

Olympiad Teacher Voices

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Head of Chemistry

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

I think mostly it's the challenge for our kids, because we've got quite a number of reasonably bright students and they are very competitive. They're very keen to take part in as many academic challenges as they can and try and outdo each other! They like the academic challenge and they like what that gives them in terms of preparing them for university. We do it mostly to give the students an extra challenge – there's not many competitive things they can do in chemistry at that level, so it's good to give them that opportunity.

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

They like to put it down on their UCAS application; it gives them something to talk about when applying to university. They generally speaking want to do anything that furthers their academics really.

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

The recognition, which they quite like. I think they get extra knowledge out of it and it gives them a certain amount of resilience – coming across questions that they haven't been taught directly and have no idea how to deal with. The Olympiad is usually pretty good at coming up with completely brand new situations to ask questions on, so that certainly helps prepare them quite well for university level stuff.

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

I have used them to do some preparation, but struggle to fit the time in to do much. I point the kids in the direction of them. It does put some of the weaker students off from doing it because some of them go, 'Oh yeah I definitely want to do that,' and then look at the past papers and go, 'Oh no actually I don't'. So they probably put off a few of the boys who wouldn't do very well. But it does help them a bit.

How do you prepare for round 1?

I give them some past questions to have a go at. In some cases we've done a bit of a crash course on the organic stuff and NMR, because that's stuff we don't teach until later in the year. So we do a bit of teaching on that so that they've got the basics and stand a chance of being able to answer a question, although generally the organic is the bit they do worst on.

What do your students find most challenging?

The organic parts. Whereas our boys are generally good mathematicians so they do a bit better on the physical questions.

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

Download last year's paper and let your brightest students have a go at a few of the questions so they get a feel for what it's going to be like. If you entered them for the real thing and gave them no practice they would probably be quite alarmed when they got the paper in front of them. There's a big difference between what they're used to at A-level, and Olympiad, so definitely show them some past questions so they get a feel for it.

It's definitely worth doing if you've got bright students that aren't necessarily challenged that much by the A-level specification.

The Chemistry Olympiad is the leading chemistry competition for students in the UK. To find out more about this opportunity to challenge your chemistry students visit rsc.li/olympiad

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