



# HOUSE OF LORDS

## Education for 11-16 Year Olds Committee

### Roundtable meeting with pupils

Wednesday 20 September 2023

#### **GROUP 2**

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Allow me to welcome you all. My name is Mike Watson, Lord Watson of Invergowrie. You've probably never heard of Invergowrie; it's a small village on the outskirts of Dundee. I'm a Labour member of the House of Lords, and now I invite my fellow colleagues on the Committee to introduce themselves in whichever order.

**Lord Storey:** I'm Mike Storey, I'm a Liberal Democrat Peer. I am a former teacher and head teacher.

**Lord Mair:** Hello, I'm Robert Mair. I'm a crossbench Peer. I spent the first half of my career as a practicing engineer, and then I went to Cambridge University to be Head of Civil Engineering.

**Baroness Evans of Bowes Park:** Hi there. I'm Baroness Evans and I'm a Conservative Peer. Before I came into the House of Lords, I ran a charity called New Schools Network that helped teachers, charity groups and parents set up new schools.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Thank you very much. Can I now ask the school students to introduce themselves and I'll just start with Participant A.

**Participant A:** Hiya. I'm participant A. My pronouns are she/her.

**Participant B:** Hi, my name is participant B. My pronouns are she/her.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Thank you.

**Participant C:** My name is Participant C.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Good.

**Participant D:** My name is participant D.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Thank you.

**Participant E:** Hello, I'm Participant E.

**Participant F:** Hi, my name is Participant F.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Okay. I think it's interesting that you have a spread amongst the members of the House of Lords, a Conservative, Labour, a Liberal Democrat and a crossbench, i.e. a non-party member. I'm just looking at the spread of you as students. There's a very broad spread across the country from the south coast right up to the north. I'm sorry, I don't know whether Blackpool is further north than Bradford, but as a Scot you're all southerners as far as I'm concerned anyway. But it's very good to have that spread and you're all very welcome.

Can I just say before we start that if anybody wants to speak, would you please use the raise hand button? That makes it easier for me as the facilitator to guide the discussion. I should have asked you at the start to say what subjects you're currently studying. If you wouldn't mind starting again with Participant A, just briefly go through and say, what year you're in and what subjects you're studying.

**Participant A:** Yeah. I'm in year 13 and I'm studying English literature, politics and history.

**Participant B:** I'm also in year 13. I'm studying maths, biology, chemistry and English language.

**Participant C:** I'm also in year 13 and I'm studying maths, physics and computer Science.

**Participant D:** I'm currently in year 12 and I'm doing maths, further maths and physics.

**Participant E:** I'm in year 11 and I'm studying history, French, drama, enterprise and the core subjects.

**Participant F:** So I've got my core subjects, and Spanish, history, business and geography.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Okay. Thank you all very much. I'm going to open up the first question that I would like to have some discussion around. The question is: how did you feel about the subject options that were available to you for years 10 and 11? Were you able to choose a set of subjects that you were happy with? That's open to anyone that wants to come in on that.

**Participant E:** Here at my school, we choose our GCSE options in year 9, so that gives us an extra year to prepare for them but also to decide if they are the options that we want to continue.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Can I just clarify something? You choose your subjects in year 9, do you start studying them in year 9, which is still formally part of key stage 3, isn't it?

**Participant E:** Yes, that's what I meant. We picked them in year 8 and then from the start of year 9 that's when we start our GCSE courses.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Right. Okay.

**Participant C:** I am in a very similar situation. We would pick our GCSEs at the end of year 8 and then would start them in year 9, but then you'd pick a further one going into year 10. They've changed it now, but when I was there that was the policy. I felt that all of the things that I would have wanted to choose were available to me, but I also feel like I was lucky enough to know exactly what I wanted to do. So the courses I wanted to do were accommodated and I could know what I wanted to choose as well.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Just to clarify, you said you are now at a different school?

**Participant C:** Yeah, I'm currently in year 13 and I'm now at a different school.

**Participant B:** We had a similar situation when we were in year 8. We made our GCSE options, so we started them in year 9, but after that we were taken over by an academy and a whole trust thing, and so we had to undo our options, in a way, and then start them again in year 10 like I think most schools do. I think that was beneficial in a way because our year 9 was the COVID year. So starting GCSEs then would have been very disruptive, but when we did choose them again in year 10, we had fewer options to choose from because they were tighter option blocks. So we did feel a little bit disadvantaged because of lack of choice the next time.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** That's a very interesting perspective on the change not just from the COVID year, but the change from a maintained school to an academy and the trend seems to have been to have made the choices at the end of year 8, which is something I think is different from what we've heard largely in our evidence from other sessions on the committee.

