

# **S3 Pupils' Career Aspirations and Views on Language Learning**

*Hannah Doughty and Joanna McPake*



**Institute of Education**





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## Summary

In May 2005, Scottish CILT undertook a SEED-funded nationwide survey of just under 1500 pupils in the S3 cohort of Scottish secondary schools. Pupils in 47 randomly selected Scottish secondary schools completed a questionnaire that explored their career aspirations and how these related to their views on language learning. The responses of S3 pupils are significant because the SEED's educational policy *A Curriculum for Excellence* is proposing to give pupils in this year group the opportunity to have a greater say in their subject choices. The findings therefore provide useful indicators for SEED, head teachers, careers advisers and language teachers in Scottish secondary schools.

## Overview of Key Findings and Implications

### Messages for pupils, parents, policy-makers and employers

- S3 pupils' career preferences and their understanding of the qualifications, skills and qualities relevant to these differ according to gender and academic performance, but are independent of school's geographical location or socio-economic makeup.
- S3 pupils' subject choices are based on short-term concerns and their career aspirations are heavily influenced by portrayals of particular careers in the media.
- S3 pupils do not recognise the wider benefits and skills gained through language study.

### Messages for teachers and school managers

- Individual schools can make a difference.
- Language teachers need to make more explicit the transferable skills acquired during language learning
- Language teachers need to develop strategies that maximise the potential benefits arising through language learning, such as creating awareness of other cultures and ways of life
- Head teachers, career advisers and language teachers need to understand how assumptions made in skills surveys may hide the use of or demand for language skills
- Head teachers, careers advisers and language teachers need to be given fuller information about the relevance of language skills in the globalised economy

# **Chapter 1: Language Skills for Life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

## **1.1 The value of language learning**

There are personal, social, political and economic dimensions to the value of language learning:

### **Personal and social value of language learning**

- [B]eing able to access and interact with real people who speak and use other languages and to engage with relevant, interesting and up-to-date information presented by modern means (Citizens of a Multilingual World 2000: 7)
- Learning a new language improves the use of English. Learning another language gives the learner valuable insights into the way the mother tongue works (The Nuffield Languages Inquiry 2000: 31)
- [E]xposure to another culture through the medium of its language could lead to various changes in understanding, values, beliefs, attitudes, and hence contribute to spiritual development (Smith 2002: 37-38)

### **Political value of language learning**

- Skills developed in language classes are ... directly transferable to citizenship education, i.e. discussing in pairs, expressing opinion, working with others, taking part in public discourse (Starkey & Osler 2003: 32)
- [I]t is in the UK's interests to wake up to the value of languages in cementing international relations (The Nuffield Languages Inquiry 2000: 17)
- A world-class education system, preparing people for life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, must reflect the fact that the world we live in is multilingual (Steering Group of the Nuffield Languages Programme 2002: 2)

### **Economic value of language learning**

- The rapid expansion of opportunities for e-business within a shrinking world is driving the need for languages ability. Customer expectations and the high stakes of winning or losing business require competence to deal in a customer's language (Citizens of a Multilingual World 2000: 7)
- There is a direct correlation between the value an exporter places on language skills within their business and their annual turnover (British Chambers of Commerce 2004: ii)
- 75% of UK companies [...] recognise a need to improve their capacity in one or more languages to support future business development strategies (CILT 2005:29)

### **Language learning and vocational aspirations**

- Young people should understand the purposes of their activities. They should see the value of what they are learning and its relevance to their lives, present and future. (SEED 2004a: 15)

## 1.2 Languages and careers

Whilst strong arguments can be put forward for language learning on a number of levels, the economic value of language learning will play an important part in the considerations of S3 pupils when they are given the opportunity to select from a new range of skills-for-work courses as part of their new educational policy, *A Curriculum for Excellence* (SEED 2004b: 6).

The policy also has profound implications for teachers as they develop their teaching, learning and assessment practices (SEED 2004b: 9) to help pupils in their charge to become

**successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors** to society and at work (SEED 2004a: 12, original emphasis)

Language teachers may feel confident that their subject

**help[s] young people to understand diverse cultures and beliefs and support[s] them in developing concern, tolerance, care and respect for themselves and others** (ibid: 11, original emphasis)

Many have long argued that pupils leaving school with low or no competence in additional language(s) are unable to take full advantage of their right to mobility within the European Union, when competing with their multilingual counterparts from other member states. But teachers may also be confused by evidence from recent skills surveys that appear to negate the economic rationale for language learning, and it is important that they understand the assumptions that underlie these data collection processes.

### ***Misleading labour market intelligence***

'Soft skills' have been the most frequently reported skills gap in recent skills surveys (Futureskills Scotland 2002, 2003, 2004). Soft skills, as defined by Futureskills Scotland, are

particular key or core skills which employers look for to complement the technical skills and experience of their staff. They typically comprise: teamwork; communication skills; problem solving ability; leadership skills; planning; and customer service skills (Futureskills Scotland 2003: 10).

