



Education for 11-16 Year Olds Committee

Roundtable meeting with pupils

Wednesday 20 September 2023

GROUP 1

Lord Knight of Weymouth: So, welcome. If we could just quickly go around what will effectively be my screen and say hello to introduce ourselves. If you could give us your name, what year you're in and what subjects you're currently studying. That would be really helpful. My name is Jim, Lord Knight of Weymouth. I'm a former schools Minister, a very long time ago, and am excited to hear from you. Let's start with Participant F.

Participant F: Hi, I'm Participant F and this is Participant G. We're in year 13.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Thank you. Participant E?

Participant E: My name's Participant E. I'm in year 13 and I'm studying geography, politics and sociology.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Thanks very much. Participant D.

Participant D: Good afternoon. My name is Participant D and I'm in year 11

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Thank you very much. Participant C

Participant C: Hi, I'm Participant C. I'm. I'm in year 11 and I studied geography, business, statistics and childcare.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Okay cool, welcome. Participant B.

Participant B: Oh yeah, hi. It's nice to meet you everyone. My name's Participant B. I'm in year 13. I studied geography, economics and politics.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Thank you. Participant A.

Participant A: Hi, I'm Participant A and I went to a UTC school and now I'm on an apprenticeship. I'm studying construction management.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Great. There are a few people listening in who are advising us as a committee or possibly from teachers in schools. I think in terms of active participants, that is all of us.

Let me move on to the first substantive question. We're interested to know how you would describe the experience for you of studying for GCSEs in years 10 and 11, and thinking about that, studying for GCSEs. Do you think the amount you have had to learn is too little, too much or about right? I understand that in independent schools you've done things slightly differently, so we're interested in understanding that different experience to what most people have done with GCSEs. Who is interested in kicking us off in terms of the experience of studying for GCSEs and the workload attached to it.

Participant F: Can we start please?

Lord Knight of Weymouth: You certainly can.

Participant G: Okay I can start. We do internally assessed courses here so it's coursework throughout year 10 and year 11. I have seven GCSEs and three internally assessed courses, so we have slightly less exams at the end of year 11. I still think that we had so much to learn and if you're learning that much content, you revise a lot for that exam. You then forget it all to then fill the space to revise for your next exam, which isn't necessarily the best way of learning in my opinion. I still couldn't remember any of the French that I learned, or any of the physics I learned at GCSEs.

Participant F: I feel like we've lost some more interest in the subjects when learning purely for the exam, so a lot of the coursework is personal to you. With the global awareness that we do it's more about what is more personal to you which sort of stands out more in your mind after all the exams and GCSEs are over. I think that's better than revising for the exam and then forgetting it afterwards.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Great. Thank you. I should have said if you want to speak, please put the raise hand function up that's on Microsoft Teams if you know what that is. If not, wave your hand at me and I will try and see you. I can just about see everyone on my screen. Thank you both, and so you both did seven GCSEs?

Participant F: Yes, we both did seven.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Did you have to do seven? Could you have done five? Could you have done less?

Participant F: We could have done less, so there was the option of further maths and triple science, which were still GCSEs, but the school are trying to transition to just two GCSEs in the next couple of years. They will transition from between five and seven to two in the next couple of years.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Do you think that's a good idea to transition down to two?

Participant F: I personally think it's a good idea. There's a lot of stuff missing from the GCSE curriculum that could be put in with the internally assessed courses. In science it's experiments, core practicals, that sort of thing that's not in GCSEs which is more valuable, that is more useful than the GCSE curriculum.

Participant G: Part of the internally assessed courses is that you can do more in the community, so in global awareness we have individual, collaborative projects where we work with the local community to solve an issue.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Thank you Participant G.

