



The Student Voice



Y Pant Geography Department

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Introduction

Education is inherently centered around the requisite needs of the individual learner. As such, the views of learners are of intrinsic value to all departments and individual teachers, who's profession focuses around the provision for, and development of, these individual students.

The views of students, classified as the 'student voice', have for some time been heard through such channels as the School Council and Eco-Group, however subject specific audits of teaching and learning are traditionally sparse. This trend appears to be changing however, with a recent movement towards the collection and subsequent dissemination of the opinions of learners towards certain subjects. Whilst it is understood that the views of learners are dynamic, given the progression of students through the school and into further study and employment, the collection and analysis of the 'student voice' is still deemed a worthy exercise given the opportunity for departmental development and improvement.

The Y Pant Geography department decided to investigate the student voice within our own subject in a proactive manner. The department has for some considerable time been a popular subject amongst students, with overall grades at GCSE and A2 being excellent. The collection of the student voice should be seen as the further development and extension of this reputation through rigorous assessment, both by ourselves and the students we teach.

Methodology

To allow students to air their opinions and constructive criticism, the department believed that a questionnaire comprising primarily closed questions, with one open question, would facilitate such a representation of the 'student voice'. The decision was made to hand the questionnaire to all students in Key Stage 3 (Years seven, eight and nine) studying Geography, to provide a representative sample of the student body. The cohort therefore comprised pupils taught by all three full-time Geography teachers, whilst also covering the spectrum of attainment, gender, ethnicity and age. A total of four hundred and eighty-three students completed the questionnaire, sub-divided into year seven (164), year eight (153) and year nine (166).

Students were allocated between five and ten minutes to complete the questionnaire during their Geography lessons. Students were encouraged to be honest and to complete the questionnaire individually to provide reliable results. It was explained to students that this was their opportunity to air their opinions with regards to teaching and learning within Geography lessons at Y Pant. Students were also given the opportunity to remain anonymous, given that some may have felt conscious of providing members of staff with feedback, although many waived this right to anonymity. Students were assured that the opinions they proffered would in no way be used against them, and that this was simply a move by the department to further improve it's delivery of the subject. All students appeared to appreciate the opportunity to provide staff with constructive feedback and completed the questionnaire sensibly and with the minimum of fuss.

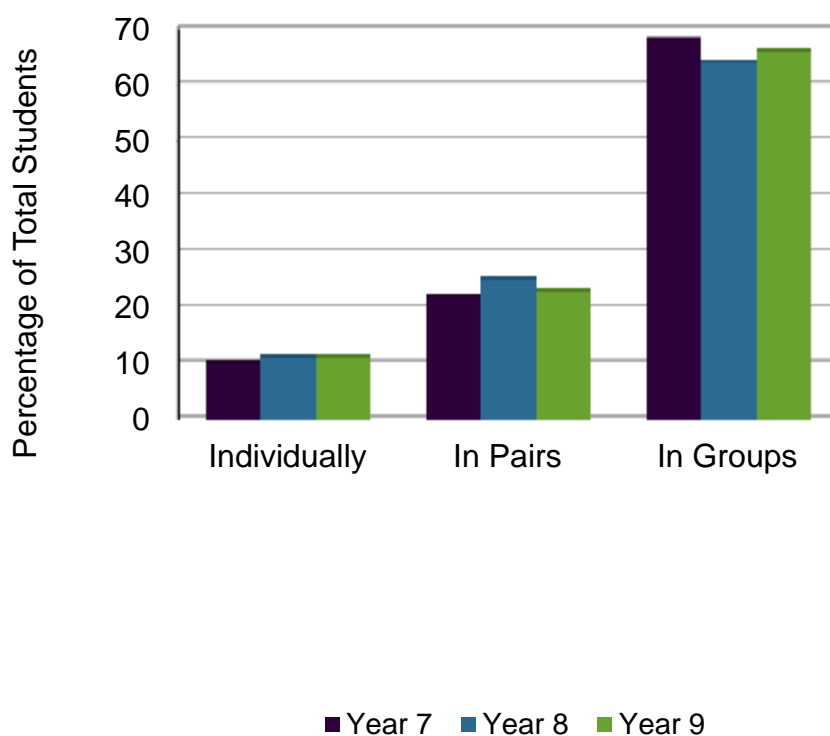
The final stage of the production of this report was the collation and analysis of the questionnaires and subsequent results. What follows is an attempt to portray the main findings derived from the questionnaires and their subsequent impacts for the delivery of Geography at Y Pant.

Results

Question 1: How do you prefer to learn?

This question aimed to investigate pupils preferential learning styles within the classroom and was sub-divided into three categories. Pupils were asked to select one learning style from ‘paired work’, ‘group work’ or ‘individual study’. Overall, the results display that pupils, irrespective of attainment, prefer to work collaboratively, rather than alone. This is especially apparent amongst the lower attaining pupils, possibly due to their lack of confidence in their academic ability; thus preferring to work with the support of peers. The department schemes of work already promote collaborative work across the key stage, with extended group work activities in year nine (Microclimate enquiry), year eight (Mediterranean fact files) and year nine (Saving the rainforest task). The incorporation of collaborative work between pupils within lessons promotes greater discussion and richer debate, whilst also allowing peer teaching and the development of issues through the exchange of ideas.

