Response authors:

Our response has been drawn from our first-hand experience (with young people, in schools, scientific and educational research), the LifeLab Youth Panel and research projects conducted by young people aged 14-18 as part of the young researcher training programme (YRTP)

Dr Kath Woods-Townsend is a Professor of Science Engagement and Health Education at the University of Southampton and the LifeLab Programme Manager. She was instrumental in the development of the young Researcher Training Programme. LifeLab Southampton is an innovative educational intervention which shows adolescents first-hand how their diets and lifestyles lay the foundations for a healthy life, and how their own health is linked to the health of children they may themselves have in the future. Building on NIHR funded research into lifelong effects of the early life environment, it engages students with ongoing investigations in a University Hospital research institute. The context-specific learning experience and direct contact with researchers improve students' science and health literacy. LifeLab comprises modules of work involving curriculum-linked lessons in school before and after an activity day at LifeLab Southampton.

Lisa Bagust is a LifeLab teacher and Senior Enterprise Fellow. She is the lead for the secondary and college programmes, the Young Health Champions qualification and for the current LifeLab EACH-B Research trial. She delivers training to teachers and researchers and teaches secondary students attending LifeLab day visits. Through developing scientific thinking and reasoning skills with stimulating activities, and connecting young people to the scientific research behind health messages, she focuses on engaging teachers and students in health education, helping to empower young people to make healthy lifestyle choices.

Donna Lovelock is a LifeLab teacher and Senior Enterprise Fellow. She is the lead for the Early LifeLab Programme – a programme expanding the LifeLab programme described above for primary schools. She delivers training to teachers and researchers. She leads the Youth panel, facilitating the discussion between young people themselves, and invited experts and supporting the young people in their independent work.

The LifeLab Youth Panel was established to recognise and value the contribution of young people in the co-production of the LifeLab research, interventions and resources. Young people from schools/colleges primarily in Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Portsmouth and Southampton are employed for 12 weeks at a time (a school term). Meeting weekly for a one-hour online discussion group and following up with two hours of independent work, the LifeLab Youth Panel has co-created a variety of resources to date (a series of animations detailing what Clinical Research is, a series of articles which detail interviews with researchers, and an Exam Wellbeing Resource). This term's youth panel have discussed and debated the questions in the Department for Education's Curriculum and Assessment Review. They have consulted their peers, teachers and family members and between themselves have crafted the written responses to the questions.

Lifelab Youth Panel members: Imogen Thomas (17yrs), Chelsea Anusionwu (17yrs), Seth Taylor (16yrs), Jayden Philpott (16yrs), Uyathandwa Luthuli (18yrs), Gayathri Kumar (15yrs), Ashmin Vohra (14yrs).

The Young Researcher Training Programme was developed to train young people in skills and knowledge to conduct their own research projects. Young people from schools/colleges primarily in Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Portsmouth and Southampton are employed to participate in a training programme that lasts 12-15 weeks. Meeting weekly for a two-hour face-to-face training session and following up with two hours of independent work, where the young people put the skills they have

learnt into practice. The training programme covers the lifecyle of research (defining research questions, considering ethics, determining methodology, recruiting participants, collecting and analysing data, evaluating and disseminating results). Young people in the most recent cohort conducted research projects, some of which had relevant insights for this call and so are included here. For more detail on the research projects please look at these links:

https://bit.ly/LifeLabYRTPResearchSummer2024LandscapePoster

https://bit.ly/LifeLabYRTPResearchSummer2024PortraitPoster

Young Researchers: Libby Tickner (17yrs), Talitha McCleery (17yrs), Samuel Gbesemete (15yrs), Maram Althabhawee (17yrs), Sophia Willcock (18yrs), Angel Padua (17yrs).

Question 1: *Are you responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?*

• *Individual*

Question 2: *If you are responding as an individual, in what capacity are you responding?*

• *Other (please describe)*

Submitting as an education/academic expert, but including and representing the views and experiences of the LifeLab youth panel and the young researchers (aged 14-18yrs)

Question 6. *What is your name?*

Kathryn Woods-Townsend, on behalf of LifeLab and the LifeLab Youth Panel

Question 7. *What is your email address?*

k.woods-townsend@soton.ac.uk

Question 8. *Are you happy to be contacted directly about your response?*

• *Yes*

Question 9. *Would you like us to keep your responses confidential?*

• *No*

Question 10: *What aspects of the current a) curriculum, b) assessment system and c) qualification pathways are working well to support and recognize educational progress for children and young people?*

From the perspective of youth panel authors: The current curriculum offers a broad range of subjects enabling students to explore various fields and discover their interests. This diverse approach can be beneficial as it introduces students to new concepts and career possibilities. However, parts of the curriculum feel outdated and lack relevance to the real-world. The introduction of statutory Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) / Relationships, Sex and Health education (RSHE) lessons has been welcomed.

