Kelly Smith, Senior Policy Adviser on Education, The Royal Society

Biography: Kelly Smith is a Senior Education Policy Adviser at The Royal Society. She currently leads the Society’s programme of work on creating the conditions for a broad, balanced and connected post-16 curriculum, which seeks to change the A level system within the next decade. Prior to The Royal Society, Kelly worked as a Policy Advisor in the Government Digital Service (GDS), where she led the GDS Parliamentary Unit, and worked as part of the EU Exit team looking at departmental digital preparedness. Kelly has also worked on assessment and qualifications policy at AQA, and was previously a Guidance Manager at a sixth form in Durham.

SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE

Jobs are going to be transformed by new technologies such as artificial intelligence and machine learning. Some jobs might be lost altogether, and others will be created that don’t even exist yet. Students who are at school now will likely change jobs and industries more frequently than ever before during the course of their career.

If we want our young people to be able to succeed in this changing workplace, we need to make sure they have the right range of knowledge and skills by the time they leave school. This should include the opportunity to study a wide range of subjects to 18, to understand how they connect in real-world contexts and to develop valuable transferable skills such as communication, problem solving, and team work.

Students in the UK specialise much earlier than many of their international counterparts, who often take a much broader range of subjects throughout school. Specialising so early does not equip our young people effectively for the rapidly changing and unpredictable labour market, nor does it help students learn how to be informed citizens contributing to our democracy and society.

All young people need to develop a wide set of skills that are best acquired by learning across a range of subjects including the sciences, maths, computing, humanities, languages and the arts through to age 18.

Young people are losing out:

The UK’s existing post-16 education systems are too narrow, but within them, many young people are not even studying the broadest range of subjects that could be offered to them. These young people are at a disadvantage in the changing world of work.
Royal Society research shows that family income has a significant impact on the number of subjects a young person takes. Less than a third of students who claim for free school meals (FSM) go on to study 3 or more A levels, compared to more than half of students from better-off backgrounds.

Where a young person lives can have a significant impact on the number of subjects they take. For example, in the South East 57% of students take 3 or more A levels compared to the North East where it is only 42%.

About the Royal Society:

The Royal Society is a self-governing Fellowship of many of the world’s most distinguished scientists working across a broad range of disciplines in academia and industry, serving as the UK’s national academy for the sciences. The Society draws on the expertise of its Fellows and Foreign Members to provide independent and authoritative scientific advice to UK, European and international decision makers.