



Qualifications and  
Curriculum Authority

---

# **A level resitting: summary of research findings**

---

September 2007

QCA/07/3387

## A level resitting: summary of research findings

1. This paper discusses A level resitting patterns and policies in respect of GCE English literature, mathematics, physics, media, French, geography and psychology. The paper draws on two main sources of evidence:

- visits to 32 centres around England carried out in March and April 2007
- awarding body data for students who took their A levels in 2006 from OCR, Edexcel and AQA.

### Focus of resitting behaviour

2. It is first important to note that nearly all GCE resitting activity relates to AS units. The example below (Edexcel GCE English literature – state secondary schools only) shows a clear distinction between the percentages of candidates resitting AS and A2 units. This is typical of what is seen across all centre types and subjects.

Table 1. Edexcel English literature

Final number of attempts January 2005 to summer 2006 (%)						
Unit	Type	Number of times unit was taken				Total
		1	2	3	4	
6391	AS	71.6	25.4	3.0	0.0	100.0
6392	AS	63.7	32.5	3.8	0.0	100.0
6393	AS	86.1	13.9	0.0	0.0	100.0
6394	A2	91.1	8.9	0.0	0.0	100.0
6395	A2	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0
6396	A2	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0

### Centre type

3. Tables 2a–c show frequencies of resitting by centre type for three different GCE AS units: French (Edexcel), geography (OCR) and psychology (AQA).

Table 2a. Edexcel French

Percentage of total candidates sitting unit 1, 2, 3 and 4 times						
Unit 6441  (AS unit)	Total number of students	Number of times unit was taken				Total (%)
		1	2	3	4	
State secondary	1,431	43.2	47.5	9.3	0.0	100.0
Selective state	570	57.7	37.0	5.3	0.0	100.0
Independent	1,583	48.3	40.6	11.1	0.1	100.1*
FE college	140	53.6	41.4	5.0	0.0	100.0
Sixth form	775	41.0	53.8	5.2	0.0	100.0

Table 2b. OCR geography

Percentage of total candidates sitting unit 1, 2, 3 and 4 times						
Unit PA01  (AS unit)	Total number of students	Number of times unit was taken				Total (%)
		1	2	3	4	
State secondary	776	63.5	31.1	5.3	0.1	100.0
Selective state	417	71.0	23.5	5.3	0.2	100.0
Independent	2,111	61.4	28.9	9.7	0.0	100.0
FE college	64	65.6	31.3	3.1	0.0	100.0
Sixth form	368	59.8	32.9	7.1	0.3	100.1*

Table 2c. AQA psychology

Percentage of total candidates sitting unit 1, 2, 3 and 4 times						
Unit PYA1  (AS unit)	Total number of students	Number of times unit was taken				Total (%)
		1	2	3	4	
State secondary	14,882	69.1	26.3	4.3	0.3	100.0
Selective state	2,449	73.7	21.6	4.3	0.4	100.0
Independent	1,482	64.6	27.5	7.4	0.5	100.0
FE college	1,662	68.6	26.8	4.5	0.2	100.1*
Sixth form	5,736	76.7	20.6	2.5	0.1	99.9*

\*Due to rounding of numbers, the total percentage may not always add up to 100 per cent

4. The data from awarding bodies indicates that there is very little difference in the scale of resitting behaviour in terms of centre type. Percentages of candidates resitting units at least once in each centre type are similar. The patterns shown in Tables 2a–c reflect the pattern across all subjects and centre types we looked at. Table 3 summarises the proportion of candidates resitting units at least once.

5. The most frequently resat unit in a qualification typically has around a third of candidates resitting (as seen below for geography and psychology). A shift in this pattern is seen in the resitting of the French AS unit where proportions of candidates attempting the unit at least twice range between 42 and 59 per cent. An explanation for this difference would be the effect of maturation and the benefit a student would have from resitting an AS unit late in year 12 or into year 13.

Table 3. Percentage sitting a unit more than once

Centre type	French	Geography	Psychology
State secondary	56.8	36.5	30.9
Selective state	42.3	29.0	26.3
Independent	51.7	38.6	35.4
FE college	46.4	34.4	31.4
Sixth form	59.0	40.0	23.3

6. Table 4 summarises the percentages of candidates attempting multiple resits, which shows the relative infrequency of this behaviour. Interestingly independent schools had the highest proportion of frequent resitting for every unit.

Table 4. Percentage sitting a unit more than twice

Centre type	French	Geography	Psychology
State secondary	9.3	5.4	4.6
Selective state	5.3	5.5	4.7
Independent	11.1	9.7	7.9
FE college	5.0	3.1	4.6
Sixty form	5.2	7.4	2.7

### Centre support for resitting behaviour

7. Evidence from the centre visits highlighted differences across centre type in terms of the preparation that a candidate might receive in the build up to a resit. A number of independent centres said they gave unlimited support to candidates in comparison to the majority of state schools and further education colleges, which said that past papers tended to be all that was offered to resitting candidates.

## Benefit from resitting behaviour

8. Despite differences in the apparent extent of support and preparation received by students in different centre types, the mean change in uniform mark (UM) for candidates resitting units in state secondary and independent schools remains largely the same (see Table 5).

