



## Education for 11-16 Year Olds Committee

### Roundtable meeting with teachers

Thursday 14 September 2023

#### GROUP 1

**Lord Aberdare:** I will make a start. It's Alastair Aberdare here. My colleagues in this room are Lord Baker, Lord Watson and Lord Storey. Welcome to everybody. I'm delighted to be attempting to facilitate and, as you will know, the session is being recorded. We have five main topic areas that we would like to cover and a couple of others if we have time left over. I think the best way to start would be by asking each of the teachers with us to introduce themselves very briefly. Participant A, why don't we start with you?

**Participant A:** My name is Participant A. I'm head of music at my school; I started here last week. It's part of a middle school system, so people start here at year 9 and usually stay until the end of year 13. So it's unusual in the system in the area.

**Lord Aberdare:** Thank you. Participant B?

**Participant B:** I teach English. I'm head of English here at my school, which was set up in order to be a school to equip 21st century learners. We focus on a lot of project-based learning as well as more traditional learning as well.

**Lord Aberdare:** Thank you very much. Participant C?

**Participant C:** Good morning, I'm Participant C. I work at a school in Furness up in Cumbria as an assistant head teacher, also a teacher of English.

**Lord Aberdare:** Thank you very much, Participant C. Participant D?

**Participant D:** Hi there. Another English teacher in the mix. I have worked in three state schools and latterly three independent schools. I'm the head teacher of a school, which is a progressive school in Hampshire, and you might have seen maybe a few things in the news this week because we are moving to a two-GCSE model but we've been doing our own curriculum at least for half of those subjects since 2005.

**Lord Aberdare:** Thank you very much. Participant E?

**Participant E:** Hi, my name is Participant E. I'm faculty director of maths of two schools in Banbury, in Oxfordshire. I'm originally from Canada but I've taught here in the UK for the last 15 years.

**Lord Aberdare:** Thank you very much to all of you. Why don't I introduce the first topic, which is rather a broad and all-embracing one? The first one is a very overall question. How well does the school system for 11-16 year olds as it currently stands equip them with the knowledge and skills they need for the future? You might like to just highlight the main area that you feel needs some attention. Participant B, let's start with you.

**Participant B:** I think that where the UK system is slightly different and maybe lagging behind other international systems is that we don't value skills enough—so things like communication, collaboration and creativity. There's a lot of research done into them, and in Toronto especially and Ontario, they're adopted very widely as being the deeper learning competencies, so those areas which we're thinking of as 21st century skills, those front-running skills of how we're going to be preparing people to work in the workplace.

Those skills are not valued, whereas knowledge and recall is very highly valued. So, for example, in English GCSE you can't have your texts with you; you have to memorise quotes from your texts. You have to be able to showcase that you've remembered them and you've remembered the format of the essay that you need to write. But, actually, we're not taking the time to explore the communications side of that. How are they communicating effectively and meaningfully? Are they just following a script to answer this, or a formula for how to answer this type of question? It doesn't give students a lot of freedom or choice to express their own individuality as well, so it can be quite a stifling curriculum in some senses.

That's where I see the major difference between what we value based on the wider international value. Even with something like the IB, students get more of a choice than they do with GCSEs. I'm not saying that it is a perfect system. It has its flaws as well, but it's much more inquiry focused and has much more of that spirit of curiosity, and much more of those skills are valued as part of the IB programme.

**Lord Aberdare:** That's fantastic, thank you. Participant A, do you want to go next?

**Participant A:** I think that, from a music perspective, we provide all the skills that are needed for pupils to function in society—it's kind of our hidden

curriculum. So we're able to teach them teamwork, resilience, and all the skills that are needed for them to go into the world of work.

However, since the EBacc has been introduced, music education is in crisis. We've got schools that aren't running music. I recently left a school where I set up music after it has been omitted from the curriculum for five years because it wasn't part of an EBacc route. The school didn't see the importance of it being on the curriculum. This is a problem we're facing with the idea of the curriculum from for 11-16 year olds. It's very different depending on where the pupils are. Some schools run a rotation; my pupils at my current school will get 16 hours of music and that's it. Then they decide whether they are going to take it as one of their GCSEs and it's pitted against art, drama, dance and all of the creative subjects that develop independent thinking.

In other schools, they're barely studied in the timetable. There's no set form within the curriculum of how many subjects schools must have. We've got the model music curriculum that came out last year, which said that all schools should do an hour of music every week, but it's not being adhered to because it's not compulsory. So, a lot of the time, we are waiting to see what's happened in key stage 2, prior to pupils starting in key stage 3, and we're constantly trying to catch up, because they might not have done any music at all at primary school. So we're in crisis. And we're fighting, but this is something that we need to be aware of when we're thinking of equipping our pupils with skills for the future.

