

# Students' and teachers' views and experiences of A level unit re-sits



CAMBRIDGE ASSESSMENT

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Cambridge Assessment  
Network seminar  
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# Seminar outline

- Background
- Extent and impact of re-sitting
- Questionnaire study
  - Methods
  - Results – student
  - Results – teacher
- Conclusions

# Background

## Current system

- Unitised A levels
- Unlimited re-sits allowed
- Best result counts
- Changes on the way?

# Background

## Issues

- Grade inflation
- Teaching to the test
- Exams not taken seriously
- Second chance
- Increased knowledge



# Research questions

RQ1: What is the extent of re-sitting at A level, and what impact does it have on grades?

RQ2: What are students' views and experiences of A level re-sits?

RQ3: What are teachers' views of A level re-sits?



# Subjects

Psychology	Mathematics
Specification H568	Specification 7890
4 units	6 units
All units compulsory	Some unit choice
Units are more distinct	Units build on prior knowledge



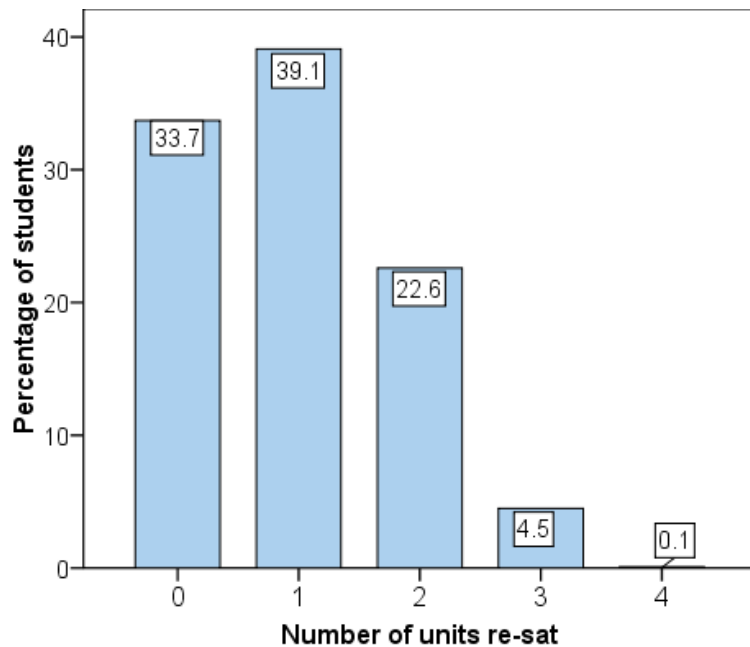
# RQ1: What is the extent of re-sitting at A level, and what impact does it have on grades?

- 2010 cohort, taking OCR specifications
- Data from all sessions
- Amount of re-sitting
- Impact of re-sitting

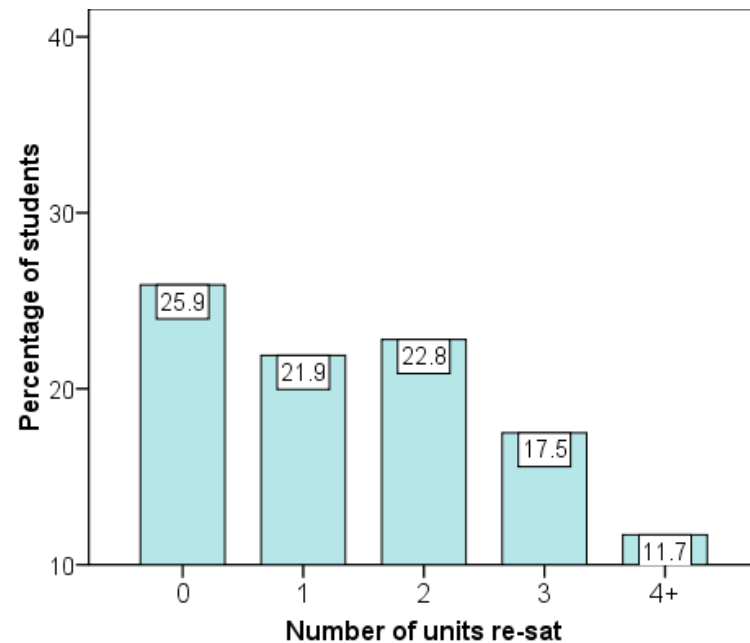


# Number of units re-sat by students

## Psychology



## Mathematics

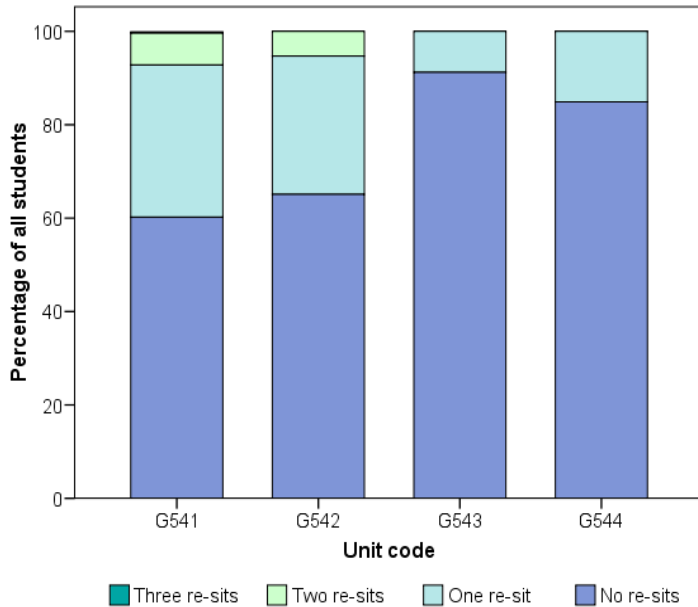




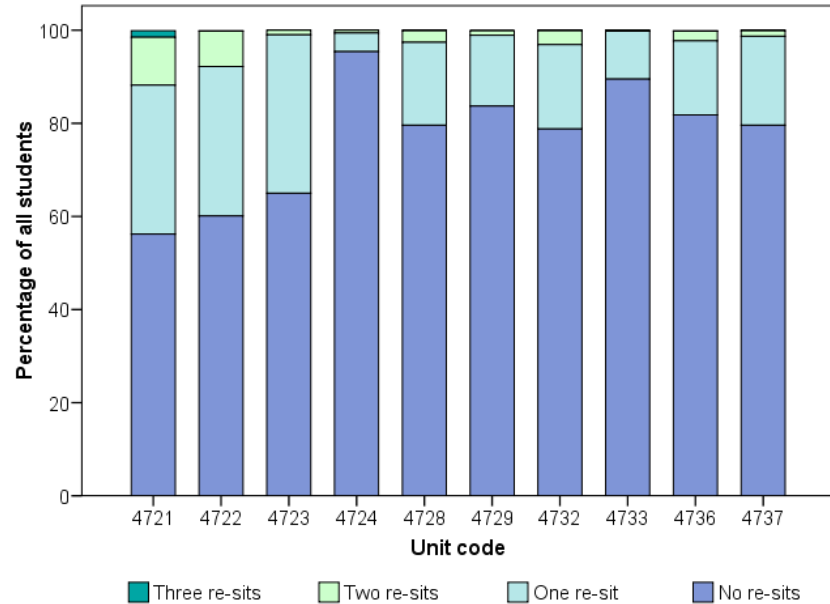


# Number of times each unit was re-sat

## Psychology

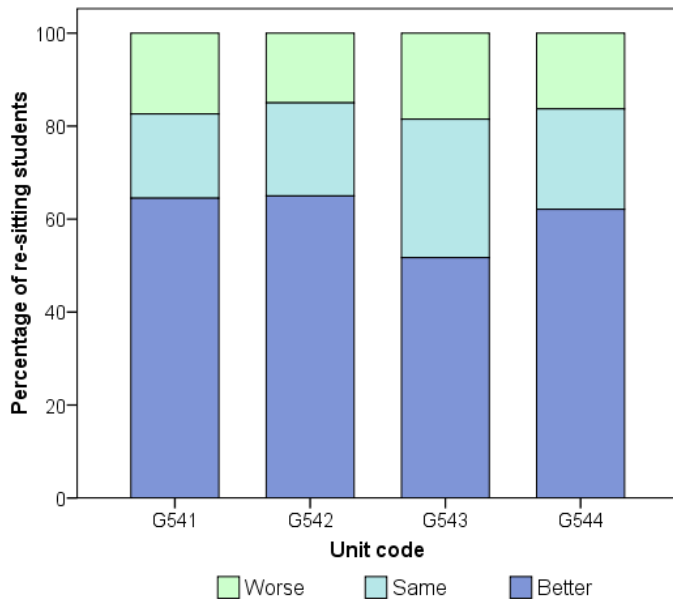


## Mathematics

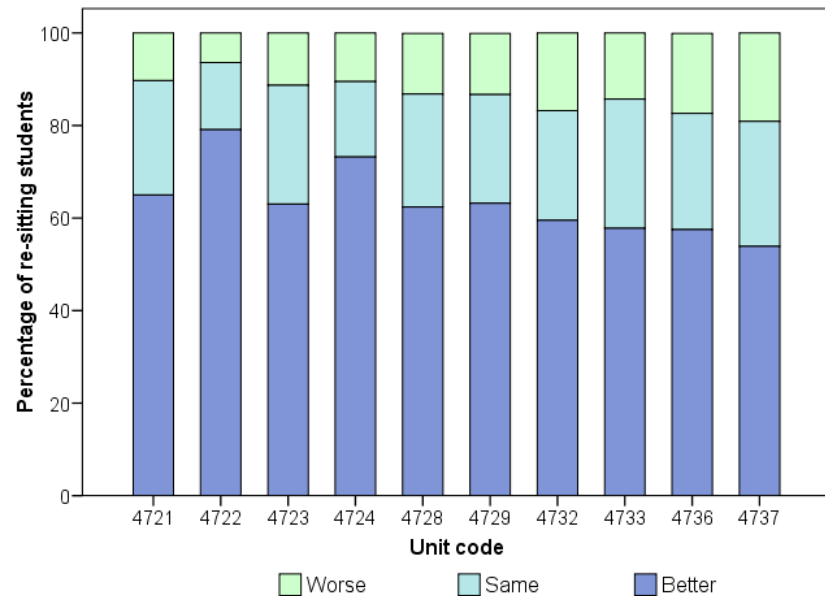


# Change to unit grade following re-sit

## Psychology

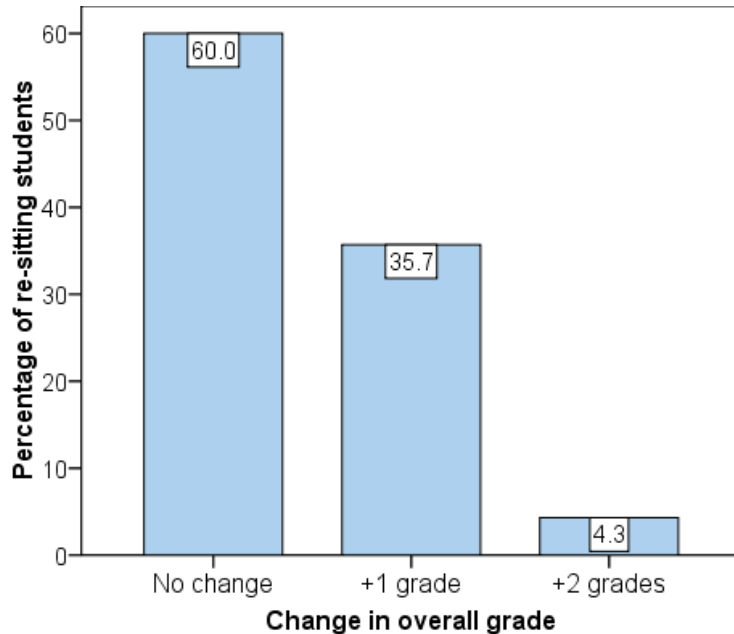


## Mathematics

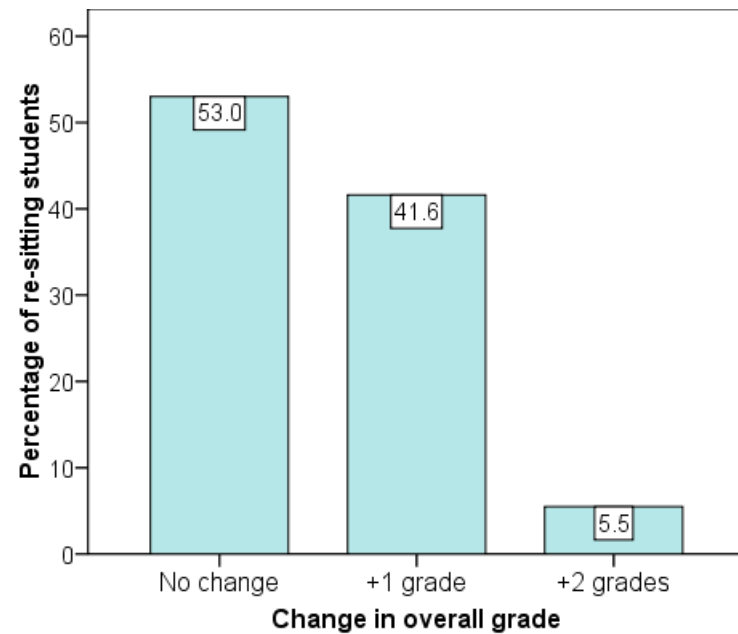


# Impact of re-sitting on overall grade (re-sitting students)

## Psychology

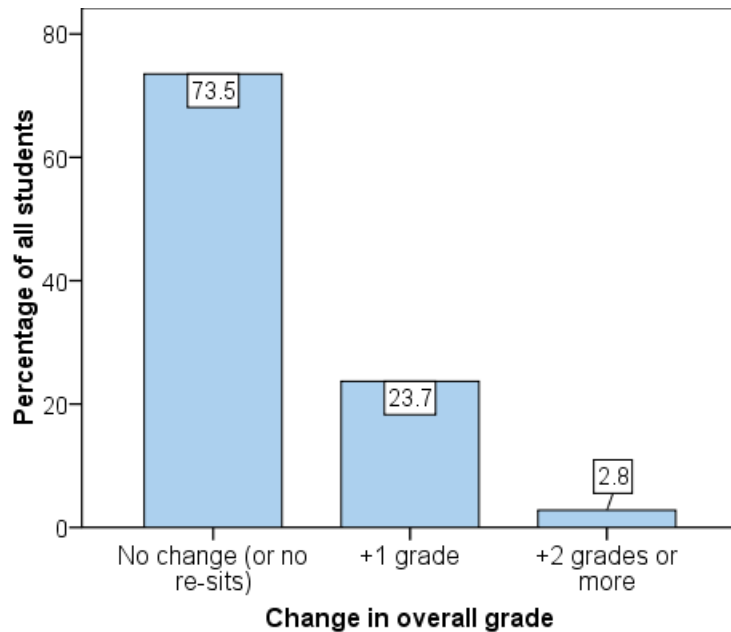


## Mathematics

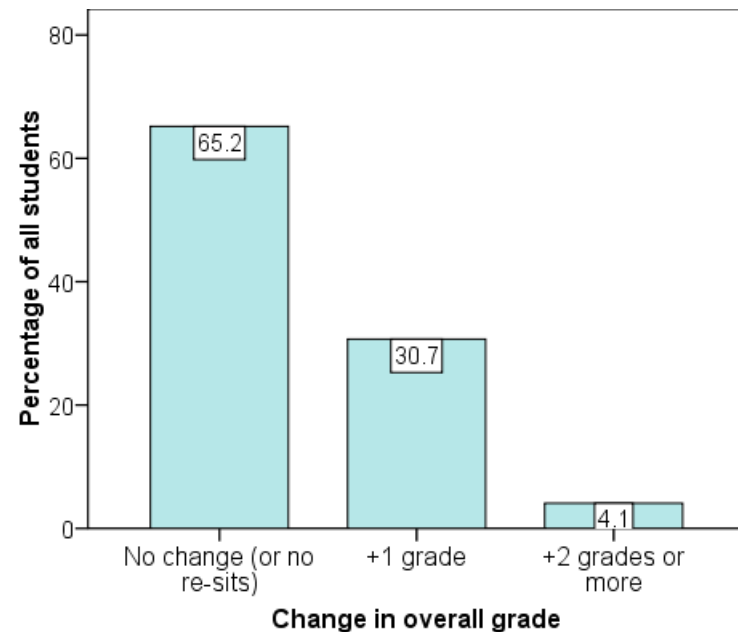


# Impact of re-sitting on overall grade (all students)

## Psychology



## Mathematics



# Questionnaire Study



# Questionnaire study

RQ2: What are students' views and experiences of A level re-sits?

