

Students' views and experiences of A level module re-sits

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Introduction

In this article, we report on a study exploring over 1,300 students' views and experiences of re-sits at A level¹. We focus on two popular but contrasting A level subjects: Psychology and Mathematics. Anticipating reforms to A level assessment, our aim in collecting the data was to gain an understanding of what the likely effects of a system of reduced re-sits would be on students and their teachers. The findings of the study could help those seeking to support students and teachers during the current transition to linear assessment at A level.

Background

Historically, school qualifications in England, such as GCSEs and A levels, followed a linear approach, whereby students were assessed on what they had learnt at the end of a two-year course. Subsequently, an alternative, modular, structure became the norm, with the content of the course broken up into a series of 'chunks', to be taught and then assessed separately. In 2000 all A levels adopted this modular structure. A few GCSEs also became modular in 2003 and 2004, and the majority did so in 2009.

An important feature of the modular approach is the opportunity for students to re-sit modules if they are unhappy with the grade they received on that module, or want to try to improve their overall grade. Until recently, GCSE and A level students have been able to re-sit modules in multiple examination sessions (in January and June each year) and to keep the best result obtained. This contrasts with the linear approach, where the only way to improve on the grade is to re-take the whole qualification. When modular A level specifications were first introduced, a limit of one re-sit per module was imposed. However, this limit was removed in 2003 (BBC, 2003).

Module re-sits are a controversial issue. There is a widespread perception that they have (until recently) contributed to a year-on-year improvement in the A level pass rate and therefore to the perceived lowering of the A level standard (De Waal, 2009; Higton, Noble, Pope, Boal, Ginnis, Donaldson & Greevy, 2012). It has also been claimed that the modular system engenders a deleterious focus on exams and alleged 'teaching to the test' in the classroom at the expense of deeper learning (Poon Scott, 2010, 2012; Higton *et al.*, 2012). Criticism has also come from within examination boards, with the Chief Executive of AQA claiming that too many re-sits may 'distort results' (BBC, 2010).

These views are shared by the current UK Government. At the start of its term in office, it raised concerns in an education White Paper (Department for Education, 2010) that the number of re-sits in

GCSEs and A levels were "undermining" the qualifications. The national qualifications regulator, Ofqual, was asked to change the rules on assessment to prevent students re-sitting a large number of modules. Over the past two years, whilst re-sit opportunities have decreased in the interim (e.g. through the removal of the January examination session in 2014), the Secretary of State for Education has spearheaded a wider programme of qualifications reform which sees A levels and GCSEs return to a fully linear structure (Department for Education, 2014). In the majority of popular subjects, new fully linear A level syllabuses will be ready for first teaching in September 2015, with the first cohort of students being awarded their qualifications in the summer of 2017 (Ofqual, 2014).

There is certainly considerable evidence that many students have taken advantage of opportunities to re-sit, particularly at A level. Ofqual's predecessor, QCA (2007b), found that the percentage of students re-sitting the most popular modules in a range of A levels in 2006 was generally between 30% and 50%. Gill and Suto (2012) looked at re-sitting behaviour in A level Psychology and Mathematics in 2010 and found that 66.3% of Psychology students and 74.1% of Mathematics students re-sat at least one module.

There is less evidence for the claim that students carry on re-sitting each module until they reach a desired grade. It is only a small percentage of students who re-sit more than once. QCA (2007b) found that the percentage of students re-sitting the most popular modules multiple times in several A levels varied from 3.5% to 9.5%. Gill and Suto (2012) found slightly higher figures: of all students taking the OCR specification in the subject in 2010, 7.1% of Psychology students and 11.7% of Mathematics students re-sat the most popular module (in terms of re-sits) more than once.

It is certainly the case that re-sitting modules tends to lead to improvements in the grade achieved on the module, and sometimes to improvements in the overall grade. For a range of subjects, QCA (2007b) compared the percentage of A grades that would have been awarded had the students taken their AS results from the end of Year 12 (i.e. ignoring re-sits in Year 13), with the actual percentage of A grades awarded. Mathematics was the subject that showed the greatest improvement through re-sitting (7.8%), followed by French (7.2%), English Literature (5.0%) and Physics (4.5%).

Gill and Suto (2012) found that the percentages of students improving a module grade by re-sitting was between 51% and 65% of those who re-sat for A level Psychology, and between 54% and 79% for A level Mathematics. However, the impact on the overall grade was considerably less: of all students sitting the specifications in 2010, 26.5% of Psychology students and 34.8% of Mathematics students improved their overall grade through re-sitting.

This raw data is informative but does not reveal the reasons why students re-sit. If students have genuinely gained more knowledge by studying more advanced modules later in the course, or if they

1. The A level is the most popular qualification taken by students between the age of 16 and 18 in England (Years 12 and 13 of schooling). It is usually studied over two years and is made up of two parts; AS (whose modules are usually taken in Year 12) and A2 (modules usually taken in Year 13). The AS level is available as a stand-alone qualification, as well as contributing towards a full A level.

were feeling ill the first time they took an examination, then it seems reasonable that they should be allowed to demonstrate that they did not initially perform to their true ability. Many teachers interviewed by Highton *et al.* (2012) felt that not allowing re-sits in a modular course would disadvantage students who were slow starters. Some commented that the final grade achieved was always deserved, regardless of how many re-sits were involved, because it demonstrated a certain amount of knowledge and understanding. Poon Scott (2012) used a questionnaire and interviews to collect information on A level students' re-sitting experiences. She found that studying A2 modules in Year 13, the second year of the course, helped students with AS level re-sits (from the first year of the course), both through improved knowledge and through better exam technique.