Regarding assessment, while traditional exams work for some, they can create significant pressure hindering performance for others. The qualification pathways including GCSEs, A-Levels and BTECs offer valuable choices for students.

Question 11: *What aspects of the current a) curriculum, b) assessment system and c) qualification pathways should be targeted for improvements to better support and recognise educational progress for children and young people?*

Recommendations: To improve educational progress for young people, we suggest

(1) updating the curriculum to make it more diverse and relevant to real-life skills such as financial literacy, health literacy, digital literacy and mental health awareness;

(2) adopting varied assessment methods that reduce reliance on final exams; and

(3) ensuring a range of qualification pathways so all students have options suited to their goals.

Curriculum

From the perspective of youth panel authors: The curriculum would greatly benefit by incorporating essential life skills such as being able to identify misinformation, where to find information and how to assess if it's 'good', financial management and digital literacy. By making the curriculum more applicable to real life and the futures in front of us lessons can become more engaging and applicable, better preparing students for life beyond school. *From the perspective of academic authors:* Whilst some of this content is included in the Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) curriculum, the lack of accountability for this content results in a varied approach to delivery of this curriculum. In our group and our further research, there was huge variety in how PSHE was delivered (tutor time, collapsed days, dedicated teachers, random teachers, humanities teachers), this resulted in some topics being taught once in school, or the same content being taught year on year. This results in students not taking the lessons seriously or valuing the content. This should be one of the most important subjects, but is not valued as a subject. *From the perspective of youth panel authors:* The curriculum should be updated to be more inclusive to reflect diverse cultures and perspectives. This shift would help all students feel connected to the material they study and foster a sense of belonging. Integrating technology education such as digital literacy including appropriate use of AI would prepare students for the evolving job market and the world they will enter as adults.

Assessment

From the perspective of youth panel authors: Regarding assessment, while traditional exams work for some, they can create significant pressure hindering performance for others. Incorporating more coursework and regular in-class assessments that contribute to final grades would allow students to showcase their skills in a more flexible environment. Furthermore, regular feedback on assignments can help students identify areas for improvement and build their confidence over time. This may also be a more effective way of implementing access arrangements for children with different educational needs. *From the perspective of academic authors:* Research from one of the young people on the 'Young Researcher Training Programme' supported our discussion that the current emphasis on final exams can lead to excessive stress making it challenging for students to demonstrate their true understanding.

Qualification Pathways

From the perspective of youth panel authors: Lastly, regarding qualification pathways, expanding vocational training and career-focused programmes would provide tailored learning experiences

motivating students to achieve their goals. *From the perspective of academic authors:* Encouraging schools and colleges to offer the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) and Higher Project Qualification (HPQ) to more students and in a more structured/supportive way could offer opportunities for students to broaden their skills, gaining experience which is applicable across subjects. The HPQ seems relatively unknown in our settings, and the EPQ is typically only offered to those motivated students who are left to complete through their own commitment, but with limited support.

From the perspective of youth panel authors: Real-world experiences such as work placements would be invaluable to show application of content and motivate students with the possibilities for their future. Increasing support for degree apprenticeships and destigmatising non-academic routes would empower students to pursue pathways that align with their skills and aspirations. Providing comprehensive career counselling and recognising skills gained from volunteering or online courses would ensure that all pathways are respected and accessible.

Question 12. *In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation (class ceilings) for learners experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage?*

Recommendation: To reduce barriers for learners experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage

(1) ensure all elements of PSHE education are afforded similar statutory requirement;

From the perspective of youth panel authors: Yes. The costs for having technology are very expensive and there is different funding for different schools, as state schools may not have access to enough funding to provide equitable, reliable access. As well as many people do not have access to a laptop, and can't access homework, or review and have effective revision work done. *From the perspective of academic authors:* One of the Young Researcher projects looked at 'How do social factors affect a young person's future', themes from this research highlighted the importance of education and revealed that young people felt that sense of disadvantage as a result of the place where they lived. Respondents felt that additional educational support would help to overcome some of these barriers – mental health support, 1-1 tutoring/smaller class sizes. Young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds were concerned about their futures in terms of possible careers/earning potential. We also reflected on the family support that young people receive through everyday conversations. As pointed out by the PSHE association, a UCL study (Anders et al 2023) showed that financial skills of 15-year-olds from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are four years behind those from advantaged backgrounds, and they are less likely to learn about money in school or discuss it with their parents. This links to our recommendations above about including more focus on financial literacy for all students, through ensuring that all elements of the Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) / Relationships, Sex and Health education (RSHE) curriculum is statutory.

