Pre-print of the paper: Torres, Ana Cristina; Peace-Hughes, Tracey; Priestley, Mark (2023). Student Transition to Scotland's Senior Phase of Schooling – Academic Experiences and Course Choices, Curriculum and Teaching, 38(1), pp. 7-26, published 1 June 2023, DOI: https://doi.org/10.7459/ct/38.1.02

Student Transition to Scotland's Senior Phase of Schooling – Academic Experiences and Course Choices

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Abstract

This paper reports a study of Scottish secondary students perspectives concerning academic difficulties experienced in the first year of the Senior Phase which corresponds to their final year of compulsory schooling (age 15-16). Transition and trajectories throughout Senior Phase have gained further significance due to substantial changes experienced in schools with the development and implementation of Curriculum for Excellence, which in this stage emphasises pathways and support for national qualifications reformed in 2012. The findings are discussed alongside the relationship between course choices and the Scottish upper secondary curriculum, mainly concerning the curricular principles of flexibility, personalisation and choice.

Keywords: educational transitions; upper secondary; secondary school; student perceptions; course choices

Introduction

This paper reports on a study of students' perceptions about course choices and academic experiences in Scotland, focusing on the students' transition to the Senior Phase of secondary education. Students' transitions throughout schooling have been broadly discussed within several disciplines, levels and theoretical orientations (Anderson et al., 2000; Benner 2011; Nelissen, 2017), as well as being the focus of political interest in

several countries (Education Scotland, 2016; OECD, 2012). While upper secondary consists of a period of educational tracking in many countries and is still post-compulsory in some, reinforcing upper secondary educational attainment or reshaping its pathways has been a cornerstone of public policies towards youth, particularly about concerns about early school leaving (Araújo et al., 2014) and improving youth transitions to employment (Walsh, 2016).

In Scotland, upper secondary education has been subjected to significant change with the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) reform. Reforms to national qualifications, instituted in 2013, overhauled the structure of the qualifications system but have led to only minimal changes to the assessment system and associated qualifications (Stobart, 2021). A 3+3 years model comprising Broad General Education (S1-S3) and Senior Phase (S4-S6) was promoted to replace the previous 2+2+2 years model for secondary education. However, the transitional S4 level (or fourth year) is simultaneously the start year of the Senior Phase and the final year of compulsory schooling in Scotland and, as such, the year in which students are awarded the new National 4 and National 5 qualifications after examinations. This attainment requirement partially explains the discrepancies reported by school leaders in implementing the reform amongst secondary schools and local authorities, just as much in the structural change as in the subjects' provision students have access to (Shapira et al., 2021). Some schools stretch the study for qualifications for 2 years, including the final year of Broad General Education (S3) and the first of Senior Phase (S4), essentially maintaining the 2+2+2 approach. Other schools award qualifications upon a single year of study, as intended in the new 3-year' model, compensating it with the narrowing of curriculum provision from 8 subjects to 7 or fewer (Shapira, & Priestley, 2019; Shapira et al., 2021). Thus, positioned between the beginning of the Senior Phase and the end of compulsory schooling with consequent decisions about future destinations, S4 is a crucial year for most Scottish students' educational trajectories.

Moreover, teaching and learning experiences have been constrained by misunderstandings of the CfE curriculum purposes and principles and tensions with established teaching practices and beliefs about education (e.g., Convery 2017; Priestley & Humes 2010; Priestley, Minty & Eager 2014), including problems of excessive assessment-related workload and inappropriate use of the flexibility in curriculum planning and implementation (Education Scotland, 2016). As such, although trying to escape formal modes of educational tracking, the curriculum flexibility likely favours more informal ways of tracking established in schools (Triventi et al., 2020), namely, through differentiated subjects' provision. In this context, students' experiences and perceptions about curriculum and school in the Senior Phase have not yet been sufficiently considered in policy and practice. The paper addresses this gap by exploring how the transition to the Senior Phase of the Scottish curriculum is experienced by students, focusing on how flexibility in course choice relates to their transition experience. Drawing on literature about academic difficulties experienced by students at the entrance of upper secondary education (e.g., Akos & Galassi 2004; Benner 2011; Pereira & Pooley 2007; Torres & Mouraz 2015), this research aimed at exploring the Scottish context and verify whether students experience academic difficulties related to

curriculum and assessment practices when entering the Senior Phase of secondary education. As such, the study's objectives include (1) identifying academic difficulties students experience when entering Senior Phase in Scotland; (2) comparing the experience of students across different courses and urban/rural contexts; and (3) discussing the relationships between academic difficulties experienced at the entry to Senior Phase and the flexibility in course choice assumed for this schooling stage in CfE policy documents.