The department already conducts mixed ability group activities, whereby pupils are with peers of varying attainment to promote greater learning and also to develop teamwork and social skills. These activities develop MAAT pupils who are encouraged to lead their particular groups, whilst also benefitting the lower attaining pupils who are stretched through their association with higher attaining pupils. The use of ‘think-pair-share’ is a simple activity currently employed by departmental staff which premises the allocation of ‘thinking and discussion time’ to facilitate better answers through collaborative work. Departmental staff will endeavour to utilise this activity during Q and A sessions to produce better class discussions, irrespective of attainment or year group.

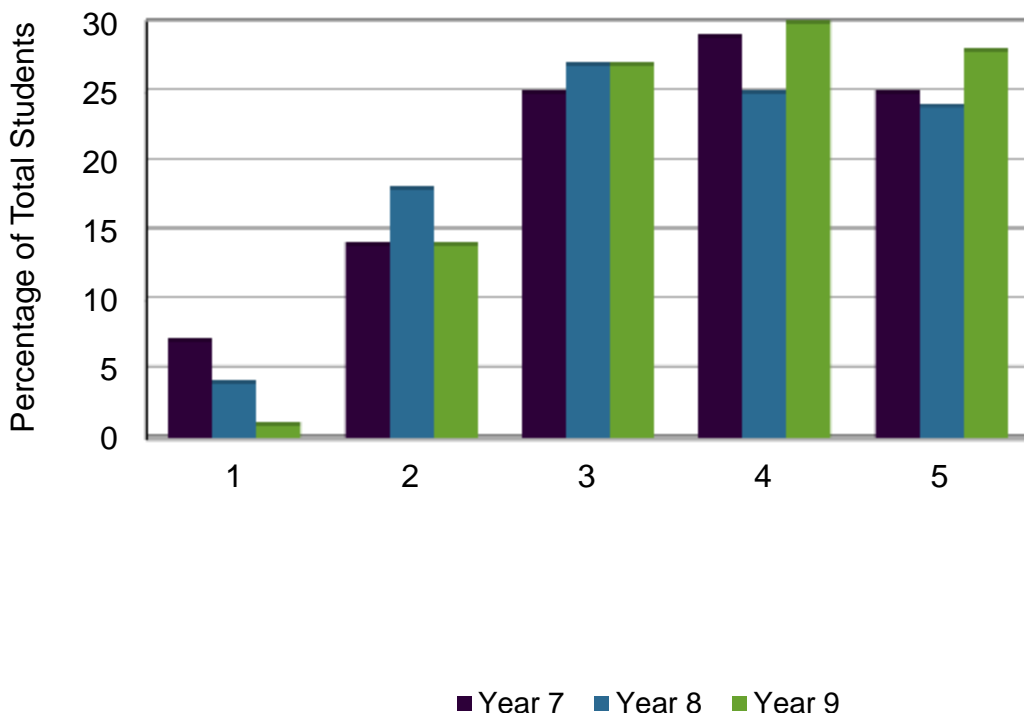


It must be mentioned that the students' desire to work with others may be in part due to their wish to interact and socialise with their peers. This in itself is not what collaborative work is meant for and can provide distractions for some students. It is important that group and paired work is incorporated into lessons only when it is of benefit to the content being covered. The results of this survey display the need, however, to utilise every opportunity available to staff for collaborative work amongst their students.

Question 2: How would you rate your understanding of the topics that we have covered?

Students were asked to rate their knowledge of the content that had been covered since the academic year began in September 2010. As such, pupils could only rate their knowledge of two completed modules, thereby weakening the importance assigned to this question. It was believed that the follow-up questionnaire, to be delivered at the end of the academic year, should also contain this question, thereby allowing students to analyse their knowledge of the content delivered over the entire year.

Overall, year nine students believed that their understanding of the topics covered was greatest, with students providing an average score of 4.1 out of 5. This may be due to the fact that the year nine students have studied Geography at Y Pant for longer than the other two year groups. As such, they have become accustomed to style of Geography lessons, to the delivery of the subject from staff and the expectations of behaviour and work ethic during lessons. By year nine, students also possess the skills necessary for accessing all of the multi-faceted aspects of the subject, thereby facilitating greater understanding. The use of content booklets at the beginning of each of the three years allows students to begin the academic year with the basic skills and understanding required to access the remaining subject matter throughout the year.



