

Linear or modular – does one size fit all?

An investigation into the effects of modularisation at GCSE

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Abstract

It has been suggested that the increase in the number of modular courses has led to changes in learning opportunities and in the interaction of learning and assessment. Modular qualifications are those in which the content is divided into a number of units or modules, each of which is examined separately, whereas linear qualifications are usually examined after a period of continuous study.

This presentation reports on a study about the effects of modularisation at GCSE (qualifications taken by the largest number of 16 year olds in England) carried out by researchers at Cambridge Assessment in 2010. The research investigated key issues relating to differences in performance between linear and modular courses, curriculum flexibility, short-term assessment goals, maturity, regular feedback and motivation. Last year, at AEA-Europe, the impact of maturity, motivation and feedback on performance was reported. The focus of this year's presentation is on assessment routes and outcomes, students' workload and teachers' attitudes towards modular courses. The impact of modularisation on learners is considered alongside a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of a modular compared to linear structure in the assessment process.

Two contrasting subjects at GCSE were selected for the research: English and mathematics and the study combined quantitative and qualitative research methods. The statistical strand explored the differences in outcomes between those who followed a linear assessment route and those who followed a modular one. The qualitative research involved questionnaires and face to face interviews with teachers and students.

The outcomes of this research provide evidence to inform key issues in an area of assessment which is currently under the spotlight as debate continues about the balance of advantages and disadvantages of modularised qualifications.

Further research has been conducted at Cambridge Assessment (Vidal Rodeiro, 2011) into the performance of students at A level who followed either a modular or a linear route at GCSE level (A level qualifications are the traditional progression from GCSEs.)