



HeadsUp Evaluation

2008 - 2009

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1. Background

HeadsUp (www.headsup.org.uk) was launched in June 2003 as a resource to promote political awareness and participation amongst young people. Since then it has been expanding to its current base of 9,300 users. The website brings under-18s, politicians and policy-makers together to debate specific political issues and allows these disparate groups a greater understanding of each others viewpoints. The site is a non-partisan, cross-party educational resource that provides a secure, structured discussion platform, centred on young people. It improves their debating skills and understanding of the political process, as well as feeding their views into policy discussions with the people that have the power to influence the policy-making process.

HeadsUp – how the forums work:

1. **Educating** - Young people vote on the issues they'd like to discuss in future forums – each forum is supported in advance by information about the issue and the decision-makers taking part. This allows quality, informed and structured debate to take place.
2. **Debating** – Young people discuss a specific political issue with their peers throughout the UK and relevant decision-makers. They are facilitated by teachers, youth workers and forum moderators to ensure the discussion is focused and high quality.
3. **Informing** – A report of the forum is produced and the decision-makers that took part are asked to respond. The report is disseminated to policy-makers, politicians and journalists, allowing young people's views to inform a wide audience of those with the power to effect change.

Why online?

Having a solely online project gives HeadsUp far more scope to connect both young people and decision-makers that are unlikely to meet anywhere else but online. It means that young people from Newcastle to Newquay can discuss their different viewpoints and experiences without the need for physical travel which is often impractical or costly. Young people also have the rare opportunity to speak directly to decision-makers about the issues they care about whilst learning about the political process.

In recent years Parliament and Government have been significantly expanding their online presence and using technologies more for their day to day business. Eighty three percent of MPs now have a website and around a quarter use social networking sites to connect with constituents, campaigners and the wider public.¹ An online forum is therefore an effective way to

¹ MPs Online: Connecting with Constituents, A. Williamson, 2009, Hansard Society.

connect politicians and policy-makers with the discussions that young people have around politics and create dialogue between these often divided groups. Technology is now an indispensable part of the way in which Parliament does business and HeadsUp has been at the forefront of developing the online link between elected representatives and young people.

Similarly it is an excellent chance for politicians and political parties to see how relevant under 18's think their policies are and gives young people the chance to have their voices heard even though they do not yet have the chance to express their views at the ballot box. This opportunity to combat political dis-engagement, leads on from 'Obamamania' in the US, where politics (facilitated by new technologies) was able to mobilise far greater numbers of young people than in any other election for many years. The greater number of politicians engaging with citizens online gives HeadsUp an increased ability to connect young people with their political institutions and representatives, as well as encouraging increased interest in the political process and active citizenship amongst young people in the future.

2. The HeadsUp Project 2008 – 2009

The last year has been a period of flux in politics with the global economic crisis hitting the headlines in September 2008, the election of the US's first black president and the upheaval in UK politics caused by the expenses scandal in the summer of 2009. These events have provided both difficulties for the project as well as opportunities.

The forum topics in the 2008 -2009 period were:

- Immigration in the UK: What effect has it had on Britain?
- Youth Citizenship Commission... Are young people allergic to politics?
- Crime in Britain: How big is the problem?
- Transport... Have the wheels come off?
- Youth Citizenship Commission...The Commission reports back

The table below shows the numbers of posts, students, decision-makers and website views that each forum attracted:

Forum topic	Date	Total posts ²	Total student posters	Decision-makers involved	Unique website views ³
Immigration	Sept – Oct 08	243	75	9	2,619
Youth Citizenship Commission	Nov – Dec 08	392	175	10	3,866
Crime	Feb – Mar 09	314	152	11	4,130
Transport	April – May 09	123	62	13	4,900
Youth Citizenship Commission 2	June – July 09	195	53	13	2,192

The 2008 – 2009 period was the most successful in HeadsUp history, perhaps due to the increasing interest in online engagement by politicians and civil society groups. 4,300 students and teachers registered with the project – an unprecedented number. There were more posts in the forums, more decision-makers from a wider range of organisations were involved and there was a greater range of young people posting in the forums than ever before. The table below shows the progress that has been made in all these areas when compared with previous years’.

² Number of moderated posts made by students in each three week forum.

³ Number of unique users visiting the site over the course of the forum

	Registered users	Average number of posts/forum	Average number of posters/forum	Average decision-makers/forum
2004 - 2008	4,500 ⁴	157	46	6
2008 - 2009	8,800	253	104	11

The website had an average of 3,771 unique visitors to the site each month from July 2008-09 which gives an indication of the numbers of people viewing the debates and reading the information about the issues discussed in the forums.

Publicity and Media Coverage

There were also a number of successes with the publicity and media coverage of the forum during this period.

The report of the first Youth Citizenship Commission forum was highlighted by Baroness Garden of Frognal, in a debate in the House of Lords about how Parliament communicates with the public, after the Hansard Society sent her a briefing that included information from the debate. An excerpt from her contribution is below:

We have already heard mention of the estimable Hansard Society as one of the bodies that looks at...aiming to strengthen parliamentary democracy and encourage greater public involvement in politics. One recent forum posed the question, "Are young people allergic to politics?"...One barrier particularly identified by young people is the lack of diversity among parliamentarians.....In fact there are some very able young male and female MPs but they are of course greatly outnumbered by those who are older, and the men greatly outnumber the women. This is an issue for all parties that look for a fairer gender balance among candidates as well as better representation from minority ethnic communities.

