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Using baseline assessments to place English as Additional Language (EAL) Learners on the right path

Epsom College in Malaysia, founded in 2014, is a diverse and unique learning community that offers boarding and day school options to its students.

Built on the traditions and philosophy of the British Epsom College, the school takes a modern approach with a focus on fostering a strong sense of belonging and community. We spoke to Avis Parker, Deputy Head, Academic, to understand more about how Epsom uses baseline assessments to support their EAL students to succeed in school.

Understanding from the start

'EAL data is really important as about a third of our students are EAL.

We are an inclusive school, so it is really important to us to have a baseline test. The baseline assessments from Cambridge help us to place the students on a pathway:

- an intensive English pathway, where they have up to 15 lessons on English a week,
- or a less intensive but still supported EAL pathway, so they go to normal lessons but have some additional English lessons on top.



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Quite often, we will take a student with low proficiency in English, who has scored over 100 in the mathematics section of MidYIS because it's an indication that they're capable and have the potential to take English on board enough to achieve at least a grade C at IGCSE.

At the start of Secondary, we use MidYIS as a benchmark test to help us indicate how we set up the students initially. We use the baseline assessment data to help us make decisions about which English and Maths sets they go into.

We also put Yellis and Alis outcomes on reports that go out to parents. So, we need to have fairly accurate predictions on our reporting at IGCSE and A Level. In the description to parents, we explain that the baseline assessment, or benchmark test, is an indication of potential aptitude for a subject.

A history teacher like me, I would probably pay more attention to the vocabulary section of the MidYIS or Yellis data rather than anything else, to see whether this student has the potential to get an A grade. The majority of the time, the maths score is quite a good indicator of their aptitude.'

Discovering just what we can do with data

'We have only touched the surface of what data can do.

We're setting up tracking sheets, which include the baseline feedback, their EAL information and their reports. So, every report cycle we can see how close our students are to what their potential is from their baseline.

When I first arrived at Epsom, there was a general concern of putting too much focus on data and becoming constrained if used too rigidly.

I think that's just one way of looking at it. My approach is thinking "Why we can't say that the data is the minimum expectation that we would like from our students. If a student has the data to suggest that they are going to achieve a C grade, we should be celebrating the fact that they could get a C – but wouldn't it be great if they got a B?" The baseline assessments from Cambridge give a range of predicted grades for each student, and we want value added on top of the average expectation.

It gives us an idea of where the student could be, if all things were equal, and what we could do to improve that. We start to look at strategies where if the data says they're going to get to, to see what their strengths and weaknesses are and how we can improve or develop their strengths for them to overcome that and become a B grade.'



Adding value to learning

'We look at value added and try to measure outcomes for students and subjects. We do get a lot of value added out of maths and science, but it's trickier with some of the art subjects because some of the students are still struggling with their English proficiency. Subjects like history, geography and music and business studies require students to write longer answers and that is something they struggle with.

So, it's important to us to use baseline assessments because that is the only way we can measure our results in terms of value added.

I suppose I am data-driven because ultimately everything else is subjective. When you have got such a range of students from different countries with different languages, I think you have to start somewhere, and I think a Cambridge baseline assessment is a really good benchmark test to start with.'

" We have only touched the surface of what data can do. "

To find out more about baseline assessments visit www.cambridge.org/insight