**Lord Aberdare:** Thank you very much. Let's go on to Participant D.

**Participant D:** I think I'm going to be very much speaking in harmony with my previous colleagues. I definitely feel that there are significant problems with the 11-16 curriculum in our country. I'm really pleased to hear Participant B referencing Canadian state-wide systems, because that's where we've been looking to for inspiration and, in some ways, leadership when it comes to thinking about how education has to evolve and progress. Certainly we're very lucky in our sector to be able to exercise independence, I certainly feel when you're looking at the system now it is extremely centralised; not just the curriculum but at every level of education, it's very centralised in this country. I think that is something which means that teachers are not able to serve the individuals that they are there to serve. So I think that's one thing which really needs to change a lot.

I think there's also excessive accountability; the amount of measurement that goes on for teachers is excessive. When we changed the school leaving age from 16 to 18, we didn't change the system to reflect that change. I think, while I know this committee focuses specifically on 11-16, that there needs to be a

bigger question about shaking up how we see those different age groups. I'm not sure necessarily that the 11-16 and then the 16-18 model is serving us well.

I know there has been talk of the 14-19 model as a potential alternative stage to think about. Again, our senior school starts in year 9 rather than in year 7, and I really enjoy that. There are different challenges by starting in year 9 rather than year 7, but actually it is a model that has existed before. Whether or not we change the actual school structures to do that, certainly in terms of curriculum, I think it makes more sense for 14-19 when you know anything about adolescent development and when adolescence really kicks in for the average teenager, or for the majority of them.

I suppose the other thing I would say, particularly working in a school which is known for the creativity that our students excel in among many other things, I think there is an enormous lack of humanity and creativity in the system. A lot of that comes from the fact that things are excessively driven by data and accountability; I feel very, very strongly that my colleagues in the state sector especially are under a burden which is excessive and autocratic in a way which stifles their ability to serve the young people that they work with. You only have to look at the recent changes to the independent school inspection regime to see that actually it is much more of a teacher and learning-centred approach, which is unfortunately something which my colleagues in the state sector are unable to access, which is terrible and needs to change.

**Lord Aberdare:** I'm going to move on because I want each teacher to have a chance to speak. Participant C, you're next.

**Participant C:** A lot of what I was going to say has already been covered, but there are two things I would like to say in a positive light. I think that we do like the fact, in terms of knowledge and skills, that reading is highlighted so consistently in an area of high deprivation and disadvantage such as ours. Putting reading at the front and centre, even in the secondary curriculum, has been really useful. Equally, putting personal development so high on the Ofsted agenda has been a really good thing in the wider community as well. So we do certainly welcome those additions.

I agree with what previous speakers have said about the content-heavy nature of the GCSEs. It does mean that even though our curriculums are stacked to be spiral curriculums from GCSE, building on knowledge and skills, it does mean that key stage 4 is so content heavy and they're remembering material for two full years there. It does mean that when they are more mature and they are more receptive and they are getting ready for work, there is less time available to then talk about the actual skills nature of the future for the world of work.

I think one other really important thing to say as well is on the dawn of the age of technology, and how students research, how they find material. For all of us on this meeting, I'm sorry to say, mobile phones had nine numbers and a zero and that was about it. We didn't research things in the same way as young people do now, we didn't have the access to the technology that they do. I think that a consideration for them of how the real world works and getting ready for that real world would constitute some real change too.

**Lord Aberdare:** Fantastic, thank you very much. Participant E?

**Participant E:** I think it's quite interesting to hear people talk about the Canadian system. I taught in Canada before I came to the UK—a long time ago, mind you—and I would agree with many things that Participant D stated—  
[*connection lost*]

**Lord Aberdare:** We've lost you. Well, I don't know what's happened; we'd better carry on. Lord Baker has already put his hand up. Participant E, are you back again?

**Participant E:** Yes. Can you hear me? Sorry. I'm from Canada originally and I taught there for a while. I think a lot of the things that have been said I would be inclined to agree with. I saw a model, the 14-19 model, and I think it was much more effective. I think the curriculum in this country is incredibly jampacked, so much so that it becomes so knowledge and content-based that there just isn't time to develop the social skills, the empathy, and it doesn't allow for the same amount of time to spend on those extra skills. That's a massive difference I've seen between the two school systems, living and breathing them.

So much time is spent on analysing data here, over and over again, and we spend countless hours in meetings doing this instead of actually running clubs for children—those extra things that build those skills in a social community like a school. I would love to see less data analysis and more time spent on skills with the children. I also think, just in general, on the 14-19 model, having been a head of maths, it's incredibly difficult to recruit teachers that teach maths all the way from 11 year-olds up to 19, further maths—that's not one individual. It just doesn't work, and within our department, we have segregated teachers who are 14-19 versus 11-13. Those are two different types of individuals who are drawn to those types of professions. It needs to be segmented in a vastly different way to enable time for those skills to take place.