Can I also ask Participant A to let us know what your position is?

**Participant A:** I chose my subjects in year 9 and then started studying them in year 10, which I thought was effective. At my school I was offered a wide variety of subjects and it was quite flexible. I know at some schools you have to study a language, but my school didn't do that. I do think that it's important to recognise though that it's not only about the subject options that you have but, once you start your subjects, the provision within those subjects. So, for

example, arts provision. I took music GCSE and the provision for the arts with funding cuts I think is also important to recognise when we're talking about subject options, because I think it turns a lot of students away from arts subjects like music and drama.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Yes, I think that's an important point. We might come back to that as one or two of my colleagues might want to follow up on that point, because that's different to choosing in year 8 and year 9. Can I invite Participant F to come in on that?

**Participant F:** I chose my subjects in year 9, and then I started studying them in year 10. I do feel like there could be more options than I got because some subjects that I did want to do I couldn't do because of the number of pupils that were in the classroom; there weren't enough students and that's why I couldn't do those subjects. There were other subjects where the course had changed and that's why I couldn't take that subject as well. But I think having to start studying your subjects in year 10 does mean that you only get two years to learn the content in that subject and that's why it's a bit trickier than what I've heard other schools do.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Okay, thank you. And Participant D?

**Participant D:** I chose my subjects at the end of year 9 and started them in year 10. I wish that I was able to do something in economics or engineering, because I think in the future they're going to be more in demand than obviously some of the subjects that I chose. It wasn't necessarily a small number of subjects that I could have chosen, but they weren't the right fit for me, they weren't the subjects that I would have enjoyed as much as economics or engineering.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Can I just clarify? Were you guided by teachers or by the school, or where you actually restricted by the options that were open to you?

**Participant D:** We had option blocks. When it started you could choose between four subjects, then it was eight subjects and then it was ten subjects. So you had to do either humanities, computer science or French, that one was the smallest option block. So I just think that engineering and economics is going to be a more in demand in the future and it wasn't offered at GCSE.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** That's interesting, thank you. Can I just welcome Participant G to our group now? I'm not sure if you heard the question, but when you answer it can you just say what year you're in at your school and what subjects you're currently studying, and then if you wouldn't mind going to answering the question, which was: how did you feel about the subject options

available to you for years 10 and 11, and how much freedom did you have to choose a set of subjects that you're happy with?

**Participant G:** Hello. My name is Participant G. I'm in year 11 and I'm currently studying the core subjects as well as geography and design. We chose all subjects at the end of year 9 which we began studying in year 10. We had a variety of subjects to choose from but they were limited, I think because we are the founding year group in our school as we're still a new school. The younger groups are getting more options to choose from now. So, like sociology and other subjects, these are things that we didn't get to choose. I think that we don't get enough time for the subjects. I think if we chose in year 8 and started in year 9 that would have given us more flexibility and time to work in our subjects, because now we're really far behind compared to other schools and we have a lot of content to get to get through before May. So I think it would have been more beneficial to start earlier.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** That's an interesting point, thank you very much. I'm going to bring in one of my colleagues now. Natalie?

**Baroness Evans of Bowes Park:** Thanks very much. I'm really interested that it sounds like quite a few of you actually started your GCSEs earlier than you have to. Quite a lot of people that we've spoken to up until now have said that's not a good thing because it means that you're all having to specialise too quickly and you don't get enough breadth earlier on. But it sounds like from those of you who didn't necessarily do it, you'd quite like that option. I just wondered for those of you that did, do you feel it was beneficial doing that extra year or did you feel that you were sort of forced to make choices sooner than you wanted to?

**Participant C:** For a very long time since I was very young, I've known roughly what sort of field I want to go into. I want to do aerospace engineering now, but pretty much my whole life I've wanted to do something to do with space. So for me it wasn't as big of an issue choosing early on because I was pretty certain of the path that I wanted to go down. But I know for a lot of people it was more problematic because they weren't sure what GCSEs they did want to pick because they weren't sure what subjects they wanted to do later in life.