Question 13. *In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation which may disproportionately impact pupils based on other protected characteristics (e.g. gender, ethnicity)?*

Recommendation: To reduce barriers for learners based on other protected characteristics

(1) ensure all elements of PSHE education are afforded similar statutory requirement, include encouragement for inclusive language and reducing stereotypes throughout schooling;

From the perspective of youth panel authors: In our local schools, many students don't have English as their first language, so there will be a language barrier, and these students may not have something or someone to help them with translating. The curriculum often includes stereotypes about specific races and cultural groups. Which can lead to many students having biased views, as well as issues like bullying flagging up because of something that was brought up in the curriculum. *From the perspective of academic authors:* One of the young researchers considered the impact of gender stereotypes on career choices; the data showed that despite efforts to encourage girls to consider STEM careers, disproportionately boys still pursue these subjects and have aspirations which outweigh girls. These gender stereotypes are engrained throughout childhood, and there is an opportunity in schools and through education to break down these stereotypes.

Question 14. *In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers in continuing to improve attainment, progress, access or participation for learners with SEND?*

Recommendation: To reduce barriers for learners with SEND

This area is too big for simple recommendations, the funding model to ensure learners with SEND have access to appropriate education and resources requires significant revision. Currently, learners with SEND are being disproportionately and inequitably let down by the education system

From the perspective of youth panel authors: We felt like this is a very overlooked topic, as students that need support like an additional teacher may not always be with them during lessons. In our experiences, this led to the in-class teacher having to work with them, affecting everyone's learning. With lack of funding now it can also be very difficult to find additional teachers.

With exams, though the extra time is beneficial it also does not completely help as relying on written exams may not help and work well, so instead they could have visual demonstrations.

From the perspective of academic authors: One of the young researchers considered how reproductive subjects were covered in SEND settings, as an unintended finding, one aspect which came through was loss of lesson time due to periods.

Question 22: *Are there particular curriculum or qualifications subjects where: there is too much content; not enough content, or content is missing; the content is out-of-date;*

Recommendations: Subject-specific curriculum content

(1) updating the subject content to make it more relevant, reducing content (which can be looked up) and increasing focus on critical thinking and analysis

(2) providing real-world examples of application

(3) raising the profile and importance of the PSHE curriculum as an subject that is of the utmost importance to ensure young people are prepared for the world beyond the school/college gates

*From the perspective of youth panel authors: T*here are opportunities to put relevant subject-specific content into the curriculum as some of the lessons taught in school/college are either not valuable or not related to the career path students want to take. For example:

- It would be beneficial if more non-European languages were offered to students – to reflect the wider global context we live in, and the broader diversity in our schools.

- Particularly for English, History and Politics, it was felt that the content in these subjects is quite out of date and involves reflecting on past events/literature instead of critically analysing current events which perhaps have more relevance.
- *From the perspective of academic authors:* For STEM subjects – there is significant content required, but not all of it feels relevant. This is a subject which changes so rapidly, that having a prescriptive curriculum is unhelpful. Teaching skills for critical analysis is lacking and poorly covered. Poor levels of scientific literacy were clearly demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic. We should be providing a curriculum that enables the citizens of the future the ability to engage with and apply scientific knowledge that affects all of us in our everyday lives. As a GCSE exam marker (KWT), the lack of students' ability to apply knowledge learnt in the classroom to problem solving in exam questions highlights a real need for change.
- In addition, it was suggested that including real-life scenarios in all subjects e.g. how we use subjects in STEM, in our daily lives etc would bring learning to life and bring open minds, giving a range of unique responses. This can be done through school trips, after-school clubs and more extracurricular activities which enhance students' knowledge and understanding of that particular subject.
- There is such an opportunity through the Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) curriculum to cover essential life skills, such as mental health and well-being as this could teach us how to manage our stress and health when revising for exams or preparing for something big like giving a speech in front of a big audience.

