

Tom Hollins

From GCSEPod student to becoming the Head of GCSEPod's Student Ambassador Programme

Tom Hollins has GCSEPod to thank for helping him rise to the challenge of the Year 11 exams. And the 19-year-old was so impressed with how the learning and revision resource turned poor predicted grades into outstanding results day success, that he's now become the Head of GCSEPod's new Student Ambassador Programme, working to help others aim high.

Tom Hollins is nearing the end of his first year at the University of Derby, and the 19-year-old is in a reflective mood. He's casting his mind back to the end of Year 9 at Thomas Alleyne's High School in his hometown of Uttoxeter, Staffordshire.

He was still two years away from sitting his GCSEs, but the exams were looming large in his life.

He is the first to admit "I wasn't engaged enough. At the end of Year 9, I was predicted a D- in English and Cs and Bs in the likes of maths, business studies, history, computing and French. My aspirational targets were 10 Bs and an A. But I was facing a tough challenge to turn things around, and while I wanted to go to university, it was looking increasingly unlikely."

Tom describes himself as someone of average ability who was likely capable of more but struggling to see the light in today's grade-dependent education system.

Yet despite his GCSE results forecast, Tom is astonishingly studying for a BA in English Literature and Language with a view to becoming a teacher, having successfully blown those Year 9 predictions out of the water.

He turned his anticipated D- in English into an A*. In total he came out with three A*s, six As and two Bs.

Tom's is an inspirational story of how determination, hard work, and the fortuitous arrival of an inspirational new headteacher with fresh ideas on how to get the best out of her students, helped turn around his fortunes.

One of the new initiatives Julie Rudge introduced to Thomas Alleyne's High School was GCSEPod. She had successfully worked with GCSEPod at her previous school and saw a place for it at Thomas Alleyne's.



GCSEPod uses short, snappy and visually appealing videos, known as Pods, which mirror the national curriculum, to help students learn and revise either in the classroom, at home, or on-the-go on a smartphone or tablet.

While the learning and revision tool has universal appeal, it can be of particular use to middle ground students who can easily slip through the net. Students like Tom once was.

GCSEPod had been introduced as Tom was nearing the end of Year 9. But it was in Year 10 that he got to grips with it – and turned his academic life around.

He recalls: "There was something about GCSEPod and the way the information is presented that really clicked for me. I loved the fact I could watch the videos anywhere, anytime, and the exciting way the information was presented drew me in. It didn't feel like I was learning."

His results proved otherwise, however.

"I had aspirational targets of a grade B. In what seemed like a very short space of time, I started not just continuously hitting those targets, but beating them. It was a surprise to everyone. I had been low on the radar. I was a grey area student.

Then suddenly I started achieving. "I was officially recognised at school as a high GCSEPod user. I can't remember exactly how many Pods I was watching, but I was certainly averaging at least five a night, just 30 minutes additional work. I started to feel more confident to retain the information, and to be able to get that across. It all snowballed from there really."

He did well in his Year 11 mocks, but it was his GCSE results that told the real story. "It changed everything for me as far as my A-level and career aspirations. I ended up doing maths, English language and English literature – unthinkable if you remember where I was at in Year 9."

Following his remarkable results, Tom took on the role of his school's GCSEPod lead in Year 12 – a function usually undertaken by teaching staff. The first sixth former in the UK at that time to be given the responsibility, he led a team of four tasked with promoting GCSEPod usage across the school.

He helped train staff on the resource, spoke at revision events, attended parents' evenings, analysed data, ran drop-in sessions, and inspired younger students to follow in his high achieving footsteps, increasing usage by a massive 195% across the school.

Following on from that success, Tom has now notched up another first – he has been appointed the inaugural Head of GCSEPod's new Student Ambassador Programme.

This sees him visiting schools to share best practice, inspiring the next generation of Year 10 and 11 students to use this award-winning service, training and developing them to promote and use GCSEPod.

It's a scheme which not only supports the current crop of GCSEPod student ambassadors within their schools, but Tom says helps them gain the valuable skills, experience and confidence crucial in today's workplace or university environment. Because GCSEPod didn't just help Tom pass his exams. "My confidence grew as I improved academically, but more than that, when I took over responsibility for GCSEPod in my school, my team-working, communication and leadership skills improved too.

"I wouldn't be doing it unless I genuinely believed in GCSEPod's worth. I was drifting. I didn't have a plan, I didn't know what I was going to do, and I was struggling.

"Without GCSEPod, my life now would probably be very different."