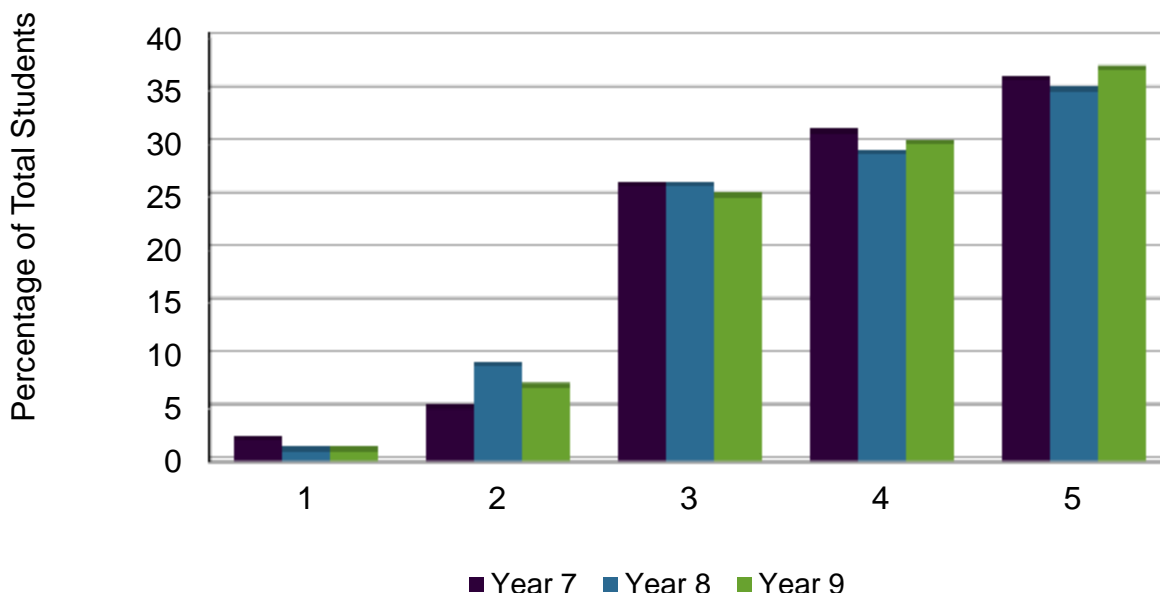
Understanding displayed by year seven and year eight students was also high with scores of 3.8 and 3.7 out of 5 respectively. The fact that year seven students displayed a lower understanding than year nine students may be in part due to transition from primary to secondary education. The difference in class sizes, changes in the expectations of work ethic and a greater degree of independence may be the cause of this lower average score for year seven students.

Year eight students provided the lowest average score with regards to the understanding of topics covered, which could be attributed to the loss of a lesson to accommodate Learn Smart within the school curriculum. This loss of contact time results in a lack of continuity for students, with most classes going a week between lessons. A number of students expressed this lack of continuity as a reason for their perceived lower understanding.

Question 3: Do you know how much progress you are currently making?

For learners to ultimately achieve their potential, it is important that they are aware of their current academic development. This awareness of their progress allows them to determine whether they need to improve their work ethic or utilise and improve certain skills. On the whole, those students questioned believed that they were aware of how much progress they were making, as shown by the high proportion of students allocating 4's and 5's to this question.

The graph below shows that there is little difference between year groups, with a large proportion of KS3 students being aware of their progress in the subject. This may be in part due to the implementation of marking grids across all year groups. These marking grids allow members of the department to record assessment marks alongside targets and areas for improvement. These grids are a way of communicating progress to individual learners, with students also contributing to the setting of individual targets.



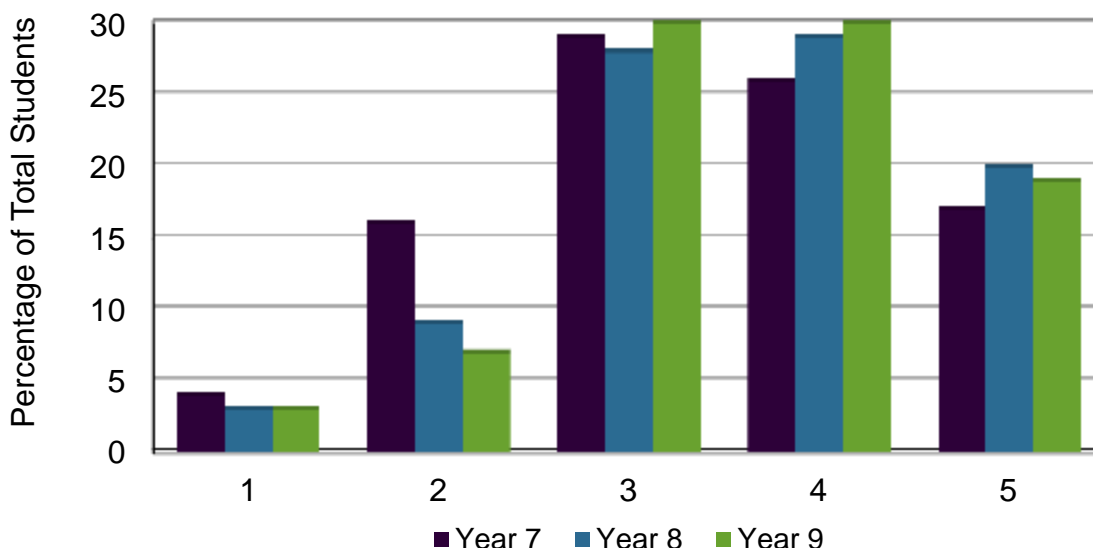
The department assesses all pupils at the culmination of each individual module, thereby providing summative feedback for students on almost a half-termly basis. The regularity of assessed feedback allows students to become increasingly aware of their progress, something that is important across year groups, but especially with year seven learners given their ascension to secondary education. This feedback is also provided to parents through reports and parents' evenings, thus allowing for a high degree of department-parent-learner collaboration and subsequently the transparency of individual pupil progress.

Question 4: Do you know what you must do to improve?

Following on from the previous question, students were asked whether they were aware of what they should do to improve their work or improve assessment marks. This question received a slightly more negative response than other questions across all year groups; however year seven were particularly unsure of what was required of them to improve.

There may be a number of reasons for the lower scores attributed to this particular question. Firstly, students in KS3 are assessed largely through examination style papers delivered at the end of modules. These papers are often handed back, discussed briefly as a class, before moving on to the next module. Individual learners may be unsure of why they have achieved lower marks on certain aspects of the course and thereby will be unsure of what they must do to improve.

