



Youth Unemployment Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Youth Unemployment

Thursday 26 May 2021

10.15 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord Shipley (The Chair); Lord Baker of Dorking; Lord Clarke of Nottingham; Lord Davies of Oldham; Lord Empey; Lord Hall of Birkenhead; Lord Layard; Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall; Baroness Newlove; Lord Storey; Lord Woolley of Woodford.

Evidence Session No. 10

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 99 - 109

Witnesses

I: Phil Avery, Director of Education, Bohunt Multi-Academy Trust, Hampshire; Tom Richmond, Founder and Director, EDSK; Andy Sprakes, Co-founder and Chief Academic Officer, XP School, Doncaster.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witnesses

Phil Avery, Tom Richmond and Andy Sprakes.

Q99 The Chair: Welcome to this evidence session of the Youth Unemployment Committee. The meeting is being broadcast live via the parliamentary website. A transcript of the meeting will be taken and published on the committee website, and you will have the opportunity to make corrections to that transcript where necessary.

Could I welcome our three witnesses today—Phil Avery, Tom Richmond and Andy Sprakes—and say thank you very much on behalf of the committee for joining us this morning to give us your advice? Could I ask each of you, in alphabetical order, to say a word or two about yourselves?

Phil Avery: Good morning. I am director of education for Bohunt Education Trust. Bohunt is a multi-academy trust of seven secondary schools and one all-through school, the all-through school being a free school, with a little over 11,000 students at this time.

Tom Richmond: Good morning. I am the director of the EDSK think tank. We conduct research on schools, colleges, apprenticeships, universities and many other education skills issues. By background, I am a former teacher and a former adviser to Ministers at the Department for Education.

Andy Sprakes: Good morning, everybody. I am the co-founder, head teacher and chief academic officer of XP Trust up in Doncaster. I am really glad to be here.

Q100 The Chair: Thank you. Welcome to you all. We have apologies from the Lord Bishop of Derby. Baroness Clark has applied for and secured leave of absence from the House and will not be taking part in any further meetings of the committee. I understand that a replacement to join this committee is being sought for her.

I would like to ask each of you what you see as the key barriers to delivering a secondary education that properly equips young people for the future, both from the perspectives of educational providers and that of your students.

Phil Avery: The major barrier is that our education system is too narrowly focused on subject domain knowledge and skills, and the assessment that goes alongside that, which allows our students to be reduced to a series of numbers. We are missing so much due to the narrowness of our system. I am not arguing that the system of academic subject domain qualifications should not be there but that it should not take up all the space in the system.

There is an overpowering burden of top-down accountability. I compared our national curriculum for science, which is 22 pages long, with New Zealand's national curriculum for science, which is one and a half pages long. You could add our specification through the exam boards on top of our 22 pages. Our assessment systems are almost entirely exam based

at GCSE, other than BTECs and the vocational qualifications. They only really test memorisation and low-level application.

More broadly, Knud Illeris, a Danish researcher, talks about content, relationships and motivation, and yet our entire system is set up around content. We could bring so many more young people into our education system in an excited and motivated way, and get better results in the core, if we were to focus more on motivation and more on relationships.

In closing on this question, I would say that our knowledge of learning, the needs of our economy and society, and technology, have all moved on, and yet our education system has not. I think we are missing the opportunity to strengthen our subject domain core by not looking at other areas.

The Chair: Phil, thank you. I will come back to you in a minute to take up two or three things that you have said, but let us have an initial response from Tom, please.

Tom Richmond: The EDSK think tank has just completed a major project on the future of secondary education. To us, the biggest barrier that we identified to having a really high performing secondary education system was the fact that the education sector simply does not agree on what a secondary education should look like and what role it should perform.

Some examples would be the fact that key stage 3 has traditionally been from ages 11 to 14, but some academy schools have now decided to shorten that from three years to two years to make more room for GCSEs. They are perfectly entitled to do that according to the rules, but Ofsted has pushed back very strongly and said it is not happy with that, and the Government have said very little. We are not really sure what key stage 3 is supposed to do any more.

We do not agree collectively on whether pupils should be allowed to move schools at age 14—something I am sure Lord Baker will have some very interesting views on. Some schools and colleges recruit pupils at age 14, but a lot of other schools and local authorities do not necessarily agree with that, so you have a very incoherent and disjointed system.

Going back to what Phil said, we do not agree on whether we need assessment at age 16 and, even if we did agree on that, what form it should take and what role it should serve. Our assessment and accountability system still acts as though secondary education finishes at age 16, when the participation age is now 18.

My greatest fear in terms of the barriers that we have at the moment is that, if we do not collectively agree on what each part of our secondary education system is there to do, we will simply never get the best out of our schools and colleges, and ultimately we think that young people will be the biggest losers from that.

The Chair: Andy?

Andy Sprakes: Building on Phil and Tom's points, for me up here in Doncaster and with my students, the outcomes-driven, exam-obsessed

system that we have narrows the focus that we need to develop further with regard to skills and knowledge in a much more holistic sense. That is a key challenge for us.

It does not exist just in schools. We have done some work recently with two universities. One university recently got in touch with me because it wanted to look at the way that we develop character in our students. It is finding that undergraduates are purely focused on assessment and not on developing the skills that they require to be successful in the workplace and the modern world. They are missing huge chunks of lectures just so that they can get through their assessments.

We need to look at that, root and branch. I agree that there are often these false dichotomies in education, in the UK in particular, in that it has to be a knowledge-rich curriculum and nothing else, or it has to be purely skills. That is just nonsense. It is the “genius of the AND”, isn’t it? I completely agree that we need to focus on really good models that are working, and share those systemically.

