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Transition after school in Scotland – opportunities and challenges for young people who are deaf

Over the period 2011 to 2017 there have been several important developments in schools which may affect achievement and progression of deaf children after school: the introduction of new secondary exams in 2013/14 and a dramatic increase of 90% in the number of deaf school leavers (from 146 in 2011 to 278 in 2017) while the overall number of school leavers has increased only by 1.4%. The number of deaf pupils leaving school varies from year to year as it is a small group, but the Government's recording of more deaf children over this period is likely to include pupils who may be mildly deaf, deaf in one ear, or those who have been previously regarded as having a different more significant disability. The Scottish Government data collection tool, the annual school census, is currently not successful at recording more than one issue, such as EAL and deafness. We would need to find this information out another way, e.g. by looking at some case study local authorities, to see if the nature of the school leaving deaf population has changed over this period. The curriculum has also narrowed over this period at S4 (Priestley, 2017) to usually 6 subjects at N5 for most pupils, often 8 in the past, to give more curriculum time to work placement and personalised choice, following the Curriculum for Excellence principles.

Figure 1 illustrates what has happened to the Scottish Qualification Curriculum Framework (SCQF) levels of deaf school leavers over this period. (For readers in the rest of the UK, Level 5 is equivalent to GCSE A* – C[1] and SCQF levels 6 and 7 are equivalent to A levels.) The previous Scottish exam system had public exams at Level 4, but these are now internally managed school certificates, although endorsed by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), the Scottish exam board.

Figure 1 Percentage of deaf young people leaving school with different SCQF qualifications 2012 – 2017
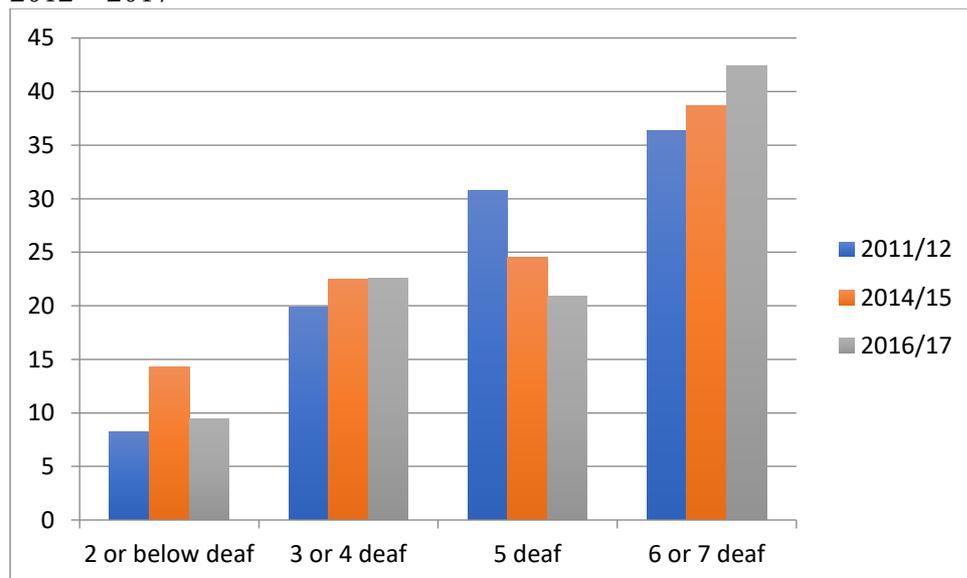
Source: Scottish Government education statistics datasets, https://bit.ly/2wER22z

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[1] Now GCSE grades 9 – 4 in England

There has been a steady increase in attainment at SCQF 6 or above and a steep drop at SCQF5. The proportion of those achieving at least one qualification at SCQF 3 or 4 has risen significantly from 2011-17. The proportion of very low attaining deaf pupils has fluctuated over this period, but there has still been a significant increase comparing 2011-12 with 2016-7. At the same time, for the wider group of all school leavers with Additional Support Needs there has been a significant reduction in low or no attaining students from 9.2% to 6.4%. The most dramatic difference for deaf school leavers is those achieving at SCQF 5, the new National 5 exams. This could be because expectations are rising and more young deaf people are staying on at school and gaining a Higher or more. Or it could be for some deaf young people that the way the curriculum is being taught in the senior phase is not as suitable as the previous system. Some are achieving at lower levels instead.