Learners in KS3 also cover a large amount of content in a small amount of contact time, thereby facilitating little time for reflection and discussion with individual learners as to their progress and targets. This is slightly easier at KS4, where individuals are in smaller groups and are seen more frequently.

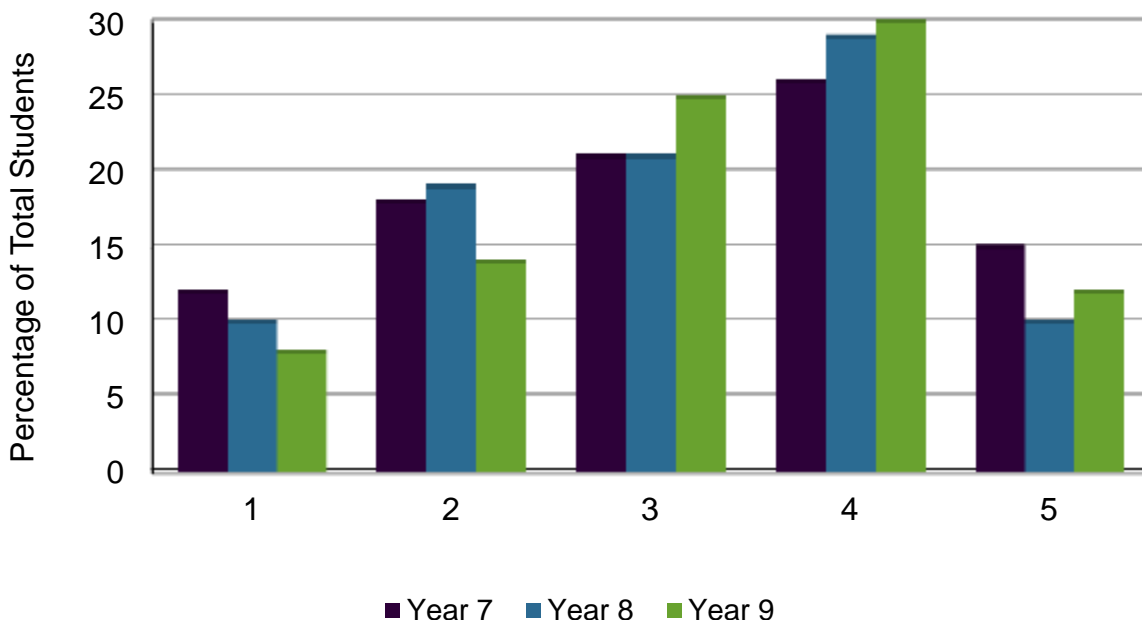


The department has endeavoured to address this issue with the introduction of progress tracking sheets mentioned previously. These sheets are stuck into the front of students' books and record summative marks alongside areas for improvement and targets. These targets are set by both students and teachers, thus allowing students the opportunity to raise any issues with their teacher at a number of junctures throughout the year. The progress sheets also allow parents to monitor their child's performance in addition to the annual parents' evening and regular tracking and reports.

Question 5: Is the classroom environment an attractive place to learn?

This question received arguably the lowest response of all those asked, with students highlighting the poor quality of buildings, drab paintwork and lack of IT facilities as detrimental to their learning and continued academic and social development. The department works hard to make the best of what are sometimes deemed to be average facilities and equipment, however this has been designated as an area of departmental development over the coming months. The recent painting of Rooms 9 and 11 has improved learning conditions, however the classrooms in the department are still some way behind those found in the 'New Block'.

In an effort to improve the old-style buildings, displays are regularly changed and improved, with students work featuring strongly. The department plans to take an audit of furniture in the coming weeks, removing all graffitied and broken items to provide students with a more comfortable environment in which to learn. The recent provision of IT facilities in room 9 have benefited students considerably and it is proposed that the provision of IT will be developed still further with the allocation of a student computer facility in the space between Rooms 9 and 10, subject to SMT approval.



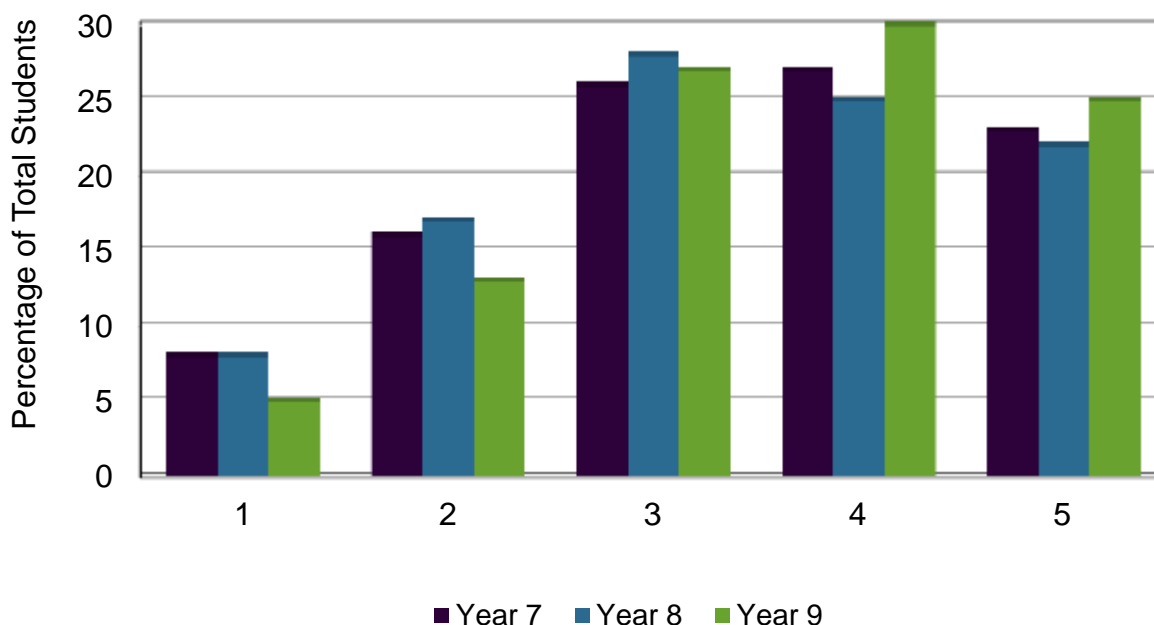
Overall, the department recognises that this is an area of education provision that needs attention in the short-term future, as a comfortable, engaging and interactive learning environment is conducive to enhanced academic progression.