The way that our system worked is that we were able to pick most of our GCSEs in year 8, and then there was one GCSE that we completed in its entirety in year 9 and then you would get to pick another GCSE, which we would complete over years 10 and 11. So you'd have a lot of hours in that one subject so that you could get it all done in year 9 so that you could then pick another GCSE. It's a bit more adaptable in that it allowed you to pick a new subject if there was something else that you wanted to pursue. I feel like that system works quite

well, but for a lot of people it was difficult to choose what subjects they actually did want to go into and not a big problem for me. But yeah, for a lot of people I know it was challenging.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Can you just say what was that subject you did in in one year, the additional subject?

**Participant C:** Well, it would have been engineering but it was all disrupted because of COVID. And so there was a hell of a lot of complications with it. In the end, it was still completed throughout year 9 but you'd have like 6 lessons every single week just doing engineering, which allowed you to get it completed within that year. It wasn't too much of a cram, but I feel like it was definitely more difficult than if you spread it out over the two years. It was difficult because of COVID. We didn't do a lot of the actual content of the course but yeah, engineering was that one for me.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Thank you very much.

**Participant E:** I feel that picking options at the end of year 8 to start at year 9 was a good idea, because for a lot of people there was— Well, I don't know about others but when we started in years 7 and 8 we had about 14 subjects. Not everyone likes all 14 of those subjects, so when you get to pick earlier you get to get rid of the ones that you're not too interested in and you get more time to focus on the subjects you are interested in or want to pursue as a career later on. Currently I don't know what I want to do. I've got some ideas, but I went with the options that I enjoyed the most. We don't start all the GCSEs technically in year 9. So for example, drama, yes, we picked it for our GSCE and we're going to do it. But for year 9 we didn't do any of the GCSE course; we started that in year 10 despite picking it in year 9. But for the other courses we started from year 9.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Okay, I was going to ask a question about the creative subjects. drama is one that you've chosen beyond the core subjects and you're able to do that. Right Participant G?

**Participant G:** So I think like you said, making us choose our subjects too early can be limiting. For the core subjects, science and maths, start them in year 9 because everyone's going to do those in year 11 eventually. By starting these in year 8 it can give us more time to focus on the other subjects that we're going to choose to do in year 10 and 11. So because these are also subjects that we're really behind in—like science and maths especially, we're really far behind—and forcing us to do summer schools, come in on weekends and holidays. So I think these are the ones we should start studying early.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Okay.

**Participant C:** There was just something that I wanted to add. I'm dyslexic, so it's very difficult for me to do other languages because I can't even spell in English. So for me, the fact that I could drop French, which was the language that I was doing by the end of year 8, was very beneficial for me because there was no way that I would have ever been able to do very well in it, no matter how hard I tried. So for me, being able to choose my GCSEs at the end of year 8 and also not being forced to do a language was very beneficial for me.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Okay. I'm going to leave that question now and go on to the next one, which is: how much do or did you know about the different options available to you after year 11 and how prepared do or did you feel to choose an option that you felt was right for you moving forward?

**Participant F:** I'm in year 11 right now. So the next steps for me are either college or going to sixth form, and I don't think it's discussed that much. I don't think there is anything else for me to do other than go to college or go to six form. I know there's apprenticeships for some people, but that's not something that I'm looking into. Once again, it's not something that's discussed as often and as in depth in our school. I'm just starting year 11 and there's not much discussion around it and there's not much information available. That's my opinion on it.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Okay. I'm sensing that you would have liked to have had more information about other options. Is that fair to say?

**Participant F:** Yeah, I think that there should be. I think there should be more, not only for myself but for parents as well, so that they can guide their kids. It's something that should be provided to students, not only in year 11 but maybe at an earlier stage, so that they know, especially with the subject picking, where to go even after you're doing your subjects.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Right. Thank you.

**Participant B:** I'm in year 13. I've gone through the whole process. After GCSEs at our school there was a lot of support available, there were career fairs and we could chat to teachers and we got employers in and they even had opportunities to actually get an apprenticeship within the school and to work with external companies that they have, the people come in and, you know, test us and hire us if they want to. That was really beneficial for a lot of people. One of my friends is now working at a hairdressing salon because of these opportunities and it's what she's always wanted to do. It was really beneficial to her.