Yet the Futureskills Scotland 2003 survey found that just 1% of employers provided training in 'soft skills' (Futureskills Scotland 2003: 51). Thus, a low level of training in a certain skills area does not necessarily imply that there is no need for, or no use of, such skills. Interestingly, 3% of employers reported training in modern languages (ibid: 51), which suggests that the development of this skill was considered more important than that of other soft skills.

### ***Misleading employer practices***

There is also evidence supporting the claim that employers draw on the foreign language skills of their staff without explicitly acknowledging this. For example, the largest percentage of workers recruited from outside of Scotland goes to fill positions in the hospitality sector (ibid: 62). It is reasonable to assume that a proportion of this staff have foreign language skills which will benefit the business in terms of ability to communicate with the many foreign tourists that bars and restaurants are dealing with during the tourist season. Yet the language skills of these employees will not be considered the MAIN reason for employment.

### ***Links between language competence and economic performance***

However, a number of recent studies DO show clear links between language capability and the benefits for the UK economy, as indicated by the British Chambers of Commerce and CILT studies quoted on page 5 of this report. Additionally, the concentration of inward investment in London and the South-East of England (Robinson 2002) can be traced back to the availability of people with a wide range of language skills (Connell 2002). This is consistent with the finding by Futureskills Scotland that foreign-owned establishments were more likely to recruit staff from abroad than indigenously owned ones, although the number of foreign-owned workplaces in the Scottish economy is small (Futureskills Scotland 2003: 62).

## **1.3 Linking Career Goals and Attainment**

In a survey of 1500 pupils ranging from S3-S6, a sample deemed to be broadly representative of the Scottish school population, Careers Scotland investigated the link between career goals and educational attainment (Careers Scotland 2005). On the basis of their findings in their sample the authors estimated 30.5% of all S3 pupils did not have clear career goals (ibid: 22). Further, those with clear career goals were more likely to recognize the relevance of the subjects studied for their chosen career, and therefore their attainment levels were improved. Those who did not have such goals were more likely to find school subjects boring and perform less well in examinations (ibid: 37).

The findings support the proposals set out in *A Curriculum for Excellence*, to introduce scope for:

greater choice and opportunity, earlier, for young people, to help them realise their individual talents and to help close the opportunity gap by better engaging those who currently switch off from formal education too young (SEED 2004b: 4)

The expectation is that by encouraging pupils to have clearer career goals their motivation for learning and ultimately their attainment in the subject will be improved (ibid: 6).

The challenge for language teachers therefore will be to show pupils and their parents how language learning addresses these policy concerns whilst ensuring that the experience of language learning remains an enjoyable activity in its own right.

## **Chapter 2: Aims and Methods of the Study**

### **2.1 Aims**

The purpose of this research was to explore pupils' career aspirations and how these relate to their views on language learning. By situating pupils' expressed views within the context of the realities of the globalised economy it is possible to infer a number of conclusions and recommendations for policy makers, head teachers, careers guidance staff and language teachers.

### **2.2 Methods**

A random sample of 58 schools agreed to participate in the research. Each school was asked to select a group of S3 pupils to whom the questionnaire would be administered. A total of 2,500 questionnaires were sent out and 47 schools (81% of those agreeing to participate) returned 1466 questionnaires. As we do not know the exact size of each group selected by the school we cannot specify the exact response rate.

We asked schools to have the questionnaire administered by a PSE or guidance teacher rather than a modern language teacher so as to avoid a potential subject-related bias.

The survey consisted of a three-part questionnaire. The first part asked about pupils' profile in terms of gender, age, language learning and academic grouping in English and mathematics. The second part consisted of a series of questions relating to pupils' career aspirations and the sources of guidance and information they had used in order to arrive at these choices. In the third part pupils were asked in greater detail about their views on language learning, their intentions for future language study and their rationales for these views and intentions.

A final question asked pupils to reflect on the likely life circumstances in which they would find themselves aged 25, i.e. to project their thinking to a stage when they were likely to have completed any post-school studies and have started working in their chosen career.

The responses were collated into the predefined categories as set out in the questionnaire and transferred into SPSS, a statistical analysis programme. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics such frequency counts and percentages. Some of the categories were further disaggregated using cross-tabulations, for example pupils' career choices were cross-tabulated first by gender, and then additionally by the number of languages studied. Some of these cross-tabulations revealed interesting differences, which are highlighted in the report.



## Chapter 3: Findings

### 3.1 Characteristics of respondents

The respondent group was slightly female dominated (51.8% girls, 48.2% boys). These proportions closely match those in the Careers Scotland study (Careers Scotland 2005: 6).