Context and Review of Literature

Curriculum for Excellence and Senior Phase in Scotland: Curriculum at the Crossroad between Choice and Assessment

In Scotland, the formal transition to upper secondary education occurs at the entrance to the Senior Phase at S4, where students are expected to build up a portfolio of qualifications. Under the revised structure of qualifications, most S4 students take National 4s or 5s in S4 around the ages of 15-16. They can opt to stay in secondary school for S5-S6 to take exams for Highers – which students usually require for university study – and Advanced Highers – equivalent to the first year of university and can be used for applying to enter the second year of university or for more competitive courses such as medicine. Students can go to university at the end of S5, as Highers provide the entry requirements for Scottish universities. However, it is more common for students to remain until S6. Traditionally, students have been required to climb this ladder of qualifications, with earlier phases seen as prerequisites for more advanced studies in subjects. This system impacts upon a provision in the BGE. Subject choices, which will lead to the study for qualifications in S4, usually are taken towards the end of S3, in line with the 3+3 approach, leading to a one-year course in S4, and can include academic or vocational courses and learning experiences at multiple sites with schools working with external providers to offer such experiences. Although CfE's design intended to delay the formal study for qualifications from S3 to S4, the reduced time to study for these qualifications has, in many schools, led to a reduction in the overall number of subjects studied in the Senior Phase (Shapira & Priestley, 2019). Where this is avoided (through the pre-CfE 2+2+2 approach), some schools manage the courses timings between S3 and S4 to facilitate progression (Education Scotland, 2016), with implications for the preceding BGE phase. Consequently, informal transitions often occur earlier in students' educational trajectories since they are commonly asked to make course choices driven by these requirements as early as S2 or S1 in some schools.

Further, the flexibility introduced by CfE in terms of the number of course choices and progression towards National Qualifications has led to the differentiation between schools in the number and type of subjects on offer, attested by solid evidence of curriculum narrowing from S3 to S4 (Iannelli & Duta, 2018; Shapira & Priestley, 2019). A recent study (Shapira et al., 2023) suggested that narrowing is socially stratified, that is, students in disadvantaged schools tend to have less choice and study fewer subjects in S4 and schools with a narrower curriculum are associated with lower subsequent

attainment (e.g., at higher), less favourable destinations and lower achievement in PISA global competence tests.

School differentiation and variation affect students' experience throughout the Senior Phase and raise concerns about how inequalities between young people's opportunities at school and work may be reinforced (Machin, McNally, & Wyness, 2013; Triventi et al., 2020).

Across the system, these practices undermine a long-term tradition of emphasising breadth across a range of subjects and little differentiation between secondary schools, which, for instance, distinguished the Scottish system from England (Iannelli & Duta, 2018). Variations in curriculum and teaching provision between secondary schools run the risk of becoming too wide due to manifested problems in the policy framework, such as conceptual ambiguity, misleading learning outcomes statements, relatively undeveloped notions of pedagogy and little specific guidance on the sort of approaches to teaching (Priestley & Humes, 2010). Further, though CfE's defended principles of flexibility and personalisation gathered broad consensus, its vagueness in terms of content prescription has led to warnings of downgraded knowledge in practice (Priestley & Sinnema, 2014), jeopardised coherence of students' learning (Raffe, 2009) and expanded gaps in the students' access to high culture (Convery, 2017). Inevitably, it becomes likely that content selection is instrumental in nature, mainly to serve the needs of future high-stakes assessments (Smith, 2019) and that practices of attainment-driven teaching largely persist.

In summary, though opening up spaces for flexibility and innovation in schools, CfE has been less successful in resolving the old issues of the strong impact of assessments in curriculum practices and learning experiences, especially in the upper secondary years. Moreover, it has added the new problematic issue of curriculum narrowing. Since subject choices and high-stakes assessment play a big part in shaping education pathways, these phenomena also influence the difficulties students experience when entering Senior Phase.

Difficulties and Challenges in the Students' Transition to Upper Secondary

Transitioning to upper secondary school is frequently crucial in educational trajectories (Benner, 2011). The pathway choices students are often obliged to make, as well as the differentiated structure and dynamics that upper secondary curricula assume, condition a set of difficulties and challenges that can result in changes to students' identities (West, Sweeting & Young, 2010), personal goals (Diseth & Samdal, 2014) or educational aspirations (Hegna 2014).