From the perspective of youth panel authors: In our discussion, we felt several GCSE subjects could benefit from changes to their content and assessments to enhance our learning experience.

- Modern Foreign Languages (MFL): we should focus on more relevant topics that connect to our everyday lives and cultures. Additionally, placing greater emphasis on speaking and listening assessments would make learning the language more practical and enjoyable.
- Science: connecting lessons to real-world issues, such as environmental science, would make the content more engaging. Incorporating more hands-on experiments and project-based assessments would help us understand the material better and apply our knowledge effectively.
- Mathematics: instead of just memorising formulas, we should concentrate on problem-solving and critical thinking skills, particularly in real-life situations like budgeting and financial planning.
- English: it would be great to read more diverse texts that reflect various cultures. Including more coursework in assessments would allow us to showcase our creativity rather than relying solely on exams.
- History: could include more local and global contexts, with project-based assessments that encourage critical thinking about historical events.
- Art and Design: we should explore contemporary and digital art forms, using portfolio assessments to better reflect our creative processes.
- Physical Education (PE): the focus should shift to personal fitness and wellbeing, allowing for self-reflection and assessment.
- Computer Science: updating the curriculum to include current technologies and ethical considerations, along with hands-on coding projects, would make our learning more relevant.
-

Question 24: *To what extent does the current curriculum (including qualification content) support students to positively engage with, be knowledgeable about and respect others? Are there elements that could be improved?*

Recommendations: Opportunities for curriculum to support respect and engagement with others

(1) All elements of PSHE to be taught as statutory

(2) PSHE to be taught as protected curriculum regularly (weekly) and not as drop-down provision or through tutor/assemblies

(3) raising the profile and importance of the PSHE curriculum as a subject that is of the utmost importance to ensure young people are prepared for the world beyond the school/college gates

From the perspective of youth panel authors: The Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) curriculum is the ideal curriculum. However, there needs to be more emphasis on the fact that PSHE lessons should occur more often (regularly) and be valued as an 'important' subject – this displays to students how crucial the values taught here are in society, even if it isn't an assessed subject. The lack of accountability in PSHE and the fact that not all elements of the curriculum are statutory result in varied approach to delivery of the curriculum and lack of value placed on the content by both teachers and students.

Through the PSHE curriculum there could be cultural activities e.g. we could have PowerPoints on cultural festivals and why people celebrate them. This would engage and interest students in exploring and understanding different cultures which would be useful when travelling and meeting new people. It also creates a sense of belonging in the community and enhances creativity and expression through art, history and drama.

Along with financial literacy (as mentioned previously), there is also opportunity to support young people in developing knowledge and skills to manage their mental health – we could bring in people from different organisations and people who have experienced issues relating to their mental health and how they approached them. This will help students understand the reality of not looking after your health and well-being and help them make better lifestyle choices.

If we could have more hands-on-work subjects like textiles and construction, students will gain experience and a deeper understanding in that particular course which would be useful when studying them at college or moving into apprenticeships. In addition, it would be helpful if we could have more non-exam based assessments like coursework, giving presentations and creative projects, students will put in more effort and time into these assessments. This will increase performance in students and give better results.

Question 26: *In which ways do the current secondary curriculum and qualification pathways support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for future study, life and work and what could we change to better support this?*

Recommendations: Changes to secondary curriculum and qualifications to better support future study, life and work

(1) Offer programme of workshops to develop 'transferable' skills (maybe through PSHE?)

(2) Embed use of technology throughout subjects – not solely in IT, consider power and safe application of AI

(3) develop career advice provision

From the perspective of youth panel authors: The current secondary curriculum does an ok job at preparing students for future study, life and work however there are aspects that could be improved. The curriculum helps young people through:

- compulsory subjects, which build a foundation of knowledge and skills
- vocational courses that offer an assortment of more hands-on learning
- qualifications like music, art and drama all support students in developing key skills which will benefit them in the long term

Aspects that could benefit from some adjustments:

