to it with UCAS.'* - Mason (S6, M, School A)

Similarly, every school offered a family choices evening. These evenings, according to the pupils who discussed them, were similar to the pupils' assemblies where the process was outlined to parents/families. The perception of these events from young people who attended was generally positive, though some young people noted how the direct influence from their parents increased following these events. It can also be seen as another opportunity for the school to stamp its 'preferences' on the process, by influencing the judgement of parents to influence their young people. For example, in School B, pupils noted that the options evening did not really explain the vocational options open to young people - such as foundation apprenticeships - instead focusing mainly on university pathways.

Much of the support available to the whole cohort was delivered through Developing the Young Workforce programmes and events. The most prominent of these was a careers fair, of which there was at least one in each school. These events allowed for a space in which young people could engage directly with employers and hear more about opportunities. Crucially, these events coincided with the choices process, so young people could gain a better understanding of what subjects they may need to take to pursue an opportunity. These events were generally viewed as useful by pupils, but more so because they were attended by local colleges and universities rather than by employers in industries themselves. In many instances it was the first opportunity that young people had to access information about the courses they may wish to study, beyond their own online



research of prospectuses. Generally, pupils found these engagements valuable, with a few exceptions. The positives of these events focused on the opportunity to engage with employers (including colleges and university) directly and without facilitation on behalf of school staff. Core to this was being able to get undiluted information from the people/organisations they would be applying to, without the need to check accuracy and with the ability to ask specific questions that - understandably - a member of school careers staff may not know the answers to.

### **8.8.2 - Careers service guidance**

Every school had a careers service that engaged young people during the course of the subject choices process. This support was offered by guidance staff and supported by Skills Development Scotland. In different schools, this support took different forms but generally can be understood as: one-on-one appointments during the process, drop-in sessions for extra support, communications via newsletter and email with advice and opportunities, and events such as attending local college and university open days.

Career guidance, according to Skills Development Scotland (SDS) (2023), plays a crucial role in shaping a students' future by helping them align their academic choices with their post-school aspirations. This alignment, according to SDS, is essential to ensure that students make informed decisions. A primary reason for the significance of careers advice is that it should better empower students with the knowledge of various career pathways and the qualifications required for those paths. Crucially, careers advice should help students develop a realistic perspective on their post-school ambitions. This clearly centres the choices process as structurally linked to the workplace and the aspirations of young people within it. There is explicit focus on education for productivity and careers, rather than other motivations. Across the four schools, there was a mixed perception by students of the nature of support that careers service guidance offered. In Schools A and D, the services were regarded more favourably than in Schools B and C, though these were not without issue. The key points of difference were about consistency of engagement from the service and familiarity with the staff delivering it.

It was clear however that, generally, students appreciated the guidance and support provided by their career advisors. They found their conversations helpful and valuable for making informed decisions and or exploring new ideas - even if these ideas were later disregarded by the pupil. Hamish (S5, M, School D) said:

*‘yea, I definitely think if you need an extra idea - definitely you should go and talk to them’.*

Of the pupils who viewed the services offered in a positive light, they felt career advisors were approachable, available, and maintained open communication with the students. Young people who had positive experiences referred to the advisors by their first names and placed trust in the advice that they were given. This was predominantly the case in Schools A and D (the two most deprived) whereas in Schools B and C there was much less personal familiarity with the service. This had the biggest impact where young people perceived the guidance they were receiving was tailored to them personally and was not just generic advice. Of particular value to young people was careers advisors’ guidance on the next phase of choices, which was of utmost importance to S4 pupils. Ryan (S5, M, School B) recounted the support he had while in S4 regarding his Higher choices:

*‘I got an A in [National 5] Biology last year, but it was a stronger A in Geography, so she recommended taking that to try and get the best grades for Higher as possible.’*

Particularly for pupils like Ryan, who had no family guidance on the choices process itself, such help to navigate the process by figures who were not teachers was appreciated.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, pupils who had little or no (useful) interaction with the careers advice service had a more negative view of it, although this was not just related to whether a pupil had personally chosen to engage or not but was more systemic. In Schools B and C, the careers service was perceived as less involved and personal, with many pupils not knowing who was involved, or its purpose. This

is potentially related to the fact that in Schools B and C young people had more clarity regarding their aspirations, which was predominantly to attend university. The salience of careers advice in such circumstances was diminished.

Some students raised the fact that the service - across all schools, but particularly in Schools B and C - lacked specialised knowledge and often relied on referring pupils to generic national resources such as the *My World of Work Website*. Related to this was a range of students who had a particular Higher Education course or career path in mind, who were seeking support to better understand what they would need to realise it, who found a lack of specific support available:

*'I've been seen twice but I don't feel that I need it because I know exactly where I'm going, I don't think they can really help me with anything.'* -  
Maya, S4, F, School D

It was in these circumstances that young people viewed careers fairs - or university open days - as useful engagements. There was a general sentiment among participants in these schools who raised the issue that more career guidance is needed, particularly when making subject choices for their future, with Ollie (S5, M, School C) saying:

*'...a bit more support about what you need to get into certain courses and stuff. It's more focused on what you're doing now and not as much on the future.'*

Students across all schools expressed clear frustration with several aspects of the choices process they had to navigate. Most notably, this was raised regarding the column based subject selection. This frustration was succinctly summed up by Robyn (S5, F, School A) who stated, *'I hate the fact it's columns, I think it's so pointless.'* Predominantly the frustration was linked to the feeling that they were forced to take subjects they did not want to study, got no enjoyment from, or had no interest in. Often, for the pupils who did raise concern on this issue, it was related directly to its impact on final qualifications:

*‘...people [should] actually get to pick what they want because that’s what they want to do and that’s what they want on their qualifications.’ -*

**Robyn, S5, F, School A**

*‘You need to choose things that you don’t want to do’ -* **Sophia, S5, F, School D**

Fraser (S5, M, School D) explained how column placement had ensured he took a subject he did not want to, which impacted his entire years’ experience of education, and questioned the rationale of logistics:

*Interviewer: ‘Would you rather have taken something else?’*

*Fraser: ‘Oh, aye, definitely. I would rather have taken anything else but [Chemistry]. Honestly, it was a year of complaining to my mum and dad ‘why do I have to do this, can I drop this?... I don’t see why you should force everybody to take things that people are going to be nowhere near. If someone’s wanting to go and do an art degree, if they want to go and do computing or if they want to do office-based work - why should they have to take history, why should they have to take art and stuff like that. I just don’t get it’.*

Notably, the link between the frustration regarding columns and their impact on what qualifications a pupil will leave school with was raised more by pupils in S5 and 6, potentially reflecting the fact that these young people are conscious that leaving is imminent, and the influence their suite of qualifications can have on their options after school. Clearly, there is a perceived influence of the structure of the process on potential post-school aspiration. Participants highlighted instances of where a subject that a student either wanted to study or ‘needed to’ (for entry into a university course for example) was denied due to it ‘clashing’ with other subjects in the same column:

*'I think biology was in the same column as PE and I needed them both'* - Sophia, F, S5, School D

*'Well, I dropped Modern Studies because it clashed in the columns'* - Maria, F, S4, School C

Important to note of course is that the 'school' is comprised of individuals, based on their own experiences and aspirations for 'their' young people, interpreting national guidance into a formal curriculum structure for their school. This is influenced by a range of factors including their own bias, personal and professional experience, school culture, parental expectation and historical performance of the school - including 'political' considerations of performance and how the school (and associated local education system) is regarded. Part of this consideration is the prominence of 'positive destinations' data which is published regarding the number of pupils from each school in Scotland and what their pupils do when they leave school. It is a key performance metric by which the performance of the education system is assessed.

### **8.9 - Prioritisation of subject areas**

Schools' direct influence on subject choice threads through the columns process, and is a clear reflection of the priorities, values and ultimately habitus of the individual institution. By structuring the availability of subject areas in this way, a school can mandate what subject areas will comprise timetables. Pupils throughout the schools in the research noted that there exists an institutional hierarchy of subjects, where the school prioritises, emphasises and encourages or compels some subjects over others. Mainly this was evident by the prominence attached to the individual subjects of Maths and English. However, pupils often saw STEM subjects as prioritised by the schools when compared to Arts or Social Subjects. Pupils who raised this issue were more likely to be negatively impacted by it, by being unable to access the subjects they wanted. Charlie (S6, M, School C) was one of these:

*'We call it subject snobs ... the Sciences, Languages, Maths and English are very much put above Drama and Art.'*

This perceived hierarchy influences students' choices, potentially discouraging them from pursuing their true interests in favour of subjects deemed more valuable. The prioritisation of certain subjects over others can also impact the allocation of resources within schools, further perpetuating the perception amongst pupils that some subjects are prioritised:

*'Yeah, I suppose so, cause you've got like, yeah, cause in Maths you've got like all these, obviously you've always got homework for that. And the same for English, you've always got things to do and you're never not doing stuff for English or Maths.'* - Callum, S6, M, School A

Lucas (S4, M, School B) described how they were only allowed to take one Social Subject, and that it restricted the choice of what they wanted to do, saying when asked if they would have taken two Social Subjects if allowed:

*'I was always fighting between Geography and Modies [Modern Studies]...I'm not sure, I might have done two social subjects instead of two sciences if I could.. If the option was given to me I probably would have.'*

While there was an impact of this curricular structure on Lucas' experience of S4, it has a wider impact on limiting potential choices for the future, and indeed post-school aspirations and destinations as it limits firstly the potential of exposure to areas pupils may be interested in and, on a practical level, limits the qualifications they can attain in the subject area. There is particularly clear potential impact on the pupils' interest and confidence towards matriculation to Arts and Humanities Higher Education courses.

In all schools, there was a perception from pupils that there was a prioritisation of Maths and English, even beyond the point where it is compulsory to take these subjects. There was however an appreciation that this was perhaps justified:

*'I think the school views Maths and English as more important because you need them for a lot of things. They're like base subjects.'* - Maya, S4, F, School D

*'Everyone kind of views it the same I guess but English and Maths - that's the big one, you have to do them 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> basically all the way up to 6<sup>th</sup> normally. If you want to do anything in your life, really.'* - Russell, S5, M, School D

*'I'd say English and Maths are more important than a lot of subjects like art and PE because I think English and Maths are subjects you need. A lot of Unis look at that'* - Maria, S4, F, School C

This perception was more prevalent in School D (the most deprived school) and amongst senior pupils. In particular, this seemed to stem from a perception - based in reality - that Further and Higher Education institutions place higher value on attainment in these subjects.

### **8.10 - Compulsion**

It was often the case that the prioritisation transcended 'encouragement' of particular subject areas and pupils were forced to take subjects, or subjects in certain areas. Compulsion is often related to subjects viewed as more 'academic' such as STEM subjects and English (beyond central Government requirements). This demonstrates significant control over young people's choices, and was often met negatively, with Zoe (S6, F, School C) stating they were *'just forced on these subjects that they don't want to be in.'*

There was a feeling among some of the pupils that such compulsion existed to ensure the school was viewed well and to ensure most pupils went to university. Forcing students to take subjects they are not interested in can lead to negative consequences, such as reduced motivation and inefficient use of teacher resources. As Zoe further explained:

*‘so, they’re [we’re] sitting in a class that they don’t want to because it’s meant to be your choices and it’s not. It’s just wasting the teachers’ time and their’s when they could have picked another subject that they enjoy.’*

Other schools, such as School D had compulsion over some subject areas beyond Maths and English. Within that school in S4 and S5 at least one Science, Social Subject and Arts subject was needed. While this gives a broader curriculum offer than School B, it still created concerns. For example, one pupil - who wanted to be an aeronautical engineer - needed to take three Sciences to meet the entry requirements of his university course. While he was given permission, he was having to study two sciences alongside each other on his timetable, as resources were allocated to reflect the rules around compulsion and two of the subjects clashed in the columns. In School B, French specifically was compulsory in S4. This was met with wide-ranging negativity. While young people understood the rationale behind compulsory Maths and English, there was less appreciation of the need to have French forced as a choice. This had an impact even on pupils with an interest in languages, as Matthew (S4, M, School B) explained:

*‘When I found out that you have to take French for Nat 5 I wasn’t that happy because I feel like you should be able to choose a language - like Spanish or something, but you have to take French. If you want to do another one you have to do that as well as French. I find it quite bad.’*

School C mandated that certain subject areas must be taken, but there was a clear lack of clarity around this from some pupils. A select number of pupils at this school set out how they had selected subjects because they thought they had to, but in reality they did not. John (S4, M, School C) highlighted this:



*'I thought you had to pick an IT subject and I looked at them all - that [computing] seemed the most plausible. I don't know, I thought you had to pick one from each one - I thought it was like Technical and IT - so you had to pick one from either Technical or IT. So, I went with one of the IT ones.'*

This highlighted the need for clearer communication about subject requirements and options, but more broadly highlights the impact of compulsion in directing pupils to subjects they do not wish to study. Though it must be appreciated there are reasons that some subjects are compulsory, and some subject areas are compulsory to try and ensure a broad experience of education, however, compulsion is the clearest example of overt influence from the choices process in determining these learning decisions. Perceptions on compulsory subjects as part of curriculum structure suggests that imposing mandatory subject choices may not be the most effective approach to fostering student engagement and motivation. These findings highlight some negative consequences of compulsion, such as reduced motivation and potentially inefficient use of teacher resources. Students may be forced to take subjects they are not interested in, which wastes their time and that of the teachers. The impact of compulsion on student engagement and motivation is evident from the views of pupils across the schools. Imposing mandatory subject choices may not be the most effective approach to fostering student engagement and motivation.

### **8.11 - Consortia arrangements**

Consortia arrangements have been increasing in use since the introduction of the Curriculum for Excellence in Scottish education (Scottish Parliament 2019). They are agreements between schools to share their campuses and resources to offer a wider range of Higher and Advanced Higher subjects to Senior Phase pupils. This allows for the pooling of resources. For example, it may be the case a school has four pupils who wish to study Higher Physics, so cannot commit the resources to hosting the subject, however if it opens that offer up to other local schools, and

they each have four, there is a viable class of twelve.

This example was the case in School C, which had an agreement with two other schools which were in its area. Two afternoons a week pupils could travel between the schools to take Higher and Advanced Higher classes. School C hosted some social subjects, and newer vocational subjects like hair and beauty, while its pupils travelled to other schools for some STEM subjects. While School C was the only school in the research with such an arrangement, they are increasingly used, becoming a feature of curricular structure. While there is a lack of research on these arrangements, it stands to reason they are an exercise in resource management and will impact more greatly on schools with less resources. There is also a necessity to have other schools within a commutable distance, meaning that such arrangements are only practical in urban areas and in those where connectivity is possible in viable transport options.

Generally, pupils were negative with regards to the arrangements. Only if a subject was 'needed' for a future aspiration, would young people be inclined to pick a subject that meant travel to another school. Many students expressed concerns about the travel involved in attending classes at different schools. They mentioned issues with taxis being late or not showing up, which led to missing class time, lunch time with peers and causing disruptions to their after-school schedules. Travel was not merely a concern of timing and logistics though, but it was also perceived to impact on learning. Some mentioned the need to catch up on missed content if taxis were late and the challenges of adjusting to different environments and teaching styles. Students discussed preferring to study in familiar environments and with people they know. They felt more comfortable and secure in their home school, and the idea of attending classes at another school can be daunting for some. As was further described by Charlie (S6, M, School C):

*'I know the teachers here and I know all the people. I am better in familiar surroundings...Maybe that's a fault on my part that I should have gone out my comfort zone, but it's one of those things.'*

Some benefits were discussed, such as having the chance to meet other people, and study subjects that would not otherwise be on offer. Although there was a general feeling that selecting a course that was subject to travel was to be avoided -which clearly is an impact of curriculum structure on influencing choices-, interestingly, it is important to note that negativity only related to traveling outwards to other schools. Pupils who attended consortia classes in School B which hosted other pupils enjoyed the experience. It was not uncommon for participants in other schools to discuss that they had wanted to do a course, but it was unavailable.

### **8.12 - Senior Phase flexibility**

As was explored in Chapter Four, one of the key intentions of the Curriculum for Excellence reforms was a new approach to the senior phase of secondary school. Instead of a linear progression through Standard Grades in S3 and S4, Highers in S5, and Highers and Advanced Highers in S6, it was intended there would be more flexibility in a unified three-year phase for young people to vary their approach to qualification, take up new subjects and make more of vocational and extra-curricular opportunities. This was echoed in an expert interview with a representative of the Scottish Government who said:

*‘That the aim for flexibility in the senior phase was about realising the Curriculum for Excellence ambitions to provide a more holistic curriculum and experience of education.’*

Pupils across the four schools, however, clearly valued the linear continuity and progression that a traditional three-year journey through National 5, Higher and potentially Advanced Higher offers in terms of being allowed to develop a depth of understanding and familiarity with a subject offered:

*‘I enjoyed that period of progressing through a subject rather than chopping and changing’ - Arthur, S4, M, School D*

It was also evident in many cases that the concept of flexibility and picking up and dropping subjects was just not reality. This was either because in S5 or S6 they did not feel they had the pre-existing knowledge of a subject to pick it up or ‘crash’ it (i.e. starting a subject at a higher level without having completed the previous level), or because the school actually prohibited such practices:

*‘Yea, obviously because you can’t - they don’t allow you, in most cases, to crash a subject in 5th year. So, if you’ve not done the National of it you can’t do it in 5th year, you need to wait until 6th year to crash a subject’*  
- Finn, S5, M, School B

*‘...you need to have certain grades in other subjects to be able to crash something’.* - Arran, S6, M, School C

The extent to which young people wished to ‘crash’ subjects was limited, even if it were a broad option as part of a flexible curriculum structure. This stemmed from an anticipation of it being difficult to ‘catch up’ with the assumed pre-existing knowledge that may be needed. This perception existed across schools:

*‘I don’t think I’d crash a Higher - ever.’* - Erin, S5, F, School C

There is a need to strike a balance between providing flexibility and ensuring that students have the necessary knowledge and skills to pursue their chosen pathways effectively.

### **8.13 - Role of S6**

‘Flexibility’ - the taking of new subjects, and the enrollment of other opportunities- was most likely to be realised in S6. There was a broad perception that there were two reasons for continuing to study in S6: to re-take subjects needed for post-school destinations that may have been failed previously, or desire to obtain more qualifications.

A significant number of students across the four schools found that their previous choices influenced the choices open to them now. S6 allowed for a year in which a change of future path could be realised. For example, a student from school A who, in making their choices for S4 wanted to go to medical school, selected mainly STEM courses. Once realising that was not the path they wanted to follow, they took a new suite of Nationals in S4 based around humanities, and then the Highers in S6. What this highlights is that while ‘flexibility’ is on offer, it is not a quick or fluid process. Secondly, many saw S6 as a time to actually enjoy the curriculum and school. One student described S6 as a ‘chill out’ year ahead of going to university. Holly (S5, F, School B) said:

*‘I said at the start of this year that S5 is going to try and be the year that I properly get my head stuck in and try and get all the stuff that I need. Then, in 6th year I can take a breather for myself’.*

Pupils also viewed S6 as the opportunity to take subjects that they enjoyed or were good at but did not perceive they ‘needed’ for university entry requirements. Talking about Business Studies, Harper (S4, F, School B) said ‘yea, but I was thinking in 6th year if I had the chance I could crash it’. Particularly in School A, which had the most robust and integrated vocational and employer engagement opportunities, this was the main year that many pupils took up such opportunities.

As increasing numbers of young people across Scotland continue in school until the end of S6, the perception from pupils of the role of S6 raises questions regarding its purpose and the potential of it as an outlet for many of the principles of flexibility and vocational education the Curriculum for Excellence reforms have sought to realise, which is discussed further in the Discussion Chapter (Chapter Eleven).

## 8.14 - Conclusions

In conclusion, the ability of the school to control the make-up of a pupil's curriculum through careful control of the process of columns is a clear overt influence on choices. The framework of these choices is shaped outwith the control, and often outwith the knowledge, of individual pupils. Through the subject choice process, schools - influenced heavily by national and local policy - structure their curriculum in such a way as to have a significant impact on the learning decisions of young people.

This seemingly simple process is, however, not only impacted by the pupils' motivations, feelings, fears, aspirations and experiences, nor is it just impacted by what families and other external actors attempt to influence either. The structure and the processes are a vitally important influence on subject choices in and of themselves. Indeed, the process already exists long before the individual makes their choices, and the structures which govern the process are out of the control of individual pupils. Often, the individual may not even be aware of the extent of this influence. All other influences this research discusses: the internal motivations, the aspirations, and the external pressures, can only operate within the set boundaries of the process and structure itself. If choices are thought of as being made while 'thinking inside the box', the structure of the curriculum and the choices process comprise its walls. Process and structure are not just the *first* influence of subject choice, they are the *foundation* on which the extent of all other influences is based and set the framework which choices must operate within.

There existed a disparity in subject choices and opportunities amongst the participating schools, facilitated towards their subject choices and curricular approach. There was variance in the breadth, width, depth and flexibility within the four Schools' approaches, with important differences evident in curricular offers across a range of key indicators and transition periods. The autonomy schools have in structuring their curriculum reinforces the notion that Schools do use their powers to significantly shape the learning and life experiences of students.

These findings show that schools have a significant influence over subject choice through the structuring of subject availability and the prioritisation of certain subjects over others. According to participants in the research, this (at least perceived) hierarchy of subjects can negatively impact students' ability to pursue their true interests, limit their potential exposure to areas they may be interested in, and restrict the qualifications they can attain in certain subject areas. The prioritisation of Maths and English in particular, may be justified by the practical implications of these subjects, but it also reflects the reality that further and higher education institutions place a higher value on attainment in these subjects. It is also notable that there was explicit mention of this point in the most deprived school in the research, while almost accepted as a 'given' in the other schools. Compulsion, whether related to certain subjects or areas, was met with resistance, as students felt compelled to study subjects they did not want to pursue. The notion of flexibility in the senior phase, intended to offer a more holistic curriculum and a central aim of reform, posed challenges as students valued the linear progression through traditional qualifications. Overall, the chapter highlights the intricate interplay of institutional structures, and the influence they wield over subject choices. The control that schools have over the composition of pupils' curricular structure through the columns process is a clear manifestation of their overt influence on subject choice.

Support - from school or other sources - is often not focused predominately on the management of influences, but instead the navigation of processes. The findings also illustrate the multifaceted landscape of support available to young people during the process of making subject choices. The formal institutional support, as detailed in this section, takes on various forms across the participating schools, primarily revolving around whole cohort advice, careers service guidance, and support from teaching staff. Notably, events such as choices assemblies and family choices evenings serve as important platforms for disseminating information and structuring the decision-making process, though they also serve as platforms of influence. The Developing the Young Workforce programmes, particularly careers fairs, play a pivotal role in providing direct engagement with employers, offering invaluable insights into future opportunities, and can serve as platforms where young people can bypass school influence and engage directly with employers. The findings also revealed a mixed perception among students regarding the

nature and effectiveness of careers service guidance, with variations observed across different schools. Crucially, support was most salient where young people did not have a strong sense of what they wanted to do upon leaving school. The need for a more comprehensive and tailored approach to support was identified, recognising the diverse needs and aspirations of young individuals as they navigate the intricate process of subject choices.

These findings reflect the interaction between social capital, individual agency, and motivation theories in shaping subject choices within institutional constraints. From a social capital perspective (Bourdieu, 1986), students and their families navigate a structured system where access to information and strategic decision-making can advantage those with greater cultural and social resources. The fact that schools control curriculum structures through subject columns reinforces structural limitations on individual agency (Giddens, 1984), as students make choices within a predetermined framework rather than exercising complete autonomy. Despite these constraints however, students still engage in a process of negotiation, balancing external limitations with personal aspirations, interests, and perceived subject value—aligning with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and Expectancy-Value Theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). While policy-driven structures shape the available pathways, student motivation remains central, as young people must navigate these externally imposed choices by weighing their intrinsic (internal) motivations for subjects against the extrinsic (external) factors of career prospects, social influences, and higher education requirements. This highlights the complex interplay between institutional power, socio-economic background, and individual decision-making in secondary school subject selection.

The next chapter will explore the internal influences that young people negotiate with regards to their subject choices.



## CHAPTER NINE - ENJOYMENT, USEFULNESS AND IMPORTANCE: THE BALANCE OF INTERNAL INFLUENCES

Pupils must negotiate a range of influences when it comes to subject choices. This includes negotiations with themselves about what choices will be best for them. This is both in the sense of their long-term ambitions and aspirations, their desire to keep harmony with their teachers and families, and their enjoyment of the school year ahead. The choices process, when it begins, can be all encompassing.

The chapter investigates the internal motivations that young people discussed throughout their interviews towards their subject choices, as well as incorporating findings from the expert interviews. Appreciating that curricular structure puts constraints and boundaries on subject choices, it aims to give a sense of the negotiation that young people have within themselves and how their perceptions, attitudes, and knowledge about subjects influence whether they decide to take them. It also must be considered that the findings of Chapter Seven on aspiration provide the context of the internal influences explored in this chapter.

This chapter will discuss the different types of internal influences (motivations) that were identified in analysis: 'Enjoyment', 'Usefulness' and 'Importance', and explore how these motivations interact within the process of selecting subjects. It will discuss the balance of these internal influences and draw some conclusions around how social background (including social demographics of a school) relates to them. The chapter begins by clearly defining what each internal influence is and discusses how they are operationalised. It then goes on to explore each in greater detail. The discussion of enjoyment begins with exploring how pleasure and interest emerged as a key motivation for participants, as well as how attaining well in a subject was a motivator to keep studying it. The section then discusses how the contrary view - not enjoying a subject - is a core influence.

Usefulness of subjects, and how perceptions of a subject's applicability to realising a certain aspiration, is then discussed. This includes exploration of how a subject's direct applicability to what young people want to do after school is a key influence on learning decisions, as is the perception of usefulness. The

importance of subjects, and how these three influences relate is then discussed. Finally, conclusions are drawn regarding the role of demographics on internal influences.

### **9.1 - Internal motivations**

Often, it is not as cut and dried as taking the subjects 'you want', no matter if that is the advice that comes from family, teachers, and careers advice. Indeed, the influences on young people's subject choices are plentiful. As has been demonstrated, these influences are contextualised by the choices that are available to young people through policy and curriculum structure. These structural influences are, however, mostly 'invisible' to the young people, who will often have little knowledge of, and no influence over, them.

As well as the structure of the curriculum, which happens in absence of the agency of young people, there are two other broad areas of influence over young people's learning decisions. These are the internal motivations that young people have towards the subjects they take, the second is the external influences that they have to negotiate.

Internal influences relate to the internal motivations of young people (they are used synonymously throughout the chapter). These are the drivers and reasons which stem from the thought, perceptions, and tastes of young people that influence their subject choices. They are the feelings, motivations, influences that are personal to the individual making the learning decision. They are based on their attitudes, experiences, and perceptions of a subject (or subject area) and how it relates to their personal circumstances, desires, and aspirations. These are very different from the external influences discussed in the next chapter, which relate to the influence and pressures that stem from teachers, friends, family, employers and the media. Within the research, three types of internal influences (motivations) towards subject choices emerged:

- **Enjoyment** - This internal influence related to young people's enjoyment of a subject. This could relate to a passion for a subject (even if it did not relate to their post-school aspiration), enjoying the content, being 'good' at it, or liking a particular teacher. Though enjoyment and future aspiration can often be linked, this theme broadly concerns subjects chosen for enjoyment versus those chosen for their perceived direct value to future aspirations. A strong driver of choices could also be pupils lack of enjoyment of a subject.
- **Usefulness** - This motivation related to the relevance - or perceived relevance - of particular subjects to participants' aspirations and future plans, or indeed, the lack thereof. For example, if a subject was a direct entry requirement of a particular university course, or if it is had 'peripheral relevancy', such as someone who wishes to go into chemical engineering taking other STEM subjects to build a skill set and knowledge base in sciences.
- **Importance** - This influence was related to usefulness, in that the key driver of the motivation is how 'important' the subject is to the future - both concerning aspirations and general life skills. It however, was more perceptive and reflected internalised societal views of what is 'important' and what young people perceive to be so. 'Important' subjects were not subjects the pupils identified as ones that they 'needed' to progress, but rather subjects they wished to attain in because they felt it important to do so.

Of course, the subjects which would be viewed through each influence is determined by the aspirations that young people have. What subjects each individual perceives as 'useful' follows on from the aspirations that they have (and then the same with subjects that are enjoyed but not 'useful' and so on), showing the importance to first understand the influence over what shapes aspirations as they are intrinsic to how young people perceive and approach their subject choices, which was why setting out how these are formed in Chapter Seven was vital to contextualise the findings in this, and the following, chapter(s).