The Crime forum report received coverage by the [Daily Mail](#) and the [Daily Telegraph](#) highlighting what young people thought about prison sentences, the age of criminal culpability and capital punishment.

During the last year's forums there was also coverage from the following education industry publications publicising the forums: *Times Educational Supplement*, *Children and Young People Now*, *Breaktime* and *SecEd*. Information from HeadsUp was also used by educational publishers in publications for teachers to use in class: *Functional Skills English Level 2* (Pearson Education) and *Citizenship Participation* (Independence Educational Publishers).

⁴ Registered users as of August 2008

Various HeadsUp forums were covered in the following local newspapers: *The Derbyshire Times*, *Edinburgh Evening News* and *The Scotsman*.

Project staff members, Beccy Allen and Michael Raftery, were invited to speak on a number of panels about the HeadsUp project over the last year. These conferences or discussions included: The National Assembly for Wales, The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, CivicWeb and a delegation of Vietnamese Parliamentarians.

Letters were also sent out to all MPs informing them of the project, inviting them to take part in the next years' forums and offering them flyers to give to schools in their local area. Twenty MPs requested flyers for their schools whilst 36 MPs have so far taken up the invitation to be involved in one or more of the forums in 2009/2010.

Developments

The last year saw two new developments for HeadsUp; a new debating space in between the times the traditional forums were open and the involvement of HeadsUp with the Youth Citizenship Commission – which fed young people's views on politics and citizenship right back to the Prime Minister.

Youth Citizenship Commission

The Youth Citizenship Commission gave HeadsUp users the chance to voice their concerns to the Prime Minister - it was an opportunity they took up in large numbers. The first Youth Citizenship Commission debate was the most successful the website has ever had by a long way, totalling 392 posts from 175 users, with many more visiting the site to view the debate.

The debates were publicised as the opportunity to tell Gordon Brown what you think, which is likely to have had an impact on the teachers and young people using the forum, as it is a rare and exceptional privilege for young people's views to be fed in directly to the prime minister. Future debates where young people's views could be highlighted to such well-renowned policy makers in the upper echelons of Government would be very welcome. We are very fortunate that our first forum of the 2009-10 academic year has seen us team up with the Department of Energy and Climate Change to highlight the UN summit in Copenhagen.

HeadRoom

This year was also the year that the HeadRoom space was launched. Its purpose is to maintain a level of interest in the site between forums and to allow discussion to take place on current issues that may not be able to be planned into the forum timetable in advance. There were 102 moderated posts from students on 18 topics from March – July.

This discussion space appears to be working well with users giving positive feedback and posting at traditionally quiet times for the forum, such as the

end of the summer term. Thirty nine percent of students responding to this year's evaluation survey said they had used the HeadRoom area of the site.

Comments and suggestions for improvements to HeadRoom include:

Really like it! Can't think of anything else to say...!

More issues to discuss

there should be more freedom to begin your own topics.

make it faster to post

Teachers have also found the HeadRoom section of the site useful with 55% of those answering this year's survey saying it was the part of the site they directed their students to the most. This is possibly because the stories are current and therefore recognisable as well as the information being self-contained and in bite-sized, manageable chunks.

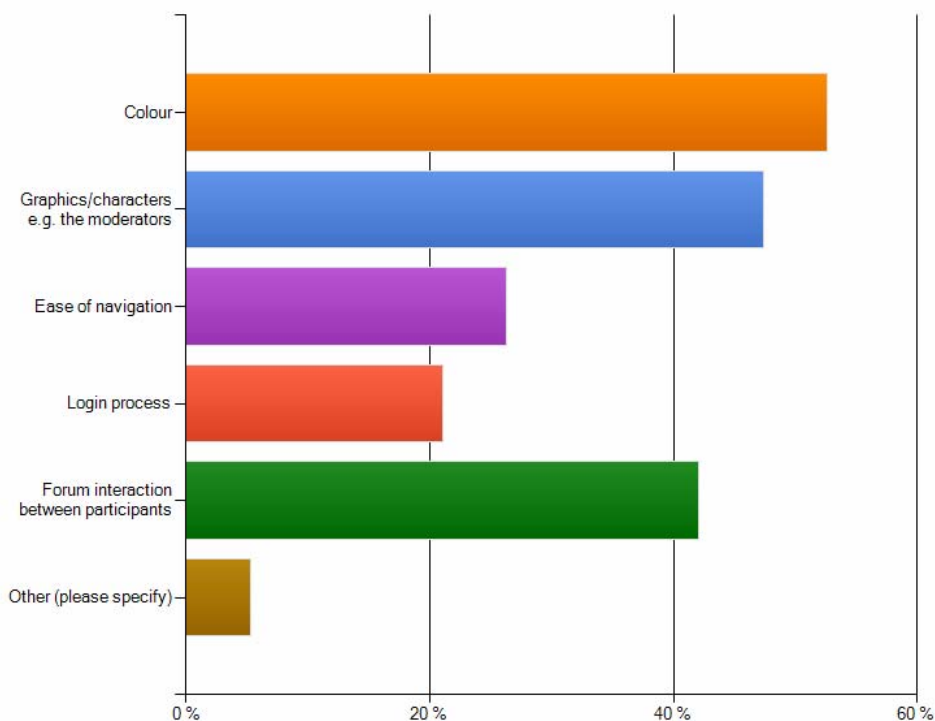
The HeadRoom section of the website is slightly limited by the structure and age of the technology of the current website – topics cannot be archived and therefore can only be commented on for a short period of time before they must be removed due to lack of space. A re-developed website could make this space much more user friendly, with new topics able to be viewed from the homepage so users knew when the HeadRoom had been updated. An archive section could also allow stories to be commented on indefinitely. However despite the limitations of the current website structure there does seem to be an appetite for this kind of space amongst the users of the HeadsUp forums and it has the capacity to create a regular online community for the HeadsUp project.