What are the implications for practitioners of these changes?
- Deaf pupils need careful advice about what they will be able to do with SCQF4 qualifications as opposed to SCQF 5. College websites can be used in visit times in S2 and S3 to discuss where school qualifications lead.
- Perhaps this mid-achieving group is missing out on in-class support as the method of teaching has changed, or possibly there have been fewer staff allocated to providing subject specific tutorial support for secondary deaf pupils than previously. This may be an effect of the reduction in numbers of teachers of deaf children, and especially a reduction in those qualified to work with deaf pupils (Ravenscroft and Wazny, 2017).
- A double achievement peak appears to be opening up (Hendar and O'Neill, 2016), which suggests we need to attend more to the pupils in the bottom half of the achievement range when planning support. This group is also likely to have an over-representation of pupils from living in areas of deprivation (SIMD quintile 1, the most impoverished 20% of the population) and include more pupils with other additional support needs.

What preparation for work is happening in Scottish schools?
Traditionally in Scottish schools a week's work experience during S4 was usual (Scottish Government, 2008). The Government report 'Education Working for All!' (SG, 2014) introduced new Career Management Skills for pupils right across the school curriculum from 3 – 18. This approach broadens out employment opportunities throughout school, not just a work placement but also encouraging visits from and to employers, enterprise activities, simulated work and internships. However, the right to a week's work placement in S4 is not monitored; inspectors look in a general way at the use of the new careers standards. This is in stark contrast to the situation in England where the Gatsby Benchmarks (DfE, 2018) are used to monitor school performance in great detail.

Pupils in S5 and S6 can take a Foundation Apprenticeship (FA) which will give them an introduction to a Modern Apprenticeship (MA); they take the MA after leaving school. FAs take two years and are at SCQF 6, equivalent to two Highers. The FA comes with a guaranteed work placement, and with core skills at N5 level, which may be off-putting for some deaf students who have spiky profiles in core skills. For deaf BSL users, BSL can be used for the speaking and listening components of Core Skills. A pupil on a FA is not employed but a school student. So far there have been no case studies of how school Additional Support funding can follow the student to college and work placement on a Foundation Apprenticeship.

How far do teachers of deaf children become involved with work placements, pre-college links, providing appropriate support for deaf young people at college, and attending transition meetings? This varies currently across Scotland. Local authority services for deaf children are usually not inspected; their work is partially reviewed through school inspections. Specialist roles in supporting deaf pupils at transition, although they may exist in some resource base schools, are not really evident. Inspection of local authority services for deaf children would ensure that specialist careers support and guidance was in place.

What progress do young deaf people make on college level courses?

Figure 2 below shows that there are 395 full time deaf students in Scotland enrolled on college courses and 1,395 part-time. However, 60% of these enrolments are students over the age of 25. Some deaf students are enrolled on special programmes designed for students with disabilities (21% of deaf students, compared to 9.5% in the sector) (Scottish Funding Council, 2018). We don't really know what sort of provision this is and whether it is suits these deaf learners.

Colleges in Scotland also contain a considerable amount of Higher Education, mostly HNDs. This can be an effective access route to university, but on the other hand enrolling on an HND course can lead to a lack of articulation with a degree at a university, so poorer likely outcomes for employment.

