



Education Committee

Oral evidence: Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG), HC 54

Tuesday 29 November 2022

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 29 November 2022.

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Members present: Mr Robin Walker (Chair); Miriam Cates; Mrs Flick Drummond; Anna Firth; Andrew Lewer; Ian Mearns.

Questions 167 - 213

Witnesses

I: Harley, sixth form student from Lancashire; Hayley, sixth form student from Northampton; Hollie, apprentice from Essex; Holly, GCSE student from Greater Manchester; James, apprentice from Sunderland; Maddelin, university student from London; and Mariam, sixth form student from London.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Harley, Hayley, Hollie, Holly, James, Maddelin and Mariam.

Q167 **Chair:** Welcome to the Education Committee. It is great to have a panel of young people who are going to talk to us about careers advice. I would like to run round the table and have our guests introduce themselves. I am Robin Walker and I am the Chair Of the Education Committee. Can I start with Hollie to my right?

Hollie: I am Hollie and I am a mechanical apprentice for Thames Water.

James: I am James and I am a machinist apprentice.

Hayley: My name is Hayley and I am from Northampton.

Maddelin: I am Maddie and I am a trainee civil engineer for Skanska.

Mariam: I am Mariam. I am in year 13, doing history, psychology and politics.

Chair: Fantastic, and I hear that you want to be a Secretary of State for Education.

Mariam: Yes.

Harley: I am Harley and I am part of Teach First pupil forum.

Holly: I am Holly. I am a student from Manchester and I am also part of the pupil forum at Teach First.

Q168 **Chair:** Fantastic. Thank you very much for joining us this morning. The first question I have for you is: thinking about your time at school and college, what kind of careers education and advice did you get and how helpful was it? Who would like to start?

Hollie: I will start. When I was in secondary school, I did not get a lot of careers advice. We saw one person once, and I saw him twice because I asked. He had lots of information on universities but none on apprenticeships and it was very much, "Look on the Government's website", and that was all the advice that I was given.

Chair: That was not very useful.

Hollie: No, not at all. However, I went to an amazing college and I had a great careers adviser called Janice. She was so well versed in everything that you could imagine. She had contacts within companies she knew everything about apprenticeships, everything about unis, and she cared and worked hard to give us the best advice possible and get us where we need to be. I had two very different experiences.

Q169 **Chair:** Absolutely. Did she talk to you about apprenticeships as well as other opportunities at that stage?



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Hollie: Yes. My college very much pushed on apprenticeships more than uni, because I went to a specialist engineering college. We were sponsored by quite a few companies as well. They came in and did talks and we did mock interviews and we had contacts with them.

Chair: A completely different experience from school to the college.

Hollie: Yes, definitely.

Q170 **Chair:** James, you have gone down the apprenticeship route. How did you find out about it?

James: I got into a meeting with my careers teacher in school. I only went in once and they told us about Seta. It is an engineering charity in the north-east. In the company I went to, a lot of the apprentices have been there and a lot of people who were there, they go to Rolls-Royce and to big companies everywhere across the world.

Q171 **Chair:** How early did you first start thinking about going down that route?

James: It was the beginning of January. I had applied for college. I was doing a welding course in Sunderland College, but then I went to my careers teacher because I wanted an apprenticeship. I didn't know how to get one, I didn't know where to go to get one. When I went to her she suggested Seta. I applied to them and got an apprenticeship.

Q172 **Ian Mearns:** On that, James, from that perspective, you wanted an apprenticeship but you had not been advised at school about the availability of apprenticeships. What put the idea of apprenticeship into your mind?

James: It was my dad, because my dad did an apprenticeship when he left school as well.

Q173 **Chair:** Hayley, do you want to talk about your experience of careers advice?

Hayley: I have not had that much careers advice either from my school. My business teacher was very helpful. She gave me advice and got me into the apprenticeship with pupil forum. We had a careers adviser on results day but it was a bit late for advice then.

Q174 **Chair:** What were they talking to you about on results day? Was it just trying to signpost you to something?

Hayley: Yes, they would look at our results and give us suggestions on where we could go. That was pretty much it.

Q175 **Chair:** How long did you have with them?

Hayley: We only had a couple of minutes because we had the whole hall full of the whole year group. We only had a couple of minutes because we had limited time.



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Q176 **Chair:** That is not the in-depth careers advice that you were wanting to get at that stage. Maddelin?

Maddelin: At secondary school I did not have much careers advice at all. We did some world of work days where we went to different places, but that was the only careers advice that we got. However, I went to the same college as Hollie and I had the same kind of experience there. We did mock interviews. We had loads of companies come to our hall and do little workshops and tell us all about the apprenticeships that they were offering and all sorts of stuff like that. Janice had every contact in the book. She got us in contact with loads of different apprenticeships, got us calls, got us interviews, and was very, very good.

Chair: Brilliant. You have decided to go down the university route.

Maddelin: Apprenticeship.

Chair: It is an apprenticeship. Sorry, it said London South Bank University. It is an apprenticeship that is supported by Skanska at that place.

Maddelin: Yes.

Chair: Fantastic. Did you meet them through the college?

Maddelin: Yes, we are sponsored by Skanska, so that is how I got in.

Chair: Very good. We will go around the room on this one and then we can a bit more freeform after that. Not everyone has to answer every question.

Mariam: My school was quite informal with how it did it. We did not have a set careers advice teacher, but we had something where, throughout secondary school, each half-term somebody would come in and talk about their career, how you can get into that and so on. However, I wouldn't necessarily say that I had a teacher that you can go to to speak to about careers—if you wanted to, and there was somebody you were comfortable with, but there was nobody employed in our school to do that.

In sixth form we had a character programme to learn about different routes you can take after GCSE and after A-levels. My school talked about all the different options but they do push more for university. That is an issue to a certain extent because for someone like me, for example, it has always been to go to uni. I had not been taught anything else until more recently. I do not feel like I could do any other route because it has always been ingrained in me to go to uni. Overall my school has helped but not directly to give any advice. It is more that if you want any help or advice, seek the help and they will help you in that manner.

Q177 **Chair:** You said that you have always been pushed towards university. Is that purely from school or is that from family as well and from your



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peers?

Mariam: It is a mixture of things but I would say that school plays a huge part in that. If you are seen as a very academic student, which is what they see me as, they will not expect me to do anything else but go to uni and get a good career. Therefore, that expectation has come from school as well. For me it is not an issue but for other people it is not always uni. They could do something else, but it is not talked about that much if you are quite academic in my school.

Chair: Where in London is your school?

Mariam: North London, the A10.

Harley: My school did have access to a careers adviser, which I think every school should have access to. Every student in my year was given at least a 30-minute meeting with the careers adviser, which I thought was good. We talked about further education and work experience and what we are thinking about doing in the future.

I think that the best form of careers education is work experience. That is where being from a small town in the north, there were not many opportunities for me. My careers adviser did introduce me to Teach First, which was virtual so that the geographical implications did not matter. However, if there was a push for big, London-based companies to do virtual work experience to get a broad base of students, that would benefit people from the north, from Wales or Scotland who cannot make it down there and don't know if they want to go into that line of work, because they could have a first-hand experience of it.

Q178 **Chair:** You said that you had half an hour with the careers adviser. Were they able to cover a good range of opportunities within that?