Participant C: I don't think we really have enough time to be learning all the content for GCSEs. I take two mostly coursework-based subjects: business and childcare. As for coursework, I think we do have enough time to be writing it, submitting it, doing the mock coursework. But I have my November mock exams coming up soon and we're being constantly reminded by teachers about how we don't have a lot of time left. We still need to learn a lot of content and we're only about halfway through, or just a little over through the content for most of our subjects, especially for the core subjects, maths, English and science. I think we need more time to be covering all the content and effectively revising it to be able to remember it. This is so we can get into the colleges or the apprenticeships that we want, as well as taking the subjects that we want in further education.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Thank you very much. Very well put. Participant B?

Participant B: My experience with GCSEs was quite a unique one, I'd say, because COVID hit when I was in year 9 and year 10. I found that although we did have some leeway in terms of specification, some content was cut down. I still found that because my school was severely underfunded, we didn't have teachers for quite a long time. We didn't end up finishing most of the content. A lot of us had to teach ourselves. Overall, I think the content is too much, but for coursework subjects it is a very good amount; it's perfect. I love my course. I took two BTECs and seven GCSEs. I think it's too much and my experience was okay, but because I managed to cram, and I managed to get good results. I think for a lot of my peers, they didn't enjoy it, they didn't have a good experience. Overall, I think it's just way too much.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Okay. Thank you. We might want to come back to that coursework issue in a short while. Participant E.

Participant E: I did nine GCSEs, and they were all exam based, so no coursework, and I found the revision process very stressful. There was a lot of pressure put on by school, so I ended up using Seneca. I don't know if you guys used that.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Participant E, just to help the committee who might be less literate in some of these things, tell us a bit about Seneca, what that is.

Participant E: It's an online website and app and you can choose many different courses from different specifications, and you can just use it for learning or revision. You go through the content at quite a slow pace. They have different questions and little quiz-based things at the end so that you can learn and revise the content that you need for GCSEs and A levels and such.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Did you personally have to pay for that, or did the school pay for that?

Participant E: No, I think we were just using the free one. There is a premium version that you could pay for, but I don't think we did.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Okay, I'm sorry. I interrupted you. Was there anything else you wanted to add?

Participant E: I was just going to say that some of the other people have said there are things that they had to learn from GCSEs that they can't remember anymore. The whole point of learning was just for the exam and just for the results, which I think is not very useful for life.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Yeah. Thank you very much Participant E.

Participant A: I attended a UTC and I did six GCSEs and one engineering qualification, and I learnt quite a lot through that engineering qualification, but the GCSEs that I did I took the information in, then did my exam and forgot it. I think in school we're often learning all this content to just take the exam and I think in the real-world, and when I'm in my apprenticeship now, we're not learning information to sit in an exam, we're learning information to apply it to real life contexts. Young people can understand how it works in the world of work.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Great. Thank you. Very well put.

Participant D: I was going to say that I'm in year 11 and when I'm studying for my GCSEs, I tend to stress a lot. They go through the topics and sometimes they don't come back to it. Most of my classmates tend to forget about what the topic is and how to answer the question. Our school has given us many websites

to help us study some of us have Tassomai which is a way to motivate you into studying.

Lord Baker of Dorking: Did any of you study design technology, put up your hands if you have studied design technology. Just one. Did any of you study performing arts or drama or dance?

Lord Knight of Weymouth: I think I see Participant B's hand on the edge of the screen attached to drama and performing arts. Is that right?

Lord Baker of Dorking: I see, right. So, none of you have done those cultural subjects or those tactical subjects at all. What did you do in your BTEC, Participant B? You did two BTECs?

Participant B: Yes, so I did creative media. It's like ICT, and I also did business and enterprise. Those two.

Lord Baker of Dorking: What was the first one? Sorry. What was your first one business studies and?

Participant B: creative media. But it's like an alternative name for ICT.

Lord Baker of Dorking: Was it any good?

Participant B: Yeah, personally, I enjoyed it.

Lord Baker of Dorking: Thank you.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Participant D, you've put your hand up.

Participant D: I studied BTEC business and most of it is just coursework The practice coursework that they gave us, it helps us to boost our grades because we are practising to what grade we should get. For drama and design and technology. That was an option for GCSEs. We only learn it from year 7 to year 9.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Alastair.

