

Are young people making subject choice decisions too early? An Analysis of the perceived implications of choosing subjects and careers at age 16 in England.

James Morrow, Nuffield Research Placement, Warwick University Q-step Centre, Summer 2017

Abstract

I'm interested in the claim that students in England are making their career decisions too early. I created and released a survey for participants to answer questions on their attitudes in choosing their final subjects at 16 and how they perceive this has impacted their future employment and higher education.

After collating the results I found that the majority of people think they made both their subject and career decisions too early. I also found that there may be a gap between the social classes with people from a lower class background are more likely to want to change their decisions.

Introduction

In the UK everyone must stay in some form of education or training until age 18. The choices they make at age 16 play a huge role in determining what students can and cannot do and ultimately what career path they will take. With the new retirement age rising to 67 by 2028 it is vital students eventually end up in a role that maximises their skills for both their wellbeing and their employer's productivity.

In England until the age of 14 all students follow the same national curriculum. At 14 pupils gain a limited freedom by having the choice to drop, continue or start studying new subjects however must remain on a curriculum with core subjects compulsory such as English and Mathematics, during this pupils sit GCSE exams. At 16 the national curriculum ends and students get to entirely pick what courses they do- usually several subject specific A-level qualifications but can also be apprenticeships, an English baccalaureate or training in employment.

The research is in the field of youth studies and is of relevance to the theory of individualisation in sociology- the idea the individuals life is becoming a more self-steered phenomenon being less restricted in collectively by social classes and norms (Beck 2000). The research can indicate whether it is perceived beneficial for young people to be given these choices at this fairly young age. Figures state '30 percent of university applicants in the UK wish they would have chosen different A-level subjects (Which? Press Office 2016). This already shows there is a significant problem for many at the current way students pick at 16. Many headlines echo this problem an example being 'Young people are having to take career decisions too early' (Lane, 2013) in the Guardian.

Many claim England should change their secondary education system further towards a baccalaureate system like is used in France which allows pupils to study a greater range of subjects through to the age of 18. The purpose of this is to give all students a broad understanding in many areas and not narrow down their career options too soon.

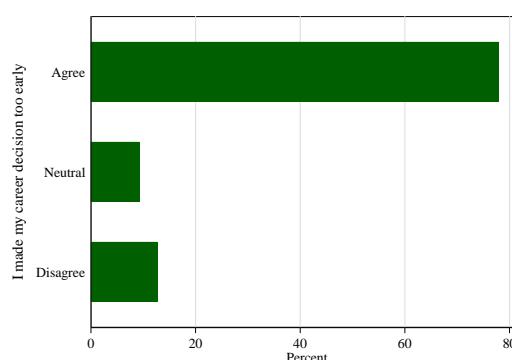
Finally in other research there have been shown to be other factors associated with student subject choice irrelevant to whether or not these courses will be a good fit for students (Jin, Muriel et al. 2011). Examples of these other factors: pupils are heavily influenced on the way course decisions are presented to them by what is known as framing effects, also school trying to improve their results/rankings by switching to providing more vocational courses.

Method

I collected data using an online survey administered using google forms. Survey participants were invited to apply from a link shared on the University of Warwick's social media. Individuals age 18-49 who completed their secondary education in England were invited to take part. The geographic area the survey was made available to include all of England. The whole of the UK was not included because there are separate education systems in each of the UK nations.

The questions in the survey were split into 4 simple sections: Participant background, attitudes at the time of subject choice and the last two sections on their attitudes now. I asked participants what their mothers and fathers jobs were when they were 14. From this, I used the Office for National Statistics NSSEC coding tool that gave a score estimating participant's social class from the respondents answers. The data were analysed using Stata. I present univariate and bivariate representations of the data. The analysis focuses of the seven main questions in the survey which relate to the research question. Then I examine bivariate relationships between responses to each of the questions and parental social class.

I made my school subject choice decisions too early

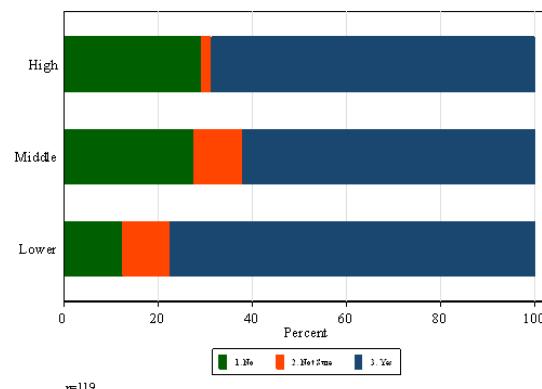


Results

The large majority of people (more than 80%) believe they made their career decision too early. The majority of respondents also believe they made their subjects choices too early. This is supported by only a small fraction (10%) saying they would pick the same A-levels if they were to choose again now and nearly half saying that they would completely change what courses they took. It could be argued the data obtained indicates people perceive subject choice to be important to their career with a strong correlation ($r=0.61$) between respondents thinking they picked both subjects and careers too early. Respondents generally answered that they would pick differently if they were to pick again now in regards to having a more fulfilling, well paid and a differing job to what they have now.

If they were to pick courses again, the respondents making up the lower class are more likely than the middle and higher classes to pick differently to get a more fulfilling, higher paying and different job and also are more likely to think they made career and subject decisions too early. This indicates there could be a social class inequality in the success of course decisions made at 16 with students in higher socio-economic positions being able to make more informed decisions.

If you were to make your subject choices again, would you pick subjects that would allow you to get a different job? BY Parental Social Class.



Discussion

My results show that people believe they are making course decisions too early in England. This supports the claim made in many newspapers and agrees with the claim that many students regret their A level choices (Which? Press Office 2016). My results also show there are class inequalities in attitudes to course decisions. The lower class category has a higher fraction of people who think they made their course decisions too early and would pick the most differently now to improve their pay and job fulfilment. Finally because there is a strong correlation between participants who think they made their subjects decision too early and career decision too early, this suggests there is perceived connection in course decisions success and career success supporting its importance.

There are limitations of my work, which could be improved upon in future studies. The sample was both not large enough consisting of only 119 respondents and unrepresentative of the population of England with a much higher proportion of university graduates answering than there is in England as a whole. This is because a convenience sample was used so there was no sampling frame used. More complex analysis could also develop the interpretation of my results.

Conclusions

If these results can be relied upon or supported by other more extensive studies this would mean there is a desire for students to make final subject decisions later on. This could result in a core syllabus carrying on until students get to 18 or allowing pupils to study a wider range of subjects. These future more extensive studies could be in the form of a larger stratified survey better representing the population confirming the attitudes expressed from this report far more reliably. These results would benefit policy makers by supporting reform of later secondary education in a way so young people do not have to specialise so early. This would allow young people more time to find an area of work or higher education that they can be successful in. Finally, if the pattern emerging in that younger people from lower class backgrounds perceive themselves to make less successful subject choices then this could also highlight an area for reform. Government could encourage schools to provide more information to all pupils especially ones with a lower social class in their course decisions at 16.

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Funded by the Nuffield Foundation, ESRC and HEFCE

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