Student Evaluation

It is crucial to the ongoing success of HeadsUp that we consult with users to ensure we continue to deliver an enriching and high quality service. The evaluation consisted of an online survey that was highlighted to users through the website, newsletter and their teachers. General feedback received throughout the year from students was also included in the data in this section.

Website design and structure

The evaluation asked - ***Which of the following aspects of the design on the site do you like?*** The use of colour, the graphics and avatars, as well as the interaction between participants were highlighted as being the most popular aspects of the site.



The navigation and structure of the website was criticised by some users. Others thought it looked in need of updating and should have more interactive games to engage young people:

The navigation lets the site down (hard to find your way around)

your web site need updating, it looks boring, and none inviting to young people!!!!!!

The format of the website is not inviting to young people

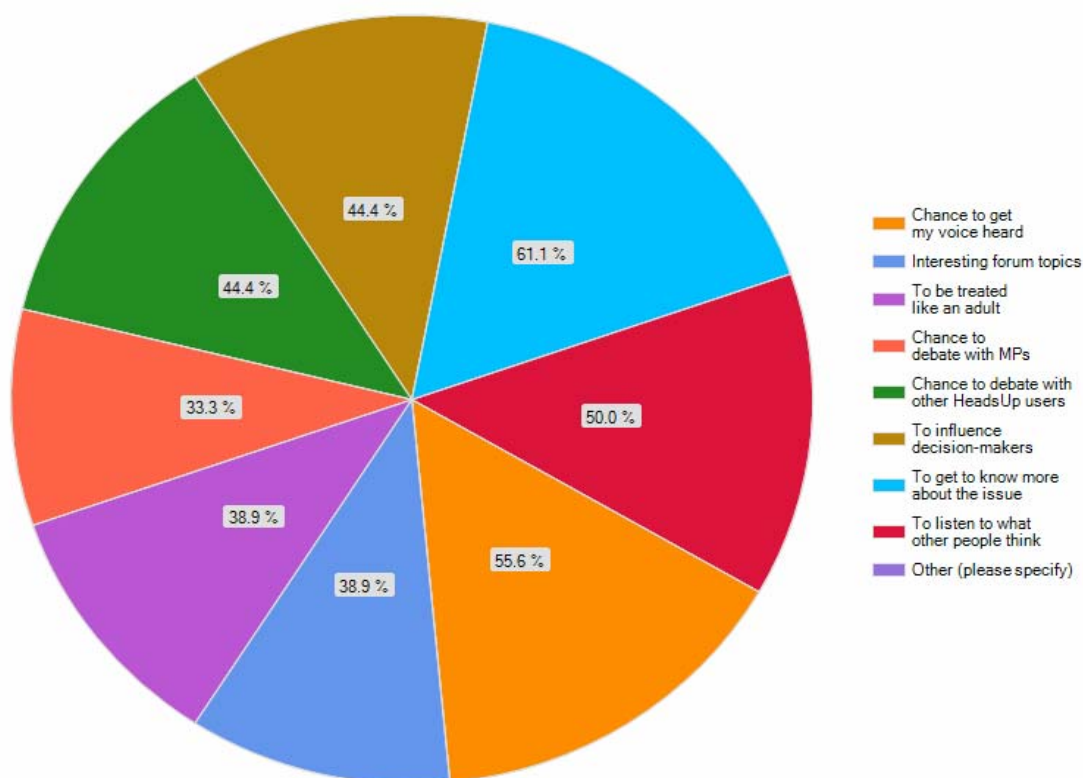
i cant not get around yooour website that easy !!! can you try and make it better to go from page to page?

www.headsup.org.uk is a great website but if there were good games it would be loads better

I think there should be some games thought because younger children and teenagers dont want to sit and read all day.

The Forums

The evaluation asked - **What do you like most about the forums/debates?**
The most popular options were: the chance to get to know more about an issue, the chance to get your voice heard and the chance to listen to what other people think.



This shows the importance of the BackUp section of the website as the young people that use HeadsUp are keen to find out more about the specific subject of that particular forum. The majority of young people asked said that they regularly used the BackUp section of the website, with only 21% saying they don't use it. It also shows the importance of introducing young people to politics through the issues that they care about and that are relevant to their lives.

Political audit

A crucial part of evaluating the project is not just about what young people like or dislike about the website or the forums, but also about the effect of HeadsUp on them. Whether they feel more engaged or knowledgeable about politics as a result of taking part is important. A positive experience with HeadsUp and the decision-makers that take part in the forums, should give them greater motivation to become active citizens in the future.