Lord Aberdare: Thank you. I just wondered if for any of our participants whether there was a subject that they would have liked to have done and weren't able to do. It wasn't an option at their school or in their course. Something that they felt they missed.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Participant C.

Participant C: I personally really wanted to study psychology because I only moved to England last September, and in year 9 I was taking tester subjects and I chose psychology, and I personally really enjoyed it. I was hoping that when I moved here, I would be able to continue it for GCSE, but I found that in my city

there was only one school that offered a psychology GCSE and they had a very long waiting list. I couldn't get admitted to that school. I feel like there's options for A level, but I feel that subject is very popular, especially among young people now that careers in therapy psychology are becoming more popular. I feel that subject should be more common for students to be able to take.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Thanks, two participants have their hands up. The question I have is very strongly related to several of the questions that we wanted to ask. I'll ask you to sort of wrap your answers into both Alastair's question. Was there something else missing in terms of options available? Also, asking you how you feel about your education, whether it's helping you to learn the skills and knowledge you need for the future, and if not, what do you feel?

Participant B: Yeah. First, I wanted to do GCSE photography. I wanted to pursue it further but then my secondary school didn't offer it. In terms of skills or experience for the future, I holistically and firmly believe that GCSEs don't really apply or have set me up for the future because overall it was just like an overrated memory test. It was cramming all night for an exam and remembering everything, which I know my peers went through this in the same way but after our final exam and in summer we were just happy that we could forget all the content we had just memorised. It's less about skill and it's more about what you learn, the facts and figures. We would celebrate it. I know a lot of my friends even burned the books because they hated the subject so much, the core subjects. Overall, I think in terms of skills I wasn't prepared at all. I feel the same way about further education at A-level, it's more extended. GCSEs just didn't do much.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Two very quick supplementary questions. Were you able to do photography post-16 as an option or had the desire gone by then?

Participant B: I wanted it, but then because of the subject combination I wanted to do, psychology and geography and photography, I couldn't do it because they had a system in blocks. Let's say two subjects can't clash if in the same block, all three of my subjects were in one block so I had no flexibility. Therefore, I moved to another sixth form and that sixth form was very, very specialist and STEM based, and they did not offer any of these subjects.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: The other supplementary was when people were burning their books because they hated their subjects so much, what subject did they find the most boring?

Participant B: I think that it depends on the person, because a lot of people despised English, especially those who loved STEM, they just hated English so much because they ended up doing bad in it. Again, we were locked down, we

didn't really have much of a chance to build on our skills, so it was just quite a mess, so we didn't have much practice exam help. You know how you're forced to do one subject, like humanities, like geography or history, one language, a lot of people hated that as I know everybody took a language. Most of my friends, they hated languages and then a lot of my friends who took geography, they didn't like that either. I think the subjects that are mandated onto you, they just don't prefer that.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Great. Thank you. Participant E.

Participant E: My school offered a lot of options that I would have been happy taking, but we only got one choice, so we were made to choose between history and geography, and we had to take a language and we had to do religious studies GCSE. That left us with only one choice, which meant I couldn't do all the things I wanted to do, which was quite disappointing, and they didn't really offer much support around helping us decide which one to choose. I went to our guidance councillor, and she just said you have options to do those in sixth form. That's not helpful.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Would you accept, though, that there's only a certain amount of time in the week and therefore you can't do everything. Are there things that you were forced to do that you just think were irrelevant?

Participant E: Yeah. We didn't get a choice on taking RE and I would have much rather have chosen something else than that because we did it all through from year 7 to year 11, and it was basically the same content the whole way through. We didn't get a wide knowledge around all religions. It was based on just Islam and Christianity the whole way through. It didn't include any philosophy. I think most people did not engage at all.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Thank you. That's helpful. Participant C.

