The Pearson Student Diversity Ambassador Programme Report

A review of the pilot programme’s findings
In January 2022, we launched the pilot of the Pearson Student Diversity Ambassador Programme with a cohort of 19 students, ranging in age from 14-17 years old. The Pearson Student Diversity Ambassador Programme provides a diverse group of young people with the opportunity to have their voices heard and work together with Pearson to help shape the future of education. The programme is designed to help Student Ambassadors develop their skills and actively prepare for their careers and futures.

For this pilot, our theme of choice was ‘The Future of Education and Assessment’. We asked the Student Ambassadors to reflect on this and work together with their fellow peers to gather feedback in response to the theme and report their findings and insight back to us in April. The Student Ambassadors looked at topics including representation in the curriculum, preparedness for future employment, assessment format and a whole host of other subjects.

The Student Ambassadors presented clear, detailed, and thoughtful insight into their experiences and offered feedback on how we can best shape the future of education. There were several common themes that arose in the discussions including an increase in anxiety and bad mental health, a lack of diverse content and equal representation in the curriculum, and a need for better access to work experience.

We know there is a lot of work that still needs to be done, but we are committed to equity and opportunity for all learners and ensuring that we represent the students we serve. We strive to eliminate bias and barriers, and provide diverse perspectives in our products and services, to build a more inclusive education for our students.
Diversity & Inclusion in the curriculum

In general, the Student Ambassadors enjoy the curriculum they are taught, specifically the variety of subjects on offer to them and how organised and clearly defined the curriculum is. However, they also feel that more can be done to improve representation across the curriculum.

- History and geography should incorporate other countries and cultures more, and refrain from glossing over the negative consequences of British colonialism.
- There is a need to become better at ‘normalising differences,’ particularly when it comes to the representation of different mental health conditions.

Key findings – Theme feedback

Across three separate sessions in April, the Student Ambassadors presented their findings and insight on our chosen theme of ‘The Future of Education and Assessment’.

Here is what they shared with us...

“The curriculum has aspects that need improvement such as normalising people’s differences and embracing them whether it’s skin colour, religion, mental well-being - not just physical appearances but also mental states.”

Student Ambassador

“I would like to include more teaching on different countries and cultures as every country has something unique to add to our knowledge and we may need that if we ever do work abroad.”

Student Ambassador
Skills & Employability

Broadly speaking, the Student Ambassadors feel the curriculum is preparing them well for the future, with emphasis on learning about teamwork, resilience and communication.

Some feel that certain subjects, like Maths, were generally more beneficial than others in preparing them for employment, but everything is dependent upon the job they want to have in the future.

Across the board, the Student Ambassadors noted specific knowledge or skills they feel are missing from the curriculum that would better help prepare them for employment, including:

- conducting proactive research
- time management
- using technology in a professional environment
- workplace etiquette
- financial skills (e.g., understanding taxation).

In addition, the Student Ambassadors also feel the curriculum emphasises facts and memorisation rather than thinking critically or applying knowledge, leaving them ill-prepared for university.

Education for the future

The Student Ambassadors believe that success at school is about more than just attaining good grades, but is also about socialising, developing life skills and making friends.

In order to attain a successful education, the Student Ambassadors want better access to work experience, as they believe that not obtaining this could greatly affect their employability. In addition, the Student Ambassadors would like to see a greater emphasis on life skills in the curriculum, such as money management, to help develop their professional skills.

“I would like to see the school day start no [earlier] than 9am. Studies have shown that a teenager’s brain doesn’t function properly until 10-11am and teachers wonder why we are so tired in the morning. Why invest time into research and science if we don’t use the findings?”

Student Ambassador

“Teachers and schools are preparing pupils for careers that don’t even exist yet. I think this is good, however I would like to learn about the real world such as taxes, paying rent, mental health, how to get a mortgage and more about college and university.”

Student Ambassador

“Success is when you can say you finished school and passed your exams with friends.”

Student Ambassador
Pros vs Cons of Assessments

The Student Ambassadors noted several benefits to the current format of assessments, including:

- having a set time and format, so they know how to prepare
- being fair, because all students sit the same exam
- having a variety of questions at different levels of difficulty
- encouraging pupils to think on their feet, which actively prepares them for job interviews and the working world
- providing a means of demonstrating progress over time
- motivating students to work towards academic goals
- removing assessment bias by judging students based on their performance and not on their characteristics (e.g., race or gender).

The Student Ambassadors believe that the format of exams feels outdated, with many describing the frustration of exams still being all handwritten and taking place in large, silent halls. They feel this stems from the fact that education has not undergone radical change in over a century.

Furthermore, the Student Ambassadors touched upon issues around accessibility, stating that exams are disproportionately about memory rather than critical thinking. This favours students with good memorisation skills and leaves out students who feel they cannot fully demonstrate their subject knowledge during exams. The unknown selection of topics can also impede a student's success if they end up revising for another topic that does not appear in the exam.

The Student Ambassadors also described several drawbacks to assessments with the overwhelming majority highlighting the negative impact of exams on students’ mental health. They noted the significant stress and anxiety that arises before, during and sometimes after the exams. Many reported how pupils’ sense of self-worth is tied to their grades, an idea that they believe schools often actively reinforce.

“Sometimes I think exams can consume you and certain people really struggle to focus because of the stress and anxiety, which has the opposite effect and could lead to lower marks."

Student Ambassador

“I revised so much for an exam and had focused on one specific topic – I failed that exam, but I had never done so much revision before in my life.”

Student Ambassador
Inclusive Assessments

The majority of Student Ambassadors believe there is a lack of inclusiveness in assessments, highlighting the following issues:

- exams are reliant upon excellent reading skills, which could place those students who struggle with those skills at a steep disadvantage
- assessments can incur prohibitively high financial costs, including revision materials that some families cannot afford
- accessing additional or special support such as extra time can be arduous and time consuming.

“Some students are able to access revision materials more easily than others, for example more affluent families can buy textbooks and laptops.”

Student Ambassador

Subject choice

Student Ambassadors choose their subjects for a variety of reasons, including:

- it opens up various career opportunities
- their favourite teacher is assigned to that subject
- they want to be in a lesson with their friends
- they’re good at the subject and enjoy it
- they feel secure in the lesson and students can’t make fun of them.

Several Student Ambassadors also noted that they sometimes feel pressured by teachers to pick particular subjects, mainly EBacc subjects, that are traditionally viewed as more academic and discouraged from choosing more creative subjects.

“There are certain subjects, such as those in an EBacc, where it was strongly suggested that these were subjects we should take. There were students who wanted to take subjects such as drama - which is totally valid - and they felt discouraged by it.”

Student Ambassador
Assessments fit for the future

The Student Ambassadors had many thoughts and suggestions on how assessments could be improved for the future.

To combat overwhelming stress and anxiety, the Student Ambassadors suggested exams should be sat in more comfortable settings, such as classrooms, instead of large halls. They believe that additional time in exams would reduce the time pressure students face and enable students to perform better.

Some Student Ambassadors felt that exams should be split into smaller chunks and sat throughout the year to reduce the great pressure built up at the end of the year. The option to have course work counting towards the final grade, a format similar to the American GPA system, was very popular in the discussions.

Student Ambassadors expressed a desire for exams to focus less on memorisation and more on their critical understanding and thinking skills - skills which are necessary for university and work.

Next steps

Visit our website for further information on the Pearson Student Diversity Ambassador Programme and to register your interest in becoming a partner school and enrolling your students into the programme.