Harley: I went to about 50 minutes with my careers adviser because I had a lot of questions regarding where to go, so it was not a set, "You are only allowed half an hour." It was more of a minimum, which was good. It was just that work experience is not available where we are from as well, it fell short on careers education.

Holly: The opposite to what Hollie said—my secondary school was a less academic environment. We were more focused on apprenticeships and more labourers' jobs. There was not a massive push for people to go into A-levels, which can be detrimental to some, like myself, planning to go through the A-levels route. It was a push to go through apprenticeships, as it was probably a better option for a lot of my school.

Like Harley said, I had about 30 minutes with a careers adviser. Obviously I am from the north, as Harley is as well, and the work experience that I was offered was not at the same level as maybe people like Mariam from London. I was introduced to Teach First, which I have had an amazing experience with. They also allowed me to do work experience with GCHQ in the summer, which was amazing.



Q179 **Chair:** Down in Cheltenham?

Holly: No, it was in the brand new Manchester office. That has quite frankly opened my eyes to what I want to do in the future. But I think without the opportunity with Teach First, I wouldn't have that work experience.

Q180 **Chair:** That came through Teach First, that opportunity to go and work with them?

Holly: That came through Teach First, yes. Also, within my school, there was not that push to go for the Teach First. It was very briefly advertised. I took it upon myself to apply and go through that application process and I was lucky to get in. Again like Harley said, there was the virtual aspect of it: there was no travelling; it was not solely based in London. It opened many doors for me. Honestly, I don't think that there are enough opportunities for children up north.

Q181 **Chair:** Is there anyone else you spoke to about the Teach First opportunity? You said it was briefly advertised at your school. Did you go and discuss it with friends, with family, anyone else to say, "I'm thinking of doing this"?

Holly: Yes, I discussed it with my family. I shared how I thought that it would be an amazing opportunity for me and that was the opinion of my family as well. I took it upon myself to research Teach First and there was not much information available. I decided to look up the pupil forum, which I did not know was not a thing until we started it, but it is an amazing company and has opened my eyes to a lot of possibilities for my future.

Chair: That is great to hear. Ian, do you want to come in?

Q182 **Ian Mearns:** There are a number of things there and a range of experience, and a range of immersion in careers information and education advice and guidance. Some of it has been fairly shallow from that perspective. Did you ever have any concerns that the person you were talking to, while giving you advice, was talking to you from the perspective of the institution they were working in—the school or the college? Did you ever have any concerns about the impartiality or the independence of the advice that was being imparted to you?

The other big question is: do you think you would have benefited if you had had much earlier beginnings of careers information, advice and guidance before you were taking your options for GCSE?

Holly: My careers advice started in year 10. That was when we were first introduced to those 30-minute sessions. I also had the work experience with Teach First. However, throughout my early years in high school the pandemic was a big thing, but there was no careers advice going into taking the GCSE options. There was not a push, for example, "If you want to go into medicine, triple science is the option for you. If you want



to go into an engineering role, maybe computer design is an option for you”.

There was not that information. I know from experience with fellow students, they solely chose options that they favoured and it was more of, “I enjoy doing that subject so I’m going to do it”, which at GCSE you can afford to do. However, especially with colleges in my area getting a lot harder to get into, you want to be picking GCSEs that are going to support A-levels that are going to support degrees. That information was not there for me at the time of options.

Ian Mearns: I am thinking particularly about the young people here who have gone down an apprenticeship route. Would you have done something different at GCSE option level if you had been thinking about going on an apprenticeship route at that stage, like back in year 9 or year 8? Any thoughts?

Q183 **Chair:** It is an interesting question. Does anyone have any regrets about the GCSEs that they chose? Would anyone do anything differently in retrospect at this stage, or are you all happy with the choices you made?

Harley: I don’t do an apprenticeship but I have friends who do and they chose stereotypically academic subjects, thinking that that was the best way to go at GCSE when we picked them at year 9. However, a lot of them have gone on to do apprenticeships because they want experience and they want to earn from this point. They go and do engineering apprenticeships without even doing it at GCSE, and they definitely regret not going down a design technology route for at least one of the GCSE choices.

Chair: My predecessor as Chair would have felt strongly about that I know. He is a big fan of science and technology.

Q184 **Anna Firth:** This is really interesting and there is a variety of experience around the room. I would love you to tell me what you think would have been the ideal type of careers advice, if you were designing it from scratch—thinking about school now. We have heard about the college and Janice, and we must clone Janice because she has clearly been amazing.

Could you go back to thinking about school and tell me when you think some careers advice should have started, and in what form might that have been the most helpful? Would it have been the interview model, or would it be people coming into the school and giving you a series of presentations? If you were designing this from scratch, where would you start? I do not mind who kicks off on this one.

Maddelin: Considering the fact that we choose our subjects in year 9, it should start in year 9, even if they just do a day where each subject has a stand where they tell you where you could go with that subject. Like maths, for example—I had no clue what I could do with maths, which now I know as an engineer is very important. Back when I was doing my GCSEs, I thought, “I’m never going to use this stuff, I don’t really need to



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learn it". I would have had a completely different mindset if someone had told me back in year 9 that it could be used for all these different pathways.

Going into year 10 or 11 and doing work experience, we only had two days where we went to different places that were completely random. No one cared about where we were going.

Q185 **Chair:** Where did you go, out of interest?

Maddelin: I went to the Foreign Office here, and I also went and did an Army day with the military, which was incredibly fun, but I work on a construction site; it had absolutely nothing to do with the pathway I was taking, so definitely choosing more relevant places to go.

Q186 **Anna Firth:** Were those two work placements that you chose or were you directed towards them or were they all that was available? How did you end up with them?

Maddelin: We got a tick-box sheet where you could choose two places, but it was first come, first served, so if one of them was filled up they put you in a random place. The Foreign Office was just given to me. The Army place I thought would be pretty cool to go to.

Anna Firth: Who was "they"? You said they gave you a tick-box form.

Maddelin: My school. It probably was my head of year.

Q187 **Anna Firth:** Was there not a dedicated careers adviser at your school who was trying to steer people towards experiences that would be useful for them?

Maddelin: No.

Q188 **Anna Firth:** That is very interesting. The point about the careers advice having to be in place when you are choosing your options is a powerful one. Could someone else add to that and give us some more ideas?

Holly: Unlike Maddelin, I was not given any option to go and do placements or anything. We also had no school alumni come in or any people from businesses, which I think would have been so helpful, especially in year 9 when you are choosing your GCSEs. A lot of people had no idea what they wanted to do when they were older, and I do not blame them at all. I feel that if that education was in place, and people came in and said what their experiences were like in the workplace, people would have a bigger idea.

Obviously you hear about different careers but there are careers within careers, and that is something people do not understand until they experience a workplace. If that was made apparent to young people, they would probably have more of a straightforward time deciding what they want to do when they are older. That starts with careers education.

Q189 **Anna Firth:** How long do you think a careers placement needs to be?



Two weeks would be an enormous placement and would give someone a very good idea, but two days might be adequate and then you could do more placements. Where is the balance, do you think?

Holly: I did a week with GCHQ and it was at the end of summer term. That week was probably more than enough for me to get a grasp of the workplace. Within those five days I was able to experience different sectors of the company, I was able to look at the different jobs within GCHQ and, if that was for me, figure out what I wanted to do.