Participant C: I just wanted to talk about what Participant B said earlier about English, and I found that we've just started English language and throughout the entire of year 10 we did literature so we did An Inspector Calls, A Christmas Carol, poetry, and Macbeth. Now that we've that we've started language, I found that it's a lot denser than literature, and I think most of my peers also feel the same way that literature was much more interesting. We got to at least learn about new stories. Language is very much just grammar and it's teaching us the knowledge that we've already learned back in primary. I just wanted to add that on.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Participant A, over to you.

Participant A: I think for me being in a UTC we had six core skills. This was communication, respect, reflect, collaboration, organisation, and perseverance,

and everything I did at UTC was embedded into those core skills and helped me build on those skills for the future. I took part in thirteen work experience opportunities that built on those skills and that equipped me with everything I needed to then move on to my apprenticeship. I think there is lots that I didn't learn in my subjects that I was able to learn back when I was working with employers. I got more benefits from working with employers than from taking English and maths lessons. This was setting me up for my future working under employers.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Thank you. Before I bring you in, Lord Baker, can I just hear from Participant F and G about this question around learning the skills and knowledge that you'll need for the future, and whether you think that anything is missing because you've had a slightly different experience?

Participant G: Personally, I felt like I had the opportunity to study the subjects that I wanted to study, and I enjoyed my subjects, but I think that the science GCSE curriculum particularly is quite outdated in a post-COVID world and with climate change being important, and at the face of a lot of activism at the moment, not having a lot of the syllabus around that is not really great.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Participant F, anything to add?

Participant F: Yeah, I feel like the core practicals at A-level are a big jump from GCSE considering that the only practice we did was mostly experiment based, and not really assessed. In terms of skills for practicals and the write ups after that, I feel like we weren't the best equipped to tackle A-level straight from GCSE. But other than that, I feel like a lot of the interest is sort of lost more than the skills, if that makes sense?

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Okay, thank you. Finally, over to you, Lord Baker, Sorry.

Lord Baker of Dorking: Just a quick question. Are any of you going to be an apprentice apart from Participant E? Any hands up?

Lord Knight of Weymouth: That's Participant A, who is an apprentice.

Lord Baker of Dorking: Apart from Participant A, no one else is going to be an apprentice. Do you know how much the Navy pays an advanced apprentice today? Does anyone know what the salary is? I'll tell you, £35,000 a year, more than a university graduate will get after three years. All you need to have for that is an A-level in maths and a technical qualification. Did you know that you're going to earn more money as an apprentice? Did anybody know that?

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Participant E is shaking their head; I think Participant B you were nodding your head. I think there are some different experiences.

Participant D: We don't get told about apprenticeships in our sixth form. Our school didn't really get into that. We had a career meeting only once and then that's it.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Okay and Participant C, did you get any?

Participant C: I think we were well informed. At school we recently had our local colleges coming in with some representatives giving us some assemblies about sixth form options, college course options, apprenticeships, they even took us on a trip to our local college where they showed us the different courses we could take. We took further steps after that if we wanted to pursue a university degree or just go to a job. But me personally, I'm looking to doing A-levels rather than an apprenticeship.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Okay, thank you very much. Back to you Lord Baker, and then I'll go to Lord Aberdare.

Lord Baker of Dorking: A very quick one. Have any of you done GCSE computer science? Did any of you do that? No one, so none of you have had direct instruction in sophisticated computing and data skills dealing with things like computer assisted design. At the UTC I know you must have it. Cyber security or virtual reality, have you had any training at all in the use of sophisticated artificial intelligence, any of you? Participant A has obviously, but the other one's going to ordinary schools have had no data skills at all at 16, and you're not getting them at 18. Is that right?

Lord Knight of Weymouth: I think that's right, Lord Baker. So that's useful. Lord Aberdare.

Lord Aberdare: Sorry Jim, I was going to pick up in the fact one of the participants had mentioned apprenticeships in their first answer. Thank you.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Thank you. I'm now going to go back to the question around coursework, which Participant B, you mentioned a bit, and Participant A as well. So, the question is, it's about how you feel about the exams you must take at GCSE. You know that these are by and large paper and pen tests in large sports halls. If there were more opportunities at GCSE for your work to be assessed through things like coursework, presentation, project work, what impact do you think that would have on your learning and your experience of school? Participant A.