RQ3: What are teachers' views of A level re-sits?

Psychology	Mathematics
Specification H568	Specification 7890
4 units	6 units
All units compulsory	Some unit choice
Stand alone units	Units build on prior knowledge

# Questionnaire design & development (1)

- 4 questionnaires:

Psychology teachers	Mathematics teachers
Psychology students (Yr 13)	Mathematics students (Yr 13)

- Piloting process involved OCR colleagues, AL teachers, & AL students
- Final versions:
  - paper-based (teleform-compatible)
  - included instructions and consent forms
  - referred specifically to OCR A level specifications
  - as short as possible (9 - 10 questions)

# Questionnaire design & development (2)

Questionnaires focused on core aspects of re-sitting:

The reasons  
why  
students  
re-sit

Who & what  
influences  
decisions to  
re-sit

Preparations  
& support  
for re-sits

General  
views of  
re-sits



# Data collection

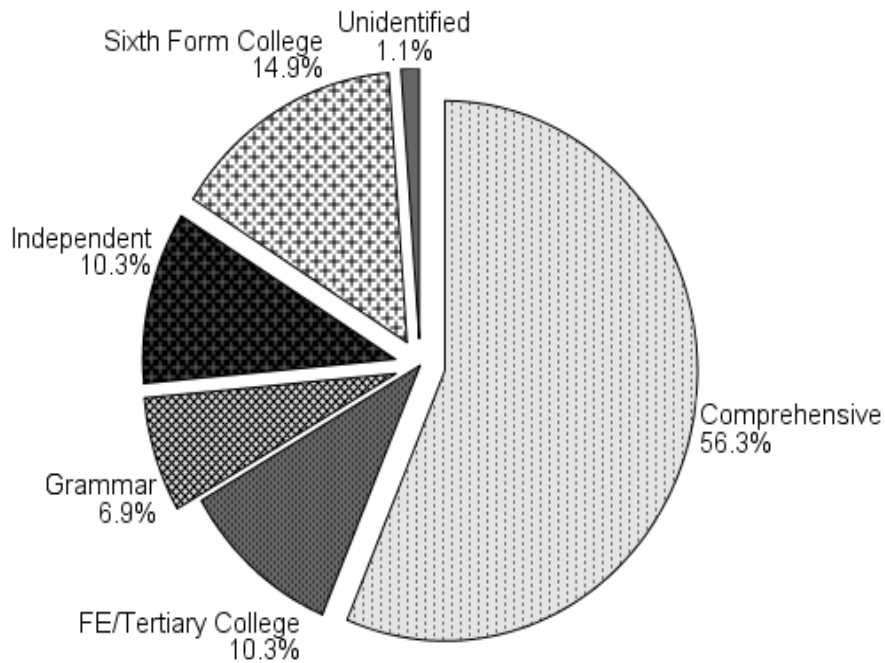
- Data collected in March 2011 (different students to impact study)
- Invitation letters sent to HoDs at all OCR centres (for the two specifications), together with:
  - 2 copies of the teacher questionnaire
  - 10 copies of the student questionnaire
  - contact details for requesting additional copies
  - pre-paid envelopes
- Centres given 4 weeks in which to complete & return the questionnaires

# Response rates

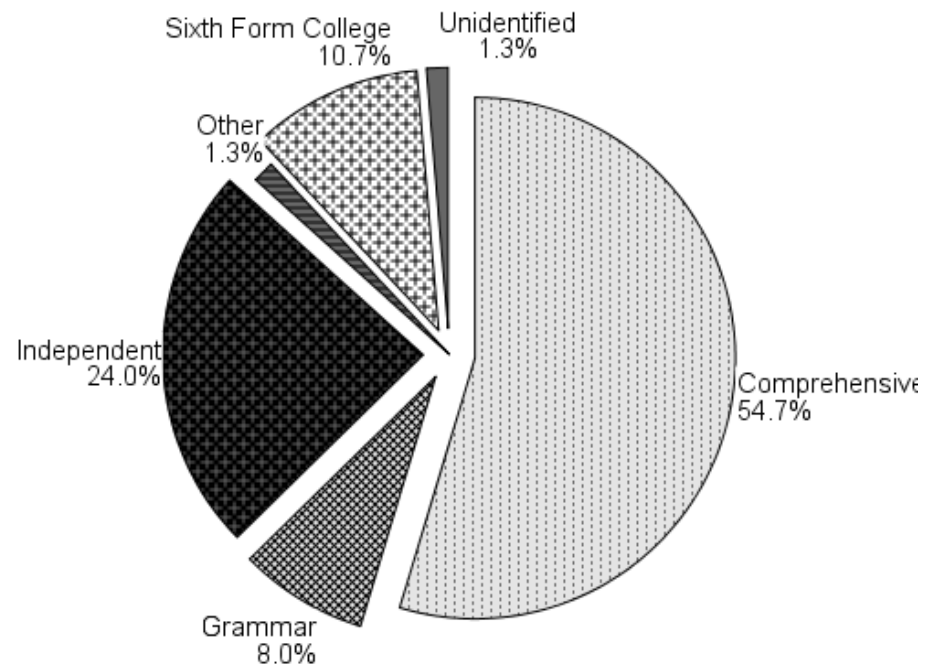
Subject	Psychology	Mathematics
Centres sent Q	329	400
Responding centres (student Q)	87	75
Responding centres (teacher Q)	85	75
Response rate	26.4%	18.8%
Responding students	737	614
Responding teachers	114	126

# Types of responding centres

## Psychology (N=87)

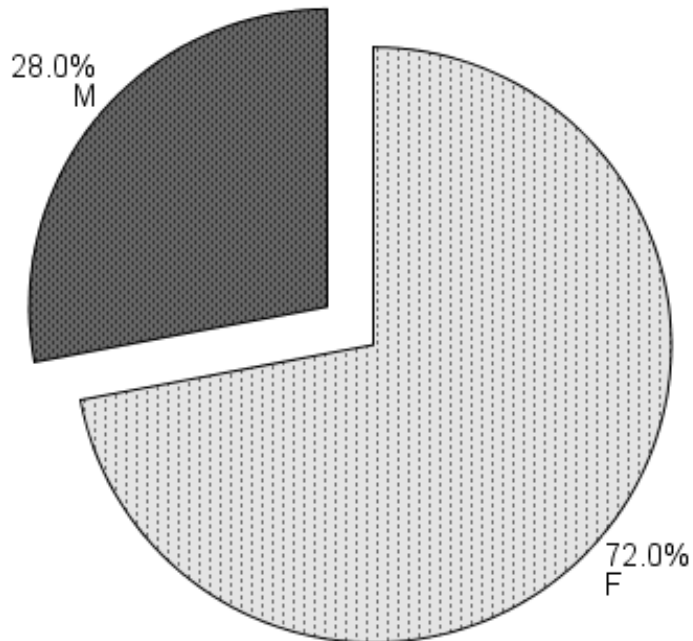


## Mathematics (N=75)

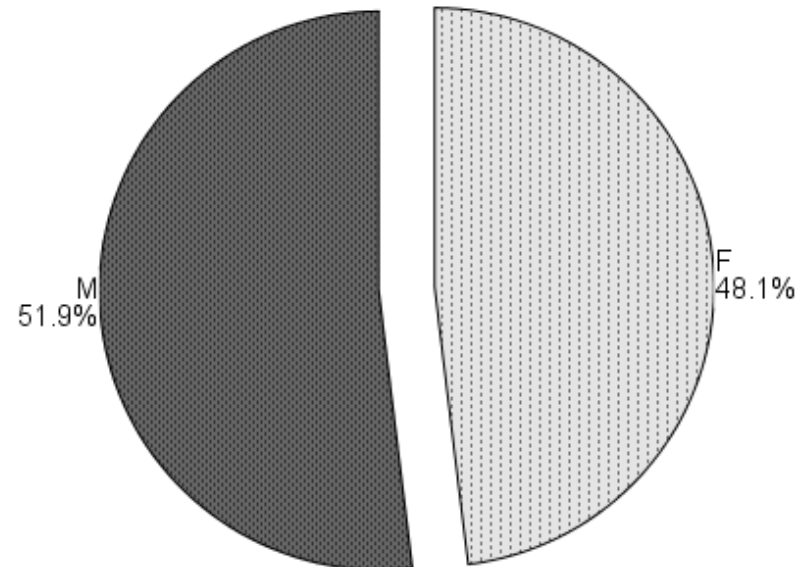


# Genders of responding students

Psychology (N=737)



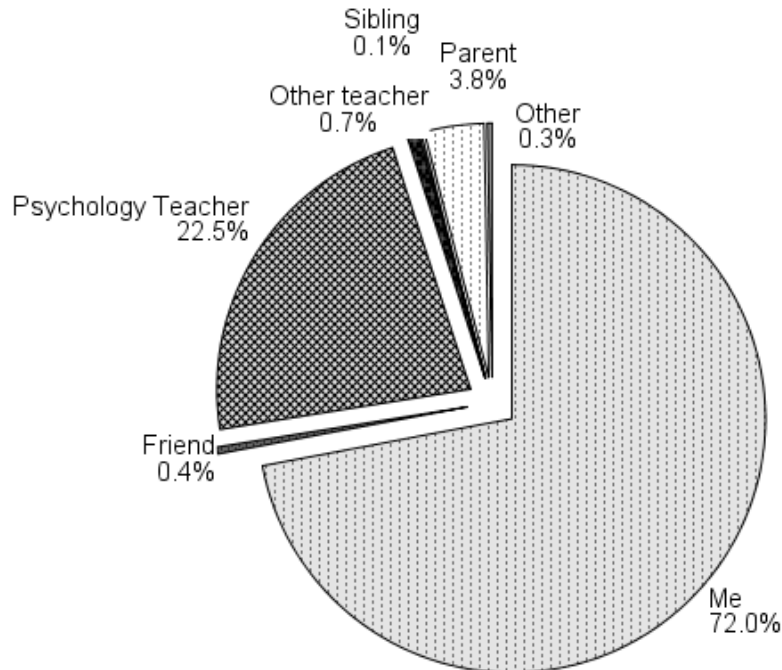
Mathematics (N=614)



