

## Two GCSE's for the Price of One

The experience of the Humanities Faculty of the Maelor School, Wrexham.

### The School

The Maelor School is a smallish, rural 11-18 comprehensive school situated just inside the Welsh border between Wrexham and Whitchurch. Historically it was built to serve the small villages of the Maelor, originally a detached part of Flintshire but which was incorporated first into the county of Clwyd and more recently into the unitary authority of Wrexham. Over the past ten years the character of the school has changed with an increasing number of the intake being drawn from Wrexham itself and the surrounding industrial villages. The school Currently has a five form entry and demand for places continues to exceed the intake despite the proximity of other schools in both Cheshire and Shropshire.

### The Background

Until the early 1990's the humanities faculty had offered students a choice of WJEC History, Avery Hill Geography or GCSE Humanities. The three subjects were offered on one option line and although, in theory, students could take any two of the subjects, option constraints really meant that in practice, it was a choice of one of the three at 14+. A free choice was offered and groups and sets were worked out in response to this. However the usual pattern was for Geography and History to have one or two sets with two sets being allocated to combined Humanities, the lower set being largely for non-examination students. This was a far from ideal situation because, despite the notional idea of sets the groups were very much mixed ability. For example the set 1 humanities group contained students who were in sets 1-4 for English and the feeling of the humanities staff was that we were not getting the best from some students. This and the pressure to improve GCSE results (Typical A-C grades for the whole cohort were between 40-45) prompted a detailed analysis of students' performance in the Humanities subjects at GCSE. It soon became apparent that more able students

were doing as well as, or better than, other subject areas but most of the mid-range and less able students were underachieving. Our response was to suggest that we drop Geography and History and make GCSE Humanities a compulsory subject for all students at GCSE.

Although some subject staff, students and parents were concerned about this apparent watering down of the curriculum, there were advantages in that all students would continue to study aspects of both geography and history, rather than being forced to choose one or the other at the age of 14. It would also enable us to match the setting arrangements to ability levels much more accurately and, hopefully, to raise achievements at GCSE. At the same time we introduced close monitoring of all students, regular feedback on performance and one to one mentoring for students who were deemed to be underachieving. The improvement in results was dramatic. At the end of the first cycle we achieved a 58% higher-grade pass rate and this rose to 64%, 68% and 73% by 1998. In recent years the rate has remained in the high 60s and low 70s. This rapid increase in overall rates was matched by a similarly impressive rise in the number of students gaining higher grades with typically between 20-25% of students gaining A \* or grades. These figures are clearly a vindication of the decision to offer whole cohort GCSE Humanities. The modular nature of the course, and the increased flexibility it allowed, enabled us to structure the course more closely to the needs of the students.

Nevertheless there was still concern because, like many other schools, we had a large gender differential. The introduction of GCSE Humanities had brought an improvement in pass rates for both girls and boys, but the improvement for girls had been greater. With the exception of one year when the ability level of the boys, measured by the CAT scores was significantly higher than that of the girls, the gender differential in favour of the girls has been between 15- 26%. As the school intake was showing an increase in the number of the boys this was clearly an issue we needed to address.

### GCSE Humanities in Year 10?

A close analysis of students' performance in Humanities showed that there was a very definite dip in performance between Easter in Year 10 and Christmas in Year 11, and it co-incided with an