

Case study: Post-16 success at West Suffolk College

Trevor Hewlett

About the author

Trevor Hewlett is Director of Maths and English at West Suffolk College. He has a background in basic and functional skills development and has held management roles at a private training provider and a land-based college. He joined West Suffolk College in 2015 and has overseen a huge improvement in GCSE Maths results among the college's 16- to 18-year-old resit students. He tweets as @WSCallaboutME.

The challenge of a maths resit class

Success rates for 16- to 18-year-olds in GCSE Maths resit classes have long been an issue for further education centres.

Since GCSE Maths resits became compulsory in 2014, class sizes have increased, as has the pressure on centres. Both are likely to continue to do so. I joined West Suffolk College in 2015 with the aim of supporting these learners to improve results and increase pass rates.

When I joined WSC, the national pass rate for 16- to 18-year-olds was 31%. At WSC it was 20%, 11 percentage points below the national pass rate.

Among our adult learners, however, the pass rate was 60%. Clearly, there was something about our approach that worked for adult learners but wasn't working for our younger students. I decided to bring in people who could help.

The right people, the right approach

Julia Smith is a further education expert and teacher trainer who specialises in GCSE Maths resits. She visited WSC four times between October 2015 and March 2016.

Following her guidance, we adopted the approach of providing the 16- to 18-year-olds with a revision year. This led to a complete change in our delivery model in January 2016.

We recognised that although the adult learners reacted well to covering one topic per week, the younger students needed help to make links between topics. We also found they enjoyed and benefitted from approaching problem-solving in groups or pairs.

Make it a revision year

AQA's one-year route map was extremely useful in supporting the revision year approach. It covers the topics that are central to the GCSE within three 10-week terms.

At the heart of our new model was Julia's 5Rs approach, which focuses on building on and improving what students already know:

- recall: key maths facts/skills that students must know
- routine: essential maths that needs to be regularly revisited
- revise: the common exam topics
- repeat: to become competent in the techniques
- ready: focus on exam techniques and practice.

It breaks a one-hour lesson down into manageable segments, which works well to engage the 16- to 18-year-old students.

This is reflected in an increase in attendance levels from 73% in 2014/15 to 82% in 2016/17.

Focus on student progress and exam readiness

I've always been passionate about encouraging and tracking student progress. I introduced milestone tests to the GCSE Maths resit classes. Another member of the maths team used Exampro to compile questions that focus on preparing students for exams.

I also used Google Sheets to create individual feedback sheets for students. This enables them to see their results and set their own targets.

Create a centre-wide culture

The whole culture of WSC centres around achievement in maths and English. We now have three dedicated maths classrooms, which helps the students focus and raises the profile of the subject. Each classroom has whiteboards for group work and joint problem-solving.

Every Friday is set aside for planning and feedback among the maths team and alongside the English team.

Dealing with the increase in class size

In 2013/14, WSC had 50 students in its GCSE Maths resit class. By 2015/16, this number had increased to 553. This necessitated the recruitment of many more maths teachers, many of whom were PGCE students who were at WSC on work placements.

This 'homegrown' approach has been successful, largely because the PGCE students had already developed an affinity with the students they were teaching. Further members of staff were promoted from LSA roles. Some of these staff now lead the maths team at the college.

Before and after

WSC bucked the trend of low pass rates among 16- to 18-year-olds in 2016/17, achieving a 40% pass rate compared with the national average of 29.5%. That's a 20 percentage point increase on the 2015/14 pass rate, despite the increase in student numbers.

I feel strongly that the key to this success has been a collaborative approach and dedication to tracking student progress.

What next?

At WSC, we don't generally enter students for the November resit. Instead we use the whole year as a revision course; this leads to greater success.

WSC is also only offering the Foundation Tier to 2017/18 students, to enable us to focus our teaching of the new specification. We'll be using AQA's new papers and mock exam analysers to assess students' ability and set targets.

Explore further

Resources that support the approach taken in this case study are:

- WSC's ['All about maths and English' resources](#)
- AQA's [one-year route map](#) and supporting teaching guidance
- Contact your local [AQA Maths Advocate](#)
- AQA's [specimen assessment materials](#), [practice papers](#) and [mock exam analysers](#)
- Trevor Hewlett shared his experience and expertise at two conferences, in February and June, hosted at WSC 2017 which led to creation of the [Good Practice Guide](#) and dedicated webpage [AllAboutME](#)