**Lord Aberdare:** Thank you, that's an interesting perspective. Now, what I'm going to do is ask if any of my colleagues have questions. Lord Baker, do you want to go first?

**Lord Baker of Dorking:** There's considerable unanimity from all five of you, quite frankly. Too heavy on information, just measuring the recollection, nothing else. The overwhelming evidence we're getting on this committee is that the EBacc and Progress 8 should disappear. We are strongly of that view. We want to open it all up so that you have other subjects. We are very worried that the cultural subjects have been almost squeezed out. I was really glad to see music so strong and I'm so glad we have a middle school. I'm so pro middle schools. This is not the debate today, but 9 to 14 are the right ages to change children, not 11. But that's another big debate. I was glad to see that music is so strong in your school, Participant A, well done.

We are moving in that way. Particularly, we are very concerned about the lack of data training. The computing GCSE is not really very attractive, and is only taken by 13% of the children. All the 7s, 8s and 9s do GCSE computing. It doesn't really feature upon many of the students in your area, Participant C, I suspect. It just doesn't. There's got to be an easier way of teaching data, because that's the one skill they must have at 18. They must have data skills. Every student we've ever talked to says that, and many are not leaving schools with data skills. Do you think any of your students leave with many data skills?

**Lord Aberdare:** Participant B, do you want to come in first?

**Participant B:** With the scrapping of Progress 8, I think that would really open things up for state schools. For example, my school is a state academy and we looked into doing IB, but we were unable to do that because it wouldn't count towards your Progress 8 figures. So this is another hurdle that state schools are facing that isn't present in the independent sector.

When we're trying to push for innovation, as we're trying to do here, the barriers to entry are so high because not only do we have to follow the national curriculum, which means when we're trying to group subjects into Progress 8 that doesn't fit as naturally, because you have to study the national curriculum in this certain way. Colleagues at other schools are doing an amazing job of this already. I've had the privilege to go and visit some twice and be part of the Edge Foundation— So they are already doing that, but the amount of paperwork and backing up and having to prove to Ofsted that you are doing the national curriculum even if you're doing it in a different way is just immense.

And then on top of that, Progress 8, where it's trying to figure out which bucket the GCSEs are going to go in and you can't take a different type of qualification; and where Bedales are doing this amazing thing of going down to two GCSEs and they've been devising their own programme of curriculum to go alongside it, we are unable to innovate in that way. It's more and more of those barriers... That's not an option that we as a state school would have; if we wrote a

qualification, UCAS wouldn't necessarily back us in the same way that they might an independent school. So to hear you say that for me is like, 'oh my gosh, that's amazing,' because these barriers in these systems that we've been actively trying to innovate in spite of, for them to go away would make our jobs so much easier.

**Lord Aberdare:** Thank you, Participant B. Participant E?

**Participant E:** One of the things I was most shocked about in the UK system when I first arrived was the incredible amount of time, energy and resources that go into analysing data. Being a maths teacher myself, understanding data and statistics, the same piece of data can be represented many different ways. So having these pieces of data that don't make a lot of sense to parents—

To be honest, even as a parent, when I was choosing schools it's not necessarily picked by data all of the time. You have a sense of whether a school is good or not based on what the community has to say about it. There's a lot more than just this data. It's just unbelievable, the amount of resources that go into it. And then for what gain, because again, if you look at PISA scores, I know that in Canada, we do outperform the UK and we don't do anywhere near the amount of data analysis; it's frowned upon. So I'd love to see what the impact of that is on actually improving systems.

**Lord Aberdare:** OK, thank you. Participant A?

**Participant A:** When we're talking about Progress 8 and data, a lot of the predicted grades that we are measured against—for pupils to achieve those grades—are absolutely nothing to do with the creative process. So I might get a pupil that can't play an instrument and hasn't had many instrumental lessons or skills, but is predicted a grade 9 based on their English, reading and maths skills, and that has generally no correlation with how musical they are within my subject. And then what happens—and this is what's been happening in the past—you will do everything you can, you will be held accountable for that pupil to get them that grade 9 and to work all the hours under the sun with all the extra interventions, and the pupil won't get the grade 9. Your Progress 8 will go down and then they'll stop giving the value in the subject even more. It does work both ways, but normally it's very high targets, as opposed to a low target for a musical individual. It's nice when that happens, but it's not very often.

**Lord Aberdare:** Fantastic. We seem to have a very harmonious group here, which is encouraging. Participant D?

**Participant D:** Just really to say that data often is just reflective of the intake you're getting, rather than necessarily the output. I think a lot of the ways in which schools are judged are profoundly unfair, because essentially some

communities are going to struggle based on the context of their community, to lead to the same things. Obviously there is a relative kind of bit in the middle there, but I think particularly the way in which you can have outstanding schools based on them getting lots of 9s; if they're a state grammar school, for example, you would expect that and often they will be in areas of high levels of affluence, and therefore it is just confirming what we already know from other measures. We don't enter our data into league tables because all it does is just reflect your intake. I think that's a big part of what data can show.

