

## **SFCA response to Niace Consultation on new GCSE maths and English**

Deepa Jethwa

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There are 93 official or 'designated' Sixth Form Colleges across England. They offer an extensive range of courses, both academic and vocational. Sixth Form Colleges are experts in 16-18 education and act as a valuable stepping stone between compulsory education and higher education and employment. Last year, 158,000 16 to 18 year olds were enrolled at a Sixth Form College. In September 2014, the Department for Education released data on Level 1 and Level 2 attainment in English and maths by students aged 16-18 (2012/13 academic year). It showed that Sixth Form Colleges had the highest proportion of their students achieving A\* to C (35.0%), compared to state-funded mainstream schools that got around one quarter (24.9%) to this standard<sup>1</sup>.

The government have made it a condition of funding from September 2014 that post-16 institutions deliver English and maths GCSE to students who did not achieve a grade A\*-C in these subjects at Key Stage 4. Stepping stone qualifications can be undertaken by students as a useful step on the way to GCSE attainment. We envisage Sixth Form Colleges will see a vast increase in the number of students retaking these qualifications at their institutions in the next few years.

This consultation response is based on Sixth Form Colleges who are currently delivering GCSE maths and English and the best practice that has been identified and successfully implemented.

### **What approaches are successful in motivating young people to re-engage with GCSEs?**

Sixth Form colleges have created a learning environment for students that aids independent learning in an adult setting. Teachers take a positive and mature stance

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Education Statistical First Release: Level 1 and 2 attainment in English and Maths by students aged 16-18: academic year 2012/13, 11<sup>th</sup> September 2014, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/352498/SFR32\\_2014\\_Main\\_Text.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/352498/SFR32_2014_Main_Text.pdf)

in their approach to teaching and learning which is a key factor in the motivation of students to re-engage with GCSE maths and English. Teacher encouragement entrusts confidence in students making them view retaking maths and English GCSE as a new challenge – this Sixth Form College ethos is the cornerstone to a student's success.

Teachers discuss educational goals and employment prospects with students and reiterate the importance of securing a grade A\*-C in GCSE maths and English in order to progress further successfully. Setting goals and discussing future careers plans re-engages students with GCSE maths and English and makes them more focused on the level of commitment and input required.

For Maths GCSE, some colleges have encouraged students to undertake the higher tier exam so that students feel that they have been provided with a fresh start. New concepts are introduced requiring students to tackle harder questions which challenges students to 'step up'. Simple changes such as new workbooks and textbooks further reinforces that this is a fresh start for them. To motivate students to re-engage with English GCSE, some Sixth Form Colleges try not to use the same text studied at schools and use more adult themed texts to make it more relevant to their age which has worked successfully. The text is viewed as more interesting and students tend to rise to the challenge. Teachers often provide this text for extended reading tasks and include it as part of their independent learning programme.

## **What are the effective ways of diagnosing English and maths proficiency in students?**

Although GCSE grades are a useful identification of a student's English and maths proficiency, it is important for colleges to undertake a diagnostic test at the start of the term to help departments monitor a student's ability level throughout their time at college. With the removal of modular assessments, both maths and English classes involve students undertaking regular tests to help monitor student progress.

Students retaking maths GCSE are asked to undertake a past paper or questions including GCSE topics. This will identify a student's ability level as well as identify particular topics they may find difficult. More attention can be given to these topic areas as well as help to inform the programme of study for the course. For English GCSE, a diagnostic test is undertaken at the beginning of the term which can involve an extended piece of written work. On some occasions, group work exercises are undertaken to review their reading level. Based on the outcome of the assessments, students and teachers agree a work plan identifying any areas of concern. Progress checks are undertaken whereby students set their own targets to work towards.

Teacher judgement is a valuable tool used by some colleges alongside diagnostic tests. Through the observation of group work, teachers are well placed to diagnose a student's proficiency level.

## **How can students with grade D or below be supported to achieve GCSEs?**

Students who have gained a grade D require a different supportive structure than those students with a grade E or below. In many instances, students have been a few marks off from a grade C in maths and English, therefore support is focused on general organisational skills and exam technique preparation. For students with grade E or below, support is focused around reading and writing, or basic mathematical skills for maths GCSE.

Many colleges have found that teaching small groups of 10-12 students can improve success rates. Students retaking maths and English GCSE require more individual attention and support in the classroom. Many colleges have seen an increase in the number of students retaking these qualifications which has resulted in colleges moving resources from level 3 provision to GCSE provision to ensure this practice is kept. Some colleges have also increased staffing levels to maintain small class groups. Tightly structured study programmes for both maths and English GCSE students help to monitor progress.

A vast amount of support is provided to students outside of the classroom. Colleges have support unit departments, subject specialist support and 'upgrade' departments in place for students to be provided with additional one to one support. Furthermore, colleges hold workshops and drop in sessions during lunch and after college for students to discuss their progress further which overall can improve the achievement of English and maths GCSE grades.

Within the classroom, group work is encouraged in maths to aid peer learning. Classroom teaching assistants are also used to support student learning further. Regular tests and past papers ensure students know which level they are working at and areas of improvement. Feedback on assessments is crucial and aids motivation amongst students. One college has developed an initiative, whereby students attend additional classes focusing on proof reading, note taking, scheme reading techniques etc. Not only does this help students with their English GCSE, it also supports the rest of their study programme.

