

CETL-MSOR Conference 2015

Sally Dodsley and Vandana Sharma: Pumping up the $V=\pi r^2 h$.

It is clear that the Government agenda around English and Maths is going to be a rising challenge for providers of Higher Education; how are we to motivate students who have been force-fed GCSE Maths throughout their school careers, and now into their Level 3 studies? In their Skills Funding Statement, 2013 – 2016, the Department for Business Innovation and Skills indicated that funding will be available indefinitely, 'so that everyone who needs to can improve their English and Maths to at least GCSE to A* to C'. English and Maths are now embedded in all major Programmes of Study for 16 – 19 year olds, both vocational and A-level. Whilst the aim is to highlight the importance of these subjects to students, we need to consider the potential impact of repeated Maths exam failure when these students embark on higher education study in September 2016? Could it be that these changes will result in an increase in the volume of students who are either utterly resistant to Maths because of a poor school and/or college experience, or who have scraped through their GCSE exam after a number of attempts. The volume of students coming into university level study needing Maths support is likely to be higher than it has ever been.

We recognise that there are differences in the entry criteria published by providers of higher education; those institutions or programmes that insist on a GCSE in Maths and those that do not, but will accept an alternative such as a Functional Skill. This understanding was a driver in bidding for the SIGMA funding and led us to ask ourselves a number of questions. We recruit many non-traditional, part time students who are returning to education after a long hiatus; how might we engage these students and overcome their barriers and preconceptions of Maths? We offer a predominantly vocational curriculum such as Business and Sport, where number skills are essential. How could we ensure that these students recognise that the development of their number skills would be an inherent part of their HE study, and that there would be support available? Ultimately, how could we motivate students to get involved, and pump up the volume of engagement in Maths development in our HE community?

So, as one of only two FE colleges engaged in the SIGMA project, it is important to share our understanding of what the impact of the Programmes of Study might be in the next few years. We are almost unique in that we are delivering HE in an FE context and we are perhaps aware, in a way that universities cannot be expected to be, of some of the unintended consequences that the English and Maths agenda might have. We hope that through this session, through outlining the answers to some of the questions that we asked ourselves in setting up the project, you might be able to start to think about this in the context of your own institutions; how are you going to pump up the volume?