**Lord Aberdare:** OK. I'm going to move on to the next topic, but I'm going to bring Participant C in first. It's really describing the experience of preparing pupils for GCSEs in your particular subject, given what we've all talked about—the very rigid and comprehensive content of the GCSEs. Participant C, do you want to make a start on this?

**Participant C:** The only thing I was going to say on the previous subject was that, sometimes, as a state school working in isolation and not as a group—a large MAT with lots of secondary schools—we feel at a bit of a disadvantage because of the resources that they are able to pump into, let's say, my subject. So, in English, having a series of English directors who can go and use the data to firefight and to raise attainment is a really big advantage over a school that works in isolation. I just wanted to make that point.

In terms of preparing pupils for GCSEs, I think music is probably a better place to go for this one. Within English, I feel that we've got quite a good open platform within key stage 3; we've got skills that we need to work towards and we do use those skills. We've used our key stage 3 curriculum to be really creative and to try and use it to engage pupils with literature and with reading and with language, because they don't come to us with a natural love of the subject. They don't come to us from households where books are things that exist, and they have very different experiences. So we do try to use the key stage 3 platforms to engage and enthuse, and we do have the freedom to do that within the national curriculum, and that's okay.

In terms of preparing them for the GCSE itself, sometimes it feels like there are some restrictions placed on us, maybe by exterior bodies like Ofsted who wish you to have a broad and balanced curriculum. And while it's broad and balanced, it means that there are fewer opportunities for you to engage in your own ideas.

**Lord Aberdare:** We've heard an awful lot about students who don't get a grade 4 pass in English and have to do resits, and whether there are functional qualifications that could help people in that position. Do you have any thoughts on that? They are sometimes referred to as the 'forgotten third'. Is that something that concerns you?



**Participant C:** That's absolutely right, yes. We've got students who we know are— This is not defeatist, but there are students who come to us barely able to read and it is unreasonable to expect that within five years they will have made all of that progress. And yes, it can be really hard work for them.

One of the only benefits of Progress 8 is it does help them to recognise some of their progress. So when we get residual marks, sometimes those residual marks for English can be really positive, because they do better in our subject than in some others because of the amount of time that we are able to have in the curriculum. But that varies from school to school as well, and that wouldn't be the case for something like music.

**Lord Aberdare:** Thank you very much. Participant B?

**Participant B:** I've seen English in a couple of different schools. I've seen it done where basically from year 7 to year 11 it's like a drilling station for GCSEs. In a previous school that I worked at, the students in year 11 had their advice and mentor group time taken away from them to do extra English lessons. There was also an extra hour after school. I was teaching drama at the time; I had one drama lesson where 14 out of my 18 students came into my room crying because they had to do extra English, because the school was so worried about getting a positive Progress 8.

I'm really glad that Participant C has got a very creative year 7 and 8, but that's not the case in every school. A lot of schools take the GCSE mark scheme and then just scale it down I think. Something that we've tried to implement at my school, and that I've also seen done at XP, is the use of standards-based learning. We use the Common Core State Standards, which help to give an age progression for where students should be, to prepare them. So it works backwards. They start at where a student should be at the end of college, and then they work backwards. But that's much more open-ended—I can spell correctly', 'I can cite evidence correctly'. They're much broader. They are the skills that they need for GCSE, but they are more measurable, in a lot of ways. When students have shown that they've achieved it, they're able to move on. We're not in this repeated loop which the current system urges us to go on—this repeated loop over and over again.

**Lord Aberdare:** That really interesting, thank you. Participant D I?

**Participant D:** Just two things in moving to a two-tier model: we are keeping English language and maths, and the idea is our students will sit them when they're ready. This I think goes back to the 14-19 rather than 11-16 points, which means that, you know, students might do it earlier or they might do it later, depending on where they are in their journey.

Picking up on Participant C 's point, that feels much fairer to those students and it's a monumental waste of time asking students to sit exams for which they're not ready. As long as they get it by the time they leave education at 18, then that should be all they need. So that's just one thing.

The second thing to say is that my subject, English, on the literature side— For a country which prides itself in its literary tradition, the GCSE in English literature I think kills the love of subject, because you've only got one novel, one play and ten poems, for a whole two years. You look at the English A-level numbers as one indicator of that, although there are many others other than A-level, I understand. I think there is a direct connection between those two. And so again, the preparation for especially that end assessment point at 16 is stifling that love of learning and that love of subject.

