Report of the GCSE English and Mathematics Project (Phase II)

February – June 2013
End of project report/evaluation

Codi Safonau Ysgolion
Raising School Standards

Report of the GCSE English and Mathematics Project (Phase II)

Audience   Secondary schools in Wales.

Overview   In February 2013 the Welsh Government funded a series of geographical-based workshops throughout Wales in order to support teachers' understanding of the syllabus changes to GCSE English and Mathematics in relation to current Year 11 learners (the Phase I Project).

Immediately following the conclusion of these workshops, a Phase II Project was undertaken for a small number of secondary schools throughout Wales to model the outcomes of the Phase I workshops. The objectives of the Phase II Project were:

- further improve use of outcomes data at whole-school level and strengthen the role of the headteacher and the senior leadership team in leading accelerated improvement through expert mentoring and coaching

- train senior and middle leaders to better link data analysis and target-setting to target-getting actions, with an emphasis on approaches learnt from the Phase I workshops

- disseminate best practice for Year 10 and Year 11 learners, as analysed in the Phase I workshops

- work alongside English and mathematics subject leaders to support them to respond to learner level information and take necessary urgent action for Year 10 and Year 11 learners.

Action required   None – for information only.

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Executive summary

The Welsh Government appointed Education London (EL) to deliver Phase II of the GCSE English and Mathematics Project following on from the successful delivery of a series of workshops to subject leaders of these core subjects in Phase I. Phase II support ran from March until June 2013.

Each of the four consortia nominated three schools to receive a programme of six days of support in each of English and mathematics, funded by the Welsh Government. Schools also had four days of whole-school programme management to coordinate the support and work alongside the school's leadership team to help ensure sustainability. The subject support was focused on Year 11 learners, with the initial aim of raising achievement in GCSE examinations in June 2013. One consortium separately funded an additional two schools and extended the number of subject days to 12 + 12 days to enable EL to work in the second half of the summer term with Year 10 learners, to maximise their chances of success in GCSE examinations in 2014.

Key issues

The support started very late in the GCSE course which therefore minimised opportunities to help Year 11 learners. It also required significant effort on the part of schools to accommodate this additional support, which had to run alongside their own planned intervention programmes. Education London (EL) advisers visited schools for whole days, which meant that learners had to be withdrawn from other lessons to work with them. Not every school was happy with this arrangement. Some schools lack effective ICT systems to support the collection and use of data.

Recommendations

1. Any future programme of support should start earlier in the academic year and include Year 10 learners as well as those in Year 11.

2. Development of leadership and management skills in the school should also be addressed, if necessary, at either senior or middle manager level.

3. Attention should be given using data effectively in the setting and achieving of targets, in order to help schools to raise the standards of all learners.

4. Schools should review the organisation of the school year so that learners are well prepared for all key assessments, avoiding clashes between subjects. Schools should consider ending study leave or starting it later.

5. Early entry strategies should be reviewed and only pursued if this will help learners achieve their full potential.

6. All schools should review their Key Stage 3 curriculum to ensure it adequately prepares learners for the latest assessment objectives in Key Stage 4.

7. Learners should have the opportunity to practise sitting full mock examinations, held in appropriate conditions and not curtailed by the length of normal school lessons.

Comments from schools

The overwhelming majority of schools evaluated the project positively. Most schools particularly valued the English mock examinations, with personal feedback for learners. The professional dialogue with advisers was also highly regarded and their objective view of the school's provision welcomed. Some schools revised schemes of work in the light feedback from advisers; others have programmed similar support for their learners next year. Most found it challenging to accommodate so many days of intervention in the relatively few remaining days for Year 11s in schools. More time to schedule the support – and to discuss its benefits with colleagues whose lessons were affected by the intervention sessions – would have been welcomed.

Main report

Introduction

This project was funded by the Welsh Government and delivered by EL between March and June 2013. It built on the Welsh Government's successful Phase I Project of February 2013 in which EL delivered a series of workshops across Wales for secondary school subject leaders of English and mathematics, which covered the following.