Personally, I know I want to go down the university route, so A-levels at sixth form was my best option. I knew the subjects I wanted to do, and even though

they weren't exactly the most enjoyable for me. Maths is not my strong point but I'm taking it because I need to take science at university for the job that I want and I'm fine with that. They've really helped with the progression into A-levels from GCSE, so there's lots of stepping up knowledge and a lot of support along the way from going from GCSE to A-levels, then throughout the whole process of A-levels constantly linking back to GCSEs as well. So yeah, I think at my school at least it has been a really, really easy and smooth process and really helpful.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Okay, thank you. It's interesting that you mentioned apprenticeships because not all schools are particularly keen to draw apprenticeships to the attention of their year 11s and or indeed the new T-level. So it would be helpful if you could say if apprenticeships were put in front of you as a potential route as you got older, or was it just not mentioned? And also the same question of T-levels.

**Participant A:** When I was in year 11 there wasn't as much focus on apprenticeships as I think quite a lot of the students would have liked. They did talk about it, but there definitely wasn't as much focus on apprenticeships compared to moving on to the sixth form within our school. In terms of the sixth form, they did a taster day in year 11 for the sixth form where you could choose some of the subjects that you wanted to try out for the day, which I thought was really helpful because it gave you a bit of experience before you picked which subjects you wanted to do. But in terms of apprenticeships, I would say that it was fairly limited. I do think that my school was getting better as the years progressed in terms of drawing more attention to apprenticeships and options other than progressing into college or sixth form.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Right.

**Participant E:** As someone who doesn't have much knowledge of college because my parents didn't go, it's a bit of a vague subject for both me and my parents, but at my school they've been very good at explaining it. Last week we had a post 16 and college event at our school where there were talks from one of the teachers here who specialises in college and moving on from secondary school, and in the hall were 'listen tables' from nearby colleges. Having a careers advisor at my school does help, especially for a lot of people like myself who are not too sure of what they want to do and how not to box yourself in with what A-levels you're going to do, to keep as many doors open as possible.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Now that's an interesting point because one of the issues about options we put in front of young people is having outside speakers, and you mentioned colleges came along to speak and employers as



well. Did they talk about apprenticeships or T-levels or whatever? Was that anything that was mentioned at the session?

**Participant E:** I know that I want to do A-levels or college, but apprenticeships BTECs and T-levels were all mentioned in equal detail. At the end of last year and just before summer, some students who wanted it were offered a week of work experience, any year 10s that wanted it.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Thank you.

**Participant D:** When we were coming towards the end of year 11, we had a weekly assembly and then pretty much every other week they had a visitor come in and speak to us. There was a lot of emphasis on T-levels and they were promoting T-levels a lot within our year group, basically saying that they were better if you wanted to do university etc. But then doing my own research I looked into university and not a lot of them are currently accepting T-levels. So I think some of the information was a bit misguided in that sense. But also there was a lot of emphasis T-levels and we did have a visit from people like BAE coming to tell us about them, and we also had a visit from the RAF to tell us about what they do and what you could do within there and the apprenticeships that were available. We didn't have a massive emphasis on A-levels, it was mainly all about T-levels and that kind of thing because we have another college next to where I went to school, so they were in pretty much every other day discussing with us.

Our careers advisor wasn't great. I went to him once and asked him about a job that I wanted to do, and he wasn't able to tell me anything about anything really. So it was a bit difficult in that sense to know where I was going to go. When it came to actually choosing the subjects that I had to do, I left it until last minute because of all of the stress of GCSEs. You don't really have time to think about what you want to do after your GCSEs, so it's more stressful to think about what you want to do after your GCSEs than it is to actually do your GCSEs because A-levels or T-levels are going to be the main part that anyone's looking for after your GCSEs.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Thank you very much.

**Participant C:** They didn't talk to us very much about T-levels at all, nor about apprenticeships particularly. It was pretty much focused on A-levels, so they didn't mention apprenticeships in any more detail than they did T-levels. In fact, I don't even think I'd heard about T-levels until I was talking to other people, I genuinely don't think I'd heard of it and that was in like year 12 last year. So I don't think I'd heard about T-levels at all when I was choosing my next steps after GCSE. I'd also thought about degree apprenticeships further down the line quite a lot, and those weren't mentioned at all in my school. It was pretty much

A-levels and degrees, or an apprenticeship straight after GCSEs, and those are the only things that were really talked about in any detail.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** That's slightly ironic because you said you wanted a career in aerospace. I think there are a number of companies in aerospace who do degree apprenticeships, and that that would have been—may still be—ideal for you. But thank you for that perspective.

**Participant B:** Yeah, mine was quite similar. I hadn't even heard of T-levels until I was researching university grade requirements, even though they talked about A-levels and apprenticeships at my school, and they even said about going to college. So I don't really know what it is apart from some sort of A-level equivalent.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Well, that's a discussion for another day. It's supposed to be an A-level equivalent, but they're still pretty young in terms of their development.

