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The Manchester Grammar School

Founded originally in the 16th century, and now with around 1,500 students, The Manchester Grammar School is now the largest independent day school for 7-18-year old boys in the UK.

QUALIFICATION:
THINKING AND REASONING SKILLS

CUSTOMER:
THE MANCHESTER GRAMMAR SCHOOL

Each year, many of the school's boys successfully secure places in universities including Cambridge, Oxford, UCL, LSE, Imperial, Nottingham, Leeds, Birmingham and Manchester.

The school's motto is *sapere aude* (dare to be wise), a step which current High Master Christopher Ray took after receiving feedback that, whilst universities were exceptionally pleased with the boys' academic capabilities, some students lacked basic skills when it came to putting their arguments and opinions forward in a coherent way.

"Clearly there was a problem and so the High Master set us a challenge to see if the teachers could find a solution,"

Dennis Brown, Head of Religion and Philosophy.

The issue was not confined to The Manchester Grammar School, but to young people generally who in modern society are bombarded every day with all types of information, issues and opinions.

"With so much information coming at them, it's not easy for young people to filter out what is useful and what isn't, and then form structured opinions and arguments themselves."

In 2009, Dennis learned through a colleague that exam body OCR was piloting a new course designed to help students to think, reason and problem-solve in a more structured way. The School became a pilot centre for OCR's Thinking and Reasoning course, which has several aims, including the development of 10 skills of thinking and reasoning, traditional critical thinking skills and wider problem solving skills, as well as skills that can be transferred to and used in other subjects.

"THE COURSE IS SKILLS DRIVEN AND STUDENTS ENJOY THE VARIETY OF LEARNING, ESPECIALLY AS IT CROSSES DIFFERENT SUBJECTS. PART OF THE BEAUTY OF THIS QUALIFICATION IS THAT IT'S AN OSMOTIC PROCESS – THE PENNY DROPS AND STUDENTS REALISE THEY'VE LEARNED A NEW SKILL AND PUT IT TO USE IN A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT SITUATION."

CONCEPTUAL
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"The course appeared to be focused on exactly the problem the universities had identified and the High Master had asked us to look at. To begin with, some of our boys were quite sceptical, especially at the beginning of the course, which for the boys that we have here is relatively easy work,"

Beyond learning the basics, however, the qualification begins to make a tangible difference to each student's learning, as the school soon discovered.

One of the main objectives of the qualification is for students to apply their learning across a range of subjects.

Furthermore, teachers and students may bring in their own topics for discussion and review; for example, debating a real-life current event that is taking place whilst the course, or even a single lesson, is in progress.

The course at The Manchester Grammar School is compulsory, but the examination is optional.

The qualification is taught to Years 10 and 11 students in 40-minute periods each week over two years, and as a Level 2 award is equivalent to a GCSE short course. It provides a good basis for progression specifically to Critical Thinking AS/A Level and also supports progression to a wide variety of Level 3 courses that require reasoning skills implicitly.

Dennis explains

"In our first round of exams, all our boys did very well we had 40 with merits and 30 with distinctions. The qualification has already grown in popularity and this year we will see double the number of boys taking the exams. They are now adding their newly acquired OCR Thinking and Reasoning qualification to their UCAS application form and educational portfolio as they go onto university."

As well as being impressed by the impact of the course on the students' learning, Dennis is pleased with the level of support provided by OCR.

Further information about The Manchester Grammar School:
www.mgs.org

Other teachers in the school have also noticed how boys are bringing their newly learned skills into classroom debates and putting across their points of view in a more coherent way. Dennis continues,

"They may be studying a Dickens novel, for example, and then use their thinking and reasoning skills to provide their own interpretation and viewpoint."

The course material provided by OCR is taken from different subject matter areas; for example, from the existence of UFOs to everyday topics affecting teenagers such as drugs.

"IT'S VERY GOOD. OCR PROVIDED LOTS OF USEFUL COURSE MATERIALS SUCH AS DOCUMENTS AND POWERPOINT SLIDES FOR EACH OF THE SKILLS AS WELL AS IDEAS FOR HOW TO TEACH IT, ALL OF WHICH ARE EASILY ACCESSIBLE. OCR HAS A COMMUNITY AND DISCUSSION GROUP ONLINE WHERE TEACHERS CAN PUT OUT IDEAS THEY HAVE AND ALSO REPORT ON THINGS THAT HAVE WORKED WELL FOR THEM."

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