Question 6: Do you feel the amount of homework is suitable?

It is department policy to administer two assessed homework tasks during each half-term, alongside finishing off classwork activities and revision for end-of-module assessments. The assessed homework is marked and handed back to pupils, forming an integral part of each module. The homework is designed to support and supplement lessons, with a strong focus on independent study and enquiry.

Students were asked whether the amount of homework they received in Geography was suitable, given their age and in comparison with other subjects. It is arguably a weakness of the questionnaire, that it did not ask students to specify whether they felt that there was excessive or insufficient homework. It is also debatable whether some of the students who scored this question a 1 or a 2, simply believed that any homework was too much, thereby implying that the amount of homework was unsuitable.

The response for this question, as demonstrated below, was remarkably positive, with students generally believing homework was of suitable quantity and benefitted their understanding of the topic being studied. Year seven students were the most supportive of the departments homework policy, with around half of the students questioned allocating a 5 out of 5 in response. The feedback deteriorated through the Key Stage, with year eight students slightly less positive regarding the amount of homework and year nine students providing the department with the lowest of the three year groups in terms of satisfaction. This can be attributed to a number of factors including the fact that year nine students often have more demands on their time such as extra-curricular activities and an increased focus on socialising. Year nine students often receive increased amounts of homework from other subject areas, thereby enhancing the amount of free time which is spent studying.

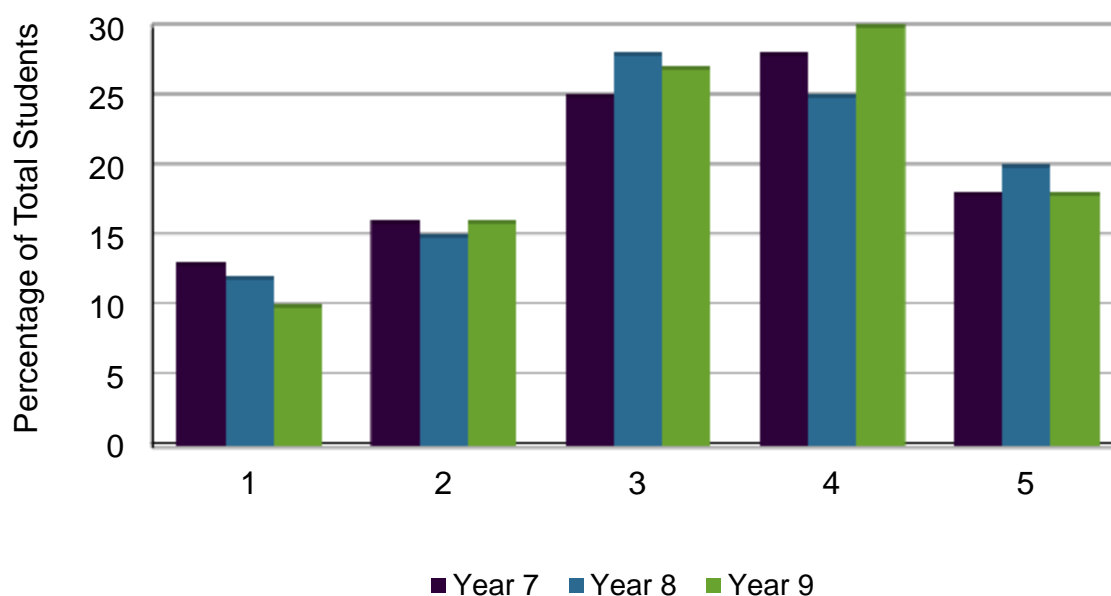


Overall though, the feedback garnered in response to this question is favourable, reflecting the departments longstanding policy of implementing homework tasks to better prepare students for the demands of GCSE and A-Level study.

Question 7: In general, do you feel that you are given enough time to complete each task in lessons?

To ensure every student makes progress during a lesson and leaves the with a greater degree of knowledge than when they arrived, lessons, by necessity, must be fast-paced and varied. As such, pupils are routinely encouraged to complete tasks in a given amount of time, thereby facilitating the development of time management skills and also the completion of all classwork tasks during the lesson. This question was concerned with whether pupils felt that the time given to them was sufficient, or whether they felt rushed into completing tasks in a sub-standard manner.