Furthermore, levels of student motivation at the time when they first sit module examinations are not known. Some schools and colleges like to enter all (or most) students for a module exam at the earliest opportunity, to give them examination practice. Poon Scott (2012) found that for some A level students, their first sitting of a module exam was rather too soon, and they performed poorly. Others were more laid back about their first sitting because they knew that they had the opportunity to re-sit. Similarly, Vidal Rodeiro and Nadas (2011) interviewed students taking modular GCSEs and found that the knowledge that they could re-sit a module meant they worked less the first time they took the exam than they would have done without re-sit opportunities. It seems reasonable that any improvement these students made through re-sitting is valid. This conclusion fits with that of Al-Bayatti and Jones (2003) who found that students re-sitting AS level modules in January of Year 13 performed worse, on average, the first time they took the exam, than would be predicted by their GCSE grades. Their subsequent performance on the re-sit was much closer to their expected level.

However, others argue (De Waal, 2009) that the original intention of re-sits, to give students who performed below their best on the day another chance, has been superseded by students using them to play the system. For instance, there is a feeling that some students try to boost their overall grade by re-sitting 'easier' AS modules (studied in Year 12) rather than focusing on performing well in the A2 modules in Year 13. There is certainly evidence that students re-sit AS modules in far greater numbers than they do A2 modules (QCA, 2007a; Gill & Suto, 2012). However, this is not to say that students are deliberately targeting the AS modules in this way; just the fact that there are more opportunities to re-sit AS modules means it is more likely that they will be re-sat. Poon Scott (2010), found this tactic to be a rare occurrence, with only 2.5% of students giving it as a reason for re-sitting. It is also worth noting that the introduction of the A* grade in June 2010 means that this approach would not apply to the very best students, who require high marks on the A2 modules in order to reach the highest grade.

A further concern with modularisation and re-sitting is that it has led to a focus on exams at the expense of deeper learning. Students interviewed by Poon Scott (2012) made comments about their approach to exams being to revise hard, but then they fail to retain the information after the exam. Teachers interviewed by Highton *et al.* (2012) often complained that their students were disrupted by re-sits and lost their focus on what they were studying. The teachers also felt they had less time to teach beyond the syllabus. These views were similar to those reported by teachers surveyed in other studies (De Waal, 2009; Williams, 2009; NASUWT, 2008).

It is not only teachers who are concerned about an excessive focus

on exams and re-sits. Media reports suggest some universities will not accept A level results that are achieved with the use of re-sits (Grimston, 2010). Poon Scott (2010) spoke to several university admissions tutors who believed that re-sitting meant that deep learning had been compromised and students were therefore not ready for university. One admissions tutor said that he would not consider students who achieved their grade through re-sitting, whilst two others said they would want to know the reasons for re-sitting. Ofqual (2013) reported on the perceptions of A levels amongst various stakeholders and found that the biggest concern from representatives of higher education institutions was "too many re-sits". This was also a major concern among most of the 633 university lecturers surveyed by Suto (2012). Teachers interviewed by De Waal (2009) also believed that grades were less worthy if achieved by re-sitting modules, and could lead to students going to the wrong universities.

Anticipating the current A level reforms, we conducted a questionnaire-based study in 2011, exploring students' views and experiences of re-sits in two popular A level subjects. Our aim was to provide our examination board colleagues with an understanding of what the likely effects of a system of reduced re-sits would be on students and their teachers. This would potentially help colleagues to provide stakeholders with maximum support during the transition period and beyond. In the study, we investigated how A level re-sits were being used, whether students were playing the system, and whether the reasons behind decisions to re-sit were genuine and valid. We also explored whether the amount of time spent on re-sit exams was such that it interfered with learning new subject content for other modules. In a few years' time, once a reformed system of new linear A levels has bedded down, data from this study may prove useful in comparative research.

Method

Subjects

Two A levels offered by the Oxford, Cambridge and RSA (OCR) exam board were selected as the focus of the questionnaires: Mathematics and Psychology. They were chosen because they were popular A level subjects and they contrasted in some important ways. First, at the time of the data collection, to obtain a Mathematics A level students were required to complete six modules (three AS level and three A2 level), whereas for Psychology A level only four modules were required (two AS level and two A2 level). The larger number of modules in Mathematics meant there was more opportunity to re-sit. A further difference was in the extent of choice of modules. In Psychology, all four modules were compulsory (although there was some choice of topic within one A2 module). In Mathematics, students were required to study four core Mathematics modules (two at AS level and two at A2 level), but then had a choice of a combination of Mechanics, Statistics or Decision Mathematics modules for their other two modules. Finally, there was some difference in the way the two subjects were structured; in Mathematics much of the learning in later modules built upon knowledge gained in earlier modules and may have helped with the understanding of the content of earlier modules. This meant that students could benefit from re-sitting some of the earlier modules late in the course. This was less the case in Psychology, where modules were more stand-alone. Overall, these differences suggested that differences in re-sitting behaviour between the two subjects would be likely.

Questionnaire design and piloting

A questionnaire was developed for Year 13 students with alternative versions for Mathematics and Psychology. Year 13 students were targeted because Year 12 students would not have had the opportunity to re-sit any modules at the time the questionnaire was sent out. It was decided to keep the questionnaire as short as possible so that students would not feel daunted by its length. This meant focusing on a few core aspects of the re-sitting experience: the reasons why students re-sit; who influences their decision; how they prepare; and their general views of re-sits.

The content was partly determined by reviewing the literature and considering which issues were covered in other questionnaires (e.g. Poon Scott, 2010). Some of the possible responses to the questions were based on media and public perceptions of re-sits. This included the following reasons for re-sitting: treating the first sitting of an exam as practice; those just below a grade boundary re-sitting on the off chance they might go up a grade; being unlucky with the questions the first time; and re-sitting 'easier' AS modules to boost overall grade (De Waal, 2009). Other questions were also informed by the literature, including the view that too much time is spent preparing for re-sits, eating into teaching time for other modules (De Waal, 2009; Higton *et al.*, 2012). More positive views on re-sits were also investigated, such as the belief that they reduce exam pressure on students by acting as a safety net, or that they enable students to demonstrate that they have improved their knowledge by studying later modules. Finally, more practical aspects of the re-sitting experience were explored, such as the time spent on preparing for re-sits and the extra support that is taken up by students.

