



London, England, UK

St Helen's School

Giving students an Oxbridge learning experience



**WORLD'S
BEST SCHOOL**
Innovation

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**WORLD'S
BEST SCHOOL
PRIZES**

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Introduction

At St Helen's School, the students lie at the heart of everything it does. The school centres the experience of every girl and makes efforts to make them feel valued and known; creating a warm and lively atmosphere that ensures the school is an exciting place to learn. It seeks to make students the best version of themselves and has a roster of specialists who have expertise in how girls learn and develop. It endeavours to push students to obtain high exam results that help open doors to ambitious university courses and careers. But also important is encouraging students to "find out more, work things out for themselves, and to love learning". Building upon this ideal, the school launched its 'Nudge' programme, a hybrid Oxbridge educational model that pushes its students to learn beyond the current national curriculum and engage with a range of complex and engaging topics that is of personal interest to them.



Profile:



Country:
England, UK



Region:
London



School type:
Private



Location area:
Town



Student population:
1001 to 1500



Prize Category:
Innovation

“Our guiding mission is to make it so that the girls can be brave and true in all that they do.

That’s not only courageous in an intellectual and academic sense but also a curiosity about the world around them and looking inside themselves”

– Alice Lucas,
Headmistress of
St Helen’s School




In-depth look

CONTEXT AND CHALLENGE

St Helen's is a leading independent day school educating over 1150 girls aged 3-18 and is a member of the UK's Girls' Schools Association (GSA). Its spacious 21-acre site is located in the heart of Northwood in North West London. The school is committed to academic excellence and is dedicated to equipping pupils with the skills that will enable them to take their places as leaders in a rapidly changing world. The culture of the school is deeply rooted in its history. It was founded in 1899 by Miss May Rowland Brown but remains a forward-looking and innovative institution. Whilst there is a strong focus on obtaining high academic results, St Helen's does not restrict its idea of success to academia alone.

During consultations with teachers and students, the school understood that a significant number of its most academically gifted students could be stretched and challenged beyond the education model it offered at the time. St Helen's was experiencing a lower retention rate for its Sixth Form, with outstanding students opting for other schools where they felt they'd be better challenged. Combining the feedback with the research of experts in the educational field, the school shifted away from its education being centred around solely teaching and learning for exams. It recognised that while its students receive excellent exam grades, they would thrive better learning scholarship for its own sake.





“The specialist provision my daughter receives through her supervision has furthered her love of learning”

- testimony from a parent of a student



EXPERTISE AND APPROACH

The core of St Helen's School innovation is its 'Nudge for Learning' model. It is grounded in the concept of 'leapfrogging' which was used to create a teaching and learning framework that takes the best of an elite university education and curates a holistic programme at a school level.

The school took inspiration from the works of behavioural economists such as Richard Thaler's 'Nudge Theory' - a concept that links positive reinforcement and indirect suggestions to influence the decision-making of individuals or groups. Whilst sparsely used within education, St Helen's School used its framework to help facilitate behavioural changes in its stakeholders. The power of the school's educational model lies in its simplicity: building a flexible model that can be replicated in any school around the world, regardless of the school's context and at very little cost.

The school's expertise is split into several components.

Mentoring sessions are based on the world-renowned 'Oxbridge' tutorial model; complement classroom learning with weekly sessions in relatively small groups of 5-8 mentees, that immerse students in the conversations that are driving a rapidly changing world. Each week students are set an academic paper to read and prepare for the topic under discussion under their supervision. The 'shared dialogic space' sees the school's mentees working collaboratively for the purpose of 'learning for its own sake'. Its educational nudge recognises the intrinsic link between behavioural change and improving end goals.



Coaching and pastoral care help create close bonds which are developed during set supervision periods between mentor and mentee. This nudge within pastoral care is especially effective for girls who typically undervalue themselves and helps nurture confidence by empowering them to set their own task-specific goals. This leads to important behavioural change as students become reflective thinkers and draw on metacognitive tools to help fulfil their potential.

All students are invited to take up termly academic projects to fuel their interest in their chosen discipline and work independently with appropriate mentoring. The school provides booklets with all the relevant information and links posted to them for ease of access. This nudge is particularly effective for enrolling students on a course or activity, as it helps minimise the unnecessary cognitive demands with other huge pressures on the students' time. Teachers plan lessons with their most able students in mind and use that data to help improve the needs of the programme.



“There is no such thing as neutrality in a school building. The choice architecture that we create in a school, however we present it, will have a huge impact on our students’ motivations.”

- Glenn Bezalel, Director of Teaching and Learning at St Helen's School



OUTCOMES AND RESULTS

The school's educational 'nudges' have allowed for the fostering of close bonds between students and staff that help create a working educational model that tailors to the needs and strengths of each student. Its complementary pastoral care through coaching also acts to boost the confidence of its female students, nurturing their talent and helping them to become reflective and deep thinkers.

The take up of students within the programme has been infectious. Students who witness their peers getting praise for their personal projects want to get involved

and become interested in participating themselves.

