

Subject choice at school: Findings from a survey of pupils and teachers

Summary

The Russell Group's *Informed Choices* guide sets out information about how subject choice at school or college is important for progression to university. As part of our work to develop a new interactive *Informed Choices* website, we surveyed hundreds of pupils and teachers to find out about when and how decisions on subject choice at school are made and how this might differ by social background.

Our survey found:

- Pupils consider subject choice at school as less important in successfully applying to university than a range of other factors including meeting grade offers, putting in a strong application (i.e. through a personal statement), or performance in an interview or audition. By contrast, teachers ranked subject choice as more important than these other factors.
- The majority of year 10 pupils have not yet decided what A-levels they want to take. Whilst similar proportions of private and comprehensive school pupils have made choices about A-level (or equivalent) subjects, private school pupils are more often doing so in the context of their aspirations to progress to university.
- After using the new *Informed Choices* website, 94% of pupils found the information on the subject requirements for specific degrees useful and 93% of teachers said they would recommend the website to colleagues or students. On boosting confidence, a higher proportion of pupils from schools with a less affluent intake¹ said they felt more confident about choosing their A-levels after using the site.

Background

Informed Choices has been published by the Russell Group since 2011 to help Year 10 and 11 pupils make informed decisions about choosing subjects to study at sixth form or college and to explain how this might affect their chances of making a successful application to university.

Informed Choices is available to all pupils and teachers, but we recognise that young people from less advantaged backgrounds may not receive the same quality of information and advice as their more advantaged peers. Our intention is to help level the playing field by targeting our guide to pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and their teachers and families.

This year, we have developed a new interactive website to host the *Informed Choices* guide. The new website offers personalised information, allowing users to see which subjects are most useful for the degrees they are interested in and to test various combinations of A-levels, to see which degrees are open to them. The site will also provide general information to pupils considering university but unsure of which post-16 subjects or degrees to take.

¹ Those with a proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals which is lower than the national average

By moving to an interactive website, we hope to increase the usage and usefulness of the guide and, ultimately, to improve understanding of why subject choice matters especially among those from less advantaged backgrounds.

In order to ensure that the new *Informed Choices* website is user-friendly and effective, the Russell Group ran in-depth testing with partner schools across the country between February and April 2019. Teachers were encouraged to look at the site with a group of Year 10 pupils before completing an online survey.

In total, 17 schools responded and survey results were received from 617 pupils² and 38 teachers.³ Of these schools, ten were comprehensive non-selective state schools (representing 270 student responses), six were independent (referred to as “private”) schools (representing 290 student responses), and one grammar school participated (representing 57 student responses).⁴ Schools from England and Wales took part, and responses were spread across the English regions including the North West, North East, South East, South West, East and West Midlands, Yorkshire and the Humber, and London.

The purpose of the survey was to:

- gather feedback from pupils and teachers about the functionality, design and content of the website and use this to make improvements to the site, and,
- enhance understanding about when and how decisions on subject choice at school are made and how this might differ by social background.

This short briefing summarises the findings of our survey regarding decision-making on subject choice at school and how this differs by social background. We have not been able to use individual-level indicators to identify the social background of respondents to our survey so we have used two proxies: school type (private versus comprehensive non-selective state) and proportion of pupils at the school eligible for free school meals (FSM).⁵

The survey results

Perceptions of the importance of subject choice at school

Pupils and teachers were asked to rank the importance of four factors in making a successful application to university:

- meeting grade offers
- choosing the right subjects for the degree they want to do
- making a strong application (i.e. through a personal statement)
- performance in an interview or audition.

Overall, subject choice was considered the least important factor by pupils when applying for university. By contrast, teachers ranked subject choice as more important than other factors.

When considering responses by proportion of FSM-eligible pupils at each school, we found teachers at schools with a higher than average proportion of FSM pupils were less likely to rank subject choice as a “very important” factor (63% did so) compared to those in schools with lower than average FSM (88%).

² The majority of pupil participants were in year 10, with six respondents from year 12.

³ Teachers and students were asked to respond to slightly different questionnaires.

⁴ We have excluded results from the grammar school when making comparisons by school type given the small sample size.

⁵ We split schools into two categories: those with a higher than average proportion of FSM-eligible pupils, and those with a lower than average proportion of FSM-eligible pupils. The national average for secondary schools is 12% and the range within our sample is 1.3%-42.4%. As there is no published data on this for independent schools, we have automatically assumed these schools to have a below average proportion of FSM-eligible pupils.

Future study plans

The majority of year 10 pupils (57%) have not yet decided **what A-level (or equivalent) subjects they want to take**. Similar proportions of private and comprehensive school pupils have made choices about A-level (or equivalent) subjects: 41% of students from comprehensive schools knew which A-levels they may need to take, compared with 45% of students from private schools.

However, when asked **whether they wanted to go to university**, 85% of pupils at private schools responded positively, compared with 60% of those from comprehensive schools. This suggests that private school pupils are more likely than their comprehensive school peers to be making decisions about which subjects to choose at school in the context of their aspirations to progress to university.

Using the Informed Choices website

The overwhelming majority of pupils said they found the *Informed Choices* website useful. The website provides a range of information based on pupils' differing circumstances including: information for those who want to keep their options open, information for those who have chosen a degree course but don't know which A-levels they want or need to take, and information for those who know which A-levels they want to take but aren't aware of which degree subjects are open to them. In total:

- 88% of pupils found the information on keeping options open useful
- 94% of pupils found the information for requirements on specific degree courses useful
- 92% of pupils found the information on which degrees were open to them with a specific combination of subjects useful.

In addition, 79% of teachers felt the website gave the right information and 93% of teachers would recommend it to colleagues or students.

After using the new *Informed Choices* website, a higher proportion of pupils from comprehensive schools said their confidence in choosing A-level (or equivalent) subjects had improved (61%) compared to those from private schools (43%).

The same applied for those in schools with a less affluent intake: 64% of pupils from schools with above average FSM felt more confident after using the website, compared with 49% of students from below average FSM or private schools.

Conclusion

The comparatively lower importance attached to the issue of subject choice at A-level (or equivalent) at state schools and schools with higher than average proportions of FSM-eligible pupils is a concern. This suggests there is a gap between those from less advantaged backgrounds and their more affluent peers in terms of their access to information and advice about the importance of subject choice at school and how this relates to university applications.

Further research is needed to investigate differences in the A-level (or equivalent) subjects young people choose by social background and to consider to what extent this supports or limits opportunities to progress to specific degree courses.

However, these results suggest resources such as *Informed Choices* can play a role in filling the gap in information and advice available to young people from less advantaged backgrounds compared to their more affluent peers. By improving understanding about how subject choice at school or college relates to the chances of making a successful university application, we hope our new website will complement wider efforts to improve access to selective universities for disadvantaged students. We will monitor usage of the new website and consider opportunities for evaluation.

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