You could be given a list of different companies that you could go in and experience and trial. If you were given two days for three different companies, that is six days. If you were able to do that and they were varied in what they were, it would give people a bigger insight into what they could do. That then streamlines what they do at GCSE, A-level, and at degree level. It sets people on the right path.

Anna Firth: Does anyone want to add to that?

Hollie: What Holly said would be amazing for anyone in year 9 or 10. I did not get work experience when I was in year 10. We were told that if we were to do work experience, we had to find it and that it would be during our half-term break.

Q190 **Chair:** Were you given no support?

Hollie: Not really, no. It was a case of if you wanted to do it. Everyone took that as, "I'm not spending my half term—" so absolutely nobody did it at all. People were behind on learning and they could not afford to have that time off. If a lot of the people I went to school with got the opportunity to go to a company or to a business, they would have picked completely different options for their A-levels.

At my school the only people we heard about after they left were the people who went to the best colleges in the area. It was very much a biased environment.

Q191 **Anna Firth:** Can I ask you all whether you were told anything about degree apprenticeships and, if so, what?

Holly: I was not told about them during school at all. I didn't even know that they existed, but in college I was told about them quite a lot and I am currently on one. It is the best decision I have made. It is absolutely amazing and there needs to be way more publicity about it. It is a great route. I never thought that I would ever go to uni at all. I had my mind stuck on, "I'm not going to uni, I don't want to spend four years paying for my education when it doesn't guarantee me anything in the future". However, to have a company work with the Government and pay for it for me—I get the experience and I also get the degree, and it is going to launch me so much further in my career than I could have imagined.

Anna Firth: Does anyone else have any thoughts on degree apprenticeships? Do you know about them, where did you find out about



them and what do you think about them?

Maddelin: Yes, I am on a degree apprenticeship as well. I first heard about them in college. Especially doing an engineering diploma, it was all they talked about, because there are different levels. When they said, "You're doing a level 3 diploma, you can go straight to a level 6 degree", it was very much, "Oh, that's a really good option".

Mariam: I first heard about it probably not until year 12. I am year 13 now, so it was probably year 12 when I heard about them first. As I said earlier, it was not a big thing. We did a term and looked at it, so each half-term we did uni, degree levels, straight into work, but it was not a massive thing. You could sense in the class everyone was like, "Can we move on now? No one really wants to do this." It wasn't really a pushed thing in my school or anything like that. There was a stigma around it—not from my school, but in general as well where it is like, "It's not the same as going to uni." That is embedded within me or my friends. Even though you know that it is degree level, people still think, "Yes, but there is uni and that is more below it—for everyone to get into." Having that naturally within you is quite unfortunate because in reality that is not the case of anything that can push you further.

I had a friend who was speaking to our form tutor a couple of weeks again and he was pushing her against doing it. She wants to go into law and she said, "I might apply to do an apprenticeship, not too sure". He was more like, "No, I think you should go to uni instead". All my teachers went to uni, so for people in my school it is not like, "Someone over here went to do a degree apprenticeship; I can do it as well". All I have seen and been taught is, "You're going to uni, go to one of the top unis in the country", and that is it. Because I have grown up seeing that from all my teachers, that is all I know. Why would I then go and do something else, because literally that is what I have pretty much seen as role models?

Chair: Can I follow up on one thing that Maddelin was talking about with the maths? I totally agree with you that to have it made relevant is so important at that early stage. I visited one school some time ago where they had subject champions, and they had some of the children in the later years being put up as the subject champion to talk about the value of a particular subject with the ones who are making your choices. Did any of you ever come across anything like that at school? It is obviously not widespread. I thought it seemed like a good idea and like something people might be more prepared to engage with than perhaps advice from a teacher or someone coming in external. I was interested in whether that is something that could be helpful in this space.

Q192 **Ian Mearns:** Can you think back half a lifetime ago to when you were at primary school? When you were at primary school did anybody talk to you about different jobs and where you could be in the future? Did you have any experience like that in primary school? I know it is difficult to think back to then. Can you ever remember a teacher or somebody coming in from outside to talk to youngsters in the class about what is



happening in the world out there with regards to work and going on to education later in life?

Holly: It has been quite a while since we were all at primary school, and careers education has developed so much in last five or seven years within secondary schools, let alone primary schools. From what I can remember at primary school, there was never any careers education. There was never any advice on what children would want to do at GCSE and everything. It is quite a lot of pressure for children primary school. They are doing SATs at year 6 and everything, and it is still quite a big decision to be making. Not even a decision but a big thing to think about.

Q193 **Ian Mearns:** Does anybody remember having a conversation with teachers about what you want to do when you grow up, when you were in primary school?

Mariam: Yes, I think that it was typical, “When you’re older what do you want to be?” The answers you get are firefighter, midwife, doctor, lawyer, teacher.

Ian Mearns: That is not what they are like in Gateshead, I can tell you. I am a school governor in a primary school in Gateshead and it is amazing you did not get pop star, professional footballer or YouTube star. If you remember a primary school where people want to be midwives and lawyers, that is marvellous.

Mariam: I wanted to be a teacher through primary school, so that is what I am basing it off. My little sister is year 6 now and if you ask her age group, they all say midwife. They all want to be a midwife.

Ian Mearns: You have moved beyond, now you want to employ hundreds of thousands of teachers, I understand.

Mariam: Yes.

Ian Mearns: Does anyone else remember conversations like that in primary school—it would be tough to call it careers advice or education, but those discussions about getting youngsters to think about what they want to do later in life? Of course every youngster is perfectly entitled to change their mind at any stage based on their experience, but you are having a thought about what you might want to do and having something to work towards.

Q194 **Chair:** Did any of you ever have someone come in and talk about what they did after school who did not go to uni—an apprentice or somebody who went straight into work? No?

Hollie: I had about one, but it was a case of he did not go to uni and then eventually he did. It was very much that they all did go to uni or they went to uni later in life. That is the only advice that we got from that.

Q195 **Miriam Cates:** It is fascinating hearing your reflections. Thanks so much



for coming in today. I want to go back to the idea of work experience. What some of you seem to be saying is that while careers advice is good and should be better, work experience could have been transformational in your decision. When I was in year 10 we had two weeks at the end of work experience. Every year 10 did it—definitely across Sheffield, where I was at school. I do not know whether that was national. Either you arranged it yourself—you found one of your parents' friends who had a job that you were interested in and you arranged it yourself—or if you could not do that, the school would do it for you. That was just standard, but it is not standard at all now. In fact, I do not know any schools that do that. If you do get any, it is do it yourself or one or two days. Why do you think that has changed? Obviously you were not born in the 1990s. What do you think are the barriers to schools doing that now?

Maddelin: When I was in secondary school, the year above me did a world of work week where they found a placement and they went there for the whole week. They also did a workshop in the hall where we had fake money and stuff and they built up their own businesses and pretended to do all that. However, because of bad behaviour, that all got taken away from us, which is why we only got the two days. That is why ours changed.

Q196 **Miriam Cates:** The school did not trust the pupils to be sent out into the world of work?

Maddelin: Yes.

Miriam Cates: That is interesting. Any other reflections?