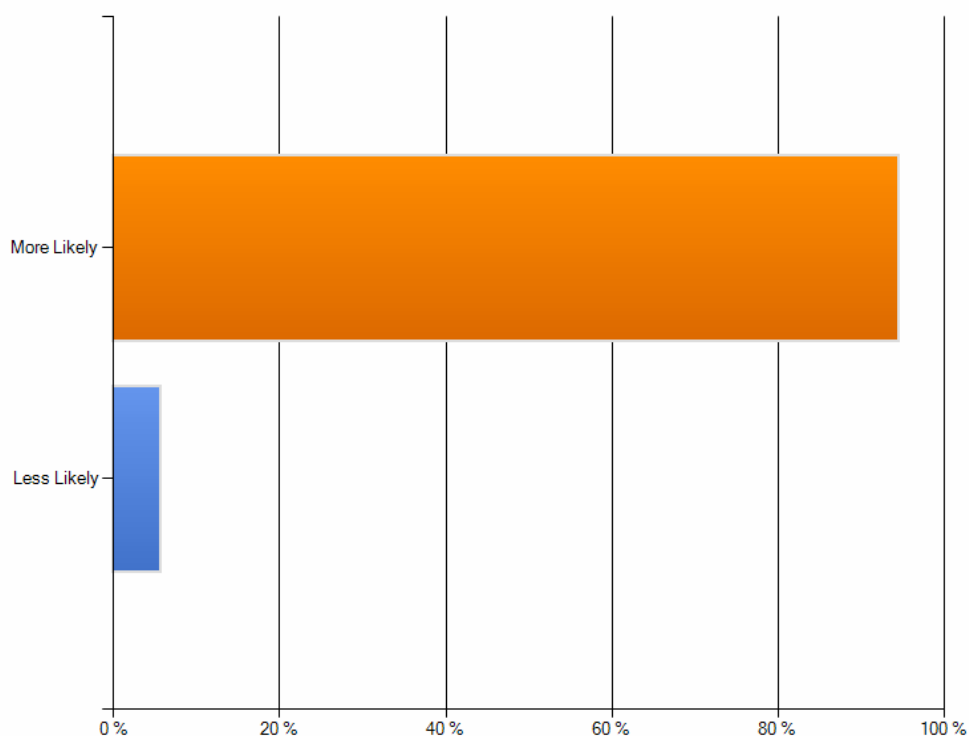
Debating skills

The evaluation asked - **Did taking part in HeadsUp encourage you, or make it easier, to discuss political issues with others?** 1 – no 5 – yes. As you can see from the table below most respondents thought taking part in HeadsUp had some positive impact on their ability to discuss political issues with others.

No	1	2	3	4	5	Yes
	6%	12%	47%	24%	12%	

Likelihood to Vote

The evaluation asked - **When old enough, do you think you are more or less likely to vote as a result in taking part in HeadsUp debates?** The vast majority of HeadsUp users (94%) said they were more likely to vote after having taken part in a HeadsUp forum. Only 6% said that they were less likely to vote after being involved with HeadsUp.

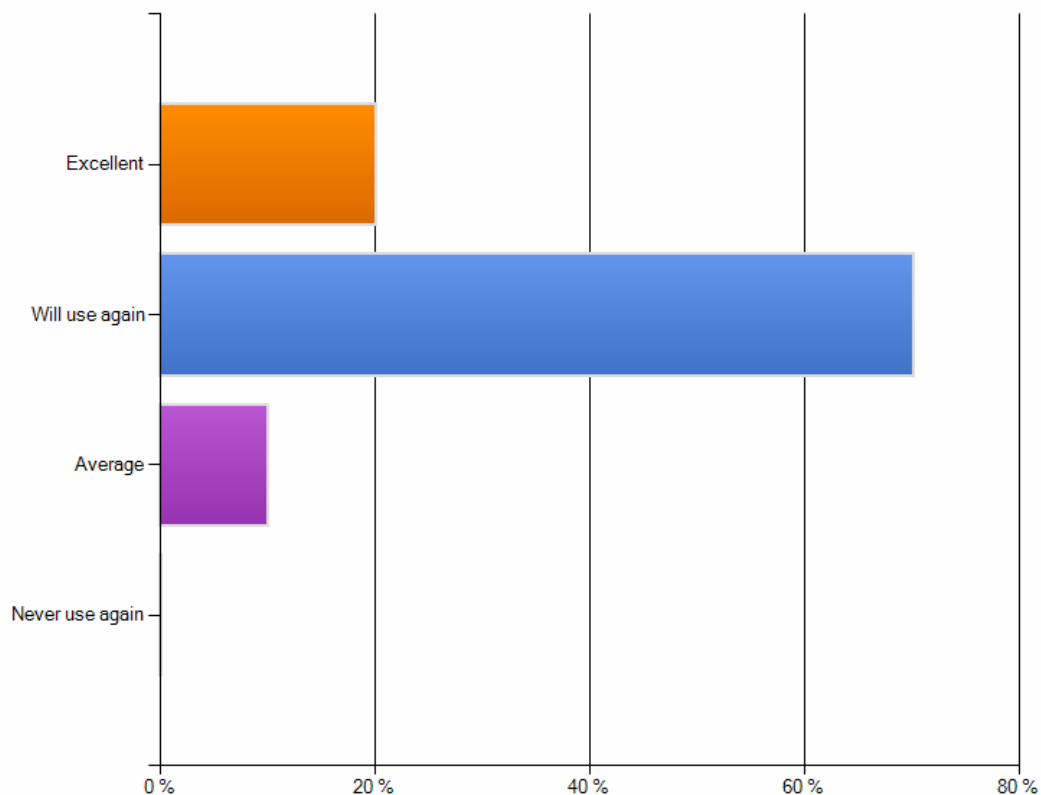


Teacher Evaluation

Teachers often introduce students to the project initially and they are crucial in teaching about the specific political issue in advance of the forum, to make sure the debates are of the highest quality possible. It is important that they value HeadsUp as a teaching resource that gives them the information and outcomes they need, as well as being accessible for a wide range of teachers.

