

Consultation with UK Youth Parliament (West Midlands Regional Youth Parliament): Learner Panel

Background:

UK Youth Parliament in the West Midlands has direct access to young people from across the region – and is fully operational in all 14 Local Areas. Members of Youth Parliament are democratically elected every February - in 2008 over 64 033 young people voted for their local Members of Youth Parliament in the West Midlands region. All elected members are between the ages of 11 and 19 and stand as a diverse ethnic group. They meet as the Regional Youth Parliament every 4/6 weeks and as a UK Youth Parliament at least once a year. They communicate regularly via an e-group; undertake regional and national projects and initiatives and work to bring about change on a local, regional and national level. UK Youth Parliament is a registered charity.

The process:

The consultation took place at Ingestre Hall in Staffordshire on Saturday 28th March 2009. There were 64 young people present made up of Members and Deputy Members of Youth Parliament and the workshop sessions were facilitated by young people. The young facilitators met as a planning group in advance of the consultation to discuss ideas and to assist with preparation and understanding. Youth workers were also invited to participate on the day and were invited on the day to submit their comments to Ofqual independently.

Photographs and video footage were taken on the day.

The purpose:

The aim of the consultation was to ascertain the elected Members of Youth Parliament's views from across the region on tests, qualifications and how technology is used in the classroom. Young people's insights and the film created on the day may be taken by Ofqual to conferences and events to give a wider audience an insight into what Members of Youth Parliament, as learners, think of the current systems in place and what the recommendations are for the future.

Workshop Group 1; facilitated by Bethan:

These notes are an accurate record of the notes taken during the workshop sessions. The wording in the main has not changed from the words submitted by the young facilitator.

Everyone in the group had taken their year 6 SATs and their year 9 SATs. Some members of the group felt that SATs are useful as they considered that it is "good to know where you are nationally", and it is useful to keep track of academic progress.

Others however, felt they are a waste of time and “don’t get you anywhere” as SATS are not a qualification. These same people felt that they put pointless pressure on to students. The group all agreed that year 6 SATs are a good thing, but that year 9 SATs are not as useful, especially before GCSEs. One person suggested that SATs provided good practise for “real” exams later in life, determining that students would feel more prepared for GCSEs in the following years.

9 members of the group had already taken their GCSEs and a further 13 were in the process of taking them. The general consensus was that GCSEs are worth taking as they are necessary to get into university or to get a job. Some people felt the difficulty of GCSEs was not right; some said they felt they were too easy, whereas others felt they were a very heavy workload and thus quite difficult. A few felt that the balance between coursework and exam at GCSE level was not right, although there was a majority view held that coursework was “pointless” and that it made it easier for someone to achieve a good grade, due to a wide availability of help and no real strict controls.

The whole group agreed that we were being taught to pass an exam rather than learn about a subject.

Some people complained that they had been made to, or were being made to, take GCSEs that were not relevant to them and they felt that they could spend their time better by studying something that is relevant to the career they wish to pursue. However, most said that they found the extended knowledge provided at GCSE useful and the subject range was generally okay, depending on the school that you attended/ed. One group member felt that there was a lack of sport-related GCSEs.

4 people in the group had already taken their AS Levels and had embarked on their A2s, and 12 people were in the process of sitting their AS levels - most of whom had already completed modules in January. There was a more positive view held within the group about this type of qualification than others, with one person saying they felt there was more of a focus on things you were actually interested in, making it easier and more rewarding to learn. Many people said they felt that AS levels were hard and that there was too big a gap between GCSE and AS level.

Some people felt that nobody should be allowed to study for them earlier than age 16 as they were too difficult. A large number of people expressed the concern that there didn't seem to be enough time to cover the syllabus before exams came and that it was therefore putting strain on both teachers and students. There were complaints about the thoughtless timetabling of exams, where some students will have up to four exams a day in May and June. Many people said they felt it would be useful to have more guidance about which subjects to choose and more information on the workload and where the options could take you beyond A' level.

