

Ofqual Consultation Report Newcastle, 23rd June 2009

Introduction and background

The National Youth Agency (NYA) was asked to organise and facilitate a consultation with young people 'on the margins' of school/non-attenders for whom routes to qualification would likely be more complex or unavailable. From confirmation of the contract to the consultation day itself was about three weeks; despite the short notice the day was a significant success for both participants and Ofqual.

The discussions on the day were participative, based on activities and designed to gather young people's thoughts and opinions around the following themes:

- Working/studying towards qualifications if not at school regularly
- Gaining understanding from those not interested in working towards qualifications or who found it hard to do when not at school
- The whole process of being assessed, taking exams and tests and how it could be made easier for people not at school
- New qualifications and systems like the Diploma which are designed to make it easier for people who can't attend one school setting

The young people

The young people were drawn from the following youth work groups:

- The Cupboard Project in Leeds
- V -Talent Volunteers in Gateshead
- YouthBank in Stockton-on-Tees
- Lobley Hill Alternative Education Project in Gateshead

Each group was supported by a youth worker who joined in the discussions and activities and helped facilitate in small group work exercises.

There were eight male¹ and five female participants of whom two identified as being disabled. All young people were white British; this is likely to be a reflection of the ethnic mix of the North East but is also due to the short notice which meant we were pleased to welcome any who volunteered for the day rather than being able to be selective in our recruitment. The young people ranged in age from 15 years to 21 years and covered a span of nine who were in full time education; two in part time education; three in training and one volunteering. Clearly this adds up to 15 which indicates that some participants had a mixed portfolio of activity. It was pleasing that at least half the group were aged 18 and over which meant that there was a wide range of experience on which to draw and young people could talk with authority about not only their own experience but that of their friends and peers.

The programme

The programme was designed in two halves; the morning sought to provide Ofqual colleagues with a picture of the lived lives of the young people attending and insights into their educational history. In the afternoon we focused down on the qualifications, exams and assessment agenda to explore young people's views, opinions and experiences. The outline programme is reproduced below with the full version available as Appendix 1.

¹ Please see Appendix 3 for the breakdown of monitoring information

- **Welcome and Introductions**
 - Ofqual
 - The National Youth Agency

- **What's it Like Around Here?**
 - Every Child Matters Graffiti Posters

- **Our Learning Journeys**
 - Things that helped
 - Things that hindered
 - What would have made it better?

- **Qualifications and Assessment**
 - Are qualifications useful? Why? Why not?
 - What's good about qualifications? What's not so good?
 - What would make assessments, exams and tests better or easier to do?

- **The Diploma**

- **Evaluation and Thank You**

The results

Below is a brief explanation of how each exercise and activity was conducted followed by a write up of the information gathered. The data is reproduced in its raw form and is followed by a section which draws out the key points made by young people.

What's it Like Around Here?

Participants were asked to look at six different graffiti posters, covering different areas of their lives (corresponding to the Every Child Matters Outcomes), including:

- Being Healthy
- Helping Others
- Enjoy Life and Learning
- The Things I Need
- Sex and Relationships
- I Feel Safe

Our Learning Journeys

Participants were asked to write on **Green** cards the things that they felt had helped them during their school career, and on **Pink** cards the things that they felt had hindered them. They were also asked to think about, in both cases, what would have made it better. Participants placed these cards on a timeline that covered different stages of a typical learning journey:

- Primary Education – aged 5-11
- Secondary Education – aged 11-16
- Further Education – aged 16-18
- Higher Education
- Work/work with training

Young people's thoughts and stories are reproduced below. Suggestions for what would have made it better are recorded in *italics*.