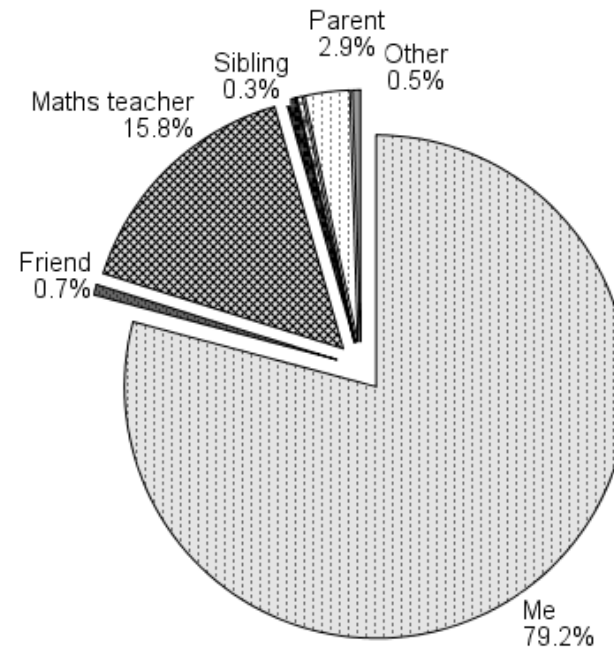
# Findings from Student Questionnaire

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

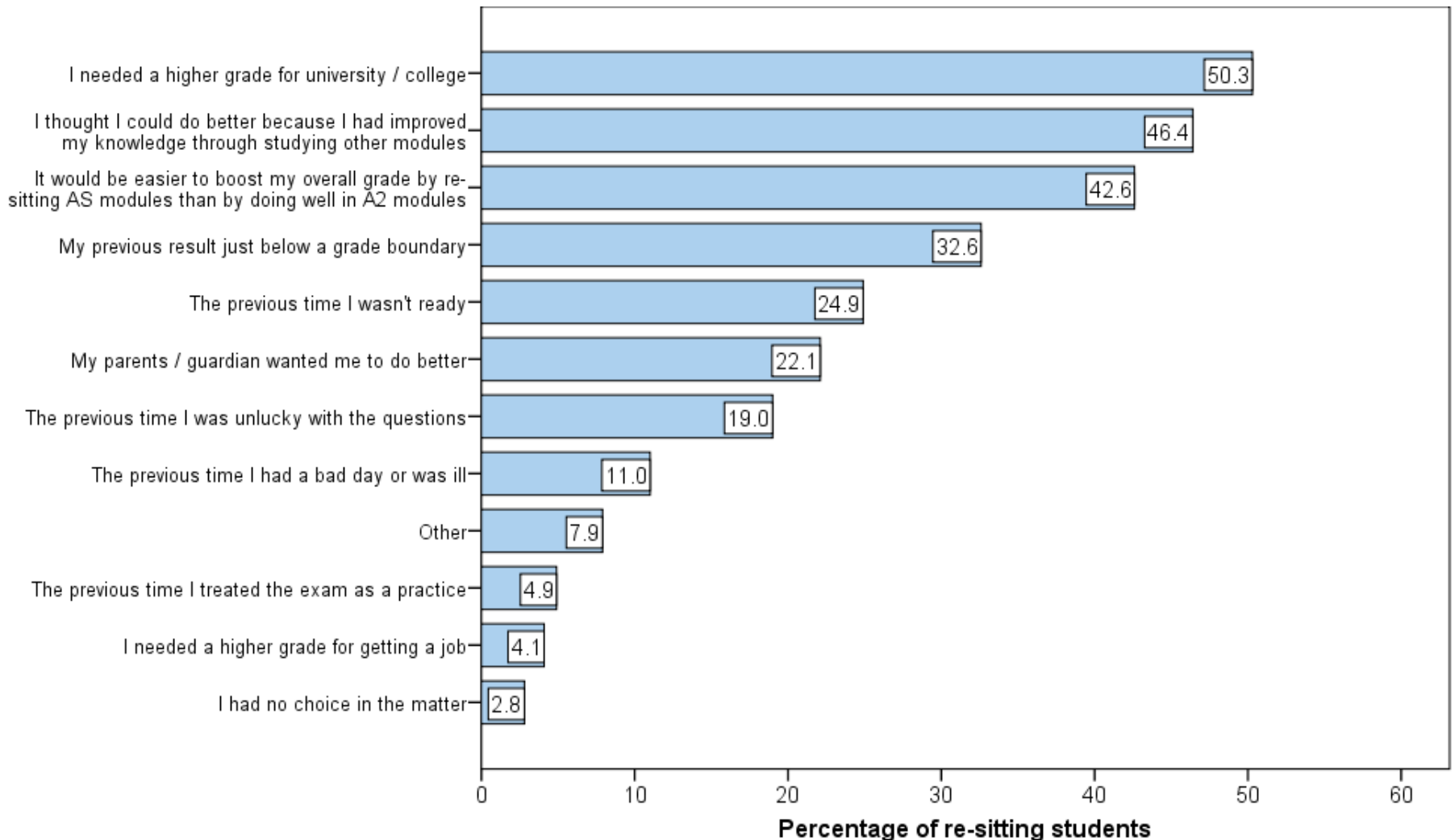
## Psychology



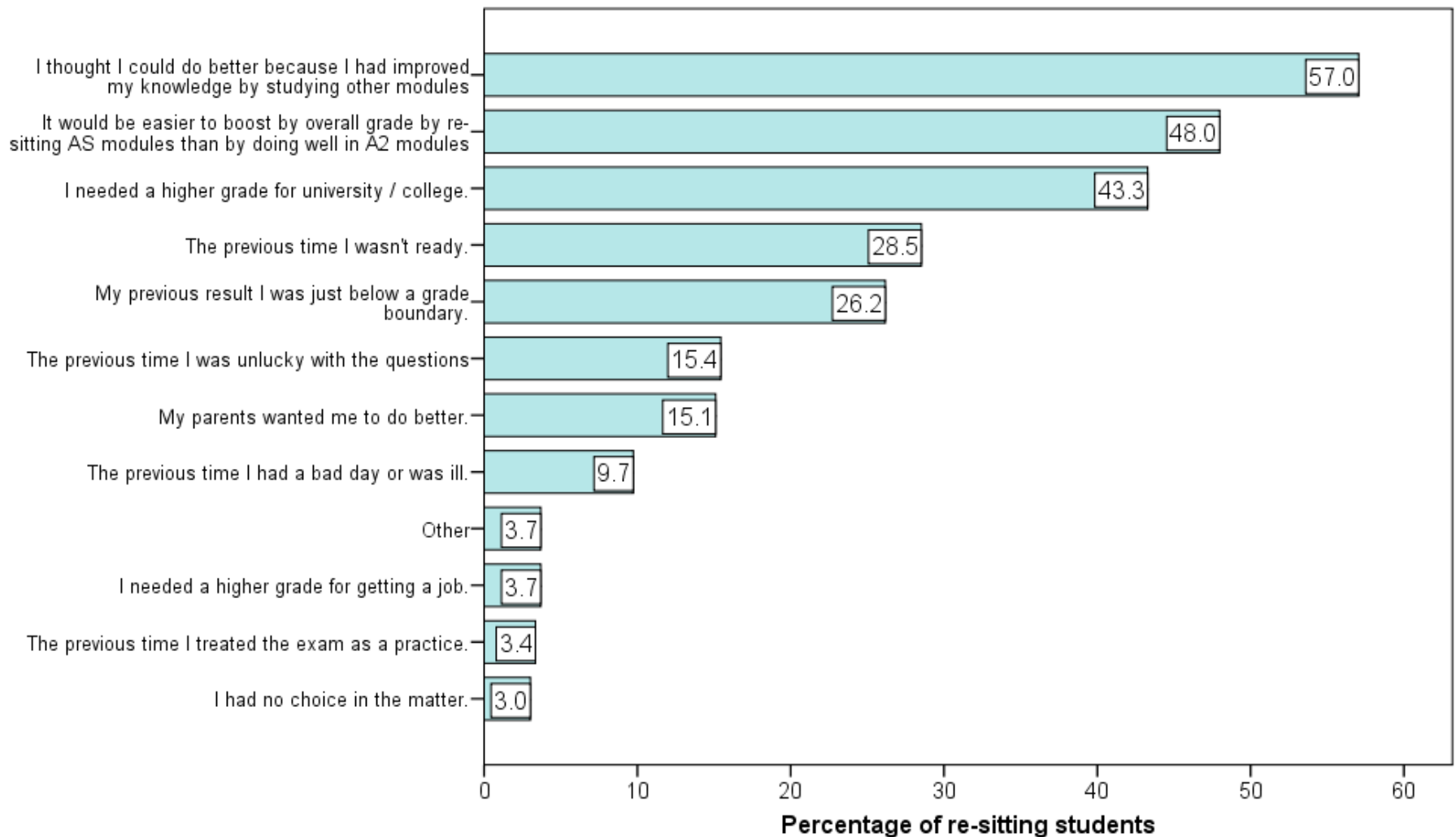
## Mathematics



# If you have re-sat *Psychological Investigations*, what were your reasons?

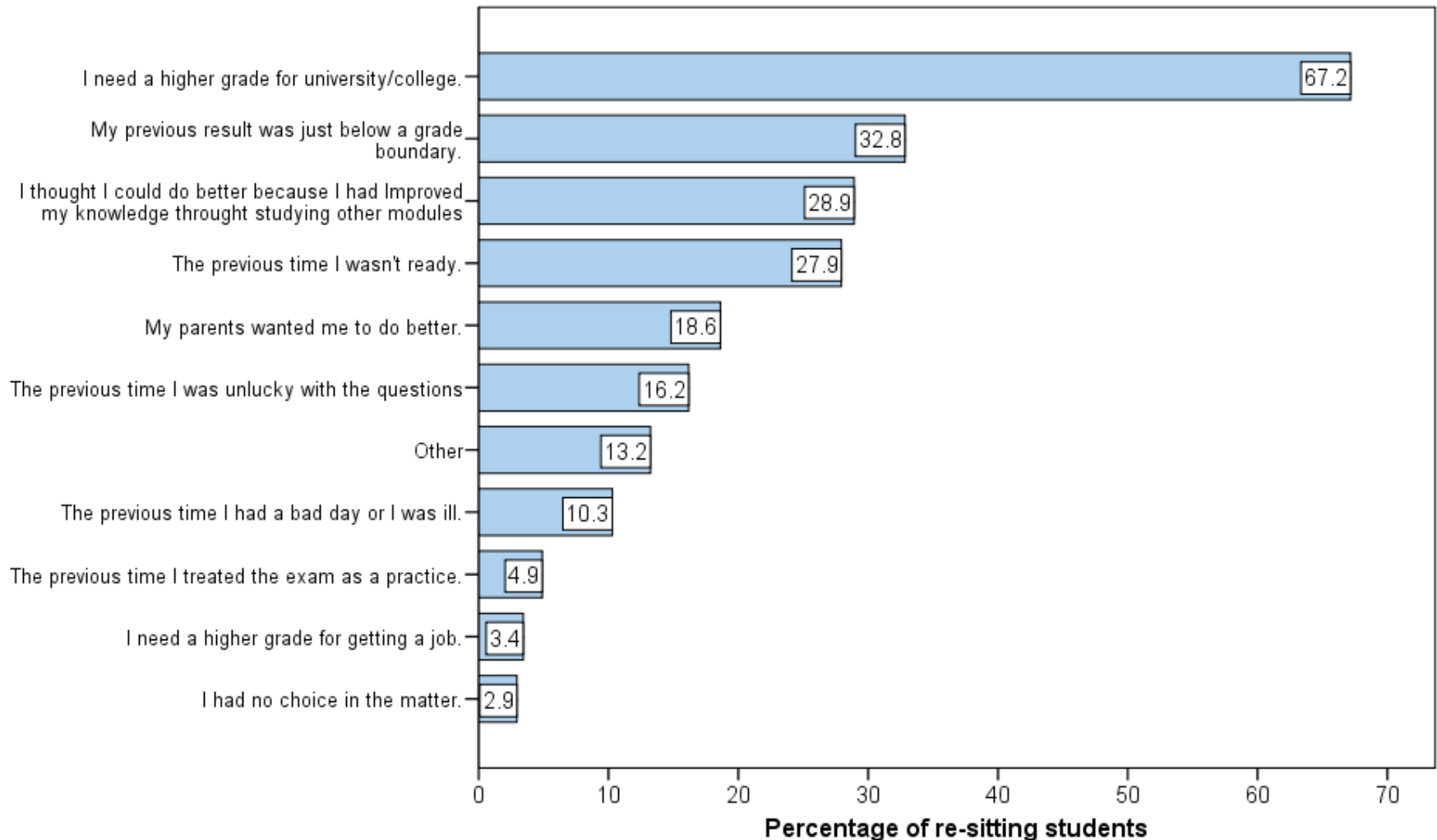


# If you have re-sat *Core Mathematics 1*, what were your reasons?

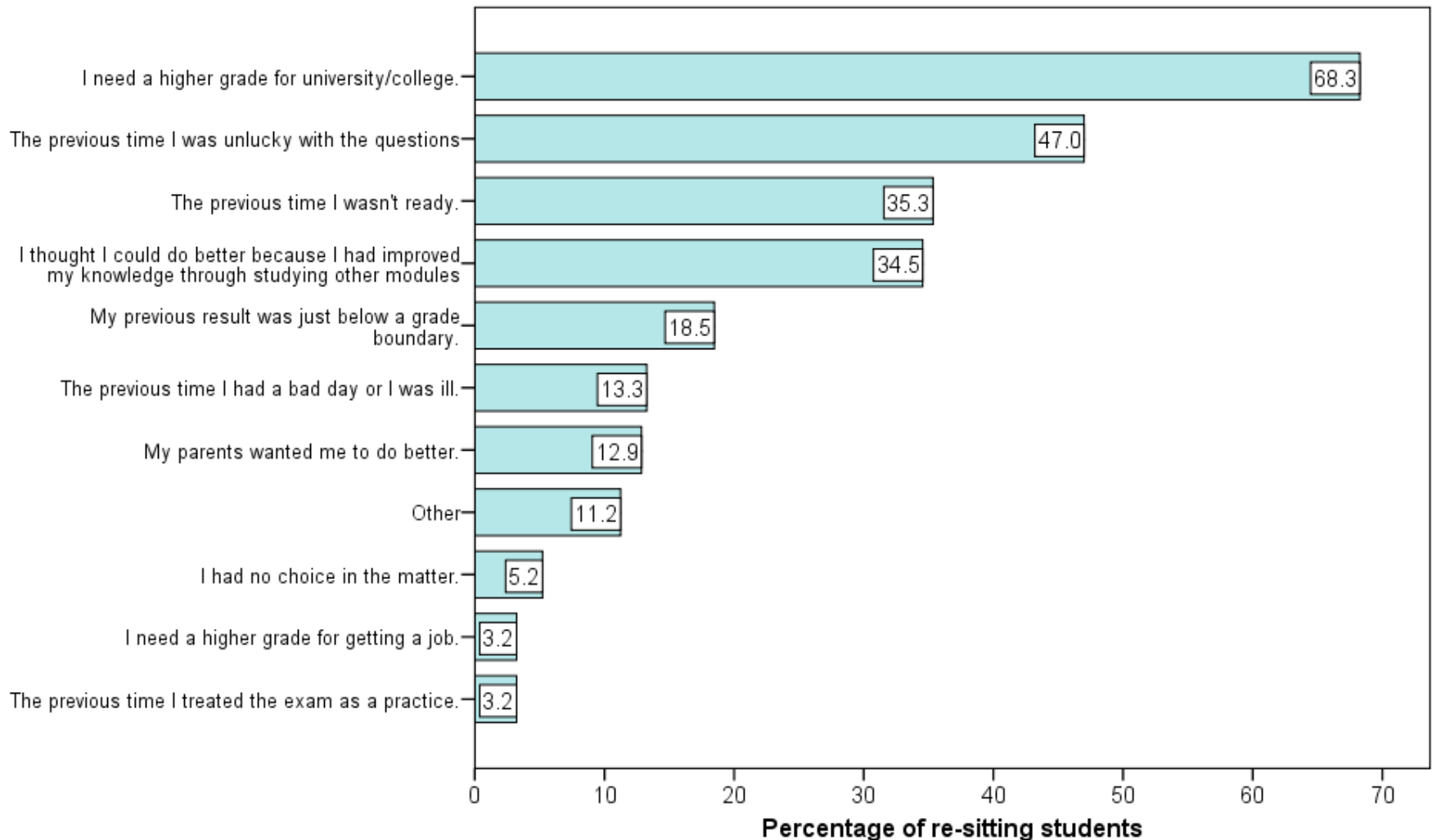




# What are your reasons for re-sitting *Approaches and Research Methods in Psychology* ?

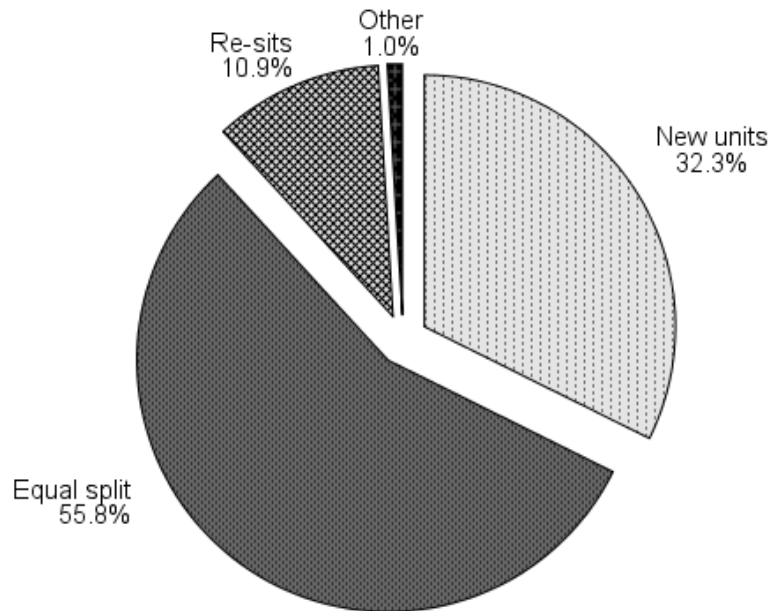