The group unanimously decided that exams were not a fair test of a pupil's understanding in a subject. One person said “it is more about speed than knowledge in an exam” and many agreed that it was biased towards those with “good exam technique” than those who knew the most or who had a talent in the subject area. People suggested that exams were too easily affected by external factors which could hinder performance, which could be “confidence shattering”.

On the subject of the exam environment, many people felt it was pressurised, although they shared this was good, as it made you feel “in exam mode”, which could help performance. There was a split view on whether the setting of exams should be standardised; some said that it should be, to make it fairer for everyone, whereas others said that there needed to be some flexibility to cater for special needs and circumstances. One person said that we should be taught better coping skills and have more practise in exam environments. They added to this that we needed to be taught how to revise, to give us the best chance of doing well in the exam, as they felt support and teaching currently provided in the area of exam revision was not adequate.

A member of the group said that they felt exams caused them to feel less like an individual and more like a statistic and that they could very adversely affect someone as a person. There was also a debate about “setting”, where people are put into classes based on ability which is gauged through an exam. Many people felt that this was unfair and didn’t allow people a chance to show and demonstrate their talents in other ways. They felt that they were being “held back” and suggested that they have a say in which “set” they get put into rather than it being based on exams.

More specifically, a member of the group made a point about the science GCSEs, which have been recently reformed. They said they felt that the attempt to make science more “real” had taken away a lot of important subject matter and also that the “how science works” questions were too hard anyway.

Submitted by Bethan and supported by Anna.

Workshop Group 2; facilitated by Tyrone:

These notes are an accurate record of the notes taken during the workshop sessions. The wording in the main has not changed from the words submitted by the young facilitator.

The group discussed different exam types – for example the modular method and the group as a whole agreed that this method can be better for students as it creates less stress on young people because they are working on just one small topic at a time and also as exams are spread out throughout the GCSE years rather than all exams happening in May/June time in year 11.

The group called for lessons on how to relax – lots of young people find the two main years really stressful and so having tips on how to relax would really help young people.

The group liked the idea of exams taking place in small heated rooms, maybe a class room that the learning took place in – although the group recognised that there could be problems with practicality if there are not enough rooms in the school.

All agreed that intermediate level for the GCSEs should be reintroduced as the higher tier does not stretch the very top A* students – intermediate level might make B students feel happier/calmer about exams as they would be easier for them.

The group stated that all the exams are bunched together at the end of year 11; they should be spread throughout the year if possible, such as the science/maths exams.

Everyone felt that the media makes exams seem too easy, when for the young people they often are not easy for them. The group felt that the media reacts like this as people in the media are older and they therefore think that some of the questions are too easy because they know more than the young people.

Further suggestions from the group to “open up exams and to make them fairer”:

- Oral exams should be available for people who find writing difficult – there should be an “opening up” of the exam system for different learners.
- Different types of learning should be taught in schools, so that visual, auditory and kinesthetic learners can take full advantage of their education.
- There should be talks about whether the exams were all fair – some people in the group believed that an A* in science didn’t correspond to an A* in a different subject for example, although most people thought that it was more or less fair.
- There is too long a “holiday” between the GCSEs and A’ levels – pupils forget their learning.
- There is too big a jump from GCSE to A’ levels – at the end of year 11 lessons should be provided for students to give them a head start for their A’ levels – at the moment this does not happen and it is a big shock for many.
- The group discussed the issue of procedures and safe guarding for pupils if they are ill or if there is a family crisis etc – the group suggested that mock exams could be used as insurance, in the event of something going wrong in the summer revision / exam period – unanimously all agreed that more flexibility was needed for exams.

Submitted by Tyrone and supported by Anna.

Next Steps:

The region welcomed the opportunity to facilitate this consultation and welcomes updates on further steps that will be taken concerning their suggestions and thoughts.

Many young people enjoyed actively taking part in the consultation – they found that it was “good to talk about the issues” and found that “the questions were very wide ranging and interesting”, they also valued the “interesting debate”.

UK Youth Parliament in the West Midlands welcomes working with Ofqual again!

Prepared by Anna Sterckx.

UK Youth Parliament Regional Co-ordinator and National Achievements Officer.