Participant A: For me, I think education at the moment is one size fit all. Obviously, every student learns differently. Every student will excel differently. I think if we can get that coursework in then we're setting our young people up because coursework doesn't just get you your grade at the end, you're getting your written skills, you're getting your communication skills and you're building all skills alongside and getting all this experience that you wouldn't be getting if you just sat in that exam hall. I know a lot of young people can work really hard and go in to that exam hall and just crumble under pressure and it's not a true evaluation of what they actually know or what they actually have learnt. I think coursework massively brings in that knowledge more than exams do.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Do you think there are issues for those children, those young people who've got a more difficult home life to do coursework? Do you think it's fairer than just everyone just taking an exam and then you sort of even out that problem or other ways of dealing with that problem?

Participant A: I think that's fading. I think obviously it's different for every person who goes through that or if there are any difficulties at home and maybe they can't get into school or are unable to join the lessons and do the coursework. I think that's when it becomes difficult because again everyone is different, and everyone needs different support. Even then they go into that exam, they've missed a lot of time, they've missed lots of content that could have then helped in that exam, so I think it's probably even, to be fair.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Thank you very much, Participant A. Participant C.

Participant C: I very much agree with Participant A because I feel that my core subjects are a lot more stressful for the exam knowing that for maths, science, and English my entire grade depends on the exams I'm going to take in June. It's a lot more pressure than if my grade was divided into coursework, presentations, and an exam. It is because everyone learns in different ways and not everyone's going to excel by just sitting in an exam hall, writing out all the answers. I think you should give an opportunity for everyone to showcase their different unique skills.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Thank you. Participant B.

Participant B: In terms of coursework, I do feel like I'm benefitting in terms of skills because of my ICT coursework. I've learnt how to make a Gantt chart, I've learnt project management, time management; they gave a lot of skills. I think this sort of hands-on approach is necessary for your development, especially when I was transitioning into higher education. I do think that it's also subjective because in my experience, core subjects are not always 100% coursework. For example, for business, 50% was exam based and for ICT 33% was an exam as well. I think they do strike a balance, but personally in my experience, I didn't

mind the exams, although I didn't like the whole process of two years of just cramming and just learning content that you're going to forget. I found the exams to be very easy. The only bad thing is just the pressure and stress. But once it's done, I found that I did very well, and it was not bad. I think at GCSE level exams are fine.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: What would you say to those people who say the problem with coursework is that they have the tools to cheat. They can just make it up. It's not really a test of anything that they know, it's how good they are at using the tech.

Participant B: I guess that's a question for wider education reform because it's more about testing the student on what they know, rather than just telling them to write this. Anybody can do that after just Googling and rephrasing and using paraphrasing tools. I think that's just a wider question on how to redo homework because that can apply to homework for A levels and homework for GCSEs. It's just a wider question I think that needs to be addressed. But overall, I think coursework was fine. Also, in coursework there's also the opportunity to max out your marks. I got full marks in all my coursework because I had the opportunity to go back and get some advice. Students will have to pay attention either way and investigate what they've done wrong and identify that themselves.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Great, superb answer. And how is it in an independent school? What do you think?

Participant F: Throughout the year we have a termly coursework hand in, and I feel like it keeps the student's interest throughout the year instead of just having to cram a couple weeks before their exams. It keeps their attention on the subjects and keeps them passionate about them rather than sort of being complacent and lazy until a couple weeks before, and then completely cramming because that's when the pressure really loads on with your exams. It's not splitting it up so it's more manageable. It's more so the students have enough time to process what they're doing instead of having one big final exam that you have to sit and if it's not your day on that day, that doesn't reflect who you really are. But with coursework every couple of months, it builds up the portfolio of who you are more than just one final exam.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Thank you. That's very helpful. Lord Aberdare.