Akos and Galassi (2004) grouped the main difficulties reported in transitioning to a new schooling level as academic, procedural and social difficulties. While academic concerns related to increased difficulty in the courses' contents and volume of work, procedural concerns involved the complexities of entering a new school, and social concerns included making new relationships and friendships with other students. Academic difficulties were the most prominent in the transition to high school, a finding that has been similarly reported elsewhere (e.g., Torres & Mouraz, 2015; Pereira &

Pooley, 2007) and is most likely commonplace for this schooling stage in many educational systems. A need to provide students with specific qualifications and certifications frequently adds high-stake exams and other forms of external assessment to this schooling period. Consequently, students report experiencing a sudden increase in the demanded volume and rigour of coursework, particularly in more academic courses (Torres & Mouraz, 2015; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Pereira & Pooley, 2007). Additionally, teachers' expectations of following stricter rules, acting more as an 'adult' or operating more independently (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Benner, 2011; Pereira & Pooley, 2007) can be challenging during this stage of schooling. Furthermore, with greater autonomy and responsibility for their learning, students often perceive less support from teachers, affecting self-concept, motivation and achievement (Benner, 2011; De Wit, Karioja & Rye, 2010; Diseth & Samdal, 2014; Pereira & Pooley, 2007).

In Scotland, in the context of CfE, the issue of students' transition experience to upper secondary education is largely unexplored. However, the West, Sweeting and Young (2010) study of S2 students' retrospective views on their transition experience to secondary school, and follow-up throughout their secondary education, supported the importance of students' attributes, such as maths ability and self-esteem. Moreover, they highlight that students can have different experiences with academic and peer changes, often thriving in one dimension while struggling in the other. Further, evidence was found of a transition effect in educational attainment, specific to school concerns in the upper years, beyond the examinations at the age of 15 (S4) and throughout advanced qualifications. In these upper years, students struggled more with academic issues such as increased workload and different teachers, a finding echoed by studies in other countries (Torres & Mouraz, 2015; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Pereira & Pooley, 2007).

Research Participants and Methods

This study was approved by the General University Ethics Panel of the host University and all the local authorities responsible for the schools in which data was collected.

The study adopted a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2008), combining qualitative data collected in focus group discussions with quantitative data collected in a survey. While using scales validated in other contexts enabled some comparisons, listening to the current perspectives of Scottish students allowed us to improve the used scale and enrich the interpretation of findings in the existing circumstances. Apart from the further education college, which only had students participating in the focus group, all secondary schools had students participating in both the focus groups and the survey.

Schools

The study took place in five public non-denominational high schools and one further education college from four local authorities from the mid-part of Scotland: Argyll and Butte, the city of Edinburgh, North Lanarkshire and Stirling. Besides reflecting some diversity in terms of local authorities, we sought to include schools located across various

socio-economic contexts (see Table 1). All high schools except one offered seven courses on S4, including mandatory English and Maths. The further education college only offered vocational subjects to students that came to the school once a week to attend them but attended other high schools for the more academic subjects.

The authors selected schools based on the criteria described in Table 1 and were directly invited to participate after the provided permission of local authorities.

Table 1. School context and student roll in September 2016 (adapted from Scottish Government Education Directorate at https://www2.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/School-Education)

Local Authority	School	Urban/Rural Classification	Total secondary student roll	S4 student roll	No. of S4 courses on offer	Proportion of students who live in 20% most deprived data zones in Scotland
A	1	Other Urban areas	*	*	*	*
A	2	Accessible small towns	800-900	100-150	7	*
B	3	Large urban areas	> 1000	150-200	7	0 - <5%
A	4	Accessible rural areas	800-900	100-150	6	0 - <5%
C	5	Other Urban areas	600-700	100-150	7	40 - <45%
D	6	Remote small towns	700-800	100-150	7	10 - <15%

Note: * no data available

Qualitative Study

The qualitative element of the study comprised a total of seven focus groups, one per school, except for one school, where two focus groups were organised. Three focus group discussions involved students attending a mix of academic and vocational courses, whereas the other four included students attending only academic courses. The participants in the qualitative study were all S4 students aged 15 to 18, with the distribution described in Table 2.

Table 2. Focus groups participants according to the context of the school, types of courses and sex

(LA) (school)	Rural/urban context	ACADEMIC only		ACADEMIC and VOCATIONAL	
		Female	Male	Female	Male
(A) (1) college	Other urban areas			6	1
(A) (2) high school	Accessible small towns	4	3		
(B) (3) high school	Large urban areas	9			
(A) (4) high school	Accessible rural areas	4	2		
(C) (5) high school	Other urban areas	5	3		4
(D) (6) high school	Remote small towns			5	3
	total per sex	22	8	11	8
	total per courses	30		19	

While students attending the further education college (A1) for some vocational courses were enrolled in a range of other secondary schools in the local area, other students attended vocational courses offered by further education colleges in their secondary school (D6).