Table 5. Mean change in best UM for first and second attempt (A level candidates only)

	Mean change (uniform mark score – UMS)				
	State secondary	Secondary selective	Independent	FE college	Sixth form
Psychology (AQA) (Max UM)					
PYA1 (100)	19.3	19.4	18.8	19.2	20.4
PYA2 (100)	20.8	21.4	12.3	19.5	13.7
PYA3 (100)	18.9	17.7	17.2	18.3	20.0
PYA4 (90)	19.0	20.4	20.7	17.4	17.9
PYA5 (120)	24.6	20.5	26.1	20.0	–
PYA6 (90)	15.6	14.5	13.3	16.5	16.0

## Reasons for resitting

9. As discussed earlier there is a clear focus of resitting activity on AS units, rather than A2. There are several reasons why this is the case. In some cases the nature of the subject means that there is a ‘maturation benefit’: for example in French, the students’ general understanding and ability in the language will have improved over time. In mathematics the structure of the subject is such that the student revisits topics at a higher level at A2, and so it is easier to achieve high grades in resits of AS units at the end of the A level course. It is, of course, also the case that students tend to complete their AS units in their first year of study, so there are opportunities to resit AS units later in the course that do not exist for A2 units.

10. The percentage of students achieving a grade A at AS is, across all centre types and subjects, always higher than the percentage achieving an A at A2 or at A level, a reflection perhaps of the resitting patterns of candidates.

11. The resitting of AS units during year 2 has a noticeable impact on students’ A level grades (see Table 6). The percentage receiving an A grade in a nominal A level result based on year 1 AS results is lower than the actual percentage of A grades achieved by the same candidates at the end of year 2. It appears that the AS resitting in year 2 is boosting their grades.

Table 6. Percentages achieving grade A in notional and actual A level results

<b>Subject</b>	Percentage achieving grade A in a notional A level result (using AS result at end of year 1)	Percentage achieving grade A in an actual A level result (using AS result at end of year 2)
AQA psychology	17.5	20
AQA English literature	21.5	24
AQA physics	26.6	31.2

12. The prime reason students and staff report for resitting is predictably to ‘increase grade or UMS’ and, as mentioned above, the awarding body data and evidence from centre visits indicate that multiple resits of the same unit is not common. One resit is often enough.

13. The benefit of achieving a high grade at AS and A2 in terms of calculating the final grade for the A level is the same. They contribute the same proportion of UMS to the final calculation, and there is no penalty for resitting a unit. The best grade applies – even if the candidate does worse in their resit, the original grade will stand. To a certain extent, a student can be expected to ‘have a go’ at resitting.

14. Centre visit evidence shows AS resitting being used strategically by all centre types to provide students with an advantage in their A2 year, as described above. Strong AS results compensate for other lower grades achieved, and help with access into higher education (particularly in the highly competitive subjects of mathematics and sciences). Evidence from the centre visits suggested that AS units are considered an easier option and that students are encouraged to maximise their AS marks, which ultimately impact on their A level grade. Some teachers said they felt they had no choice but to encourage their students to resit units even if they did not think it was necessary.

15. Centres often said that they used the January examinations as useful confidence and motivation-building sessions. There was no suggestion that early sessions were treated as ‘mocks’.

16. Looking at the change of UM between the first and second attempts of a unit (see Table 5) the benefits of resitting is clear. Across all centre types and subjects, the majority of candidates did better on their second attempt at a unit than they had on their first with the mean change in UM typically being between 15 and 25 marks. With the best result always being counted, there is no gamble associated with resitting units.

## **Type of student**

17. The number of candidates sitting a unit more than twice (so taking more than one resit) is very small, although as can be seen in previous tables this does vary across subjects (especially where maturation is a factor). French, mathematics and physics were more likely to see a greater percentage of students using multiple resit opportunities through years 12 and 13 and attempting a unit three times than any of the other subjects we have data about.

18. Evidence from teachers on the type of students who resit indicates that it tends to be all students but particularly those on either the E/U or A/B borders, those who feel they underachieved at the first attempt and those exceptional candidates who want to maximise their UM (not grade), even by a few extra marks because of requirements for entry into higher education.

## **Implications**

### ***Limiting resitting***

19. The suggestion of reducing the number of resitting opportunities for each unit to one received strong support from the teachers and senior management team members (and even the students) we spoke to. Many thought it would not actually have much of an impact on the current practices of resitting, and teaching and learning.

20. Considering the relatively small numbers of students who attempt a unit more than twice is so low it is likely that the impact of making this change would be minimal. The consequences would be felt most by mathematics, science and modern foreign languages students, and it could result in a slight fall in the numbers of candidates achieving an A grade. However, this might not necessarily be the case as the one resit allowed would be likely to be postponed until the January or June sessions in year 13 to allow for maximum benefit of maturity.

### ***Weighting of A2 units***

21. The suggestion of weighting A2 units to increase their role in determining the A level grade was viewed positively by the majority of teachers interviewed. It was felt that the effect of this weighting would be a focus on the student's A2 year, recognising the increased 'stretch and challenge' of the qualifications. The weighting would be likely to reduce the current resitting activity to benefit from the UMS available via relatively 'cheap' AS units.

22. The current position that A\* at A level will be awarded on the basis of a student's achievement on the A2 element of their award (having achieved an A grade on the basis of the current model) may encourage a reduction in the current resitting behaviour. However, a student or a centre may need to feel

very confident that the A grade threshold can be met in order to 'risk' the lower level of AS resitting.  
Teaching and learning aimed at achieving A\* grades may require a focus on the A level units that may be calculated to compromise a safe A grade achieved through a focus on maximum achievement in AS units.