

Leeds City College Outstanding results and GCSEPod

GCSEPod is usually seen as an indispensable learning tool for secondary schools. But the online teaching and learning platform is proving to be a valuable study resource for students taking Leeds City College's raft of academic and vocational options.

Thousands of 15 and 16-year-olds in secondary school education are preparing to take their GCSE exams this summer.

Indeed, GCSEs and secondary schools are irrevocably linked in most people's minds.

But it won't be just this year's crop of Year 11s who will be sitting down to take these important exams in what is the final year of compulsory secondary education in the UK.

There will be students aiming to achieve good GCSE grades second time around, as well as in some cases those taking the exams for the very first time, years after leaving their school days behind.

These mature students may have left school with little, if anything in the way of qualifications, or be re-training for new careers that demand different exam credentials to those offered decades ago when they waved goodbye to secondary education.



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They will be aiming to catch-up at further education establishments like Leeds City College.

One of the largest further education establishments in the country currently operating over three campuses in the West Yorkshire city – a new site is due to open in September 2019 housing two of the biggest schools, Creative Arts and Social Science – the college currently caters for around 35,000 learners aged 16-plus.

Most are young adults, but Jonny Diamond, Leeds City College's English and Maths Development Manager, says it's not unusual to find retirees in the 70-plus age bracket coming back into full or part-time education to take academic and vocational courses ranging from basic skills to A-levels and foundation degrees.

"We have some learners at the minute who are in their 40s and 50s. They may be looking to make a career change or may have lost a job and are having to re-train and gain extra qualifications," he says.

These will invariably include a good GCSE pass in English Language and maths. It's not just mature students who will be aiming to achieve the benchmark grade 4 or above in English Language and maths, however.

Since September 2013, the government has insisted that further education students who didn't achieve the target grade will study GCSEs in these core subjects until they are 18. It means that staff who teach hairdressing, IT or childcare, for example, are now faced with the challenge of schooling their students in English and maths.

But last September, extra help came Leeds City College's way in the form of GCSEPod. The online teaching and learning platform with its short, easy to access revision videos (known as Pods), cover all the major exam boards and relevant subject areas, and can be simply retrieved in both the classroom or on the go on a smartphone or tablet.



Leeds City College uses just the English and Maths resources across a number of schools, among them Hair, Beauty and Media Make Up, Engineering Social Science, Creative Arts, Sport, Science and Exercise, Applied Science, Events, Enterprise and Employability and Digital and IT.

It was the students who led the push for an independent English language learning platform to be introduced at the college, which is part of the Luminare Education Group, which includes Keighley College, Leeds College of Music and the White Rose Academies Trust.

"We have lots of students here who can't always get into college for set classes either because they are working or have childcare problems," Jonny explains. "For example, a parent might not be able to get to college before 9.45am if their children start school at 9am.

"We had been successfully using an online maths platform from another provider for some time, and both the students and teachers were asking for something similar for English that would help support teaching and independent learning.

"We did some research and came across GCSEPod. It has been used at Leeds West Academy for the last couple of years, so we went along to the school to see it in operation, and chatted to the students and staff. Everyone spoke very highly of it."

So in September 2018, the English and maths elements were launched at Leeds City College.

It has revolutionised students' capacity for independent learning in English, especially for those who may be holding down jobs alongside their studies, or who are having to juggle family and college life.

Between September 2018 and March 2019, a total of 6,202 Pods had been viewed, 5,017 of which were in English Language.

Jonny has conducted his own research into how GCSEPod is being utilised and says: "It's not in the classroom. Around 90% of our students are using it outside the classroom, and not at the times you would necessarily expect them to.

"Popular times for our learners to be accessing the Pods is between 10pm-midnight and 1am-5am, and the best days by a long way are Mondays and Thursdays."

It is too early to say what effect GCSEPod may have on students' long-term exam success. But Jonny says: "We had 380 learners resit their English GCSE in November and what we noticed was that they scored better in paper 1 than they did in paper 2.

"When we looked at the GCSEPod usage, we saw that they had watched more paper 1 Pods than paper 2. Our goal now is to ensure that the students watch the same level of paper 2 Pods as they do paper 1."

Both the students and staff have embraced GCSEPod, although Jonny admits take-up isn't without its unique challenges.

"Younger students think nothing of using technology, whereas it's a different experience for many of our older learners who are still perhaps more used to leafing through hefty textbooks to find out information, than Googling it.

"But we have specialist coaches on hand to help facilitate independent learning and a permanently staffed network of Independent Learning Zones equipped with the latest digital technology, so if a student can't get to a class or access a smartphone or tablet for whatever reason, then they can still study autonomously."

The college also advocates flipped learning, where students are encouraged to gain an understanding of a topic via

resources like GCSEPod before they go into the classroom, leaving more time for directed support and hands-on study.

But Jonny says this is not as important as independent learning. "That's the big thing here at the college. We know that students who study independently are more motivated to learn and are more actively involved in their learning."

Steven Hope, Leeds City College's Head of Independent Learning, says GCSEPod fits into a wider plan to exploit cloud-based learning "so if a student isn't in college they can still continue their learning in the library or at home. It is about creating a system where intuitive digital platforms and tailored online resources and activities are supporting where and how the students learn."

Ultimately, he maintains, it is about engaging the students in their education in a new and effective way.

"It is a challenge when the majority of our students haven't met the set standard in their GCSEs. We are having to break-down the barriers and re-engage.

"But what GCSEPod does is show them that there is a different way of learning, one that empowers them."

Feedback from staff and students has thus far been positive. "Everyone seems to enjoy using it. It isn't a magic wand, it is another tool in our tool box that frames how they continue to learn.

"Nationally, GCSE resits are a challenge and we felt that just purely classroom-based learning wasn't working for us, so we have to try and engage students in a different way."

GCSEPod's short bursts of audio-visual learning designed to drive student progress and engage them in the subjects at their own pace, makes the platform not just an ideal solution for those struggling to conform to what may be regarded as usual study times, but an important tool in plugging knowledge gaps.