Hollie: I have a bunch of older brothers and I was very much looking forward to it in year 10 because I heard about all of them. I know that one of them went and worked at WHSmith for a week, which is not maybe what he wanted to do in the future but it still got him some work experience. I was very much looking forward to doing my work experience in year 10, because I knew that was standard. Then to be told that my school did not provide that at all anymore was a big shock.

Q197 **Miriam Cates:** What were the reasons they gave for that?

Hollie: It was a mixture of bad behaviour, people being behind in class so they could not afford to take time off because people needed to get prepared for GCSEs.

Chair: Was part of it pandemic-related?

Hollie: No.

Miriam Cates: It was prioritising GCSE grades—which of course are important but not the be all and end all—over that important experience.

Hollie: When covid hit it was just before my GCSE exams, so we did not even do them.

Q198 **Miriam Cates:** Of course, so you missed out for nothing. Any other



reflections?

Mariam: For me there are two things. First, when I was in year 10 covid hit, so taking that into account at all. Also my school was a fairly new school. I am the third year to go through the school. I saw it happen with the first year to go through, who are two years above me, but even for them it was not a set in stone thing. It was after their GCSE exams, and it was, "Okay, after you've left our school you can have a week, during the holidays, and do work experience". I think that the school helped them but it was that if you did not do it, it was your choice. It was not a school thing.

My older sister, for example, is 22 now, and when she was in year 10 she did that and it was very much a school thing at the time. For me, obviously there was covid but my school sees it as, "If you want to do it, you can do it". They see it as not their job to make sure you get experience. "If you want to go into a set career, go into it." In my school now, they tell you about stuff. Teach First, because I heard it from the school—it was, "Yes, there is this, look into it, apply to it" and that is pretty much it. They will share the opportunities but—

Miriam Cates: You do not get to go out and do it.

Mariam: Yes, it was, "Apply for it if you're going to get into it". If it was during term time, for example, that was fine, they would let you do it, but it was not school—

Miriam Cates: They will not help you arrange it or make sure that everybody does it.

Mariam: Yes, it is not an everybody thing. It was, "If you're so serious about it—"

Miriam Cates: If you are proactive and if you have support, then you can do it.

Mariam: Exactly. I have friends who have done absolutely nothing throughout sixth form, but other people who have done so many different things. It is dependent on the person and what you want to do for yourself.

Harley: One barrier for my school was the availability or willingness for local companies to take on students from schools around them. I am from a small town in the north, and we have a Greggs and a McDonald's. There are not very many hubs of respected professions that are pushed in school and the work experience is not available. The school does not have a network in Manchester or London of places that will take on students who want to do law or top medicine students and stuff like that.

Q199 **Miriam Cates:** Yes, but it doesn't matter in some ways what the work is. Working at WHSmith might not be a career that you want to go into, but you have to be on time, you have to be smart, you have to talk to



customers, you have to add up at the tills. Those are the kind of experiences where most places could find something, or was there nowhere near enough for the kids in your school?

Harley: Certainly not for the whole year. That is part of the reason they say you should do it on your own—so that only a selected few who are passionate about it will go and look for their own, because we cannot provide for the whole year.

A good way to combat the lack of availability for work experience is taking the emails or details of students who leave the school so that they can contact them years later, and ask them to come in and give a talk, or, “Wherever you work, is it willing to take on a group of five students?” or something like that.

Q200 Miriam Cates: Do you think that unless the Government said to schools, “You have to do two weeks or one week of experience in year 10”, it is not going to happen? How do you combat this behaviour issue, because obviously that is a real issue? Thinking about some of the kids that your school did not want to send out into the world, do you think they would have risen to the challenge or do you think that it would have been a disaster?

Ian Mearns: There is another aspect to that question, though, isn't there? It is all very well the Government saying to the schools that they have to find places, but do the Government not have a responsibility to try change the culture of business to be welcoming to young people to get work experience?

Miriam Cates: That is also true, but when I was at school the school built up a relationship with enough local businesses, the third sector and the public sector as well, that they knew each year would take another student. It would take years, but do you think that it would happen without, essentially, being forced to?

Hollie: I don't think so at all. I feel that within schools there has been a massive shift between providing and helping you get to your future destinations, and getting the good grades to make the school look good. There is a massive push that everybody has to do perfectly in their exams and that is all that the school talks about. I found that with my school and I found that a lot with people around me as well. It is a huge pressure put on us from year 7. It is constantly, “This is going to prepare you for your exams. Get ready for them.” Then because I did not even do them it was very much that I had wasted five years.

I got my grades, which was kind of handy to me, from what my teachers thought I would do. I know a lot of people who did badly. I did okay, I did quite well, but it was very much that there was massive pressure on you that you had to spend all of your time working towards these and there was nothing about your future places. It was all just getting those grades 7, 8 and 9 and that is it.



Q201 **Miriam Cates:** Any final reflections on work experience?

Mariam: I think that it depends on the school and the teachers that you have in your schools. Our school is great and I am not trying to hate on my school in any way, but I had a teacher tell me last week, "I'm only your teacher; I'm only your educator". To me it was, "Is that what you want to be seen as, that you're only a teacher?" Obviously that is what they are employed to be, but that comes with different jobs. They need to make sure that I am ready for the outside world. They should be making sure that school is a place where you feel comfortable and safe, and where you have that experience. For him to sit there and tell me—this was the vice-principal at my school—"We're only your teacher" then I know that, "You, as my teacher, don't care about anything else other than me getting you those A stars that you want me to get at A-level and go to the top uni". When I get an interview at Oxford or Cambridge, he will tell me, "Well done, well done", but why do you care so much what I am doing after school if you are only my teacher?

Other teachers in my school will really care and help me find something. If they have any friends, they will get you that link. My personal experience is that having a teacher involved, you have different experiences. I have great experience from the school, work experience, based on certain teachers, not the whole school system and the school policies. It is unfortunate that not everybody can have a great teacher who can help them through work experience.

Holly: To bring in another perspective, throughout my time in secondary school, my secondary school ran special measures for quite a long time. Whether that was detrimental to the amount of work experience that we were offered, I am unsure. Like Harley said, I am from a small town on the outskirts in Manchester. We do not have those links to companies. My mum works in a school in the same borough as me, and at that school all the boys—it is a boys' school—are encouraged to go and find work experience. It is mandatory, so a lot of the boys go to maybe their parents' workplace, maybe corner shops or to their primary school. However, it would not be work experience in a company or a business that the boys might want to strive to go into.

Like you were saying before, it is about that work routine, going into a workplace where you have to be there at a certain time and there are certain rules that you have to follow, almost like school but in a stricter environment. You are being paid and you have those consequences if you do not obey the rules. Even that sort of experience in a workplace in the adult world, as you probably like to call it, is not there for a lot of people.

Kids coming to the end of their time at secondary school, or even post college people not wanting to go to uni, it is a massive shock for people. They go into workplaces and do not understand the world of work. There should be a massive push for people to go and do work experience in big companies, big places—to have the highest aspirations when it comes to that—but even that experience of people having that work experience in



the world of work helps people so much to understand what they have to come to after education.

Q202 Anna Firth: We have talked a lot about teachers and their involvement in giving advice. Clearly that is very important. Having that Janice figure is probably the A1. However, what about other sources? With so much information being online and so many careers, surveys and tests that you can do online to see what sort of a person you are, psychometric tests, and so much information on social media, to what extent have you been able to gather good information online and at what sites? If not, it is useful for us to know that that is not a useful avenue. Did you need help to find the right places?