- build a programme of workshops and skill-specific tasks to use and develop transferable skills. Ensure these are available to all students, as typically, these are only available to certain students. Have a key focus on e.g. problem solving, communication and creativity. This will enhance academic success, by preparing for future workplaces and encouraging critical thinking.
- Embed the use of technology – not simply in 'IT' curriculum (which you can drop at Yr 9). This is the future for young people and we need skills and understanding to use responsibly, safely and effectively. One of the young researchers conducted their research project into the use of AI. It was clear that young people recognised how powerful this was and will be, but reflected that they aren't taught how to use it effectively.
- *From the perspective of academic authors:* Career education is varied across settings, opportunities for work experience are limited and knowledge in schools/colleges about possible careers is limited, rather than a tick-box exercise for schools/colleges to deliver career education, some authentic, meaningful education would be valuable. Many young people leave school/college without knowing what they want to pursue in their future education and end up choosing options they don't enjoy or excel in

Question 27: *In which ways do the current qualification pathways and content at 16-19 support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for future study, life and work and what could we change to better support this?*

Recommendations: Changes to 16-19 curriculum and qualifications to better support future study, life and work

(1) Expand work experience opportunities across all qualification pathways to enhance practical skill and technical skills for students intending to enter work after 16-19 education.

(2) Promote greater recognition of vocational qualifications to ensure that they are valued alongside A-Levels to combat the societal stigma that only A levels lead to successful careers.

(3) ensure core subject resit options are easily available.

(4) Integrate mental health and wellbeing support.

(5) Include travelling enrichment opportunities to enhance engagement.

From the perspective of youth panel authors: The current qualification pathways for students ages 16-19 offer a diverse range of subjects that equip learners with valuable skills. A levels & BTECs promote critical thinking and analytical skills that are vital for future study, life and work. However, to enhance the relevance of these qualifications – implementing a greater emphasis on essential soft

skills such as interpersonal skills, leadership, resilience, compassion, time management, collaboration and many more will better support readiness for future paths. Fostering collaboration between educational institutions and local industries relevant to the qualification pathways taken by students to provide them with work placement opportunities as these are often out of reach for students especially in competitive fields such as medicine, pharmacy, engineering and business etc will significantly allow them to gain practical skills to better equip them for work life. Ensuring that educational institutions are equipped with resources and trained staff and providing all students with the opportunity to resist core subjects alongside 16-19 courses will enhance student readiness for future paths. Introducing mental-health and well being support would benefit students, promoting resilience and reducing stress. Enrichment opportunities like travel could enhance engagement and motivate students by making education more engaging.

Question 29: *To what extent do the current secondary curriculum and qualifications pathways support pupils to study a broad and balanced curriculum? Should anything change to better support this?*

Recommendations: Changes to secondary curriculum and qualifications to better a broad and balanced curriculum

(1) Support and encourage schools to collaborate to provide wide offer to young people, with appropriate expert teaching.

(2) Require young people to be involved in decisions about e.g. triple/double science and Higher/foundation – so decisions aren't made to support school's results and league table placings, but are in best interests of young people

(3) encourage cross-disciplinary teaching, making connections between subjects

(4) encourage wider delivery of the Higher Project Qualification, including either recognition of additional qualifications in the Progress 8 measure (and other accountability measures), or revisiting how school success is judged

From the perspective of youth panel authors: The current secondary curriculum and qualifications pathways support young friendly to study a broad and balanced curriculum to a good extent. This is because students study:

- Core subjects that are compulsory including, English, maths and sciences,
- their chosen subjects, a humanity and the extracurricular subjects like IT and PSHE.

This all creates a broad range of qualifications for students to study and earn their GCSEs in, however there are some issues:

- some schools have different or limited options for students to select from, which can limit young people's choices and not allow them to choose a subject area they enjoy; if all schools had to have mostly the same amount of subjects, then all students will have an equal and broad curriculum.
- some subjects like languages and construction are limited to a certain number of students and selection of students, changing this to allow more students to choose the subjects they want will give them more flexibility over their education and create a more engaging and enjoyable learning environment. These changes are realistic to a lesser extent because having more subjects and more spaces for qualifications would be difficult for newer or smaller schools and they may not have the facilities to run subjects like construction,

outdoor education and hair and beauty. *From the perspective of academic authors*: exploring opportunities for collaboration across settings could widen the choices available to young people, and ensure expert teaching

- allowing students to make informed and educated choices about which qualifications they want to study at GCSE level, to prevent students being entered for further maths/triple science without having a voice in the decision
- students being entered for lower qualifications such as foundation exams without having a choice in the matter. Perhaps there could be discussions between teachers, parents and most importantly the student themself before a decision is made.
- a greater emphasis on connected learning so encouraging cross-curricular learning could help students make links between different subjects. For example, combining arts with science or mathematics with humanities can encourage a more integrated and approach to learning. This is realistic because subjects cover many topics which can interloop like chemistry and maths which both use equations, this will allow students to be more engaged and create links in their learning, making it feel more valuable.
- *From perspective of academic authors:* encouraging schools to recongise the value of the Higher Project Qualification would allow for cross-disciplinary teaching and development of skills in critical thinking. This would have to be valued appropriately - by schools so it was resourced properly to enable student success and by government – schools won't deliver anything outside of those subjects which contribute to Progress 8 scores