The questionnaire was successfully piloted in two schools, one for each subject. Following this, letters of invitation were sent to heads of department in all schools and colleges taking the OCR specifications, along with ten copies of the questionnaires. (Contact details were provided so that further copies of the questionnaire could be requested, as required.) The teachers were asked to give the questionnaires to students in Year 13 who had re-sat or were planning to re-sit modules. The questionnaires were sent two months after the January examination session, to allow for results to have been received by students. Schools and colleges were given four weeks to complete the questionnaires and return them.

Responses

Questionnaires were sent to all schools and colleges taking the OCR qualifications (329 in Psychology and 400 in Mathematics). Responses were received from 87 schools for Psychology and 75 for Mathematics (response rates of 26.4% and 18.8% respectively). Overall, there were more responses from Psychology students (737) than Mathematics students (614). An analysis of the background characteristics of the students and their schools/colleges confirmed their overall representativeness in terms of the OCR A level populations in the subjects, and an absence of any notable response biases.

Results

Influences on re-sit decisions

In the questionnaire, a multiple choice question was used to ask students:

Which person most influences your decisions about whether to re-sit modules?

This question was asked because the way in which decisions are made may impact on students' views and experiences of re-sits, in terms of the control they feel they can exert and how happy they are with the decision. The responses (and response options) are presented in Figure 1. Despite instructing students to tick only one box for this question, some Psychology students ($n = 48$) ticked multiple boxes. These might be students who genuinely found it too difficult to make one choice only. However, their responses were excluded since we did not know how many other students had a similar desire to tick more than one box but felt unable to do so.

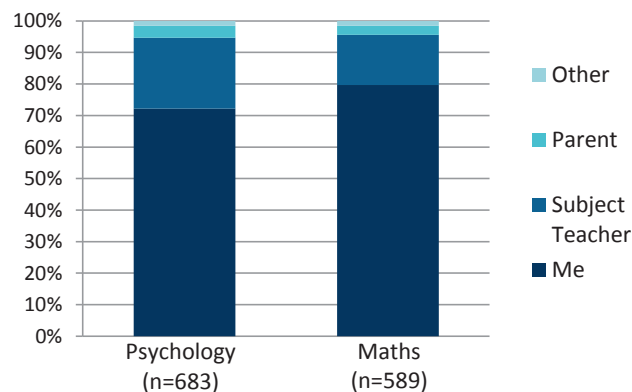


Figure 1: Influence over re-sit decision, according to students (% of responding students)

A large majority of students (72.0% for Psychology and 79.2% for Mathematics) believed that they had the greatest influence on their re-sitting decisions. Of the remaining students, some felt they were most influenced by their teachers (22.5% and 15.8% respectively) whilst a small minority felt they were influenced mainly by their parents (3.8% and 2.9%).

Reasons for re-sitting

The students were asked to choose, from a list, their reasons for re-sitting AS level modules (if they had done so). Multiple reasons were permitted. These questions focused on the AS modules (and on the compulsory ones only in Mathematics) as they were the most likely modules to have been re-sat. The opportunity to give reasons for a second re-sit of a module ('Psychological Investigations' in Psychology and 'Core Mathematics 1' in Mathematics) was included. These modules were the most likely to have been re-sat more than once (Gill & Suto, 2012).

Figures 2 and 3 present the percentages of students (who gave at least one reason) choosing each of the possible responses, for the AS modules in Psychology and Mathematics respectively. It can be seen that most students gave multiple reasons for re-sitting, with between 68% and 78% giving two or more reasons, and between 47% and 55% giving three or more. Psychology students were slightly more likely to give two or more reasons than Mathematics students.

For all modules considered, the three most popular reasons were: "I needed a higher grade for university/college"; "I thought I could do better because I had improved my knowledge through studying other modules"; and "It would be easier to boost my overall grade by re-sitting an AS level module than by doing well in A2 modules". For each module, only a very small percentage of students said that they treated the first exam as a practice, or that they had no choice in the matter.

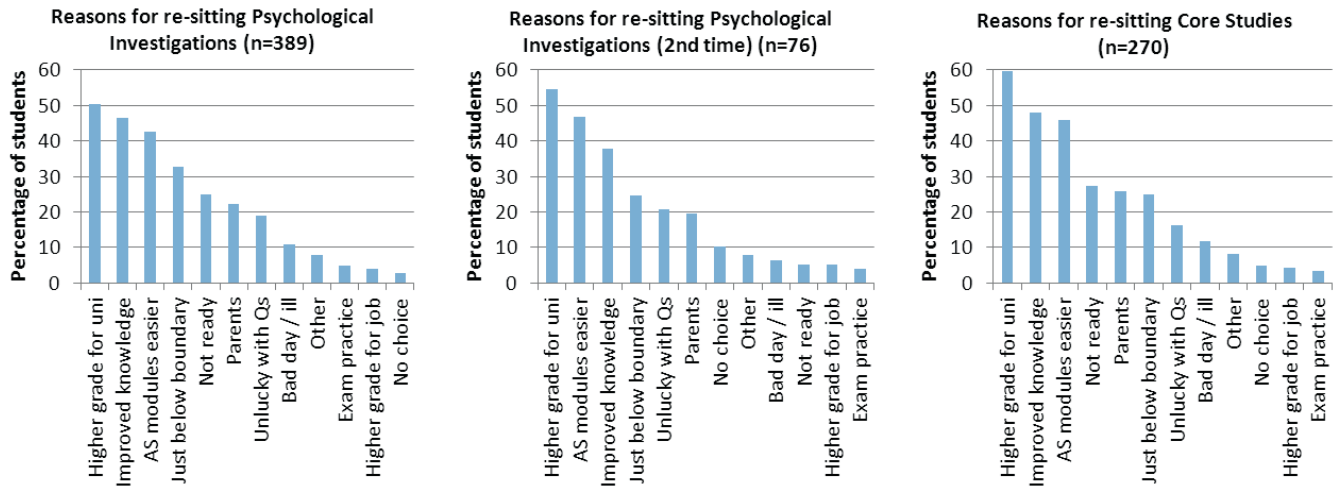


Figure 2: Reasons given for re-sitting Psychology AS modules (% of responding students)

