

# In This Issue

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This section aims to provide a quick introduction to the research *In This Issue* including some context, key findings and their relevance.

## **Social media use affects some aspects of wellbeing but not others**

The recent ban on social media use for under 16s in Australia and discussions of restrictions in other countries suggest growing concern about its impact on young people. One worry is the possible effect on wellbeing – however, research findings about the impact of digital use on adolescent wellbeing are often mixed or inconsistent, making it difficult to know how to interpret the evidence.

In this issue, Carmen Lim and Pia Kreijkes unpick the apparent effect of social media browsing (and, additionally, gaming) on different aspects of wellbeing, providing more detailed insights which could help inform this debate. Their findings come from analysing questionnaire data collected in an international survey of adolescents. The analyses revealed that more time browsing social media was associated with increased reports of symptoms such as anxiety, sleep difficulties and headaches and, for girls, increased likelihood of poorer body image perception, general wellbeing and life satisfaction. Moderate use of social media had some benefit for sense of belonging at school, but this positive effect was relatively weak.

Overall, the research findings could add support to arguments for restricting social media use for children and adolescents. How policy could tackle the gender-based impact on wellbeing while not introducing inequality is more difficult. This may require efforts to address certain aspects of social media content or advertising that may be contributing to specific effects on body image, for example.

Carmen and Pia's research study highlights the importance of disaggregating different aspects of wellbeing, and exploring patterns for girls and boys, in future research in this area.

## **Exam timetabling less important than might be expected**

Students, teachers and parents may worry about whether the timetabling of exams will influence how well students perform. Do candidates suffer from fatigue as they take more exams or do they get better at later exams as they more get into an exam-taking mindset? Does it have an impact if there is little time for revision between exams?

For a factor that could potentially affect many exam takers in many different exam contexts, there is surprisingly little research about the scheduling of exams. In this issue, Tim Gill shows that, for A Levels, the effects of timetabling on exam performance are minimal, with little systematic influence except where learners take two (or more) exams on one day. There was, however, an interesting pattern in terms of ability – higher ability students seemed to benefit from having taken more exams already during the exam series, suggesting a positive effect of practice, while lower ability students seemed to be affected by fatigue.

The findings offer reassurance that the timetable of a particular student's A Level exams is unlikely to substantially affect how well they perform, and Tim concludes that there is not a strong case for substantial changes to current exam scheduling practices.

It is interesting to consider whether there are ways that lower ability students can be supported to reduce the possible impact of fatigue as the exam series progresses. For example, could additional revision lessons during the exam series help with motivation and counter the fatigue effect? In England, there are currently recommendations (from the Curriculum and Assessment Review report<sup>1</sup>) to reduce the amount of exam time for GCSEs (taken at around age 16 years) by at least 10 per cent. It would be informative to explore whether the ability-based pattern observed in the current analysis of A Levels is also present for GCSE students and whether the proposed reduction in exam time changes this.

### **Paper versus computer: Ensuring fairness by exploring differences**

The third article in this issue highlights the importance of being guided by evidence when developing and delivering new assessment formats. As the use of digital exams is set to increase in the coming years, this type of research into paper-versus-digital formats is critical.

Carmen Lim, together with Carmen Vidal Rodeiro and Tim Gill, report on a study exploring whether individual exam questions differ in difficulty when delivered on paper compared with on screen. Using data from digital mock exams and paper-based live exams, they found that about one in five questions were easier in one mode than the other and that there was no clear consensus on whether digital or paper-based assessment was easier. Research in other exam contexts has also reported differences in difficulty for some questions but, as the authors discuss, there is currently limited guidance on what level of variation should be considered problematic or warrant further investigation.

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1 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-and-assessment-review-final-report>

The researchers also explored whether particular features of questions could explain the differences in performance between modes but found very few systematic associations.

## **Decisions about vocational courses should be informed by multiple factors**

Predicting how well a student is likely to do in a particular course is tricky but important. If a student is accepted to a course that turns out not to be well suited to them, this can result in weak performance or dropping out, both of which can set back their educational or employment progress. In England, plans to shake up Level 3 vocational education by replacing existing qualifications with new V Levels will affect students' choices, making it a pertinent time to reflect on what is known about factors that can predict success in vocational education and training.

For her article in this issue of *Research Matters*, Annaliese Micallef Grimaud reviewed UK and international research literature in this area. The evidence showed that previous exam results or school grades were often good predictors of success in vocational training and qualifications. Additionally, certain cognitive abilities and other non-cognitive traits may play a role. Understanding the factors that predict success can help students decide on an appropriate educational route for them and help admissions staff select which students to admit to courses. Such understanding could also help with designing assessments to support such decision-making.

## **Examining benefits teaching**

Whether initial training courses provide future teachers with sufficient knowledge and skills about assessment is an area of debate. Given the many competing demands on the knowledge and skills that need to be covered in teacher training, perhaps there is limited scope for additional content on assessment. However, research by Victoria Coleman and Martin Johnson shows that working as a professional examiner may well have benefits for teacher assessment literacy that extend into the classroom.

Victoria and Martin designed and administered a questionnaire to teachers who also worked as professional examiners. Most respondents felt that their assessment literacy was significantly influenced by their examining work. The benefits related to increased understanding of summative assessment, including exams, as well as formative aspects of assessment such as giving feedback to students – thus, feeding into teachers' classroom practice more broadly than just in terms of preparing students for exams. Teachers also reported that they felt more trusted by students and by colleagues on matters of assessment because of their examining experience.

School senior leaders could consider whether teacher involvement in examining is something they wish to actively encourage.