Just under half of the respondents were in a Credit group for English (48.5%); around a quarter (25.4%) in a General grouping and a small percentage (5.6%) in a Foundation grouping. From the 2005 SQA results for NQ we know that 43.9% achieved English at Credit level, 21.8% received General and 3.3% received Foundation awards. These figures are roughly in line with our own percentages (keeping in mind that the results refer not to our respondents but the year group above). **We therefore believe that the group is in line with the S3 population nationally.**

Among our respondents, 62.4% were studying French, 16.6% German and 4.7% Spanish. The corresponding SQA data for 2005 tell us that in the S4 cohort of that year, 59.8% were studying French, 19.7% were studying German and 4.9% were studying Spanish. **Again these figures suggest that the respondent group is broadly representative of national trends.**

SQA data do not tell us how many pupils are studying more than one language but it is generally assumed that the majority do not. This is borne out in our sample where 85.8% indicated they were studying just one language and 9.4% said they were studying two or more languages. Encouragingly, only 4.9% indicated that they were studying no language at all.

**On the basis of the above considerations we make the assumption that the responses we have obtained are broadly representative of Scottish pupils in S3 during the 2004-05 session.**

### 3.2 Language provision and views on language learning

#### Summary

French dominates provision, and most pupils study just one language. Most pupils do not intend to continue with the study of their language, or to study a new language. The reasons for non-continuance arise predominantly from short-term considerations ('I don't enjoy this language') and non-awareness of the globalised labour market ('I don't think I will ever meet people who speak this language'). Girls were more likely than boys to intend continuing or starting new language learning, but reasons for doing so were predominantly social ('I hope to be able to meet people from these countries', 'I hope to visit places where this language is spoken').

#### French dominates language provision

In line with the national trend, most pupils (around 70%) were studying French, and the majority had started to study their main language in primary school, most frequently in Primary 6 (around 40%). These responses suggest that the recommendations of *Citizens of a Multilingual World* (Scottish Executive 2000) are being implemented with mixed success. On the one hand, pupils appear to be getting a consistent experience of one language from primary into secondary schooling. However, this consistency has been at the cost of diminished diversification, with languages other than French finding it difficult to sustain uptake.

## Short-term concerns in subject choices

The majority did *not* intend to continue studying their main language after S4, with the figure for boys being particularly high (nearly 60%), with only 18.4% intending to continue and 21.7% unsure. For girls the responses were more evenly split: 39.3% did not intend to continue, 31% did and 29.4 were still unsure.

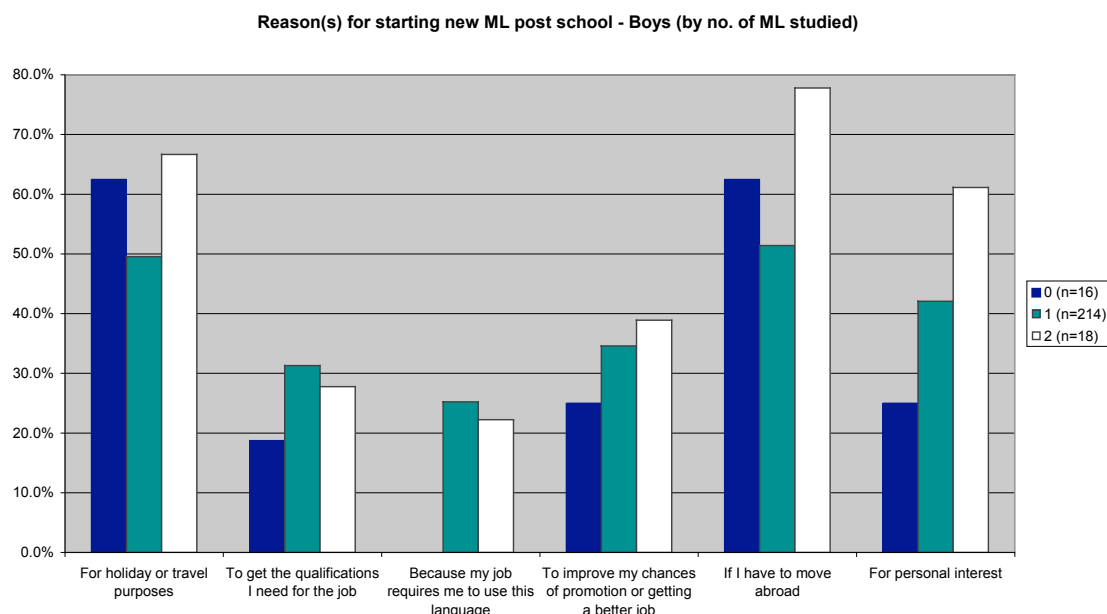
Importantly, a large number of pupils (63.9% of girls, 51% of boys) indicated that they *might* consider studying the language after S4 if they found they got a good grade in S4. This short-term concern outweighed the long-term consideration of finding out that language skills were needed for either their studies or their career (54.4% of girls and 38.3% of boys). For those NOT wishing to continue with language study, the most important reason cited was their lack of enjoyment of language study (again consistent with findings from the FLUSS report (McPake et al., 1999), which is again a short-term concern.