Figure 2   Proportion and numbers of deaf students enrolled on college FE and HE courses 2016-17
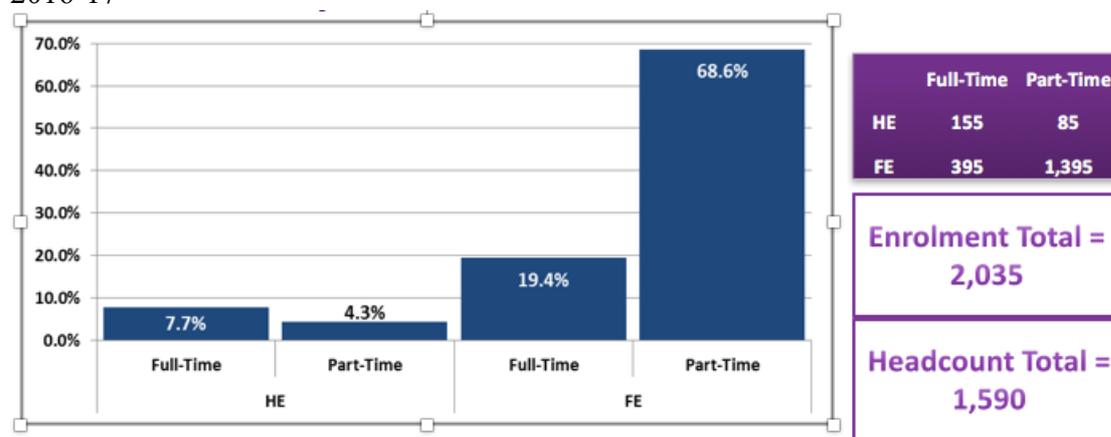
Source: Scottish Funding Council, 2018

Completion rates from college based courses for deaf students (see Figure 3 below) are better than all students for full time FE courses, but worse than for all students at HE level. This gives us some confidence in the support arrangements in general for deaf students on FE courses, but perhaps the need for better assessments of needs for these students studying at HE level in FE colleges. School services could support the Disabled Students Allowance assessment process more carefully to ensure students are aware about the importance of qualified notetakers, radio aid systems, deaf awareness for staff and peers, subtitles and language tutorials. Meeting with a deaf HE student who has been through a DSA assessment would be an important school-based activity in the Senior Phase.

Figure 3   Achievement rates for deaf students at college on FE and HE courses compared to all students
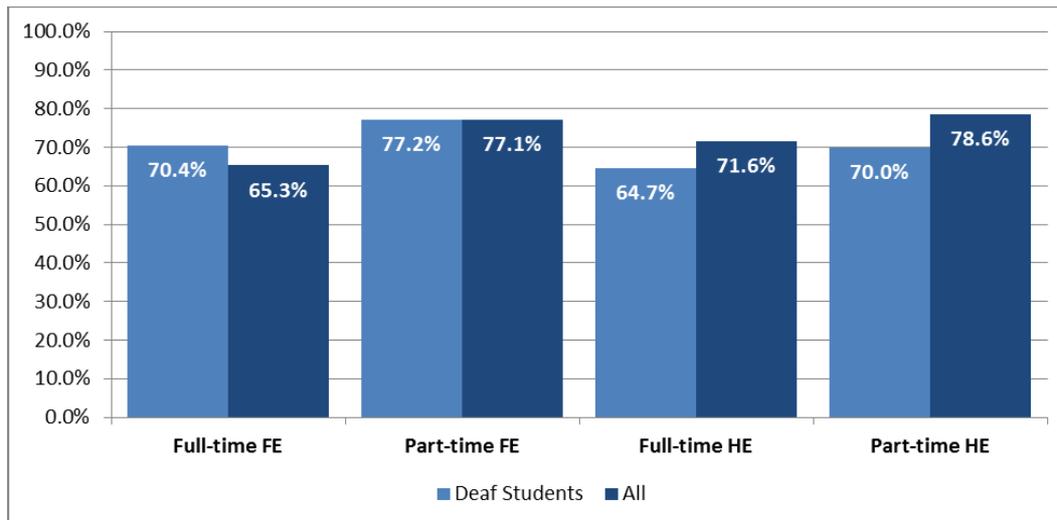
Source: Scottish Funding Council, 2018

What does transition to work and training look like in Scotland today?
Over the period 2012 – 2017 youth unemployment for all 16 – 24 year olds has fallen significantly in Scotland from 22.9% in 2012 to 9.4% in 2017. However, the changes in youth unemployment do not seem to have had an impact on staying on rates at S4 and S5 (Scottish Government, 2018a).