## 9.2 - Enjoyment

### 9.2.1 - *Pleasure and interest*

Core to the theme of enjoyment, perhaps unsurprisingly, was the strong sense of feeling that many pupils chose to take subjects simply due to the pleasure and the interest that they got from studying them. No other real considerations were brought into these decisions, such as their relation to the future aspiration, or attainment. Several participants noted that interest, pleasure, and enjoyment were factors behind many choices. Often, amongst the participants who had taken a subject for this reason, the subject was directly linked to a hobby/interest that they held outwith the school gates. These choices allowed a space where academic experience - and expectation - could interact with their interests. For example, Alice (S6, F, School D) took Photography because she liked taking pictures outwith school as a pastime and found it '*fun*'.

Of interest within this theme, however, was that in most (but certainly not all) circumstances the subjects taken for enjoyment were often practical or arts - based subjects such as Art, Drama and Photography.

There was a strong sense that the choices made purely for enjoyment, particularly for S4, were taken aside from full focus on future aspiration or attainment as a motivation. Exemplifying this further, Arthur (S4, M, School D) described how he took music because he'd been playing guitar in his own time since primary school and that it was something that gave him enjoyment from studying. Further, Harper (S4, F, School B) described that Art '*benefited [her] own relaxation*', as it was a subject she enjoyed and was already proficient in with many skills and techniques, as it was a hobby previously. A key insight within this finding is that pupils attach a value to enjoyment within their learning, and that it is a key motivation in the process of making learning decisions. Indeed, there were many instances where young people had a perception that they would enjoy a subject, and taking it developed that interest and enjoyment further, even if they had never elected to take the subject previously. This shows the need to have opportunity within the curriculum to allow young people to change course and pursue different interests.

### 9.2.2 - Interdisciplinary enjoyment

Enjoyment was further exemplified by some students noting that their choices may have seemed ‘random’ to the outsider and lacked a synergy between them. In these cases, pupils identified the subject(s) that were taken for enjoyment as almost the ‘odd ones out’. This can relate to a motivation to study as wide a range of subjects in and of itself, or can occur ‘randomly’ as young people go through each column in their choices form. Based upon a range of motivations - including interest and enjoyment - their choices focus on singular motivation relating to each subject in each column, rather than a linkage running through all of their choices. This interdisciplinary enjoyment allowed for great breadth of subject exposure, and according to the young people, a sense of personal enjoyment of school.

Rory (S6, M, School D) outlined his journey through the senior phase:

- S5 - English (Nat 5), Maths (Nat 5), Practical Woodwork (Nat 5), PE (Higher)
- S6 - English (Higher), Maths (Higher), Photography (Nat 5), Music (Nat 5), Sports Leadership (Foundation Apprenticeship)

He described his choices:

*Rory - ‘They’re all quite different subjects, none of them really ‘work together’ but I just picked them because that’s the ones that I wanted to do. Even if it didn’t make ‘sense’ - I thought there’s not really a point in picking subjects I don’t want to do, to make the other ones work.’*

*Interviewer - ‘So, you just went purely with what you enjoyed and were interested in?’*

*Rory - ‘Yeah.’*

Though there was a realisation that a rounded and holistic suite of subjects is a positive, there was also the perceived risk that it was not the most conducive approach to crafting a suite of qualifications that related to a specific aspiration. Rory, for example, noted that STEM subjects are seen as important by school and useful by employers but that he had opted not to take a science beyond what was mandatory as he did not enjoy them.

There were examples of where enjoyment, interest, proficiency, and aspiration linked, but it was of course not uncommon for young people's aspirations to be linked to their interests, which in turn influenced their learning decisions as part of the choices process. Sophia (S5, F, School D) noted that as she was very sporty and enjoyed 'practical' subjects. She had taken '*as many as possible*' in S5 - including PE, Art and Music. Interestingly, she wanted to be a teacher - though she was not sure in what subject - because she loved the school environment, and these were the subjects that interested her.

### **9.2.3 - Attainment as enjoyment**

Proficiency at a subject - being 'good' at it and attaining well in it - was a key driver of enjoyment influencing subject selection. It is regarded as a motivation of enjoyment because often it was described as a reason in and of itself why young people got enjoyment and a sense of satisfaction from a subject, even if the subject they attained well in was not perceived by them as useful or important. This feeling was neatly summed up by Matthew (S4, M, School B) who stated that he liked Maths and Physics because he was quite good at them, '*which helps*', he said, in making subject selections. At the same school, Charlotte (S5, F, School B) highlighted that being good at a subject is key to driving motivation throughout the year, bringing an inverse to this point:

*'If I don't enjoy a subject I'm not going to want to try as hard because I'll find it difficult as well.'*

Similar arguments were made by participants in every school, and across years. Luke (S4, M, School A) made a link between the understanding of key content in class to enjoyment of the subject, while Clarke (S4, M, School D) said *‘now that I actually understand physics I kind of enjoy that class as well’*.

Holly (S5, F, School B) talked starkly of her lack of motivation towards subjects she did not attain well in, compared to enthusiasm around those she did:

*‘If I love and am good at something that’s what I put my effort into. If I don’t enjoy something, it’s really hard for me to try and put effort into it. Which I don’t think’s right - because for my English for example I don’t enjoy it. I feel like I need to put effort in but I don’t, because I don’t, enjoy it - which is bad.’*

Despite Holly noting that this was perhaps not the best way to approach subjects, particularly given English was mandatory to S5, it was a fairly widespread view. It also shows that the three key motivations identified interrelate, and that interest, attainment, aspiration, and other influences can congregate in decision making processes.

#### **9.2.4 - Non-enjoyment and subject avoidance**

When considering the non-enjoyment, or ‘dislike’, of a subject as an internal influence on subject choice, there were two related but distinct categories. There was the dislike of subject content meaning the modules, curriculum, or forms of assessment *within* a subject, and the dislike of an entire subject in and of itself. The distinction is important, as often a young person who disliked subject content still had enjoyment of the subject as a whole, which was a motivator to select it.

There was also a distinction in the subject areas prevalent within each type of motivation. Subjects that young people opted not to take where the content drove non-enjoyment were predominantly languages and social subjects, whereas when it was feelings towards the entire subject, it tended to be related to STEM subjects. There was also a difference in the curricular approach of pupils in both categories. Elizabeth (S4, F, School C), for example, was in the process of

selecting her subjects for fifth year. She was going to drop Administration, because she *'didn't enjoy it, and didn't want to keep doing it for another year'*. Her choices for S5 were English, History, Modern Studies, Philosophy, and Business Management at Higher level.

Charlie (S6, M, School C) was a high attaining student with a suite of Highers already and had made an application to study Law at a Russell Group university. He dropped Chemistry going into S4 - and eventually all STEM subjects - as he *'can't do any maths or science subjects. I don't even have a National 5 at any science'* and described himself as *'hopeless'*. His S6 subjects were all in arts or social subjects.

These examples are broadly indicative of the two categories. Those who disliked subject content were usually still interested in the subject area. Typically, they enjoyed and good attainment in 'similar' subjects. Those who disliked the subject itself tended to not enjoy - nor attain well - in related subjects.

### **9.2.5 - Dislike of subject content**

There were a few iterations of what motivated dislike of subject content, in some cases this manifested as the perception of a subject, or an 'outside' interest in its area, not matching the reality of what the course involved. Fifth year Hamish (S5, M, School D) had a keen interest in politics and the economy, related to his aspiration to work in finance, but decided to not continue Modern Studies after National 5 level:

*'I dropped [Modern Studies] - I kind of liked the idea of politics and stuff. Then I was like 'nah' it's just a bit boring. That threw that out the window'.*



More often it was the dislike of assessed modules, or elements of the modes of assessment. Among participants who raised this issue this related to an aspect of the course they were not the most proficient at, or they saw as inconsistent with the reason they took the subject, such as the writing/theory elements of PE or Drama. Another example came from John (S4, M, School C) who decided against taking Spanish to a Higher level due to disliking the oral element of the course assessment.

There were also pupils who were deterred from certain subjects due to the perceived level of workload in the course, and this often manifested as pupils becoming 'bored' of the subject. This was the case when subjects were not viewed as 'useful'. Aidan (S5, M, School C) had a keen interest in History, though acknowledged that it was not related to his aspiration to work in the music industry, where he already had extensive work experience. He said of the subject *'there was much more writing in it than I thought and I got bored of it.'* Due to the fact that he had a clear career aspiration in mind, there seemed to be more motivation around seeking 'enjoyment' in the subjects that were not directly related to it.

This was similarly exemplified by final-year pupil Zara (S6, F, School A) who enjoyed Modern Studies at National 5 level, but not the workload at Higher:

*'I think it was a lot of having to go home and do a lot more studying than every other subject. I don't know if it was just because the facts and figures, there was a lot more of them. I just couldn't seem to get it in my head the way I did in Nat 5. And the essay writing and the assignment was just really really difficult. I'm not good at writing essays and that's obviously what comes with Modern Studies Higher. It's just three essays in the exam. It was just a case of I didn't enjoy it so I wasn't putting the work in as much as I should have been.'*

### **9.2.6 - Dislike of subjects and choosing the 'least bad' option**

The dislike of entire subjects also had different motivations behind them. Sometimes, there was just raw dislike of a subject. As mentioned, this would often be from pupils who simply had no interest or found no enjoyment in certain subject areas. Often these feelings were cemented following preliminary assessment results, or National 5 results, where the participant did not think they had performed well:

*'Chemistry - I've never been the best at, I tried to in my Nat 5 but I wasn't really enjoying it.'* - Ada, S5, School A

A common instance was subject choices being made where pupils were faced with a choice in a column where they were faced with two or more subjects that they disliked but had to choose one of them even though they found no motivation towards any of them, so they used enjoyment as the key motivation factor. Though finding no proactive 'enjoyment' in the offers, they picked the subject they perceived as least 'painful' to add to their timetable. Arran (S6, M, School C) highlighted the conundrum:

*Interviewer - 'Do you know which subjects yet, that'll be in the same column?'*

*Arran - 'I think computing is in the same column as one of the maths one - that could be a bit of an issue.'*

*Interviewer - 'I see, do you know which one you would take?'*

*Arran - 'I think I would take computing over maths...yeah for the enjoyment'.*

Again, as was set out in Chapter Eight, subjects tended to be grouped into columns based upon their area/faculty, so the effect of a student not liking a certain subject area was present in this finding also. In some cases, pupils would further self-justify dropping a subject beyond their non-enjoyment of it:

*'I just don't really enjoy French, I'm not really going to use it - I don't think - in the long run.'* - Anna (S4, F, School B)

This example shows the interrelated nature of balancing the internal motivations that have been identified in the research.

### **9.3 - Usefulness**

'Usefulness' of a subject - or indeed lack of usefulness - was the most predominant internal motivation of subject choices, appearing as a motivation in the largest number of interviews and towards the largest number of subjects. 'Usefulness' in this theme is defined as subject(s) which have a direct - or perceived - relevance to post-school aspirations. Perception is key to this theme, as it was not always the case that a participant knew for certain that a subject was 'needed' towards their aspiration and their future plans.

#### **9.3.1 - Direct usefulness to aspiration**

Unsurprisingly, all participants had at least an element of what it was they wanted to do after they left school at the forefront of their minds when making their subject choices. Even if this was not a direct aspiration and they genuinely did not know what their future plans were, all had at least a semblance of an idea of what area they may like to pursue. For many, usefulness was the predominant consideration in their subject choices, particularly for their Higher qualifications (whether that be in S5 or S6). Therefore, the subjects which were perceived to directly contribute to attaining that aspiration were subjects which young people were highly motivated to select. Understandably, there was sometimes an overlap with enjoyment - as people want to have a career in areas which they enjoy. As

personified by Fraser (S5, M, School D), when discussing their first awareness of the seriousness of the choices process they were undertaking, and the impact it may have on their life:

*Fraser - 'I kind of realised maybe around the end of 2nd year - around the time we were told about the choices. I can remember when we were told and I remember saying to myself - just pick the ones that I think will be good for my own benefit.'*

*Interviewer - 'By 'your own benefit' do you mean for getting a career in the gaming industry, or do you mean the ones you enjoyed.'*

*Fraser - 'A bit of both.'*

In discussion with participants, choices which have been themed as 'useful' were often described in discussion as 'important' but were in fitting with analysis for this theme.

### **9.3.2 - Direct applicability**

This theme illustrates that young people often view their subject choices pragmatically, as direct 'steppingstones' to attain their aspirations. The clearest manifestation of this was where young people had an unequivocal and direct link to their aspiration and a subject acted as a gateway to be able to reach it. Participants who raised this issue often talked of the necessity of subject, such as Margot (S5, F, School C) who, when asked about the priority of subjects in their choices said, '*...the ones I care about*'. *The ones that are going to get me to where I need to be*'. The focus brings in elements of disregard for other motivations, and other subjects, that are deemed irrelevant to ensuring an aspiration can be reached. The term 'need' is interesting in this context, as it denotes an absolute priority, and also has a finalism around it. It is indicative of this usefulness being the dominant - and perhaps only - motivation driving decision making at certain stages, for certain participants. Indeed, Clarke (S4, M, School D) '*really,*

*really*’ wanted to be a pilot, and had for some time. Though his fourth-year timetable was varied, with Practical Cookery and Modern Studies taken, he was starting to refine his timetable to be focused on the ultimate aim of flying planes:

*Interviewer* - ‘What was the motivation behind the other subjects that you’ve taken for next year then?’

*Clarke* - ‘Well, honestly I think all of them - I’ve taken all of them for a reason. Higher English I feel that’s completely necessary. If you want to be a pilot, I need Advanced Higher Maths and Physics.’

Such direct considerations predominantly came from participants who had long held aspirations, who had had the time and resources (in terms of family experience, work experience, or support from the school) to gain the accurate knowledge of what subjects they did indeed ‘need’. The accuracy (as opposed to misplaced perception) of which was strongest particularly among less deprived pupils, whose family had experience of the job market aligned with their aspiration. With Clarke, Higher English was described as a necessity to be able to access the qualifications - and employers’ requirements - he would need. As well as this, there were the Maths and Physics choices relating directly to the technical requirements of the career, which would be expectations of Higher Education institutions also.

Further exemplifying this was Jack (S5, M, School C). He wanted to be a primary school teacher - a conviction he had held since Primary 7. Further, he wanted to study Gaelic alongside Primary Teaching at University. Interestingly, Jack went to a Gaelic Medium Education primary school, but was on the ‘*English speaking side of it*’ and did not formally begin learning Gaelic before taking it up in S1. He highlighted:

*‘I wish I was in the Gaelic section in Primary because I was involved in the Gaelic choir, I played the accordion, so I was always in the classes with the Gaelic kids. But obviously never knew the language and it always annoyed me a bit so it was nice to finally learn it.’*

He was currently sitting the subject at Higher level, noting with regards to the choices he had made: *‘obviously Gaelic is a need, Higher English was obviously a need for a Uni course’*. Interestingly, and giving insight into the power of ‘usefulness’ as a motivator on learning decisions, Jack explained that he was the first person in his family to take Gaelic as a formal qualification. Despite siblings also attending the Gaelic Primary school, he explained that his brother had not taken Gaelic qualification because he did not have aspirations aligned with it:

*‘My brother wanted to do it when he came into 1st year - a couple of year before me - but he never had the push to do anything with it. At least I had the hope of doing something, so my parents kind of steered him towards French and the other Modern Languages - which they regret now’.*

This is indicative of perceived usefulness as a driver, as well as overt family influence on choices, which will be explored further in this chapter. Jack explained that the Speaking module of the course was one that he was struggling with, and that the lack of speaking it at home had hindered this, opting for use of the Duolingo languages app to keep his skills sharp outside of class. The case of his brother gives some insight as to how the prioritisation of ‘useful’ subjects over all else can help focus on achieving goals and aspiration, but potentially hinders the development of more holistic skills, and impacts (or completely kills) the development of interests.

Compulsory subjects for further and higher education course entry were the most dominant form of direct usefulness. This was where (normally university, but not always) courses require attainment of a certain level in a specific subject. Elizabeth (S4, F, School C) had taken English as *‘it’s the only requirement for Uni, they want [it] for law’*. Fourth year Matthew (S4, M, School B) - who wanted to study some form of sports science at university - explained that for his National 5 choices he was ‘between’ Chemistry and Business Management, but opted for Chemistry to compliment his choice of Physics as he was looking ahead to what universities may look for in their entry requirements and that he *‘wasn’t really going to do anything with Business [Management]’*.

While there is understanding that universities - for some courses at least - require attainment in relevant subjects, this highlights the power of institutions outwith the schooling system to directly influence on subject choices - and indeed curricular offer. The existence of compulsory requirements for specific subjects raises a question as to whether the opportunity to sit a course should be offered - regardless of resource or the curriculum structure in the school.

Margot (S5, F, School C), like Clarke, wanted to be a pilot, but in the Royal Air Force. She had very high attainment but had issues with the placement of subjects in the columns during the choices process over her years in the senior phase. This was in particular relation to being able to sit the STEM subjects required to gain access to Higher Education and training programs. Though the school had a consortia arrangement (as detailed in the previous chapter), it had not been possible for her to sit Advanced Higher Physics. The course was a required subject among many of the courses she had been interested in. She had an option to sit it outwith school on her own accord with a private provider, but the school did not want her to take on the load of work alongside her in-school responsibilities. She noted:

*‘My options were an absolute mess in 4th and 5th year because I couldn’t fit anything in and nothing I wanted was going ahead. It was just terrible’ and ‘I’m really not happy about not getting Advanced Higher Physics’.*

This shows the interrelation between curriculum structure and motivations. It is an example of how barriers created by what the school ‘offers’ impacts upon the subjects available for choice, regardless of motivation. Asked about the impact on university, Margot said:

*Margot - ‘Especially when they’re saying that everything is in the school, and this is your future - but they’re not helping us get there. To be a pilot I need my advanced Physics, and I can’t do it. So, I think it can be quite unfair.’*

*Interviewer - 'Do you think that is going to impact your university applications?'*

*Margot - 'Yes.'*

It was not always the case that it was university mandates which drove this motivation, it was true of colleges and apprenticeships too, though this was less frequent. This was due to twin factors of aspiration to go to university representing a plurality of aspiration amongst participants, and that other aspirations were more varied and fragmented. Fifth year pupil Fraser (S6, M, School D) had decided to stay on at school until S6 so that he could sit the subjects he needed to enter an apprenticeship in engineering. It had been his intention to leave after the current year of S5 but had recently become enthused with the idea of going on to be an engineer. He had been informed that the companies he was seeking to work with and the college where he would study required him to have Physics, Maths and Graphic Communication. He had not attained these in S4 or yet in S5. Part of the reason for staying on also was to allow for the extra time to secure an opportunity.

This shows the conceptualisation of a 'flexible senior phase' in a positive light, where Fraser's choices did not prohibit a change in course once his aspirations had developed and settled, and showed, in stark comparison to the experience of Margot, the school curricular structure being able to facilitate this.

### **9.3.3 - Perceived usefulness**

Also linked to this is findings around 'perceived usefulness'. These subject choices originate from the same motivation as the direct usefulness discussed. They are however, different, in that they rely on presumption and perception. So rather than *knowing* that a university course requires Higher English, there is a *belief* that a subject will be needed, or useful, towards the aspiration. Discussions on this often featured terms like 'I think' and 'probably need'. Perceived usefulness is where



young people did not know - whether through accessing a course website, engagement with employers, or family knowledge - that their assumption of 'use' was true. It is important to note that this did not mean that what participants were assuming was not the case, just that it was not directly confirmed that it was.

Demonstrating this, Elizabeth (S4, F, School C) - mentioned earlier in this chapter who wanted to study law - had dropped Maths from her timetable at the first opportunity because she did not *'think I need it for my profession or even for any of the uni requirements'*.

Millie (S4, F, School B) was an S4 who was thinking about a career in physiotherapy, medicine or *'something sciencey'* who was weighing up the usefulness of subjects for her S5 choices. This was even though she was not set on a direct aspiration, clearly stating that subjects which will contribute to what she will do after school was the most important consideration, and more 'academic' subjects are *'probably'* of more use:

*'I've kind of being deciding because I've got 6 that I would want to do [note: she had 5 options]. Maths, English, Chemistry, Biology, Modies, Physics and Drama because I do really like drama but I'll probably just stick to the other five and not do drama. The other five are probably more useful because I don't think I'd really do anything when I leave school that's to do with drama, drama would kind of be more for the enjoyment.'*

As with a driving factor of enjoyment, much of perceived usefulness was the selection of related subjects and taking several subjects in one particular 'area' such as STEM or social subjects. Charlie (S6, M, School C) had already applied to Law school, but stayed on until S6 due to not feeling ready for university as he was only seventeen years old. His S6 subject choices were Advanced Higher Modern Studies, Advanced Higher English, Higher Geography, and a new module in Mentoring in Violence Prevention, which was a leadership course where he did peer-to-peer sessions. He highlighted that *'I knew I wanted to do law so it makes sense to streamline it into subjects that were more applicable to the course in*

*that sense*'. These choices were related to preparation for university work, and better knowledge of subjects he perceived as important to a Law degree such as Criminology (a module within Modern Studies) and written expression (a skill learned in English).

#### **9.3.4 - Not knowing**

There were a minority of pupils in the research who did not know what they wanted to do after school, though they mostly had general ideas of what sounded good to them, or the areas they were interested in. These pupils still had usefulness of subjects as a motivator - more often perceived than direct.

Sophia (S5, F, School D) recently had the idea she might like to be a teacher, so had shifted her choices to make sure the option was open to her if she did choose to pursue this, once more showing a pupil taking advantage of the 'flexibility' offered in a three-year senior phase:

*'So, I just - I think I dropped Modern Studies in second year, social subjects it was called then - but then I picked it back up in 3rd year. I thought maybe I need this if I want to be a teacher.'*

There were a number of pupils where there was a sense of exploration and uncertainty in their choices, and future plans. This uncertainty affected their subject choices, as they were trying to keep their 'options open'. Others expressed a pressure to choose more 'academic' subjects due to their perceived importance for future employability or university admission. There seemed to be a sense that if there was a level of uncertainty young people would opt for subjects perceived (by them, the school, and society more generally) as 'academic'.

#### **9.3.5 - Subjects lacking perceptions of 'usefulness'**

The perceived lack of usefulness of subjects to the future - i.e. that they were perceived to not contribute to the realising of an aspiration - was a core influence

on these learning decisions. Even if some participants enjoyed a subject, they would not continue with it if it was not deemed useful. This of course brings about the same eventual decision (that the subject is dropped), but it shifts the iteration and the motivations within the process. There were a few direct examples of this, spanning across schools and across school years:

*‘Drama I did enjoy but I’m not sure, just in the future I thought I’m not really bothered about it’ - Ada (S5, F, School A)*

*‘Spanish isn’t something I use or plan on using so I didn’t really see any point in taking that on to a Higher level. Chemistry wasn’t really something I needed either’. - Ellie (S6, F, School C)*

Clarke, one of the aspiring pilots, dropped PE and Hospitality going into fourth year, explaining why, he noted that they were almost *‘leisure subjects’* which were dropped as he did not *‘really need’* them. There were also instances where young people dropped subjects that they did not view as useful, despite enjoyment and good attainment in them. Maya (S4, F, School D), an S4, who wanted to be a midwife, described why History - one of her favourite subjects - at National 5 would not be on her S5 timetable:

*‘I got good marks on my prelim and my teacher said that my assignment was really good by the looks of it but I just don’t feel that I need to take it on to Higher. I don’t really need it for anything....I might take it to Higher in 6th year or something like that.’*

This is again indicative of the relative flexibility that young people know they have open to them in a three-year senior phase, but also of the perceived role of sixth year described in the previous chapter, where young people see it as a year which was not as vital to their future progression, and one where more *‘leisure’* and enjoyment can be found.

## 9.4 - Importance

The theme of importance occupies space in both internal and external influences (which will be explored in the next chapter). In internal analysis it refers to subjects that the young people believe to be 'important'. This can be defined as subjects that young people regarded as important to their future, and general life skills. This differed from usefulness as 'important subjects' did not need to relate directly to their aspiration. They are not subjects the pupils identified as ones that they 'needed' to progress, but rather subjects they wished to attain in because they felt it important to do so. It is far more perceptive than usefulness and often reflected internalised views from external actors of what is 'important'.

Often 'important subjects' reflected what young people internalised from what the school, teachers, and their families perceived as important, in much the same way that their perceptions of usefulness were formed, having little to no actual experience of their own. Predominately, participants viewed Maths and English as the most important subjects. This was usually described in terms of the importance in literacy and numeracy given the transferability of these skills, and the basis that they allow for learning. Indeed, illustrating this finding Maya stated that *'Maths and English [are] more important because you need them for a lot of things. They're like 'base' subjects'*. Linked to this were some participants who discussed 'needing' these skills - not for direct access to future opportunities - but for learning and *'life in general'*. At the same school, Eleanor (S4, F, School D) wanted to be a Modern Languages teacher. She studied French and Spanish in S4 and was going to continue this into S5. The school was also seeking opportunities for her to add Italian to her options. Despite this she compared the 'importance of the subject areas':

*'You need Languages for a lot of things but you need English and Maths for everything.'*

This was fairly indicative of attitudes around the motivation of importance. It was clear in discussion that there were three main inspirations behind these attitudes.

The first was the societal importance that young people felt from upbringing, family, and perceptions of the skills employers and further higher education institutions value. This can be demonstrated succinctly in fourth year Nathan (S4, M, School B) highlighting that:

*‘People don’t really care about your ‘Dramas’ [meaning Arts/Creative subjects] but if you’re good at Maths that’s seen as important.’*

Though Nathan did note that the idea of importance was subjective, and showed the close link between importance and usefulness:

*‘It depends on what you want to do to be honest. If you want to be an artist then obviously art is pretty important [for the skills and interest]. It depends what career path you want to follow.’*

The second was the fact that literacy and numeracy skills are at the foundation of learning and young people recognised this, and lastly was the fact these two subjects were compulsory in the curriculum. The extent of this compulsion varied school-to-school, but broadly young people at schools in the research had to take Maths until at least S4 (until S5 in School B), and English until S5. While, as discussed in the previous chapter, there were other areas of compulsion young people had to negotiate their choices around, this would tend to be in subject areas, not specific subjects, except for Maths and English.

Some participants equivalised compulsion of subjects with their own conception of importance. As set out in the previous chapter on curriculum structure, while the national curriculum mandates certain subjects to certain levels, individual schools make certain subject areas compulsory through policy and the structure of their choices form. It is vital to note however, that importance attached to compulsory subjects cannot be understood as a motivating influence in the same way has been described, due to the fact they are compulsory. Participants raised Religious Education, Home Economics (though this was only the case in Broad General Education from S1-S3) and PE as important subjects for a range of reasons, including life skills, and health and well-being. These subjects are not for the

purposes of assessment and qualifications. Anna (S4, F, School B), with regard to core PE, said *'I think they're trying to keep us all fit and healthy and smart at the same time.'*

### **9.5 – The dominance of Usefulness**

The three distinct themes of internal influences and motivations are intertwined. There was not just one influence which drives every subject choice within a choices process, but different (and multiple) motivations negotiated regarding each individual selection of a subject. Usefulness however, presented as a dominant influence that was afforded higher priority when the balance between motivations was negotiated. This is exemplified in the case study of Jack

### Case Study: Jack's *'Useful Dilemma'*

Jack (S4, M, School C) was a fourth-year student at School C. Like many fourth years in the research, he had not yet settled on a specific aspiration, but was starting to form an idea of pursuing psychology. This was based on his interest in the subject, and an interest in *'how the human mind works'*. Though he had yet to sit psychology as a formal subject (it had not yet been an option throughout Broad General Education), it stemmed from enjoyment of human biology.

He had discovered before making his choices for S4 that in Psychology could be an option for selection in S5 (National 5) and then S6 (Higher).

In his current year (S4), Jack was taking: Geography, Modern Studies, Maths, English, Chemistry, Biology and Graphics, which represents a fairly broad range of subjects which the school's aim in the way it structured its choices for S4. He highlighted that the choices he made were linked to enjoyment of the subjects during BGE, and as discussed enjoyment of aspects of Human Biology had driven his emerging aspiration. Jack was in the process of making his choices for S5 when interviewed, and what subjects would be useful had begun to drive his decision making.

