

The New Key Stage 4 Curriculum – Frequently Asked Questions

Q1 Which students at Rossett will be doing the new curriculum?

Current Year 8 students (Year 9 in June 2010), current Year 9 students (Year 10 in June 2010) and current Year 10 students (Year 11 in June 2010) – NB At Rossett the academic year begins in the 4th week of June. In 2009 all students moved up a year on 22 June.

Q2 When did it all start?

During the summer term in 2008. There were some transitional, logistical issues to overcome in the first year of the new model but implementation has gone smoothly and the school year has now moved to a mid-June to mid-June academic year

Q3 Some students seem to be doing fewer subjects than in previous years. Aren't you reducing academic rigour?

In 2008-2009 the maximum number of GCSE passes a student in year 11 could achieve at Rossett was 12. In the new model the maximum number of GCSE passes a student can achieve is 11 for students currently in year 11 (from June 2009) and 12 for students currently in year 9 or year 10. When benchmarked nationally this is very high with schools gradually reducing the number of subjects. All LA and Government targets consider only the best 8 GCSEs (including English and Maths). In the new model the majority of students in current year 11 will study 1 fewer option than has been the case in the past but this will effectively be replaced by the opportunity to study an additional maths GCSE. Students in current year 9 or year 10 will study the same number of options as has been the case in 2008-2009 (4). We expect an increase in GCSE entries overall as the additional time committed to the core subjects will enable more students to access triple science (Biology, Chemistry and Physics), English Literature and the additional maths GCSE.

Q4 But aren't you putting too much emphasis on the core subjects?

Society and the Government have increasingly put more emphasis on literacy, numeracy and the core subjects of English, Maths, Science and ICT. Admissions tutors in Further Education and Higher Education, and Personnel Officers in the world of work, want to know first and foremost how many GCSEs a student achieved including English and Maths. The levels attained in Science and ICT quickly follow. Whilst we obviously want potential to be fully realised in every subject which is studied, a top priority must be to ensure every student gets the highest grade attainable in these core subjects

Q5 This all seems to have happened very quickly – haven't you rushed things in?

When we heard an outline of this model at the National Specialist Schools conference in December 2007 we quickly realised it would be a huge step forward here at Rossett. The keynote speaker was from a school (very similar to Rossett) which has been following this model for 4 years. We have been in regular contact with him since the conference checking details and asking numerous questions. We believed this was such a massive positive move forward for our students that it was worth working hard to bring it in last year rather than waiting a year.

Q6 Surely mixing together year 9, 10 and 11 students in the same teaching groups is going to cause problems?

This is not what the evidence suggests. Students will be set according to their ability. With 3 year groups to set across (700+ students instead of the usual 230) this will mean that this setting will be even tighter than usual (although as always at Rossett movement between sets based on progress made will continue to take place). This has proved to be a real benefit in terms of progress in schools using this model. Furthermore significant improvements in behaviour and attitude have been witnessed. There is a sharpening of focus in that courses are examined at the end of the year and the mixing of students from different years seems to have a settling effect

Q7 Will you be offering the same broad range of subjects which you have always offered at Rossett?

We will actually be offering a broader range of subjects to these 3 year groups. Nothing will be lost and we have been able to add some new subjects. The greater the number of students there are selecting options, the easier it is to put on minority subjects such as GCSE Dance

Q8 But will my child be able to do the options she/he wants to do?

Almost certainly yes. With this model there will no longer be option blocks which link subjects together and mean that certain combinations of subjects are not possible because their lessons are on at the same time. There will effectively be 2 option blocks but each will contain every subject so there can be no impossible combinations. Students will simply choose the subjects they want to study with a couple of reserves. It may be that where subjects are very popular we can only staff a certain number of groups and some students may not get their first choices. Should this happen those students will always get priority the following year when options are selected again.

Q9 Can they really do a GCSE in a year, especially when they're only in year 9?

All the evidence suggests students not only enjoy this but attain well. Our own experience of fast track courses, and research done in the school which pioneered the model, are both very positive. Questionnaires given to year 9 students in the first cohort showed a 98% satisfaction rating. Students in year 9 responded superbly to the prospect of getting 2 GCSEs before they even went into year 10.

In our current Key Stage 4 curriculum options are studied for 2 hours per week for 2 years. 5 hours per week for one year actually provides more time for studying the subject.