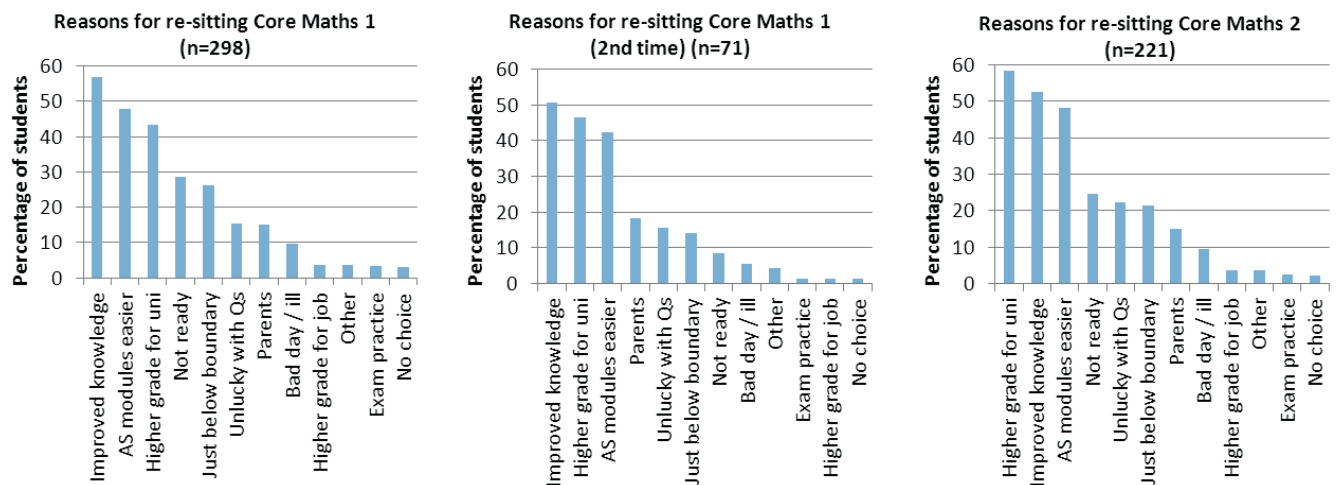


Figure 3: Reasons given for re-sitting Mathematics AS modules (% of responding students)

For the first AS module in each subject, it is noticeable that the percentage of students re-sitting, because they were not ready, was much lower for the second re-sit than for the first. This is not surprising, as it seems less likely for students to still not be ready when taking a re-sit.

The students were asked whether they intended to re-sit one of the A2 modules ('Approaches and Research Methods in Psychology' or 'Core Mathematics 3') and if so why, giving the same options as for the previous question. A common approach for A2 modules is to take one in January of Year 13, allowing for the possibility of re-sitting in June of Year 13. Therefore the A2 modules chosen for this question were those most likely to be sat for the first time in January of Year 13. The numbers of students planning to re-sit were 192 in Psychology and 242 in Mathematics.

As with the AS modules, most students gave more than one reason for re-sitting, with only around 30% giving one reason only. Their reasons given were slightly different for this planned A2 re-sit than

for the completed AS re-sits. Large proportions of students (67.2% in Psychology and 68.3% in Mathematics) were planning to re-sit to get a higher grade for university. This may be partly due to the influence of the A* grade, for which students need to get 90% of UMS on A2 modules. Smaller proportions (28.9% and 34.5% respectively) had improved their knowledge by studying other modules, which is perhaps to be expected for an A2 module.

Nearly 50% of students re-sitting Core Mathematics 3 (the first A2 module) believed they were unlucky with the questions they got, a much higher percentage than for the first Psychology A2 module. This suggests it may have been a particularly difficult paper, or that there is less predictability in Mathematics exams in general than in Psychology. As with the AS modules, a higher percentage of Mathematics students (34.5%) than Psychology students (28.9%) gave improved knowledge as a reason. A slightly higher percentage than in the AS modules (35.3%) gave 'not being ready' as a reason, which may be due to some students struggling with the shift up from AS to A2 modules.

Time spent preparing for re-sits

The students were asked:

When preparing for exams, what proportion of your time do you spend on re-sits?

Figure 4 displays the results.

In both subjects, just over half of the students estimated that they split their exam preparation time equally between new modules and re-sits. Almost one third of Psychology students and almost two fifths of Mathematics students spent more time on new modules. Only 10.9% of Psychology students and 6.2% of Mathematics students spent more time on re-sits. This suggests that for most students, revising for re-sits is seen as being important but does not take over to such a degree that they spend more time on this than on preparing for other module exams.