For S5, he had already decided he was taking: Psychology at National 5 level, and English, Maths and Biology at Higher level. All of these choices were due to the subjects being useful to getting into a career in psychology and - in the case of English - because it was compulsory (and important). For his fifth, and final choice, Jack explained his *'dilemma'* over whether to take Higher; Modern Studies, Geography or Chemistry:

*Yea, I'm on the fence about Modern Studies, Geography and Chemistry because they all would help with what I'm doing. Geography is technically a science and is also a bit easier than doing three [life] sciences. Modern Studies would help with the social aspects [of psychology] and criminology. Chemistry would just help with the whole endorphins and the way your mind works... I'm probably thinking what would be the most effective for me to keep in terms of either getting into university or being able to be employed.*

Interestingly, Jack expressed regret over the fact he had not taken any (what he described as) 'creative' subjects in S4, 'like Music or Art'. When asked about why he was not considering rectifying that regret, he concluded that it was too late to do so, dismissing enjoyment as a driving factor for S5 choices:

*'Since I've chosen all the academic stuff, I've kind of locked myself into a place and I can't really take those on to another area'.*

Jack was a stark example of how taking subjects that he enjoyed had (in his view) determined his future options, and that usefulness of subjects was driving his S5 choices where it had not previously done so. Fifth year pupil, Nathan (S4, M, School B) outlined negotiating exactly this:

*'This year, what I'm studying just now yeah [it was about enjoyment]. Next year it's Higher, it's a bit more about what you want to do after school and I'm more thinking about that. That's why I'm not sure if I can make up my mind between what I enjoy and what I think I should do.'*

These comments stem from Nathan weighing up whether to take PE at Higher or opt for two sciences, he was also considering dropping History that he enjoyed, but did not 'need'. This finding was also expressed clearly by others such as final year pupil Ellie (S6, F, School C):

*'I don't think until 5th year you know exactly what you want to do. I think you kind of just follow what you like and what you've enjoyed up until that point.'*

'Up until that point' is key in understanding the shift in motivation that Ellie experienced, as focus on life after school became the key driver over choices. This focus was also described by some as 'pressure', and that it becomes onset in more senior years:

*'In 2nd year obviously when you pick it's obviously more what you enjoy. I think, to be honest, it's only really hit in at 6th year that this is - it's something that's only hitting that this is what I need for the future. I've*



*always been like '5 Highers,' but you need actual subjects and specific things if you want to do. It only really hit in recently, to be fair'.*

Young people had a profound sense of importance around the need to prioritise useful subjects. Ada (S5, F, School A) described it as defining *'your whole future'*. The extent of the truth of that is of course far more complex, but it was the perception of Ada, and gives insight into why usefulness becomes a driving force, even though she did not know what she wanted to do after school. This seemed to just compound the pressure:

*'It is, because you're picking in 4th year and it's your Highers - I was just thinking 'it's just next year'. But you kind of have to decide for your whole future. Will you get into uni? What will you do? What courses? I think that is quite hard because the teachers say 'write down what you want to be' but I was like 'I don't know what I want to be.'*

Ada went on to illustrate the deep and nuanced connection between enjoyment and usefulness however, by stating she balanced enjoyment with what she thought might be useful to the future. Despite the aspiration of the education system to have a *'flexible senior phase'* where young people can take a range of subjects throughout their three years, it is not always the case. Young people face a situation where the choices they make in previous rounds of the process, influence the future subject choices they can make. This is simply due to progression of qualifications and their developing interest and base knowledge of a subject or a subject area.

This means that although, generally, the predominant internal influences shifts from enjoyment to usefulness, the *'useful'* subjects that are open for young people to select are determined by both the subject choices they made due to their enjoyability, and indeed the important subjects (and subject areas) defined by the curriculum structure through compulsion.

## 9.6- Conclusions

This chapter has provided an exploration of the types of internal influences that drive young people's subject choices, and the way in which these influences interact. It defined three distinct themes of internal influences: enjoyment, usefulness, and importance.

It then discussed the ways in which enjoyment, or the lack thereof, influenced participant's choices. Central to these decisions was the selection of subjects due to pleasure, interest, and connection to hobbies and extracurricular activities. Enjoyment was often the predominant influence over subject choices for S4 qualifications, before usefulness became the key driver in later years. Proficiency in a subject also played a pivotal role in determining enjoyment. A positive feedback loop exists where achievement and understanding amplified interest, leading students to further develop greater interest. Conversely, lack of proficiency or enjoyment led to a negative feedback loop, causing a decrease in motivation and effort. Interestingly, the aversion to certain subjects was not always holistic. Sometimes, it was specific components, modules, and modes of assessments within a subject that deterred students. This gives an important role for understanding enjoyment as the decisions made in earlier choices processes influence heavily the choice available in later rounds. This reinforced the importance of providing flexibility within the curriculum, allowing students to pivot and explore diverse interests.

The theme of 'usefulness' emerged as the predominant influence behind students' subject choices across the entire senior phase. This was indicative of a pragmatic approach wherein subjects are seen as facilitating towards post-school aspirations. Participants generally demonstrated an intricate interplay between aspirations and subject selection, underpinned by direct or perceived 'relevance' of subjects. The distinction between 'direct' and 'perceived' usefulness reveals is an important consideration. It's important to recognise that while direct usefulness offers clarity, perceived usefulness arises from assumptions, sometimes unsupported, about future requirements. It underscores the necessity for clear guidance and enhanced curriculum flexibility.

Importance was related to usefulness, in that the key driver of the motivation is how 'important' it was to the future - both concerning aspirations and general life skills. It however, was more perceptive and reflected internalised societal views of what is 'important' and what young people perceive to be so. It also spoke to subjects that were deemed important beyond careers. They were not subjects the pupils identified as ones that they 'needed' to progress, but rather subjects they wished to attain in because they felt it important to do so. While subjects such as Maths and English emerged as important to most pupils due to their foundational role in learning and their near-universal applicability, there was an evident reflection of societal values and priorities in these choices. The young participants' view of importance was frequently shaped not just by personal aspirations or interests, but also by how society, schools, and families prioritise subjects. Compulsory subjects, though not necessarily seen as pivotal for their future, still had weight in participants academic perceptions.

There was a balance between the internal influences that participants set out. A discernible shift from initial decisions based on sheer enjoyment in the earlier choices, to a dominant focus on usefulness and future aspirations in the more senior years was evident. Yet, this transition is not linear. Rather, it was heavily shaped on the aspirations and perceived future needs of young people, underpinned by the curriculum structure. Remarkably, the choices made for the enjoyment of a subject inevitably shape the choice of 'useful' subjects available later on, illustrating a cyclical influence. While institutions, curriculum structures, and demands and perceptions of aspirations have core influence over subject choices, the individual's personal motivations remain central. They are of course heavily intertwined with the external influences upon young people during the choices process, and this is explored in the next chapter. The three key internal motivations that emerged related to the motivation that external actors had for young people.

These findings highlight the intersection of social capital, individual agency, and motivation theories in subject choices. Enjoyment and interest-driven selection in earlier years aligns closely with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which emphasises intrinsic motivation as a key driver of engagement and

persistence. The positive and negative feedback loops between proficiency, enjoyment, and effort reflect Expectancy-Value Theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002), where students' expectations of success and the perceived value of a subject influence their motivation to continue.

As pupils progress through the Senior Phase however, there is a shift from internal enjoyment to other factors – such as perceived subject usefulness towards university, college, and career prospects – begin to outweigh enjoyment, illustrating a shift along the Self-Determination Theory process from autonomous to more controlled and focused motivation. From a capital perspective (Bourdieu, 1986), students with greater access to cultural and educational resources may be better positioned to balance enjoyment with strategic subject choices, while others may lack the flexibility to prioritise personal interests. Additionally, the ability to pivot subject choices underscores individual agency (Giddens, 1984), as students navigate institutional structures that both enable and constrain their decisions. This reinforces the importance of a flexible curriculum, ensuring that early choices do not unnecessarily limit future opportunities and that students can adapt their pathways based on evolving interests and attainment.

The following chapter will discuss the spheres of internal influence young people had over their choices, and the different ways and extents these operated.

## CHAPTER TEN: THE SPHERES OF EXTERNAL INFLUENCE

School pupils have various people, groups, and institutions who hold external influence over them and their lives. These influences, which govern elements of their life and sense of self, impact upon their aspirations, learning decisions and subject choices also. There are a range of external influences on subject choices that young people have to negotiate. They must negotiate these influences within themselves by weighing up the advice, and pressure, coming from external actors. Pupils also have to negotiate *their* wants, desires and aspirations (discussed in the previous Chapter on Internal Influences) with the wants, desires and aspirations that others have *for* them.

This chapter discusses the motivations behind external influences on subject choices. By presenting data on young people's own perceptions of the influences upon them and how they negotiate them - both between the various external spheres of influence, and with their own internal motivations - the chapter aims to situate the role of external influences.

It first introduces five spheres of external influence which emerged throughout the research and explores the often-all-encompassing nature of their influence on young people. It then goes on to describe the influence that teachers exert on choices, both in an 'indirect' and 'direct' manner, including the role of subject enjoyment, teacher direction, and the significance of the perception of importance on this sphere. Then it highlights the role of employers on specific subject choices, further developing the evidence of the significance of their influence on aspirations, which has been introduced in Chapter Seven.

The chapter then discusses the role of peers in the process and focuses on interesting divergences in perceptions of the role of friends described by parents and teachers, and young people themselves. There is discussion that relates to how there are misconceptions and misunderstandings of the - sometimes significant - role of friends. The highly significant role of family is described which introduces a range of different *types* of support that parents and siblings offer. Lastly, conclusions relating to external influences are drawn.

## 10.1 - Spheres of External Influence

There are five 'spheres' of external influence on subject choices which were identified during the process of discussing with young people who they consult regarding their choices and what influences them: teachers, employers, media, peers, and family. These spheres all impressed upon individual young peoples' learning decisions. All five had varied relations with the internal influences set out in Chapter Nine. External influences were often all encompassing, in that they prevailed both within school and beyond school. During the subject choices process, young people could not escape external influences, whether they constituted a major influence or not.

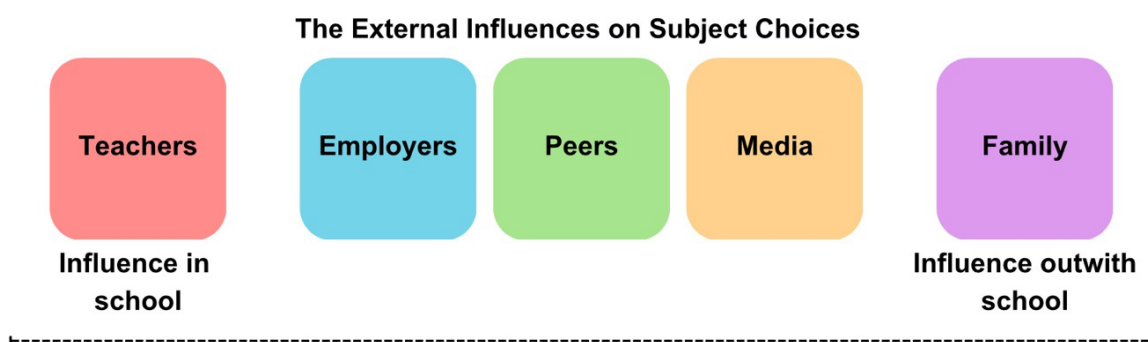


*Figure 10.1: The spectrum of external influences on school subject choice*

Clearly, the influence - both overt and covert (which will be discussed in detail) - of teachers happened within the four walls of the school, whereas the role of family existed at home. This relationship is illustrated in Figure One. It was apparent that the motivations of perceived enjoyment, usefulness and importance majorly impacted the decisions which external actors were trying to influence also. Each of these influences will be discussed.

## **10.2 - Teachers**

Every participant, when asked who they would speak to about their subject choices as they navigated the process, mentioned teachers and family members. The sphere of teachers included engagement with guidance teachers, senior management, personal support teachers, and class/subject teachers.

Teachers' influence on subject choice came in two forms: Indirect and Direct. Indirect related to influences that were not direct advice or instruction, such as enjoyment of a subject being related to liking a teacher and being inspired by them or being 'put off' by personality clashes between teacher and pupil. Direct influence relates to teacher gatekeeping, advice, and explicit direction.

### ***10.2.1- Trust in Teachers***

What could be observed was that young people generally had a high level of trust in their teachers when it came to seeking guidance regarding subject choices. A significant number of young people discussed how they would seek and rely on the advice of teachers when it came to their decisions. This trust was often established, it seemed, from a close student-teacher relationship. This meant that advice was often sought and taken not from 'all teachers' in general, but specific young people seeking advice from specific teachers. Trust also stemmed from the perceived expertise that teachers had - experience of school, in attaining university entry themselves, and in 'getting good jobs'. This specific perception was more acute amongst more deprived pupils, perhaps due to the narrower social networks they had exposure to.

Interestingly, the solid relationship of trust a young person had with a teacher when discussing their subject choices did not need - necessarily - to derive from that teacher's subject expertise. For example, Sophia (S5, F, School D) had discussions with her PE teacher regarding her choices in general, not just about whether PE should be considered. The relationship they had, had its foundations in the fact Sophia wanted to be a PE teacher, so his expertise was appreciated:

*Interviewer: 'When you're going through your choices form who, if anyone, would you discuss it with?'*

*Sophia: 'I'd probably go to Mr [X.]'*

*Interviewer: 'What's his role?'*

*Sophia: 'He is my PE teacher. I feel that - maybe because he's a PE teacher- I feel like I can trust him. Helping me get into PE teaching and helping me with what I need to know. But, Mr [X] is probably one of the teachers that I can go to anything with - if I'm struggling in Maths I can go and say to him, do you want to help me with Maths and he'd help me with Maths.'*

Within the relationships of trust young people had with teachers, enjoyment of their subject, or usefulness in developing understanding of how to reach a particular aspiration, featured heavily.

### **10.2.2 - Indirect teacher influence**

'Indirect' influence defines the themes of influence which were not direct and explicit direction from teachers to pupils. This type of influence was more subtle and relational. Indirect influence was inextricably linked to the internal motivation of enjoyment, in that liking a teacher (their personality and/or teaching style) could drive enjoyment, interest and then selection of a subject. Disliking a teacher, or their teaching style, could drive a lack of enjoyment and non-selection of a subject. This was summed up by Jessica (S4, F, School D):

*'When you were younger you obviously picked based on what teachers I liked and what ones I didn't. It's made - obviously you'd want to pick something, but you didn't like the teacher - so you'd pick something else instead of that.'*



There was a link evident between this and the ‘balance of internal influences’ previously discussed in Chapter Nine in that subject selection in earlier choices rounds, driven by influence of enjoying the teaching of certain teachers as described by Jessica, had a demonstrable impact on the options open to pupils in future rounds. The inter-relationship of internal and external influence continues when young people’s predominant internal motivation shifts to usefulness in later years, as the teachers - who often drive the enjoyment of subjects - become trusted to give advice on what will be useful to an aspiration.

### **10.2.3 - Teachers’ influence on subject enjoyment**

In one stark example, Jack (S5, M, School C) explained how enjoying the style of teaching of a science teacher had driven his motivation to take Physics for 4<sup>th</sup> year - even though the teacher in question was not a Physics teacher - but rather a Chemistry teacher who was covering staff absence:

*‘We had one of the Chemistry teachers who’d taken Physics in Uni, he took us and he makes every class a laugh and makes it kind of fun. So, I got a really big enjoyment from going into Physics...he was really nice and he made everyone laugh - but also he made it more interesting because he wouldn’t just talk to you, and make you write notes. He’d bring in new experiments he knew from Uni and he just made it entertaining.’*

Showing the power of this influence, Jack eventually dropped the subject for S5 because it turned out he ‘*hated it*’, in large part due to getting another teacher he did not like:

*‘[She] just kind of ruined Physics for me. So, I never took it.’*

There were several other examples of subject enjoyment driven by teachers, such as Millie (S4, F, School B) who took Chemistry because they and the teacher got on ‘*very well*’. The selection of subjects due to enjoyment of a teacher’s style was not always purely down to their work in the classroom. Some teachers had influence beyond their academic roles, providing emotional and general support

and serving as role models, which also impacted students' aspirations and learning decisions. Contrary to the positive impact of teachers on subject enjoyment, negative experiences of teachers tended to 'put off' young people from subjects they initially enjoyed or attained well in. Negative teacher-student relationships, and non-enjoyment of teaching style, could lead to a student 'dropping' a subject from their timetable from year-to-year. Liam (S5, M, School A) wanted to be a primary school teacher and had for some time. In S5 he was sitting Higher English, Geography, Music and PE. This suite of Highers was focused on attaining a university place after S6. He was also sitting National 5 Drama. When asked about the rationale for the choice he noted that he felt the workload of five Highers in S5 may have been too much (a position raised by a few participants in School A due to the school's curricular structure recognising that the option to do this may increase attainment), and that he was inspired to by one of the Drama teachers. Within this, Liam saw his Drama teacher as a role model, which influenced his decision to take the subject, and to continue to take it.

This brought frustration to young people. Among the participants who raised the issue, Ada (S5, F, School A), speaking about Maths - which was one of her two favourite subjects - discussed how she only started to enjoy it in third year:

*Interviewer: 'Was there anything that particularly changed about your enjoyment of Maths in third year?'*

*Ada: 'Well, at the start of school I really did not like Maths but then, I don't know, after 3rd year I just enjoyed it more....I got a better teacher...My first year and second year teacher, I didn't really learn that much from him. So, yeah that was much better.'*

Ada's experience is indicative of the experience of participants who raised the impact of negative student-teacher relations, or teaching style. In this case, it was fairly instant and transformative. Her interest in Maths did not wane, but it required a teaching style that she enjoyed to fully appreciate how motivated she was to study the subject, which she attained well in. Also at school B, Aria (S5, F) attained an A grade in both Drama and Modern Studies at National 5, but did not

continue them into Higher level in S5 because she *‘didn’t like [her] teachers’*, and was clear about the impact this can have, concluding *‘I feel like teachers can put you off doing subjects.’*

The negative impact sometimes meant that young people were ‘put off’ the formal subject at school, even though their interest, enjoyment and skill in the area remained. For example, Elizabeth (S4, F, School C) was disincentivised from taking Art from as early as first year due to not liking the teachers, but arts and crafts had remained a key hobby for her outwith school. Emphasising the power of teacher relationships over learning decisions, Elizabeth wanted to be a primary school teacher due to being inspired by other teachers she had liked throughout her time at school. It is important to note that young people’s contention typically was not that the teachers they were referring to were *bad* teachers, but that the individual pupil did not enjoy their style of teaching, or there was a personality clash.

#### **10.2.4 - Gatekeeping**

Direct influence from teachers was also a key theme. In all schools, there were formal processes that young people had to complete in order to both stay on at school beyond their legal age of requirement, and also to select each specific subject during their choices process. These processes meant there was ‘gatekeeping’ of access from staff, and by extension ‘the school’ regarding choices.

#### **10.2.5 - Staying on at school**

Increasing numbers of young people across Scotland are staying on at school until the completion of S6: currently 60% of leavers, with only 12% of leavers coming from S4 (Scottish Government 2022). In this vein there was relatively few participants who were planning on leaving school before they had completed sixth year. Participants were also not generally aware of many others who were planning to leave, unless they had a clear plan of what they were going to do, such as a confirmed university place or having secured an apprenticeship.

In every school staying on beyond fourth year required the agreement - and signature - of a teacher. This was either a Guidance or Personal Development teacher, or a member of the Senior Management Team (SMT). This meant that whether or not a pupil could access a choices process for S5 or S6 was controlled by the school. Generally, this would take the form of a one-to-one consultation between the pupil and the designated teacher. There would be a focus on whether or not the young person wanted to stay on until S5 (if they were currently in S4) or S6 (if they were currently in S5), and whether the school decided that this would be agreeable. A member of SMT at School C highlighted that it is extremely rare for a young person who wishes to stay on to be refused the opportunity.

#### **10.2.6 - Specific subject selection**

Following this process, a discussion would commence regarding the subject choices the young person was likely to make, with a focus on why they were taking each subject. This would largely focus on the relevant usefulness of the subject, and the chances of attainment in the course. This happened before each subject teacher or department head 'signed off' on the young person taking their subject. Ollie (S5, M, School C) described how this operated:

*'Then when you come in once you're done you talk to your Personal Development Teacher who goes through it and discusses the reasons for your choices and if they think it's okay. Then, once you've picked your subjects you need to go to a teacher - the teacher of the subject - and get them to okay, and sign ...'*

There were instances where teachers blocked pupils from taking their subject. Evie (S4, F, School D) originally wanted to be doctor, but had changed this aspiration to wanting to be a paramedic, potentially within an army setting. A key reason for this change, she contended, was that she could not attain in chemistry, and attaining grades in two sciences was a requirement. Explaining she *'didn't really 'get' the subject*, she explained that the opportunity to attempt it was stopped during the choices process:

*Interviewer: 'Have you ever changed a subject choice based on a teacher's advice?'*

*Evie: 'The Chemistry one - Mr [X] said I didn't understand it so he told me to drop it. So, I kind of had to, I never even had a choice.'*

This control was a clear example of the overt influence of teachers. Just as curricular structure dictated the choices that were available to young people, so did the 'sign off' processes, as discussed. These processes were open and transparent to young people and were performed with direct engagement with them. This is not to suggest that control over subject access in this manner should not happen, or that it is not in the genuine best interest of the young person, only that it was a clear influence on the choices available to some participants. How this can be seen in operation is within the 'Transfer Market' approach of some teachers, and discussed in the case study:

### *Case Study - 'The Transfer Market'*

The direction that some teachers made concerning subject choices sometimes strayed into promotion of their subjects, or the encouragement of certain pupils to take their subjects. This was particularly presented in discussions with pupils in School C, but elements of it were evident across other schools also. Although the direct examples were not great in number, the incidences that were raised can be conceptualised in a similar manner to how sports coaches/managers aim to sign players to their 'teams'. Teachers would sometimes explicitly promote their subjects - creating a 'transfer market' of sorts. Where this was raised as an issue in the research it concerned high attaining students.

Ellie (S6, F, School C) wanted to go on to get qualifications to be a personal trainer, which meant that attainment in PE was vital to progressing towards her aspiration. She however encountered other teachers disregarding the importance of taking it at a Higher level. In a stark example, she explained how a college based vocational course she wanted to do was disregarded, not viewed as useful as other subjects and how teachers would compete for subject selection, discouraging a range of other options:

*Ellie: 'I never took Higher Maths, I dropped Higher Maths to do Sports Leadership and I know that teachers were pure questioning me about that. I just knew for any course I was going to do within Sports, I wouldn't need my Higher Maths.'*

*Interviewer: 'When you had those discussions with them...did their attitude change when you explained what it was you wanted to do after school or did they still keep the same attitude towards it?'*

*Ellie: 'They understood but they said - for example the Maths department said that I should have dropped English and then English were saying 'no, drop Modies [Modern Studies].' Do you know what I mean. They all try and compete within each other to get you to study with them.'*

### 10.2.7 - Direction

Teachers also advised - and directed - students on course workload and future relevance (usefulness) of subjects, which was perceived by pupils as helping students to make strategic choices that aligned with their aspirations. Thus, much of the advice that came from teachers was linked to perceptions of usefulness of subjects, and indeed subjects with wider importance.

A significant proportion of young people noted that they felt Maths and English were viewed as the most important subjects by teachers and the school as an institution. Many felt that this went beyond compulsion to study these subjects (as discussed in Chapter Eight) by being strongly encouraged and directed during the choices process, and the amount of time and work that was prescribed to the courses in the curriculum. With regards to selecting these two subjects, some pupils had opted to take them purely based on the direction of teachers. Holly (S5, F, School B) wanted to be a Drama teacher, and unsurprisingly Drama was her favourite subject. In S5 she was sitting Higher PE, Maths, Drama and Religious Education, as well as National 5 English. She was staying on until S6 and was in the midst of the S6 choices process when interviewed. When advising that she would take Higher English, she noted she likely would not have without the pressure from teachers:

*‘Think it’s just teachers and stuff saying that you should do Higher English. If it was just up to me, I don’t know if I would. I feel it’s because everyone around me is saying ‘you should do Higher English.’’*

Jessica (S4, F, School D) explained how some of her teachers had advised her to take Administration instead of Computing (which she was originally going to take) because of the lesser workload and - as teachers apparently contended - there was a higher chance of a better grade.

Elements of teacher direction could involve discouragement of certain subjects, rather than proactive positive promotion. For the participants who were impacted, this revealed itself as teachers advising against subjects they did not deem as useful or important and could often lead to pupils feeling they had to further justify their choices to teachers who were not formally involved in the choices process. Jack (S5, M, School C) explained in detail some of his other teachers' reactions to his decision to take Gaelic. He felt he had to explain how it would be useful to him before there was an acceptance regarding the decision:

*Jack: 'They view Gaelic as very unimportant. [School C] pushes people to do it, but when you say to teachers you're doing Gaelic they either say 'that's useless,' or 'it's not going to get you very far.' You have to explain how you want to use it...Yeah, when you try and say to them - no, Gaelic has improved quite a lot of things for me. Not just in the subject but other subjects as well. Some of them become a bit more 'oh, okay, you have a path with it.' But a lot of them still have the thing of, in general, that language - not only the subject - but language is useless. They just have that kind of thing of you'll never have to use it so what's the point in learning it. That's kind of annoying - you do have to explain yourself to them of why you're taking it.'*

Other instances of teachers exerting influence over some subjects - and some subject areas - were evident. All related to teachers' perceptions of lack of usefulness and importance and brought a perceived 'snobbery' of sorts against more practical subjects. Abigail (S4, F, School A) faced direction which made her feel uncomfortable and deterred from taking Engineering as an option. She aspired to study Product Design at university and had taken some advice on Engineering being a useful subject towards aiding understanding of what would be included in the course. She was however 'put off' taking it in S4 as a teacher had advised her against because she was a woman. Though it must be noted this was the only type of such discrimination that was raised, and inspired a parental complaint:



*Abigail: '[She] said that there wasn't many girls doing engineering at that point and that I shouldn't do it because of that.'*

*Interviewer: 'Really?'*

*Abigail: 'Yeah so, my mum made a complaint about that so she was just a bit like, that didn't help as much.'*

*Interviewer: 'So, it was a bit off putting then?'*

*Abigail: 'Yeah.'*

While there were sex-based differences evident within the subject choices of young people in the research - there were more women selecting arts subjects such as Drama and Music, and more men who selected Physical Education and Practical subjects for example - there was little evidence beyond Abigail of advice and direction towards or against subjects on account of gender alone.

Zara (S6, F, School A) was in the process of applying for modern apprenticeships in Accounting. She described Accounting as a '*passion*' that she had developed. Consequently, Accounting and Maths at a Higher level had been subjects of core usefulness and importance to her. She however, also enjoyed '*creative*' subjects and in S6 had taken Higher Drama, and in S5 had taken Higher Art. She encountered teachers who ascribed a '*hierarchy*' to subjects, a position she disagreed with despite her aspiration.

What can be observed altogether is the significant influence that teachers have over subject choices. This takes an indirect and direct form, where relationships between teachers and pupils play a role in influencing learning decisions. Although all pupils noted the role of teachers, it was the case that pupils in the more deprived schools, and from the more deprived postcodes, were more likely to discuss the direct impact of teacher influence. This was especially the case

surrounding seeking advice and receiving direction regarding university entry. This is linked to the findings in Chapter Seven on aspirations, whereby young people with higher levels of deprivation aspired to become teachers or to access university through exposure to teachers - sometimes one of few professions they had detailed knowledge of.

### **10.3 - Employers**

As widely discussed in the Chapter Nine in connection with the internal motivation of usefulness, universities and colleges represented a significant sphere of external influence on subject choices. There was little evidence of industry employers doing so directly on specific subject choices, they exerted influence on the choices process by influencing aspirations - influencing the overall aspiration of young people that would become the framework with which they thought about all of their choices.

The lack of influence in this sphere from industry employers is perhaps indicative of the distance some employers feel from the ability to meaningfully engage with schools. During an expert interview a policy officer from a representative body of businesses explained that while their members were able to access events such as careers fairs, or offer work experience placements, they struggled to consistently access Developing the Young Workforce structures which would enable them to provide more engagement and support in the curriculum of subjects. They expressed frustration that their members were keen to do much more to aid young people's experience of education and help them prepare for the workforce, thereby also improving the skills pipeline to themselves. They noted that their members only find success in providing such engagement where there exists a partnership or a keen interest from a headteacher or other staff at a school, rather than DYW structures allowing for partnerships being consistently facilitated.