HeadsUp as an educational resource

The evaluation asked - **As a teaching resource please rate HeadsUp** – 90% said that it was excellent or that they would use it again. None of the respondents said that they wouldn't use the project again.



However there were some criticisms of the project – although mainly to do with the website and the structure not the content or format of the discussions. Some of the comments about the project as a resource are listed below:

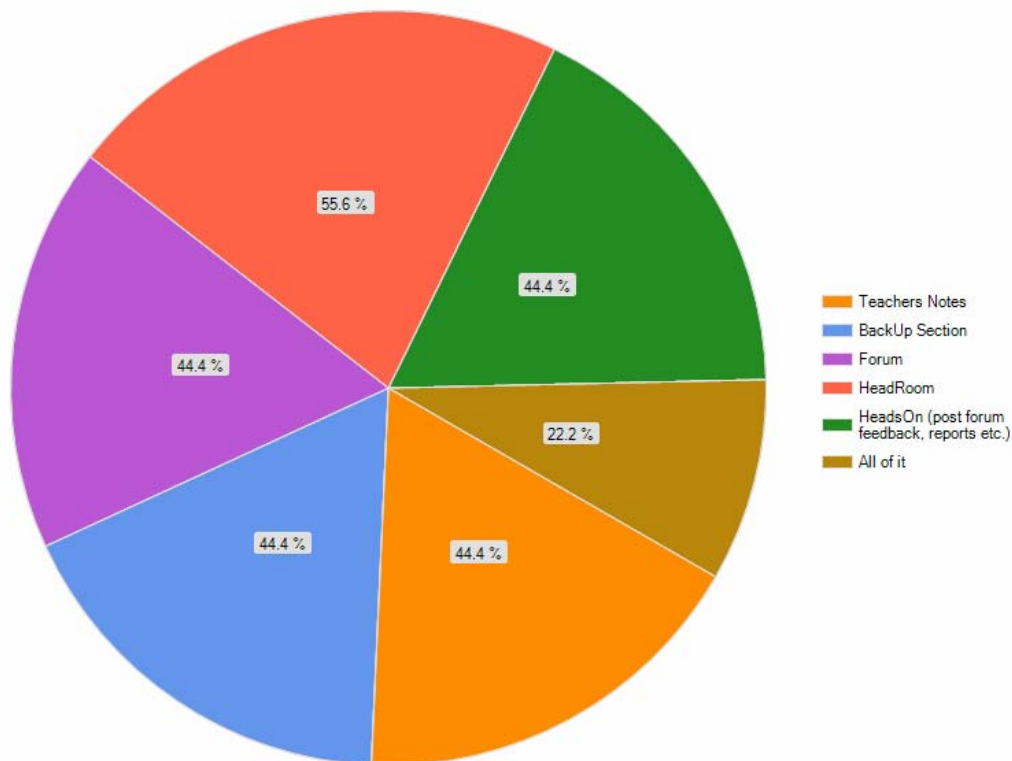
The process for registering whole classes should be easier; the Current Forum link should be hugely visible on EVERY page, not tucked away on some only.

Please make it more relevant and appropriate to pupil referral units

Sometimes parts of it don't work on our school computers so pupils can't access it properly

Sections of the website used

The evaluation asked - **Which parts of the site do you use or direct your students to?** All respondents selected multiple areas of the site that they use, suggesting that teachers are aware of the different sections that make up the HeadsUp website and that all parts of the project are useful to them.