1. How changes to GCSE specifications in English and mathematics relate to broader literacy/numeracy issues.

2. How best to support Year 11 learners to maximise attainment in GCSE.

3. How future teaching, task setting and preparation for GCSE could incorporate the full set of PISA requirements more fully, developing learners' ability to apply literacy and numeracy skills to real-life situations.

These workshops were attended by circa 85 per cent of the secondary school English and mathematics subject leaders in Wales. The main findings were then summarised in a guide for subject leaders.

The aim of the Phase II Project was to deliver a programme of support to 12 secondary schools in Wales, three per consortium, to raise attainment at the end of Key Stage 4, with a particular focus on Year 11 English and mathematics. Each school was allocated 12 days of support, which in almost all schools was used to give six days of support in each of English and mathematics. One school opted for support in science instead of mathematics, while another divided the days among English, mathematics and science. Schools were also provided with professionally-produced English language study guides for learners.

The objectives were to:

- improve further the use of data at whole-school level, strengthening the role of the headteacher and senior leadership team (SLT) in leading accelerated improvement, through expert mentoring and coaching

- work with senior and middle leaders to improve the link between data analysis and target setting, and to develop target-**getting** strategies, with an emphasis on approaches discussed in the workshops in Phase I

- disseminate the best practice for Year 10 and Year 11, as analysed in the Phase I workshops
- work alongside the subject leaders of English and mathematics, supporting their response to learner level information and planning the necessary urgent action for Year 11 and Year 10 learners.

In addition, the Central South Consortium funded two further schools in order that one school in each local authority area of the consortium would be represented in the project.

This report is based on three significant sets of discussions:

- those between EL's School Programme Managers (SPMs) and the subject advisers for their schools about the delivery of the English, mathematics (or science) programme, as appropriate
- a meeting earlier in June of EL's SPMs when they were able to review delivery of the Phase II with the project lead and with the lead English and mathematics advisers
- final review visits by EL's SPMs to their school(s) to meet the headteacher or relevant member of SLT. The outcomes of these discussions were recorded in a Record of Visit (ROV) proforma[1] which was shared with the school (and, in most cases, other recipients), with feedback from the school invited. Where the SPM was not able to undertake this final visit, a summary report was sent to the school and feedback invited. Overwhelmingly, the feedback from all the schools was positive.

[1] See Appendix 1.

Project overview

While this support programme has been appreciated and valued by schools engaged in the project, an often repeated comment was that it was launched very late and would have been more effective if it could have been commissioned and delivered earlier. The result, it was reported, was that the project could not really be strategic; it had to focus on the immediate issue of current Year 11 performance in final assessments and examinations. Other organisational issues (see below) also followed.

While this concern is understandable and even to be welcomed, the context of the project was to launch a small-scale, pilot programme to build on the Phase I workshops and trial the recommendations of the workshops in a small number of pilot schools.

Organisation and methodology

Schools emphasised that the project started very late in the academic year, which presented a significant organisational challenge. This was exacerbated by the existence of other programmes aiming to maximise Year 11 attainment, both internal or external, and the need to ensure that the EL support complemented rather than conflicted with these programmes. The first phase of support was an analysis of standards by EL's SPM and the school's SLT[2]. Based on this, a project plan was devised and this usually managed to resolve the difficulties caused by adding another layer of intervention. However, one school made a comment about learners being confused by conflicting approaches in two programmes they were experiencing. More than one school made the comment that this put particular pressure on subject leaders in English and mathematics to manage all this support, at a crucial time of year. Also, the perceived late start meant it was difficult in some cases to fit in all the days of support before learners were involved in final examinations, had to make final submissions of controlled assessments or before study leave began (see below).

Some school practices inhibited EL's ability to deliver support.

- There was a reluctance to release learners from other lessons to attend sessions with English and mathematics advisers. EL's programme, with its focus on English and mathematics achievement and the reality of single day visits from subject advisers, necessitated learner withdrawal from other lessons to work with them. While cogent arguments can be made against

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[2] See Appendix 2.

this practice, EL's experience has shown it is effective in raising Level 2 inclusive achievement. Feedback from schools indicates that they came to value this approach.