**Participant G:** I think part of the reason that we're sometimes confused about what to do post 16 is because they're not actually telling us what a degree is and what the steps after are; they're not telling us what the A-levels can do for us after 18. I realised that most Russell Group universities don't take BTECs or T-levels into account, but in school they're telling us that they are really good and they can get us where we want. I think they should tell us more about the end goal, which is universities, and how we can get into them. That's going to help us choose our post 16 groups.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Alright, thank you. Before we move on, does anyone else want to say anything on this question? Okay. Well, moving on then to the next question, which is: do you feel that your education is helping you to learn the skills and knowledge you'll need for the future? And if not, what do you feel is missing? Or what would you like to learn more about or do more of at school?

**Participant D:** I think there's definitely a lack of real-world skills within the GCSE curriculum. So obviously PSHE exists, but I don't think that it's a developed enough curriculum in the sense that I've left school and I have no idea how bills work, finances or pay slips. I got a pay slip the other day and I had no idea how it worked, so I had to Google how that worked. I think it needs to be discussed.

I don't think that it should be like an exam subject. It should just be a life skill rather than it being PSHE. Just call it a life skills subject and then just teach the main things like managing your finances, how to balance your money, because that's a lot of things that I see people doing. They're like, 'I've just spent all of

my wage and have not saved any of it'. I think that should be something that schools put an emphasis on because when you're getting into the real-world, people get overcome with bills, people get into debt, then people end up sort of— The main point of what we're discussing is how education can help and grow the economy. But the people who are leaving school at the moment aren't equipped with the skills to manage their own finances.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Thank you. That's a very important point. I mean, financial education should be something that schools cover. The depth could vary, but I find it surprising that you had none of that. But thank you for making that point.

**Participant A:** To link to that, I think it is really important that any kind of PSHE, personal development life skills, is taught in a really quality way because I'm the same. I didn't really have any kind of information about that kind of stuff. But my form tutor heard from our form that we hadn't been taught any of this stuff in school and took it on himself to start teaching us about what he knew, like renting places and things like that, and how to make a CV, which I don't think should be on him. I think it's important that your personal development is of a really good quality and has a set structure.

I also think it's important that we talk about extracurriculars, because I think they're undervalued in terms of the skills that they can bring students and not just in terms of like skills in particular subjects and the arts and stuff, but also in connecting with other students. I think post COVID especially it is important that we garner these skills, and young people connect with other young people. I think it's really important that all schools have really good extracurricular provision as well as good academic provision as well.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Thank you.

**Participant F:** In our school we've got a lot of extra extracurricular activities, and that's what's helped me currently with gaining the skills and gaining the qualities that I need for the future. But we do have personal development as well. However, it's not structured and it's not as developed as I would like it to be. So we do talk about having healthy relationships, and we talk about having to take care of a person and taking care of yourself. But again, it's how to write a CV. We haven't learned that. How to know what to do with your bills. How to gain any mortgages or any of that. We don't really learn that unless you go ahead and then research it yourself. That's something, we're not really equipped with any skills that are about real life.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** That's good. Thank you.

**Participant C:** I think for me it's difficult to tell whether I've been equipped with the skills that I need for adult life because I'm not there yet. I know that I've been equipped with the skills that I need to move on to the next steps in my education to get the qualifications that I want for the career that I want. But I do definitely feel, as everyone else has been saying, that there certainly is a lack of real-world skills that are going to be commonly in use.

I also feel because there's such an emphasis on exams at the end of any GCSE that you're doing—there's essentially no coursework for any of the GCSEs that I took, except for drama where there's some performance coursework—which means that you don't quite learn the same level of project and time management skills as you would if there was more coursework, and the time management you do learn is how to manage when you're going to be doing revision. But now that I've moved on to A-levels and I'm doing some coursework for computer science and I've found that it's been very beneficial for me in advancing my abilities to manage my own time and to know how to set out a project from the beginning to know where to start and then where to look to progress from there. So potentially a greater emphasis on coursework would equip you with those real-world skills that you'd need if you're actually in the world of work when you're working through a project.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** That's interesting.