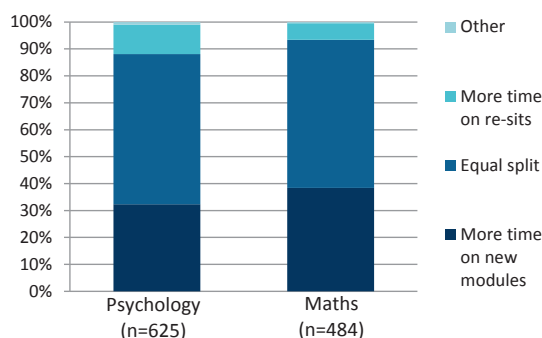


Figure 4: Proportion of time spent preparing for re-sits (% of responding students)

Ways of preparing for re-sits

Students were asked to select, from a list, the ways in which they prepared for re-sit exams.

The majority of students chose multiple preparations, with around 50–55% in each subject getting either two or three different types of help. Almost 20% in each subject indicated four or more types of preparation. The percentages of responding students selecting each option are presented in Figure 5.

The most popular methods for preparing for re-sits in both subjects were: to obtain past papers; to study with other students; and to get extra help, either informally or by attending extra lessons. Obtaining past papers was more common amongst Mathematics students (75.2%) than Psychology students (63.5%). Private tutoring was also more popular amongst Mathematics students (21.7%, compared with 4.8%).

Attitudes to re-sits and their impact on learning

To assess more general attitudes to re-sits and how they impact on learning, the students were asked to use five-point Likert scales to indicate their level of agreement with each of seven statements. Figures 6 and 7 present each statement and the percentage of students responding with each level of agreement.

Around half of the students (49.8% in Psychology and 47% in Mathematics) agreed they felt under less pressure the first time they sat an exam because they knew they could re-sit (Statement 1). However, over a third of students (34.5% in Psychology and 36.2% in Mathematics) disagreed, indicating that modular assessment did not invariably reduce stress levels.

The vast majority of students indicated that they did not treat their first sitting of an exam as a practice (Statement 2). Only 3.8% of

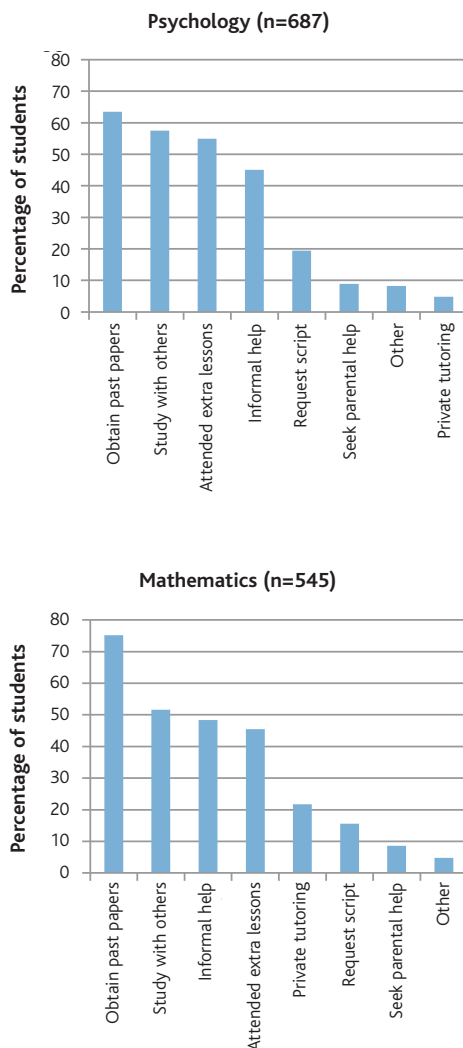


Figure 5: Preparation for re-sits (% of responding students)

Psychology students and 1.9% of Mathematics students agreed with the statement. The Mathematics students were more likely than the Psychology students to strongly disagree (60.9% compared with 48.8%). For both subjects, the difference in responses to Statements 1 and 2 indicates the existence of a group of students for whom initial attempts at A level exams are serious but less stressful events than final attempts.

Students generally agreed that re-sitting meant that they had to work harder (Statement 3), with only 5.6% of Psychology students and 6.7% of Mathematics students disagreeing. The students were also likely to agree (over 60% in both subjects) that re-sitting had improved their understanding of the subject (Statement 4), suggesting that module assessments may be being used formatively as well as summatively.

Students were less decisive in their response to Statement 5: "I feel I did less well in later modules because I spent too long preparing for re-sits of earlier modules". Around 39% in each subject neither agreed nor disagreed. This may be because they found it hard to judge the effect of re-sit preparation on their performance in other exams. Of those that did voice an opinion, the majority disagreed, with only 17.3% of all Psychology students and 13.4% of all Mathematics students feeling that re-sits led to them doing less well on other modules.

In general, students did not think that re-sitting module exams had wasted their time (Statement 6). This response fits with that for Statement 4 in supporting the idea that module assessments may be