Q101 **The Chair:** Thank you very much. Phil, I said I would come back to you, but, both Tom and Andy, I am quite keen for you to respond to the question I will pose, and then I will hand over to Lord Clarke of Nottingham.

Phil, you said we are effectively testing memory and low-level application. Tom and Andy have made other statements in relation to everything being outcomes driven. I would like to know what skills you are developing and what skills are missing that we should be looking for when we come to do our report.

Phil Avery: We are developing, and I would argue there is definitely a place for this within the curriculum within our system, student subject domain schema. We are plugging an awful lot of knowledge into that schema that gives them a grounding in those subjects. If they then follow those subjects, we have given them the basis to go on and be successful, but we are doing that to the exclusion of so much else. The sorts of things that we are excluding are things like really deep thinking, interdisciplinary learning and the ability to apply knowledge to real-world context. Dispositions such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity are very much missing from the curriculum, albeit not necessarily from schools, because we are working on this around the sides.

There is also something about our society and our empathy. I asked one of my sixth-formers I teach to write a blog on her reflections as she is leaving us this year. She talked about the need for empathy and how things changed once she arrived in the sixth form, where she had the space and time in the curriculum for wider reading and following her own interests, which had built empathy and understanding. She wished she could have had more of what she has had at sixth form—that space and time to follow her own interests—in the lower school. She felt that so many students had missed that and had become disengaged with education and with their society and the global society. She could have had so much more if there was more space for that.

The Chair: Thank you. Tom, do you want to add anything?

Tom Richmond: Yes. Phil raises some really interesting questions, but his points raise some further questions. If you agree that those are the right things to be teaching in secondary education, there is then the question at what ages you should be teaching those and how you should be teaching them. There is also a much thornier question of whether they should be assessed. This goes right back to the point I made that, if we do not agree what the purpose of secondary education is and what the different parts of it are supposed to do, it gets very hard to make decisions. Are we just going to assume that something like critical thinking is being taught, or do we have to somehow assess to make sure that critical thinking is being taught?

That is where the interaction between our assessment and our accountability system, which Phil and Andy have both rightly alluded to, becomes so critical, because there is the question of what we want schools and colleges to do. However, there is a separate question: whether we want to follow up and check that it is happening. That raises all sorts of questions about performance tables, Ofsted, government Ministers and school autonomy, more broadly. It is a fascinating and very deep-seated set of questions.

The Chair: Andy, you talked about outcomes-driven systems. Do you want to say more about what you are teaching?

Andy Sprakes: Absolutely. We have done a lot of work up here at XP on simplifying things as much as we can, because these are complex issues. We have a three-dimensional approach at our school where we get our all kids to create really beautiful work, and through doing that they grow their character. That is really important. We want great citizens in our country and in our world. Therefore, we have a responsibility as educators to develop those types of skills through creating beautiful work that is really purposeful, which has meaning and social agency, impacts on their immediate community, and, beyond that, brings with it academic success.

We are seeing really great returns from kids doing their GCSEs. Do I think they are the best way to assess students? No, I do not. But there are approaches out there. I want kids to be the best versions of themselves and I want them to contribute positively to society. That is why I became involved in education 30 years ago. I want them to be able to grapple with, question, resist conformity and provide solutions to the problems that our planet is facing. We can do that only by taking a holistic look at what we are doing. I totally agree with that.

The Chair: Thank you. Let us move then to Lord Clarke.

Q102 **Lord Clarke of Nottingham:** It is very interesting. As I understand it, you are not suggesting that we should reduce the basic content of the national curriculum; you are talking about how it is taught and what actually surrounds it. Do you accept that to be a citizen in the modern world you need to acquire at school some basic skills in maths and English, some basic knowledge of history, geography and preferably a

modern language, and that that core curriculum is quite successfully navigated by a very high proportion of pupils—particularly the most academically able ones, who go rather smoothly through it?

You are not suggesting that education does not have at its heart the acquisition of knowledge and the acquisition of really essential skills such as mathematical and English skills, and some scientific skills as well. I do not think that moving to a vague notion of life skills, which, of course, people also require and carry on acquiring throughout their lives, should somehow oust the basic content that people expect to acquire from education. Is that the case? Tom, you are one of the more radical people. Do you challenge that?

Tom Richmond: Not at all. My background is in teaching A-level psychology. I did a psychology degree myself. There is very strong evidence from the world of cognitive science that you need to give pupils a very strong grounding in knowledge so that they can use that to build up their own skills. We talk about critical thinking and problem solving, but you can be a fantastic problem solver and critical thinker only if you have the necessary knowledge on which to grow those particular skills.

Some of us seem to be agreeing that both knowledge and skills are important, but it would be hard for me to argue based on the research evidence that we have seen that it should be skills before knowledge. Surely, it has to be knowledge, on top of which you then build those skills.

Lord Clarke of Nottingham: I accept that. Phil and Andy, do you want to add anything to that? Do you think you can be more radical?

Phil Avery: Would I argue that we throw out knowledge? Absolutely not; I agree.

Lord Clarke of Nottingham: Or reduce the quantity of it.

Phil Avery: Right. So in terms of reducing—

Lord Clarke of Nottingham: You sound as though you need to know a little less about history and a little less about geography, and perhaps you do not need to bother with a foreign language.

Phil Avery: There are two things there. Number one, it is who decides on that knowledge. At the moment, in some areas, we have far too much knowledge that is prescribed from top down, from either the national curriculum or an exam specification. New Zealand, which I mentioned earlier, put an awful lot of weight in its national document on how schools should design the curriculum to meet the needs of its children, which is knowledge rich and skills rich. There are some interesting examples in this country of where we are trying to do that very well. The Morecambe Bay curriculum is a very exciting opportunity for a locally based curriculum.