**Participant G:** I agree with all the previous points. I think they've said most of what I was going to say. I think school really emphasises what academic things we need, but they don't really focus on real life skills like buying a house, taxes, all of those, but also things like first aid or CPR. These things are vital for day-to-day life. I think schools should focus on real life skills because we're not going to have time to learn all of those in A-levels or in university, and then after university we just going to go into the real-world not knowing how to get a house, how to buy a car, how to manage taxes. I think it's really important to do those things in secondary school to prepare us for what comes after.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Thank you. I'm going to ask Baroness Evans to join the conversation.

**Baroness Evans of Bowes Park:** Thanks. I totally get what you're saying about life skills and stuff. That's really interesting, but I wonder, going back to what Participant C said, what we're also interested in is how you learn. I think as you're so focused on exams and everything's focused in one way, I just wonder, do you actually feel the way you're learning is helping you? Did it put you off a bit that you were having to focus so much on exams? Are there other ways that, perhaps even in subjects you really like, you felt you could have been engaged more through project learning or whatever? How did you feel about the

experience of how you had to learn in order to get through your GCSEs, basically?

**Participant E:** I agree with the lack of life lessons. Our school, once or twice a week during form time, set these slides for form tutors to go over with their forms called learning for life. But form time is only 20 minutes at my school, and also my form tutor sets it for us on Chromebooks for us to look through ourselves. I don't feel like it's forcing it; it's kind of like free will, and not everyone's interested in it. Even if everyone was interested in it, 20 minutes isn't enough. I feel like just one lesson a week, like a normal 50 minute lesson a week in the timetable, would be more beneficial because there are a lot of skills that I'll be able to learn, and other students will be able to learn eventually. But it's nice to know them now as well, rather than figuring them out too late.

**Participant B:** I think quite similar to some of the other points raised, with GCSE level we didn't have much life skills learning. Now that I'm in A-levels my school has incorporated a lot more of that sort of thing. We have done first aid courses and we do PSHE every fortnight, we do theology and they've now got a new financial life skills compulsory course that we do have to do at some point in the year, which I haven't done yet because it was only introduced a few days ago. But it does sound really good and I know that it definitely will benefit everybody. And answering your point, Natalie, I think we did coursework for some of our GCSEs, I studied art and drama and they were quite coursework orientated, and it was not fun. I think my personal learning style is more to study and then do the exam, but of course it did teach you time management skills and balancing the workload because that work on top of all of the other subjects was quite difficult to have the time. I think some sort of coursework within subjects could be good, but that would have to balance out the level of time spent on exam preparation and things like that.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Okay.

**Participant A:** I just wanted to jump in because I'm so, so passionate about just how unfit for purpose the exam system is. I think it's a disgrace to the country, really. I think it needs entirely rethinking. I've spoken to so many young people who agree and think the same.

I think not only do we have a mental health crisis, especially among young people in this country, that the exam system entirely feeds into and plays a massive role in, but I think the exam system saps any curiosity out of learning. I can't tell you how many classes I've been in where the teachers have said to put your hand down and that they can't take questions this lesson because they just need to get through the content, and that's taking away any curiosity in the wider subject. I think it's just completely unfit for purpose and should be

rethought, with young people at the centre of that rethinking, because we're going through an education system that is set up by people who went through education 30, 40, 50 years ago and don't understand the current pressures that COVID placed on us, that technology and social media places on us, the mental health crisis. I just think the exam system is entirely wrong and doesn't have a place in modern day society.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** I think that's a really telling point you've made about teachers being unable to accommodate students who want to ask questions—I'm assuming questions related to what the teacher was covering on that day—and for that to be squeezed out of the system. I think it's quite worrying, and I don't know if any others have experienced that, but I see that Participant C has their hand up.

**Participant C:** I would largely agree on the previous point. I don't think that it's entirely unfit for purpose. I think there's some value in exams, partly for learning to manage stress and a deadline, but I do think that there is definitely a lot of change that should be brought about within that system, partly because I do think that the system that we have at the moment does certainly restrict creative thinking and coming up with new ideas. It's really been a revelation to me since I started doing computer science coursework of how much freer you can be in terms of your education. For my coursework I've had to do a lot of my own research and collate lots of ideas that other people have come up with for the final product that works well, and I feel like it's really cultivated a mindset of creative thinking and coming up with new ideas, which is somewhat absent when you just have to learn and process more and more facts, which you do if you're leading up to an exam.