The key element of this external influence in this sphere was the criteria that universities and colleges set for admission to their degrees and courses. It was the predominant driver of the internal influence of perceived usefulness of subjects. As discussed in Section 5.3, universities and colleges have been included as an

‘employer’ influence as they are exerting influence on young people in much of the same spaces as industry are, such as the careers fairs and whole cohort assemblies which have been discussed. They also shape aspirations in much the same way, particularly in the development of usefulness towards attaining a college or university space as a motivation which drives subject choices. While this influenced aspirations generally and significantly drove internal motivation, there were instances of direct employer influence over the choice of specific subjects. Ella (S5, F, School B) wanted to do *‘something with Maths or Physics’* after leaving school. She was considering engineering but was not quite set on that yet. Her timetable in S4 and S5 was heavily stacked towards STEM - as was encouraged by the school culture and facilitated by the school through its curriculum structure. When considering her choices for S6, she had decided to take Advanced Higher Physics following discussing her options with a representative from the University of Glasgow at a careers fair organised by the school. She noted that she asked if Advanced Higher Physics would be of benefit to her application to attend the university and that she *‘was quite set on it after speaking to them’*.

Millie (S4, F, School B) - following discussions with employers at a fair - was going to take Chemistry in S5 as she gained their perspective that an A in Higher Chemistry would be *‘worth’* a lot when it came to applications. It was often the case that this direct influence confirmed the choices that young people already had in mind, rather than changed them. This was because young people often already had a strong draw towards a specific subject. This was usually inspired by enjoyment or usefulness but included external influences also. It was clear, however, that the opinion and influence of employers was taken seriously and would often be the confirmation needed for commitment to a certain subject.

#### **10.4- Media**

As discussed in Chapter Seven, media influence was stronger in shaping the broad aspirations of young people rather than on specific subject choices themselves. In a small number of cases, the media did have a direct impact on choices, however.

This was most prominent at School C in relation to Beauty and Hairstyling, which had seen an increase in pupils wishing to take this or similar courses. The school had recently completed a purpose-built facility to teach the course (to its own pupils and those of other schools as part of their consortia arrangement) and had also been in discussions with local colleges to facilitate it as part of the colleges' curriculum offer. A member of staff highlighted that demand for courses in Beauty was predominantly driven by the social media influencer Jamie Genevieve.

Jamie Genevieve is an international hair and beauty social media influencer, who has millions of followers across a range of platforms. She rose to fame through online reviews and tutorials of make-up and has launched her own ranges of cosmetics with international brands as well as her own stand-alone brand. She has also been named in the Forbes *'Thirty Under 30'*, which details the thirty most influential early career individuals in certain industries (Stroller 2023). Key to her influence in School C was that she still lived locally to the school and started her career studying at a local college. A teacher at School C discussed the impact:

*'It is quite amazing really, increasing numbers of young people are seeing the potential of YouTube, Instagram and things like that as viable routes for them...Hair and Beauty has been in such demand due to the success young people see and the inspiration they have coming from influencers. A few of the girls here have siblings and friends who know Jamie [Genevieve] and have been asking for ways to study some of the courses.'*

Discussing whether this influence meant that young women in the school were all set on being involved in the beauty industry, the teacher noted that this was not the case en masse. They highlighted that pupils were keen to explore it as an option or wanted to do the subject due to influencers impacting their interests and enjoyment. The teacher noted that within this there was a large element of peer influence, whereby the (social) media influence was impacting on some young people, who would get their friends interested, and then it became a self-fulfilling craze of interest. There was no evidence of traditional media in influencing the selection of specific subjects, though it did have a role in impacting on some young people's aspirations, which shapes the way in which they select

subjects as detailed in Chapter Seven.

### 10.5 - Peer groups

The majority of participants identified friend groups as a key sphere they would talk to regarding the subjects they were thinking about taking, and the repercussions of each subject on their enjoyment of the next year. Peer influence related to the influences over choices that stem from individual friends and friendship groups which were in the same stage of school and choices process as them. There were many facets to peer influence which encapsulate more than just a direction towards a choice, but comprises a sphere where advice is sought, discussions are held, there are aspects of emulation and planning in choices, which extends beyond the four walls of the school into young peoples 'personal life'.

There was an interesting divergence between the perceived influence of friends, from parents and teachers, and pupils themselves. A representative of a national parent organisation highlighted that parents felt there was a '*friend group factor*' where pupils consider whether '*their friend is doing a subject*', and that direction is needed to discourage this. Similarly, a Senior Management Team member at one of the schools noted that schools see the risk of pupils taking subjects just because their friends do. The 'risk' - as perceived by teachers at the schools - would be that choices could be made based on peer influence instead of pupils taking subjects which were useful to their aspiration or that they enjoyed.

Pupils themselves described a situation where there was not generally any direct influence exerted from peer groups but that there were often discussions on mutual interests that surrounded what subjects everyone in a group was taking and why. Any direct influence that was raised was said to relate to *other* people, but generally not to the participants themselves. This perhaps speaks to young people not wanting to admit peer influence rather than the fact it did not exist:

*'They'd [friends] talk, but that didn't really affect me because a lot of my friends took subjects that their pals took and now, they hate the subject.'*  
- Orla (S5, F, School A)

Holly (S5, F, School B) described being influenced by her friends to take Modern Studies - a subject which is focused on politics and society - so that she could keep up with their interests. She explained why she was 'crashing' it:

*'This is more my pals [influence] actually. Obviously, there's a lot going on with politics and stuff like that. They were sitting talking about it because a lot of them know about it and I was sitting there like I've not a clue what they're talking about, but I really want to know. I was saying this to my Pupil Support [Teacher] and he said "Why don't you take politics then and you can find out? So, I thought 'why not.'"*

Holly raised an interesting situation where the influence that was guiding the subject choice was not usefulness, importance, nor particularly enjoyment, but as a way to facilitate keeping up with her friend's interests. Holly's experience with relation to Modern Studies was a rare example of subject selection as education for the generation of knowledge in and of itself, without considerations of how it impacts post-school pathways, nor internal motivations such as enjoyment.

#### **10.5.1 - Discussions with friends**

##### ***Future aspirations***

It was common for young people to discuss their future plans and aspirations with their peers. The subjects that young people were intent on taking, and the relationship to what they wanted to do, was a key focus of peer-to-peer discussions during the subject choice process. The influence of peers in this context varied from encouragement to the pursuit of specific aspirations to increasing curiosity about certain subject areas.

### ***Subject choices***

Participants repeatedly mentioned discussing subject choices with friends. There were several different purposes of these conversations. Many discussions that were highlighted simply related to the fact it was a major event in everybody's life and so naturally it became a topic of conversation.

### ***Peer confirmation, not influence***

Contrary to the views of parents and teachers, who viewed peer influence as significant and introduced strategies to minimise it, many participants suggested that while they discussed choices with their friends, their choices were not necessarily swayed by these conversations. Rather, the subjects they were already considering taking were confirmed. Thus, they described a process of peer confirmation, not direct peer influence. This was generally the case across schools and across school years. Alice (S6, F, School D) highlighted the typical perception of the influence of friends when describing that she had approached her friend for advice on the basis of the choices her friend's sister had made:

*Alice: 'I think I would discuss with my pal, because she - her sister done all the subjects, so she'd be able to talk to her sister and see what the courses were like.'*

*Interviewer: Yeah, I see. So just to get actual information about the courses? Have you ever changed any subject choices based on that?'*

*Alice: 'No...it's just kind of confirmed it.'*

Reuben (S5, M, School B) had an ambition to be a physiotherapist and had a keen interest in sports and fitness. He studied a broad range of subjects in S5 including National 5 History and Chemistry. He was staying on to S6 to gain a bit more 'freedom' in the year, but also to study Advanced Higher PE and Higher Biology. These were subjects that he was already thinking of taking, as they were useful

to his aspiration, but also - in the case of PE - because his friends were also interested in it. His choices were influenced by discussion with friends and family. It was generally the view of pupils that they did not receive direct influence from their peers.

### ***Free time, not subjects***

The co-ordination of timetables between friends in order to have the same free time - even if studying different subjects - was apparent. Several participants discussed trying to match up 'free periods' or 'study time' with their peers. This tended to only be an option available to pupils in S6. As discussed in Chapter Eight, pupils are often allowed to take just three or four subjects in S6, particularly if they are studying Advanced Highers, which come with a 'personal study' component. This means that if subjects are selected from the same columns - even if they are not the same subject - then the free periods pupils have will match with those selecting a subject from the same column.

Robert (S5, M, School D) highlighted that this consideration was the only real peer influence that impressed on him:

*'I don't think [friends] would influence what I chose. Maybe, if picking a study period we'd try and get the same study period, but other than that, not really'.*

Michael (S4, M, School D) outlined how he would discuss subject selection with his friends so that they could get time off together:

*'I'd speak to friends about it. Especially in 6th year, you speak to them so you can try and get your free periods in the same column if possible.'*

The influence of friends therefore would appear to be complex, and there are two opposing positions regarding peer influence held by young people on one side and parents and schools on the other. It is clear that friends are a key source of advice



and support, and offer a space where young people can explore their choices away from the eyes of 'authority' in the form of teachers and family. Pupils also place trust in their peer groups with regards to discussing their aspirations. This was evident in all schools and across social backgrounds. Elements of why these discussions take place are clearly to seek advice - and in turn - influence choices. Much of the discussion happens however because it is a major, and communal, event taking place in the lives of all peers in a group.

The perceived influence of friends from parents and teachers - as opposed to the evidence given by pupils - is so significant that it is a point of concern of these groups, and so-much-so that warnings are to ignore the influence of friends is inserted into information provided to parents. This is particularly in relation to a fear around subject choices impacting on the future options open to pupils after they leave school. On the contrary, pupils deny that there is such direct influence over their choices from their friends, describing a situation where there is more a process of confirmation than influence that comes from discussion with their friends. Some young people noted also that while other people may be influenced by their friends, they themselves were not. The findings show that the reality may be somewhere in between the two positions. It is clear that there is an influence from friends. Even though there is a process of confirmation that happens within discussions with friends, this still has an influence over the decisions.

## **10.6 - Family**

Family influence came predominately from parents, but where young people had older siblings - often who had went to the same school - there was influence from brothers and sisters too.

## **10.7 - Parents**

Michael (S4, M, School D) raised parents as a predominant influence who he would consult. He noted that the consultation he would have with them was based around his thoughts on which subjects he might take:

*'I'd speak to my parents about it as well. Just 'this is what I'm taking, this is what I'm wanting to do.'*

He also noted that *'they need to sign off on the sheet anyway'*, and this was the practice in every school. It was necessary that parents sign off the choices form alongside the pupil, giving an effective veto and a significant level of formal influence over the choices process. Parents were a near universal sphere of influence that participants discussed, and the sphere where the influence was strongest.

The level of formal engagement that parents have within the process can vary from school to school. A representative of a national parents' organisation (during one of the expert interviews) explained that the greater the level of parental engagement that is offered, the greater awareness that parents have of the process. This in turn can better align parents' expectations with that of young people and the school, and leave parent's influence less dependent on their experiences and guesswork:

*'Certainly, in [some] schools, [engagement] is very limited. Logistically, it's very limited, not least, because you know, every child is an individual, every family, you know, comes with its own interests, or agendas, or whatever. And schools can only offer generalist information, really...I think parents are often caught in this tension between high schools and young people, who want to be individual to make their own choices to do their own engaging, and their own dialogue. And that tends to shut parents out. And that's not to say that parents will have a different position from their young people, but it means that parents tend to not know as much what's going on.'*

Regardless of the level of formal engagement, the parent's representative was clear about the care and desire to be involved that parents have, stressing parents' aim in the process was generally to be supportive of their young people. It is important to note there was not one participant who said that a parent had refused to sign off on their choices form.

### **10.7.1 - Internalised ‘expectation’ and cultural influences**

It is important to note that threaded throughout parental influence was an expectation that their young people would advance as far as they could in Maths and English. There was a near universal perception from participants that their parents viewed the two subjects as the most important. Expectations related to wider ‘family culture’ could also be internalised and acted upon by young people, even when it was not an explicit part of a discussion with family. This was not a common theme but was raised by some participants. For example, Rosie (S5, F, School C), when selecting her compulsory language in S3 and S4, took French because her uncle lives in France. Similarly, Aiden (S5, M, School C) opted for Spanish because his family enjoyed holidaying in Spain. These choices are likely to be related to enjoyment, in that it is interest which has motivated the choice.

The starkest finding in terms of external influence was that parents seem to have a significant impact on students' choices, either by recommending - or directing - selection of certain courses, or by influencing their children's decision-making indirectly through their own expectations and encouragements. This was irrespective of school, background, or stage.

Maya (S4, F, School D), stating that *‘[my parents] just want me to do whatever makes me happy’* was indicative of the role that parents’ representatives saw them occupying - and that they seemed to generally do - but also stated:

*‘My dad and my mum don’t really want me to take PE because I don’t really need that for anything unless I want to be a PE teacher or in the Police or something like that.’*

This qualification of ‘freedom’ that Maya describes from her parents was commonplace in participants’ experience. Pupils generally exercised autonomy from their parents in making their choices, but within certain parameters that had been set for them. Similarly, Rory (S6, M, School D) had aspirations to be an apprentice joiner, as such he had chosen a host of practical subjects throughout

his senior phase. He discussed that his family were supportive of his ambitions and decisions so far and gave him the freedom to do the subjects he enjoyed. He however noted that there were some expectations put upon him:

*‘My mum and dad they said ‘if you just get your English and Maths, the rest you can do yourself, it’s up to you.’*

### **10.7.2 - Support and coercion**

Predominantly, the participants who raised the role of parents in their choices process suggested that parents were supportive during the process. This however was not universal, and there were some pupils who indicated that support could become coercion. Support could be understood in several key-ways: Facilitation, Advice, Direction and Coercion.

#### **Facilitation**

Facilitation related to young people being encouraged to follow their own interests, the subjects that they enjoyed, and to follow their own perceptions of importance and usefulness. Within this theme, discussion by participants generally related to more systematic processes facilitated by family to arrive at decisions on subjects. Harriet (S4, F, School C) explained that in her experience so far, her mother had been open and supportive of her choices, and through discussion with her and her sister, she had received guidance and assistance, but had still experienced freedom over her choices:

*‘Mum would be like ‘you choose what you want’. Because my sister’s been through it already she’s usually just been like ‘I would recommend you take these ones but only if you like them, if you don’t - don’t take them.’ They’ve helped me but it’s really just been up to me.’*

Given that S4s were the most likely year group to have no set career or educational aspiration - as they were the group in the research furthest from leaving school - it was no surprise that Harriet had not yet decided. Many other participants set

out how parents offered facilitated support through the process, often discussing with young people their strengths, weaknesses, interests and how subjects would advance them towards a certain aspiration.

Indeed, there was a strong link between parental influence and the parents' perception of subject usefulness to their young person's aspiration. Fraser (S5, M, School D) highlighted that both his parents had been involved in his school subject choices since the first round. In his view their support was positive and was based upon facilitating understanding subject-by-subject the impact it could have for him:

*'Yeah after [the family choices] assembly [my family get involved]. When my dad came home from work, I said to my mum and him 'right what am I doing about that?' And they were like "right, what's your options, what are you thinking of taking?" So, it was just a thinking it out, what are you going to do, what are you thinking of, what's the best options, what's your options for college - stuff like that. [It's useful] they've been helping me since 2nd year with it.'*

Fraser further explained how the systematic support was based upon the perceived usefulness of different subjects:

*'As soon as the thing came out they were like 'right, are you thinking of Art at all.' And I said 'Not really, what's the point in taking that?'. And they're like 'well, are you thinking of this, is there any interest in this.' Just kind of whittling it down to the ones that would actually be useful.'*

While Fraser described in the most detail of any participant of how facilitation worked for him, family engagement in this manner was a common 'type' of influence that was identified.

## **Advice**

Related to facilitation was parental influence exerted through advice. These discussions would be similar in structure to facilitation, in that they were viewed positively and focused predominately on subjects that were perceived as useful or important to the future. They however involved less openness in conclusion and an absence of clear advice about a certain outcome. Lilly (S6, D, School A) was certain about becoming an Early Years Teacher. She had failed to attain the grades that she needed in S5 for an offer to university but had secured a position on an HNC course at a FE College from which she could matriculate to her preferred university course's second year upon completion. One of the subjects she failed in S5 was Higher Maths (she did not take the exam due to a lack of readiness), and her mother advised her against taking it again for S6 based upon both her lack of enjoyment and attainment in it, and that she *'didn't really need it'*. Her mother concluded by asking a question designed to influence a certain outcome: *'do you really want to put yourself through that for another year?'*. Based on this influence Lilly took another subject instead.

Parents' advice did not always relate to the taking or dropping of subjects, but on the approach to the structure of the curriculum itself, and how young people should navigate through the three year 'flexibility' of the senior phase. Georgia (S5, F, School A), for example, discussed how her parents had advised her not to take music in S5 but instead S6 so that she could attempt to get the suite of Highers that a university would want in order to offer a place in Fifth Year. Part of this related to the fact that some of her subjects - due to attainment and workload - would need to be taken over two years to increase the chances of sufficient attainment. This showed a confluence of the school taking advantage of curricular autonomy (in facilitating a structure which allowed certain subjects to be taken over two-years) and parental influence understanding where advantage in that could be best sought (the knowledge and understanding of the advantages that taking a subject of that structure could have):

*‘Yeah, [they advised delaying Music] mostly because there was a few subjects this year that I thought I might need to take over two years. So, it would be good to get them started this year and then I can continue them if I need to. Rather than take them in sixth year and then running out of time to finish them’*

It was also not uncommon for young people to reject advice and be happy with their decision. For example, Ada’s (S5, F, School A) dad had strongly advised her not to ‘crash’ Accounting as she had never taken the subject before, and that he strongly tried to influence the decision not to take it. It however turned out that she took the subject anyway and was enjoying the course and was expected to perform well in her upcoming assessments.

### ***Direction***

The third identified type of support was Direction. Direction was exclusively linked to perceptions of importance and usefulness and operationalised as strong encouragement and direction towards certain subjects or subject areas. Direction discussions had stronger desired outcomes on behalf of the parent than advice discussions, but choices were not apparently forced. Direction was usually - but not always - viewed positively by young people as well, in that no regret over the subject choice was raised. Finn (S5, M School B) had recently developed his interest in STEM subjects into a desire to do Engineering at University. Originally, he had wanted to go into Medicine purely due to having high attainment in science-based subjects, but his rising enjoyment and interest in Engineering changed this. From S4 to S5 he had dropped French, History, and Art from his timetable, as he did not perceive them as useful to his aspiration, nor important for any skills he might need. He also dropped Home Economics, but he was originally going to continue taking the subject due to his enjoyment and interest in it. Instead, he took Computing Science *‘right at the last minute’* because his dad had directed him, given the usefulness of the subject to engineering. He expressed no regret in taking the subject but noted *‘he would rather have had taken something else’*, even if that was not Home Economics as he originally intended.

Direction was most evident away from subjects which were to be taken because of enjoyment, and towards subjects perceived as useful. Often the direction from one subject to another came when a young person had already decided to take the original subject. Direction was also most prominent at School B. In this vein, Reuben (S5, M, School B) explained how he was directed away from taking Geography into taking Biology as it was more closely aligned to his aspiration of being a Physiotherapist. This came from parents and his sibling:

*‘I was going to do Geography instead of Biology and then my mum and my brother - not forced me obviously -you do what you want- but they said they thought Biology would be useful because it’s just a useful thing to have and “Sport’s something you should look at.” It was just like “yeah, I’ll go for that.”’*

Further, Mason (S6, M, School A) exemplified that parental influence exerted through direction was always concerned with perceptions of usefulness, setting out:

*‘My mum was quite open...she tried to sway me towards a couple of other subjects like Physics because she knew it would be good on your CV and stuff - so that’s why I picked it.’*

### **Coercion**

Another key theme is that sometimes young people were coerced into specific subject choices. Parental influence exerted through coercion was operationalised through forcing a subject choice or subject choices. Coercion was primarily used *against* taking a certain subject, rather than forcing a young person to *take* a certain subject. Participants’ who described being coerced unsurprisingly did not view the decisions positively. Parental coercion was also linked to poor prior attainment in the subjects they were forcing young people away from. Whereas other types of parental influence were heavily linked to perceptions of usefulness and importance of subjects, coercion was much more closely linked to parental fears that their young people would not enjoy and/or not succeed in certain



subjects. It manifested as a form of protectionism, where they did not want them to fail at a subject or have a learning choice negatively impact on their future. Although there were examples of this at every school and across school years, it was most prevalent among more deprived students and the schools with the more deprived catchment areas in the research.

For example, Alice (S6, F, School D) was going to Further Education college to study Social Sciences. She did not have much experience of social subjects through the senior phase until S6 where she tried to introduce more. Her timetable was made up of Higher English, Higher Photography, Higher Geography and National 5 Travel and Tourism. She had previously completed Higher Psychology in S5 which - along with the fact her mother had also taken a Psychology Higher - inspired her college subject aspiration. In her current timetable, she also had Higher Biology, which served as an 'outlier' as it was a STEM subject in amongst a suite of Arts and Social Subjects. Discussing this, she described how she had been forced to take Biology:

*Interviewer: 'Have you ever changed a choice based on anything [your mother] has said or has it always just confirmed what you were thinking anyway?'*

*Alice: 'I did want to take Drama this year, Higher Drama. But, she made me change it to Biology.'*

*Interviewer: 'Really, why was that?'*

*Alice: 'She just said that I won't be good at Drama.'*

There were also instances of young people being dissuaded against taking subjects such as Photography. There was also dissuasion about taking up foundation apprenticeship opportunities. Evie (S4, F, School D) had wanted to take Psychology which linked up with the local college but was forced not to by her mother as,

like with Alice, she said Evie *'wouldn't be good at it'*. Aiden (S5, M, School C) had a similar experience, explaining how his subject choice process had seen his parents coercing his choices, saying that engagements with the subjects he preferred *"were useful" but at the same time it was like "you should do this or you shouldn't do that"*.

The link between parental coercion and a fear of the impact of decisions on their children's future was best exemplified by a small number of pupils who had felt forced into staying on at school. As mentioned in the chapter on curriculum structure, the first choice that must be made during the process of subject choices in S5 and S6 is whether to stay on at school or not. Evie explained how her mother had made her stay on, and highlighted that it was directly linked to her mother's fears about what leaving at an earlier stage would mean for her future opportunities:

*Interviewer: 'What is it that makes you want to [stay on until S6]?'*

*Evie: 'I don't want to. My mum is forcing me to do it.'*

*Interviewer: 'Would you rather leave now or would it be 5th year, if you could?'*

*Evie: 'I would leave in 5th year if I could....[she has mentioned] the fact that I won't pass anything and just drop out and become someone in McDonalds.'*

Coercion could also manifest as aggressive and lead to conflict between young people and parents. Tyler (S4, M, School C) was of Chinese descent and discussed how cultural approaches to education had led to his Mum being overbearing over the subject choices process, and education generally. He noted how he felt pressurised in making learning decisions:

*‘Pressure [over choices] from my mum because she finds it difficult to regulate her tone because you know how - Chinese people are pretty bad at screaming at their children.’*

Tyler’s mum applied pressure over selection and attainment in STEM subjects and English, which were unrelated to his aspiration to be a voice actor, and from which he took little enjoyment from. In much a similar way to how teachers’ qualification to offer advice beyond their sphere of knowledge (becoming teachers and university access), parents too vary in their ability to advise. Parents’ advice stemmed from what they knew (their direct experiences of school and work) or what they felt would be best for their children (their perceptions). Often where there was no set advice it was a product of parents not having experience of issues such as university admission, for example. The strongest advice - certainly when it concerned direction - came when young people had an interest in, or the ability to access, a profession in an area similar to what parents had.

### **10.8 - Sibling influence**

Older siblings, particularly those who had attended the same school, also had a significant influence on their younger siblings’ decisions about which subjects to take. Again, this stemmed from their experiences and knowledge. There were examples of participants following older siblings’ paths or learning from their experiences, such as staying on at school or getting insights about subject choices that they made. The influences from siblings varied in their motivations. Some were linked to the fact older siblings felt their younger sibling would enjoy a certain subject or subject area, while others were linked to perceived usefulness and importance of subjects. Young people clearly valued the opinions of their siblings and viewed their influence positively.

Sibling influence not only revolved around immediate subject choices but also long-term aspirations. This influence was particularly notable for those with recent experience at the same school. Awareness and preparedness for subject selection were heightened for participants with older siblings who had undergone

the same process. Siblings played a crucial role in advising and influencing subject choices. Participants expressed reliance on siblings' insights, which affected both specific subject choices and the overall decision-making process. The shared school context fostered an environment where perceived helpful advice was exchanged. Some participants indicated that siblings' interests could transfer to them, influencing their subject choices and fostering enjoyment of specific subjects.

## **10.9 Conclusions**

Interestingly, while there were notable differences in the curriculum structures and internal motivations that influenced the subject choices of different groups and those from different schools, years and social backgrounds, this was less evident with regards to external influences. The impact of the five spheres of external influence were relatively universal, although there were some instances where the influences were more or less powerful and where they operated in a different context. This was particularly evident with more deprived pupils more commonly experiencing parental coercion in respect of certain subjects.

Teacher influence was important at all schools, and at all stages. Generally young people had one particular teacher that they would have confidence in taking advice from and sharing their thoughts with. The influence of teachers generally was strongest when it related to young people who wanted to go to university or become teachers themselves. In these instances, young people had confidence in the advice and direction they were receiving as they perceived teachers to be knowledgeable on these matters. This meant that overt teacher influence was most evident over young people with high attainment who would have access to such opportunities after leaving school. It was also the case that S5s and S6s - who were closest to the point of leaving school - were more influenced by overt teacher influence. In a similar vein, teachers were gatekeepers of access to subjects, and - according to participants - often strongly encouraged high attaining students with the best classroom manner to take their subjects.

It is further apparent that educational institutions have a significant impact on the subject choices of students. This often appeared to work in tandem with the students' internal motivations and perceptions of the usefulness of different subjects, wherein the latter was frequently shaped by the former. Direct engagement between students and universities' representatives at careers fairs or open days served as a crucial arena for influence and information exchange. Students valued these interactions highly as they provided specific insights into the benefits of different subjects for their future academic and career prospects. The influence of industry employers over specific subjects was weak, with this sphere more evident in exerting influence through shaping motivations, though it was clear employers had frustration at not having the opportunity for deeper engagement. The influence of peers on subject selection among students was multifaceted. It was apparent that discussions with friends served as a significant platform for students to explore and confirm their subject choices and their future aspirations. However, these exchanges did not usually amount to direct influence over students' choices, according to participants. Instead, they acted more as a process of peer confirmation, strengthening the initial decisions students have towards certain subjects.

Parental involvement in subject choice significantly shaped participants' learning decisions, and was the most important sphere of external influence. Both direct and indirect engagements impacted students' perceptions and preferences, with familial expectations, particularly around core subjects such as Maths and English, guiding choices. Despite expressing autonomy, students' decisions tend to operate within pre-set parental boundaries. Furthermore, the influence went much deeper than explicit discussions, with internalised family cultures and experiences also shaping choices.

Three key modes of parental influence as support were identified: Facilitation, Advice, and Direction, and each were characterised by increasing degrees of parental involvement in the decision-making process. Although parents' intentions were to act in their child's best interest, the diversity of modes of influence highlighted the delicate balance between guiding and dictating choices. The findings echo the importance of the students' enjoyment and interest in a subject,

as well as the parents' understanding of subject usefulness, in shaping these choices. The chapter also reveals the significant power of parental influence in the subject choices process, which underscores the importance of parental education about the range of subjects and future opportunities available. The interaction of internal and external influences was complex, but it was clear that perceived usefulness of subjects was the main motivator behind the influence that external actors were trying to exert.

These qualitative findings align with social capital theory, individual agency, and motivation theories in explaining how particularly parental influence shapes subject choices. Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital suggests that parents leverage their knowledge, networks, and cultural resources to support their children's educational decisions, with varying degrees of involvement – ranging from facilitation to direct intervention – reflecting differences in social and economic capital. This process does not however negate individual agency; rather, students actively negotiate between their own interests and parental expectations, illustrating Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, where individuals operate within but also shape structural constraints. Additionally, the interplay between enjoyment and perceived subject usefulness exerted by the spheres of external influence aligns with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which differentiates between intrinsic motivation (subject interest) and extrinsic motivation (career utility). Together, these frameworks highlight how subject choice is shaped by a dynamic negotiation between external social influences and internal motivational drivers.

The aim of the next chapter is to discuss the findings laid out in the previous four chapters in relation to the research questions. But first, it will summarise key themes before seeking to triangulate discussions of the findings in relation to each other, prior literature and theory. It will also offer policy and practice recommendations for the UK and globally facing education reform.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN - DISCUSSION

### 11.1 Re-cap of key findings

The first part of the chapter discusses and situates the impact of the findings. The main contributions of the thesis are then discussed, before the research questions are considered in order. The chapter then discusses the fundamental role of curricular structure in shaping pupils' subject choices and aspirations. It emphasises the influence of exposure and experiences within the curriculum on the breadth of perception and the knowledge, skills, and qualifications of young people. The role of employer engagement, the difference in experience of young people experienced, and the influence of Further and Higher Education Institutions are further considered.