Holly: Forgive me, I don't know the name of it, but throughout my time in secondary school, my school invested in a website. I don't know if it was an app as well. You were able to put in your predicted grades, the sort of grades that you had or were expected to get, and you were able to look at different career paths. You could take different personality tests, different tests that would test what you would be like in a workplace, maybe if you are a visual learner or an audio learner. It was to gear you towards a career that may be suitable for you.

It also did it with unis as well. If you put in your A-level grades or your GCSE grades, it would streamline a subject that you favour but also that could potentially help a career. It was so helpful for me. I want to go into the civil service, working with the Government, and there is not that much education on it. I was not in the know about it until I did my work experience with GCHQ. However, going through that website and exploring the resources that I was given, thankfully, by my school, I was able to learn about it. I feel that it is so helpful for people, especially those who have not had the greatest careers education. They are able to do it themselves. With the investment from school, it was great.

Anna Firth: Did others in your school find it helpful as well?

Holly: Yes. We were given about an hour to go on it. It was mandatory. They made everyone sit down and create a log-in and go on it for an hour. We were encouraged to go and explore it to the greatest extent. Maybe for the people who did not understand it, teachers would go and sit with them, and maybe ask them in a more simple way, "What are the subjects that you like doing? This is where it could potentially take you, these are the different alternatives to university, different alternatives to A-levels as well." It was so helpful for a lot of people.

Anna Firth: Can you remember any of the words that would lead us to that website, or might someone else know about the website you are talking about?

Holly: It was a short word. I think that it began with an A but I am not too sure about it. It is widely used and widely available.

Anna Firth: Thank you. Can anyone else come in on this?



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Harley: I think that my school did the same website as Holly's school, where it asks us about our personality and our hobbies, and used the subjects you like to gauge where you might want to go on a career path. At the end it gave us a specific job role, which was great because it was a free resource for the school to give us an insight into what we might want to do.

However, it would have been better if my school had capitalised on that by grouping up corporate jobs and medical jobs that people were given and then looking for work experience, or someone to come in and talk about them, because at the end of it you were just given a role and you did not know what to do with it.

Anna Firth: That is interesting. It is a good tool but it is not a panacea.

Holly: I have to agree with that. A lot of people were given the options to do in the future—potential A-level courses, apprenticeships, potential degrees that they could go on to do—but after being given that option there was no guidance as to how to go about accessing these opportunities.

Ian Mearns: You knew what the what was, but not what the where was.

Holly: Exactly, yes.

Anna Firth: Does anybody else want to come in on online resources, social media, and other places to find information other than school and teachers?

Mariam: We use quite a few different websites in my school. One is Springpod. There is also Unifrog. Both of them are pretty much the same, trying to see what you can do, trying to find the different pathways. It was great, but my issue with stuff like that is that it is not really helping me; I do not see what I am meant to do with that information. You are telling me that I can do A, B, C, D, but who is helping me to get there? Where do I find out where A, B, C, D is? It is telling you A, B, C, D and not any routes to get there. That is the issue. There was also a different website. I think it was called Smart. Once again it can help to tell you, "What are you going to do at A-level? What can you do afterwards? what are the best ways?" The experiences that you can find on Springpod—there was a lot of work experience on that.

Yes, the same as some others have said: all the experiences and information they give you, it stops there. Then you are meant to think about what you can do with that yourself. Even last week the year 12s in our school were doing Unifrog, which helped them to figure out what they can do or how to get experience, but once you know what you can do, there is not much help to find the avenues for that.

It sounds quite bad, but something like TikTok, for example, gives you some sort of help. With TikTok you see different pathways and you think, "I didn't know that was a job. I didn't know that I can do that after I do



that." I did not know that I could do that, for example, or anything like that. Seeing case studies or real-life examples of people who are where you want to be, and did not do A-levels or did not do what they were meant to do at uni but are still there, can be really helpful. People tend to explain their personal pathway, which can help you because if you did not do the normal A-level and uni pathway, to see someone else's pathway can be quite helpful.

Q203 Anna Firth: Thank you. Does anyone else have any reflections on social media being used positively? It also occurs to me that it is a way in which you can link up with people who are outside your school and your area, but share you interests.

Holly: With social media for quite a while there has been quite a lot of stigma around not going to university, but one of the advantages of social media is it does open people's eyes to what people can do besides go to university. Obviously you have degree apprenticeships, which take that degree idea and make it a bit more hands on, but there are also so many different ways to go into those top companies. Throughout school it is hammered into you that university is the way to get those top jobs, if you want to go into that top career, but one advantage of social media definitely is that there is a lot of guidance on it not being the only way. Maybe if you are not the most gifted academic student who does not want to go to university, there are other ways. It is not really taught in schools as much as it is promoted on social media.

Q204 Ian Mearns: Two or three of you mentioned different websites that you had access to, but you have been guided towards them by the school and then left to your own devices. However, there is a website that the Government established called the National Careers Service website and a telephone helpline. Has anyone ever heard of that or used it? We had representatives of the National Careers Service in this very room only a couple of weeks ago and we were trying to find out how they spent £100 million a year, so that is an interesting insight from your answers today. Having said that, you are not necessarily representative of all young people out there, but the information that we have is that about 10% of youngsters over the age of 13 have accessed that website.

Can I come back to you, James? You said that you went down the apprenticeship route because your dad had done an apprenticeship. If your dad had not done an apprenticeship, how do you think that you would have got to where you are now?

James: When I went to see my careers teacher in the school, she told us about Seta, but if she had not told us about Seta I probably would have been in college. There was nothing in the schools that told us about things like engineering apprenticeships. It was teaching apprenticeships and apprenticeships in shops and places like that, but it was not engineering.

Ian Mearns: The apprenticeship route that you are on at the moment,



what level does it lead towards? Is it level 3 or level 4, do you know?

James: I think that it is level 4. At the moment I am on my first year, level 1, and then I go and do types of materials. There is a lot of maths involved in it as well. We do a couple of months of maths as well.

Q205 **Ian Mearns:** I know that you have followed this particular route because of advice that you got from your dad. Do you think that if you had your time again, you would have made different choices about the subjects that you took for GCSE?

James: Probably not. I took engineering for GCSE, but it was more design technology. It was called engineering but it was just design technology. I was in a year where we did not do much work experience because of covid. When I was in year 9, which was the beginning of GCSEs, after Christmas covid stopped everything. That is why I did not have any experience in the workplace.

Q206 **Ian Mearns:** Can I ask around the table as well? James has mentioned design and technology. How many young people in here had the option to take design and technology at school? It is a subject that has been disappearing from our curriculum. Did anybody have the option to do design and technology?

Hollie: I did.

Holly: There was the option there. I did not take it but there was definitely the option.

Harley: There was the option there, but from what I remember the subjects in design and technology were quite undersubscribed. There was the stigma that you should be doing the academic languages, maths, English, history and things like that.

Maddelin: I vaguely remember there being the option but I don't remember anyone who took it.

