

Implementing Innovative Courses During Key Stage 4: An introduction to School Designed Courses

Discussion of GCSE replacement courses is gathering pace.

Latymer Upper School and Bedales have made a splash with national coverage of their plans to offer just two GCSEs, replacing the rest with in-house qualifications. The School Directed Courses Consortium continues to flourish, with representatives from a growing number of schools and Multi Academy Trusts meeting regularly to discuss the challenges and opportunities of designing enriching courses to replace one or more GCSEs.

It feels to me that the quality of conversation with colleagues within and beyond my own school is beginning to change. Perhaps we are now collectively beginning to recognise that it is at least worth thinking through how we can add some sparkle and variation to the educational lives of our fourteen- fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds.

At King's High Warwick, we are now in our second full year of delivery of two GCSE replacement courses. Our Global Changemaker Programme has units on Global Citizenship, Social Justice, Climate Change and Law & the Legal System. Our Innovation & Entrepreneurship Programme focuses on Sustainable Engineering, Data Analysis, Neuroscience and Entrepreneurship. We therefore have recent experience of working through some of the key questions involved when taking the plunge and turning conversation about innovation during Key Stage 4 into concrete action.

Here are some of the queries that we often receive from colleagues at other schools, with some practical ideas in response.

1. HOW CAN YOU ENSURE THAT THE COURSES ARE A SUCCESS?

School-based educationalists used to dealing in detail can make heavy weather of questions such as these. Well-written assessment objectives, clear organisation and lesson planning are of course important. But the elements that will excite your students and have a lasting impact on their journey as young thinkers are simpler, more interesting and less time-consuming.

First, you need to put passionate and knowledgeable teachers onto the project. There has to be a strong sense of vocational motivation from the top team you assign the task of course design and delivery. The first planning meeting can't be about the logistical challenges. Instead, it needs to be about the pressing need to give pupils something better than solely studying for terminal exam after terminal exam. We are lucky at King's High to have this inspirational team in place, delivering their courses with passion week in week out. This is what gives replacement courses their heartbeat and what ultimately makes them fly.

Secondly, and almost as importantly, are assessment methods. I have been astonished to feel the difference between a class preparing for an exam and a class preparing to share films about social injustice for a film night to which parents, pupils and staff are invited. A key part of this is the consideration of how assessment methods can enable a strong element of pupil agency and choice. At King's High we continue to believe that examinations have their place and that there is an element of throwing the baby out with the bathwater in some of the discussion about assessment. But at the same time, seeing a classroom full of zest and community spirit as pupils watch one another's TED talks or participate in a courtroom scenario attended by a local magistrate makes abundantly clear just how powerful a simple reframing of assessment methods can be.

2. WHAT SHOULD THE COURSES BE ABOUT?

There are two broad approaches to this. The first is to design a course that replaces an existing GCSE, for example a replacement course in English Literature, Drama, Music or Art. When exploring subjects to replace with a new course, it is worth asking the question: How much foundational knowledge in this subject is required in order for pupils to go on to A Level/further study, and ultimately Degree-level study?

Mathematics, for example, has a high degree of foundational knowledge. English Literature, on the other hand, does not. (One need not have studied *Of Mice and Men* to do A Level English and beyond) If you are pursuing a combination of rigour, distinctiveness, and preparation for further study, it therefore seems wise to consider replacing courses with lower levels of concrete foundational knowledge, without losing any academic rigour.

To go a little further, it is also worth thinking about the difference between a 'wholesale' replacement course, where the GCSE in the given subject comes entirely off the curriculum, and a 'concurrent' replacement course, which runs alongside the GCSE. Is there a way of organising your staffing and timetable to give pupils the option of studying either GCSE Art or your exciting Art replacement course? This is not a purist's approach, I realise. But if you are looking for a more manageable shift, a concurrent replacement course might be the route to go down. I suspect this is the kind of pragmatic thinking that will encourage a larger number of schools to dive in.

Another option is to design a completely alternative type of course that catches the attention of pupils and parents because it responds to the needs of young people today and provides them with something radically different from the GCSE offering. Our Global Changemaker and Innovation & Entrepreneurship courses are designed along these lines. In my own context, this approach has worked well. Sign-up

in year one of delivery was good, with towards half of pupils taking one or more of the courses. This grew to closer to 80% for our current year 10. We partly put this success down to the carefully chosen subject domains, chosen for the eight units of study across the two courses.