The graph below shows that on the whole, students felt that the time allocated to them for completing tasks by their teach was sufficient. The main dichotomy in opinion was between high achieving sets and lower achieving sets. Those pupils who were used to academic success and higher grades felt that the time allocated was too little, leaving them feeling rushed. This is, with hindsight, unsurprising, given that many students in these classes are perfectionists. These students desire the maximum amount of time to ensure that their work is of the highest standard. This is in comparison with lower achieving students, who often enjoy fast-paced lessons comprising short tasks which keep them focused and engaged.

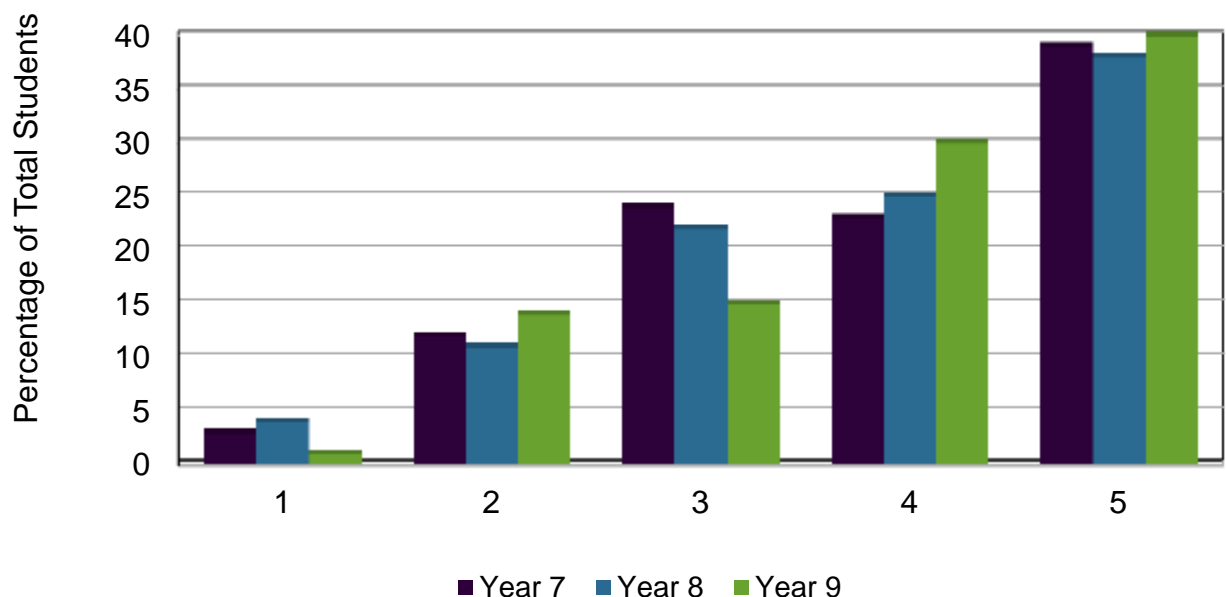


The department will endeavour to be flexible in the time allocated to students for specific tasks, ensuring that pupils are given enough time to finish work to as high a standard as possible, whilst also maintaining a fast-paced lesson which engages pupils, irrespective of achievement. However, the needs of the overall group must prevail when setting time limits for pieces of work and pupils are, of course, free to complete tasks during free time at home if they so wish.

Question 8: Do you feel that you are given enough opportunities to use IT within each module?

Many students responded negatively to this question, believing that they were granted insufficient opportunities within each module to utilise and develop IT skills. This was especially true of year eight students, who felt that they were rarely allowed to use IT facilities to enhance their studies. The other two year groups questioned were of a similar persuasion, although to a lesser extent.

This perceived lack of IT is in no small part attributable to the absence of computer facilities in Room 11 and minimal computer access in Room 10. The department’s IT access has been improved since the start of September 2010 with the installation of fifteen computers in the back of Room 9, however this number is insufficient for a whole department, especially when all three members of staff are teaching. The lack of IT facilities is also detrimental at a later stage of the learners’ development, when the completion of controlled assessments in both the GCSE and A-Level courses rely on extended internet research.