Finally, the chapter discusses the policy implications that stem from the findings. While there is a plethora of existing policy reviews and recommendations in the landscape of Scottish education, it is not the aim of this section to further review these recommendations, or to simply re-state them but to situate the findings in the context of practical policy changes that could be made.

This chapter aims to synthesise and critically analyse the findings presented in the previous four chapters, situating them within the broader policy context of subject choices in Scotland. The research employed triangulation by integrating insights from various qualitative sources—to provide a multi-perspective understanding of the influences on subject choices in the senior phase. This approach enhances the reliability and depth of the findings by cross-referencing student experiences with expert interpretations, as well as the curriculum structure in schools - allowing for a more nuanced analysis of how structural factors and individual agency interact in subject choice. These findings firstly provide answers to the three foundational research questions, their sub-questions, before more critically exploring policy and practice recommendations.

In sum, the present study reinforces the knowledge that secondary school choices in Scotland are deeply embedded within broader social inequalities, shaped by factors such as socio-economic status and even within this small geographic

sample - affected by school location and demographics. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) theories of habitus and capital, the findings support that, while Scotland's education system aims to provide equal opportunities, disparities in influences and aspirations, institutional practices, and access to curricula continue to reinforce educational stratification (Reay 2017). The introduction of the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) was intended to create a more flexible and inclusive educational framework (Priestley & Minty 2013) however, this research highlights how school subject choices remain structured by social background, with less deprived students disproportionately benefitting from access to academically advantageous pathways through the school structures, and influences which they are negotiating during their choices process. These patterns raise critical concerns about the effectiveness of current policies in addressing educational inequalities, and the discussion below - though grouped by research questions - ends with recommendations for the future of Scotland's secondary schooling system as the process of structural reform continues.

Looking ahead, future research should further explore how post-CfE reforms are shaping subject choice and long-term student outcomes, particularly in relation to socio-economic disparities. Emerging studies indicate that despite the curriculum's emphasis on breadth and skills-based learning, inequalities persist in subject availability and uptake, particularly in STEM and advanced-level qualifications (Shapira & Priestley 2020). Comparative research across different Scottish regions, as well as longitudinal studies tracking student trajectories, would provide deeper insights into how structural inequalities evolve over time. Additionally, investigating how students navigate subject choice in the context of broader policy shifts – such as the Scottish Government's commitments to closing the attainment gap (Scottish Government 2021) – will be crucial in assessing the long-term impact of educational reforms on equity and social mobility.

Furthermore, it is hoped that this research contributes to ongoing debates on the intersection of education, social class, and policy in Scotland and beyond. As socio-economic inequalities continue to shape educational opportunities, there is a need for more targeted interventions which equal access to the curriculum and resulting opportunities are not dictated by background but rather by interests and aspirations. There is also the extent to which issues of educational inequality are



not that of the education system to address but rather are to do with the reduction of broader social inequality. That said, strengthening school guidance systems, widening access to diverse subject offerings, and critically evaluating the implementation of CfE can help mitigate existing - and future disparities.

The main findings explored below more specifically focus on the internal and external influences which emerged around subject choices, then discussing the complex inter-relationships and balance within and between these internal and external influences combined with short and long-term motivations, individual agencies, and with a focus on the multifaceted relationship between the influences.

## **11.2 - The contribution of the thesis**

There are four main contributions to this PhD. These contributions are triangulated and built on the knowledge generated from each other. Detailed discussion of each is included within the consideration of the research questions below but are set out in broad form within this section.

The first key contribution is the development of understanding around what the internal motivations of young people are, what are the main spheres of external influence, and how these are negotiated (and are explored from Section 11.3 below). Although the internal influences which are identified - Enjoyment, Usefulness, and Importance - are evident in various forms within existing literature, this study contributes unique definitions to these motivations (as set out in Section 9.1), separating out the sometimes drastic and sometimes subtle differences between them. Further, this study highlights how these motivations are also what informs the influence of external actors and offers insight into the relationship and balance between how these influences are applied. Particularly, it highlights the dominant role of usefulness in influencing internal motivation towards choices, external actors, and the formal process young people must go through. Crucially, the thesis provides an insight into what is influencing young people in contemporary Scotland when it comes to their subject choices and adds some 'pupil voice' to issues which have been a key policy focus.

Secondly, and further to the findings on usefulness, the research demonstrates

the pivotal role of aspirations in influencing choices. It highlights that the influences on aspiration are in turn influences on subject choices. Central to this is that aspiration is linked to family networks which serve to broaden perceptions of post-school pathways and increase knowledge of the processes that need to be negotiated to achieve aspirations. These advantages the already advantaged and creates a 'Perception Gap' (discussed in Section 11.3.3), where more deprived pupils have a narrower perception of what is possible to aspire to and the knowledge needed to attain it. It demonstrates that there is not so much a need to 'raise aspiration' among any group of young people, but more of a need to broaden the perceptions of young people to what destinations may be achievable and the processes of how they can be attained. This was particularly the case for young people who had a narrower exposure to careers through their own social networks and highlights a key opportunity for employer engagement to broaden perceptions and shape post-school pathways.

Thirdly, the research provides insight into the impact of the changes to curriculum structure that CfE, and to a lesser extent DYW, have had. This builds on previous quantitative research focused on the narrowing of curriculum width and issues surrounding curriculum breadth and depth and adds a wealth of contextual detail as to how these issues are impacting on the choices, and chances, of young people. The research affirms that the choices that young people have open to them in Scottish education are significantly shaped by chances based on social determinants. What is more the width and breath of the curriculum that a pupil will have the opportunity to experience is heavily a product of the school they happen to attend, and therefore of where they live given a school system structured around catchment areas.

Lastly, this thesis contributes to the broader literature on educational policy and social inequality by demonstrating how still developing curriculum structures under the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) and Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) influence young people's subject choices and, by extension, their future aspirations and life chances. By highlighting the disparities in curricular opportunities between schools serving young people from different socio-economic backgrounds, this research adds to the literature on how educational policies can reinforce social inequalities. This work aligns with and extends

previous research by scholars such as Barrance and Elwood (2017), Scott (2018) and Shapira et al. (2023), who have examined the impact of curriculum structures on educational equity.

### **11.3 RQ1 What are the main influences over young people's learning decisions under the Curriculum for Excellence?**

The research is structured in such a way to investigate the influences on young people in two broad domains: internal and external influences. As is developed throughout Chapter Nine, these generally can be understood as internal motivations and the attempted influence over decisions sought, or exerted, from external actors whether they be individuals, groups or institutions. This research defines three internal influences): Enjoyment, Usefulness, and Importance. While these are themes broadly evident within the existing literature (as set out in Chapter Three and the discussion to follow), the findings further develop the definitions and differences between the influences in some important ways.

Enjoyment is linked to the pleasure of studying a subject. There are three main factors which young people identified as contributing towards enjoyment of a subject. The most pertinent of these was pure interest and pleasure for a particular subject or subject area. Consistent with Blekinsop et al's (2006) research which found that the majority of participants noted interest and 'enjoyment' as integral to selecting it, this study found that the motivation of young people to take a subject based on enjoyment alone was a factor in many subject choices. This research, however, found that these subject choices are often Arts based subjects, or that the subjects they identified as taken for 'enjoyment' seemed 'random' when their suite of choices were considered as a whole, with the rest of the choices often being linked to usefulness or importance. This extends understanding from previous work of how the balance of motivations are applied. Secondly, further to quantitative research which found 4-in-5 pupils being motivated to take a subject in early choices phases due to enjoyment (Davies et al. 2008), this research found that proficiency and good attainment (in terms of formal qualification grades) was a key factor driving enjoyment also.

Third, as was also found in Palmer, Burke and Aubusson's (2016) research, young people in the present study also attributed enjoyment of teaching style, or liking the personality of teachers, to enjoyment of the subject. This was also the case in reverse (not liking a subject so consequently not taking it). Crucially, enjoyment was found to be of most salience in earlier rounds of choices (for S4), with usefulness becoming the predominant motivator in later years of schooling. This echoes both Blekninsop et al's (2006) conclusions that the importance of enjoying a subject towards selecting it declined as the year of school became more senior, and findings from Ofqual (2017) which found that at earlier stages there was increased motivation to select enjoyable subjects regardless of future envisioned challenges. Though of course it is important to note that, just as identified by research which found that enjoyment and utility to the future can be linked (young people will want to aspire to do jobs linked to what they enjoy) (Stables and Wikeley 1999) there are inextricable links between motivations identified by this study, and these are explored further in Section 11.3.1 below. This research suggests that choices made for enjoyment influenced later choices of 'useful' subjects, demonstrating the cyclical nature of internal influence.

'Usefulness' - the perception that a subject was needed or would be useful towards attainment of an aspiration - emerged as the dominant influence for students in the senior phase, driven by a pragmatic approach aimed at aligning subjects with post-school aspirations. This finding demonstrates the integral nature of what a young person's aspiration is, and how it is influenced, as foundational to understanding the influences on subject choices. Young people place the most importance on usefulness when making their choices, which was also found to be the case in Foskett et al's (2005) research which noted that the perception of how crucial a subject is to the future was paramount. This research found that usefulness is all-encompassing in its dominance in influencing subject choices and was vital too in earlier choices rounds in S4. This was in contrast to studies such as Blekinsop et al. (2006) which found few pupils at such a stage made a direct link between earlier choices and post-school destinations. This perhaps points to pupils in education in the 2020s being more focused towards consideration of careers in their choices. It is interesting to note that aspirations were a feature of some of the participating schools' choices forms. What is important concerning the definition of usefulness within this study is that what is perceived as 'useful'

will vary from pupil to pupil based on what their own particular aspiration is. This is a clear operationalisation of Rational Choice Theory (Green 2002) where young people are focused on their future career predominantly when making their learning decisions. This is in contrast to studies that identified core subjects in areas like STEM as 'useful' (e.g. Palmer, Burke and Aubusson (2016)), as this study found a more focused definition of 'importance' for such subjects. Indeed, a key contribution of this research is the distinction between usefulness and importance in influencing choices.

While usefulness is the dominant consideration, importance is also perceived as a high priority. This influence reflected motivation based on future significance in both aspirations and life skills. Though usefulness and importance were linked, interestingly while usefulness is unique to the individual, the subjects which were viewed as 'important' were near universal regardless of the school of attendance, stage, background, or aspirations. Importance revealed a perceptive aspect influenced by societal views, beyond just career relevance, and linked closely to literacy skills (English) and numeracy skills (Maths). Crucially, importance's major influence over choices was that these subjects tend to be - until a point - mandatory subjects and reflect a large proportion of the subjects young people will study.

The research identified five spheres of external influence which had relatively universal impacts: Teachers, Employers, Peers, Media and Family. These spheres, in various ways, exerted influence on young people with regards to their learning decisions. Variations occurred in the strength of their influence and context in which it was applied. Teacher influence plays a crucial role across schools and stages, with students who raised this sphere often relying on specific teachers for advice. As in Golden et al's (2004) research, which identified that pupils would approach teachers they liked and had trusting relationships with even if they were not experts in the subjects or pathways advice was being sought around, this research finds that to be the case also. Further to this however was that influence from staff is most pronounced, and sought after the most, for those aspiring to attend university or become teachers, particularly among high-attaining students given that pupils knew teachers had experience of these processes (as also identified in Blenkinsop et al. 2006 and Cryrie, Furst and Lauder 1979). There are

also findings in the present study suggesting teachers ‘tout’ or attempt to encourage the ‘best and brightest’ pupils to their subjects, almost operating like a football transfer market, as found in a range of previous studies (Cryrie, Furst and Lauder 1979, McCrone et al. 2005). It is important however to note that many of these considerations from staff are based on not just their perceptions of pupils’ ability, but also their perceptions of what will be useful to a pupil, and indeed their regard for their subject as being important.

Further and Higher educational institutions significantly influence subject choices also, often in alignment aligning with students’ internal motivations regarding usefulness. One finding from this study was that more direct engagement with university representatives provides valuable insights at career fairs. In contrast, the study also engaged with industry employers, and found weaker influence on individual subjects, mainly shaping choices through influencing shaping aspirations (as discussed further in Section 11.5.2 below). Therefore, a novel contribution of this work is developing understanding towards the benefits of different types of employer engagement activities in the contemporary Scottish context, under CfE and DYW.

Parental involvement is the most influential external factor impacting on subject choices. Direct and Indirect engagements, alongside familial expectations, guided students’ choices. While this has also found to be the case in research such as Wilely and Stables (1999), which found that young people valued and sought their parents advice even if it was disregarded, a key contribution of this research is defining that parental influence manifests through four key types on influence: facilitation, advice, direction, and coercion. These are set out in Section 9.8 and highlight the delicate balance of influence parents had and exert.

Peer influence is multifaceted, serving as a platform for students to discuss and confirm choices rather than - according to participants - directly shaping individual decisions. Similar to the findings of McCrone et al.(2005), which noted that peers were a strong support group where choices were discussed and appreciated, but not a key factor in selecting subjects just because friends did. Indeed, as far back as the 1979 research just one percent of pupils noted peers as the reason from a subject selection. However, research from Ofqual (2017) noted

the 'risk' of peer influence and this was broadly in fitting with schools and formal advice, as well as advice from parents and teachers, explicitly warning against peer influence on choices. There is of course the factor that young people may not be likely to admit peer influence, due to the knowledge of how poorly it is perceived by their families and their schools.

### **11.3.1 – RQ1A What is the relationship and balance between internal and external influences?**

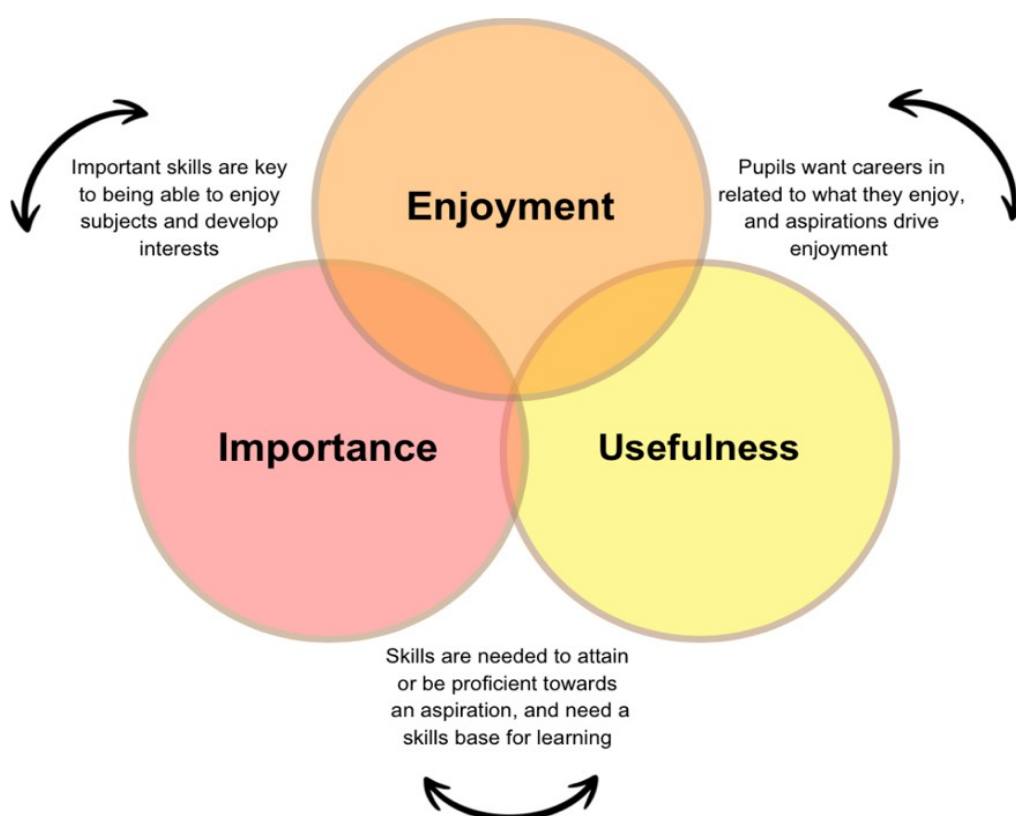


**Figure 11.1:** The inter-relation of internal influences, created by author

The research also develops further understanding of how these internal and external influences are considered by young people, and how they were 'applied'. Internal influences, as explored in Chapter Nine describe the internal motivations young people have toward subject selection. External influences refer to the groups, institutions, or areas (defined in this research as 'spheres') which have influence over young people as they make their choices. It was clear that there is a relationship within and between both internal motivations and external actors, and indeed different balances as to what influence were applied and when. The findings highlight the intricate dynamics between internal influences,

acknowledging the diverse factors impacting pupils' motivations, decisions, and ultimately their pathways. As has been discussed, the three distinct themes of internal influences and motivations are intertwined. There was not just one influence that drove every subject choice within a choices process, but different (and multiple) motivations negotiated regarding each individual selection of a subject. Indeed, similarly to this research, Ofqual (2017) concluded that enjoyment of a subject, its direct applicability to post-school destination and perceived difficulty were the three main drivers of subject choice. As is illustrated in Figure 11.1, there is an interrelationship between internal influences. Enjoyment of subjects is inextricably linked to usefulness of subjects to attaining an aspiration. Subjects viewed as useful to future aspirations are of course viewed as being important to skill development and interest. These important subjects can often either be directly the subjects which are enjoyed or appreciated as 'base' subjects which give the skills for attainment in enjoyable and useful subjects, and so on.

There are findings that further understanding of internal influences, how young people triangulate them, and the balance between the three. It also develops of how the habitus of pupils, their families, and the institutional habitus of schools, and the staff in schools, exert their influence (Bourdije 1986). Over the course of the senior phase usefulness can be seen as the predominant driver of choices. As mentioned, this is not for every choice - but in determining the balance of a timetable - young people will select subjects that are directly relevant to their aspiration over those they enjoy or deem important (if indeed these are different subjects). Perception of usefulness is also a key factor here. Young people from less deprived backgrounds, with greater access to diverse and connected social networks - with larger amounts of social capital - often perceive a wider array of subjects as 'useful', compared to their peers from less privileged backgrounds.

There also exists an inextricable link between the internal motivations and external influences, which critically, emerges over the course of the senior phase is important to this understanding. This process develops throughout young people's senior phase journey, and that enjoyment is the biggest driver of subject choices when young people are making their choices for fourth year (third year in



School B), whereas usefulness becomes the biggest influence in S5. Within their wide-ranging systematic literature review into choices at the junior stage, McCrone et al. (2005) found that young people at an earlier stage were heavily influenced by their enjoyment of a subject. Often this enjoyment, according to the findings of this research, was linked to self-perception of ability. This was related to both a stronger sense of what young people wanted to do after school, and a near universal desire to attend university, where subjects perceived as more 'academic' were deemed as more useful to this end. Usefulness was still key in S6, but enjoyment returned as a core consideration if young people attained what they 'needed' in S5. If they did not, usefulness still drove choices in S6.

The interplay of internal and external influences shaped students' subject choices. Perceived usefulness emerged as the primary motivator for many external influencers too, underscoring the significance of their understanding and perceiving subject relevance to post-school destinations. Though, in a similar fashion to personal internal motivations, there were different contexts as to the application of influence. Teachers, for example, were focused on the pertinence of subjects to young people futures but were conscious of having young people pursue subjects that they were deemed 'good' at. As can be seen in the findings of the current research, young people would direct questions and seek advice from teachers that they had a relationship with, even if the advice being sought was outwith the direct expertise of the teacher. This is in line with findings from a study which showed that pupils were willing to bypass the formal processes of guidance to engage with staff they trusted (Blenkinsop et al. 2006). Teachers also focused pupils on subjects of importance, with a particular focus on English and Maths. Previous studies suggested that teachers perceived choices for 'senior' qualification as more important and were more inclined to exert influence - certainly as it related to what this research would define as 'usefulness' at this stage (Foskett et al 2004). Despite this research finding this was the case for pupils' internal motivations, it did not find a marked difference at the stage with which teachers differentiated their advice. What is crucial to note however is the indirect influence of teachers, through pupils enjoyment of and attraction to their teaching style, for example (Adnett et al. 2003, Blenkinsop et al. 2006). It is interesting to note however that Foskett's et al's (2005) study concluded that there was limited influence from teachers over choices, in contrast to the findings

of this research.

The dynamics of parental influence on students' subject choices reveal a delicate balance between usefulness, importance, and enjoyment. As discussed, parents emerged as key external influencers, providing not only (often welcome) guidance but also in holding a significant level of formal influence through the necessity of signing off on subject choices. Core to parental influence was an expectation for their young people to attain in Maths and English, representing a broad belief in the fundamental importance of these subjects, which was often shared by young people themselves as well as by staff. Though parents often viewed these subjects in relation to usefulness, as in other studies (Palmer, Burke and Aubusson 2016). Turner (2003) also noted that these considerations from parents were based on their perceptions - and misconceptions - of subjects. While this proliferated within this research, the differing ways in which parental influence was exerted was not always just perceptive. Cryrie, Furst and Lauder (1979) were keen to stress that all parents were interested and proactive in encouraging their child's education and post-school outcomes, and this in the main continued through to what participants described within this research. Indeed, the intricate nature of parental support was evident through facilitation, advice, direction, and, at times, coercion. Key to these findings was that perceived usefulness of subjects was the dominant influence of both internal motivations and external influence. As will be explored in Section 11.4, it also drove the process and policies governing the curriculum.

### ***11.3.2- RQ1B What is the role of aspirations in influencing choices?***

Every young person in the research had an 'aspiration'. If this was not a specific and settled job or career aspiration, it was a general area that a young person was aiming towards, or a certain post-school pathway such as further or higher education attendance. Given the findings of the dominant role of usefulness of a subject to future aspiration, it is important to consider aspirations and what influences their formation. Given that usefulness emerged as the key motivation for internal and external influence, what drove the perception of what was 'useful' was vitally important to understanding influences. Thus, the attainment of a particular post-school pathway - an aspiration - can be seen as

the key driver of learning decisions that interweaves the themes identified within the research. As discussed, the construction, and the attainment, of a post-school pathway was a key component of internal influences, external influences, and the processes and curricular structures of schools also. While this in and of itself is not unexpected: young people will seek to attain their aspiration and make decisions in pursuit of that and schools and families will aim to facilitate this, it means that the influences over their aspiration held significant influence over subject choices and a pupils' experience of education. The choices process itself was also designed to prioritise and facilitate the attainment of post-school pathways. This was evident in two keyways: through the schools' process and through their curricular offers

The findings showed that considerations of subject choices towards achieving an aspiration and constructing a timetable which would best facilitate that was at the foundation of decisions for young people. This was particularly the case when choosing Highers for Fifth Year. The balance of internal influences showed a shift from initial enjoyment-focused decisions for S4 qualifications to a focus on usefulness with regard future aspirations in further years. Of course, there is a relationship between the two (it is usual to aspire to something related to enjoyment and interests) but there was a clear change in the internal motivation driving decisions for S5, where a sharp focus toward post-school pathways pervaded. This transition was not linear but instead shaped by curriculum structure and individual motivations, creating a cyclical process.. Further to this, external actors - particularly family, but also teachers and unsurprisingly employers too - heavily predicated their exerted influence on subjects they perceived as useful or important towards post-school aspiration. This manifested as subjects which were perceived to be 'useful' or 'important' towards attaining that aspiration being the predominant motivations for influence over subject selection.

### ***11.3.3 – RQ1C How significant is the role of social background in how influences apply?***

Perception is vital to influencing aspirations and is where divergence of the impact of deprivation can be observed. It is important to set out that every young person

in the research was ‘aspirational’ (discussed in Section 7.1). In that all wanted to go on to achieve something, or do something, they deemed as worthwhile and important. The difference in what young people want to do after school, and the knowledge they create for themselves regarding how to actually make it happen, is often regarded as an ‘aspiration gap’ (discussed in Section 3.7). As discussed within that section, political discourse on education over the past two decades has contended that what the solution is needed to address educational inequality and the differences in life chances that stems from it is efforts to ‘raise aspirations’ of groups of young people. The present evidence provided by the participants of this study, however, instead suggests that what exists is rather more a ‘*perception gap*’. What is needed is not the raising of aspiration *per se* but the broadening of perceptions of what is attainable.

The ‘*perception gap*’ is a deep-seated inequality identified in this research whereby there is a disparity between knowledge and connections that the least and most disadvantaged pupils have in forming their aspirations. This manifests as the more disadvantaged young people having less perception over the specificities of what they want to do when they leave school the pathways that are available to them, and the knowledge and connections of how to attain them. There are key findings where this is noticeable in the current research. This perception gap significantly narrows the range of subject choices for pupils from deprived backgrounds, who often select subjects that they perceive as immediately useful based on limited exposure to broader career possibilities. That young people from less deprived backgrounds aspired to occupations with potentially higher economic or cultural capital (often both) was a feature of the findings. This was often linked to the overwhelming influence of family on aspirations, as detailed in Chapter Seven. The networks of family allowed for a situation that, through direct or indirect influence, young people from less deprived backgrounds had knowledge and exposure to a wider range of potential careers, and a much surer sense of what it was they needed to attain their aspirations. This is similar to findings of Foskett et al. (2004) who assessed that parents who had higher educational attainment had a stronger understanding of the needed to attain post-school destinations. Indeed, young people from less deprived backgrounds had both a stronger sense of aspiration and relied less on their own perceptions of how

to achieve it.

Cryrie, Furst and Lauder (1979) also found with their research that generally it was only more affluent parents who had sufficient understanding of the formal curricular structures that enabled them to offer practical influence over choices. The researchers assessed that working class parents who had little success within education themselves were more trusting that teachers and ‘the school’ would safeguard their young person’s interests. This was evident mainly in the ability of parents to use their knowledge of processes and social networks to widen opportunities. For example, often young people had the ability to secure work experience in a chosen field and could utilise family connections for information with regards to accessing a certain pathway. This could also manifest as having more detailed knowledge of processes, such as how the university admission system works or having a much more specific idea of the degrees they wanted to take at university.

#### **11.4 - RQ2 What is the role of processes, curriculum, and policy frameworks on these learning decisions?**

Choices processes, the curricular structure of a school, and the policy which informs them have a significant impact on learning decisions. The process of selecting subjects, the list of subjects pupils have to choose from, and the number of choices there are to be made are at the foundation of a young person’s experience of education. It is only the choices that young people have available to them that can be subject to internal or external influences, and the national curriculum, local authority policies, and individual school structures and processes collectively shape the choices available to young people. It can create an ‘illusion of choice’ (Black, 2019) whereby, the scope of subject choices is pre-determined and influenced by policymakers at these various levels. The findings emphasise that the structure of the curriculum significantly influences subject choices.

These findings align with the broader discourse within the literature on educational inequality, particularly the role of curriculum policy in perpetuating or mitigating social stratification. The concept of the ‘perception gap’ underscores the ways in which social background influences students’ aspirations

and their perceived and actual opportunities within the educational system. This is consistent with findings from scholars like Cryrie, Furst, and Lauder (1979), who emphasised the role of family networks in shaping educational outcomes, and more recent studies that have focused on the impact of curriculum narrowing in deprived areas (Shapira and Priestley, 2018). By integrating these insights, this research contributes to a nuanced understanding of how curriculum policy can reproduce existing inequalities or serve as a tool for broader social equity.

Indeed, Cryrie, Furst and Lauder's (1979) research from several decades ago demonstrated young people were unaware of the extent of the influence that policy decisions had upon their choices and of the impact of the structure of the curriculum. They noted that the determination imposed by structure was undetected by most pupils, and that the operation within these structures is perceived to be similar for all. While this was broadly echoed in the findings of the current research to some extent, the findings of this study differ slightly. While young people - when asked about the impact of the process and the curricular offer - did not discuss some of the key broader policy issues that have been raised in relation to subject choices generally, they were aware of the role that the school's processes had on what was available to them. This is more in line with the findings of research in England regarding curricular opportunities which found a broad awareness amongst participants of how policy decision impacted on their experience (Barrance and Elwood 2017).

The findings of the impact of process and structure are harmonised with a range of previous literature which highlighted that access to subjects and curricular structure is mediated by both national and local (school) policy (Barrance and Elwood 2017, Alldritt and Taylor 2015). Of particular relevance were conclusions made by Anders et al. (2017) which noted that schools face 'constraints' from national government which can impact upon their curriculum development, and ultimately the structure and offer. Barrance and Ellwood (2017) further develop that 'institutional inequalities' in curriculum can develop, as schools structure their curricular offer in such a way to provide curricular intent.