- Early study leave for Year 11 learners adversely affected attendance at some intervention sessions. Obviously, the dates for this had usually been determined in schools before the project started but this, combined with the late start, made it difficult to find enough days to deliver all the support. Typically, schools ran intervention programmes for identified Year 11 learners who were invited to come into school from their study leave to receive support during the working week, at weekends or in the holidays; EL's support was integrated into these programmes. Generally, attendance at such sessions was not good. It is worth adding here that, typically, in England, Year 11 study leave has either been discontinued, or starts later than in most schools in Wales.

However, despite these difficulties, the overall verdict from the SPMs was that school organisation and preparedness to receive support were good. In particular, when the subject advisers visited, they found that learners had been informed of the time and place of their work with them. When they failed to attend, a member of school staff would usually locate them. Typically, subject advisers found they were allocated a suitable room, with appropriate teaching resources, and that they had this room for the whole day, i.e. there was no need to vacate because another teacher or group was due in the next lesson. Typically, SPMs praised their contact SLT person and the English and mathematics subject leaders for their skill and hard work in making the support effective. Where, occasionally, the organisation within the school was not effective, the headteacher at the school intervened to change arrangements and ensure effective organisation in the future.

In one school, there were issues at senior and middle leader level which proved difficult to overcome, with the result that, overall, the programme was less effective than it might have been. In this school also, a whole-school attendance issue impacted on learner attendance at the support sessions. However, even here, both the school and SPM are very clear that it produced very significant benefits.

It was in the schools which were most reluctant to accept the notion of learner withdrawal from other lessons, where the sessions tended to take place during study leave and/or school holiday periods, and attendance was lowest.

In the case of one school, this was compounded by a poor grip on data which meant that those learners who did attend represented a wide ability range (see also section on data below).

Data

EL's English and mathematics programmes depend heavily on the identification of a target group of learners in each subject with whom the subject adviser will work. This in turn requires the schools to have appropriate systems which generate data on learners' baseline performance and, arising from this, a target grade in each subject. Of particular importance is an understanding that to maximise Level 2 inclusive achievement, schools need to identify a group capable of five or more passes at grade C or above, but who are vulnerable in one or both of English and mathematics (or a different key subject, such as science) and who will therefore benefit from intensive work in the problem subject(s).

Subject target groups in English and mathematics are then derived from the group who are not only borderline grade C/D in one or both of these subjects, but who, overall, can achieve the necessary five or more passes in appropriate subjects and therefore Level 2 inclusive overall. Some learners will, inevitably, fall into more than one intervention group.

EL found a wide variation in schools' awareness and use of data, and in their approaches to target setting for learners. In one case, the data existed at senior leadership level but was not effectively disseminated to middle leaders and below. At its worst, some schools were unable to provide a coherent target group for the subject advisers. Mathematics advisers, in particular, occasionally commented that there was a wide variation in the ability level of learners they were asked to work with.

In some schools, very slow ICT systems impact adversely on teachers' ability to access data quickly and effectively. In a busy teaching day it is simply not possible to work effectively with very slow systems and inevitably this discourages teachers from even trying. This means

that important learner level data, including that provided online by examination boards, is not always used to inform future planning and staff training.

However, some excellent practice was also observed in schools and, in these, identifying the learners who would most benefit from support was easily and quickly achieved. In almost all schools, sometimes with support from SPMs, schools identified a coherent target group for EL subject advisers to work with.

English and mathematics advisers

In almost all cases, the advisers very positively viewed by schools. The features of the programme they were delivering which were most appreciated included:

- the English mock examination, which led to an awareness that more formal assessments like these need to be built into schools' planning
- the 'walk through' mock examination in mathematics
- the one-to-one feedback to learners about their performance in the mock examinations. This was highly valued by both learners and subject teachers – comprising individual feedback to learners and the identification of areas for improvement in performance – and informed the content of the final sessions with the learners
- working with learners in small groups
- the prompt return of examination papers, prior to individual feedback, as above
- the close link to actual examination questions in the work of subject advisers.