Do I think we should reduce the national expectations of knowledge? In some areas, such as science and history, there is wide inconsistency in the national curriculum between the level of specification of what needs to be taught. Geography and history are very different, certainly in the

national curriculum at key stage 3. Would I argue for a reduction of knowledge? Yes, in areas where they are nationally prescribed, because I think we need them to be more locally based. In some areas, I may actually argue for a reduction in content to allow more space for some of those other types of learning.

A teacher approached me the other day—this was an actual conversation—and said, “If I know my students have not understood a concept, if I pause and make sure they understand the critical concepts in science but don’t cover all the curriculum that I have been set, will Ofsted look badly upon me?”

Basically, do I just teach everything, which will better with Ofsted better than making sure that my students have understood critical concepts? That is the time pressure that they are under in science. To get through everything requires them to teach at pace, in some cases regardless of whether students have understood key concepts. My answer was very much that you make sure that students know for the long term and for application widely the key concepts in science.

Lord Clarke of Nottingham: Moving on from that, do you accept that the pupils themselves, and those who are contemplating employing them, offering them apprenticeships and so on, need some objective measure of how far they have successfully attained the necessary benefits of education, and how able they are?

It may be that more people will leave school at 16 in the future and go into apprenticeships, FE and more technical-based courses if that is their aptitude, which we all want to develop and give equal status. However, for years, GCSEs, and O-levels before that, provided people who left school at 16 with a way to tell the outside world and the pupil what standards of attainment that particular pupil has reached.

Last summer’s events showed that the only way of measuring what is acceptable to the public, parents and pupils is an examination. There was all the fuss about algorithms, teacher assessment and all the rest of it. There are still teachers being sued by disappointed parents for the grades they gave. People may be enraged or disappointed by their examination results. They may appeal the exam, but the world accepts that as an objective attainment of where you have reached. If you drop that, people will leave school and say, “I acquired quite a lot of knowledge. I was quite good at all these subjects, and I also had life skills, confidence and creative thinking ability”, which is more difficult to measure, and those who have contact with them will discover in due course whether they have actually acquired those skills.

Do we not need some objective, accepted assessment of the relative levels that pupils have reached so that they can show their ability and attainment if they have succeeded to the outside world, future employers and institutions such as universities, FE colleges, sixth form colleges and so on? The idea that you abandon any objective measurement of the standards that pupils have reached when they leave school strikes me as extremely drastic. You can see where I am coming from. What is your reaction?

Andy Sprakes: We have a standards-driven curriculum, and we assess our students. We do tests and exams, but we assess them in a variety of different ways that are much more agile, much more comprehensive and much more robust than reducing what students know to a two-hour exam in a stuffy exam hall at the end of five years of secondary school. It is outdated and outmoded, and I do not think it allows students to express and demonstrate what they are capable of academically.

I also want to respond to the earlier points about acquisition of knowledge. We were drifting into that false dichotomy again. I totally agree with Phil. Whose knowledge is it anyway? Where is the room for black history, for example, in the curriculum? That is a separate argument, but it is ideologically driven.

On the knowledge question, it is how we make that knowledge powerful and meaningful for students. What do they do with that knowledge? How are they activists in bringing about positive social change in their communities? Exams are not fit for purpose for a number of different reasons, but I will let others speak.

The Chair: Before Phil and Tom respond to that, Baroness McIntosh would like to ask a supplementary.

Q103 **Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall:** I would. Thank you. I did not want to let the anecdotal moment go past that Phil mentioned a few minutes ago. Phil, your description of that conversation with your colleague seems to me to be extremely important. We are not just talking here, are we, about the impact on students of the way that the curriculum is currently arranged and is required to be delivered, but the impact on teachers, a lot of whom, some might argue—I do not know if you would agree—feel that they are being effectively deskilled by the way in which they are being asked to teach and to deliver? That happens to be my view based on very scant evidence. Do any or all of you see anything here that we should be concerned about?

Phil Avery: On that final point, I agree, but I would use the word “frustrated” rather than necessarily “deskilled”. They know that there is so much more they could do for those young people. They could begin from the starting point of that student rather than where the curriculum is, and they could do more of that. They could do more about drawing out the interests of that student, but very often they get caught in a Catch-22 situation where the student starts asking them, “Is this in the exam?” If the answer is no, you lose part of the class, because they know that this is all about a number at the end.

In response to Lord Clarke, we can have really robust assessment that does not look like a GCSE exam and it can be really meaningful to where that student is going on to. We can look and assess—whether we should assess is a different question—dispositions such as critical thinking and creativity. We can draw out from students their own interests. Look at what the EPQ does. The extended project qualification gives students a real chance to show their ability with self-regulation and show their areas of interest. If universities and employers read those rather than just

looking at the letter that is drawn out from that, they will learn so much more about that student.

We are in a place now where we do not have to rely on exam hall qualifications or on assessment tools. We should probably have some, but in a much smaller area, and probably not at 16. We should allow for far more of our students to be known.

Finally, you said that we have those exams to tell the pupil where they are. Unfortunately, I feel that we are in a position where we are defining the pupil's identity rather than allowing them to explore identities. Too often, we hear students saying, "I'm not a scientist", or, "I'm a historian". How can we have students who are defined and we have an exam system where one-third of students have to fail, rather than having an education system that allows students to explore their identities?

The Chair: Tom, do you want to add anything?

