Teaching the first group through a new qualification is daunting. It can feel like you are leading a class and your colleagues through dangerous territory...

With the first exams in many new GCSEs taking place this summer, we wanted to share the experiences of heads of English and maths who had prepared their students for the first English and Maths (9-1) GCSEs in summer 2017.

Last year, we set up a research project to help heads of departments (HoDs) to identify areas for improvement and strategies for future success. We wanted to know if the early experiences of English and maths leaders could benefit other colleagues going through similar changes in their subjects for the first time.

We presented our findings at Whole Education’s Conference this spring and we’re delighted to share a summary of the findings here.

Our research was conducted with approximately 30 schools who are part of Whole Education (WE). WE is a national network of schools and organisations committed to providing an education which develops the skills, knowledge and qualities needed to flourish in life, learning and work. The research is the latest development of a partnership between OCR and WE which has been evolving since 2011.

Methodology
Our research was conducted with HoDs in two phases. The first was in June 2017, immediately after students had taken their first exams for the new GCSEs. The second phase involved the same HoDs in the days after GCSE results were issued. OCR used online questionnaires to explore whether their views had changed following results, and to investigate whether they planned to make changes to their delivery of the new GCSE courses.

Schools across the country were invited to take part in our research by Whole Education and took GCSEs from a mix of exam boards. Their results in the legacy English and Maths GCSEs in 2016 varied. At one school in the group, 95% of students had achieved grades A* to C in GCSE English Language, while at another, 45% of students achieved grades A* to C. There were schools with a similar range of results for GCSE English Literature (from 88% to 40%) while the percentage of student achieving A* to C results for GCSE Maths ranged from 83% at one school to 53% at another.

Key challenges identified by our research
Participants reported the following four challenges associated with the new GCSEs in English Language, English Literature and Mathematics, listed in order of importance:

1. Ability to track student progress and predict student grades. The lack of grade boundaries in advance of exams had affected interactions with SMT, students and parents. Confidence in this area increased following results, but this remains a source of anxiety.

2. Adjusting to new content. For English Literature, many teachers had to prepare to teach new texts, and in mathematics there was substantial new and more demanding content for both higher and foundation tiers, such as an increased focus on problem solving. This would be a particular anxiety for non-specialist colleagues.

3. Changes to the assessment model in English Literature and Language; with the removal of controlled assessment, and the move to closed book examinations meant that the delivery of the course had been changed substantially. Developing an understanding of what was required from students in the new assessments requires substantial work, and teachers felt uncertain about how best to prepare their classes. Teachers had identified areas to target improvements after analysis of student performance on different topic areas.

4. Teachers had to develop knowledge, either of the new content, or strategies to prepare students for a new form of assessment. Ongoing work is needed to ensure that all teachers are able to deliver all content areas of the new specifications confidently.

Several participants also commented that the scale of the changes had led to much higher levels of anxiety among staff.

Successful strategies identified by our research
Despite these challenges, most HoDs reported that they had developed a range of successful strategies to adapt to the changes:

- Changing the teaching plan, to allocate different amounts of time to specific topics.
- Building in multiple opportunities for revision.
- Changing teaching plans for KS3, to ensure smoother progression to KS4.
- Moving away from giving students grades as a method of tracking progress, and using percentage scores on tests instead.
- Changing their intervention strategies, though different schools took very different approaches to intervention, with one participant indicating that every student had some form of intervention.
• Taking training courses, either exam board led, or by other organisations such as PiXL.
• Becoming as familiar as possible with the specification, and making use of all available materials, from all exam boards.
• Collaboration with colleagues within their institution.
• Encouraging staff to become examiners for their exam board.

Impact on teachers in their departments

The HoDs who were most positive about the reforms emphasised the role that collaboration with colleagues had played and the importance of fostering a supportive ethos. They thought that teachers had:
• Enhanced their subject expertise.
• Enhanced their pedagogical expertise.
• Increased the extent to which they collaborated.

What advice would HoDs give to their colleagues in other subjects moving to 9 – 1 GCSEs?

There were three pieces of advice mentioned most frequently:
• Develop resilience and independence in your students to help them to be positively engaged with the opportunities of new specifications and linear exams.
• Embrace the need for quality CPD and staff training. Look for opportunities within the school, MAT and other networks and organisations (including exam boards) to upskill staff. Recognise the link between staff confidence and student engagement and success.
• Consider the curriculum in KS3 to ensure smooth progression to KS4.

After results day 2017

Key advice to teachers from HoDs

“Stress the importance of skills, percentages achieved and NOT MADE UP GRADES that we have to produce to satisfy SLT/ data drops.”

“Know the specification really well. Give students clear aims and outcomes – use marking band grids as you can’t give them grades. Tell them they should be aiming for 100%.”

“What teachers must be prepared to ‘put the work in’ to upskill themselves in the style of exam questions and where the marks come from in the questions.”

“Don’t be scared! Be confident in your ability as teachers to teach your students. Make sure that you plan carefully and don’t be afraid to change your plans as you go along if lessons are learned.”

“Stay positive!”

The broader curriculum challenge

One thing which became apparent in our research was the need to consider the student experience, not just the department’s. This means reflecting on how best to build a curriculum which meets individual learner needs in Level 2 study and prepares them for their next steps.

A case in point would be provision in computing. If there are students for whom GCSE Computer Science is not the best fit for example, there are other qualifications – such as Cambridge Nationals in Creative iMedia or Information Technologies – which count towards Progress 8 or attract performance points.

Key advice about developing skills in students

“Try to develop students’ ability to recap knowledge – revisit content throughout the 2 year course and not just at the end.”

“Building independence and resilience is a major factor throughout the year. Maintaining confidence and supporting pupils has a big impact on their mentality going into the exam. Regularly use revision tasks, tests or activities to build retention of learning.”

“Parent information evenings – I have completed two. This is to tell parents that the grades I am using are made up (be specific). In my case, I said that they were very high and that saying to the child e.g. why are you only getting grade X is not helpful. Concentrate on the percentages they are achieving, are they increasing? Great.”

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