	Pink	Green
Primary Education aged 5-11	<p>Teachers struggled to push my academic capabilities as they could not give me the next year group's work as I would have had nothing to do the next year.</p> <p>Parents struggled to help with homework in later years as teaching methods and ways of working out sums had changed so much.</p> <p><i>Sheets detailing currently taught methods may have helped them.</i></p>	<p><i>If I got more help with my work.</i></p>
	<p>I feel the teachers didn't do enough to give you the help you really needed.</p> <p><i>To make it better, children should listen more and not give up so quick.</i></p>	<p>Year 2 (aged 6-7) SATs were done "secretly" (i.e. we as pupils were not made aware that we were taking any sort of test). Children are under too much pressure at early ages for tests that have no impact on their lives.</p>
	<p>I didn't enjoy year 4+5. We had the same teacher and she was awful, she won't take any nonsense, if we talk or laugh she went off on one, we were 8-10 for God's sake.</p> <p><i>Make teachers understand we are children not perfectly behaved robots.</i></p>	<p><i>Talk to me not shout about things.</i></p>
	<p>Someone to help me when I moved primary schools as I found it hard to fit in and get picked on as I was the "new girl".</p> <p><i>If there had been more support I would have felt more comfortable.</i></p>	<p>I think during SATs support was really good such as keeping energy levels up i.e. breakfast club. Also extra help was given to everyone by offering after classes after school hours.</p>
	<p>The school was small and filled with hundreds of kids. The teacher barely had any time to help on a 1-to-1 basis. I used to move around a lot so I never stayed in the same place for long and all these schools felt the same. I didn't feel I had learnt anything.</p> <p><i>More staff – didn't have control what I did. If I had someone to support me and help me out when needed.</i></p>	<p>In year 6 we had the most amazing teacher, Mr Pope, and the main reason he was brilliant was his diversity in learning and revision techniques.</p> <p><i>Maybe introducing new ways of revision i.e. to revise maths we sat in a circle out side and threw a ball at some one with an equation. It was a competition, if you got it wrong you were out, winner got sweets or a drink or something of the like.</i></p>
		<p>In year 5 and 6 we got a teacher who decided to take us on a trip in the summer to an activities centre. This was really good as it gave us something to work towards and helped us build confidence whilst we were there.</p>
		<p>The school was not very big and a nice school. Lots of kids there, many I knew, all the staff were good. I really enjoyed primary school.</p>
		<p>Primary school was small and I knew everyone and really enjoyed it. I hated high school – too big and intimidating.</p> <p><i>The old system of middle schools may have made the transition a bit easier.</i></p>
		<p>I felt that the SATs exams were made out to be not all that important which for me was very good as at that age I had to worry about leaving friends and going to a new school and making new friends so taking a little bit of pressure off was very good and resulted in me doing better.</p>

Secondary Education aged 11-16	School went downhill in year 7. <i>Make it better by asking me why.</i>	Got transferred to Junction Box which is alternative education. Donna and Becca helped me a lot by helping me pass my exams, helping me with drugs. <i>More funding for Alternative Education.</i>
	When someone told my daughter she could not do something. <i>Encourage her to give it a try.</i>	<i>If she just give you a change in learning</i>
	I think bullying is a very big factor because I don't think the help is there for everyone who needs it. <i>Peer education would be great towards young children.</i>	<i>Explain more to me when I was doing the work.</i>
	Going to different school. <i>Letting me stay at one school.</i>	Ms Buckley, she was a tutor for special needs but when I entered the school council she offered help, I could go talk to her, even if it wasn't about school stuff. <i>More Miss Buckley's.</i>
	Lots of pressure throughout my five years at secondary school as I was made to feel that every test I took was the most important thing I would ever do and add this to the pressure of becoming a teenager and everything that comes with that, makes everything much more difficult.	It was made better by going to Lobley Hill because of small numbers in the group so you got more one to one.
	Biased teachers. One or two of the teachers hated anything different (*raises hand*) so "chavs" were favoured and "moshers" were looked down on. <i>Teachers don't show bias.</i>	
	Never had any support to help me back into school or any help to get me off the drugs. More information about drugs from a drugs counsellor. Youth worker/school behaviour team to help me back into school.	
	Began high school and hated from the 1 st day. Chose the lessons I like but still don't go. There's too many people and I don't like really any of the staff. <i>Something to make it better would be not going at all.</i> <i>Continued further in out of school education, were only allowed to go for 6-8 weeks.</i>	
	Teacher were always stereotypical. They made you feel small like we're all the same. <i>Give us personality back. See us as one person not all the same!!</i>	
No support for my different religion and activities and suffered some bullying through it. Every other religion is included on the syllabus, why not spiritualism?		

Further Education aged 16-18	Parents and teachers pushed me into doing what <u>they</u> wanted for me. I ended up dropping out of 6 th form and drifting for ages unsure of what to do next.	We were treated as adults and it caused us to act like it and take responsibility. <i>Treat like adults.</i>
	College was really hard as I went through a lot with grandparents dying and my mum being in hospital but I just got grief off some of my teachers. <i>I think I needed someone to talk to who wasn't involved but also wasn't a teacher so wasn't just interested in getting my work done.</i>	Assigned a mentor when having troubles in my second year who helped me understand myself more (motivations, learning styles, etc.)
	<i>Would have been better if I knew more about the subjects that I choose. As I would of chosen different subjects so I wouldn't fail next time.</i>	A youth worker called Chris Downie from Stockleton Youth Service acted as a role model and influenced me to get into youth work and carrying on to do my degree in youth work at Teeside Uni.
		<i>Give help if I need it.</i>
Higher Education	Not enough financial support. Lack of finances during my first degree limited my social activities contributing to the social seclusion that resulted in me dropping out after my first term.	
	I feel <u>really</u> resentful that I have to pay for doing my degree and it used to be free!!	