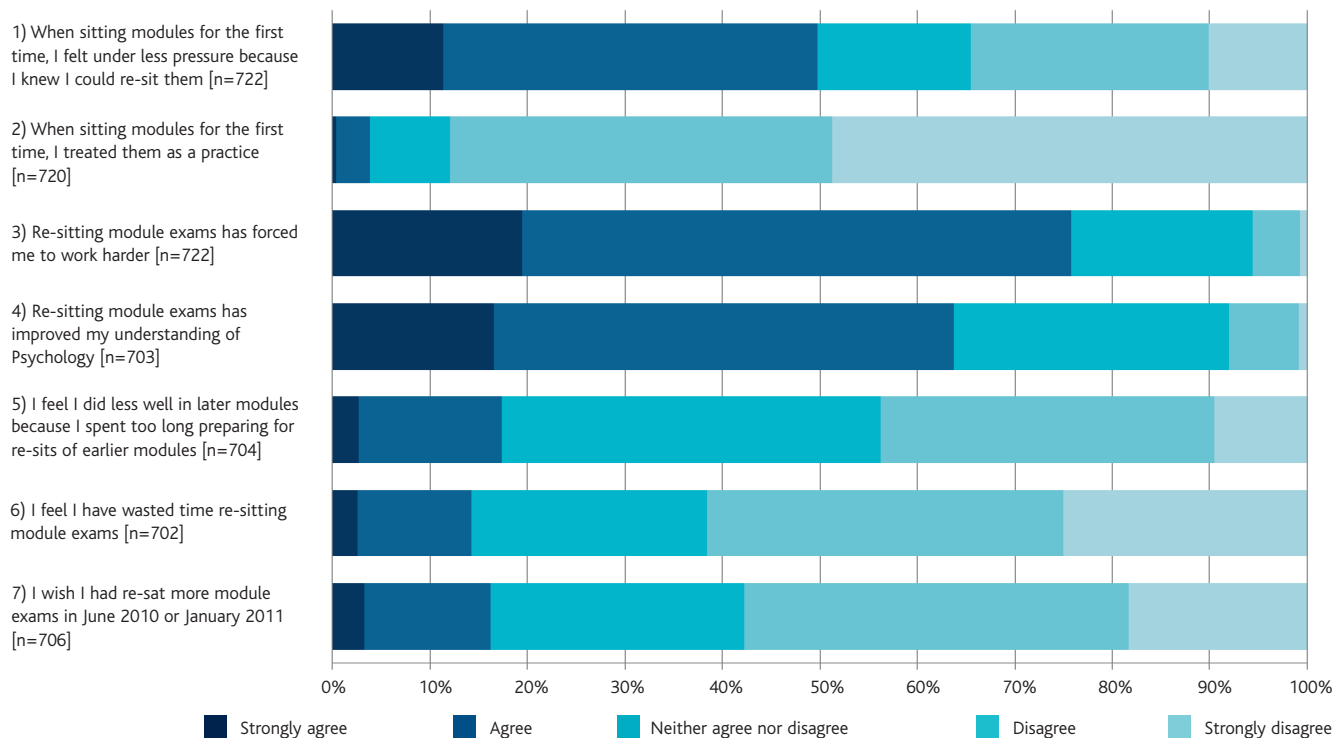


Figure 6: Percentage of responding students agreeing with statements (Psychology)

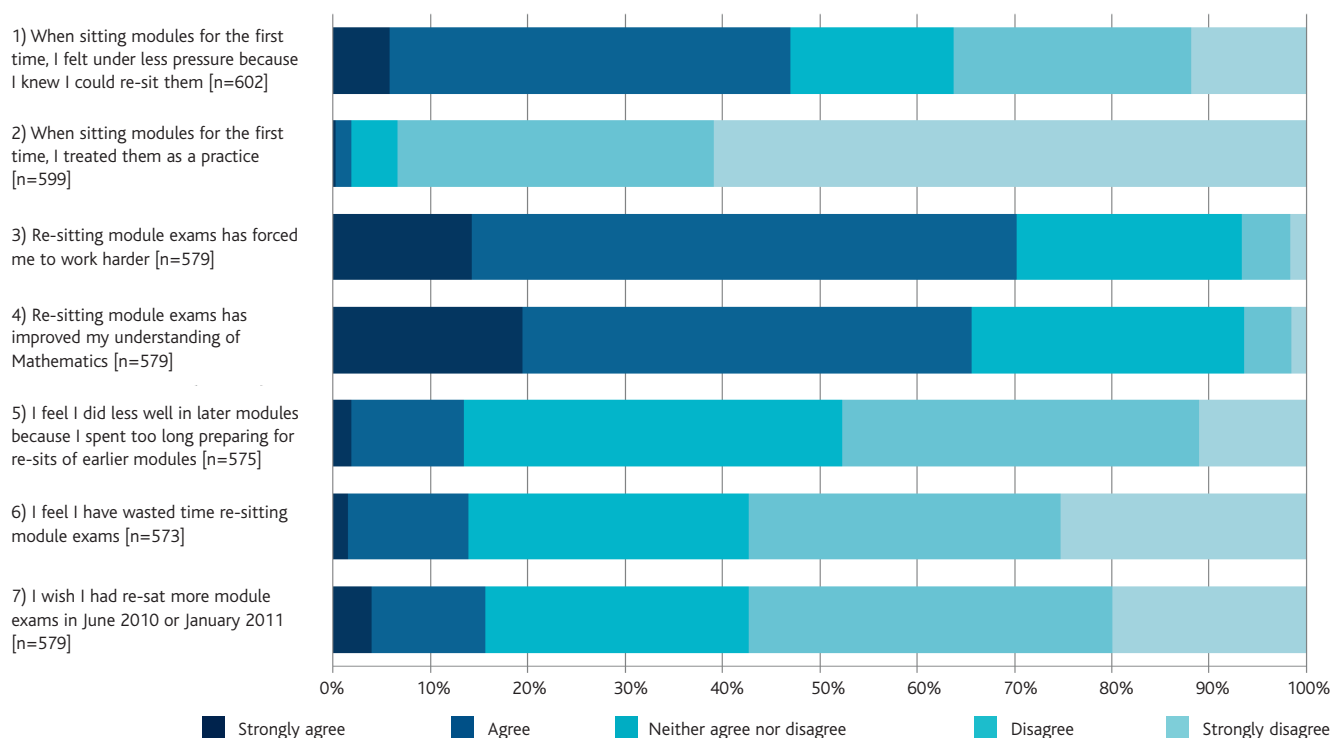


Figure 7: Percentage of responding students agreeing with statements (Mathematics)

being used formatively as well as summatively. However, a minority of students (14.3% in both subjects) believed they had wasted time in re-sitting (although they may have been only to some of their re-sits and not all of them). Another minority (16.2% of Psychology and 15.6% of Mathematics students) felt they should have done more re-sits in previous sessions (Statement 7). Over half (57.8% of Psychology students and 57.3% of Mathematics students) actively disagreed with the statement.