# What are your reasons for re-sitting *Core Mathematics 3*?

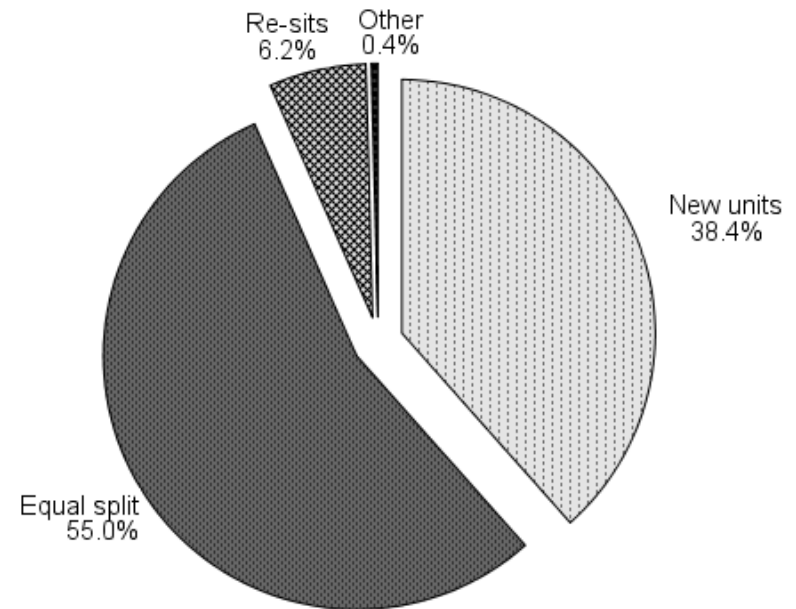


# When preparing for exams, what proportion of your time do you spend on re-sits?

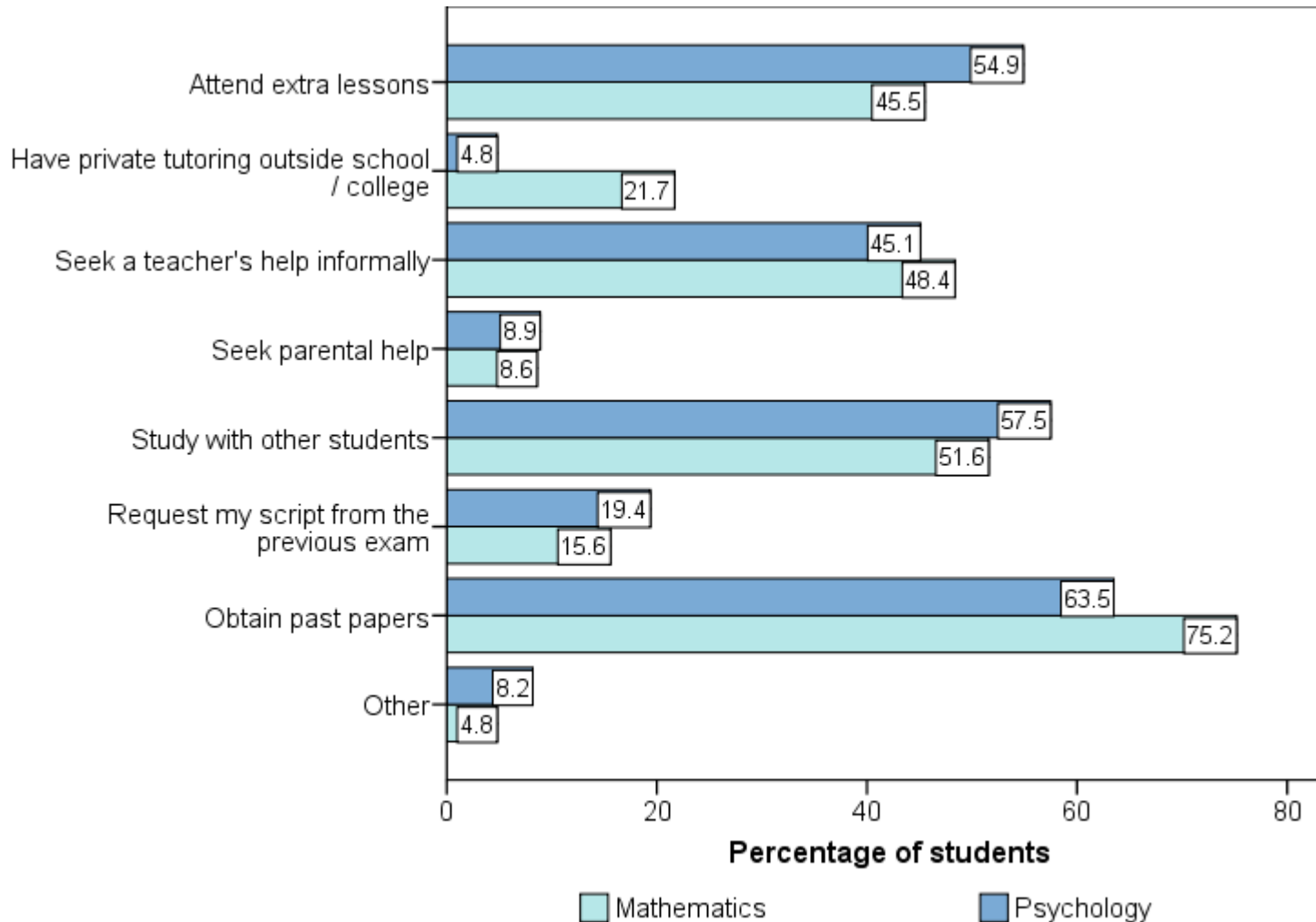
## Psychology



## Mathematics

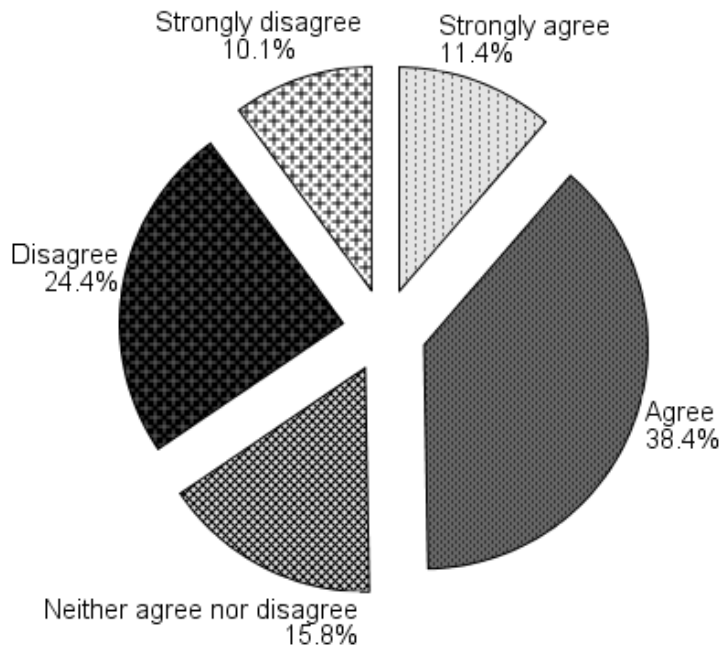


# Do you do any of the following to prepare for re-sits?

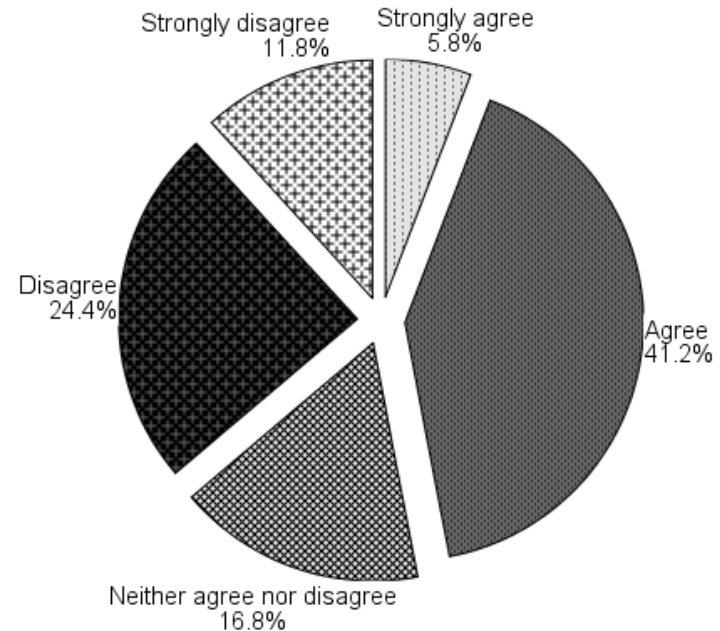


“When sitting module exams for the first time, I felt under less pressure because I knew I could re-sit them”

