

# London Councils: Young People's Education and Skills - Operational Sub-Group

## Learner Voice

Item No: 7

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**Summary** This paper sets out the proposed means of incorporating the learner voice within the work of London Councils Young People's Education and Skills Board (YPES).

**Recommendations** OSG members are recommended to note the decision of YPES and discuss how the proposed Young Learner Blog might be established and rolled out.

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## 1 Background

- 1.1 At its meeting on 14 February 2011 London Councils Young People's Education and Skills Board (YPES) members agreed to investigate ways in which the voice of the young learner could be incorporated into the work of the group.

## 2 Options

- 2.1 Subsequently the YPES team investigated a wide range of mechanisms utilised for engagement with young people. Options were explored and narrowed to finally consider, in detail, three potential means by which engagement with Learner Voice might be achieved:

### **A. Group Membership**

The constitution could be amended to provide for an allotted number of young learner members to receive membership of the board.

#### Pros:

- Would offer direct participation opportunity for young people.
- Does not patronise young people and assumes capability to be involved.
- Minimal costs incurred, although likely that some resource would be required to ensure young people are briefed appropriately to fully participate in YPES meetings.

Cons:

- Meetings often held at times students would normally be in learning, and turnover of students is likely to be yearly offering little opportunity for membership continuity.
- Much of Board business is technical and unlikely to be of key interest to young learners lacking the sufficient professional expertise.
- Other members are paid to attend the Board – but students would be volunteering.
- Will not be able to be representative of all London's young people (e.g. necessary cross-sections of gender; ethnicity; special needs; type of provision attended; NEETs etc.)

**B. Young Learner Sub-group**

The Board could establish a sub-group to provide a consistent ongoing forum for learners to feed in to their views. The sub-group could potentially provide a representative.

Pros:

- A sub-group would ensure regular input from and communication with young learners in London.
- Sub-group activity could help inform the work as well as be responsive to it.

Cons:

- A formal group of this sort would require significant use of resources – both time and money – from YPES team to be established and supported effectively. This would inevitably impact on team's ability to fulfil other strands of work in light of decreasing capacity.
- YPES team does not presently contain specific expertise in facilitating formal engagement with young people or requisite qualifications (e.g. CRB).

**C. Specific Engagement with Young Learners**

The Board could approach existing advocacy groups and organisations working with young people to seek input into specific issues as and when such input is required

Pros:

- Minimises costs of engagement to YPES.
- Could potentially tap into existing local groups such as London Youth Parliament; GLA's Peer Outreach Team; school and college student councils etc.
- Would potentially allow YPES to engage with young learners as and when is appropriate.

Cons:

- Unclear what structures remain in place for youth advocacy following cuts to 2011/12 public expenditure.
- Would require adult judgment of what issues young learners would consider worthy of consultation.

**3. Consultation with Young Learners**

- 3.1 The views of three different groups of Young Learners were sought on their preferred means of engagement with YPES. A full summary of this consultation is attached as Appendix A.
- 3.2 The Young Learners felt none of the three suggested means of engaging the Learner Voice were entirely appropriate. Instead they proposed that YPES should publish a blog

for young learners summarising work of the group and inviting comments and suggestions which could in turn feed into YPES work. The advantages of this approach were stated by the young learners to be:

- It would allow YPES board to potentially reach *a//* London's young learners.
- It would allow young people to engage with YPES board on their own terms at their own convenience.
- It could be easily promoted by learners to students through individual institutions' own existing forums and councils.
- It would be easy to administer – young people were very clear that messages and communications must be short and understandable in order to engage the targeted audience.
- Young people believed that social networking would also be best means to capture the voice of their peers who were NEET.

#### **4 Setting up a YPES Young Learners Blog**

4.1 At the YPES meeting on 24 May 2011, members agreed to investigate the viability of establishing a blog for Young Learners. The YPES team have already begun speaking to London Councils' online team about the technical aspects of the programme. Once a model for the blog has been further developed next steps will include:

- Consulting further with young people over best means of editing and distributing content.
- Consulting other local London organisations such as Student Councils in various learning institutions, Youth Parliaments and GLA Peer Outreach on the means of advertising the blog to London's young people and opportunities for joint working.

#### **5 Recommendations**

5.1 OSG members are recommended to note the decision of YPES and discuss how the proposed Young Learner Blog might be established and rolled out.

## **APPENDIX A – CONSULTATION REPORT**

### **Consultation with Young Learners**

#### **Background**

At its meeting of 14 February 2011 the London Councils Young People's Education and Skills Board (YPES) agreed it wished to consider means for it to be able to incorporate the learner voice on an ongoing basis.

