

The Quality Mark award:

Self-evaluation with a critical friend



Convent of Jesus and Mary A-level students with the Gold Quality Mark certificate

The Quality Mark has been a really important part in the journey of the development of our history curriculum culture at the Convent of Jesus and Mary. Our school is a diverse comprehensive all-girls Catholic school situated in Harlesden, north west London. We first started working together as a department team in 2016, and ambitiously decided to transform the curriculum. We mapped out key guiding principles that would ground our curriculum: diverse histories, criticality and academic excellence. We wanted to create a bespoke history curriculum which resonated with our students, gave them a global perspective of the past and improved their academic performance. This was a huge undertaking, but a new transformed curriculum emerged. This was a difficult process which took years to create and while we were proud of what we had developed, we needed to evaluate our new curriculum culture. Critical reflection is a key part of teacher professionalism, however there are not many opportunities to engage in such critical exercises as an history department team in a meaningful and productive process.

In 2018 we decided that the Quality Mark would be a helpful critically constructive tool to use to evaluate our curriculum development project. The Quality Mark is much more than an award, it is a unique unrivalled programme of history-specific department evaluation. What drew us to the Quality Mark award was that it served as a valuable CPD that we could collaboratively engage in together as a department team. This was the key reason we wanted to explore the Quality Mark; we trusted that the Historical Association, as a leading voice for history education, would specifically understand the specificity of the work of an history department.

We are very proud that in 2020 we were awarded 'Gold' as an outcome of the Quality Mark [QM]. However, the critical value of the QM lies in the

process rather than the outcome. The framework used in the Quality Mark is:

- effective teaching and learning;
- leadership in history;
- curriculum, achievement and enrichment.

The range and depth of the framework is unique in the sense that other CPD courses normally relate to one aspect of the framework, but the QM evaluates the department holistically. While the Quality Mark process is very thorough and it took a lot of hard work from the team, each stage was very rewarding.

We started the process by applying for a bursary which was available for schools to cover the cost of the process. This was extremely helpful at a time where the critical importance of the curriculum and subject specificity had not yet been elevated by the new Ofsted framework. Once our application for the programme was accepted, the first stage in the process was a rigorous and thorough self-assessment audit. Compiling the portfolio was definitely a labour of love! But the dividends of this are immeasurable. The audit gave us a sound understanding of where we currently are. The portfolio allowed us to appreciate all we had achieved since we started our curriculum development journey. We had developed a clear vision and could articulate our unique curriculum, pedagogy and purpose.

Given that this has now become a core focus for schools, the QM award is an invaluable source of support for departments who want to diagnose their development with a critical friend with expertise in history education. It's important to stress the cordial and pleasant nature of the process. From beginning to end the Quality Mark team and the assessors were helpful, genuinely supportive and constructive in their feedback. While there is a judgement that is given at the end of the assessment process, we did not feel a burden or pressure of being *judged*. The process is rigorous, but also reasonable. This in large part is due to the core aspect of the process being that departments critically assess *themselves*. We were able to make



our own judgments on our progress in each of the five key areas before we even met with our assessor. This gave us ownership of the process and enabled us to judge which level of award we believed we could earn. This took away a lot of the pressure away on the assessment day; we didn't need to perform for the assessor, but simply introduce ourselves and display what we had already proclaimed about our strengths and share our insights for development.

Before the assessment day the assessor was in contact via email and phone to talk us through the process and alleviate any of our inevitable anxieties about the day. Developing a rapport with the assessor beforehand and made the assessment day go smoothly. It was a hectic day: all members of the department were observed teaching and students from each year group were involved in focus group interviews. The logistics of the day mean that the support of the leadership team is really important. The assessment also included a conversation with the headteacher. The entire process from application to end involved us talking and liaising with our leadership team much more frequently about the curriculum. Because they were invested in the process, the achievement felt like a wonderful accomplishment for our school community.

The impact of our work culminating in the Quality Mark award has been

very positive. Uptake at GCSE and A-level has increased and student engagement in history has been a key feature of our success. In the thick of a busy school year, it is easy to forget just how much thought, creativity and hard work goes into the curriculum and department development. Piecing together the history of our journey, gathering all the supportive sources as evidence was a helping and affirming process. The Royal Historical Society is researching the impact of the Quality Mark process. Key findings thus far from the evaluation similarly echo our own experience and sentiments. Most notably, the power of the self-evaluation tool as a mechanism for curriculum development. The full report is accessible on the Historical Association's website; it is worth reading and gives a valuable insight into the process from those who have undertaken it.

While we have been recognised as performing at Gold Quality Mark standard, we are committed to continuing to develop our history curriculum culture. We feel better equipped to undertake a 'deep dive' experience and have a clear development plan that is already bearing fruit. The Quality Mark has been a crucial part of our journey, and we hope to embed the process into our practice as a department team.

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