Lord Aberdare: Thank you, Jim. Participant D was the only one to mention that they had done drama and performing arts or something in that area. How was that assessed? Was that a GCSE, just an exam, or did it have an element of, I don't know, performance or whatever was involved as well?

Participant D: I don't take drama and performing arts. It was Drama and DT. I don't take them as GCSEs. But when I was in year 9, we transitioned into a different subject so we could experience how it feels to take DT GCSE or business as a GCSE. The way it was assessed was that they gave us a script, like a play in drama, then they recorded our acts and then in the next lesson we had to answer questions and write things down about the performance we've done. I don't really have the answer for this. I'm sorry.

Lord Aberdare: Thank you.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Okay, thanks. Thank you. I've got questions coming from Sue Garden and Lord Kenneth Baker. I'll start with Sue and then come to Kenneth.

Baroness Garden of Frognal: This is really fascinating. I wonder how many of you are studying citizenship and how many of you feel that the things that you're studying are really preparing you for future life. If you don't have citizenship in your schools, do you have anything that's approximate to it? Learning to be a good citizen? No.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: I see Participant A shaking their head.

Baroness Garden of Frognal: I mean, do you learn about voting for instance and democracy?

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Participant B put their hand up and Participant E.

Baroness Garden of Frognal: All right. Yes. Okay.

Participant B: Yes, my secondary school didn't offer citizenship nor any alternative, so I just want to add that.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Okay.

Participant E: We don't have citizenship as a subject, but we do have form time and enrichment where we learn about things going on in the world, and a lot about going on to further education and university courses.

Baroness Garden of Frognal: Thank you.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Okay, so it's covered off in tutor time. Participant C.

Participant C: Similarly, to Participant E, we have form time PSHE which I think is somewhat like citizenship, but our school doesn't offer citizenship or an alternative to that.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Participant C, are you taught about how to vote, how to pay your taxes? What a mortgage is? You know, those basic things on how to function as a citizen.

Participant C: No, last year though my maths teacher did cover a few lessons on it. It was just after we finished the content for year 10 and it was around the end of the year, and she just wanted to take her time out to teach us about it. But it wasn't in the syllabus or in the course or anything.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Good. Alright, Lord Baker.

Lord Baker of Dorking: I was going to say I found your answers fascinating because they do show up the total inadequacy and inappropriateness of the curriculum from 11 to 16 in ordinary schools. What is happening in your schools, that you've all said to us, is that they've not really prepared for you for what you're going to do at 16, and even less at 18. It's unrelated to your needs as children to live in this world. For example, I assume that none of you can use a 3D printer, because you can't do it, unless you were taught CAD/CAM. Participant A will be able to do it, but 3D printers are going to dominate industrial life in the way that they've done the industrial revolution. You're not even aware of them. You're not really in touch with so much that's needed and all the skills you need at 18 just aren't there. I think what you've summed up is a huge indictment of our present curriculum and exam system. Thank you very much.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Thank you. Now we've still got 15 minutes. We've got more things to explore with you and possibly with Lord Baker's words ringing in your ears. But it's entirely up to you. Thinking about your experiences, if you could change one thing about the current system for years 7 to 11, what would it be? We're giving you the magic wand. Participant C.

Participant C: I mentioned it before, but for schools to spread out our learning not only through our assessments, not only in exams, written exams, but like presentations, group projects, coursework. This is so everyone has the opportunity to execute their unique skills, to show that they have learned the content, but they can't perform as well at an exam as they would maybe in a presentation, in a pitch or in a coursework essay.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Thank you.

Participant B: One thing I would change is abolishing GCSEs, and I completely agree with Lord Baker around how GCSEs are outdated and don't prepare us at all. I'm turning 18 next month and I'm in year 13 and I found that GCSEs were completely out of touch, not preparing me at all. Current affairs show that private schools are now making their own curriculum. So GCSEs are a form of

segregation now because private schools know how outdated GCSEs are. I know one school in London has done it, and now other private schools are set to follow. It just highlights how in a contemporary society GCSEs just don't work.