Tom Richmond: Yes. I have a very brief response to that supplementary and will then go back to Lord Clarke's fascinating question. My own observation of what Phil said is that, of course, we have to recognise that Ofsted is part of our accountability system too. When we are talking about assessment and accountability, we should not just assume that exams and exam results are the only driver of schools' behaviour. Ofsted is an incredibly powerful driver. I am sure we could do an entire evidence session on whether that is good or bad, but ultimately it is an important fixture of the education system as it stands.

Lord Clarke of Nottingham: I set Ofsted up.

Tom Richmond: Indeed. At that point, I shall respond to Lord Clarke's fascinating question about GCSEs. I think the word about this issue is purpose. Whenever you want to design any assessment for any child of any age, the very first thing you have to decide is the purpose of that assessment. When GCSEs were created, they were created with a clear purpose to act as a school-leaving qualification because you were perfectly entitled to leave the whole education system at that point. But with the raising of the participation age to 17, and then to 18, it is quite clear to me that GCSEs have not really kept pace with those very dramatic changes in the wider education system. That is not to say that GCSEs are no longer doing what they were set out to do, but the point is that the context in which they exist has now changed very dramatically.

In our research at EDSK, we came to the conclusion that spending about £200 million a year and asking around 600,000 pupils to sit about 25 to 30 hours of written pen and paper-based exams across a whole range of subjects was simply disproportionate to the role that GCSEs now serve within what we believe is an 11 to 18 education system. To us, rigorous external assessment is absolutely vital within our education system in primary and secondary education—we are very clear about that.

GCSEs are now caught in a halfway house. Are they the final measure of attainment? Well, they are not the final measure of pupil attainment any more. What happens at 18 is now the final judgment for universities, and indeed for employers, particularly if we move to a post-qualification

admission system for universities, which is not certain yet, but we might well be moving in that direction. We do not think that you need that sheer volume and cost of assessment. We believe you should have rigorous external assessment around ages 15 and 16, but it should look different from how GCSEs look now, particularly with a greater use of technology, which we might well come on to later in the discussion.

The Chair: Thank you. I will ask Andy if he has anything he finally wants to respond with. I will then check if Lord Clarke has anything further to say and then move to Lord Baker. Andy, was there anything you had not said in response to this conversation?

Andy Sprakes: Not really. I agree with Phil about assessing our students on such narrow foci. Education is about more than just exams. It is about creating agents for social change and for people who are going to be stewards for our world moving forward. We cannot lose that in a discussion about exams. I think they are outmoded and no longer fit for purpose. I really do believe that we can come up with a better solution that shows the range of skills and knowledge that our children acquire at school. That can be competency driven, skills driven and knowledge driven, but it does not have to be reduced to sitting in an exam hall, churning out stuff that some kids can retain because they have really great memories, but other kids cannot and who are therefore at a disadvantage and fail. I just do not think it is a very modern way of looking at how we assess and judge who our children are and who they will be in the future. It is more than just an exam grade.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Lord Clarke, was there anything further you wanted to add?

Lord Clarke of Nottingham: Chair, I could debate this all morning. My only response is that it seems to me that having an examination system does not necessarily drive out all those other more modern and relevant ways of teaching subjects and education generally that have been referred to. I could debate it all morning, but I will not because it will drive other members of the committee up the wall. I will give somebody else a chance. Thank you very much, Chair.

The Chair: Ofsted was mentioned a moment ago, so I am hoping very much indeed that Ofsted will provide us with evidence through witnesses at some point in the next few weeks. Lord Baker, can we move to you, please?

Q104 **Lord Baker of Dorking:** Andy, I will not ask you a question because I completely agree with what you do. You are a pioneer. You are a great teacher. You are running a wonderful school. I cannot gild a lily or throw a perfume on the violet. I congratulate you on what you have said. Your views on assessment are completely right and Lord Clarke's are wrong. It is as simple and as straightforward as that.

I want to turn to Mr Richmond, because he has sent us more reports than any other institution in the country. He sent us five reports, all of which I have read. Good boy. They are very readable, they are very well written, and they draw upon your considerable experience of lower secondary

education, upper secondary education, GCSEs and A-levels.

My first question to you is very simple. Progress 8 and EBacc are a straitjacket. Do you want to abolish those? Yes or no?

Tom Richmond: EDSK published a report on the EBacc in 2019 in which we said that we should remove the EBacc as a measure of secondary schools. We came to that conclusion, because the curriculum impact that we detected on creative and art subjects of only measuring schools on a very narrow range of English, maths, geography, history and science subjects, a language and so on seems to have crowded out a lot of subjects that a lot of parents, pupils and teachers see as very valuable. We simply could not support it in that context. There have been other pressures too, particularly funding.

Over the past 10 years, it may have contributed to that, but ultimately we did not believe that the EBacc is a suitable measure at all for secondary schools because it gives a very narrow definition of success. It says that success is achieving high GCSEs in a very narrow range of subjects. We simply could not find any evidence to suggest that that was the case.

Progress 8 is admittedly a slightly broader measure of secondary schools, because it allows a little more space for supposedly non-core subjects such as art, music and so on, but, again, it still puts those EBacc subjects on a pedestal above other subjects. We simply cannot find any evidence in our research that studying GCSE geography is necessarily more valuable than studying GCSE art, design technology or music. On that basis, we did not think that they were supportable.

Lord Baker of Dorking: That is right. In effect, you are saying that it is too much of a straitjacket, it has squeezed out culture, drama and music by 30% or 40%, and it has reduced technical education almost completely. We have had evidence from Pearson that there has been a dramatic fall in technical and vocational qualifications since 2010, which is when it was proposed by Michael Gove. You would support that, would you not, because you have come up with proposals? Briefly, could you explain to the committee your proposals as the alternative to Progress 8 and the EBacc?