Most Scottish school leavers in 2017 go initially to FE (26.8%) or HE (40.7%), while 22% were in work, 2.4% were in training and 4.5% were unemployed. The downward trend in unemployment rates (at 3 months after leaving school) has continued over the past 6 years (Scottish Government, 2018b). In contrast, most deaf school leavers continue to go to FE (35.8%) rather than HE (27.2%). The proportion going to work (21.1%) is very similar to the whole school leavers group, as is the proportion in training. The proportion unemployed (6.9%) is higher (Scottish Government, 2018c, Table L1.5). Going to college may enable deaf students to continue to improve their qualifications and so ultimately to progress to better jobs, training and work. However, if the proportion of young deaf people gaining SCQF 6 qualifications has risen, so should direct university entrance after leaving school.

Skills Development Scotland is now much better at recording trainees with disabilities and health conditions (SDS, 2018, Tables 8 & 9) through encouraging self assessment. Previously apprentices were reluctant to self declare. The improvement means that the performance of trainees with impairments and health conditions on apprenticeships can be monitored. However, the published statistics are not broken down to show deaf trainees.

Knowledge of Access to Work (ATW) was found to be particularly lacking amongst deaf young people aged 16 – 24 (O'Neill et al., 2014, chapter 4). Deaf young people in employment include Modern Apprenticeships: all are entitled to an assessment with the Job Centre and an agreement with their employer for arrangements at work, such as a notetaker for staff meetings or a BSL / English interpreter for a certain number of hours per week. Preparation which teachers of deaf children could do with pupils at school is to discuss ATW in Senior Phase visiting sessions and arrange for the pupils to meet a deaf person who has negotiated an ATW agreement. Deaf organisations such as Deaf Action, NDCS and BDA can provide contacts for school services in local areas. Many employers do not understand ATW,

so a service such as the Moving On Project from Action on Hearing Loss may be able to assist in the workplace (https://bit.ly/2xSTvIB).

How are young deaf people doing in HE in Scotland?
When deaf people go on a first degree, whether college or university based, it is much more likely to be part time than for all students (see Fig. 4 below). This could be because there are many more adult deaf students than for other groups: 49.2% of deaf students are over 25, and 70.5% over 21 (SFC, 2018). One reason could be that it sometimes takes longer for deaf students to get to the right achievement level to enter HE, and by that time they have other responsibilities so they have to study part time. It would be better if we could get more students through Highers and straight to university earlier. This would probably also lead to attendance at a wider range of universities rather than so many doing HE in colleges.