Q207 **Andrew Lewer:** The Chair referenced subject champions earlier on and I want to focus on a more obvious subject champion, which is the teacher of that subject. Do any of you recall the teacher in question relating what they taught—whether it was maths or design and technology or biology or whatever it was—to a career? Was there a chemistry lesson featuring some information about the careers that chemistry could lead to, for instance? Do you recall that happening or do you recall that not happening, and the subject not being related to a subject?

Holly: I took GCSE history and I had an amazing history teacher. We were given so many different ways that history involves itself in careers. I have mentioned a few times that I want to go into working for the Government. There were certain things that we did for GCSE history—the cold war, and America from the 1920s to the 1970s. The modern aspects of the history that we did—it involved itself with the politics of our time. He constantly related it to different careers that we could potentially go



into, and referenced it. It involved people more in the subject because they saw an understanding of it.

Maddelin said before with her time with maths at GCSE, that she never saw a point to it. A lot of people in my maths GCSE class used to say, "Algebra, when am I ever going to use this?" Until the teacher involves the subject with potential careers, people do not understand its benefit.

Andrew Lewer: Maddelin, that happened with maths. Did it happen with any of the other subjects that you can remember?

Maddelin: Not really. We did not have anyone who related their subject to a career. I remember when I was picking my results, back in year 9 I wanted to be a cosmetic engineer. I went up to my teacher and said, "I want to be a cosmetic engineer, what should I take?" She said, "You'll need chemistry so you'd have to do triple science but you don't have the grades to do it". I was like, "Oh, okay, let me just pick some random subjects, then, and hope for the best".

Andrew Lewer: That is a bit of a contrasting experience. What about you, Hayley?

Hayley: My teachers did not mention the career paths that we could go down with our subjects. They have only started mentioning it since A-levels. That is when they have started saying, "You can go down this path, you can go down that path". You had to ask what career paths you could go down. A lot of us with low grades would not want to ask because we know we would be put down because they would say, "You don't have the grades to go down that career".

Mariam: They did mention it in two different ways. For example, if we were learning something in maths, they would say, "This is how this embeds into all the different types of courses and careers". How do I explain it? For example, in a history lesson, they would say, "If you want to do this further, this is what this would look like and this is what this can be in a career". They also talked about their own career paths as well within a lesson. Within our school, across all the boards, it says, "This is where maths can take you, this is where history can take you".

You were surprised as well, because people always ask me, "What can you do with history?" What can you do? Politician, lawyer, historian. But in reality, if you can see what you can do, there are a lot of different pathways that you can take with just history. Walking around school and seeing that makes you feel better as well. People always judge you and think that you are narrowing down what you want to do. "Why didn't you do maths A-level?" I did not do maths A-level because that is what I want to do. People always ask, "Why did you do what you did because that will not get you anywhere and you will not get into the career you want to? What else can you do?" I think, "I can do so many other things that you don't think I can". There are things that I study now, and my uni degree that I want to do—there are lot of things that I can go into.



Andrew Lewer: James, what about you? Can you remember your teachers relating what they were teaching you to jobs and careers?

James: The only thing that they mentioned was teaching. Like, for maths, you can use it to be a maths teacher. My science teacher linked it to some jobs that you could get outside of school or education, but most of them just linked them back to being teachers because that was all that they had done.

Hollie: I did not have any of that in secondary school. It was not linked to anything. However, in my college I did A-level maths, and every single topic that we did my teacher made sure to spend a lesson on, "This is where this maths is used". She applied it to real-life scenarios. One day we came in and we were doing trigonometry or something like that, or trigonometric identities or something, and the starter would be like a crime scene and they would do the blood splatter by using trigonometry and triangles, something like that. It was like I never thought ever someone examining a crime scene would ever have to use trigonometry or maths or anything like that. That was really good because it opened a lot of people's eyes to, "Yes, I chose maths but I don't have to be a mathematician".

Andrew Lewer: That is a good example.

Ian Mearns: You had Janice and an inspirational teacher.

Andrew Lewer: That is a very good example.

Harley: In subjects like geography and history it was good because my teachers related a location to our country to familiarise it, or a time period to a modern time to get it into our brains. I think it is important to do that in core subjects that students are forced to take—that are mandatory—because it will help them get on board with the subject more when they realise where this learning is taking them.

Q208 **Andrew Lewer:** There is an argument for taking a subject just for the enjoyment and enrichment of the subject itself. Do you remember anybody relating that the indirect skills of a subject, say, enable you to think or be creative—those more general senses—as well as just, "If you do this it gives you a qualification and means you can do that?"

Harley: The only careers advice we got when choosing our GCSE subjects—say, history allows you to analyse things and that can take you to a certain point in life—were not a direct link to careers but more the skill a subject endows you with, which I think is quite helpful to know.

Holly: If I remember correctly, at year 9 in my school we had a push on great lives, which is life education if you will. What was really interesting was that we were given a starter every lesson, whether that be core or geography, history and that sort of thing. We would have the date and that stuff, and then underneath it we had—I can't remember exactly what they titled it—skills that the lesson would involve that would help you in a



workplace environment; for example, in history the analysis part. It allowed people to understand what skills they would gain from the lesson, and how they could develop them and apply them to a workplace environment.

It was really interesting for us to understand it. It was metacognitive learning in a sense—learning how we learn. I think it helped a lot of people understand why lessons are planned in a certain way, to help us learn.

Andrew Lewer: I have just learnt something myself.

Chair: I would say as a historian, it is very cheering to hear how well marketed history is. It is slightly concerning that we do not seem to have heard much about STEM subjects in general. Maddelin's point about maths was very well made. I would have thought, though, that we would have heard more about the promotion of STEM, because that has been such a huge push over the last few years, but it has not been as visible to you. That in itself I find interesting.

Q209 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** If you were to design a careers service, how would you do it? What age would you start it?

Ian Mearns: There are no wrong answers here.

Holly: I would probably start it a year before people take GCSE options. I know some schools take GCSE options in about year 9 or potentially year 10—my school took them at year 9—so maybe the middle of year 8 or the whole of year 8 have a big push on how subjects lead to certain careers. I think what would have helped a lot of people who went to my school would have been, say, a designed set of four subjects you could take and how they might be able to influence a career.

For example, if you wanted to go down the medicine or pharmaceutical route, you needed triple science—I don't even know what other subjects you would take for that to be fair—but maybe a set of four that would push you towards that instead of being given an overwhelming 15 subjects and asking, "What four do I pick? What four are the most geared towards me?"

I think that it is all well and good being advised, "Do what makes you happy, do what is favourable to you" but at the end of the day these qualifications are going to help you to get a career. It is not just going to appease you for two years of your education. Do you know what I mean? I think that would be a really good idea—almost a pre-pack. I don't know if that makes sense.

Mrs Flick Drummond: Are you talking about year 8?

Holly: Definitely year 8. I think it would get people from an earlier age thinking about it—obviously not crucial decisions that are going to change your life and keep it that way forever, but definitely start stimulating ideas about what they want to do when they are older and how that affects A-levels and degrees and so on.



Mrs Flick Drummond: Any other ideas to build on that?

Mariam: I think it should be in order, in the sense that when you are doing it in year 8, year 9, let's say, to start with, "What can you study to be a lawyer?" for example—starting to open their eyes. Then working backwards now, "what can I pick at GCSE?" Then by the time you get to year 10 and year 11, it should be more about whether you want to go into this career or do this course—"How can I do that?"

