

## **An Evaluation of the Youth Summit Electronic Consultation**

### **First Version**

### **Introduction**

This report gives a brief evaluation of the ITC's *E-Consultant*, the web site which enabled young people to comment and vote on the issues to be discussed in the first Scottish Youth Summit, in the six weeks before the event. The emphasis is on issues that helped and hindered the 'e-consultation' process, and on possible ways forward. Following an executive summary, the methods and results are outlined. We also suggest improvements that might be made to the site and its relation to the consultation process. We would particularly appreciate feedback from members of the Action Programme for Youth consortium, on which of the suggested improvements they think are feasible and desirable in light of their own experience.

## Executive Summary

From 2<sup>nd</sup> May to 12<sup>th</sup> June, any young person with access to the internet could participate in the electronic consultation by going to [www.e-consultant.org.uk/ScottishYouth](http://www.e-consultant.org.uk/ScottishYouth), a web site, produced by the International Teledemocracy Centre at Napier University as an (unfunded) collaboration with the Community Education Branch of the Scottish Executive. On this site they could do two things:

1. Have a look at the top 20 issues facing young people in Scotland today, read other peoples' comments and, importantly, add their comments on the issue.
2. Vote for the top 10 issues that they thought the most important for young people in Scotland.

The number of comments (587) and voters (279) was significant, comparing well with, for example, the most popular of the on-line policy forums on the Number 10 Downing Street site. This was despite the consultation's unfortunate coincidence with exam leave, and lack of prior publicity. Comparison with conventional consultations is difficult, as responses to them are often made on behalf of organisations without supporting data on the extent of consultation with their own memberships. This in itself highlights a benefit of electronic consultation; greater transparency in the scope of the consultation, given that the number of participants can be counted and the participation of members can be audited.

We have yet to do a detailed content analysis of the young people's comments. However we think it fair to characterise them as uninhibited either by fear of technology or adult censorship. We attribute much of the success of the site to the supporting role of teachers and youth workers, and the tie-in with the summit event itself. Most of those who completed our on-line evaluation questionnaire were using the site from a school, library, community centre or youth internet café. However this 'infrastructure' was not visible from the outcomes of the consultation, nor was the role of teachers and youth workers well supported by the site design. Our suggestions for improvement are mainly concerned with the fit between the design and how the site is used in these settings. Some needs for improvement are apparent from responses to an on-line questionnaire completed by 245 of the site users, from our observations and discussion with people using the site, and from our experiences in developing and managing it.

Responses to the evaluation questionnaire were very positive. They showed that most young people found the site easy to use, and thought they would use it again for other consultations. However a significant minority thought it too text-oriented and lacking a rich and colourful page style. Presentation aspects aside, the most frequently mentioned 'like' was the opportunity to vote and express an opinion, and the most disliked aspect was the inability to add to the range of issues. Most thought that web sites were generally a 'good way to voice your opinion'. There were a few concerns about entering personal details, but the most frequently voiced general concern was that the comments would not 'make a difference'.

Observations in schools and internet cafes, and discussions with young people there, showed that most associated the e-consultation with "Personal & Social Education" classes, rather than with sites they would find and use of their own accord. The most enthusiastic users were those who could clearly relate the issues and existing comments to their own personal experience or interests. There was also a great deal of discussion "off-line", with users showing their comments to their friends and elaborating on what they had said. In addition to presenting the background to the consultation, and ensuring access to the internet, teachers and youth workers were involved in attempting to draw attention to issues that might be familiar to their group ("we've talked about this one before..."). Comments were not usually moderated by the facilitators, but in other respects it was noticeable that groups worked *as* groups, often with the teacher/ group leader taking a local vote on which issues were most important.

Our own experience in managing the site and particularly in moderating the on-line discussion provided valuable lessons, especially about identification issues. We did not ask users to identify where they were, or their age, before making comments. Some however thought these sufficiently relevant to state them in their comments anyway, and many others made reference to people, places or events that would only make sense to those with shared experience or local knowledge of them. Our site structure does not distinguish between comments entered by users at home and those entered by participants in an organised group, or between comments entered in Ayr and Aberdeen. Nor can the site tell us about aspects of the discussion that can be readily observed by those actually present; for example whether a comment has been made in seriousness or as a joke, or when an exchange of comments is actually between people who are in the same place at the same time.

Finally, the analysis by age and issue of the votes and comments demonstrates that there are significant differences between the concerns of 11-14 year olds and 15-18 year olds, though for both age groups the most important issues appear to be those that can be directly related to personal experience and/or to heavy media exposure.