Based on qualitative feedback, the school began to see the results of the nudge programme in aiding its students to develop the soft skills needed to communicate learned ideas. This impact on the students' life experiences was positive as noted by one student who went on to attend Oxford University to study History. "The biggest benefit of the mentoring supervisions was the discussions where I learnt how to articulate my views on topics which I was unfamiliar with or had limited knowledge of in a cogent manner," she said.



“They likewise taught me to be more flexible in my thinking, as the very nature of our discussions would show the diversity of opinions and perspectives in the room, encouraging me to sometimes adapt my view in the light of other people’s insights”.

Students who didn’t originally think of themselves as academically gifted were able to find “hidden depths” to themselves and the Nudge model has allowed room for broader conversations around topics such as politics, climate change, foreign literature and the economy. Some parents who initially saw a level of elitism within the programme were eventually persuaded to its benefits due to the efforts of the school’s staff in explaining how the educational model is open to all girls and students can enter and leave the programme when they see fit.



Key Steps



IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

For years the school's data showed that the value added for its most able learners was relatively weak in comparison to the other cohorts within each year group. In order to clarify the issues, the school carried out sessions with students and consulted with teachers. The qualitative feedback supported what the numbers were suggesting: teaching was largely aimed towards the middle cohort with high-ability students complaining of a lack of challenge and not needing to think hard in their lessons. This resulted in self-described demotivation for some students as they didn't feel their abilities were catered for. This lack of academic challenge was supported by generalised pastoral care that didn't appreciate the specific social and personal needs of gifted students.





RESEARCHING THE EDUCATIONAL LITERATURE AND DEVELOPING IN-HOUSE EXPERTISE

The second step lay in conducting research that could provide a number of solutions that would help the needs of the school's most gifted students. The school appointed Lead Practitioners to focus on pedagogies as well as Personalised Learning Coordinators who would specialise in catering for the needs of the ablest cohort in each year group. As the school broadened its expertise as a staff body, it was able to provide greater peer support for its student body. Simultaneously, the school took up in-depth research into Able, Gifted & Talented literature, working with external experts such as Ian Warwick, so that it could consult on ways forward. Bound by evidence-based pedagogy, St Helen's School became convinced by the philosophy of 'teaching to the top and scaffolding down' as a whole school policy.





‘NUDGE FOR LEARNING’

Whilst staff began researching into effects of Nudge Theory in all aspects of life, it became clear that very little was mentioned about the field in the academic educational literature. Working with the Headmistress, Lead Practitioners and Personalised Learning Coordinators, the school then thought collaboratively about how it could adapt nudges with the aim of not just achieving positive outcomes but bringing about behavioural changes that would impact its students as learners. Staff and students were then consulted on learner habits that could be focused on and used as a measure of success. But the school understood that in addition to developing intellectual virtues, strengthening character attributes such as courage, integrity, resilience and kindness should be at the heart of its educational model as well.



PEDAGOGICAL STUDIES

With its growing expertise in mentoring and coaching, the school launched a dual academic and pastoral programme, by adapting the best of an elite academic education, the Oxbridge tutorial. In seeking



to develop the learner habits and character attributes of its students, a personalised educational model was born. The school modelled this educational model through peer coaching among colleagues that guided the rollout of the programme. This included brainstorming sessions among staff members about possible nudges it could incorporate, highlighting the need to take risks and remain pragmatic as the school sought the best solutions. It was important the school shared its expertise and experiences in the field and decided to write academic articles sharing its pedagogy and assessment philosophies, detailing the innovative nudges that were undertaken.



MONITORING AND TRACKING

Due to the risks of taking such an innovative approach, there was a need to measure the success of the programme. The school agreed on several indicators that helped it outline success: university success rates, the take-up of academic challenges by



students, feedback on mentoring by staff and pupils and whether its brightest students believed the programme created extra value to their education. The monitoring and tracking showed substantial success in all key areas, including significant movement in the value-added data for the school's brightest students. However, some strategies had to be re-evaluated as the name of the challenges ("high intellectual potential") left some girls feeling excluded and so it was renamed to "academic challenges" to boost inclusivity.



Advice and Guidance

St Helen's School has encouraged the replication of the Nudge programme in part due to the wonderful learning process that can be seen when students truly begin engaging in their supervision and chosen projects. In sharing the idea that behavioural science has much to offer the education sector, these university-style supervisions have an enormous potential to enhance the way students approach their education and enjoy "learning for learning's sake". It advises keeping the ideas used to engage students in the supervision as "easy, attractive, social and timely" and to begin reaching out to students who have gone through the Nudge programme themselves as they would be a rich source of information. The educational model can be replicated in any school context throughout the world because it is inexpensive and easy to implement.



More information

 <https://www.sthelens.london/>

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- Download the [Lucas and Bezalel Magazine \(November 2020\)](#)
- Download the [Year 9 Transition Programme Booklet 2021](#)
- Read the article: [Nudge theory: how it can boost attainment \(tes.com\)](#)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXrU-Rz6774>

Learn more about their work by watching their event at 2022's T4 World Education Week: [watch here](#)