## **What are the practical issues in preparing for GCSE part-time 16-19 students?**

Under the Raising the Participation Age (RPA) regulations set out by the government, all young people are required to continue in full time education or training until the end of the academic year in which they turn 17 (18 from 2015). The vast majority of students at Sixth Form Colleges are aged 16-19 and in full time education.

## **How can students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities be effectively supported?**

Colleges use the information supplied by schools. Colleges also have comprehensive learning support departments that undertake diagnostic tests. This

determines and identifies students with learning difficulties or disabilities and what support is required for these students to successfully undertake their study programme. In addition, Sixth Form Colleges employ specialist trained staff when dealing with particular learning difficulties such as dyslexia.

All colleges have a learning support department to provide additional support to students with learning difficulties outside of the classroom. For example, extra support is provided to English GCSE students through the use of tutorial teams who act as readers for students with learning difficulties. Students with learning difficulties are taught general time management skills. If required, learning support teaching assistants attend classes for extra help. Communication between support teams and teachers is essential to make sure both know students progression is on track and to ensure equipment/extra resources are in place for students.

With smaller classroom groups, students with learning difficulties are treated more as individuals receiving the one-to-one teaching and learning required to be successful.

### **For students transferring from the old to the new GCSE, what challenges do you consider there may be and how can they be addressed?**

As GCSEs are becoming more rigorous and the level of demand more challenging, there will be an increase in students re-taking GCSE maths and English. At department level, colleges need to ensure that staff who are less experienced in teaching lower ability level students receive the appropriate training. At a time where colleges are already experiencing funding cuts, more staff will need to be employed to cover additional classes to teach the new specifications.

A key concern colleges have raised is that the new Maths GCSE specification includes more content including the use of problem solving skills and trigonometry. Colleges will be tasked to organise a timetable which is already tightly packed to ensure the extra content is covered. Some colleges do not have enough classrooms available or extra hours in the curriculum timetable to teach the extra material. Twilight and revision sessions may need to take place outside of lessons.

In order to communicate the changes to the GCSE maths specification to students, some colleges may produce an in-house student facing document to ensure students understand the changes and the extra material included. It is absolutely essential for resources such as text books and past papers for the new style maths to be available to colleges on time.

The new style English GCSE will be a 100% untiered exam assessment towards the end of the year. Many students will be inexperienced on how to work through questions, particularly those students who have lower processing skills. Furthermore, students with learning difficulties may find the proposed increase in examination time a struggle. The new style English GCSE will use unseen 19<sup>th</sup> century text. For students who have not read this type of material, it will prove very challenging and colleges may need to undertake extra reading in the classroom.

Past students benefited from modular assessments where they had short term goals to work towards. With the removal of modular assessments students will not be able to see the progress made. Colleges will need to put on mock exams to compensate for this.

## **How can technology support the achievement of GCSEs?**

Technology plays an important role in the achievement of GCSEs inside and outside of the classroom. It acts as an additional support mechanism to enhance student's learning. However, traditional methods of learning are still highly regarded and should not be displaced.

In the classroom, interactive whiteboards are used which teachers find useful when discussing past papers. The use of GeoGebra in classes makes it more interactive and fun for students. Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) are extensively used by colleges and include a catalogue of resources such as past papers, online activity books etc. Students can undertake interactive activities as part of their independent learning. Many colleges use [www.mymaths.com](http://www.mymaths.com) website as an additional resource to support topics studied in the classroom. Students can also use the software at home.

Online tracking systems are used whereby students can login to review their past paper results and view their progression. Online booklets help a handful of higher tier students wishing to focus on more difficult questions. For English GCSE, students are encouraged to use computer facilities available at the college. Students research topics and are asked to re-write the text in their own words. Some colleges use iPads to engage students with particular topics and undertake educational quizzes. This technique has been viewed as vibrant and fun by students.

## **What further professional development is needed for teachers to deliver GCSE Maths and GCSE English to 16-19 students?**

The following professional development was suggested to help teachers deliver GCSE maths and GCSE English to 16-19 students.

- Training on how to teach problem solving skills for the new maths GCSE specification to students at the lower ability range
- How teachers can teach the new specification and the types of questions it will ask.
- Development of online one hour training sessions whereby teachers can undertake training in their own time
- How teachers can mix subjects into scheme of work programme
- How teachers can deliver teaching of the new style GCSE maths and English within a year

- For English GCSE, training on how to increase student reading skills on period and genre text
- Teaching new exam techniques for non-tiered English papers

### **What further professional development is needed for teachers to deliver GCSE Maths and GCSE English to 16-18 apprentices?**

Training on how teachers can use resources and provide examples with a vocational context including the type of language used in a professional setting and the practical maths skills required in a workplace.

### **What further development is needed for teachers to support students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities?**

There has been an increase in the number of students with emotional behavioural difficulties which requires a different form of teaching. Training on the techniques teachers can use to help support these students would be useful including how to cope with students with specific needs in a classroom environment without them feeling targeted.