

## Preparing for Functional Skills King Edward VI School case study and interview

**King Edward VI School** draws students from the Suffolk market town of Bury St Edmunds and surrounding areas.

Jane Tyers, the school's Director of Learning Support has seen huge positive changes in her Year 10 and 11's attitude to school work since she introduced Adult Literacy and Adult Numeracy (ALAN) qualifications to her vocational cohorts three years ago. In terms of future curriculum planning she sees ALAN qualifications as a practical way to get to grips with what the school is going to have to do for Functional Skills. Jane says the process has taught them a lot about delivering a new curriculum that addresses basic literacy and numeracy skills, so she believes they'll be well placed to welcome the FS qualifications.'

### Full interview with Director of Learning Support, Jane Tyers

*'The most important lesson? Literacy and numeracy aren't the same as English and Maths. Schools need to develop functional skills separately to succeed.'*

#### **When did you first introduce ALAN qualifications?**

*We had students who were going to college a day a week and doing extremely well in their vocational courses, but really struggling with GCSEs. We were looking for something else that would give them a formal qualification, but most importantly something college or employers would know about. Something more suited to the way in which these students work, so not five pieces of coursework and then two, 2-hour exams at the end of it. Qualifications that were a little bit more intensive, but also a little bit more user-friendly. The attraction of ALAN qualifications is the flexibility in terms of preparation and the fact that they're online and on demand so preparation can be time-limited. We can say to a student – OK you've got 9 weeks to do this – or you've got a whole year, according to what best suits them.*

#### **How have you been using ALAN qualifications to support achievement?**

*We're now onto our third cohort of students taking the qualifications. We've run a flexible curriculum for this cohort – they've gone to college and done a vocational course, combined with a diet at school of core subjects including English, Maths, Science, PE, PSE and ICT.*

*We have a lot of students who have issues outside school that make attendance very difficult. Some students are long term sick, or have attendance issues, others have social and emotional issues, domestic issues even, that lead them to be out of school for quite*

*long periods of time. If that happens in Year 10 those kids are stuffed for GCSE. So we were looking for something to help us ensure that these students leave school with a formal qualification that gives employers or college a clear idea of where they're at in terms of core studies. Key skills for us, and ALAN in particular, ticked all those boxes, so we went for it.*

*Most importantly employers recognise and value the ALAN qualification. It says this individual has reached the national standard required of an adult. Not all employers view GCSE's in such a positive light.*

### **And you've found ALAN qualifications motivate students?**

*Our students have found ALAN qualifications hugely motivating. Our ALAN cohorts may have experienced a disrupted education but they're not all academically weak, quite the opposite, some are very able. With ALAN you have a tool that the whole group can engage with, but at different levels.*

### **How have you developed staff to deliver ALAN?**

*I lead the team that the SENCO and teaching assistants are all part of. Our High Level Teaching Assistants have gone through a process of accreditation very similar to qualified teaching status. They work with small groups of students to deliver ALAN.*

### **How do you believe ALAN helps schools prepare for Functional Skills?**

*We see ALAN as ideal preparation for Functional Skills. If we had a wish list we'd love to offer ALAN qualifications to everyone.*

*The most important lesson we've learnt is that literacy and numeracy don't test for the same skills as English and Maths. GCSE English goes some way to prepare a student for literacy but it's not the same thing. Another valuable lesson we've learnt is that you can't assume that students who might be at Grade C level GCSE will get a Level 2 at ALAN. Different skills are being tested so they have to be taught and practiced in a structured fashion, and schools need to develop these skills separately to succeed.*

*In fact the key to it is careful preparation, you've got to put the teaching hours in, and testing or examining small groups at a time has worked very well for us. It all means we should be able to hit the ground running when FS is introduced.*

### **What do you think students gain from having these 'functional' skills?**

*Adult literacy and adult numeracy qualifications are functional because they focus on the basics. They are real life skills and everyone from students through to employers can see their relevance.*

*For example, five years ago our motor vehicle man told me what the kids really needed was basic reading, writing and communication skills, so that they'd be employable and*

*they could engage with what he was teaching them. Now ALAN gives kids exactly that - the core skills that enable them to access vocational paths and so much more.*

### **What about the online aspect?**

*It's been hugely successful. If they get it right when they introduce FS it will have real student-appeal. Adult Literacy and Adult Numeracy free online practice tests are fantastic - as a resource and as an assessment tool. And sitting a literacy test is much shorter than a GCSE exam, but it's also the immediacy that appeals to students. So we can have a session on Wednesday of week 8 and if we think they're ready, the next Wednesday they can sit the test. Then they can come back at the end of school and know their results. That's so, so important. For those kids who suddenly felt, 'Why am I only doing 3 or 4 GCSEs?' ALAN has been a major motivator. They've really wanted to get ALAN qualifications for their college interviews.*

*The ALAN tests are just the right length. We also use SAM Learning here and all the students who've been learning with ALAN are very confident online with SAM Learning.*

### **How are you going forward with ALAN qualifications?**

*Teaching adult literacy and adult numeracy has given the staff and school valuable experience of delivering a new curriculum. We've gone from one to two ALAN cohorts; one group that do the vocational course at college and 6 GCSE's at school, and a second that do basic skills at college and 3 GCSE's. Since we aren't yet sure how exactly Functional Skills will look, we view ALAN qualifications as the best way of getting everybody ready.*

*We've trained the authority's home tutor to do ALAN as well, so she teaches students who are long term sick. They can take the test anywhere that has a computer when they feel well enough. If you can book the test for a student and they can take it in half an hour's time, it's great.*

*We're trying to focus the whole of our ALAN students' educational diet on what is relevant to these young people when they're 16, when they're moving on. We're linking in with developments in Diplomas too, because the outcome will be dependent on attainment in the literacy and numeracy component.*

*We really hope that the FS qualifications will reflect the good work we've been doing with literacy and numeracy.*

### **Has the school management been supportive of ALAN qualifications?**

*Our Head Teacher, Geoff Barton, is totally committed to adult level literacy and numeracy skills. Geoff's contributed to some of the Adult Literacy course books, so he's been hugely supportive. Teachers throughout the school have been equally behind it, especially when they've seen first hand that ALAN qualifications create career opportunities.*