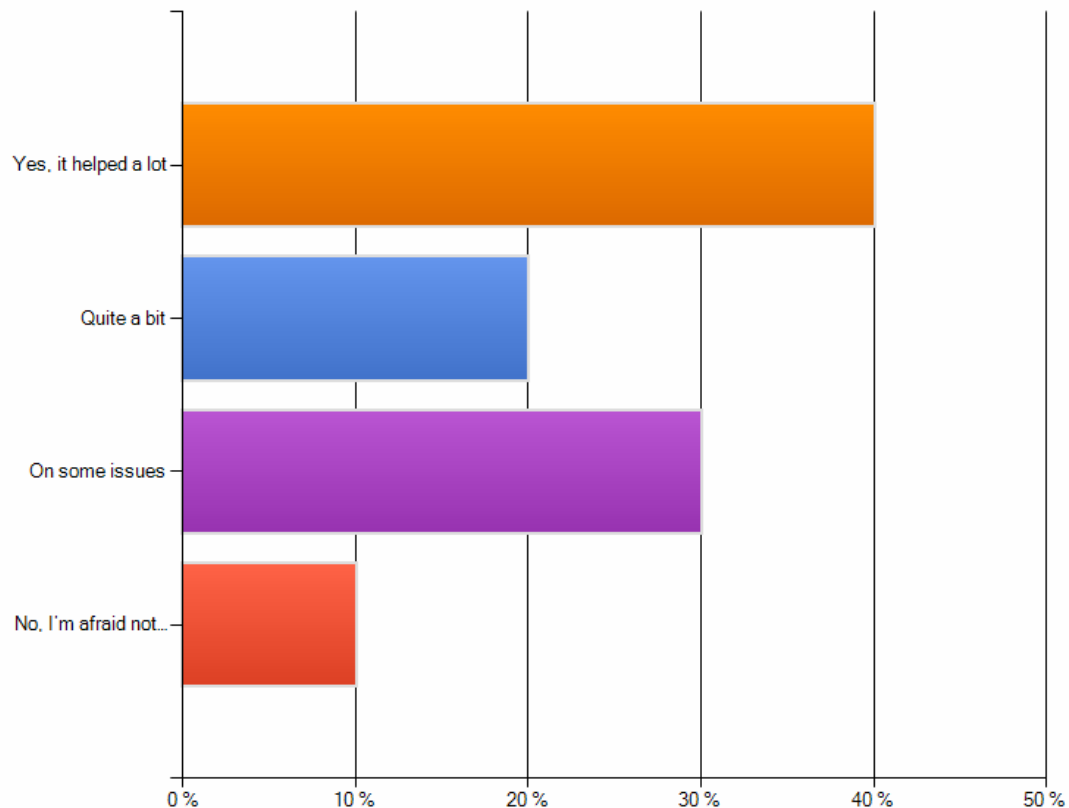
Learning Outcomes

As has previously been mentioned, young users of HeadsUp value the informative nature of the forums and the BackUp materials as much as the opportunity to debate and have their voices heard.

However HeadsUp also works with teachers and schools to achieve improved knowledge and understanding of the political process - how well do the teachers using HeadsUp think it meets their objectives for learning and improves their student's ability to take part in informed political debates?

Understanding of political issues

The evaluation asked - **Did the HeadsUp site help you build awareness and understanding of political issues and participation amongst your students?** 90% of respondents said that the site helped – although to varying degrees. Only 10% said it didn't help at all.



