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# **Spoilt for choice? Is it a good idea to let students choose which questions they answer in an exam?**

*Conference Abstract*

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**Blog:**

<https://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/insights/spoilt-for-choice-is-it-a-good-idea-to-let-students-choose-which-questions-they-answer-in-an-exam/>

## **Abstract**

For many years, question choice has been used in some UK public examinations, with students free to choose which questions they answer from a selection (within certain parameters). In this paper we distinguish some different scenarios in which choice (or 'optionality') arises: first where there is a completely free choice for the student because they have been taught and prepared for every topic that could potentially be assessed and choose the questions they think they will score best on; second where there is a self-imposed restricted choice because they have only prepared for topics that they believe will appear; and third where there is a restricted choice imposed by the teacher – either through the design of the assessment (where there is not enough teaching time to cover all the topics and the school or teacher makes a choice), or where teachers have decided to maximise teaching of the minimum number of topics necessary for the exam.

We then discuss some of the arguments that have been made in the literature (see references) for and against using optional questions. Arguments for include that it contributes to fairness and equality by allowing students to show themselves to their best advantage, that it increases their sense of control, and that it enhances motivation. Arguments against include the costs of both preparing extra questions / mark schemes, and of training markers to mark them, the potential extra difficulty and stress for students in having to understand which combinations of questions are allowable, and the risk to fairness if the optional questions are not equally difficult (if no statistical adjustments to scores are going to be made).

We then describe some statistical methods for exploring the comparability of optional questions and discuss whether they can achieve their aim in the light of the assumptions they require. We conclude that unless there is a very good reason for allowing question choice it should be avoided.

## **Selected references**

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