## Vocational and social rationales for language study

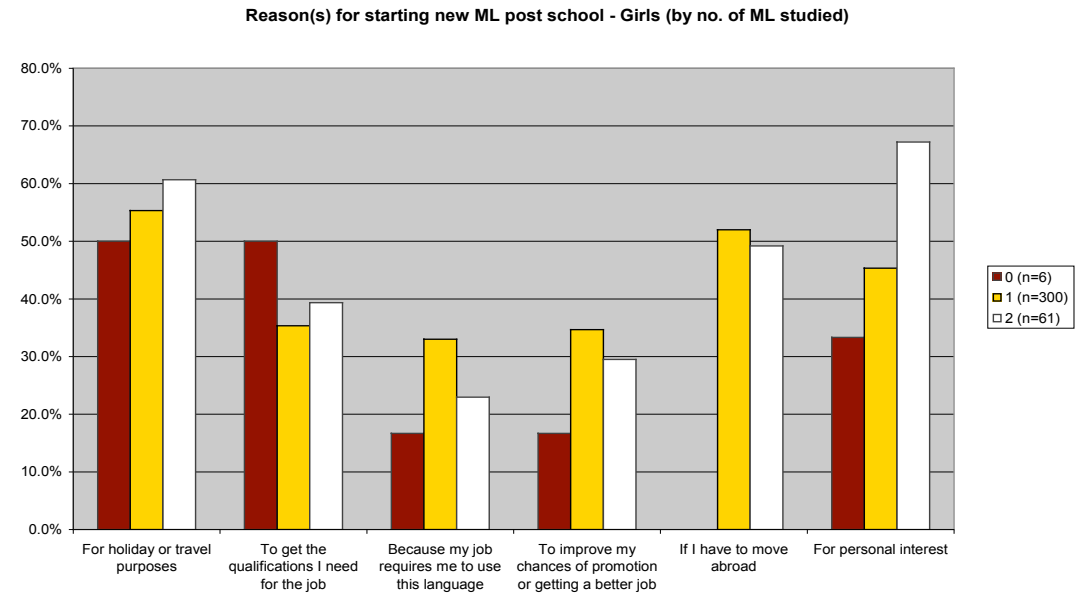
Only 13% of pupils who *wanted* to continue their language study believed they would need a language qualification for their future studies or career, a finding consistent with that in the FLUSS report (op.cit.). Similarly, most pupils who planned to start studying a new language in S5/S6 or after leaving school also indicated a social reason, such as visiting the country where the language is spoken or learning it for holiday purposes. There was, however, also a realisation of the possibility of an externally imposed necessity such as having to move abroad, with just over half of both boys and girls citing this as a reason.

Interestingly, when we disaggregate scores by the number of languages studied, rationales become more gendered. Thus, 77.8% of boys studying two languages cited external factors e.g. 'if I have to move abroad' (Figure 1). By contrast, the majority of girls studying two languages most frequently cited 'personal interest' (Figure 2).