#### ***11.4.1 – RQ2A What is the impact of the Curriculum for Excellence in how schools structure their curriculum, and are there differences in curricular opportunity?***

Curriculum structure plays a crucial role in shaping the subject choices and aspirations of young people. Core to this was the exposure and experiences that a pupil has as part of their curriculum, which has a direct impact on the breadth of their perception and the knowledge, skills, and qualifications base they go on to leave school with. It is important to note that Scottish schools - and the schools participating in this research - are vibrant places of learning, with a diverse array of subjects on offer to study, much more diverse than pathways that have existed in the past (including and especially vocational options (and the extent of subjects on offer in Scottish schools can be seen in Appendix One). There is also a much wider range of support evident compared to the past. As has been explored in relation to the dominance of usefulness, formal support, processes and cultural influences on young people are geared towards the attainment of a post-school pathway as the priority of their Senior Phase education. It was the predominant consideration amongst participants, experts and is evident in the process which can be seen throughout the findings.

Vital in the contemporary context in Scotland though is the implementation of the CfE (explored in Chapter Four), which has led to unintended consequences in the structure of the Senior Phase, leading to schools needing to adapt individually to facilitate and accommodate the national curriculum. The divergence of curricular structure between schools and offer was evident amongst the participating institutions. Therefore, in examining subject choices, it is essential to consider the variation in curricular structure available to young people depending on the school they attend, and the framework within which their choices occur.

Even though education in Scotland is delivered by local authorities, some of which have authority-wide curriculum policies, the national CfE gives responsibility for curriculum to individual schools, underpinned by national guidance. This makes generalising curricular structure in Scotland increasingly difficult. Research by Scott (2015, 2018) highlighted the increasingly variable nature of curricular

structure in Scotland, with a focus on curriculum width. He found that six subject choices for National 4 and 5 awards in S4 was increasingly becoming the norm. In an assessment of the curricular guidance and handbooks of all 32 local authorities in Scotland and of 62% of Scotland's secondary schools, Scott found 162 different S1-4 curricular structures across 224 schools. Within this hugely varied picture, Scott identified nine distinct 'curriculum patterns'. Further research developed this disparity in curriculum structure, for example Shapira and Priestley (2018) who found that none of the most deprived authorities uniformly offered eight subjects in S4, and were indeed often offered as few as five. Further, they noted that all the authorities uniformly offering eight subjects at S4 were from the least deprived quintile of councils.

Much of the research which exists regarding these issues is quantitative in nature. While this research did not look at curriculum patterns in the same way as other studies and did not make year-on-year comparisons, it did find different curriculum approaches in each of the participating schools. The findings highlight four different and diverse curriculum patterns and approaches within the participating schools. As defined in the four different combinations of curriculum approaches, each had different width (the number of choices available), breadth (the number of subjects available), depth (at what level the subjects are available) and intent (the pathways which the curriculum was focused upon facilitating). Usefulness and aspirations are linked to all of these characteristics, with intent providing the framework of this facilitation.

The four participating schools' policies, structures, and processes each had a clear influence on their students' subject choices, stemming from the institutional habitus of the school (Bourdieu 1986). This was primarily exercised through their control and autonomy over the curriculum structure. The subject choices process significantly impacted the learning decisions of participants to such an extent that the process served as the foundation for all other influences.



Four approaches to the senior phase curriculum were observed and defined, which were detailed further in Section 8.7:

- 'Diverse Breadth': School A adopted an approach where a wide range of subjects and experiences were available. The school emphasised wider achievement alongside formal qualifications. Its structure facilitated diverse pathways, including vocational options, reflecting the varied aspirations and destinations of its pupils.
- 'Mandatory Width': School B's approach started National Qualifications in S3, giving it a greater number of subject choices when compared to the other participating schools. Despite mandatory English, Maths, and French in S4, three elective options allowed students to explore various subjects. The school prioritised STEM subjects and focused on preparing students for both careers stemming from university and the demands of the workforce, while uptake of vocational options were limited.
- 'Collaborative Depth': School C embraced a model which integrated with local schools and colleges to offer a broader range of subjects. The collaboration allowed for formal vocational qualifications in diverse industries and a broad array of Advanced Higher subjects. The emphasis on subject-specific columns in S4 and the option to study Higher Maths and English over two years provided students with a framework for choices and depth in their curriculum.
- 'Flexible Facilitation': School D's approach was aimed at a flexible curriculum with a wide representation of subjects and levels across columns. Of note was the availability of subjects at different levels in the same column, facilitating a broad experience. The school's tailored approach reflected an understanding of diverse student needs and allowed flexibility and customisation based on specific areas of interest.

While it is no surprise - nor necessarily of great concern - that schools' aim to facilitate the aspirations of their cohort of young people, it can be seen to be of importance with regards to broadening perception and widening (if not needing

to be ‘raising’) aspirations. If a school’s curricular structure intends to facilitate the pathways to aspirations, but aspirations can be and are impacted by the experiences that come from exposure to areas of knowledge through the curriculum, there is a question if it can become a circular process where one is re-enforcing the other without broadening the perceptions of aspirations, or broadening the offer within the curriculum.

#### **11.4.2 - RQ2B *What is the role of deprivation on curriculum opportunity?***

It has been well established that schools which have a higher proportion of deprived pupils have faced greater narrowing of curriculum width in Scotland. In essence, the evidence is clear that the more disadvantaged your background, the less subject choices you likely have (Black 2019, Shapira et al 2023, Priestley & Shapira 2019, Scottish Parliament 2019, Scott 2018). While it is vital that schools have significant autonomy over their curriculum - they as institutions must be able to facilitate and develop the needs of their pupils and take advantage of any opportunities to develop local partnerships - it is clear that schools with less deprived cohorts of young people are adapting their structures to create further advantage for their pupils, but there is a question as to whether this is not solely driven by the pupils’ best interests, rather than the schools’, though the two are of course not mutually exclusive.

Research indicates that schools’ curricular decisions are also influenced by accountability measures, where schools aim to maximise their attainment statistics by streamlining the number of subjects offered, what subject these are, and to whom. This approach can help students perform better and increase the schools’ standing on statistical terms, a clear form of performativity. While studies such as Shapira et al. (2023) have established these inequalities over time, this study highlights the disparities evident within the participating schools in the year of the research, although there are various characteristics of the participating schools’ curriculums which match with those found in quantitative studies. The clearest example of this is the structure of School B’s Senior Phase, which begins in S3 instead of S4. This structure is set up in a such a way so that there are three distinct two-year phases (as opposed to two three-year phases as is usual) to facilitate the greatest possible number of Highers in S5, as desired by

Higher Education institutions. Given that School B is has the lowest level of deprivation in the study, this is in line with the findings of previous literature. This level of autonomy and intent was also linked to School A's integration of Developing the Young Workforce principles into its core curriculum, and its investment in staff to deliver this, so as to facilitate attainment of diverse pathways. This reflects findings in the literature that schools with more advantaged pupils can more readily implement structures that favour high attainment.

There were also evident differences in the depth of attainment of subjects. In the two schools where there was a higher proportion of pupils from more deprived backgrounds School A and School D - there was a greater proportion of participants either re-sitting Higher subjects in S6 when they had not got the grades they wanted in S5, or 'crashing' Highers needed for university entry, or that had - in a few cases - been studying a Higher course over two years, in S5 and S6. These findings confirm those of Shapira et al. (2024) which showed that young people in more disadvantaged areas face delays in presenting for National 5 and Higher qualifications.

Schools within the research could also be seen to be developing other ways to widen and broaden their curricular offer, in spite of the unintended consequences of CfE's Senior Phase. These included School C's consortia arrangement with other local schools in order to broaden the range of subject available to young people. Interestingly, Shapira et al. (2024) identified a relationship between school size and the number of subject choices available. The collaboration of schools in increasing curricular opportunity through approaches like consortia arrangements was evident within this decision. This initiative highlights how collaboration can help mitigate the constraints imposed by limited resources and support a broader curriculum.

There of course exists within this consideration the reality of attainment. Those from less deprived background were more likely to be doing more Higher qualifications for example, and the reality of Scotland's incredible attainment gap between the richest and poorest pupils means it is the case those from less deprived background will have a wider range of options available to them. These

options will be in higher earning careers and those that have more cultural capital.

However, high attaining pupils from more deprived backgrounds, and schools with larger proportions of more deprived pupils, also had a narrower perception than similarly qualified - but less deprived - peers. Indeed, for these young people - who had a narrower exposure to careers through their own social networks using their own social capital - had less specific higher education aspirations for example or aspired to professions like teaching (of which they had had exposure to).

With regards to curricular approach, schools focused upon ensuring that their pupils' aspirations could be facilitated through the structure of the curriculum. They are doing so in what they deem to be in the best interests of their young people, as is every school. They are adapting beyond the unintended consequences of curriculum narrowing to broaden the opportunities available to their young people. As this research has found, subject choices are heavily influenced by the aspirations of young people and these aspirations are heavily influenced by exposure and experience through the curriculum (and social networks of family). While family, the networks, and differing levels of social capital that stem from it, is a difficult field to achieve equity within, the school curriculum should be a place that offers the same breadth of opportunity to young people no matter their social background. While schools strive to structure their curricula to align with their students' aspirations, this research highlights the complex interplay of factors beyond just the best interests of pupils. Accountability pressures, resource availability, and the unintended consequences of educational reforms all contribute to the fragmentation and disparities in curricular opportunities. Indeed, the structure of CfE has led to inequity in the experience of the curriculum depending on the school of attendance. This is not necessarily issue of the autonomy for schools to develop their curriculum to suit their context, but the need they have to adapt to the unintended consequences of reform.

### ***11.4.3 - RQ2C What are young people's experiences of the formal support available to them during the choices process?***

There were similar types of support available across the four participating schools, though the experiences of this support was found to be varied. Notably, the support that young people discussed in relation to navigating the choices process was heavily linked to how subjects related to post-school aspirations. Two modes of formal support emerged: whole cohort advice and careers service (these are outlined in Section 8.8).

Whole cohort advice is a universal feature across the schools involved in the research. This mode of support included events such as choices assemblies for pupils, and family choices evenings, where students and parents are informed with the decision-making processes involved in subject selection and its implications. Implications focused on the impact of choices to the future aspirations of young people. These events are perceived - by the school, parents, and pupils - as vital platforms for disseminating essential information about subject choices and career pathways. However, there is a noticeable variance in the comprehensiveness of information provided, with some schools - School B and C - focusing predominantly on university pathways, neglecting focus on other pathways. While it is the case that young people in these schools were more likely to aspire to university than in School A and D - and therefore such advice was catering to the aspirations and needs of their cohort - there was some sense from participants that these events were used by the school to influence rather than facilitate choices. There was also evidence of parents changing the nature of their influence based on the information provided at choices evenings. There are also findings relating to the influence of careers fairs (which is a mode of whole cohort advice) and these are discussed in Section 11.5 below in relation to the role of employer engagement.

The role of career service guidance is identified as being varied. This support encompasses one-on-one appointments, drop-in sessions, and communication through newsletters and emails. The aim - as set out by Skills Development Scotland who are the national agency who deliver and support guidance - is to align students' academic choices with their post-school aspirations, which is

intended to emphasise the importance of informed decision-making and developing a realistic perspective on future career paths. Despite differences in how these services are perceived across schools, there is a general appreciation for the guidance provided when it was felt needed, or it was sought. Pupils' find the conversations with career advisors helpful, particularly in exploring new ideas and making informed decisions when the careers advisors had knowledge relevant to the aspirations (or ideas of aspirations) of the individual. Indeed, personalisation of advice is valued. However, there are noted disparities in the consistency and personal familiarity of the services across schools, with students in Schools A and D expressing more positive views compared to Schools B and C.

However, there is criticism, particularly as mentioned in Schools B and C, regarding the service's reliance on generic national resources and a lack of specialised knowledge, leaving some students feeling unsupported, especially those with specific career paths in mind. This was linked to the 'Perception Gap' discussed in Section 11.6, whereby pupils' in these schools generally had boarder perceptions of what they wanted to do after leaving school, and greater knowledge of how to achieve it. This left a lack of support for those in these schools who lacked clarity over their aspirations. This diminished the perceived relevance of career guidance. There is a broad consensus among participants across schools that more guidance focusing on specific future career paths, and the requirements for specific degrees and courses is needed, suggesting a gap in the support provided during the subject choices process.

### **11.5 – RQ3 *What is the role for employer engagement in influencing these learning decisions?***

There is little evidence in the findings of employer engagement influencing specific subject choices. This did not mean that employer engagement did not have a wider and important impact however. Employer engagement was more likely to influence participant's aspirations which in turn influences subject choices. It can be viewed as an influence over some young peoples' approach toward their subjects as a whole, rather than on specific subjects. However, there was an impact where employers demanded a mandatory subject. If employer engagements under Developing the Young Workforce can be seen to include

Further and Higher Education Institutions, then the impact on specific subjects and pathways was evident.

National policy, as implemented through schools, has a focus upon improving post-school destinations. Developing the Young Workforce, as discussed in Section 5.2 has seen a significant resource appropriated within the system and the regional improvement structures empowered to ensure its implementation. The research found a clear role for employer engagements - and in particular work experience - broadening perceptions of post-school opportunities and influenced aspirations. Often this is in a positive manner and made young people more interested in a related career, but also in a negative manner where it put young people off a certain path. This is still however broadening perception and is of value. Indeed,

St Clair, Kintrea and Houston (2011) found that there was a disparity between young people's aspirations and the realities of the labour market, and for the young people engaged in employer engagement activities in this research there was a greater sense of how their choices linked to what they wanted to go on and do after school, compared to other schools. Indeed, previous studies showed that very few pupils had spoken to potential employers about their choices, even though a large proportion were able to directly relate their choices to their future aspirations.

There were elements of employer engagement observed in every school and it was generally met as positive by young people. These included careers fairs, where young people would seek advice from employers and education institutions directly. The research found that the ability to get information through such events that was not mediated by the school, family, or individual teachers is valuable in giving young people a clearer sense of what would be useful for their future careers.

Some participants noted a desire to have an increased number of such opportunities, as was also found in Hooley et al's (2012) research, which concluded that sporadic or one-off events, which have no broader integration with learning and the curriculum, can have limited long term impact. Their research also highlighted that schools can see such engagement as at conflict with provision

of qualifications and ‘core’ classes. This was observed also in a range of participating schools, whereby if a vocational or employer based subject selection was made, it would not be possible to sit a suite of qualifications for Higher education access - creating a ‘either this or that’ situation that facilitates different pathways through the curriculum for vocational based education, rather than it being integrated as a flexible option. This links to prior work on vocations learning, but extends it in the current Scottish policy context.

**11.5.1 - RQ3A *Are there any differences in the experience of employer engagement opportunities between schools?***

The research shows that the extent of the opportunities for employer engagement was dependent upon the school of attendance, and stage of schooling a young person was at. In much the same way that the curriculum offer of subjects differed from school- to-school in the research, the same could be observed of employer engagement opportunities. There was a disparity between schools in the integration of Developing the Young Workforce programmes and events. It is clear from the research that schools, such as School A, who prioritised DYW and invested the staffing and resourcing to take advantage of local partnerships, found success in both broadening aspirations and ensuring that there were post-school destinations based on young people’s individual needs. This was observed through an improved perception amongst these pupils as to what they would ‘need’ to attain to achieve their aspiration, which was also a finding of the impact of employer engagement in Mann and Percy (2014). The difference in school experience evident within the study is supportive of findings of DYW evaluations which have shown that it has an unequal application across the country (Scottish Parliament 2018). This is further highlighted by findings in this study that businesses find it difficult to make partnerships where there is not express interest and investment from the school, such as in School A.

An area of clear disparity existed in schools’ approaches to work experience. As detailed from Section 7.4.1, there were distinct approaches evident at each school. School A took a proactive approach, fitting with the finding just discussed on its focus on DYW and employability, by arranging work placements based on students’ interests, attempting to ensure diverse experiences aligned with



aspirations and had additional opportunities for career exploration integrated into the curriculum. School B requires students to find their own placements, often relying on family connections, particularly benefiting from exposure to professions with high economic and cultural capital, resulting in experiences often related to their career aspirations. School C lacks a mandatory work experience but offers employability skills training. It leaves placement arrangements up to students, with those from less deprived backgrounds more likely to arrange placements aligned with their aspirations, while others rely on family professions as fallback options. School D, like School B, expects students to arrange their own placements, often utilising family connections, with a less structured approach to alignment with aspirations. School D, however, identified placements throughout the year for pupils with a strong interest in a particular pathway.

Part of how these current approaches further advantage those with family connections - who tended to be from schools with lower levels of deprivation in their cohort - is the onus being placed on the young person to arrange their own placements. This means that family connections are often the driving factor behind the work experience opportunities that are available to young people. So, while exposure through these experiences was shown in the findings to broaden perceptions and impact on subject choice decisions, this in practice tended to benefit the already well connected.

#### ***11.5.2 - RQ3B What role do Further and Higher Education institutions play in influencing subject choices?***

Building on the findings of usefulness being the dominant internal motivation and the key consideration for external actors when they exert influence, Further and Higher education institutions had a key role to play in influencing subject choice.

Building on the findings of usefulness being the dominant internal motivation and the key consideration for external actors when they exert influence, Further and Higher education institutions had a key role to play in influencing subject choice. The findings reveal a crucial factor: the imperative for many pupils to attain proficiency in specific subjects to gain access to desired courses significantly influences their decisions. This influence is corroborated by Ofqual's (2015)

findings, which underscored how the subject preferences of prestigious institutions like Russell Group universities profoundly shaped students' subject choices.

Moreover, participants aspiring to university admission were conscious of institutions' requirements, not only in terms of specific subjects but also of the number of subjects they would be required to attain in one sitting, often stipulated as four or five Highers during S5. Consequently, despite the Curriculum

for Excellence (CfE) advocating for a flexible three-year Senior Phase to be approached holistically, students tended to adopt a linear progression through S4, S5, and S6, a trend also facilitated by schools. This finding underscores the considerable influence wielded by colleges and (mainly) universities over the senior phase curriculum. It highlights how the shaping of subject choices is not merely driven by personal aspirations but is profoundly influenced by the structural expectations and requirements imposed by higher education. This illustrates the power that they have over the senior phase curriculum, and how this is mediated by schools is a key consideration when considering influences on subject choices.

## **11.6 - Policy implications and recommendations**

Findings of this research also have something to contribute to ongoing policy considerations regarding subject choices, and regarding the Senior Phase curriculum. Findings of this research also have clear implications for policy related to subject choices, both in national policy and in practice. Firstly, however, it is important to note the ongoing process of education reform that is ongoing. This process provides an already existing framework for some of the key issues raised in this research to be addressed and can act as a platform from which the policy recommendations below can be considered.

Indeed - as set out in Section 4.3.6 - there already exists a plethora of evidence and practical policy recommendations with regards to subject choices, curriculum development and indeed the broader education system. It is not the aim of this section to further review these recommendations, nor to simply re-state them.

From the exhaustive bank of evidence and reviews which have been outlined, and the resources which have been invested to bring them to fruition, there is a roadmap of reform which should be implemented to bring about necessary improvements. They are based on evidenced need, significant resources, and tens of thousands of voices.

The reforms and improvements set out in this range of reviews are needed, as highlighted within these findings and in existing literature, to improve the structure of the Senior Phase so that the unintended consequences of the narrowing of width can be addressed, and more equitable curricular opportunity is inherent within the structure of the national curriculum. There are, however, key areas highlighted within the findings of this research which can further develop solutions as the education reform process in Scotland continues.

#### ***11.6.1 – There is need for new guidance on approaches to curriculum structure***

**National guidance is needed on the impact of different curricular approaches, with particular focus on the reduction of the number of choices and the impact of the narrowing of curricular experience**

Currently the divergence in curricular approaches creates disparity in curriculum opportunity. As has been discussed, there is benefit for the ability of schools to have autonomy over their curriculum, but the unintended consequences of reform mean that schools need to adapt structures to overcome obstacles in national guidance. This needs to be addressed. demonstrated, this is not just about the impact on suite of qualifications and skills but also about broadening the perceptions of young people and furthering the scope of their aspirations. Schools that prioritise a diverse breadth of subjects tend to provide a set of choices that reflect a wider range of interests and career aspirations.

This links closely to, and must be considered alongside, future reform of the structure of the Senior Phase. As is noted, it is only recently that the Scottish Parliament debated the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment (Hayward 2023), with the Scottish Government due to formally respond to its

recommendations at the time of this thesis' submission<sup>3</sup>. This means there is likely to be coming a reform to the structure of the Senior Phase and how qualifications and assessment work within it.

As part of these considerations, the current research gives insight that the current 'flexible' three-year phase that is currently intended does not operate as is intended, and that schools still encourage and often mandate a linear progression through S4-6.

#### ***11.6.2 – Higher education institutions must be central to further Senior Phase reform***

Higher Education Institutions must be central to the reform of qualifications in the Senior Phase, so that there is no divergence between the structure that is set out in the national curriculum, and the expectation of universities in their admissions.

As the findings show, Higher Education institutions have a significant influence over subject choices, and the way in which young people navigate the Senior Phase. This is due to universities' expectations around admissions and the attainment of a certain number and range of Higher awards in S5. As was explored in Sections 8.13 and 8.14, pupils also value a more linear approach, with any flexibility seen as an option regarded as outwith what is 'useful' (for example in S6 once they have attained what they 'need' in S5). These issues must be considered alongside any further Senior Phase reform.

Divergence between these two elements - national guidance and admissions expectations - will simply mean more divergence in the curricular offer between schools, with findings indicating schools who have lower levels of deprivation will adapt their structure to match that of university admissions.

#### ***11.6.3 - Collaboration between schools to expand curriculum opportunity needs to be resourced***

Approaches - such as consortia arrangements, central senior phase hubs, and

online methods - which have been shown to widen and further broaden curricular opportunity must be expanded and resourced. There is a key role within this for the Scottish Government, Local Authorities, and schools.

Formal consortia arrangements - like that of School C - aim to pool resources and increase curriculum options to pupils. Indeed, consortia arrangements have been of increasing use in Scotland (Scottish Parliament 2019), with the aims of providing a broader range of subject choices. There are also approaches. Many urban areas have had 'hubs', often based at a central college or university where pupils from several schools travel to take classes. Some however, such as the Glasgow Advanced Higher Hub are now under threat due to budgetary pressures (McEaney 2024). Other areas of the country have seen increasing use of online collaboration to deliver shared learning, where travel is not feasible.

The findings outlined in this study, coupled with the existing literature, show that such collaboration can be of benefit. This is not to say that it is not without logistical challenge (as set out in Section 8.1), but it is clear such arrangements can expand the curricular offer for young people. Further, there is a need for the consideration of these issues when it comes to curriculum making at the meso-level, within organisations like the OECD.

#### ***11.6.4 – There should be equal access to employer engagement opportunities***

It should be ensured that every young person has equal access to employer engagement opportunities, that it is mandatory, and that work placements are arranged through the school and not family connections.

Employer engagement plays an important role in shaping students' learning decisions, particularly regarding subject choices and aspirations. While direct influence on specific subjects was minimal, engagement impacted broader aspirations, influencing students' general approach to subjects and career paths. This makes it a key tool in addressing the 'Perception Gap' outlined in the findings. However, the current approach to employer engagement, and particularly the experience of work experience advantages the already advantaged further. Rather than addressing the gap, it can widen it. Schools varied in their approach to

employer engagement, with disparities in work experience arrangements. Further, and linked to this, effective career advice can counterbalance the limitations imposed by a school's curriculum structure, offering pupils insight into alternative pathway that might align better with their personal skills, aspirations and interests, and employer engagement has a clear role to play in broadening these perceptions.

#### ***11.6.5 – Efforts to increase the involvement of parents in the choices process***

To enhance the subject choice process, it is crucial to increase parental engagement, providing them with more information and resources to understand the educational landscape, beyond a formal role of signing off a form, and perhaps with more information regarding individual choices rather than a sole focus on post-school destinations. This should also include the enhancement of parents' knowledge of curriculum. Engaging parents in the process of subject choices is crucial, as revealed by the findings, which emphasises the significant influence parents have over their children's decisions. This is formally in terms of signing off choice's forms, but also in the decision-making process. Young people were broadly positive about the influence of their parents and may have sought and most welcomed it. The research highlights that parents are a dominant influence, with their role being particularly strong when it comes to formal approval of subject choices. However, the level of formal engagement with parents varies across schools, indicating that there is a need to level the playing field of family perception towards subjects given that, in many cases, pupils identified their parents' influence stemmed from their parents' own experiences. Parental engagement in Scotland has also decreased since the pandemic, making this recommendation even more important. It is noteworthy that parents' expectations are not always explicitly communicated but can be internalised by the students, influencing their choices. This operated in much the same way as indirect influence over aspirations discussed in Section 7.2.

Schools should strive to offer systematic support to parents, helping them guide their children based on individual strengths, weaknesses, and aspirations. Addressing disparities in parental engagement levels among schools is essential to ensure that all parents can actively participate in their children's education, ultimately contributing to more informed and equitable subject choices.

## **CHAPTER TWELVE - CHANCES OR CHOICES?**

### **12.1 - Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to draw concluding thoughts from the findings of this study. The chapter first draws conclusions regarding the importance of subject choices to the individual, broader society, and the economic skills pipeline. It then sets out the findings in relation to how the choices young people have are impacted by the ‘chances’ of social background, school of attendance, and the time period.

Thoughts are outlined regarding the Curriculum for Excellence and its impact on opportunity for young people, and what a fairer process of subject choices could look like for the curriculum to achieve its aims of fairness, choice, and personalisation. The impact of the pandemic on the findings of the research, and the role of place are then discussed, before suggestions for future research are explored.

### **12.2 - The importance of subject choices**

The issues that have been the focus of this research have very real implications for pupils, schools, and wider society. The process of subject choices in Scottish education allows for significant autonomy of choice and personalisation for young people. At the age of 14, there is a lot at stake when young people make these choices.

There is a lot at stake for their own futures. While they are not final (there is plenty time after school to pursue interests and aspirations of course), the choices they make shape the immediate options that they will have available to them upon leaving school. They shape the possible careers and pathways that will be attainable in the early years of post-school life and set the suite of qualifications a person will have. They are of critical importance for economic inclusion and success and social mobility too. More broadly, the subject choices of each

individual young person are important for broader society. They are a step towards the skills that will be available in the workforce, and therefore key to the economy, its competitiveness and ensuring critical jobs within it can be filled. Indeed, the Scottish education system requires a lot of young people - at a very early stage - to begin to shape their own curriculum experience through the subject choices process.

Over many years, there has been significant policy focus and resource to broaden the options available within the Scottish curriculum, and to increase the pathways that are open to young people leaving school. This has particularly focused on expanding vocational options and attempts to bring some parity of esteem to these pathways. The evidence shows that there has been success in the increasing curriculum breadth. The implementation of Skills for Work qualifications, Foundation Apprenticeships and partnerships with the Further Education sector has increased the choices available to young people. This has in part been facilitated by the 'new' Senior Phase structure, intended to be a flexible and cohesive three-year phase.

Though in its implementation, the Senior Phase model has widened inequalities. Consequences of curriculum reform have led to significant disparities in the approach to the curriculum between schools, as is evident within the findings of this research. A significant contributor to this has not been pedagogical reasoning or the enhancement of opportunity but dealing with the issues of aligning the requirements of qualifications with the new curriculum structure. This has led to schools adapting their structure in spite of the curriculum and has meant a reduction in the number of subject choices a young person can take compared to the curriculum which preceded the CfE. This has been more pronounced in schools with higher levels of deprivation.

For a truly 'flexible' and holistic Senior Phase to be achieved, where young people are judged on the sum of their success over S4-6, rather than a linear progression within each individual year, there are elements within the design and operation that must change. Firstly, there must be action to address the disparity in curricular width (the number of subject choices). The structure of qualifications



must match the aims of the Senior Phase to allow flexibility and fluidity in how young people progress through it. Increased curriculum breadth is undermined by narrowed curriculum width. The narrowing of width makes each subject choice so much more vital to achieving an aspiration, meaning that subjects taken for interest or enjoyment are the first to be ‘dropped’ during a choices process. It also leaves much less room within a timetable to be flexible and ‘change course’ during the Senior Phase. Higher Education institutions also must be involved in achieving these aims, as their admissions criteria will dominate the structure of the Senior Phase, regardless of national curriculum policy.