**Lord Aberdare:** Thank you very much. Mike, you had a question you wanted to come in with?

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Yes, I've got a specific one that I'll come to, but in light of what has just been said, I wanted to ask whether in terms of preparation for GCSEs— We've heard some evidence in our committee so far of schools squeezing key stage 3 to start the preparation for GCSEs in year 9, and that means of course narrowing the curriculum before key stage 3 is finished. I've not actually heard anybody in favour of that, but we do know it happens in some schools. So my question would be a general one: does any of that happen in your school? I think by the shaking of your heads it's really very unlikely. We heard from Amanda Spielman. She said that should not be happening, but Ofsted do not make that a consideration in their inspections. Could you share any comments on that?

Participant D, you mentioned about sitting exams when ready—I suppose a bit like a driving test. I think that does make sense, but I am not clear on the practicalities. How would that affect teachers? If you have a class of, say, 30 young people, and they're going to be ready at different times, how would that be managed in terms of a teacher's workload, in terms of actually getting to sit the exams? Thank you.

**Lord Aberdare:** Participant D, can you give some very brief answers to those issues?

**Participant D:** It works when you're talking about particularly skills-focused subjects like English, and English language and maths. It would be different for other subjects, but that's the reason why we've kept just those two.

For the other ones, we have a more rigid and carefully choreographed kind of curriculum. But English and maths I think have a different function and that is

why they can be sat at will. Essentially, it would probably be a kind of two-term kind of pathway you would track onto, and then you'd probably be wanting exams at multiple times in the year rather than just one.

**Lord Aberdare:** Thank you very much. Now I'm going to bring in Participant E.

**Participant E:** I would say that preparing pupils to take GCSEs in maths is quite a stressful time. Students write an incredible number of exams in a very, very short space of time. And you know, amongst all students—lower and higher ability—it creates a huge amount of stress sometimes. I don't quite understand why all subjects need to be assessed with exams. I mean, you know, I was never asked to write some. Some of them are writing 25 or 26 exams over a period of five to six weeks.

Some subjects are conducive to being examined, subjects like maths and English, but is it really appropriate to be examining subjects for more creative subjects like art, for example, or physical subjects like PE in the same way? I would argue no.

One of the other challenges we have in preparing students to take maths GCSE is the decision whether to put them on a foundation or higher paper. Particularly when new subjects are introduced, as a department head, it's very stressful—for science as well—trying to figure out which is the best paper for them to write, because on the one hand they might do very well, and on the other hand, they won't.

I wish that we had one exam where we had one examining body. A huge amount of resources is just spent trying to decide which body should we go with and which exam shall we do, constantly worrying that we're not preparing them properly for the GCSE because we put them into the wrong area, and that's not something we should be spending our time on.

**Lord Aberdare:** OK, that was a fantastic lead into the next subject, which is to do with the other forms of assessment, and specifically non exam assessment. Kenneth, I don't know if that was related to what you were going to ask, but why don't you hopefully help us move on to that?

**Lord Baker of Dorking:** My question is very simple to all the teachers. You have to make a start in changing, and schools are now going—like Bedales and others—to just two GCSEs, English and maths. Are any of you in favour of that? Just a quick answer, yes or no, and then I have a short supplementary.

*[some participants raise their hand]*

**Lord Baker of Dorking:** My supplementary now. I've been looking seriously into children's reading books and I've come to the conclusion that the best

author of children's books today is a person called Katherine Rundell. Have any of you heard of her? Maybe not. She's a fellow of All Souls and she's just won the best book of the year for the biography of John Donne. But she's also written six children's books, all of which have won prizes, and they are brilliant. Look up Katherine Rundell; look up her book *The Explorer* and look up the one that was just published this week. They say she's the replacement of Tolkien and CS Lewis. That's my tip and I have no financial interest in Katherine Rundell.

**Lord Aberdare:** That's sorted out my Christmas reading. Thank you, Kenneth. Participant D, do you want to come in on that and on non-exam assessment as well? I think this is something that your school has done quite a lot of work in as well.

**Participant D:** Yeah, just very briefly— I mean, that was a slightly naughty question, Lord Baker, because in our context we've been doing our own curriculum for— We started this movement gradually 17 years ago. So for us to be able to move to two GCSEs over the next few years is an easier progression than for maybe the entire state system in England and Wales. So there is that to say.

But yes, certainly, I think that the move needs to happen. Moving assessments online is another thing which I think that we need to look at urgently in order to serve students well. It would also be an efficiency. I also agree with stopping the multiple exam boards ridiculousness. I think you would also save a lot of money and time, both in terms of teacher effort, if you didn't have as many GCSEs, but also in terms of learning times.

So one thing that we will gain by our students moving to a two-GCSE model and having continuous assessment during their key stage 4 years with us is that we gain back the entirety of the summer term, which currently is just revision and then study leave for year 11. Once we've moved over, they'll spend the whole of their summer term with us. So if you think about the money saved by not doing GCSEs and the learning time gained, I think in terms of productivity and outcome that would be huge in terms of the benefit to young people.