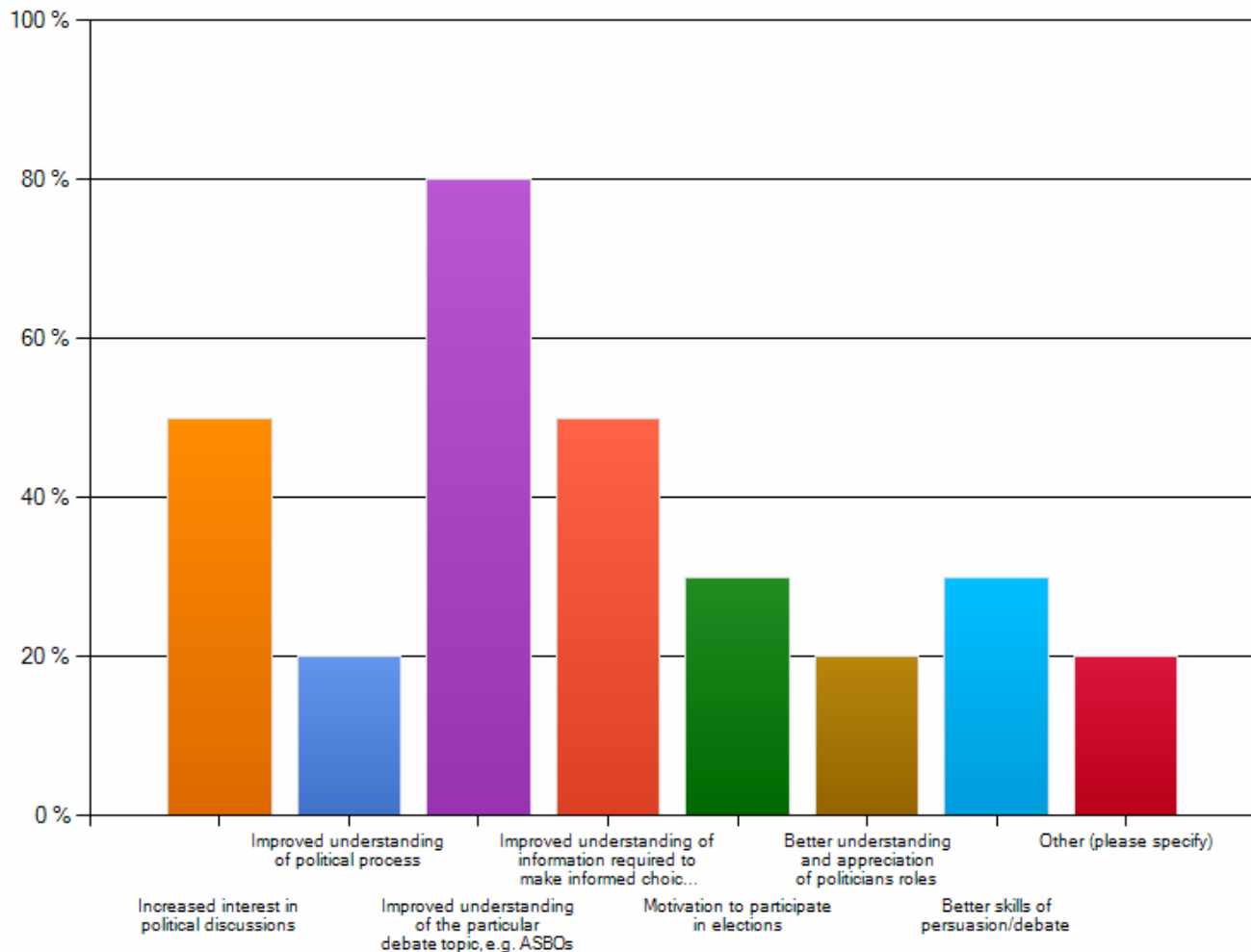
Improvement of student's skill

The evaluation asked - **What were the students' learning outcomes from HeadsUp?** The teachers were given a number of specific ways that the HeadsUp project may have improved their student's skills, understanding, participation or interest in areas related to politics and the political process. The graph below shows in which areas teachers felt the forums helped their students most.

An improved understanding of the issue under debate (80%); increased interest in political discussions (50%); and a better understanding of the information required to make an informed choice or argument (50%) were most highly rated as learning outcomes from taking part in the project.

Other comments included:

encouraged them to become involved in active local campaigning



Additional Comments

Young People

Just...really like it! (Sorry, not in a particularly imaginative frame of mind today...!)

It is the best thing that's happened to me :D

it would be better if there were permanent topics areas where people can debate certain issues. also a head to head area would be good, where only 2 members can post, get some good discussion going on there.

the site is really good too, its the only one of its kind I've found

i like heads up its cool all different things on here to do

its very good helps students at school as, we learn better on internet. :)

I love the website, it's a really good idea. Can we have more large debates a year please? That would be awesome :)

i think its good as we can learn about polotics in a good and easy way.

Teachers

I run the Philosophers' Circle which is a lunchtime debating group, the members are all also members of Headsup - we enjoy the forums and it means a bit of variety in our activities.

My AS level Citizenship students took part in your crime and law debate and from this they looked at the level of teenage crime in our local district and produced a display and power point titled 'Not all youths are criminals!' They were invited to do 15 minute presentation at a local conference for young people where the council corporate director asked to come and talk to them in a lesson about activities for teenagers in the district. Following this a few of the students were invited to a fundamental review committee meeting at the local council to give their opinion on activities for teenagers and how they could be improved to reduce anti social behaviour. So by participating in the heads up debate they found an issue to raise awareness about for their AS exam project and had a real advocacy experience.

I do think it is a fantastic and invaluable resource for Citizenship teaching.

i intend to use heads up much more next year by asking the iCt team to register the pupils in ict lessons however they will not be the teachers delivering the heads up debates as that is the citizenship team. i want pupils to be able to log on from home and take part in debates as homeworks rather than the usual boring essay research type things they do in other lessons. i think the heads up site is appealing visually and extremely informative for staff and pupils. keep up the good work. try and gets a 'heads up' on the issues for the gcse and as/a2 exams next year. look at the ocr source book when it comes out in feb and maybe centre some issues on the topics in that e.g. this year it was 'animal experiments' last year was 'dna profiling'.Just an idea to make it a better learning tool in the classroom.

Thank you

3. Future Developments

Is HeadsUp still delivering?

HeadsUp has often been seen as a project that has been ahead of its time. Using technology to link young citizens with their political institutions and representatives through debating important issues is still innovative and the way HeadsUp does this is unique. Although HeadsUp has been running for 6 years the climate is now more supportive for this kind of project than ever before. Politicians are going online in increasing numbers, many teachers are more receptive to online projects and to the young people using HeadsUp, the online environment is second nature.

The election of Barack Obama in 2008 opened many people's eyes to ways that the internet could engage a greater variety of people in politics (particularly the more politically reluctant younger generations) using online tools in addition to traditional campaigning or engagement techniques. In this sense HeadsUp was ahead of the game in terms of connecting young people with politicians online but now politicians are seeing the benefits of this kind of project in greater numbers. With a general election due in the next year, it is crucial to harness young people's views on politics, their representatives and political parties. With the excitement of an event that generally happens once every five years, even less often where a change of Government is likely, it is a crucial opportunity to further link political processes and policy debates with voting, in the minds of young people.

HeadsUp is well placed to further embed the progress that has been made over the last six years and is a project that is currently expanding despite the negative view of politics and politicians held by many citizens and the media.

The successes of the past year include:

- Increased number of average posts per forum
- Improved media coverage and a HeadsUp report mentioned in a Parliamentary debate
- Greater range of young people posting in the forum⁵
- Registered users almost doubling
- Average number of decision-makers per forum almost doubling

These improvements are a combination of a fresh outlook for the project, changes in the political and educational environment, the further embedding of technology in everyday life and the originality of the HeadsUp project and its approach to engagement. There are a number of opportunities for HeadsUp in the next year to improve on these successes and develop as a project.

⁵ Shown by the greater number of average posters per forum in 2008 - 2009 compared to previous year's p. 5.