Question 30: *To what extent do the current qualifications pathways at 16-19 support learners to study a broad curriculum which gives them the right knowledge and skills to progress? Should anything change to better support this?*

Recommendations: Changes to 16-19 curriculum and qualifications to better a broad and balanced curriculum

(1) Explore elements of the international baccalaureate (IB) model such as introducing additional 'minor' courses in essential topics (e.g. economics/citizenship) or Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) style projects that students could take alongside main subjects without added exam pressure to ensure a well-rounded education and versatile skill range.

(2) Implement more flexible subject combinations and widen accessibility, tailoring entry requirements for some courses to encourage students to explore diverse fields without being restricted by their initial subject choices or prior attainment.

(3) Increase opportunities for interdisciplinary projects that will allow students to navigate different fields whilst they gain practical & essential soft skills.

(4) Increasing variable support for individual progress with more opportunity to mix and match qualifications and receive personal feedback on progress.

From the perspective of youth panel authors: Current qualification pathways at 16-19 allow students to specialise in a select number of subjects which offers in depth focus and skill development in their chosen areas. However, this narrow selection may also limit student options if decide they want a broader foundation to explore various interests or if their career goals shift. Implementing strict entry requirements to 16-19 education can hinder students from exploring subjects they are passionate about by placing barriers on their potential, completely diverting them away from their aspired careers. Reducing restrictive entry requirements will make it easier for students to follow paths aligned with their interests even if those interests change during their 16-19 education.

Implementing interdisciplinary projects where students can apply knowledge from multiple subjects in a holistic manner, increasing their transferrable and critical thinking skills while helping students make connections between fields. Allowing students to have more flexibility in how qualifications are matched and providing personalised feedback on progress will allow students to better understand their strengths and areas for improvement to better prepare for dynamic future study or work paths. Supporting students to mix and match qualifications on different pathways would open opportunities.

Question 31: *To what extent does the current curriculum at secondary and qualifications pathways (at secondary and 16-19) ensure that pupils and learners are able to develop creative skills and have access to creative subjects?*

Recommendations: Extent that secondary curriculum and qualifications enable development of creative skills

(1) Encourage schools to value creative subjects – above and beyond simply for exam results.

(2) Encourage schools to think creatively about how these skills can be embedded throughout subjects – taking an inter-disciplinary approach.

From the perspective of youth panel authors: Having creative subjects available like art, media, drama, tech, available to us in primary and secondary schools ensures that we can develop these skills. However, I do realize that the curriculum formation may vary across schools, and they may prioritise math, English, science and let the creative subjects get overlooked. So, some young people may have more limited access to these. After realising this, I did some research and found out that creativity is not narrowed down and left for only the creative subjects to teach because subjects like stem, do teach and learners are able to develop creative skills, especially in project based learning. In my school, our teachers are constantly encouraging us students to register our creative thinking and skills in our work. Having this being done, us learners get chances to use creative skills. And I believe that the way we are developing and applying our creative skills does not only develop critical thinking skills but also creativity skills, for example in practical applications. This means that when a student decides that they really don't want to take any creative subject, their creative skills can still develop. So, to summarize, there is a certain extent that the curriculum and pathways ensure students access to these subjects, as while we do have subjects to access these. There are also a lot of barriers. I say this because of standardised testing, and the huge priority of our core subjects, can cause many to lose touch in creative subjects and fall behind in their creative thinking. So though it is accessible it is to a certain extent.

Question 40: *What more can we do to ensure that:*

a) the assessment requirements for GCSEs capture and support the development of knowledge and skills of every young person; and

b) young people's wellbeing is effectively considered when assessments are developed, giving pupils the best chance to show what they can do to support their progression?

Recommendations: effectiveness of GCSE assessments and consideration of wellbeing

(1) Encourage schools to value creative subjects – above and beyond simply for exam results.

(2) Encourage schools to think creatively about how these skills can be embedded throughout subjects – taking an inter-disciplinary approach.