Tom Richmond: The research project that we have just concluded on secondary education says that measuring the progress of pupils is absolutely vital. Going back to Lord Clarke's comments, we need some kind of staging post assessment around ages 15 and 16 to look at how pupils have developed in the first part of secondary education. We also need to look at pupil progress in the later stages of education regardless of whether they study an academic, applied or technical subject.

However, the unequivocal conclusion from our research was that, in the current system, all the accountability measures look at success in a very narrow way, which is academic success. We simply do not believe, in the world we live in, that we should prioritise someone's performance in A-level Latin over someone training to work in health and social care up to the age of 18. Yet our accountability system very clearly says that we are

most interested in GCSE performance in academic subjects and we are most interested in the progress that pupils make from GCSE to A-level. That simply crowds out, from the perspective of head teachers, departmental leaders and faculty leaders in schools and colleges, any space for a discussion about how we can get the best of each and every individual pupil. It treats them very much as being part of a great big Goliath system rather than saying, "Take the pupil as an individual".

Lord Baker of Dorking: Mr Avery, you said in your introduction that you wanted to see in education collaboration, creativity, empathy, critical analysis and communication. Those are subjects that are not covered in Progress 8 or the EBacc in any significant way. Would you also like to see Progress 8 and the EBacc abolished or fundamentally reformed?

Phil Avery: I think those dispositions and some of those skills could be built into subject domain, but they would be better served by having interdisciplinary qualifications and a wider suite of styles of learning. I would argue that there needs to be space for breadth in our curriculum. To do that, I think the EBacc measure is not appropriate, and I would take the "8" bit out of Progress 8. I think the move from attainment to progress has been of significant benefit to the education system. It is the level at which we are determined that I want to reduce.

Lord Baker of Dorking: You are three experts. You have all said the curriculum must basically be changed and reformed. Were you aware of a poll in the *Times* this Monday by YouGov—following the commission they have set up in education, there are two pages of it—in which they asked parents what the main problem facing their children was; 47% said the curriculum. I have never seen such a figure before. I never expected parents to say something like that. They trust the teachers. But this is a case where there are lots of people now wanting change. I congratulate you all for doing it.

Apart from GCSEs, there are methods of various assessment. How would you change GCSEs, Phil?

Phil Avery: First, we need to take away the really high stakes that we have at GCSE. Picking up on Tom's point, we do need some form of assessment during the secondary phase—probably the lower part of it rather than the upper part of it. Some of that needs to be about subject domains. We need to know how they are doing, probably at English, maths and science.

Moving away from that, I think we need some different forms of assessment. There are really interesting ways of looking at critical thinking, potentially within subject domains and in interdisciplinary projects, using technology. We could look at portfolios. We could look at learning journals. We could start to understand not only what children can do and what they know, but their ability to self-regulate and their ability to apply their learning from subject domains into real-world contexts. All that is possible right here right now, and a lot of it is possible without, or at the same time as, building towards whole-system change.

Lord Baker of Dorking: Tom, you could reduce Progress 8 to Progress 5, having just five subjects that every school is expected to do: one English, one maths and three sciences—and one of the sciences should be computing, quite frankly. I tried to introduce that, as Education Secretary, to exams; I felt that science was practically all about other subjects. That would allow each school to decide a whole variety of different subjects and teaching that you want. It would give them space to bring back the cultural subjects.

We do not have a broad, balanced curriculum. I tried to establish a broad, balanced curriculum. There is now no computing education below 16 in our schools of any significance, quite frankly, which in a digital age is crazy.

Tell me one thing, Andy. You have school leavers at your school now. Do many still leave at 16, or do they go on to 18?

Andy Sprakes: They leave at 16. It is really interesting. I agree with the points made about having a much broader, much more diverse way of assessing students and their skills and competencies. I think a portfolio-based assessment would be much better to construct something over time, including beautiful things that students make, that they do and that they contribute to their community and to wider society. We have students who leave us at 16, and it is really interesting, because they take away with them exactly that. They have a portfolio of evidence of the fantastic things that they can do, the presentations, they develop oracy and are confident.

We have just had an expedition called “You give me fever”, where our students have interviewed experts from the health service. They have led those discussions. They have prepared and planned for those, and we have evidence of that. These are really high-level skills that we are developing in our students.

A young boy called Iestyn had an interview for a paramedics course. The guys from the university asked him for his views on community and social justice, and he was able to answer those questions really eloquently. He was a student who came to us as a “middle-ability” kid—the horrendous way we categorise our kids based on their academic performance. That is a shocking phrase to use, is it not? He talked eloquently about those things. There were minimal places on this course. They said that they would get back to him in two or three weeks. They got back to him within 48 hours and offered him a place on that course because they saw in him the confidence and ability to be able to think creatively, problem solve and express himself clearly from a knowledge base but also with great skill. He had examples of work that he had done, which made a difference, mattered and were powerful.

Q105 Lord Baker of Dorking: Congratulations for getting a student up to that level.

I have one last question. Could you all briefly say what you would do about A-levels, because there is a great movement now to have a baccalaureate, which is much wider and is cross-curriculum? Would you

like to start first, Phil?

Phil Avery: That broader suite of qualifications and what it assesses is the way to go. Driving that needs to be the changes we are seeing at university. Warwick University is doing open-book exams over four weeks expecting students to reference, to read novel, peer-reviewed articles that they have not been taught about, and build that in. What universities are looking for is changing. We need a wider, deeper suite of qualifications for our students at A-level that builds on what we have been talking about here.