The focus groups were conducted by two of the authors between February and June 2017. Considering the constraints of students' weekly schedule availability and exam agendas presented by the school's senior leadership teams, we allowed schools to select the students who participated in the research. However, the schools were asked to

ensure the participation of students enrolled in diverse courses. We obtained written informed consent from all participants through the school's senior leadership teams and confirmed the permission at the beginning of the discussions.

The focus group topics drew upon literature regarding difficulties in the transition to upper secondary education, addressing academic, procedural and social difficulties (Akos & Galassi, 2004) experienced by the students when entering Senior Phase. Further, concerning literature relating to course choices, educational tracking and subsequent educational trajectories, and ongoing debates about the consequences of flexibility in the secondary curriculum structure, students were also asked about how they made their course choices into S4. The focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were subject to content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013). Using NVivo allowed for combining pre-determined macro-categories related to course choices and experienced difficulties in the transition to the Senior Phase with emergent micro-categories from the students' views and experience.

Quantitative Study

A questionnaire was administered to anonymously collect data measuring students' perceptions regarding the difficulties experienced in the transition to the Senior Phase. Data on the students' demographics, school trajectory and course choices were also collected. While reasons for course choices were asked via an open question, questions concerning experienced difficulties at the entrance of the Senior Phase were addressed through a 5-point Likert scale. This was adapted from a study in which good internal consistency for academic and procedural difficulties reported by Portuguese students (Cronbach alpha of $\alpha = 0.883$ and $\alpha = 0.831$, respectively) was obtained (Torres & Mouraz, 2015). Only one item was considered to analyse social integration difficulties in this study. The updates included adding new items and regrouping components considering only academic and social difficulties. The addition of the new items was derived from an analysis of students' perceptions expressed in focus group discussions in the present study. The regrouping of the items derived from the adaptation to the Scottish education system in which students rarely have to change schools when entering the Senior Phase, unlike in the study reported by Torres and Mouraz (2015). In turn, we decided to consider the interconnectedness between academic and procedural difficulties in previously separated items. The updated scale also has good internal consistency with a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.884. The new items and components are presented in Table 3.

The questionnaire was administered in June 2017 in the same five secondary schools where the focus groups were organised but with convenience samples according to the students' class schedules. One hundred eighty-six responses were obtained from students who gave explicit consent via the check box at the start of the survey. Responses from students who did not express consent were not considered (n=12). The response rates per school were diverse, ranging from 5% of enrolled students in S4 in one school to 40% in two other schools.

Table 3. Components, items and internal consistency of the questionnaire

Components	Items	Internal consistency
Academic and procedural difficulties	(2) It was difficult for me to adapt to the new rules I have to follow in my current study/work. (3) I found no people available to understand my difficulties and help me to overcome them. (4) The study/work that I develop now does not suit my expectations. (5) It was difficult for me to solve practical issues of everyday life. (6) I wasn't used to the study/workload that is now demanded. (7) I wasn't used to the rigour that I now have to put into my study/work. (8) The learning I had developed so far was insufficient what I need now in some courses. New items: (9) It was difficult for me to engage with the courses due to the pressure to meet what was prescribed in courses specifications (10) I had to give up some extracurricular activities in which I was involved. (11) It was difficult for me to adapt to the new class schedules. (13) I felt disappointed with some content taught in my general/academic courses. (14) I felt disappointed with some content taught in my vocational or work-based skills courses. (15) I had trouble in being as responsible and organised as was expected of me in fulfilling assigned tasks.	$\alpha = 0.845$
Social integration	(1) It was difficult for me to make new friendships. New items: (12) I felt there was too much competition between my classmates, which made it difficult in class and study activities. (16) I felt greater distance in the relationships with my teachers and I didn't look for their help with my difficulties. (17) I didn't recognise in my teachers an effort to get me interested and committed in the courses. (18) I felt that my teachers did not have the time to support me better.	$\alpha = 0.742$

A total of 98 females (52.7%) and 88 males (47.3%), mainly 15 (61.3%) or 16 (36.6%) years old, participated in the survey. Most students reported having completed S3 with Fourth level in English (83.3%) and Math (75.8%). Table 4 presents the distribution and sex of survey respondents according to the school's context and education provision.