From the perspective of youth panel authors: To make GCSEs more supportive and meaningful, several key changes could help students better demonstrate their knowledge and reduce stress. A primary improvement would be to diversify assessment methods, including not only exams but also coursework, projects, and presentations. This would provide students with different strengths a fair chance to showcase their skills, making the system more inclusive. In Maths and Science, incorporating real-life applications and practical tasks would make learning more relevant, helping students understand how these subjects apply beyond the classroom. Right now, many students feel they are learning only to pass exams rather than to develop useful skills. Real-world examples would make these subjects more engaging and show their value in everyday life.

Another beneficial change would be to spread assessments over Key Stage 4, rather than concentrating everything at the end of Year 11. This would reduce stress and give students a clearer sense of their progress throughout their GCSE years, preventing the overwhelming pressure that comes with final exams. Additionally, vocational courses should be given equal respect to academic courses, offering a viable option for students who excel with hands-on, practical work. Recognising these pathways would support a broader range of student interest and capability and career goals.

Stress management programs could also make a big difference. By teaching skills like mindfulness, time management, and exam preparation techniques, schools could help students manage exam-related anxiety. Balanced exam schedules with regular breaks would further prevent burnout and give students the time they need to prepare properly. Ensuring a fair, supportive environment could also involve more inclusive exam formats. For example, students with specific learning needs or disabilities could be provided with extra time or given alternative types of assessments to better suit their needs. Such accommodations would ensure that all students have an equitable opportunity to succeed.

Regular feedback, using technology, could significantly enhance learning as well. Frequent practice tests with rapid feedback would allow students to see where they need to improve before final exams, making study time more effective and focused. This approach would alleviate some of the stress that comes from not knowing how well they're doing until the final assessment.

Finally, to ensure that assessments remain challenging yet manageable, educational psychologists could be involved in designing GCSE exams. This collaboration would ensure that exams are well-structured and fair, targeting key knowledge areas without overwhelming students. By focusing on realistic improvements, like introducing diverse assessment methods gradually and providing supportive programs, these changes would make GCSEs fairer, less stressful, and more reflective of students' real abilities. This vision for GCSEs would allow students to demonstrate a broader range of skills, build real-world understanding, and feel more supported throughout their educational journey.

From the perspective of academic authors: our work with young people in exam years has shown the depth of anxiety there is and the expectations that young people place on themselves. Exploring ways to reduce the 'all or nothing' feeling about these assessments could only be helpful, along with providing both support for managing wellbeing, but involving young people in the conversations and decisions confers a feeling of inclusion and empowerment which helps to diminish the fear of the unknown. Several of our young researchers considered the impact of exams and that high accountability environment on young people's mental health and wellbeing. It was evident that this is a concern for young people, a high proportion of young people commented that there had been 'a particular period of time where education has negatively affected their mental health' with mention of exams. Conclusions from this research were that education should be something that people want

to receive and if students aren't attending due to poor mental health, then schools need to take action. Arguably, schools need to be supported to take action by a refreshment of the measures against which schools are themselves judged. Different research projects drew out that young people would welcome more support schools during and in the lead-up to exam time, in the form of 1-1 tutoring/support groups. For students, this could simply take the format of knowing that (all) their teachers are supportive and encouraging. A particularly poignant reflection was '*For a student to believe in themselves, they need the people around them to believe in them'*

Question 41: *Are there particular GCSE subjects where changes could be made to the qualification content and/or assessment that would be beneficial for pupils' learning?*

Recommendations: effectiveness of GCSE assessments and consideration of wellbeing

(1) Encourage schools to value creative subjects – above and beyond simply for exam results.

(2) Encourage schools to think creatively about how these skills can be embedded throughout subjects – taking an inter-disciplinary approach.

Question 47. *To what extent does the range of programmes and qualifications on offer at each level meet the needs and aspirations of learners?*

a. Level 3

b. Level 2

c. Level 1 and entry level

Recommendations: to what extent do the range of programmes and qualifications meet the needs and aspirations of learners

(1) Level 2/3 courses involve more hard skills, like digital competence, that are transferable across several career paths

(2) vocational Level 3 courses endorse more industry partnerships to match the latest skills (that are transferable) required in the job market

(3) For Level 1 and entry level, individual learning plans and personalised classes could aid students, allowing educators to understand the different approaches of their learners and their aspirations

From the perspective of youth panel authors: The qualifications offered at Level 3 are beneficial to the academically able and those looking to progress onto further study, as they enable students to focus on individual courses that cater to their desired career and exposes them to in depth concepts that may be revisited at university, if they choose to go. Similarly, Level 1/2 and entry level facilitates easy progression to Level 3, preparing students with foundational skills. They recognise that various students may have differing educational needs and thus, need more time devoted to building skills in literacy, numeracy as well as practical skills for career prospects.