In my school, before covid, but we had a lot of advice just hit at us in year 7 and year 8. To me, in year 7, that meant absolutely nothing. I had no interest. I did not really care about what I was going to do. I mean, I cared but it wasn't really important, necessarily, to think about what I was going to do when I was 18 when I had only just turned 11. If we start with the younger kids, we should make it engaging and relevant to them. "Okay, so you enjoy doing this; this is what you should be doing more of" and maybe do extracurricular activities you can do that relate to that, or think about what you should be engaging in more and then picking options for GCSE.

I think everyone can agree about being told, "Pick what you want; pick what you enjoy". That is great; I did that and it worked out well. But for some people, for example, being told, "Pick what you would enjoy" might not pick—I don't know what you wouldn't pick—history, for example, but then they might want to go into law, and they might find it a bit difficult and might think they were at a bit of a disadvantage now. Someone telling you, "If you want to do this, I would advise you to pick this" is beneficial. Then before you pick your A-levels, once again there could be a whole new set of ideas and careers education if you must. A lot of my friends just said, "I want to pick maths" for example, because it can get you anywhere, but then when they started picking their uni courses it's like, "Oh, that can't get me where I want to be"—for example, because they needed physics for that.

If you had more of not pressure, but— Everybody is told, "Don't worry about it; decide what you want to do later" but now they are applying to uni and picking a course. But in year 11, you told me, "Think about it later". What if I make the wrong choice? What if I started year 12 with three A-levels in what I enjoy, and now I am in year 13 and applying to uni and these subjects are not going to get me to my degree? I think it would be good to have a step in between when you want to think about your career and what course you want to do, and then your A-levels, if that makes sense—working backwards in a way.

Mrs Flick Drummond: As you say, you might not know when you are in year 8 what you want to do, but the options should be made much clearer to you and what they going to mean later on.

Mariam: Yes.

Q210 **Ian Mearns:** Would I be right in thinking, Mariam, that you would rather have an ongoing process through all your school life where you can go back and talk to people, and have people talk to you about the



possibilities?

Mariam: Yes, because for me, I had a lot of that in year 7 and year 8, and maybe year 9. Covid hit in year 10 so that can be a factor as well but I don't think in the whole of year 11 or even in year 12, I had any sort of conversation. It was more like, "You pick what you want to do. Any questions, ask your teacher who might be able to help you about that subject". It was more seen as individually, "I want to do history at A-level because I liked it at GCSE", rather than putting the pieces together and thinking, "Will all this together help me get to my future career?", if that makes sense.

Ian Mearns: Yes. Thank you.

Mrs Flick Drummond: Any other views?

Hollie: I feel there needs to be a big push for companies, or something like that, to go into schools in year 9 because when I was in year 9, I had no idea what I wanted to be or do so I ended up picking GCSEs that I found fun and that I liked, because I wasn't going to pick a boring one or I wouldn't pay attention. I think there should be a much bigger push. I work at Thames Water and I have been back to my college—my college goes from year 9 to year 13—as a mentor. I sat with year 9s and I told them what I chose for my GCSEs. I said, "I did this for A-level; this is where I've got and this is my plan" because I have gone the apprenticeship route. I had a person with me who went the uni route. It showed the year 9s that with what subjects they pick they can do much more than just uni or they can do much more than just an apprenticeship. I think it should be very much a widespread thing. We had quite a few companies there and it allows them to have a conversation with somebody in a company—with someone who actually works, not in a school.

Chair: You have been back to your college. Would you go back to your school if it invited you?

Hollie: I think I would, yes.

Chair: That is where we need it, from what you were saying earlier.

Hollie: Yes, I think if I was asked, I definitely would because I want to help people get what I didn't get. I know how it affected me that I didn't have that, so being able to provide it would be a great opportunity.

Q211 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** Some independent schools use their alumni and drag them in all the time. Every school should be doing that, shouldn't they?

Should there be more careers information support outside school too or should it be concentrated in school?

Holly: From one perspective, I do think people often go to school for guidance more than they would do it independently. My school is not overly academic. We are not filled with people who want to go to top



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universities, but I do think people do go to schools for the support. School is that centre point. For instance, if I wanted to choose a career in medicine, I would go to my teachers and staff, and ask, "How do I go about doing this?" as opposed to maybe seeking it independently.

I don't think a lot of people do it independently. It may be they don't have the time or the motivation. I think if there was more of an encouragement to do it independently, people would take it upon themselves to do it, but at the moment, from how I see it, people do go to schools or colleges. They go to get that information so I think if it was given more in schools and colleges, it would be received a lot better.

Mrs Flick Drummond: Anything else to add on designing a careers service? No? Thank you.

Q212 **Chair:** To wrap up the session, it has been very helpful for all of us to hear from you and get the variety of experiences, but one thing in common that you all agree on is that advice could be improved in schools and that is why we are doing this inquiry.

Is there anything we have not asked you that we should have done? Anything else that any of you around the table would like to say, or do you have any questions for us before we wrap up? I don't see a forest of hands.

Holly: I have always found it interesting that there is that north-south divide in the UK; we wish there wasn't but there is. Does anybody have an explanation as to maybe why people in London have more opportunities with careers education and workplaces compared with people in, say, Manchester? We are not on the same scale city-wise, we are not the capital city, but we do have those sorts of businesses. We have this thriving city. Why aren't those sorts of things given to us equally?

Chair: That is an interesting question. Perhaps our northern MPs might want to pipe in on this one.

One thing that was done many years ago was a big thing called the London Challenge, which encouraged businesses to get engaged with schools in a way they had not always been before, and that helped to create an ecosystem in which there was that engagement going on. I have always taken the view that we ought to learn the lessons from that and apply them around the rest of the country.

My constituency is neither in the north nor the south; it is in the midlands. I definitely always look at those examples and think about how we could do that—how we could learn from what has been done very successfully in London with the integration of the private sector working with schools, working with that set-up, and apply it in the rest of the country. Part of it is around that, but part of it is more challenging with geography. When you have a big city where everything is interlinked and the public transport makes it easy to get around—yes, in the city of Manchester that is relatively easy, but once you get to the small towns on



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the outside it is that much more challenging to get businesses to come along and engage.

As a Select Committee that looks at the whole country, we have to think about rural communities and people who are even further away from urban centres and how we can link them in. There is never a one-size-fits-all solution, but I think levelling up, breaking down those divides and making sure that there is support for those areas that have perhaps sometimes felt left behind or more remote is an important part of what we need to do.

Miriam Cates, do you want to come in on that as well?

Miriam Cates: Yes. I am a northern MP—from Sheffield, so not too far from Holly. I agree with what the Chair said but I think it is not so much a north-south divide—although I do think that exists—but it is more of a London-everywhere else divide. If you live in Cornwall or in a coastal town in East Anglia, you would have exactly the same thing.

There are two things. Part of it is population density—that is just a factor of how much you can access—but we are an incredibly regionally divided country compared with almost every other country in the world, with so much wealth and productivity in London and the south-east compared with everywhere else. That is the challenge. Even when there are businesses in the north, they don't necessarily have the same attitude about investment and hiring because they don't have the same infrastructure. That is at the heart of the levelling up agenda, to spread the opportunities. You are right, there is a divide.