The general election is an enormous opportunity for young people to have a direct impact on politics and feed their ideas on party policy back to the politicians. There is no other time when politics is so high up on the agenda of the media and its citizens or when politics gets so much (positive) attention. This is a time to ensure that young people engage with the political system, understand the arguments each party is making and see the benefits and outcomes of being an active, engaged and informed citizen.

How can HeadsUp develop and deliver more?

Although there are other forums for young people to discuss politics HeadsUp is unique for a number of reasons:

- HeadsUp is educational and provides background materials for young people and teachers to encourage informed debate
- Young people are not debating for the sake of it – their views are sent to those with the power to effect change
- HeadsUp works with Government departments and other organisations to give users views the maximum reach and impact possible
- We have run HeadsUp for 6 years and have used our experiences to continually improve the project and respond to users feedback
- HeadsUp allows young people to see the value in our political system whilst learning critical thinking and debating skills meaning they will be active and informed citizens in the future

The format of the project and the way the forums work seem to be meeting the needs and expectations of the vast majority of HeadsUp users (both students and teachers) however there are areas in which HeadsUp needs to develop and where improvements need to be made.

Website re-development

The original features of HeadsUp such as the personalised avatars, the colours and graphics continued to be popular with student users but the age of the website is the part of the project that most users felt was holding HeadsUp back or not meeting their expectations. The student users were particularly emphatic about improvements that were needed to the website and updating the technology to incorporate innovations that have happened over the past 6 years. The look and feel of the website is very important when trying to engage people and competing against an increasing number of other online projects⁶. Young people are particularly demanding when it comes to where they spend their time online!

Teachers have also commented that the current layout of the website makes it difficult to move between sections and that there is an element of information overload due to the lack of archiving available on the site. Improvements to technology have been vast over the past 6 years and without website re-

⁶ See page 8 for the young people's comments on the redevelopment of the website.

development HeadsUp is vulnerable to frustrations with the technology affecting the longer term use of the project. An increased number of users also creates difficulties for the project, with managing increasing volumes of data, the slow running of the website and further problems archiving content.

Enhancing links between representatives and citizens

Although one of HeadsUp's strengths is its ability (through the online nature of the project) to connect a diverse range of young people, often geographically dispersed, the general election could be a good opportunity to engage young people in physical events with decision-makers and further inspire HeadsUp users to become active citizens. This would have the benefit of making the Parliamentarians 'real' in the eyes of young people and increasing young people's trust in their representatives⁷.

Another way to improve links between young people and their representatives could be to map the schools registered on HeadsUp and their MPs. Making sure the relevant schools realised that their MP would be taking part in a forum, would mean that young people could connect with their local MP and the MP would benefit from knowing the opinions and views of their younger constituents on a specific issue. These links could increase both numbers of schools and the number of MPs using the forums. This would build on the work carried out this year - publicising the forum to MPs and asking them in turn to let schools in their area know about HeadsUp, particularly if they would be involved with the project.

Broadening reach

HeadsUp targets all schools in the UK through a mailing at the beginning of term as well as additional information in a variety of external organisations' newsletters. However due to concerns about young people's private data and the age of the current website it is difficult to monitor how effective we are in reaching different groups of young people. Through a re-developed website as well as a larger scale evaluation of our users we could more accurately understand their needs and how to bring new audiences to the project.

Although making sure all schools know about the forums at the beginning of term is one way of reaching new audiences we also need to make sure that the content is as accessible as possible for all students. Over the past year more pictures and videos have been used and the backup information has been broken up into smaller more bite-sized sections. Some teachers from Pupil Referral Units feel that HeadsUp is not always suitable for the classes they teach. Developing more advice and guidance for teachers in PRU's about how to use HeadsUp with their classes, may rectify this problem, as well as having an area on a redeveloped website where teachers could give examples of how they have used HeadsUp and what has worked for them.

⁷ The Hansard Society's Audit of Political Engagement has found that the citizens surveyed who had contact with their MP, were more satisfied with the job they were doing than with MPs in general

4. Conclusion

The HeadsUp project has had an incredibly successful year with thousands of new registrations, more decision-makers involved with the project and a greater range of students posting more comments in the forums than ever before. HeadsUp has benefited from the involvement of the Youth Citizenship Commission during this period and has been well placed to take advantage of the increasing acceptance of technology within schools and Parliament. HeadsUp users (students and teachers) have overall had a good experience of the project with plenty complimentary comments.

However, as this evaluation has shown the HeadsUp project has reached a point where its' development may stall without significant investment in the technology that makes it a unique and special project. It is still an attractive forum compared to many others, even those aimed at a younger audience, as it has characters and colours that continue to draw young people in, as well as procedures that work well and meet the aims of the users.

The main issue is with the tools that allow information to be aggregated making the forums easy and intuitive. The current site was designed for a very different time before social networking, RSS feeds and Google analytics – it is not designed for the current stage that technology is in and is not flexible enough to meet the growing needs of this project. HeadsUp is ready to develop as a project and is fantastically positioned, as we come up to a general election, to engage and interest young people in politics.

We have seen in the 2008 – 2009 period that a growing number of young people want to be involved with HeadsUp. However to keep them interested and encourage even more young people to be involved, the project needs to develop and deliver more for its users. This is why in the next academic year we will aim to source funding for a new website that will refresh the HeadsUp project and allow it to continue to develop and reach its potential.

Beccy Allen

HeadsUp Project Manager