However, Level 3 qualifications, including vocational, are extremely content-heavy and too specialised, limiting students to choosing 2-4 courses, narrowing down their education to a specific career path. Consequently, this restricts their job prospects, at a time where students are unsure about their futures. Learners studying Level 1/2 qualifications may struggle finding career prospects due to progression requirements that are not attainable by some students, and may not be suited to the traditional classroom teaching style.

Question 51. *Are there additional skills, subjects, or experiences that all learners should develop or study during 16-19 education, regardless of their chosen programmes and qualifications, to support them to be prepared for life and work?*

Recommendations: What additional skills, subjects or experiences would support students to be prepared for life and work?

(1) Providing access to compulsory lessons in financial competence, citizenship, and social responsibility, which are crucial for facilitating a steady transition to being independent in learners' living conditions and money management

(2) Implementing more digital skills would be beneficial to match the current work landscape and rise of technology in careers.

(3) Encouraging uptake of the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) and raising awareness of this qualification in Higher Education and in the workplace. Encouraging Higher Education establishments to include EPQ in contextual offers.

(4) Encouraging extra-curricular citizenship projects

From the perspective of youth panel authors: Whilst it is vital that learners develop a fine focus on achieving required grades for their desired career, it must be acknowledged that students are entering an unfamiliar stage of their lives, where they are required to be independent in managing their finances, and living conditions in university accommodations, for instance, as well as personal well-being.

Concerning additional skills, thorough workshops in economics and sociology (outside of the A-Level/T-Level etc.), would help to broaden students' knowledge of rent, savings, conflict management and their duty as a UK citizen. Imposing these supplementary lessons enables learners to develop confidence in supporting themselves after 16-19 academics and succeed in their future aspirations without the burden of uncertainties.

Moreover, as the globe gears towards a digitalised future, learners who do not already study Computing, should have access to workshops that enable them to develop crucial IT skills. Many students originate from underprivileged backgrounds, where they may not own devices, whilst, others may only have a very basic understanding of technology from 11-16 education: thus, due to this varied proficiency, IT workshops offers valuable abilities that are more applicable to life outside of school. *From the perspective of academic authors:* The opportunities afforded through completion of the EPQ are great. Ownership of a research project, coupled with good quality teaching of the skills required, enable young people to develop cross-disciplinary knowledge and essential critical thinking skills. Several of our young researchers focused on opportunities for young people outside of the formal curriculum. The reflected that projects to be engaged as citizens, to feel connected to their communities and to have their input valued and acted upon was beneficial to their mental health, to their motivation for study and in developing skills for future workforce/further study.

Question 53: *How could technology be used to improve how we deliver the curriculum, assessment and qualifications in England?*

Recommendations: How could technology be used to improve delivery of curriculum, assessment and qualifications?

(1) Encourage use of technology to support delivery of lessons – online presentations, better use of technology.

(2) Embedding use of technology throughout subjects – not siloed in 'Computer Science'

(3) Embracing opportunities provided with new technology, whilst developing understanding to use appropriately and effectively

From the perspective of youth panel authors: Many teachers do not post lesson presentations online for us students to review which is very unhelpful, as we are all human, and we may miss a lesson for whatever reason, and may need to catch up, as well as if we have an exam we can review the lesson slides. And if we had online accessing tools we could improve the way the lessons is delivered with using those tools like google classrooms so they are accessible to all and more engaging. And by embedding technology into the curriculum delivery, assessments and qualifications can improve how these are delivered by having personalised work and materials to review that are more tailored, especially when it comes to exams. Technology can enhance how the curriculum is delivered by enabling online tests and assessments to take place which would also allow us students to gather and also learn from our mistakes, realize where we went wrong, and we can also see where our peers went wrong so that we can revise and study those specific areas. *From the perspective of academic authors:* Higher education establishments have had to adapt to more online delivery and could provide insight and support to L2/L3 colleagues to support development of teaching practice. AI as a technology is rapidly progressing, as educators it is incumbent upon us to understand how to best use it effectively, to provide education to our learners so that they are safe whilst using it, but also using it appropriately.

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