

# Olympiad Teacher Voices

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## Why do you, as a teacher, like to take part in Olympiad round 1?

I don't think any subject should be just exam learning. We love chemistry here – with nearly 200 students studying it in the sixth form. We want to teach them beyond the syllabus, to help them understand what's going on and feel the passion for what is an absolutely brilliant subject. So the Olympiad is one way of doing that.

## Why do your students want to take part in the Olympiad?

We enter our students in the lower sixth as most of them make early applications to university, and a lot of them want to be able to include their Olympiad results (which they can't do if they do it in the January of the upper sixth). All our lower sixth students are invited to take part, and we're very pleased that many of them achieve gold and silver awards. We firmly believe that students should be allowed to follow their interests regardless of age and we regularly have really passionate GCSE pupils who also take part in the Olympiad. One year we had a completely self-taught Year 7 boy who was one mark off a bronze!

## What do your students get out of taking part in the Olympiad?

Certainly getting a good grade; if they get a silver or a gold then it just boosts their confidence – but grades aren't everything! Sometimes some very unexpected students get these awards – it tells us who can think outside the box, and then we can provide them with lots of other opportunities to practise this. For example, we've just started another Chemistry Society which is precisely for that, we give them an interesting chemistry scenario and get them to think, 'Why does that happen?' It's nothing to do with what's on the syllabus; it just gets them more switched on to chemistry. (We start early with a heavily oversubscribed Potions Club in Year 7!)

## Do you use Olympiad past paper questions in any of your preparation or classes?

Oh yes - we often start with 'sherbet lemons' because that's a nice straightforward one; it's really not much more than GCSE. We use questions like these throughout the school where appropriate, because they are very interesting applications of chemistry

## What do your students find most challenging when they look at the questions, because they are harder than A-level questions of course?

They're great! Almost everyone in the sixth form takes maths, it's a very strong maths school. So they find that doing the mathematical questions can get them more marks and give them confidence as they can work these out. But there are still topics that some of the students won't have met before, even if they do the Olympiad in the upper sixth. Faced with unfamiliar ideas, some of the more confident students are prepared to think, and try and work out what's going on. Solving puzzles is very satisfying, and is something we positively encourage.

## What advice would you give a school that was thinking of taking part in Olympiad round 1 for the first time?

Go for it! We're very happy to talk them through it – I started entering students many years ago when I taught in a comprehensive school and people would say, 'Oh don't be silly, we haven't got any students good enough.' But we did! It's not an elitist thing, it's something where if you've got interested students, no matter how difficult the subject (and chemistry is a difficult subject) it's really worthwhile being able to switch them on and make them think, 'Well, why does that happen?'

## Anything else you'd like to say?

Long may it go on. We're delighted with it.

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