Table 4. Participating students according to sex, school context and education provision

School	Rural/urban context	SCHOOL Only		SCHOOL and COLLEGE*	
		Female	Male	Female	Male
(A) (2)	Other urban areas	9	16		
(B) (3)	Accessible small towns	45	35		
(A) (4)	Large urban areas	32	26	1	
(C) (5)	Accessible rural areas	10	6		
(D) (6)	Other urban areas			1	5
	total per sex	96	83	2	5
	total per courses	179		7	

Responses to the open question on course choices were subjected to content analysis and closed categories to a descriptive statistical analysis that included a chi-square ($\chi 2$) test of independence to compare courses enrolment in schools from different contexts. Responses from the scale were subjected to an initial descriptive statistical analysis and further Mann-Whitney non-parametric statistical tests for independent groups to verify differences between socio-economic contexts and courses enrolment. In this last case, we used Mann-Whitney since we had a scale with nominal categories, and we could not assume a normal distribution of data (Field, 2009). To facilitate comparisons, courses were grouped into categories of Sciences and Technologies, Modern Languages and Humanities, Creative and Performance Arts and Vocational courses.

Results and Discussion

The results identify and compare the difficulties students experience when entering the Senior Phase, cross-analysing data from the qualitative and quantitative studies and relate them to the flexibility in course choice fostered by the reformed curriculum.

Academic Experiences when entering Senior Phase

When students were explicitly asked in the focus groups about experienced difficulties in the transition to Senior Phase, across all focus groups, there were mentions of increased and more demanding workload (both classwork and homework), which is consistent with findings from students in other educational systems (Akos & Galassi 2004; Pereira & Pooley 2007; Torres & Mouraz, 2015). Furthermore, students discussed the experience of intense pressure, mentioning, for instance that "in 4th year I felt thrust into exams and pressure" (1E). One student explained this by referring that "deadlines for the assignments in different subjects overlapped. I think that was more stressful than the actual exams" (3A). Frequently, unit test dates and assignment deadlines overlapped due to prelims (or mock examinations) and exam assessments. Students felt that examinations pushed some teachers to a faster teaching pace to finish the course syllabus earlier and help students prepare for final exams. Mandatory subjects, such as English and Math, were viewed by students as courses where there was often a large discrepancy in the demands and teaching pace between S3 and S4. And while some students qualified it as

"more challenging", others reported feeling more pressured and lacking in support from teachers.

Consequently, some students reported struggling with the feeling of having a combination of too much content to memorise and more demanding content, referring, for instance, "it was just hard to do remember, with all the stuff that we have learned" (5A). Some students viewed having courses of their choosing as positive. This was partially explained by the possibility of making new friends, thus expanding social relationships while also keeping previous peers from subjects studied during the BGE. Moreover, it also seemed to be a factor that improved their attitude towards school since "you being able to choose kind of gets you to enjoy the courses more" (4R) and "there are some subjects I didn't enjoy and I liked to be able to pick the subjects I had to do. Made my attitude to school better" (2E).

However, the survey findings were not consistent with the focus group discussions in terms of the significance of these academic difficulties in the students' overall experience in S4. Considering the survey sample (N=186), and since most responses tended to fall under the "Disagree" degree of concordance, it is safe to say that these students experienced little difficulty in the transition to the Senior Phase, which the distribution of degrees of agreement in Figure 1 can verify.

However, we must highlight the great dispersion in levels of agreement for items 6 and 7, with a greater tendency to agreement, which is verified in Figure 1. Although the quantitative study findings do not allow us to infer a huge experience of difficulties in the transition to the Senior Phase as in studies in other contexts, this higher trend for agreement with difficulties resulting from the increased study and associated workload and rigour is consistent with the focus group data where similar difficulties are highlighted, primarily in academic subjects such as English and Math.