### **Where do we go from here?**

On the basis of our experience with the Action Programme for Youth consultation, we can say that version 1 of e-consultant has proved a positive first step. However we are some way from achieving electronic consultation that is as open, transparent, and effective as is practically possible. We would endeavour to have the following changes in place for future consultations, and would appreciate feedback from consortium members on which changes are feasible and desirable.

1. Schedule consultations with young people outside of examination times.
2. Improve on-line and off-line publicity aimed directly at young people.
3. Improve the graphic presentation of the site, to better reflect the expectations of its audience.
4. Provide 'slide-show' presentations of background information, so that these may be used (e.g. with data projection) in group discussions;
5. Provide facilities for local discussion forums, so that local 'moderators' can negotiate which comments go forward as contributions from the local group, and/or hold a local vote and forward the results;
6. Retain a facility for individual contributions, but provide an incentive to register personal details;
7. Provide support for individuals to share comments with friends.
8. Provide facilities for users to rate their agreement with specific comments or proposals, and to find others who agree/disagree.

## **The e-consultation process**

In the main body of this report we outline the methods used to evaluate the web site with which we consulted 11-18 year old Scottish young people on the range of issues to be considered in the Scottish Youth Summit.

### ***Design of e-consultant***

Our aims in designing e-consultant were to :-

1. Make the site easy to access and use by a broad range of 11-18 year-olds.
2. Clearly identify what was being asked of users, and why they were being asked.
3. Encourage users to read and respond to comments, using a 'threaded' discussion forum (i.e. visually indicating the sequence of replies to each comment).
4. Take account of education authority guidelines on the disclosure of personal information by school pupils, by not disclosing full names.
5. Minimise editorial control of the content, except where in breach of stated conditions of use.

The first of these objectives was the most challenging, particularly within our resource constraints. We were aware that only a small minority of young people enjoys easy access to the internet from home, and that school access is normally tied to specific curricular activities. We considered it unlikely that many young people would be able or willing to visit the site more than once during the period. Accordingly, we abandoned our earlier intention to have a separate voting period. For the same reason we rejected the possibility of asking users to register (to obtain a password). The trade-off was that we were then unable to obtain *precise* details about the numbers of users.

### ***Scope of the e-consultation***

In all we estimate that approximately 600 people visited the site (based on 760 home page impressions). Of these approximately half went on to vote, of which 279 stated they were in the relevant age groups and lived in Scotland. The number of comments (587) was reasonably high, comparable for example to the more popular of the Policy Forums on the No. 10 Downing Street website, which of course has a much larger target audience. Our site also received a considerably higher response than the discussion forum site which has been used over a similar period by UK Communities Online, for their electronic consultation on the Government's Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy Consultation Document.

The scope of the consultation is an outcome of the measures taken to publicise it. It was publicised *directly to young people* through the Young Scot newspaper (April 19). Also, during the consultation period, online advertising was initiated by the Scottish Executive, involving the placing of 'banner ads' on two websites heavily used by young people in the 15-18 age group. It was evident at this stage that the site was attracting relatively few people in this age group, the most likely reason being their absence from school on examination leave. With this in mind, a further site "Pupiline" was approached by the Executive and agreed to feature a link to the e-consultant site. However efforts to ensure press and radio coverage during the consultation period unfortunately resulted in little coverage.

The consultation was also publicised *through the Education and Community Education sector*. Youth Summit leaflets were distributed with the consultation toolkit, and letters written to key local authority managers. Photocopied leaflets were distributed with the help of consortium members; via the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh City Council Libraries, and various Community Education departments. Some 20 schools were also directly approached by the ITC, and several youth voluntary groups contacted with a view to observing the system being used in their own events.

It is apparent from our evaluation that schools provided the most effective route to young people in the e-consultation period, and its scope would have been wider if timing had been more appropriate. However the needs and interests of teachers, who may want to adopt e-consultation in the context of civic education classes, are different from individual young people who may find the site of their own accord and use it at home. The needs of youth group workers who have to engage the attention of young people participating on a voluntary basis, may fall between these. That is, “issues of concern to young people” were probably presented too dryly to engage the attention of many more young people on a *voluntary* basis, rather than in civic education classes.

### ***Validity of the e-consultation***

We do not intend in this report to comment in any detail on the voting results or number of comments for specific issues. We should however address the validity of the voting returns. The number of votes obtained was, though, tiny in relation to the population of 11-18 year olds in Scotland. There was no attempt to recruit a sample of participants based on socio-economic indicators such as, parents occupation or employment status.