## Psychology

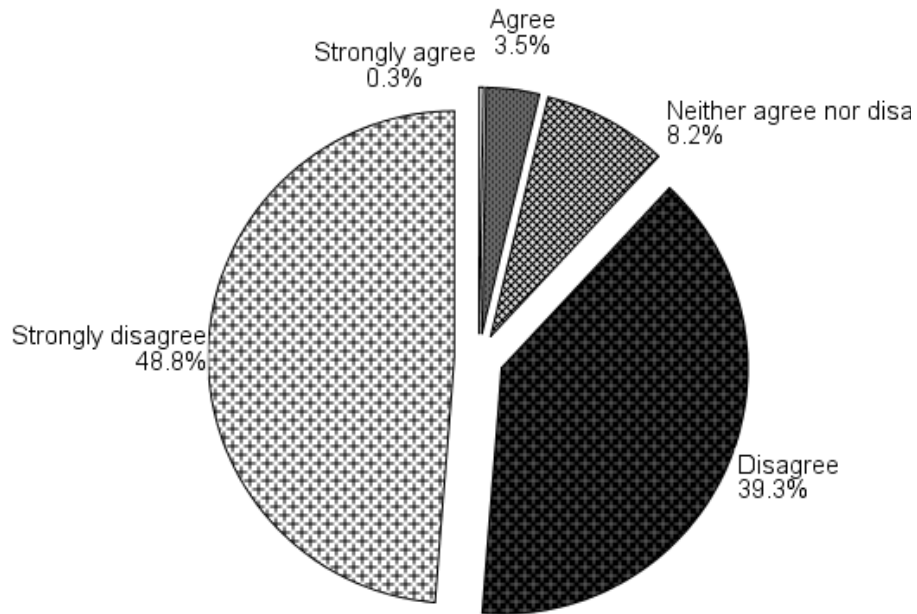


## Mathematics

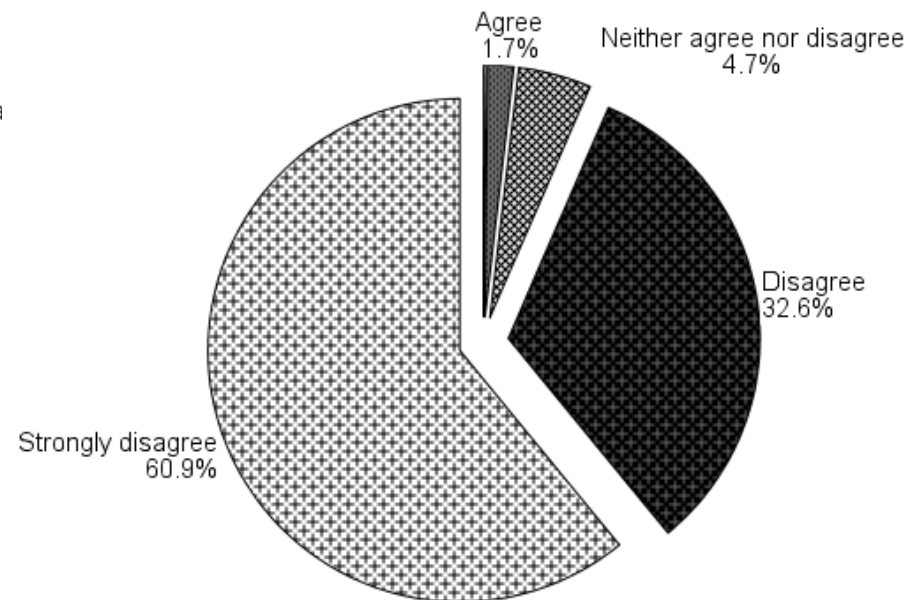


# “When sitting module exams for the first time I treated them as a practice”

## Psychology

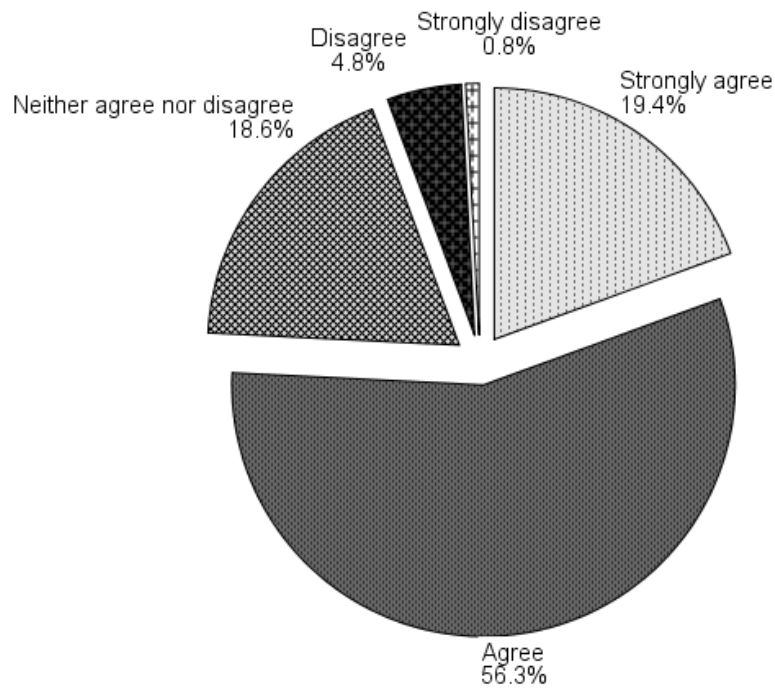


## Mathematics

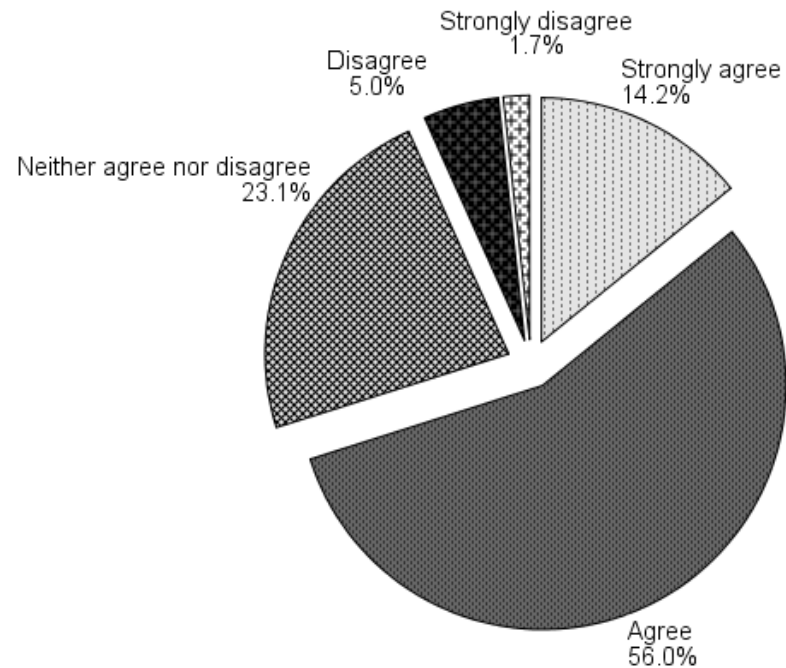


# “Re-sitting module exams has forced me to work harder”

## Psychology

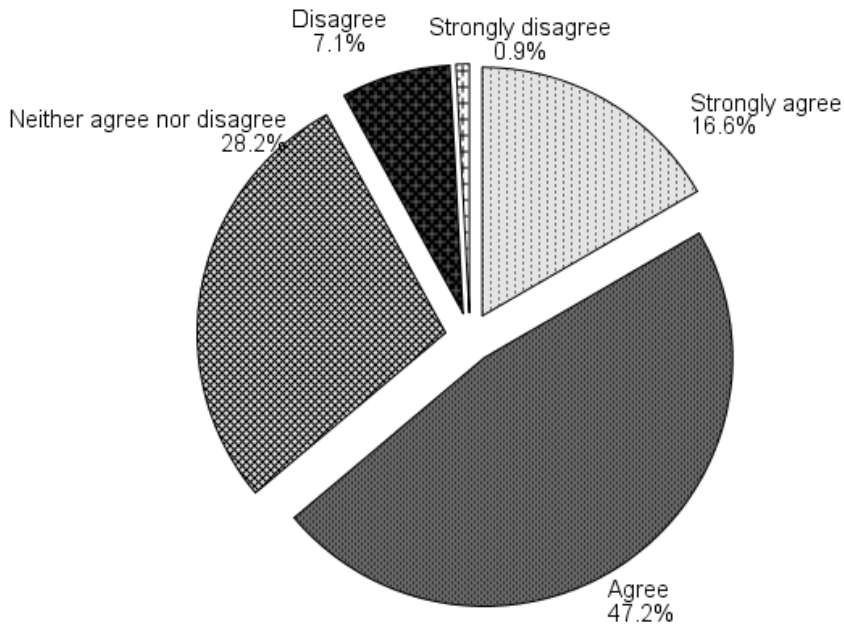


## Mathematics

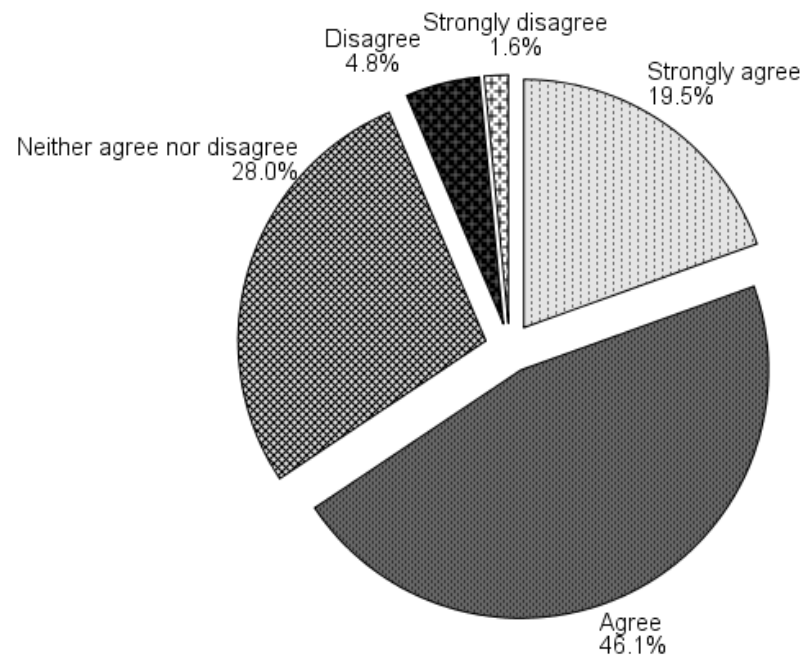


# “Re-sitting module exams has improved my understanding of Psychology/ Mathematics”

## Psychology



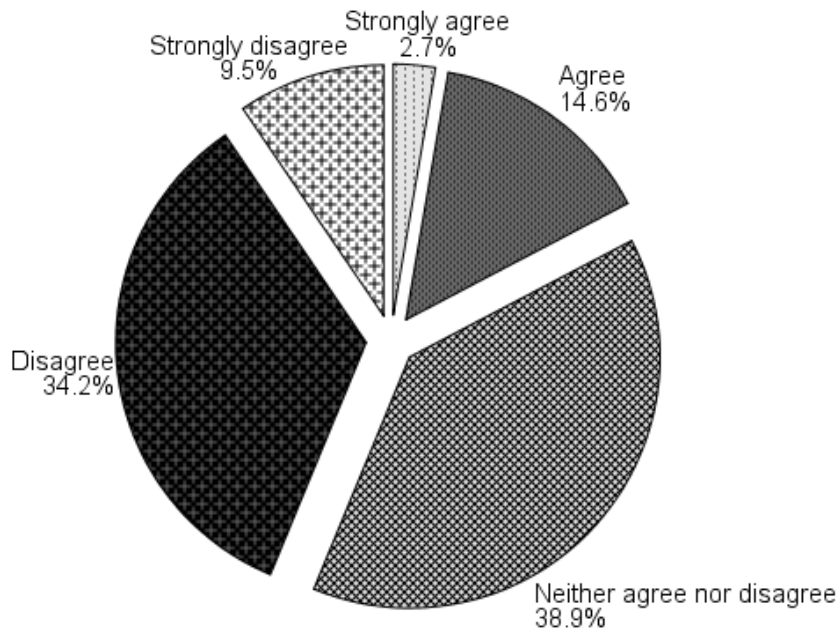
## Mathematics



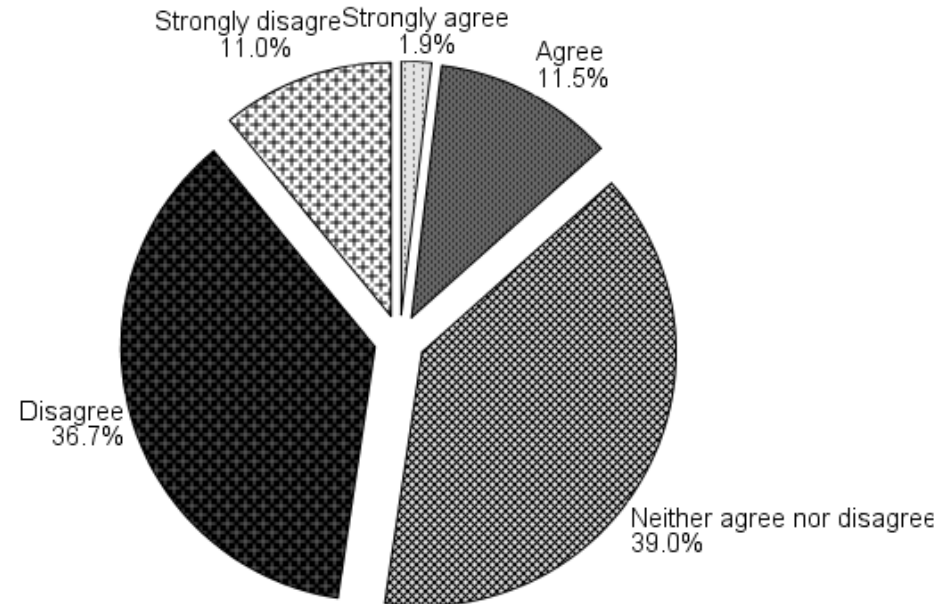


“I feel I did less well in later modules because I spent too long preparing for re-sits of earlier modules”

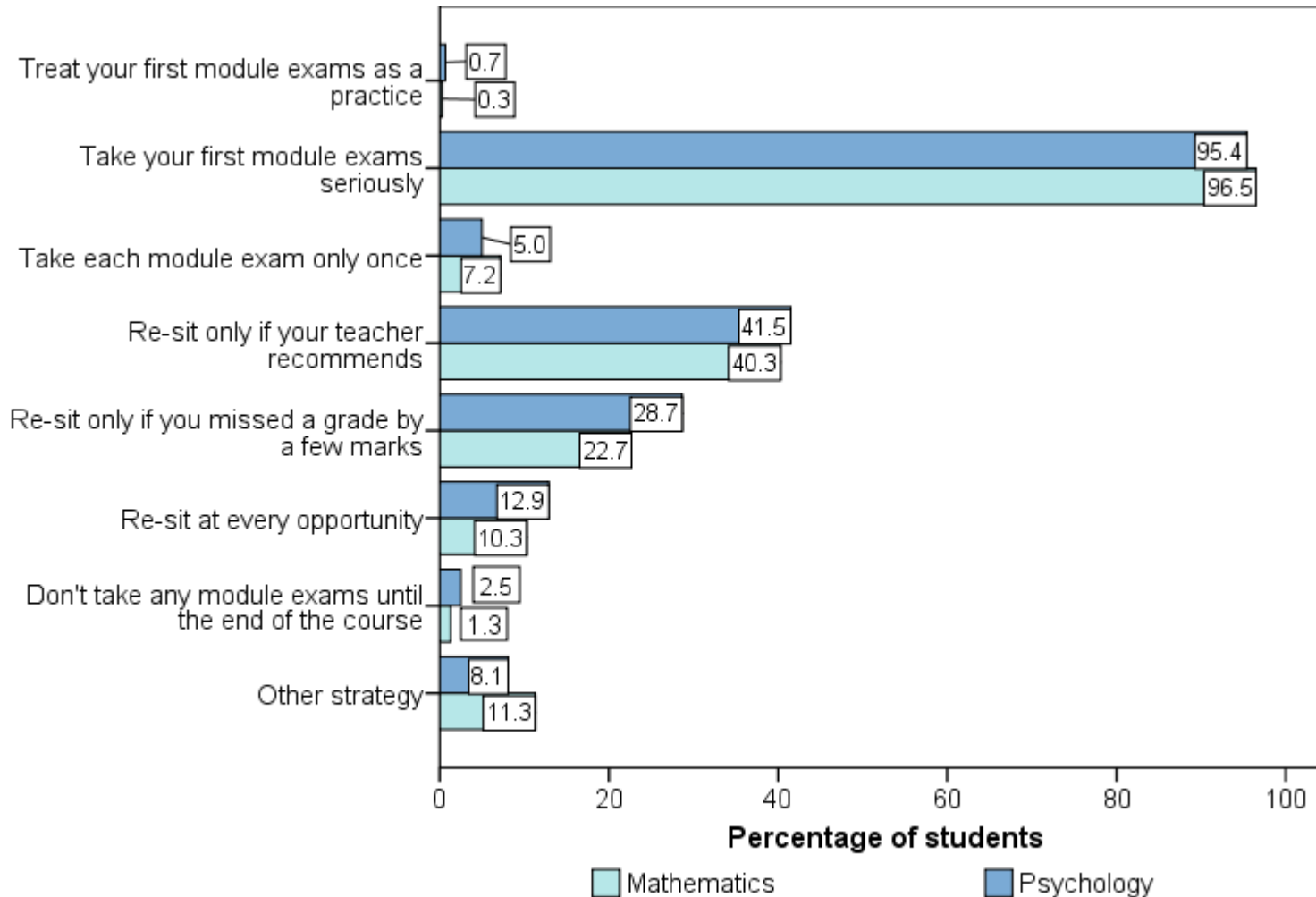
## Psychology



## Mathematics



# What advice on re-sits would you give to someone at the beginning of their A level course?



# Student comments (both subjects)



- Re-sits are good because they mean you can improve your grade (9 comments by psychology students, 5 by mathematics students).

*“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)

- Re-sits are valid because they allow students who had a ‘bad day’ to have another chance to show what they know (7 comments by psychology students, 5 by mathematics students).

*“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)

# Student comments (Psychology only)



- Re-sits cost too much, which is unfair on those who cannot afford them (8 comments).

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

- Re-sits should only be undertaken if they do not interfere too much with preparation for new units (4 comments).

*“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 student, comprehensive school)

# Student comments (Mathematics only)



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- Re-sitting AS modules later in the course is a good strategy as it is easier to get top marks on these units (4 comments)

*“Core three and four seem much harder than one or two, so it seems logical to resit core one or two to improve UMS”* (Female student, grammar school)

- 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 (4 comments).

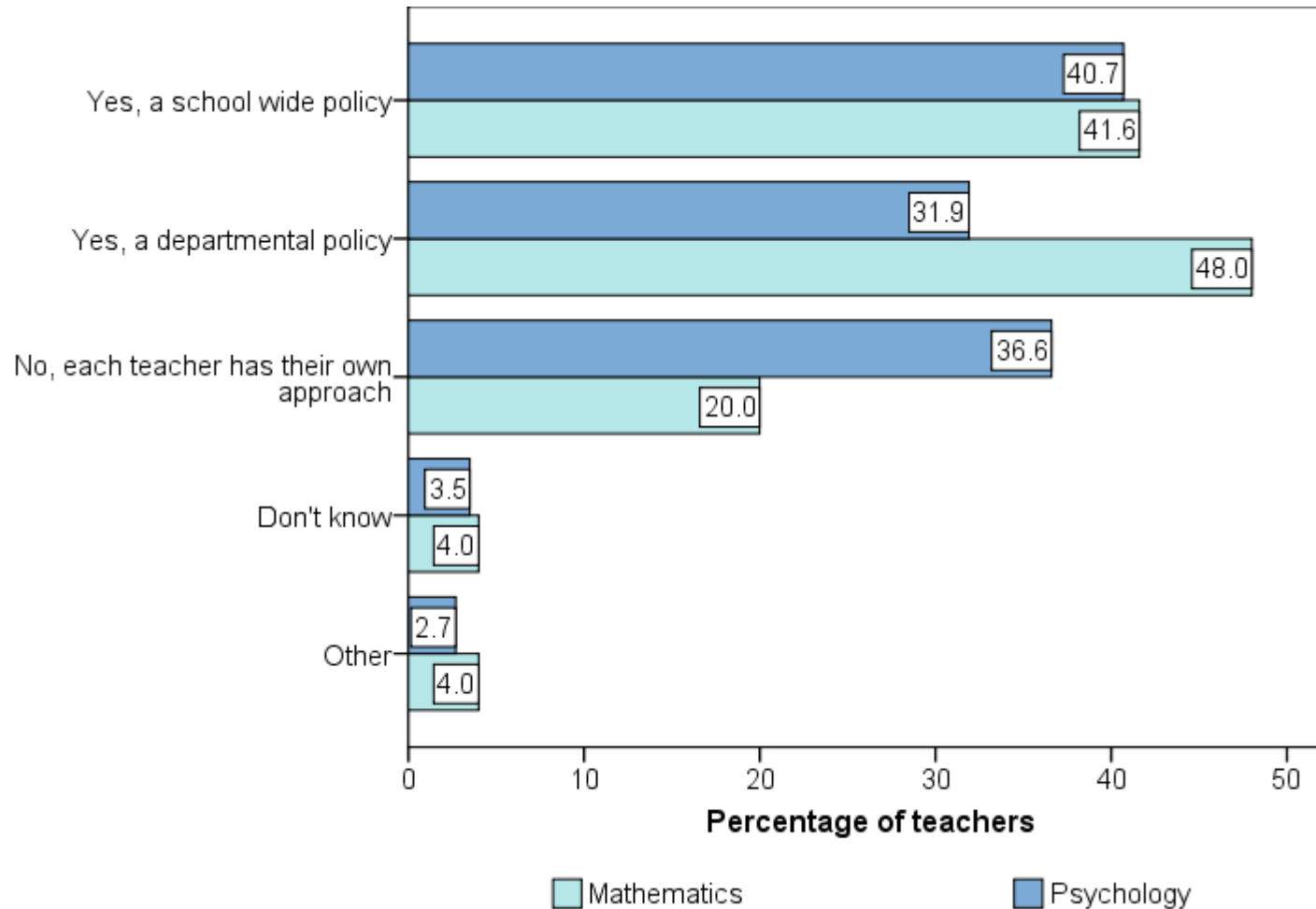
*“I do not think it's fair that people can re-sit C1 and C2 in Year 13 and get close to full UMS when they got much lower first time round”* (Female student, grammar school)

# Student questionnaire - summary

- Feel in control
- Multiple reasons
- Improved knowledge
- Some 'playing the system'
- Significant time spent preparing