Lord Baker of Dorking: Thank you, Participant B. Over to one of those independent schools. What are your thoughts? What is the one thing you would change?

Participant G: I think I'd have a broad range of assessment methods for every subject, because learning how to write an exam is not necessarily a very important skill later in life, but being able to create a campaign or give a presentation is a lot more important, especially in the workplace.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Thank you. Anything to add from you, Participant F?

Participant F: No, what they said.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: I loved your comment earlier about sustainability and climate education, but I'm biased. Participant A, you're next.

Participant A: I think for me, I was quite lucky, but the way GCSEs are assessed in UTCs still must have assessments. We all still must go and sit in the exam at the end of the day, and I just think that's not a true representation of who we are and what we've learned. I think obviously we get the skills to engage with the employers but still, it's that grade at the end that often puts you ahead of someone else when you get an apprenticeship. It's not truly representing our young people and it's not setting our young people up for the right success in the future.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Very good, and you even got some affirmation I think from Participant E. Over to you Participant E.

Participant E: I agree with what everyone said so far. I think there should be wider opportunities from 11 to 16 to study things that are more related to real life and how life works and how life is changing. Obviously, there are a lot more opportunities within the tech world and we need to be learning more about sustainability, like earlier with climate change, learning skills and keeping the subject, but just making them applicable to how we will be in normal life rather than in the circumstances of schools.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Thank you. Participant D.

Participant D: When I was picking my GCSEs, I was wondering what subjects I should choose so I could have my future career, and I was wondering, when would we use poems? In English, we have to identify what rhyming couplets are, and so on, and I was thinking, 'We're not going to use poems in the future'.

That's something I don't really get, because we're having to identify all of that in English literature. The maths that says 'find X' or 'find Y', that's not going to come up in my future career. I was wondering when choosing GCSEs if there should be an option to either do further maths, where you would find out what X and Y is, and to learn about poems. It should be in your GCSEs what you can choose so it can help you with your career.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: I've got Baroness Garden with her hand up, so I'll bring you in a second, Sue. Participant D, do you think your schooling is there to prepare you more for university or more for work?

Participant D: They mainly focus on GCSEs. They set high expectations for all of us to aim higher and not to fail our GCSEs. They just throw everything on us and expect us to learn it quickly, when some of us process more slowly than others.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: But when you hear about being ambitious or to aim higher, do you think people are saying it is to get a great job and change the world or to go to a better university?

Participant D: I'm in the middle. I can't really comment on this. They just make us want to get better GCSEs. They want us to pass and get higher grades.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Thanks, Participant D. Sue.

Baroness Garden of Frognal: Following on from that, I wonder whether any of you have got careers in mind and whether you feel what you've learned at GCSE is really helping you move forward to those careers. It's really following what Jim was saying. Are you just aiming at universities and a further academic career, or are you aiming to have a job that really interests you at this stage and you'd quite like your education to help you towards that job?

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Okay, I think I've got Participant B first up to answer that.

Participant B: I want to get into conflict resolution and diplomacy, so I want to join the UN and become a diplomat. But I do feel like GCSEs were completely irrelevant. There was not any subject that had any content to do with that which was relevant. I think at A-level some content like geography overlaps with configuration like geopolitics and superpowers. At GCSE, even geography, the most relevant content was when we learnt about oxbow lakes and how the coast erodes. There was nothing relevant whatsoever. Even the human side was so irrelevant that I fully forgot what we learned. I don't see how it relates to my career at all. I wanted to join the Air Force and again there was nothing at all that was relevant to that career path. No opportunities, pathways, guidance.

Baroness Garden of Frognal: There are always the Air Cadets. I don't know whether you have Cadets in your school, but the Cadets would have got you to join the Air Force.

Participant B: Yeah, I was going to join the Cadets, but they completely ignored me because in my boroughs the Cadets are just really underfunded, so they couldn't take on more people. They completely ignored me when my teacher tried to recommend me to them.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Participant A.

