



Inspiring – and valuing – young women and non-binary people

As North West Regional Advisor for the **Stemettes Futures Youth Board** in the UK, A-level student **Rachel Ryan** is helping to inspire girls and non-binary people to pursue STEM. From visiting local schools to discussing curricula with exam boards, she is a young leader highlighting that “dreams are attainable”.

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What motivated you to join the Stemettes Futures Youth Board?

I saw the opportunity advertised by the Stemettes Society, a social network for young girls, women and non-binary people aged 13 to 25. I am aware that lots of national organisations tend to be London/southern-centric so when I saw the chance to give a voice to my region and provide more opportunities to North West England by working alongside Stemettes to promote engagement, it seemed like a no-brainer.

How do you think girls and non-binary people are currently feeling about STEM?

I have visited lots of schools in my region and, despite any opposition that young girls and non-binary people have faced from peers and societal expectations, those I have spoken to throughout my time on the youth board have a clear passion for STEM. They really value the work that Stemettes does to broaden their view of STEM fields and provide them with role models that show them their dreams are attainable. Young women and non-binary people are aspirational.

What did your work on the Stemettes’ white paper on ‘Equitable Curriculum Reform’ involve?

The white paper on ‘Equitable Curriculum Reform’ is a remarkable Stemettes initiative that I am honoured to have played a part in. Two days after finishing my GCSEs in June 2023, I attended the Newcastle ‘roundtable’ to represent the youth board for North England and discuss the subject of diversity and inclusion in GCSE and A-level curricula (in the UK, curricula for 14 to 18-year-olds). This event was truly inspirational, and I was able to meet people from exam boards (such as OCR and WJEC) and the British Science Association, as well as the MP (member of parliament) for Newcastle and many others. It was fascinating to hear their thoughts on the subject and to have the opportunity to give my own thoughts as a young person studying A-levels.

What did you learn from this experience?

Mustering up the confidence to give my own views alongside so many outstanding individuals was a challenge but one I valued greatly. Opportunities

like these are ones I will treasure forever; they have shaped many of the skills I will take into my professional life. I think that someone like me having a seat at that roundtable shows that, above all, Stemettes values the opinions of the young women and non-binary people who are interacting with these curricula. At the moment, these curricula do not reflect our aspirations or provide us with the role models we need. I fully support the white paper put forward by Stemettes and am so proud of the individuals behind it.

What curriculum changes would you like to see?

The ideal of diversifying the mentioned scientists and mathematicians in A-level curricula is very important. The two years spent studying A-levels are when most people are making major decisions about their future; if the content you’re interacting with on a daily basis makes it seem like you wouldn’t belong in a particular industry or profession, it could put you off pursuing a career in that area. I think that a more diverse range of individuals taught in STEM curricula would open up more opportunities in the minds of future generations.

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In what way has your role on the Stemettes Futures Youth Board challenged you?

Confidence didn't come naturally to me, but through my work on the youth board, I've had to network and communicate with various people, like students, trustees and partners. This has drastically improved my people skills. You would think that being much younger than most of the people I have worked with would make it harder for me to get my opinions across, but this has never been the case. Stemettes has always valued my views, which has helped me in other aspects of my life; I know that everyone deserves respect, and all perspectives are important.

What is rewarding about your role?

The little things are very important to me – like hearing from a primary school I visited that a young girl has signed up for a Stemettes event, or getting a group of friends to sign up to the society together. Ultimately, I hope my work through Stemettes has made a positive difference in the lives of a few young people and opened up some doors to futures they

didn't know were attainable for someone like them. That's what I really value.

What is your advice for anyone considering joining the Stemettes society?

Absolutely go for it – the Stemettes

Society is such a supportive, inspirational environment, and there are so many amazing young girls and non-binary people with real passion for STEM that will welcome any new member with open arms. I have learnt so much from this group of people, and I've made friends that I value greatly. →

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The Stemettes Futures Youth Board © Stemettes.org



About Rachel

I have always loved the problem-solving aspect of STEM, and I find it to be a very rewarding area of study – the logical methods to a (generally) definitive answer make sense to me. My passion for STEM has always come from my own interest rather than a specific moment or another person.

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You've got nothing to lose by putting your name down for that work experience or event, so why not?

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I relax through music – both listening to and performing it. I have sung from an early age, mainly solo, but I am also in my school choir. I'm also on track to do a diploma in popular music vocals. My musical extracurriculars are very important to me because a lot of them involve spending time with my friends, and they also provide a stark but necessary contrast to my STEM-focused studies.

Currently, I aspire to pursue a career in engineering – potentially, with a link to my interest in geography, such as energy or environmental engineering. Thanks to Stemettes, my passion for STEM just keeps growing!

Rachel's top tip

Take every opportunity you can, and do not allow self-doubt to hold you back. Signing up for interesting clubs/events, like those that Stemettes provide, has been such an important aspect of my life. You have to be mindful of not taking on too much, but if you play your cards right, you can end up with some really amazing opportunities. My thinking has always been – you've got nothing to lose by putting your name down for that work experience or event, so why not?

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