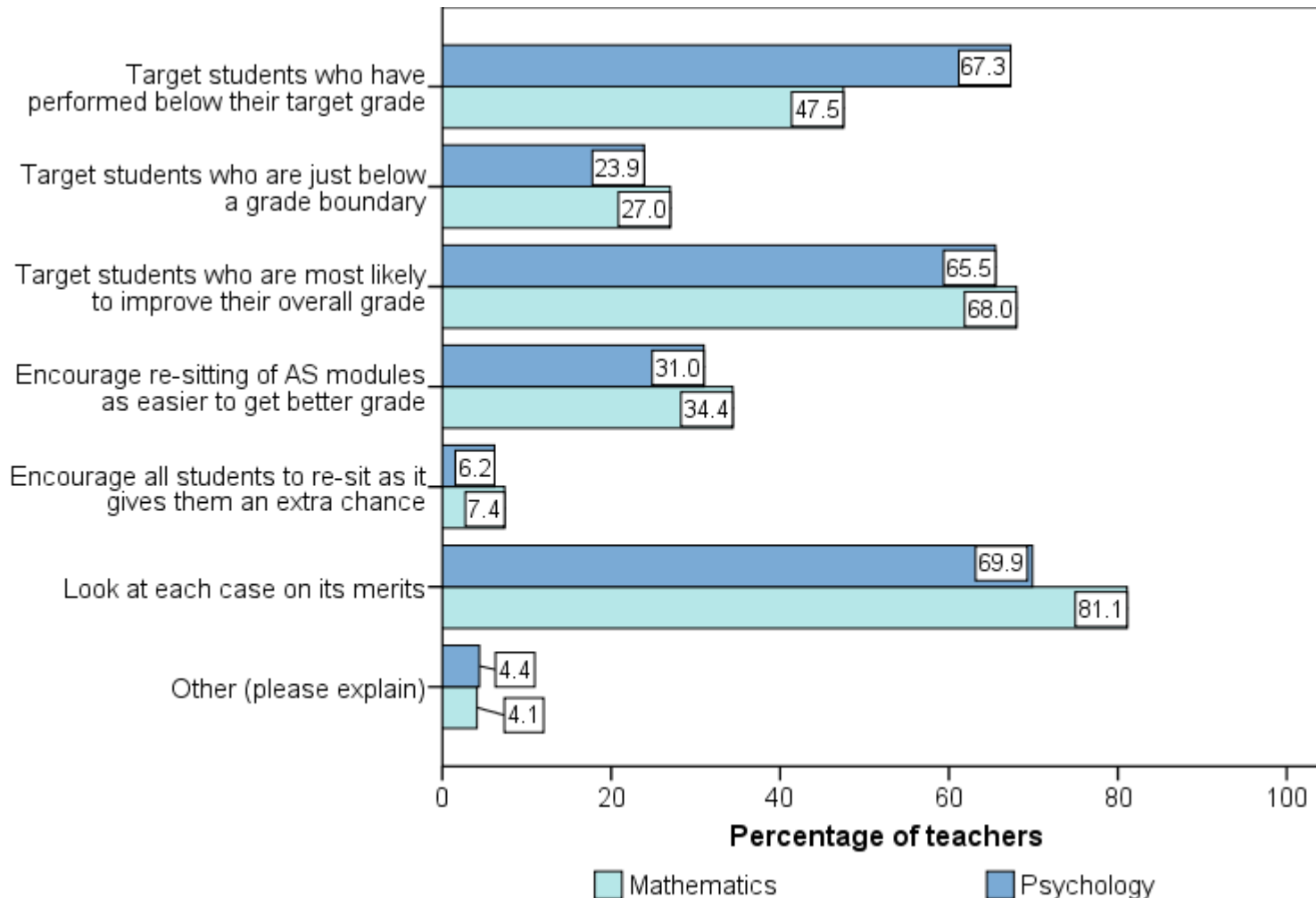
# Findings from Teacher Questionnaire

# Is there a policy within your school/college for A level module re-sits?



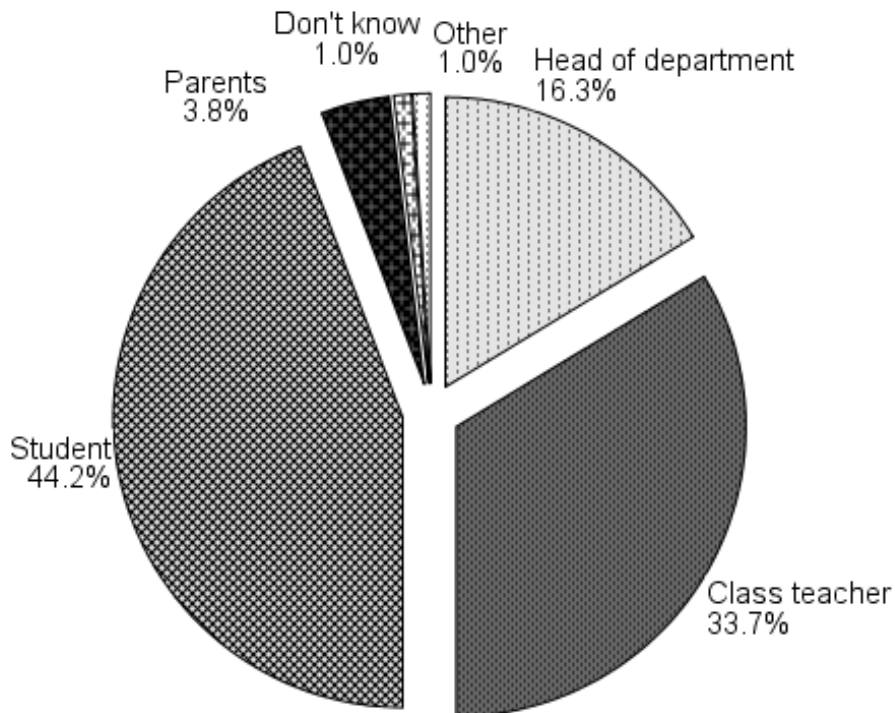


# What does the policy/approach for A level Psychology/Mathematics entail?

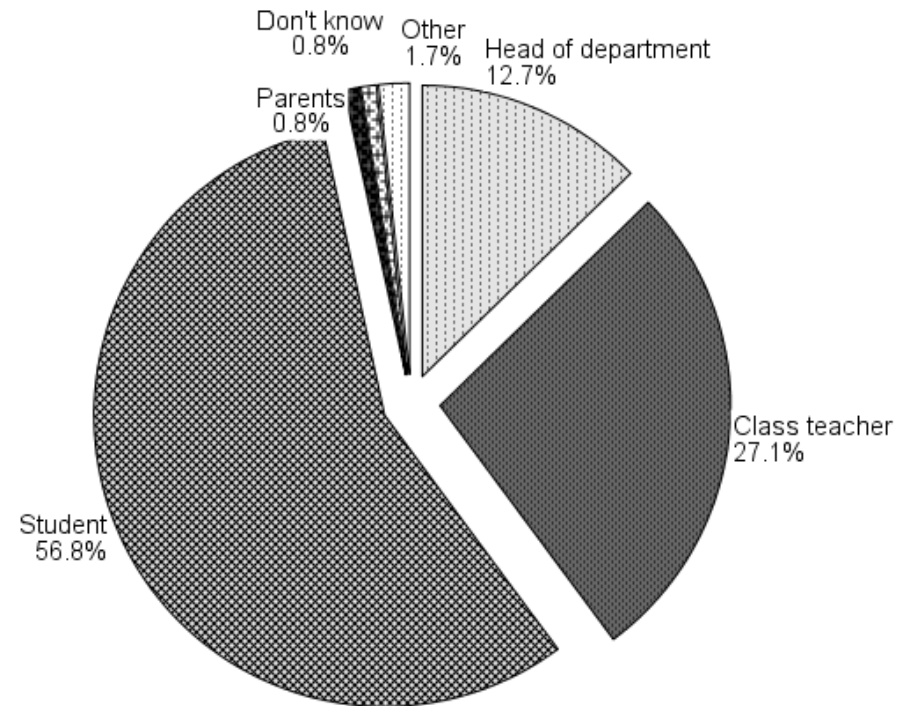


In general who do you think is most influential in the decision of whether or not a student re-sits a module?

## Psychology

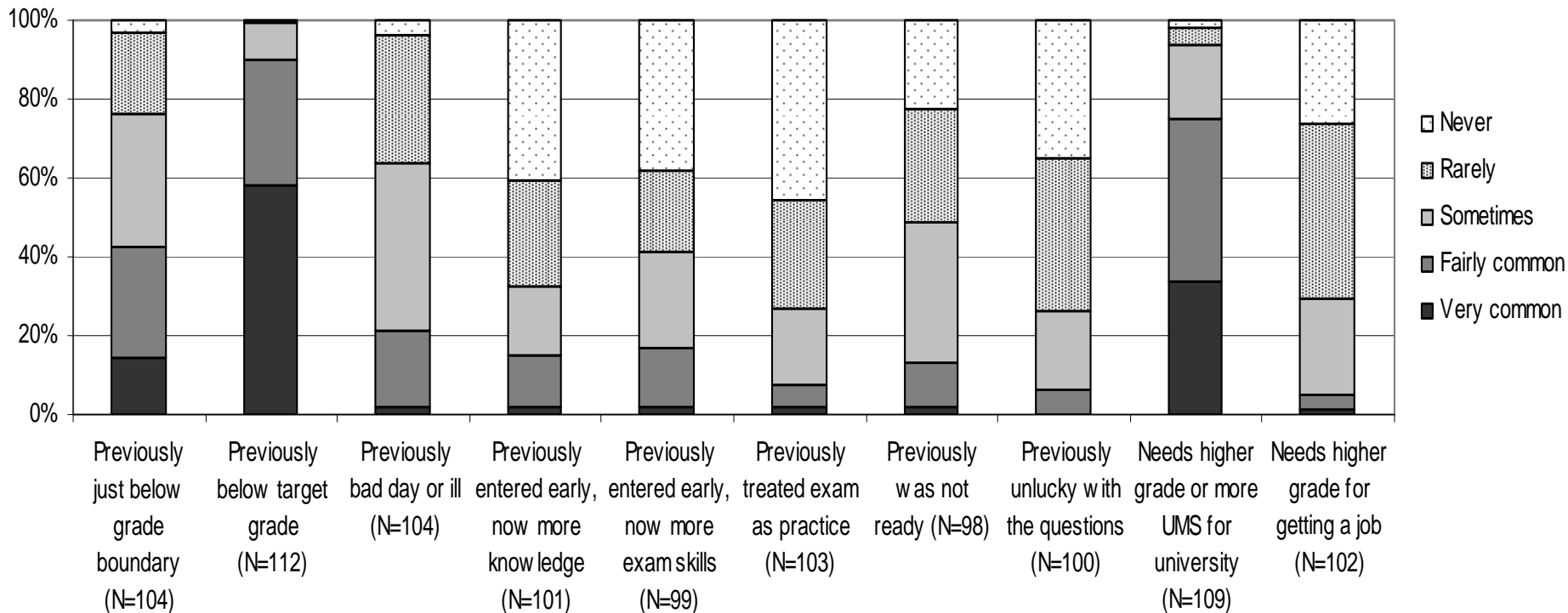


## Mathematics



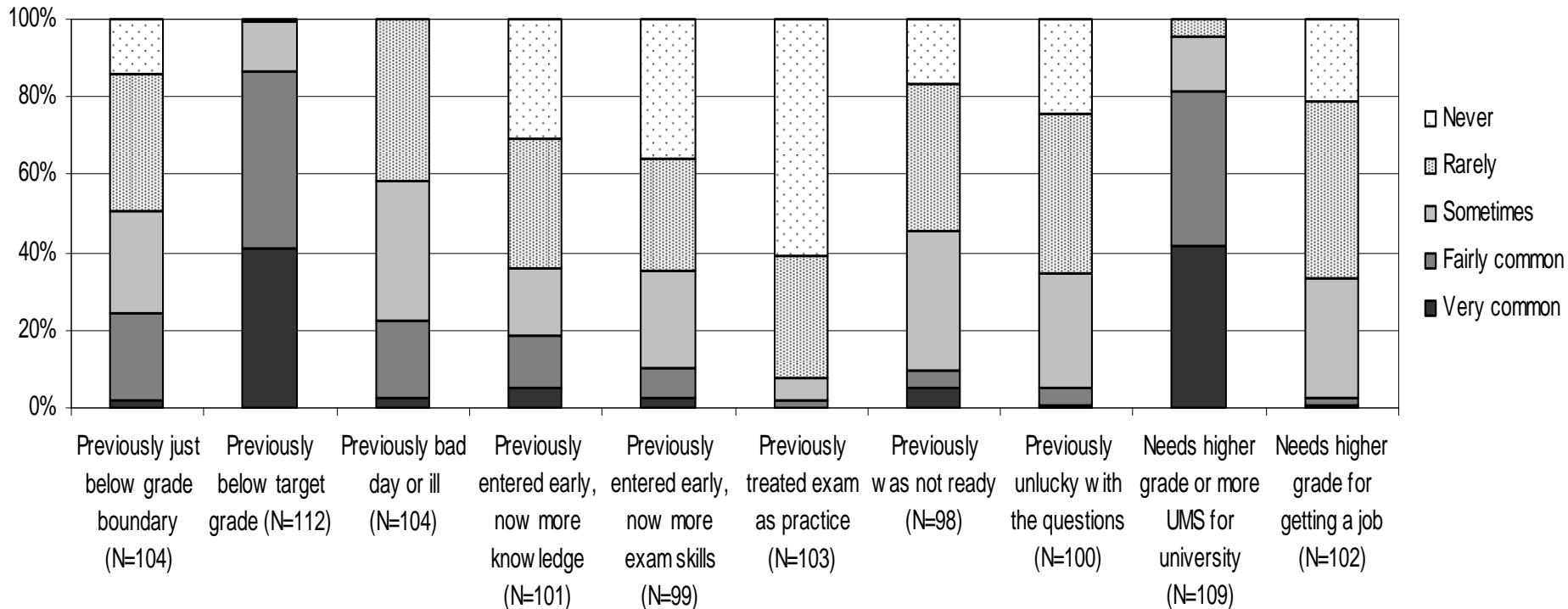
# How common are the following as reasons for your students re-sitting a module?

## Psychology



# How common are the following as reasons for your students re-sitting a module?

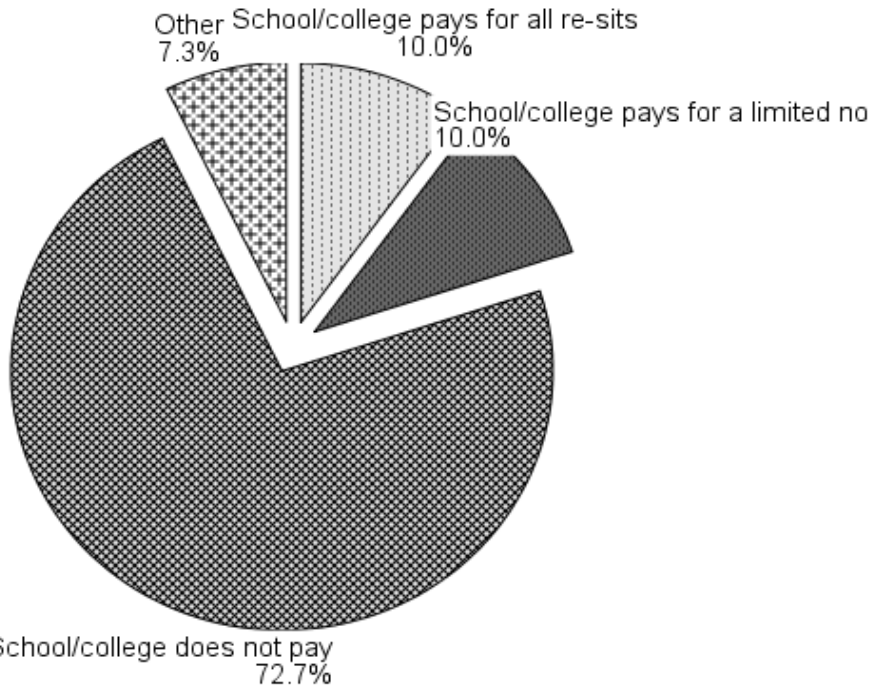
## Mathematics



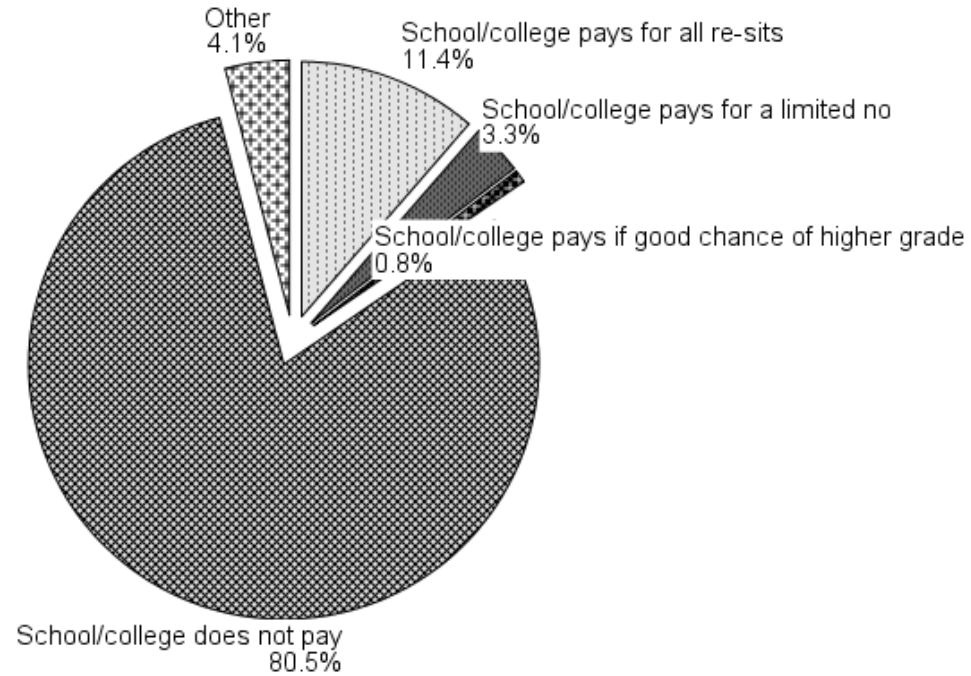
# Who pays for re-sits at your school/ college?