In only two schools was anything other than English and mathematics support delivered – in both cases, science. One school opted for science support instead of mathematics. Here the science adviser worked with learners to improve their practical coursework assessments. In so doing, he modelled good departmental practice in relation to these. Another school opted for science support as well as English and mathematics – with reduced levels of each. Here, the support was more strategic, therefore it is difficult to measure the impact this year.

Inevitably, there were a couple of instances where the subject adviser was not appreciated by the school.

- In one school, a critical report was not well received, though this did not impact on the learner support provided.
- In another school, the subject leader and adviser disagreed about what were the most pressing needs of the learners.

Schools often began by assuming that the subject adviser would take the whole target group, i.e. 25 learners in a revision session. However, the subject advisers believed that working with learners in small groups, so that typically the whole target group was seen over a day, was more effective. Schools came to value this practice.

Advisers noted different approaches to early entry in schools, with varying degrees of success for learners. In general, they feel that early entry should be determined by the specific needs of individual learners, rather than a whole-cohort policy which treats all learners in the same way, and that decisions should be informed by data.

Teachers

Most teachers responded positively to subject advisers although, understandably, some non-core teachers, whose lessons were adversely affected by the support programme, were unhappy. Some teachers observed the subject advisers delivering lessons to groups of learners and commented positively on the experience. Sometimes, schools noted a type of support which they then incorporated into their own practice, such as a technique from one of the mathematics advisers – the 'walk through mock examination' in which a group of learners are talked through answers as they sit the paper.

Records of visits (ROVs) were said to have helped subject leaders and teachers to develop their professional practice.

Learners

Learners, in general, responded positively to the support of the subject advisers. Usually, they appreciated being in lessons with them – one school said that learners felt important to have been selected for this intervention. In some schools, an initial apprehension and resistance soon faded once the learners had had their first sessions with the subject advisers and support for the sessions grew. The overwhelming feedback from subject advisers was that learners were hard working and cooperative, and very much wanted to do well.

Occasionally, there were comments from the SPMs and subject advisers about a minority of learners who did not engage, some boys who 'couldn't see the point', boys who became less engaged as the project went on, and other pressures, such as those arising from controlled assessments and final examinations increased. Generally, it was felt that girls engaged better than boys.

There were occasional comments from SPMs about learners who were too passive in intervention sessions, learners with low expectations who were too easily satisfied with work they produced or who were too relaxed in view of the proximity of their final examinations.

Learners' attendance was generally good within the school day but for sessions at the weekend, in holidays or study leave attendance was more variable. It was disappointing to see the low level of attendance at a Sunday session organised in one school, before a mathematics GCSE examination the following morning.

Parents/carers

It was pleasing to note that, in the case of two of the schools, parents/carers were made aware of the support programme. One school invited parents/carers to a meeting to raise awareness and explain the benefits to their children.

Key issues

There were four key issues emerging from the programme.

1. The fact that the support started very late in the GCSE course was the main concern for schools. They welcomed the programme and were keen to help it succeed, but were frustrated that they had very little time to capitalise on the recommendations emerging from it. Opportunities to help the current cohort of Year 11 learners were limited.

2. It had to dovetail with existing intervention programmes, which caused organisational difficulties.

3. Learners had to be withdrawn from other lessons to work with EL advisers. Not every school was happy with this arrangement.

4. Some schools lack effective ICT systems to support the collection and use of data.

Sustainability

Several schools have already planned similar intervention programmes for the current Year 10 learners. In particular, they have reviewed their use of mock examinations to prepare learners more effectively for their actual GCSE examinations. Both subject leaders and SLTs have reviewed their use of data to inform target-setting and target-getting procedures and to develop strategies to raise attainment at all levels; more staff training will be required to develop understanding of this.

Recommendations for a future phase of the project

1. The support programme should begin earlier in the academic year and include Year 10 as well as Year 11 learners.

2. Broader leadership and management issues in a school should be addressed, whether at senior or middle level, if necessary.