So that freedom is very important because it produces that scientific mind, you question the ideas that are already around and you can really learn to take from lots of different ideas and build on them rather than just regurgitating the things that other people have already come up with, which will be especially important when we're dealing with a constantly evolving world with things like climate change and new technology.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Those are very interesting points, because we've heard from other witnesses, as the committee has sat through the year, that creativity, critical thinking, teamwork, problem solving, all aspects which employers say they want to have from young people like you, when you enter the workforce, if not entirely missing, are certainly underplayed at schools. From what I'm hearing from you today, that seems to be your feeling as well.

**Participant D:** Not everyone learns in the same way, so the way that classrooms are still set out from, I don't know, 200 years ago when school first

started— When I was in high school, there was this one teacher who used to teach, but he would teach in four or five different ways so that everyone could understand it and had different methods if they wanted to do it a different way.

Building on from what Participant C said, coursework is a massive thing in terms of time management. I did a lot of coursework for business and photography, but it is a massive overload in terms of how much coursework you have to do. I think there ended up being about 130 pages in my business coursework. It's a lot of stress, but then the exams I think are more stressful in terms of the fact that if you don't get the right question that you've revised, that's it. You could be the best in the subject out of everyone in your school, but if on that day something's happened before the exam, someone has said something to you that completely throws you off, or you get one question that you don't have a clue on, that's it. You drop grades, you lose marks, and that might not allow you to do your A-level course. It might not allow you to do what you want in the future just because of the pure amount of stress that's been put on you by the exams. So that's why I think coursework is good to offset the amount of pressure an exam has.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Thank you. We've heard that view from a number of witnesses. I think it's very interesting to hear it from you, currently within the system, if I can use that terminology. Participant B, you also put your hand up.

**Participant B:** Yeah, about exams, you revise, you learn all of the information, and then just regurgitate it back on the page. I think elements of that are definitely important, because you do need to know things to have any chance at a career in that field. But I do think that a lot of exams should be more applicable to other scenarios. In my science exams, it's just regurgitating information. Even though I want to go into a career in science, it's not really going to help me apart from, you know, knowing what Avogadro's Constant is or something, but it doesn't show you how to actually apply this to the real-world and in real jobs, especially at a greater level. Once you get to your final GCSEs or your final A-levels, I think a section of it should be orientated towards applying the knowledge that you've learned to other situations.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Thank you very much. Participant F?

**Participant F:** Going back to Participant A's point, I've had teachers tell me that they can't answer one of my questions because they've got more content to get through and that just puts you down. It doesn't allow you to learn what they're teaching you, but again, that's not the teachers' fault. It's the curriculum that they're following, and so they can't really do much about that. But that, alongside the constant reminder of knowing you've got your GCSEs this year,

means you need to focus on your exams when again, everything's being cramped up for you. We need to follow this strict schedule that they're giving us and we don't have much freedom in that. That's part of why exams are not fit for purpose.

But then again, for example in business, we haven't got any coursework, but I feel like there are some students who would benefit from getting coursework instead of having to work off a textbook or having to listen to the teacher. There are other subjects like geography where you get to go out, have field work trips and so on, but again you still test students on that field work, whereas it doesn't really make sense on how you're supposed to be tested on that when you're going out there experiencing it and then being tested.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Thank you. That's very interesting. Participant G?

**Participant G:** I think the exam system is really strict and very pressurising on us. You know that you've been working for five years on this, and then eventually it's all going to a few papers—with science, for example, it comes down to about six different papers. I was looking into the rules for the exams a few days ago and they're very strict. If, for example, someone loses a family member, they may still have to sit the exam and then you can only get about a 5% increase in the exam. But that sort of tragic event can really put pressure on you, and it can really jeopardise your mind and your whole exam. A 5% increase does not really compensate for it, but it's very strict. I think there should be more flexibility with it. It should be more lenient with exams because they are just very off putting. They put too much pressure on people. You can know all the content but just not be able to put it all out on paper in those 45 minutes, it just doesn't work like that.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Thank you. That's a very important point about the high-stakes nature of exams as they are at the moment.

**Participant C:** I think a point building on what Participant D and Participant G have already said is that because of the importance placed on exams, especially in certain STEM subjects where essentially all of your marks come from just two exams for each science for example, it means that if you don't perform on the day, you're not going to do well in that subject, and there's a huge amount of factors which will determine how well you do on the day. Even just, for example, having a really bad night sleep is going to seriously affect how well you do. It doesn't feel like it rewards hard work quite as much as if there was some way of proving it through something like coursework. I know I keep harping on about it, but the idea is that if you're putting in a lot of hard work throughout the course in the year, you're going to do well in your coursework just because you're



working on it. I think that would increase the value of hard work throughout the education system because it's not just about that day, it's consistent, long term, hard work towards a goal, and creating a product that you're proud of. It is just a different way of working that benefits some students more than other.