## Psychology

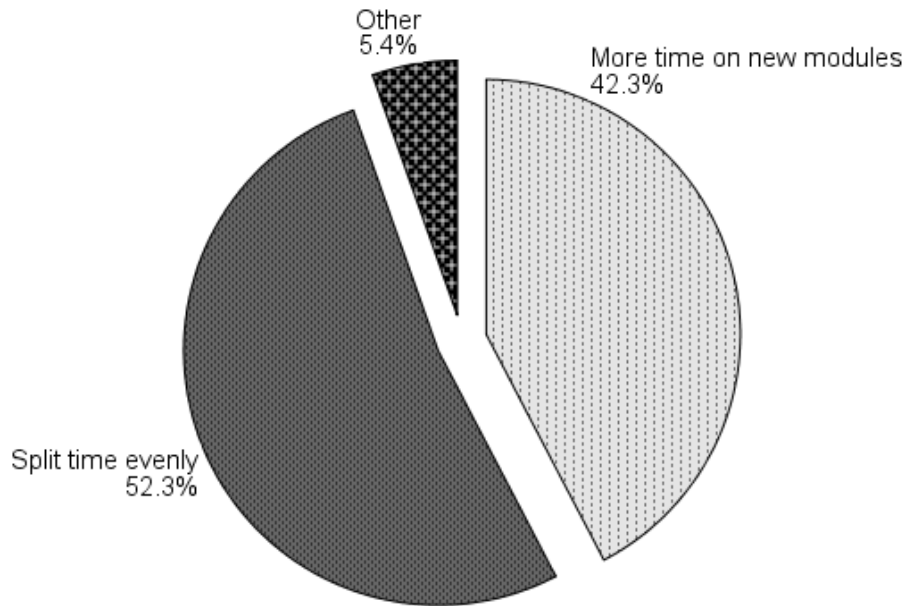


## Mathematics

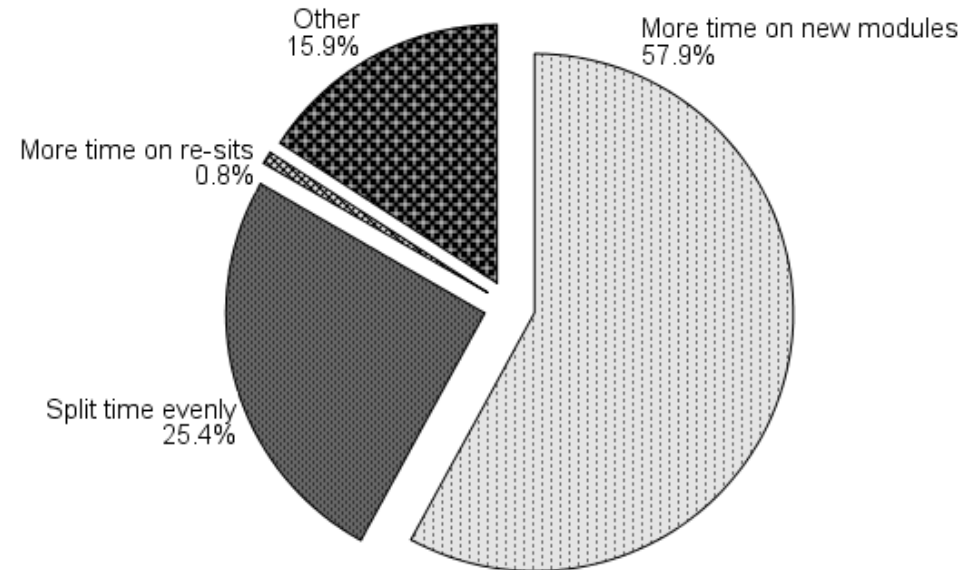


# How much time do you usually advise students to spend preparing for re-sits?

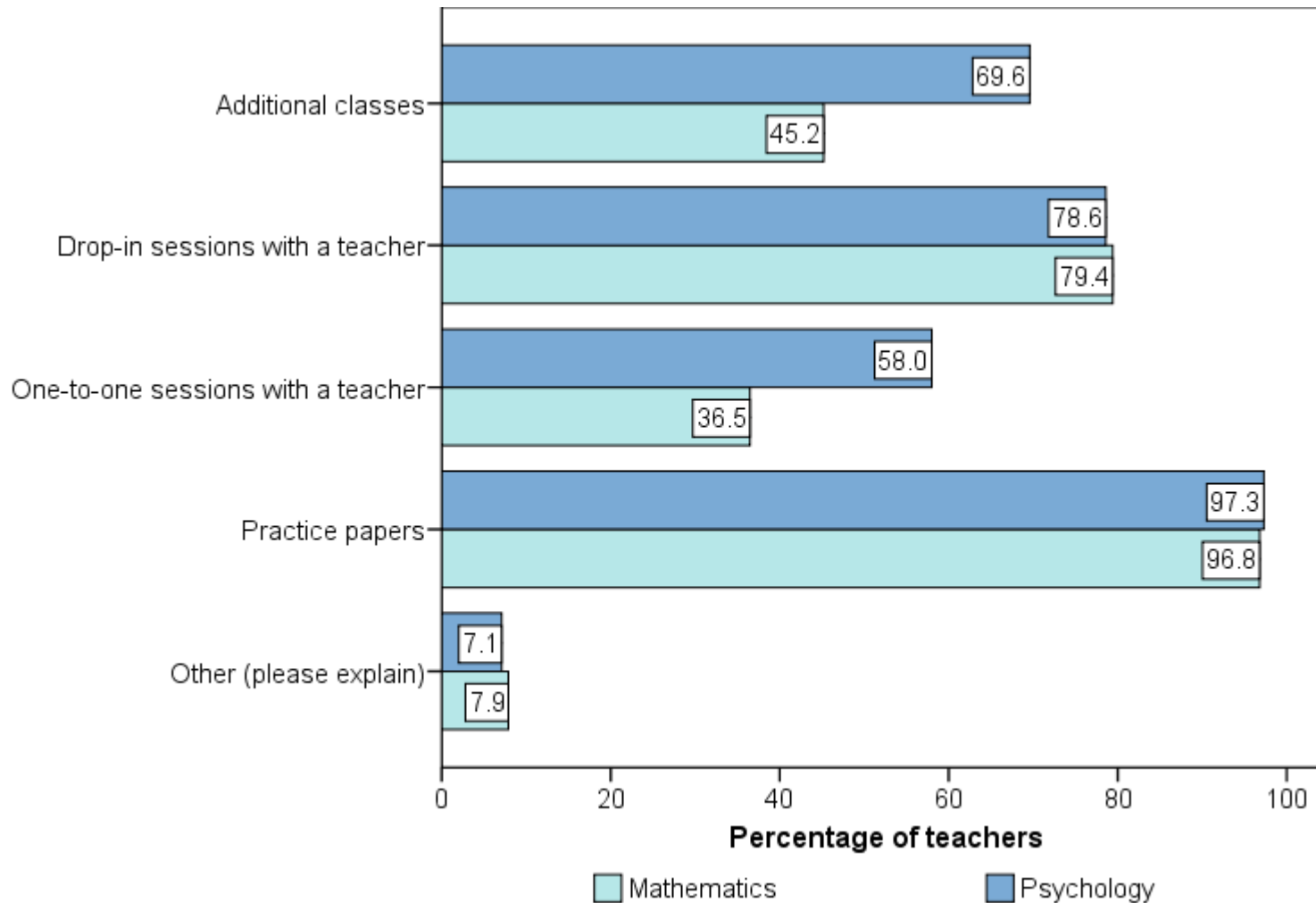
## Psychology



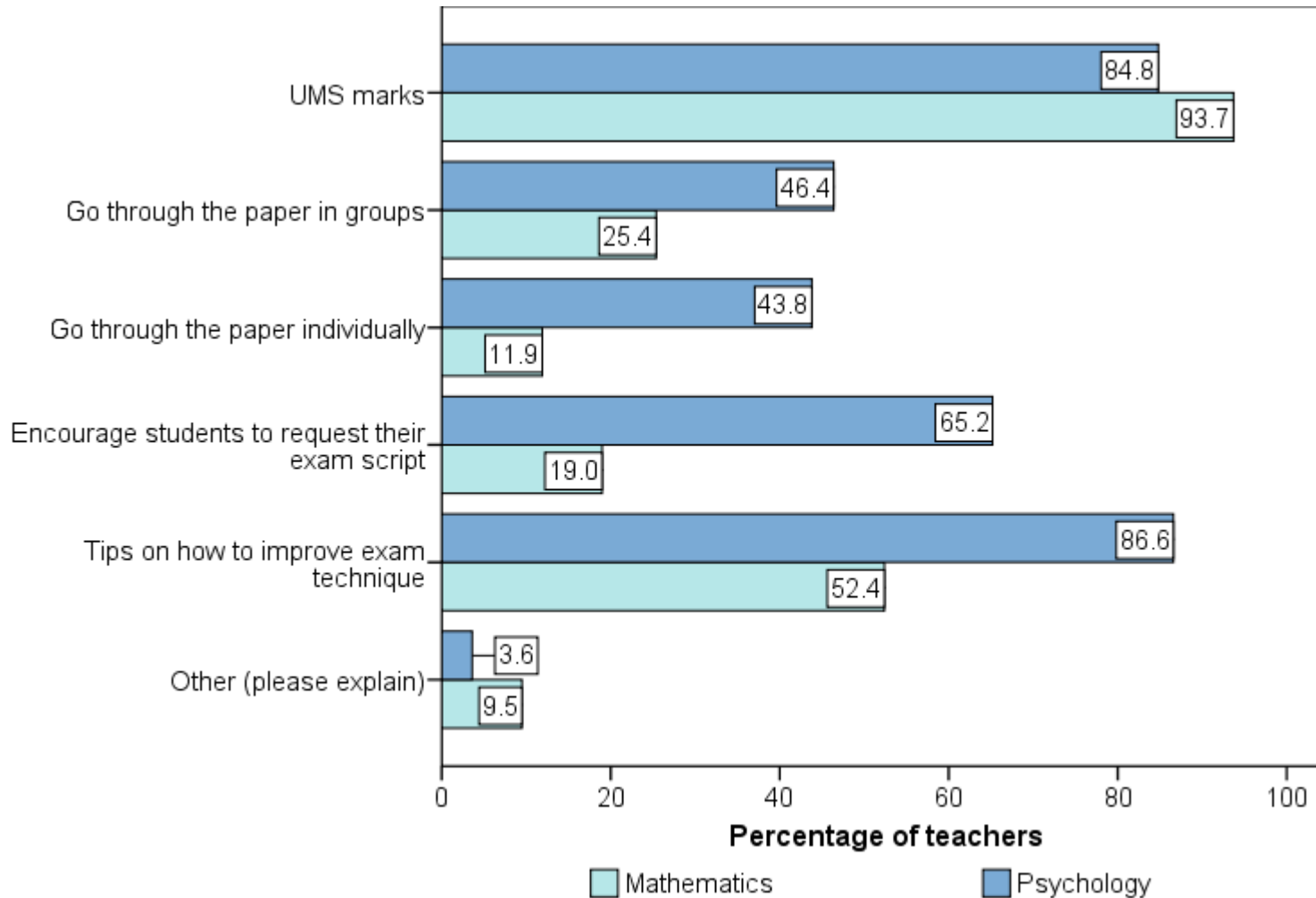
## Mathematics



# What help is provided for students to prepare them for re-sits?



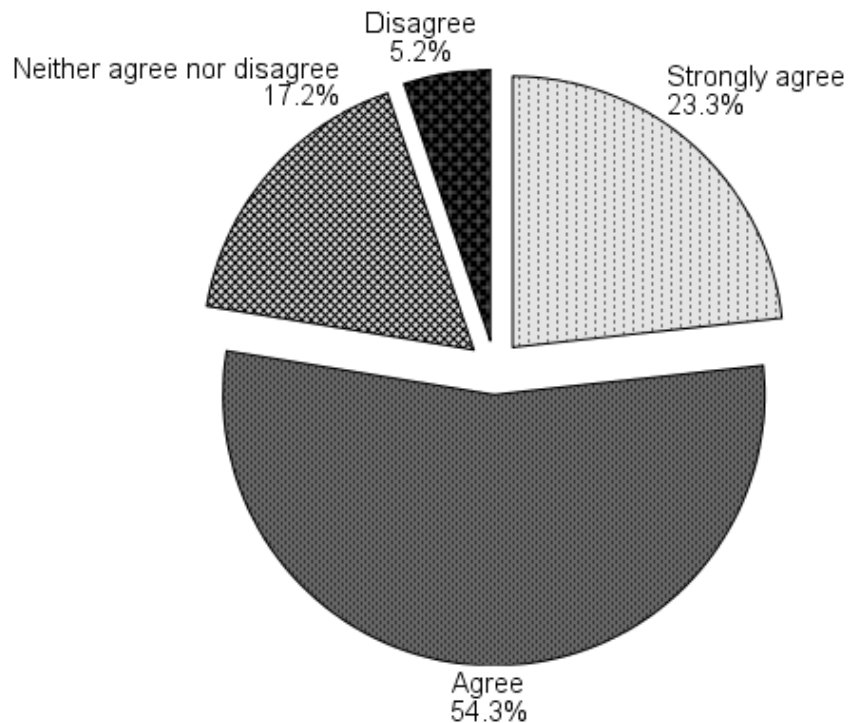
# What feedback do you usually give your students following a module exam?



