

Olympiad Teacher Voices

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

Here at Bilborough Sixth Form College we are determined to get our students to reach their full potential and not to limit their aspirations based on their GCSE grades. Traditionally we would only enter the top few students in Year 13 for the Olympiad but for around six years we have encouraged the vast majority of our Year 13 students to give it a try. We also get around a dozen of our strongest Year 12 students to attempt it too. We refer to the Olympiad from the outset of Year 12 as something to work towards which, along with the Cambridge Chemistry Challenge, gives the students something other than the A-level to study for. We take photocopies of all the certificates which make for attractive and impressive wall displays.

What do you think your students get out of the competition?

The students get to meet a completely different style of chemistry question and apply their knowledge and skills to some unfamiliar yet fascinating chemistry. The Year 13 students can refer to their intention to take part when writing their UCAS personal statements whilst the Year 12 students might have an actual bronze, silver or gold in place before they apply.

What role do the round 1 competition and Olympiad past paper questions play in your teaching and learning?

We include questions of Olympiad level as small parts of our formal assessments and as stretch and challenge activities in class and as part of our homework assignments. Perhaps this contributed to the comment in our recent Ofsted report where the chemistry homework was mentioned as legendary! It is likely that getting most students to aim for this higher academic level has contributed to the department's very strong value-added and overall success year after year. It seems to help our students who pursue chemistry at university with their entrance exams and interviews.

What are the biggest challenges you face as a teacher and that your students face?

The biggest challenge is selling the idea to all the students that they should work beyond the A-level specification. We talk about how past students have found it helps them to secure the higher grades in A-level and how it looks good for UCAS. We show examples of past students who despite not being on a top grade for A-level managed to secure a good result in the Olympiad.

What advice would you give to a school that is taking part in round 1 for the first time?

Tell the students that they have nothing to lose except a bit of time and they might surprise themselves. If they don't get an award they will not be obliged to refer to it ever again, although even taking part sounds good. Show them the past grade boundaries which are often really quite low. Get them to tackle selected easier questions in class to boost their confidence. We don't find it upsets any students as long as we explain that it is a really challenging exam that they can simply have a go at and we won't think badly of them if they get a low score.

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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