This study has demonstrated that secondary school choices in Scotland are deeply embedded within broader social inequalities, shaped by factors such as socio-economic status, cultural capital, and geographic location. Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1986) theories of habitus and capital, the findings suggest that while Scotland’s education system aims to provide equal opportunities, disparities in parental knowledge, institutional practices, and access to the curriculum continue to reinforce educational stratification (Reay 2017). The introduction of the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) was intended to create a more flexible and inclusive educational framework (Priestley & Minty 2013); however, this research highlights how school subject choices remain structured by social background.

Looking ahead, future research should further explore how post-CfE reforms are shaping subject choice and long-term student outcomes, particularly in relation to socio-economic disparities. Emerging studies indicate that despite the curriculum’s emphasis on breadth and skills-based learning, inequalities persist in subject availability and uptake (Shapira & Priestley 2020). Comparative research across different Scottish regions, as well as longitudinal studies tracking student trajectories, would provide deeper insights into how structural inequalities evolve over time. Additionally, investigating how students navigate school choice in the context of broader policy shifts—such as the Scottish Government’s commitments to closing the attainment gap (Scottish Government 2021 )will be crucial in assessing the long-term impact of educational reforms on equity and social mobility.

Future research should also examine the role of student agency in navigating these constraints, offering a counterpoint to structuralist interpretations of educational inequality (Archer et al. 2010).

This shift evidenced in subject choices in Scotland, particularly the tension between increased curriculum breadth and narrowed subject width, has significant implications for education systems across the UK and globally. One key lesson is that structural misalignment between curriculum design and assessment frameworks can unintentionally reinforce educational inequalities. If pupils are judged on a cumulative assessment over multiple years rather than a linear, year-by-year progression, education systems must ensure that subject choices remain flexible and adaptable. Otherwise, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds risk being disproportionately affected by early, high-stakes choices that shape their post-secondary opportunities.

For the wider UK, where England, Wales, and Northern Ireland have differing qualification systems, Scotland's experience raises critical questions about how subject choice constraints impact student aspirations and equity in access to higher education. In England, for example, the narrowing of GCSE subject choices due to accountability measures (such as the EBacc) has led to concerns about reduced access to creative and technical subjects (Gill 2018). Similarly, the increasing dominance of university admission requirements in shaping subject offerings suggests that, without coordinated efforts between schools and higher education institutions, secondary curriculum may not serve the holistic development of pupils but rather function as a filtering mechanism for university entry- in the wider UK and beyond.

On a global scale, this issue highlights the challenge of balancing curriculum standardisation with individual student needs. Many education systems, two of which were discussed in Chapter Four, have worked to prioritise flexibility and young people's autonomy in subject selection while ensuring that qualification structures remain coherent and navigable. Scotland's experience suggests that curricular reforms must be accompanied by systemic changes in qualification

frameworks, curriculum opportunity, and guidance services to ensure that flexibility in education does not inadvertently exacerbate inequality.

### **12.3 - Chances and Choices**

The question however remains whether subjects taken by young people in Scotland today are ‘chances’ significantly based on pre-determination of social background and school of attendance, or ‘choices’ freely open to young people. There are a broader range of subject available in Scottish schools than previously, and more support exists around pathways into employment, apprenticeships and colleges. Though the findings of the study show how these choices are impacted by chances of circumstance.

Deprivation is a clear arbitrator of the chances that young people have open to them. There is the reality of Scotland’s attainment gap, where young people in the most deprived communities have significantly poorer attainment than their peers. This has clear implication for the choices they have at school (in the ability to progress to higher levels of qualifications) and with regards to the post-school options that they have open to them. This study also shows that there is an impact on the perceptions that young people have of what is attainable in their future. It also shows that the least deprived pupils have family networks which broaden perceptions and increase the knowledge young people have of what they require to attain their aspirations, conceptualised as the ‘Perception Gap’.

Closely linked to this - given that school of attendance is linked to postcode - is the chances a young person will have based on their school of attendance. This is also a findings relating to social background. The findings of this research show that the experience of curriculum is inextricably based on the approach of individual schools. This is the case in terms of curricular width and breadth, but also in the opportunities that there will be for employer engagement and the types and level of support that will be offered for pupils to navigate the process.

There are also the chances that are impacted by time. The period of time in which a young person attends school impacts on the choices they will have open to them. While many broad issues of similarity transcend time periods, it can be

demonstrated that the basics of opportunity - including the amount of qualifications that a young person will be able to attempt - are dependent on the prevailing policy direction of the time.

#### **12.4 – Do we have Curriculum for Excellence, and are we Developing the Young Workforce?**

There is too a broader consideration to be made of the purpose of education in the Senior Phase, and how this relates to the stated ambitions of the Curriculum for Excellence. The ambition of the CfE is to build four fundamental capacities: successful learners, confident individual, responsible citizens, and effective contributors. While these principles have been lauded, the reflections from the findings of the research are that there is an all-encompassing focus on the attainment of a 'positive destination' following school. This was observable in the processes schools have for their subject selection, the influences young people had upon them, and the internal motivations they themselves prioritised. As has been discussed, the aim of the changes to Senior Phase structure were, in-part, intended to increase flexibility and incorporate broader and more holistic curriculum opportunity, including vocational pathways. While that increased curriculum breadth is evident, there is an extent to which these opportunities are perceived as an 'additional extra' in grander scheme of subject choices.

It was clear from the findings that the purpose of education is seen by pupils, and is facilitated by schools, as an exercise readiness for the workplace - whether this was directly into the workforce or via Further and Higher Education. This is not to say that this should not be a central aim of education by any means, or that it is not what schools should be facilitating, but rather that its prominence - indeed dominance - is not reflected in the national curriculum aims as the number one priority of what CfE is intending to achieve but is the number one priority in its implementation.

This in itself raises interesting questions regarding the unintended consequences of reform which are of such importance in the curriculum opportunities young people have. Indeed, if this was a driving aim of the curriculum - as set out in the fundamental capacities - more credence may have been given in the design of the

Senior Phase to the impact of its changes. In particular on the linear progression through qualifications that young people desire, schools still facilitate, but in which the curriculum structure intended to fundamentally change. In Scotland, recent curriculum reform has created unintended consequences which has increased educational inequalities in curriculum opportunity. Interestingly, over the course of over fifty years of comprehensive education, Howieson, Croxford and Murphy (2017) concluded that Scotland has largely been successful in progressing equality on opportunity, but not in equality of outcome. Though the findings of this research, and the body of research which relates to the impact of the new curriculum structures which has come previously, raise questions over whether that latter point is now more complex in its answer.

Indeed, what is striking regarding the findings of this study is the similarity to the findings of Cryrie, Furst and Lauder's landmark study in 1979. While of course there are differences - as discussed in the previous chapter - there are broad themes of the influences over choices which have remained the same. In particular these relate to the findings of the role of family connections and networks in making opportunities available and enhancing the knowledge of how to attain certain aspirations. Similarities in themes exist also, not just between this study and the 1979 study, but also with research from the 1990's and mid-2000s, much of which was carried out in other parts of the UK with separate education systems. These relate to the links young people make between their choices and their aspirations, the way in which they seek influence, and are influenced by teachers, and the disparity in the experience of curriculum they face depending on the school that they attend (and the social background of the school's cohort).

These observations are to not say there has not been an amount of progress over this time, it is just to note that some of the fundamental influences over learning decisions have remained over five decades, multiple iterations of curriculum reform, several parties of government, billions of pounds of public spending, and adjacent social progress in inequalities related to social background.

The shadow of the pandemic

There is also the need to reflect on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education system. While there has been consideration of the impact of the pandemic on this research, there is need for wider appreciation of the continued influence that the disruption from that period has had - and continues to have - upon young people and schools. Far from being a stress-test, or temporary shock to learning, the shadow of COVID on young people's education continues to cast an increasingly long shadow.

Of course, the impact of COVID has been felt worldwide and many of the issues impacting upon education in Scotland stemming from it are prevalent elsewhere also. There have been clear impacts on attainment of qualifications, with attainment gaps between the most and least deprived exacerbated, which has clear ramifications on life chances and the post-school options open to young people. Of equal importance though are issues which relate to development and engagement with school.

The OECD (2024) found there has been a reduction in a feeling of belonging at school, particularly amongst disadvantaged young people, and there has been a significant rise in the number of young people who are persistently absent from school in Scotland. These issues have also brought with them new - and potentially more urgent - policy priorities. As was set out in Section 1.6 of the Introduction, when I first began engagement with the issues of subject choices in 2018 (as a researcher for a Member of the Scottish Parliament) and then as a Postgraduate Researcher on this thesis, subject choice, and the impact of the curriculum reforms upon them, was one of the key priority policy areas in Scottish education.

The relevance of this to drawing conclusions of this research is that the policy landscape has changed in the 'post-COVID' environment we now find ourselves. It seemed then that action on these issues - as a Government priority - was inevitable, it seems now that any meaningful reform is years away at least. Indeed, it is not to say that any of the issues outlined throughout this research have been solved or are not as urgently in need of addressing as they were, but rather that the policy priorities have changed in the time since the years of disruption to education that was caused by the pandemic.

## **12.5 – Place - the impact of researching around Glasgow**

As set out in Chapter Six, the research originally planned to include a focus on Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICs) and their intended role in curriculum development, meaning that recruitment of schools was limited to ‘Greater Glasgow’, the area covered by the ‘West Partnership’ Regional Improvement Collaborative. Should the research be replicated - or if I could go to the beginning of the process again with the knowledge of hindsight that RICs would become quickly defunct - I would have attempted to recruit schools from a range of regions across the country.

Therefore, there is need for reflection also on the role of place within the findings of this research. In concluding that deprivation has a strong impact on the chances of young people, it would be remiss not to reflect on the fact the fieldwork was conducted in a region of Scotland with levels of deprivation significantly higher than the national average. Though - although a stated defining mission of Scottish Government policy is the elimination of the poverty-related attainment gap - it also important to note the absence of data relating to the socio-economic status of individuals in Scottish education. Instead, there is a reliance on categorising individual’s level of deprivation based on the relative deprivation of their postcode rather than their own circumstance (Kintrea 2021).

The impact of place also potentially extends beyond the impact of deprivation, but also on aspirations. It is the case that location in which an individual lives and goes to school is likely impact upon both the perception of the opportunities available to them, and the reality of what pathways are available in the local economy. For example, in the North East of Scotland there is a significant proportion of the population which works in the energy sector, in Edinburgh financial services are a key employer, and in Glasgow there is a diverse economy with opportunities in significant employment in engineering, creative industries and the service sector.

This is to say that the local economy has an impact on perceptions of the pathways of which a young person will aspire to. Additionally, to the opportunities available, it is likely that a young person's family will have experiences of, and networks within, the prominent economic sectors of the area, and the influence that can have in influencing aspirations has been demonstrated throughout this research.

Further, as has been discussed a key policy objective of CfE and Developing the Young Workforce has been to enable schools to take advantage of local opportunities and to create collaborative partnerships with local employers. As has been demonstrated, employer engagements can shape aspirations, and are therefore regionally specific. Finally, within Greater Glasgow, most of the region is commutable to four universities, two other Higher Education institutions and several colleges, having an impact on considerations of Further and Higher education aspirations, increasing the choices of courses and degrees open to young people and allow them to stay at home. This population density also makes collaboration between schools - such as consortia arrangements - more viable than in other, more rural, parts of the country.

## **12.6 - Further Research Areas**

These two areas of reflections on the conclusions of the research - the lasting impact of the pandemic and place - leave significant opportunity and need for future research. One crucial area for further investigation is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on subject choices and curriculum opportunity. Indeed, as schools navigate through a period of significant reform in a post-COVID educational context, understanding how the years following the pandemic has shaped subject availability and academic pathways becomes essential. Particularly, there is need for an assessment of how divergence in curriculum patterns has developed since before the pandemic, to assess whether the divergence has reduced, increased or stayed the same.

Another crucial aspect of potential interest is the balance and evolution of choices throughout students' academic journeys. A longitudinal study tracking subject choices from S4 choices through to the late twenties would give greater insight



into how internal and external influences evolve over time, giving greater insight into the balance of influences and how and when these are applied by individuals in different contexts. It would also allow for insight into the impact of subject choices on the shaping of pathways, economic activity and potential earnings, and the extent of pre-determination that subject choice at school have over early careers.

There would be salience in developing further understanding of parental influence in influencing choices. Indeed, parental influence stands out as a significant factor shaping subject choices, but the overwhelmingly the data captured in this study was young people's experience of parental influence. Delving deeper, research could explore how parents utilise their social networks to influence these decisions. Employing methods such as network analysis and qualitative interviews, the 'Perception Gap' conceptualised within this study could be understood further. This could better appreciate the dynamics of parental networks and the motivations driving their influence in their children's educational journeys. Moreover, there is a growing interest in including parents as active participants in educational decision-making processes, and a desire on behalf of parents for greater depth of involvement. By understanding parents' understanding of formal curricular structures and how they use such information in exerting influence, valuable knowledge into the interplay of familial influence and institutional expectations could be developed.

## **12.7 – Conclusion**

This research has demonstrated how subject choices under the Curriculum for Excellence are shaped by a complex interplay of internal and external influence, school structures, and broader socio-economic circumstances. The findings reveal that subject choice is not simply an individual learning decision but is deeply embedded within structural inequalities, reflecting disparities in economic, social, and cultural capital. Pupils from less deprived backgrounds often benefit from greater parental knowledge and networks, enabling them to make strategic choices that align with long-term aspirations, while those from deprived backgrounds may face constrained options due to limited access to information and guidance. In essence the perceptions of what options were attainable post-

school were broader amongst those who experienced less deprivation, who also had greater knowledge of how to make their aspirations a reality.

The narrowing of the curriculum further exacerbates these inequalities, restricting flexibility for pupils to explore a breadth of subjects, particularly in more deprived schools where resources and subject offerings may be more limited. These findings highlight the persistence of socio-economic based divisions in education, where the structures of subject choice reinforce existing patterns of advantage and disadvantage.

The role of schools, employers, and policy-driven curriculum structures also emerged as a critical factor in shaping student choices. Schools, while acting as sites of guidance and support, also serve as gatekeepers, structuring choices through timetable constraints, subject columns, and implicit expectations based on prior attainment. Employer influence, particularly in STEM and vocational pathways, further reinforces a market-driven approach to education, where subject selection is increasingly aligned with workforce demands rather than individual interests or holistic educational development. This dynamic illustrates the tension between structure and agency as young people navigate external influences while exercising varying degrees of internal autonomy in their decisions. The findings suggest that while some young people demonstrate reflexivity and agency, their ability to do so is shaped by their habitus and access to capital, meaning that educational opportunities remain unevenly distributed across social groups.

These insights have important implications for education policy and practice. If Scotland's secondary education system is to reduce inequalities in subject choice, there is a need for greater flexibility within the curriculum, enhanced guidance provision, and policies that challenge rather than reinforce socio-economic disparities. Schools must be empowered and resourced to offer a wider range of subjects, particularly in disadvantaged areas, while university and employer admissions criteria should be aligned with policies that support diverse educational pathways. Further research is needed to explore how curriculum structures can be reformed to support social mobility, ensuring that students from all backgrounds have the opportunity to make informed and aspirational choices.

By recognising the interplay of social class, curriculum design, and institutional influences, this study contributes to a broader understanding of educational inequalities and calls for a more equitable and pupil-centred approach to subject choices in Scotland.

## **12.8 - Reflexivity**

During my fieldwork, it was a privilege to re-enter schools in Scotland around a decade after I left school myself (which was one of the final pre-CfE years). I witnessed a dynamic, vibrant, innovative, and exciting system, packed full of professionals striving to do their very best by every young person. Further, no matter their social background, interest, or level of educational attainment, every young person I spoke with rightly had high levels of aspirations for themselves.

It is surely the role of everyone involved in the education system - not least policymakers at all levels - to resource and facilitate the highest quality and most equitable educational experiences for every young person. To ensure that young people have real choices for the future, and not just chances determined by circumstance.

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## APPENDIX

### Appendix One - Scotland's Subjects

| Subject                     | Levels                                                           | Course Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Accounting                  | National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher                             | Accounting is a key function in the dynamic world of business. The Courses provide the knowledge and skills needed to understand, analyse and interpret financial information in order to make informed judgements and decisions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Administration and IT       | National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher                    | Administration and IT develops candidates' administrative, organisational and IT skills. Candidates develop an understanding of administration in the workplace and the IT skills required for the role.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Applications of Mathematics | National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher                    | Applications of Mathematics brings mathematics into the real world with personal finances, statistics and measurement. Learners develop knowledge, understanding and skills that will enable them to apply mathematical ideas and strategies in real-life situations. These include managing finances, statistics, data and probability, geometry and measurement.<br><br>Applications of Mathematics can be studied alongside 'traditional' mathematics or taken as an alternative. The courses equip learners with mathematical and statistical skills that support a range of curricular areas, including humanities, social sciences, health care, and business. |
| Art and Design              | National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher                    | Creativity is the focus of the course. Learners develop knowledge of art and design practices by studying artists and designers and their work. They also develop an understanding of expressive and design processes.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Art and Design (Design)     | Advanced Higher                                                  | The Art and Design (Design) Course provides opportunities for learners to develop their creativity and apply their understanding of design practice, function and aesthetics.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Art and Design (Expressive) | Advanced Higher                                                  | The Art and Design (Expressive) Course provides opportunities for learners to develop their creativity, visual awareness and understanding of aesthetic, while exploring how to communicate their personal thoughts, ideas and opinions through their expressive artwork.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Biology                     | National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher | The Course develops interest and enthusiasm for biology. Scientific inquiry and investigation skills are developed through a range of topics from molecular through to whole organism and beyond.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| British Sign Language       |                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Business                    | National 3<br>National 4                                         | The Course introduces learners to the dynamic, competitive, financial and economic environment of business. It develops skills in presenting business related information, in a variety of formats, to the various stakeholders of an organisation.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Business Management         | National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher                             | Business Management develops enterprise skills and attributes by providing opportunities to study a range of business and organisational contexts.<br><br>Candidates see the ways in which society relies on businesses and other organisations to satisfy its needs, and an understanding of how to use business information to interpret and report on overall business                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |

|                           |                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                           |                                                                  | performance. The Course also looks at the impact that external influences can have on organisations.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Business in Practice      | National 2                                                       | SQA's Business in Practice qualification develops learners' understanding of the way in which businesses operate. Through activities relating to enterprise and customer care, learners develop skills for work, knowledge of basic business concepts, and an understanding of the role that information and communications technology (ICT) plays in business.                                     |
| Cantonese                 | National 2<br>National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5<br>Higher   | Modern Languages Courses develop candidates' knowledge and understanding of a modern language and cover the contexts of society, learning, employability and culture. These Courses provide learners with opportunities to develop their reading, listening, talking                                                                                                                                |
|                           | Advanced Higher                                                  | and writing skills to help them understand and use the language.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Care                      | National 4<br>National 5 Higher                                  | Candidates understand why people use care services, and develop the knowledge required for working in care practice settings such as health care and social care.<br><br>Active learning and personalisation is promoted by giving candidates opportunities to investigate care issues and topics of their own choice.                                                                              |
| Chemistry                 | National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher | The Course develops candidates curiosity, interest and enthusiasm for chemistry in a range of contexts. The skills of scientific inquiry and investigation are developed throughout the Course, and the relevance of chemistry is highlighted by the study of the applications of chemistry in everyday contexts.                                                                                   |
| Childcare and Development | Higher                                                           | The Course enables candidates to understand child development from pre-birth to 16 and the roles and responsibilities of practitioners, other professionals, parents/carers and others in contributing to the development of children and young people.                                                                                                                                             |
| Classical Studies         | National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher | Candidates study the religious, political, social, moral and cultural values and practices of classical Greek and Roman societies. They become more aware of issues affecting their own society, and globally, by comparing the classical world with the modern world.                                                                                                                              |
| Computing Science         | National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher | Computing Science shapes the world in which we live and its future. The course brings together elements of technology, science and creative digital media, providing an insight into the challenge, excitement and reward to be found in these areas.                                                                                                                                               |
| Creative Arts             | National 2                                                       | In studying Creative Arts, candidates will:<br><br>demonstrate an awareness of the range of creative arts work imaginatively and develop individual creativity communicate thoughts, meaning and ideas through creative work<br><br>demonstrate skills in using techniques, processes, materials and media to produce creative work<br><br>use media and technology as part of the creative process |
| Dance                     | National 5 Higher                                                | The Dance Courses enable learners to develop a range of technical dance skills. It challenges and inspires to develop choreographic skills.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

|                                     |                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Design and Manufacture              | National 4<br>National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher               | The Course provides a broad and practical experience in product design and manufacture. Creativity is at the heart of this Course and its combination with technology makes it exciting and dynamic.                                                                                                                                                     |
| Design and Technology               | National 3                                                       | The Design and Technology Course develops skills in producing and interpreting sketches, drawings and diagrams. Skills are also developed in practical model making and construction; and testing and simple evaluation of models. Learners apply safe working practices and develop knowledge of basic engineering ideas.                               |
| Drama                               | National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher | The Drama Course allows learners to explore both the practical and analytical aspects of the subject. Learners develop skills through practical aspects of theatre, the creative exploration of the art of theatre and its forms and practices.                                                                                                          |
| ESOL (English as a second language) | National 2<br>National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher      | ESOL courses are for learners whose first language is not English. Learners develop their reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills in the English language, and also their knowledge of language.<br><br>Our National Qualifications in ESOL correspond with levels A1 to C1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). |
| Economics                           | National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher                             | Economics is about choice and its impact. Studying economics gives candidates an appreciation of how markets and governments work, and how economic decisions affect our lives.                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Engineering Science                 | National 4<br>National 5 Higher                                  | Engineering is vital to everyday life; it shapes the world in which we live and its future. Engineers play key roles                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|                                     | Advanced Higher                                                  | in meeting the needs of society in fields which include climate change, medicine, IT and transport.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| English                             | National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher | The courses provide candidates with opportunities to develop skills in listening, talking, reading and writing. Language and literacy skills are of personal, social and economic importance.                                                                                                                                                            |
| English and Communication           | National 3                                                       | The Course develops learners' skills in reading, watching, listening to and understanding texts and in communicating their responses.                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Environmental Science               | National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher                    | The course develops learners' interest and enthusiasm for environmental science in a range of contexts, as well as their investigative and experimental skills. Environmental science takes a problem solving approach to attempt to develop solutions that prevent or reverse environmental deterioration and aim for sustainable practices.            |
| Fashion and Textile Technology      | National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher                    | Course develops knowledge, understanding and skills in the technological processes of the fashion/textile industry. Course is experiential and practical, with opportunities for candidates to develop and communicate their own ideas for fashion.                                                                                                      |
| Food, Health and Wellbeing          | National 2                                                       | The purpose of the Course is to enable learners to understand the relationship between food, health and wellbeing. Learners develop the knowledge and practical skills required to produce healthy dishes and develop practical skills required to support independent living.                                                                           |

|                                |                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| French                         | National 2<br>National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher | Modern Languages Courses develop candidates' knowledge and understanding of a modern language and cover the contexts of society, learning, employability and culture. These Courses provide learners with opportunities to develop their reading, listening, talking and writing skills to help them understand and use the language.                                                                                                                                                          |
| Gaelic (Learners)              | National 2<br>National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher | Modern Languages Courses develop candidates' knowledge and understanding of a modern language and cover the contexts of society, learning, employability and culture. These Courses provide learners with opportunities to develop their reading, listening, talking and writing skills to help them understand and use the language.                                                                                                                                                          |
| Geography                      | National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher               | The study of geography introduces candidates to our changing world, its human interactions and physical processes. Candidates develop the knowledge and skills to enable them to contribute to their local communities and wider society. The study of geography fosters positive life-long attitudes of environmental stewardship, sustainability and global citizenship. Practical activities, including fieldwork, provide opportunities for candidates to interact with their environment. |
| German                         | National 2<br>National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher | Modern Languages Courses develop candidates' knowledge and understanding of a modern language and cover the contexts of society, learning, employability and culture. These Courses provide learners with opportunities to develop their reading, listening, talking and writing skills to help them understand and use the language.                                                                                                                                                          |
| Graphic Communication          | National 4<br>National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher                             | The Course is practical, exploratory and experiential in nature. It combines elements of creativity and communicating for visual impact with elements of protocol and an appreciation of the importance of graphic communication standards.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Gàidhlig                       | National 2<br>National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher | The main purpose of the course is to provide candidates with the opportunity to develop the skills of reading, critical reading, listening, talking and writing in order to understand and use Gaelic language. As candidates develop their literacy skills, they are able to process information more easily, apply knowledge of language in practical and relevant contexts, and gain confidence to undertake new and more challenging tasks in a variety of situations.                     |
| Health and Food Technology     | National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher               | Health and Food Technology Course focuses on health, the influence of food and its nutritional properties, and the dietary needs of individuals. It also focuses on the application of safe, hygienic and informed practices in food preparation.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| History                        | National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher               | The Course develops a coherent and balanced understanding of Scottish, British, European and world history. Through examining the past, candidates can better understand their own communities, their country and the wider world.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Human Biology                  | Higher                                                                         | The Course provides the opportunity for learners to acquire a deeper understanding of cellular processes, physiological mechanisms, communication between organisms, and the biology of populations as they apply to the human species.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Information and Communications | National 2                                                                     | The course brings together elements of technology, science and creative digital media, providing an insight into the challenge, excitement and reward to be found in                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |



|                          |                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                          |                                                                                | these areas.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Italian                  | National 2<br>National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher | Modern Languages Courses develop candidates' knowledge and understanding of a modern language and cover the contexts of society, learning, employability and culture. These Courses provide learners with opportunities to develop their reading, listening, talking and writing skills to help them understand and use the language.                  |
| Latin                    | National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher               | The Course develops linguistic awareness and analytical skills through the study of Latin texts. It provides candidates with opportunities to develop translation skills and to understand, analyse and evaluate through the study of Latin language and literature.                                                                                   |
| Lifeskills Mathematics   | National 2                                                                     | The National 2 Lifeskills Mathematics Course builds on the principles and practice and experiences and outcomes of Mathematics and Numeracy.                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Literacy and Numeracy    |                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Mandarin                 | National 2<br>National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher | Modern Languages Courses develop candidates' knowledge and understanding of a modern language and cover the contexts of society, learning, employability and culture. These Courses provide learners with opportunities to develop their reading, listening, talking and writing skills to help them understand and use the language.                  |
| Mathematics              | National 4<br>National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher                             | Mathematics is rich and stimulating and develops logical reasoning, analysis, problem solving skills, creativity and the ability to think in abstract ways.                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Mathematics of Mechanics | Advanced Higher                                                                | The course develops important mathematical techniques, which are critical to successful progression beyond Advanced Higher level in Mathematics of Mechanics and many other curriculum areas. The skills, knowledge and understanding in the course also support learning in technology, health and wellbeing, science, and social studies.            |
| Media                    | National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher               | The courses give learners opportunities to use different media. Learners will express themselves in different ways. Learners will synthesise ideas and arguments through the use of critical thinking.                                                                                                                                                 |
| Modern Studies           | National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher               | Modern Studies follows a multidisciplinary approach to develop candidates' knowledge and understanding of contemporary political and social issues in local, Scottish, United Kingdom and international contexts. Candidates develop the skills to interpret and participate in the social and political processes they will encounter in their lives. |
| Music                    | National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher               | The Music courses provide candidates with broad practical experience of performing, creating and understanding music. The courses enable candidates to work independently or in collaboration with others, and can help them to plan and organise, to make decisions and to take responsibility for their own learning.                                |
| Music Technology         | National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher               | These courses are for learners with a broad interest in music technology and 20th and 21st century music. The courses are practical and experiential in nature. There is scope for personalisation and choice through the contexts for learning.                                                                                                       |