**Figure 1: Boys' responses for post-school language learning**



**Figure 2: Girls’ responses for post-school language learning**

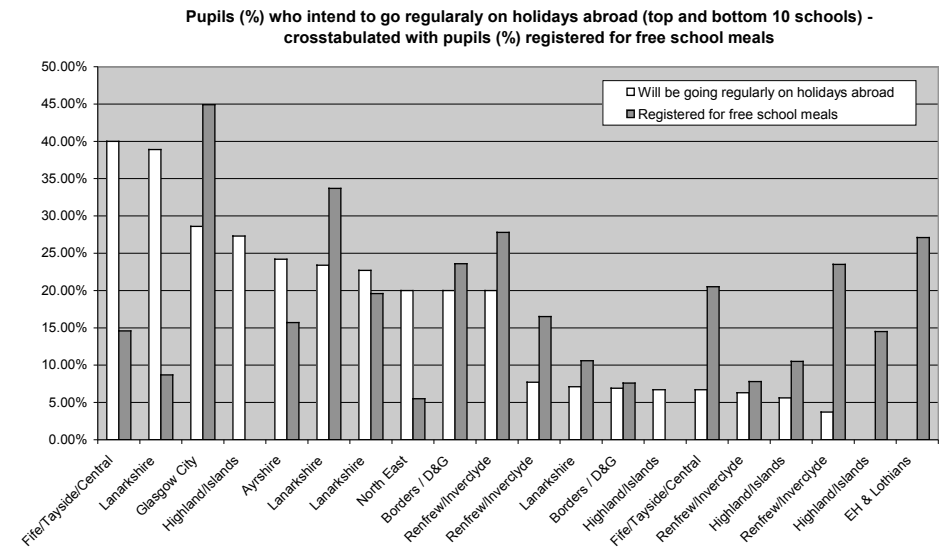


**Schools can make a difference**

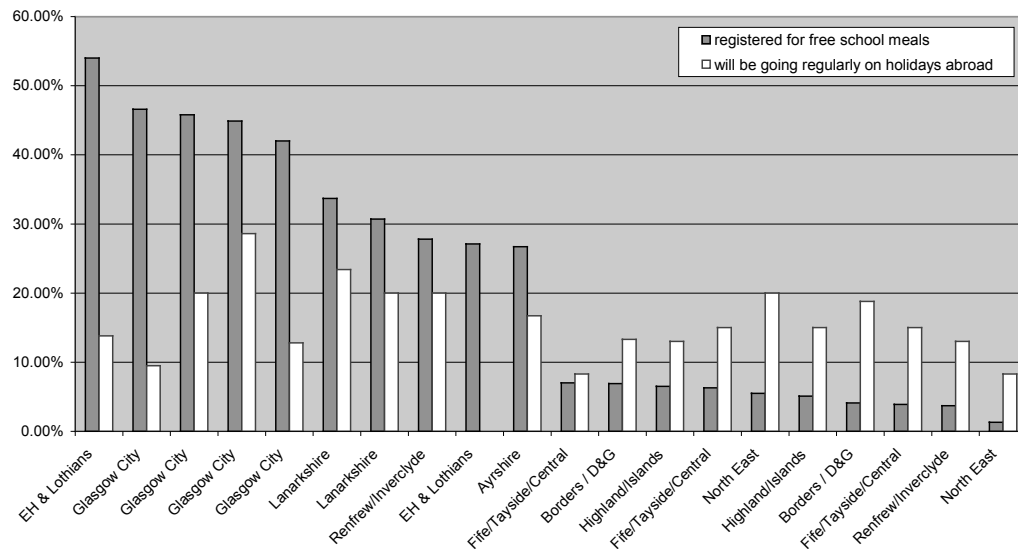
In addition to the gender differences outlined, there were also marked differences between schools as to percentages of pupils studying two languages, intending to continue with their language study, starting a new language, or believing that they would be going regularly abroad for holidays. However, these differences were not related to either geographical location or the socio-economic makeup of the school. This suggests that individual teachers and school managers can influence pupil perceptions.

For example, pupils who believed they would be going regularly on holidays abroad in their adult life were just as likely to come from a rural or inner city school; and that school was just as likely to have a higher or lower than the average 15% registered entitlement to free school meals (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Perceived likelihood of going regularly on holidays abroad**



**Pupils (%) registered for free school meals (top/bottom 10 schools) -  
crosstabulated with pupils (%) intending to go regularly on holidays abroad**



### 3.3 Career aspirations and expectations

#### Summary

S3 pupils' career preferences and their understanding of the qualifications, skills and personal qualities relevant to the jobs they seek are strongly influenced by gender and by academic grouping. Language skills are rated lowest of all the skills students see as appropriate for their future careers. There is therefore a need to make more explicit to students the contribution that language study makes to a wide range of the skills valued by the students themselves and by potential employers. Few students seemed to be aware of, or attracted by, the increasing importance of mobility in a globalised economy. This indicates a need for students to have these developments drawn to their attention, along with the value of language learning and the concomitant enhanced awareness of other cultures and ways of life, in this context.

#### Imagining life beyond school

Most respondents were very hopeful that they would be in an enjoyable job with good earning potential. For boys, the most important factor was the potential to earn a lot of money (74.4%), whereas for girls, it was job satisfaction (63.8%) – although this aspect was also highly valued by boys (60%).

Few respondents expected to be living or working in the same area as they do now. At the same time fewer than a quarter of the respondents (23.9% of boys and 21.3% of girls) wanted the opportunity to travel as part of their job. Much has been made of the argument that in a globalised labour market, mobility in employment may become a more prominent feature in the future, which in turn would require knowledge of other cultures and the acquisition of language skills. Yet only 5.2% of girls and 3.9% of boys believe they will be using language skills at work.

Around 40% believed that they would regularly spend holidays abroad. This roughly mirrored the percentage of those who indicated they wished to learn a language for holiday purposes; in other words language learning was seen as being of personal or social benefit but not relevant for vocational purposes.

## **Career goals and attainment**

From their findings, Careers Scotland concluded that having clear career goals was linked to higher attainment (Careers Scotland 2005: 34). By contrast, in our study 'Credit' boys and girls were more likely to indicate that they had *not* made up their mind about a career than either the General or Foundation groups. Similarly, the forecast by Careers Scotland that about 30% of the S3 cohort would have no career goals (Careers Scotland 2005: 22) was not confirmed by our data where only 9% of boys and 10.9% of girls indicated uncertainty in this respect.

