

Individualised instruction

Low impact for very low cost, based on moderate evidence.



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Individualised instruction provides different tasks for each learner and provides support at the individual level. It is based on the idea that all learners are different and therefore have different needs, so an individualised or personally tailored approach to instruction ought to be more effective, particularly in terms of the tasks and activities that pupils undertake and the pace at which they make progress through the curriculum. Examples of individualised education have been tried over the years in education, particularly in areas like mathematics where pupils can have individual sets of activities which they complete, often largely independently.

How effective is it?

Individualising instruction does not tend to be particularly beneficial for learners. One possible explanation for this is that the role of the teacher becomes too managerial in terms of organising and monitoring learning tasks and activities, without leaving time for interacting with learners or providing formative feedback to refocus effort. The average impact on learning tends overall to be low, and is even negative in some studies, appearing to delay progress by one or two months.

How secure is the evidence?

There have been a number of meta-analyses which have found broadly similar effects, and support the conclusion that individualising learning for whole classes is not beneficial for pupils' learning.

This finding is also supported by research from other connected fields, such as computer based learning, and Bloom's 'mastery learning', where students have instructions broken down into steps, receive feedback on their learning, and only move on when they have 'mastered' a particular step. In both fields, small group approaches appear to be more effective than individualised approaches.

The evidence is mostly drawn from secondary school studies and predominantly in mathematics, though there is also evidence from other curriculum subjects such as science, history and geography.

What are the costs?

The costs of implementing individualised learning are usually low, unless the approach uses technology (such as tutoring programmes or integrated learning systems). Estimated outlay for increased resourcing per pupils is £150 per year. Overall costs are therefore estimated as very low.

What should I consider?

Before you implement this strategy in your learning environment, consider the following:

1. Overall the evidence does not support approaches which individualise instruction at class level.
2. It is hard to identify exactly why individualised instruction is not more effective. It may be that in a classroom setting, learners receive less direct teaching, get less feedback or move at a slower pace when they manage their own learning progress with support (see Meta-cognition and self-regulation).
3. Individualised instruction runs the risk of the teacher managing diverse activities and learners, without sufficient time to work directly with each individual.
4. Have you considered small group or one to one settings as a more viable strategy?
5. Approaches to individualise learning activities supported by technology may provide learners with effective practice, however it is still important to ensure that learners receive direct instruction from a teacher when learning new content, or when they are not making progress.