Qualifications and Assessment

Groups were asked to think about 3 sets of questions:

- Are qualifications useful? Why? Why not?
- What's good about qualifications? What's not so good?
- What would make assessments, exams and tests better or easier to do?

Each group started on a different question and were asked to record their thoughts on a pre-prepared sheet. The sheets were rotated so that each group contributed to each set of questions. The responses from all groups are reproduced in the tables below.

What's Good about Qualifications?	What's Not So Good about Qualifications?
Can be fun. Good starting point. Learn basics. Hands on experience. Achievement. Get good job. Got more chance to get work. Passing them. Work hard to get them. Build confidence up. Work as a group and ask for help to achieve them. Parents/carers pleased with you.	Pressure from parents/carers. Relevance. Tiring. Labels you. Leads to lack of employment [you still can't get a job even if you have a qualification]. Lack of choice. Negativity. Feel bad about yourself. Some are not standard – e.g. local award Q. Feel you don't have a chance to get a good job. Could have done better. No job (on job seekers)

Help you get into college.
 Gives you more opportunity.
 Feel good about yourself.
 Respect of parents.
 Rewards.

More chances to get a job or college.
 Proof of skills.
 Easier to get a job.
 Recognised system.
 Pleased with yourself.
 Achieving a high level.
 NVQs are good because they're national.
 Get you more money!

No money.
 Some qualification people don't know what they are (e.g. ALAN – Adult Literacy and Numeracy)
 Changing names of qualification.
 Something happens in family you can't take them and fail.

Pressure.
 Put yourself down.
 Think you can't get a job.
 Work hard.
 Do things you don't want to do.
 Parents/carers shouting at you.
 Might not get a job.
 Puts you down.
 Get punished.

Do You Think Qualifications are Important?

Why?	Why Not?
<p>Needed for jobs. Gives you the basics. Makes you feel good. Socially. Leads towards other qualifications. Opens doors.</p> <p>Yes they help you in your future.</p> <p>Make a difference in your life. Get you into a job. A life long career. Open doors for you. Socially affect you – friends. Get more job/colleges with more of these. More training to get in.</p>	<p>Over qualified. Changed person. Waste of time. Not the be all and end all. Experience more essential. They run people's lives. Pressure. Don't identify personal skills.</p> <p>You don't need GCSE to go to college.</p> <p>Made out to be too important. They take over people's life (e.g. trying to improve them). People can attach too much importance to qualifications, often ignoring real life experience. Wouldn't be considered due to people having better qualification.</p>

Assessments / Exams / Tests

What would make them **Better / Easier** to do?

Split down/made more clear.
 Time limits. Not too short/not too long.
 Comfy chairs.
 Music/ipod/MP3s
 Refreshments
 Learn certain subjects in certain amount of time.
 Space/your own comfort zone.

No time limit for exams.
 Teacher wearing high heels (noise in room).
 Session on how to revise. Prepare you for the actual exam.
 Split it up between the two years.

Support from tutors, friend, family.

Less people: smaller area.

Someone to read for you.

Listening to music like ipod.

Take clock out of room.

Longer time to do exams.

Different sets in different rooms.

Be able to choose where you set them.

Someone you know in the room with you.

Choose what you wear.

More support from family and friends.

Word the question different in young people language.

Take little notes in with you.

Key points

The key points which emerged from young people strongly echoed messages we have heard in previous consultations; these included:-

- ❖ Young people are keen to learn and capable of doing so given the right conditions
- ❖ They are clear about the benefits of qualification to their future but are concerned that the importance of qualification is sometimes exaggerated and is a cause of considerable pressure and stress
- ❖ Experience can be as significant as qualification
- ❖ School is not the right educational setting for everyone and numbers in the group matter
- ❖ Not all young people feel safe in school and would welcome more support
- ❖ Bullying is a significant issue for some
- ❖ It is the relationship with the responsible adult that is key to success
- ❖ Young people respond positively to being treated with respect/like an adult/as an individual
- ❖ Encouragement not punishment works
- ❖ A focus on the 'whole person' is needed
- ❖ A menu of educational choices will enable more young people to gain qualification – information about the new Diploma was positively received
- ❖ There are sometimes unnecessary rules/restrictions placed on people taking exams