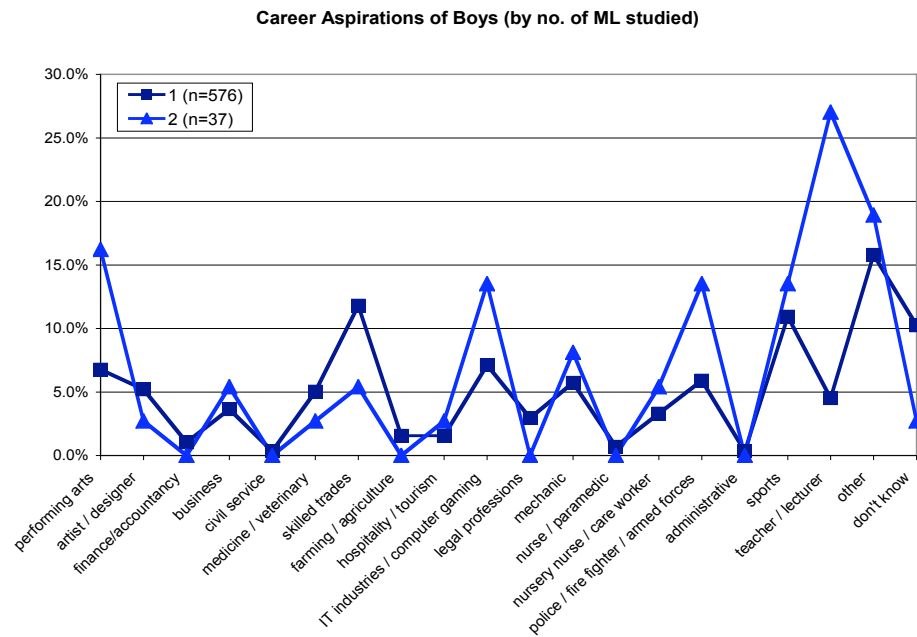
However, our principal concern is that subject choices pupils make in relation to future career aspirations take into account the nature of the ways in which globalisation is likely to affect working lives, no matter which vocational path is chosen.

## **Gendered career aspirations**

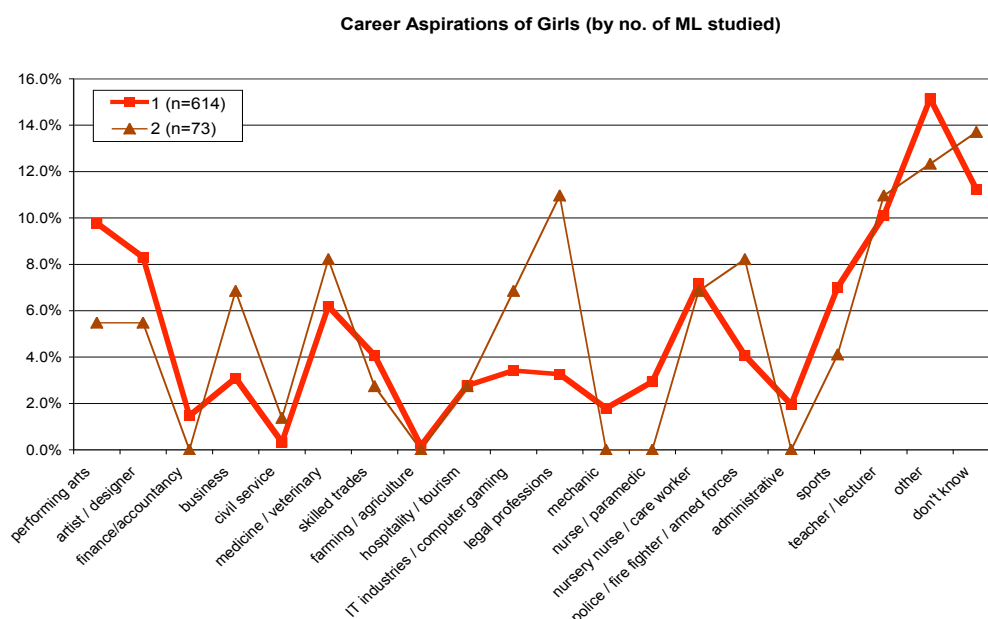
Girls and boys had different career preferences and there were additional variations amongst respondents according to their self-reported academic grouping in English, and according to the number of languages studied. For example whilst overall, a career in a skilled trade was most popular amongst boys, Credit boys were more likely to chose a career in the IT industries. Girls' favourite career option was teaching/lecturing both for the group as a whole and for Credit girls. However, when we disaggregate the data by the number of languages studied, the vocational profile of both boys and girls changes. For example, boys studying two languages most frequently cited the top girls' choice 'teacher/lecturer' as their preferred career choice (Figure 4). Amongst the girls' responses, the option of careers in IT or the legal profession become more prevalent (

Figure 5). However, because we are not comparing equal group sizes, it is not possible to draw firm conclusions from this set of findings.