In our view it would be wrong to draw parallels between survey research and a consultation. Survey research uses statistical techniques to generalise quantitative findings from samples to populations, normally to describe the correlation between variables. Consultations do not normally have these aims or carry the same assumptions about participation, so we have not assumed that the Action Programme for Youth does. The voting here was not conducted with the rigorous checking of identity that would be necessary for an election. However the outcome of the voting was used to suggest priorities to the executive, rather than to select between a choice of outcomes.

We suggest it is more appropriate to judge the validity of the consultation by criteria such as:-

- Openness – was the e-consultation open to any member of the target group to take part?
- Transparency – were the processes involved, and those involved in them, easily identifiable?
- Effectiveness – did the consultation process engage people in deliberation of the issues concerned, and produce a usable account of the results?

We offer these as criteria for others to judge the e-consultation, though we return to them in considering our evaluation results below.

### ***The Evaluation Questionnaire***

The e-consultant site took its users to an evaluation questionnaire immediately after voting. This questionnaire could be completed on-line. In all, 245 responses were received. The results are summarised below.

The responses did not of course take account of the views of those who did not use the site, or those who accessed it but did not vote. Their views were available to us from observation of the system in use (see section below). Some insight into reasons for non-participation can also be gleaned from the more negative comments that were obtained from the online survey

The main questions that we wanted to answer were: -

### 1. Where was the site being accessed from?

School or college	58 %
Home	18 %
Internet cafe	12 %
Community Centre	8 %
Friend's house	2%
Work	2%
Library	1%

### 2. Was the site used as part of a discussion with other people?

Of those who answered this question, **47%** said they had, and **53%** said they used it “on their own”.

Most young people used the site from school, and from observations it seems likely that most of these were using it in the context of a Personal and Social Education class. Note that another 20% used the site from a computer in a shared or semi-public location (though it is also likely that home users would share access with other family members). This has some implications:-

1. School users may be put off from using the site if they feel coerced into participating
2. It is more difficult to ensure that users have privacy
3. An appropriate level of support should be available ( the next question takes up this point).

### 3. Did the young people get the help they wanted?

We asked two questions here :-

- A. Did anyone help you to use this web site?
- B. Did you want anyone to help you?

From the responses :-

- 15% got help but did not want it
- 27% got help and wanted it
- 1% did not get help and wanted it
- 58% did not get help and did not want it

This suggests that there is a danger in providing *too much* support, or support of the wrong kind (for example inadvertently invading on privacy), perhaps reflecting generally high levels of internet ‘literacy’ among young people.

#### 4. Was the language used appropriate for the target audience?

86 % thought the language was “about right”, with 5 % responding that it was “too difficult” and 9% “too easy”.

#### 5. Was the site appealing in terms of its general presentation?

32% thought it “good”, 38% expressed “no strong opinion” and 30% thought it “boring”.

A large number of the responses to the open ended questions on likes and dislikes (see below) concerned the presentation of the site, and it is likely that many of the non-participants would have responded negatively to this question. We should point out that graphic design is the most time consuming aspect of site design and therefore the most expensive. Although some changes were made to ‘brighten up’ the appearance during the consultation, clearly greater effort is required to engage the attention of young people.

#### 6. Where were difficulties experienced in using the site?

Questions here related to the facilities for:-

	Easy enough	Not sure	Too difficult
Reading the comments	79%	17%	3%
Posting your own comment	86%	11%	3%
Giving an opinion rating	85%	12%	3%
Voting	92%	5%	2%

These are good results, although they do not identify specifically what was problematic for those users who did have difficulties. We were however able to identify difficulties from observing the site being used, and made some changes to improve usability.

#### 7. Would young people come back for other consultations?

55% responded “yes”, 29% were “not sure”, and 16% said “no”.

We interpret this as a positive result, although again it is worth noting that non-participants are excluded from these responses. The high percentage of “not sure”s could be expected given that participation would no doubt depend on what the consultation was about and many other factors.