**Lord Aberdare:** Thank you. Participant A, do you want to say something, given that music is, as you mentioned earlier, not a subject that is easily assessed through GCSE-type exams?

**Participant A:** When the changes came into place in the GCSEs, the only difference really for us was the weighting of the exams, because you can't do performance as a written exam. So it just meant that the listening exam, the appraising exam, was changed to a 40% exam, which is very, very difficult. The questions got much more difficult for students to access. And for pupils to get a

grade 4 in music, it's 60% of the overall qualification. It's a very high percentage compared with other subjects.

We're starting to see the knock-on effect now of the 9-1 GCSE. We've got no music teachers. The music teachers who are coming through have got a BTEC qualification, they can't teach A-level, and it's having this downward kind of spiral effect of the changes that have already just taken place. So yeah, it's difficult, because teachers want to do well, to get the correct grade and the right courses for the pupils. I'd love to put my pupils through GCSE—all of them—but I know they're not going to achieve target grades in that course at the moment. So that's affecting the development of music moving forwards. It's very sad.

**Lord Aberdare:** Yes. One of the concerns we heard quite a lot about changing from GCSEs is that they are reliable and comparable and easy to assess. Is there any concern among teachers that new forms of assessment could impose extra workload and challenges on the teaching staff? Participant B?

**Participant B:** I think with any system-wide change, there is going to need to be training for teachers. For example, Scotland is often pointed out as an example of having an amazing competency-based framework. But speaking to colleagues in Scotland, there is a big implementation gap, because they haven't rolled out a training programme for their teachers.

I think people are scared of change. Naturally we have the innovation curve where it's great to take a step in the right direction, but sometimes you face so much resistance just trying to take that step. It's like you're wading through a rip current as you're trying to take one small step of innovation.

A lot of colleagues have a standards-based framework; they can devise their own assessments, so they can create projects which bring in music and art and drama to an English classroom, and then students can be successful in multiple ways. Currently in England, the only communication in the GCSEs that is compulsory is your speaking and listening, but that mark counts for nothing. Even if you get outstanding, it doesn't matter. You could just pass and it would be fine. You can't pass your GCSE if you fail it, but it means nothing to your overall grade outcome, which is to my mind ridiculous, because that's such an important thing.

Then we have things like music and drama being side-lined, subjects which really value those teamwork and collaboration skills. Programming skills are on the future list of skills that are being showcased, programming and being able to code, but this has actually fallen down the list, because now we're using AI to write computer programming systems. So what we're seeing are the things that we need a human being to do—that collaboration, those teamwork skills—those become the most important skills for us.

**Lord Baker of Dorking:** Could I just please interrupt? I'm very sorry, I have to leave now. But thank you all. But look, be bold. If you're not bold in your proposals, nothing will happen. Right. It's up to you. Goodbye. Good luck.

**Lord Aberdare:** Thank you, Kenneth. We will also try and be bold. Participant E, why don't you come in on this one?

**Participant E:** I think we have had some massive changes, and change will always have pushback, because change is scary. But ultimately I think everybody is united in the idea that some sort of drastic change does need to happen. I don't think it's going to happen regardless, but it needs to happen no doubt.

**Lord Aberdare:** Participant A?

**Participant A:** Yes, so what Participant B was saying about the speaking and listening aspects of the English GCSE— I actually supported quite a few of our students at my previous school with the skills needed to do well in the speaking and listening exam. Like Participant B said, music and drama, they all link together. So you've gone from pupils that wouldn't speak in front of people, to getting them to actually discuss the topic they're passionate about. So I just wanted to agree with what Participant B was saying about using those other skills.

**Lord Aberdare:** Thank you very much. OK, now I'm going to move on to the next question. It is about the fact that there have been significant reforms over the past decade, but a lot of people—and I think that's true of all our witnesses here—have suggested that further reform is now needed. How do you feel about further changes potentially being introduced and how might they be introduced?

The other thing that has come across to me is that there needs to be a process of preparation—rolling out, transition, all those kinds of things. I think it would be really helpful to the committee to have your thoughts on an approach that might work for you as teachers, rather than having yet another vast shake-up being dropped upon you from a great height. Participant B?

**Participant B:** I think what's really important is looking at what people are already doing well. So going to schools like Bedales or XP, visiting Lumiar, working with our colleagues in Scotland—Wales are also working on a new curriculum model as well—and visiting other countries. So there's a school in America called High Tech High, which focuses on project-based learning. There are lots of institutions— In the UK we have the Edge Foundation who do a lot of work with both the political system but also with teachers and leaders. And so having a system where all of those voices are included at the start when we're looking at what this reform looks like, and going and seeing different things

doing well and then saying to teachers, 'okay these changes are coming in the next three years, how can we prepare you, how can we prepare your staff?'