Tom Richmond: The EDSK report that we published last month called for a baccalaureate-style model to be introduced for the later stages of secondary education. One of the biggest driving forces for that was that we have to correct the imbalance where we prize achievement in academic subjects over all else. We absolutely believe at EDSK that rigorous academic exams are vital, particularly at age 18 but even before that, because many pupils, as we have seen from the university application numbers, will want to go down an academic path through their studies, and they should be supported and indeed tested through very rigorous academic, potentially written, exams, but maybe other exams too.

The problem is that we cannot have that existing to the detriment of applied and technical qualifications alongside them. So we believe that a baccalaureate is the most effective way to maintain that rigorous academic route for those who want it, but also that applied and technical subjects are perfectly legitimate and valuable options in a way that the current system simply does not achieve.

Lord Baker of Dorking: Andy, you do not do A-levels, do you?

Andy Sprakes: No, we do not, but I would broadly agree with what Phil and Tom have said there.

Lord Baker of Dorking: Thank you all very much.

Q106 **Lord Storey:** Thank you all. This has been music to my ears. It is fantastic. These are my thoughts. As leaders of academies, you have more freedoms and more powers than maintained schools. How have you used those freedoms and more powers to do what you are suggesting? Secondly, is the truth of the matter also that it is not just about reform of the curriculum exams but about how you, as schools, are inspected, which can be a straitjacket to changes in the curriculum? I will start with Andy first.

Andy Sprakes: I understand the points about Ofsted. Could you repeat the question? What was the first part of it?

Lord Storey: The first part of the question is that academies supposedly have more freedoms to do what they want to do. Given what you have said, how have you used those freedoms?

Andy Sprakes: That is quite interesting. Our curriculum is standards based, as I said at the start, but is very broad, and we teach through

cross-subject expeditions, as we call them, which have at their heart subject specialisms. We develop that out and we connect subjects.

We have a staff day at the minute where staff are looking at subject integrity, the progressive acquisition of knowledge and skills in science, and how they can connect that across other subject disciplines to enhance and deepen connection and context so that it deepens the learning experience. We built our curriculum, ironically, from the national curriculum, which is what all schools use. We have gone beyond that. All schools can do that. I am not always 100% convinced about the idea that academies have massive freedoms to do what they want. I think you have freedom within any system that you are working in to develop and construct creative alternatives to what we perceive as being absolutes.

We have used the national curriculum. We have been subject to Ofsted inspections. For me, it is about how we look at this systemically.

Phil Avery: We have freedoms, but, due to accountability, we do not. Ofsted put out a video recently. It is only 50 seconds long and it mentions two, potentially three, times in the 50 seconds that they will be using the national curriculum as their starting point. We have freedoms, but if we want to get through Ofsted in a positive way we should follow the national curriculum. We obviously have to follow the exam specifications, and then there is Progress 8 and EBacc on top of that. By the time we are through those, before we look at things like audits, how we spend our money and a costed curriculum, all those accountability measures take away the freedom.

Our biggest freedom is opening an all-through school, ages two to 16. The opportunities that affords us are huge. Interestingly, even then, when we were designing the building, the DfE computer system had a model for a primary school and a model for a secondary school in it, so that is what we should build. We are not, but we had to argue long and hard that we were not building a primary or a secondary school.

Lord Baker of Dorking: Well done.

Phil Avery: We are building an all-through, which needed to look and feel different, and have different-sized spaces. At first, they said, "No, because that's not what our computer system has". We came to a better decision.

Lord Storey: "Computer says no". Tom, do you have any thoughts?

Tom Richmond: The debate over the shortening of key stage 3 in some academies is a perfect example of how we now have some enormous tensions in the system that are simply unresolved. The fact that they are unresolved is the worst outcome for everyone. If, tomorrow, the Government announced that all academies had to follow the national curriculum from 11 to 18, that would be fine. That might not be the best solution, but it is at least a solution. On the other hand, they say to all local authority schools, "You don't have to follow the national curriculum". The problem is that we are caught in a horrible halfway house where academies have the freedom to change their curriculum, but some do to a greater or lesser extent, and some do not.

We have Ofsted, which is making its own separate judgment as an independent inspectorate, of course, which may be the same or different from that of Department for Education Ministers, which may then be different from how multi-academy trusts want to run themselves. To me, that is the worst of all worlds. If we simply cannot get agreement among the education community as to what each part of the system is supposed to do, we will have these endless and sometimes very public spats and discussions, which no one wins. The Department for Education approves in theory two completely different models whereby it says that academies can have that freedom and Ofsted can do what it wants, and we have a national curriculum that the DfE designed, which schools are now allowed to ignore. Those tensions are absolutely fundamental to the question of where the future of secondary education goes, and I think they should be resolved. One resolution either way, to me, is better than no resolution at all.

Lord Storey: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, everyone for that. Let us move on to Baroness McIntosh.

Q107 **Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall:** Thank you. The question I wanted to ask you, as you will no doubt know, is to do with STEM subjects. I ought to say, as a matter of context, that my background is not in STEM but in the subjects that we have already discussed, which are pretty much marginalised in the curriculum as it is currently taught—that is to say, arts and creative subjects.

First, do you think that there is still a need to continue to emphasise the importance of STEM subjects over everything else in the way that has been the rhetoric over the past few years? If you do—or, indeed, whether or not you do—is there still a problem, and, if there is, how can we resolve it, with the people who are drawn to STEM subjects, particularly the low numbers still of female students who are willing to engage sufficiently with them to go on and make careers in the areas that require them?

