

bksbLIVE

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So let's take a look at the timeline: way back in 1994, when the Channel Tunnel first opened, the UK lottery was introduced and shops were legally allowed to open on Sundays, a college in West Nottinghamshire develops screening and assessment tools that start to improve maths and English skills achievement across the board. In 2000, interest in 'basic and key skillbuilder' or 'bksb' develops among other educational providers, and soon computer based versions are launched. ICT assessments are made available by 2004 and a pilot for functional skills is launched in 2007. By 2008 things are really rocking, with 80% of FE Colleges using bksb. City and Guilds endorse it in 2011 and a year later an online 'learner-centric' platform called bksbLIVE is launched.

So, bksb is a flagship commercial venture from one of the country's leading colleges and it's safe to say that it has carved out a real niche for itself, massively contributing to the way education providers deliver functional skills. What the good folks at bksb do then, is write, develop and supply interactive basic/key/functional assessments and learning resources to improve English, maths and ICT skills.

One of the many products on offer is the GCSE Initial and Diagnostic Assessment, a fully interactive and self-marking skills assessment package, which is fully hosted and comes with bags of technical support. To say this is a pretty handy product would be an understatement. It's a god-send for assessing strengths and

weaknesses, determining which programme a learner takes and producing an individual learning plan.

From a learner's point of view everyone gets his/her own student home page which details achievements and pinpoints the subjects he/she needs to do. There is the ubiquitous avatar option, which never fades in popularity so it's good to see – although perhaps it could be a little snazzier. The first activity is to take the Initial Assessment, which then dictates what follows (it can be retaken if necessary). The questions are reasonably well written, although I wonder if the writers could be more creative and offer more exciting assessment for learning inspired texts with variations.

From a teacher's perspective there are lots of obvious advantages to smile about, such as the interactivity, self-marking features and instant results print-outs. What really should float your boat though is the fact that the diagnostic assessments produce an individual learning plan. All you have to do is read across each line to see the results of learners for each topic area and the learning plan highlights where there are skills gaps. These can then be used to bring a structured approach to filling in the gaps identified. So, bksb's solutions are reliable, results transfer automatically to your system and they seem the most functional assessments out there. What's not to like? Adding users, adding groups and managing groups is a doddle in the Tutor section. What ticks the boxes further is the

databridge, which allows 2-way communication between bksbLIVE and your organisation, chiefly via MIS database.

Minor moans include the name. I think 'bksb' isn't easily identifiable as an educational product or assessment solution. It would stand out more by getting its name changed by deed poll and being a bit more obvious. I'm not suggesting it should call itself Ajax, Gunner or Brian but bksb lacks gravitas and identity. Another mumble I have is the fun. Where is it? I reckon the assessments could use an injection of excitement, so perhaps the bksb bods could blue sky that. I wondered whether the text and background could be written in different colours? It can. I wondered whether animation could be turned on and off. It can. Could there be a space for video too? I'll leave it with them. The inaccurate use of the words 'square' and 'rectangle' on some maths sheets – a personal bugbear of mine – really does need correcting immediately, though.

All pupils who fail to achieve a good pass – C or better – in English or maths GCSE by the time they finish secondary school must continue to study these subjects in post-16 education until they get these qualifications. There is no hiding place or opt-out. The bksb products therefore have a key part to play in helping you support your learners in raising their skills, improving their confidence and helping them to recognise what they need to do to improve further. This clearly helps learners to target where they need to improve, which could contribute to improving their overall grades. bksbLIVE aids closer scrutiny, pinpoints weaknesses and gets us all focusing on improvement.

For me, best value is foremost in my mind so to achieve this I'd recommend using the bksb products in whole or in parts throughout the year as teaching and consolidation tools. My only concern with online stuff is that students don't take the assessments seriously enough and just click at random. Let's hope they don't.

VERDICT:

Basically brilliant

Dynamic, innovative, and a market-leader, bksbLIVE is a first-choice online solution for achievement and progression.