Further views from students

In the final section of the questionnaire, students were asked if they had any further comments they would like to share. There were over 100 comments from Psychology students and around 80 from Mathematics students, although many of these were not related to re-sits. However, of those that did relate to re-sits, there were two main themes that were common to both subjects.

1. Re-sits are good because they mean you can improve your grade (nine comments by Psychology students, five by Mathematics students). For example:

Re-sits are a helpful way to gain extra marks and lifting your overall grade for A level. (Female Mathematics student, independent school)

I found re-taking these exams very beneficial and it has completely changed and improved my grade beyond what I thought possible. (Female Psychology student, FE/tertiary college)

2. Re-sits are valid because they allow students who had a 'bad day' to have another chance to show what they know (seven comments by Psychology students, five by Mathematics students). For example:

I agree with re-takes as students shouldn't be punished for having 'bad days' on the day of the exam. It also allows for another chance if students have an unfortunately planned exam table not allowing them enough time to prep as they would like. (Male Psychology student, comprehensive school)

It gives you a second chance if you had a bad day/didn't feel well or questions were really hard. Re-takes give you a chance to do better. (Female Mathematics student, sixth form college)

Among the responses from Psychology students, two other themes stood out:

1. Re-sits cost too much, which is unfair on those who cannot afford them (eight comments).

Although I agree with the idea of re-taking exams in order to obtain a better grade, I feel it is an unfair system and think re-taking shouldn't be allowed as it depends on how much money the students and school has. (Female Psychology student, comprehensive school)

Re-sits are too expensive. I feel as if I've wasted my money trying again and again to improve my grades. (Female Psychology student, comprehensive school)

2. Re-sits should only be undertaken if they do not interfere too much with preparation for new modules (four comments).

Only re-sit exam if you are definitely not jeopardising the newer modules. Make sure you don't over burden yourself. Pace yourself. (Female Psychology student, comprehensive school)

People should only re-sit an exam if it doesn't or won't affect or interfere with any other exams which will be coming up also. (Female Psychology student, comprehensive school)

In Mathematics there were another two topics that students commented on.

1. Re-sitting AS modules later in the course is a good strategy as it is easier to get top marks on these modules (four comments).

I am waiting until the end of course (June 2011) to re-sit Core 1 and Core 2, as I will have a better understanding of Mathematics, so hopefully will do better, as on borderline A grade. (Male Mathematics student, comprehensive school)

Core three and four seem much harder than one or two, so it seems logical to re-sit core one or two to improve UMS. (Female Mathematics student, grammar school)

2. Re-sits are unfair on those students who do well the first time and therefore do not have to re-sit. They don't reflect the true ability of students (four comments).

I do not think it's fair that people can re-sit C1 and C2 in Year 13 and get close to full UMS when they got much lower first time round. (Female Mathematics student, grammar school)

Re-sits are an unfair advantage and do not reward people who attain good grades at the first time. (Male Mathematics student, comprehensive school)

Finally, in both subjects there were some interesting comments on how best to overcome the feeling that re-sits undermine A levels:

I believe a culture of re-sits has been a major contributor to grade inflation. If it were in anyone's interest to combat this, one could ensure a candidate definitely takes the grade they get from re-sits – allowing those who had terrible exams to re-take, but ensuring no one would casually re-take on the chance of increasing their grade. (Male Mathematics student, comprehensive school)

Re-sits should be limited to one re-sit per candidate per subject. Continual re-sitting of A level modules particularly AS modules at the end of Y13... devalues A levels. (Male Psychology student, comprehensive school)

Discussion

In this study we obtained A level students' views and experiences of re-sits in Psychology and Mathematics, prior to a reduction in re-sit opportunities taking effect nationally. Our aim was to provide examination board colleagues with an understanding of the likely effects of a system of significantly reduced re-sits on students and their teachers. Since the data was collected, the move back to linear assessment at A level has begun, beginning with the abolition of the January examination session at the start of 2014. The findings of our study indicate several important consequences for students and other stakeholders in the new assessment regime.

Traditionally, it has been argued that re-sitting individual modules in a qualification gives a second chance to students who, for one reason or another, did not initially demonstrate their knowledge, skills and understanding. Re-sitting also enables students who were underprepared the first time to become more knowledgeable about a topic, and to demonstrate this improved knowledge. Few would claim that students who genuinely benefit in this way do so unfairly. In a linear system, after all, students are assessed only when they have covered the entire course content, when knowledge acquired in Year 12 has been reinforced and augmented by knowledge acquired in Year 13. However, it has also been argued that re-sits enable some students to achieve a higher grade than they deserve by playing the system, for example by becoming more 'exam-savvy' through practice or by being 'lucky' with the questions on one of the versions of the exam. In line with these arguments, we found that one of the students' most common reasons for re-sitting could be seen as a valid means of getting a higher grade ("I had improved my knowledge through studying other modules") whilst another might be seen as playing the system to some degree ("It would be easier to boost my overall grade by re-sitting an AS level module than by doing well in A2 modules"). These findings concur with those of previous research (for example, De Waal, 2009; Poon Scott, 2010, 2012).

However, further findings from our study suggest that, in reality, the situation is perhaps more complex than this simple split would suggest. Most students who responded to the questionnaire gave multiple reasons for re-sitting a module. In each subject, a majority thought that re-sits *per se* had:

1. made them work harder, and
2. increased their knowledge of the subject.

These views indicate that module examinations do not only provide summative assessment, but are also used for formative assessment purposes too. The implication is that those responsible for new linear A levels need to think carefully about the need to offer students suitable interim assessments, for reasons of both formative assessment and motivation. The motivational feeling that module exams 'actually count for something' could be difficult to replicate in lower stakes internal exams.