Participant A: I think I'm in two minds. In terms of the actual content from the GCSEs now in my apprenticeship, I have not had to go refer to GCSEs once to apply in real life. However, when I was with employers and did interact with employers to gain work experience and gain skills, I've used all of that going into my apprenticeship and all of that equipped me ready to move on into my future. In the actual GCSE syllabus, I've not once had to look back and say, 'yeah, I remember that'.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Thank you. Participant G?

Participant G: I'm hoping to study biochemistry at university. If I look at the GCSE syllabus that we studied, there was absolutely no biochemistry in our syllabus, and the only time when I've started to learn anything that will have any significance to my degree is now in year 13.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Why do you want to study biochemistry? Is that with a particular occupation in mind?

Participant G: Yeah, I'm looking to be a research scientist.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Okay, cool.

Lord Baker of Dorking: I have got a bit of advice. I think you ought to go back to your schools and ask your teachers about degree apprenticeships, because if you would get a degree apprenticeship, you will be able to go to university without incurring any debt, and many of you are not well trained to do those at the moment. Participant B is the closest, I imagine, but none of you seem to have any connection with local companies in your area and local employers and things like that. Your schools don't fix things like that.

It's really, really depressing that they don't, because they're inhibiting you. They're not letting you develop your talents. You all have talents, listening to you. You're all talented people and intelligent people, but the education system is not really helping you as it is at the moment and I'm sorry for that. I can only apologise for it but we're trying to change it, but we will. You may have studied Macbeth; will you ever be tested on Macbeth in an exam or not? Have you

understood the play by any chance? Did you enjoy it? Have you seen it on a video or anything like that?

Participant C: We will be tested on it for our English literature GCSE, but otherwise I don't think I'm ever going to use it again. I enjoyed the play because I do like reading Shakespeare. I like reading in general, but I don't think learning this in school is very beneficial to me in later life.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Participant C you also had your hand up to answer Baroness Garden's question about whether you've got a particular career or occupation in mind, and whether what you've been learning equips you for that.

Participant C: I'm really interested in taking the route of psychology. Mainly I've been thinking about attending medical school and specialising in psychiatry so I can be a doctor. I don't think that the GCSE syllabus really equips me for any of that. I don't think any of the knowledge I've learned has really educated me. It's really been just me researching different careers, finding out what kind of careers I'd like.

One thing that my school's done to help us recognise what kind of career path we might be interested in is using the platform Unifrog. It's a website which essentially makes you take these personality quizzes, finds your personality type, asks you questions about what kind of environments you would like to work in, how you learn, and then it directs you to what kind of careers you might enjoy. We've also had a bit of careers education in terms of interviews, but I don't think GCSEs helped me realise what kind of industry I wanted to go into.

Lord Aberdare: What was the platform called?

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Unifrog.

Lord Aberdare: Thank you.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Unifrog, yes, around half of schools use Unifrog. Participant F, you were just about to say something.

Participant F: Yes, I want to study maths at university, and I feel like a lot of the GCSE syllabus didn't really prepare me because we swapped exam boards for further maths just because it was easier to transition to A-level. I feel like there are different examples so you can sort of mix it up a bit. In terms of pursuing one exam board, it might not be the best transition between GCSE to A-level and further.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Yes, you want to study maths with a view to what?

Participant F: I'm not sure yet.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Okay, cool. We've only got three minutes left before the room gets closed. Participant D, do you have any last thoughts for us?

Participant D: Some of the things that we learned; it doesn't really take off to some of the careers that we want to go into. For example, I want to go into counselling to look after other people's poor mental health because I'm passionate of helping others and I don't see any type of learning which would help me to that career.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Okay. Thank you. Last comment from you Participant B before we get back to the main session.

Participant B: I wanted to say a thank you to all of you, especially Lord Baker, because it's nice seeing that the senior people who are behind the scenes do care and do acknowledge that there is a problem, and it needs to be addressed. I appreciate that something's going to happen.

[End of transcript]