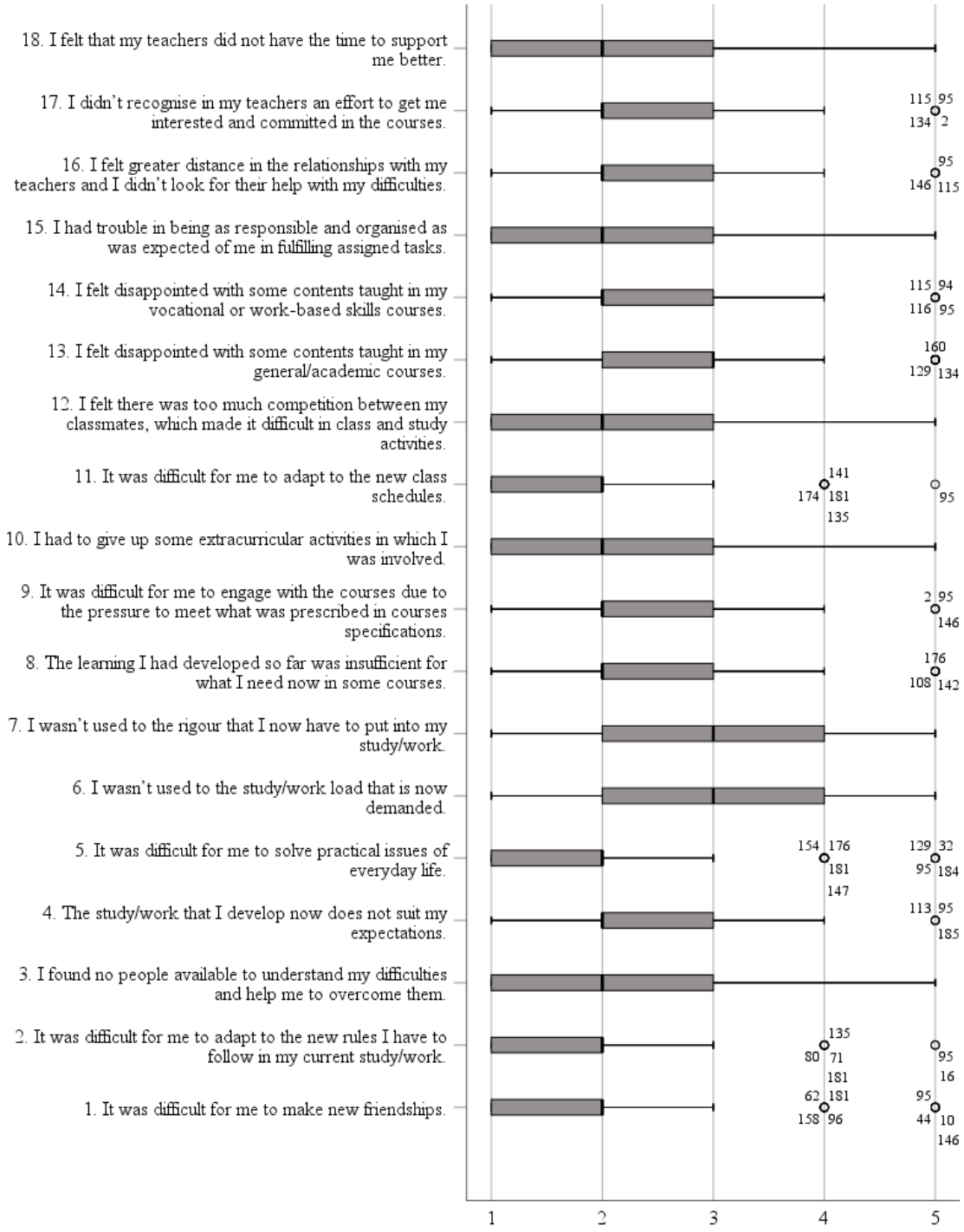

Figure 1. Boxplot for the distribution of agreement degrees for items of experienced difficulties in the transition (N=186), from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree (outer circles stand for outlier cases).

Experiences of Students in Different Courses

An understanding of diversity in course choices was obtained through the questionnaire. Table 5 summarises the main findings, including a report on the differences in students' course enrolment according to rural/urban location. To compare the data, students' course

enrolment was grouped into fields of study of the courses and number of enrolled courses. We then divided these groups: enrolled in none or one course in the field of study; or two or more courses in the same field of study.

Table 5. Respondent students' course enrolment according to fields of study and rural/urban locations (N=186)

ENROLLED IN COURSES IN FIELDS OF STUDY	Medium or large urban locations N (% in location)	Small towns or rural locations N (% in location)	TOTAL	Pearson Chi-square tests of independence
Enrolled in two or more courses of…				
Sciences and Technologies	71 (74%)	48 (53.9%)	119	χ^2 (1)= 8.07**
Modern Languages and Humanities	66 (68.8%)	30 (33.7%)	96	χ^2 (1)= 22.71***
Social and Business	16 (16.7%)	8 (9.0%)	24	χ^2 (1)= 2.41
Creative and Performative Arts	15 (15.6%)	2 (2.2%)	17	χ^2 (1)= 9.90**
Health and Wellbeing	0 (0%)	7 (7.9%)	7	χ^2 (1)= 7.84**
Vocational courses	0 (0%)	4 (4.5%)	4	χ^2 (1)= 4.41

Note: * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001;

Sciences and Technologies, Modern Languages and Humanities courses were among the more popular courses. Students in small towns and rural locations tended to be enrolled in a more diverse set of courses than those in medium or large urban locations, for which course enrolments were mostly concentrated in Sciences and Technologies, and Modern Languages.