**Figure 4: Career Aspirations - Boys**



**Figure 5: Career Aspirations - Girls**



### **Gendered views on the relevance of qualifications**

Around a third (33.1%) of girls indicated that the highest qualification required would be a university degree, as opposed to 23.5% of boys. Conversely, whilst 18.7% of boys believed that 'good Standard grades' would be sufficient to be successful in their chosen career, only 7% of girls did so.

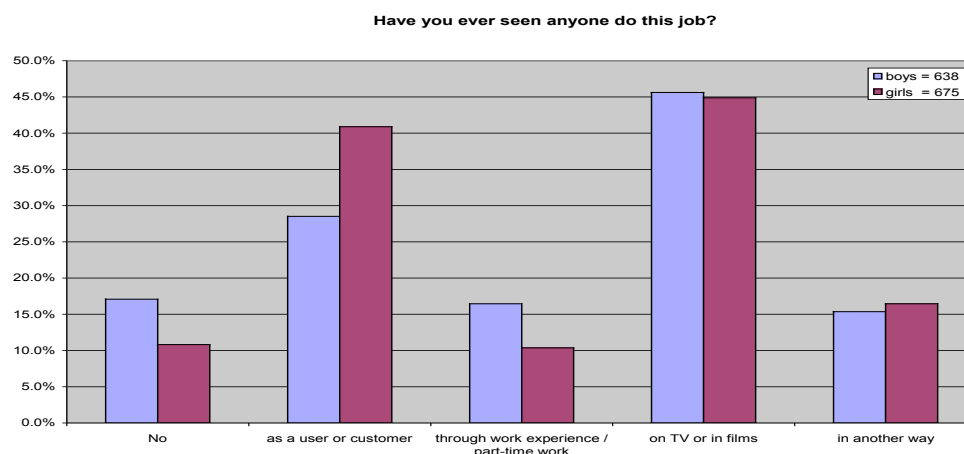
We therefore agree with Careers Scotland's recommendation that "there would appear to be scope for improving amongst teachers and pupils alike an understanding of the link between subject curriculum and the world beyond school." (Careers Scotland: 35). The importance of this advice becomes clearer in the light of the findings that follow because they give more detailed information about how pupils in S3 arrive at their professed career aspirations. This aspect was not investigated by Careers Scotland.

### **Media influences on career aspirations**

Just over 40% of respondents in both genders indicated that they did not know anyone who did the job they were aspiring to. The jobs of people in the immediate family of the respondents did not appear to provide inspirational choices for career options, all attracting less than 10% of responses. Yet the majority (around 63% of boys, 70% of girls) were turning to their parents for advice – even though parents' own jobs evidently did not relate to pupils' aspirations.

By contrast, nearly half of the respondents indicated that they had seen their chosen career either in TV or on film. It thus appears that the way that jobs are portrayed in the media has a noticeable effect on young people's career aspirations. This is important since the jobs portrayed in the media tend to be glamorised and are not necessarily representative of reality.

**Figure 6**



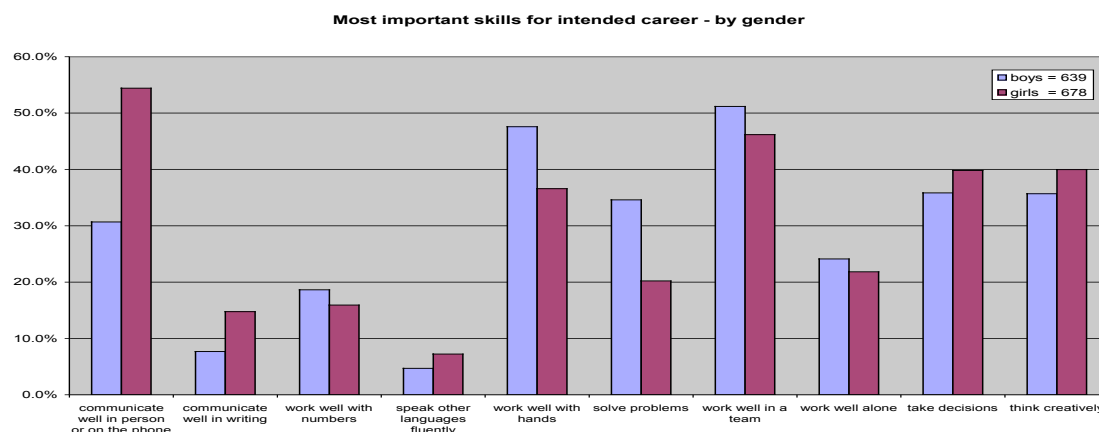
Less than half of respondents (33.6% of boys, 41.9% of girls) had discussed their aspirations with careers advisers although most intended to do so in the future. Given the above findings it would clearly be beneficial if careers advisers were involved at an earlier stage, provided they are well-informed about the conclusions that can and cannot be drawn from skills surveys and other labour market intelligence concerning the need for language skills.