Phil Avery: It is a really interesting question, because it is an example of the wider problems. STEM careers are well paid on the whole. There is a real need for people, so there are places available and you are not competing against that many people. It is that mix of the academic and, in many cases, application, and yet we could not fill those places in our own economy. What is it about our education that means that we do not have young people wanting to go on to well-paid, meaningful careers where there is not a huge amount of competition? I think the problem is what we have been talking about: we are emphasising academic learning in very narrow subject silos that are devoid of societal and parental interest.

Our figures used to be really quite poor of students choosing STEM subjects and STEM careers, so we put in place STEM festivals to engage the parents. We have started working with external organisations. I am a Winston Churchill fellow, so I was very lucky to travel to the United States, the Netherlands and Sweden to look at what they do. Their

schools are part of an ecosystem in a local area where it is completely fine to take certain lessons in a museum or in a business. I think it is a symptom of the wider problem that we have been talking through.

We have some really interesting areas that are getting it right. I visited a number of UTCs. When you go into a UTC, it feels different. In the one in Norwich, you have employers dropping in for a cup of tea with students just to chat things through. It is entirely different. However, we can do so much more.

Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall: Could you address the question of the gendered nature of STEM subjects, because it comes up regularly? Do you still find among your students that that is the way it goes?

Phil Avery: If you include maths at A-level, no. It has become less so over time, because we have done a lot of work in this area. The best thing that we can do is to bring meaningful application—not whether you can take a concept and apply it in a very slightly different concept in an exam question—and all these things like engagement with employers into the curriculum. If we do not do it in schools, we rely on the media and society to do it, and that reinforces stereotypes. That is why we are not seeing change. The businesses have changed, but our parental knowledge and student knowledge of the change of apprenticeships, and the change of routes, is not there. We are not seeing it in schools because there is not the space.

Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall: Thank you. I do not know whether either of our other two witnesses want to add to that, but I will say in passing that I would be interested to know whether you accept that there are careers to be had, for example, in the cultural industries and the creative industries that absolutely require STEM subject competence.

Lord Baker of Dorking: Yes, I totally agree.

Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall: They also require other kinds of competence. We have heard the phrase “false dichotomy” several times already. That is a false dichotomy if ever there was one. Does either of our other witnesses wish to comment on that?

Andy Sprakes: That is correct. I would totally agree with that. One of the first things that I jotted down here was that STEM is creative. We call it STEAM because we include the arts in our teaching of science, technology, engineering and maths. Our students create beautiful work that has real power, because it is effecting change within our community and in the wider community as well.

For me, it is about making that work relevant. I touched on it before, but we have this idea of a curriculum art where we look at the stewardship of our world. At the minute, we have a real focus in our curriculum. It starts from the basis of a national curriculum, but you work up; you aim higher than that, do you not? As I said, our staff are developing cross-subject expeditions, including science and the humanities, where we are looking at the climate emergency, because that is quite important. Our students need to learn about that and be the solution to that. There are some real

curriculum imperatives here about how we shape our curriculum, how we design our curriculum and what we focus on.

I would totally agree with connecting the work that we do in our STEAM subjects to the world. When we take our kids to university—and we are in an area of socioeconomic deprivation—we do not just go to university and let them see this kind of place that might seem unattainable to them. They work in the labs in the university with experts. I am a teacher; I am not an expert. I want to work with scientific experts and I want our kids to work with them, because it ignites fires that the kids do not even know were there in the first place. My own daughter is an example of that. Her love of science has developed now because of the way we have approached it through multidisciplines. I think we have to stop the idea that science is somehow not creative.

Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall: I could not agree more. Thank you.

The Chair: Tom, do you want to add anything to that?

Tom Richmond: When we come to supporting STEM, we cannot ignore the role of apprenticeships within that. Expecting schools to do all the heavy lifting would be far too great a burden on them. We need to look at technical education much more broadly and institutions that can deliver that technical education as well, both in the 11 to 18 system and beyond that. If we expect schools simply to look at biology, physics and chemistry as examples of science subjects, we will miss out on an awful lot of potential in a lot of pupils.

The Chair: Thank you all much very much. Let us go to Lord Woolley.

Q108 **Lord Woolley of Woodford:** Thank you. This is another great session. I want to target my question to Andy, which in part you have answered, but I have a little twist on it. How far should careers education and employer engagement be embedded into the curriculum at both primary and secondary level?

Particularly in the north of England, there is lots of talk about the white working class and their underattainment, and being left on the scrap heap. From your perspective, does the present curriculum disengage many of these white youths with their perceived or seeming irrelevance to the job market and to their lives?

I was interested in the other point that you and Phil made earlier on about having rounded students. You mentioned that perhaps we should also look at the curriculum in terms of its history and be less Eurocentric. Is that all part of the rounded students who are not only for the workplace but for life, Andy?

Andy Sprakes: Thank you for that. It is a great question. The short answer to the curriculum question is yes, it does not meet the needs of those students. They do not see the purpose. I was born and brought up in Doncaster from mining stock. Fortunately, I went to university because my parents thought that books were important. I was surrounded with books, and that was my way to get to university. Most of my friends did not take that path. I am not saying that that is a path everybody has to

take. For me, it is about equity, at the end of the day. We need to provide all of our students regardless of their class, gender or race an equity of opportunity. That is why we set up our school to provide that for our kids.