Q10 But if they study for a GCSE in year 9 surely they will be missing some underpinning knowledge and skills which they would have gained during year 9 in the old curriculum model?

The additional time referred to in the answer to the previous question will be a major factor here. Furthermore the Key Stage 3 year 7 and year 8 programmes of study have been tweaked to ensure that any skills/knowledge gap from Key Stage 3 to GCSE will be minimised.

Q11 What about the core subjects in Year 9?

Year 9 students will continue to study English, ICT, Maths and Science throughout year 9 and on to the end of year 11. With the removal of the SATs in English, Maths

and Science the Schemes of Work in these subjects are being modified to ensure that the skills necessary to maximise realisation of potential, in both core subjects and optional subjects, are fully embedded.

For current Year 8 and year 9 there is no longer a statutory requirement to report National Curriculum levels in non core subjects if students finish Key Stage 3 before the end of year 9. We believe this to be part of a government agenda to gently ease schools towards a 2 year Key Stage 3 and a 3 year Key Stage 4. We will, of course, continue to report progress at regular intervals including a final level report at the end of year 8 in the non core subjects.

Q12 How will the new curriculum be more personalised?

In the old Key Stage 4 curriculum the 3 pathways were very rigid in that students on pathway E selected from one group of options, students on pathway B a different group of options and students on pathway C a third group. In the new model it is quite possible to mix-and-match between options organised in the different pathways. With the wider range of subjects being available for both the options to be chosen this provides so much flexibility that conceivably every student in any year could have a bespoke timetable! Add into this the tighter setting outlined in Q6 and you can see the curriculum is truly personalised

Q13 The government seems to have a whole new 14-19 agenda including the new Diplomas starting in some local schools in September. How will Rossett's new model fit with that?

We believe our new model will adapt easily and effectively as developments proceed towards full implementation by Sept 2013. Current year 9 students will consider picking up Diplomas to study in years 10 and 11 and timetabling these in will fit very nicely with our own model

Q14 My child is currently in year 11 and they only did 4 hours of Science in year 10. Surely that's not enough?

Students in year 11 have indeed done only 4 hours of science in 2008-2009 but in year 11 they are doing 7 hours of science. In the past students following double or triple science courses only studied science for 5 hours in each of years 10 and 11 therefore you will see that the total over the two years is slightly increased in the new model. Though clearly a 4/7 split is unbalanced, the nature of the new, highly successful "Science for the 21st Century" science course is such that this imbalance is not a problem. Our DOS Science believes that the advantage of the extra hour over the 2 years will outweigh any issues around the imbalance across the two years.

Q15 What are the vocational courses that are an alternative to GCSEs?

We have been offering BTEC and ASDAN courses at Rossett for a number of years. The BTEC First Diplomas have been around for many years and are well established as pathways for progression onto level 3 (A level equivalent) courses or very occasionally directly into employment. A BTEC First Diploma is worth 4 GCSEs with a Pass grade equal to 4 GCSE @ grade C, Merit 2@A and 2@B and Distinction 2@A* and 2@A. We offer ASDAN qualifications in Personal Effectiveness and Career Planning and are looking to expand our portfolio. Both are level 2 courses with a pass equivalent to a GCSE grade B.

Q16 If my child studies an option in Year 9 will they still be able to pick it up at A level? If so, won't they have forgotten everything they learned and then struggle at A level?

They will certainly be able to study such subjects. We often have students pick up subjects at AS level which they have not studied at all at GCSE and there is no evidence of them underachieving compared with peers who did study the subject at GCSE. Students of this age do not forget things as we adults perhaps do and quick recapping at the beginning of AS courses will soon have everybody up-to-speed. Logically where students particularly enjoy and succeed in subjects, and are confident they will want to study them at AS/A2 level, they may well want to leave them to select towards the end of Key Stage 4.

Q17 If my child doesn't study an option until year 11 won't they have forgotten all they learned in years 7 and 8 and then find GCSE difficult?

The same arguments about children not forgetting apply here. Furthermore with the extra time allocated to the options in the new model staff delivering the courses will be able to ensure everyone is ready to proceed before new material is introduced. Again the tighter setting will be an advantage and we must also remember that many of the most popular options over recent years have been subjects which students have never studied before anyway (eg Business Studies, GCSE PE, BTECs etc.) As was the case in the answer to Q16 there is no measurable difference in results in these new subjects when compared to subjects studied in Key Stage 3.