I do not think that exams serve no purpose, but I do feel like if it was closer to a 50/50 or 70/30 type of split there would be more ability for students who find exams very difficult or who don't perform well on that day to still be able to get a grade that they're proud of and do well through putting in consistent hard work over the course of the entire year. One last point: in the age of the internet, information is obviously extraordinarily accessible, so learning facts has less value than it did in the past, simply because you can find facts online more easily than you ever have been able to do. Therefore, I feel like things that promote a sort of scientific mindset of being able to come up with new ideas is more important now than it ever has been.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Yes, we're not going to get into the whole ChatGPT discussion; I'm sure that could last for several hours. But it's interesting that I think almost all of you talked about coursework, presentations, and project work as things that you would like to see integral to the whole assessment process, which is something that we as a committee have been considering.

**Participant D:** Another thing that I want to build on from what someone said about not being able to answer questions because of time, but also by the same token sometimes teachers can't actually tell you certain things because of the limitations of the course. As an example, in physics I had a taster session at the college that I'm now at, designed to give you a taste of what physics is like at A-level. They told us that light isn't a wave or a particle. But when I went back to school and asked my physics teacher, they essentially said that I need to forget that knowledge because GCSEs are dumbed down. The first thing that you get told when you go into A-levels is that you need to forget everything that you learn at GCSE. So realistically, what is the point in learning that content if you're not going to need it afterwards? Because technically most of it is wrong.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Thank you. Participant A?

**Participant A:** I don't want to sound like I've got a problem with everything, I just wanted to talk a bit about coursework because I think I am wary that focusing too much on coursework could also present problems in terms of inequality between students, because—especially between the state school and private school gap—private schools will have more resources. Also, just more affluent kids will have more resources and be able to pay for more resources to get help with their coursework. I also think in terms of the classroom, some kids

don't actually have permanent classrooms at the minute, which I think is really important to bring up on an education call because we can't not touch on that. There are kids not learning in permanent classrooms right now, and to me, I think that is just abhorrent and I don't think that that's something to be proud of, as Gillian Keegan seems to think.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Thank you. Well, we've only got 5 minutes left in the session. I'm just going to go round and offer everybody the chance to have a final say of the points that you think are important, and if I could ask you to be as brief as possible, that would be very helpful.

**Participant A:** I just want to stress that we haven't touched much at all on climate education, but I think it's really important going forwards because young people have really bad climate anxiety at the minute. The number of kids with anxiety about climate is staggering, and it's really important that we learn more about the climate crisis in schools.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Thank you. Participant B?

**Participant B:** Yeah, completely agree about the climate. We need more environmental knowledge, and also a stress on supporting young people's mental health, especially through the exam seasons. And please don't make maths compulsory at A-level. No one wants that. I take maths. It's kind of useful, but my career does not relate to it. GCSE level is enough.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Okay, thank you. Participant D?

**Participant D:** The gap between A-levels and GCSE content is probably a bit too big. Like I was saying before in terms of walking into A-levels and being told 'forget everything you know'. I think it should be a bit more of a bridge in the gap at some point.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Thank you. Participant F?

**Participant F:** Probably that not all students learn in the same way. I know that there is this idea of equality and equity, but if a student is learning faster compared to another student, or a student gets more information out of something compared to another student, that's something that should be looked into and considered.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Thank you. Participant E?

**Participant E:** I feel that some schools focus more on real life skills than others. I think that every school should be more focused on life skills, and it should be regimented more into the curriculum.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Yeah, of course. Thank you. Participant G?

**Participant G:** This is on real life skills as well as academic skills, so making a balance of focusing more on life skills, just like how much we focus on academic skills.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Balance is a key, a key word. Thank you. And finally, Participant C?

**Participant C:** I think that there should be a balance between coursework and exams so that we can cultivate a creative scientific mindset in our youth, which will be very important going forward.

**Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** That's great. I think I could speak on behalf of Lord Mair, Baroness Evans and myself in saying that you've all been really impressive. Not just with your candour, which is important—it wouldn't mean much if you were not candid. But also I think the thought that you've put into your own education, how you've got to where you are, where you want to go and your reflections on that, and that will be very helpful to us as a committee.

[End of transcript]