|                    |                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| National 1 and 2   |                                                                                | National 1 and National 2 qualifications are set at SCQF levels 1 and 2 and are designed for learners who require additional support. They provide opportunities for learners to develop their knowledge and skills, and to have their achievements certificated.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| People and Society | National 3<br>National 4                                                       | <p>The People and Society Course builds on a wide range of experiences and outcomes and principles and practices from across several curriculum areas. Courses can be built on the foundation laid by the principles and practices and experiences and outcomes in the social studies curriculum area, as well as on aspects of health and wellbeing and religious and moral education curriculum areas.</p> <p>This Course will encourage learners to develop important attitudes, including: an open mind and respect for the values, beliefs and cultures of others, openness to new thinking and ideas, and a sense of responsibility and global citizenship.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Performance Arts   | National 2                                                                     | The National 2 Performance Arts Course builds on the principles and practice and experiences and outcomes of the expressive arts curriculum area. The expressive arts are rich and stimulating, with the capacity to engage and fascinate learners of all ages and skills. The expressive arts also play an important role in supporting learners to recognise and value the variety and vitality of culture locally, nationally and globally.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Philosophy         | National 5 Higher                                                              | The courses develop reasoning skills by focusing on abstract concepts and philosophical problems. They develop basic knowledge and understanding of philosophy and encourage candidates' ability to engage with abstract thought. They also offer candidates insight into the ideas of others, while developing a range of skills such as analysing arguments, recalling, selecting and using specified knowledge, explaining philosophical ideas and theories, explaining criticisms of philosophical ideas and theories, and presenting ideas in a logical sequence in an extended piece of writing.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Photography        | Higher                                                                         | The course encourages candidates to be inspired and challenged by visually representing their personal thoughts and ideas through the medium of photography. An integrated approach to learning means candidates plan, develop and produce creative and technically proficient photographs.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Physical Education | National 2<br>National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher | Physical Education acts as a stimulus for personal achievement, and this makes it an ideal platform for developing confidence, resilience, responsibility and working co-operatively with others. The courses also promotes mental, emotional, social and physical wellbeing.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Physics            | National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher               | <p>The purpose of the course is to develop candidates' interest and enthusiasm for physics in a range of contexts. The skills of scientific inquiry are integrated and developed, throughout the course, by investigating the applications of physics. This enables candidates to become scientifically literate citizens, able to review the science-based claims they will meet.</p> <p>Physics gives candidates an insight into the underlying nature of our world and its place in the universe. From the sources of the energy we use, to the exploration of space, it covers a range of applications of the relationships that have been discovered through experiment and calculation, including those used in modern technology. An experimental and investigative approach is used to develop knowledge and understanding of physics concepts.</p> |

|                        |                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|------------------------|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Politics               | Higher                                 | <p>Politics sees the study of important political concepts and ideologies, the comparison of different political systems, and the evaluation of factors that impact on the electoral performance of political parties.</p> <p>Candidates develop knowledge and understanding of key political concepts. The theoretical perspective of the course enables candidates to identify, explore and analyse political issues in order to develop their own views and perspectives. Candidates develop analysing and</p>                                                                                                                                                      |
|                        |                                        | evaluating skills during the course which help them to interpret and understand political issues.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Practical Cake Craft   | National 5                             | <p>The course builds on the principles and practice and the relevant experiences and outcomes for the technologies and health and wellbeing curriculum areas. It enables candidates to participate in engaging, motivating learning experiences, to develop and demonstrate highly imaginative techniques in the production of cakes and other baked items. The course provides opportunities for candidates to achieve through participating in engaging, motivating and relevant learning experiences, and develop confidence as individuals who derive satisfaction from creating cakes and from having their achievements and skills recognised.</p>               |
| Practical Cookery      | National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 | <p>This course aims to further develop candidates' life skills and enhance their personal effectiveness in terms of cookery and to provide a set of skills for those who wish to progress to further study in the hospitality context. In preparing candidates for life, the course anticipates their future needs and enables them to learn how to plan, prepare and cook food for themselves and others. It also develops organisational skills, which have an application in a wide variety of contexts.</p>                                                                                                                                                        |
| Practical Craft Skills | National 2<br>National 3               | <p>The Course is practical and experiential in nature. It focuses on the development of practical woodworking and/or practical metalworking skills. It provides opportunities for learners to gain practical craft skills in the use of a range of tools, equipment and materials, working with wood, manufactured boards and/or metals. It allows learners to follow a series of activities through to the completion of a finished item.</p> <p>The Course provides opportunities to develop and enhance practical creativity and practical problem- solving skills, and to gain an appreciation of safe working practices in a workshop or similar environment.</p> |
| Practical Electronics  | National 4<br>National 5               | <p>Electronics brings together elements of technology, science and mathematics and applies these to real-world challenges. The course provides progression from experiences and outcomes in craft, design, engineering and graphics, and in science. It provides a solid foundation for those considering further study or a career in electronics, electrical engineering and related disciplines. The course also provides a valuable complementary practical experience for those studying engineering science, physics or other science courses.</p>                                                                                                               |
| Practical Metalworking | 4 National 4<br>National 5             | <p>The National 5 Practical Metalworking course provides opportunities for candidates to gain a range of theoretical and practical metalworking skills relating to tools, equipment, processes and materials. They also develop skills in reading and interpreting working drawings and related documents as well as an understanding of health and safety.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |

|                                            |                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|--------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Practical Woodworking                      | National 4<br>National 5                         | The National 5 Practical Woodworking course provides opportunities for candidates to gain a range of theoretical and practical woodworking skills relating to tools, equipment, processes and materials. They also develop skills in reading and interpreting working drawings and related documents as well as an understanding of health and safety.                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Psychology                                 | National 5 Higher                                | The course enables candidates to develop an understanding of the psychological study of the human mind and behaviour in a range of contexts, and enhances their ability to use evidence to explain behaviour. The course develops candidates' understanding of psychology as the scientific study of the mind and behaviour. Psychology is a research-based subject, and it provides the opportunity to conduct practical research, including working with human participants in accordance with ethical standards.                                         |
| Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies | National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5<br>Higher | The course develops knowledge and understanding of religious, moral and philosophical issues that affect the world. The course explores the questions they raise and the solutions or approaches they offer. It includes both                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|                                            | Advanced Higher                                  | religious and non-religious perspectives. Candidates have opportunities to reflect on these and on their own experience and views. Candidates are required to study a world religion, contemporary moral issues and responses, and key aspects of answers to religious and philosophical questions.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Science                                    | National 3<br>National 4                         | The purpose of the Course is to develop learners' curiosity, interest and enthusiasm for science in a range of contexts. The skills of scientific inquiry and investigation are integrated and developed throughout the Course. The relevance of science is highlighted by the study of the applications of science in everyday contexts. The Course is an up-to-date selection of ideas relevant to the central position of science within our society. It is practical and experiential, and develops scientific awareness of issues relating to science. |
| Science in the Environment                 | National 2                                       | The purpose of the course is to develop candidates' curiosity, interest and enthusiasm for science in a range of contexts. The course aims to develop each candidate's awareness of themselves and their environment through observation, practical experiments, and tasks that encourage them to develop an interest in and an understanding of the living, material and physical world.                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Social Subjects                            | National 2                                       | The Course develops generic thinking skills and basic knowledge and understanding within social subjects (Geography, History, Modern Studies, Classical Studies) and/or religious, moral and philosophical studies. Candidates develop their understanding of the world by considering other people and their values and beliefs, in different times, places and circumstances.                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Sociology                                  | National 5 Higher                                | Sociology offers opportunities for learners to investigate human society, cultures and social issues. The courses encourage learners to ask questions about the social world we live in. They also encourage evidence-based explanations for human social behaviour.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |

|                                    |                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Spanish                            | National 2<br>National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher | Modern Languages Courses develop candidates' knowledge and understanding of a modern language and cover the contexts of society, learning, employability and culture. These Courses provide learners with opportunities to develop their reading, listening, talking and writing skills to help them understand and use the language.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Statistics                         | Advanced Higher                                                                | The Course explores the collection, analysis and interpretation of data. It develops an understanding of degree of certainty which can be attributed to inferences made and conclusions reached when interpreting and analysing data.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Statistics Award<br>(SCQF level 6) | Higher                                                                         | The general aim of this Unit is to develop skills that focus on the use of statistical ideas and valid strategies that can be applied to managing statistics in real-life contexts which may be new to the learner. This includes skills in interpreting and analysing graphs and statistical diagrams, applying skills to the normal distribution, applying statistical skills to data analysis, interpretation and communication and determining the equation of linear regression and using it for prediction.<br>The Outcomes cover aspects of statistics in real-life situations and also skills in statistical reasoning and modelling. |
| Urdu                               | National 2<br>National 3<br>National 4<br>National 5 Higher<br>Advanced Higher | Modern Languages Courses develop candidates' knowledge and understanding of a modern language and cover the contexts of society, learning, employability and culture. These Courses provide learners with opportunities to develop their reading, listening, talking and writing skills to help them understand and use the language.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Work Placement                     |                                                                                | Our Work Placement units are designed to recognise the valuable learning and development that takes place as a result of participating in a work placement.<br>Candidates will review career aspiration(s) and abilities as part of the unit. They will also review their own progress and learning gained in the workplace.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |

## Appendix Two - Defining Subject Areas

|                                                         |
|---------------------------------------------------------|
| STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) |
| Accounting                                              |
| Applications of Mathematics                             |
| Biology                                                 |
| Chemistry                                               |
| Computing Science                                       |
| Engineering Science                                     |
| Environmental Science                                   |
| Human Biology                                           |
| Information and Communications                          |
| Lifeskills Mathematics                                  |
| Literacy and Numeracy                                   |
| Mathematics                                             |
| Mathematics of Mechanics                                |
| Physics                                                 |
| Science                                                 |
| Science in the Environment                              |
| Statistics                                              |
| Statistics Award (SCQF level 6)                         |

|                       |
|-----------------------|
| Social Subjects       |
| Administration and IT |
| Business              |
| Business Management   |
| Business in Practice  |
| Classical Studies     |
| Geography             |
| History               |
| Modern Studies        |
| People and Society    |
| Philosophy            |

|                                            |
|--------------------------------------------|
| Politics                                   |
| Psychology                                 |
| Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies |
| Social Subjects                            |
| Sociology                                  |

|                             |
|-----------------------------|
| Arts                        |
| Art and Design              |
| Art and Design (Design)     |
| Art and Design (Expressive) |
| Creative Arts               |
| Dance                       |
| Drama                       |
| Music                       |
| Performance Arts            |

|                                     |
|-------------------------------------|
| Languages                           |
| Cantonese                           |
| ESOL (English as a second language) |
| French                              |
| Gaelic (Learners)                   |
| German                              |
| Gàidhlig                            |
| Italian                             |
| Latin                               |
| Mandarin                            |
| Spanish                             |
| Urdu                                |

|                            |
|----------------------------|
| Vocational                 |
| Care                       |
| Childcare and Development  |
| Health and Food Technology |

|                                |
|--------------------------------|
| Work Placement                 |
|                                |
| Practical                      |
| British Sign Language          |
| Care                           |
| Design and Manufacture         |
| Design and Technology          |
| Fashion and Textile Technology |
| Food, Health and Wellbeing     |
| Graphic Communication          |
| Music Technology               |
| Photography                    |
| Physical Education             |
| Practical Cake Craft           |
| Practical Cookery              |
| Practical Craft Skills         |
| Practical Electronics          |
| Practical Metalworking         |
| Practical Woodworking          |

|                           |
|---------------------------|
| English                   |
| English                   |
| English and Communication |
| Media                     |



## Appendix Three - Letter to Schools

Dear [X],

**RE: *Chances or Choices?* Research Proposal**

I am writing to ask whether [School Name] would be interested in taking part in a qualitative research project concerning subject choice in the senior phase.

I am a PhD researcher at the University of Glasgow currently working on a research project focused on subject choices in the Greater Glasgow area. The research aims to investigate the factors which influence young peoples' subject choices, the implications this has for employer engagement and the impact on post-school destinations.

My research is funded by the European Social Research Council and is supervised by the University of Glasgow's School of Education, College of Social Sciences and Ethics Committee.

Your school has been approached because it is located within one of the local authorities which comprises the 'Greater Glasgow' area.

If the school was to partake, I would be looking to anonymously select and then speak one-on-one to a range of pupils from S4-S6 about their choices, aspirations and influences. All interviews would last no more than one class period and would be fully confidential. Of course, the participation of each individual would be voluntary with a full process of consent in place, seeking parental agreement where necessary. I would also look to speak to a small number of staff who have responsibility over the curriculum. All data would be anonymized in all outputs. **This means that the individuals and the school itself will not be identified.**

I would be aiming to come into the school at some point between January and the 2020 summer break. Additionally, I would report back findings to the school in any format which may be helpful.

You will be far more aware than I of the increasing importance of understanding pupils' motivations and expectations of their choices. Particularly as the expansion of programs such as Developing the Young Workforce continues. My research aims to go 'deeper than numbers' and gain an understanding of the competing influences over pupils when they make their decisions, and how they come to their choices.

If this is something you may be interested in or you would like further information, please get back to me via the email address or phone number provided. My research supervisor, Professor Keith — can also be contacted on [keith.kintrea@qla.ac.uk](mailto:keith.kintrea@qla.ac.uk).

I look forward to hearing from you. Best Wishes,

**Barry Black**

## Appendix Four - Pupil Participants

| School | Code | Pseudonym | Year | Age | Gender | SIMD   |
|--------|------|-----------|------|-----|--------|--------|
|        |      |           |      |     |        | Decile |
| A      | SA1  | Luke      | S4   | 15  | Male   | 3      |
| A      | SA10 | Oscar     | S6   | 17  | Male   | 3      |
| A      | SA11 | Callum    | S6   | 17  | Male   | 5      |
| A      | SA12 | Liam      | S5   | 16  | Male   | 8      |
| A      | SA13 | Mason     | S6   | 17  | Male   | 1      |
| A      | SA14 | Clara     | S4   | 15  | Female | 1      |
| A      | SA15 | Robyn     | S5   | 16  | Female | 3      |
| A      | SA16 | Amelia    | S4   | 15  | Female | 5      |
| A      | SA17 | Orla      | S5   | 16  | Female | 9      |
| A      | SA18 | Ada       | S5   | 16  | Female | 10     |
| A      | SA19 | Violet    | S4   | 15  | Female | 1      |
| A      | SA2  | Abigail   | S4   | 15  | Female | 9      |
| A      | SA20 | Ruaridh   | S6   | 17  | Male   | 3      |
| A      | SA21 | Sara      | S6   | 17  | Female | 1      |
| A      | SA22 | Freya     | S6   | 17  | Female | 8      |
| A      | SA23 | Lilly     | S6   | 17  | Female | 6      |
| A      | SA3  | Imogen    | S4   | 15  | Female | 1      |
| A      | SA4  | George    | S4   | 15  | Male   | 4      |
| A      | SA5  | Lola      | S4   | 14  | Female | 10     |
| A      | SA6  | Aria      | S5   | 16  | Female | 2      |
| A      | SA7  | Cameron   | S5   | 16  | Male   | 10     |
| A      | SA8  | Georgia   | S5   | 16  | Female | 7      |
| A      | SA9  | Zara      | S6   | 17  | Female | 7      |
| B      | SBW1 | Millie    | S4   | 15  | Female | 10     |
| B      | SB10 | Innes     | S5   | 16  | Male   | 10     |
| B      | SB11 | Thomas    | S5   | 16  | Male   | 8      |
| B      | SB12 | Finn      | S5   | 16  | Male   | 10     |
| B      | SB13 | Ryan      | S5   | 16  | Male   | 10     |
| B      | SB14 | Russell   | S5   | 17  | Male   | 10     |

|   |      |           |    |    |        |    |
|---|------|-----------|----|----|--------|----|
| B | SB15 | Reuben    | S5 | 16 | Male   | 10 |
| B | SB16 | Charlotte | S5 | 16 | Female | 10 |
| B | SB17 | Florence  | S5 | 16 | Female | 10 |
| B | SB2  | Anna      | S4 | 15 | Female | 10 |
| B | SB3  | Harper    | S4 | 15 | Female | 10 |
| B | SB4  | Lucas     | S4 | 15 | Male   | 10 |
| B | SB5  | Matthew   | S4 | 15 | Male   | 10 |
| B | SB6  | Nathan    | S4 | 16 | Male   | 9  |
| B | SB7  | Holly     | S5 | 16 | Female | 10 |
| B | SB8  | Anna      | S5 | 16 | Female | 10 |
| B | SB9  | Ella      | S5 | 16 | Female | 9  |
| C | SC1  | Margot    | S5 | 16 | Female | 4  |
| C | SC10 | Aiden     | S5 | 16 | Male   | 8  |
| C | SC11 | Ellie     | S6 | 17 | Female | 5  |
| C | SC12 | Charlie   | S6 | 17 | Male   | 9  |
| C | SC13 | Ollie     | S5 | 16 | Male   | 4  |
| C | SC14 | Erin      | S5 | 16 | Female | 9  |
| C | SC15 | Arran     | S6 | 17 | Male   | 7  |
| C | SC16 | No Show   |    |    |        |    |
| C | SC17 | Joseph    | S4 | 15 | Male   | 9  |
| C | SC18 | Harriet   | S4 | 15 | Female | 9  |
| C | SC2  | Jack      | S5 | 15 | Male   | 9  |
| C | SC3  | Olivia    | S6 | 17 | Female | 4  |
| C | SC4  | Zoe       | S6 | 17 | Female | 9  |
| C | SC5  | Elizabeth | S4 | 16 | Female | 8  |
| C | SC6  | Tyler     | S4 | 15 | Male   | 9  |
| C | SC7  | Maria     | S4 | 15 | Female | 9  |
| C | SC8  | John      | S4 | 15 | Male   | 5  |
| C | SC9  | Rosie     | S5 | 16 | Female | 7  |
| D | SD1  | Maya      | S4 | 15 | Female | 3  |
| D | SD10 | Hamish    | S5 | 16 | Male   | 8  |
| D | SD11 | Fraser    | S5 | 16 | Male   | 8  |

|   |      |          |    |    |        |   |
|---|------|----------|----|----|--------|---|
| D | SD12 | Sophia   | S5 | 16 | Female | 7 |
| D | SD13 | Rory     | S6 | 17 | Male   | 1 |
| D | SD14 | Alice    | S6 | 17 | Female | 1 |
| D | SD15 | Michael  | S4 | 16 | Male   | 1 |
| D | SD2  | Eleanor  | S4 | 15 | Female | 2 |
| D | SD3  | Evie     | S4 | 15 | Female | 1 |
| D | SD4  | Isabelle | S4 | 15 | Female | 5 |
| D | SD5  | Jessica  | S4 | 15 | Female | 3 |
| D | SD6  | James    | S4 | 15 | Male   | 4 |
| D | SD7  | Arthur   | S4 | 15 | Male   | 3 |
| D | SD8  | Molly    | S5 | 16 | Female | 2 |
| D | SD9  | Robert   | S5 | 16 | Male   | 9 |

## **Appendix Five - Pupil Participant Information Sheet**

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

### **What is the purpose of the study?**

This study is being carried out to help understand the subject choices process in schools in the Greater Glasgow region and what influences young peoples' learning decisions.

### **Why have I been chosen?**

You are being asked to take part in this study because you are a pupil at a school in the Greater Glasgow region who is in S4, S5 or S6.

### **What will happen if I take part?**

If you agree to take part, you will attend an interview with a researcher that will last no longer than one class period. You will be asked about the subject choices process in your school, what subjects you picked and why, your motivations and what you want to do when you leave school. With your permission, these interviews will be audio recorded and then transcribed (written up word-for-word). Once transcription is finished, the recording will be destroyed. You will be able to withdraw from the research at any time until publication (expected to be October 2021), without giving a reason.

### **Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?**

If you agree to take part, a name will be selected to be used in the data that isn't your own. This will help make sure that anyone who takes part in the research will remain anonymous. It will also make sure that anyone reading the research will not be able to identify you. Your school will also not be identified. All data collected during the process will be stored on a secure device.

Please note that confidentiality will be maintained as far as it possible. For example, if during our conversation I hear anything which makes me worried that someone might be in danger of harm, I may have to inform someone in your school's senior management team. Due to the size of the school it is also possible

other may know that you are participating in the study.

**What will happen to the results of the research study?**

After having collected all the necessary data, a thesis will be written, which will then be viewed by the staff at the University of Glasgow and potentially the wider academic community. The transcripts (the word for word record of our interviews) will be kept in a secure location for possible use in the future by other researchers. This would mean that the content could be published in the future in a separate publication, like at a conference. The research data will also be stored for ten years on the University of Glasgow 'Enlighten' data storage facility. Your anonymity will be ensured as it is in the current research.

**Who do I contact if I have questions or issues with the research?**

If you have any questions, do not hesitate to email the researcher at [b.black.1@research.gla.ac.uk](mailto:b.black.1@research.gla.ac.uk). You can also contact the research supervisor from the University of Glasgow, Prof. Keith Kintrea, by email on [keith.kintrea@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:keith.kintrea@glasgow.ac.uk).

If you have any concerns regarding the conduct of this research project you can contact the College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer, Dr Muir Houston by email on [Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk).

## **Appendix Six - Parents Participant Information Sheet**

### *Chances or Choices? Influences on Young Peoples' Learning Decisions*

You are receiving this form because the young person in your care has been invited to take part in a research study. As they are under the age of 16, they will require your consent to take part.

Before you give consent, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please get in touch if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

#### **What is the purpose of the study?**

This study is being carried out to help understand the subject choices process in schools in the Greater Glasgow region and what may influence these choices. The school has agreed to take part in this research.

#### **What will happen if they take part?**

If you agree to your young person taking part, they will attend an interview with a researcher during the school day that will last no longer than one class period. They will be asked about the process of selecting subjects in their school, why they selected their subjects and what they want to do when leaving school. With permission, these interviews will be audio recorded and then transcribed (written up word-for-word). Once transcription is finished, the recording will be destroyed.

You, and they, will be able to withdraw from the research at any time until publication (expected to be October 2021), without giving a reason.

#### **Will the study be kept confidential?**

If you agree to your young person taking part, a name will be selected for them to be used in the data. This will help make sure that anyone who takes part in the research will remain anonymous. It will also make sure that anyone reading the research will not be able to identify anyone. The school will also not be identified. All data collected during the process will be stored on a secure device.

Please note that confidentiality will be maintained as far as it possible, unless during the conversation anything is disclosed which causes worry that someone might be in danger of harm. If this is the case, someone in the school's senior management team may have to be informed. Also, due to the size of the school, it is possible others may be aware of participation.



**What will happen to the results of the research study?**

After having collected all the necessary data, a thesis will be written which will then be viewed by the staff at the University of Glasgow and potentially the wider academic community. Transcripts (the word for word record of interviews) may be held in a secure location for possible use in the future. This would mean that the content could be published in the future in a separate publication, like at a conference. The research data will also be stored for ten years on the University of Glasgow 'Enlighten' data storage facility. Your anonymity will be ensured as it is in the current research.

**Who do I contact if I have questions or issues with the research?**

If you have any questions, do not hesitate to email the researcher at [b.black.1@research.gla.ac.uk](mailto:b.black.1@research.gla.ac.uk).

You can also contact the research supervisor from the University of Glasgow, Prof. Keith Kintrea by email on [keith.kintrea@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:keith.kintrea@glasgow.ac.uk). If you have any concerns regarding the conduct of this research project you can contact the College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer, Dr Muir Houston by email on [Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk).

I understand that my young person's participation is voluntary and that I and they are free to withdraw consent at any time, without giving any reason.

I agree to participation in this research study ☐

I do not agree to participation in this research study ☐

Name of Young Person

Name of Parent/Guardian

Signature Date

## Appendix Seven - Consent Form

**Title of Project:** Chances or Choices? Influences on Young Peoples' Learning Decisions

**Name of Researcher:** Barry Black

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Please mark (X) |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| I consent to interviews being audio-recorded.                                                                                                                                                                                        |                 |
| I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym (A made up name that is not your own).                                                                                                                              |                 |
| I acknowledge that there will be no effect on my grades arising from my participation or non-participation in this research.                                                                                                         |                 |
| The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.                                                                                                                                                |                 |
| The material will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research.                                                                                                                                                 |                 |
| The material may be used in future publications, both print and online.                                                                                                                                                              |                 |
| I agree to waive my copyright to any data collected as part of this project.                                                                                                                                                         |                 |
| I understand that other authenticated researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.                                                     |                 |
| I understand that other authenticated researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form. |                 |

I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I agree to take part in this research study ☐

I do not agree to take part in this research study ☐

Name of Participant

Signature

Name of Researcher

Signature

## Appendix Eight - Demographic Form

Year -      S4                      S5                                      S6

Age -

Gender -    Male                      FemaleNon-binary                      Prefer not to say.

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Postcode -

## **Appendix Nine - Research Instrument Version One**

### **Aspirations**

What they want to do after education and why, for how long they have wanted to do this

Parents, siblings education

School subject choices process

What subjects they picked

Why - what their priorities were for the process (discussion of enjoyment, usefulness and necessity)

When they started thinking about subject choices

Who they discussed each subject choice with, who they listened to regarding choices

Their thoughts on the process, what they enjoyed and any barriers they faced

How previous 'rounds' of the choices process has impacted on the current choices they have

Employer engagement at school

What external engagement they had with employers/colleges/universities during choices process or what research they had done regarding subjects

What it was, what was useful, what was missing

How it has impacted their approach to education, aspiration and subjects

## Appendix Ten - Research Instrument Version Two

### **Aspirations After school**

Have you thought about what you might want to do after school? What has made you want to do this?

For how long have you thought about doing this? Was there a specific *thing* that triggered interest in it?

Have you ever wanted to do something other than this? What changed your mind?

Do you think it will be easy enough to get a job in this area?

What key skills and qualifications do you think employers in this area will be looking for in potential staff members?

(If S4/5) When do you plan to leave school?

(If S6 or answer is S6) What attracted you to stay on until Sixth-Year? Parents, siblings education

Is there anyone in your family that does this for work? What is it that they do?

School subject choices process What?

What subjects did you select/What subjects are on your timetable?

[Leave this open and don't disrupt their chat] Can you tell me a bit about why you selected those subjects?

(If S5/S6) Please tell me what subjects you studied in previous years

(For any that have been added/'crashed') Could you tell me more about why you study that this year, compared to not having done it before?

What is your favourite subject?

What is it that makes it your favourite subject?

Enquire for more information about any 'new' choices that are mentioned - like foundation apprenticeships

The 'make up' of the course and what it involves How much time on the timetable it takes

How they found out about the opportunity to do it Why they took up the

opportunity to do it

Who they spoke to about this choice before making it (if no-one, why?)

Are there any subjects in your timetable you think the school view as more or less important than others?

Are there any subjects in your timetable your family as more or less important than others?

Are there any subjects in your timetable you view as more or less important than others?

Why is it you think this is the case?

[Clearly relate to each question] Did this impact your decision making at all?

Why?

Have you studied any of these before for exam purposes?

Did you have what you want to do after school in mind when you made your choices?

In your mind, how do the choices you have made relate to what you want to do when you leave school?

Were there any subjects you couldn't take that you wanted to? Why?

Are there any choices you have made in any year of school you would change on reflection?

Why would you change this?

Who?

Did you discuss your choices with any one before you made them? Who? Why did you speak to these people?

What difference did speaking to X make? For example did you gain reassurance that you were making the right choices, or change one of your selections? (Make sure and ask this about each person/'group' that is mentioned!)

Are there any subjects that you were encouraged to take? By who?

Are there any subjects you were discouraged to take? By who?

How?

What is the process for choices? When did you make them?

What did you like about the process?

Is there anything that you would change about the process?

Do you think the choices you have made in previous years have impacted on the choices open to you now? In what way?

When?

Overall, do you think that subject choices are important to achieving what you want to do after you leave school?

In what way / Why not?

When did you start thinking about subject choices?

Did you take any practical steps at that point to find out more?

When did school start to inform you about the process and what it means?



## Employer engagement at school

Have you done any employer engagement at school (such as careers fairs, work experience, etc?)

What were these?

What did you get out of these engagements? What was useful?

What wasn't?

Did you discuss your subject choices with any employers at all (can also ask about colleges and unis too if that is their aspiration)?

Why did you speak to X?

Was this through school, family or your own research? Did it have any impact on your subject choices?

What was the impact?

How about with careers advice specifically?

Did it change anything about the choices you made?

## Appendix Eleven - Memo Examples

### SD2 - [Codes]

Wants to be a languages teacher - studies French and Spanish. Wants to study Italian - teachers trying hard to sort that for S5. Family history of teaching though - and is 'good' at the languages.

Has dropped subjects as she got bad grades.

Has rejected teacher, parents influence over different pathways - though has been influenced to aspire to [Name of University] is there and there is familiarity with it.

Never found work experience or careers advice helpful.

Thinks there is a mismatch from subjects' school pushes as important and subjects she will need to get the job she wants.

--

### SC10 - [Codes]

Wants to be in the music industry and study music at Uni. Strong family influence - all in a band and keen musicians.

Wants to stay on to increase odds of qualifications and part of rationale for picking subjects is where he will get good grades

Parents have a very strong influence over him, very overt in directing him. Little in the way of school employer engagement.

[Name of university] is the aspiration but couldn't explain why other than liking the title of one of the courses.

--

SA11 - [Codes]

Wanted to be an architect until 6th year when she was hooked up by the school onto a 3 day BSL course. It came out of discussions she had with a director of nursing at a school career fair.

Managed to swap a subject choice to biology, though having never done it since BGE, and wants to do nursing or paramedics at uni. Aspiration clearly influenced by her employer engagement. Well supported through UCAS process too.