3. SHOULD WE ACCREDIT THE COURSES AND, IF SO, HOW?

I think are three different models here, each with their pros and cons.

Some schools are choosing not to accredit at all. Their courses are graded internally and lead to a form of school certificate. This leads to a purer form of flexibility and means that a school can get away fully from the existing structures of an external accrediting body. In future there may also be fruitful ways in which to add layers of accountability to this model, for example if clusters of schools begin to work together to benchmark the quality of one another's courses and pupil outcomes.

Other schools may want to take a middle ground. Regulating bodies such as Eduqual offer Level 2 accreditation involving a requirement for clear definition of objectives, course content, assessment methods and so on, leading to a process of moderation and quality control. This enables freedom of design for teachers whilst also offering a guarantee of quality and an existing method of outside accountability. We have opted for this method at King's High for our GCSE alternative courses and several other programmes that we run in other year groups. It works well for us in our particular context.

A further note on this 'middle ground' route: I suspect that, as Exam Boards and other key players pick up on the interest in school directed courses, new models of accreditation will begin to appear. Pearson, for example, are leading the way with proposals about how taught courses might be assessed through the Higher Project Qualification (HPQ), or even multiple Project Qualifications that could be bundled together into a 'Baccalaureate'. At the moment we have content-packed GCSE qualifications and a skills and outcome framework through the EPQ - but is there an untapped space in the middle where accreditors could design Project Qualifications that sit fully alongside exam-based qualifications? My sense on this: watch this space.

Third is to choose something off-the-shelf: an existing course or certificate that isn't a GCSE but provides subject knowledge or skills-acquisition that GCSEs lack. For example, there are courses out there in creative arts subjects, business and computer science that fit into this bracket. Part of me wonders whether this lacks some of the purer inspiration borne of designing one's own course and channelling the expertise and passion of talented staff. Then again, if you find an off-the-shelf course that meets your needs then it might save work and provide a clear structure within which to work.

4. WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO WANT TO PURSUE 10 GCSEs?

This a commonly raised stumbling block. And it is an understandable one: if we ask pupils to study eight or nine rather than ten GCSEs, will we be seen as going back on a promise to offer the full sweep of ten or more GCSEs?

One very simple route if you are looking to manage risk and build your Key Stage Four innovations gradually is to offer choice. At King's High, we allow pupils to study for eight GCSEs plus two courses, nine GCSEs plus one course, or the full gamut of ten GCSEs. We softly advise the eight or nine GCSE option, but fully support those going for ten. We have worked hard to ensure that the staffing and timetabling picture support this variation and flexibility. All of which means that, when it comes to the risk of disappointing those not keen on GCSE replacement courses, we think we have the issue solved.

The deeper, more proper response to those not keen to sign up is of course to win hearts and minds and make a compelling case that taking a GCSE replacement course is the better route to take: that they provide high-level thinking skills, cultivate wonderful knowledge-acquisition, offer the development of scholarly dispositions, and complement exam-centred GCSEs. But until hearts and minds are won, giving the option of sticking with ten GCSEs is a way of accommodating the full range of perspectives.

5. CAN THESE COURSES REALLY ACHIEVE THEIR AIMS?

A simple one on which to close, with a simple answer: yes, they can.

One of my recent career highlights was the film night I mentioned earlier, at which pupils, parents and staff gathered to watch short pieces about social injustice. We put out a red carpet, ordered popcorn, and pupils dressed up, all of which helped add shine to the evening. But the deeper magic was the sight of Year 10 pupils engaging in a process of independently forming their own interests, becoming passionate, gathering wonderful knowledge, and presenting it in an engaging and creative manner. The experience of that evening made the public debate about GCSEs feel very thin indeed. It couldn't be more obvious that providing variety and creativity for Year 10 and 11 provides myriad benefits.

So my conclusion won't come as a surprise: logistics are important, but never let them become your guiding light. For me, playing a part in the buzz, energy, intelligence and personal growth provided by our two courses has given me as much professional pride as anything else I have worked on as Deputy Head of King's High. Finding time for our mid-teens to engage in flexibly-designed courses is both logistically doable and one of the most important things we can do as secondary educators.