When we look at a school's location (urban areas; small towns; rural areas), two particular fields of study (Sciences or Technologies; Modern Languages or Humanities) and the number of courses studied in these fields (none or one; two or more), no group of students had median responses in any degree of agreement ("Agree" or "Strongly agree") with the survey items (see Table 3). This suggests a relatively easy and smooth transition to the Senior Phase. Furthermore, no statistical differences were found between responses from students in urban locations, small towns or rural locations. However, some significant differences were found when applying Mann-Whitney non-parametric statistical tests to particular students' responses regarding course enrolment, as displayed in Tables 6 and 7.

Table 6. Summary of differences between students enrolled in up to one or two or more Sciences and Technologies courses on the Mann-Whitney U Test

	Student enrolment in Sciences and Technology courses		
	None or one course (n=67)	Two or more courses (n=119)	
ITEM	Mean rank	Mean rank	Z-value
5. It was difficult for me to solve practical issues of everyday life.	103.49	85.52	-2.35*
9. It was difficult for me to engage with the courses due to the pressure to meet what was prescribed in courses specifications.	102.25	86.49	-2.02*
12. I felt there was too much competition between my classmates, which made it difficult in class and study activities.	104.65	85.86	-2.40*

Note: * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001;

Table 7. Summary of differences between students enrolled in up to one or two or more Modern Languages and Humanities courses on Mann-Whitney U Test

	Student enrolment in Modern Languages and Humanities courses		
	None or one course (n=90)	Two or more courses (n=96)	
ITEM	Mean rank	Mean rank	Z-value
8. The learning I had developed so far was insufficient for what I need now in some courses.	99.53	83.11	-2.21*
9. It was difficult for me to engage with the courses due to the pressure to meet what was prescribed in courses specifications.	99.69	84.72	-2.01*
12. I felt there was too much competition between my classmates, which made it difficult in class and study activities.	101.18	84.37	-2.24*

Note: * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001;

Students reporting having none or only one course in the field of Sciences and Technologies were more likely to agree with: difficulties in solving practical issues in everyday life, pressure to meet what was prescribed in course specifications and competition between classmates. Agreement with difficulties of competition between classmates and pressure to keep up with the course specifications, alongside a sense of insufficient learning in prior courses, were also reported slightly more frequently by students enrolled in none or only one Modern Languages and Humanities course when compared with their peers attending two or three courses in this subject area.

Additionally, the focus group discussions highlight how students studying a combination of academic and vocational courses seemed to struggle with more prominent transition difficulties when compared with those attending solely traditional academic courses. These young people commented on struggling with the vast differences between the demands and teaching paces of these two types of courses. However, these findings from the focus group discussions could not be triangulated with the survey data since only 10 out of 186 respondents reported studying vocational subjects, a limitation of the sampling.

Exploring Relationships between Academic Experiences and Course Choices when entering Senior Phase

To explore the relationships between academic experiences when entering Senior Phase and course choices, our approach was to ask students about the main reasons for their course choices in the focus group discussions and an open question in the questionnaire (which 155 of 186 participant students completed).

In the focus groups, the most frequently cited reason by students for choosing courses was that selected courses best suited their interests or addressed topics they enjoyed, an idea echoed by 44% of the questionnaire respondents. Across the data, this was frequently associated with two other sets of reasons. The first was that the subjects were thought to be easier to study, or the student perceived they were good at a particular topic, specifically when they had a formed idea about the subject after having tried it out in the BGE. The second reason was summarized by one student as "wanting to try out some subjects" (5B) which was justified as being a way to gain a clearer idea of what to choose in S5. This was particularly noted when students had in their timetable courses completely different from the ones they had taken in S3, as, for instance, vocational courses: "I tried out college courses for being different from school and may help me to decide" (1G).

In the questionnaire, the idea of enjoying the selected subjects was frequently accompanied by mentions of students' need for future options concerning university or employment (15.5%). Indeed, some students solely stated that their selected subjects were the ones needed for future options at university or employment (14.8%) – and this was without any mention of enjoying their subject choices. These results are consistent with the strong relationship between course choices in the transition stages to post-compulsory schooling and educational aspirations found in other countries (Hegna, 2014; Torres & Mouraz, 2015), namely aspirations to higher education. Some students perceived S4 as a preparatory stage for the later stages of the Senior Phase, rather than being the beginning of a coherent schooling stage. For example, students appreciated the fact they could change their courses from S4 to S5, stating in the focus groups, for instance, "it's good not having to be stuck with some subject that annoyed me" (4E).