I think when the 1 to 9 system came in, I was a brand new baby teacher. That was my first year of teaching. I remember being in a department where I knew as much as my head of department, because there were no resources given by the exam board until November, and everyone was like, 'well, I don't know what a grade 9 looks like, do you know what a 9 looks like?' No, nobody knows; it was this ethereal thing.

I think if we're using the research that's already gone before us, if we're engaging with people like Edge Foundation, Rethinking Assessment, who have already done a significant amount of work on this issue, and we're talking to schools in the process of that innovation journey and what that looks like— I know that we could have been better prepared for starting here at my school and what that was going to look like. I know that having a text strategy is really important and making sure that all the text systems work, there's so much that goes into that. But I think having teachers feel more included than when the 1 to 9 reforms came in is definitely a key factor, especially with everything that's been happening in the sector recently, with all the strikes and the teacher shortages as well. I think if we were able to offer a more creative route into teaching, we might actually see more teachers join the profession, because then it's excitement, enjoyment, curiosity. You're not just sat there teaching the same GCSE lesson to the kids who don't want to be there.

**Lord Aberdare:** Thank you, lots of good ideas. Participant D?

**Participant D:** Just very briefly, thinking about the process of change, it is one which we have to be realistic about how long it will take, because I think fundamentally you were talking about us moving away from a system which on many levels doesn't trust teachers to have autonomy and to make the right decisions for their students to move to a higher trust system for teachers. That is the work of probably a decade, because you will also have to re-empower teachers to be subject specialists if you want them to be able to tailor the curriculum more individually to the students and the schools that they work in. So I think you are talking about a decade if you want this change to be achievable, but also if you recognise the amount of change that needs to happen culturally.

I suppose the other thing really to say is that there are ways in changing where you can keep the existing frameworks but dial down where that assessment happens, or when that assessment happens. So you could, for example, keep all the same subjects, keeping all the same frameworks, but just start moving things so that assessments are conducted internally and are not necessarily

reported for some of it. So you initially just reduce the number of assessments that happen at GCSE point.

I think there is a gradualist approach which would immediately relieve the pressure not only on schools but also on young people and the mental health impact of excessive terminal assessments. The UK, in the OECD system, has the second-highest level of adolescent mental health problems after South Korea.

**Lord Aberdare:** Good. You got a good clapping reaction to that. Participant C?

**Participant C:** I know that this is an 11-16 education committee, but one of the things that maybe didn't work so well when the last round of changes came into A-level and GCSE— They were a couple of years apart and I'd actually say that when we're thinking about how we build on skills all the way through, it's actually probably quite important to include all of the partners, from early years foundation stage right through the education system to universities and to industry as well, because the things that industry need are the things we need to be teaching.

One of the things that we really struggle with in an area of high economic deprivation, where there aren't many opportunities, is being able to make all of the curriculum relevant to them for when they go forward, and that's a big part of engagement for us. We've got one enormous employer in this area, BAE Systems. If you don't go in there, the opportunities are quite limited. So we've got a huge rush for engineering and yet maybe we could be doing with a bit of diversity more locally anyway. So you know, from industry, we would need to know also what soft skills they would want.

I also think that when you're doing anything at all, having an integrated technology system would be a really, really, really good way to go—something that everybody has access to. There's equity in it so that nobody is disadvantaged by where you work, what school you're at, because of your access to technology. We need to be forward-thinking and we need to be competitive to keep up with the advancements in China, in America, and for the country's economic growth. Lord Baker was absolutely spot on, the uptake for computer science here is shocking. It's not very good at all; not enough people want to do those things.

**Lord Aberdare:** OK, that's fantastic. Now, we are rapidly running out of time. What I'm going to ask each of you in a moment is to suggest one change that you would like to see as an initial or key step of a reform process which, I entirely agree, is likely to take a considerable amount of time. Before I do that, I'm just going to ask my two colleagues whether they would like to raise questions that haven't otherwise been covered. Do you have anything that we haven't covered that you would like to throw into the mix?



**Lord Storey:** I've been really impressed with the session. The two big issues for me have always been the fact that we have an 11-16 school system, which is mainly focused on the academic curriculum; and secondly, I was interested in Participant C 's point about skills. We talk about it, but do we really see it in practice, because schools very much guard their status? And I just don't know how we break that barrier down; how do we make sure that we get those skills happening in schools? Skills will be different for different areas, of course.

And then the final observation I have is—and I think it goes back to what you all said, and this is not a party-political point—we do face a real challenge over teachers. The number of people wanting to be teachers has dropped to virtually an all-time low. Why? The number of people going into initial teacher training has declined and declined. In some of these specialist subjects— I always quote the example of physics. You know, there are 400 schools in England which haven't got a qualified physics teacher. To slightly add to that, I'm not always a believer that just because you've got a degree in physics that makes you a good teacher. I think that the skills of teaching are not necessarily linked to that academic subject. Those would be my observations.