3. Schools should be helped to generate and use data to create and then meet appropriate targets for learners of all abilities and ages, so that achievement for all is raised. The lack of agreed baseline data (i.e. no Key Stage 2 SATs) was frequently cited as an issue; however, the new National Reading and Numeracy Tests, being undertaken by learners at the end of each year from Year 2 to Year 9 from May 2013, as part of the new National Literacy and Numeracy Framework (LNF), should at least make a contribution here. In any event, schools can set their own baseline assessment when learners begin in Year 7 and again at the end of Year 9, before GCSE courses usually begin. This can then be used as the base for setting targets for learners across all subjects and year groups – as long as these baselines are not lower than teacher assessment in Key Stage 2 – and for measuring progress in Key Stage 3.

4. Attention should be given to the organisation of the school year to maximise school achievement, for example:

   • early completion of controlled assessments

   • frequency and timing of mock examinations

   • ensuring sufficient emphasis is given to formal assessments in whole-school and departmental planning

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- minimising or eradicating Year 11 study leave – most learners are unable to take sufficient advantage of study leave and would benefit from a structured revision programme, if not staying in normal lessons as long as possible.

5. Schools should be encouraged to review assessment strategies and only consider early entry if examination outcomes demonstrate that this in learners' best interests.

6. Support for reviewing the Key Stage 3 curriculum should be provided, to ensure that learners are prepared appropriately for the changing assessment patterns in Key Stage 4, particularly with regard to literacy and numeracy, as set out in the LNF.

7. Learners should have the opportunity to practise sitting full examinations, held in appropriate conditions and not curtailed by the length of normal school lessons.

Appendix 1: Record of Visit (ROV) proforma

School		Local authority/ consortium	
Adviser		Visiting	
Role		Date of visit	

Purpose

Activities

Outcomes, actions and next steps agreed

Recommendations

Date and focus of next visit

Appendix 2: Standards analysis for Welsh schools (2012/13)

School			
Headteacher			
English- or Welsh-medium			
Local authority/consortium			
Current band (November 2012)		**Previous band (November 2011)**	
Family of schools			
Date of initial EL draft			

Section 1 – Context

1.	**Characteristics of the school (based on 2012/13)**
a.	Socio-economic context and free school meals (FSM) %
b.	Gender balance Boys % Girls %
c.	Special educational needs (SEN) including proportion of statements
d.	Proportion of ethnic minority learners
e.	Most recent whole-school Key Stage 2–4 progress figure
	2011 2012

Section 2

Section 2.1 – 2011 Key Stage 3 results (teacher assessment data) (for further background on current Year 11)

Key Stage 3	Level 5+	Level 6+	2013 target	
			5+	6+
English				
Mathematics				
Science				
Core subject indicator En/Ma/Sc				

Section 2.2 – 2012 results (teacher assessment data) (for further background on current Year 10)

Key Stage 3	Level 5+	Level 6+	2013 target	
			5+	6+
English				
Mathematics				
Science				
Core subject indicator En/Ma/Sc				

Section 3 – 2012 examination results

Key Stage 4	2012			
Number on Year 11 roll				
Level 2 threshold including English/Welsh and mathematics				
5 A*–G				
Average points scores				
% A*–C	English/Welsh Language or Literature %	Mathematics %	1 Science Number	2 Science Number
GCSE 2012 subject level data	From school/local authority/ Welsh Government data			
Comments/issues: (include: comparison of core subjects, especially English/Welsh and mathematics; look at English Literature and English Language differences; note poorly performing subjects with possible reasons; note best performing subjects with possible reasons; note proportion of grade Ds in key subjects.)				

Section 4 – Relevant additional background information

1.	Attendance 2011/12 %

2.	Exclusions data for 2011/12
a.	Fixed term:
b.	Permanent:

Section 5 – Estyn information

Last Estyn report; notes of HMI monitoring visits	
a.	Date of the last full inspection:
b.	Overall judgements reached – Performance:
c.	Overall judgements reached – Prospects for improvement:
d.	Recommendations – Standards/Quality/Leadership
e.	Judgement on progress at last HMI/local authority monitoring visit (if applicable):

Section 6 – Issues and hypotheses arising form Sections 1 to 5 (for discussion with headteacher and SLT) with particular reference to Year 11 and year 10 action

Section 7 – Other external support in place