Q213 Ian Mearns: I come from the proper north. James and I live 60 miles from the Scottish border and if I get to Sheffield, Miriam, I think I am halfway to London. It is a different neck of the woods. The economic base that provides the context is rightly important. I will bore people on the Committee but the economic base in the north-east of England is very different from London and the south-east. So many large corporations are headquartered in London and the south-east, and therefore provide a range of employment opportunities and also, because they have those headquarters there, they have the decision-makers who can engage their companies in education in the wider context in that locality.

In the north-east of England, for instance, which is a region of 2.5 million to 2.6 million people between Yorkshire and the Scottish border, there are only 1,000 companies with more than 50 employees. That is the difference. Yet on an economic base, okay there are some massive employers there—Nissan, for instance, in Sunderland is a massive employer with a huge supply chain—but a huge part of our employment base is in small and medium-sized enterprises, and finding the capacity within those companies to engage themselves in things like work experience is difficult.

Also, by the way, there is a different culture about companies not engaging themselves in the process of training their own future workforce



and I think that is vital.

It is very different and geographically more disparate. I will disagree with Miriam about one thing; it is not just London, but London and its immediate hinterland—the home counties in particular.

Chair: Hayley, I saw you indicating that you wanted to come in.

Hayley: I do have a question, which does go off topic a little. The grading system of 1 to 9 is obviously different from how employers up to now would have had the A, B, C. Linking to young people ourselves having limited experience, from what I have heard, not all employers understand the new grading system. For example, they might think a grade 1 is an A* because it has been flipped around, and they might think a 9 is a D or E or something like that. I don't know how to word this. How are you making it in a way that all employers understand? To some extent, it could set us up to be able to be employed.

Chair: That is a good question. I think it is one of those things, like all these things where there is pressure from employers saying, "You need to change the rating system" where inevitably, as and when you do that, there will be those who don't necessarily follow it and don't understand it. When I was at school we moved from O-levels to GCSEs and some people did not understand the difference that made and what the shape was, and with CSEs as well. Any time you make a change in a system, you will have a bit of a catch-up period. I think it is very important for Government and schools to be out there communicating about it.

Part of it, though, is having that relationship with the employers. If you get the businesses talking to the schools regularly, you are less likely to have those misunderstandings. Part of what we are looking at here is how to foster those relationships and allow that to become a constant dialogue, so that all employers ought to be thinking about what is going on in the school system and what the changes are so that they have those answers. It is a challenge. Any time you make a change to a system, there will always be some level of disengagement, people needing to catch up and people needing to have it explained. It is one of the things that the Government have to think carefully about before they take any decision such as moving to that numerical system.

There are some advantages in having a wider stretch of grades and I think we had got to a place with the A, B, C, D, E where there was a very clear C/D boundary in what people thought of as a pass/fail. I know some of the rationale and some of the thinking in Government was to say there should not be such a clear pass/fail mark, but we ought to be allowing for a greater range of outcomes for people and not having such a clear line. I think it is really important to bring business with you and clearly that is a work in progress from what you are saying.

Andrew Lewer, I know you want to come in.

Andrew Lewer: Yes. There is just a slight hint of cynicism in me in thinking that if you grade a thing from 1 to 9 and 9 is the top, people will



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always have an infinite capacity to add up the grades; it tends to happen.

A broader point is that there is a temptation in politics always to introduce new things and whizzo things, and Ministers can stand up and say, “We are doing an exciting new thing” rather than making sure that the things you have either work or are properly understood. It is a useful reminder to us as politicians constantly wanting to do the new thing because it makes us look good and innovative that making things work and be properly embedded is more important for people day to day.

Mrs Flick Drummond: Very cynical, Andrew, I have to say.

Ian Mearns: It is interesting, though. Andrew has mentioned grade inflation and I think that is something that we wrestle with and young people themselves become the victims of the debate about grade inflation. We are being told that grade inflation is going on in the system and yet, at the same time, we have Ministers standing at the despatch box telling us that a larger proportion of our youngsters are being educated in good and outstanding schools than we have ever had before. If you have a large proportion of your school pupil population in good and outstanding schools, why would the number of youngsters getting good grades not go up? I don’t understand the problem with that.

Chair: Thank you for that statement. Come back, Holly.

Holly: Going back to what I said before, and talking about the difference between northern and southern parts of the country, I do understand that it is a geographical thing that more companies are based in London and companies probably have more access to go into London schools, but as specialist MPs in education, do you think there could be some sort of funding put into place for maybe virtual opportunities for schools around the country—making sure you are going into those rural areas, giving every student across the country the same opportunity and the same options to look at these different companies? Teach First was virtual and was made accessible to everyone. Obviously there was an application process and only a certain number got through, but it was available for everyone.

Chair: It is a good challenge. We all saw during the pandemic that sometimes virtual engagement is not the same as face-to-face, proper engagement but if you don’t have the opportunity otherwise to meet these companies—

The other thing is the responsibility on the Government here. One of the challenges of geography and one of the things that I know is a priority is to look at how we share the investment that Government makes in the public sector workforce and the civil service in particular around the country.

The Department for Education has a number of sites around the country, including in the north-east, and that is quite important. Before I was on this Committee, I was a Minister at the Department for Education for a



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period. While I was there we spent a lot of time on Zoom calls to people in Darlington or other offices to communicate with the civil servants in the Department. The interesting challenge, though, is how to make sure that decision-makers and the senior people are spread around the country so that they can make a difference.

It is quite easy to relocate bits of a Department. As you were saying before the session started here, you were being offered work at the DWP office down the road but it probably was not where the senior civil servants were. Government needs constantly to think about these things and about how to invest in different parts of the country.

You have talked about the benefits of having good careers websites and the benefit you saw through Teach First being provided virtually. That is something for the Committee to take into account—that support for employers engaging more widely.

Ian Mearns: I am wondering, because Holly and Harley both had a similar experience with the website, if that was provided by Teach First. I don't know.

Holly: Do you mean the website within schools and colleges?

Ian Mearns: Right.

Holly: No, as far as I am aware, it was not. But just to follow up what I was saying before, I found it interesting that as a follow-up from the pupil forum I was emailed by Teach First. I was given quite a few follow-up work experiences, one of them being GCHQ. I found it very interesting. There were a number of placements, only one being offered to anyone outside of the London area. I was quite lucky for it to be in Manchester, and that was GCHQ. Obviously they have offices in Cheltenham, Manchester and London, but even so, I feel like Teach First made that new thing of having virtual online work experience. At the same time, however, why aren't companies being encouraged by the Government to have these virtual experiences for children?

One thing about going into the workplace I was speaking about before is that you are being on time, you are being punctual, and you are being taught that sort of ethic of a workplace. But people who don't have the opportunity to do that do not have the opportunity for a virtual one, so you are losing out on two very big opportunities there. I don't think it is very fair for children outside the London area, that they are not being given those same opportunities, whether it be in person or virtual.

Chair: That is a very fair point and certainly something we will take on board as part of our evidence.

Thank you all. Thank you for some very interesting contributions. It has been a very useful session and the sort of thing we should perhaps be thinking about doing more often as a Committee—getting the young people for whom we are responsible to scrutinise things in front of us and give us evidence. Thank you, Charlotte, for the work that has gone into



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setting this up and thank you to Teach First.