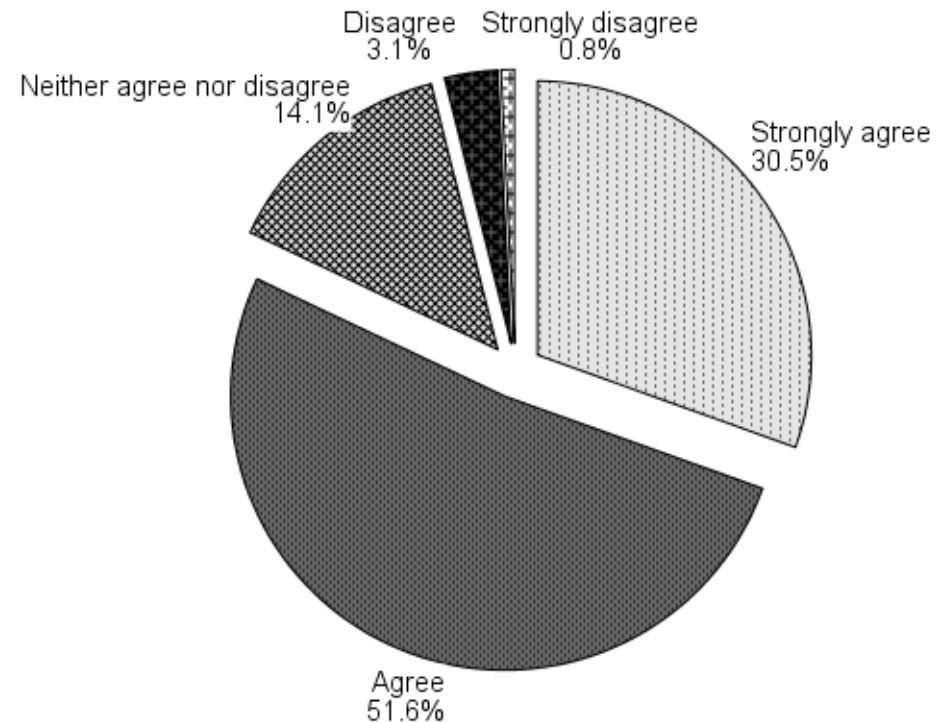


“It is generally easier for students to get a higher grade if they study courses that allow re-sits, rather than courses that don’t”

## Psychology

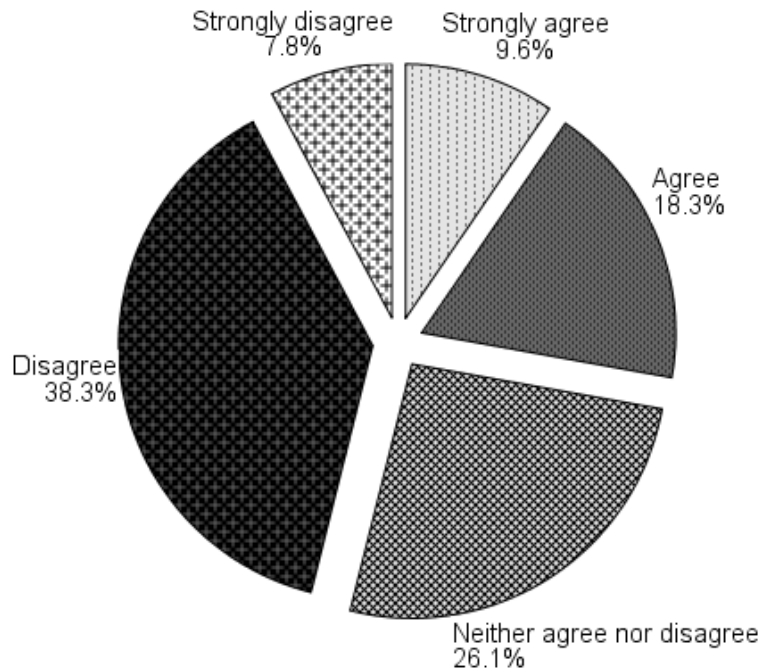


## Mathematics

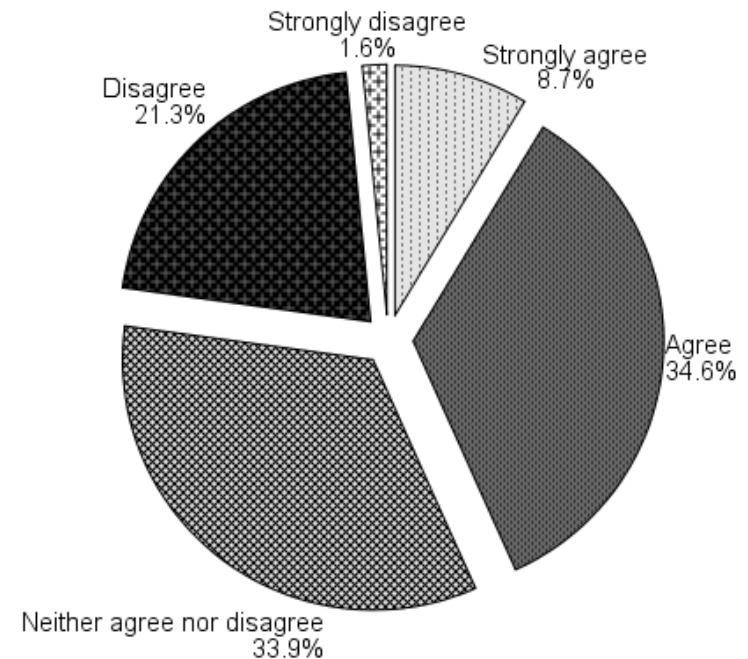


“Having students re-sitting means that they are spending too much time on exam practice and not enough time on learning”

## Psychology

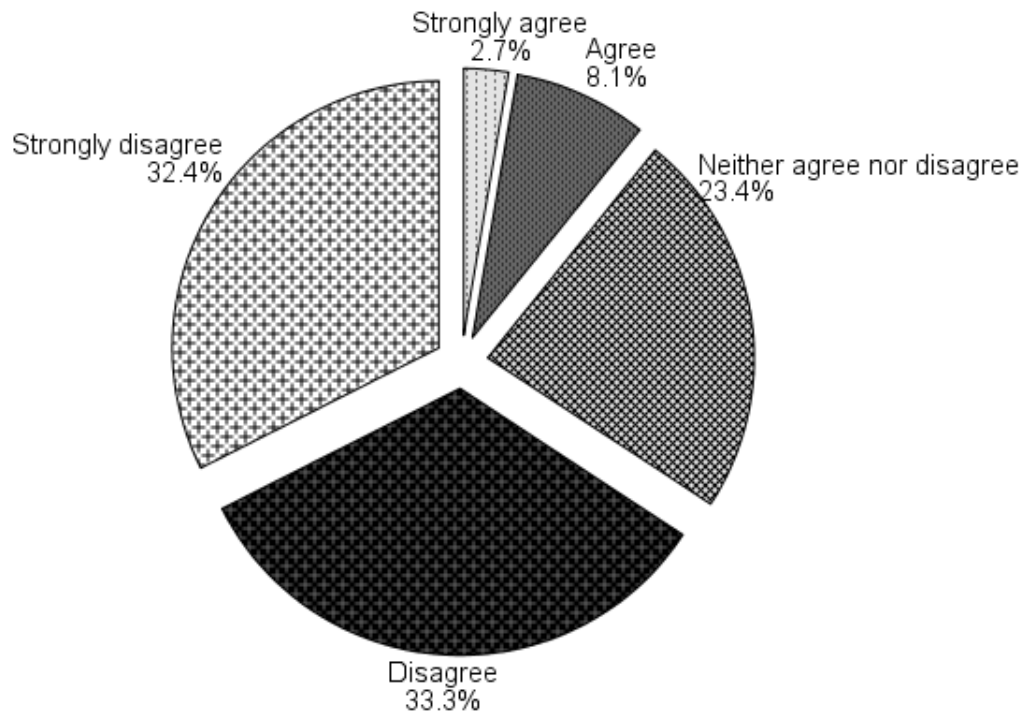


## Mathematics

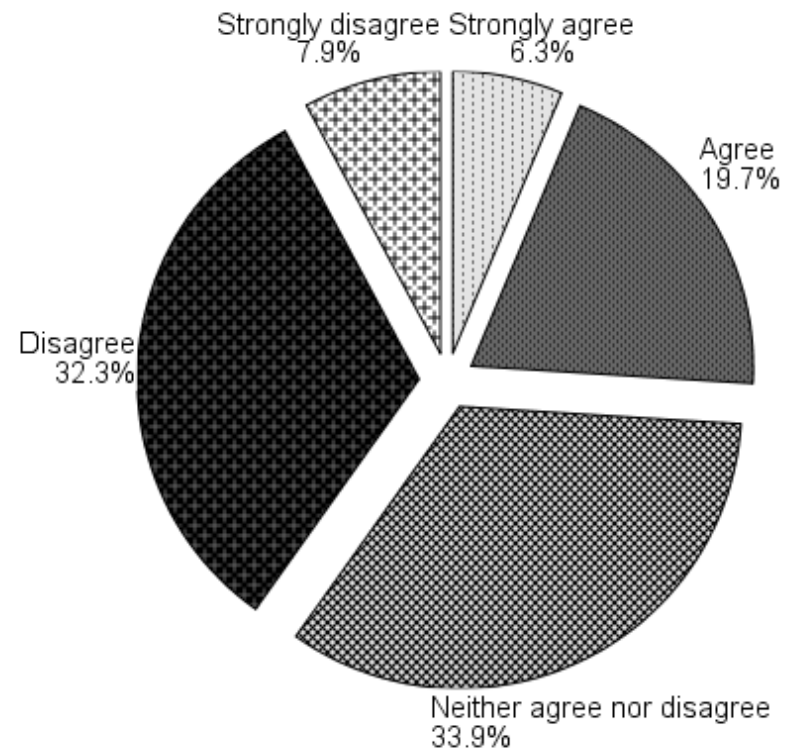


“Students who improve their grade through re-sitting modules are not as deserving of their grade as those who don’t”

### Psychology

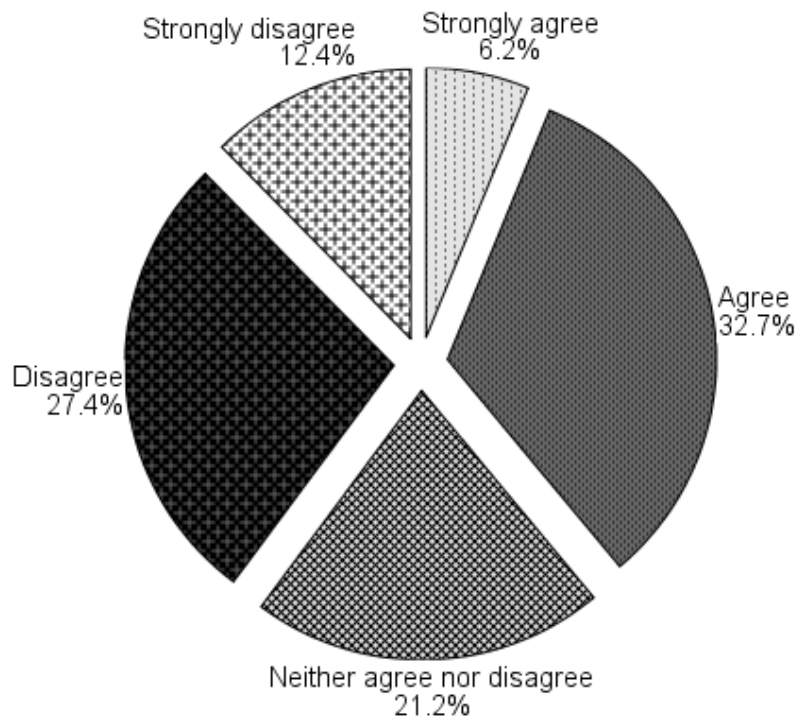


### Mathematics

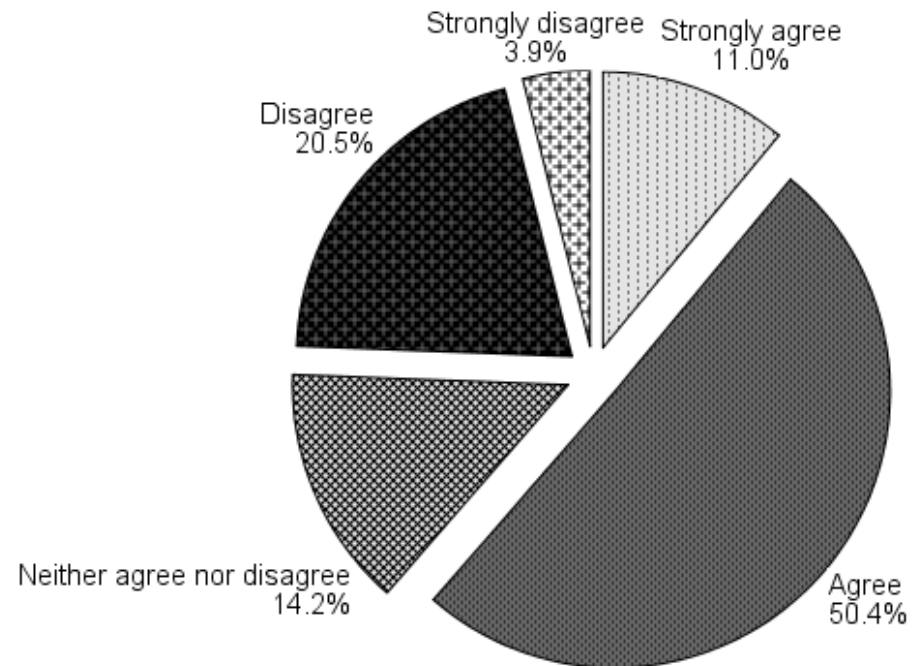


“It is reasonable that some universities favour students who have not re-sat modules at A level”

## Psychology



## Mathematics



# Teacher comments (Psychology)



Re-sits are important for students who improve their knowledge through studying other modules or just mature later in the course.

*“Re-sitting modules is a really good thing as it promotes learning: instead of students just leaving a topic having (at best) half understood it, a re-sit can encourage them to actually get to grips with it in earnest. As such, it seems to me that they end up better prepared for university than they would otherwise be.”*

(Sixth-form college teacher)

*“Students frequently fail AS units in Year 12 but show a marked improvement by Year 13 and eventually achieve a reasonable overall A level grade which represents their ability and achievement.”*

(Comprehensive school teacher)

# Teacher comments (Mathematics)



Mathematics is more suited to a linear structure.

*“The modular system focuses attention upon 'exams' at the expense of learning and at the expense of all the other benefits school provides. Mathematics, in my opinion, does not break down into neatly defined modules. The linear approach which builds upon itself toward a final exam is a more sensible way of learning the subject.*

(Grammar school teacher)

# RQ3: What are teachers' views of A level re-sits?



## Summary

- Mixed views.
- A majority believe it is easier to get a higher grade on a course that allows re-sits
- Only a minority feel students who re-sit are less deserving of their grades
- Most act strategically in their approach to re-sits
- Psychology teachers more positive than mathematics teachers

# Limitations

- Only two subjects investigated
- Self-reported reasons etc
- No combination of responses



# Conclusions



## Analysis of extent and impact of re-sitting

- High % of students re-sitting
- Usually only one re-sit per unit
- Majority of re-sits led to higher unit grade
- High % of students improved overall grade

# Conclusions

## Questionnaire study

- Students positive
  - Their decision
  - Increased knowledge
  - Little impact on other units
  - Not just a backup
- Teachers less positive
  - Advised spending more time on new units
  - Too much time spent on re-sit preparation
  - Acted strategically
  - Grade still deserved

# Conclusions

## Questionnaire study

- Subject differences
- In comparison with Psychology teachers, Maths teachers..
  - Advised less time on preparation
  - Provided less assistance
  - Thought too much time was spent on preparing for re-sits
  - Thought students who improve their grade through re-sitting are less deserving
  - Thought reasonable that some universities favour students who have not re-sat