As part of the review consultation interviews were held with three groups of young learners across London. The learners were aged 16-19 and drawn from an FE College, a school sixth form and various apprenticeship placements.

#### **Questions**

The purpose of the consultation was to establish the issues young learners care about, and understand how they would best wish their voice to be incorporated into the work of YPES. In order to achieve this the interviews were structured around four thematic questions:

- a) What issues relating to 16-19 education and training/apprenticeships do you feel you and/or young people as a whole care about?
- b) Do you feel young people's views on these issues are put forward adequately and listened to?
- c) Tell me about your experience of being involved in decision-making at an organisational level.
- d) What characteristics do you think 'good' participation for young people should embrace?

#### **What do young people care about?**

The principal issues which were raised by young people were as follows

- *Introduction of tuition fees.* Young people were particularly concerned at the cost of university. One student suggested previously 15-20 of her classmates were considering going to university. Since fees had been announced this figure had now dropped to three.
- *Removal of Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA).* Young people were equally concerned that the removal of EMA would adversely affect the numbers able to stay in learning. They did not believe provision in the new Bursary Fund would be sufficient.
- *Perceptions of Academic vs Vocational Learning.* Young People did not understand why academic and vocational qualifications were viewed so differently by policy-makers and particularly employers. This view was held just as strongly by young people studying for A-levels as those completing apprenticeships and vocational qualifications.
- *Employment.* Young people spoke of their fears of a depressed job market making it very difficult to obtain employment when they finished learning. Some specifically mentioned problems even securing part-time employment to help them through sixth-form or if they went on to university.

#### **Are young learners listened to?**

Young learners did not feel that their voice was adequately represented or listened to at a national level. A particular complaint was that the media focused too much on a small minority of troublemakers in recent protests around tuition fees, which had made it more difficult for the majority of erudite young people to make their views heard.

However, learners had much more positive experiences of advocacy within their learning institutions where teachers and leaders were perceived to actively consult, involve and make decisions with young people about matters relating to the institution.

### **Involvement with YPES**

As part of the interview young people were presented with three potential means to engage with the YPES board and invited to discuss the merits of each. These were:

- Direct representation on YPES board;
  - A Young Learners sub-group of the YPES board;
  - Ad hoc consultation and engagement with young learners on a specified issue basis.
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- All the young people recognised the difficulty of accurately representing the full diversity of the capital's young learners on the board within the small number of young people delegates which would be permitted. The lack of a pan-London representative body for young learners was a barrier – although it was suggested that the UK Youth Parliament might be able to help?
  - Similar problems were cited for establishing a pan-London young learners sub-group. Travel would make it particularly difficult for all young people from across London to have an equal chance of attending. Inner-London young people were perceived to have an advantage as meetings were more likely to be held centrally.
  - YPES board meeting times were perceived to be problematic as they would inevitably involve young people missing classes and it was felt it would be impossible to attend any meetings during exam season.
  - Learners mentioned that a 'specific-issue' consultation might prevent them voicing other concerns – this approach would need to be flexible enough to allow young people to bring up other issues they wished to raise.

### **Social Networking**

Overall young people saw pros and cons in all three approaches. However, the preferred means of consultation by the YPES board was an alternative which each group of young learners suggested separately themselves – to engage via the means of social networking.

Young People felt an ongoing electronic newsletter/blog by the YPES board on matters discussed at its meetings and a summary of decisions made would allow young people to see clearly the decisions being made and also to respond with their own viewpoints electronically. Advantages of this approach were said to be:

- It would allow YPES board to potentially reach *all* London's young learners.
- It would allow young people to engage with YPES board on their own terms at their own convenience.
- It could be easily promoted by learners to students through individual institutions' own existing forums and councils.
- It would be easy to administer – young people were very clear that messages and communications must be short and understandable in order to engage the targeted audience.
- Young people believed that social networking would also be best means to capture the voice of their peers who were NEET.

Quotes from Young Learners:

*"Facebook is the way to do it"*

*"That's where you learn about things – where it's really buzzin'"*

## **Participation – Good Practice**

Young learners were adamant that good participation was where demonstrable impact could be shown. This does not mean that full success or delivery of young people's demands has to be achieved, but that adults and authority were shown to be listening and actively responding to young people's concerns.

Equally necessary was proper information and support to ensure young learners are able to participate fully in discussion and make informed choices - *“Young people need to be in a position to make decisions”*.

Vitally important too was to *“close the feedback loop”* (as described by one young learner) – that is to say that young people are given information about how their views have been used and responded to. In this spirit it is recommended short feedback on the board's decision regarding how to incorporate the learner voice is provided to each of the groups of young people who participated in the consultation.