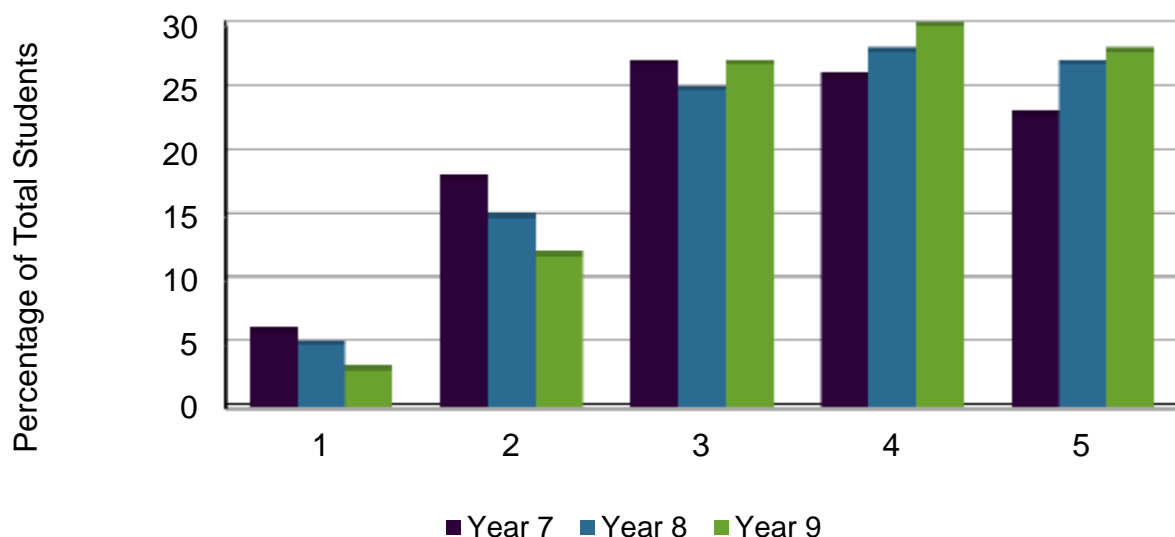


The department intends to develop IT facilities with the creation of a computer suite in the space between Room 10 and 11, thereby enhancing the opportunities for learners to utilise IT facilities within their Geography lessons. This computer suite is subject to approval, although it would go some way to alleviating the concerns of learners, who evidently feel that their lessons would be improved even further with additional access to IT. For the moment, the sharing of computers in Room 9 will suffice, with the fifteen computers proving very successful. These PC’s allow half a class to use the facilities at a given time, before using other resources available whilst the other half of the class use the computers.

Question 9: Do you feel that the work challenges and extends you? AND Question 10: Do you feel that you are given enough support when you are unsure about any of the work?

We have chosen to group together these two questions, given their focus on the suitability of work for students. As such, the graph below is a combination of the results for both questions. The department decided to ask this question to investigate whether the content of lessons was correctly pitched for the students present. The overall findings are positive, with students feeling challenged by the geographical content delivered, yet believing that the support was there in the form of their teacher, should they need it.

The schemes of work throughout KS3 are continually reviewed and amended to ensure that there is scope for teacher interpretation and also provision across the achievement spectrum. This allows individual teachers to provide students with work which will develop and engage them, as work that is too difficult or too easy will disengage and ultimately disillusion learners. The schemes of work also allow for the inclusion of contemporary geographical events and phenomena, thereby challenging students to engage with contemporary literature and media.



The department, as mentioned previously in this analysis, attempts to foster an atmosphere and learning environment which is conducive to discussion and mutual support. The results below portray that students evidently feel that they are able to ask the members of the department for assistance, should they feel unsure of a particular topic or theme. Challenging lessons are built upon the subject knowledge of members of the department, whose subject specialisms dovetail well to cover the wide spectrum apparent within Geography.

Question 11: How much do you enjoy Geography as a subject at Y Pant?

This question requested that students not only compare their enjoyment of Geography as a subject against others offered within Y Pant, but also how they rate their enjoyment of Geography as a stand-alone discipline. The questionnaire is weaker for its lack of differentiation within this question; for example there is little room to manoeuvre for students who have enjoyed certain aspects of the subject or for those students who dislike academic learning in general yet Geography constitutes the ‘best of a bad bunch’. This question however, still remains valid, and displays the overall viewpoint that the subject is a popular one within Y Pant across the whole of KS3.

Enjoyment of Geography is not confined to one particular year group, with the questionnaire also showing that Geography at Y Pant is a subject which provides enjoyment to the vast majority, irrespective of attainment and gender. Year nine students were the most positive overall with over 40% allocating their enjoyment a 5 out of 5. Year eight students were slightly less positive, due in part to the discontinuity apparent in the teaching brought about due to the 2 hours a fortnight as opposed to 3 hours in years seven and nine.

Year seven displayed a high level of enjoyment, although they recorded the lowest average of all three year groups. It is difficult to assign reasons to this, although it is possible that topics taught at the beginning of year seven, based at a local and national scale, are different to the global issues that they may have covered briefly at KS2. The larger class sizes compared with primary education may also be a factor, as may the change in expectations with regards to homework and work ethic.

The high enjoyment factor is testament to the innovative and engaging lessons taught within and across the department, fostering a love of the subject in many students that leads to high numbers in GCSE classes and also at A-Level. To ensure high numbers of students continue to participate in the GCSE course, thus confirming the sustainability of the subject as a distinct discipline within the school, the department will endeavour to continue to deliver lessons premised upon a depth of knowledge and content, taught in an engaging manner.

Question 12: Which tasks do you feel help you to learn the best?

The department wished to ascertain which of the wide variety of tasks employed during Geography lessons best suited the students learning. Students were given seven tasks that are often utilised within lessons and asked to score each one out of five. Those tasks included ‘Fieldwork’, ‘Research and Investigation’, ‘Poster Activities’, ‘DVD’s’, ‘Question and Answer’, ‘Class Discussion’ and ‘Group Presentations’.

This question provided a mixed response across the cohort of those questioned, with all learning tasks receiving a similar, positive response. This adds strength to the argument that outstanding lessons incorporate a variety of teaching and learning styles and activities, an ideal around which the department continually plans its lessons and schemes of work.

Those pupils in high achieving groups favoured class discussions, question and answer sessions and also, to a lesser extent, group presentations. This portrays the confidence these students have in their academic ability, and the desire to further their attainment through unstructured activities which premise independent study. The department already supports these views, implementing enquiry-based individual projects within all three KS3 year groups.

The most popular learning tasks within low achieving groups in KS3 were, unsurprisingly, fieldwork and DVD’s. This reflects the lack of confidence many of the students in these classes

have in their own literacy skills. The visual and kinaesthetic focus of fieldwork and DVD's is favoured by these students, and these notions underpin the delivery of Geography lessons to lower achieving groups. Whilst the department strives to improve literacy through frequent structured, supported written tasks, lessons always include elements of visual and kinaesthetic learning.