### **Perceived irrelevance of language skills for world of work**

Government statistics (Labour Market Trends, 2002) indicate that changes in the occupational structure from manual to non-manual labour mean that the demand for skills related to manual dexterity and strength is falling – yet boys in our sample still appear to hold on to these traditional values (see Figure 7 and Figure 8). As indicated earlier, lack of communication skills consistently feature in labour market surveys. It is therefore worrying to note that only 30% of boys rated communication skills as important.

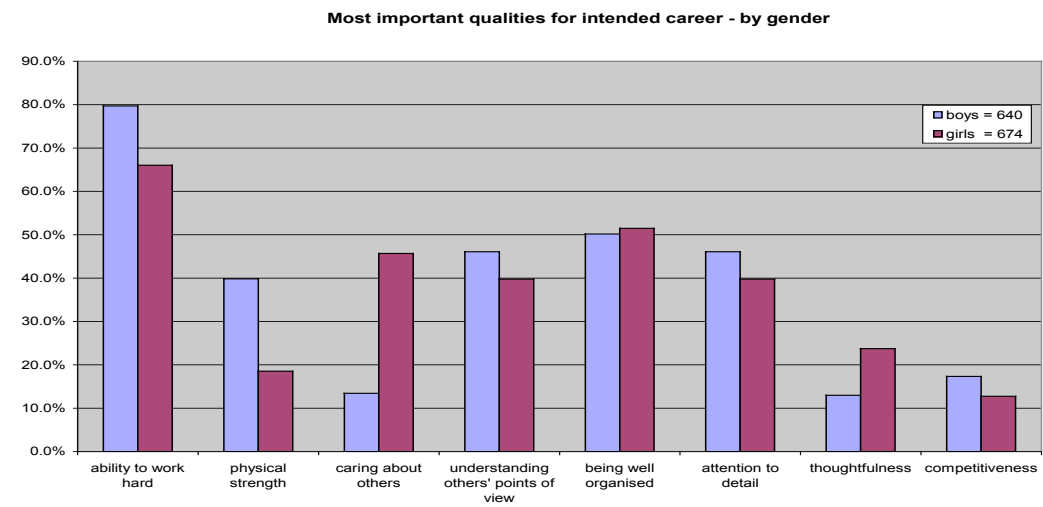
We also argued that language learning helps develop related skills such as customer handling, team working and problem solving, and showed that lack of language skills affects students' future employability in the international labour market (cf. page 5). It is therefore disappointing that only a minority accepted the vocational relevance of language skills (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Vocational skills**





**Figure 8: Vocational qualities**



## **Chapter 4: Conclusions and Key Messages**

### **4.1 Conclusions**

- At the point of making their subject choices in S3, pupils are pre-occupied with short-term concerns.
- Pupil career aspirations are heavily influenced by the way jobs are portrayed in the media. At the same time, pupils rely on their parents, who themselves may not be very knowledgeable about these jobs, as an important source of information for career advice.
- By the time pupils consult career advisers in S4 or later, decisions about the kinds of skills and qualities required for a given job may already have been quite firmly embedded in pupils' minds.
- Subjects chosen at the end of S2 on the basis of unsubstantiated or erroneous assumptions are likely to limit pupils' ability to develop their full potential during their remaining compulsory secondary schooling, as envisaged by ACfE (SEED 2004a: 14).
- Careers advisers may unwittingly give inappropriate advice if they interpret findings from 'objective' labour market surveys as meaning that language skills are not used or in demand.
- The majority of pupils in our study did not recognise the importance of language skills in their own right nor the role that languages play in the development of transferable skills.
- Irrespective of geographical or socio-economic factors, individual schools had influenced pupils' views on language learning and the role they might play in their future lives.

### **4.2 Key Messages**

#### **Language Teachers should**

- make more explicit the contribution language study makes to a wide range of skills valued by S3 pupils themselves and by potential employers
- develop strategies that maximise the potential benefits arising through language learning
- collaborate with other subject teachers to find novel ways of motivating pupils

#### **Head Teachers, Careers Advisers and Language Teachers should**

- take account of the ways in which generic skill surveys and labour market intelligence may hide the use of or need for language skills
- be given more detailed information about the ways in which language skills contribute to the national economy
- collaborate on a strategy that allows careers advisers to have access to learners before S3 subject choices are made, at which time the need to develop a range of broad, transferable skills is outlined

### **Scottish Executive Education Department should**

- provide more detailed information about the relevance of language skills in the globalised economy to head teachers, careers advisers and language teachers so that they are able to provide appropriate guidance to young people at a still very impressionable age
- continue to encourage language study and provide incentives to extend the range of languages learnt in schools and beyond in order to contribute to the development of a 'smart, successful Scotland' fully able to compete in the global market place.

### **Implications for future studies**

- A follow-on study could investigate in greater detail how individual subjects contribute to the development of 'employability' skills and how employers view the contributions made by these same subjects.

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