#### 8. What did young people generally like and dislike about e-consultant?

This was an open ended question, and the results have been categorised as in the table below. The figures indicate number of comments (some comments were counted against more than one category):-

Likes	
As a medium for voting and “getting a voice”	34
Found it easy to use and well-organised	33
Appearance / style	28

Non-specific likes (e.g. "everything")	24
As medium for seeing others opinions	14
The range of issues	14
Thought language appropriate, "not patronising"	11
Site was informative	10
<b>Dislikes</b>	
Appearance / style	57
Non-specific dislikes (e.g. "everything")	29
Not being able to add to range of issues	12
Difficulties using the site	6
Comments not being taken seriously by those replying	5
Providing personal details	5
Lack of information e.g. on sites related to the issues	4
Thought language 'patronising'	4

## 9. What did they think about using web sites to express their views?

There were 141 responses to this open-ended question, and the comments here were overwhelmingly positive. Only 13 were negative and a further 10 were non-committal (typically "its OK").

Some typical positive comments were:-

- They are a good way of getting to lots of people
- Its nice to know that someone wants to listen
- Very good idea as I don't have to go to much bother to express my feelings as I can do it from home or a local internet provider and it also gives me a good idea of what the other, distant teenagers of Scotland have to say on the matters in question, I will definitely use this or other similar sites again!!!
- I think it is a first stepping stone for the government to actually let US express how we feel! We should be getting more feedback from the government and not pushed aside to the fact that we are too young to care about how our world , and people in it are coping!
- I think it is a very good way of putting your views across and should be used more in future

Some typical negative comments were:-

- Alright, but I had 2 do it so I probably won't do it again
- It is a pointless way to make us [the youth] feel like we have an opinion in this world.
- Not too happy about us having to put our name and other stuff down
- I think it is kinda strange and I would rather just use pen and paper and fill out a questionnaire
- It is rubbish as the opinions put forward will be considered lesss than even eligible voters and the politians are obviosly too in love with there own voice they can't shut up and listen (or read) anything i've just written and if you are reading this you ain't no politian but somebody they hired.

Some of the positive comments were also qualified by a strong desire to see some concrete feedback from the consultation.

Finally although the comments received on e-consultant were very positive, it is likely that non-participants (i.e. in the consultation generally, as well as our evaluation questionnaire)



would include many young people completely disenchanted with the very idea of political participation.

### ***What we observed***

Observations were made in 5 sites:-

1. Two secondary schools, in the context of civic education classes.

Three internet cafes:-

2. With a Girl Guides group
3. With young people attending the Login Café stand at the Choice for Life 2000 event, at the SECC
4. With members of the Junior Board of the International Children's Parliament

In observing the site in use, attention was paid to:

- How the consultation was presented to young people
- Their general demeanour and responses when faced with the website
- Their activities around the website, and the relation between comments made on the site and these activities

Some common themes:-

Facilitators play a critical role in:-

- Persuading young people to use the site (which can also alienate some young people)
- Presenting the background to the consultation
- Drawing attention to the relation between issues presented and the particular experiences (e.g. recent discussions) of the group present
- Bringing the use of the site to a close, often with local vote or brief discussion of the benefits of the site.

Young people in schools, and group settings

- Often use computers in pairs, sharing passwords
- Voice their opinions off-line as well as on-line, attracting others into conversation (and commenting), particularly when an issue can be directly related to a personal experience.
- Are aware that their anonymous comments may be seen by many other unknown people not physically present, but enjoy wording comments to identify themselves to people they do know.
- Want to show their comments to their friends.
- Use e-mail a great deal.
- Demonstrate very high "cross media literacy": i.e. they use (and appear more interested in) web sites that relate to games, sports, music, or celebrities that 'tie-in' with more conventional media like TV, film/video and print.

It was also clear from observing comments being written and talked about that: -

1. A minority (around 20%) of young people resented being faced with using the site in a situation where they had little option to refuse;
2. Almost all of those observed had previous experience of using web sites, and no difficulty with basic procedures for accessing a site;
3. Some comments are not made seriously and it is often not possible to tell this merely from the written outcomes.
4. Comments that are made anonymously on the web site may still be identified with their authors because of the particular people, places or events mentioned, and the time they were written.

We would have preferred to include more observation sites, but on the basis of these observations we can conclude that:-

1. The site's presentation of background information in the form of a document does not directly support facilitators. It would be more appropriate to present it in a 'slide show' format.
2. Where e-consultant is used in organised group situations, some degree of local moderation of the comments (by a teacher or youth worker) would be appropriate. However this would clearly be at the cost of the privacy of young people in such situations, so:-
3. There should also be the option for young people to use the site anonymously, of their own accord and in situations where they are not identified with any particular organised group.
4. Features that cater for young people's desire to share their comments with their own network of friends may well make the site more appealing.
5. Presentation of 'serious' issues in the context of *personal* narratives, or *fictional* narratives (as in TV soap operas for example) could enhance the appeal of the site.