Finally, it should also be mentioned that there was a strong negative feeling towards group presentations within lower achieving pupils across KS3. This may again be attributed in part to the lack of confidence these pupils often have in their own academic attainment, however to develop academically and also socially, the department believes that it is of paramount importance that these pupils are encouraged to interact and develop in an academic setting in conjunction with peers. Whilst this may not always be their preferred way of learning, students in lower achieving groups should be encouraged to participate in group presentations, through the creation of a safe learning environment, devoid of unhelpful criticism and premised upon constructive peer assessment and support.

Question 13: Do you have anything else that you would like to tell us about how we can improve in the Geography department?

The final question was intended as a space for students to make comments, should they see fit, which may not have been addressed by previous questions. Many students elected to leave this space untouched, thereby supporting the theory that the questionnaire had been relatively exhaustive in its collection of student views. Some students chose to utilise this space to expand upon views covered in other questions however, and it is these points that will be covered below.

Many students believed that fieldwork could form a larger part of the delivery of Geography within Y Pant. Fieldwork is sometimes difficult to implement across whole year groups, especially at KS3, however the department does organise annual field trips for all year groups. The department aims to integrate more enquiry activities into lessons, thereby covering many of the skills required for, and utilised within, fieldwork but within the confines of the classroom. The desire to engage with fieldwork was not confined to one year group, many year seven students expressed their anticipation of future fieldwork, having recently completed the microclimate investigation of the Y Pant grounds.

Some students utilised this section of the questionnaire to reinforce points that have been made previously in this analysis; notably the state of the departmental buildings; lack of IT facilities and access to computers; and their enjoyment of group work and DVD activities. These points have been discussed elsewhere in this analysis and as such warrant no further development.

Finally, many students elected to utilise this space to express their enjoyment of the subject, their enjoyment of certain themes within the subject (notably the study of volcanoes and other associated natural hazards) and their enjoyment of teaching and learning styles.

Conclusion

An analysis of the student voice across KS3 in its entirety has proved to be no small undertaking, involving the collection and subsequent analysis of the opinions of over 400 students. It has however, proved to be a worthwhile process, for without consultation with those learners we set out to care for and develop, how can we as teachers ever hope to truly understand how best to cater for the wide gamut of achievement, socio-economic background and learning styles encountered on a daily basis.

Education must always centre around the needs of individual learners and the consultation of the student voice must surely be observed as a positive step in the continued strive for better education. Whilst there still may remain the concern that a process such as this ultimately oversteps the binary between teacher and learner, the development of teaching and learning within education cannot take place without first consulting those who we strive to support and progress.

This analysis of the student voice has allowed the Geography department at Y Pant to reflect not only on the small number of areas for development that have arisen through this process, but also the successes that have become apparent. Whilst this progress will lead to small-scale changes, those areas of success should be celebrated and then continued and strengthened. Provision of Geography at Y Pant remains strong, irrespective of gender, achievement, age or ethnicity.

Appendix

Student Voice Questionnaire

Name: _____ **Class:** _____

To help the Geography Department at Y Pant provide you with the best opportunity to learn and develop through Key Stage 3, we would like to hear your views on what you enjoy; what best helps you to learn; and how the department could improve.

Thank you for your time,

The Geography Department.

1: Least

5: Most

1.How do you prefer to learn?

In groups Individually In pairs

2.How would you rate your understanding of the topics we have covered?

1 2 3 4 5

3.Do you know how much progress you are currently making?

1 2 3 4 5

4.Do you know what you must do to improve?

1 2 3 4 5

5.Is the classroom environment an attractive place in which to learn?

1 2 3 4 5

6.Do you feel the amount of homework is suitable?

1 2 3 4 5

7.In general, do you feel you are given enough time to complete each task in lessons?

1 2 3 4 5

8.Do you feel that you are given enough opportunities to use IT within each module?

1 2 3 4 5

9. Do you feel that the work challenges and extends you?

1 2 3 4 5

12. Do you feel that you are given enough support when you are unsure about any of the work?

1 2 3 4 5

13. How much do you enjoy Geography as a subject at Y Pant?

1 2 3 4 5

14. Which tasks do you feel help you learn the best?

Class Discussion

1 2 3 4 5

Question and Answer

1 2 3 4 5

DVD's

1 2 3 4 5

Poster Activities

1 2 3 4 5

Group Presentations

1 2 3 4 5

Research and Investigation

1 2 3 4 5

Fieldwork

1 2 3 4 5

15. Do you have anything else that you would like to tell us about how we can improve in the Geography Department?

Intended action points arising from student questionnaire analysis

1. The department intends to create a display between Rooms 9 and 10 to inform students of the results of the survey. This will incorporate information as to what the department intends to do as a result of the questionnaire analysis.
2. The department will focus attention on the year seven scheme of work due to this year group producing the lowest enjoyment results in the questionnaire.
3. There will be a concerted effort made to reduce the teaching time allocated to each module, given some students' statement that too much time was spent of each topic.
4. The department will seek funding from the school to replace broken and damaged furniture and also to carpet Room 10.
5. Help will be sought from the school and IT department to turn the area between Room 10 and 11 into a computer suite to better provide for the IT needs of all students.
6. The department will investigate and discuss the possibilities for providing students with better regular formative feedback.
7. Finally, the department intends to increase the amount of fieldwork opportunities available to all KS3 students in the future, with a particular emphasis placed on 'decision making exercises', given their importance at KS4.