

Olympiad Teacher Voices

Head of Chemistry

The Sixth Form College Colchester

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

Because it stretches some of our more able students and gives them a real challenge. They also get a great sense of achievement when they receive their awards. Some of them found that it's the first time they've done an exam that they've really found challenging, which is a good experience for them. I think it also rewards people who don't manage to do that much of the questions but have a go – they can still get an award, which is nice. I think the maths challenge can be a bit demoralising but here they come away with something at the end.

It's always difficult to time it, because it depends on what they've been taught in the course and there are parts of it that they haven't covered. We do OCR-B, which does things in a slightly different order. For example, they don't do aromatic chemistry until quite late in the course, and so that's been a problem. But last year we had a particularly strong cohort and it was an ideal opportunity for them to have a go and to stretch themselves and they enjoyed it.

We're a mixed entry sixth form college and we have nine Year 12 classes with over 200 Year 12 students and we don't always have students that are suitable for the Olympiad. This year we're not actually sure if we're going to have anybody enter because it depends on our cohort. In our town, we are the inclusive sixth form college, but there are also two selective grammar schools, so it varies whether we get students of that calibre who will be able to cope with it. But we ask around the department, students who have got As and ask if it's going to be worth them having a go. Are they the sort of student who could enjoy the challenge without being stressed out by it?

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

Enjoying a challenge really. To stretch themselves. There's not been anything else other than that I don't think. We have fairly mixed ability classes and occasionally there are students that stand out and soak up everything that is taught to their class. Knowing that we have this opportunity for them is great. And if they're very able students but don't say, get over the hurdles of getting into Oxbridge, it's nice that they have the Olympiad and can feel very pleased about that.

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

I don't personally, I've been teaching chemistry for thirty years so I have a lot of resources anyway. And I would say that with our classes they are quite an ability range compared to some other

institutions, and you don't want to freak the less able students out too much. But you can direct them to the website and they can access them and the bright students find them anyway. It's good that they're available to students, I think the students should be able to find them directly.

How do you prepare for round 1?

A couple of years ago, when funding was less of an issue and there was more time available, we had a teacher here who used to do a weekly class and try and teach them NMR and aromatic chemistry in twenty minute bursts before they took the Olympiad. But it was interesting because there were some students who didn't attend those sessions, but actually ended up doing better on the Olympiad than students who had. So it doesn't necessarily test content knowledge. It does test thinking skills, however, they need to have a good foundation in the first place. We teach 35 periods a week – so there's not a lot of spare time.

Trying to get students together from different classes last year was a real challenge; all of the able students were never free at the same time because we don't have a common lunch. So, logistics meant that we didn't have it in that format, but by email we arranged for them to take it. Just finding a room, and a time, and an invigilator was a challenge in an institution of our size. We had 35 students last year go on to do chemistry and related degrees. In terms of encouraging girls, we have nine chemistry teachers and they're all female – it's become a bit of a joke really. We're finding the college is becoming increasingly female – we are up to 58% female students. It's interesting, we're noticing the change.

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

Prepare your students because it's going to be very challenging. But if they like having a go at something and don't mind thinking, 'Nope, can't do that one, I'll move on to the next one' then don't give up. See it as an opportunity for a challenge – bear in mind that no one is going to be able to do all of it. Most probably the teachers can't do all of it. I can't do all of it – I fully admit that! You don't want to demoralise your bright students, but if you have somebody who has the attitude of, 'Well this is fun, I like having a go' then go for it. Target your students who enjoy a challenge and won't be afraid if they can't do something.

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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