It is interesting to note that the percentages of students in the study who thought they had improved their knowledge through studying other modules, were higher for both of the two Mathematics AS modules than for the two Psychology AS modules. This may be due to differences in the nature of the subjects and the course structures. Mathematics is a subject that is 'spiral' in nature, in that later modules build on knowledge gained in earlier modules. In contrast, Psychology modules tend to be more separate from each other in their content and in the background knowledge assumed. Thus it is more likely that Mathematics students will learn things in later modules that would help them in earlier modules, and will therefore struggle less than Psychology students will in the move to linear assessment. Subject differences of this kind may need to be taken into account when grade boundaries are determined for the first cohorts of students taking the new linear A levels.

We found that over half of the students in the study claimed to spend at least half of their exam preparation time on re-sits rather than on new modules. The return to a linear assessment system should free up this time (as well as the time spent preparing for first attempts at module exams partway through the course), but consideration should be given to how this time is used instead. If at present, modular assessment motivates students to spend part of their exam preparation time looking back at where they went wrong during previous module attempts and addressing gaps in knowledge revealed by those attempts, then arguably, it could be challenging for teachers to get students to do something equally or more worthwhile. On the other hand, it seems plausible that the amount of time spent on re-sit exams interferes with learning new subject content for other modules. Moreover, the freed-up time in the linear regime could be spent teaching beyond the syllabus, an activity which has been found to be associated with higher results in A level Mathematics, relative to students' performances in their other subjects (Suto, Elliott, Rushton & Mehta, 2011).

This study suggests that an important benefit of linear assessment could be the resolution of some equity problems (either perceived or actual). Several participating students felt that re-sits cost too much, and that the modular system was therefore unfair on those students who were less well off financially. The linear system should ensure that all students taking a particular A level course will sit the same number of examinations, and that their assessment costs will be uniform.

Finally, the study had several notable limitations. First, due to the self-report nature of questionnaires we cannot be sure about the honesty or accuracy of all of the responses. Secondly, the analysis of response

data was limited to fairly simple descriptive statistics. No statistical tests were undertaken to determine if any of the differences observed were statistically significant. Furthermore, some of the questions allowed multiple responses, but the analysis was only carried out for each response separately. Had a larger data set been obtained, it would have been interesting to investigate the combinations of responses that were most commonly selected (for example, influence over re-sit decision and reasons for re-sitting). Finally, we looked at two A level courses only. It would be useful to know how generalisable the findings are to A levels in the same subjects offered by other exam boards or to other A level subjects. Additional ideas for further research include a longitudinal study. In a few years' time, once the linear A levels have bedded down, data from the present study may prove useful in comparative research.

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Do Cambridge Nationals support progression to further studies at school or college, to higher education courses and to work-based learning?

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Introduction

The number of students taking vocational qualifications in England has risen dramatically in the last few years (Ofqual, 2012). This can be partly attributed to the growing availability of vocationally orientated/related qualifications aimed at 16 to 19 year-olds. However, whilst in the past the completion of a vocational programme would have been seen as an end in itself, there is now an expectation that all forms of education and training provide progression. In particular, it has been argued that vocational qualifications must be designed to ensure they provide a sufficient platform for progression to higher level of study or to employment (e.g. Bowers-Brown & Berry, 2005; Cowan, 2012; Fuller & Unwin, 2012).

OCR National qualifications, now called Cambridge Nationals, are exam-free, vocationally related qualifications at levels 1 to 3 of the National Qualifications Framework¹ that have an engaging and practical approach to learning and assessment. They are primarily aimed at young people aged 14–19 in full-time or part-time study, although they are also appropriate for adult learners, therefore suiting a wide range of learning styles across the whole ability range. As well as providing practical insight into industry sectors, OCR Nationals help students develop valuable workplace skills, such as team working, communication and problem-solving.

OCR National qualifications have been gaining popularity since their introduction in 2004 (e.g. awards rose from 14,620 in 2006/07 to around 300,000 in 2011/12) and currently around 3,000 education establishments in England are delivering OCR Nationals alongside other qualifications. In fact, more than 1.5 million students of all abilities have been awarded

OCR National qualifications over the past few years and the ICT version of the qualification is currently one of the most popular courses in English schools, delivered by more than half of secondary schools. The growth of these qualifications is expected to continue because teachers enjoy teaching them and pupils find them motivating, very relevant and very clear in explaining what is expected of them and what they are trying to achieve (mc² market research, 2008; EdComs, 2009).

OCR National qualifications are made of units, which are centre-assessed and externally moderated and as a result, there are no timetabled exams. Candidates receive assessment and learning support throughout the course, giving them a clear indication of their progress, which can increase levels of success and motivation as students can see their own progress through the course, rather than waiting until the end to sit an exam. Furthermore, OCR Nationals offer teachers the flexibility to incorporate work experience, to use their own assignments, and to deliver units in any order. However, some of the OCR National qualifications have been described as having little value and being used simply as a way to take low achievers off academic subjects or to boost schools' league table positions (e.g. Civitas, 2010; Sharp, 2010; Williams & Shepherd, 2010). However, OCR Nationals are a distinctive and important contribution to the 14–19 curriculum. In fact, recent research (mc² market research, 2008) provided evidence to support the view that OCR Nationals should have a significant role in 14–19 education. This research consisted of a survey carried out in schools and colleges across the country where the respondents taught or managed the teaching of at least one OCR National qualification. Most respondents said that OCR National qualifications had helped students engage with the subjects in ways that had not been possible before. Furthermore, with the pressure of exams taken off them, the confidence of many students was boosted to allow them to develop themselves. Although it was acknowledged that this did not work for every single student, the overall

1. Each regulated qualification in England has a level between entry level and level 8. Qualifications at the same level are of a similar level of demand or difficulty. To find out more about qualification levels visit <http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/help-and-advice/comparing-qualifications/>.