Figure 4   Proportion of students on their first degree in Scotland that are Full Time
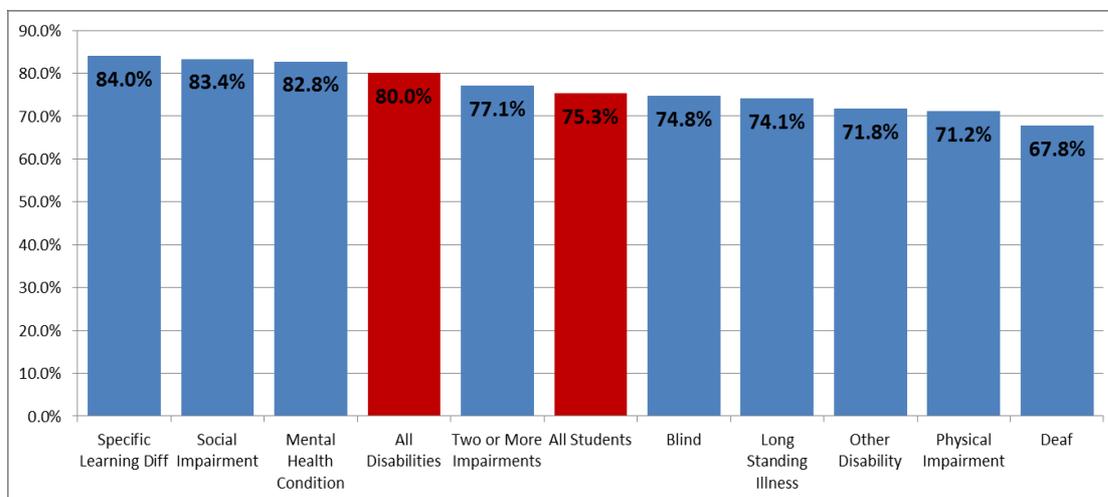
Source: Scottish Funding Council, 2018

However, the proportion of deaf students retained at Scottish universities is not much less than for all students, suggesting that support arrangements are fairly good at HE level (see Fig. 5). Deaf students, in common with other students with disabilities, have the best rights in the whole education system at HE level because of the very good support available through Disabled Students Allowance. Notetakers, for example, are available in HE but rarely at any other phase of the education system.

Figure 5   University retention: proportion retained, undergraduate students, all domiciles
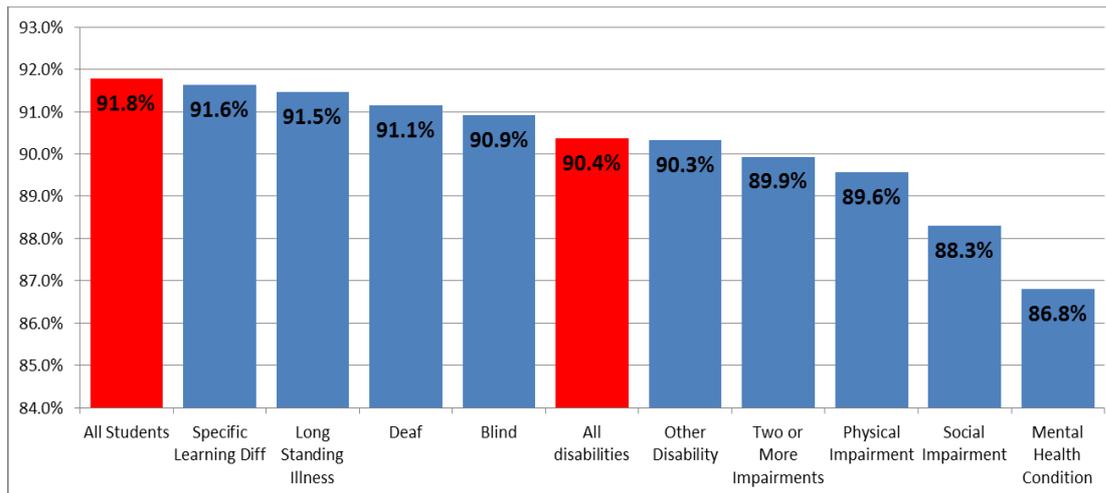
Source: Scottish Funding Council, 2018

Continuing the discussion
Official statistics only tell one part of the story. Practitioners working in schools have very valuable perspectives on why changes are happening in deaf students' school achievements and transitions from school to education, work and training. I would be very happy to continue the discussion and to supervise MSc projects on this theme. In addition, a PhD studentship will shortly be advertised to be based at the University of Edinburgh, in partnership with the University of Manchester and funded by NDCS, to follow a large representative cohort of deaf young people from the age of 16 over the next six years. Please contact me if you would like to continue this discussion.

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