In answer to the careers question, we absolutely want to, and we engage with employers in a really authentic way. When we were working with Hitachi on an expedition, our students wrote a book about the rail industry in Doncaster because it is a significant part of our history—the “Flying Scotsman” and the “Mallard”. We did a historical site study of the plant works where those two steam engines were built. We looked at the industrial revolution and all the social ills it created. It connected those kids with their local community and it allowed them to see what they could potentially achieve. We worked with employers.

Lord Woolley of Woodford: On my specific question about the white working class, do you think that your approach engages them more than the curriculum as it is? Do you see that perhaps with some of the Asian, African and Caribbean students there is something different going on? My own view is that often with black, Asian, and minority ethnic parents, a bit like your parents, there was a strong driver that you have to read. But if there is not that, are you saying that the curriculum is turning these young white boys and girls off?

Andy Sprakes: Yes, absolutely. What I am saying is that, through the approach that we have, regardless of whether they are white working class, black or Asian, we are finding high levels of success because our curriculum is relevant and purposeful. We aim high and we scaffold up. Students with special educational needs also respond to our curriculum because of the high expectations that we have. It is not about dumbing down. It is about making our curriculum really authentic, really relevant and really purposeful to the lives of our young people.

You can go back in time. We have done the history of the miners in Doncaster. Our students have told the stories of the proud mining communities that we have. That has had a real impact, not just on the experts that we worked with, who were in tears when our kids wrote these wonderful social histories about them and looked at the geology and why we have mines in Doncaster. We looked at the geology of Doncaster. We looked at the science behind the coal seams. It is those things and then the students create beautiful, powerful work that makes a difference.

Lord Woolley of Woodford: As an educator, why do you think it is important for white working-class kids to have a broader view of the world than the Eurocentric view that is presented?

Andy Sprakes: It is vital, is it not? We talk at our school about working hard, getting smart and being kind—so, above all, compassion. One of the other seams in our curriculum is about social justice, diversity and belonging. They are our three key seams: climate emergency, social justice, and diversity and belonging. Why would we educate our kids about anything else? We want our kids to make the world a better place, so we have to give them the opportunity to do that.

Phil Avery: Very briefly on that final point, we need to teach broadly partly because of empathy, which I mentioned earlier, but also because it really engages and interests children. We do immersion language teaching in French, Spanish and Mandarin. That means that students go to tutor time and it is entirely in Mandarin. They then go to their PE lesson, which is entirely in Mandarin. It is incredibly challenging, but they love it and they are really interested in it. It is the culture. It is just something entirely different. Yes, they get a really good GCSE on the way through, but, even better, they are prepared. If you are going to learn a language and do it better than a translation app, you need to immerse yourself. Our students will not see immersion in another country as a barrier because of how we teach.

It links back to that point: how we teach can reinforce our core while also allowing students to learn more about themselves and be more productive for society and the economy.

Lord Baker of Dorking: Hear, hear.

Tom Richmond: Those are some wonderful examples from the other two witnesses about the potential impact that getting other people in front of students can have. I would like to think that I did a pretty good job during my time as a teacher imparting knowledge and skills and helping my pupils. I can talk to them as much as I can about the world, but ultimately having someone from the outside coming in and giving pupils some really good guidance is powerful. As good as a careers adviser can be within a school, they are limited with time and resource, so let us get the experts to come and talk to the pupils, and vice versa, as Andy said.

Q109 **The Chair:** Thank you, Lord Woolley. I would like to draw this session very shortly to a close. I was struck by several mentions, particularly by Tom a few minutes ago, of apprenticeships and the extent to which the structure of apprenticeships is fit for purpose, and whether we ought to be doing and saying more about their structure. Would each of you be willing to write to us with any very specific observations on apprenticeships, the apprenticeship levy, what challenges there are and what remedies we ought to be examining as a committee? I would quite like to have that in writing from you. I can see that everybody is nodding. Clearly, what you are doing is leading through to a route that is apprenticeship based.

Was there anything any of you wanted to say finally before I draw us to a close?

Phil Avery: There is one important thing linked to assessment that has not come up in this session that could be drawn out at a later point, which is student well-being. We have tracked the well-being of our students over lockdown. The student well-being of our exam year groups dropped when they came back into school in September. How can we have an education system where student well-being is impacted as they come back into school? That link between well-being and assessment could be drawn out at a later point.

The Chair: Thank you for that. That is very helpful. In fact, this is

something that I hope the committee will be looking at as it takes further evidence in the early summer period.

Tom Richmond: We did our major report on the future of secondary education recently, because the astonishing events of the past 12 months, particularly the collapse of our assessment system, have obviously raised some incredibly fundamental questions about where we go next. With the lack of exams, we have had to move to another system, which has thrown up all sorts of conversations in itself. We really do think that conversation needs to be had now. There are, of course, some very strong views, as we have heard in this committee already, about what that might look like. We absolutely want to make sure that that conversation happens, and this committee could well be a great vehicle for that too.

Andy Sprakes: Just to build on what Phil said, we did not see that drop. Part of that is because we have what we call "Crew" at XP where we invest that. I am sure Phil does too in his school. I am not suggesting that he does not for one minute. We have 45 minutes a day where our students come into a small group where we nurture them and look after their needs. That is a really important point about how we manage that as well as how we manage that against the assessment system. I totally agree with that, but I have nothing further to say.

The Chair: Thank you all very much indeed. I have mentioned apprenticeships, but if there is anything that you would like to add formally as evidence please feel free to write to the committee. We are taking evidence until July.

On behalf of the committee, can I thank you all very much indeed for your contributions as witnesses, which have been exceedingly helpful to the committee's deliberations? I declare that this meeting is now suspended. We will be about two minutes before we go into the next session. Thank you all very much indeed.