**Lord Aberdare:** Thank you very much, Mike. Now we've got just about five minutes left and there are five teachers with us. So you each have a minute. Participant E?

**Participant E:** The most important thing to me is moving to a different model like 14-19. You were just talking about retention and teachers. I think a lot of schools are already moving to a different model. Even within our trust, we've already segmented some of the teachers with that. It's absolutely dire in a lot of the maths departments—half of my maths department are unqualified maths teachers—or our PE teachers, our science teachers. We put out adverts for a job and we simply can't recruit enough maths teachers. If the system changed drastically and we had a system of 14-19, we might have enough specialist maths teachers to actually deliver the subject properly. You don't need the same kind of specialist content knowledge in maths when you teach students who are 11, 12 or 13 years old. I think it would also equally help the students and solve the massive retention and recruitment crisis, at least for the maths department. So yeah, obviously that's the thing that I would most like to see.

**Lord Aberdare:** Participant C?

**Participant C:** I agree with the idea of getting rid of Progress 8. I don't think that anybody really values the effect that it has had on teachers and students and academics alike. Also reducing the amount of content that students are expected to just remember. The work that the EEF has done is really, really valuable in things like meta cognitive strategies and so on, but with really poor

learners it's still an awful lot for them to remember. I think that anything that we do going forward needs to have a huge hook in technology. For dinosaurs like me, who are in their mid-40s and didn't have very much access to IT in their own background, we need more training for teachers on technology. But technology needs to be a big focus right across the curriculum moving forward.

**Lord Aberdare:** Fantastic. If you're a dinosaur I don't know what that makes me. I think I'm long since extinct. Participant D?

**Participant D:** I'm going to say one thing which is perhaps slightly leftfield, but I think it's the tail that wags the education dog further down the system. So again, picking up on that idea that we have to look beyond just 11-16, I would get rid of pre-qualification applications for universities. So much of our education system is seen through the lens of academic universities and that is driven by I think media narrative and the nature of the ruling classes potentially. But I think if you got rid of that, suddenly the pressure comes off at 16, the pressure comes off the GCSEs, because those are what are used by universities to filter, and then that has a massive distorting effect on having to have academic GCSEs because they are universal qualifications and that feeds into that system. There are plenty of other things I'd want to talk about—getting rid of multiple exam boards, capping the number of hours that students have to do exams at 16, just because there should be almost like a legal limit for health and safety reasons—but that's one I'm just going to throw in.

**Lord Aberdare:** That's fantastic. OK. Participant A?

**Participant A:** As you said previously, removal of the EBacc and Progress 8. It doesn't do any favours for creative subjects at all. I think if we're moving forward and we're changing the system, we've got to make sure that this new system is accessible to everyone. I work for a variety of different exam boards and, you know, I'll go from a private school where pupils have been learning the harp to a pupil from a more deprived area, and the only thing he's got is a backing track and he's trying to rap along to it. So whatever it is needs to be accessible for all pupils. There might be a bit more funding within the arts, but I'm biased. I'm the only music teacher in this entire school. I have to do all the stuff that ordinary teachers do and then top up all the extracurricular on top of that as well. That's why we have no music teachers coming through. They're just tired; they're worn out.

**Lord Aberdare:** You highlighted one of the challenges for this committee actually, which is that looking at the 11-16 education part of the education system in isolation really doesn't work unless you're thinking about what happened before and what's going to happen after. So thank you for making that point. Participant B?

**Participant B:** I would reduce the number of GCSEs that students are required to take and maybe introduce an interdisciplinary GCSE option where students could be more focused on skills, those deeper learning competencies, and showcase that through a project of their choosing. So giving students more control and autonomy over their learning.

I am speaking as someone who did nearly leave the profession. I had a really stressful situation happen and I basically got PTSD from working at a particular school, and my current school was my saving grace. My current school was: 'We're going to do things differently. We're focusing on project-based learning. We're focusing on skills. We want to prepare students'. And I have flourished as a teacher since coming here. What it's done for me as an individual is mirrored in what it's done for our students. But the way that we do things differently, focusing on projects and making it exciting and having curiosity and allowing people to have freedom in what they choose to teach—within certain bounds, obviously—that for me has been a really freeing experience and has made me now not ever think I could be anything but a teacher, but only in this kind of context. I don't want to go back to a normal school.

**Lord Aberdare:** I can only thank all five of you. It's been really encouraging first of all to have your views and inputs from the frontline, as it were, but secondly the degree of enthusiasm for tackling the system and not sitting on our laurels, but really trying to make some changes with a long term view in mind. I hope the committee will be helpful in some way in what it comes up with. I certainly am very encouraged by what I've heard from the five of you. I'm very grateful to you all for sparing time and intellectual input for this process.

[End of transcript]