

Think Piece

Thinking about GCSE

Suggested activities for PGCE students

1. What does a GCSE specification include?
2. Comparing the content of GCSE specifications
3. Analysing GCSE papers
4. Awarding Body controlled assessments
5. GCSE and progression

1. What does a GCSE specification include?

Either individually or in groups, select a specification from an Awarding Body website. Briefly look through the specification and note down the sections which are included in it.

- What information is included?
- How are these elements intended to help subject areas plan for learning in their departments?

Once you have completed your analysis, share your findings with others. Is the information provided similar in detail, style and utility?

2. Comparing the content of GCSE specifications

Individually or in groups, select a specification and analyse the subject content of the specification. Once you have done this, compare your findings with those from other specifications.

- What patterns emerge in content?
- How close is the content to that you have experienced as a university undergraduate?
- Are there any common inclusions which you feel you would need to revisit in terms of your own subject knowledge (e.g. glaciation)?

Extending the activity

Whilst on placement, discuss with your school-based tutor which specification they are considering adopting and why. Share your findings with others from your group on a VLE discussion board.

3. Analysing GCSE papers

Individually or in groups, select a module examination paper from the website of one of the Awarding Bodies. You will need to look at both the Higher and Foundation Tier papers to begin with. Read through the paper you have chosen, then consider and note down some observations concerning:

- do they use the same resources?
- are the expected levels of challenge and lengths of answer different (if so how)?
- are there any differences in the command words used in the questions, and are their proportions different?

Once you have analysed your papers, share your findings with others in your group. Obviously, the question papers themselves are only part of the analysis, as the way in which marks are allocated within those papers will also impact on their difficulty.

Split your group into two (or more depending on its size), and agree on two or three questions from a Higher and Foundation Tier paper which you intend to complete as if you were the students taking the examination. One group should answer the Higher Tier questions chosen, the other the Foundation Tier questions. This exercise should be time limited as it would be in the actual examination. Once the questions have been answered the Higher and Foundation Tier groups should swap papers and mark each other's scripts using the mark schemes for the papers involved. Once this is done, each group should give (sensitive) feedback to the other.

Having completed these exercises, you should have enough understanding of the process and details of both the papers and mark schemes to consider a number of interesting questions:

- Is it easier to get a C from a Higher Tier paper than a Foundation Tier?
- Are tiers a good thing?
- How should teachers decide on which paper a student should sit?
- How might the detail from the mark schemes and papers be incorporated into learning approaches and classroom based assessment for learning?

4. Awarding Body controlled assessments

Individually or in groups, choose a specification and then analyse the controlled assessment element of the specification, together with any paper which has been produced for the assessment.

- What is/are the nature of the task(s)?
- What potential advantages/pitfalls do you see in trying to engage students in enquiry based learning through this approach to fieldwork?
- Is the controlled assessment a better form of assessment than traditional coursework in your view (given that many of you will have undertaken coursework during your own GCSE studies)?

5. GCSE and progression

Whilst on placement, ask your school based tutor which GCSE they are intending to adopt from September 2009. As part of the discussion, ask them to what extent they have taken into account their planning at Key Stage 3 and A-level (where appropriate), and the factors which have been important. This will give you an insight into the issues which are important in attempting to ensure a level of continuity and explicit progression over the course of the key stages.