Though appreciating the possibility, and flexibility, of changing courses, most students end up continuing with the same subjects at more advanced levels in S5, progressing from their National 4s and 5s. On the other hand, although students tended to have continuity in some subjects from S3 to S4, there were some mentions in the focus groups of having little time to decide their S4 courses. Many felt they needed more time and information about the courses to aid decision-making. Moreover, students discussed this experience of having too little time to decide with a feeling of too much pressure to pick courses, especially from specific teachers.

Students from two more academic groups also mentioned feelings of pressure from parents. Though not perceived as a negative pressure, students commented that parents sometimes pushed specific subjects or specific expectations onto them. This raises concerns about increased existing inequalities between students' choices due to differentiated parental educational and socioeconomic backgrounds (Iannelli & Duta,

2018; Shapira & Priestley, 2019) and increased marketisation of schools (Reay & Lucey, 2004).

Conclusions

When entering Senior Phase in Scotland, students experience some difficulties clearly related to the increased pressure due to the demands of high-stakes assessments traditionally taken in S4. Across both qualitative and quantitative data, students mentioned their struggles with a sudden increase in the teaching pace and the need for much independent study in class and homework, alongside increased teacher expectations of the students' commitment to the produced work. These perspectives from students confirm previous findings of how, in the face of unclear policy documents and lack of coherence, curriculum and teaching are increasingly shaped by high-stakes assessment demands with the national qualifications (Priestley & Humes, 2010; Stobart, 2021). Further, although students praised an increased fluidity between some of the S3 and S4 courses, according to CfE practice guidelines, the increased pressure and workload difficulties seem to persist from former curriculum provision, as they concur with previous findings with senior students in Scottish secondary education (Hamilton & Brown, 2005; West, Sweeting & Young, 2010). However, this is not an exclusively Scottish issue; similar struggles were found with English students who felt pressure to achieve good GCSE grades (Attwood & Croll, 2015), and is strongly associated with the strong output curriculum regulation in examination systems of the British tradition (Leat, Livingston, and Priestley 2013; Stobart, 2021). In the case of Scotland, these backwash tendencies are likely to be further exacerbated by the highly unusual (internationally) structure of national qualifications along a ladder of accreditation – effectively a 3+1+1+1 model rather than the commonly claimed 3+3 – resulting in what is widely termed the "two-term dash" to each qualification level within school years S4-S6.

Other differences were found between students studying different courses – primarily the rural/urban divide, with students in urban locations more likely to be studying Modern Languages and Humanities courses and Sciences and Technologies courses. This suggests further research to explore the relationships with course choices, especially in light of the present debate about curriculum narrowing in Scottish education. The policy principles of flexibility in curriculum design may pose problems for students' course choices and may create the conditions required for curricular narrowing. However, when associating results regarding the experienced increase in teaching pressure throughout S4 towards qualifications with the findings on reasons for course choices mentioned by the students, it seems clear that the curriculum reform has failed to remove the informal transitions between schooling stages students experience. It appears these transitions in schooling still occur when course choices have to be made and external assessments are demanded of both students and teachers. To this extent, S4 is a particularly sensitive year in the students' educational trajectories since students are driven to make important decisions about their future school and post-school options. What seems clear in the students' responses is that such a personalisation in course choice from the early stages of secondary education (sometimes as early as S2) makes students

even more susceptible to several seemingly less explicit pressures in the school organisation, from teachers to parents, staff hiring and external assessments results. This is presently being debated within the implementation of the CfE reform. The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent recourse to school-based assessment for national qualifications have destabilised the system and interrupted pre-existing assumptions about what constitutes a national qualifications system, leading to a groundswell of support for more eclectic approaches and a shift away from predominant reliance on terminal examinations (Priestley et al. 2020; Stobart, 2021). Moreover, the publication of the OECD (2021) review of CfE and the parallel publication of Stobart's (2021) discussion paper on qualifications and assessment, and the ongoing Hayward Review of Qualifications and Assessment (to be published in May 2023), have further increased the impetus to address problems in Scotland's national qualifications, including issues of coherence and progression, breadth of provision, equitable access across different schools and the long-standing issue of backwash onto teaching and learning.

Acknowledgements: Ana Cristina Torres is funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (SFRH/BPD/108950/2015) and the Centre for Research and Intervention in Education from the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences from the University of Porto, Portugal (UID/CED/00167/2019; UIDB/00167/2020)

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